SEVENTH

5



Author Yomu Mishima
Illustrator Tomozo


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Seventh: Volume 5 [Complete]

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Prologue

I know this may be coming out of nowhere, but I—Lyle Walt—*despise* little sisters. This perhaps had something to do with the fact that my little sister had been the one who'd gotten me driven from my own home.

To be clear, neither of these facts had anything to do with my current predicament. Honestly, this wasn't the time to be thinking of this sort of thing at all. However...there is a concept called "escapism." Sometimes, a guy just wants to distance himself from the truth of his existence, and think of literally anything else.

Alas, I was brought back to reality when I used the back of my hand to wipe sweat and dust from my sticky face, and the overwhelming stench of my leather gloves stabbed directly into my nostrils. My dirty state was due to the fact that I was currently standing in the dungeon of the Academic City of Aramthurst, and had only just emerged from battle.

"What the heck am I supposed to do here..." I muttered.

Before my eyes stood two girls, who just so happened to be quarreling with one another. One of them had red hair that curled in odd angles at the bottom, and the other had black hair that hung straight and long down her back. In order of appearance, they were Aria Lockwood and Sophia Laurie.

Like me, Aria's hair was a bit disheveled. She'd dressed with mobility in mind for this excursion, and had chosen clothes and metal protective gear that accentuated the lines of her body. Heavy armor would have only gotten in her way when she was dashing around with her spear.

In contrast, Sophia had a large battle-axe slung over her back and was wearing a robe over heavy equipment. Her outfit choice wasn't particularly surprising to me, as it'd become evident by this point that she hated to expose any skin.

None of these things were my current focus, however. I was more concerned about the two girls' mental states. Sophia, our heavily armored warrior, was

sobbing as she stared down at her hair, a portion of which had been cut off during our previous fight. Aria, meanwhile, was angrily closing in on her, gesturing to her own hair and armor, both of which showed evidence of taking a scorching.

"Hey, why didn't you dodge back there?!" Aria demanded. "Thanks to you, I almost got lit up!"

"How was I supposed to jump out of the way when you were swinging your spear around like that, Aria!" Sophia shot back. "It was so distracting... I was *this close* to being gravely injured!"

"Please calm down, both of you," said a girl with tawny hair pulled into a side ponytail. "Shouting will get us nowhere. How about we all take a deep breath and have a reasonable conversation?"

The girl who'd stepped in to pacify my two bickering party members was Novem Fuchs, my ex-fiancé. She had on a magician's robe and held a silver staff in her hands. As her appearance suggested, she was a mage through and through.

I sighed, watching the scene in front of me. It had all started with an accident that had happened in the middle of our last fight.

Aria and Sophia had been sticking to the frontlines, acting as vanguard fighters, when a blast of magic had been shot at them from behind. Sophia had accidentally stepped into the line of fire, and had ended up reflexively slamming the blade of her battle-axe into the oncoming spell. As a result, its trajectory had shifted, which had caused the ball of flames to burst right next to where Aria had been standing.

We had all been shocked, watching it go down. In the end, though, we'd had no choice but to continue fighting until all the monsters had died. Then we could finally work through our surprise and take a little breather. Or, so we'd thought, as the girls had begun fighting the instant the battle was over.

Clara Bulmer, the supporter our party had hired for this dungeon excursion, had ignored them entirely, and was in the process of going around collecting materials and Demonic Stones from the corpses of the monsters we'd slain. Clara was a small woman with a delicate frame, paired with denim-blue hair

and sleepy red eyes. Her features were conspicuous enough all on their own, but most distracting was her left arm, which was made up entirely of an armor-covered prosthetic from the elbow down.

Looking up from her work, Clara let out a tired sigh. “To me, it seems both of you have your own share of problems,” she declared.

A woman with wavy green hair and eyes shaded emerald walked up to Clara with a laugh. Although she gave off the air of a reliable elder sister, she was in fact the cause of the current infighting—she had fired the fireball which had started it all.

The woman’s name was Miranda Circry, and she was the eldest daughter of a viscount, as well as a student of Aramthurst’s Academy. Like my former fiancé Novem, she had once been considered as a potential marriage candidate for me. We’d run across each other by chance in Aramthurst, and were now working together as comrades.

“Come on, Lyle,” Miranda said lightly. “At least those two aren’t going at one another with their weapons. Why don’t you just let them fight it out?”

I pressed down my blue hair, narrowing my eyes at her. I could tell she hadn’t made the suggestion because she thought it would improve things—she just thought it’d be fun to watch.

“I don’t think so,” I responded to Miranda finally, shaking my head in denial. “How about you go stop them?”

When there was a slight pause, I sent Miranda a *look*. In it lay the message,*You fix it, Miranda! Your magic is what caused the problem in the first place!*

“I fired my magic on *your* orders, Lyle,” Miranda finally replied, shrugging. “I even shouted a warning to them before I did it, so I don’t see how any of the blame for this can be laid at my door. If you really want to point fingers, you should take a look at yourself—*you’re* the one who issued the order.”

Her words sent me flinching backward. *I guess it really wasn’t the best idea for us to use magic at that time...* I thought anxiously.

Miranda’s eyes lingered on my face, a slight smile curving her lips. It was clear

she was having fun watching me stress out. Unsure what to do or say, I turned my attention to Clara, who let out a small sigh.

"I cannot say that your timing was perfect, but it was not completely off, either. Mind you, Miranda *did* warn those two. Thus, the situation is not completely your fault, Lyle."

At least someone's willing to stick up for me, I thought, heart swelling with gratitude.

Aria and Sophia, however, were none so happy. Clara's opinion didn't seem to have shifted theirs in the least.

"How was I even supposed to know how to react?!" Aria shrieked at Miranda. "You've never shouted a warning before any of your other spells before!"

"That's right!" Sophia chimed in. "When you suddenly change how you do things, you can't just naturally expect us to know what to do! That goes for you too, Lyle!"

To be fair to Miranda, we hadn't been fully prepared to dive into battle. The group of monsters we'd fought had popped up as we traveled down a corridor, and we hadn't had any other choice but to engage them.

Things were nothing like how they'd been before, when I'd been able to use the Jewel hanging from my neck to learn the location of enemies before we chose our path. Without the aid of my Arts, I couldn't even issue orders ahead of time. The most I could do was give my party a rundown of the general methodology of what to do when we ran into monsters.

"W-Well, I mean, th-the monsters just suddenly appeared!" I stammered. "I didn't want to just leave you guys to fight them all alone..."

"Then start using your Arts already!" Aria snapped, propping her spear against her shoulder. She was so disgusted with me at this point she looked away, as if she couldn't bear the sight of me. "What's the point of you even doing this?!"

"I agree," Sophia declared. "I don't know why you've suddenly decided not to use your Arts, Lyle, but we're still only on the fourth floor. It's taken us the *whole day* to get this far. When you compare that to our results last time, when we were able to make it to floor forty, it just doesn't make any sense."

My shoulders drooped. *I know we could easily clear this dungeon if we used my Arts,* I grumbled internally. *I know that, but...I can't.*

Every single one of my Arts had been sealed away. My mental suggestion, spatial awareness, terrain visualization, enemy detection, storage...even my abilities to boost my movement speed or enhance my body were beyond my reach. Well, to be more precise, my permission to use them had been revoked. If I did...well, all I knew was that a terrifying punishment awaited me.

"Well, you see... It's just that, uh...we need to get a better idea of our party's capabilities! Part of measuring that is seeing how far we can go without relying on Arts."

My reasoning probably would've sounded more concrete if I had actually been the one who'd decided to restrict myself from using my Arts in the first place. The decision, however, had been handed down by the living memories of my house's ancestral heads, who were housed inside the blue Jewel hanging around my neck. They all operated under their own free will and were able to converse with me, and periodically their advice proved even more useful than the Arts they'd passed down to me. Things were a bit different this time, though—they'd banned me from using their Arts and had declined to even tell me the reason.

To be honest, I truly didn't understand why. There were a few scenarios in my mind that I thought might be true, but I couldn't know which one was right without my ancestors being more open with me. As a result, whenever I tried to explain the situation to members of my party, my explanation was always wishy-washy. Each attempt had sent the mood of my party nosediving.

"I'm telling you, Lyle," Aria said, ruffling her hands through her hair in frustration, "it's pointless! Sure, maybe it would be a good exercise to do once, but we've entered the dungeon *three times* since you started refusing to use your Arts! We haven't made an ounce of progress!"

She was right. But that wasn't even the worst of it...

"I didn't want to mention this..." Sophia said reluctantly, "but the cost of hiring Clara is starting to become a large burden. If we don't start making money soon, we're going to end up in the red."

To tell the truth, I was just as keen to explore the dungeon further as the rest of my party was. I knew Clara's assistance was necessary to facilitate that, which was why I'd continued to hire her. But without my Arts, we hadn't been able to get nearly as far into the dungeon as we'd hoped our last few excursions, and without the more expensive goods located deeper inside, Clara's hiring fee was going to waste.

This excursion isn't going to make us enough money to cover all we invested in it either, I thought glumly. *Considering what we spent to prepare and what we had to pay Clara, we aren't even close to breaking even.*

Blessedly, Novem decided this was the time to swoop in and save me. Unlike the last time she spoke up, this time she took on a strong tone.

"Aria, Sophia—both of you are going too far. I think it is more than obvious that our party was relying far too much on Lord Lyle's Arts. Any number of things might happen to incapacitate him in the future, so it is important for us to learn to operate in a situation where he is unable to assist us."

Ah, I'm saved! I thought, inwardly bowing my head to Novem in thanks. *What a wonderful, rational argument!*

But just as I began to relax, Clara spoke up.

"I apologize for interrupting," she said, "But...it seems we've made too much noise. The monsters are gathering."

Following Clara's line of sight, my eyes landed on a gaggle of goblins wearing clattering metal armor. There was still some distance between us and them, so I drew a saber from my hip.

"Novem, get ready to burn them," I ordered. "Once you do that, I'll—"

Aria and Sophia shoved past, rushing out onto the battlefield on their own.

Did they...not like my orders? I wondered, my free hand stretching out helplessly toward their backs.

"H-Huh? Why did they...? Guys, wait!"

Now that the two girls had decided to go off of their own accord, there wasn't much we could do magically to help them. It was too risky for us to cast any

spells, lest they get caught up in the crossfire.

“I’ll keep them in one piece,” Miranda called out, running after them. “I’m counting on you for support!”

“Y-Yes ma’am,” I stuttered in reply.

Am I the leader of this party, or is Miranda? It’s getting hard to tell...

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“I don’t even know how to describe what a mess your party is, Lyle.”

“Right? You didn’t think it could get this bad, did you?”

“The numbers have gone red... Horrible, *terrible* red! Lyle, how could you?! And with so many girls to look after!”

“The fact that those two ignored orders is completely outrageous, but Lyle’s attitude is part of the problem.”

“That’s true. Lyle, you should keep in mind that a commander must be careful with what they say. Spreading the seeds of anxiety in your own troops is the worst thing you can do.”

“Well, at least he’s learning that lesson early. That’s a good thing as far as I’m concerned.”

I stared despondently at the six men sitting around the round table that was contained within my Jewel. Each of them had said their piece in turn, starting with the second head, who was dressed like a hunter, then the flippant third head, all the way down to the stern-looking seventh head. From what I could tell, the most frustrated one of the group was the fourth head, who couldn’t stand that I was losing money.

At a cursory glance, the fourth head was a tall, bespectacled man who kept his aqua-blue hair parted to one side. If one were to simply judge him by how he presented himself, you would think he was the most serious member of the Walt ancestral heads. History didn’t contradict that—he was known for his proficiency as a statesman who’d proven his mettle tackling the various domestic affairs of House Walt’s territory.

If you asked me, though, that wasn’t the whole truth about him. When I

looked at the man, the same thought would always cross my mind: *That guy just really likes money.*

"Lyle, listen up," the fourth head said, jolting my attention back to the matter at hand. "I'm not telling you not to invest money into your preparations. I just ask that you aim to make some profit, even if just a little. I mean, *honestly.* A deficit...three times in a row..."

Yep, I thought, *just like always, the cash is the only thing he focuses on. The disorderly mess that is my party doesn't even seem to faze him.*

"Y-You know..." I said hesitantly, "if you r-really wanted me to make a profit, you could just lift that Art ban..."

The fourth head leaned back in his seat, as if reeling in shock at my request. Nevertheless, his response to my proposal was immediate and merciless.

"Rejected. That's not going to happen."

Well, you can't blame me for trying, I thought with an inward shrug.

When my ancestors had banned me from using their Arts, they'd told me there was only one way for me to get their permission to use them back—to clear the thirtieth floor of Aramthurst's dungeon without their help. It was clear they weren't going to be backing down on that particular point. And, if that wasn't enough, they'd also banned me from using the silver greatsword the founder of House Walt had left behind during this period of time.

Removing his glasses and beginning to polish them, the fourth head continued firmly, "Use of Arts will not be permitted under any circumstances until the assignment we gave you has been completed."

"In that case, can you at least tell me *why* you restricted them?" I demanded.

"You need to think over that one yourself," the third head answered. "Consider it a part of the assignment."

Sorry, by "answered" I meant "didn't answer at all."

My grandfather, the seventh head of House Walt, then added, "Lyle, it's important you find the answer to the puzzle we've given you on your own. For that reason, even if it takes you years to reach the goal we've set, we will stand

firm in our decision. If you want to regain the use of your Arts sooner rather than later, then you should get to clearing the thirtieth floor."

But why the thirtieth floor?! I thought in despair. *Did any of you consider how few adventurers there are in Aramthurst with the capability of reaching such a deep floor? We were even told that the only parties that succeeded in reaching it in the past consisted of dozens of skilled members, not our tiny team!*

Even with Miranda now on board, my party was only made up of five members. If we hired Clara for some temporary help, that put us at six. If I took that into account, properly accomplishing my ancestors' assignment probably *would* take me years.

"Is this your way of telling me to go recruit more members?" I asked.

The third head grinned. "Well, that depends on you, Lyle. Oh, and don't you think it's about time for you to wake up?"

Mere moments after he spoke, I felt my mind begin the journey back to my body.

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When I woke, it was to someone shaking me.

My party was currently on the third floor of the dungeon; we'd decided to take a break in a narrow room on our way back to the surface. Our original plan had been to reach the tenth floor in a span of three days, but we'd barely managed to reach half that. The failure was a true indication of our level of skill—or lack thereof.

"It's time, milord," Novem said as I sat up.

"Y-Yeah, okay. Sorry. Wait...huh?"

I looked around, taking in the fact that everyone was awake. Under normal circumstances, that shouldn't have been the case—I should've woken up before morning so that I could rotate out the person who'd been on watch duty.

"Don't tell me...I slept in?"

Novem smiled. "No, you looked terribly weary, so I let you sleep. I took over your shift, so don't worry."

I sprung to my feet, panicking. “S-Sorry! Let’s set off at onc—”

“Please eat before that,” Novem cut in. “We might only be returning to the surface, but that doesn’t mean we can let our guard down.”

And so, I ended up waiting, suffused within the awkward mood that had taken over the camp, for my breakfast to be served to me. I received bread and soup, but the latter’s flavor was... Well, it was terrible. I struggled to swallow down the bitter, watery substance, and eventually ended up choking and clutching at my chest.

Novem, who’d been watching worriedly, quickly readied some water for me. As I roughly swallowed it down, I heard Sophia say from close by, “See? Lyle reacted the same way. It really *was* a failure. That stuff’s not soup—it’s hot water with a bit of flavor. In fact, I’d say it would have turned out better without any flavor added at all.”

Ah, I thought. *So Aria was the one who got assigned cooking duty.*

“H-He was tired, so I thought a more muted flavor would be better for him!” Aria sputtered in reply. “Anyway, you *always* over season, so I wouldn’t expect you to understand what’s good about my cooking.”

“‘Muted flavor’? You thinned this out so much it won’t nourish him at all, let alone fuel him enough to regain his strength!”

“I-It tastes fine,” I said, sending Aria an admittedly stiff smile.

She and Sophia both gave me doubtful looks in reply.

Miranda, seated a few feet away, chuckled. She seemed to be amused at the predicament unfolding before her eyes. “Lyle, that was a terrible lie,” she chided me. “Everyone already knows that soup is terrible. *Especially* Aria—she’s well aware that she failed. You don’t have to waste your time trying to convince her otherwise.”

“S-Sorry,” Aria said, hanging her head in shame. “I’m just not used to the spices they use in Aramthurst yet.”

Now that we’d traveled around a little, I know that her excuse wasn’t entirely without merit. As we’d gone from region to region, I’d noticed that the way

food tasted had differed wildly depending on where we were located. There were even subtle differences between different places within the same region. That said, the taste of a home-cooked meal in Aramthurst was obviously quite different from in Darion, the previous city we'd operated out of.

Part of it was that the ingredients we were able to obtain here were different than we were used to—I'd never even seen some of the vegetables before. I could see why Aria would be at a loss when thrust into making Aramthurst cuisine.

"Listening to them bickering about how to season things reminds me of my mom and wife," the second head commented from within the Jewel.

"You're right," the third head agreed, his tone turning nostalgic. "Granny came from the lands of the north, and she would always lay on the flavors thick. Apparently, they had to use strong flavors in order to forget the cold."

I was the only one who could hear my ancestors' comments. I was actually the only one who knew they existed inside the Jewel at all—no one else had any idea that I was receiving aid from the previous heads of House Walt. If I told someone about it...well, the ancestors themselves had told me how insane I'd look.

Personally speaking, I wanted to tell those around me about how my ancestors' memories had come back to haunt me. I knew I couldn't, though, as long as I didn't have any definitive proof of their existence. It was better for me to remain silent, even if I did want to tell everyone how much trouble the group of men caused me by draining my mana away whenever they got into heated arguments.

You see, while on paper possessing the blue Jewel of House Walt was an incredible boon, in reality it wasn't as wonderful as it seemed. Sure, being its owner meant I could learn how to use my ancestors' Arts from the very men who they'd belonged to, but it also perpetually drained my mana. It drained it so hard I could practically hear the glugging sound as my tank emptied. Thanks to that, and my ancestors' inability to stay quiet, I'd collapsed in front of my comrades and lost consciousness several times already. As a result, everyone thought I had terrible stamina, and I'd become quite famous around

Aramthurst. Apparently having one's limp body hauled around in public by one's female party members was quite pathetic.

My thoughts were interrupted by Aria muttering under her breath, "You're from the sticks, Sophia. You just aren't cultured enough to know the tastes of the big city."

I winced. *She's really gotten abrasive lately. Sophia isn't much better, though...*

This thought was only confirmed when Sophia snapped back, "So that soup's supposed to align with the 'tastes of the big city'? If that's true, I guess you're right—I can't find a single positive thing to say about it. If that's the best you can do, I'd rather just keep that automaton around and have her cook."

"Oh, get over yourself!" Aria snarled, full-on descending into a rage. "That thing cooks better than you do too, and you know it! At least I can say that I don't know what I'm doing when she serves up tastier dishes than me, but *you* were taught how to cook—what's your excuse?

The girls' bickering grew more and more heated, until finally Novem stepped in between them. "Our break time is over," she said wearily. "Please, let's just move past this. We should start cleaning up, then depart once we're done."

My eyes fell on Clara, who was sitting a short distance away from the commotion reading a book. There was an air about her that made it very clear she did not consider our party's infighting to be her problem, which was fair enough. After all, she was only a temporary hired hand—the only reason she was present at all was to fulfill her contractual obligations.

"Oh, done fighting so soon?" Miranda crooned, bringing my attention back to her. "But I wanted to watch for a while longer..."

I had to sigh at this decidedly unhelpful sentiment. Still, despite her attitude, Miranda was a huge asset to our party—she was incredibly skilled, and could deftly pull off any position assigned to her, whether it was frontline, backline, or anywhere in between.

"Miranda," Novem said firmly, still in her peace-keeper role, "could you please refrain from stirring them up any further?"

“If you ask me, I think it’s healthy to vent your true feelings a bit, but...” Miranda smiled, but there was a chill to it. “Since I’m the new recruit here, I guess I might as well follow orders for now. I can put up with that until I become Lyle’s number one.”

If the mood had been bad before, it became dismal after that. Everyone’s mouths snapped shut and the camp fell deadly silent, with only the faint *fwip* of Clara flipping pages disturbing the gloom.

If I had to say what Miranda’s biggest flaw is...it would definitely *be her personality,* I thought weakly.

“*This* is Milleia’s great-granddaughter?” the fifth head asked, sounding a bit weirded out.

He was referring to one of Miranda’s ancestors, a woman named Milleia. She’d married into the Circry family from House Walt, and was thus related to me as well. This meant that Miranda and I were actually distant relatives, although this far down the line the blood connection had been so watered down as to be almost nonexistent.

In any case, Milleia was a woman who’d had a connection to every one of my ancestors from the fifth heads onwards. She’d been the fifth head’s daughter, the sixth head’s sister, and the seventh head’s aunt. And it was Miranda, this lovely woman’s great-granddaughter, who’d joined my party not long ago and immediately proclaimed, “I’m going to become Lyle’s number one,” in front of the rest of my comrades. Ever since, I hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that our party had grown a bit disjointed.

“How?” the sixth head moaned. “How did the descendant of my gentle little Milleia turn out like *this*...?”

The seventh head gave his father an exasperated look. While he had never said his exact thoughts aloud, it was clear he felt the two weren’t as different as the sixth head claimed.

“She is most definitely Aunty Milleia’s descendent,” he proclaimed with a sigh.

I swept my gaze over my party, taking everyone in. The group of women

around me certainly weren't the comrades I'd pictured back when I'd started out—my imagination had tended toward a gathering of strong-willed manly men. To tell the truth, most of the parties I saw at the Guild actually *were* composed like that. Parties that consisted of one man and many women were evidently a very small minority; I'd actually never seen one apart from my own.

As I dwelled on this thought, we all began to get our bags in order. The air remained tense, and I couldn't help but think, *Didn't we all used to smile more?* It felt like, ever since Miranda had joined the party, everyone's moods had taken a turn for the worse.

"Where did I go wrong..." I muttered to myself.

"Well, the mood went sour ever since Miranda joined, right?" chimed in the second head.

"Personally, I think Lyle's attitude is the more fundamental problem," the third head admitted.

"So you want to know where you erred, Lyle?" asked the fourth head. "I believe the problem began when you first arrived in Aramthurst. You remember that brief rebellious phase of yours?"

The fifth head's lips twitched. "Ah, yes. That was an awful time."

"Yeah, you should really get a grip, Lyle," the sixth head said, chuckling.

"If you ask me, this is the result of a long, continuous stream of mistakes, not something going wrong somewhere down the line," the seventh head said thoughtfully.

I sighed. *Not a single one of those comments held any decent advice. Maybe the Jewel is a cursed item after all...*

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It was afternoon by the time we returned aboveground, which actually put us a little ahead of schedule. We decided to set course for Aramthurst's Adventurers' Guild right away, and so set off immediately.

Aramthurst had been constructed with a school called the Academy at its center, which had eventually resulted in it coming to be known as the Academic

City. The city's center also came equipped with an entrance to the underground dungeon from which we'd just emerged, which was one of the features of Aramthurst that set it apart from other places in Banseim Kingdom.

As we made our way to the Guild, I couldn't help but notice the strangeness of the cityscape around us—there was an utter lack of any sense of unity among the city's architecture, which made each building feel as if it was at war with all the others.

Passing through these disjointed streets, we were met with the cold eyes of Aramthurst's residents. Adventurers were considered a nuisance to those who lived in the city—not only did they strike fear in people's hearts, walking around with weapons, but they also left the city's dungeon covered in sweat and blood, trailing an unavoidable stench behind them until they were able to cleanse themselves.

Understandably, the city's normal residents didn't want to go anywhere near them.

"Good grief, can't we do anything about these adventurers?" I heard a voice scoff.

"They're a blight on Aramthurst's scenery," another agreed.

"And take a look over there," said a third voice, filled with spite. "That young man has a whole pack of fair ladies trailing behind him. How truly envi— Ahem. *Deplorable* that is. He should be ashamed."

Ashamed of what?! I wanted to snap at them. *There's nothing shameful about women being adventurers!*

Still, I didn't say a word—I knew that they just didn't like the fact that I was surrounded by so many beautiful women. It was a sentiment I'd just barely begun to sense being directed at me recently, but I didn't know how to dispel it. Personally, I knew my circumstances were nothing to be envious over, not with my party's current internal tensions. But if I actually said that to anyone, it would come across as a humble brag.

"Who do those people think is supporting the economy of this place?" the second head asked abruptly, his voice irritated. "And what the heck was that

person talking about, saying adventurers are a ‘blight on Aramthurst’s scenery’? Have they taken a look around them?! This place is a total mishmash!”

“Well, adventurers are hated by a lot of people,” the fourth head added, clearly disinterested in this particular topic. “Don’t forget we’ve got a resident adventurer-hater of our own.”

“Why, thank you very much for thinking of me,” the seventh head said sarcastically. “You’re right—I *do* hate adventurers. If I had it my way, Lyle would’ve never become one.”

Trying not to acknowledge the chilly looks of disdain being directed our way, I continued to lead my party forward. Either weary or worn thin by the mood, my comrades followed suit, not saying a word. It was unfortunate, but we’d have to deal with the city folk’s grim reception for a decent while—Aramthurst’s Adventurers’ Guild was located all the way out by the city’s outer wall, which was quite a ways away from the dungeon.

Trying to lighten the mood, I stammered, “W-We have some free time today. How about we all eat out somewhe—”

“I want to get back, clean myself up, and lie down,” Aria said stiffly. “I’m you go, it’ll be without me.”

“I’ll have to refrain as well,” Sophia immediately added. “I already ate in the dungeon.”

I grimaced. It had become rather a trend recently, for Sophia and Aria to be so standoffish with me.

“We can’t just leave them behind to scavenge up a meal while we eat at a nice restaurant, can we?” Novem murmured in a troubled voice, placing a hand to her cheek.

Miranda, meanwhile, didn’t seem at all concerned. “Lyle, think of your maid,” she teased. “If you tell her you’d rather dine out than eat her cooking, she’s going to bawl her eyes out.”

I mean, she is *a maid...I think? But is she* my *maid? I mean, Miranda’s not wrong but...sometimes I think Boinga could be something else entirely.*

As I pondered this, Clara's eyes flickered over to me. "I have business at the library," she said, her voice small and a little reserved. "So...let's split up at the Guild."

I dropped my shoulders, giving a dry laugh. "I see," I said wryly. "Then I guess we should hop to it."

There was a wave of snickers within the Jewel. A wave of irritation washed over me, but I pushed it back when Clara called me aside.

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Once we'd sold off all our Demonic Stones and monster materials at the Adventurers' Guild, we returned to Miranda's house, sans Clara. We'd all been quite thankful at the invitation to move in, as spending our nights at an inn had been costing us a nice chunk of change.

"We're back," I announced, pulling open the front door.

I was in quite a sour mood—the money we'd managed to get from our sales had been quite low, and that was before we'd even divided it equally among all our party's members, as we'd stipulated in a contract. Clara especially had been impacted by the measly sum we'd collected, as she only received seventy percent of the cut everyone else did due to her position as a supporter. We'd paid her a base fee before we even left for the dungeon, of course, but that didn't make things much better.

Even worse, we'd naturally had to shell out some funds to prepare to enter the dungeon as well, which had even further sapped away our profits. Assembling all the things we needed was never cheap, and since the items were mostly expendable, they had to be replenished with each trip. Thankfully, our group hadn't taken on too much of a loss, since we'd just planned to stay in the dungeon for three days, and had only spent the money to prepare for that short stretch of time.

But it was not our money troubles that was currently haunting me—it was what Clara had said before we'd parted ways.

"If these conditions continue, I will not be able to accept a contract on the same terms. Should you wish to request my support again, I will have to

reconsider my fees."

I couldn't blame Clara—she had her own life to live. She couldn't just shrug our excursions off as a failure and leave it at that. In that sense, at least, we were lucky. After all, we had quite a bit of money saved up, and a house in Aramthurst that we didn't have to pay rent for—

"My worthless chicken!"

"Gyaaah!"

The moment I'd stepped inside, I'd been tackled by a person—or rather, an automaton. I was so tired that when she pounced forward and latched onto me, I'd been knocked straight off my feet and onto the floor.

"What are you doing?!" I shouted, glaring up at the girl lying atop me.

She had golden hair tied up in two long, fluffy pigtails, red eyes, and a frilly dress dyed scarlet. Despite her appearance, she was decidedly not human. She was the legacy of a civilization long lost to time—a mechanical doll made by the ancients. I'd given her the name "Boinga" not too long ago, but despite her hatred for it she didn't seem to have any inclination of calling me anything other than a "useless chicken." If you asked me, there was definitely something wrong with the self-proclaimed maid robot.

As I daydreamed of firing her for her impertinence, Boinga straightened up, her cheeks flaring red as she realized she was straddling her so-called "master. "Unbelievably, she didn't climb off, but instead struck a cutesy pose.

"Do you want dinner or a bath? Or maybe...do you want me?!"

"Well, for starters, all of us will be taking turns bathing," I said, giving her a frigid look. "But before that, could you get off of me?"

"You're gonna play this straight?!" she cried, dismayed. "You damn, useless chicken—at least act a *little* embarrassed! I was very lonely here, you know!"

The group of women standing around the door, watching me and Boinga, had some rather...dubious looks on their faces. Considering the fact that we all lived under the same roof, they were well aware of Boinga's eccentricities by now, but that didn't stop them from flaying me with their eyes. Why were they acting

that way, you ask? Well, how would I know?

I have absolutely no fault in the matter, I thought resolutely. *So, all of you—stop blaming me with your eyes!*

Boinga was suddenly pushed aside, revealing Novem. “Ms. Boinga, Lord Lyle is worn out. Please cease with this indecency.”

Irritation erupted all over Boinga’s face. At this point, I knew it wasn’t Novem’s words that had pissed her off, but Novem herself. Ever since Damian Valle—an oddball professor from Aramthurst’s Academy—had activated her, Boinga had been blatantly hostile toward Novem, and made no attempts to hide it.

“Enough noise out of you, vixen,” my automaton snapped. “Tending to this chicken is my duty; I won’t concede it to anyone else.”

I sighed. Boinga was an odd one, but I was also well aware of her incredible proficiency as a maid and/or general servant. From cooking to cleaning and laundry, she could do anything. Her talents had made the Circry house a very pleasant place to come home to of late.

I hand appeared before me—it was Miranda, offering to help me up. I grabbed hold and pulled myself to my feet, catching sight of a certain young girl with wavy periwinkle hair in the corner of my eye.

