



SEVENTH

9

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

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INTRODUCTION

With **the qilin May** at their side, **Lyle** and his friends arrive at the **Free City of Baym**.

The city is massive, governed by merchants who line their pockets with trade from its bustling port. With no royals or nobles to preside over its inhabitants,

it attracts adventurers from all across the land. Thus has it earned the name:

the heartland of adventurers. However, outside experience means little in Baym.

Those who haven't proved their worth within the city are treated no different

from new recruits. Despite how the battle to take down Ceres had hardened their

party, Lyle and crew find themselves forced to devote their time to menial labor

for the foreseeable future in order to earn the trust of Baym's Adventurers' Guild.

Meanwhile, **a rookie adventurer named Erhart** picks nonstop fights with Lyle,

envious over how the other man is constantly surrounded by women. He and his

party members are also offered menial labor, but angrily refuse. Erhart continues

to press Baym's Adventurers' Guild

receptionist lady for more,

only to finally be offered a job of

some substance—a role in a large-scale

operation set to unfold in Baym's dungeon.

SEVENTH

First Head



Basil Walt

First Stage

Full Over

Raises physical abilities from between 10% to 20%.

Second Stage

Limit Burst

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

Third Stage

Full Burst

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

Second Head



Crassel Walt

First Stage

All

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

Second Stage

Field

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

Third Stage

Select

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

Third Head



Sley Walt

First Stage

Mind

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

Second Stage

Control

Bends foes to one's will.

Third Stage

???

Fourth Head



Marcus Walt

First Stage

Speed

Gives a stable boost to movement speed.

Second Stage

Differential

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

Third Stage

???

Arts of the Ages

Fifth Head



Fredriks Walt

First Stage

Map

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

Second Stage

Dimension

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

Third Stage

???

Sixth Head



Fiennes Walt

First Stage

Search

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

Second Stage

Spec

Provides detailed information on friends, foes, and traps.

Third Stage

???

Seventh Head



Brod Walt

First Stage

Box

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

Second Stage

Warp

Teleports the user and items across short distances.

Third Stage

???



Lyle Walt

First Stage

Experience

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

Second Stage


Connection

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

Third Stage

???

Arts of the Ages	Author Yomu Mishima
Prologue	Illustrator Tomozo
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Prologue

Spring had come to Central, the capital of the Banseim Kingdom. The scenery of the metropolis took on new seasonal colors, and the people seemed even more lively than they had been during a bustling winter.

Within the kingdom's royal palace, a lone girl sat arrogantly on the throne. Her name was Ceres Walt.

She played with her somewhat curly, long blonde hair with her fingertips as she crossed her legs disinterestedly.

As the crown princess, Ceres would usually have been barred from sitting on the king's throne. She could have even received the death sentence had she been found out, but not a single person within the royal palace could possibly find fault with her.

With near transparent skin, her balanced features were youthful yet bewitching. She was more beautiful than cute—there was even something captivating about her. The beautiful young girl was practically glowing as she moved her luscious lips.

“On top of letting that trash get away, you even fell for his trap, I hear. Lionel, I had high hopes for you. You’ve disappointed me.”

A young man knelt before her on one knee, his head down. The boy with blue hair and blue eyes looked identical to her own brother. His name was Lionel Walt, heir to the court noble House Walt which shared a common ancestor with her own noble house if you went back far enough.

But now, he was quivering and shedding a cold sweat. His head was so low, he was nearly pressing it into the floor.

“M-My deepest apologies! Lyle—that bastard set me up!”

Lyle—Lyle Walt—was Ceres's brother. A man who was once the eldest son of the feudal noble House Walt.

Ceres looked at Lionel loathsomely. “I told you not to touch him, did I not?” she said. “You chased that trash against my orders, and you couldn’t even do it right. Do you have any awareness of your position as captain of the Special Guard?”

Lionel was the captain of Ceres’s Special Guard. Not that there were any other members. As he was the one and only, he was captain plain and simple.

Lionel’s home, the court noble House Walt, had previously held the low-ranking peerage of esquire. In Banseim, they truly were the lowest of the low among the nobility.

But Ceres had taken a liking to him, and he had obtained the rank of baron and the title of Special Guard captain. With all she’d given to him, Lionel feared nothing more than putting Ceres in a bad mood.

“I’ll definitely catch him!” proclaimed Lionel.

Ceres looked at him wearily, though within, she was practically jumping for joy. *This guy really is a complete idiot, she thought. I told him not to interfere, but he prioritized his personal grudge over me. But...that’s exactly how you should be.*

As far as Ceres was concerned, Lionel’s incompetence wasn’t an issue. As a matter of fact, his incompetence was precisely why she kept him around.

A man identical to her detested brother. Seeing him put his complete inability to do anything on full display was a good way to kill time. This was her entertainment. The title of Special Guard captain had also been granted for nothing more than her amusement.

Still, for him to end up in a cell after chasing Lyle, he really is an idiot. But it’s interesting enough, so I’ll forgive him.

She would have never forgiven him if he had been one of her proper subordinates. He would have been put to death on the spot. But Ceres could overlook it for Lionel.

“I told you not to chase him,” Ceres said.

Lionel’s eyes wandered. “B-But...” he stammered.

There seemed to be a reason he gave chase. *Does he plan to do something again? Well, I'll save that for my future enjoyment.*

As Ceres secretly relished in Lionel's far-too-pathetic attitude, a member of her real guard, a young man, reached a hand for his hilt.

"Do you intend to disobey Lady Ceres's orders?" the tall young man in his early twenties threatened in a low voice.

His chestnut hair was straight and long. He possessed emerald eyes and a stern glare.

The name of this serious-looking knight's name was Baldoir Lundberg. He hailed from House Lundberg, a house of knights that had served House Walt for many generations, and Baldoir was its heir.

He was now in charge of Ceres's personal guard detail.

A highly capable knight, he was one of Ceres's favorites. And seeing such a man mere seconds away from cutting down Lionel on the spot, Ceres held up a hand to stop him. She didn't want his death to spoil any of her fun.

"Baldoir, take your hand off of your sword."

"Are you certain about this? This man is abusing your authority to do whatever he pleases, Lady Ceres. I see no benefit in leaving him unchecked."

It was a response befitting the earnest man.

Ceres smiled. "I said I forgive him."

There was a pause before Baldoir conceded, "Pardon what I said."

He released his grip on his hilt. Lionel, trembling, placed a hand to his chest and breathed a relieved sigh upon realizing he would live another day.

Watching him, Ceres stood from her throne and walked to the window. It was a rather large window with ample sunlight streaming through it.

"Lionel, you are to leave that piece of trash alone for the time being."

Lionel quickly turned his body toward her and dropped to both knees in abject servitude.

"He is dangerous, Lady Ceres! We need to capture him at once!"

Lionel's strong fixation on Lyle did not solely come down to the last name they shared. The woman he loved was with Lyle. And Ceres knew this too.

"Lionel, don't disappoint me any further."

Ceres turned his back to him, taking care not to let him see her face. Her tone brooked no argument, voice, yet her expression had curled into a sickly sweet smile.

This endlessly incompetent young man was the perfect distraction.

But now, she had thought of a new amusement. She couldn't just keep focusing on Lionel.

"There are nobles who are opposed to the idea of me becoming the crown princess. We need to take care of them. As a member of my Special Guard, are you really going to leave my side at such a critical time?"

"N-No, that's..."

His indecisive attitude caused Baldoir and all the other members of the real guard to furrow their brows in discontent. Lionel, being dull, did not notice their irritation.

Once again, Ceres found amusement in his incompetence. *I truly am glad I picked you up.*

"We are going to crush the rebellious elements within the kingdom. For that, we'll mobilize the royal army. And naturally, my father will be part of the campaign."

Banseim's royal army and the provincial army of House Walt were both preparing to take on the rebellious nobles. To Ceres, it was all a game.

She looked at the staff that concealed her rapier. There was a yellow Jewel embedded at its tip, letting off a faint and bewitching glow.

Staring at the Jewel, she quietly muttered so no one else could hear.

"Yes, I know. This is where the fun begins."

Her eyes turned back to all the city sights she could see beyond the large palace window. She gazed out over the capital with a smile.

The yellow Jewel spoke to her in a voice for Ceres and Ceres alone.

“My adorable Ceres. Soon. Very soon, the lands will be stained in blood again.”

The female voice was very pleasant on the ears, but there was something uncanny about it.

Ceres replied to the seductive whispers, “I’m looking forward to it...Agrissa.”

It was the name of a woman who had once dragged the whole continent to hell with her own hands.

“I’m glad it’s to your liking. It’s showing on your face, by the way.”

“Oh, I’m sorry about that. I’m the crown princess now, so I need to keep up appearances a bit.”

“Indeed. Though soon, you won’t need to pretend anymore. Just hold on until then.”

In the window glass, she saw the reflection of her own hideous smile.

The Free City of Baym housed a large port and was ruled by the merchants who used its flourishing foreign trade to line their pockets. It was a massive city that was also said to be the true home of adventurers.

The reason there were so many adventurers had to do with just how convenient the city was for them. As Baym was not ruled by kings or nobles, it imposed a shockingly low tax on adventurers. Moreover, there was a never-ending influx of work coming in.

The most delightful aspect, however, was the dungeon that existed within Baym.

Baym’s dungeon was rumored to exceed a hundred floors in depth and was an ideal place for adventurers to earn money. Monster encounters were very frequent, making it easy to defeat a great number of them.

From there, the Demonic Stones and the materials—salvageable parts of the monsters’ bodies—were collected and sold outside of the dungeon.

Baym was very accepting of adventurers, and its Guild was reputed to provide even more support than the Guilds in other cities.

This all came together to earn it the tagline of being the city of merchants and adventurers.

“So this is Baym, huh? It’s more impressive than Central.”

Baym itself was a massive city surrounded by high walls—but that wasn’t all it was.

I probably looked like some country bumpkin as I gazed up at all the tall buildings with admiration. Now and then, the residents of Baym would chuckle as they passed by, and some would even look at me with mocking eyes.

But ignoring them, I, also known as Lyle Walt, stared longingly at the city that was Baym.

The paths were paved immaculately with stone. The streets were wide and clean.

There were quite a few people and wagons passing to and fro. Far too many of them, even. The population density seemed incredible.

And more than anything, the buildings were all very tall.

They were built in varied architectural styles and looked like somewhat of a mishmash, but all the buildings that lined the main road were splendid and extravagant.

I’d seen several large cities, but none as magnificent as Baym.

As I stared wide-eyed, I heard the third head’s voice from the Jewel hanging at my neck. He sounded surprised.

“What is this place? It’s more than I imagined.”

Apparently, he was startled by the scale, the size, and the grandeur. The fourth head sounded similarly surprised, but as per usual, his thoughts immediately went to money.

“Just how much does it cost to maintain this place?”

As far as he was concerned, it was far more extravagant than necessary. After

all, it was as though the entire city was sparkling. It wasn't like they were actually using precious metals in abundance, but everything that entered my eyes looked like it would have cost a fortune.

Since Baym had no royalty or nobility, the streets and other public spaces were apparently maintained by wealthy merchants. This was perhaps why it had a different atmosphere than other cities.

Though monotone, the fifth seemed a bit suspicious. "What exactly do you have to do to get this much development?"

It seemed he had something to say about Baym's growth.

The sixth head let out a booming laugh. "That's what happens when trade's booming. With that said, it's incredible they got this far without any king or nobles up top."

As far as I was concerned, this was unbelievable.

The seventh also had his suspicions, although he seemed to have some schemes of his own. "It's greater than what I've heard. Still, if they've gotten this far... It looks like we can get our hopes up."

"Right." The third seemed to nod along. "But this isn't what any of us were expecting. You need to move with caution if you don't want to have the rug pulled out from under you."

He cautioned me just as Monica called out.

"Oh chicken, my useless chicken. That's enough fantasizing; please do something about this."

The girl calling me a useless chicken was a girl with blonde pigtails who wore a red maid outfit. Despite how she came off, she was a machine—an automaton—left behind by the ancients; unfortunately, she was a defective product who couldn't help herself from insulting her master.

"So this is Baym!"

"We're going to live here starting today!"

"Hey, that lady who walked by was a real beaut!"

The young men making a ruckus wore slightly grimy shirts and mud-smeared trousers. They had rusted knives hanging from their hips. On their backs, they carried large bags, and it all came together to clearly advertise that they'd come straight from the countryside.

They were being laughed at, but the optimistic young men seemed to think that the sneers sent their way were welcoming smiles. They responded with smiles and waves of their own.

It hurt my heart to watch.

"Is that how people see me too?" I muttered anxiously.

Then, Novem Fuchs desperately tried to stand up for me. She was the only person who followed me when I was driven from my house, and we'd previously been engaged.

Novem almost always had her tawny brown hair in a side ponytail, and always thought of me first and foremost.

"It's all right. You maintain a very hygienic appearance, Milord. There shouldn't be any issue. What's more, your hometown, the administrative center of Walt territory, is also a large metropolis. There is no reason for anyone to mock you."

"Well, I mean, they can't just look at my face and know where I'm from, right? I can kinda tell that they're looking at me the same way."

"It's all right! Don't worry about it!"

"A-All right."

"That's the spirit! After all, you are the legitimate successor to the Walt legacy, the inheritor of Walt blood. You hold class no other gentlemen could hope to imitate."

Novem wasn't backing down on the point, so I opted to concede. She was, however, fundamentally mistaken. There was no class to be found in Walt blood. If we were to get into the nitty-gritty, our founder Basil Walt was essentially a barbarian—the furthest thing from classy.

Should blood be the defining factor, then I—the inheritor of the first head's

blood—would be in the same position as him.

As I chatted with Novem, a different woman rested her chin on my shoulder.

With green hair and green eyes, and occupying a big-sisterlike role among our comrades, she was Miranda Circry.

“Bloodline alone doesn’t define a person. Isn’t it his own effort that makes Lyle who he is?”

Miranda would often intentionally make statements that showed her hostility toward Novem.

Novem, fully aware of this, replied, “Yes, I understand that. Therefore, Lord Lyle, who carries Walt blood on top of all his amazing effort, has nothing to be ashamed of.”

I’m glad you recognize that, but I’m feeling really embarrassed listening to you. While the two of them continued to argue and praise me, another bumpkin was making a fuss.

“Look, everyone! It’s a stupidly huge fountain!”

It was Shannon Circry this time, her yellow eyes practically sparkling with enthusiasm.

We’d pretty much left her to frolic as she wanted ever since we’d gotten through the gates of Baym. What really set her apart from the bumpkin men was that the eyes that fell upon Shannon were far warmer; they seemed to find her endearing.

Perhaps the peanut gallery saw her as a young child having fun.

Wearing a black robe, Sophia Laurie frantically tried to get her to settle down.

“Please keep it down, Shannon. They’re staring.”

Shannon ignored her and looked around. “The buildings are all so big. And the road is wide, and it feels kinda pretty.”

It was just as Shannon said. The streets, the buildings, they were all so oversized it felt like I’d become a dwarf.

Aria Lockwood, a red-haired lass, was carrying multiple bags as she kept a

keen eye on her surroundings. She seemed very wary of pickpockets.

“There are too many people here. Let’s get moving fast. Still, with so many people, how do they...?”

The speed at which the people around us walked, and the speed the wagons ran at. They all seemed to be in such a hurry. It felt like they’d shout at us, tell us we were in the way if we stood around for too long, so we picked up our bags and were off.

The country boys took a hint and followed alongside us. I was informed as such by May, the qilin who tugged at my sleeve.

“Lyle, those kids are following you.”

She was a divine beast known as a qilin, but she was currently taking on the form of a young woman. Her somewhat—scratch that—*considerably* revealing clothes did wonders to gather strange looks.

Turning around, I set my eyes upon the leader of the young men, Erhart Baumann. His appearance was a bit...unique.

The man possessed messy black hair, a slender yet muscular body, and tanned skin. That much was all well and good, but the issue was with his equipment.

He was wearing nothing but a tank top up top, despite all the armoring he had around his waist and legs. He was practically exposing all of his upper vital points while keeping his bottom a sturdy fortress.

And, on his back, he carried a rusty, poor-quality greatsword dubbed the Demon Sword Grammer.

He seemed to believe his equipment was best kept that way; as a matter of fact, he strutted it about with pride.

Watching him closely was a story-loving elf woman: Eva.

While fixing her hair, disheveled from the long journey, she seemed to show a bit of interest. She stared at Erhart a while before ultimately shaking her head.

“No, it’s not going to work out. The main character still has to be Lyle. I thought he might be a hero in the making, but it’s just not hitting home for me.”

The words got Eva a sharp retort from Clara Bulmer, who was always at odds with her.

Clara was small with blue hair and red eyes, but her most notable feature was her prosthetic left arm.

“I highly doubt you can discern a hero.”

Eva angrily closed in on Clara. “Now you’ve said it, you pigheaded woman!”

“Better than being a liar.”

The two started bickering, but this was just more of the usual. I ignored them, while my other comrades simply gave looks that spoke a single simple message: “This again?”

“So, hey... Why are you following us?” I called out to Erhart.

Immediately, Erhart and his boys averted their eyes. “Huh? Why would we be following you? You guys are just walking in front of us, is all.”

They’d been following from even before we’d made it into Baym.

The third head interpreted their mentality for me. “Sure, they made it all the way to the big city, but they’ve got absolutely no idea what to do now that they’re here. By the look of them, I don’t think they planned out what they were going to do after this.”

Yeah, I don’t buy it.

But the third then cackled at my clear disbelief. He most likely had that usual flippant look on his face. “Huh? You don’t believe me? You’ve still got a ways to go, Lyle.”

What to do? That’s obvious. You’re in a new place, so you should start by registering at the Adventurers’ Guild, right? Or maybe, get an inn before that?

I informed Erhart of our destination.

“All right, well, we’re going to the Adventurers’ Guild.”

As one might expect from the city known as the home of adventurers, Baym’s Guild was massive. A towering building smack-dab in the center of the city...or so I’d heard.

Once we started off toward the Guild, Erhart's party headed out too.

"Oh, that's right! The Adventurers' Guild. That's where we've got to start!"

I turned around, aghast.

The men were all exchanging looks and nodding at this genuine revelation.

"I've never been to an Adventurers' Guild before."

"What do you think it's like?"

"We're finally becoming adventurers, huh?"

It was only after Erhart pointed it out that they seemed to recall that they had to go to the Guild.

Are they really giving any serious thought to the future?

I could hear the third head laughing in the Jewel. "What did I tell you? They're not thinking about anything. That's how the young'uns are."

"No, these guys are definitely on the extremes," the fifth head corrected him.

As I stared at them in shock, Aria shot a glance at them too. "So they're just winging it. On that note, are they really going to follow us all the way there?"

"I'm concerned they might cause trouble," Sophia said, her expression darkening. "We may be strangers, but it'll be bothersome if we give off the impression that we're together."

The youths who'd left their hometown for the city seemed to be even more clueless than I thought. *Even as a stranger, I've got to wonder. Are they okay?*

"F-For now, let's just go to the Guild. I doubt they'll continue following after that."

Aria shrugged and smiled. "Oh, I'm not so sure. They might just stick with us forever."

Yeah, that's not happening... At least, that's what I want to believe.

We arrived at Baym's Adventurers' Guild. It was so large that all the Guilds before seemed puny by comparison. To start with, there were at least four

entrances.

We entered through the one marked “West Entrance” and searched for the counter.

The building itself was cylindrical, while the interior was divided into four equal quadrants by a cross through the center.

A large number of people were entering and exiting through those doors. They weren’t just adventurers either; there were merchants and ordinary people as well.

The interior was actually quite tidy and structured for functionality. The decor perfectly walked the fine line between excessive and underwhelming, and most impressive was the counter.

At the long counter in the back, a great many staff members stood in file, speaking with adventurers.

The adventurers had formed several lines to wait their turn. There were some adventurers sitting on the sofa by the wall as well.

“I thought it when I saw the big building,” May said, sounding rather impressed, “but I’m surprised they can get so many people in here. You humans really like being in boxes.”

Was this perhaps the expected reaction from a qilin?

As I wondered which line to join, Novem pointed at a desk closer to the entrance.

“Milord, that appears to be the information desk.”

“The information desk?”

“Yes, they’d need one at this size. With all the adventurers coming in from the outside, the information desk serves to answer any questions they might have.”

They thought this through.

We made our way to the information desk, only for Erhart’s group to run ahead of us.

“Whoa there, we were here first!”

The guy at the desk, having seen everything, turned to us, and I gestured to tell him we didn't mind who went first.

With a light bow, he turned back to Erhart.

He looked to be somewhere in his mid-twenties.

"How can I help you today?"

Planting his elbow to the counter, Erhart seemed a little nervous. "Err, yes, it's that. We want to be adventurers! Then we'll hammer out those requests and become the best damn adventurers you've ev—"

Just as his talk of dreams got him into a fiery mood, the receptionist cut him off.

"Understood. You wish to register as adventurers, correct? In that case, please go to the south desk. That is where new adventurer registration is conducted."

The Guild was divided into four sectors. The receptionist explained how to get to the south counter, but Erhart started smacking his hand against the desk and complaining.

"Do it here, why don't you? I'm sure you're able to. We're dying here."

The receptionist seemed well accustomed to this. "The system is set up in such a way that we are physically incapable of registering anyone at any place besides the south counter. Complaining here will accomplish nothing. Next person please."

Ignoring Erhart's group, the receptionist called out to us. Though it felt awkward to intrude, we couldn't just play along with their antics forever. As the leader, I started up the conversation.

"We have already registered as adventurers, but this is our first time in Baym."

What followed was an explanation that the receptionist had clearly recited countless times before. "Do you have your Guild card with you? If you do, please go to the south counter. Adventurers from outside have to go through the same orientation as newcomers."

It seemed our prior registration didn't mean much in Baym.

"Are we treated the same regardless of experience?"

"There are a few things that set us apart from other Guilds. The intent of the orientation is to teach these differences."

Grumbling about it here was pointless, so I promptly started off toward the south counter. Then Erhart's group, who had been watching us, followed along.

Wait, are they really going to follow us to the end...?

As for the orientation, it wasn't anything special. It really was just a simple explanation of the Guild. According to the explanation, the south counter was the counter often used by newcomers and standard adventurers.

Baym's Guild was split into four distinct functions: The south side was the standard counter. The north was the counter that dealt with the dungeon. The west was a bit special and was where requests that had to do with mercenary work were handled. And finally, the east was a very Baym-specific counter that handled matters related to the sea. Guarding ships, and the like.

After we'd gone through the orientation, we handed over our Guild cards and filled out the paperwork.

Guild cards were metal plates that came in pairs. When the owner of the pair passed away, the name on both plates would be permanently marred. One of them would be carried around by the owner, while the other would be entrusted with the Guild.

And, once all explanations and formalities were over...

"How am I supposed to put up with this?!" Erhart cried, raising a ruckus.

The group orientation was over, and we'd reached the stage of individual Q&A when he finally broke. As all the other newbies and newcomers to Baym were leaving, Erhart and his group began complaining, so we left them behind.

"Why can't we take any requests?! To top it all off, we can't even enter the dungeon! This isn't what I was told!"

The very first thing that the Guild made very clear for all the new registrants and new additions was that our past accomplishments would not be taken into consideration. It did not matter how much we achieved outside, in Baym, we were all treated no differently from beginners.

Erhart was grumbling his heart out to a male staff member in his thirties.

“As I explained, newcomers lack credibility. We are unable to assign important requests to them, and we do not want them to risk their lives in the dungeon. Please start with basic odd jobs like everyone else.”

“We can handle any request you throw at us, and we’ll return from that blasted dungeon with a mountain of treasure on our backs! We don’t need to do odd jobs!”

The staff member took Erhart’s boasts with a bit of a troubled look.

At that moment, a woman appeared.

She seemed to be in her early twenties with long, silky blonde hair and drooping yellow eyes that gave off a gentle impression. Her pretty face was paired with a shapely body accentuated by a uniform which, compared to the uniforms worn by other Guild workers, seemed purposely modified to emphasize her sizable chest.

The eyes of Erhart and his friends were immediately drawn to these emphasized portions.

The woman seemed to have been drawn by the commotion. “What seems to be the problem?” she asked.

The male staff member looked at Erhart’s group, sighing at their blatant ogling.

“Apparently, they find being treated as newbies to be humiliating, Miss Marianne.”

“Oh dear. Is that so?”

The composed beauty put on a bit of a surprised act, and suddenly Erhart and his men were meek as lambs. They had become gentlemen in her presence.

“You might not believe me, but I’ve got three whole Arts at my disposal,” said

Erhart. “I’m a master of my craft. Don’t you think it’s wrong for someone like me to be stuck on odd jobs?”

Three Arts? Did I hear that right?

He didn’t look like he had any Demonic Tools that would serve the function of Arts. To be more precise, perhaps he was able to use his own Art up to its third stage?

Either he was taught incorrectly, or he simply didn’t comprehend what should have been considered common knowledge for an adventurer.

The beautiful woman praised him, taking great care not to rub him the wrong way.

“That’s incredible! There aren’t many people who can manifest their Art up to its third stage, you know? I’m sure you’re very strong.”

“I-I know, right?! So you can put me to work with some peace of mind. Give me some jobs that’ll help me stand out as an adventurer.”

I’m amazing, so treat me special—a bit selfish, no?

Hearing it all out with a smile, the pretty lady’s face suddenly shifted to sorrow as soon as Erhart had finished with his demand.

“I’m so sorry. The rules are strict, and there’s nothing we can do about them. But...oh yes! Baym does hold a *proficiency* test to measure the strength of adventurers who’ve come from afar. If you’re that confident in your abilities, why not give it a go?”

The male staff member who’d listened quietly to that point started to panic, a startled look in his eyes.

“N-No, that’s—”

But, “Leave it to me,” the woman assured him and shut down his objection.

That was when she cast a brief glance in my direction—no, at me. Evidently, she wanted me to hear it out too.

This was a test to gauge the skill level of adventurers from the outside. Perhaps it was something we’d be interested in.

“It’s simple enough. The test this time involves challenging Baym’s in-house dungeon. Well, actually, you’ll be taking a Guild request to act as support members for others who have already proved themselves. If they recognize your worth, then Baym will recognize you as first-rate adventurers.”

Erhart and his friends lit up, their eyes sparkling with expectations.

“Hey, that sounds easy enough. Count on us, then. We’ll be recognized in no time! O-On another note, would you mind telling me your name?” Erhart timidly asked.

It didn’t look like he actually understood what it meant to challenge a dungeon.

From the Jewel came a shower of cold words for this beautiful staff worker.

“Could this be their way of getting rid of nuisances? They sent oblivious but troublesome youths into the dungeon to get rid of them?”

The fourth head’s opinion was met with agreement from the other ancestors.

I was not going to speak up about it or give them any pity. This was the path they chose. I saw no need for us to convince them to give up on the trial.

The woman put a hand on her chest and smiled.

“I apologize for the late introduction. My name is Marianne, and I work here at the Guild.”

Marianne, a mild-mannered beauty. But the ancestors were thoroughly critical.

Through his usual veneer of disinterest, I could hear a slight hint of frustration in the fifth’s voice. “She can smile like that as she sends oblivious young men to die. Not that it has anything to do with us.”

If their party—which was without any decent equipment—went into the dungeon, they would most certainly die.

Shannon timidly glanced around. “H-Hey, we’re not going to stop them?”

She understood the danger they were in and wanted to put a stop to it.

But Miranda expressionlessly told her, “It’s their choice to make. I, for one,

am not going to babysit them.”

Shannon then looked at me pleadingly, but I shared Miranda’s opinion. I pretended not to notice her.

“So, when’s the test?” Erhart asked Marianne.

“It will take place in two weeks. The duration is roughly a month.”

The moment he heard that, Erhart exclaimed, “A-A month?! It takes that long?!”

“It’s a large-scale operation. Quite an expedition that you’ll be assisting if you wish to take the examination. But don’t worry. You’re all very strong, aren’t you?” Marianne encouraged them, clapping her hands.

“Y-Yeah! We’ll have that exam done lickety-split!”

Her eyes then turned to us.

“Now then, what about your group? From what I can tell, you seem to be quite an experienced party.”

Did she determine that from our equipment? Then she must be fully aware that they’re complete amateurs. This woman might be a little dangerous.

I gripped the Jewel. And as soon as I did, my ancestors...did not offer their usual advice.

“Oh? Are you already relying on us? Why don’t you try thinking on your own?”

He knew what I wanted to ask, but the third head abandoned me.

“Lyle,” the fourth added, “the third is not abandoning you. It’s about time you thought and acted on your own.”

The fifth agreed. “It’s up to you whether you take the exam or not. Remember, your goal is not to become a first-rate adventurer. It’s to defeat Ceres.”

“I’m interested to see how you plan to go about accomplishing that goal,” the sixth bemusedly chimed in. “So have at it. Make your choice.”

“Now, Lyle—what decision would *you* make?” the seventh head urged me to

choose.

I gave the Jewel one more strong squeeze and released it before smiling at Marianne.

“I will not take you up on that offer.”

Chapter 98: Plain Old Adventurers

Baym's Adventurers' Guild had an optional ability test, but I'd decided not to take it. Marianne seemed a bit surprised by my decision.

"You're quite capable, aren't you? You really won't take it? If you don't, you'll be treated like rookies for at least another three months."

Yes, we'd heard that during orientation.

"That isn't an issue," I replied. "We'll just go at it slow and steady then."

My comrades didn't complain about my decision—well, most of them didn't. Shannon looked quite displeased.

"Huh? Why not take it?" she demanded. "If Lyle takes the test, he'll be recognized immediately."

"You keep it down, Shannon," Miranda ordered, quickly clapping a hand over her sister's mouth.

Marianne seemed to want to say something in reply, but a certain someone of the Erhart variety butted in before she could.

"What? Too scared to take a little trial?" he taunted. He stuck his hands into his pockets and walked up to me with a bowlegged strut, bringing his face right up to mine.

"I just don't see any issues in not taking it," I told him.

These words seemed to be the deciding factor in whether or not Erhart and his comrades concluded that I was a coward.

"Hmph! You back down from duels, you back down from trials. It's crazy that a weakling like you's leading around so many beauties," Erhart scoffed before turning to the rest of my party. "Yeah, I'm talking about you girls. I'm asking you this for your own good—are you sure you want to follow this guy? We're a lot more reliable."

Novem shook her head. "Lord Lyle is not a weakling, nor is he unreliable."

Monica stole a glance at me as she said, “The useless chicken is certainly unreliable, but he is still my master. It is simply inconceivable for me to serve anyone else. Oh, what a noble and devoted maid I am!”

Clara had opened up a book out of boredom some time ago, but now that a ruckus had begun to brew, she shut it and stowed it in her bag. “I don’t know what you’re expecting exactly, but we know what we’re in for,” she said.

“Looks like you don’t understand the niceties of the heart,” Eva teased her. “Erhart here’s trying to advertise himself to all the cute girls. Oh, but make too big of a show, and it all turns to farce,” she added, turning to him. “Be careful of that.”

Erhart’s smile turned stiff. He reached a hand to grab the hilt of his greatsword, only for Aria to stick out the butt end of her spear at his throat.

“If you’re going to bring out a weapon, you’d best be ready,” she warned. “Our chat won’t be so friendly after that.”

“In the first place, Lyle is our leader,” Sophia calmly explained. “Calling our leader unreliable is the same as looking down on our entire party. Do you understand that when you mock Lyle, you mock all of us as well?”

Struggling to come up with a response to this, Erhart instead glared at me. “Quit hiding behind the backs of women, coward!”

Hey, don’t bring that up. I’m a little self-conscious about that, I thought. In any case, it felt like he really would draw his sword if I came to the front, and that was what I wanted to avoid.

“Now look here, we don’t want to get involved with you. I have my own goal, and that doesn’t involve taking the trial. What does that even have to do with you or your party?”

Why is he so insistent on picking on me?

When I told him flat out, he yelled at me red-faced. “You’ve got some nerve. Fight me!”

“No.”

“Do it!”

As I shot him an unpleasant look, May—who'd sat down on the spot, having grown weary of the conversation—nonchalantly added fuel to the fire.

"It's a male's base instinct to fight over a female. Lyle, beat him down."

No, no, we're not moving on instinct here. I'm not going to let May impose her standards on me.

But the fifth head, ever so kind to May, hopped aboard the proposal. "What a clever girl. Lyle, you just need to beat him down once to give him a dose of reality."

"Aren't you awful?" the third said with a sigh. "Sending him out to fight just because you're sweet on May?"

Yes, he's awful. You're all awful. As for what was so awful—sure, they were critical of the fifth, but no one else even tried to put forth a rational way to quell the situation. Quite the contrary. They were all yelling, "Go get him!" and "Smash his teeth in!"

I did not want to grow up to be like them, so I tried probing out a peaceful, rational solution. *Hmm. I'm not coming up with anything.*

Shannon tilted her head quizzically. "Hey, sis. Why do those men keep picking on Lyle? They don't even seem to care about him that much—their attention's mostly on us. And those creepy stares are annoying."

Miranda's eyes sharpened. "Shannon, hide behind me. Putting that aside, we can't waste all our time here. We can't answer your expectations, gentlemen. You're just in the way, so won't you disappear already?"

Her blunt words had Erhart and his friends flinch. They looked between me and Miranda.

Then, pointing at me, Erhart cried out, "Y-You're really okay with this guy?!"

"Yes, I am," Miranda replied with a smile. "He's a good man, is he not?"