I turned to behold Miranda’s younger sister, Shannon Circry, who was standing in the entranceway of the house. There was a deeply displeased look on her face, and her golden eyes were narrowed, shooting daggers in my direction.

She might look cute on the outside, but that attitude is anything but, I thought with disgust.

Shannon hated me. I hated her in return. Just knowing she was someone’s *little sister* was enough to make me grow enraged at the sight of her. It was bad enough that she was two years younger than me, putting her at the same age as Ceres; the toxic attitude she took toward me only exacerbated the situation.

Clicking her tongue, Shannon made a little moue of distaste. “If only *you* didn’t return...” she muttered.

The rude utterance didn’t surprise me—Shannon was a deplorable little lady who said such things whenever she opened her mouth.



“Silence, small child,” I spat back, glaring.

The fourth head groaned. “Why are you getting so serious with a child?” he asked wearily.

Meanwhile, Shannon had stuck out her tongue. “It’s your fault that big sis is like this, and don’t you forget it! You gigolo!”

“What did you just call me?!”

“I called you a gigolo, *gigolo*. What else would I call someone who’s mooching off our house, barely making any money, and causing loads of trouble for Sis, huh?!”

Each time she repeated *that word*, my rage deepened. The cackling coming from inside the Jewel did not help.

“Well, she’s not wrong!” giggled the second head.

“A ‘gigolo,’ she called him!” the third head said, gasping for air. “Yep, that about sums it up!”

The fourth head couldn’t even manage a response—he was too busy laughing.

“Unfortunately, Lyle, you can’t really argue with her logic,” the fifth head said, his voice amused. “That house *does* belong to Miranda—or rather, House Circry—and you certainly haven’t earned any money lately.”

“She really hit you where it hurts,” the sixth head agreed.

“Lyle...j-just give it your all next time, all right?” the seventh head asked, barely containing his laughter. Then, quieter, almost to himself, he muttered, “To think, my grandson, a gigolo...”

My eyes narrowed—I was feeling none to appreciative of my grandfather’s obvious amusement.

As I grew more and more frustrated, Miranda finally stepped in. She wrapped her arms around Shannon and scooped her up.

“How about we leave the nonsense at that,” she said sweetly. “You should at least welcome all of us back; it’s good manners.”

Shannon immediately looked guilty—she loved Miranda, and listened attentively to most things her beloved big sister said. “I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “Welcome home, Sis.”

“Say it to everyone.”

Shannon let out a little *Eep!* of fear, cringing away from Miranda’s intensity. “W-Welcome back,” she muttered sullenly.

Serves you right, I thought.

“Glad to be here,” Miranda replied, smiling. Apparently satisfied with Shannon’s obedience, she set her little sister back down and stroked her head. “Now, I’m sure all of you are quite tired. Come inside. And Boinga, Novem? Tone it down.”

It seemed my ex-fiancé and my automaton were still arguing. I glanced over at them, only to see Novem snap to her senses at Miranda’s sharp words.

“My apologies...” Novem said ashamedly, clearing her throat. “Lord Lyle, why don’t you go ahead and take the first bath.”

I shook my head. “Don’t mind me—I’ll go last. You girls take it easy.”

Watching our exchange, Boinga frustratedly bit at a white handkerchief, tears rolling down her face. “I work so hard for him, and that damn chicken won’t even look in my general direction...” she mumbled to herself. “Although...perhaps that is good in and of itself. Yes, it’s getting fun around here!”

Boinga’s tears completely vanished, a jubilant expression taking over her face instead. Her abundance of expressions, coupled with her general strangeness, honestly creeped me out a bit.

“You’re...kinda scaring me,” I told her with a shiver.

“B-But why?!” she cried. “Hey, don’t pull away from me! If you started hating me, I wouldn’t be able to live anymore...”

You’re a machine, I grumbled internally. *Are you even alive in the first place...?*

Sophia and Aria, who had been standing by the door watching the whole time, looked as if they had some things they dearly wished to say. But when I

locked eyes with them, they just turned and entered the house without a word.

"Useless chicken, if you're not going to take a bath, then the meal comes first," Boinga rambled on from next to me. "Leave it all to me. I'll assemble a feast of everything you love!"

Novem sent the automaton a troubled look as the two of them walked through the entranceway. "If you only cook his favorites, it won't be good for him, you know."

"I did not recall asking for your opinion," Boinga replied sassily.

I was left standing outside, alone. I took a step forward, about to enter the house myself, when Shannon's head popped back out the door.

"Stuuupid," she sang, screwing her face up at me. Then she ran back through the door.

Once again, my feelings were confirmed.

"Little sisters really *are* the worst."

***

Once Aria had taken a bath and gotten some food into her system, she laid down in her bed and stared up at the ceiling. The room she was currently in was her own, as the house the Circry sisters lived in—which was big enough to call a mansion—thankfully had enough rooms to house all of Lyle's party members separately.

Being alone is such a relief, Aria thought.

While she didn't mind participating in the legion of group activities that now made up her life, recently she'd begun to treasure these small moments of individual contemplation.

Aria pressed the back of her hand against her forehead. "We failed again today," she murmured.

Turning her head to stare outside her window, Aria recalled the bath she'd submerged herself in not so long ago. It would've taken too long for their entire party to bathe one by one, so she'd ended up joining Sophia. The other girl had ignored Aria entirely, however. She'd still been irritated over her mocking

comments about her “countryside cooking.”

“I’m hopeless, aren’t I...?” Aria asked no one with a sigh.

Truthfully, she wanted to apologize, but she couldn’t admit it to herself.

It had grown hard lately, as the group had begun fighting over the smallest, pettiest things. In previous days, Novem would have mediated, with Lyle providing a bit of support. But now that Miranda had been added to the mix, things had deteriorated. She actively stoked the flames between the other party members, and Lyle had still failed to do anything about it.

It’s so irritating to watch... Aria thought. *Although, I’m the worst person of all of us. I just drag everyone down with failure after failure*.

Aria’s mood darkened, though it had admittedly not been the best before. To be honest, the moment Miranda had joined the party, everyone’s mental states had taken a nosedive.

“So, she wants to be Lyle’s number one, huh...?” Aria muttered, recalling Miranda’s pronouncement of only a few days before.

When she first said that, I got so flustered, Aria thought with a self-recriminating laugh.

No matter how long she mused over things, it seemed she couldn’t figure out what she wanted to do. And so, Aria spent another long night awake, filled with distress and feelings of discontent.

Chapter 56: Various Assignments

Waking in tandem with the sunrise, I rose from my bed and stepped into the yard outside the Circry house. Due to the season, the sun's rays were beaming brightly even this early in the morning, and they blinded me as I stretched out my stiff muscles.

As I yawned, taking in a lungful of the fresh air, Shannon stepped out of the house as well. As soon as she saw me, she sent me a look of blatant disgust.

"Something wrong?" I asked lightly.

"Not much, beyond the fact that I had to see a face I could have really gone without seeing, first thing in the morning," she shot back. "Oh, if only big sis hadn't woken me up at this hour... I wouldn't have had to see *you*."

If I was being honest, she was pissing me off. "I think I hate you," I plainly informed her.

"*Do you* now? Then it's mutual. I can't wait for the day sis wakes up and throws you out of this house."

I glared at her, and she glared at me back.

It was unfortunate Shannon was such an idiot, since the abilities she possessed were apparently pretty incredible. To get more specific, she had a set of orphic eyes—powerful organs that could be used to manipulate mana and read the emotions of others. At the moment, she could barely use them; she was too unskilled. She was like a pig that had been gifted a pearl necklace.

By the time I heard the door to the house open and close again, I'd grown considerably irritated. With a scowl, I turned and watched Boinga walk outside, a set of tools in her hand. She appeared to be planning to clean the yard—in other words, where Shannon and I were currently standing.

"Oh, what a strange pairing I see here..." Boinga said, cocking her head to the side. "I'm glad you two are finally getting along, but I hope you know that if you leave me out, I will end up sobbing to myself in the middle of the night. Right by your bedside."

So now I have to get harassed by my automaton as well...? I thought crankily.

It just so happened, though, that one of the things Boinga had said got me and Shannon in perfect sync.

“We don’t get along!” we both screamed, then turned to glare at one another once again.

“Oh my, you’re even on the same wavelength,” Boinga said, watching us with a smile. “But, putting that aside... Shannon, what are you doing out here? You usually sleep as late as you possibly can.”

At the sound of Shannon’s name, I turned my glare to Boinga. While the automaton generally gave me special treatment and treated everyone else with an identical lack of care, the others at least got called by their names; I, meanwhile, was almost exclusively called a “damn chicken.” Novem was the only other exception—Boinga seemed to consider her an enemy, and referred to her as “that vixen.”

“Sis said I had to get up early and get a breath of outside air,” Shannon begrudgingly explained. “She used to be so gentle, but ever since *you people* settled down in our house, she’s completely changed.”

This statement was followed by a flood of fake tears, à la a tragic heroine. I saw no reason to pity Shannon, though—not when she’d used her orphic eyes to manipulate the same sister she was now supposedly shedding tears over in order to stage a plot to get back at her family. Sure, that revenge had amounted to little more than childish mischief, but the intent had still been there.

“You ought to reflect on your actions a bit more,” I told her sternly. “Come to think of it, I’m still of the opinion that Miranda let you off way too lightly for trying to brainwash her.”

“Oh, shut it, you worthless gigolo,” Shannon spat, her face contorting with hate.

Ah, so we’re just retorting with insults when we can’t refute the other person’s point, hmm? I thought, eyes narrowing. *And after I gave her a calm, rational explanation too. What a horrible girl.*

Boinga set her tools on the ground. “What a healthy way to start the

morning!" she said cheerfully. "It's an open secret that early rising is the key to good health, you know. And since you're both here, I suppose that I, Boinga, shall teach you the proper traditional exercises with which you can make a clean start to your day!"

Shannon and I both stared at the automaton in silence.

"That's...a thing you can do?" I asked doubtfully.

Shannon let out a groan. "I don't wanna move... I wanna *sleep.*"

Neither of these utterances seemed to affect Boinga in the slightest. "Let us begin!" she called out energetically. "Hold your hands out in front of you and stretch out your back like this!"

Just like that, Boinga's exercise routine began. I did my best to imitate her, and to my surprise, Shannon reluctantly tried to follow along as well.

Before I knew it, five minutes had already gone by. Personally, I was barely warmed up, but Shannon was bent over next to me gasping for air.

She's played the feeble young lady for too long, I thought, amused. *After laying around her whole life, she's got no stamina to speak of.*

I couldn't help it—I started laughing. "What's wrong?" I crooned at her. "Don't tell me this is as much as you can do."

Scowling, Shannon took a swipe in my direction. "Hey, don't get all high and mighty just because you're more athletic than me! You're *nothing*! You keep it up and I'll call sis out here. She's more than able to beat you up!"

That was one threat I couldn't really laugh at—Miranda *had* beaten me up. I *could*, however, laugh at how pitiful Shannon was, always relying on her big sister to save her.

I snorted. "What a pathetic threat."

My blasé attitude apparently wasn't to Shannon's taste, since she took a kick at my shin after hearing that response. I easily dodged out of the way, then lorded my small victory over her with a big grin. Her small body shaking with rage, Shannon took another swipe, but even that stubborn move failed to land.

Boinga sighed, watching us. "How sloppy," she said in disgust. "And your

movements aren't much better, my damn chicken."

That made me look at the automaton, startled. "You can tell?"

Shannon took advantage of my distraction to angrily come at me, swinging her arms; I reached out and held her back with a hand on her head.

"Why, of course I can tell!" Boinga said, her pigtails swaying as she struck a pose. "Your Boinga came preinstalled with combat knowledge. Martial arts are indispensable to maids, after all."

Shannon stopped resisting and pulled back, exchanging a look with me. "Are maids supposed to fight?" she asked, confused. "The servants I know don't do anything like that..."

I shrugged. "Well, Boinga came to us a little broken. And I guess it's possible the ancients had different expectations of their servants."

Regardless, taking the automaton seriously was a quick way to exhaust yourself—I'd learned that from experience. Shannon and I turned to look at her with pitying eyes.

"Hey, hold on!" Boinga protested. "I can tell you don't believe me. Think I'm weak, do you? You are gravely mistaken."

I gave her a dubious look. *Well, Boinga* is *a machine, so I'm sure she has a stronger physique than a human, but—*

"I shall prove my strength to you here and now." Boinga took a stance. "Come at me however you want!"

Again, I exchanged a look with Shannon.

"Hey, go humor her," muttered the tiny girl. "I feel bad leaving her like that."

"It's kind of hard to work up the will to hit her, though," I admitted. "Since she looks like a woman and all..."

"You were just holding me back by my head!"

I scoffed. "Yeah, but I hate you. It's different."

My problem was abruptly solved by Boinga plopping onto the ground. As we

watched, she began to sob violently. “You two keep saying you hate each other, but you seem dead set on acting buddy-buddy right in front of me. Well, don’t worry about it! I’m not jealous at all!”

The second head chose this moment to speak up, perhaps due to a flicker of empathy for the sulking automaton. “Come on, Lyle,” he chided. “Just go entertain her for a bit.”

“Seriously, give her a go,” the fifth head agreed. He seemed curious over Boinga’s abilities. “Judging by that stance she took, she’s no amateur.”

I don’t see what you guys are seeing, I thought, *but fine.*

I walked up to Boinga. “Just once, okay?” I said sternly.

She hopped up, beaming, taking her stance as soon as her feet hit the ground. “That’s my chicken! Now come at me, goddammit!”

How about we start off with a punch.

I took a swing, and Boinga blocked it with her right hand. Somehow, the blow sent her flying; it was a few seconds before she came thumping back to the ground. A few tumbling rolls later, she finally recovered and climbed back to her feet. She stared at the hand she’d used to defend herself, baffled.

I stared at her, equally perplexed. “How did that...?”

Inside the Jewel, I could hear one of my ancestors snickering at the fifth head.

It’s probably the third head, I thought. *He’s always one to laugh at times like this.*

I was proven right when the third head continued, “A seasoned pro, is she? Explain how a middling punch like that was able to send her flying, then.”

The fourth head, meanwhile, was livid with me. “Come on, Lyle, you didn’t have to hit her *that* hard,” he snapped. She may be a machine, but she’s still a woman—you’ve got some nerve.”

Hey, I definitely held back there! I protested in my head. *She just...flew a lot farther than I anticipated...*

“Apologize,” Shannon said insistently, staring at me. “That was terrible.”

Hearing that from her, I of course wanted to protest, “Are you really one to talk?!” but I kept it in. Instead, I walked over to Boinga, intending on apologizing. But just as I opened my mouth, the automaton suddenly sprung into the air, did a front flip, and then landed right in front of me in the same stance she’d been in before.

“I see, I understand now,” she said excitedly. “This magic stuff is curious indeed. I never thought you’d be able to strengthen your body to that degree.” Unbelievably, she seemed as if she was raring to go again.

I sighed. “Boinga, I refuse to hit you a second time. I’m pretty sure you can understand why.”

You’re nowhere near as strong as you say you are, I thought at her, willing her to relax.

That’s when her palm came flying at my face. Hurriedly, I dodged, but my stance fell apart due to my surprise. As I struggled to recover, my automaton grabbed me by the arm and chucked me through the air.

Before I knew it, I was lying on the lawn. “Umm...” I muttered, still reeling. “What just....?”

Well, I’m not hurt, so she must have pulled back before I hit the ground... Which means she went easy on me.

Releasing her hold on me, Boinga proudly puffed out her sizable chest. “How was that? Do you understand *now* how great I am?”

Before I could answer, Shannon came running up to Boinga. “That was incredible!” she rejoiced. “Show me how to do that! I want to teach this guy a lesson.”

Perhaps I should have just let it go there, but I just couldn’t accept such a crushing defeat. “O-One more time!” I yelled, climbing back to my feet.

Boinga readied herself, a massive smile bursting across her face. “I don’t mind going again, but I don’t think you will be able to defeat me as you are now.”

The automaton was still beaming when I took a swing at her. She completely redirected my punch; I immediately swung again, only to be parried a second

time. I went tumbling forward, collapsing into the dirt once more.

“Now this is a surprise,” came the sixth head’s admiring voice from the Jewel. “I thought it was just her stances that were good, but looks like she’s got some great moves as well. She reminds me of mom, mother, mama, mummy, and ma.”

“Agreed,” the fifth head said. “She definitely went flying on purpose that first hit.”

Ignoring them, I climbed to my feet a third time and took a fighting stance again. Boinga watched me the whole time, a haughty look on her face.

“Look here, you damn chicken,” she began. “Your physical capabilities are astounding, plain and simple. But that’s all there is to your fighting style—you’re like an amateur with a bit of talent. I suspect you never received formal training?”

“Get him, Boinga!” Shannon cheered from the sidelines. “Beat up that amateur!”

I lurched forward, grabbing at the automaton in an attempt to throw her. Somehow, I not only failed, but ended up as the one getting thrown instead.

“Y-You’ve got to be kidding me,” I spat, still lying on my back in the dirt.

A triumphant look on her face, Boinga smugly ran a hand through one of her pigtails. “Told you so. I might not look it, but I’m strong—my databanks contain combat logs that were many, many years in the making.”

As I sat there, absorbing this along with the fact that I’d lost to such a broken machine, applause broke out from within the Jewel. The sound immediately irritated me, but the third head didn’t pause for a second.

“She’s better than I imagined!” he exclaimed, still clapping. “There aren’t many folks out there who’d be able to handle Lyle this easily.”

“I-I’m definitely going to defeat you!” I declared, heaving myself back to my feet.

The automaton struck a pose. “I’ll keep you company however long it takes—looking after a useless chicken like you is my life’s calling. If you want to defeat

me, you have my full support!”

What exactly is that supposed to mean?

I cocked my head curiously; Shannon did too.

“Hey, that’s kind of weird though, isn’t it?” Shannon pointed out. “This useless gigolo said he wants to beat you, and your response is that you’re going to help him? Just how hopeless and pathetic is he, to receive help from his own opponent?”

I turned to glare at Shannon, but she’d adopted an air of indifference. *You don’t fool me,* I thought, eyes narrowed into slits. *I know you’re ridiculing me for losing to Boinga.*

“A ‘useless gigolo’ you call him...? How delightful; I adore hopeless masters. But, putting that aside—if you want to beat me, damn chicken, your problem has a simple solution. You’ll just have to study under my tutelage.”

Yeah, no thanks, I thought with a grimace. *That’s the very last thing I want to do.*

Barely managing to overcome my hostility toward Shannon, I focused back on Boinga. “I’ll have to pass on that one,” I told her. “After all, we’re in Aramthurst, the perfect place to learn. I’ll study up at a training hall and beat you—mark my words! I’m not going to accept your pity!”

Slowly, Boinga’s eyes filled with tears. She gave me a look of utter devastation before squatting and tucking her head into her hands. “This damn chicken says he doesn’t want me to look after him!” she wailed, her voice so loud I felt sure everyone could hear. “This is *terrible*—I was only doing my best! I just want to serve him until he’s useless without me...”

What is that supposed to mean? Anyway, you’re making too much noise for this early in the morning! I can see the neighbors staring at us...

“H-Hey, quit it,” I muttered. “People are watching us.”

Her sobs continued unabated. “There’s no one in the world better at looking after this chicken than me! And yet...and yet...he’s going to turn to someone else to train him?! How awful!”

Shannon fidgeted nervously. “H-Hey, how about you just let her teach you? I feel bad for her.”

I glanced at Boinga, briefly contemplating this, only to catch her stealthily stealing a look in my direction.

“Th-That machine just used crocodile tears!” the seventh head said, thoroughly shocked. “How can she be capable of that?”

Meanwhile, I was sending a silent curse out to the ancients. *Did you* have *to make such a needlessly high-spec automaton?!*

“Please, forgive me!” Boinga wailed. “I tend to your needs every day, so don’t cast me aside!!!”

A rush of whispers erupted from the edge of my yard. A bunch of the neighborhood residents had gathered there, watching us. At the sight of them, I had to force myself into silence—lodging a complaint about Boinga’s furtive glances would only further lower my reputation in the eyes of the neighborhood.

“I get it, I get it!” I said, sighing in defeat. “Just...stop crying.”

Boinga immediately smiled and stood.

“Hey!” Shannon shouted. “You were fake crying just then, weren’t you!”

“What of it?” Boinga said flatly, sending Shannon a disinterested look. “As long as that damn chicken agrees to do the things I want, that’s all that matters. Everyone else merely exists so I can use them to achieve that goal.”

As if on cue, the neighbors began to go off on their way. My shoulders drooped, the tension in them draining as I was filled with a wave of relief.

“You’re the absolute worst,” I told my automaton.

“I’ll do anything if it’s for my chicken’s sake,” replied Boinga.

I sighed, then wiped a hand across my brow. Despite it still being early morning, I was sweating up a storm.

“Lord Lyle, Shannon!” Novem called from the door to the house. “Breakfast is ready!”

We both yelled back something to the effect of “Coming!” and headed inside. Boinga was still monologuing behind me.

“We shall strike while the iron is hot! Damn chicken, your training starts tomorrow! I, Boinga, will do my best to beat the correct technique into you.”

“Teach me too!” Shannon pleaded. “I wanna learn!”

Boinga arched her brow. “Oh, whatever shall I do? I am that chicken’s *exclusive* maid, you know.”

“What’s *that* matter?” Shannon demanded, tugging on the automaton’s dress. “Teach me!”

Watching them, I had to smile just a little. Boinga didn’t seem as if she was against teaching Shannon at all—she was just having fun teasing the other girl.

Remembering what had just happened to me, though, darkened my mood once more. “I never thought I’d lose to Boinga...” I muttered, sighing.

“Hey, you’re a lucky guy, if you ask me,” the fifth head said, attempting to console me. “If Boinga can teach you a thing or two, you won’t need to find yourself a training hall.”

That would *save us a bit of money,* I admitted to myself. *It’s just that, personally speaking, I came all the way to Aramthurst in order to learn from the people here.*

“It’s just, I’ve yet to learn a single thing in this city so far,” I mumbled.

What exactly should I learn, anyway? I wondered. *And from which person or establishment?*

Turning my mind to pondering the subject, I took my seat at the breakfast table.

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As she set the laundry out to dry, Sophia heaved a deep sigh. Regret over her failures in Aramthurst’s dungeon hovered in the back of her mind, dragging down her mood, but the thoughts plaguing her the most were all centered around the fights she’d been having with Aria recently.

I did it again... Sophia thought, sighing once more.

Lately, she hadn't been able to get herself to apologize to Aria after they bickered as she had once before. She simply couldn't bring herself to do it. And every time Sophia tried and failed, she was filled with self-hatred, which only made her even more angry and discontent.

I need to do something to fix it, Sophia thought.

She'd been trying to improve the situation in her own way, but it was difficult for her, as she was more of a reactive individual, rather than a proactive one. She was the sort of person who would earnestly do whatever was asked of her, but rarely took action on her own accord. More than anything, Sophia was good at obeying rules—it was that trait which had driven her to become one of Lyle's adventuring comrades, as her household had always taught her that she must repay the debts she owed. Alas, it was also this trait which made it difficult for her to come to conclusions on her own. And so, despite endless pondering, Sophia couldn't think of a way to move forward.

Sophia raised her head, squinting as she took in the bright gleam of the summer sun. *Today's a good day for drying*, she thought.

That was when she heard a voice. Turning, she saw that Lyle was out in the yard with Boinga, with Shannon tagging along.

"I shall start by teaching you the hidden arts!" the automaton declared. "This is my secret trump card—Savage Sparrow Stance!"

Boinga suddenly lifted both her hands into the air and raised one of her feet off the ground. The way she placed her arms made it look as if they'd become flapping wings.

Taking in Boinga's positioning, Sophia couldn't help but be shocked. And not in a good way.

H-Huh? she thought incredulously. *A sparrow stance? That sounds pretty weak... Not to mention, it looks pretty strange—it seems like you'd be leaving your opponent a ton of openings.*

If Sophia was being honest, as a martial arts move, Boinga's Savage Sparrow Stance seemed almost absurd. A good part of her couldn't help but think the

three of them were playing around.

I mean, if an enemy appeared before me in a stance like that...I'd think they were a complete fool, Sophia admitted to herself.

It seemed Lyle and Shannon were having similar thoughts, as they cast doubtful looks Boinga's way.

"You're definitely lying," Lyle pronounced. "No way that's your trump card."

"Yeah! You may be able to fool that gigolo, but you can't fool me!"

Dropping back out of her stance, Boinga shook her head dismissively at the duo. "This is why you two amateurs are no good. *Of course* that stance has no actual use."

Wait, it's useless?! Sophia thought, even more shocked than before. *What's the point in them learning it, then?*

By this time, Sophia was thoroughly invested. She shifted herself so she was just barely peeking out from behind a wall, so she could continue watching.

Boinga's expression had grown serious. She placed a hand on her hip. "There may be no reason for you to use that stance, and no positive effect gained by taking it, but that doesn't matter. From here on out, you two are going to learn my skills. Once you make them yours, you'll be able to give that stance its own meaning and complete your ultimate technique! Each of you will gain a unique special skill just for you!"

She's certainly speaking the part, Sophia thought reluctantly, *but I don't know if I'd really call that stance a trump card. Isn't she basically just telling them she doesn't have an answer, so they've got to figure things out on their own?*

As Sophia watched, filled with doubt, Lyle and Shannon both fell into the automaton's stance.

"Savage Sparrow Stance!" Lyle cried.

"Yeah, that!" Shannon echoed.

Both of them gleefully imitated Boinga's so-called "ultimate technique."

It looks even more stupid than before, with them doing it, Sophia thought,

stifling a giggle.

Lyle seemed delighted, however. “So, in short, once I learn everything, this will become a hidden skill just for me? Amazing!”

“Well, I’m gonna complete it before you!” Shannon snapped, fired up by the competition. “And once I do, I’m gonna beat you black and blue with my new hidden skill!”

Filled with determination, the pair faced one another, each of them in the Savage Sparrow Stance. Boinga folded her arms across her chest as she watched them, nodding in approval...but to Sophia, the automaton looked as if she was holding in laughter.

“Y-Yes, that’s right!” Boinga cried. “P-Pfft... The sparrow is a small and weak bird, but you are only at the beginning of your training! As you grow, you two will become hawks, and eventually even eagles! That is the sort of technique this...is... Pfffft!”

Boinga clenched her arms around her stomach, fighting to hold her laughter in. Somehow, Lyle and Shannon didn’t even seem to notice.

“I’d prefer a gryphon over a hawk,” Lyle said consideringly.

Not to be beaten, Shannon proclaimed, “U-Um...then I’m gonna turn into a dragon!”

Lyle’s eyes narrowed. “Hey, that’s not fair! A dragon isn’t even a bird.”

“I don’t get caught up on such trivial details,” Shannon scoffed. “You—just twiddle your thumbs and watch!”

As they descended into a scuffle over the petty details, the duo broke stance to tug at each others’ cheeks. It was almost like watching a fight between two small children.

Those two get along well, Sophia thought.

An aching pain took root in her chest. Unlike how he normally portrayed himself, Lyle seemed so full of life with Shannon. He was even descending into a full on quarrel with the younger girl.

Am I anything but a bother to him? Sophia wondered, depression weighing

down her limbs. *I'm not useful for anything, and I cause everyone nothing but trouble...*

"Eavesdropping is a terrible hobby, you know."

Whirling around, Sophia came face to face with a smiling Miranda. "No, um!" she sputtered in apology. "I wasn't eavesdropping, I was just..."

Ignoring her, Miranda peeked out from behind the wall, taking a look at the three figures in the yard. Lyle and Shannon were still fighting, while Boinga was watching and laughing.

"Looks like they're having fun," Miranda said lightly. "I've been thinking it for a while now, but Lyle's mental age might be quite low. Not to say Shannon's is any higher. I'd say they're around the same."

"I-I don't think that's true at all!" Sophia refuted. "Lyle is very strong... He's sometimes a bit unreliable, but he always comes through."

"Hmm, is that so," Miranda mused, brushing her hair aside. "I like him better like he is now. It's sort of cute."

Sophia gave her a look of disbelief. "*Cute?"*

Miranda raised her brows. "Don't you think so? Just look at him—he's fighting so seriously with Shannon, all the while being oblivious, unguarded, and failing right and left. I like seeing him that way."

Listening to Miranda's upfront response only made Sophia feel worse. *I could never bring myself to say something like that out loud...*

In the end, she told Miranda, "I guess Lyle *is* better off with people like you and Novem."

Miranda let out a mocking laugh. "And? Do you want my sympathy or something? It's a shame if you do—I don't console people like Novem, and I certainly don't intend to be displaced by anyone who doesn't put in their share of effort. I put in the work so that Lyle likes me, but *you* don't even bother to do that. You're far too wishy-washy—you can't even say you like him. We're incomparable."

"I...I just wanted to return a favor," Sophia stammered. She cast down her

head, clenching her fists.

That's the only reason I'm here. Liking Lyle has nothing to do with it.

But just as Sophia was about to voice this thought out loud, Miranda's eyes turned cutting. "That's *your* problem. Lyle doesn't care if you repay him or not, and he won't chase after you if you decide to leave. To me, it just looks like you're clinging to a convenient excuse to stick around."

Sophia flinched, taken aback. But...she'd already known. She'd known from the beginning that she wasn't being useful.

I guess...I really should *just leav*e.

"That's the exact face someone makes when they think they'll stop causing problems if they leave," Miranda said mercilessly, cutting right through Sophia's façade. "Do you know what we're doing right now? We're trying to get to the thirtieth level of the dungeon. We're trying to work out how to do it when our party lacks both quality *and* quantity. It'd be more than a bit irresponsible to leave the party in the middle of that over some unrequited love, *wouldn't it*?"

"Then what am I supposed to do?!" Sophia demanded, her head jerking up even as her expression contorted with rage. "If you wanted me to leave, you should have just said that and been done with it!"

Miranda's expression didn't shift, even at the roughness in Sophia's voice. "Think about it on your own," she said flatly. "If I told you what to do, I'm sure you'd happily do just that without a thought in your head. What an easy life you have."

Left without any words to respond, Sophia could only grit her teeth.

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In the middle of holding my Savage Sparrow Stance, I heard Sophia's voice. "Wh-What is it?" I called, but didn't receive an answer.

I have a terrible feeling about this.

I could feel Shannon, beside me, staring in my direction as she quivered. She was holding the stance with me, but because she normally didn't train her body, it had turned out to be quite difficult for her. That didn't stop her from

insulting me, though.

“L-Looks like you’re at your limit,” Shannon stammered. “How about you put your foot back on the ground already? You don’t have to push yourself.”

I turned my head back to glare at her. Back when we’d first taken the stance, Shannon had declared that whoever put their foot down first would be the loser.

“I’m perfectly fine,” I said firmly. “And, hold on—you aren’t even fully holding the stance anymore!”

As I watched, Shannon teetered back and forth. She was only barely managing to keep her leg off the ground.

“She simply lacks exercise,” Boinga pointed out. “Very well; it seems I shall have to train you in that too.”

That was all fine and dandy, but I was more concerned about Sophia than Shannon’s lack of exercise.

“I’m worried about Sophia,” I told the girls. “I mean, didn’t you guys hear her voice?”

“Lyle...” the sixth head said from inside the Jewel, “trust me, you didn’t hear anything. You get me? You didn’t hear a word.”

What’s he talking about? I wondered, deeply confused. *I certainly* did *hear something. Plus, if something’s wrong, it’s my duty to check on her.*

“I heard Miranda as well,” I continued. “You guys think something happened between those too?”

Despite teetering around and shaking on one leg, Shannon still managed to avert her eyes from mine. “I didn’t hear anything,” she muttered.

“Come on, you had to have heard it!”

I dropped out of my stance, turning to head in Sophia’s direction.

“Lyle,” the fifth head said in a remonstrative tone, “if you can go over there and say something tactful and encouraging, I won’t stop you. But right now, I think we both know you’re incapable of that. So just listen to what we’re telling

you.”

How can I just abandon her, though? I can’t do that…

“I’m going to have a look,” I decided.

Just as I was about to step forward, Boinga popped up, blocking my path. “Chicken, you’re still in the middle of training. Are you seriously trying to skip out? Know some shame.”

“I don’t think you even know what shame is,” I said with a sigh. “Why are you getting in my way?”

Before my automaton could answer, a shout of victory arose from my side. “I-I won! I beat the gigolo!”

I turned and looked at Shannon. Back when I’d set my foot on the ground, I’d freed her to do so as well. She now had both arms raised into the air, and seemed overjoyed in her victory, even if she was sweaty and panting.

“Quit calling me a gigolo,” I said, with a glare. “More importantly, why won’t you let me leave, Boinga?”

The automaton gave this question a bit of thought. “Dear chicken...” she finally said, “I think it’s a bit too early for you.”

That’s not a satisfying answer in the least, I thought, irritated.

As I stood there, weighing my options, I heard the sound of a door slamming shut. It seemed Miranda and Sophia had gone back inside the house.

“What even just happened?” I snapped.

My ancestor’s all began to console me from inside the Jewel. Uncannily, they all sounded far kinder than usual.

“I think you’re better off not knowing about these things yet...” the second head said.

“Reality can be cruel, at times,” the third head agreed.

“Indeed,” the fourth head went on. “We’ve all seen our share of ugly battles.”

“You don’t need to know these things yet,” the fifth head told me plainly. “Enjoy your ignorance while you still can.”

“He’s right,” the sixth head chimed in. “The time will come for you to learn, but I don’t think you’re there yet. I don’t know if you’d be able to endure it...”

Finally, the seventh head said, “Just be patient, Lyle. You’ll know someday. But, for now, please don’t get involved.”

I deflated. *I...don’t know what any of you are talking about...*

Seeing the defeat in my expression, Boinga grinned at me. “Now let the tutoring resume! Chicken, you get the hard course. I’ll prepare an easy course for Shannon.”

Tutoring, training...it’s a bit shady how she’s always changing what she calls it, I thought. *Still, there’s some parts of her teachings that make sense. That Savage Sparrow Stance is definitely going to bear fruit someday.*

A special, hidden unique skill just for me...it excited me just thinking about it.

Chapter 57: Harem Party

Every fiber of Shannon's being reverberated with the pain of her aching muscles. It hurt. No matter what anyone said, it *hurt*. But she was willing to endure the agony to reach the room before her—the one that belonged to her sister, Miranda.

Shannon knocked on the door, and the response she heard from within was enough for her to feel comfortable turning the knob and walking in.

Miranda's desk was lined with tools of some sort, along with fragmented Demonic Stones and clay. Alongside them were a scattering of small dishes, filled with various powders. Miranda was hard at work, very carefully measuring out the components and compounding them.

Taking this in, Shannon could tell that magic had something to do with whatever her sister was doing, but the specifics were lost on her.

"What?" Miranda said, her tone a bit curt. "I don't really want to be bothered right now."

She's...so cold. Shannon thought.

Before, her sister had always smiled no matter what it was she was doing, but nowadays, something had changed in her.

"Sis, do you want to kick out the other women?" Shannon asked.

She simply couldn't help herself, especially after she'd heard her sister arguing with Sophia that morning. Lyle hadn't seemed to realize what they'd been fighting about, but it was clear to Shannon that Boinga'd caught on.

"Kick them out?" Miranda asked, still working away. "You have me all wrong—I just want to set the record straight. I despise things being left uncertain. I mean, if that Sophia girl doesn't even like Lyle, then is there really any need for her to be by his side? Sure, Novem's penchant for gradually hoisting relationships onto him may irritate me, but that's a whole other issue."

When she puts it like that, I do agree with her on some points, Shannon

thought.

The thing was, Shannon could use her eyes to read emotions, and that ability allowed her to see that her sister's irritation hovered alongside other complex feelings. Unlike with a more simple array, however, Miranda's emotions were too tangled for Shannon to easily identify. She couldn't tell what her sister was truly thinking.

"B-But...Aria and Sophia look happy when they're with Lyle, don't they?" Shannon blurted out.

Although neither girl was blatant about it, they both actively tried to situate themselves at Lyle's side. That alone made Shannon feel a bit sorry for them, now that Miranda was trying to drive the other women away and lay her claim on Lyle.

"Lyle isn't the most perceptive man," said Miranda. "Those two are well aware of that, so it's their problem if they don't speak up and get their feelings across. They're like young foals, tamed at Novem's hand."

Shannon hung her head. *I knew it—it's that gigolo's fault that sis is acting so distant and cold.*

"Sis," Shannon pleaded sincerely, "please go back to being the kind sister you used to be. Right now...you're scaring me."

Miranda's hands paused, and she turned to look at Shannon. There was a smile on her face. The light of her workbench, which cast shadows over her expression, turned the expression into something terrifying.

Shannon stumbled back a step.

"You seem to be under some kind of misunderstanding, Shannon. I am being *very* kind."

The pressure oozing from that ominous smile was enough to force Shannon into agreement. The young girl nodded again, and again, and again.

As for her true thoughts on the matter...well, Shannon cast those aside.

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"Getting straight to the point, there is no simple method to conquer the

dungeon," the young woman across from me said.

My shoulders sank. "Is that...so...?"

At the moment, I was sipping tea at a small round table in the break area of one of Aramthurst's libraries. I'd dropped by in order to see a woman whose frequent visits had resulted in her being dubbed the Lord of the Library—Clara Bulmer.

Although Clara specialized in support, the fact that she worked out of Aramthurst meant she still knew far more about the city than any of the others in my party. That knowledge, coupled with the fact that she was familiar with my party's current situation, made her the best person to consult on my quest to reach the thirtieth floor without using Arts.

To tell the truth, I often found myself asking Clara for advice of late, as she was one of my few acquaintances in the city, and I'd found myself venturing outside the Circry estate more and more due to the growing tensions within my party.

Clara took off her glasses, then began to wipe their lenses. "Lyle," she began, "while you are certainly skilled in adventuring, you are lacking in far too many areas to be able to make it to the thirtieth floor without your Arts. With them sealed away, you may even lose your life while trying."

"Things are that bad? I mean, I realize I've been too dependent on Arts, but..."

Is this the true reason my ancestors restricted my use of Arts? I wondered. *Were they concerned with my party's lack of ability?*

It wouldn't be of much use asking them—I knew they wouldn't tell me. Their usual noisy bantering vanished entirely whenever anything concerning their assignment got brought up.

I used to get anxious over them running their mouths, but now I get anxious over them being too quiet, I thought with a wry laugh. *They're definitely hiding something.*

"I consider myself to be talented at supporting, as you are with adventuring," Clara continued. "But your party's most fundamental problem is a lack of members. You've recruited Miranda now, but I still don't think she's enough.

On a slightly different note, Lyle, how do you rate the abilities of the rest of your party members?"

I flushed slightly, embarrassed for some reason over speaking about them. "Well...Novem is an excellent magician. She's probably better at magic than I am. Aria is strong, and she can use her Art well. Sophia is powerful when she wields her battleax. Miranda is...how do I put this...? I feel like she could do anything."

"*That's* what you think about them?" the second head burst out, clearly flabbergasted. "Oh c'mon! Now I feel bad for those kids."

"There are other things you should be focused on beyond just attack power," the fourth head wearily added.

Clara seemed to have similar feelings to my ancestors, since she looked at me and let out a slight sigh. "You should have a better look at your comrades," she said firmly. "You are the leader, Lyle. Your orders may determine whether they live or die. Or, in your particular case, they will determine whether *you* die and leave the rest of your party helpless, awaiting their own annihilation."

I opened my mouth, about to tell her, "That's not true!" but before I could Clara cut me off.

"You can generally do most things on your own, Lyle," she pointed out, putting her glasses back on. "And the majority of the time, that's how you get things done. Which means that the moment you disappear, your party will cease to function."

This time, I didn't try to interject. I remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

"If all you want to do is reach the thirtieth floor," Clara instructed me, "you just need to assemble around fifty people. It should be very possible with that number of allies."

"Fifty? That many?"

"You don't have to make them all your party members. If you lack the manpower, then borrow some—that's how they do it in Aramthurst. There are also plenty of unaffiliated adventurers around, though there's no guarantee if

you can trust them or not. Polish up your coordination, bolster your numbers, and... Well, given two or three years, I'm sure you can get there."

Yes, you heard that right—by Clara's estimate, it would apparently take us three years.

"A-Are you serious?"

"That is the normal amount of time it takes. Please understand; as far as most normal adventurers are concerned, your standards are ridiculous."

But that's when it hit me: *We're already strained with the party we have. Should we really be adding more members? Won't it just get even worse? I don't want any more trouble, if I can avoid it.*

"C-Can't we reduce the numbers a bit?" I suggested. "You know, I was just thinking I'd like to go at it with a select few elites..."

Clara debated this for a moment and then replied, "That is certainly one option. However, lower numbers mean a proportionally larger burden will be placed on each individual member. If everyone trains well...you could lower the size of your party to thirty people."

So I'd still need thirty, huh...?

"If you invest five years into training," Clara continued, "I'm sure everyone will be first-rate adventurers skilled enough for the task."

"F-Five years?!"

If I take that long, Rondo will have gotten way ahead of me by the time we've finished things. Yes, five years is a bit—

"You should be able to reduce the number of support members you need if you have the proper equipment. Although, if you could use dolls like Professor Damian, that would be a whole different story."

"Th-That's it!"

I shot up from my chair and grabbed Clara's hand. I'd gone for her left side, which was prosthetic, without thinking about it, so the small hand gripped between my fingers ended up being rugged and made of metal.

“Thank you, Clara!”

Clara’s glasses shifted a bit, and her usually expressionless face was touched by a hint of red. “Um...can you let go? I find this a bit bothersome.”

I quickly backed off, turning my mind to Professor Damian Valle, another one of my acquaintances in Aramthurst.

Maybe he’ll have some kind of brilliant idea, I thought hopefully.

“I’ll be back to consult with you again!” I proclaimed cheerfully.

Clara’s eyes narrowed. “Please keep your voice down in the library!” she cautioned.

Her voice had been faint, yet forceful. It seemed to be the loudest voice she could muster, but it wasn’t that loud at all.

I waved my hand, smiled at her, and then left the library.

***

Mere moments later, I arrived at the Academy of Aramthurst. This was where Professor Damian Valle, one of the seven greatest hooligans of Aramthurst, could be found. He was also known by the moniker of Dollmaster, due to his ability to manipulate a small unit of dolls that he’d constructed himself.

His magic was certainly useful—it allowed him to do the work of several people on his own—but only Damian was able to use it at such a high level. Most people, regardless of their talent, would face many difficulties piloting the dolls and would need to pour all their focus into controlling just one of them.

Professor Damian had actually taught me how to use his doll magic a while ago, and that’s why I’d decided to visit him today—I wanted to know if I could put it to a more practical use. However...

“Hic. Hic... I-I’m...I’m not going to give up...”

Upon entering the professor’s lab, I found his scrawny form curled up in a chair, his knees clutched to his chest. He was sobbing, and he’d pulled his glasses off so that he could wipe his tears with his sleeve. Beyond that, my initial impression was that he looked far cleaner than I’d ever seen him before. His curly hair, however, was just as messy as always.

An automaton similar to Boinga was standing behind the professor and to his left, her posture perfect. Unlike Boinga, however, this automaton had long black silky hair, and her dress was a calming navy blue instead of bright red. She also gave off a vibe closer to your typical maid, without the assertive intensity that radiated from Boinga. There was something odd about this one's face, however. It almost seemed to be...shining.

"H-Hey, are you okay?" I called out, concerned.

It was the automaton that chose to reply. A splendid smile spread across her face as she said, "Master is fine. He has merely grown a bit further into his adulthood."

"So she finally outmaneuvered him..." the sixth head said pityingly from inside the Jewel.

Damian lifted his head to look at me. His eyes were so puffy and red I struggled to look into them directly.

"I'm fine," the professor said weakly. "I'm totally fine—I've just been naïve. It seems the ancients were even bigger degenerates than me. But I'm never going to give in to failure! I will persevere!"

Well, at least he seems to be resolved, I thought, *though I'm not sure what he's determined to do.*

"I see," I said slowly. "I don't really get it, but do your best. Putting that aside, there's actually something I wanted to ask you."

From there, I described my current issue to Professor Damian. As I spoke, his automaton went off and briskly prepared us a spot of tea.

Now that the professor had calmed down, I noticed idly that everything in the lab had been neatly organized. It was a complete one-eighty from how it had been the first time I'd dropped by; back then, I'd struggled to even find a place to set my feet.

The automaton's work, most likely, I mused.

After all, I'd visited the lab several times now, and I'd grown to know the professor quite well over that period of time. It was hard to imagine him as the

one responsible for this new level of cleanliness. But checking in on the professor wasn't what I'd come here for.

Sipping at the tea I'd been served, I asked Professor Damian if he thought I'd be able to use dolls to solve my lack of manpower.

"Ah, I see what you're getting at," the professor responded as soon as I'd finished. "It's impossible."

"Hey, I'm not *that* hopeless, am I...?" I replied, frowning.

The professor shook his head. "That's not what I'm talking about. You see, I have a certain rare skill—I'm able to think of multiple things at the same time. And I don't mean thinking about them together either. I can separate each thought I have into individual items and consider them separately and simultaneously. But most people don't understand what I mean when I say that."

"Parallel thought processing," the seventh head muttered. "I've only heard about it. I didn't think anyone's brains actually worked that way."

Curious, I took the phrase the seventh head had used and repeated it back to the professor. "Are you referring to parallel thought processing?"

Professor Damian's brows rose. "Oh, you're knowledgeable. Well, you should get it, then. Basically, at the same time as you speak to my normal self, there can be another part of me pondering my research, and yet another part concentrating on controlling my dolls. Even now, I have several different parts active, ruminating over my research along different trains of thought. That's how I know for certain that your idea's impossible—controlling dolls takes concentration. You might be able to operate two of them at once after you get used to piloting them, but you won't be able to do anything else while you do it. Pretty pointless, don't you think?"

My shoulders drooped. "So it's hopeless, then."

The professor shrugged. "Well, once you master the technique, I believe it would be possible for you to control a single doll while moving around yourself...but it would be much faster for you just to recruit some more people."

You make it sound so easy, professor, I grumbled internally. *Adding more people to the party is difficult too—you've got to account for ability, but as I've come to find out, personality is an important factor as well. And, if possible...I'd prefer not to add any more women, no matter how enthusiastic Novem is to do so. At this point, I just want a normal party.*

Deciding to voice some of these thoughts aloud, I told the professor, "It's not that I don't want more people. I just have to carefully consider the personalities and abilities of potential recruits."

Professor Damian's brows scrunched slightly together—he didn't seem to get what I meant. "If you're going to reach your goals, you'll likely have to compromise at least a little," he pointed out. "And honestly, I don't understand the point in you going this far to restrict your Arts in the first place."

"Well, I thought it would help us in the long run..." I said weakly.

I had no choice but to keep my response relatively ambiguous, since my other party members weren't at all held back by the restrictions I'd seemingly decided to place on myself.

"In that case, I get it even less," the professor replied. "If you're focused on thinking about the future, wouldn't it make more sense for you to work on honing the most efficient methods at your disposal? Prepare yourself a party that works with you flawlessly, and train them to protect you at all costs if you become incapacitated. That seems the most practical route to me."

Now that you mention it...that does *sound more efficient,* I realized. *If I end up out of commission, then the rest of the party just has to focus on defense until I get back up again. Although, if I die... You know, I don't want to go there right now.*

"The difference between having Arts and not having Arts is massive, Lyle. I just don't know how you're going to manage."

I folded my arms, drifting into thought, but was jolted back to myself when the professor's automaton spoke.

"May I have a moment?" she asked. "I don't want you sticking around for too long and stealing away my time with master, so I'll get straight to the point."

“Huh? What?” the third head said, sounding weirded out. “Did this girl just tell a guest to leave because they were in the way? Since when do maids act like that?”

I was similarly surprised by the automaton’s conduct, but she continued speaking, undeterred by my reaction.

“Do you not think it would be best to consult with that scrap heap of yours? She *is* an automaton, for what it’s worth. She should have the capacity to compute an appropriate solution.”

Would consulting Boinga really be helpful? I wondered, deciding to ignore the casual insults the other automaton was flinging her way.

“So I should talk to Boinga, huh...?” I muttered under my breath.

The automaton burst into laughter. “*Boinga*? Is that what you called her? What a fitting name indeed. The utter lack of refinement to it is just wonderful.”

Am I...being insulted right now? I wondered.

“Boinga?” Professor Damian asked, lifting his eyes from his drink, which he was pouring heaps of sugar into. “So you named the automaton?” When I nodded, his eyes turned thoughtful. “I see...it’s a good name. Very easy to remember.”

“Somehow we’ve found someone whose taste in names is just as bad as yours Lyle,” the fourth head said, his voice shocked.

Ignoring him, I exclaimed, “Right?! Isn’t it great?!”

A grin spread over my face. *I never thought the professor and I would be on the same page!*

Professor Damian turned his eyes to his own automaton. “I guess I should probably name this one too, hmm?” he said consideringly.

His automaton, who’d been mocking me only moments before, turned to her master with a smile. “What a lovely idea,” she said brightly. “What name do you wish to bestow upon me, master?”

Professor Damian thought for a moment. “I’d prefer to keep it simple. Let’s go

with Lily.”

The automaton—now Lily—clenched her fist triumphantly where the professor couldn’t see.

Perhaps she thinks that name’s a small victory compared to Boinga, I mused.

This line of thought seemed accurate, since the fifth head laughed shortly and said, “Lily is a simple name, yes. But it’s *way* better than Boinga.”

*Is her name...*really *that bad?*

***

My shoulders still slumped in defeat, I left the Academy and made my way towards the Adventurers’ Guild near the city’s outer wall. I was feeling rather depressed, as I still lacked any good ideas, and the thought of continuing to attempt to reach the thirtieth floor with such a strained mood in my party felt daunting.

“I really, honestly thought everything would work out...” I muttered. “But...”

It seems my idea to use dolls for labor instead of people is impossible. Which means our lack of members is once again a problem.

“I guess we’ll just have to do things the normal way,” I said with a sigh. “We’ll have to start recruiting people and...huh?”

I’d headed to the Guild with the plan of starting the long and arduous process of finding new party members—after all, what better place was there to find other adventurers? I’d dropped in a few times before to see if there was anyone who caught my interest, but hadn’t had much success. This time, however, my eyes had locked onto a conspicuous party that I’d never seen before. The peculiar nature of their composition really stood out to me.

Drifting into earshot of the group’s conversation, I pretended to be interested in a sheet of paper stuck on the wall near the Guild’s front entrance.

“Finally, we’re in Aramthurst,” I heard a male voice say. “Let’s hope we can find some new party members here.”

Glancing over, I confirmed that the speaker was a handsome young man with blonde hair and blue eyes. He was smiling brightly as he spoke to his comrades,

of which there were three, as far as I could tell.

“Right,” one of them replied. It was a woman this time, who looked like she was a front-line fighter. “Personally speaking, I’d like it if we found someone who could battle out front like me.”

“Forget about that,” another woman spat, her voice muffled due to the hand she had cupped over her mouth. She held a staff, wore an outfit that barely exposed any skin, and had a wide-brimmed hat perched on her head. “Let’s just finish up and leave. It’s filthy here.”

“Agreed,” a third woman replied. She was small and had an energetic vibe to her, and was clad in an outfit that appeared to facilitate a full range of motion. A dagger hung at her hip. “I want to take it easy today. In your room if you’d like, Narx.”

“People are going to misunderstand your intentions if you say you want to be in a man’s room,” the young man answered with a smile. “Now then, let’s get moving and find an inn. If possible, I’d like to challenge that dungeon I’ve been hearing so much about.”

Their party is...just like mine! I thought, overcome with excitement. *That guy Narx has a harem party too!*

“I...finally found another one,” I whispered breathlessly.

My eyes ran over the party of four, taking in the way all three girls smiled unceasingly at the jovial young man at their center. *This* was the party I’d been seeking, the ideal I was desperate for my own group to reach. Looking at them didn’t make my stomach churn, and none of the girls were proclaiming they had to be the man’s number one. The group standing in front of me had a good atmosphere about them, like everyone genuinely got along.

“That party seems to be structured similarly to yours, Lyle, but that kid appears to be doing a better job at managing it than you,” the fourth head said, his tone a bit disbelieving. “Is there a secret to it perhaps...?”

“If there’s a secret, I’d love to know,” the sixth head enviously said. “If I’d had that knowledge back when I was alive... Oh, how different things would have been.”

I had to smile a bit at that. When the sixth head had been alive, he'd failed drastically when it came to his marriage. He'd grown up watching his father—the fifth head—living with four mistresses on top of his legal wife, and had come under the impression that that sort of arrangement was perfectly normal for nobles. Thus, right after his marriage, he'd immediately brought two other women to the estate...sending his wife into a fury. Ever since, his home life had become rather hellish, or so I'd heard.

You reap what you sow, I thought mercilessly.

Gathering up my courage, I approached Narx. "U-Um!" I said haltingly.

Narx gave me a wary look—it was no wonder as to why, since we were meeting for the first time. Still, his tone was gentle when he asked, "Do you need something from me?"

The women said nothing, clearly on guard against me. They took up protective positions around Narx, showing just how proficient their party was.

"Please!" I burst out. "Teach me the trick to managing a harem party!"

Narx seemed at a loss for words as he stared at my lowered head. "Huh...?"

***

In the end, Narx and his party invited me to an eatery a short distance away from the Guild, where I got the chance to share a meal with the four of them. I'd offered to pay for all of us, but Narx had turned me down, saying that wouldn't sit right with him. He'd proposed we split the bill instead, which I'd happily agreed to.

As we ate, I gave the kind man a somewhat vague explanation of my party's current state—my ancestors had cautioned me not to get too specific about our problems.

Narx planted his elbows on the table and folded his hands in front of his mouth as he listened. Finally, he said, "I think I understand the situation. In short, your party also consists of one man with everyone else being female, correct? Then the answer is simple."

"Really?!"

A sense of relief washed over me. This was the first time I'd met someone who I was actually able to discuss my women problems with. My ancestors were useless in that domain, but Narx seemed different—in fact, he seemed pretty reliable. He seemed happy to be asked too; on closer inspection, he was practically sparkling with happiness.

"A party like mine, huh?" he said with a grin. "Well, since I'm the only man around, it's easy to misunderstand, but I don't have romantic relationships with any of these three."

"Is that so?" I said thoughtfully.

I turned to look at the three women at the table, and they all nodded, though their faces did hint at a few conflicted, unsatisfied emotions beneath the surface.

"To men, a party like mine is ideal in a sense, so I'm often envied," Narx added. "To be honest, I was actually quite happy when you called out to me."

I nearly teared up, knowing such a kind person had to go through such torment. I could understand his situation quite well.

"I don't know if this suggestion will help you out or not," Narx admitted, "but I do have one piece of advice I can give you. Treasure every member of your party. That is my creed as a party leader."

I nodded, taken in by the seriousness in Narx's face.

He went on, "What is required from a party leader will change based on the situation. Different people will give you different answers, from strength to decisiveness, from decisiveness to making effective use of your comrades. But me? I just want to treasure everyone. These three are all precious to me."

Narx's face melted into a smile as he said the last few words. He really did look radiant as he gazed sweetly at the rest of his party. All three of his female companions blushed at his statement.

"No romantic feelings?" the fifth head grumbled. "Please. Those three are clearly in love with him. And what does 'treasuring everyone' even mean in the first place? If we knew who to do that, our problems would be solved already."

Please, just shut up for now, I prayed silently.

So, umm, Narx...what exactly should I do if I want to treasure everyone?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "For starters, why don't you tell them what you want from them? Say you want everyone to get along with each other. I get the feeling you're a bit too reserved, young Lyle, so speak your mind. It will be alright—I'm sure they'll understand."

"I *do* want them to get along..."

If nothing else, I should at least give it a try, I decided. Memories of when we first arrived in Aramthurst flickered through my mind. *If we could just go back to how we were then...*

I nodded, coming to a decision. "Thank you so much, Narx! I'm going to give it a shot!"

And with that, I said my thanks and left. Narx and his party members waved their hands as I went.

All right, so to start, I just need to try and communicate to them how I feel. I need to tell everyone I just want them to get along. I took a deep breath and let it out. *I feel like...this might actually work.*

In contrast to my growing enthusiasm, the Jewel was dead silent.

If only they'd be this quiet on a regular basis, I thought cheerfully.

***

Upon returning home, I'd come to the decision that the conversation about the party would be best had after dinner, and had announced to everyone my intention to have an important conversation at that time. However, now that the after-meal tea was being passed out, a mood even heavier than usual began to loom over the dining table. Just the atmosphere alone left me gasping for air; I could feel cold sweat dripping down my cheeks. I wiped it away with my bare hands and swallowed back my building saliva.

The Jewel, in contrast, was quite lively.

"Wh-What's with this atmosphere?" the second head asked, aghast.

“It’s because Lyle said he had something important to say,” the third head pointed out.

The fourth head made a pained noise, like his stomach was bothering him again. “I’d run away if I could...”

“The mood’s growing worse every day,” the fifth head said with a sigh. “Though it’s better than it was with a *certain* someone.”

“Who the hell are you talking about?” the sixth head asked, genuinely confused.

“Oh, I wonder,” the seventh head replied sarcastically.

I took a sip of tea, wetting my mouth. *It’ll be okay,* I reassured myself. *Narx and his girls are pulling it off just fine. I know I can do it...probably*!

“I...” I trailed off, built up my courage, and the soldiered on. “I want everyone to get along. And not just with me—I want us to aim for a party where every member maintains a good relationship with one another. I think the way we’re going right now is no good!”

I said it! I finally said it! I thought in relief. I started looking around, taking in everyone’s reactions.

Novem was giving me a troubled smile. “If that’s what you want, I have no objections, milord. I want to get along with everyone else too.”

I knew it, I thought, heart warm. *Novem’s a good girl. She gets me*. *If only she’d stop pushing other women onto me....*

I glanced over at Aria next. She was sipping at her tea, one elbow on the table.

“Hey, I’m just acting the same as I always do,” she said, tone slightly irritated. She wouldn’t even look at my face.

You’re definitely *not acting the same, Aria!* I thought defiantly. *You used to smile a lot more, and you used to enjoy it when we ate together!*

Seeking help, I sent a pleading glance to Sophia, but found no help there. Her eyes were closed, her back was straight as a pole, and her hands were resting elegantly on her lap.

“I would think it would be blatantly obvious to you who is causing our issues,” Sophia said coldly, her eyes opening and locking onto Miranda.

Miranda grinned. “Huh? Wherever could that have come from? I mean, I love Lyle. All I did was have the courage to speak my mind. What’s so wrong about that?”

“I can’t believe such a formidable little lady descended from our house,” the second head said, his voice quavering. “We were just small-time village lords, you know.”

I could see why he was so shocked—back in the second head’s time, House Walt was little more than a number of countryside lords running a tiny piece of land. It was hard to imagine that such a house would one day be related to the daughter of a viscount.

Aria stood.

“Huh? Hey, wait!” I reached out a hand as Aria silently made her way to the door.

Miranda folded her arms. “It’s not like you to run away,” she prodded the other girl. “You need to be a bit tougher, or there’s no point in us competing.”

“Just do whatever you want,” Aria snapped, turning back. “Go right ahead—it’s got nothing to do with me. I was just...bought by Lyle. That’s all.”

This was a forceful reminder that the circumstances behind Aria becoming our comrade were a bit special. Ultimately, it had ended up looking to outsiders like I’d purchased her, but I’d never once been bothered by that.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Aria,” I told her gently.

Aria clenched her fist. “And *you* don’t have to worry about *me*. I’m going to my room.”

“I’m going as well,” Sophia added, standing as soon as Aria was gone. “I did not intend to ruin the mood of our party, but if I have made it worse, you have my sincere apologies, Lyle.”

As I watched Sophia turn and leave, Boinga stepped into my field of view.

“Chicken, aren’t you going to ask for my opinion?” she demanded. “Why, I’ll

prepare even greater carnage if that's what it takes to get you to look at me. Now look at me, goddammit!"

"Shut up, would you?!" I snarled, silencing the babbling of the attention-craving automaton.

I looked at the members who remained at the table. Shannon was holding her mouth, I noticed, watching my troubled face. *She's...laughing*. I could just see the word, *Stuuupid*, in her eyes.

"Lord Lyle..." Novem stood. "I'll clean up the table, then."

"Oh, umm... thanks," I mumbled.

Seems Novem's the one on cleaning duty today.

Then, jolting my attention to her, Miranda asked, "Lyle, do you *really* want everyone to get along?"

"Of course I do!" I responded fervently. "It'd be way more fun like that. I mean, if we got along, I know we'd definitely—"

Miranda's smiling face seemed to stare straight into my soul. "Hey, Lyle...who did you hear that from? I just feel like that's not the sort of thing you'd come up with. Up until now, you've just watched, so what's gotten into you all of a sudden? Perhaps...someone offered you some advice?"

She realized I consulted with Narx? The cold sweat running down my face showed no signs of stopping.

Meanwhile, inside the Jewel, my ancestors were in an uproar.

"D-Don't tell me she has orphic eyes too?!" the fourth head fearfully cried out.