It felt rather embarrassing when she said it so bluntly. I could feel my face turning red.

From within the Jewel, my ancestors were cheering, "Miranda's so cool," while also chiding me with mutterings of: "Lyle, stop being so pathetic."

Erhart gritted his teeth and turned his back.

“We’re leaving.”

After I’d seen them off, I realized that the other Guild staff members had left too, and Marianne was the only one nearby. She looked at me with a chuckle.

“You’re well loved, I see. You have a good party.”

When things get too tense between us, I don’t even know if we’re comrades anymore...

“I agree. They’re so good they’re wasted on me.”

“Oh, how envious. But harem parties often become the target of envy for men who don’t understand the situation. I’d wager this isn’t the first time.”

“Yes, we’ve been through it a few times before.”

“I see. Don’t hold it against them. They’re young and reckless.”

I wasn’t planning on holding a grudge, I thought. But from my perspective, I was more jealous of his all-male party. It was just wrong for me to be the only man; it was a fundamental error I needed to somehow correct.

Although we also had Damian, he was rear support and fell into a different category.

“Well then, while we’re here, why don’t we talk about the requests that’ll be available for you starting tomorrow?”

“Ah, before that, could I ask a question?”

“What is it?”

Before it came to requests, I asked Marianne if there were any inns she recommended in Baym.

The next day, our actions were...very plain indeed. We left through the gate early in the morning and got to cleaning the highway.

It was a road that many people and horses crossed many times over. The area around the gate would grow filthy in no time if it was left to fester.

If it was just for appearances, perhaps it wouldn't be too much of an issue, but there were plagues and other sanitation issues to consider. Cleaning was an essential task.

So while plain, it was important work.

With that said, the job mainly involved scraping together filth and trash and piling it up. Despite its simplicity, there were hardly any people who wanted to do the work. It was for this reason that the Adventurers' Guild took over the task and offered it to their adventurers as a low-ranking request.

And, there was one more important thing to note: although it reeked, it was backbreaking work, and no matter how much you cleaned, it would immediately get dirty again—the pay was minuscule.

Shannon threw her shovel at the ground.

"I can't take it anymore!"

I felt irritated just watching her. "I told you that all the tools are on rental! We have to pay compensation if you break them!"



Shannon wasn't in her usual frilly outfit. She wore work clothes that she was fine with dirtying on top of long boots and gloves. Her long hair was tied back, making her almost unrecognizable at a glance.

"Why do I have to join in on the cleaning?! This sort of filthy stuff—you can just go do it alone!"

Shannon and I had taken on a mundane and low-paying request.

Even in Baym, the heartland of adventurers, there wasn't much in the way of choice for new adventurers. Instead, the Guild prepared a handful of jobs that they were sure almost anyone could handle, and the rookies would have to choose from among them.

"Well, what else can we do? Novem took on the transcribing job, and May needs to learn common sense before we can send her out. Otherwise, I'll be terrified of what might happen."

Shannon retrieved her shovel, trembling. "Why am I the one cleaning up shit, then?! Hey, tell me why?! I don't want to work! If I have to, it ought to be something easier than this! At least something intellectual and elegant!"

She came with a laundry list of complaints, but the girl was still learning how to read and write. Owing to her awful handwriting, she couldn't take up transcription jobs.

Also, Miranda suggested, "Let's be a little harder on her," and that was how she ended up on road cleaning duty with me.

"Complain all you want, but keep those hands moving. Otherwise, we'll never finish."

"Right after we clean, a horse just comes by and starts shitting it out again! Why do I have to deal with this— Ah!"

A horse chose just that moment to let it all spill out right where Shannon had just cleaned. It looked straight at us, its teeth laid bare in what looked like a grin as it pulled a wagon away.

Shannon resumed her cleaning, crying. "You're kidding me! This is all some bad joke! I used to be a pampered princess who never had to hold anything

heavier than a spoon. Why am I here shoveling shit?”

It's a harsh world we live in. I had it pretty hard too, at first.

“Multitask. Keep your hands moving when you move your mouth.”

“I’m doing it! Give me a break already! Anyway, Aria and Sophia should be better suited for this, so why are they doing transcription with Novem? They should be here, logically speaking.”

The two of them were on transcription duty. The reason being—well, it was Miranda again. This time, she said, “Isn’t it about time those two started picking up other work?”

Watching Shannon slip and fall on the horse dung, I pointed and laughed.

“Look who fell...! Whoa, that was close!”

As I cackled away, Shannon picked up a large hunk of horse dung and threw it at me.

“You— You ought to be covered in shit too!”

“Hey, you called yourself a princess, but you’re the one who keeps repeating the word ‘shit’! Isn’t that disgraceful?!”

We continued to bicker back and forth until a supervisor came and scolded us.

Monica was crying alone at the inn. She sat in a corner as she sobbed.

“It’s terrible. I know I can be useful to that chicken... But just because someone has to stay behind, why does it have to be me... This is too much!”

Left behind to ensure nothing was stolen, Monica finished cleaning among other things, and was left with nothing but time on her hands.

“Street cleaning wouldn’t take even an hour if you left it to Monica, your superior maid!”

Monica was certainly capable enough to finish up the street cleaning job at a record pace. But if she did that, the party would most certainly stand out.

Considering they didn't want to attract any undue attention, her comrades had all been on board with leaving Monica behind. And so, she waited in her room, counting down the seconds to Lyle's return. That was, until she seemed to notice something. She turned her head toward the door.

She stood and quickly undid the lock, even though it hadn't even been knocked yet.

"It's open," she said.

Just beyond the doorway, Eva stared back at her with a look of surprise.

"H-Hey, don't open the door before I knock. You startled me."

"If it were that damn chicken, I'd show some consideration, but there is absolutely no benefit for me in being mindful of you."

Eva stepped in and took out her luggage. Fishing through her travel bag, she spoke to Monica. "You really are an irritating automaton. Anyway, am I the first one back?"

"It's still noon, after all. There are approximately five hours to go before the chicken returns."

"I see. Then could you tell them I'll be late?"

Eva took out a few costumes, carefully considering which one to wear.

After watching a while, Monica took a guess. "Will you be standing onstage?"

"An elf manager asked me. One of their members got bedridden, so they want me to fill in for a while."

Eva was gathering intel by getting in touch with the elves of Baym. Although she wasn't taking on any adventurer requests, she was still fulfilling a crucial role.

Soon, she'd decided on her costume. She changed and stood in front of a mirror where she struck various poses to ensure nothing was off.

"How's Clara doing?"

The moment Eva showed concern for Clara, Monica snorted. "Oh, a tsundere for other girls, are you?"

“No, I just don’t know where she is or what she’s up to. I thought I should ask, for what it’s worth.”

Monica told her about Clara. Like Eva, she hadn’t taken on any adventurer requests, but she was at the Guild anyway.

“She is in the Guild’s reference room looking into Baym and its relations with the surrounding nations.”

Eva changed back out of her costume and prepared to leave. “Sounds like her,” she said.

It was all about putting the right person in the right place. That was the job that suited Clara best. Monica was capable of doing just as much if not more, but Lyle had judged it would be dangerous to rely on her alone, so he’d entrusted Clara with the task.

Once Eva had all her things together and was about to head out, there was a knocking at the door. In came Miranda and May, both looking exhausted.

Monica seemed to light up with excitement as she asked about the situation.

“Oh my, did you utterly fail?”

Looking down over May who sat on the ground and turned the other way, Miranda heaved a deep sigh.

“I couldn’t get May away from the food stands.”

“There was so much delicious-looking food, and Miranda said it was off-limits,” May gave her excuse.

Miranda folded her arms beneath her chest, her cheeks twitching in frustration.

“Today was supposed to be for you to learn about how to live in human society. I said I’d treat you after we were done.”

“You didn’t treat me to anything!”

“Because we had to call it off halfway. Good grief, there’s a long road ahead of us.”

Miranda had taken May out to see Baym in order to teach her about human

society. Of course, Miranda's actual objective lay elsewhere.

She was investigating Baym, walking the city streets to gather information.

Eva laughed at her—a girl going through so much trouble to care for May.

“Looks like you have it rough.”

Miranda shot her a cold look. “And you look like you're having fun.”

“It's just so rare to see you struggling. I'll be out late, so you can eat without me.”

As soon as Eva was gone, Miranda squatted down to meet May's sulking gaze.

“May, we'll go out again after lunch. If you keep your promise, I'll buy you sweets.”

“S-Sweets? S-Sure...I'll do my best.”

And so, motivated by sweets, May would try her very hardest that afternoon.

At Baym's Adventurers' Guild, a long counter stretched across the room where a transcription service was offered. This counter was separated by many partitions, and in each partition, the transcriber would sit across from the client.

Once Sophia had finished up a job and the client had left, she slumped over the counter, exhausted.

“D-Done,” she muttered.

She'd written letters for various clients since the early morning and completely worn herself out. Writing a letter for a man who wanted to send a message to a far-off family he'd left to earn money for was simple enough. But writing a love letter left her at a loss.

If the client had been messing around, she could have gotten angry, and she could have turned them down. That was within her right. But she couldn't, because the client was serious.

With all the letters she'd written for various people, her hands were covered in ink. She was usually swinging around a massive battle-axe, yet today, she'd been worn out just from wielding a pen.

The same could be said for Aria, who was working at the area one over.

“I’ve had enough. I would have preferred street cleaning to this.”

She heard a complaint, so Sophia stuck her head out of the partition and peeked at Aria’s ink-stained hands.

“You’re holding on well.”

“I could say the same for you. Why are we the ones doing this, anyways?”

Aria insisted that physical labor would have been better for her, and Sophia had to agree with her there. Just then, Novem, who’d finished her work, approached them.

“That’s because we want you to learn this type of work too. It’s okay if you’re not good at it, but you can’t be incapable of doing it. It was Lord Lyle’s decision.”

Even if they weren’t suited for the task, the experience alone was valuable. Lyle didn’t expect Sophia or Aria to become proficient.

Staring at the ceiling, Sophia said, “Your Lord Lyle is out doing road cleaning, though.”

Novem hung her head, a serious look on her face. “I knew it. I should have been the one out there. It feels like we’ve pushed the heavy labor onto Milord. It’s a sickening feeling.”

Sophia and Aria exchanged a look and a shrug.

“She’s at it again.”

“She really is overprotective. Though she’s really strict sometimes too. By the way, what’s for dinner today?”

“I heard the inn’s dinner features fish as the main dish. Baym has a port, so fresh fish is cheap and plentiful. Seafood is very common, it seems. I’m looking forward to that!”

Despite Novem’s concerns, the two of them talked enthusiastically about their upcoming meal.

The narrow and complicated back alleys of Baym carried a completely different atmosphere than the main roads. A man—seemingly a cook—emerged from a building, dumping kitchen waste into a trash bin before returning inside.

From the shadows emerged Erhart, who'd been watching all along. He led his comrades to the trash, where they began to rummage.

"Oh, looks like we've got a good haul today."

These weren't just any kitchen scraps—they were the meals left by the patrons. The party avoided starvation somehow or another by feasting on leftovers.

One of his comrades spoke up tearfully, "Hey, what's going to happen to us now? We finally made it to Baym, and now we're scavenging food. It's pathetic."

The other young men seemed to be thinking the same thing. Their expressions darkened.

But Erhart encouraged them. "Don't be stupid! This is just until we can get into the dungeon. Just hold on until then! Once we're recognized as proper adventurers, we'll be rolling in dough. We'll stay at a good inn and feast on luxurious food and wine with beautiful women at our side!"

They'd left their homeland with a dream, but reality was persistent and harsh. Without any money to their name, they could only afford a hostel room in a cheap inn. But as the money ran dry, they were kicked even from there. This life they lived was worlds apart from the one they'd dreamed of.

"I should have just tilled the fields back home," his comrade complained.

Erhart desperately tried to keep his spirits up. "We'll be out of this life soon! We'll make money, trust me. Or do you want to be out cleaning streets every day like that Lyle guy?"

Street cleaning was a triple threat of smelliness, filth, and harsh labor. To make matters worse, it barely paid chump change. It was a job that Erhart and his comrades were determined to avoid. Unfortunately, jobs like transcription were simply out of reach.

Erhart was the only one among his comrades who could barely read and write.

They'd turned down the requests the Guild had offered to them and been left penniless.

"This is temporary. We'll surpass that guy in no time and show those stupid women what they missed out on. We'll go up to 'em and tell 'em, 'You're the fools who turned us down.' Okay?"

Erhart and his friends barely managed to scrape by, fueled by all the fantasies spread out before them.

One night two weeks after we'd arrived in Baym, we'd eaten dinner and begun lounging around in our rooms. We had two four-person rooms and one single. I was the one in the single room.

With a bath and a meal behind me, I was enjoying some leisure time in peace. The Jewel rested on the bedside table. These days, my free time usually consisted of talking to my ancestors, and today, it was the fourth head.

"It came as a surprise to me. I was sure you'd accept the trial."

Though I didn't show it, I was a little happy that I'd gone against his expectations. Not that I'd made my choice to startle him or anything.

"We've only just arrived in Baym," I said. "Getting information on the area is my first priority. The dungeon is tempting, but we didn't have enough time until the exam either."

Had they given us a month instead of two weeks to prepare, I would have considered it. But I believed I'd made the right choice by choosing the less conspicuous option.

"Yes, your investigation seems to be going well."

Clara was scanning the Guild's reference room, researching everything we'd need to be successful in Baym. Meanwhile, Eva was stocking up on all sorts of rumors from her fellow elves. Miranda had also apparently found several information dealers in the city.

Over the past few days, May had learned just a little bit about living as a human. The remaining members were taking on Guild requests to steadily build up trust.

I don't think I made the wrong choice.

If we'd rushed to the dungeon, it would have been far more chaotic. Instead, we were slowly and methodically laying the groundwork.

"It's only been two weeks, but we've achieved quite a lot. Cleaning jobs are very satisfying. It reminds me of the muckraking I did early on," I said with a laugh.

With a pleased tone, the fourth replied, "Back then, you were complaining just like Shannon. I guess a year is enough to change a person."

"It takes me back to when I knew nothing about being an adventurer."

I had been awful, truly awful back then.

"So what's the plan now?" the fourth asked.

"I'd like some more information about the dungeon. And then—I should check up on Damian."

Damian was living with Lily in the Dump Truck just outside of Baym. He'd parked the vehicle in an open area outside the walls, but the fees to rent out that space were very high. We needed to find a place where he could settle down, and we needed to find it fast.

"Baym seems to be living up to expectations," said the fourth head. "It's about time you found yourself a base of operations."

"We'll need a place for the Dump Truck, and enough space for us to live... A mansion might work out?"

I felt drowsy. As I began to drift off, I heard the fourth softly say, "You're tired. Get some rest."

"Yes...I think...I will."

I had an early morning ahead of me; I didn't feel inclined to go against the feeling.

“Good night, Lyle,” the fourth head said, his gentle voice lulling me to sleep.

Chapter 99: Baptism by Baym

“Wh-What the hell is this?”

Erhart’s face twisted in shock as he observed the adventurers preparing to challenge Baym’s dungeon. The Guild was leading a large-scale raid involving numerous parties.

The scale of the operation was staggering, with over three thousand participants including support members. A large gate had been erected at the dungeon’s entrance, which was being firmly guarded by the city’s soldiers.

His comrades wore similarly stiff faces of disbelief.

“Y-You could gather up every person in the village, and it wouldn’t add up to this much.”

“Hey, look at the guys over there; they’re all in full plate armor.”

“What’s with these numbers?”

The adventurers came in all sorts. There were those who looked like they belonged to a knight order and others whose wild appearances would have easily had them mistaken as bandits. Right next to an adventurer in full plate armor stood another clad in beast pelts and holding an axe.

Despite their lack of uniformity, each and every adventurer was very well-equipped.

Erhart felt a sense of inadequacy about the sword on his own back.

As he and his comrades stood in stunned silence, a Guild worker approached them.

“Are you the party taking the exam? The name is... Huh, the handwriting’s pretty bad. Am I supposed to read this as...Gryphon Cavalry?”

“That’s right,” Erhart replied, eliciting laughter from some of the surrounding adventurers.

This was a group in uniformly light equipment led by a young man with short, curly orange hair. Though their armor was light, they had various tools dangling from their belts, and they were certainly better equipped than Erhart's party.

"Gryphon Cavalry?" the orange-haired leader said. "I don't see no gryphons. Hell, I don't even see any horses."

Erhart glared at him. "You got a problem with that?"

The man raised his hands, signaling surrender.

"Hey, no offense. I had a late night and was feeling drowsy, but it looks like a good laugh was all I needed to perk up. The name's Albano. Leader of this here gang."

The cackling man seemed just a little older than Erhart. He gave off a flippant vibe, but he had a nice body and his weapons seemed well maintained.

Just as Erhart was about to go at him, a man in full plate armor intervened.

"You again, Albano?!" said the knight-looking man.

He had an overly stern vibe to him, with his black hair neatly slicked back. He was tall too, his innate seriousness clear in even his face. The party he led were all outfitted like mounted knights. They wore metal armor and even had horses.

Albano grimaced at the sight of him. "Cleto? You really gotta be this overbearing so early in the morning?"

Cleto stood imposingly on the opposite side of the other frivolous gathering, clenching his fist as he began to lecture Albano. He had a loud voice that demanded attention.

"Are you picking fights with the newcomers again?! Quit provoking them into fights they can't win. We're all part of the same raid team. You, me, and them."

As Cleto—whose last name was Benini—pointed this out, Albano sat down on a crate and gestured toward Erhart's party with a nudge of his chin.

"Take a better look at 'em. Do you think they can keep up with us? They reek of garbage and don't got any decent equipment. They're just rookies who took the Guild exam without knowing a thing. They've got a better future ahead if they just leave here and now."

Cleto glanced at Erhart before closing his eyes in thought.

“The Guild endorsed their participation. They must see some potential in them.”

Albano burst out laughing, holding his belly. “Potential?! Hell no. They’re just tryna take out the trash.”

The two seemed to know one another, despite their opposing personalities. It was clear they were accustomed to not seeing eye to eye. Not that this had anything to do with Erhart.

He felt that he was being mocked, and reached for the hilt of his sword.

“Who’re you calling trash? How about we put those words to the test?”

With these youthful, impulsive actions, even Cleto, who had stuck up for Erhart up to that point, had a cold look in his eyes.

“Let go of your weapon. You cannot beat Albano.”

Erhart flared up, his face turning red as he wailed, “What do you know?! I have three Arts. I never lost to anyone in the village. I even beat my old man!”

Cleto looked at him curiously. “Three Arts? My apologies, but I don’t see any Demonic Tools on your person.”

“Demonic Tools? The hell’s that about?! Quit throwing in incomprehensible nonsense!”

Albano scratched his head, looking even more troubled than before. “What backwater did you crawl out of, kid? No, before that, what sort of Arts?”

As Erhart activated his Art, the muscles of his arms swelled. There was a grating sound as the effect spread to the rest of his body, and he seemed to grow a little taller too. There were veins popping out all over his exposed skin.

“How about that? Amazing, right?”

It didn’t take more than a glance to understand it was a physical enhancement Art. Albano’s expression turned serious as he scanned him with appraising eyes.

“Hmm, not bad. I take back what I said. You might be good for carrying

supplies.”

Erhart felt something snap inside of him.

“I’ll kill you!”

Forgetting himself in anger, he grabbed his greatsword and charged at Albano—only for his momentum to carry him face-first into the ground.

“Bff?!”

What just happened? As he lay dazed from the fall, the commotion drew the attention of another man. This man appeared to be in his early thirties with blond hair neatly parted in a three-to-seven ratio.

He carried an air of strictness, and his tone as he spoke only seemed to reinforce this.

“What are you doing here?”

Albano and Cleto both seemed on edge at the sight of him.

“Tsk! Boss Neu, you reeled in a pain in the ass.”

“Albano, you’re being rude to Sir Neu!”

His name was Neu Neumann, a deputy leader of the raid team and an overseer of the operation. That alone was proof of the extent to which the Guild recognized his abilities.

Neu grabbed Erhart and helped him to his feet.

“Albano, I told you. Stop causing quarrels before we even set out.”

“Yeah, I know.” Albano had been neutered by Neu’s presence.

Neu turned to Erhart. “Are you a newcomer here for the exam?”

“That’s right!” Erhart answered, wiping the blood from his nose.

“I’m saying this for your own good. Don’t pick fights. This is an exam. Your actions are being monitored by Guild workers. No matter how capable you are, you will fail if you cause issues.”

When he put it like that, Erhart had no choice but to lower his fist. He didn’t want to return to that miserable life in the back alleys. He was determined to

prove himself, and to finally do some real adventurer work.

“O-Okay, I get it.”

After making sure Albano and Cleto were gone, Neu went on his way too. He didn't forget to caution Erhart on his way out.

“Also, if you're going to fight, you need to do a better job picking opponents. Albano is strong.”

Erhart's comrades tended to him as he thought, *Then I'll take him down and show you I'm stronger.*

Baym's dungeon was a truly curious place. It took the form of a massive hole in the ground with a spiraling path that led down its sides.

No, rather than a path, it was more like a town. The way was lined with dilapidated houses that looked like they would crumble at any second, forming a maze of back alleys and dead ends.

A blinding light poured in from the center hole, but the ever-present ceiling created a perpetual dimness. As one ventured farther down, the spiraling, winding nature of the mysterious town meant that the floors you had previously tread loomed above you.

Curiously, right beneath the ground they walked, on the bottom side of the outwardly extending paths, there were abandoned buildings that protruded down just like the ones that rose up. Once night fell, the strange fireless torches littered throughout the dungeon were said to glow with a pale blue light, only adding to the air of mystery.

The hole itself was massive, spanning approximately three thousand meters in diameter. When one stared across, they'd see the shadows of places they'd passed through before as tiny specks in the distance.

They were proceeding along the downward slope of the spiral along surprisingly spacious paths three meters across. As the path brushed up against the hole, Erhart strayed to the edge to take a peek at the bottom, only to be met with a pitch-blackness far vaster than his eyes could perceive.

“S-So this is a dungeon...”

As he and his comrades were in the center of the formation, they had yet to take part in combat. Now and then, they would hear the battle cries of humans and the anguish of monsters from the front lines.

It was a dim and creepy place.

Turning around, Erhart came face-to-face with his party members using wooden sticks as makeshift canes.

“Erhart, do you feel all right?”

“I feel sick as hell.”

“Is everyone else okay?”

Seeing his mana-intoxicated comrades, Erhart put on a brave face.

“Nah, this is nothing! Don’t worry about it. Anyways, if we wanted to get down there, shouldn’t there be an easier way?”

One of his comrades stared curiously at the ceiling above.

The upside-down town was a strange sight to behold, and the dimness created by the lines of crumbling buildings was uncanny.

“H-Hey,” his comrade said. “If there’s such a massive hole, what’s stopping Baym up there from falling straight into it? I’m starting to get scared.”

Erhart had no answer for that. But he hazarded a guess: “W-Well, you know! They must’ve spread really thick boards up top and made sure it was safe before they built Baym!”

The real answer, however, came from Neu, who was surveying the entire expedition team from the center.

“Is this your first time in a dungeon?” he asked.

“Neu... Err, Mister Neu.”

Erhart wasn’t good around calm and composed adults like Neu.

“According to the esteemed scholars, dungeons apparently exist within another dimension. We are merely accessing that space. You could dig beneath Baym all you wanted, and you’d only find dirt.”

Despite his explanation, Erhart didn't understand the half of it.

"O-Oh. I see."

Neu gave a troubled smile. "It's all to say that Baym will not fall into the hole. More importantly, it's break time. We're going to hunker down here for the day, so please help set up camp."

Looking around, Erhart saw that the others were already hard at work. He scratched his head, awkwardly.

"Hey. Mister Neu."

"What is it?"

"There's a device that lets you skip over dungeon floors, right? Wouldn't it be quicker to use that and jump straight to our destination?"

Understanding what he was trying to say, Neu sent him a weary look.

"Did no one tell you? Our expedition has multiple objectives, one of which is to start from the top and subjugate the monsters around the entrance. Skipping floors would defeat the purpose."

"Oh, is that so? But we should hurry down once we're done with that, right? Could we use a rope or something?"

Gazing down into the abyss, he could faintly see the nearest floor; a townscape much like the one that surrounded them.

Neu sighed. "Don't even think about it. A few adventurers try it every year, but they're all sucked into the hole. Not one of them has returned. It all goes to show that corner-cutting is not rewarded."

Neu went on his way, and once he was gone, Erhart looked around disinterestedly.

"We'll never have any time to shine if we stay around here. Hey, boys, don't help with that nonsense. Rest up. Our job is to kill monsters."

Discontented at their lack of opportunities, Erhart and his party members rested up.

Two weeks had gone by since the start of the expedition. Erhart and his party were still being treated the same as before. They were inside one of the run-down houses, eating lunch at a rickety table. The meal consisted of soup and hard bread.

Participation in the expedition thankfully guaranteed three meals a day, but Erhart and his comrades were dissatisfied.

“It’s the same food every day.”

“Those guys out there fighting get to eat meat, but it’s vegetable scrap soup and hard bread for us.”

“And they won’t let us go to the front line even if we ask.”

At this rate, they would never get a chance to prove themselves.

Erhart made his resolve. “Listen, boys. Tonight, we sneak out and do what we came here to do.”

“We’re finally doing it?!”

The young men’s eyes sparkled with excitement. They were eager to finally do some monster hunting, the kind of adventurer-like work they’d dreamed of.

“It’s no use asking Mister Neu—he just doesn’t listen. This is where we have to be proactive, to take the bull by the horns and show our strength.”

Night fell, and after confirming everyone was asleep, Erhart and his party members set out to join the front lines. They came across the occasional patrol, but this dungeon never left them wanting for hiding places.

They moved down a path, even darker now than it had been during the day, with a makeshift torch and with Erhart taking the lead—then suddenly, they heard a beast’s growl.

Erhart drew his greatsword and took his stance.

“Use the torch to find the enemy! I’ll slice it dead.”

As they nervously cast a light on their surroundings, they revealed the figure of a wounded wolflike monster. Its red eyes let off an eerie gleam.

“H-Hey!”

“I’ve never seen anything like it before!”

“S-Someone, help!”

His comrades were stunned and panicked at the sight of it. It was no wonder; the wolf was larger than they were, its size on a completely different level from any of the monsters they’d seen around the village.

Erhart readied his greatsword, expanding his muscles.

“Don’t lose your nerve! It’s all bark, no bite. I’ll take it down in one hit!”

He lifted the greatsword high and swung it down hard. This was how he’d buried many a monster before.

A massive lump of metal propelled by highly enhanced muscle—he swung down with the full might of his Art. Erhart had never encountered a monster that could withstand such a strike before.

And the wolf became the first.

“What?!”

The wolf dodged with a swift backward leap, and the tip of the sword found itself lodged deep in the ground. As though to mock his frantic efforts to extract it, the wolf bit down on the blade and pulled back against him.

“L-Let go!”

Despite his best efforts to reclaim his blade, the wolf went on to crush it between its jaws. His comrades cried out in terror as they saw this.

“It’s over!”

“How are we supposed to beat this?!”

“I told you it was a bad idea.”

The young men turned around. He’d lost his comrades as well as the light of the torch that they carried, leaving Erhart trembling in the dark. Seemingly amused, the wolf circled him, growling to heighten his fear.

“Damn it. Damn it... *Damn it!*”

He quivered and shouted as he burst forth, relying on the sound of the wolf’s

steps. He tried to punch it, but instead smacked into the wall of a dilapidated house and fell back.

Collapsed face-up, Erhart could feel the wolf resting its front paws on his chest. Its face drew closer, its drool dripping down on his face.

“St-Stop...”

The wolf opened its mouth, casting a rancid breath upon him.

Tears of fear streamed down his face. A warm wetness spread from his nether regions and the smell of ammonia filled the air. And then...

“What, you again?”

He heard a voice laden with annoyance; a voice which prompted the wolf to raise its head and turn.

The light of several lanterns had drawn near, completely unbeknownst to Erhart. Barely illuminated by the lanterns, a young man with orange hair and a one-handed sword leaped down from the crumbled roof of a ruined house.

Before the wolf could register the man, his sword had taken its head.

Erhart watched in a daze as the blood from the cross section bathed him.

The wolf’s body slowly fell.

“Eek!” He let out a shriek as he finally regained some control of his body and scooted backward along the ground. Then, he realized it was Albano who had decapitated the wolf.

With a weapon smaller than his own, Albano had defeated a monster he could not. Erhart found this unbelievable.

Arriving with the lanterns, Albano’s comrades surrounded Erhart.

“You’re covered in blood, kid.”

“Nah, that’s monster blood. But man, you reek.”

“Did you wet yourself?”

And before these laughing adventurers, Erhart promptly passed out.

The next day, Erhart and his comrades were sent back to the surface with the floor transfer device. They were apprehended at the Adventurers' Guild where Marianne—and her superior—awaited them. That superior addressed them with a condescending tone.

“You ignored orders and nearly got yourself killed from your arbitrary actions... This here report details your reputation within the team. It says you were a bunch of freeloaders who didn't even help out where you could.”

They had been of no use in battle. But that wasn't all; they lacked cooperative spirit, refusing to help out with the camp. The only time they ever made the effort to show up was at mealtime. How would the other adventurers view such behavior? It was obvious. Their reputation was the absolute worst.

The forty-year-old male supervisor scoffed as he regarded Erhart and his despondent companions.

“It seems you understand just how powerless you really are. Right now, you are a useless bunch with nothing but shoddy equipment and empty boasts. You should quietly return to that village of yours.”

Erhart lifted his face to glare at the supervisor, but behind him and Marianne was a well-armed guard. He could only stay silent, lowering his head and clenching his fists.

His comrades were also quiet.

Having fled and left Erhart behind, they had nothing to say. Some even seemed pleased by the prospect of returning home, and their relieved faces and sighs were not lost on Erhart.

“How am I supposed to understand your side if you stay silent? Why did you do this?”

“Please wait. These kids were just trying to do their best,” Marianne cut off her supervisor's criticism to defend them. “They were certainly reckless, but that's how adventurers need to be. Can't we watch over them for just a little longer?”

Shooting her a troubled look, her supervisor asked, “Are you going to take responsibility for them, then? They've inconvenienced the Guild with their

actions.”

Are you going to look after them? When posed with the question, Marianne offered a serious nod.

“Let me take charge of them, please. If they want to remain in Baym, I will personally oversee them and turn them into full-fledged adventurers.”

Erhart lifted his head again at Marianne’s sincerity, tears of joy welling in his eyes. He hadn’t experienced such kindness since coming to the city.

“Miss Marianne, I... I’m...”

As he burst into tears, Marianne comforted him. “It’s okay. But from now on, I am going to be strict. Will you properly follow my instructions?”

“Y-Yes!” Erhart nodded. “I’ll do my best for you!”

Marianne smiled, and her supervisor shrugged.

“Let’s do our best together, then.”

“Yes!”

Thus, Erhart and his comrades failed the test. After just two weeks, they had left the expedition team midway.

Chapter 100: Life in Baym

It had been a month since we first arrived in the Free City of Baym. We'd generally take Guild requests five out of seven days a week, undertaking what was generally considered menial labor.

Then came two days of rest, but...

"Sophia, you're cheating!"

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

We were spending our free time learning new things. Today, we'd all come out to a ranch just outside of Baym to practice horseback riding. Aria, a rather active girl who was also formerly a noble, had some riding experience and quickly got the hang of it.

This ignited Sophia's competitive spirit.

Sophia also had some riding experience, but she wasn't nearly as skilled as Aria. The two of them were now competing in a horse race.

At first, it was Sophia trying to catch up to Aria who rode ahead of the group, but soon enough came Sophia's moment when she finally overtook. That was when Aria got competitive and took her lead right back.

This repeated back and forth until, before anyone realized it, things had turned into a full-fledged race.

Initially, Aria showed her superiority, but—

"You used your Art just because you were about to lose!"

Not wanting to lose, Sophia ended up using her Art. Sophia's Art allowed her to manipulate the weight of whatever she was touching. Simply making herself lighter was a huge boost to her horse.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Stop making baseless accusations."

Sophia tried to play innocent, but the stiff look on her face said otherwise.

Noticing the lie, Aria's face flushed with anger and she decided to even the playing field.

"Don't underestimate me! If I use my Art to acceler— Huh?!"

Aria's Art allowed her to accelerate *her own* body and move at incredibly fast speeds, but this was completely meaningless when she was riding a horse.

Sophia chuckled. "It's my win, Aria!"

"You cheater!"

Seeing Aria so worked up, my other comrades laughed too.

"Aria can be so clueless. Her Art only makes her faster, not the horse," said Eva, an experienced rider who was enjoying herself, as it had been a while since she last rode a horse.

The same went for Miranda. "They're both idiots. We should be thankful they're realizing these things in training. That aside, Shannon—you mustn't cling to the horse like that."

Unlike everyone else, Miranda had to take care of a problem child that went by the name of Shannon.

Shannon was trembling, her arms wrapped around the neck of the small pony she was riding on.

"I mean, I'm scared!" she protested.

Shifting my eyes away from Shannon, I looked to Clara, who was also a first-time rider and was receiving instruction from Novem.

"Please calm down, Clara. Also, keep your back straight."

"I can't. I can't! I definitely can't! I-I-I'll get hurt, very hurt if I fall from here."

Yeah, it can feel surprisingly high up when you're riding a horse. Looking down is a bit scary.

"Shouldn't you stop poor Clara before she gets hurt?" the third head said with concern. "And what's even the point of horseback practice when you have Porter? I feel sorry for her."

The seventh head admonished him. "Everything is an experience. This is a

valuable opportunity for Clara to learn what riding is all about.”

Clara was usually calm and composed, but atop the horse, she was trembling. Seeing her teary-eyed and shouting was a rare experience in and of itself.

As for my other comrades—the moment I looked at May, the fifth head blissfully muttered, “Animals are nice, aren’t they? They soothe the soul. Let’s come here every week.”

How is that supposed to work out? That’s a definite no.

His voice bounced, a stark contrast to his usual indifference.

“Look at May, Lyle. Isn’t she having so much fun? Animals really are wonderful.”

The horses and other animals were gathering around May.

“Hmm, it’s kinda strange for me to ride a horse, right?” she said.

The horse she was riding looked so nervous I was feeling bad for it.

May was a qilin. Did the other animals understand that?

Finally, there was Monica—she was leading the horse I was riding on. In her case, she insisted she didn’t have to ride a horse since she could run faster than one.

“Good grief, it’s so noisy here. You handle riding better than I thought you would, by the way. I was hoping you’d show a more hopeless and incompetent side befitting a damn chicken.”

“Hey, is that how you see me? I used to be the heir to an earl house you know. Of course, I at least practiced riding...umm, I think.”

I couldn’t remember it as Ceres had stolen my memories, but it seemed my body knew what to do. I could get the horse to an amble or a gallop just fine, though I wasn’t as good as Aria.

No, the real crux of the matter was that Aria was simply too good.

“Finally caught up! Sophia, you’re not getting away this time!”

“How are you catching up like that?!”

Aria's horse was keeping pace with Sophia's despite Sophia using her Art. Aria was indeed skilled.

It was Miranda who found this facility. She had gone into town to gather rumors, and the ranch was one of the things she found out about—alongside information on various other training halls and private schools.

Eva approached me on horseback. "Looks like this isn't an issue for you, Lyle."

"I do need some practice to brush up. So, what's up?"

I asked her why she'd come up to me, and Eva positioned her horse parallel to mine before speaking. She, too, was adept with horses.

"I heard something interesting the other day, so I thought I'd tell you about it. Do you know about Zayin?"

The Theocracy of Zayin was a nation near Baym. The countries around Baym were all small and constantly fighting among themselves. The adventurers who took on mercenary work would earn their bread by taking part in these skirmishes.

Zayin was a relatively larger country among its puny neighbors. A short while back—well, several decades to be exact—they had snatched up territory from a country called Lorphys, making it stand a head higher than its peers.

I'd heard about that from Clara, but I knew Eva would grow sullen if I brought up her name, so I kept quiet about that.

"It's one of the larger countries around Baym, right?"

"That country seems to be going through some internal discord."

"Really?"

"I don't have any definitive proof. But there are too many suspicious rumors to think otherwise."

Eva had heard concerned voices, all wondering if a civil war was about to break out in Zayin.

From the Jewel, the sixth head was beginning to hatch another nasty scheme.

"A theocracy? That'll be a bit of a pain, but... If we can leverage the conflict

well, it could turn interesting.”

“Isn’t it too soon for Lyle?” the third refuted. “He doesn’t have enough allies. It’ll be a while before he can rise as a mercenary.”

“Oh, what a shame, when there’s definitely so much to exploit,” the sixth head said with a sigh.

Are we really thinking of exploiting people when they’re going through hard times?

As per usual, they were terrible people. But perhaps there was some way we could use that information.

“Eva, can I ask you to do something?”

“What?”

“Can you gather more information and rumors about Zayin?”

Eva beamed. “Oh? Did something catch your interest? All right. I’ll try asking my kin who came from that direction. I’ll put in a word with Miranda too.”

“With Miranda?”

“She knows a few information brokers, so she might be able to get something from them.”

“Then I’ll ask her.”

We’d made a fair bit of progress in a month. Everyone had become so reliable.

After talking it through with the owner of the ranch, we arranged for them to take care of Damian’s Dump Truck for the time being. So there, it stayed.

Inside the truck, I sat across from Damian.

“Hmm, so that’s why you’ve been doing earnest adventurer work?”

Sipping on overly sweet coffee, Damian seemed a bit interested in our recent activities.

“Well, I don’t see any problem with it. Gathering information is important.

More importantly, is there any quiet, calm place in Baym? There are all sorts of tools available in the city, and it would be convenient to have a lab there.”

I wanted to fulfill his request, but my wallet wouldn’t permit it. Sure, from an adventurer’s perspective, I had a lot of money, but I needed to economize with the future in mind.

“We have a lot of expenses right now. But we’ll probably be able to enter the dungeon in three months, and I plan to make a killing.”

“Yes, I’m sure you will, Lyle. But why not find yourself a patron among the local merchants?”

“I’m considering it.”

Baym was a city of adventurers and merchants. Many large merchant firms were earning big bucks from the city’s prosperous trade, and it would certainly be a lot easier to operate in Baym with one of them backing us.

The problem was finding someone willing to sponsor us. We wouldn’t be able to negotiate if they weren’t interested. The character of the merchant was also crucial—we couldn’t link hands with someone who planned on exploiting and discarding us.

“Considering what’s to come, it would be good to partner with one of the bigger firms, and for now, we don’t have the achievements to do so. We’ll continue gathering information for the time being.”

“Not much you can do about that,” Damian said with a bit of disappointment. “Your patron’s money will go straight to me, so I’d prefer a big one too.”

Hey, don’t just expect funds like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. It’s a bit bothersome.

But Damian was skilled at what he did. The tools he developed would prove useful down the line. Probably.

“Damian, don’t overdo it.”

“Ha ha ha! I’ll keep that in mind.”

At first he was laughing, but his face was completely serious when he said that last part. And then, he promptly averted his eyes.

It was hopeless. He would never do anything that he wasn't personally interested in.

Within the Jewel, the fourth head was giving the patron issue some serious thought: "We've been looking into various merchants, but this is one thing we should approach with the utmost caution. We need more information."

"Right," the seventh said, similarly cautious. "I'd prefer it if we weren't exploited to death. Merchants are astute when it comes to profit. Especially the wealthy ones."

In other words, they would easily betray us the moment they judged us to be a liability.

The third head offered a different take. "You're being too cautious. Honestly, we need to use whatever we can get if we want to defeat Ceres. Though I agree that information gathering comes first."

It had been so much simpler when we were only focused on earning money as adventurers.

After parting ways with Damian, I headed to the Adventurers' Guild. I needed to check up on Clara, who was doing research in the Guild's reference room.

The third head's voice was filled with excitement.

"Baym's Guild is incredible, isn't it? It's better than your average library."

Entering a room with an engraved plate that read "Reference Room" hung above it, I found myself in what did indeed feel like a library. The bookshelves reached to the high ceiling and required the use of stepladders to access the tops.

The room was also vast, with various Guild workers stationed around to manage the place.

The worker at the front desk called out to me, "Are you searching for something specific?"

"I came to fetch a friend."

“I see. If you need help finding something, just let me know.”

The books in the reference room weren't confined to materials necessary for adventurers; they also included novels and essays. The place functioned much like a regular library.

And some adventurers came there just out of their love for books.

A huge mountain of a man with a magnificent beard was learning letters with picture books.

A magician-looking adventurer studied with several books on magic stacked over the table.

There were quite a few people making use of the facilities.

“It really is like a library,” I muttered.

The third, clearly enjoying himself, said, “It falls short of Aramthurst, but it's incredible for a Guild to have such facilities. On top of this, Baym has a splendid library proper. It's envious, really.”

According to Clara, the city had an actual library that put the reference room to shame.

It didn't take long to find her. She was at one of the desks, reading through the stacks upon stacks of various materials laid out before her and taking notes.

“Yeah, Clara's working hard, isn't she?” the third head said with fondness. “Lyle, why don't you treat her to some tea?”

The third head was soft on Clara. He himself had been an avid reader in his life, and he favored her purely for their shared hobby.

“Be reasonable,” I softly reprimanded him before approaching Clara. “Clara, I've come to pick you up.”

Clara looked up, took off her glasses, and stretched.

“Is it that time already?”

She glanced at the clock in her room, but without her glasses, she was apparently unable to make it out. She squinted and stared hard at it.

She can be a bit klutzy when she lets her guard down.

“It’s already evening. Shannon will be upset if we’re out too late again.”

Clara was responsible for doing research in the reference room. She was gathering all the information we’d need to operate effectively as adventurers in Baym. Apart from that, she was also looking into the history and various other aspects of the local area.

Since she loved reading and didn’t even consider this as work, she would oftentimes lose track of time and would end up staying out late.

“I’m sorry for causing concern.”

A few days ago, she’d returned in the dead of night and been scolded by both Eva and Shannon. Well, it was less that they were angry and more that they were worried about her.

“Did you find anything interesting?”

“Interest is subjective, so I cannot say for sure. But there are some intriguing facts about Baym.”

“Like what?”

I took a seat next to her, speaking quietly so as not to disturb others.

“It’s about Baym’s dungeon. The dungeon takes the shape of a large vertical shaft with a spiraling path that descends along its size. Although it is very extensive, there is essentially only one path through it.”

Even if she told me that, I struggled to picture it.

“A spiral?”

“Like this.”

She drew a diagram on her memo pad, and I finally understood.

The dungeon was structured like a spiral staircase.

“Apparently, you descend a slope lined with abandoned buildings. As with other dungeons, the deeper you go down, the stronger the monsters become.”

Dungeons, also known as labyrinths, took on various shapes but all shared one quality—the deeper one ventured into their depths, the stronger the monsters and the more valuable the treasure you would find. This was the

unchanging rule.

“Is there a device to get between floors?”

“There is. Unlike Aramthurst’s, it is just a round floor panel. It floats in the air, and can take you higher or lower.”

Large-scale dungeons were always furnished with a convenient device. I’d heard about it being something prepared by the dungeon itself to lure adventurers farther in.

“That’s quite a strange dungeon. So was that the interesting fact?”

“No, that is just the start of it. The dungeon is thought to span over one hundred floors.”

“That’s deep.”

“However no adventurer has ever reached the innermost chamber. Though I doubt they’d let anyone clear it even if they did.”

The dungeon in Baym was a managed dungeon. Dungeons were supposedly living beings and would disappear once fully conquered.

Once the dungeon was gone, it would be impossible to harvest the precious materials and Demonic Stones that came from the bodies of monsters. And the same went for the treasures.

Therefore, some saw it more profitable to manage dungeons rather than exterminate them.

Baym’s dungeon greatly contributed to the city’s development and was thus strictly guarded.

“It’s living up to its reputation as the best in the world.”

“Yes, it’s rare to come across dungeons of this scale. Many adventurers say it feels like walking through a ruined city.”

So it’s like a city even when it’s in the dungeon? That’s going to change how we’ll have to approach combat.

“I’ve been looking into the types of monsters that appear. Ah, I nearly forgot. I haven’t mentioned the most important part.”

“The most important part?”

“The criteria Baym’s Guild uses to judge adventurers and permit their access to the dungeon. It was written in one of the documents.”

“Well done! You always come through, Clara.” The third praised her for her discovery.

The fifth, sighing, seemed skeptical. “So the test contents are in the reference room, huh? This might be a test to ensure that adventurers are doing research in advance.”

So it’s important to go over the data.

“Nicely done, Clara.”

“Thank you?”

She cocked her head, seemingly unaware of what she’d accomplished.

When we returned to the inn, Miranda was waiting for us.

“So you were with Clara.”

“I went to pick her up. By the way...”

Clara had gone to take a bath, leaving only me and Miranda. Well, not exactly: May was there too, lying limply in her qilin form. She was sprawled out over the bare floor, sleeping with an exhausted look on her face.

Seeing her like that, the fifth head immediately grew concerned, and the sixth quickly tried to keep him in check.

“Hey, what happened?! What did you do to May?!”

“Calm down for a second, would you?”

I was curious myself, so I asked, “Why’s May so tuckered out?”

“I just taught her some common sense. *Human* common sense. As you might expect, it can be quite difficult when she has a completely different perspective than us. She worked especially hard today, so she wore herself out and fell asleep. We’ve reached the point where we can let her go off on her own and— No, I’m still a bit concerned. We’ll be there soon.”

The qilin were a very long-lived species with a different sense for the world than humans. This difference made it challenging for May to adapt to human society.

She seemed to be getting more accustomed lately, but it was still tough on Miranda, who'd been tasked with looking after her.

"Teaching sounds like a hard job."

"I got used to it with Shannon. More importantly, here are the documents you asked for."

I took the papers and skimmed through them; my ancestors seemed a bit more interested than I was.

"Zayin. Quite a strange country, don't you think? Each king—err, queen—doesn't last more than a decade."

"'Holy maiden' is the proper term. It seems like the highest authority is a woman."

"She's more than likely a figurehead. The priest class beneath her are the ones that actually handle politics."

"But the current one's been in power for quite a while. Fifteen years, starting from when she was fifteen. This brewing rebellion might be because she's held power for too long."

"So many weaknesses to take advantage of, but unfortunately, Lyle isn't in any position to exploit them right now."

The nation called Zayin was a theocracy. It was presided over by an individual who held the title of holy maiden, while a class of priests ran the government.

Typically, a holy maiden's reign lasted three to six years—nine at most. However, the current holy maiden had been in power for fifteen years, making her one of the longest reigning in all of the nation's history.

Reading further, I found that tensions were brewing between the holy maiden and the knight order that acted as Zayin's standing army. The captain of the knights was in the middle of a power struggle with the holy maiden.

"Has she ruled for so long the power's gotten to her head?" I gave my honest

impression.

“I’m afraid not,” Miranda said, smiling at me. “Sure, among all the holy maidens in Zayin’s history, perhaps she’s seized the most authority. But ever since she seized power, conflicts with neighboring countries have significantly decreased.”

“They decreased?”

I looked at another document, and indeed, it stated that Zayin used to frequently wage war with other nations. War was essentially a yearly occurrence with skirmishes being commonplace.

“That’s awful.”

My ancestors seemed to share my opinion.

“There’s a lot of war around Baym... And I guess that’s profit for the adventurers who’re into mercenary work. And the merchants, of course,” the third head said.

The others stayed silent.

The current holy maiden was known as a pacifist, who cut down on wars and instead invested heavily in internal affairs to fundamentally challenge Zayin’s history of aggression.

“There have always been a lot of skirmishes in the area, but lately, there’s been so little fighting that the knights are angrily demanding more opportunities to prove themselves. That’s how it looks from the outside.”

“Interesting,” I mused.

Meanwhile, Miranda took a seat on the armrest of the sofa I was sitting on, bringing her face close to mine.

“So. What are you trying to accomplish, looking into Zayin?”

“I can’t do anything right now. We don’t have the scale of a mercenary brigade, and we can’t sell our services to them.”

With our meager numbers, we could not involve ourselves in war. Even if we had the ability, no one would want to recruit us in our current state. We would

just be used and tossed away.

The holy maiden, or the knights... It'll be difficult to side with either.

“Well, you have a point. If we had more fame and more strength, perhaps we’d be able to make a mark.”

But that was backward. If we were ever going to join the fray, it would be to make a name for ourselves—we wouldn’t have to if we were already famous.

It was just as the seventh head laid out. I wasn’t in any position to do anything.

Miranda looked at me, amusedly. What was I thinking? What was I going to do? It was like she was enjoying the anticipation.

“What shall I look into next?”

“First, I’d like to establish our name as adventurers. It’s about time we started investigating the top adventurers and parties in Baym.”

One step at a time, we’d steadily build up our reputation.

One day, during our relatively mundane routine...

“Tsk! It’s you guys.”

“Ah.”

As we headed out to do some street cleaning, we came face-to-face—with Erhart and his party. They took no effort to hide the displeasure that crossed their faces the moment they saw us.

They were wearing work clothes, similar to us. Erhart turned away, seemingly embarrassed to be seen.

I couldn’t help but pose a simple question. “Huh? What are you doing here? Isn’t the expedition team still inside the dungeon?”

His trial involved participating in the expedition team. And that expedition team hadn’t returned to the surface yet.

Erhart’s shoulders shook.

“Did you fail and retreat?” I grew concerned. “Were there any casualties?”

On closer inspection, he had fewer comrades than before. *Don't tell me... Did something happen in the dungeon?*

But my worries were met with a furious yell. He turned to me and bellowed, “That’s right! We failed! Is that what you wanted to hear?!”

I struggled to understand what had gotten into him when I heard the sixth head laughing in the Jewel.

“Lye, read the room. I’ll bet these guys were the only ones who failed.”

“His comrades died or fled,” the fifth stated coldly. “It’s good that he faced reality sooner rather than later. Surviving and starting over with menial labor isn’t the worst outcome.”

So he either deserted or was sent back? I’d failed to pick up on that. Judging by his tone of voice, I’d said something quite rude.

“U-Umm... Sorry.”

I apologized for my lack of consideration; this made Erhart tear up.

“Are you mocking me, you bastard?!”

My apology only made him angrier.

The fourth head, struggling to contain his laughter, told me, “Lyle—stop rubbing salt into their wounds.”

Once work began, Shannon, who had gotten quite used to street cleaning over the past month, boldly strutted out in front of the new hires. She immediately began bossing them around.

“Don’t you underestimate street cleaning! If you really want to scoop up that shit, put your back into it! That shit isn’t going anywhere if you’re so afraid of it!”

A little girl like you shouldn’t be repeating that word.

She provided a live demonstration for Erhart and his friends.

“See? Scoop with a firm grip. You can’t leave any of the shit on the ground.”

Shannon, having become needlessly skilled at street cleaning, grew irritated when faced with Erhart’s party’s less-than-serious attitude.

“Pay attention.”

They took her wild fury with disdain and kept their distance from us. I couldn’t shake the feeling they were slightly—no, completely—making light of the job.

“How am I supposed to get serious about cleaning?”

“I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t have to.”

“Why can’t time just pass more quickly?”

As he passed by me, Erhart offered a frustrated bit of sarcasm: “You’ve been doing this for a whole month? How easygoing can you be?”

“Hah?!” Shannon exclaimed, stamping her feet. “How about you try working properly, stupid!”

As we cleaned the highway, I listened in on a conversation between the third and the fifth.

“Easygoing, huh? He sounds pretty mad.”

“Lyle riled him up, even if he didn’t mean to. Of course he’s angry.”

“It feels like he’s taking out some frustration that has nothing to do with Lyle too.”

“He’s young. They all are. Guys like him tend to lash out.”

“Oh yes, I’ve had to deal with them before. Those people who blame everything on everyone around them. In the end, even if you’re stuck in a bad environment, you still have to do your best.”

“They’re lucky, I’d say. They don’t even realize how fortunate they are. This, after they were nearly erased by that Marianne woman.”

“I wonder... I’m not sure if she was really trying to get rid of them.”

“There was a risk of death. And she threw them into that situation—that

much is true. I couldn't sense any ulterior motives either. A woman who can do that while being genuine is scary."

The fifth head was harsh on Marianne.

Meanwhile, the sixth offered a laugh that seemed to conceal some hidden meaning.

"You just don't understand a woman's heart, Fifth."

"I don't want to hear that from you."

The other ancestors similarly chimed in, all essentially saying, "Are *you* seriously saying that?" And I felt the same.

That aside, it's good that I can distract myself with their conversations when I'm stuck doing monotonous work.

"I understand what you're all trying to say, but if you ask me, that woman has something to her."

Something. A very vague way of putting it. I couldn't imagine what it was.

The fifth head demanded a further explanation from the sixth.

"What do you mean by 'something'?"

"I don't know. It just feels like she's carrying some burden."

"She just seemed carefree to me. Though she did come off as a little eccentric."

She appeared to be a gentle and normal woman. I didn't know what to think when they kept insisting there was something shady about her. According to the fifth head, she was a scary person for shoving Erhart and his comrades into such imminent danger.

But the sixth head trusted his gut.

"My intuition is telling me she's a good woman," he said.

The seventh head snorted. "Then she's definitely a woman with a *harsh* way of loving. Lyle, be careful. Whatever you do, don't get involved with her."

Do you think I'm as indiscriminate as the sixth head?

I felt rather offended by that remark.

While I silently continued working, Shannon—now a lot more serious than she had been on the first day—continued to rage away as she watched Erhart and his group's lack of motivation.

"Those guys are practically playing around."

Unmotivated adventurers were not the minority. This kind of work was just meant to earn some quick money—they didn't see it as a long-term solution.

In fact, there were far fewer who actually took the job seriously.

"Leave him be," I told Shannon. "More importantly, you need to do your job properly. I don't want to be scolded by the supervisor again."

"Neither do I!"

We worked together, shedding sweat as we finished up another day of road cleaning.

It had been around two weeks since Erhart started cleaning roads. Summoned to the Guild, he sat across the counter from Marianne.

As he could hear a voice from beyond the partition to his side, there seemed to be someone in the neighboring station.

"Seriously, Erhart?!"

"Y-Yes?!"

In a huff, Marianne began to lecture him.

"I've received complaints from the road cleaning supervisor! He says you're not taking your work seriously!"

Erhart was secretly happy to be able to talk to the older, kind, and beautiful Marianne.

"Well, I mean... You know. We're not cut out for this kind of dull work."

He genuinely disliked road cleaning. He'd had enough of it back home; back there, he'd had so much menial labor shoved onto him, that he'd grown sick of

it. Doing monotonous work would remind him of those times, and he couldn't bring himself to take it seriously.

Erhart tried to appeal to the receptionist. "Hey, c'mon, Marianne. Don't you have something cooler I could do? Like being a guard, or slaying monsters. There's got to be something."

"You failed in the dungeon and you still haven't learned?" Marianne asked, staring with narrowed eyes.

"Don't get me wrong! If we go outside those walls, there'll be monsters, right? Can't we at least handle the small fry?"

He tried to emphasize that he and his party were more suited for monster extermination, but Marianne wasn't so convinced.

"You don't have proper equipment. Are you managing to save up money? You'll run out of living expenses at this rate."

He didn't have the funds to buy gear. The payment he'd get from road cleaning would disappear with cheap lodging and daily meals.

"That's why I'm saying I want to earn more with a bigger job. I can't even hold on to hope like this."

It seemed Marianne had considered this. She let out a sigh.

"I understand that, but your credibility right now isn't zero—it's negative. I am unable to assign you well-paying jobs with your current situation."

"But still..."

Finally giving in, Marianne offered a proposal. "Then, if you work hard cleaning those roads, I'll introduce you to one lucrative job. Just once."

"That's Marianne for you!" Erhart rejoiced.

But Marianne drove the point home. "Remember, that one time will be your last chance. If you fail again, even I won't be able to cover for you."

"I-I get it."

Erhart tensed up at Marianne's serious expression.

But she's cute even when she's angry. I think I'll confess to her once I become

a first-rate adventurer.

Erhart—a man head over heels for the kind Guild worker guiding his party. As he blushed, letting his imagination run wild, Marianne got the documents in order.

“First, focus on the road clea—”

It was at that moment that the voice of a startled receptionist came from beyond the partition.

“What?! Y-You’re making that kid do road cleaning too?!”

Erhart and Marianne exchanged a look before turning toward the voice.

His curiosity getting the better of him, Erhart took a peak to find Lyle and Shannon—alongside a kid with short blonde hair. Lyle was talking to the receptionist.

“Yes. Please put her on street cleaning work starting next week.”

The girl he brought had a peculiar outfit that exposed quite a lot of skin. Rather than paying the slightest bit of attention to the conversation, she seemed interested in everything *else*, with her eyes curiously glancing around the Guild.

He’d almost overlooked it with Shannon, but indeed, the two girls both looked quite a bit younger than Lyle.

Th-This guy... He’s putting children to work?! Even I’m not that bad.

From Erhart’s perspective, Lyle came off as a despicable adventurer who was reaping the rewards of child labor. *This guy’s the worst!*

Chapter 101: Baym's Dungeon

Erhart and his comrades sat wearily in front of Baym's gate, having finished their road cleaning duties. As he watched the setting sun, Erhart reflected, *Three months went by, just like that.*

He'd arrived at the city with a chest full of hopes and dreams, only to be struck by the stark differences between dreams and reality.

As it turned out, he hadn't managed to do *any* of the glorious adventurer work he had in mind and instead found himself toiling away day after day, cleaning roads.

He did his best, owing to Marianne's promise of a bigger and better assignment down the line—but he couldn't shake his dissatisfaction. Sitting there, dirty and exhausted, he and his friends watched all the people entering and exiting Baym.

Among them were young and stylishly dressed women—the city girls they'd once yearned for. They seemed to be on their way back to the city.

"Eww. They reek."

"Cleaning streets is a job for the lowest adventurers, right?"

"Let's hurry inside."

"Tsk," Erhart clicked his tongue as he saw off the sneering women. "Just like home, eh."

They were the same as those villagers who'd mocked them in their hometown. Under their glamorous facade, it turned out that those city girls were no different from the countryside girls he despised.

But Marianne is wonderful.

Comparing her to the women who'd just passed by reaffirmed to Erhart just how amazing Marianne was as a person. Borrowing some water, he began to wash off the grime in preparation to return to his cheap inn, when Lyle

approached.

Yet again, he was accompanied by Shannon and May.

He stopped, not too far from Erhart and his party, and began using a pail of water to clean his arms and legs.

“Another tiring day,” Lyle said to Shannon and May.

“May, don’t splash me!”

“You started it!”

The two young’uns were quite lively as they used the water. They were clearly still at that age where they wanted to play around, yet Lyle was putting them to work.

This was unforgivable, in Erhart’s eyes. *You’re the bigger man here. What, you can’t even provide for them?*

Baym was rife with rumors about Lyle. He’d come to Baym with a harem party—which was conspicuous enough—but had ironically stood out even more by not taking the Guild trial and devoting all his time to road cleaning.

The gossiping adventurers dubbed Lyle a “gigolo” living off of his women, a notion supported by the sightings of his comrades working daily.

What do they even see in that guy?

Erhart simply couldn’t comprehend why Lyle’s companions followed him.

As Lyle helped Shannon and May wash their hands, a woman emerged from the gate with a basket. Her side ponytail bobbed up and down as she walked—it was Novem.

The adventurers, all finished with their work, became restless and excited at her approach.

“Damn it. He’s showing off again,” one of Erhart’s comrades bitterly spat.

Novem jogged over to Lyle and eagerly began taking things from her basket—a canteen, some snacks, and more.

“Good work, Milord!” she proclaimed.

But Lyle seemed a bit disheartened as he stared back at her. “You don’t need to come get me. I’m dirty, and I’m going straight to the bathhouse.”

His coldheartedness toward Novem, who’d only come to greet him, annoyed them even more. *You jerk! A kind girl goes out of her way for you, and this is how you treat her?*

The snacks and canteen were promptly snatched away by Shannon and May.

“Thanks, Novem. I was just getting thirsty.”

“I’m starving here.”

Novem panicked. “Please save some for Lord Lyle, both of you!”

Seeing Novem so fretful, Lyle smiled. “It’s fine. We’ll have dinner once we get back, anyway. More importantly, we’re all still pretty dirty, so you shouldn’t touch us.”

Ignoring Lyle’s warning, Novem reached out and took his hand.

“It’s all right. Even if they are dirty, these hands are merely stained with the dirt of hard work. They aren’t unclean.”



This was a stark contrast to those women from earlier; Novem's gentle consideration left Erhart seething with envy.

Damn it! What's such a good girl doing with him?!

As Lyle and his party members finished washing up and headed back into the city, Erhart overheard their conversation.

"Milord, you've received a summons from the Guild."

"The Guild?"

"Yes. It's been nearly three months."

What happens at three months? Erhart wondered. But he quickly concluded it had nothing to do with him and lost interest. *More importantly, I'll be going to see Marianne tomorrow. If only I could get her a present.*

Erhart was so eager to greet the coming day that he didn't know what to do with himself.

Called to the Guild, I talked with a staff member about our future plans.

"The Adventurers' Guild of Baym thinks highly of your work ethic."

This bearded Guild worker seemed to hold a higher position than the others. Rather than the usual counter, we were guided to a private room with sofas.

The Guild worker happily went on, "Adventurers these days are so fussy about the work they get. It's frustrating. However, you've diligently taken on every task offered to you. Based on your performance thus far, we see that you are trustworthy enough. Now that your credibility has been proved, we want to see your skills."

I found it hard to believe he wholeheartedly trusted us after only three months, but he at least recognized us as hard workers.

"Our skills?"

The man smiled at me. "This is how we do things in Baym. We believe you and your party are more capable than the average adventurer."

“What do you want us to do, exactly?” I asked.

Then, the man began laying out a dungeon exploration plan.

“You and others will start from the surface and descend to the twentieth floor.”

As he went on, it became clear that this was identical to the expedition team that set off shortly after we arrived in Baym.

“Didn’t this just happen three months ago?”

“We must conduct these excursions regularly to thin out the monsters. They will rapidly multiply and cause issues if left unchecked.”

“What will our role be?”

“You’ll be initially stationed at the center of the force. After that, it will be left up to the on-site commander.”

In the dungeon, the center was where noncombatants would gather. Enemies came from both sides—both the front and the back—so the front and back lines took on the role of protecting those at the center of the force.

If we were stationed there, we wouldn’t have many opportunities to prove ourselves.

The Guild worker looked at me with probing eyes.

“What do you think?”

“I accept,” I immediately replied.

He seemed a bit amused. “You’re not as hot-blooded as you should be at your age. I’d even say you’re a little too cautious, but that’s preferable to those adventurers who have nothing but momentum keeping them going.”

“He’s testing Lyle, huh,” the sixth said with scorn.

Indeed, he’d tested me by placing me somewhere where we wouldn’t shine. If I’d expressed disdain and demanded to be put somewhere else, he probably would have obliged.

He was gauging my reactions.

In a sense, the exam to prove my skills had already begun.

“Yes, well, being an adventurer isn’t all about fighting.”

My response got a slight nod.

“You understand well.”

“We did some digging into the exam’s criteria in the reference room.”

His smile broadened when I said that.

The Adventurers’ Guild of Baym was watching to see how we operated during the test. Would we follow orders? Did we have the right skill set? Were we able to cooperate? These factors would all be taken into account, and whether we passed or failed would be based on a comprehensive judgment.

Even if we lacked skill, as long as we could follow orders and show cooperation, we’d get a pass. Conversely, if we disregarded orders and went off on our own, it would be tolerated so long as we were strong enough to justify it.

What mattered was whether or not we would be useful to Baym’s Guild.

“How reliable. I have high hopes for you,” the man said, standing from the sofa.

Back at the inn, I gathered my comrades to discuss our upcoming plans.

“It looks like the Guild wants to see what we can do.”

Aria’s and Sophia’s eyes sparkled with joy, albeit for a rather pathetic reason.

“So we’ll finally be free from transcription!”

“It was long. So very long. Those three months felt like an eternity!”

It was a job unsuited for them.

“For the both of you, this is where the real challenge begins. Right?” Novem reminded them with a sigh.

Both Aria and Sophia were warriors who fought fiercely on the front lines. They found it far easier to swing weapons than to write letters.

May cocked her head curiously. “Humans are amazing. They think they can use *dungeons* of all things. I’d love it if we could get rid of it, but Baym’s dungeon is a bit beyond us. It’s gotten too big.”

Even for a qilin, it seemed a dungeon with more than a hundred floors was too much to handle.

Shannon wore a dark expression. “A-Again with the dungeons? Spending a whole month in a dark place is the worst.”

In your case, you just don’t want to work.

“Light pours in from the ceiling of Baym’s dungeon,” Clara told her. “It’s a little dim, but there’s still sunlight, for what it’s worth. At night, the torches scattered through the dungeon glow with a pale blue light.”

“Huh? Then it’s not dark?”

“The...torches aren’t very numerous, so it is dark at night.”

“Then it’s hopeless!”

Frustrated with Shannon’s constant complaints, I joined the conversation.

“Weren’t you perfectly fine with dark places?”

“Not when they’re crawling with monsters! I’m a fragile little girl.”

“Fragile? You?”

When I chuckled, Shannon retaliated with a kick. I dodged out of the way as Eva clapped her hands to get our attention.

“Yes, that’s enough. Let’s get things back on track. Lyle, we need to prepare for it, right?”

The preparations weren’t an issue. In Baym, it was easy to procure food and equipment. The real concern was our lack of manpower. The party had ten members counting myself, and that wasn’t a lot as far as adventurers were concerned.

We couldn’t take Damian or Lily—rather, they’d just be trouble if we did take them so we were leaving them behind. They probably didn’t want to come in the first place.

“We should be able to get everything except more people.”

Then, Monica placed a hand on her hip and boasted, “With your Monica by your side, you have the strength of one hundred.”

She actually did do the work of a hundred people, but we couldn’t rely solely on her.

“It would be great if we could make some contacts during this expedition.”

Naturally, I considered hiring people to make up for our numbers. Based on the information Miranda and Eva had gathered, I had my eye on a few capable adventurers.

However, I lacked any real achievements in Baym. If we hired skilled adventurers and succeeded in the expedition, the credit would go to those adventurers, not us.

Therefore, we had to tackle this challenge with our own strength.

“We need to make a name for ourselves.”

Novem nodded. “Certainly, Milord.”

Now then, it’s time to start preparing for Baym’s dungeon.

Marianne had prepared a well-paying job for Erhart.