I could understand his terror. If Miranda had eyes that could read and manipulate the human heart, just as Shannon did...it would be a huge deal.

The seventh head, however, immediately opposed this theory. "No, that's a bit... But if she's auntie's great-granddaughter, maybe..."

My eyes began to wander, and then...

"I...need to use the bathroom!"

I promptly ran away.

***

As Novem washed dishes in the kitchen, Boinga chased after a fleeing Lyle. Miranda briefly left the room as well, leading a yawning Shannon to her room. When she came back a few moments later, Novem was still cleaning on her own.

“Oh, you’re almost done already?” Miranda asked, brows rising. “It was my turn today, so let me help.”

It had become a regular thing now for the members of the house to take turns doing various chores, since they were all living together under one roof. Novem, however, didn’t relinquish her task. Her hands kept moving over the dishes, even as she turned her expressionless face to look at Miranda. Her ponytail bobbed behind her head, having been swept back until the washing was done.

“Why are you doing something so pointless?” Novem asked finally.

Miranda stepped forward, beginning to wipe down the plates Novem had washed with a cloth. “Is it really pointless?” she countered. “At the very least, I want those girls to stand on equal footing with me. I can’t stand how they keep their feelings hidden, hoping that on some fateful day, Lyle will notice them. If they can’t even speak their minds, then I’d rather they not get in my way. I’m serious about this.”

I don’t doubt her sincerity, Novem thought to herself, *but we both know that the way she chose to declare her love has sent shockwaves through the party.*

“I can understand how you feel,” Novem admitted, “but I do not understand why you would go about it like this. You’re causing nothing but problems for Lord Lyle.”

Miranda smiled as she set her polished plates in a row. “I want to contribute to the party in the way I’ve concluded will produce the best outcome. Don’t you operate in the same way?”

“Yes, you’re correct,” Novem assented. “But I don’t want to be compared to you.”

And so, silence fell between them, and not another word was uttered until the plates were all put away.

Chapter 58: Lyle's Answer

Aria walked down a narrow Aramthurst alley, a flyer in hand. If one squinted, you could see that the paper she clutched read, "Martial Arts Instruction, Experienced Fighters Welcome!"

Whoever the teacher is, they've got to be pretty confident in their abilities to welcome experienced adventurers, Aria mused. *Maybe they're someone amazing who just isn't publicly known.*

After wracking her mind over and over, trying to pinpoint where she was lacking, she'd finally reached the conclusion that she simply wasn't strong enough. Thus, her answer to the issue was simple: train, fight, win. If she did that, she'd grow stronger—*far* stronger—and then Lyle would be able to rely on her.

Aria's feet paused as she arrived at what appeared to be a training hall.

It's pretty quiet, she thought, peeking in the open window. *Ugh, and it reeks of men, and of sweat.*

Leaning in closer, Aria was overwhelmed with the stench of alcohol. It seemed someone had decided midday was as good a time as any to have a drink. Likely that person was the supposed master of the filthy training hall, who appeared to be asleep along with a few of his students, none of whom looked particularly well-trained.

What's going on here…? Aria wondered, hesitating now over whether or not to enter the training hall.

Before she was able to come to a decision, a mountain of a woman appeared from behind her, threw open the doors, and shouted, "You useless louts! Isn't it about time you paid your tab at the bar?!"

As Aria watched in astonishment, the woman beat the hall's master awake with a broom she'd apparently brought with her.

"Just give me a little more time!" the man said frantically. "If I get more students, I can pay you for sure. I'll pay! I promise, I'll pay!"

Going off that fervent apology, I'm going to assume that woman is stronger than the hall's master, Aria thought in disgust. *He's clearly a drinker too, and is struggling to pay off his debts.*

The situation forcefully brought back memories of her father, whose life had fallen into ruin as he drowned in drink and wracked up a hefty pile of debt. Her impression of the training hall soured; truthfully, it could hardly have gotten any worse.

Yeah, no. Not in a million years. Let's try somewhere else.

Aria turned around and stealthily took her leave, leaving the training hall behind. She hadn't gone that far back down the path she'd come from, however, when her eyes fell on Sophia. The other girl had a flyer in her hand, and seemed to be looking for something.

"O-Oh..." they said at the same time.

There was a short silence, wherein both girls realized they were holding the same flyer, then averted their eyes from each other.

"So you had the same idea, Aria," Sophia said. "I was just searching for the training hall."

"I... Well, I was too, but I don't recommend it. The place doesn't look decent at all, and from what I overheard, they're in debt."

Sophia glanced down at the flyer. "R-Really now… Well, it's good I found that out before I got there."

As if in silent agreement, the two girls began making their way up the alley once more, heading back to Aramthurst's main road. The atmosphere between them was awkward and stiff.

"I guess even a city famous for its teachers has its share of stinkers," Aria said with a sigh.

Sophia, meanwhile, had a rather uncertain look on her face. "It's been a while since we came to this city, but I still don't know anything," she said weakly. "I have no idea where to go."

That's right, we've been in Aramthurst a whole month now, Aria belatedly

realized.

The two girls slowly began walking again, discussing possible destinations, and they soon settled on visiting a few more training halls that had piqued their interest. Unfortunately, each one they stopped by ended up falling far short of their expectations, and they were forced to return to the Circry estate empty handed.

Upon entering the yard, both girls were stunned to stumble across Lyle doing something quite strange in the yard. He was balanced atop a board that had been placed over a ball, taking on various poses at Boinga's direction. The automaton was watching from a distance, standing on top of a ball of her own, and clapping out a beat for him to follow. The whole thing would have looked like Lyle and the automaton were simply playing around, if not for the complete seriousness on Lyle's face.

"Yes!" Boinga cried out, her entire body radiating the essence of a street performer. "Now, the Savage Sparrow!"

Lyle shifted his stance, looking perfectly composed. In contrast, Shannon, who was laboring away beside him, was shaking with exertion. Her knees were wobbling and almost giving out on her, and her poses barely resembled the ones Lyle had mastered.

Taking a side glance at her, a triumphant look came over Lyle's face. "What are you shaking for, huh?" he prodded her. "Don't tell me *this* is too much for you. Didn't you say you'd never lose to me?"

Aria was arrested by the mocking smile on Lyle's lips, the likes of which she knew would never be directed her or Sophia's way.

Not that I want to be lorded over like that, Aria thought, discomfited. *It's just...he looks so much more lively than I've ever seen him before.*

Meanwhile, Shannon had started yelling. "You're really starting to piss me off!" she snarled at Lyle. "I'll tell sis on you—don't think I won't!"

Lyle gave her a quelling look. "Hey, tattling to Miranda's no fair. If you're going to go that route, I guess I'll have to tell her about all those snacks you've been sneaking..."

“W-Wait...” Shannon stuttered, her rage evaporating. “Come on, let’s just discuss this rationally. I can totally see what you meant now! Bringing my big sis into it would never end well.”

They almost look like a close pair of siblings, Aria thought. *They really seem like they’re having fun.*

Gloom settled over Aria. *She* wasn’t having fun at all. If she was being honest, though, she wouldn’t want to be in Shannon’s position—when she and Sophia were mulling over a situation and stressing, looking over to see Lyle so at ease, almost like he was messing around, was overwhelmingly irritating.

Beside Aria, Sophia seemed to sense a presence. She turned, then said a heavy, “Oh...”

Aria turned as well, quickly catching sight of Miranda. *Looks like she went out,* Aria thought. *I thought she didn’t have any plans to attend the Academy today, though...*

Miranda spared Aria and Sophia a brief glance, then shifted her eyes to Lyle and Shannon. “Oh my, it looks like they’re doing their best today,” she said with a slight smile. “The muscle pain might just put Shannon out of commission tomorrow.”

“They sure are taking it easy when we’re hardly earning any money,” Aria grumbled. “There’s a bunch of other things we ought to be doing.”

Here they were, in *Aramthurst* of all places, and yet Lyle showed no inclination to visit any of the city’s training halls or private schools. It made Aria question if there had been any point in them visiting the city in the first place. Staring at Lyle, her mouth soured with the taste of bitter discontentment.

Miranda, on the other hand, was smiling as she watched Lyle bicker with Shannon during their lesson with Boinga. “Let them be,” she said with a shrug. “I doubt what they’re doing is completely pointless, and they look like they’re having fun. I mean, at least they’re going about things earnestly, Aria. The way they’re acting is certainly a step up from someone who just sits around and complains.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?!” Aria cried. “How does that logic make

any sense? Lately, we've been failing left and right, and you're telling me it's just fine if he decides to spend his free time playing around like that?"

Sophia remained silent, watching the trio in the yard with a conflicted look on her face.

I could do the same exercise Lyle's doing, no problem, Aria thought irritatedly. *That's how I know he's just messing around out there. He's not doing anything productive at all.*

Miranda, however, seemed to think she knew better. She gave Aria a pitying look, then let out a mocking laugh.

"What're you laughing at me for...?"

"Oh, I was just thinking it must be an easy life, mocking others for their efforts while you don't do anything yourself."

Aria flushed hot, her blood heating up as her heartbeat sped faster and faster. Every cheap provocation that came out of Miranda's mouth made her angrier.

"All I'm doing is telling it how it is," Aria snapped. "We came to this city to learn."

Sophia reached out, holding Aria away from Miranda. "Aria, why don't you calm down a little. And Miranda, stop provoking her."

Miranda's expression turned serious, then cold, as she looked at the flyers in their hands. "To be blunt...you two are entirely lacking in motivation, you know. Unless ordered, you won't do a thing." She gave an indifferent shrug. "From what you've said, it seems you feel discontent with Lyle doing his best over there, but what's up with that? Are both of you really sure that you're not the ones at fault here? Even a little? If you came here to study, then go study. It's not like you're not getting paid, and as long as you have a proper reason, I doubt Novem would complain if you asked her to provide you with some extra funds. I mean, if you had any *real* motivation, you could have brought it up with me. If you'd just asked me if I knew any good places to train, your whole problem would have been solved. Other than that...well, you could have asked Clara too."

It wasn't as if Miranda was wrong; Aria and Sophia didn't know a thing about

Aramthurst. If they wanted to know the best training halls to visit, it was only natural that they would turn to Miranda or Clara. But...

We've barely even talked to Clara before! Aria thought, going angry once again.

Sophia, meanwhile, finally spoke. "Th-That's true, but..." she sputtered weakly.

"*But*," Aria cut in, her voice strident and powerful with her rage, "Lyle is our leader. It's perfectly within his rights to give us orders. He could just tell us what to do, instead of leaving us to decide for ourselves. Anyway, this whole thing is your fault! You're destroying our relationships with one another! Before you came, everything was going perfectly fine!"

Aria fell silent, deflating now that she'd vented her frustrations. Her head hung low, and her shoulders rose and fell sharply with every heavy breath. Still, she didn't let her exhaustion get the better of her. She raised her head, wanting to see Miranda's face.

The other girl's expression hadn't changed in the slightest. The same pitying, condescending look lingered in her eyes. "Okay... And?" she demanded. "Are you really going to make me say it?" Aria and Sophia said nothing, and Miranda's eyes narrowed. "All right, here's my take—if your relationship could be destroyed by a single sentence from me, it wasn't much of a relationship to begin with. So why let it get to you?"

With that bold statement, Miranda turned her back to the two other girls and headed into the house. Aria and Sophia stared after her, dumfounded, stunned, downtrodden...and then, they exploded.



“The heck’s with that woman?!” Aria shrieked. “How dare she screw with me!”

Sophia nodded vigorously. “I can’t take it anymore!” she declared. “Aria, let’s go to the library at once. I hear that’s where you can find Clara!”

Neither girl felt depressed anymore; when all was said and done, they were too worked up to feel anything but rage. They weren’t the type to take the kind of things Miranda had said to them lying down.

“Going to be Lyle’s number one, is she? Thinks we don’t have much of a relationship with him, does she? Well, if you’ll let me have my say...*someone* needs to be put in her place!!!”

Sophia had reached her limit too. Standing in front of the house, she screamed, “That bitch!”

Newly motivated, the girl’s set course for the library. There was no way they were going to stand down, not after Miranda had insulted them like that.

***

Just as Shannon and I had finished our practice for the day with Boinga, I’d heard Sophia and Aria yell something. When I’d turned to look at them, they’d already run off.

“What…just happened?” I muttered, feeling perplexed.

At the moment, I was alone in the yard; Shannon had been so tired out that she could no longer move, so Boinga had been forced to carry her inside.

“It appears they’re being a bother to the neighborhood,” the fourth head said from inside the Jewel, his voice bewildered.

“Those two idiots never change,” the second head said with a sigh, as harsh on Aria and Sophia as ever.

I found myself a bit concerned; things had been tense lately, and it worried me to think that their boiling frustrations might have finally run over. I was soon distracted from these thoughts, however, when Boinga returned to the yard, smiling and waving at me.

“Dear chicken dirtbag,” she called, “Your Boinga has perfectly executed your orders and returned. Now, please decide on a name more fitting for me.”

All she had to do was carry Shannon inside, I thought, rolling my eyes. *Can you even manage to do that job imperfectly? I mean, even if she just tossed her on the floor somewhere, I wouldn’t really mind.*

More importantly, Boinga’s blatant efforts to get me to alter the name I’d come up with for her really irritated me.

“Do you really hate the name ‘Boinga’ that much?” I demanded.

“Well, I just think it is a bit much,” she answered in all seriousness.

My mouth promptly snapped shut. Overcome with defeat, I wondered, *But what would be a more fitting name for her if not Boinga?*

I couldn’t think of anything, and just let out a sigh. “I’ll think of something eventually,” I said dispiritedly. “Putting that aside, there’s actually something that’s been bothering me.”

“Oh, you’re finally consulting with me, huh? You can rely on me all you want. After all, I, Boinga, am the supreme automaton. Completely different from that *bag* of *bolts*.”

“Bag of… Oh, you mean Lily?”

“Lily…?” she asked, her voice going tight. “Going off the context, I take it you are referring to that scrap heap at Professor Damian’s place? Y-You’re not telling me she received such a lovely name, are you? Please, tell me you’re joking, you chicken layabout!”

She seems frustrated that the other automaton received a “better” name than her. Really *frustrated.*

“To be fair, just about anyone would think that name was over the top,” the third head said with a laugh.

“He’s right,” the seventh head agreed. “This is one time where I can’t stick up for you, Lyle.”

Whatever, that’s enough bashing me over my naming abilities, I thought. *Why don’t we get this conversation back on track...?*

Determined to redirect the automaton's attention, I said, "The truth is, I'm worried about how small our party is."

"H-Huh?!" she said incredulously. "You're seriously just going to ignore my complaints?"

Indeed I was—I proceeded to explain my thought process to the speechless automaton, not saying a word about her concerns. I told her how normally we'd need thirty to fifty people to conquer the dungeon without my Arts, and that I'd been told it would take a few years to gather that many people. I got pretty real with her at the end, explaining to her that I really didn't want to waste such a long period working toward this particular goal.

Boinga nodded a few times as I spoke, her pigtails airily bouncing around as she did.

"The point is, I don't want to invest too much of my time into this," I concluded.

"Well, five years *is* a bit harsh," Boinga said thoughtfully. "Even three years sounds like a bit much." She puffed out her chest. "Just leave it to me, my chicken! I shall solve all of your problems for you."

"So you have a plan?!"

"Indeed! Just take me in with you, and everything will be resolved."

Hearing her say that with so much confidence, I let out a weary sigh. "I was a fool for consulting with you, wasn't I...?"

"Huh? Why're you acting so depressed? Damn chicken, to be blunt, I am decently strong in combat, and if I wanted to, I could operate day and night without rest. I don't need to eat or excrete like any of your other females."

Please don't be so blunt about excretion... I mean, it is *an important issue, but I'm not sure bringing her will accomplish much of anything.*

"Now, look here," I said after a moment of silence. "We don't just need combat strength; we need support members too. Can you fight, hold bags, and look after everyone all on your own?"

"Well, it's not impossible," Boinga said, cocking her head. "To be honest,

though, while I'd be happy to look after you, tending to the others is a bit…"

"That automaton didn't say she *couldn't* do it," the sixth head said thoughtfully, his interest clearly piqued. "You think she can really pull it off?"

Well, a human certainly couldn't do all those things at once, but Boinga is an automaton, I mused. *Perhaps she really could handle everything. With that said, though...*

While I still didn't understand what my ancestors had had in mind when they'd told me not to use Arts, something told me that if I relied on Boinga too much, they'd insist I had to clear the dungeon without her as well.

Yes, my real problem was clear—I had no idea what was going on in my ancestors' heads.

"If possible, I want us all to work hard together…to get stronger together," I told Boinga. "But I guess you might not get what I'm trying to say in telling you that..."

What am I even saying to her? I thought, embarrassment running through me. *How pathetic am I, thinking that she'll be the solution to all my problems?*

Boinga cocked her head again. "There *is* something I find a bit peculiar…"

"What?"

"Chicken, your goal is merely to clear the thirtieth floor, correct?"

I nodded. "That's right."

"And the only condition is that you cannot use Arts, yes?"

"No, I can't use my silver weapon—the greatsword—either. Oh wait, you don't know about that one, do you?"

Boinga put a hand to her chin and stared at me intently, like she was trying to seek out my intentions with her eyes alone. "What exactly is your objective?" she asked finally. "Are you trying to raise everyone's skill level, or are you trying to recruit more members…? It's unclear what you are trying to accomplish. It doesn't seem like just clearing the thirtieth floor is enough for you."

That's the exact thing I want my ancestors to answer! I thought miserably. *But*

they always just dodge the question.

Unsure of how to answer, I could only stare at Boinga in silence.

"Then, let's summarize," Boinga declared. "You want to put all those useless louts you call party members to work while keeping the necessary personnel to a bare minimum. Under these conditions, you wish to conquer the thirtieth floor. Do I have that right?"

"Yes… That's correct."

She nodded again. "Then just leave it to me. I, Boinga, meet all of your expectations. Should you take me along, then you'll have balanced full-course meals even in somewhere as absurd as a *dungeon*."

"A full course in a dungeon's a bit much…" I answered honestly.

By this point, we'd been speaking in the yard for quite a while, so I looked over at the house. The door to the storehouse had been left open, I noticed, and I could see the exoskeleton of the boss I'd collected through the gap.

Boinga called that thing an "armored tank," didn't she?

"Hey… Could we get that thing moving?"

Boinga shrugged. "Well, we have the parts to repair it, but we don't really have any way to get fuel."

Boinga explained that the machine used oil extracted from deep underground as its fuel source. What's more, this oil had to be refined before use, and to put it simply, this vital resource just didn't circulate within Banseim Kingdom. Without it, the tank wouldn't move.

"I think it'd be a lot easier if we could get that thing moving," I muttered.

My eyes ran over the hefty metal box, which was fitted with large wheels. I knew from experience that there was a spacious interior inside, which could presumably hold a hefty amount of supplies.

But supplies are only the beginning, isn't it? I mused. *If we get that thing moving, I bet it can carry people too.*

"Hey...is there any way we can get it moving by ourselves?"

“I could either push or pull it like a cart,” Boinga immediately replied. “But if you are imagining it moving on its own, that will be difficult to realize.”

I walked into the storehouse, then approached the tank. I brushed my hand over its metal surface, testing out the golem magic that Professor Damian had taught me before.

“What are you doing?” Boinga asked.

“Well, I was just wondering if something had to be a doll for this to work...” I explained absently.

It seemed a natural assumption that golem magic, which had been invented by Professor Damian and which he used exclusively on humanoid dolls, would only work on that sort of object. But what if you could use it to get any inanimate object moving? Wouldn’t it be more convenient to use the magic on something easier to operate?

With that in mind, I began testing it out.

A faint light started to emit from the tank, brightening up the dim warehouse. I backed away from it a bit, then ordered it to move forward.

“Move…” I muttered. “Move!”

Boinga watched from beside me. At first, nothing happened at all. But eventually, I got a minute jerk out of the wheels. Unfortunately…it went backward, not forwards.

“Huh?”

I stared at the tank in confusion. I couldn’t be sure why it wasn’t moving like I wanted it to. Why would it go backwards, when I ordered it to come towards me?

“That was a surprise,” Boinga said, clapping her hands together in appreciation. “Magic is a convenient thing indeed. However, I don’t think you’re going to be able to get it moving properly like that.”

I wasn’t entirely sold on that thought. *I did manage to move it a little,* I refuted in my mind. *If I practice, maybe I’ll be able to learn how to control it better.*

“How about if it was smaller?” I asked Boinga. “You brought up a cart—maybe I’d be able to move that?”

Boinga pursed her lips. “I think you’d probably be able to move one of those, but I don’t know if you’d get enough horsepower for it to be of any use in the dungeon... Additionally, you should remember that the more people or supplies it is loaded with, the more energy it will take for you to move.”

My brain flicked to Professor Damian, who could maneuver four dolls at once. Sure, it was impossible for me to operate so many objects at the same time, but why wouldn’t I be able to move one simple craft?

“All right,” I decided. “I’m going to go buy one and start trying it out right away.”

Boinga smiled. “Oh, then let me accompany you! Shopping with chicken—hooray!”

Is she that happy to buy a cart with me? I wondered, eyeing her suspiciously. *I thought girls would be happier with clothes or accessories…but no, she’s a machine*.

It was just, Boinga looked so insanely human that I was prone to forgetting what she really was.

“Let’s head out, then.” I declared. “What sort of cart do you think would be best...?”

“Well, if you get me the raw materials, I can just make one,” Boinga replied.

I turned to her slowly. *Did she just say what I think she did*?

“What exactly are you…?” I asked, exasperated. “What sort of maid, or even servant, can do stuff like that? Was it like a normal thing to know how to do in your time?”

“What are you talking about?” Boinga said shortly, placing a hand on her brow as though she was fed up with my nonsense. “It’s only natural a maid must be capable of at least that much.”

“R-Really?”

She’s so confident... I thought. *Am* I *the strange one? Should I be able to build*

a cart of my own...?

"N-No," I muttered to myself, shaking off the notion. "It *is* strange. It's not just me."

"It's not strange at all," the automaton countered. "Your Boinga is the crowning achievement of maid-type automaton technology! How could I be myself if I couldn't do it?"

You know what? I'm just not going to think too hard about it. My head hurts just trying to keep up with her.

"Whatever," I said with a sigh. "For now, let's just buy a model that isn't too heavy."

And so, off the two of us went, heading out to fulfill our mission of buying a cart.

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Sophia stormed into the library, Aria at her side. Without a moment's pause, they began searching for Clara, and the second they found her they got right down to business.

Her eyes darting back and forth between the two girls, Clara asked, "The best place to learn martial arts in Aramthurst, is it?" Her voice came out a bit flustered.

"We are unfamiliar with these lands," Sophia said with a nod. "We haven't got the slightest idea about which training halls or private schools are famous or reputable. If you know a place, Clara, we would love to hear about it."

"We...well, you see... We want to grow far stronger than we are!" Aria proclaimed.

Clearly confused by their enthusiasm, Clara said in a slow, remonstrative tone, "I understand how you feel. If that's the case, I could introduce you to a training hall I know of."

"Th-Thank you!" exclaimed Sophia.

"*But* there is one thing I want to confirm first. What exactly are you two aiming to learn?"

Sophia and Aria exchanged a look and cocked their heads. They seemed to come to a mutual decision, and when Aria turned to face Clara once more, she spoke for both of them. “Well, we just want to get stronger, you know?”

Clara sighed. “I won’t deny your desire to be strong. However, from my perspective, you are both *already* very strong. In terms of raw strength, you are already in the upper echelons of Aramthurst.”

This made the two girls a bit bashful. They really were a simple pair to please.

In a gentler tone, Clara explained, “What I’m asking is your...your party’s objective. The last time I worked with you, I believe it was to clear the thirtieth floor. Has there been any change?”

Sophia shook her head.

“Then you should be working towards that,” Clara went on. “You should be focusing on learning the most effective fighting methods against the monsters and traps that appear up to the thirtieth floor. As long as you study up on those, you should be able to make it down to at least the tenth floor, even if nothing else about your party changes.”

“U-Umm,” Sophia stammered, “is that all? We do plan on leaving Aramthurst eventually, so I was hoping for a strength that could be applicable everywhere.”

I want to be strong enough to blow away any monster that stands in our path!

Aria seemingly agreed, for she nodded readily at Sophia’s statement. “Yeah, that would be preferable,” she added.

Clara’s eyes grow distant at this answer. A few moments passed before she shook her head and returned her eyes back to them. “Gathering and sharing information is important for any party,” she said firmly. “Even if Lyle knows how to deal with every monster, if you two aren’t as well informed, you won’t be able to coordinate as efficiently.”

Clara went on to explain to the two girls that most parties gathered far more intel than theirs before challenging a dungeon. “I guess Lyle has his own issues,” she muttered to herself.

Sophia dwelled on the information Clara had just shared for a moment, but

was still left feeling at a loss as to what to do. “U-Umm,” she stuttered, “then what exactly should we be working on?”

Taking out a memo pad, Clara directed them towards a private school that would teach them everything they needed to know about the dungeon.

“If you go here, you can learn all sorts of things. From knowledge and etiquette geared towards beginners, to all sorts of studies for intermediate adventurers.”

The moment she heard the word “study,” Aria frowned a bit. One look at her face made it clear she was no good at sitting at a desk. “How long will we have to stick it out there?” she muttered.

“Ten two-hour sessions should do it,” Clara courteously explained. “They’ll teach you the types of monsters in the dungeon and how best to deal with them. You have to reserve time slots, so please check their schedule. As for the tuition fee, beginner classes go for...”

As Clara listed the rates, Sophia’s eyes went wide. *Th-That’s so expensive... Should I really be paying that much for information that will only ever be useful in Aramthurst?*

Clara caught on right away to how Sophia was feeling—both girls were terrible at hiding their thoughts. Their faces were open books.

“It might seem a little expensive,” Clara prodded them, “but you’ll find it’s a lot better than not knowing. Also, about the training hall recommendation you wanted from me—it really depends on how you’re looking to go at things. Do you want to further your current style, or do you want to try something new?”

A bit of interest surfaced on Aria’s face. “Like what?”

“You are a warrior that focuses on speed,” Clara pointed out. “I think you could do a scout’s job very well, and I get the feeling Miranda could fulfill that role too. Admittedly, those sorts of skills are unnecessary when Lyle uses his Arts, but I find it a bit concerning that you don’t have any party members that specialize in recon.”

This was one of their party’s main problems—Lyle was too proficient, to the point that he stole the jobs of other members. It had left Aria and Sophia

lacking any abilities outside of combat.

“A scout…” Aria murmured. “Yeah, I guess one’s not needed when Lyle’s around.”

“Usually, scouts are very important to have,” Clara explained. “Though, of course, there are very few jobs that aren’t important. But scouts are necessary for nearly every party.”

Even parties without specialized scouts cherished their members who could get the lay of the land for them; they were indispensable in a dungeon.

Seeing how Aria’s eyes were sparkling, Sophia burst out, “Umm, what am I best suited for?”

Clara gave her a bit of a troubled look. “I think you could pick up scouting too, but you are simply very strong. I think you’d be fine if you polished your current style.”

“I-Is it not possible for me to learn something new...?”

Seeing the dejection that draped over Sophia like a cloud, Clara heaved a sigh.

“This is just my personal evaluation, so you don’t need to put too much weight on it, but you are both already strong. I don’t even know if anyone in Aramthurst can keep up with Aria’s speed. And Sophia, you can manipulate weight, right? That is an Art any frontline fighter would love to have.”

There was clear envy in Clara’s voice when she spoke of the two girls’ Arts. Sophia’s allowed her to control the weight of anything she came into contact with, while Aria’s allowed her to raise her speed to absurd levels.

“Really…? Personally, I’m jealous of Aria’s Art,” Sophia admitted.

Clara strengthened her tone a bit. “Having her Art on top of your own is asking for too much. Especially when most adventurers never get a chance to use their Art, and are forced to fight while relying on tools.”

After all, while every person had the potential to awaken an Art in their lifetime, they didn’t get a choice as to what sort of Art they would have. Some would manifest an Art that ran counter to what they wanted, while others would find themselves with an Art that was completely useless to them. Now

and then, an Art with completely broken capabilities would be discovered, but even if Sophia's wasn't that extreme, her Art was still one most would be delighted to possess.

Clara raised her left hand. A hatch opened up on the prosthetic limb, revealing a metal rod contained within it. "Also, if you want a quick boost to your strength, it might be a good idea to buy Demonic Tools."

Demonic Tools were items carved with certain patterns that allowed them to reproduce Arts. Although, some items that used Demonic Stones as an energy source to function were called Demonic Tools as well.

Aria scratched her head. "Yeah, that's a no-go for me. I've got this thing."

She pointed at the red Gem hanging from her neck, which was a different sort from Lyle's blue Jewel. Regardless, though, it had terrible compatibility with Demonic Tools. If used in combination, the two objects would interfere with one another, sealing off Arts altogether.

Sophia hung her head. "Umm… Demonic Tools are pricey, so we don't really have the budget for that right now."

Demonic Tools were generally expensive, as the metal they were made from was rare. They could be made from any metal—be it iron, copper, etc.—but whichever kind it was, the metal would have to emit mana as well. Any metal that possessed this quality was referred to as rarium, and was considered a valuable resource.

Clara's brows knit—from her perspective, Sophia already had everything she needed. "But what about that battle-axe I've seen you using?" she asked. "I believe it is made of rarium, isn't it? It should be cheap to get it processed."

Sophia stared at the other girl in shock. While the axe was a family heirloom, she hadn't known any specifics about it. "Is it really?"

Clara nodded. "Yes, there's no doubt about it. If you have an Art engraved into it, you should be able to use it. I know a craftsman; do you want me to introduce you to them?"

Sophia's face lit up, and Aria bounced happily in her chair.

“Good for you, Sophia!”

“Y-Yeah!”

“H-Hey,” Clara cut in, a troubled look on her face. “Keep it down in the library.”

Chapter 59: Trial and Error

Although it was still early morning, it seemed the Circry house had already grown rowdy. The dining table had been lined with sandwiches designed for easy eating, and when I walked into the room, I was greeted with the sight of Aria scarfing down one after another in a hurry.

Watching her, I mused aloud, “You’ve got quite the appetite today.”

Aria choked, then poured her drink down her throat to unclog it. “I won’t make it through the day if I don’t eat. I’ve got plans from morning to evening, so I won’t have time to eat lunch.”

“Please at least chew before swallowing, then,” Boinga said with a sigh. “Gulping things down whole is bad manners, and it has not good for your health either...”

“Aria,” Sophia called from the entranceway. “I’m heading on out.”

Aria shot up from her chair. “W-Wait! I’m going too!”