“Assisting with a dungeon expedition? Wait, you mean we’ve been recognized as first-rate adventurers?!” Erhart rejoiced.

But Marianne was quick to put a damper on his spirits. “Read it carefully. It says you’re only assisting. You will be mostly transporting supplies and helping to set up camp. Do not, under any circumstances, try to fight. This is not a test.”

“B-But...”

Just when he thought he’d landed a more adventurer-suited job, he immediately felt disheartened upon realizing he and his party members weren’t being seen as combat assets.

Marianne shot him a serious look. “Erhart—have you forgotten how you almost died in the dungeon?”

“I-I haven’t.”

“Then do your work properly this time. The adventurers around you will protect you. If you make it through this job, you’ll be able to afford cheap equipment.”

The rewards were promising this time. After all, he was headed to a dangerous place. Sure, he was just assisting, but his daily wages would be more than double what he made from road cleaning.

“Erhart, you should start by equipping yourselves,” Marianne advised. “Your weapons and armor are the tools of your trade. You must assemble them no matter what. Do you understand?”

“Y-Yeah!”

Erhart could hardly contain his boundless gratitude at Marianne, who showed such concern for his party.

“Once you have the right gear, you can venture out to hunt monsters. Then, since you’ll be earning more, you can pick up some skills at the many training halls and private schools that Baym has to offer.”

“Training halls? What I taught myself is more than enough. After all, I’ve got three—”

“Erhart.”

Marianne’s low voice prompted Erhart to correct himself.

“Uh, I can use my Art up to its third stage.”

“Good. Never claim to have three Arts, okay? You’ll give people the impression that you’re hiding Demonic Tools.”

Marianne corrected his mistakes with patience. Erhart blushed.

“S-So, err, Marianne.” He mustered up his courage to ask her a personal question. “Do you...have someone you like?”

“Who can say?” Marianne replied with a cryptic smile.

I’d come to the plaza in front of Baym’s dungeon several times before to

conduct some preliminary investigations. It had been quiet then—but now, the plaza was crammed full of adventurers.

Adventurers of all kinds had gathered, their equipment varied and uncoordinated. Yet even among the diverse crowd, the ones who stood out the most were us.

“The hell’s that thing?!”

“A horseless carriage?!”

Two men named Albano and Cleto were inspecting it from up close.

They were both in their mid-twenties and were both leaders of their respective parties. And now, they were circling Porter with great intrigue.

Despite their opposing personalities and outfits, they were both adventurers that Miranda had singled out.

Albano’s party was a quintessential group of adventurers, favoring light and versatile equipment that let them take on any role required.

On the other hand, Cleto led a group clad in full plate armor. The man seemed to have a strong admiration of knights, judging by the horses his party led along to complete the image of a knightly cavalry. His group was entirely specialized for combat, making it difficult for them to perform in other fields.

They were both commoners, born and raised. Neither was a knight or a noble. It was interesting to see how two men of similar backgrounds had formed completely different parties.

“This is a vehicle developed in Aramthurst,” I explained to them. “They should make their way to Baym in the near future.”

I decided not to mention that I was the one who headed the development—it would just complicate things.

Albano knocked on the armored panels, assessing their thickness.

“Arrows would be useless against this thing. Maybe a gun—no, maybe not,” he said. He seemed to be contemplating how to counter it.

Cleto cautioned him. “Albano! Do not think of defeating allies!”

“Today’s ally is tomorrow’s enemy. This thing does seem mighty convenient, putting that aside.”

As I tried to smooth things over, the person in charge came up to us.

“How noisy.”

Both Albano and Cleto fell silent upon his arrival. He was another person I recognized from Miranda’s research.

“Good morning. You’re Neu Neumann, correct?” I greeted him.

He smiled at me. “Polite, aren’t you? It’s a pleasure to work with you.”

Though he was an adventurer, he had originally been a knight. But, having lost his liege, he left his homeland with his family and drifted around before ultimately settling in Baym. Or so I’d read.

Despite his long years as an adventurer, there were still some slight vestiges of his knightly past—he remained a courteous and serious person.

“Ain’t the boss lady—ain’t Alette s’posed to join us this time around?” Albano asked Neu.

“She has temporarily returned to her homeland. Her knights are on break.”

“I was wondering why I hadn’t seen her around lately.”

As the two of them exchanged some idle banter, Cleto turned to me. “Your party is quite, err...vibrant.”

He was probably trying to be polite, trying to be as inoffensive as possible while pointing out that my party was all women.

“It’s not like I was specifically trying to gather only women. It somehow ended up this way before I realized it.”

“I-I see. In that case, you should be careful. Parties like yours can easily attract resentment from men. Also they...err...they tend to have a lot more internal conflict. And those conflicts can have...fatal consequences for everyone involved.”

Yes. I’m aware.

It’s nothing but danger. Both outside and within.

“I’ll be careful.”

Our conversation came to a close as Neu turned to us.

“It’s time to depart.”

Taking part in the expedition team for the second time, Erhart spotted Lyle in the middle of the formation.

“He’s here too?”

Erhart and his group walked alongside the wagons carrying supplies on their backs. By contrast, Lyle’s party rode a large metal box with wheels attached to it. He sat atop a wheeled mysterious craft that moved without the aid of horses as he carefully observed his surroundings.

Next to Lyle was a pretty elf girl with beautiful pink hair. She had a bow on her back and was surveying the area alongside Lyle.

They were talking, but Erhart couldn’t hear their conversation. Still, he watched and grumbled to himself, “Tsk! Flirting with girls again. Does he think this is some sort of playground?”

To Erhart, Lyle’s party evidently lacked the necessary seriousness for the situation.

Sure, we joined the dungeon expedition, but to be blunt, it was quite uneventful. I would sit atop a slowly moving Porter, watching just in case anything happened, but... It was boring.

We were being protected on all sides. Danger rarely ever made it to the center.

“It’s so boring.”

Eva, who was on lookout duty with me, echoed the sentiment. It was nothing but the same repetitive scenery.

“Just a little longer until our shift ends. Hang in there.”

“There’s no monsters and we’re barely moving. It’s dull.”

Though Eva had a very long list of complaints to get through, her eyes remained vigilant.

Still, this dungeon is quite a strange place.

It resembled a massive hole with a spiraling path that ran along the edge. This path was lined with abandoned buildings reminiscent of a ruined city. But there were hardly any twists or turns, and as the path continued in a constant spiral, one look out into the abyss made it feel like we'd been retreading the same exact cobblestone for hours on end.

Light streamed in from the ceiling—it looked like it was coming from the world above, but...was it really? I had my doubts.

The slope was gentle and consistent.

From the Jewel, the third head offered his thoughts with a relaxed tone of voice.

"If you can just get to floor twenty like this without incident, then go for it. You'll be able to start from there next time."

Expeditions were regularly sent out to reduce the number of monsters. If we reached the twentieth floor, we'd be able to use the floor transfer device to start from there on our next outing—though it was all pointless if we didn't receive permission to enter the dungeon by the end of this.

"It sure would be nice. To breeze through this, and pass the trial."

My statement got me a disapproving look from Eva. "Life ought to be full of plot twists and moving scenes. That's what I think. Oh, can't we have some major incident soon?"

"Personally, I'd prefer it if nothing happens."

The expedition force continued on slowly. As the sun went down and darkness began to set in, the dungeon was lit anew with the pale blue light of the torches affixed to the abandoned buildings.

Neu rode his horse to the center of the expedition force and called out, "That's it for today! Prepare to set up camp!"

Work in the expedition team was plain indeed. Sure, adventurers were

fighting the good fight in the front and back, but that had little to do with us. In the center, it was our job to support the glorious combatants, and we were often tasked with mundane things.

“A little more to the right, Shannon. That’s the left.”

“Huh? From your perspective, this should be right, right?!”

Shannon and I prepared for the next meal—and by that, I didn’t mean cooking. We were lining up the makeshift tables and chairs. We had a lot of people, and so, we had a lot of chairs. Everything had to be in order before the adventurers began to gather.

Honestly, we were just helping out however we could since we couldn’t cook.

Shannon wore quite the tired look once everything was neatly lined up.

“It’s been nothing but this for two weeks straight. I’m sick. Tired. Bored. I want to go home!”

How many complaints could one girl have? I flicked her on the forehead.

“Just two weeks left. Hang in there a little longer.”

“There’s nothing to do and it’s so boring! Let’s head straight down to floor twenty already.”

“We wouldn’t be having such a hard time if we... Hm?”

In the middle of our pointless conversation, a group of flustered adventurers rushed into the campsite.

“B-Bad news! A variant appeared!”

A breathless, sweat-soaked adventurer ran around the campsite, telling the noncombatants to flee immediately.

“Our comrades are holding it off. Run while you still can!”

The expedition team fell into a panic upon hearing that a variant had appeared near the camp.

Shannon hid behind me, gripping my shirt as she asked, “Wh-What?! What’s a variant?!”

A variant was a monster that had become stronger through Growth. However, Growth was seen as a blessing of the goddess that was not granted to lowly monsters. It could not be openly stated that a monster had undergone Growth. They were instead called variants and treated as freak abnormalities.

“It’s when a normal monster becomes stronger. The troublesome thing is that there are countless different ways it can grow stronger, so it’s hard to prepare for. You never know what you’re going to get.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?! Why are you so carefree?! And wait, why are you happy?!”

Back when my ancestors first taught me about variants, it had been all seven of them together. The noisy first head, the earnest second head; they were still with us at the time. I remembered it being even livelier than it was now.

But it seemed those fond memories had made it to my face.

“I didn’t know about variants until a short while back. I was just remembering how I had to be taught too, and that made me feel nostalgic.”

Since there was no telling what direction a monster’s newfound strength had taken it, this was not a fight that could be prepared for in advance. While a part of me wanted to see how Baym’s adventurers would handle it, I was also pleased to see a chance presenting itself.

Turning toward the commotion, I lightly patted Shannon on the back.

“That’s where the noise is coming from. Head straight to Porter, and gather everyone up.”

“Huh?! You’re staying here alone?!” Shannon looked at me anxiously.

“Just go already.”

I sent her off running toward Porter with another, more forceful push.

Then, I walked through the panicking noncombatants who had started to make their escape from the campsite, grasping the Jewel in my right hand. A detailed map of the area surfaced in my head; I could see the adventurers fighting the monster, displayed as glowing dots on the map.

They had the beast surrounded as they fought in groups.

“They move well.”

Unlike the adventurers I’d seen before, each party seemed to be full of skilled fighters, and there were very few casualties. However, the variant was also leading a monstrous group of its own, forcing them into a difficult battle.

My ancestors rejoiced from the Jewel.

“What’s this? You’ve stumbled upon a bigger opportunity than expected. I was holding on to the slim hopes of them putting you to work in the latter half of the expedition,” the third head said without a care.

Though he sighed at his father’s demeanor, the fourth also saw this as a chance. “It’s unfortunate that they’re making such a scene, but it’s not so bad if we think of it as Lyle’s time to shine.”

“It’s helpful that they’re escaping quickly,” the fifth head said, observing the fleeing folks.

It would have been much harder if I had to fight while protecting them, so it was good that they ran. Adventurers were guiding them along, but none of them had the time to notice or care about me—the one person heading in the opposite direction.

The sixth head confirmed the enemy’s position on the map while pondering over my best course of action. “Hmm, we’ll first need to see the enemy. Why don’t you try to get a read from the roof of one of the buildings?”

The seventh was somewhat worried. Though it wasn’t me he was concerned about.

“You must defeat it fast, or your achievement will be snatched away. Hurry up, Lyle.”

The wave of people was unending. I could hardly see a thing in front of me; I broke into a sprint and locked onto the nearest abandoned building. Using the crumbling fence as a foothold, I leaped onto the roof, then raced forth shifting from roof to roof. Each new roof took me closer to the enemy.

Most of the buildings were only one-story tall, but some had second and third floors as well. I scrambled up the nearest tall building and stared at the

battlefield.

The battle was fierce if the dust cloud was anything to show for it.

I could see a monster breaking through buildings as it advanced.

Its upper body was somewhat reminiscent of a human. The monster was bald with pale blue skin, its red eyes open wide.

“Is that a centaur?”

It was taller than the one-story structures, and its lower body—which I could only catch glimpses of through the gaps between buildings—belonged to either a cow or a horse.

To combat such a foe, the adventurers had climbed onto the roofs to bombard it with long-range attacks. Despite struggling against the massive creature, they seemed to be holding their own.

It would take time, but they’d manage if left to their own devices.

“Hmph! Not bad,” the seventh head begrudgingly conceded. He hated adventurers, but if they were skilled, he had to acknowledge it. Hence his irritation.

“If they can keep this up, it seems we don’t have to intervene. Well, the real problem is what’s behind that thing.”

The variant monster did draw the eye, but the horde of monsters it led was also troublesome. They were giving the adventurers trouble with their sheer numbers.

Some distance away, a pillar of flame rose, shortly followed by an explosion. Presumably, a spell had been fired off.

“They’re really going at it,” my thoughts slipped out.

As I watched, I was approached by Miranda. She rode on the back of a golem she’d created from dirt, with Aria and Sophia riding behind her.

Aria and Sophia jumped down and asked me about the situation.

“What’s it like?!” Aria excitedly demanded.

Sophia cautioned her, “Calm down, Aria! Lyle, what’s the damage?”

Miranda silently watched the battlefield, though she was also listening in on our conversation.

I explained what I could: “A troublesome variant appeared, but the real problem is the enemy’s numbers. At this rate, the herd of monsters might make it all the way to camp.”

Her spear leaned against her shoulder, Aria reassured me, “The camp will be just fine. I mean, everyone’s pretty much run away already.”

“The people, yeah. But that leaves another issue.”

The people were already gone—however, the camp contained the expedition’s precious supplies. If those were destroyed, the expedition would be a failure.

We’d be forced to return to the surface.

I had no idea how the Guild would judge it, but personally, this was something I wanted to avoid.

Miranda glanced at me. “So, what do we do?”

Watching the adventurers fight, I folded my arms and mulled over it. There would certainly be a few adventurers who’d be less than amused if we forced our way onto their battlefield. Yet this was an excellent opportunity to show off our strength.

I gripped the Jewel once, getting the usual carefree tone from the third head.

“Do whatever you want. It’s up to you, Lyle.”

I released the Jewel and turned to my three comrades.

“I want to make a flashy entrance, so try to fight in a way that stands out. As for me—I’ll start by taking care of that troublesome variant.”

It was hard to control, but if I aimed well, I could take out even a variant in one hit. This was a golden opportunity. *Let’s make a good spectacle of it.*

Chapter 102: Rising Star

The sounds of battle echoed from every direction—the noise of collapsing buildings, the booms of spells being unleashed. At the front line where adventurers and monsters met, the air was filled with their shouts and the sounds of clashing metal.

In such a place, Erhart—who had missed his chance to escape—hid in an abandoned building, holding his breath.

“Why’d it come to this?”

The battle had broken out just as he was growing weary of his daily chores. Even so, he remembered his promise to Marianne and had no intentions of joining the fray.

With that said, he was curious to see how the other adventurers fought. Hoping to get a peek at the front lines, he’d taken on the role of carrying supplies to the frontline fighters mid-battle. While he was at it, he thought he might catch a glimpse of how it was all playing out.

His comrades hadn’t been so keen, so he’d left them behind. But he felt safe as there were other adventurers escorting him.

He was just a bag carrier. There were no issues whatsoever.

He had no need to fight, and nothing to be worried about.

And yet.

Each time the sound of that massive monster’s footsteps reached the abandoned house, the tremors would cause dust and sand to fall from the ceiling.

There was no telling when the whole place would come crumbling down, but he was too scared to flee outside. Cowering as he approached the window, he saw a monster larger than anything he had ever seen. It swung its great club at a fleeing adventurer, crushing an abandoned house.

How's anyone supposed to defeat that?!

Did such monsters actually exist? Was it even possible to defeat it?

As he continued watching, trembling, something glowing struck the variant's head and pierced through it. All at once, the monster stopped moving—and a moment later, its head burst open.

Blood and flesh scattered around, and slowly the headless monster collapsed, crushing two abandoned buildings beneath it. There, it lay, unmoving.

"Huh?"

Erhart couldn't understand what had just happened, and neither could the adventurers who were fighting.

"Was that magic?!"

"Who did that?!"

"Doesn't matter. Hurry and take care of the others!"

The fall of a formidable foe caused the morale of the adventurers to surge.

Erhart stepped out from his hiding place, carefully scanning his surroundings. He saw a man standing on the highest building in the area, bow in hand, still alert.

It was Lyle.

"D-Did he do it?!"

Eventually, by some contraption or another, Lyle's silver bow disappeared, and mounting a nearby creature that could have been mistaken as a monster, he headed toward Erhart.

"Wh-What? What do you want?"

Fearful of him, Erhart sat on the spot holding his head. There, he heard a woman's voice.

"Did you miss your chance to run? Honestly..."

He looked up to see Lyle leaping off the monster's back and running toward him, saber in hand.

“D-Don’t get any closer!”

The Lyle who came at him was completely different from the Lyle he’d quarreled with at the Guild. It was his eyes. There was something terrifying about them. How could this be the same person he’d mocked before?

Lyle pointed the tip of his saber at Erhart and...

“Stay crouching!” he shouted, leaping over him.

Erhart kept his head hung, only timidly glancing upward after a cautious silence. He looked at Lyle.

There he stood, having defeated a monster—an orc larger than Erhart. He was wiping the blood from his saber.

“Huh? U-Um...”

An orc had closed in without him even realizing it.

Atop the monster’s back, Miranda extended her hand out to Lyle. Lyle gripped it and leaped back aboard the creature that resembled a tiger.

“Where shall I deliver you next?”

“Just follow the path. Also, you there,” Lyle called out to Erhart. It seemed he hadn’t yet noticed who he was. “Follow this road, and you’ll see the camp. It’s safer there. Miranda, hurry.”

Lyle took a seat behind Miranda, his arms wrapped around her waist.

“How hectic, good grief.”

Once they were gone, Erhart found himself tormented with a humiliation greater than anything he had ever felt before.

I rode on the back of Miranda’s golem, racing across the battlefield. The golem moved viciously, whipping me around as it leaped from rooftop to rooftop. There was nothing to hold on to, so I was forced to hug Miranda from behind, and I couldn’t have felt any more pathetic.

“Hey, make some handrails. What’s stopping you?”

I filed a complaint.

But with a smile, she replied, “If I did that, you wouldn’t hold me anymore. And then I’d feel oh so lonely.”

Perhaps that was fine for Miranda, but it was embarrassing for me, being seen clinging to a woman in the middle of a battlefield.

“Fine. I’m jumping off.”

It wasn’t because I was fed up with it; we’d arrived at our destination.

She looked a little disappointed as I let go.

“I’ll head to the next spot. Lyle, don’t do anything reckless.”

“Likewise.”

As I hit the ground, I drew my saber and slashed at the surrounding monsters. The adventurers fighting them looked relieved at my arrival. One of them even whistled.

“Hey, c’mon. No need to show off,” an adventurer called out, circling behind me and entrusting his back to mine.

We were covering each other’s blind spots.

“Sorry for being late. This is actually my first time inside of Baym’s dungeon.”

That alone seemed to be enough to get the message across.

“You must be new here, then. Glad to have you on the team.”

With his spear, he skewered a monster that leaped at him.

I, too, sliced the foe before me.

“What is the situation looking like?”

“We... Well, we won’t lose, but things aren’t looking too good. If these guys make a mess of the camp, we’ll have to retreat. That means our pay gets cut.”

It was just as I thought.

“That’s a problem. I really want to pass my exam, so I’ll risk it and help out.”

“I call bullshit! Guys like you, they get all giddy when they see a chance like

this. Good grief, this is why I can't stand you overly competent bastards."

It seemed there were quite a few others who shared my mindset.

As I sliced a charging monster in two, the other adventurers seemed a bit taken aback.

"I've never seen anyone fight like that with a saber."

"Thank you."

My arrival seemed to give the surrounding adventurers a bit of breathing room. Not a bad situation.

And as the area stabilized, another extraordinary monster appeared, bursting through one of the buildings. It took on the form of a very large bull, and on its back—was Albano.

He clung to the monster's horns with both hands, trying his best not to be thrown off. On closer inspection, I saw that there were swords and spears stuck into its body.

"Y-You! Quit thrashing around, would ya?!"

As Albano struggled to stay atop the rampaging bull, another figure leaped from the wreckage of the broken wall. This time, it was Cleto.

"They're putting on quite a show," I muttered.

Riding a horse and wielding a spear, Cleto charged forth and slammed his spear into the monster's vitals with all his momentum. The monster spewed blood and fell, rolling Albano to the ground.

He only stopped rolling after hitting a wall, Cleto dismounted and approached him. Albano seemed completely uninjured as he let out a hearty laugh.

"Thanks for the save, Cleto."

After lending him a hand and standing him to his feet, Cleto promptly punched him in the cheek.

The surrounding adventurers scrambled to stop him from going any further.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?!"

“Don’t fight at a time like this!”

“Someone hold them down!”

Three adventurers held Cleto back as he lifted his faceplate and angrily shouted, “Knock it off, Albano! Why must you always get in the way?!”

Something had obviously happened.

“It’s because you guys were taking too long, goddess damn it!” Albano shouted back, clearly irritated as well. “I was tryna help you finish things up. How about some gratitude, ya fake knight!”

“Fake? How dare you!”

As they bickered, the surrounding adventurers tried desperately to stop them. The adventurer who’d been covering my back stabbed his spear into the ground, keeping a watchful eye on the area as he spoke.

“Albano and Cleto are always like this,” he said. “They’re both skilled, but they clash like oil and water. They’re always getting into fights.”

“So it seems.”

It’s nothing but trouble if they fight, even in this situation.

That was when Mister Neu arrived atop a horse.

“You two again?”

Albano and Cleto both grew docile before him.

“B-Boss, you have me all wrong. Cleto, the bastard, he—”

“Th-That’s no fair, Albano! Sir Neu, it’s a misunderstanding. Albano—”

Mister Neu cut off their excuses with a stern shout. “Consider the situation! Once we’ve settled things here, move to the next area immediately!”

The adventurer who’d been talking to me praised Mister Neu.

“That’s a former knight for you. He’s reliable.”

After surveying the area, Mister Neu called out to the adventurers. “All who are unoccupied, immediately go and support your allies! Other areas are still being pushed back by the monsters!” he called out before taking off on his

horse.

I could feel him looking at me as he rode past, but neither of us said a thing.

Cleto slammed his faceplate shut, mounted his horse, and rushed to regroup with his party members. Without a moment's delay, Albano hopped on behind him.

"Albano, get off!"

"We're headed to the same place, so give me a lift. You don't want the boss scolding us anymore, do you?"

"Grr!"

As they left, I decided to head to another area as well.

Sophia wielded a battle-axe against the seemingly unending waves of monsters.

"Hrah!"

Her axe—so large it would be difficult for a stalwart man to handle—drew a beautiful arc through the air as it cleanly separated a monster's head from its body.

As others fought at range, she was alone in the thick of it, rampaging to her heart's content. The sight of her laying enemies to rest with her axe turned the faces of onlooking adventurers pale.

"What's with that woman?!"

"Is she some sort of Amazon?"

"Such a waste of a cute face!"

Blood splattered with each swing of the axe, staining Sophia a filthy red. There were monsters coming at her from all sides.

Knowing it would be bothersome if they all attacked in unison, Sophia lowered her own weight, stooped down, and leaped into the air. The charging monsters collided with one another as they missed their target.

Her leap took her quite high into the air. As she looked around, she could see the others were fighting as well. Aria, for one, was wreaking even more havoc than she was.

Fountains of blood seemed to manifest around her, each near immediately after the last, as cheers rose from the adventurers watching her.

At another spot, Miranda used three golems to take on armies in a coordinated effort.

“Everyone’s amazing.”

I can’t be outdone, she thought as she looked at the ground.

Decreasing her weight had increased her air time. Both monster and adventurer seemed amazed as they looked up at her.

“There’s too many of them. In that case!”

Sophia reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of small stones she had picked up along the way. Increasing their weight, she tossed them at the ground. With such tremendous mass thrown from above, the stones hit with greatly increased force.

Most of the monsters they hit died instantly on contact.

She’d managed to thin them out somewhat before landing and readying her battle-axe once more.

“Now, come at me!”

The adventurers watching her fight began to cheer for her.

Porter was stationed at the center of the expedition team, and there, Eva waited, ready for any monsters that slipped past Lyle and the others.

They seemed to be causing quite a stir in the distance with clouds of dust rising from all around. Eva watched from atop Porter, impressed.

“Aria and Sophia are really letting loose.”

They hadn’t been able to fight for quite a while now, so perhaps they were letting off steam. With that in mind, Eva turned to a bored-looking May.

“Are you sulking?”

May wanted to fight too, but Miranda had stopped her.

“I want to go on a rampage too.”

She was clearly dissatisfied, and Eva tried her best to talk her out of it.

“If you go all out, we’ll stand out in a bad way. Besides, you might need to protect me. I’m a singer first, fighter second.”

Although Eva could handle herself in a rough situation, her main role lay elsewhere. She didn’t seek strength like Aria or Sophia. At most, she was fine as long as she could protect herself.

“You elves have always loved your songs and stories. If you trained seriously, I’m pretty sure you’d end up quite strong, you know.”

“I’m sorry to say I don’t need any excess strength. What I want is to improve as a singer. Aria and Sophia can handle all the fighting.”

May looked toward the dust clouds, where Aria was running amok.

“Those two are amazing for humans. If it’s just in raw strength, they’ll surpass Miranda in no time.”

While Miranda was a versatile jack of all trades, Aria and Sophia were specialized for combat. Their strength came as no surprise. Fundamentally, they would train whenever they had free time.

“Miranda has her own strengths. She can’t do what those two do, but that’s just fine in my book.”

But none of them could imitate Miranda either.

Eva’s gaze then drifted over to the makeshift beds set up near Porter. This was where injured adventurers were being brought in. Novem was handling the treatment—with Shannon as her assistant.

Despite all her complaining, Monica helped out as well.

“Why must I stay behind? I wanted to be by my chicken’s side, supporting him in combat.”

She wore a maid uniform that was completely out of place—absurd even—

within a dungeon, but Monica really was strong. She was an important individual who supported the party. An invaluable existence that propped up their everyday lives.

Shannon was doing whatever Novem instructed.

“Shannon, could you get me some new bandages?”

“Again?! I just got you some.”

Eva gave a pleased smile, seeing everything fulfilling their designated roles.

Taking note of this, May looked at her curiously. “Did something good happen?”

“Right, well I’m realizing just how exceptional this party is. As the comrades of a hero, it’s nice to have flair and skill. Perhaps this incident might be worth turning into a song.”

She’d sing stories with Lyle as the main character. That was why Eva joined the party in the first place, and she felt proud of her comrades who had grown stronger than before.

By the time the battle ended, darkness had set in. Torches and lanterns were packed together as Mister Neu gathered up all the main members with a conflicted look on his face.

“There are more injured than I expected.”

The other commanding figures of the expedition weighed in.

“We haven’t had many deaths, but we’ll be shorthanded if we send all the injured back to the surface.”

“It’s tough luck, running into a variant.”

“Should we have the Guild send in new parties?”

The party leaders, meanwhile, could only watch over the exchange. I was with the party leaders, and next to me, Albano showed an excessive level of familiarity.

“Hey, Lyle. I heard about what you did. Sounds like you made quite a splash.”

“Impressive, right?” I replied.

He returned a laugh. “If you can say that while surrounded by all those scary ladies, you’ve got guts... So, here’s the deal: how ’bout you team up with us?”

“Team up?”

I don’t know what he’s proposing, exactly. As the thought crossed my mind, Cleto cut in.

“You’d best be careful with him, Lyle. Teaming up with Albano can be quite the ordeal.”

“Cleto, you little...!”

The two began arguing, drawing a glance from Mister Neu.

Noticing this, they lowered their voices.

“When I say team up, I mean just for the expedition. Your people know how to treat wounds, right? We know how to do a thing or two, but we’re stuck with basic first aid. With your party on board, we can afford to be a little reckless.”

Albano’s aim seemed to be Novem’s healing magic. I appreciated that he was suggesting mutual cooperation, rather than trying to take Novem.

But...that was to his benefit. Not mine.

“What’s in it for me?”

My ancestors—particularly the sixth head—seemed pleased by my response.

“Finally, learning to negotiate, are we, Lyle?”

Albano looked a little deflated by my demand. “You’ve got the looks of a pampered brat, but you’re pretty shrewd,” he said. Despite his words, he still seemed somewhat pleased that I was open to negotiation. “You’ve been in Baym for what, three months? Then there’s got to be loads of stuff you don’t know yet.”

“I’ve been looking into that with my comrades.”

“I’ll bet. You seem thorough enough. But it’ll save ya some time if you hear it from someone who’s worked in Baym.”

So he's offering information in exchange.

It wasn't a bad deal. We'd only be working together for the expedition, and right now, we needed information.

Cleto joined the conversation. "Then I will provide information as well. In exchange, I would like to request treatment for our injured."

"Cleto, I asked first."

"He didn't say he'd only team up with you, did he? It is up to Lyle."

Just as it seemed like they were about to start fighting again, the discussions finished and Mister Neu came over to us. They fell silent.

"Lyle, I heard about your exploits from the others. If it's all right with you, we would like your cooperation from tomorrow onward."

That was the invitation I'd been anticipating.

"I don't mind. That's what I was fighting for."

Mister Neu gave a wry smile. "Good grief, you're quite reliable for your age. And composed too. Albano, Cleto, you could learn a thing or two from him."

The two of them looked around a bit awkwardly.

Erhart watched the adventurers' discussion from the shadows. Adventurers who wouldn't even spare him the time of day were having a blast talking with Lyle. And that wasn't all; even Neu, a leader of the expedition, acknowledged him.

Erhart clenched his fist in frustration.

"Why?"

He had thought of Lyle as nothing more than a pampered greenhorn who hid behind women. But, when he saw him in battle, he understood.

Lyle was far stronger than he was.

Why was that? The answer, when he thought about it, was obvious.

Natural talent.

Erhart was unbearably envious of that.

Around then, the girls were preparing to spend the night in a suitable abandoned building as they awaited Lyle's return. They chose a relatively intact structure and rested within—a common sight in Baym's dungeon.

Sophia wiped herself down with a towel and a large tub of water that Clara had filled with hot water. Relying on the lantern's light, she made sure she had gotten off all the grime before sitting in the tub to warm herself up.

"It may be abandoned, but it's good to have a house."

Normally, washing up in a dungeon would mean exposing one's body to comrades, as separating from the group was too dangerous. Even now, Clara was just beyond the room's door, reading a book and sitting on a crate.

But it was nice to be surrounded by walls, and not have to worry about anyone seeing.

The world beyond the shattered window glass was too dark to see a thing.

"Is Lyle not back yet?"

It had been quite a long while since the battle concluded, but Lyle had yet to return. Miranda was gone too—she'd disappeared to who-knows-where as soon as she'd washed her body.

Though Sophia was only talking to herself, Clara—ever the diligent girl—replied.

"Lyle is in a meeting with the core members of the expedition team. There were considerable casualties during today's battle. Dealing with those will take time."

Sophia felt a surge of admiration for Lyle. Despite being exhausted from battle, he still participated in such tedious discussions. Sophia herself was exhausted and didn't want to talk about anything difficult.

"Lyle is impressive. He seemed so unreliable not too long ago, but now he's discussing important matters with seasoned adults."

She'd known Lyle for over a year, and in that time, he had changed a great deal. An unreliable young man had grown into a capable leader.

Clara had to agree with her on that one.

"Yes, he's become quite dependable. I suspect it is because he has a clear goal in mind. He's been putting in a considerable amount of effort, though few seem to notice."

Since swearing to defeat Ceres, Lyle began to put in more effort than ever before. Not only in training—he was also working his head, strategizing for the future. It was the latter part that Sophia found to be the more impressive one.

I can only swing my axe, while he thinks about the party's operations and its future... He really is incredible.

But Clara continued with a hint of shame. "It's unfortunate. Lyle has had a poor reputation ever since we arrived in Baym. I hope he can change that here."

"Huh? Is that true?!"

Sophia was startled to learn of Lyle's poor reputation. He was working so hard, so why wasn't he being recognized for it?

"You didn't know? He's quite infamous at the Guild. He's the only man in a party of women, so he'll stand out whether he likes it or not. Furthermore, he's done nothing but simply requests since arriving in Baym. Those with sharp tongues call him the 'local gigolo.'"

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

Flushing with anger, Sophia stood from the tub, stormed through the doorway, and confronted Clara. Her ample chest was thrust right into Clara's face.

Clara narrowed her eyes a little more than usual and explained, "Complaining to me won't solve the issue. The fact is, we haven't done any notable work in Baym. He cannot avoid standing out, so the negative talk outweighs his efforts. It is as simple as that."

"That's what I hate! Lyle is doing his best. He trains early in the morning and wrestles with problems late into the night. To call him a gigolo is simply unfair."

Clara instructed Sophia to dry herself, before explaining a little more sympathetically.

“People cannot see *effort*. Only *results*. That’s why I hope this incident will improve his standing.”

Sophia felt dejected. “R-Right. It’s not fair of me to take it out on you.”

Those close to him could see his struggles. But to outsiders, it looked like he didn’t have a care. Normally, those with skill would immediately take the test and begin their adventurer careers at a high point.

Lyle’s refusal to do so led to him being underestimated.