From her seat at the dining table, Novem watched the boisterous duo rush from the house from the smile. “Things have grown hectic, yes,” she said, “but they both seem much more cheerful than they were before.”

I brought a sandwich to my own mouth, then paused and asked, “Where are they going, anyway?”

“They’re going to a class where they’ll learn more about Aramthurst’s dungeon,” Novem replied. “And in the afternoon, I hear they’re each going to be training their hearts out a training hall.”

I returned my eyes to the breakfast table. Shannon was drowsily eating a sandwich; in her carelessness, she was letting its contents ooze all over the place.

Smacking her younger sister on the head, Miranda cautioned, “That’s bad manners, Shannon.”

“I-I’m sorry, sis..”

Miranda herself soon finished eating, and stood from the table. “I’m going out too,” she told us, beginning her preparations. “I won’t be back until noon, so I’ll be counting on you all to do the housework. You can make use of Shannon as much as you like.”

And with that, Miranda was gone. In her absence, some of the tension drained from Shannon’s body. She seemed quite relieved—indeed, she was indecorous enough to plant an elbow onto the dining table.

“Finally, it’s quiet,” Shannon said with a long sigh.

But, just as she let her guard down, Boinga piped up.

“You seem relaxed,” the automaton said cheerfully, “but once we’ve cleaned up the table, it’s time for training, training, training! After that, you’re going to help me with the cleaning.”

“Ehhh,” Shannon shot a reluctant look at her. “I want to take it easy today. Didn’t I work *terribly* hard yesterday?”

“That’s what you said last time,” I scoffed. “And then you just slacked off all afternoon.”

I could clearly remember Shannon sitting on the sofa for hours, reading a picture book. She couldn’t actually read—or write, for that matter—since she’d been blind until very recently. Thus, she’d lately gotten addicted to deciphering the picture books she bought with her pocket change.

Novem turned to me. “In that case, why don’t you accompany her out into the city, milord? You haven’t really explored Aramthurst either, have you?”

I stared at Shannon’s face. She seemed just as disgusted by the idea as me.

“Yeah, no,” I said.

“That’s a no from me too,” Shannon agreed. “I’ll just have sis take me out when she gets back.”

Observing our fierce glare-off, Novem smiled. “I hear a troupe of traveling performers should be putting on a show on the main road this morning...”

Shannon straightened in her chair, clearly intrigued. She seemed restless.

“R-Really?” she asked weakly. “Then... I wouldn’t mind going. I guess.”

“Well, I’m not going," I proclaimed, immediately wrenching my gaze from hers. I didn’t quite manage to look away, however, before seeing her eyes well with tears.

The sight seemed to evoke some sympathy from my ancestors, since they all started talking at once.

“Hey, she looks like she’s about to start bawling!” the second head said, appalled.

“Lyle, take her, why don’t you?” demanded the third head.

The fourth head sighed. “Your attitude with that girl is pathetic to watch.”

“Mentally, he’s just as much of a child as Shannon,” the fifth head added.

Okay, that’s a bit too far, fifth head, I thought indignantly.

But it wasn’t long before the sixth head piped up, seemingly agreeing with him.

“Lyle, the same mental age as Shannon...?” he said consideringly. “Well, if that’s true, I can certainly see why they get along so well!”

“Come to think of it, Shannon was confined to her mansion too,” the seventh head pointed out.

His words stabbed directly into my heart. Sure, Shannon was a fool more often than not, and we were very dissimilar people, but when it came to her circumstances, they *did* bear more than a passing resemblance to my own.

Actually, she might have been treated even worse than me, I admitted to myself. *What with being confined from the very moment she was born.*

“Fine...” I said at last. “Once we’re done cleaning up, I’ll take her to see the performers.”

Shannon’s depressed face brightened up, joy blossoming across her features. Novem sent me a warm smile as well, and while Boinga sent Shannon an envious glance, she didn’t try to get in the way.

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Not long later, Shannon and I arrived at Aramthurst's main road. There was a traveling troupe of elves there who were putting on a show containing various songs and tricks. A few of them were even showing off some incredible acrobatic feats, which appeared to have immediately garnered them a massive crowd.

I may have accompanied Shannon there, but my mind was preoccupied with worries over my cart, which was still in a trial-and-error stage. Shannon, meanwhile, was riveted by a street performer who was juggling while standing atop a large ball. She gripped my hand firmly, a serious look on her face.

Sweet, gentle words drifted from the Jewel to my ears—the kind that would *never* be directed my way.

"I'm glad she's having fun," the second head said cheerfully.

"Well, she never got to go out before," the third head pointed out. "Indulging her this much shouldn't hurt."

"She's still a young girl, orphic eyes or not," the fourth head added. "Experiencing small bits of entertainment like this will be good for her."

The fifth head made a thoughtful noise. "I'd imagine everything she sees will be interesting to her for now," he mused.

"Yes, I'd think so," the sixth head agreed excitedly. "I'd love to show her all sorts of things!"

"Remember Lyle, Shannon also carries the blood of House Walt," the seventh head said firmly. "Please treat her well."

All of a sudden, I felt irritated. *They're just being kind because she's a girl,* I muttered internally. *This is completely different from how they treat me… Am I wrong for feeling that this is just a tad unfair*? *The fifth and sixth heads especially seem like they're showing her a substantial amount of favoritism—probably because she's the great-granddaughter of Milleia, who they both knew so well.*

I absentmindedly watched the performance, these thoughts occupying my mind. Then, all of a sudden, I felt a tugging at my sleeve.

“Hey,” Shannon muttered, “do you really hate hanging out with me *that* much?”

“Well...” I paused. “Yeah, I do. But that’s not what’s bothering me right now.”

Her shoulders relaxed a little. “Oh, it’s about the cart, then. You look like a total buffoon when you’re riding donuts on that thing in the yard.”

“Oh, shut it,” I said, reaching over her smug face and poking her in the forehead.

Shannon smacked a hand to her brow, then sent me a protesting look. “Ouch,” she whined.

Ignoring her, I explained, “The cart’s going to be pretty important to us. It’s going to make transporting supplies a lot easier. But...the expenses keep adding up.”

The cart itself had been pricy enough, but with every experiment we did on it, costs rose even higher. And if Boinga wasn’t around... Well, things would’ve probably been even more expensive.

In addition, we had to be very careful when using the cart. We’d modified it in order to mitigate some of the issues—it was now a four-wheeled cart instead of a two-wheeled one—but it still wouldn’t move if we loaded it up with too many supplies, and it would still break if I pushed it even a little bit too hard. We’d modified it even further with every new issue popped up, and those changes hadn’t come cheap.

“Why did I come all the way to Aramthurst if I’m just going to be modifying carts...?” I mumbled to myself. “The reason I came here was to study...wasn’t it?”

I remembered when Aria, Sophia, Novem, and I had first come to this city—how we’d planned to stock up on knowledge at the libraries and private schools and to polish martial arts at the training halls... We’d come here to obtain the necessary skills and comrades to function properly as adventurers, and yet now I found myself spending my days tinkering with a cart alongside my maid.

What exactly is my end goal here?

A burst of applause interrupted my thoughts. It seemed the song the elves had been performing had come to an end. Shannon looked like she'd thoroughly enjoyed it; she'd lost interest in me entirely, entranced by the elven singer.

"She sure has it easy..." I grumbled, looking at her enviously.

There was a sudden ripple in the crowd around us—everyone seemed cringing backward, trying to avoid a group of people passing through. At a glance, they did look rather shabby.

"Look, adventurers," I heard one person spit.

"What savages," another muttered.

"Why do they have to use this road? Can't they travel somewhere more...fitting for them?"

Curious, I examined the group closer. They were all carrying heavy bags, presumably to take to the Guild, and one of them had apparently been injured, as they were wrapped up in bandages.

"Dammit, my legs are giving out," one of the adventurers moaned.

"Give me your bag," one of the others said kindly. "I'll carry it."

There was a shuffle, and the first adventurer passed their bag onto the second. "Sorry," they mumbled.

If only we could be such a good team, I thought wistfully, staring after them with dazzled eyes. *Oh, if only.*

Just then, the injured adventurer started grumbling. "It's a helluva long way to the Guild," they muttered. "It'd be a lot easier if we could move by wagon or something..."

He wasn't wrong—I knew from personal experience the Guild was inconveniently far away from the dungeon. Aramthurst did have a service to transport supplies between the two locations, but there were so many problems with it that hardly anyone actually used it.

"Don't be crazy—that'll just cut down our profits," I heard one of the other adventurers reply with a sigh. "Put up with it and walk."

“I wanna hurry back and drink already...” the injured adventurer moaned.

Once they’d walked off, I muttered thoughtfully to myself, “So, transport by wagon costs too much, huh? Well, the service *does* cost money, and if you were to borrow a cart...”

I trailed off, wincing. Those hefty bags the adventurers had been carrying were their meal ticket—they contained the Demonic Stones and monster materials they’d gathered during their grueling travels through the dungeon, which they had to sell in order to make any profit. Those bags couldn’t be discarded, no matter what.

Sure, there were some people who lingered around the dungeon’s entrance, offering to transport goods for adventurers by horse-drawn wagon, but their ranks were plagued by a few, shall we say, “bad actors.” Leaving valuable cargo in any of their hands was just too risky.

On top of that, those who offered wagon transportation services needed money to maintain their horses, which made the cost of hiring them rather high. When you combined that fact with the reality that most adventurers wouldn’t minding hauling their baggage a bit farther after they already had to lug it all the way through the dungeon and back to the surface, it wasn’t surprising that the wagon service was little used, and that adventurers most often found their way to the Guild on foot. There were exceptions of course, but regardless, the distance between the Guild and the dungeon’s entrance remained a persistent issue.

“I...might be able to do something about that,” I realized with a grin.

As Shannon watched the elves’ continuing performance with a satisfied look on her face, my mind revolved around the idea that had just come to me. Slowly, I began putting my thoughts in order.

***

The same day Lyle took Shannon into town, Clara was working with another party she was acquainted with. She entered the dungeon with them, and worked as one of their supporters. The job was no different the usual, but once they emerged from the dungeon, they found themselves confronted with the same issue they always had.

Just like always, the party had slain a multitude of monsters in the dungeon, collecting the Demonic Stones that lay within them and tearing off any of the parts that had a use. But the more they fought, the more they obtained, and the more their bags grew in size. In the end, they wound up thoroughly weighed down by their spoils.

The two figures outside seemed to have thought of this issue as well. The girl held a sign declaring, “To the Guild, 3 Silver.” It seemed to have once read “5 Silver,” but it seemed there had been an attempt to erase and replace the original number. The man standing beside the girl just happened to be Lyle.

That girl must be the Boinga I’ve been hearing about, Clara thought. *With that flashy red dress and the apron, she certainly fits the description.*

Approaching Lyle, Clara asked, “What are you doing?” As she waited for his answer, she examined the somewhat large cart that was sitting behind him. It looked like it had originally been a two-wheeled pushcart, but some DIY work had been done to get it up to four wheels.

“Well,” Lyle said, a bit sheepishly, “I thought I’d open up a supply-shipping business.”

Clara mulled a bit over this response. “Are you giving up on being an adventurer, then?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not giving up. It’s just that I’ve been tinkering with this cart, and I’d like to earn enough to cover the costs. Would you say three silver’s expensive?”

Inwardly, Clara sighed. *It would be idiotic to pay three silver just to transport some goods across the city. The path from the dungeon to the Guild* is *a hassle, but at that high a rate, we’d be better off walking.*

“Yes, I’d say that price is quite steep,” she finally said. “How steep would depend on the amount transported, but I wouldn’t want to pay any more than one silver regardless.”

Lyle turned to Boinga with a knowing look in his eyes. “See? I told you it was too high.”

“Damn chicken, please don’t feel discouraged. Our services are worth three

silver at the very *least*. Believe in yourself."

She doesn't seem like she's going to waver, Clara thought, eyeing the automaton. She glanced over at Lyle just in time to see him nervously reach for his blue Gem. He gripped it and rolled it around fretfully in his hand. *That's a habit of his*, she mused.

"All right," Lyle said suddenly, finally seeming to have come to a decision. "What do you say we do a test run? Clara, I'll let you ride absolutely free of charge just to get a feel for the service I'm offering."

Clara hesitated a moment. "I must decline. I don't have the right to decide that."

This was when Clara's acquaintance, who'd been listening to the entire exchange, chose to weigh in.

"You know this guy, Clara?" he asked. "If it's free, we might as well give it a go. But sir, madam...you sure you can carry this many bags?"

It was a legitimate question—there were around twenty members in the man's party, and much of what they were hauling around was metal. Their luggage was certainly nothing to scoff at.

That cart seems large enough to have the space to accommodate everything, Clara mused, *but it's hard to imagine Lyle's going to be able to pull it once it's all loaded up.* Taking a closer look at the cart, she cocked her head. *In the first place, the shape is off—it's like they just stuck four wheels onto a platform. It's not properly designed to be pushed or pulled*.

Indeed, unlike an ordinary cart, Lyle's was just a long box with four wheels. There was what looked to be a handle at the front, but it jutted into the cargo platform rather than out of it.

Clara glanced at her companions; they looked similarly confused.

Boinga, however, was unphased. "Indeed, we can," she told the party leader. "We'll take half of your supplies, as well as your injured members."

Without further ado, both the humans and the cargo were loaded aboard, Lyle and Boinga hopping atop the cart alongside them. The sight made Clara's

head hurt.

“What are you doing, Lyle? You’re not going to tell *us* to pull it, are you?”

The members of the adventuring party not on board the cart gave Lyle wary looks, but despite that, Lyle smiled.

“I highly doubt I would be able to run a business like that,” he said, chuckling. “Look, if I just do this...”

Lyle reached out and grabbed the handle at the front of the cart, and despite the lack of people pushing or pulling it, it began to slowly inch forward. And, despite everything loaded onto it, the cart seemingly moved without issue.

“I-It moved!” Lyle cried, his face lighting up.

But Boinga, who was sitting next to him, didn’t seem nearly as satisfied. “It’s unfortunate that we can’t increase the output any further. We could do a lot more with some extra horsepower.”

“What’s this?” The party leader asked, beginning to laugh. “This is interesting!”

At a glance, the other adventurers in his group seemed to be brimming with curiosity as well.

“How’s it work?” one of them asked. “I mean, how do you move a wagon without a horse?”

“Can you even *call* it a wagon if there’s no horse?” another adventurer mused aloud.

A third adventurer stared at the cart, perplexed. “So they’re even making things like this these days,” he muttered thoughtfully.

It was a rather calm reaction to an invention that would have caused a commotion anywhere else, but they *were* in Aramthurst, after all. The entire city was overflowing with peculiar contraptions; to city residents, Lyle’s cart merely looked like another of the Academy’s latest innovations.

Clara, however, knew differently. *That thing is amazing,* she thought. *It’s amazing, but...Lyle, what exactly are you thinking? Are you* really *starting a business*?

Oblivious to Clara's churning mind, the party of adventurers breathed a sigh of relief. They were just happy not to have so much to carry; evidently, they didn't see the cart as anything more than a convenient new vehicle.

Lyle, meanwhile, was gleefully steering the cart, directing it down Aramthurst's main road. The cart's pace was about the same as the rest of the adventuring party striding along beside it, but that didn't seem to be Lyle's choice. It seemed more likely that the cart's load was so heavy that he couldn't coax it into moving any faster.

"There's still some room for improvement," Clara heard him say decisively. "I'll draft something up when we get back."

Watching Lyle so intently musing over the cart, Clara found herself overcome with a rather conflicted emotion.

***

That night, I found myself in the storehouse, modifying the cart with Boinga. We'd made the executive decision to buy a wooden cart back when we'd gone to the market, thinking the durability of the material wouldn't be an issue, but alas, it had come back to bite us. We were having to use a more sturdy material after all.

At the moment, Boinga was doing most of the work—she'd donned a welding mask and was currently processing metal to affix to the body of the cart. As she worked, the occasional flurry of sparks sputtered around the room.

"If possible, I'd appreciate if you could make the cart a bit bigger," I said. "Oh, and I'd like it to be faster too."

Boinga turned to me and stared at me for a long second through the mask, then shrugged. "You're a greedy bastard, you are," she replied, her voice coming out muffled. "Anything beyond metalwork's unknown territory to me—you'll have to ask someone else for assistance with magic and whatnot."

The first person who popped into my mind to ask was Professor Damian. He seemed busy though, and I didn't want to get in his way. Plus, taking Boinga into his laboratory was just asking for trouble. She was bound to get in a fight with Lily.

They're both automatons, but they get along terribly, I mused. *Are they broken, or did the ancients make them like that on purpose? It's hard to say*.

Then an idea came to me. "Come to think of it, Clara's arm is a Demonic Tool, isn't it...?"

Clara didn't just love the library—she'd gained an abundant amount of knowledge from lurking in there as well. It was possible she could come up with some sort of brilliant idea that we could make use of.

I set down the tools I'd been using just in time for Shannon to stride into the storehouse.

"Sis says it's dinner time and you have to come in," she said snottily.

Oh, it's that time already? I thought, surprised.

I turned to reply to Shannon, but the tiny girl took one look at me and giggled.

"What?"

"Your face is all black," she said, giggling again. "Go wash up before dinner, okay? You're filthy."

And with that, she was off. I watched her leave with palpable irritation.

"I can't stand that girl..." I muttered.

As I glared at the storehouse door, Boinga brought me a clean towel and wiped off my face. "Now, now," she said chidingly. "Don't move, you damn chicken."

"Hey, stop that! And wait, how come you're not dirty?"

By the nature of her work alone, Boinga should have been far worse off than me in the cleanliness department. Despite that, she was clean as a whistle.

"I, Boinga, am incredibly high performance," she said with a grin, showing off her spotless figure. "Dirt does not stick to me, and even if it does, it immediately falls off. In case of damage and malfunction, I am additionally programmed to use your—"

"Come to think of it, you only have that one set of clothes. You wanna go out and buy something else?"

Having only a single outfit is cruel, even for an automaton.

My words didn't seem to please Boinga, however. She began to bite frustratedly at her handkerchief.

"I... I appreciate the sentiment, but my chicken, are you seriously telling me to *strip*? To discard my maid uniform?! Don't take that the wrong way—I'd be happy to strip for you! It's just...are you seriously implying I must wear something else?! I take great pride in this uniform!"

Internally, I groaned in exasperation*. This girl's such a pain. I just felt a bit bad for her and thought it would be nice to buy her clothes! Her turning me down is confusing enough, but I've got no clue what the rest of that rant was about.*

Finally, I just sighed. "If you're all right just wearing that, then I won't worry about it either. But, uh...I *do* think you should wash your clothes every once in a while. Won't they start to smell?"

"They will *NOT*! A-And, even if they do, they'll only give off a dreamy, floral smell that tickles the imagination!" Giving me a disgruntled look, Boinga muttered, "Perhaps you have been corrupted a bit too much by *real women*. Despite how I might appear, I am something more—a masterpiece created in pursuit of a perfect ideal!"

I scoffed. "A masterpiece that calls her master a damn chicken, huh?"

"I'm calling you master in my heart!" Boinga shouted, quivering. Her eyes went teary.

I'm not really sure what that's supposed to mean, but it doesn't matter how confidently you say it—I refuse to be deceived! I thought, not trusting her innocent look.

"Whatever, I guess it doesn't matter," I said, turning toward the storehouse door. "Let's eat. Today is Miranda's turn to cook, isn't it?"

"P-Please wait! Don't leave me behind! You damn chicken, you're going to make me cry. Keep it up and I'll cry so much it'll annoy the hell out of you! You'll hear me sobbing right by your ear as you sleep!"

I turned and looked back at her, smiling slightly. "I don't think you can get any

more annoying than you already are," I told her plainly.

Boinga lurched back, pressing her hand exaggeratedly to her heart. "To think you'd disparage me with such a smile on your face!" she proclaimed, her eyes lighting up. "Why, you can't even imagine how happy that makes me!"

I haven't known her for long, but I'm getting the feeling that she'll be delighted no matter what I do to her, I thought with a sigh. *Regardless, I'm famished—time to head inside.*

Without further ado, I made my way outside and headed toward the house.

"C'mon, hurry up, or I really will leave you behind."

"I'm comiiiiiing!"

***

The next day, I went to Aramthurst's central library along with Boinga. My goal was to find Clara there, and I accomplished the task with little trouble—an unsurprising result, as she spent nearly every one of her days off in the building.

As I invited Clara to join me in the break room, Boinga headed off on her own to do some research. Thus, I gave Clara an explanation of my current plan alone.

"So you're using Professor Damian's magic to move the cart?" she asked, seemingly not entirely on board, but curious nonetheless. "That's certainly an interesting proposition."

I nodded, although I was actually more curious over why no one else had bothered to try it before.

"To be honest, while I'm trying out a number of things with the cart, I keep running into different problems," I explained. "Would you consider helping me out?"

Clara brought her drink to her mouth and took a sip. "I wouldn't mind. But I do have one request."

"What sort?"

"Well, it's really just a favor," she said quickly. "Or rather, a cart. I'd like you to

make one for me, if you're willing. I can use Damian's magic too."

That was news to me. "You *can*?"

Clara smiled slightly and lifted up her left arm. "The professor's magic is what I use to operate this artificial arm. I use it as though I'm manipulating only a portion of a doll."

Ah, I see, I thought. *She probably wants to make her own job of carrying supplies easier. No wonder she's so willing to help out.*

"Sure, that's an understandable request," I said, nodding. "I'll try to make it happen."

"Then I'll drop by to have a look tomorrow," Clara said cheerfully. "Carrying supplies is quite the grueling task—it would be nice if I had something like that to assist me in traveling around the dungeon."

"You're a huge help. Also—"

"Is there something else?"

I bashfully scratched at my cheek. "Actually, there's a book I'm looking for..."

***

The morning of another day dawned with no end to the glaring rays of the sun in sight. Novem stepped out into the yard and right into the gleaming light, on her way to hang up some laundry. Moments later, Aria and Sophia tore out of the house, as they had every day recently.

"Those two are really doing their best," Novem murmured, smiling slightly as she watched them go.

No sooner had the two girls vanished than other figure skulked into the yard—it was Lyle. Novem's face lit up at the sight of him, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

"Are you going to start training now, milord?"

"Yeah, we'll start once Shannon gets there," Lyle replied, then paused to give way to a deep yawn. "Ugh. Lately, I've been so sleepy I don't know what to do with myself."

“That’s because you’re staying up so late every night,” Novem chided, her motherly side coming out. “Make sure you don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right,” Lyle agreed, nodding.

Novem eyed him with skepticism—while he hadn’t offered any particular objections to her suggestion, she’d already issued him the same warning several times to no avail. There had been no signs of Lyle’s condition improving. Still...Novem had to admit she found it a bit endearing to see him get so engrossed in his work. His exhaustion was only proof of his passion.

“To shift to another topic, I’ve been wanting to ask you about the dungeon. I know you said we wouldn’t be going inside for a while, but are you sure that’s all right?”

Lyle had announced not long ago that he’d decided their party wouldn’t be entering Aramthurst’s dungeon for the foreseeable future. Part of the reason he’d made that choice was because they hadn’t made a decent profit from their last few ventures, but the primary factor had been that both Lyle and the other members of their party had wanted to take some time to focus on the individual ventures they’d begun. Unfortunately, this decision also meant that they would have absolutely no income for quite a while.

Lyle, however, seemed unconcerned. “It’ll be fine,” he said confidently. “We’ve got a few gemstones to sell if things take a turn for the worse. Oh, and can you make enough food for an extra portion for lunch and dunner today?”

Novem nodded. “For Clara, right?”

The past few days, Clara had often joined their party for lunch and dinner, as Lyle needed her around to work on his vehicle, which he was rushing to completion. Novem couldn’t help but have conflicting feeling over it.

I don’t really want him too involved with that thing, she thought, discomfited, *but Lord Lyle* is *having a lot of fun working on it, and I’d feel bad taking that away from him*.

Thinking of the broken tank in the storehouse, Novem’s fingers began to itch—normally, she would have thrown it away as quickly as possible, but now that Lyle had taken a liking to it, she couldn’t bring herself to do so. Thus, it

remained.

"Come to think of it," Lyle said, lifting his hands into the air and stretching out his muscles, "is there anything you'd like to do, Novem? Now that we've all got our projects, I'm worried we might be putting too much of a burden on you."

Novem's forehead wrinkled; she couldn't help but be a bit bothered by the question. *There's nothing for me to learn here in the first place.*

Forcing a slight smile, Novem replied, "No, there's nothing in particular. I already learned everything I needed to know back home, and besides, I enjoy looking after everyone."

Lyle examined her, seemingly no less concerned. "Why not let Boinga handle a bit more of that?" he asked finally. "I think you need a bit more breathing room, Novem."

Novem chuckled. "I'm fine; housework is like a hobby to me. But perhaps if I find something I want to learn, I'll ask her to step in."

Lyle's face turned apologetic, and Novem felt a little flutter of happiness in her heart.

Ah, well. The fact that he's asking these things just goes to show how much he's thinking of me.

***

That afternoon, the cart-construction team—now consisting of me, Boinga, and Clara—stood round the newest iteration of what we'd been working on. The cart had been completely remade, molded around a skeletal structure Boinga had produced from iron pipes, and now appeared closer in shape to a horse-drawn wagon than its original form. It had four tires, a spacious interior, a cargo area in the back, and a driver's seat in the front.

Staring at what we'd created, Clara said, "I'm getting the feeling that this isn't a cart anymore. In fact...I don't even know what it is at this point."

It's still a wheeled thing that carries things, I thought consideringly. *So...it's probably fair enough to keep calling it a cart, right? Although, we* did *reinforce it with a variety of Demonic Tools and other contraptions... Maybe it does need a*

new name at this point.

I scratched my head, then shrugged. “We can decide on a new name later. At this stage, there are still too many problems with it for daily use to be practical.”

It wasn’t that the cart hadn’t improved—compared to before, it could transport heavier loads and travel at faster speeds, but the issue was that controlling it placed too intense of a burden on the one steering it. Maneuvering it around for long periods of time, like you’d have to in the dungeon, would be impossible with the cart as it was now.

Clara pushed her glasses up her nose with one finger, then inspected the cart. “There’s a limit to how much the cart can move using a human’s mana alone. Professor Damian might have an idea about how to resolve the issue, if you ask him. He might even draw something up if he’s interested.”

“We can’t do that,” I said, shaking my head.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to rely on him for everything; it’d make me feel bad. But more than that, I’d like us to complete this all on our own.”

And, more secretly...I was just having fun working on such an intriguing project. If I was going to bring it to Profession Damian, I wanted it to be in a more finished form at the very least.

“Could you strengthen it a bit more with your Demonic Tools?” Boinga asked Clara. “Make use of that mysterious “magic power” you all possess, and fix it that way.”

Clara sighed. “Please refrain from thinking of Demonic Tools as all powerful. Magic has its limits. However...” Clara set a hand on the cart and thought a bit, then added, “There might be a way to supply the cart with mana. You can extract it from rarium or get it directly from Demonic Stones.”

“So you *can* do it,” Boinga angrily pointed out. “That’s magic for you.”

From what I’d gathered from Boinga, the ancients had never used magic, so to her, it was a strange, incomprehensible phenomenon. From where I was

standing, however, Boinga was infinitely more mysterious.

Clara's perpetually drowsy eyes narrowed even more than usual at Boinga's cranky reply. "If we use rarium or Demonic Stones, that will increase the cart's maintenance costs, plain and simple. In my opinion, it would be better to downsize it and lower the load capacity. Then it won't be too much for one person to operate, and will have more maneuverability in the dungeon."

I pondered this. *Even if we do make the cart smaller, it'll still greatly increase the amount of supplies one person can take with them. And if it's only to be used in the dungeon, the decreased size might actually be a boon.*

Boinga, however, was not content with this solution. "Ultimately, I want to advance this technology enough to get the armored tank in the storehouse moving," she said. "Making it smaller won't help us there."

Clara glanced at the storehouse, and the tank peeking out of the open door. "Even using Demonic Stones, you wouldn't be able to move something that large. You'd need Mana Crystals for that, and those will cost you at least several hundred gold coins. Is that a price you can manage?"

Boinga's whole face screwed up in disgust, but it wasn't at the expense. Yet another new term had popped up before her—Mana Crystals.

"This is why these fantasy worlds are so..." she grumbled.

If she said something else, I didn't hear it, since that was when the third head decided to pipe up from his place inside the Jewel.

"Mana Crystals?" he muttered. "Come to think of it, Lyle, don't you have one? You know, that peridot you found during the dungeon expedition a while back?"

"Just because he has one doesn't mean there's a reason to use it," the fourth head refuted. "Mana Crystals are a great portable asset; if we could use Demonic Stones or rarium in it's place, it'd venture to say that would be better."

Curious about Clara's opinion, I went to tell her about the Mana Crystal, but she pulled out several books she'd brought with her before I got the chance.

“These are written about Demonic Tools,” she explained. “The problem is, what we’re trying to accomplish is so revolutionary, hardly any of them are useful.”

I picked out one of the books and cracked it open. It went into detail on how Demonic Tools were produced, and the principles by which they operated. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and looked up to see Boinga grabbing a book as well. She began to flip through it at a breakneck pace.

“Can you really read like that?” I asked.

“I’m scanning, to be more precise,” Boinga responded, not even pausing her page-turning for a moment. “It shouldn’t be an issue; I’m evaluating the information as I go. It’s far more primitive than I expected...”

This comment seemed to fluster Clara. “W-Well, that book only contains the basics of the most foundational information! The manufacturing methods of most modern Demonic Tools are treated as trade secrets. Anyway, Boinga, do you have the same Art as me?”

“Wait, you have an Art, Clara?” I asked, turning to her.

Clara gave me a slightly bashful nod. “My Art is special. You come across them now and then—Arts that do not have any stages, that come all in one package. I’m grateful I manifested anything at all, but it is completely useless in battle.”

As if to demonstrate, Clara spread out her hand, and a hefty book materialized on top of it.

Boinga’s eyes widened. “*That’s* useless? You can’t be serious.” She turned to me. “Did you see that?” she demanded. “This woman just manifested a book out of thin air!”

The third head—bookworm as he was—seemed quite interested by this development. “Nice,” he said appreciatively. “Clara’s truly amazing. I don’t know what to say other than, Lyle, you can’t let such an incredible talent get away.”

My eyebrows rose. The third head was usually so flippant and unconcerned with things that his strong interest in Clara surprised me.

That almost sounded like he thought I should try and bring her into my party and make her one of our comrades.

Clara shook her head at Boinga's ranting, then explained, "My Art is called Walking Library. To put it simply, it stores every book I have ever read in my life. Like this, I can instantly manifest that stored knowledge in tangible book form."

"That's incredible," I said sincerely. "It may not be useful in the heat of battle, but it's a valuable Art outside of that."

Again, she shook her head. "There are plenty of people with similar—no, even greater Arts of the same sort. Those people easily find employment at the Academy and the library. But they would not hire me."

Confused, I stayed silent, listening as Clara insisted that her Art fell short of that of others in every aspect imaginable, and that neither the Academy nor the library saw any value in it.

"When I use my Art, I picture a vast library within myself, with shelves stocked with all the books I've ever read. I can pull any of those books off the shelf and manifest it into reality whenever I want. But I've seen people who can completely understand everything in a book just by touching the outer cover, and can easily exclude all unnecessary information to focus in on what they're searching for. They can even duplicate the books as much as they want as a bonus."

Boinga picked up the book Clara had produced and looked at it from every angle, then began flipping through it.

"The reason I work as a supporter is because the Academy and library would not hire me," Clara continued. "My lifestyle satisfies me well enough; I can read as much as I want."

I looked over at Boinga. *Clara probably never even imagined she would possess an ability similar to hers,* I thought.

Boinga closed the book she'd been examining with a snap. "Unfortunately," she said abruptly, gathering both my and Clara's attention, "I do not have any such ridiculous JRPG-esque abilities. I am simply gathering and storing data from visual input. Albeit I am performing content analysis at the same time."

A...JRPG? I cocked my head. *Is that some kind of ancient term?*

“I-Is that so?” Clara stammered, her tone apologetic. “My apologies.”

I rolled my eyes. In my opinion, it was a waste of time to feel bad because of anything you did toward this specific automaton. *However...*

"However,” Boinga began, cutting my thought off before it could finish forming. “I don’t think you have any reason to feel discouraged, Clara. Your Art is wonderful, as far as I’m concerned.

I found myself impressed. “So, you actually *can* be kind from time to time.”

A look of deep displeasure formed on Boinga’s face. She glared at me.

“Wh-What?”

“I *despise* empty flattery. Sure, I’ll praise you to high heaven, but I have no reason to be partial to anyone else. This is simply a fair appraisal.”

“So...you’re being serious, then?” Clara asked, looking a bit flustered. She seemed unsure of how to respond. “Should I be thanking you?”

Boinga scoffed. “I don’t need gratitude from anyone besides my chicken. It would just be a nuisance. Anyway, do these compiled books disappear?”

Clara shook her head. “For Arts similar to mine, I’ve heard duplicated books generally disappear after a week or two, but in my case, the books don’t go away. The people at the library were surprised by that.”

Clara explained to us that it wasn’t as if she could create hundreds of volumes on her own, however. It seemed she was limited to making a few books a day, a fact that meant that neither the Academy or the library say her ability as a threat to their sovereignty.

“Couldn’t you just earn a living producing books, then?” Boinga asked, her face confused. “I’d think you’d be able to open a store if you wanted to.”

“No,” Clara refuted. “I wouldn’t be able to make enough money to live off of, even if I sold several books to a second-hand bookstore or two every day, and I don’t have the funds to open a store. I *do,* however, make a decent living as an adventurer. That said, opening a bookstore one day is a dream of mine.”

I can imagine, I thought. *Living out the rest of her life surrounded by books sounds exactly like the sort of thing Clara would dream of.*

"Yep, that's the life," the third head concurred. "I would have loved to spend my days reading too."

Sounds like the third head is in full support of her dream, I mused. *He was born as a noble and was later forced to become the lord of House Walt territory, so such things were probably far beyond his reach when he was alive.*

"Now then, let us put an end to that inconsequential topic," Boinga said, taking charge.

"Don't call peoples' dreams inconsequential," I said with a sigh.

I glanced at Clara from the corner of my eye and felt even worse. *Just look at her! She looks like she's practically turned to stone! Here I was, thinking of Boinga in a new light... Obviously, that was a mistake.*

Boinga placed a hand on the cart. "What's the point in mulling over a dream that's already so practical and plausible? My chicken's orders take precedence! Now then, I've learned the basics, so let me reexamine the blueprints."

Boinga began removing parts from the wagon. I exchanged a look with Clara; I was about to apologize to her for Boinga's attitude, but then she sent me a smile.

"What's up?"

"I'm...kind of happy. She accepted my dream as practical and plausible. Everyone else tells me I ought to think of something that'll lead to my happiness as a woman."

Uh...I don't really get what that means, to be honest. But if Clara's happy, all's well that ends well, I guess.

Chapter 60: Targeted Party

Summer was on its way out, and autumn was definitely approaching. It was hard to believe three whole months had passed since we'd first arrived in Aramthurst; the time had come and gone before I knew it. It was also a bit sobering to realize that my only noteworthy deeds over the whole span had been learning martial arts from Boinga and tampering with my cart.

Speaking of the cart, I'd spent another late night hard at work in the storehouse. I'd only recently gone inside to clean up and head to bed.

Yawning, I stepped out of my lonesome bath. "I have an early morning," I muttered to myself. "I better get to sleep."

My mind drifted back to the midnight snack Novem had left out for me as I stepped into the living room. It'd been deliciou—

I paused, staring at the two women stretched out across the living room sofa—Aria and Sophia.

They must have tired themselves to sleep, I thought. I instinctively looked away. *But...should they really be laying around in their undergarments like that? I mean, it's hot outside, but still...* I sighed. *Maybe they've just gotten that comfortable living here in the Circry house.*

My eyes drifted slowly back to the girls. Neither of them were wearing anything that carried a shred of sex appeal, I noticed. The problem was all the bare skin before my eyes—the plump, healthy limbs, the exposed midriffs... It didn't help that Aria's slender, muscular build was on full display, and the way Sophia was sleeping emphasized her large chest.



Honestly, where am I even allowed to look?! Are they even aware that I'm in this house?!

My thoughts came to a shrieking halt. "Come to think of it, I only ever see them in the morning, if even that," I muttered.

Everyone had been so busy lately, to the point that Sophia and Aria were rarely ever in the house. I was no better; I spent my nights laboring away on the cart, and I often ate my meals separately from the others. I couldn't remember the last time I'd sat down with either one of the two girls in front of me for a nice, long conversation.

My thoughts were interrupted by murmurings from within the Jewel. My ancestors sounded strangely excited.

"Sure, they've got the looks," the second head murmured. "But intelligence-wise..."

"What a shapely behind..." the third head breathed.

The fourth head's tone was thoughtful. "Aria would be ideal if she had a bit more meat on her," he mused.

"They both look entirely healthy," the fifth head refuted. "Thankfully, it seems they're not pushing themselves too hard."

The sixth head hummed in thought. "How to put this..." he muttered. "There's just...no sexiness to them, as they are now. They should be a bit more modest."

The seventh head chuckled and agreed, "Yes, when they're this bold about it, I don't really feel anything."

I sighed. *I don't recall asking about any of your preferences.*

Ignoring any further ramblings from my ancestors, I focused back on the two girls in front of me. I couldn't help but think of how much the temperature had been dropping lately—I couldn't just leave them laying like that, so exposed. I turned and left the room, planning on fetching a blanket, but was brought to a halt when I nearly barreled straight into Miranda.

"Oh dear," she said, giving me a warm smile over the blanket she had

clutched in her hands. “You got quite the eyeful of those two, I’m guessing?”

I felt my face flush red. For some reason, my cheeks felt three times as hot as they’d been just moments before, when I’d caught sight of the girls in their undergarments. It almost felt like I’d been caught doing something I shouldn’t have.

Ah, so this is what embarrassment feels like.

Miranda laughed softly, then made her way over to the sofa and draped the blanket over the duo sleeping away on it.

Watching her, so overflowing with kindness, just as she’d been when I first met her, my idea of her seemed to fracture, to the point that I felt unable to understand her true intentions. I thought back over the times I’d come across her recently—occasionally I’d seen her conversing with Shannon or Clara, and more rarely, Boinga. I’d seen her talking to Novem too, but their relationship seemed very businesslike. I was pretty sure they only spoke about chores.

“Miranda, can I ask you something?” I said suddenly.

“What could it be? Did you want to see my undergarments next?”

I immediately averted my eyes from her face—some strange sensuality had begun to exude from her, and it made me feel flustered. I could tell my face was growing even redder; all I could do was press my hands against it to hide it as best I could.

A little laugh slipped from Miranda’s lips. “How cute,” she purred. “But let’s leave the jokes at that—what was your question?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but paused at the sight of Miranda settling on top of the backrest of the sofa. She lifted her legs high, then folded one over the other despite the fact she was wearing a very short skirt.

I get the feeling I’m being teased, I thought, forcefully directing my eyes to her face.

“Miranda...” I took a deep breath. “Why did you proclaim you wanted to be my number one like that? I get the feeling someone like you, well...would have been able to pull that off better, if you’d wanted to.”

It was hard for me to put into words what I felt, but I just *knew* that she hadn't had to make that proclamation and make an enemy of all the other girls in order to get what she wanted. In fact, before that moment, she'd actually gotten along quite well with the duo still sleeping just yards away.

"You think I could have handled it better, huh? Well, that's certainly true, but I think things would have turned out far worse in the end if I had."

My brow wrinkled in confusion. "H-How so?" I mumbled.

"Well, I'd imagine things would have devolved into an ugly battle for control between Novem and I, albeit behind the scenes. Aria and Sophia would have gotten wrapped up in it eventually, I'm sure. Trust me—it would've been simply awful."

I still felt like I wasn't quite understanding. *What is she implying would happen, exactly? I'm curious, but I get the feeling I'm not actually supposed to know*.

"An...ugly battle?" I repeated.

Miranda smirked. "Indeed. All's fair in love and war, and there are plenty of weapons at our disposal. That's why I made my proclamation and caused a bit of chaos. Did you find it a bother?"

If I'm being honest, yes, I thought frankly. *Still, it doesn't feel right for me to go after her for it.*

My shoulders dropped, and I let out a long sigh. "I just want everyone to get along a bit more."

"I know," Miranda said. Her smile didn't move an inch. "That's why I riled them up."

What...? Why would Miranda just fan the flames in response to my earnest plea not to fight? I wondered, my head starting to ache. A truly baffled expression must have come over my face then, since Miranda giggled.

"Lyle, you know someone with a harem party, don't you?"

I nodded, assuming she was talking about Narx, who I'd gotten to know a little better lately. I'd seen him at the Guild a few times after our initial meeting, and

we'd grown close enough now that we exchanged a few words each time we met. I'd noticed that he still seemed to be pulling the harem party thing off seamlessly—his girls all appeared to get along, in contrast to the strained air of my own party.

I'd consulted Narx a few times on how to harmonize my party once more, but at this point, he seemed just as lost as me.

"The grass is always greener, as they say," said Miranda.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, puzzled. "The girls in Narx's party all get along really well with him. In fact, they just added another member the other day, so now they're a party of five."

Miranda gave me that mysterious smile of hers again, then stood and made for her own room. "You don't have to understand now," she said over her shoulder. "In fact, it's fine if you never do. Just remember this—everything I'm doing is for your sake."

With that, she was gone, leaving me only Aria and Sophia's snores for company. I relaxed and gripped the Jewel tightly in my fist, letting my mind wander.

"Does that girl really have my blood in her veins?" the second head asked disbelievingly.

The third head chuckled. "Mom's blood is definitely doing some heavy lifting with her."

"Having multiple women must be hell," the fourth head breathed, his voice tense. "My stomach is hurting just watching."

"I... I don't get what she means at all. Don't ask me," muttered the fifth head.

The sixth head sighed. "How did Milleia's descendent end up like this?"

"Regardless, I'm not inclined to watch such an ugly battle between women," the seventh head said, his tone stern.

Just as I thought—these guys are as useless as usual when it comes to women.

Perhaps I would have dwelled on their incompetence longer, but my musings were interrupted by the sound of someone babbling in their sleep. I couldn't

quite hear what was being said, but when I looked over at the sofa, I saw Aria had kicked the blanket off of herself, and, uh... I couldn't help but notice that her pose was less than ladylike. Her legs were spread wide.

"Have some modesty," the second head muttered.

I found myself conflicted. While I didn't particularly feel anything, looking at her in such an absurd position while only in her undergarments, I still felt as if I shouldn't approach.

Still...I can't just leave her like that, I thought with a sigh. *I'll just restore the blanket back to its rightful place, and push her legs back together while I'm at it.*

I drifted closer, but then paused as I smelled the faint scent of some kind of medicine.

"Is that...ointment for muscle pain?" I wondered aloud.

I looked at Aria closer, and quickly noticed she was covered in wounds. She seemed to have smeared medicine over most of them—I could tell it was the same ointment Shannon used frequently for her muscle pain by the scent alone.

The fifth head chuckled lightly. "What's this?" he asked, tone approving. "Looks like those two are doing their best out there. Honestly, it's probably good for them—they can blow off some steam outside instead of getting bogged down here in the house."

It seems everyone is doing their best, I mused.

Spurred by the thought, I asked, "Do you think everyone is doing better than they were before? Could it be that it's better for me to leave them to their own devices instead of deciding on a goal for us to collectively work toward?"

"That answer will change based on the party," the third head said, a hint of a teasing tone in his voice. "These kids are all talented, so they'll do well even if they just act on their own. But they'll do their beset when they're skillfully nudged along."

Nudged along? I thought, head starting to ache. *But by who?*

I voiced my question aloud, but the third simply replied, "Why don't you dwell

on that for a while?" and refused to speak on it further.

Whatever, it's already late, I thought with a sigh. *I'll just go back to my room.*

***

On the third floor of Aramthurst's dungeon, Boinga, Clara, and I were riding around on our cart. Thanks to our hard work, the cart had begun to operate at a significantly higher level this month, and could now maneuver around the dungeon's corridors without issue.

Clara was currently sitting in the driver's seat, getting a feel for the controls.

"Teaching others to drive the cart shouldn't be a problem," she told me. "Even I'm able to operate it without issue."

Boinga leaned out of the cargo area of the cart, looking around. "It's like an abandoned building in here," she said, eyes wide with interest. "No, the ceiling's a bit too high, and the halls are too wide for that, but... Huh. It's almost like a building made specifically for people to come storming through."

I winced; Boinga had completely ignored Clara, acting like she hadn't spoken at all. Still, I couldn't quite bring myself to address it.

After a pause, I turned to Boinga and said with a sigh, "Well, obviously."

She gave me a look. "Is such a thing *so* obvious to you? I, for one, can't help but be curious. Why do you think they manifest in such a convenient form?"

I don't know if I'd call a dungeon's form convenient, I mused. *It doesn't feel like the right term for a place that's so dangerous. Although, I guess Aramthurst's dungeon* is *pretty well maintained; that must be why it feels so easily navigable to her.*

Casting those thoughts aside, I turned back to Clara. "You want me to swap with you?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "I-I'm quite all right."

Looking at her more closely, I noticed that Clara seemed completely entranced with driving. She even looked like she was having fun.

I seem to have come across a side of hers I didn't expect, I mused, smiling

slightly.

Personally, I was less focused on the fun aspect of things, and more relieved that I'd finally gotten my hands on a way to move more easily through the dungeon.

"Hopefully, this makes our mission a bit—"

"Oh, looks like someone's injured!" Boinga said suddenly, cutting me off.

Reacting quickly, Clara brought the cart to a halt. A voice soon became clear, no longer hidden beneath the sound of the cart's rolling wheels. The three of us climbed from the cart, then proceeded down the corridor, our path lit by the lantern in my hand.

Before long, we found a party of injured adventurers.

***

We'd ended up transporting the party of adventurers we'd come across back to the surface and to the hospital. As soon as we exited the dungeon, the leader had started to thank us again and again, tears in his eyes.

"Thank you—*truly* thank you," he'd sniffled. "Once we were no longer able to move, I was sure it was over for us."

According to him, his party had been attacked on the fifth floor. They'd barely managed to evade the persistent attacks of their foes, clawing their way back up to the third floor, but then their stamina had run out. Then, they'd been at the mercy of their attackers, who hadn't actually been monsters—they'd been other adventurers.

"I'm glad you're all right," I told the party leader.

I turned to leave, but he stopped me. Before I knew it, he'd handed me his entire wallet, which I could see at a glance contained silver and gold coins.

"I can't accept this," I protested.

"Come on, you have to," the party leader insisted, refusing to let me hand his wallet back. "I'd give you even more if I could. It's thanks to you that everyone made it back, and with all our bags to boot. You have my sincerest thanks."

Seeing that the other man wasn't going to give him, I reluctantly decided to accept his gift, then began to make my way back to the cart. Clara, who was at my side, told me about the adventurers we saved as we left—apparently, their party was among the most skilled in Aramthurst. It was a bit shocking to think that there had been adventurers lurking in the dungeon that had managed to corner them to such a degree.

Still... My eyes dropped to the wallet clasped in my hand.

"I smell money," the fourth head said, voice bursting with happiness. "And not just a small amount... A *whole pile* of it."

I could practically hear his head buzz as he made his calculations. *The old miser seems to be thinking up a new business model,* I mused.

Only moments later, the fourth head proved me right.

"Lyle, so far you've just been running a service ferrying people between the guild and the dungeon entrance, hm? Don't you think it's time you spread your reach further, into the dungeon?"

I gripped the Jewel, signaling my agreement with the idea. With so many people still around me, a verbal response was a no-go—not that this stopped the fourth head from talking.

"Let's target adventurers who are earning a lot," he rambled on. "To them, a gold coin or two is no issue. Yes, in that case, how about you take them straight from the Guild to the fifth floor of the dungeon? Traveling that far of a distance would definitely be worth the price! Oh, and on the way back, you can target adventurers that are heading out of the dungeon as well!"

It wasn't the worst plan I'd ever heard. The fifth floor was the first level where you could access the floor-transfer device, so most adventurers entering the dungeon would be heading there, and those who were on their way out would be disembarking there too.

Hmm... Can we...actually do that? We could definitely find clients, whether we're talking transportation to the fifth floor or back to the Guild.

Clara had caught on to my churning thoughts—she was looking at me funny. "You've been acting strange for a while now, Lyle," she commented.

“W-Well, I just thought of a business idea,” I stammered, a bit embarrassed.

Clara sighed, but her eyes were curious. “You’re far more entrepreneurial than you look, aren’t you? Well? What sort of business?”

I explained the proposal the fourth head had set forth—pretending it was mine, of course—and watched as Clara’s face turned conflicted.

“It’s not impossible...” she muttered, “but it might be difficult.”

“Why’s that?”

“Firstly, the dungeon’s structure will change every time, causing you to get lost,” Clara pointed out. “In addition, you’ll have to engage monsters in combat if you run into them, I would think. If the bags you’re transporting are damaged during the scuffle, you’ll have to compensate your clients for that. Taking that into account, it’s clear that expanding your business into the dungeon will be a dangerous proposition.”

She’s right, I thought. *If we lose some of the supplies that were entrusted to us due to a monster attack, just apologizing isn’t gonna cut it.*

“That *does* sound like it would be a pain...” I had to agree.

I could practically hear the fourth head’s shoulders dropping. “Oh, that’s right,” he muttered. “Your Arts are sealed at the moment. If you could use them to grasp the surrounding terrain and identify the location of monsters, things would have been quite a bit easier.”

This comment brought a certain person to mind. A person who just might be perfect for this particular job.

***

“No waaay...” Shannon moaned. “Why do I have to ride on that crazy thing?!”

“Yeah, yeah, just get on already,” I muttered. “It’s finally time for those eyes of yours to be useful.”

After our visit to the hospital, Clara and I had headed back to the Circry house, and at the moment she was standing on the sidelines as I forcefully escorted Shannon to our cart. I heaved the younger girl’s reluctant body up into it before she really started resisting.

I'd realized earlier that, unless I was woefully mistaken, this girl most likely had the ability to sense the locations of enemies within Aramthurst's dungeon. If I was right, that meant Shannon could use her eyes to tell us where monsters were, while Boinga—who would be able to easily memorize the layout of the dungeon's corridors due to her stellar memory—could tell us where we needed to go to avoid them. With the two of them working in tandem, our treks through the dungeon would be a piece of cake.

There was just one problem—Shannon wasn't exactly a fan of this plan.

"Why do I have to listen to you, huh?!" she snarled. "That's the part of all this I hate the most!"

I clicked my tongue in irritation, but didn't even get the chance to speak before Shannon started yelling at me again.

"Y-You... Did you just click your tongue?! You can't fool me; I heard it! Ugh, you gigolo! You seriously want money so badly you're even going to put *me* to work?!"

Some part of Shannon's rant seemed to give Clara pause. She gave me a strange look.

"Lyle...you were a gigolo?" she asked reluctantly. "Although now that I think about it, I haven't seen you working at all lately..."

As I stared at Clara in disbelief, Boinga grinned.

"Don't worry, damn chicken," she cheerfully added. "Even if you are a useless gigolo, I won't abandon you."

Hey! Yeah, you guys—I'm talking to you! Must all of you treat me like a gigolo? What have I done to deserve this?!

It wasn't even worth addressing out loud; at this point, I already knew there wasn't much I could do to stop them. Which was why I immediately turned my focus to persuading the root of our current drama.

"Shannon..." I said slowly, "I—"

"Could you not use my name like we're *friends* or something?" Shannon's face shriveled in distaste.

I took a deep breath, holding my irritation in. *Goddesses, this girl pisses me off.*

"I'll pay you a small cut of what we earn," I said in my best persuading voice. "You'll be able to buy a ton of candy on our way back..."

The third head's scoff reverberated in my skull. "Lyle, c'mon," he complained. "There's no way that'll—"

"A whole mountain of candy?! I'll do it! What's taking you so long, let's go!"

Shannon stared imperiously down at Boinga, Clara, and I from where she sat on the cart, now looking thoroughly at home.

So much for not wanting to go, I thought, chuckling inwardly. *Now she's urging us to pick up the pace.*

I heard a weak, "Huh...?" slip from the third head's lips. "No way," he muttered, dumbfounded. "You're telling me that actually did the trick?"

"Well, Shannon's..." The fifth head sighed. "She's a little stupid, you know. Ah well. It's probably best that the one born with the orphic eyes turned out to be an idiot."

This I heartily agreed with. If Miranda had gotten the orphic eyes, things would have been much, much worse. Perhaps Shannon's airheadedness was the silver lining on a dark cloud.

Turning my attention back to the girls, I said, "All right, let's earn some money today. If possible, I'd like us to bring in around ten gold coins a month."

Clara nodded. "With that much money, we won't even need to be adventurers anymore."

"Sounds nice," I said, smiling. "Want to run a bookstore together or something, then?"

I'd intended it as a joke, but...

"L-Let's hurry up." Clara stammered, hurriedly boarding the cart. Her face was flushed.

Shannon, meanwhile, had wrapped her hand around the handle that

controlled the cart's movements. Her expression was bright, her motivation on full display.

Boinga turned and look at me. "My chicken is a philanderer," she said with a sigh, "but that's fine. Supporting trash like you is an automaton's dream."

Okay, time to call the mechanic. I'm done with this automaton calling me trash.

***

As Lyle, Clara, Boinga, and Shannon headed out for a second time, Sophia was bringing her battle-axe down on another woman—one of great muscle and valor.

"Hiiiyah!" she shouted.

By using her Art, Sophia had greatly increased the force of this particular downward swing, but this did not give her instructor a moment's pause. The woman—who was the master of the training hall Sophia was practicing in—parried the younger girl's strike using the shield in her left hand, then swiftly swung the weapon in her right, trying to land her own blow.

Sophia decreased her weight using her Art, then purposely allowed her instructor's weapon to connect with her own. The force of the blow sent her flying back, allowing her to build up distance between herself and her opponent.

The master of the training hall straightened, propping her sword against her shoulder. "Not half bad, lassy," she said with a grin.

Sophia lowered her head. "Thank you for your guidance."

She'd acted this way from the very beginning of her training—courteously and graciously. Still, training hall master gave her a weary look.

"Don't take your eyes off your foe until the end," the woman cautioned. "Oh, and just so you know—you're still a bit rough around the edges, but as a vanguard, I'll give you a passing grade."

Sophia watched as the training hall master put her weapons away, feeling a bit proud of herself. She'd been polishing her strength in this training hall for

several months now, and it seemed she'd made progress toward her goal of becoming a front-line fighter that could be relied on.

"Oi, you lot!" yelled the training hall master, addressing several muscular pupils who'd been watching her and Sophia practice. "It'd do you good to take after this lassie a little—pick up a few manners, why don't you?"

Maybe it was due to the training hall master's brusque way of speaking, but her students tended to be similarly gruff. Sophia didn't mind, though—she'd entered this training hall not to learn etiquette or how to have a pleasant attitude, but to learn basic combat skills. This place was known for giving students constant combat experience, and for its ability to quickly turn out battle-ready warriors.

"Boss," one of the students who'd been chided called back, "ain't you the one who said ye'd get goosebumps if any 'a us started imitatin' Sophia?"

"Yeah," one of the other students added on. "And even if I tried fixing myself now, it's not like I've got anyone to impress."

Another student let out a long sigh. "Can't anyone introduce me to someone nice?" she moaned.

All three of the people that had spoken were women, and were wearing clothes that put quite a lot of skin on display. It was a pretty regular sight at this training hall, since women were the main demographic that enrolled. It wasn't that men were barred from training there, but since the training hall's master was a woman, it had just naturally turned out that way.

The training hall master rolled her eyes at the last woman who'd spoken. "This is why all the men run away from you," she said with a chuckle.

Sophia, meanwhile, ignored them all and set down her weapon, then wiped the sweat from her brow. She wasn't wearing the hefty robe that was her typical attire, and was therefore exposing a good bit more of her body than was usual for her, but she wasn't overly mindful of that fact—there were no men around, after all.

Not as tense now that training was over, Sophia's smiled slightly. *Looks like I'm starting to shape up,* she thought.

When Sophia had initially heard that this training hall focused on basic combat skills, she'd already felt pretty confident in her own abilities. That confidence had been thoroughly thwarted, though, when she'd discovered she couldn't hold a candle to the training hall's master, who was a first-rate adventurer.

Since then, she'd put all her focus into desperately furthering her fighting style, and had come out a far sturdier woman by the end of it.

"By the way, how's it feel to use that thing?" the training hall master asked, gesturing toward Sophia's battle-axe.

Sophia looked down at her weapon, then replied, "I haven't used it in a real fight, so...I don't know."

The training hall master let out a hearty laugh. "Makes sense! If practice was enough to make everything work, then no one would ever struggle with a thing. Well, as you are now, you can rest assured you won't lose to any of those flimsy weaklings out there."

Some of the stiffness went out of Sophia, hearing that the training hall master approved of her. "Th-Thank you!" she stammered, a little frazzled at the praise.

"Come on kid, loosen up some more!" the training hall master said with a wide grin. "Though, that attitude of yours is part a' your charm, so it's hard to fault you for it."

Sophia blinked at the woman in confusion. It seemed that even though her overly earnest personality had tired her out, the training hall master found it praiseworthy nonetheless.

As Sophia was still trying to come up with a reply, the training hall master spun around and faced her other students.

"Aight, breaktime's over!" she called out, wiping her sweat away with a towel. "Get your weapons and start swinging!"

The women quickly lined up, then began to take practice swings with their weapons. Their battle cries filled the air, filtering out of the training hall and into the neighborhood around it.

To the people of this area of Aramthurst, the women who attended this particular training hall were known as the “Amazons.” They struck fear in the hearts of all those who met them.

And Sophia? She’d been shedding sweat among them for several months.

***

That evening, I inspected the contents of my wallet. I’d thought that the leather sack would contain about ten gold coins by now, but I’d been very wrong—instead, it housed over thirty of them.

At the sight of the wealth cradled in the palm of my hand, I came to a realization. “I... I might just be able to make a living like this.”

Who would have known that starting a human and baggage transport service to and from Aramthurst’s fifth floor would be so incredibly profitable?

Although, I guess it isn’t that surprising that plenty of adventurers make use of us. A ton of them must have been wishing for an easier way to reach the fifth floor, and practically everyone is dead tired by the time that they’ve made most of their way back from the dungeon’s depths.

Regardless, I’d made quite a bit of money in just a single day.

I pulled my eyes from the mound of coins and looked at Shannon, who was currently lying limply in the cart’s cargo hold.

“Hey, you all right?”

“It’s no good...” she moaned. “It’s all over for me.”

I rolled my eyes. At first, I thought her listlessness was because of the incredible thickness of the dungeon’s mana, which commonly made first timers intoxicated on their initial dungeon run. I’d been wrong, however—Shannon hadn’t been affected by the mana at all. She was just exhausted from working for the very first time in her life.

It wasn’t that she didn’t have the stamina for the task, as Shannon had actually been making the effort to exercise recently. It was just still hard for a lazy girl who’d never had to put her body to work before to exert herself to the extent she had today.

I turned my attention from Shannon to Clara, who was clearly flustered over the amount of money we'd made today. It was likely a far greater fortune than she had been anticipating.

"T-To think we would earn this much in just one day..." she muttered.

There had been, admittedly, some luck involved in the matter. But I thought the fact that I'd been standing out in front of the dungeon for the past few days had played a larger role. My horseless cart had already become famous, and it turned out that many adventurers wanted to take it for a test drive out of pure curiosity alone. Thus, there had been no shortage of customers.

"Now that we've got this much money," Boinga rejoiced, "we'll be able to modify the cart even further, my chicken!"

That's true, I realized.

Certainly, our development costs were as good as covered. Even subtracting Clara's cut and Shannon's candy expenses, there would still plenty of money left.

These thoughts were interrupted by the excited babbling of the fourth head, who was so over the moon due to recent events that I was beginning to grow annoyed with him.

"Oh, how could this be?!" he chortled. "Thirty gold in just one day?! Why, if you buy a fleet of carts and set up a regular service, you'll be able to set up a stable transport business! Just think of how much money you could make if you seized control over the market!"

"Silence, you miser!" the fifth head yelled, seemingly as exasperated as I felt. "We were never trying to start a business—our objectives lie elsewhere!"

We've earned so much money that it feels stupid for us to try and do any proper adventuring work, I thought. *But I'd rather not take it any further. This is where I draw the line.*

"I should head over to the professor's place," I said aloud.

"Professor Damian's, you mean?" Clara queried. "I think your cart's already complete, though."

Cocking her head, Clara looked at my modified cart. She was right—it may as well have been complete. It wasn't why I wanted to go see Professor Damian, though.

"Actually, I wanted to go see him about something else," I explained. "I've got a bit of an idea on how to get the armored tank in the storehouse moving. That was always my ultimate goal."

"You're still aiming for that?" Clara asked, her gaze returning to me.

There was no particular emotion in her eyes. She wasn't angry, nor was she fed up with the idea. She was simply looking at me.