“I’m looking forward to tomorrow,” Clara said, sounding a little optimistic.

“Y-You’re right! I’m sure his reputation will be straightened out by tomorrow!”

Sophia felt a little relieved to hear that.

Chapter 103: Those with Skill

From the next day onward, our roles changed. Until yesterday, we had been positioned to assist the center and guard noncombatants. But from today, we were recognized as members of the combat force and were stationed on the front line.

We moved on foot, stationed around Porter as we advanced with the utmost caution.

While in the center, we'd only progressed through areas where the monsters had already been taken care of. That would no longer be the case.

Aria and Eva were on lookout duty, while I kept a hand clutched around the Jewel to grasp the surrounding situation.

If we proceed down this path, we'll end up in combat with the herd of monsters down there. Though I was aware that this, too, was an experience.

I hadn't told Aria or Eva.

Observing our surroundings from atop Porter, Eva was on alert for the monsters that hid on the rooftops, lurking as they waited to ambush adventurers. Meanwhile, Aria—on foot—kept an eye out for the monsters on the ground, mainly the ones hiding inside the buildings.

"There are way too many hiding spots here. It's awful."

With all the ruins that lined the path, there was no shortage of places to hide. The monsters who concealed themselves within were troublesome.

I could see them, but my comrades couldn't tell where the enemies were.

Shannon griped her head off about how that was unfair, but Aria accepted it saying, "This is good practice."

How reliable she had become.

Approaching me, Novem said, "Milord, you were up late last night. Why not take a break inside Porter?"

“Thanks,” I replied, grateful for her consideration. “But we’re just walking. It’s not much of a strain on me.”

“We’d normally be more cautious and mentally exhausted.”

She wasn’t wrong. As a matter of fact, Aria was starting to get mentally worn out. We took frequent breaks, but we unfortunately lacked manpower and had no one else who could do her job.

“I’d like to recruit more people. Do you think we’ve gotten our names out there a bit?”

Once we were famous, it would be easier to gather comrades. Anyone would prefer to work with a skilled party; not only was it safer, it was more lucrative too.

“There are some people who are trying to nestle up to us with the intention of using us. Please be careful, Lord Lyle.”

“Yes, that’s another problem.”

The sixth head’s Art was not omnipotent. It did not react to those who were trying to use us. While it helped in seeing through deceivers, the important part was whether or not they were hostile. For instance, those who saw us as conveniently exploitable suckers would have a rather positive opinion of us—in a way.

As we talked, Aria stopped in her tracks and reached a hand to the side.

Everyone halted, grabbing their weapons. Meanwhile, Aria slowly picked a small stone from the ground and tossed it into one of the buildings. Then monsters—realizing they had been noticed—began flooding out the door.

I applauded Aria. “Well done.”

But despite the compliment, Aria shot me an exasperated look. “I can at least notice that much. Don’t just watch; help out.”

The monsters were goblins—no, their slightly larger hobgoblin relatives. They were about as large as humans and were smarter than normal goblins. Not only were they adept at using tools, they also possessed more strength than most humans.

They were troublesome creatures, plain and simple. The Guild records noted how they would often hide in ruins to take adventurers by surprise.

Just as I was about to draw my saber, Novem stepped forward. She held a silver staff in hand, aiming it at the monsters and chanting a spell.

“Wind...Cannon!”

I could feel the air around me shifting as all the wind in the area changed course to gather at the tip of her staff. She’d formed a vortex before her, the winds growing more violent, more turbulent by the second.

Once the spell was unleashed, the hobgoblins were thrown into the air by these unseeable winds. They crashed into the floor and the walls and did not get up again.

“One shot,” I exclaimed.

Novem turned to me. “Monsters of this level are not worth Milord’s effort.”

Indeed, I wouldn’t struggle against them, but it felt awkward to just stand around doing nothing.

And, there was a girl who simply refused to understand how I felt. Her name was Shannon.

“Huh? That’s kinda gigolo-like, don’t you think? Aren’t you a tried-and-true gigolo now?”

A gigolo...a man whose income came solely from the hard work and financial support of women. I wasn’t one—certainly not—but I could understand why I’d be seen that way.

To be clear, I worked. I was not a gigolo.

I pinched Shannon’s cheek.

“Who are you calling a gigolo? You do even less work than me.”

“Hwey, ai dwo wowk!”

She probably meant “Hey, I do work.” Well, so did I.

“If I’m doing the same work as you and I’m a gigolo, then you’re in the same boat. Do you even understand that?”

As I quarreled with Shannon, Sophia, who was watching over us, piped up, “Keep it at that, both of you.”

Aria was going around making sure the monsters were really dead, while Eva was keeping watch over our surroundings. May was asleep inside Porter, while Clara was the one driving.

Novem was looking at us fretfully, and Miranda was watching with a smile.

“Milord is not a gigolo. It is simply a waste of his strength for him to personally dispatch foes of this caliber, and—”

“Oh really? I don’t mind either way. Lyle, if you ever want to be a gigolo, just hit me up. I’ll support you,” Miranda teased.

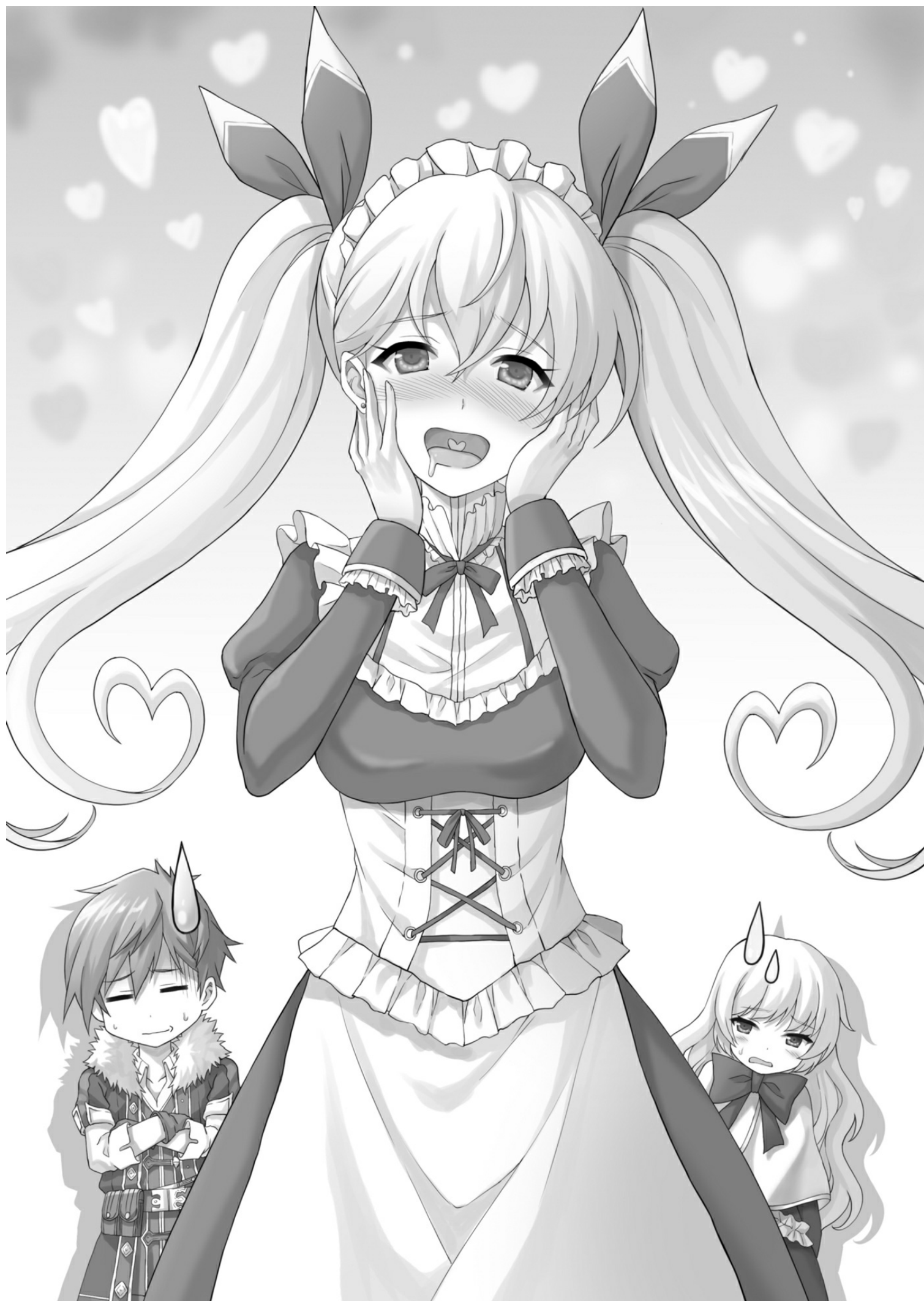
As all that happened, there was only one individual who had a serious look in their eyes. “A gigolo—what a marvelous thing! Truly, that useless chicken is the only master befitting of me. I will gladly look after you from morning to night.”

Seeing Monica so genuinely overjoyed, Shannon and I were both a bit creeped out.

Also, Novem got seriously angry. Her expression faded and she began to matter-of-factly lecture Monica.

“You mustn’t spoil him. In the first place, considering Milord’s well-being, you must be strict from time to time. That is also a form of kindness. Your coddling would only lead to the downfall of mankind.”

Monica smiled and retorted, “Downfall? So be it! My entire purpose is to take care of people. A good-for-nothing chickenshit gigolo is my ideal master. I don’t mind if he’s an absolute lowlife who can’t do anything as a human being! Aah, a gigolo—it has such a wonderful ring to it! Just imagining a damn chicken who can’t do anything without me... Oh dear, I’m drooling.”



She said it all with a completely serious look in her eyes. The madness we sensed caused both Shannon and me to regain our composure.

I made a vow in my heart. "I'll fight next time."

Shannon was on the same page.

"I need to do my best too. I'm going to go study; I'll be in Porter if you need me."

"Do your best."

I saw her off with a wave of my hand. And suddenly, Monica began to panic.

"Why are you suddenly so motivated?! I'd be more than happy to care for you!"

"If the other option is being cared for and treated like a gigolo, I'm going to work my heart out."

My response brought a smile to Novem's face. "I knew you had it in you, Milord. What you're feeling right now is a very important feeling."

She seemed to be taking my playful banter with Monica seriously. Just as seriously as Monica herself.

"Oh, come on!" the automaton exclaimed with heartfelt disappointment.

Ignoring her, I gripped the Jewel. A three-dimensional map of the surrounding area spread out in my mind. I could see exactly where enemies were hiding.

"This way."

Taking the lead from Aria, I started walking at the front with the rest of the party following behind.

Looking at all the defeated monsters, Aria sighed.

"Leaving all the Demonic Stones and materials feels wrong. It doesn't feel like we're making any money."

Sophia shared the sentiment. "I've heard that the people following behind will collect them, but it still feels like such a waste."

Due to their line of work, they'd made it a habit to extract everything valuable

from the monsters they'd defeated. Leaving them behind made them uneasy.

Is this what you call an occupational disease?

It was hard to imagine that these were the same girls who were so opposed to dissecting monsters only a year ago.

There was a man watching Lyle and his comrades at work.

It was Albano—he was stealthily following the party, observing their movements.

“That guy’s navigatin’ the maze with no hesitation.”

Realizing that the party never once had to retrace their steps, he concluded that someone in the party had a relevant Art.

“They’re skilled, but it’s more’n that. It’s like their party’s specialized for dungeons.” Albano thought over various things while scratching his hair. “They know damn well I’m tailing them.”

Seeing Lyle’s party skillfully track down any and all hidden monsters in their vicinity, Albano decided it was time to take his leave.

“Well, I at least found out they’re competent. That’s somethin’.”

As he jumped from rooftop to rooftop, Albano cracked a smile.

“We’ve got some interestin’ newcomers on our hands.”

And just like that, Albano returned to his party.

That night, the parties led by Albano and Cleto had gathered near Porter. There were several bonfires set up and it had become something of a feast.

Albano and Cleto were savoring their drinks while staring at the food Monica had whipped up.

“Man, it’s been a while since I got to eat somethin’ this good!” Albano exclaimed as he heartily dug into a meat dish.

Cleto sat straight and ate with decorum. They really were polar opposites.

“Albano, can’t you eat more calmly? The food won’t run away.”

“Nah, it’ll go cold if I waste time on etiquette and all that. More importantly, Lyle. Your routes are nice and easy to follow.”

Albano and his party members—having been stationed behind us—likely had a nice and easy time without any monsters.

Cleto looked at me, impressed. “So it’s not just combat. You’re skilled at scouting too? I don’t know if it’s you or your allies, but you’re quite competent.”

“This guy’s as rigid as he looks,” Albano said, pointing his fork at Cleto. “His comrades all take after him too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?! We’re just earnest.”

“Hah! Too earnest, if you’ll let me have my say. They’re armed to the teeth and strong in a fight, but useless everywhere else.”

“N-Not useless. How rude! It’s simply not our strong suit.”

From how embarrassed Cleto was, it was clear he was struggling.

I tried asking him. “Have you considered polishing those skills, or getting new comrades?”

Cleto shook his head at this obvious advice. “Of course, I’ve considered it and I’m always recruiting. I am, but... I have a dream.”

“A dream?”

Cleto suddenly went into his dreams and aspirations, and for once, Albano did not mock him.

“I want to become a knight.”

“Oh?”

“I was not born into a knight house, but it is something I’ve always aspired toward. So, I am gaining strength to become a knight. I have comrades who share my dream, and we’ve all formed a party unified in one singular goal.” But there, Cleto’s shoulders dropped. “With that being said, many new recruits feel out of place in that atmosphere and quit. Adventurers, in particular, find it too

rigid.”

By the time he realized it, the gathering had become one of only those dreaming of knighthood, and it became difficult to ask those members to polish their noncombat skills.

Troublingly enough, they still produced excellent results without those skills. This made for a tricky situation.

“I understand that seeking strength alone isn’t enough, but our party has grown stronger, and our earnings have increased. I hesitate to change our approach.”

“And thanks to that, you got a bunch of muscle-heads who only know how to fight,” Albano said with a mocking laugh. “Man, you love to hate ’em. Parties with no versatility.”

Cleto’s eyes turned stern. “Albano, you’re not any better. We may have our tendencies, but so do you.”

“How so? We’ve got plenty of skillful guys who can handle anything you throw at them. We’re doing just fine as adventurers.”

Indeed, it seemed like they could pull off most things. However, they were a little...should I say, rough around the edges? Or rather, they sometimes seemed more like bandits than adventurers.

“Look at your team and tell me you don’t see a band of thieves. Do you seriously aim to be a knight like that?”

Startled, I looked at Albano who bashfully downed his ale.

“What’s wrong with that?! We’re gonna rise the way we know how. Right. First, we’ll make it as mercenaries, then we’ll make something of ourselves in the war. And then, some country’s gonna hire us. Mark my words. Ain’t that what you plan on doing too?”

“That’s true, but...”

Both their parties were less than twenty strong. Those numbers were sufficient for adventurers, but on the smaller side for a mercenary brigade.

Albano turned to me. “Well, you heard me. Lyle, how about we work

together? With your help, I bet we could join the next war as mercenaries. We invite Cleto and his stubborn boys too, and we've got fifty of us altogether."

I was being invited into a mercenary brigade, but if I had to say, I wanted to be the one doing the recruiting. And not for that. In an attempt to change the topic, I brought up Mister Neu.

"Why not invite Mister Neu? He seems quite strong."

I'd seen the party he led, and unlike Albano's or Cleto's, it seemed truly balanced.

Albano averted his eyes. "The boss is no good. If he's here, everyone will think he's the leader. And I don't got it in me to order that man around."

Rather than admiring him, Albano gave off more of the impression that he recognized his abilities. But while Albano acknowledged Neu's superiority, Cleto respected him.

"Sir Neu was a real knight, once upon a time. I look up to him. But I think it would be difficult to invite him into the mercenary industry."

"Why is that?"

"He...has his own reasons."

Talking with the prominent adventurers of Baym was enlightening. I could somewhat tell that Cleto was trying to become a knight, but it was surprising to find out that Albano was driven by the same ambition. In Albano's case, however, it seemed less about the knighthood itself, and more about the desire to rise up and make something of himself.

As we continued our conversation, a cheer rose from a short distance away.

Albano glanced over. "What now?"

"Oh, that's one of my comrades. She's an elf, so she loves to sing whenever there's a gathering."

Eva was singing, surrounded by Albano's and Cleto's comrades. She was clearly enjoying the rowdy atmosphere. Despite the discord between their leaders, the members seemed to get along well enough as they shared a drink and a laugh, sitting shoulder to shoulder.

Cleto watched with a smile. “She has a nice singing voice. I’m honestly jealous of parties that have such comrades.”

Albano scoffed at those words. “Comrades? Please. Just be real and say you’d feel more motivated if you had a pretty girl by your side. Once tomorrow rolls around, we’ll be relaxin’ in the rear. I’ll bet you’re planning to head to the merchants and enjoy the company of some harlot.”

“Why must you always mock me like that?!”

Based on Cleto’s red face, Albano had likely hit the mark.

“But it’s true, right?”

Albano seemed to tease precisely because he knew it to be true.

In any case, the two of them were fighting again, and I tried to put a stop to it.

“Well, how about you keep it at that?”

Then their eyes both turned to me.

“Lyle, how is it for you, anyway?”

“Huh?!”

Albano wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

“No need to hide it. Having so many beauties is rare, even for a harem party. How many of ’em have you been with? All of them?” he asked with a grin.

Cleto, despite his blushing face, was listening with deep intrigue.

“I’m curious. Do you have a special someone, Lyle? If so, I question this harem setup of yours.”

How am I supposed to respond to that?

In the first place, it just ended up as a harem before I’d realized it. It wasn’t like I was carefully hand-selecting my party members.

“How should I put this... I haven’t done anything like that, nor are we in that sort of relationship.”

Albano looked utterly disappointed. “Whaaat?! All those beauts and nothin’? Are you stupid? What are you faffin’ around for? Get on with it already. Your

whole world will change.”

“You’re making such a big deal out of it.”

Cleto stood and burst into a fervent speech. “It will change! It will! I hesitated once upon a time, but after experiencing it, I understood. I could feel myself growing as a man! Lyle, you should try it too! Shall I introduce you to a popular spot in Baym?”

He looks earnest, but does he actually play around quite a lot?

“Hey, take me too,” Albano flippantly chimed in.

I heard some chuckling from the Jewel. “He’s got a point. It’s about time for Lyle to become an adult.”

The third’s teasing voice ticked me off.

“The first time is crucial. Failure can have lasting effects.”

The fourth’s advice caused my blood to boil.

“It’s usually safest to get your first experience with someone who knows what they’re doing.”

What do you mean by “safest”? And who knows what they’re doing? No one in my party knows jack!

The sixth head sounded unnecessarily excited. “That’s why I told you to play around. Listen, Lyle. The first time is crucial. Just that one failure will impact your relationship going forward. Well fine, what else can you do? When you get back, you should head to the brothel first and foremost. Avoid the cheap ones; they’re hit or miss.”

He seemed strangely knowledgeable about this, getting him a cold response from the seventh head.

“Yes, you’re just as knowledgeable as I’d expect for a man who almost got stabbed for his womanizing. Putting that aside, you are the legitimate heir of House Walt, Lyle. You can’t avoid these topics forever. Perhaps you should learn from someone with experience.”

Oh, please. You guys are just having fun watching your descendants struggle,

aren't you? You all just want to laugh at me.

There were nothing but enemies within the Jewel.

The third head was clearly enjoying himself. "Lyle, look forward to when you get back."

I was not enjoying it at all.

But...I was a little curious.

Seeing me so hesitant, Cleto amusedly asked, "Are you scared? Don't worry. There's nothing to be afraid of. Or have you already decided who you want to be with? If so, you should get your feelings across as soon as you can. In our line of work, there's no telling when you might lose your life."

Suddenly, he had turned serious.

But putting that aside, I had a rather pressing issue.

"N-No, err... I don't know who to start with..."

Albano and Cleto exchanged a look before shaking their heads.

"Lucky bastard. You've got your pick, huh?"

"My thoughts exactly. You don't know who to start with? I've never heard of such a dilemma before."

Is it just me or do these guys actually get along?

After returning from the dungeon, I lay on my bed at the inn. The expedition had been successful; we'd reached our destination and returned to the surface.

Our return was made a lot quicker by the floor transfer device, but it wasn't like Aramthurst's; it was a bit more anxiety inducing. This device consisted of nothing more than a handful of circular boards, neither hanging nor fixed in place. The boards would transport adventurers up and down the central cylindrical void of the dungeon.

Watching those flimsy-looking things carrying people all the way to the surface filled me with dread. It was efficient, and we'd certainly be using them again, but it was unsettling nonetheless.

I lay on the bed, hands behind my head, discussing with my ancestors.

“I guess you were right, Lyle. There was no need to rush with the test,” said the third head.

Then the sixth took over, more interested in the parties we’d met. “We’ve spoken to a few adventurers,” he said, “but the one who caught my eye was Albano. He and his party, they have promise.”

By contrast, the seventh head pushed for Cleto. “What do you see in a guy like that? If I had to reach out to anyone, it would be Cleto’s party. They may be a bit iffy as adventurers, but they’ve got the strength you’re looking for.”

He wasn’t too fond of adventurers, and so he took a liking to the least adventurer-like of the bunch. Certainly, Cleto’s party was proficient when it came to combat.

“His knightly ambitions are a bit too strong,” the fourth countered. “It would be better if he was a little more flexible.”

From the fifth’s perspective, it didn’t seem to matter which. “It would be just right if you could average them out. But I’m more interested in that former knight, Neu.”

Since he was one of the people leading the operations, I didn’t get many opportunities to talk to him. I had plenty more things I wanted to ask him, but alas.

“I’m curious about him too. He seemed reliable,” I said.

Albano and Cleto both seemed to acknowledge Neu as their superior. He had the skills, and I definitely wanted him on the team.

The third head shared my sentiment. “I know we can’t be picky, but I’d love to get little old Neu. I’ll push for Albano and Cleto too, while I’m at it. Look, you’re never going to find a perfect talent. You’ll either have to train them or make good use of what they have.”

“I agree. We need more members.”

It was always better to have more comrades in arms.

Before the conversation could continue, I heard a knock. The ancestors fell

silent as I stood and approached the door.

It was Novem.

“Lord Lyle, you’ve received a summons from the Guild.”

I headed for the Guild with Novem, and there I found the same Guild worker from before waiting for me.

“I’ve heard all about you. Why, it seems you took down a variant in just one hit.”

“I was just lucky.”

He must have heard about my reputation from the other adventurers. The Guild worker seemed terribly pleased. Although I couldn’t tell if it was an act or not.

“We welcome all adventurers with skill. Please feel free to use Baym’s dungeon as you please.”

The Guild had issued us official permission to use the dungeon. This came as a relief to me, but Novem’s expression remained completely unchanged. It was like this result was a given to her.

I exchanged some small talk with the Guild worker.

“It looks like we’ll be pulling in a lot more money now. That’s a load off my mind.”

“Please make money to your heart’s content. The Guild takes a cut, after all. Putting that aside, the Guild can now recommend a wider variety of jobs to you.”

There were many requests brought into the Guild, and they were divided into a number of categories. Before, we’d only been able to do minor tasks like cleaning and assisting. Now, we could take more serious jobs such as guarding people and caravans and hunting monsters.

The Guild clearly had a high opinion of us.

“That’s reassuring.”

The conversation wrapped up. We stood and left the room.

Walking down the hallway of the Guild, we passed by several staff members along the way.

“It turned out just as you expected, Milord,” Novem said to me.

Indeed, this was what I’d predicted. We could have taken the test far earlier, but I was also satisfied with this result.

“We could’ve gotten to this point the moment we reached Baym, admittedly.”

“Your decision was not mistaken.”

“Are you sure about that? I make mistakes all the time.”

I’d made so many mistakes. No—it was more that I refused to make a choice, and left myself to get swept along with my surroundings.

As Novem tended to see me through rose-tinted glasses, she never spoke out against me. It was comforting, but also a bit lonely. It never felt like Novem was speaking her true thoughts to me. When she looked at me, it was like she was looking at someone else entirely.

Novem’s smile faded slightly as she changed the topic.

“However...”

“However?”

“I-If you do intend to make use of a brothel, please make sure it is a safe place. Even with healing magic, sexually transmitted diseases can be terrifying.”

“Pfft!”

Seeing me do a spit take in shock, Novem started panicking.

“Are you all right, Milord?!”

“I-I’m okay. No, forget about me. Novem—where did you hear about that?”

She blushed slightly. “From Mister Albano’s party. When we were together in the expedition team, they talked about you quite often.”

Albano... Do you have a grudge against me or something?

“That stuff about the brothel was a joke. I’m not going.”

“You’re not?”

“I’m not!”

My strong denial was met with a troubled look.

“You’re a man, after all. It’s important to take care of your sexual urges. If you are not completely against it, I can assist you.”

“What?!”

For a moment, I was overcome with elation and felt like jumping for joy at that proposal—then I felt ashamed of myself for even contemplating it. My ancestors were raising a ruckus inside the Jewel, but my heart was pounding too hard, my ears were burning too hot to hear them.

It was incredibly tempting—but I had to decline.

“N-No, I’d like to treasure these things a little more, and rather, are you really all right with that, Novem?”

Novem smiled. “If that is what you wish for, Milord, I don’t mind at all.”

There was something cold, something clinical in her smile and her words. Something off. I didn’t understand it well myself, and if I was being honest, I wanted to hold Novem—but that wasn’t the right smile. A loving smile willing to accept everything, but was it really directed at me? Was she even looking at me?

I knew she cared for me deeply, but it wasn’t as a lover. This was different.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?”

Novem looked at me with concern as I quickened my pace.

Once the receptionist counter was in view, I spotted a few familiar faces.

“Amazing! That’s incredible, Erhart!”

“Heh heh?”

Erhart and his party members were at the counter, dressed in new gear.

Though new, it was all lightweight, cheap stuff. But still, they were fully equipped for adventure.

Though in the same old tank top, Erhart had a new greatsword on his back.

When I stopped to look at them, Novem stopped beside me.

“They are the ones who picked on you, correct?”

“Yeah. And the receptionist is Marianne.”

Marianne was a woman who seemed to be hiding something. Erhart’s party had come to show off their new equipment, and she was showering them with praise.

“You’ve all worked so hard. Lately, I’ve heard nothing but good things about your cleaning work too; you’re on the path to becoming first-rate adventurers. Keep up the good work.”

Apparently, Erhart and his party members were working diligently. And Marianne would keep praising them about it to the point it felt excessive. Seeing Erhart and his team so happy made me a little sad.

It wasn’t because of them, but because of the adventurers around them. They had dubious looks on their face as they watched this new party being showered with compliments.

Among them was a party of two, one a veteran and the other a newbie. The newbie looked fed up with the scene.

“The hell’s up with getting praised for basic cleaning? And look at how they’re all over the pretty receptionist. Ugh, I’m jealous.”

“You’re seriously jealous of that?” the veteran replied to his envious junior.

“I wanna be praised by a pretty receptionist lady too, sir!”

“You don’t get it. Those newbies are oblivious bumpkins that just landed in Baym. You ever heard the saying ‘a big fish in a small pond’? It’s not a rare situation, but it can spell trouble.”

“Okay. And?”

“All it takes is for a pretty lady to butter them up a bit, and it’s easy to get ‘em

in line. The Guild's got a knack for it. They use attractive receptionists to shape adventurers to their convenience."

"Um...what?"

The newbie seemed startled as he looked back at Erhart's party. Erhart was enthusiastically telling Marianne about his ambitions.

"Just you watch us, Marianne! We're gonna rake in loads of cash and become top-notch adventurers!"

They were eager to slay hordes of monsters for money.

Marianne praised them, but she also made sure to remind them about the Guild's requests.

"I know you will do just fine," she said, "but being an adventurer isn't all about slaying monsters, you know. Don't forget to complete the Guild's requests as well."

"You can count on us! Anything from you, Marianne, will be our top priority!"

"I'm so happy to hear that! Thank you!"

Hearing Marianne's sweet voice from the counter, the veteran adventurer closed his eyes.

"And there you have it. One party of sheep that does whatever the Guild tells them. Burn it into your eyes."

The newbie's image of a pretty receptionist seemed to shatter as he slumped his shoulders.

"Isn't there a chance...? Can't love blossom if we see each other often enough at the desk?"

"You're a damn fool. Maybe if you're good-looking or rich, but otherwise, it's just a job to them. Do those guys look pretty to you? Do they look like they're making good money?"

Looking at Erhart and his comrades, it was clear they weren't exceptionally handsome. Their attire also marked them as rookie adventurers, not wealthy by any means.

“If you were a woman, would you give them the time of day? Exactly.”

“Reality is harsh.”

“If you want to dream, go to a brothel.”

As the duo walked away, I felt a pang of sadness. Though Erhart and his party members were wrapped up in innocent delight, they were receiving sympathetic looks from those around them. Some of the younger ones seemed envious too, but once they figured out the circumstances, these looks were replaced with blank ones.

Watching Erhart, the third head said, “Well, it’s not that bad for them, is it? Sure, it feels like they’re getting tricked, but they’ve got new equipment. Can’t they finally start their adventurer careers now?”

“Better than dying in a ditch,” the fifth head agreed.

When they were done bragging to Marianne, Erhart and his comrades left the counter. They noticed me. Then Erhart broke off from them and approached. Novem stepped forward to shield me, but I reassured her.

“It’s fine,” I told her.

He was right in front of me.

“I’ll admit defeat. For now.”

Those were the words I hadn’t anticipated. I thought his new gear would have gone straight to his ego; that he would have picked another fight with me.

“Huh?”

“I mean it. I lost... It’s frustrating, but true.”

His comrades behind him either looked down or away. They were much calmer than before.

The fourth seemed a bit pleased by their attitude. “Oh, how wonderful it is to watch the young’uns grow up.”

The sixth head, similarly, rejoiced at the change. “They’re at least capable enough to accept loss. Lyle, remember these guys. They’ll become strong if they manage to survive long enough.”

Erhart looked me straight in the eye.

“Honestly, I used to mock you. But seeing you fight and...all that, I started feeling pathetic.”

I knew he was on the expedition team, but what happened to him?

“U-Um... Did something happen?”

He’d changed so much that I had to wonder if this was some imposter pretending to be Erhart. A little bashful, he began to tell his tale.

It happened on the day that the expedition had safely concluded. The expedition team had accomplished their goal, and it was finally time to return to the surface.

Erhart, who had joined as support, performed his daily tasks while maintaining an air that kept others at a distance. As he waited for the floor transfer device to arrive, he noted how the people around him rejoiced at their mission’s success.

But Erhart alone couldn’t share in that joy.

Damn it. Why is that bastard recognized while I’m not? I’m more amazing than him. Far more amazing.

He had developed his Art all the way to its final stage and had been hailed as the strongest in his village by far. With those accomplishments under his belt, he’d been convinced he’d also be able to make it in Baym.

But reality proved otherwise.

Lyle was the one who received recognition while Erhart was largely ignored by the other adventurers.

As he sat alone on a wooden crate awaiting his return to the surface, he was approached by Neu.

“May I have a moment?”

“What do you want, old man?”

Erhart’s rude attitude was met with a smile.

“I noticed you were alone. Do you mind if I sit next to you?”

Taking a seat before he could answer, Neu began to speak. He looked a little pleased.

“You did well. Unlike last time, you were diligent with your work. Thank you. You were a big help to the expedition.”

Back at the village, he’d been worked to the bone. Just because he had strength, people would yell at him to help, and even when he did help, they would shout at him for being slow about it. Compared to that, this expedition was on the easier side.

“It is important to complete the tasks given to you. The accumulation of all these little things is what becomes trust. It is the same for adventurers.”

Hearing that he would diligently have to complete these menial tasks to succeed as an adventurer made Erhart irritated.

“What do you know? No matter how hard I work, it’s always someone else getting the recognition. This time too. That guy’s done nothing but cleaning ever since he got to Baym, but we— Damn it!”

He keenly felt the difference in skill when comparing himself to Lyle. But still, it was frustrating to lose to someone he’d previously mocked. Lyle led along nothing but beautiful women yet was still stronger and more reliable than Erhart.

He detested him for it.

“Are you comparing yourself to Lyle? Then you should stop that right now.”

“So you think I can’t beat him either?! I, you see, I—!”

“It’s pointless to compare yourself to others. And how do you know that Lyle hasn’t faced hardship?”

“Th-That’s...?”

What exactly has Lyle done so far? Erhart had no idea.

“He is strong. But it is hard to imagine anyone having such strength without doing anything to get it. Such geniuses certainly exist, but they wouldn’t have prepared for this trial as thoroughly as he had.”

“Prepared? Prepared what?”

“He certainly researched this dungeon’s structure and all the types of monsters that appear within it. And I’m sure he looked into many more things too. He brought nearly everything he needed.”

“Wh-What good is information?”

Even without that, you can defeat monsters as long as you’re strong, Erhart thought.

Neu asked him, “Did you put in that much preparation when you took the challenge last time?”

“I...didn’t.”

He and his party members believed it would work out somehow or another and hadn’t prepared in the slightest. It was the same as when they came to Baym. They hadn’t made any plans.

“You can’t beat him as you are right now. That knowledge alone is valuable.”

“But! But I want to beat him...”

It was frustrating. At the same time, he hated himself for knowing he couldn’t win.