"You don't think it'll work out? I've taken quite a liking to that thing."

I could see it so clearly in my mind—the heftiness of the tank, it's rough exterior and simple design... It was strange, but when I looked at it up close, I felt... Well, weirdly attached to the thing.

Plus, as great as the cart was now that we'd gone through several stages of modifications, it was still just a cart. The thirtieth floor was a dangerous place, and so were the floors along the way—if we were attacked by monsters as we traveled there, it would take only a single attack for the cart to get busted to the point that it could barely move.

"Keep in mind we've still got our intial objective to consider," I pointed out to Clara before she could respond. "We're all working on various things that will help prepare us to conquer the thirtieth floor.

A small smile formed on Clara's lips. It seemed I'd impressed her. "It's good to know you haven't forgotten your goal," she told me. "I was sure you'd lost yourself in developing the cart."

I averted my eyes. "W-Well of course I didn't. I'm not that scatterbrained."

"Are you sure about that?" the sixth head teased. "You've started breaking out humming while you work. I'd wager you were having a pretty good time, if you got to that point."

That's rich, coming from the only one of my ancestors who broke his silence, all because of how interested you were in the construction of my cart, I thought.

Indeed, the sixth head had thrown out all sorts of suggestions about how to modify my current labor of love.

Perhaps our bloodline is actually well-suited to that kind of work...

I was jerked from my musing by Boinga, who had proceeded to prod the still-immobile Shannon with a stick.

“Why don’t we go home for now?” she proposed. “You can stop by Professor Damian’s laboratory tomorrow—Shannon’s run out of steam.”

More like she’s a stupid child who put in too much effort just to get some sweets, I thought, not pitying her in the slightest.

I turned to Clara, casting my eyes away from the annoying girl. “Would you like to join us for dinner tonight?”

“I’d love to,” she replied. “Although I think I’ve let you treat me far too much lately.”

Clara smiled at me wryly, and I couldn’t help but think the expression was a bit cute on her.

***

Elsewhere in Aramthurst, three men sat around a table.

One of them was a male student wearing an academy uniform—clearly from a well-to-do house—while the other two appeared to be adventurers.

The student, Rudall, placed a sack filled with gold coins on the table. “There,” he said. “Your down payment.”

The two adventurers counted the coins out, then straightened once they’d made sure the sack contained the promised amount. Their eyes had a keen gleam in them, like they were both interested in hearing what Rudall had to say.

Before the other man spoke, however, Zalsa—the younger of the two adventurers—went over the details of their agreement again.

“As we’ve previously discussed, the job you are hiring us for involves launching an attack on a certain party, all of whom are to be killed except for the designated individual. Correct?”

“That’s right,” Rudall muttered, folding his arms. “Obtain Miranda Circry. The woman hails from a viscount house of the imperial court—her status is a worthy match to mine. I must regain her with all haste.”

An unpleasant look settled on Rudall’s face as he looked at the two other men. He didn’t even try to conceal the disdain he felt, having to converse with an adventurer. He had been raised as a noble from the moment he was born, and he had no doubt in his mind that he was superior in every way, shape, and form.

“Then with this,” Zalsa said, ignoring Rudall’s expression in favor of indicating the sack of coins before him, “you have become our client.”

Zalsa himself was rather well known in Aramthurst—he was one of the city’s top swordsmen, and was famous for being a gentleman. The suit he wore reflected that reputation, though it was rather a strange choice for an adventurer. His sword, which he was very prideful of, had been set down nearby.

To Zalsa and his companion, Rudall seemed as if he was acting incredibly impulsive. But to the young male student, his actions made perfect sense. With his house behind him, preparing the money to hire adventurers had been no trouble at all.

Rudall’s face turned even uglier, as if he’d had a nasty thought. “Former Earl’s scion or not,” he muttered, “it matters little. Miranda is not a woman fit to linger around with such a bastard forever.”

Zalsa fiddled with his long hair, then replied lightly, “I must admit I cannot comprehend having such an attachment to a flower that’s already been sullied. But well, if it’s for status...I guess you’re willing to put up with that much?”

“Hold your tongue, adventurer,” Rudall snapped, giving Zalsa a sour look. “You just need to do your job.”

“Point taken,” the young adventurer replied, relaxing into his chair. “Still, you must let us have a little fun, at least. Now—about Lyle’s party. The women he surrounds himself with are all beautiful flowers, are they not? My comrades are all clamoring about how they’d love to get a taste.”

Despite his refined appearance, the smile that crossed Zalsa's face could not be described as anything but vulgar.

"Do whatever you want," Rudall spat. "As long as it doesn't become public, I don't care. Just don't cause me any problems."

"Now, now. It's only good manners to clean up after your own fun. All we have to do is be careful with the Guild cards, and everything will be fine."

Zalsa had no particular connection to Lyle, but harbored a feeling of distaste toward him regardless. That had been enough for him to hop on board with Rudall's plot—as long as he got paid, of course.

The only real issue was going to be the party's Guild cards. They came in pairs, one to be held by the adventurer themself, and the other to be kept in the custody of the Guild. This was so that the Guild could determine whether an adventurer was dead or alive—if they passed away, the name on the card the Guild had kept would be erased.

Not only did the Adventurers' Guild keep track of their adventurers in this way, but they would also send out a party on occasion to conduct a search of survey an area if they noticed that something seemed off.

"If they send some adventurers out because they notice something strange with the Guild cards, that'll be troublesome," muttered Zalsa's companion, Benil.

Benil was a broad, short, man with a beard and a hefty amount of muscle mixed in with his layers of fat. He was proud of his physique, and was a fan of swinging around a large hammer with his strong arms. For his entire adventuring career, Benil had always managed to smash through anything that stood in his way, whether that thing be monster or human.

"I take it we're free to do what we want with their belongings, yeah?" Benil asked Rudall.

"I said you can do what you want," the student snapped back. "I have no interest in the baggage of *paupers*. Oh, and make sure to torment that countryside noble—Lyle, I think his name was. He needs to be punished for sullying my Miranda."

Despite Rudall's big talk, and the way he spoke as if Miranda belonged to him, he wasn't in love with her in the slightest. He simply craved the status he was sure he'd obtain if he married her. The girl herself was merely a bonus to him, though the thought that she had been polluted by another before he'd had the chance to lay his hands on her did irritate him.

These feelings were no mystery to Zalsa and Benil—they had quickly caught on to how their employer felt.

"Anyway, I'll inform you once I know the day they're challenging the dungeon," Rudall added. And, with that, he considered the discussion over.

Once Rudall had left, Benil let out a slight sigh. "What an impertinent noble brat," he muttered.

"It's not an issue—not as long as he has money," Zalsa said, looking down at his nails. "Still, you're right—he's a real piece of work. You realize he plans to earn that girl's trust by saving her as she flees from our attack, barely alive? What an idiot."

Benil let out a mocking, scornful laugh. "I've made my share of messes in the dungeon, but this is my first time receiving a request like this."

Zalsa grinned. "I'll say it now: you can't have any of the flowers I find."

"That's your business," Benil said with a laugh, though he didn't find Zalsa's hobby to be particularly praiseworthy. "You're a strange man, calling adventurer women 'flowers.' Only a weirdo lusts after those folks."

While the two adventurers were acquainted with one another, and had a sort of kinship between them, built from the fact that they were both ill-natured scoundrels who targeted members of their own trade, Zalsa's tastes were considerably darker than Benil's.

Most male adventurers wanted a reprieve from the harsh world they so often lived in, and so searched out women who didn't work in the same trade. When faced with female adventurers, who had grown as hardened as the men due to the working conditions they had to face, they found them too masculine. Some didn't even view them as members of the opposite sex at all.

Zalsa, however, was different. Despite the refined look about him, the man

was rotten to the core. “Overpowering strong women is part of the fun.”

“That so? Well, all I care about is that you do your job and you do it right.”

And so, these two adventurers—both who had done their share of misdeeds—continued to talk, plotting an attack on Lyle’s party together.

Chapter 61: It's All in the Name

As I'd feared when I'd decided to bring the cart to Professor Damian's laboratory, Boinga and Lily had begun trying to one-up each other the moment they met.

I pressed a hand to my forehead even as Boinga hissed, "A mass-produced *worm* shouldn't get a big head just because her name is a little better than mine."

The other automaton gave Boinga a bright smile. "Oh, Ms. Boinga, that must mean you accept the superiority of my wonderful name! Yes, you're entirely correct—my master is wonderful, and he has granted me the delightful name Lily. But you...how unfortunate. I mean, 'Boinga' of all things... Is that supposed to be your name?"

Boinga brandished her massive hammer, tears in her eyes, and Lily readied a broom in response.

"How dare you insult my damn chicken! I'm the only one who gets to mock him!"

I sighed. "Hey, chill out—don't make a mess here. You're being a bother."

Professor Damian, who had been ignoring the ruckus and looking between the blueprint I'd given him and my completed cart, seemed to share this opinion. He lifted his head from his work to glare at Lily.

"Can't you see I'm busy right now?" he snapped at her.

Both automaton's shoulders drooped at our scolding words, but they quickly straightened their postures and returned to standing properly, with the dignity expected of a servant.

If only they'd act like that on a normal basis, I thought ruefully.

I returned my focus to Professor Damian, who appeared to be scribbling a few corrections on my tank blueprint.

"The shape isn't bad," he pronounced, "but there are a few things that need

some looking into. The utilization of Demonic Tools especially—what you've got implemented here is just the bare fundamentals. There's still a decent amount of room for improvement."

I glanced over the professor's shoulder, but I couldn't make hide or tail of what he'd written. It wasn't because he had shoddy handwriting or anything like that—it was just that, whatever he was getting at, it was far too high level for me.

Feeling troubled, I continued to stare a hole in the blueprint in front of me. At least, until Boinga wandered over and took a peek at it.

"I see," she said immediately, seeming to understand the professor where I could not. "So, if you rearrange it like that—"

"Yes. That should increase the output. Then, by improving—"

"Oh, in that case, how about—"

Little by little, more and more scribbles appeared on the blueprint. It seemed having Boinga to bounce ideas off of had gotten the professor's brain going.

"Do you think we'll be able to make it happen?" I asked, cautiously peering around my maid.

Boinga turned to me and nodded, her eyes alight. "Rejoice, chicken—you might just be able to get that tank moving!"

"Really?!"

Although I'd hoped we'd be able to get the tank up and running, honestly, I'd never thought we'd actually be able to manage it because of its massive weight. But if we could...it would certainly be a reliable asset.

Professor Damian pressed a hand to his chin, then nodded several times as he looked over the blueprint. "This is quite the interesting vehicle. It could even put horses out of business, don't you think?"

"I doubt it," I said, shrugging. "First off, you'd need to be able to use magic in order to drive it. That'll limit how many people could use it."

That said, the amount of magic you'd need was minuscule. Even people like Clara, who could barely use magic at all, would be able to operate the cart.

Magicians were still a very small minority of Bansiem's population though, so that didn't broaden the scope of things very far.

Professor Damian didn't seem put off by this, however, judging by his gleeful grin. Evidently, my modified cart had drawn his interest.

"One quick question," the professor said suddenly, pointing at the cart. "What did you name this one?"

I cocked my head. "Cart."

"...Really?"

"Yeah."

"Huh."

Having confirmed the cart's name, Professor Damian quickly lost interest in our conversation, and his focus turned to inspecting its construction instead. Lily, meanwhile, watched him intently, practically spellbound.

"Ah, my master is in delightful form today," she breathed.

I stared at the automaton in disbelief. Knowing Professor Damian, the man would only ever do something if it was in service to his own interests, and yet Lily was practically panting after him.

Maybe there's something fundamentally wrong with automatons, I thought. *Some kind of error in how they're made...*

These musing were interrupted by a very frustrated Boinga.

"M-My chicken is a pretty hopeless human being too, you hear!" she hissed at Lily. "He's not going to lose to some *layabout* professor!"

Hey now, that's a bit much, I thought. *I can't just let that slide.*

Given no choice but to defend myself, I demanded, "What part of me is a hopeless human being? And why are you two competing over something so ridiculous in the first place?"

The two automatons exchanged a look, both of their faces flushing red.

"Why, because it's more worthwhile to serve a hopeless human being, of course. My godforsaken chicken, I'm waiting for you to grow even more useless

and start working me to the bone!”

“Yes,” Lily agreed, nodding. “Dignified, awe-inspiring masters are lovely, but I’m more enticed by a master who simply can’t live without me. To automatons like us, the most wonderful thing in the world is to have a master that needs us.”

You know, I think grasping this is beyond me...

***

Aria rubbed her drowsy eyes, awakened by a flurry of voices outside the Circry house. For once, she hadn’t had plans to study or to go to the training hall, so she’d let herself sleep in and had been planning on taking it easy this morning.

The commotion made her curious though, and she rose from bed, shivering at the chill of early autumn on her skin. Making her way over to her window, she looked out into the yard, only to see that Lyle had once again taken on the bizarre pose Boinga had been teaching him.

“Training must always start with the basic stance!” the automaton declared.

“Savage Sparrow Stance!” Lyle cried.

“Sparrow Stance!” Shannon echoed.

A ball had been placed in the center of the yard, and a plank had been set atop it. Boinga’s two disciples perched on the wobbling plank, somehow managing to properly take their stances despite how difficult it must have been for them to keep their balance.

Watching the spectacle through her bedroom window, Aria couldn’t help but think...

“Yeah, it still looks stupid to me.”

I mean, look at them! Their arms are outstretched like wings, and they’re only standing on one leg! That stance has so many weak points I don’t even know where to start.

Despite this, Boinga was watching her disciples with a wide smile, and Lyle and Shannon could not have been any more serious. They quarreled

periodically, but Aria found herself feeling as if she was watching the bickering of a pair of very close siblings.

Aria turned from the window, then stretched her muscles. Sometime over the last few months, she'd gotten a bit taller than she'd been before, and the work she'd done at her training hall—a different one than Sophia's—had made her more flexible. She cherished that proof of her progress.

Done stretching, Aria took in her room. It was littered with equipment—apart from her usual spear, she'd added a short spear and a handful of knives to her collection, among other things.

"You know, it's gotten a lot less oppressive around here lately," Aria reflected.

Not too long ago, she'd woken up every morning drenched in sweat from the heat. It made her grateful the temperature was falling, even if the result had left her a bit cold.

"You know..." Aria said thoughtfully. "I should go somewhere today."

She set about changing and getting ready, then left her room, whereupon she ran into Miranda. An awkward air hung between the two girls—although Miranda, at least, didn't seem to mind it.

"Morning, Aria," she said. "Did you sleep well? You certainly slept long—right through breakfast, in fact. I left your food out on the table for you."

There was no nastiness to her voice; Miranda was acting just as sweet and kind as she'd used to. Still, Aria knew the dark, scheming side of her was there, buried beneath the surface.

"You're really throwing me off, you know," Aria told her, deciding to get it all out in the open. "Which side of you is real, anyway?"

Miranda just giggled, her expression gentle.

She's right back to how she used to be when we first met her, Aria thought. *I just don't get it. When I compare this version of her to the one who claimed Lyle so fervently and turned my life upside down, I can't help but think they're entirely different individuals.*

Catching on to the turmoil in Aria's expression, Miranda smiled. "It's not like

we need to be fighting all the time. Doesn't that sound exhausting? I bet Lyle would hate all the scheming that would go on too."

"So in short…you're saying you'd do all those underhanded things behind the scenes as long as Lyle wasn't bothered by it? I hate these kinds of messy quarrels too, you know."

In truth, Aria was the sort whose hands moved before her mouth. She was simple and open-hearted, and the underhanded nastiness that seemed to exclusively take place in fights between women disgusted her.

This didn't seem to surprise Miranda—she shrugged. "I can imagine," she said lightly.
"After all, you're easygoing and manly. Still...I'm not sure what to think about leaving your underwear lying around the changing room. Lyle looked a bit confused on what to do there."

"Th-That wasn't me!" Aria shouted, turning red.

Miranda grinned. The confident expression sent Aria's mind spinning, even as she vehemently denied the other girl's accusation.

Wait, is she talking about back then?! Oh, or maybe it was that other time!

To her dismay, Aria realized there were several different instances where Lyle could have encountered her undergarments.

D-Don't tell me he actually saw them?!

Miranda giggled. "You're going to put Lyle off if you don't learn a bit of modesty, Aria. That aside, we're entering the dungeon again in a month. Lyle's orders. Make sure you're ready."

Though her cheeks were still a tad flushed, Aria forcibly focused her mind on Miranda's words.

"He's finally up for it? What, are we running low on money or something?"

It's certainly possible we're struggling to fund everyone's activities, Aria supposed. *After all, we are staying in Aramthurst, and we haven't done any work for months now. Training halls and self-study each cost money, and we've done quite a bit of both—maybe that small fortune we came here with is almost*

gone.

Faced with these thoughts, Aria realized she might be proving a burden for Lyle. Still, it wasn't like she could just rush into the dungeon alone. Their group worked together as a party.

Miranda pressed a hand to her forehead, looking at Aria wearily. "Don't tell me you didn't know?" she asked, exasperated.

"Know what...?"

Aria stared at Miranda in complete confusion. She'd been so busy lately that she'd only tangentially been aware of what Lyle was doing—she had no idea the kind of money the man was bringing in.

"Lyle's been making bank lately. He's earned several hundred gold coins."

Aria's eyes flared wide in shock. "You're joking!"

"Not in the slightest," Miranda said, clearly delighted to speak of Lyle's latest exploits. "He's been going to Professor Damian's place and working with Clara to improve that cart. You know, the thing that moves on its own."

"Oh, that thing. It makes money?"

Miranda nodded. "Honestly, I think he could make a living with it, if he so desired. He seems to want to tackle the thirtieth floor regardless though, so I guess he doesn't plan on switching jobs. Not building on such success is a bit of a waste, but that's Lyle for you."

Hearing this, Aria couldn't help but wonder, *Lyle, what did you even come to Aramthurst for in the first place?* It was a bit of a hypocritical thought—after all, she'd been fooling around almost the entire time they'd been staying in the city herself.

Pushing that aside, Aria laughed at the thought of Lyle's recent windfall. "Not too shabby of him," she said with a grin.

"Oh right, I was in the middle of cleaning," Miranda said, then turned to leave. "You get the picture," she called over her shoulder. "Start preparing. Also...this time, I hope you don't do anything to mess up Lyle's plans, Aria."

It was clearly an attempt to provoke her. Aria stared at Miranda's back, a

dubious look on her face.

"That girl really *does* have a nasty personality," she muttered, turning to head for the living room. "But whatever, I should go check in with Lyle."

She wanted to get more details on Lyle's plan for the next month.

***

Miranda eyes lingered on Aria's back as she walked away. *I'm glad she's properly confirming things,* she mused.

Truth be told, Miranda had been curious over how Aria would react after she was told about Lyle's plans to enter the dungeon again during the coming month. Seeing her act so responsibly gave Miranda some peace of mind. Enough, at least, to return to her housework.

Sophia's gone out, so I'll have to wait until she comes back to bring the dungeon excursion up to her, Miranda thought. *If she confirms the details with Lyle tonight, I guess she gets a pass*.

Up until now, Lyle and Novem had taken care of everything, with Sophia and Aria following their orders without question. Never once had the two girls taken the initiative.

Looks like fanning the flames got me some results, Miranda concluded, relieved.

Her actions had had their intended purpose—the two girls had been spurred into motion.

***

It was early morning, and Boinga, Clara, and I were back inside the storehouse. Shannon was with us as well, having joined our cause somewhere along the way. I was feeling incredibly nervous, and even Boinga seemed to be treating the situation with a similar amount of gravity—a look of utmost seriousness was on her face.

Handing me a cylindrical object so large I could wrap both my arms around it, Boinga said solemnly, "Chicken, if you will."

This is it, I thought. *This is all that's left.*

The object in my hand, which was embedded with two fist-sized glass balls, would soon be installed in its rightful place on my tank, serving as its head.

Clara removed her glasses and wiped away her tears with her sleeve. “We did it,” she said softly. “We’ve finally managed to get this far.”

All those days we’d spent, slowly improving the cart bit by bit through trial and error, had been for this moment.

“Uh, hey...” Shannon muttered, her head tilting curiously as she observed the tank in front of her. “Where are you gonna attach that thing, anyway?”

It was a fair question, as the exterior of the tank looked pretty much completely unchanged from its original state. It’s insides, however, had been almost entirely overhauled. We’d removed all the mechanisms we wouldn’t be able to use and replaced them with Demonic Tools, the cleaned it up and loaded it with supplies.

The reason we’d decided to attach a head to the tank was because of what Professor Damian had advised us—he’d said doing so would make the apparatus easier to operate when one of us used his magical technique. His magic had been created to operate golems, after all, so the closer the tank was to a humanoid doll, the better.

With this in mind, I turned my eyes to the tank, its head clutched precariously in my arms. It would prove a bit of a derpy addition, but I didn’t dislike that. It would soften the rough, barebones atmosphere the craft exuded into something softer and more loveable.

You know, now that I’m putting the finishing touch on the tank, I can really feel my fondness for it growing, I mused. *I mean, the cart is nice and all, and we put so much work into it, but...*

I shook my head, forcing my thoughts back to Shannon’s question.

“The center, I guess...” I finally answered.

Clara held up a hand, stopping me before I could move forward. “I think that might be too simple,” she said. “Plus, wouldn’t placing it on top of the main compartment be better?”

“If you put it there, it’ll get in the way when you want to move supplies,” Boinga pointed out.

“Why don’t we just put it inside with everyone else?” Shannon asked, pointing into the tank. “It’d be pretty pitiful, leaving its face all alone outside.”

As our quarreling gained steam, I could hear my ancestors having a very similar argument from within the Jewel.

“It’s the head, so of course it goes in the center!” snapped the second head.

“You say that, but it’s obvious it’ll just get in the way!” the third head erupted.

The fourth head sighed. “Calm down, everyone. I don’t see any real problems with putting it inside.”

“But it’s going to impact the precision of the controls!” the fifth head cut in, his voice uncharacteristically strident. “It’s an important decision!”

“It looks kind of empty if it’s only got a head...” the sixth head said, hummed thoughtfully. “How about we stick some arms on the tank too?”

The seventh head ignored this question, choosing instead to sing the tank’s praises. “At first, I just thought it was just a box,” he proclaimed, “but looking at it now, I can see how crude and gallant and *wonderful* it is.”

The arguments only got more intense from there, both within and without the Jewel. The only person who had a level head about the whole thing was Aria, who’d peeked into the storehouse in the midst of the chaos and stated she had business with me.

She stared at the tank skeptically. “I mean, if you just need to stick it somewhere...does it matter where it goes?” she asked.

Aria, I know you’re not really interested in the tank, but...that statement is one I just can’t accept!

Just as I opened my mouth to refute her words, pandemonium burst out within the Jewel—my ancestors were furious.

“Silence, fool!” roared the second head.

“’Does it really matter where it goes’?!” quoted the third head. “Of course it

does—it's vital! Why can't she understand that?!"

The fourth head blew out a breath. "My word, why is that girl so dense?" he muttered.

"Regardless, this decision is crucial," pronounced the fifth head. "We shouldn't be taking opinions from people who don't care about it."

"Well, it's only natural she's not attached," the sixth head pointed out. "She wasn't at all involved in the process."

"Honestly, I feel sorry for the girl," the seventh head said pityingly. "She can't understand what wonders we're working here."

As if my ancestors weren't being rowdy enough, Boinga joined the fray.

"Hey, you there," she said snarkily, jabbing a finger at Aria. "You're being very rude in front of the crystallization of my and the chicken's love."

"I participated as well," Clara calmly pointed out.

"And me!" Shannon burst out. "I helped too!"

Aria scratched roughly at her head, and a strange feeling went through me. Lately, I hadn't been able to shake the idea that she'd been growing more and more manly.

"I'm sorry, I'm still just failing to see why the placement of that head thing matters," Aria finally said. "As long as you make sure it's not in the way, it'll be fine, right? How about...right there! That spot looks big enough."

Before I had the chance to reply, Aria scooped the head out of my hands and rested it on the front right-hand side of the tank. She still didn't show any outward interest in what we were doing—it was more like she just wanted to get things over and done with as soon as possible. Still...

"I...kinda like that spot."

Even though Aria hadn't placed the head in the center of the tank, for some reason her positioning felt more natural.

"Oh, wow..." Clara breathed, clearly impressed. "I guess it's true—sometimes you *do* have to take opinions from the public. That placement's even better

than what I was imagining.”

Since it was at the front, you could properly see it when you stood in front of the tank. On top of that, the asymmetry naturally drew the eye. Although it wasn’t a balanced design, that was what made it work!

My ancestors had completely turned face and were now singing high praise of the girl. How capricious.

“It’s kinda...nice. Yep, I guess idiots have their uses.”

“Aria, I always knew you were a capable kid.”

“On the right rather than the center... It’s certainly nice.”

“You could call it a safe option.”

“It doesn’t impede function at all. That’s a fine placement.”

“I get the feeling it was the closest spot in arm’s reach, but...it’s good.”

I turned to Aria, wrapping both my hands around hers.

“Thank you, Aria. With this, our Porter is complete.”

Aria seemed perplexed by the reactions of those around her, and seemed completely baffled by my show of gratitude.

“Huh? A-Are you sure? And wait, Porter?”

Indeed, up until now, I had just called the cart “cart”, but then I realized something. We’re not even working with a cart anymore, are we? In a wide sense, I guess it was still a cart of sorts, but it was incomparable to any other cart out there.

Still, it felt a bit lacking to call it “Armored Tank”. That felt like naming a dog “Dog”. So I gave it a name.

From my stack of things, I took out a book pertaining to names. It was a book I’d received from Clara.

“Yes, truth be told, I looked through here and thought something up.”

Clara turned to me blankly while Shannon averted her eyes. Boinga dropped the tools she planned to use to weld the head on the spot.

She looked like she was going to cry.

“Chicken... What’s that supposed to mean?”

I cocked my head. “No, well everyone was going on about how names are important, so I gave it some serious thoughts.”

Her pigtails grew disheveled as she screamed, “Porter! What an adorable name! And yet, why am I still Boinga, then?! Please give my name some serious thought too!”

Clinging to the tank that had received a proper name before she did, Boinga wept. “Porter, my child. I’m so glad that you received such a fine name. It’s your mama, it’s Boinga. Boinga. I envy you, who someone went as far as to reference a book to name.”

Everyone was taking fleeting glances at me. I hated this air that seemed to be screaming, “Just give her a proper name already.”

I averted my eyes. “I-I’ll think of one next time.”

“Back when you asked me for that book,” Clara sighed. “I thought you wanted it for Boinga.”

Taking advantage of the fact that everyone was already chastising me, Shannon toxically spat, “You really are the worst. Even I’d be able to think of a better name.”

But there, Boinga made a straight face. “Oh no, if the other option was receiving a name from you, I would prefer to stick with Boinga.”

“Why?!”

Shannon angrily took on the savage sparrow stance, and for some reason, Aria placed a hand on her face.

“Ah, let’s just forget about all that,” Aria said. “More importantly, we’re headed to the dungeon in a month, right? How far are we going?”

I folded my arms. “It’s going to be the real deal. All the way to floor thirty. In two weeks, I’m planning to have a smaller expedition to go over our coordination, but in a month, we’re going to be going for the goal.”

“Two weeks, right?” Aria nodded. “Got it, I’ll be ready... So what are we doing for the real one? Are we really going with just us?”

I thought for a moment. “That depends on how well Porter performs in trial runs. I do think we’ll need some extra help, but I haven’t decided how much we’ll need yet.”

Chapter 62: The Tank

Three men had gathered in a room of a certain inn. There was wine on the table, but only Zalsa and Benil were drinking it.

Rudall, the client, sat in his chair. Frustratedly shaking his leg.

“Hey, you know their plans, right?”

Benil took a swig before passing a memo over the table. “I heard it from the guild staff. There are loads of blokes who’ve got a bone to pick with the staff. It wasn’t too hard to draw information out of them.”

Rudall snatched up the paper and looked it over.

“They’re entering the dungeon in one week. That’s where you attack them.”

Zalsa lightly chuckled. *A small fry is getting too big for his britches*.

But though he was insulting Rudall in his head, his words remained calm and courteous.

“I wouldn’t recommend it. We need to do some preparations ourselves, so let’s target their second outing.”

The first time, they were set to head for the dungeon’s tenth floor. The second time, they would aim for the thirtieth floor. The staff member had been quite thorough about it, so they had gained information that Lyle’s party intended to subjugate the thirtieth-floor’s boss as well.

Benil downed the wine in his glass. “Aim for when they’ve earned their fortune and used up all their energy. Either when they’re righting, or lay an ambush for when they’re on the way back. We can make the call on-site.”

The floor-transfer device could take them anywhere from floor five to floor twenty-five. It would be a pain if they reached the twenty-fifth floor, where they were more likely to receive assistance from other adventurers.

Zalsa looked down at his beautiful nails. He never failed to keep them maintained, and they were shining beautifully today.

“With attacks like these, the preparation is crucial. You have to investigate the floor to make sure they can’t get away. You need to lay the traps and wait for the prey to wander into them. Well, you can leave that to me.”

Rudall stood. “I have my own matters to prepare. Make sure you don’t fail.”

He violently slammed the door behind him, and once sure he was gone, Zalsa clicked his tongue.

“Annoying brat...”

Benil chuckled. “Hey, you’re showing your true collars, my boy.”

“Oh, my apologies.”

Seeing him plaster a refined look on his face, Benil gave a thin smile. “So... what are you planning?”

In the eyes of these two, even Rudall looked like nothing more than pray. These were adventurers who betrayed their own on a daily basis. They never had any intentions of properly doing the job in the first place.

“Accidents are commonplace in the dungeon. There’s no guarantee that youngster won’t try to seal our lips, and I’ve started to grow weary of Aramthurst. I’d like to let loose once before I leave this city behind.”

Benil was on board. “I’m sure he’s a second or third son with no claim to his house—a noble in name alone. His folks back home won’t seek retribution if someone like him disappears. And I hear that Lyle kid’s also stocking up a hefty sum. We’re going to make it big.”

The duo keen on taking their client out with their mark poured each other a glass and exchanged a cheer.

“Let’s wipe the record clean before we leave Aramthurst.”

“And make a fortune while we’re at it.”

The two adventurers shared a laugh.

***

We’d made it to the tenth floor of the dungeon. When we set foot on the floor, the floor boss was nowhere to be seen. Some other adventurers had

already taken care of it. We walked with Porter at the center of our formation, gazing over the room.

“What do we do...?”

The reason for the troubled look on everyone’s face lay in the fact we had reached the tenth floor far quicker than anticipated.