“Envyng him won’t make you any stronger,” said Neu. “And it’s not about winning right now; it’s about what you can do right now to win in the future.”

Erhart lifted his head.

The floor transfer device arrived, and people began to board it one after the next.

“To win in the future?”

Neu stood with a smile and headed for the mysterious device.

“Do your best.”

Watching his back as he made his way off, Erhart stood and clenched his fists tightly.

“Badass!”

It was unclear whether he actually understood anything or not, but Neu's words had imparted him with strength.

"And that's the story!"

Watching Erhart puff out his chest with pride, I silently offered my thanks to Mister Neu.

Thank you. You reformed a very troublesome guy.

Erhart pointed at me. "I'm fine with losing right now! But I'll beat you someday, just you watch! One day, I'll build an even bigger harem than you!"

His bold proclamation drew the eyes of those around us.

Naturally, I felt embarrassed to be the center of attention.

Why are we even competing over harems? I don't remember ever joining that competition.

"I... I see."

I considered saying, "Well, if that's fine with you, then I'm not complaining." But Novem stepped out in front of me, replying with all seriousness.

"Milord will never lose to you in the future either."

Why is that the part you're being stubborn about?

Novem was a little strange, or...how to put it?—she had an endearingly hopeless side to her.

But Erhart didn't back down, not even against her.

"No, I will win. I'll start making the big bucks, train the hell out of it, and get stronger. I'll be cooler and stronger than Lyle, you hear!"

Novem was smiling, but she evidently didn't intend to concede a single step.

"But by then, Lord Lyle will be even stronger than he is now. He will be even richer *and* cooler. You won't stand a chance."

They could have backed down at any point, but the argument just continued on and on.

“I’ll be on top!”

“That’s impossible. Lord Lyle will be the victor.”

“You never know what the future holds!”

“Even so, Milord will not lose.”

Seeing Novem put up a calm yet powerful refutation, the third head let out an amused chuckle.

“I never thought I’d see Novem competing with Erhart.”

Then came the seventh head’s weary voice.

“Lyle... This is embarrassing. Go stop her. Good grief, what’s there to be so obstinate about?”

My thoughts exactly.

A strange switch had flipped for Novem, and I struggled to put an end to their petty quarrel.

Chapter 104: Sweeper

We were in a bustling Baym tavern.

“Lyle, you know what a sweeper is?”

Albano had invited me out, and we were having dinner just the two of us.

“A sweeper? Do you mean like a cleaner?”

Our personal relations continued even after the expedition.

“That’s right. A cleaner. But the things they clean up are adventurers.”

“They’re people who hunt adventurers, then?”

“It’s a rumor. They say that the Guild hires experts to hunt down bad adventurers. Stories like that, well, they’ve been goin’ around Baym for a long time now.”

For better or worse, Baym was a place that attracted people. There would, of course, be bad people among them. Adventurers who repeatedly committed crimes couldn’t just be left to their own devices, so the Guild’s sweepers would apparently get rid of them.

“The word ‘sweeper’ is new to me, but I’ve heard about the concept before. There were similar stories going around the other Guilds too. I always thought they were just rumors, though.”

“Yeah, same here. Well, whether there are sweepers or not, it shouldn’t bother adventurers like you. You’re not the sort.”

“And you *do* seem like the sort, Albano.”

“Like hell I’d get up to crime. It just ain’t worth the risk. Maybe I take advantage of some gray areas, but...anyway. Neither of us wants to deal with sweepers.”

If they were tasked with hunting down adventurers... The sweepers would have to be very strong.

Albano sipped sparingly at his drink and turned the topic to more recent events.

“Changing the topic, I hear the boss lady is back.”

“Boss lady? Are you talking about Alette Baillet?”

I know I heard that name somewhere before... Right, it was from Miranda.

She was supposed to be quite the proficient adventurer.

“Hmm... So you know about her. You’ve been doin’ some diggin’.”

So that was a leading question, huh?

I couldn’t let my guard down around him.

“I do want to know about the people I work with.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. But right, the boss lady. She’s pretty skilled, even among Baym’s adventurers. From what I hear, though, she was pale as a ghost when she returned.”

She’d returned to her homeland for a while, but had recently come back to Baym.

“Did something happen?”

“She’s a former noble. The house had apparently already fallen from grace by the time she was born, and her homeland of Lorphys is a small country. Thing is, there’s some shady stuff going on near there.”

Several pieces of info clicked in my mind. I’d heard the name Lorphys somewhere before. And the country next to it...was it Zayin?

“Zayin?”

“You know something?”

We were at the pub to exchange information. We both benefited from this exchange. If I one-sidedly kept information from him, Albano would surely start keeping things from me too.

“I’ve heard they’re going through some internal disputes.”

“Really? No wonder the boss lady’s in a hurry.”

“What would Miss Alette be in a hurry to do?”

The former noble Alette was in a hurry due to suspicious movements in a country neighboring her homeland. *Is she worried about her family?*

“She’s got some complicated circumstances. But she’s an interesting gal, once you meet her. After all, she’s someone who leads a real knight order.”

“Wait, real knights?”

It sounded ridiculous for an adventurer to lead a knight order. *Does that have something to do with her former nobility?*

“Yeah, they call themselves Lorphys’s Raid Knights. An eccentric bunch of ex-nobles and knights who still pledge their loyalty to the country.”

I couldn’t understand it. Why remain loyal after losing their status?

It didn’t seem like Albano was going to elaborate, so I’d have to investigate the rest on my own.

“Is something happening in Lorphys?” I asked.

“They’re on a losing streak with Zayin, and they’re the prime candidate for the next war if there is one. The boss lady’s scrambling to scrape together some mercenaries.”

She was trying to gather up mercenaries to put up as much resistance as possible should war break out. Her approach, however, was very adventurer-esque.

“Is she hiring them?”

“Pretty much. And she and all her buddies are gettin’ the funds for that from the dungeon. She invited me too, and while I’m all well and good with the dungeon fundraising stuff, I can’t take her up on the mercenary part. I can’t join a losin’ side. And Lorphys is a poor country.”

So he prioritizes rewards over obligation.

I did not have the qualifications to criticize him for that.

“So. I was considerin’ invitin’ you to help with the dungeon side of things. How about it? It’ll be easier and more lucrative with you around.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow on a request.”

“A request? For how long?”

“About two weeks, a month at most.”

“No problem, then. We’ve got time before we challenge the dungeon. Could you decide if you’re in or not by the time you get back?”

Alette Baillet... I’d heard she was an excellent adventurer, and she had plenty of allies to boot. Personally, I wanted to be on friendly terms with her, but her curious circumstances had me concerned.

“Look forward to meeting her. She’s fun.”

“Fun?”

“And especially fun in her post-Growth.”

As I took in Albano’s bemused laugh, I for some reason began to feel a sense of kinship with Miss Alette, a woman I’d never met before.

It was late at night when Albano parted ways with Lyle and slipped into an alley between buildings on his way home. He rummaged around in his attempt to relieve himself. But that was when a woman’s voice called out to him from behind.

“That’s rather unbecoming of you.”

Thanks to this woman who’d approached without so much as the sound of footsteps, Albano was rendered unable to let anything out. He hurriedly tucked his parts away and turned, being met with a pretty woman with blonde hair.

“Well, sorry about that. So, did you need somethin’ from me? I ain’t nothin’ but an honest adventurer these days.”

“Nice try. I’ve heard all sorts of unpleasant rumors about you.”

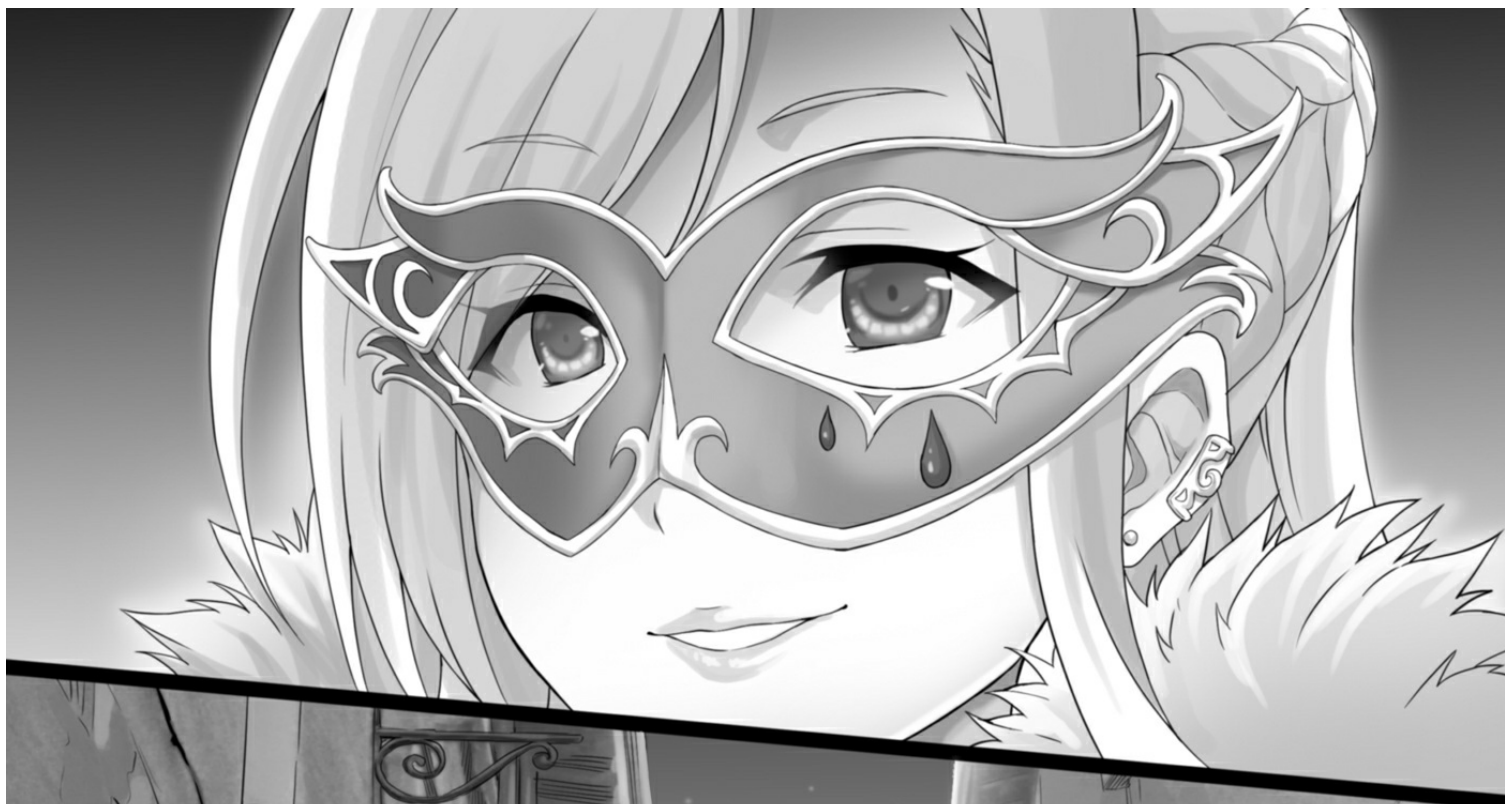
“Is Cleto complainin’ again?”

“Him, and others.”

Though he put up a strong front and tried to keep his tone light, he was

shuddering within. *What's she doing here?* he thought. *Is she here to kill me?*

The woman in front of him was none other than one of the sweepers he'd mentioned to Lyle before.



Albano had once dabbled in borderline criminal activity. Back then, he'd had a sweeper sent after him. The same one. She narrowed her eyes at Albano, who hesitated to draw his sword.

But she simply shrugged. "You've been doing good work lately, and I just came to thank you for it. How else could I? You never approach me when I'm at the counter."

Albano could feel his sweat ooze out in his relief.

Don't scare me! Phew, she spooked the drunkenness right outta me.

"They'd suspect you if I approached you."

"Oh, please. Anyway, this is for the last time."

The woman showed him a leather pouch filled with gold coins.

Albano took it, counted the contents, and said, "That's too much."

"Consider it a bonus. I appreciate what you do."

Albano pocketed the pouch and looked at the woman—at Marianne. The mask on her face caught the moonlight. A masquerade mask decorated to look like tears were streaming down it.

"Take off the mask. It's scary at night."

"I don't want to take it off when I'm doing this work."

Wiping away his cold sweat, Albano voiced his doubts about the request Marianne had given him.

"I don't think they were worth your attention."

"What do you mean?"

"Those kids led by Erhart, or whatever his name is. I did my best to protect them without being noticed, but what was even the point? It didn't feel like a request from the Guild. But then, why would a sweeper like you care about them?"

Marianne—the receptionist he saw around the Guild—came off as shrewder than this. A woman who could easily manipulate adventurers like Erhart as

though they were dancing atop the palm of her hand.

Using Albano to keep them out of danger seemed out of character for her.

Marianne reached out to Albano, placing her index finger over his lips.

“You owe your life to me. Just shut up and follow orders. You don’t have to know why.”

“G-Got it.”

Marianne removed her finger before cautioning him, “Also, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk about sweepers around that kid.”

“Lyle? That was just small talk and... Got it. I won’t talk about it anymore.”

“That’s the spirit. And remember, sweepers don’t exist,” she hammered the point home.

Albano silently nodded. Back when he was about to be killed, his life had been saved by Marianne. Ever since, he would take on the occasional request from her.

She walked off, disappearing down the depths of a narrow alley. Once she was gone, Albano put a hand to his chest in relief.

“That’s one scary lady. ‘Sweepers don’t exist’? What a laugh. Tsk... I’m all stone-cold sober now.”

Albano promptly decided he needed a little more to drink and started searching for another pub.

We’d taken on a monster-hunting request. Baym itself was a city-state that didn’t hold too much territory, but several villages lay outside its massive walls. A request came in from one of them, and we were the ones to accept it.

There were a number of reasons, but the biggest one was May.

“Outside!”

“I’m glad May seems happy.”

I watched as she spread her arms out wide as she stood atop Porter like she

was the queen of the world, ignoring the fifth head's nagging.

"You can't take on your original form in Baym, right?"

"I want to pound my hooves against the ground and soar across the sky! Oh, can't we find some convenient place without people?"

"I know, right?" said the fifth. "Of course you need to run around more. I'm so sorry for shutting you away in that pesky city."

May's true form was a qilin. Not that her human form was a complete imitation, but she apparently regarded it as secondary. And so, she often felt the urge to transform and run wild.

For May, life in the big city was stressful.

"We'll head out periodically. Will that be enough, or do you need more than that?"

May was fidgeting, eager to burst off. "Hmm, it might work if you let me run free for about a week."

"A week?!" I exclaimed, taken aback.

Then came the nagging. "What's the harm in that?!" the fifth pestered. "Do you simply not understand how stressful it is for May to live in Baym for months at a time? Lyle, I think you need a thorough lesson on animals."

I respectfully decline.

Whenever animals were concerned, the fifth turned a bit useless—rather, he would unconditionally take the animals' side. I ignored him.

"What would you do for a whole week, May?"

"Run around, take it easy. And maybe do some qilin work too."

"Work?"

"That's right! If there are too many monsters, we defeat them, and if we find a dungeon, we conquer it."

Yes, it's been bothering me for a while now. Why do they do that?

"Is there a reason, May? I mean, it applies to all qilin and the other divine

beasts too, but why do you go around destroying monsters and dungeons?"

May cocked her head and thought a bit. Then smiling, she said, "I don't know. But mom said it's a promise."

"A promise?"

"Yes, a promise with the goddess."

I don't really get it. Did they really make a promise to one of the goddesses?

"They do say that the divine beasts were created by the goddesses," the fifth head explained. "Maybe they made a promise with one? It's been so long that I doubt May knows anything about what actually happened."

"A goddess, huh?" I muttered.

Then Novem poked her head out from the hatch. She quickly contained her fluttering side ponytail with a hand.

May lit up with joy the moment she saw her. "Novem! Novem! Do you want to run free with me too?"

With a troubled smile, Novem reached up and patted May on the head. "I must remain by Lord Lyle's side. Please make sure you come back, okay?"

"Yeah!"

May showed absolutely no wariness toward Novem. She was practically a child fawning over her mother. As I watched over the two of them, Miranda called out from inside the cabin.

"Lyle, do you have a moment?"

I entered through the ceiling hatch and saw Miranda had opened the hatch in the rear. She was pointing at the scenery through the hole.

"Isn't that a bit curious?"

"That'? You mean the carriage?"

Off the road lay an overturned and broken carriage, perhaps victim to a monster attack.

"Should I stop Porter?" I asked.

But as I moved to investigate, Miranda shook her head.

“It seems deserted. I’ll check it out alone.”

There were no signs of any people around and it didn’t seem to be a trap, so Miranda seemed determined to look into it on her own.

“Is something bothering you?”

“Something seemed a bit off in the towns and villages we’ve passed through. I’ll catch up, so head straight to the village.”

And with that, Miranda jumped out of the rear hatch. The moment before she hit the ground, a golem of her creation manifested and caught her on its back. The golem took the form of a catlike animal and quickly turned, racing off toward the overturned wagon.

We soon arrived in a village largely populated by wooden houses. Nearby was a forest, and a border with a foreign land. After we drove in on Porter, the village chief explained the situation to us.

“Monsters are crossing the border?”

“Yes, that’s right. Baym is stable with all its adventurers. Most issues come from the outside.”

“Stable?”

“You don’t know? By the time adventurers retire, a good number of them get sick and tired of the city life and feel the urge to move to the country. This village has a lot of them.”

The chief was a former adventurer himself and seemed accustomed to dealing with monsters. He and the other villagers could deal with the monsters around the village without issue.

Right now, they were struggling with the increased numbers.

“It’s hard to chase them in the forest at my age. We occasionally call on young active adventurers through the Guild.”

It was a little interesting to hear about the circumstances of Baym’s

agricultural sector.

As we walked around the village, our conversation continued.

“Have you noticed anything strange lately?”

“Strange? Well, the increase in monsters, for one. Many of them are ones you don’t see around these parts, so it’s a pain to deal with them.”

Is there a reason?

“Just make sure you deal with them, okay? It’s real troublesome how we can’t enter the forest.”

“Leave it to me.”

With the conversation over, I headed to where Porter was parked. I found myself alone along the way, and so I lent an ear to the conversation my ancestors were having. According to them, the sights of this farming village were indications of a booming market.

Village life didn’t seem any less well-off than city life.

“It’s well-off, as far as villages are concerned. Maybe too well-off,” the third said.

The other ancestors springboarded off of his statement into a heated discussion.

“When they’re this affluent,” the fourth noted, “I can’t shake the feeling they’re cheating on their taxes.”

“Do they even pay tax here? The ones managing the place are merchants, right?” the fifth chimed in.

The sixth said, “There doesn’t seem to be any government officials either. There were soldiers in the last town we passed through, but this seems very different to how we governed.”

“This is making me curious about how they run the place,” concluded the seventh.

As former lords, they were intrigued by what made the village viable. Eavesdropping and walking, I felt a bit idle and decided to use my Arts. I wanted

to check the terrain and see where any monsters might be lurking.

It would be better to decide our next steps before I reunited with my comrades.

However, I noticed some suspicious activity in the forest.

My attention was immediately drawn to rapidly moving red dots; they seemed to be trailing yellow dots.

“What the...?”

Yes, it was like the yellow dots were being chased... The moment that thought occurred to me, a flock of birds took flight from the nearby forest.

The third put the discussion on hold to speak to me. “Oh dear, there’s some sort of commotion in the forest.”

Right after that came an explosive boom. The voices of birds and beasts grew louder, and the villagers became boisterous as well.

“What happened?”

While I was contemplating what to do next, Novem and Sophia came up to me.

“Milord!”

“Novem, where’s everyone else?”

Sophia answered in her stead, “We were all acting separately, so I don’t know. Novem and I came to get you.”

I quickly checked the map of the village and its surroundings. I closed my eyes, touched my right hand to my temple, and concentrated.

The explosion in the forest had stirred up not only the animals but the monsters as well. When I investigated the yellow dots in more detail, they seemed to belong to humans. There were three... Three people? But one of them was surrounded by monsters. Even if I rushed over now, I wouldn’t make it in time. I could only save the other two.

Worse yet, a group of monsters was approaching the village, possibly in an attempt to flee from the forest.

“This is bad. Monsters are headed our way.”

Sophia panicked. “Huh?! W-We need to solidify our defenses at once!”

Despite her panic, she was still thinking about what needed to be done.

Noticing the concerned look on my face, Novem asked, “Milord, is something bothering you?”

I thought and thought over what I ought to do, and ultimately, I told them. “There are people being chased in the forest.”

“Th-The forest?!” Sophia stammered. “Th-Then we need to go save them—no, but we need to protect the village too.”

As I mulled, the fifth head barked, “Stop mulling, you fool! Your decisions must be swift. What will you do if you mull so much you’re unable to save both the people in the forest and the village? If you’re going to hesitate, then go help them!”

There were far too many monsters stirring in the forest. But the number headed for the village couldn’t be scoffed at either. If I wanted to help out in the forest, it would be better to take minimal forces.

Just as I was about to head out alone, Monica arrived. She was carrying Shannon on her back.

“Damn chicken!”

“Lyle! Thanks to that explosion, the forest is buzzing! It looks like they’re coming our way!”

Shannon possessed orphic eyes. Her special eyes allowed her to see mana, and it seemed she’d used them to pick up on what was going on in the forest. It was a very convenient power, but since it belonged to Shannon, it wasn’t being used to its fullest.

Originally, those eyes should have been capable of far more amazing things—but it was like pearls before swine.

“I know. Have you seen May or Miranda?”

If I was going to maneuver around the forest, it would be best to have one.

But our timing couldn't have been worse.

"May flew off a while ago," Monica explained. "Presumably, it will be a week before she returns. Though that girl is loose with time, so I highly doubt she'll make that deadline."

She was already gone.

Next, Shannon told me about Miranda: "Sis hasn't come back yet."

"I should have kept one of them."

With May, I could have ridden her back and entered the forest from the sky. With Miranda, I could have moved atop one of her golems. It was a bit tough without either of them...

The fourth head let out a slight sigh. "What terrible timing."

"Let's call them back immediately. No—all hands protect the village. For Miranda—"

Then Sophia anxiously interrupted, "Lyle, what about the people in the forest?"

Weren't we going to save them?

I sorrowfully answered, "It's too late to save them."

Hearing my resignation, Sophia clenched her fist.

"P-Perhaps my Art can be used for transportation?"

"Yours? I see!"

If I had Sophia decrease my weight, I'd be able to increase my movement speed. It would be a greater burden on Sophia, but it opened up the possibility.

"Sophia's grown a bit," the third head praised her. "Anyway, it's curious, so go check it out. The remaining members should be fine, defending the village."

"Got it. Sophia, come with me."

"Y-Yes!"

I immediately issued orders to Novem. "Novem, rally everyone to protect the village. They'll all be coming from the direction of the forest. Leave Porter and

intercept them there.”

If we knew where they were coming from, it wouldn't be so hard to deal with them.

But Novem refused the order. “Milord, I'm coming with you.”

At that time, Miranda was still outside the village. She'd gone out alone to investigate something that caught her eye along the road.

“I knew it. They fought here.”

She'd carefully followed traces from the carriage, tracks that continued farther and farther, and finally, she found something. There were traces of magic left at the scene.

The overturned, broken carriage had been attacked.

“Did bandits chase them down after they abandoned the carriage?”

There were footsteps and bloodstains and more wheel tracks that continued into the forest.

Her eyes turned to the trees.

“Is this trouble? Hmm.”

Did they flee into the forest? she thought. But just then, she heard an explosion.

“From the forest...? I should regroup.”

As she pointed her palm at the ground, the dirt swelled up and took on a feline form. Once Miranda had situated herself on its back, the golem took off toward the village in a hurry.

Each step I took propelled me farther than expected, almost like I was moving in a series of powerful leaps. I'd entered the forest with Sophia and Novem.

Novem usually listened to me, but today, she was being unusually stubborn. If I was being honest, I wanted her back in the village to help with medical

treatment, and with fending off the monsters. Sophia, following closely behind, seemed concerned about the village.

“Will Aria and the others be all right?”

We’d left more members than we’d taken.

“I think it will be okay. The real problem is on our end.”

“Is there a problem?”

There were people fighting within the forest. However, that didn’t necessarily mean they were people who ought to be saved.

“We don’t know what sort of people they are. Even if you do spot someone, approach with the utmost caution,” I told Sophia.

She seemed to get the message. “R-Right. They might be bandits.”

In her panic, she’d assumed that whoever was in the forest was surely a hapless victim. However, while I was talking to the village chief, he told me that the villagers were keeping well away from the forest due to all the monsters.

I turned my attention to Novem, who was silently following.

“You too, Novem.”

I wanted to make sure she understood that as well, but I got no response from Novem.

I stopped, and Novem and Sophia came to a hasty stop too.

“Hey, Novem?”

“Huh? Y-Yes?!”

She seemed out of sorts, a rare sight from her.

Sophia found it unusual as well. “Novem? What’s wrong?” she asked.

Novem pressed her hand against her face, as though to hide her expression.

“I’m sorry. I was thinking about something else.”

Is she tired?

I regretted taking Novem along, but it was now too dangerous to send her

back alone.

“I was just saying not to be careless when approaching the people, even if they’re being attacked. They’re not villagers. They could be bandits.”

I myself had my doubts about there being bandits in a forest with increased monster activity. Nevertheless, caution was necessary.

Novem apologized. “I’m sorry. I’ll be careful.”

“Novem, Sophia and I will go out front. Please support us.”

Not wanting to overburden Novem, I decided to handle the situation with Sophia. After a brief moment to catch our breaths, we quickly set off again.

Chapter 105: Zayin's Holy Maiden

Two figures in brown robes ran frantically through an unfamiliar forest. The first was an elderly man.

"Please hurry, Milady."

The man's name was Gaston Bonini. His body was thin and frail with a slight stoop, his wrinkle-ridden face crowned by a distinctive hooked nose. The man was in his early sixties, and though there was little dignity to be found in his current appearance, he had once been the high priest of the Theocracy of Zayin.

His white hair and beard disheveled, a staff in hand, he was doing whatever he could to aid in the woman's escape. He had the looks of a villain, at first glance, but by demeanor, he was being incredibly considerate.

Gasping for breath and struggling to walk through the forest was Thelma Zayin. The holy maiden who stood at the top of a nation—or at least, she used to be. Her long blonde hair was tied back in a large braid, and her eyes were a striking sea blue.

Thelma was thirty. She had reigned as the leader of Zayin for many years now.

She'd taken her seat at the age of fifteen—as was customary—and led Zayin for close to fifteen years more, but now she was the one being hunted.

"Gaston, let's put an end to this already."

Exhausted, Thelma practically collapsed to the ground. She sat limp, with grim resolve in her words.

"Wh-What are you saying? Are you just going to let Armand do as he pleases?!"

Armand was the captain of Zayin's knights. However, he wasn't just a knight leader, but also a general, making him the top authority in the military. He was, additionally, a political opponent of Thelma.

"What can we do at this point?! We're the only ones left!" Thelma broke

down in tears.

Gaston hung his head as well. “Are you truly okay with this? Do you have no regrets, letting our fifteen years end like this?”

Thelma smiled through her tears. “This is the end! You’re looking at it! If I knew it would come to this, I— No, I’ve said too much. But in the end, we couldn’t change that country. We weren’t enough to change it.”

She had completely resigned herself to fate.

Still, Gaston tried to convince her. “On your feet, Holy Maiden. You must not die in a place like this.”

“I’m not the holy maiden anymore.”

And as Gaston tried however he could to get Thelma up and running—there was a sway in the nearby thicket. Gaston glanced over to see the monsters perched on the boughs of a great tree.

“They’ve already caught up...”

Quickly, he stood to protect Thelma. Taking a stance with his wooden staff, he stared down the monsters staring down at them from the canopy.

These creatures were different from ordinary monsters.

Their skin was pitch black. If it was just one of them, perhaps it could have been a variant, a mutation. But there were far too many for this to be some spontaneous change.

The monsters that had caught up to them were goblins armed with weapons, and the weapons they held were all shiny and new. Their armor, too, was pristine and uniform.

Most notably, each monster wore what appeared to be a collar.

The goblins soon proved to be the lesser threat as they were quickly followed by massive orcs who lumbered across the land. They also wore collars and shared the same dark skin.

As their red eyes locked onto Gaston and Thelma, they raised their massive weapons high.

Thelma remained motionless, not even attempting to struggle.

“Oh goddess,” muttered Gaston. “Please grant us your protection.”

The tip of his staff let off light, and a surge of magic caused thorns to erupt from the ground and spear the orcs. However, the orcs simply slashed through them with their weapons and continued as if nothing had happened.

Gaston gritted his teeth. *What are these monsters?* he wondered. *They’re all equipped with similar gear and outfitted with the same collars. And it’s strange that they’ve been pursuing us for so long.*

These monsters were their pursuers. They had chased Gaston and Thelma since they fled Zayin, crossed through another territory, and arrived in the lands of Baym. These were the same monsters that had killed all their comrades.

“Stand, Holy Maiden! You must escape from here!”

Thelma kept her head down, her hands locked in prayer. She offered no response.

“Grr! So this is it.”

He could have run himself, but he didn’t. He’d sworn to protect Thelma to the end.

The monsters swarmed, surrounding them to prevent their escape. They seemed very well coordinated for monsters. As Gaston prepared to cast another spell, an arrow struck his staff, knocking it aside.

His eyes shifted to a band of goblins with bows.

“Curse you!”

Just as it seemed that the end had come, as an orc raised its weapon, a young man descended upon it from above.

The man clutched a saber, bisecting the orc from the crown of its head and all the way through. Its body spurted dark red blood as it fell to the left and right.

Gaston stared, wide-eyed.

The monsters moved quickly.

The goblins with bows on the trees unleashed a volley of arrows. And the

young man calmly dodged them as he walked forward, as if he knew exactly where the arrows would strike from the start.

Who is he?

Just as their arrows had come down upon him, next it was the goblins who fell from their perches one by one. Looking up, Gaston saw a woman with a battle-axe slicing through goblin after goblin.

Her movements were very light and nimble as she danced from branch to branch.

The monsters seemed panicked at this sudden turn of events, but still, they attacked to complete their objective.

But all who approached the young man with blue hair would be sliced by his saber as soon as they were within its range. He had the flowing movements of a master of the blade.

The monsters surrounded him, attacking from behind.

“Ah, watch out!” Gaston found himself calling out.

The boy turned toward the incoming monster and sliced all in one motion. He moved as if he’d known it was there all along.

Gaston could only marvel at his tremendous strength.

And then, another woman descended from the sky.

This woman, with tawny brown hair, was equipped with a silver staff.

What...is she?

What startled Gaston was the odd atmosphere around her. Though she was undoubtedly beautiful, he found he harbored absolutely no emotion toward her. He was struck by the curious disconnect.

Yet she showed concern for him.

“Are you all right?”

“Y-Yes. More importantly, thank you for saving us.”

“Your thanks can wait. For now, let’s get out of here.”

“B-But...”

Gaston watched the other two who were still fighting.

The blue-haired man and black-haired woman were taking on the monsters that continued emerging from the trees.

“What about those two?”

“They will be fine. Now hurry.”

The woman helped Thelma to her feet and the three of them fled.

Novem led the two being attacked by monsters away. Watching them go, I stood back-to-back with Sophia, who had jumped down from the trees.

“What’s wrong with these things? It doesn’t feel like I’m fighting monsters.”

Those were Sophia’s honest thoughts on the matter, and I had to agree with her there.

It was hard to tell whether the thick, viscous substance coating my saber’s blade was oil or blood, but it smelled closer to oil.

“I don’t know either. Forget about that for now. Can you still fight?”

Sophia was breathing heavily. She was visibly tired from all the times she had to use her Art to get us here.

“S-Somehow,” she said.

She tried to put on a strong front, but her movements were growing sluggish.

From the Jewel came the third head’s serious voice.

That alone made it clear just how dangerous the situation was.

“Are these things monsters? You don’t often see them coordinating like this. And their matching armor is curious.”

They wore similar—no, mostly identical equipment. Everything they used seemed brand-new.

At first, I thought they were variants, but that didn’t seem right.

Whether it be the goblins or the orcs, neither was as strong as a variant. But they were stronger than normal goblins and orcs. The trouble mainly came from the fact they were fully equipped, and that they were coordinating their attacks.

As I observed them, the goblins pounced.

“Sophia!”

“Leave it to me!”

We fought, protecting one another’s backs.

I pierced through one of the goblins, using its skewered body as a shield against another. From the impact, I could tell it was a merciless blow that had no compassion for a fellow goblin. Drawing the saber from the flesh, I aimed for a gap in its armor to skewer the second one.

As the saber plunged into the second goblin’s vitals, Sophia fell against me.

The large tear in her robe revealed the armor she wore underneath.

Her armor had been dented.

Sophia quickly sprang up.

“S-Sorry. I was careless.”

It seemed she’d struggled to keep up when two monsters had attacked in unison. But still, she had managed to reliably take them down.

“This is bad,” the fifth head said with concern. “Sophia’s not weak; the foe is just too troublesome. They’re closer to soldiers than monsters.”

I recalled the soldiers of House Walt I’d fought before in Banseim’s capital.

These monsters weren’t as strong, but with equipment and coordination this good, that alone made them a threat.

I quickly made a call.

“Sophia, Novem’s made it out. Let’s retreat,” I whispered.

Sophia nodded.

She spurred on her weary body and invoked her Art. In an instant, her and my

weight had been cut down by a large margin.

“Lyle, hurry!”

The fifth’s voice was firm. Goblins and orcs were closing in on us.

The large weapons the orcs held—blunt clubs and greatswords—were about to come crashing down. I immediately grabbed Sophia and jumped to flee upward.

I watched the weapons strike just where we’d been moments before as I reached out and grabbed a tree branch, pulling us both up onto it.

“Wow, that was a close one. Looks like we were right to get rid of the goblin archers first. It’s all thanks to you, Sophia.”

Sophia, red-faced, quickly distanced herself from me. “Th-That’s because you gave the order.”

Getting rid of their ranged attackers was my ancestors’ orders. Not mine.

But thanks to that, it seemed we’d be able to get away safely.

I wrapped a hand around Sophia’s waist and pulled her close.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you doing?!”

I felt bad for her, but escape took precedence.

“Don’t talk. You’ll bite your tongue.”

I kicked off from one tree branch and onto another.

If we can lead them away... I thought.

“Let’s try to guide them to— Wait!”

I stopped and turned toward the monsters. Without stopping for a second to chase us, they were already heading off in another direction.

Sophia was equally surprised. “That’s the direction Novem evacuated them to, right? Wh-Why aren’t they chasing us?”

They were smart for monsters. It was almost like there was a more intelligent, more malevolent monster directing them. But I couldn’t sense anything of the sort.

“This is bad. Looks like we have to deal with them here and now.”

Gripping the Jewel, I prepared to change it to its bow form—and stopped. The Jewel was still unstable. I couldn’t use it without proper consideration.

Sophia looked at me, cocking her head. “U-Umm, aren’t you going to use the silver bow?”

“It’s hard to control the output. It could be disastrous if I mess up.”

To start with, we were here on a Guild request. Any issues that happened would be our responsibility. Life was irreplaceable, but I didn’t want to cause any problems if I could avoid it.

Sophia seemed to have an idea. “Then what about the silver greatsword? You should be able to blow all the monsters away in one attack.”

It had the power to take out the whole group in one swing, but the silver greatsword was powerful. Too powerful. It would devour all my mana.

“I can only use it once, so I’ll have to reject that idea. It’ll be too hard to find the right moment.”

Sophia dropped her shoulders and hung her head. “I’m... I’m sorry. It looks like I really am useless.”

“Huh?”

“I know, even if you don’t put it into words. I am not as strong as Aria, nor am I as clever or skillful as Miranda.”

Seeing her crestfallen face caused me to panic, and right then, the fourth chided me for the first time in a while.

“Lyle, you’re only scoring a thirty for not replying immediately. But it’s understandable why Sophia would feel a sense of inferiority.”

Is it, though? I think Sophia’s doing pretty well.

The sixth head was harsher. “She’s definitely strong, but not as strong as Aria. Her Art is convenient enough, but its user isn’t bringing out its true potential. She does fall short within the party.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the third head nodded along, and that irritated me.

My ancestors continued raising one fault after another.

“She’s kinda plain, isn’t she? And she always wears a robe so you can’t see anything.”

“She’s not slender enough to pull it off. It’s not very exciting.”

“Her large chest throws off the balance, honestly.”

“Yes, being large alone is no good. The shape is important.”

“Her hair and robe hide her nape, so that’s a minus from me.”

They were just saying whatever they wanted.

It frustrated me, made me want to ask them what part of her they were even looking at. And more importantly, it was just too much.

I grabbed both of her shoulders.

“Sophia!”

My loud voice caused her to widen her eyes.

“Y-Yes?!”

“Did I ever say you were useless?”

“N-No, you didn’t, but...”

She averted her eyes.

And I spoke honestly. Sure, she fell short of the others in some areas, but she had her strengths too.

“I’ll admit it, Aria and Miranda are amazing. You fall short of them in some aspects.”

“I-I know, right?”

“But! But you have your amazing qualities too. The sight of you swinging that battle-axe on the battlefield fills me with strength, and you’re one of the most dependable people I know.”

Still avoiding my gaze, she mulled over those words. “I-Is that so? Strong and reliable... Should I be happy about that?”

Why is that your worry here?

“And your Art is incredibly useful, isn’t it? It’s incredibly versatile! Just look at what we did with it today! If you use it right, it’ll be a huge boon to the team!”

“I’m sorry for not using it right most of the time.”

No matter how I tried to persuade her, her thoughts kept veering in a negative direction.

Urgh! Wh-What am I supposed to do?

Yeah, Sophia had her flaws. She was a slob after Growth—no, she was still better off than me. I was actually envious.

But she was far from useless.

“I-I for one have never thought of you as useless! I was really happy when you decided to go along with me. And you’ve saved me countless times! If anyone, even you, says you’re useless, I won’t forgive them. I need you.”

“Lyle.”

Sophia blushed.

Then came the teasing of my ancestors.

“Go on. Praise her more.”

“Lyle’s problem is that he doesn’t express himself.”

“How did it take that many insults for you to speak up? Stand up for your girl.”

“Lyle’s just no good with women.”

“Let’s just ignore the sixth... Lyle, show some more consideration on a regular basis. And you have the means to get out of this situation, don’t you?”

Wait, don’t tell me they were just teasing?

I suddenly felt embarrassed.

As my face flushed, the third head spoke up. “Yes, yes, enough with the embarrassment. If you don’t hurry up, Novem’s going to be in a pinch. Why don’t you go take care of those black monsters nice and quick?”

Even if you tell me that, how am I supposed to do it?

I could use the silver bow, but worst case, I'd burn the forest down. That was the one thing I wanted to avoid, and right now, I couldn't control it.

The third began to grow irritated at the fact I couldn't find an answer.

"Why don't you get it? C'mon, you just have to kiss her. I'm talking about Connection."

Connection. That was my Art. It had manifested as my second stage and was quite a peculiar one. It seemed to share nothing in common with the first stage.

If my first stage, Experience, was an Art to speed up growth, then Connection was an Art that allowed me to form links with other people. Once a link was made, it became possible to pass messages back and forth.

But that wasn't all. We could share each other's vision, and I could even use it in conjunction with the second head's Art to share my Arts over longer distances.

I swallowed my breath.

Ignoring my reaction, the third continued, "Form a Connection with Sophia. Sharing sensations and Arts is a wonderful thing. Although it's only Lyle's Arts that can be shared."

Sophia seemed a little confused. "Lyle, what's wrong?"

I couldn't afford to hesitate any longer. Novem was in danger.

I stared straight at Sophia.

"Sophia, kiss me... Bwah!"

Sophia's face immediately turned serious, and in no time, she had slapped me.

I heard some irksome laughter echoing from the Jewel.

"Lyle. Please consider the situation."

She's right. But I would appreciate it if she heard me out to the end.

"N-No, it's not like that! It's my Art. My Art!"

“Your Art? Are you talking about Connection?!”

Sophia turned red to the ears, her mouth opening and closing in her panic to find the right words.

“That’s right. It doesn’t just let us communicate. We can share vision, and you’ll be able to use my Arts.”

“Th-That’s incredible! B-But a kiss is... Umm...”

Sophia was embarrassed.

Then the fifth head, growing impatient, began to voice his complaints.

“Is this really the time for that? Does she just plan to watch as Novem dies? If she dies now, she’ll be leaving far too many unresolved mysteries.”

Back at the royal capital, we found out that Novem had some secret dealings with Ceres.

Was Novem truly my ally?

Even my ancestors couldn’t decide.

No, she was probably on my side, but there were some suspicious points about her.

And so, my ancestors had some conflicted feelings about Novem.

I heard a sigh.

It was the fourth head. “You’re just as bad as him, Fifth. Now listen up, Lyle. Many women place great importance on kisses. Please try and understand how Sophia feels.”

Then what am I supposed to do?

It was too hard a question, and I just didn’t know.

Amid my internal struggle, the sixth head cleared his throat.

“Ahem, Lyle... This is just the preparation to use your Art. It is not a kiss.”

What is he talking about?



Noticing my exasperation, he went on, “Well, hear me out. A kiss is important to women. Don’t just come out and tell her it’s unavoidable, or that it’s for Novem’s sake. You’ll just make Sophia disillusioned.”

Yeah, that might not be pleasant for her.

That was why the sixth was insisting it wasn’t a kiss. That it didn’t count.

“And. This is also important...”

I decided to follow his advice.

Why, you ask?

Because my other ancestors were utterly useless when it came to these things.

Lyle was silent, while Sophia was awkward.

Was it wrong of me to have denied a kiss in such an urgent situation? She felt that her selfishness was bringing nothing but trouble and tried to shift her mindset. I know Lyle’s decision has to be correct. That’s right. A kiss or two...though I wanted to save it for a better occasion!

Sophia’s maiden-esque heart wept. But the situation wouldn’t allow for any griping.

“Lyle!” Sophia called out, having decided to kiss him after all.

Lifting his face, Lyle said, “Sophia. This is a ritual.”

“Hm?”

His face was dead serious as he explained, “I understand that you might not want to accept it. But this is nothing more than a ritual to give us an advantage in combat—and not a kiss. This is not the same affectionate deed performed between lovers. It does not count.”

Really? she thought, for a moment. But Sophia quickly shook her head.

“No, that’s nonsense. A kiss is a kiss!”

“It’s a ritual! And...I-I want to pick a far better place when I kiss you. So don’t

count this one. Please. Otherwise, it'll be a little troubling for me."

His atmosphere different from usual, he continued prattling on, "This isn't about me wanting to kiss you because it's an emergency. I want to give you a proper kiss someday. So I want this one to be off the books. Please, for my sake!"

Convinced by his plea, Sophia nodded. "I-Is that so? Understood. We won't count this one."

Her face grew warm halfway through, and at some point, she didn't even know what was being said to her.

H-He wants to kiss me. And in a proper place... So this time doesn't count. Right. Yeah! Since he's asking nicely, it can't be helped!

Failing to process what was happening, her resistance to the kiss diminished.

Lyle brought his face close to hers and whispered, "This doesn't count as a kiss. But...I'm still a little happy."

Sophia's head felt so hot she thought it might burst. Her heart was racing with excitement.

"I-I feel the same way."

The two of them kissed on the branch of a great tree, their tongues entangling with one another.

Inside the Jewel, the ancestors had cut off their view of the outside in order to give Lyle some space, and to not watch while he and Sophia were kissing.

But they could still feel it when Connection successfully activated.

"Did you see that?! This is my power!"

Standing from his chair, the sixth head raised his hand triumphantly, all while the others stared at him with cold eyes.

The third head questioned it. "I'm pretty sure Sophia was going to accept it from the start. Did this really have anything to do with the sixth?"

The fourth head's eyes were even colder than the others. "I'm sure you've

swayed plenty of women with your words. But what the hell was that line you suggested? It was so insincere it's giving me goose bumps."

"Can you understand the feelings of a father watching his son act so triumphant after deceiving an innocent girl?" The fifth looked at him with sorrow.

The fact the sixth was leading along someone as pure as Sophia seemed to weigh on him.

"If Lyle just asked her, wouldn't Sophia have agreed?" said the seventh, who shared the sentiment. "This is not your achievement, old man."

But despite all the criticism, the sixth head simply folded his arms. He surveyed everyone...and sneered.

The surrounding gazes turned from cold to hot—filled with fiery rage.

"You just don't get it. Sure, Sophia would have gone along with it if Lyle pressed the point. But would she be satisfied? How's she supposed to feel, kissing the boy just so he can do his best for Novem's sake?"

The third and fourth exchanged a look.

"Huh? That doesn't change the fact that you're tricking her. That's the bad part here."

"Yes, he's definitely the worst."

The sixth head slammed his fist onto the table. "Quit your yapping! Trickery? Please! The ends justify the means. And this problem will resolve itself once Lyle kisses her again. We wrap it all up in a neat, tidy bow. What's the problem here? In fact, aren't you all the bad guys for not even considering Sophia's feelings?"

The fifth head stared at him, and brought up one thing that was bothering him: "Aren't you kinda forgetting about Lyle's feelings here?"

The sixth head averted his eyes. "He gets to kiss such a cute girl. What a lucky man he is. Well, I'm sure he doesn't hate it. Then what's the problem? Lyle should take this opportunity to learn more about womanizing. All right, it's straight to the brothels when we get back!"

This guy's the worst. Everyone save for the sixth head was on the same page.

Meanwhile, Novem and her two evacuees were resting a safe distance from the monsters. Having run for so long through forests they'd never trained for, Gaston and Thelma could no longer stand.

The pursuit took a mental toll as well, their bodies and minds at their limit. Though Novem wanted to get away in a hurry, forcing these two to run in this state would only lead to easy capture.

In which case, it was better to rest—and to hear their stories.

Novem shot a sharp look at Gaston.

"Mister Gaston, was it?"

"I-Indeed. Thank you...for your...help..."

Gaston struggled to steady his breath as Novem asked him an important question.

"There's one thing I need to know. What are those black monsters? Why are they following you?"

Novem thought about the monsters she'd seen. *Where are they producing those things?*

Gaston shook his head. "I-I do not know. We left the country, and pursuers were sent after us—at some point, they were on our tail."

Her sharp ears had picked up the conversation they were having before they'd been saved. Zayin's holy maiden—there was a high chance that their pursuers were related to Zayin.

Zayin made them? That country shouldn't have the resources for that. If it were a nation with more budget and facilities...

Novem knew about the black monsters but was aware they shouldn't exist. Spotting them today had caused her to overreact; it had put her on edge. That was why she had insisted on following Lyle.

"Even the smallest detail is fine. Do you know anything?"

“Wh-What am I supposed to say...”

Gaston seemed genuinely clueless. But as Thelma gradually collected herself, she lifted her head and replied, “I-I have heard rumors.”

“Rumors?”

“That there was a way to control monsters. I thought it was impossible, but seeing those creatures relentlessly chase us makes me think otherwise.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“I heard it from a knight while I was still in my nation. The knight heard it from a merchant.”

Gaston also seemed to recall something. “C-Come to think of it, I feel I heard that ten years ago. But that is impossible. Numerous methods to control monsters have been attempted over the years, and all have failed.”

Novem arrived at her explanation. *A merchant...of course.*

There happened to be one place nearby with abundant resources, facilities, and personnel. Novem’s gaze shifted toward Baym.

They’re repeating the same mistakes... They truly are beyond salvation.

Too exhausted to care about Novem, Gaston and Thelma sat and caught their breath and rested.

Novem held up her staff, taking her position in front of them.

“What’s wrong?” Thelma looked at her curiously.

Novem kept it simple. “They’ve caught up.”

Goblins with pitch black skin burst from the thicket. Novem deflected all their attacks with her staff.

“You’re quite skilled for a magician,” Gaston exclaimed.

He and Thelma were both astounded by her effortless defense.

However, the situation wasn’t too favorable for them. As Novem contemplated firing off a spell, Lyle and Sophia arrived. The two of them jumped in front of Novem and tore through the monsters with such synergy it

was like they had rehearsed this routine a hundred times before.

“Sophia!”

“On it!”

Standing behind Lyle, Sophia tossed her battle-axe just as Lyle ducked. The spinning axe passed just over his head, cleaving through several monsters in its path.

Novem looked up.

A goblin was dropping toward them, its weapon poised to attack Sophia.

“Sophia, watch—”

Lyle had moved before she finished.

Sophia had clasped her hands together, and as Lyle stepped atop them, she tossed him up. Lyle—now airborne—sliced through the goblin with his saber. Meanwhile, Novem noticed Sophia’s battle-axe flying toward him on its return.

“Ly—”

Lyle caught it without even looking at it, tossing it down at Sophia below him. And with tremendous force too. One mistake could have seriously injured her.

But Sophia caught it in her right hand without looking and took a hearty slash at the monsters coming at her.

Gaston stared, his mouth agape.

“Wh-What combat prowess...”

It was like they were in perfect sync—two minds in one body. As she watched them, Novem felt a twinge of pain in her heart.

Chapter 106: A Card

Connection. It was the same Art I'd previously used to communicate with May when she was in her qilin form, but now that I'd connected with Sophia, I got some new insight into its workings.

"This is...harder than I thought."

On top of micromanaging the Arts of my ancestors, I had Sophia's senses too. It felt like I had gained an additional pair of eyes.

With the second head's Art, I could grasp the movements of most things in a wide area around myself, and at the same time, my mind was flooded with information from Sophia.

I was accustomed to using multiple Arts at once, and even I found it grueling. Sophia was probably having an even harder time than I was.

In fact, she was breathing quite heavily.

"Th-This is more than I... Urgh!"

After clapping a hand over her mouth, Sophia fell to her knees and vomited. Evidently, the influx of information was too overwhelming.

I tossed aside my battered saber and snapped my fingers, causing a magic circle to appear from the ground. From it, I produced two new sabers, taking one in each hand and giving them both a forceful swing. The scabbards flew off to reveal the blades.

"Sophia, take a break."

"M-My apologies."

Using her battle-axe like a cane, Sophia struggled to her feet. All the while, I tried to whittle down the information that was being sent to her. It was an effective Art, but far too dangerous to use in the field without practice.

Mastering it would take time.

Despite the situation she'd been thrust into, Sophia was doing her best. But even though we'd managed to clear away all the monsters in the immediate vicinity, more and more enemies continued to emerge from the forest. They were all equipped with similar equipment, all sporting similar collars.

"Do monsters have fads too?"

As I ran, strengthening my grip on the sabers, a blast of magic flew from within the forest. The orb of red flames startled me, but I quickly sliced it in twain, causing it to burst.

Quickly, I searched out the culprit.

"What do you think you're doing in a forest?"

Even monsters refrained from using magic that would burn down the environment.

And yet, the magicians—the goblin mages that emerged from the thicket—didn't hesitate to use fire magic.

"Are they trying to burn themselves to death alongside us?!"

The forest would burn if I didn't defeat the goblin mages as soon as possible. As I leaped at them, orcs assailed me to protect them. I narrowly avoided their weapons and sliced.

But their armor blocked most of the blow, resulting in only shallow cuts.

"Damn it!"

The sabers I had were mass-produced ones that struggled to hold an edge. They quickly chipped and became useless as soon as I brought them out.

"I should've bought better weapons."

As I came to that conclusion—a bit late to do anything about it—my ancestors took the opportunity to recommend the weapons they'd favored in life.

"Double-edged swords are where it's at, I tell you. Even if they stop cutting, you can use them as blunt weapons."

"Lyle's dexterous, so wouldn't daggers suit him best? You can carry a lot of them at once, and they're good to throw too."

“I think...weapons with gimmicks are good too.”

“If you’re a man, it’s gotta be spears! Axes! Put them all together, and you get a halberd! The strongest weapon of all!”

“It is the age of the gun. Lyle, I’m sure you can get a gun in Baym. Stock up before you’re left in the dust.”

All five of them were adamant about their own weapons. Some things never changed.

I stabbed through the windpipe of an orc to take it out, but the blade broke before I could pull it back out. The quality was even worse than I expected.

Casting aside what was now just a hilt, I took out the other orc as the goblin mages unleashed their magic. Their fiery blast struck the forest trees, setting some of them alight.

“N-Not good!”

I could hear a crackling sound. If that wasn’t bad enough, the goblin mages continued firing shot after shot in every direction.

“They’re seriously trying to destroy everything!”

What on earth are they thinking?

I immediately tried to stop them, but in the next instant, a gust of wind sliced through the flames, blowing them away for the most part. I jumped back in surprise as the blade of wind left a mark on the ground where I’d been standing.

A line had been etched into the ground. I heard the sound of a twig snapping under someone’s foot.

From the spot where the flames were sliced came a man dressed in a black robe. He was surrounded by monsters, all wearing matching equipment—and collars.

The man wore a mask.

“Good grief—what a show you’ve put on. Do you know how much damage you’ve caused?”

This man was undoubtedly human. The presence of a lone human mixed in among all the monsters littering these woods. The other dot on the map. Back then, I thought he was someone who'd unfortunately found himself caught up in this. Knowing I wouldn't make it in time, I'd forsaken him, but now he seemed to be the culprit.

"Who are you?"

There's no harm in asking, I thought. But the man simply cackled away behind his mask. His mask, too, sported a laughing face.

"Do you think I'm going to tell you?"

"A shame."

As the man reached a hand toward me, sharp needles shot forth from the ground at his feet.

The needles came at me one after another; I was about to leap aside to avoid—but I gave up on that idea, tossing my saver aside and planting both hands to the ground. A large wall of dirt manifested before me to block the spray of needles.

From beyond the wall, the man spoke, sounding rather impressed.

"You can use magic? If you hadn't run into them here, you might have become a renowned adventurer."

And it was then.

The fifth muttered in a cold voice, "How does this guy know Lyle's an adventurer?"

We'd only just met. While he could have assumed we were adventurers based on our appearance, there was a definitiveness to his tone that made it feel like he knew from the start.

I backed away from the wall just as a blast of the man's magic struck it.

A massive fireball scorched the earth and pulverized my earthen defenses. Flames scattered all around as it burst.

"Hey, are you kidding me?"

The forest was going to burn. And this man didn't seem to care.

"This is work. Sorry, but you'll all have to die."

So he doesn't plan on letting us get away. Then it shouldn't be an issue if I'm a little rough with him.

I calmly steadied my breath. The flames were spreading, the smoke and heat making it hard to breathe.

I continued to watch his every move, but the masked man in the black robe just looked down at the fallen monsters that littered the ground and shrugged.

"Good grief, all that money gone up in smoke. Though you're somewhat strong—that makes for a good test."

Behind the masked man and from inside the thicket of trees emerged an ogre, even larger than the orcs. This massive beast wielded a greatsword in each hand. Its black skin and collar remained the same as the others.

There were large horns on its head, and long white hair that jutted out like a thorny stack of needles. The orcs already towered over me, and this ogre made them look like children.

"That's quite big," I muttered.

The masked man remained composed. "I'll give you credit for having the guts to say that after seeing this thing. At the present moment, this is the strongest monster we have under control. It's several times stronger than a regular ogre. Now, attack!"

Following the man's command, a flock of monsters led by the ogre came at me.

That erases any doubt. They really are being controlled.

But he was way too relaxed against me.

"It's a bit too early to be feeling victorious!"

The masked man seemed a little surprised, seeing me crouch down. But it wasn't about me. Behind me was Sophia, poised with her battle-axe.

She coiled her body, a blue flame engulfing her as she swung her axe with all

her might. The flames swirled and expanded in a spiral as she spun.

“Hraaah!”

Sophia threw her battle-axe, which spun viciously as it passed over my head. The axe, wreathed in blue flames, spun so quickly it looked like a blue ring. Black blood splattered all around as it passed through all the lesser monsters charging at me.

The blue flames coiling around Sophia—and her axe—came from the Art of House Walt’s founder, recorded in the Jewel. Full Burst.

There was a sizzling sound as the monster blood splattered across the burning trees. But still, the axe continued to spin and fly at the monsters in the area one by one.

The masked man panicked as he saw this mysterious axe that chased down its enemies.

“A homing Art?! Protect me!”

The man immediately ducked behind a group of orcs with large shields to get away. But that wouldn’t be enough. The second head’s Art, Select, had already locked its aim.

The axe would continue to chase until it lost all momentum.

Sophia’s mighty weapon blew away the shields of the orcs, cutting deep tracts through their flesh as it whizzed by, and lopping off the masked man’s left arm before embedding itself into the trunk of a great tree.

The masked man clutched his severed stump.

“Gaaaaaargh!”

I raced over as he screamed in pain, stabbing a newly drawn saber into his leg to pin him to the ground. The tip found its way deep into a tree root; it would surely hold for some time.

Once the man was captured, it was time to face the ogre.

This one didn’t even try to protect the man. Is it just following orders?

“Sorry, but there’s no time. I don’t plan on letting this area become a burnt

wasteland.”

Thanks to the flames the masked man had spread, the forest was set to be burned to the ground.

I turned my back to the encroaching ogre and made a running grab for the battle-axe in the tree. Imbuing a blue flame into my right hand, I passed it along the battle-axe and wrapped its blade in fire.

“This one’s more suited for someone like you!”

As the ogre’s greatsword came crashing down, I avoided and severed its arm in one motion. It immediately swung the blade it held in the opposite hand, and that arm, too, was deftly removed.

The armless ogre had no sadness in its eyes. Or even any anger.

“Seriously, what are these things?!” the seventh head cried out in confusion.

This seemed to be a first for my ancestors too.

But the fourth head remained calm. “There is no need to panic. We know that they’re monsters that move on orders. And that’s all they are. It doesn’t change what we have to do.”

Though troublesome foes, these creatures lacked the will to fight on their own. They were simply obeying commands, lacking the spontaneity—the decisiveness and determination—required in crucial moments.

As the ogre tried to bite at me, I lowered the battle-axe straight ahead and landed the finishing blow.

It was too anticlimactic.

I immediately stabbed the battle-axe into the ground and approached the masked man.

He was in agony.

“You talked too much. Thanks to that, we were able to complete our strategy meeting.”

“M-Meeting? What are you talking about?”

He didn’t seem to understand.

But Sophia and I had discussed and coordinated our strategy at length.

We were linked with Connection and... What should I call it? The voices of our hearts? Anyway, we had a strategy meeting unbeknownst to the masked man and shifted to our counterattack.

“I-I did my best...”

“That was great for a first attempt, Sophia!”

“N-Next time, please don’t throw me in without a rehearsal.”

The blue flames surrounding Sophia gradually shrank and faded away. Sophia sat on the spot, coughing as she inhaled some of the surrounding smoke.

We had to extinguish the spreading fire.

I glanced back at Novem, who’d continued battling monsters to protect the two that we’d saved. She blasted one last monster away with magic—truly, the last one.

Novem seemed to sense what I wanted to say; she held her staff high and fired her magic off into the sky.

“Water Bullet.”

With just two words, she fired off several balls of water which burst in the air and doused our surroundings. The fire was no more. Only the smell of burning remained.

Now that the fire was no longer a concern, I turned to the man writhing on the ground.

“Now then, we’ve got a few questions for you.”

But the eyes—the eyes I saw through the holes in his mask—gave me one last sharp glare, before rolling back to show their whites.

I heard a tongue click from the Jewel. “Poison,” the sixth head said.

I immediately removed his mask to find blood flowing from his mouth.

As soon as she saw that, Novem turned pale and raced toward me.

“Milord, get away at once!”

“Huh?”

The man’s chest began to glow.

“Lyle, dodge!”

Reacting quickly to the third head’s voice, I grabbed Novem and threw us both onto the ground. In the next instant, an explosion erupted from where the masked man had been.

As she hid inside of Porter, Shannon cowered at the sounds of battle that seemed to come from every direction.

“Why does this always happen?!”

Whenever she stuck around Lyle, she’d find herself wrapped up in trouble more often than not. It was so bad she had to wonder, *Is he cursed or something?*

Clara spoke to her from the driver’s seat.

“The monsters are thinning out. It should be over soon. Shannon, can you do a check for me?”

Owing to her orphic eyes, Shannon was often tasked with searching for enemies. Despite her fears, she made her way into the driver’s compartment where she could get a better look outside.

She could hear voices.

“Give some proper support fire, would you, Eva?!”

“Oh, shut it! You disappear the moment I take my eyes off of you. Do you understand how hard it is to keep up?!”

The sounds of Aria and Eva arguing, to be more precise.

With her Art, Aria was a gale that sped across the battlefield, while Eva’s ranged attacks kept her out of harm’s way—but Aria was so fast that Eva’s support couldn’t make it in time. Eva remained on the roof of Porter from which she aimed her bow.

She wasn’t completely safe herself. A goblin that latched onto Porter

managed to clamber its way to the roof.

“Get off, you bastard!”

Eva’s furious shout was followed by the goblin being kicked into the air.

Meanwhile, it was almost like Monica was dancing on the battlefield. The skirt of her red maid dress lifted airily and twirled as she spun. A beat behind, her pigtails gave chase. It was a scene that seemed completely out of place on a battlefield.

However, the large hammer Monica wielded was a perfect fit for the chaos.

“Oh, I’m no good at this sort of cleaning. But I can’t slack off either. After all, I am...an impeccable maid!” she proclaimed as she continued bashing away at monsters.

As she took in the sights, Shannon’s eyes gradually began to take on a golden glow. With her ability to see mana, Shannon could track the movements of monsters in the forest.

“I think most of the ones in the forest have come out already. That’s what it looks like.”

Her ambiguous phrasing had Clara a bit troubled.

“Can you be more specific?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I can do the same thing as Lyle. More importantly, what happened to our request?”

“These should be the monsters we were after. Once we overcome this, we’ll have to wait and see.”

Around Porter, Miranda had crafted a number of golems to keep the monsters at bay. The villagers had solidified their defenses behind them.

“It would have been easier if May was still around,” Shannon grumbled at the girl who wasn’t there. “How can a qilin be this useless?”

It seemed like they’d be able to defend the village, somehow or another.

I slowly stood in the aftermath of the masked man’s explosion.

“A-Are you hurt, Novem?”

Novem had a terribly startled look on her face.

“Why...why did you cover me?”

“My body just moved on its own.”

“That’s not something someone in your position should do, Milord!”

What was I supposed to say to that?

“But we’re both safe.”

“That is merely the result. Please do not do anything like this again. If something were to happen to you, Milord, I...won’t be able to live on.”

I tried to laugh it off; to tell her she was making such a big deal out of it. But Novem’s face couldn’t have been any more serious. Realizing this wasn’t a moment to make light of, I offered a simple “Sorry,” before making sure I didn’t have any major injuries myself. I was fine, and so was Novem. With that out of the way, I patted the dirt from my clothing.

Sophia approached.

“Are you both all right?!”

“Yeah, somehow or another.”

Looking at where the masked man had been, I saw that the explosion had done its job splendidly. Not a trace remained.

“They’re quite thorough,” the seventh warned. “You’ve run into a troublesome bunch. And then, there’s the two that they were after.”

I turned my eyes to those very two people: an old man and a woman. At first, I thought they might be father and daughter, but their conversations and the nature of their pursuer made it clear they were far from ordinary.

Noticing my gaze, they expressed their gratitude.

“You have my thanks for saving us.”

Teetering to her feet, the woman removed her hood to show her face. She was pretty, for one, but there seemed to be something more to her; she had an

imposing aura about her.

The same could be said about the old man.

“We owe you a great deal. Though I’d like to repay you, we have nothing to offer at the moment.”

The third muttered, “For now, why not hear their story?”

We needed to confirm the surrounding situation too. We decided to take a break for the time being.

“Novem, Sophia, protect them. I’m going to scan the area.”

Novem grabbed my arm.

“No. Please rest, Lord Lyle. I will take care of recon.”

“But...”

“It is important for you to hear their story. And you are very tired, aren’t you?”

It was true that I’d pushed myself too hard and could barely use my Arts anymore. A little rest would do me well.

“Got it. Don’t go too far. Just far enough to make sure there’s no fire left.”

“Of course.”

Novem left us. I led the other three along to find a place to rest. A nearby tree stump seemed good enough to sit on, so we lowered ourselves down and got to business.

“Please tell us your story.”

The old man was hesitant at first.

“Once you know, there’s no turning back. It could cost your life.”

“We’re already involved.”

He paused before saying, “Very well, then.”

Resigning himself, he began by introducing himself. “I realize I’ve yet to give you my name. I am Gaston—former high priest of Zayin.”

“High priest?”

It sounded impressive, but I wasn’t really sure how high up that was. My ancestors were equally uncertain.

“Yeah, titles and roles change from country to country. It’s such a pain,” said the third.

“It was quite common for official titles and roles to be completely different in foreign countries.”

The seventh head shared the sentiment. “High priests are more numerous than you’d think. *Very* numerous if you include the self-proclaimed ones.”

As I puzzled over it, the woman spoke up. “Please think of it as something similar to a prime minister. Gaston served as my aide for many years. And I am Thelma—former holy maiden of Zayin.”

Her words made Sophia’s mouth fall open.

“I figured they were from Zayin, but isn’t the holy maiden the most important person in the country?! U-Um, is it normal for one to be all the way out here?”

She seemed to be having a hard time believing someone so high up would be out in some random forest. It seemed more plausible that they were trying to pull a fast one on us. But the signal the sixth heat’s Art showed was blue—an ally.

They weren’t hostile; in fact, they had quite a favorable impression of us.

“So what are two very important people doing in a place like this?” I asked.

Gaston hung his head in frustration. “You caught us in the thick of it. We are fleeing, with Baym as our final destination.”

“Baym?”

Thelma nodded. “We are fleeing the country.”

The moment they heard that, my ancestors seemed to immediately understand what was going on.

“Oh my, if this is the real deal, then won’t this turn into something big?”

“There’s a high chance. They’re at least important enough for those monsters

and the masked man to be sent after them.”

“Zayin... Huh. Weren’t they on the verge of civil war?”

“Indeed! Something about growing dissatisfaction toward the holy maiden and high priest who’ve held power for too long—now’s your chance. You’ve hit the jackpot!”

“It’s good to help others. But I never imagined you’d reel in such a big shot. Well done, Lyle!”

What are they so happy about? Didn’t we decide not to get involved in Zayin not too long ago? In the first place, so what if I saved them?

My ancestors all seemed keen on securing the two of them, so for the time being, I opted to keep them close. As the Jewel grew rowdy, I addressed Gaston and Thelma.

“We are adventurers from Baym; we’ve come here on a request from a nearby village. If you want to return with us, we can take you there.”

“That would be a huge help,” Gaston rejoiced. “But are you sure? You’ll be targeted again if you’re with us.”

It was certainly dangerous, but my ancestors weren’t about to let them leave.

“Don’t let them escape! Lyle! Keep them, at all costs!”

“Make them deeply indebted, and have them understand that you are on the same side. Lyle, you must handle them with care.”

“That’s right. After all—they’re an important card to play.”

“It’s starting to get fun around here! I didn’t think an opportunity would just fall into our laps! Lyle, you really are a lucky boy!”

“Lyle, don’t let a just cause slip away. They will have our cooperation—whether they want it or not.”

I just knew they were plotting things with nasty looks on their faces.

And wait, what do you mean a just cause? Even if everything they just told me is true, they could still be bad people.

My ancestors were practically jumping for joy.

“Yep, this is good. Splendid!” the third head said in high spirits. “It’s getting fun, isn’t it, Lyle?!”

I’m not having fun at all.

Chapter 107: Money

The figures in black robes stood beyond the forest, far from the settlement with nothing noteworthy around. They stood beside a line of several horse-drawn wagons. These wagons were loaded with numerous valuable Demonic Tools, which the men used to monitor the state of the forest.

They all wore similar masks, white with laughing faces painted on them; it was quite an unsettling sight. Beneath the robes, they all seemed to be wearing different clothing.

A man who seemed to be their leader sighed as he gazed into a crystal ball.

“It seems he blew himself up. A failure.”

A masked woman dressed in the garb of a warrior shrugged at that. “I knew this was too much to test the newbie.”

The leader shook his head. “Anyone who can’t handle this much doesn’t deserve to be one of us. But forget him. The forces we’ve lost are significant.”

The wagons were all crammed tightly with cages. It was from these cages that the black monsters had been unleashed onto the forest.

“Employing monsters isn’t a bad idea, but if they’re weak, they’re useless. We’ll have to take care of it ourselves.”

The warrior woman gripped the hilt of the sword at her waist.

Wearily, the leader stopped her. “Don’t make a move when we don’t understand the situation. I’ve already set scouts to... Hm?” He cut himself off, staring into the ball. After a while of silence, he issued an order. “Retreat! Leave this place at once!”

“Huh? Why? Are we just going to let them get away? There’s no telling what the higher-ups will say if we return like this.”

The leader offered the warrior woman a brief explanation: “The signal from the scouts vanished. They’re gone.”

“Were they done in?”

“I didn’t get any enemy readings. No monsters either. But they disappeared. We can’t afford to lose any more of our forces.”

The scouts he sent out were skilled, yet he could no longer sense them anywhere in the forest. It was hard to imagine they’d simply died by accident.

“This mission is a complete failure,” the warrior woman said.

Stowing the crystal ball away, the leader answered, “It’s better than being completely annihilated. We need to get back and report this at once.”

Cloths were draped over the wagons to conceal the cages and Demonic Tools. The members all doffed their black robes, their appearance quickly shifting to that of merchants. The masks still made them an ominous sight, but once those were removed, they would look no different than any other merchant caravan.

“So the assassination of the holy maiden and high priest is a failure, huh,” the leader muttered before leading his shady assembly away.

It was already nighttime when we reunited with Novem and returned to the village. Thanks to the defense mounted by Aria and the others, the request was tentatively considered a success.

The chief thanked us.

But the problem was what came after that.

As I sat in Porter, hearing out their story, I covered my face with my hands. The sight of the weeping woman in front of me made me want to be anywhere but here. My other comrades seemed to feel the same way.

No one dared interrupt Thelma.

“I-I mean, I’m not saying I was forced into the holy maiden position or anything! Don’t get me wrong! But the knights are too quick to go on about war, war, war, and then what will happen to all the people living in Zayin? They push for it so hard, it’s like they’ve completely forgotten about how the country’s exhausted itself with the countless wars. I want to retire and get married like everyone else!”

I shifted my eyes from her to Gaston. The others were also giving him accusatory looks.

As he took on our critical eyes, Gaston began throwing out excuses. “N-No, I did consider preparing a replacement for the holy maiden to continue our investment into internal affairs. However, searching for a holy maiden from the position of high priest caused an outcry of people saying I was just trying to maintain my power. And in the end, I couldn’t move forward with it.”

Zayin was a troublesome country indeed.

Many of the priests aspired to become the high priest, and the most promising among them—the elite high priest candidates—each prepared girls who could potentially become the holy maiden. And, if the girl they pushed for successfully became the holy maiden, they would be promoted straight to high priest.

I had many questions.

For instance, *Are there really no issues with running a government like that?*

And of course, *Is that really how you’re deciding the leader of your nation?*

I had loads of things to say, but if the incumbent high priest was the one choosing the next holy maiden, it would be seen as them consolidating power. This wasn’t wrong—but it felt like the system itself was a mistake.

“What a curious country.” The fourth sounded befuddled. “But if it’s functioned like that for so long, then there must not have been many major issues thus far. Or maybe it’s been functioning despite the flaws.”

The third chuckled. “There’s no country without issues. Now then, I’m starting to see what’s going on here.”

If their words were to be believed, Zayin had continuously waged wars on all its neighboring lands despite being a theocracy. As a result, they couldn’t adequately invest in their own country.

The reason that war did not stop even under these circumstances came down to a simple belief: “If the country is poor, then just take what you need from other countries.”

The saddest part was that all the countries around Baym seemed to think the same way. I'd heard about war being far too frequent around Baym, but this was just terrible.

Enter Gaston.

Seeing the persisting state of affairs, he'd established a faction under the banner of "No, how about we improve our own country too!" and successfully made Thelma into the holy maiden. Wars were cut back under her reign, and more money was invested domestically.

They achieved some success, and Thelma became quite popular.

However, the frustration of the knights who wanted war continued to mount. This sentiment was shared with the priests of opposing factions, who plotted to enthrone a warmonger as the next holy maiden.

Seeing that her efforts to stop the wars would all be wasted, Thelma used every trick in the book to barely keep her hold on power.

Thelma wailed, "Normally if you become holy maiden at fifteen, you retire around twenty and get hitched! Mid-twenties at the latest...and here I am in my thirties! I wanted to retire and live my life too!"

She lamented having missed her prime.

That's when it occurred to me. "Huh? Thirties? That's around the same as my mother—"

Thelma fell silent for a moment. She stared closely at my face, tears welling in her eyes. "I could have had a child this big by now!"

And, she was crying again.

The cold eyes of my party were turned on me, this time.

"Lyle," Aria sighed, "you should think a bit before you speak."

"S-Sorry. But don't worry, Miss Thelma, you're still younger than my mother."

Thelma sniffled as she cursed out the knights. "I threw away my happiness to serve the country, so who the hell are you calling a witch? You just want war; you're not even thinking about the nation. Being called a coward—I could put

up with that, but saying the holy maiden's a hag?! C'mon—it's embarrassing for me too!"

There was, apparently, supposed to be an age limit on holy maidens. Rather than an actual political leader, they were more a symbol to represent the nation's vigor and prosperity.

My ancestors in the Jewel were similarly perplexed.

"Public opinion can be harsh."

"Right. I married late myself, so I understand the feeling."

"From the knights' point of view, they were deprived of their chances to achieve anything. Failing to handle that is indeed a mistake on her part."

"They're still waging war with the country in tatters? I'm surprised there hasn't been a rebellion."

"Perhaps that's the perks of being a theocracy?"

In any ordinary territory, it would be perfectly reasonable for the civilians to revolt.

Gaston said, "In the end, she was ousted by an insurrection of the knights. If I knew this was going to happen, I would have had Thelma retire earlier."

An adult woman sat, holding her knees and staring into the distance. It made me feel sad just looking at it.

"So you plan to use Baym's trade routes to flee to some distant land?"

"Yes. At the very least, Thelma must escape and find ordinary happiness."

As Gaston put it, it was his duty as he was the one who twisted her life askew.

Miranda looked at me. "We've heard the story, but what are we going to do, Lyle?"

For starters, I needed to verify if it was true or not. It didn't seem too far off from the information that Miranda and Eva had gathered.

How would we involve ourselves with Zayin—a country that seemed like it was headed straight for chaos? I wasn't too sure either.

“Let’s think about it after we get back,” I said, and that was the end of it for now.

Late at night, I headed into the Jewel. Not by my own will; my mind was dragged in by the ancestors as I fell asleep.

“Did something happen?”

“Not yet. But it’s going to. More accurately, you’re going to make it happen.”

Seeing that bemused look on the sixth’s face, I just knew he was scheming again. I made my way to my chair, glancing at the room of memories behind it before taking my seat. Nothing about that sealed door had changed.

The third head spoke to me, kicking off our strategy meeting.

“First, let’s get what we know in order,” he said. “The Theocracy of Zayin—the holy maiden at the top of it fled abroad after being overthrown by the knights’ heinous revolt.”

“Hmm, from what I heard, the other side had their reasons too, didn’t they? The holy maiden’s term in office being far too long, among other things.”

Admittedly, driving her out because they wanted war was going too far, but they weren’t completely unjustified.

My ancestors saw it differently.

“Lyle—in this case, our opponent’s circumstances are irrelevant. What matters is our *just cause*. The wonderful holy maiden who stopped the wars to bring a prosperous life to her people was driven out of the country. What a tragedy!”

The seventh head’s insincere-sounding words were met with nods and smirks from the other ancestors.

I quickly realized, *Oh, they’re serious about this.*

“So to summarize, you want me to fight the knights—or rather, an entire country ruled by a new holy maiden?”

The fourth nodded with a smile. “Now you get it, Lyle.”

“No, err, doesn’t that mean we’ll have to drag Madame Thelma back into the conflict? Is that okay? I mean, she doesn’t seem to want anything to do with it anymore.”

Thelma and Gaston both seemed weary of conflict.

The fifth head refuted my point. “Lyle, you underestimate those in power.”

“Huh?”

“They stripped her of her position and, because of her guilt, want her dead. To those who want to silence her, the fact that she wants to live peacefully abroad means nothing. They will keep sending folks like that masked man after her.”

What awaited Thelma was a life cowering in fear of potential assassination. A pitiful life.

“Can’t we do something about that? Maybe fake her death?”

“Do that, and then what? They’ll investigate the hell out of it, and if they find out she was cooperating with anyone, they’ll kill them too. Just in case they might have heard something. Listen well, you’re already involved in this.”

And now that I was involved, I had no choice but to fight the country known as Zayin.

“But are we certain that Zayin’s behind this?”

The sixth head folded his arms. “Who’s to say? Those Zayin folks are the ones with the most reason to want them dead, that’s for sure. And that’s important too. Believe me. But the issue right now—is the war with Zayin!”

My ancestors were all overjoyed. Genuinely happy, with sparkles in their eyes.

“You’ve got little Miss Thelma as your just cause, and even High Priest Gaston, your window into the country’s inner workings. This is a huge opportunity!”

Yes, and it’s because of those two that we’re all in danger. Do you understand that, Third Head?

“If you rally around them to start a war, you’ll definitely be able to get your name out there!”

I did consider joining a war to make a name for myself, but I never considered starting the war myself, Fourth Head.

“A just cause is important. What’s more, she’s a holy maiden who seems pretty popular with her people. Just what we need.”

You seem happy that we stumbled upon an excuse for war, Fifth Head.

“We’ll take Zayin! No, that’s not it. We’ll return those two to Zayin, why don’t we!”

Wow, you just came out and said it, Sixth Head.

“From what we’ve heard, Zayin has amassed some considerable power. It doesn’t get much better than that! If you win this battle, then Zayin is yours for the taking!”

What should I do... I’m starting to think we’re bigger villains than our enemies, Seventh Head.

My ancestors were planning to use Thelma and Gaston to take Zayin. They were totally villains.

“Are we really doing this? I have a...bad feeling about it.”

Their faces all turned serious at my comment.

“Lyle... Now look here. You can’t be shying back from something of this level if you’re going to defeat Ceres. When you swore to take her down, was it a lie?” the third asked me, and I struggled to respond.

I’d never expected this development. “N-No, but...”

“Time isn’t on your side. We need to hurry if we want to defeat her. Besides, Thelma was indeed driven from her country and targeted for assassination. This much is true. Can you allow that?”

I nearly agreed with the fourth head’s persuasive words. *But is it all right for me to take it?*

The fifth head chastised me for my naivete. “The moment you decided to go against a nation, you became a villain. Don’t get cold feet here. You might not get a chance like this again.”

“It truly is a goddess-send!” the sixth said with a nod. “The lucky man is the one who can use these chances to the fullest. Do you get it, Lyle? Luck is something you must grasp with your own two hands!”

“There’s a fine line separating a pinch from an opportunity,” the seventh agreed. “Lyle, overcome this, and you’ll be a good deal closer to your goal. Isn’t that to save many lives?”

“You’re...right. Understood. I’ll do it.”

From the day I decided to defeat Ceres, I was no longer a righteous person. In which case, I needed to seize hold of this opportunity.

The third smiled, and yet...

“Well said! Just one thing. There’s one very important problem.”

“How important are we talking?”

“Well.” His smile vanished, his expression turning grave. “We’re not lords—and neither are you. We have no subjects and no resources. And the biggest problem, you see, is money.”

I almost fell out of my chair when I heard that. “The problem is money?!”

“Do not underestimate money problems!” the fourth scolded me. I found myself cowering back at the wrath in his voice.

“O-Okay.”

“Do you really get it, Lyle? War is an expensive business. You’re earning good money as an adventurer, but that’s only enough to hire a few dozen people at most. Not nearly enough to win.”

War was costly. The reason some could relish in it came down to the possibility of plundering from the defeated. It was a horrible reality. As for those who would be stolen from, they would have to fight to survive. It all perpetuated a cycle of misery.

The seventh sighed. “You’re going to need a patron. We’ll have to start searching seriously.”

Meanwhile, the sixth was staring at me.

“What’s wrong?”

He seemed a little different from usual.

“Hm? Well, this and that. More importantly. Lyle, once you get back to Baym, I’ve got to teach you how to play with women!”

“Huh? Y-You really don’t have to.”

“You fool! You need to experience these things. You’ll be in for a world of pain if you don’t learn how to handle women. We’ll start with the brothel. Forget about the cheap places. We’re going straight to the expensive one!”

Watching him having so much fun, I realized he hadn’t changed after all.

A large ship was unloading at Baym’s harbor. The work was watched over by Vera Trace, a girl whose black hair was done up in a half-up pigtail on both sides.

She held a parasol overhead as she spoke to her father, Fidel, about her most recent venture.

“Vera,” said Fidel, “it looks like business went well again. Papa is so happy for you.”

Vera sighed at her father’s overly doting tone. “We just returned a little late. You’re making such a big deal over this.”

Her words had Fidel biting down on his handkerchief.

“A little?!” he cried out. “Just how much do you think your papa worried about you in that time?! I was so worried I didn’t get a wink of sleep.”

This seemed to be true, and Fidel looked a bit thinner than before.

She thanked him for his concern. “Get some rest. I’ll be terrible if you collapse, papa. And thanks for worrying about me.”

Fidel smiled from ear to ear and hugged her tight. “I love you, Veraaaaa!”

“You’re suffocating me!”

As she tried to peel her father away, a man and a woman approached them.

One of them was Vera's younger sister, Gina Trace. In contrast to the determined vibe of her older sister, Gina had a settled and gentle demeanor. And next to her...was the young man who'd gifted Vera her parasol. Roland.

An affable, earnest-looking young man with short hair.

He had once worked under Vera as a sailor, but now he was tasked with looking after Gina.

"Welcome back, sis," Gina said to Vera.

"Yeah, it's good to be back, Gina. You look well."

As Vera looked at Roland, the man lowered his head. She felt a pang of sadness upon seeing it, but smiled nonetheless. "You're starting to look the part, Roland."

"Thank you, Miss Vera."

Roland was dressed in a suit, though he'd taken off the jacket and donned a vest instead.

There was a man glaring daggers at him—Fidel.

"Hmph! Papa doesn't approve of having a whelp like him look after my precious Gina."

Roland was a good and hardworking young man who came from a lowly background. Even though Baym had no system of nobility, there was still a stark difference between the rich and the poor. Watching Roland work hard to pull himself out of the gutter, remaining diligent and kind despite his upbringing, Fidel actually had a very high opinion of him.

Letting him marry his daughter, however, was a different issue entirely.

Gina glared at Fidel.

"Why won't you accept it already, papa?"

Fidel faltered under her gaze but shook his head, his face turning serious. He had his daughter's best interest in mind.

"This is for your sake. Roland is a hard worker, but he lacks what it takes to be your husband. Please understand, Gina."

Gina turned away. “Let’s go, Roland.”

“Y-Yes! Excuse us.”

With another deep bow, Roland hurried to catch up to Gina, who’d walked off without him.

Watching his back, Vera tried to reason with her father: “If you don’t intend to get her a political marriage, then what’s wrong with letting her be with Roland?”

Fidel was a rare breed among the large merchant houses in that he didn’t believe in political marriages. He had no intentions of marrying off his beloved daughters just for business.

“Vera, papa wants Gina to be happy too. Do you think that whelp can make her happy?”

“He’s a hard worker.”

“That’s not enough. Please, hear me out, Vera. What matters is the results. I acknowledge his work ethic, but I don’t want Gina to marry a man who never achieves results. Do you understand this feeling?”

“Not at all.”

“You too, Vera? You’re making things difficult for papa!” Fidel broke down in tears, making things difficult for everyone else.

“Hah,” Vera sighed. “I’ve got my next shipment to take care of. Can we talk about that?”

“Huh?! Can’t you relax a bit? You’ve been working too hard, Vera.”

“It’s fine. I want to work now.”

Her eyes flitting in the direction of Roland, who was already out of sight, Vera felt pathetic.

How long will it take to get over it? I’m hopeless.

The man she once loved—Roland—had chosen her little sister instead. And her sister had accepted him. Vera didn’t intend to complain about it, but seeing them around the house was still hard on her.

Once it came to business, Fidel turned serious. “All right. Give me some time. We should be able to gather up a few more things that’ll sell well in this season. Also, I plan to replace the guards.”

“Did something happen?”

“An adventurer party we were employing decided to take on some mercenary work. Wait until that hole is filled in.”

“Another war? Papa...”

Fidel cut her off before she could say more. “I understand what you want to say, but this is a problem for all of Baym. It’s nothing the Trace family can resolve on our own. Now, let’s hear the intel you gathered along the way. Has anything changed?”

Fidel was one of the major merchants representing Baym, and his expression reflected that—once business was concerned. Even when dealing with his daughter, he didn’t intend to pull any punches.

“Sure, I’ll bite. The north’s the same as it’s always been. But in the south...”

The two of them began to talk about business.

Back at the inn in Baym, I’d arranged rooms for Thelma and Gaston. We spent the night before talking to them about their future plans.

“Please stay and rest a little longer.”

“Are you sure?” Gaston asked. “We can’t pay for this.”

They’d lost nearly everything while on the run, so they were close to penniless.

“It’s fine. If you need anything, we’ll buy it for you. There’s still a risk of assassination, so you’ll have to lay low for a bit.”

“B-But we can’t impose on you forever.”

“Don’t worry about it. More importantly, please consider my proposition. It’s for your benefit as well.”

Gaston looked at Thelma, who seemed despondent.

I'd proposed the reclamation of Zayin to them.

"I am fine with it, but Thelma is already..."

Gaston wasn't too against the idea; the issue was Thelma.

"No matter where we flee, Zayin's pursuers will be on our tail. It will be the same no matter how distant a land we run to. We will live in constant fear of assassination. But! But still, I no longer wish to maintain my position as holy maiden. I'm tired."

Gaston's shoulders dropped. "Thelma..."

Worn thin by the situation, Thelma had rejected my offer. But relinquishing her was not an option, as far as my ancestors were concerned. Thelma was necessary for the plunder—scratch that, reclamation of Zayin.

She was absolutely essential.

It seemed it would take a bit of time before Thelma regained her resolve.

"I'm sorry," Gaston apologized to me, "but with Thelma like this, I can't provide much assistance. I doubt I'll be of any use on my own. Considering the assassins after us, you do not need to offer us shelter. It will only put you in harm's way."

I couldn't let them go, and keeping them close would make it easier to protect them.

"We're already involved. If we want to overcome this situation, then fighting back is our only option."

"Again, I apologize. I will try to convince Thelma."

The masked man was also curious. There were some troublesome figures on the move, but if I couldn't overcome something of this level, there was no way I could ever defeat Ceres.

"For now, just rest."

As soon as I left the room, I heard the sixth head click his tongue.

"Thelma's lost her nerve. But it will take some time before the preparations are in order. You must regain her motivation by then."

I whispered to him, “She says she doesn’t want to do it.”

“Ultimately, it’ll be fine if she’s just a figurehead. But the way she’s going, she might even take her own life. She needs rest.”

Thelma was exhausted.

She was necessary to take Zayin. We’d have to protect her for a while.

It would be a struggle to protect those two from assassins, but they were simply that valuable.

We had to see it through.

“That aside, Lyle—are you ready?”

“Y-Yes. But are we really doing this?”

“Of course! With everyone tired and resting, this is the perfect time to strike! Slip out, have some fun, and slip back. Easy as that.”

The sixth head kept making noise about sending me to a brothel.

“We’ve gotten all the info we need from Cleto! All that’s left is to take action!”

I’d already gotten recommendations from Cleto who was very knowledgeable—far too knowledgeable about brothels. I had the necessary money, and I’d studied all the necessary etiquette.

Now, I just had to go to the store and have fun.

“Is this really okay?”

“Fool! How can you lead women into battle without understanding women? Lyle, this is a trial! Knowing how to handle women will make you more adept at utilizing them later!”

Are you sure about that?

B-But...if I’m being honest, I’m curious.

“W-Well, if you’re that insistent, I guess I don’t have a choice.”

“That’s right. What are you supposed to do when I’m insisting so strongly? Lyle, this is a trial for you!”

I purposely went along with his sly words and set off. I burst from my inn room, setting off for the women waiting for me. And there they were. The women waiting for me.

“Huh?”

My comrades.

“Where do you think you’re going, Lyle?” Miranda said with a smile.

“No, um, err...”

Miranda closed in, pressing me until my back was against the wall, and planting my hand next to my face.

“I heard. You kissed Sophia, didn’t you.”

O-Oh, that’s what this is about!

Though I was mostly petrified, I managed to shift my eyes toward Sophia to see her blushing furiously with her hands on her cheeks. She seemed incredibly embarrassed, but... *Hold on a second. You told them about that?!*

“Th-That one didn’t count.”

“And why not?”

“I-It was something of a ritualistic gesture needed to use my Art, and—”

Miranda smiled harder as I explained it to her. “I see.”

“Do you get it now?”

“Yes, I get it. So in short, we all should experience it too. Wouldn’t you say so?”

“Huh?”

I was shocked, and Novem seemed a little upset. She had such an adorable way of being angry.

“I heard the circumstances from Sophia,” said Novem. “Milord, if practice is necessary to use it properly, you should have said so in advance.”

Aria had her head turned the other way but was stealing glances in my direction.

"I-If I need to practice, then I suppose I don't have a choice."

What's gotten into her?

Monica was all for it. "That damn chicken's first kiss was already claimed by me! Squabble over him all you want, you flesh girls!"

Why is she riling them up?

I looked at Eva and Clara who both seemed uninterested. They were deep in conversation, not even trying to look my way.

"Getting stronger from a kiss... Don't you think that's an interesting story concept?"

"I'm interested in the concept, but is kissing really the only way? I suspect there may be other methods."

As they discussed my Art, they seemed more animated than usual.

May gave a disinterested yawn. "Getting so fussy over a kiss, you humans sure are strange. It's just one form of expressing affection, right?"

She wasn't wrong about that, but was it wrong of me to want her to show some self-restraint and not thoughtlessly speak what mustn't be spoken?

Then there was Sophia. Red and silent.



Miranda brought her face close to mine.

“If it’s just a ritual, then it’s nothing to worry about, right?”

“I-I think that kisses should be treasured.”

As I quivered, Miranda whispered in my ear, “That aside, were you planning to go somewhere to have fun today? Maybe...a brothel?”

“How did she know?!” the sixth head exclaimed. “We made sure to act with the utmost caution.”

Th-That’s right. I was taking great care to keep it a secret from everyone. I can’t imagine the information got out anywhere.

Her gentle breath was cast upon my ear.

Seeing me twitch in response, Miranda hammered the point home with glee.

“I’m not sure what to think about visiting a brothel when you have us, Lyle.”

“Eep!”

A shriek leaked from the back of my throat; my body rattled and shook as I stared back into Miranda’s face. The message that face told was clear. Three simple words: “I knew it.”

“I just tried taking a guess, but it looks like it’s true. You sadden me, Lyle—I wanted you to choose me as your first.”

The looks from everyone suddenly grew cold as ice. Meanwhile, the voices from my ancestors began to quaver a bit.

“Huh? What’s this? Miranda’s scaring me.”

“How troublesome. We never studied how to handle these situations.”

“How did it get out?”

“Miranda’s giving off the same air as my wives. She’s smiling, but she’s definitely furious!”

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure that out. But this is bad. You have it rough.”

Please don’t make it sound like this is someone else’s problem. Why isn’t anyone helping me?

The seventh head sighed and said, "This is your fault for going along with anything my idiot father said."

I...have no rebuttal.

Miranda put on a seductive voice. "If you don't choose me, Lyle, it will be very troublesome for me. I might get a *little* jealous of the prostitute you hold in my stead."

"O-Oh, don't be silly, Miranda. There's no way I would ever go to a brothel?"

"Really?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Lyle, please look me in the eye when you answer. You're being honest with me, right? If you lie, then—"

Miranda was terrifying me. And the eyes of my other comrades were...quite scary too.

As I stood there trembling, Shannon rubbed her sleepy eyes and stepped out of her room. She was in her pajamas, drowsily holding a pillow under one arm.

"Morning, people."

It's almost noon. Has she been sleeping all this time? She sure has it easy.

Shannon looked at me, cocked her head...and burst into laughter.

"What? Did stupid Lyle do something? You really are an idiot. Now what stupid thing did you do to get everyone so angry?"

She approached with glee.

"Sis, what did Lyle do?"

Shannon asked with innocent curiosity, and Miranda turned away. It seemed she was unable to tell her young sister that she was scolding me for trying to visit a brothel.

"Shannon, for starters, you should get changed."

"Huh? Why won't you tell me? Hey, Aria!"

Shannon turned to Aria next. Aria, too, turned away and returned to her

room.

“Oh, that’s right! I’ve got to service my tools today!” she said as if she’d only just come up with that excuse, and Sophia quickly followed suit.

“M-Me too!”

Eva and Clara were already gone by then, having disappeared separately. As I tried looking around to see where they could have gone, Shannon questioned Monica.

“Monica, what happened?”

“This matter cannot be discussed with anyone under the age of eighteen. Come back when you’re an adult!”

Wait, Monica actually has common sense? And why eighteen?

Shannon grew stubborn, turning to May.

“May!”

And for once, it seemed like she was going to get her answer.

“Truth is, Lyle was going to go— Mpph!”

A hand reached around from behind to seal up her mouth. With a smile, Novem led May away.

“It seems you need to learn a little more common sense. Why don’t you study with me?”

Once Novem and May were gone, Shannon looked at me, her cheeks puffed out.

“You’re all making fun of me. You all think I’m stupid. Since it’s come to this, I’m going to find out no matter what it takes! You better be ready, Lyle!”

Essentially, she proclaimed she was going to surveil me for the rest of the day. Finally, wearily, Miranda gave me some space.

But before she left, she whispered in my ear, “Lyle, you can play around if you want... But make it serious, and I’ll never forgive you.”

A chill raced down my spine. I found myself nodding vigorously again and

again as Miranda led Shannon away.

“All right, it’s time we went on our way, Shannon.”

“Sis, please tell me. What did Lyle do?!”

“He hasn’t done anything. Yet. But he might do something after this, so you’d better keep a close eye on him.”

Shannon beamed and nodded. “Leave it to me! Prepare yourself, Lyle!”

Once they’d returned to their room, only Monica remained. Monica wriggled bashfully.

“Oh, you pervy chicken! But I love you, even if you’re a cowardly, good-for-nothing perv. How about I, Monica, give you a thorough lesson in physical education?”

“What’s physical education?” I sighed. “It looks like things will get messy if I ever try it.”

“Right,” the sixth agreed. “Miranda’s got some sharp intuition.”

I couldn’t hear any other voices from the Jewel. But what was I expecting? My ancestors were completely useless when it came to these things.

Even though I’d been looking forward to it a little, my comrades were too scary for me to even consider it. Resigned, I quietly returned to my room.

SEVENTH

9

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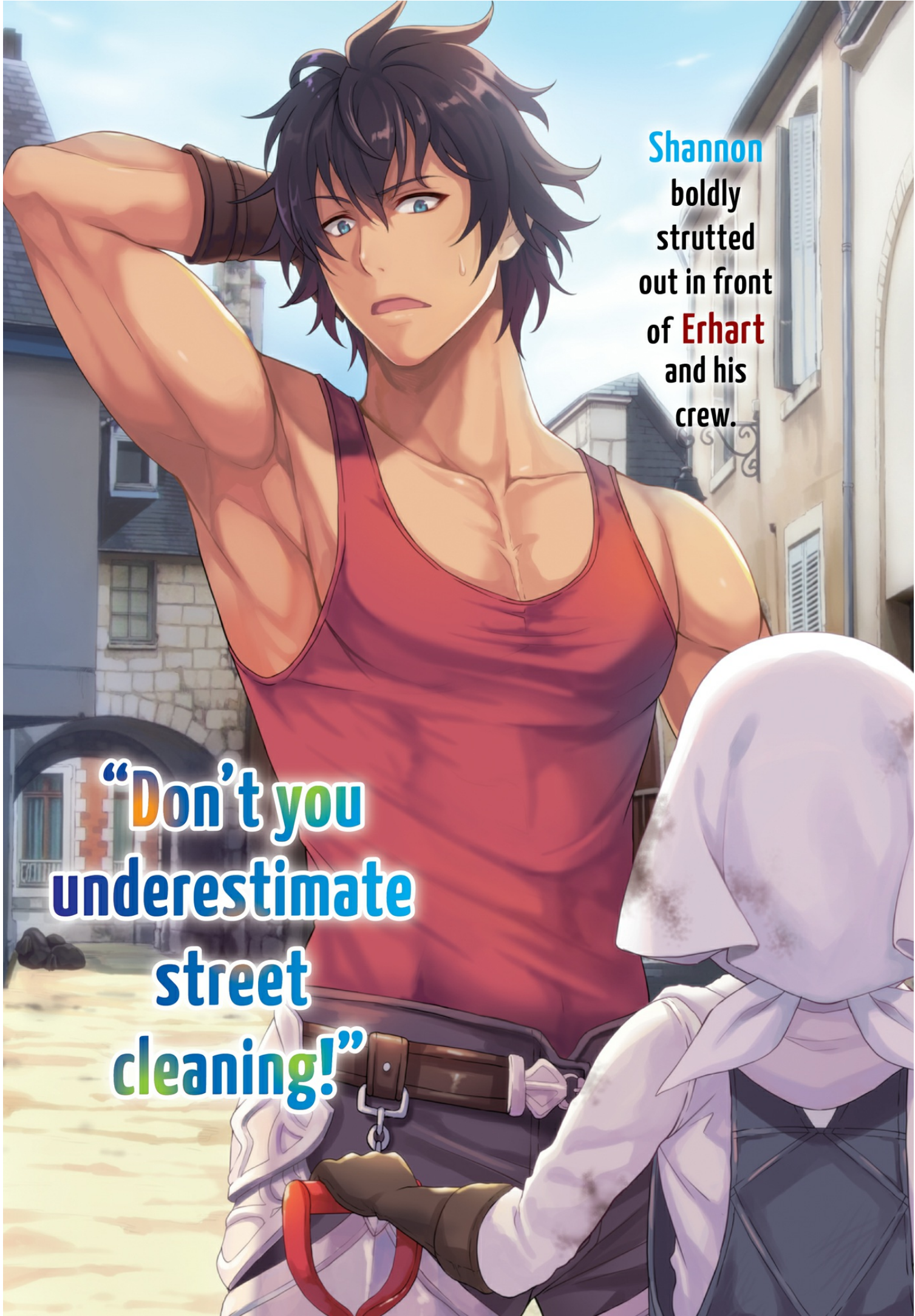
Sophia
wielded a
battle-axe
against the
seemingly
unending
waves of
monsters.



“My
apologies.
I work
here at the
guild.”

The mild-
mannered
beauty’s
name was
Marianne.



A muscular man with dark, spiky hair and blue eyes, wearing a red tank top and a brown armband, stands in a European-style street. He has a determined expression and is looking towards the viewer. In the foreground, the back of a person wearing a white hooded garment is visible. The background shows stone buildings and a clear sky.

Shannon
boldly
strutted
out in front
of **Erhart**
and his
crew.

**“Don’t you
underestimate
street
cleaning!”**



Flushing with
anger, **Sophia**
confronted **Clara**.
Her ample chest
was thrust right
into Clara's face.

**“What is that
supposed to
mean?!”**



Lyle brought his
face close to hers
and whispered,

“I’m happy.”

Sophia’s head felt so
hot she thought it
might burst. Her
heart was racing
with excitement.

**“I-I feel the
same way.”**













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by Yomu Mishima

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SEVENTH 9

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