Even Novem was flustered. Holding up her staff, she said, “Boinga takes care of the mapping, and Shannon can inform us of any nearby threats. I guess that solves most of our issues.”

There was a box fastened to Porter’s roof, and this box was stuffed full of Demonic Stones.

We’d evidently exceeded Novem’s expectations. “Wh-What should we do now, Milord?”

I’d initially planned for a three-day trip down to the tenth floor and back. However, we’d easily reached our destination floor within a day. We had time to spare.

I muttered to myself, “We should... return to the ninth floor and set up camp. We’ll head back tomorrow.”

Clara stepped out of Porter. She disembarked from what Boinga called the driver’s seat and reported on the ride.

“Lyle, it’s about Porter.”

“Was there a problem? If you’re tired, I can swap out with you.”

My proposal had her shaking her head.

“It’s bizarre,” she replied. “It’s far too easy to operate. Even easier than the cart we modified—is that really possible?”

I looked at Porter. “Oh, that. Hey, Boinga.”

When I called Boinga over, she took a box out of the interior and brought it with her. Clara cocked her head, only to be startled when she saw what was contained within it.

The box itself was a Demonic Tool. And inside of it glistened the pea-green

gemstone—Peridot. A valuable item known as a Mana Crystal that contained mana within it.

“You had a Mana Crystal?”

“We obtained it before coming to Aramthrust. I considered using Demonic Stones, or rarium, but if we were going to have to design from the ground up anyways, I thought this would be better.”

Porter was so heavy that a bit of assistance was required to get him moving. A mana crystal was simply the best energy source I could think of.

“It would be too expensive to purchase, but I already had one, so I used it.”

Clara seemed to experience a dizzy spell, hearing that. She placed a hand on her forehead. “I’m already surprised that you had one at all. Lyle, you really are a mystery.”

Am I really? I know I’m oblivious to how the world works, but I think I’ve been getting better lately...

In the midst of our conversation, Aria and Sophia came up to me.

“Lyle, what do we do from here?”

“If possible, I’d like to know soon.”

I told Boinga to put the box away and turned to Novem. Though she still had a troubled look on her face, she advised, “We have not made sufficient preparations to go any further. Why don’t we head back and set up camp.”

I scratched my head. “Right. We’ll camp out for one night and return tomorrow.”

Aria shrugged. “Are you sure? We packed for two nights of camping, right? I think we’ll earn a bit more if we stick around for another day.”

I looked at Porter. Shannon had crawled out and was being nursed to health by Miranda. She was feeling a bit ill after witnessing us fighting monsters, and dissecting them to strip them of their materials.

“Shannon’s not used to it. Even if we don’t push ourselves, the trial run was a success. We’ll return tomorrow.”

It had gone far better than anticipated, and on the contrary, I had to wonder if this was really alright. It was a huge change from how it had been the last time.

***

It would have been night on the surface. But we were camping nine levels down. I could hear the soft breathes of sleepers around me. I was on lookout duty with Aria, and the two of us sat with a lantern between us.

Things had gotten strained between us ever since my Arts had been restricted, but it didn't feel that way today. As per usual, I didn't know what to talk about, but once we got a conversation going, it would naturally carry on.

"So scouts come in all sorts, huh?"

The topics Aria brought up mostly had to do with her training hall. She'd gone nearly every day these past few months, and had polished her skills there.

"It's incredible," she explained. "Some of them can tell the surrounding situation just by putting a hand on the wall or floor. There's a huge variety of traps, and there's a lot more to learn than you'd think."

At the training hall, she was scolded and praised, and now, she finally felt some results having tried it all in real battle. I got the impression she was really enjoying herself.

"So what made you choose a different place from Sophia?"

I thought it was a simple question, but Aria seemed a bit uneasy as she answered.

"It wasn't... quite for me. How should I put this... Yeah, it was a bit much."

In contrast to Aria, who had picked up all sorts of new skills, Sophia—who was currently soundly asleep—had apparently grown her strength as a frontline fighter.

"So how are things with you, Lyle? What have you been up to? I guess I never really asked."

"Well, I get some exercise with Boinga in the morning, and then I'm spending the rest of the day working on the cart. Other than that I sometimes drop by

the library, or Damian's lab."

Aria glanced over at Clara, who was also asleep. "I've heard some rumors. A few things about you and Clara. How is it, really?"

"Clara? Definitely not. We do get along, but it's nothing more than that. I do owe a great deal to her, admittedly."

Aria hung her head a bit. "I-I see."

"I'd like to recruit her onto the team, but she really loves the library. I don't know if she'll ever want to leave Aramthurst."

As far as Clara was concerned, Aramthurst was probably the best fit for her. This was mostly because it boasted the greatest library on the plannet.

"It'd make me happy if she came along, though..." I muttered.

There was a voice of agreement from the third head. "I'd like Clara on board. She's my recommendation. Lyle, how about you seduce her like you usually do? Then, you'll be able to read books all day, every day."

What exactly does he think I am? *Please don't make it sound like I'm just going around seducing people willy-nilly.*

Three days later. We'd returned to the surface, and I was out shopping with Novem. We had to place an order for the necessary food and water for our expedition. There were also other consumables we needed to purchase.

Although we were only heading to shops I'd been to before, it bothered me that I hadn't gotten the opportunity to talk to Novem at all lately. And so, I'd asked her to go with me, but...

"Why am I being laughed at this time...?"

I looked around. It wasn't just fellow adventurers, even the bread-and-butter residents of Aramthurst were laughing at me.

Novem was a bit more keyed in on Aramthurst's rumors from her usual outings. Taking her eyes off of me, she said, "Well, a while back, you failed horribly in the dungeon, and you hardly did any adventurer work since then..."

Apparently, I'd become acquainted with Damian and had immediately reached the fortieth floor with his help. But the moment Damian stopped accompanying me, I kept failing again and again. Everyone was convinced I was completely inept as an adventurer and had only gotten by with his help.

Then, there were the days I spent perfecting Porter. That created rumors that I'd realized my own ineptitude and had changed my industry in shame.

"It's that famous?"

Novem nodded, though she seemed to feel that something was off.

"I've started hearing about it a lot more these days," she said. "The rumors did exist before, but it was never this bad."

It had evidently gotten worse lately, but there had always been bad rumors around me.

"That's harsh."

Then, I heard the second head's voice. "Now then...what should we do about this?"

"Why not pay them a visit?" the sixth head replied.

I was struggling to comprehend their conversation when I noticed Novem's eyes locking onto the crowd. I followed her line of sight. There didn't seem to be anything strange.

"What's wrong?"

"It felt like we were being watched, but I might just be imagining it."

I quickly grasped at the Jewel, but there was no response. My ancestors fell silent.

What's wrong with them...?

Novem turned to me with a serious face. "Maybe a bit of caution is in order. Tell everyone not to go out alone, if possible."

"Got it," was all I could reply.

Up until now, I had my Arts, so I could immediately tell if anyone had any ill intent toward me. But now, even if a malicious soul was right next to me, I

couldn’t notice.

“I’m surprised you could tell, Novem.”

I genuinely thought that was amazing.

“It’s just a gut feeling. And they were following us rather unnaturally, so I caught on.”

I felt...a bit ashamed that I hadn't noticed.

The day after Novem and I went to the market, I ended up joining Narx for lunch. The man was one of the few adventurers I'd become friends with in Aramthurst, and we got along quite well, if I did say so myself. That was why I'd decided to consult with him about our unwanted entourage.

"This is just my guess... But doesn't that mean your women are being targeted?" Narx asked.

"My...women?"

Narx nodded and folded his arms, a serious look on his face. "Well, parties with one man and many women *are* quite envied. Not to mention that adventuring is a rough profession, so there are a lot of ill-bred folks among us."

Well, now that I think about it, there certainly is a high chance my party members are being targeted, I thought. *I mean, they're all beautiful women. Well, except Shannon and Boinga.*

Turning my attention back to Narx, I asked, "You think I should be careful, then?"

"Yes, you should make sure no one goes out alone," he agreed. "Also, don't forget to be wary of your surroundings."

I nodded slowly, thoughtful.

My seriousness seemed to put Narx at ease, and he changed the topic. "How *are* your comrades doing, anyway?"

"Things are better than before, but I still feel a bit of a rift between them," I said with a sigh.

Narx sent me a concerned, sympathetic look. "That must be rough. I wish they could be a bit more understanding of one another."

From what Narx had told me before, he made sure to treat everyone in his party equally in order to ensure that the peace between the members was never disrupted. The fact that he could actually pull that off made me more unbelievably envious.

"Anyway, you've got a big job coming up, so it might be a good idea to talk to everyone again," Narx suggested with a smile. "If you can get your feelings

across, I'm sure they'll understand."

Feeling motivated at the confidence in Narx's grin, I said excitedly, "You're completely right! I'll make sure things work out this time!"

Man, how did I manage to become friends with such a reliable guy? I wondered dreamily.

The sixth head let out an exasperated moan. "If talking was all it took, I wouldn't have had so much trouble!" he complained. "You know, back in my day...back in my day—!"

"That was all on you," the fifth head snapped, "so shut up."

The sixth head seems unbearably jealous of Narx's happiness, I thought idly. *I mean, I know he was terrified of his own wife, but just what sort of married life did he live...?*

Putting my ancestor's troubles from my mind, I continued chatting with Narx. A short while later, I heard someone call out to him. It was a woman in glasses.

"Oh, Narx!" she said, her considerable chest straining against the school uniform she wore. "So this is where you've been all this time."

Oh, she's Narx's new comrade, isn't she? I remembered.

Apparently, the two had met while he'd been in residence here in Aramthurst.

A surprised look came over Narx's face at the sight of his new party member. "I didn't realize it'd gotten this late," he muttered. "Looks like I have to get going, Lyle."

"No worries," I told him. "Thanks for hearing me out."

Moments later, we left of the shop and found Narx's comrades waiting for him outside. Seeing how well the girl's got along with one another, I couldn't help but think, *If only my party was like that too...*

"Well, I'll just do my best to make sure it is!" I declared aloud.

Before we tackle the great task before us, I will improve all our relationships!

***

“Oh?” Miranda said lightly, her lips curling upward at the edges. “I’m sorry, Lyle, I didn’t quite get that. Could you run it by me again?”

I faltered before Miranda’s smile.

I’d returned to the Circry estate from my outing with Narx only a short time ago, and coincidentally found myself alone with Miranda. I’d already planned to bring up the subject of group harmony to each of my comrades separately—doing it when everyone was present had been an utter failure—so I’d taken advantage of having Miranda alone to launch my offensive.

Alas, it appeared my first attack had been countered by an insurmountable foe.

“Well, uh...I just, I think it would be really great if everyone got along...you know?” I asked faintly, unable to meet Miranda’s gaze.

It didn’t help that I could hear my ancestors laughing at me from inside the Jewel.

“Come on, Lyle, give it a little more *oomph*!” chuckled the second head.

“Yeah,” agreed the third head. “You’re being pathetic, Lyle!”

“A little boldness will do wonders,” added the fourth head.

“He’s right," the fifth head agreed. "How you start out is important with these things.”

There was a rattling, like the sixth head had slammed his fist onto the table. “Lyle, you still have it better than me and my wives," he said vehemently. "You have a chance!”

“And what happened to your initial enthusiasm?" added the seventh head. "Go get ‘em, Lyle.”

From those words alone, one might think they were encouraging me, but it was blatantly obvious that they were stifling their laughter. They were deriving enjoyment from my situation.

“Just kidding,” Miranda said with a shrug. “But, and I do apologize, honestly, but I don’t think that’s going to work out.”

She flat-out told me it was impossible for her to get along with the rest of my party.

“Y-You were managing to do it before, right?”

“That’s not what I mean. I’d love to do whatever you ask me to, but since it’s not in your best interest, I have to say no.”

Whatever I ask? I wrung out some courage.

“Then please get along with everyone!”

“What was that? Could you please repeat that again?” Miranda had a scary smile on her face as she grabbed both of my shoulders. “I’m sorry, I didn’t quite get that.”

“It’s...nothing.”

The sixth head let out a sorrowful voice. “Milleia’s great-granddaughter is terrifying. How did she grow up to be like this?”

“Isn’t it precisely because she’s her descendent?” the seventh head muttered.

Miranda giggled. “If you made a serious request, I’d go along with it. Anytime. But only if you honestly believe it yourself.”

And with that, she parted from me. My shoulders dropped as I watched her back.

“We’re entering the dungeon tomorrow... Are we really ready...?”

My anxiety only grew.

***

It was midnight, and the party of adventurers melted into the darkness. They were led by the middle-aged Benil.

Glancing back at Rudall and the other students who were struggling to keep up, he clicked his tongue. “Are you sure you should be taking it easy like that?”

Zalsa was right beside Benil, a slender blade specialized in stabbing dangling at his waist. This was a sword that wasn’t often seen with an adventurer, but Zalsa only ever used rapiers.

“Students are always a shallow-minded bunch,” Zalsa told him. “This much, you should have expected.”

They were going to enter the dungeon before Lyle set off. There, they would either set an ambush or prepare for a sneak attack.

Benil stroked his beard. “Even if they had Damian at the time, they still managed to clear the fortieth floor once before. We mustn’t underestimate them. And that strange box also bothers me.”

“The horseless cart, you mean? I’d love to obtain it if possible.”

Then an irritated voice came from behind them. It was Rudall.

“Take this seriously, would you?” he demanded.

The two exchanged scowls where he couldn’t see them. It was not wise to argue here and now.

Straightening his posture, Zalsa answered, “My apologies, sir. Incidentally, you seem to have brought insufficient numbers.”

Including Rudall, there were only ten of them. A few were students, while the rest of them wore hoods to obscure their faces. They seemed to be dressed as baggage carriers.

“That’s none of your business. More importantly, you need to make absolutely certain that they don’t get away. Everyone apart from Miranda is unnecessary.”

Rudall’s attitude irritated Benil and Zalsa, and all the other adventurers too.

“Just leave it to us,” said Benil. “We’re used to this.”

“I hope so.”

And so, the group set to take down Lyle once he entered the dungeon.

***

I rode through the entrance to Aramthurst’s dungeon aboard Porter, then placed a hand atop Shannon’s head.

“Okay,” I told her. “Make sure you search for every enemy.”

Clara and Boinga were occupying the driver's seat, and with Shannon and I stuffed into the front cockpit as well, there was not much space to work with.

We'd woken her up early for this, and she crabbily brushed away my hand. "Oh, shut it. I just have to do the usual, right? No problem," she answered over a yawn.

I couldn't shake the feeling she was being a bit too relaxed about all this.

Clara invoked her magic, causing Porter's massive frame to advance. We pressed on, protected by a hefty layer of armor.

"Hmm!" Boinga proclaimed. "Approaching from the front! The bat-shaped—"

Clara expressionlessly picked up speed, ramming straight into the large bats that had charged at us.

"At least let me finish," Boinga said, sounding a bit troubled.

Clara seemed troubled too. "Huh? I mean, I heard we would proceed to the tenth floor while ignoring monsters."

If we started out fighting every monster we came across and gathering their stones and materials, it would take up a good chunk of time. It would also add to our baggage.

The resources obtained here weren't even worth that much to begin with, so we opted to ignore them.

I looked at Shannon. Apparently, she'd been too excited to sleep last night, and that led to her now being soundly asleep, leaking drool in the passenger's seat.

I lightly tapped my palm against her head.

"Yipes?!"

She jumped up and looked around. Awkwardly wiping away her spit, she said, "I-I washn'th asweep."

She couldn't even properly articulate herself.

"Next time you fall asleep, I'm calling Miranda," I said.

"Tattling to sis is unfair! You unfair gigolo!" she protested.

“Gigolo this, gigolo that. Are you trying to make the word stick or something? Well too bad for you—I’m not a gigolo anymore. I’m earning my own money, and I’ve paid Miranda for all the living expenses. In fact, aren’t you the bigger gigolo now?!”

Shannon went on an angry rampage within the narrow interior.

“More importantly, can we decide on our route already?” Clara said with a sigh.

***

Novem, Aria, Sophia, and Miranda sat in Porter’s rear compartment, a deadly silence stretching out between them.

There were two benches installed that faced one another. So, they had to look at one another’s faces whether they wanted to or not, and all four of them went without a single word.

From the front, they could hear the sounds of Lyle and Shannon fighting, occasionally interspersed by a tired comment from Clara.

Porter was large, but once loaded with supplies, there was very limited space left. In this limited space, the four of them stared and spent several hours in silence.

Finally, Novem spoke up. “Since the four of us are all stuck here for a while anyways, how about we talk a bit?”

Aria took a few glances at Miranda’s face. “Well, I don’t really mind, but what should we talk about? How Sophia’s becoming an Amazon?”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!” Sophia indignantly stood. “Are you mocking everyone at my training hall?! They’re all very good people?!”

They were definitely good people, but there was no denying that the people on the street called them Amazons.

Miranda giggled. “You’ve definitely been exposing more skin lately. Don’t you think Lyle’s going to see you when you fall asleep in your undergarments?”

“I knew it!” Aria laughed. “You’ve been letting your guard down lately!”

Novem smiled at her. “You did it too, Aria. Milord has draped blanked over you several times already. Spreading your legs like that is a little indecent.”

Aria covered her face with her hands, turning red to the ears.

“See? You’re even worse, Aria!” Sophia refuted. “I-In the first place, for him to peep at women while they sleep...”

Miranda sighed. “If you fall asleep in the living room, everyone’s going to see you. We just don’t wake you up because we know you’re exhausted.”

Sophia turned an embarrassed red and curled up her body. Miranda seemed to have a blast watching their embarrassment.

“By the way, Miranda,” Novem said. “Haven’t you been bothering Lord Lyle lately?”

Miranda smiled, but this was a provocative smile. “That was not my intention. I think I’m acting in Lyle’s best interest.”

“Are you sure that’s not your own self-conceit? Are you sure it’s for Lyle, and not for yourself?”

They were both smiling, and yet Aria and Sophia felt ill just watching them.

“You’re really one to talk. In the first place, why are you—”

But before she could finish, Porter came to a sudden stop and cut the conversation short.

Unable to bear the atmosphere in the compartment, Aria called out, “W-what happened?!”

If something bad had happened, she wouldn’t have to stay here anymore. She seemed to even be looking forward to whatever disaster it was with delight.

The back hatch opened, and there was Boinga. She had a large hammer leaning over her shoulder that was covered in a few flecks of blood.

“My apologies, everyone. We ran into a rather large monster, so I took the liberty of taking it down. I was hoping you would help me collect the Demonic Stones, but... You seem to be having fun. Please stay here on standby.”

Sensing the venom in the air, Boinga left it at that and slammed the door

shut.

They heard the voice from outside.

“Huh? Didn’t you go to get everyone?”

“They were in the middle of a lively conversation, so I decided to leave them to it. It’s some of that so-called girl’s talk. You mustn’t eavesdrop, my chicken.”

“Why would I want to do that? Well, whatever. Let’s handle this, the two of us.”

Lyle and Boinga took care of the matter, and a while later, Porter was moving again.

But this time, no one even dared to open their mouth. The time passed in complete silence.

***

As Porter stormed down the dungeon corridors, something occurred to me.

“My Porter is just way too strong...”

All normal monsters were simply rammed out of the way. Even the larger ones were sent flying back, and we’d ride right over them to press on.

It was as if this vehicle had been designed from the ground up to be able to proceed along even the poorest road conditions. The rugged design and sturdy armor were not just a decoration.

Clara lightly raised her hand. “Umm... I was involved with the production too.”

“Now hold on!” Boinga angrily exclaimed. “I, Boinga, and the one who did most of the work! No one other than myself could possibly be this child’s mother!”

Shannon was sitting in the passenger’s seat munching on sweet treats. “Who cares about that?” she said. “By the way, there’s a horde of monsters waiting for us right up front.”

“A-ha!” Boinga thrust out her fist. “Nothing but small fries. Bulldoze right through them.”

“Very well. Speeding up,” Clara indifferently replied.

A hum came from what Boinga called the *reactor* as Porter accelerated and sent the monsters ahead of us flying. The simple addition of Porter had made our jobs far too easy.

“Is this really alright? I mean, in terms of the assignment,” I muttered under my breath.

I grew anxious that my ancestors would start complaining about my reliance on Porter, but the Jewel was filled with nothing but cheers.

“You’re the best, Porter!”

“I want one too!”

“If we can mass produce our boy, we might just revolutionize the world.”

“If I had one of these in my days...”

“How magnificently robust! This is a man’s vehicle!”

“I’d love to take him for a spin.”

Looks like I was reading too deeply into it. They’re having fun.

I shook my head as Aria opened a hatch from the back compartment and popped her head in.

“Hey, what floor are we on right now? I can only feel the time passing, I don’t get any other input back here.”

There was very little shaking within Porter’s warm embrace. A normal horsedrawn cart would get one’s behind aching if ridden for too long, but that was completely absent here.

However, the ride was so steady that the people riding in the back cargo hold had nothing but free time on their hands. I turned my eyes to Boinga, and that was enough for her to sense what I wanted to say.

“We are currently on the sixteenth floor,” she reported. “Aboveground, the time is five minutes to six in the evening. It is a good time to begin preparations for camping.”

She had a few screws loose, but she was reliable when it came to these things.

“Floor sixteen in just one day? Do you even need us?”

Aria’s worries were understandable. In the first place, Porter was far more proficient than I had anticipated.

“I’m sure our pace is going to drop past floor twenty. Don’t worry.”

At that moment, Shannon screamed. “Gyaaah?!”

She clung to me, rubbing her sweet-covered hands all over my clothes.

Everyone followed her line of sight, looking ahead at a monster crawling along the wall, trying to flee from Porter.

It was an insect monster that didn’t look like much of a threat, but Shannon was terrible with bugs. She was so fearful she’d clung to me of all people, and I promptly peeled her away.

“Get a hold of yourself. Why are you screaming?”

“I mean, I’m scawed!” she said with teary eyes.

Scawed? She was making it sound cute, but I felt completely unmoved.

“Well, whatever. More importantly, let’s find a good place to set up camp.”

“Are you only this cold to me?” Shannon glared at me.

And so, I replied with a smile, “Of course. I hate you—”

“Hyah!”

Her fist—bolstered by the twist of her hips—dug right into my stomach.



“Y-You...”

“Your smile irritated me. Not sorry.”

Shannon brushed aside her light purple hair watching me squirm with a smile. Her punch hurt. She’d learned from Boinga well.

Chapter 63: Results

Once we made it as far as floor eighteen, we found a room without monsters and prepared for camp. The only entrance to the room was narrow, unfortunately, and Porter was unable to enter it.

So, after setting him at the entrance as a wall to prevent any monsters from getting in, we all moved separately to carry out our designated roles. Aria pulled a foldable table and chairs out from our supplies.

“Hey, does this look like a good spot?”

Sophia worked with Clara to get the toilet up and running.

“This is a pretty sturdy piece.”

“Boinga built it. How should I put this, she can make some very convenient tools.”

The lantern was set in place, and as various facilities were set up, Boinga began to cook dinner.

“You cannot make complicated dishes in the dungeon? That is nothing but an excuse! I’ll prove it to you here and—”

“Can you tone it down? Right, and mince those up for me, would you?”

She briskly finished the prep work with Miranda while Novem pulled out the blankets and bedding.

“It’s nice how we have so much space for supplies,” Novem remarked.

And like this, everyone worked on their tasks, but...

“You really are a gigolo after all.”

“Are you really one to talk?”

Shannon sat on a wooden crate. It wasn’t like she was slacking off or anything, she and I were taking a break. Shannon had constantly been using her eyes to search for enemies, while I had engaged them a handful of times. Once Clara was done, she was going to rest too.

For me, I don't feel like I really did much work, but... I'm on break anyways.

Novem approached me with a smile. "Milord, Shannon. Why don't you wipe yourselves down with hot water while you have free time? After dinner, brush your teeth, and go to sleep early."

We both replied with a lazy, "Okaaay," and stood.

"Don't peep," Shannon said, glaring at me.

I scoffed. "Peep at what? Do you have anything to peep at?"

She thrust out her first with a reddened face, so I retreated a step and brushed the blow aside. This irritated her and she shifted to a kick.

It wasn't so long ago that she was only able to swing her arms around fruitlessly at me while I held back her head. But now, she was displaying decent movements.

"Oh, you want to go at it? In all our battles, I'm undefeated, you know."

"Graaah!" Shannon cried out. "What right have you got to get so stuck up when you just mooch off my sis?! Today's the day I settle the score!"

Shannon took the stance of the savage swallow. She was serious.

I took the same stance in response.

"Don't underestimate me. I'm far stronger than you!"

But there, Aria clapped her hands together. "Oi, quit playing around and hurry it up."

Before, Aria would pace about not quite knowing what to do during camping time, but now she promptly finished her work.

"Y-Yes," I stammered to Shannon before heading off to get some warm water to wipe down.

***

The next day, we reached the twenty-first floor, then waited on standby around Porter. The light had been extinguished, and in the darkness, we heard footsteps approaching us. Anxiously looking over, I saw Aria, who had returned from her recon.

“Why are you so surprised?”

“Well, you appeared out of nowhere.”

Aria could increase her speed with her Art—it was an ability that allowed her to go insanely fast for a short period of time. Using it, she would approach the enemies and gather information before swiftly returning.

Apparently, she still wasn’t satisfied with her skill level, yet I had been unable to notice her until she had gotten close. She passed what she’d learned to the rest of us.

“Three lizardmen up ahead. They’re in a room, but they’re not relaxing there. They’ll come out if we pass nearby. One of them has a torch.”

We nodded.

“Oh, not bad,” Miranda praised her.

But Aria wasn’t so pleased with herself. “Thanks for that,” she said. “So what now, Lyle? There don’t seem to be any other monsters around. Should we all launch a surprise attack?”

That seemed to be our safest bet, so I nodded.

But then, Sophia picked up her battle age and said, “Can you leave this one to me?”

Her voice was quite serious. It was too dark to make out her face, but I knew she really meant it.

Lizardmen were, as the name implied, a mix between lizards and men. Their size easily exceeded that of a grown human male, and they also had several times the muscle mass of one. They were troublesome monsters that swung around large axes and spears.

But Sophia seemed keen on handling it alone.

“It might be good to put Sopha on the front and have the rest of us on support,” Miranda advised me. “It would be irresponsible to just send her in on her own.”

“I’m fine with that,” Sophia said.

And with that, she walked forth. Miranda and I followed along in case she needed assistance, bringing us closer and closer to the room with the lizardmen.

Once we were at the doorway, we could see the lizardmen discussing something, their faces brought close to one another. As soon as she was ready, Sophia nodded.

She quickly rushed into the room, held up her battle axe, and lobbed it.

“Wait, Sophia?!”

I was so surprised I nearly took off to help, but Miranda grabbed my shoulder.

“Wait, she’s stupid, but she’d not just an idiot. Let’s watch a bit more.”

The battleaxe spun in the air before slamming into one of the lizardmen, taking him out. But it didn’t stop there—it continued to fly until it stuck into the wall.

The lizardman with the torch opened its mouth wide and let out a horrible noise; this sent the other lizardman running at Sophia.

Sophia reached out her right arm. “Come.”

It was like someone had forcefully yanked the battleaxe from its resting place. It began spinning again as it flew. The lizardman turned just in time to see the axe approaching right before its eyes.

Blood erupted into the open air, and the axe was back in Sophia’s hand. Once she had a firm grip on it, she quickly took her stance.

The last remaining lizardman tossed its torch aside and charged. Its hefty axe clashed with Sophia’s, sending sparks scattering around them. Their weapons met a second time, then a third—but each time, the lizardman’s stance would crumble bit by bit.

Sophia had a smaller physique, and yet the Lizardman was losing the contest of strength.

The fifth head raised his voice from the Jewel. “Hmm, not half bad. She must have made that battleaxe into a Demonic Tool. Sophia’s also gotten better at handling her Art.”

“She makes it lighter when she lifts it, and heavier when she lowers it,” the sixth head said, sounding just as impressed. “Well, it’s an Art that manipulates weight, so I guess anyone would think of that...but it would take a lot of training to master it.”

She obtained a Demonic Tool and polished her own Art. It wasn’t anything complicated, but she had undoubtedly grown stronger. It was very fitting of such an earnest girl.

I shot an orb of magic into the air to serve as a light source. At just about the same time, Sophia jumped up and lowered her battleaxe.

Her blow had enough might to quite literally split her foe down the middle. Miranda, who had been watching from behind me, tucked her knife away and whistled. I found myself applauding her as well.

From the Jewel, the third head offered just one word. “Splendid.”

For once, he wasn’t teasing. He offered one sincere word of praise.

It seemed that, just like that, the two girls had grown a great deal... But there, I noticed a critical problem. Actually, I realized it around the time we passed through the twenty-fifth floor, but I’d kept quiet until floor twenty-nine.

Aria could scout and use her speed to land a preemptive strike. Meanwhile, Sophia could perfectly fulfill her job as a frontline fighter. Novem could burn through monsters with her magic, while Miranda could adapt to fill whatever position she had to.

Boinga could participate in battle and provide support from the rear line. Clara not only operated Porter, she also fulfilled her main designated role as a supporter.

Although Shannon was only useful for her eyes, she was still doing her best as a member of the party.

And, when we were finally at the point where we were about to challenge the boss of the thirtieth floor, the fourth head finally came out and said it.

“Lyle... Am I just imagining it, or have you not contributed anything noteworthy whatsoever?”

The party was in high spirits, excited that we would finally be fighting the floor boss tomorrow., and I noticed I hadn't really done anything in particular. I'd realized a while back, and I'd been trying hard to ignore it.

"I didn't want to say it," the third head said with genuine concern, "But right now, Lyle really is a gigolo. He's putting all the women around him to work and doing nothing himself. Well, that might be the right disposition for a leader, but this is not good."

"Novem! Is there anything I can help with?!" I called out as those around me were hard at work, setting up camp. I called out in the hopes I could assist in something—anything.

But Novem simply didn't understand my feelings. "Milord, please go to bed early for tomorrow's sake. We'll handle things here," she told me and got back to work.

I looked around.

Everyone had gotten quite skillful at their jobs, and there really wasn't anything for me to help with in the first place. As I nervously scanned the area, my eyes stopped upon Shannon—the only girl sitting atop a wooden box doing nothing.

She looked at me, her mouth spreading into a crescent.

She just read my heart!

"Pfft..." She laughed.

I could feel the anger swelling within me.

I didn't mind if someone cautioned me for doing a poor job. If someone scolded me or yelled at me, I'd repent. But being laughed at—by *her*—was the one thing I couldn't stand.

Catching on to my anger, she silently glared back at me. We were students of the same style, the same master. We took the same stance, ready to end this once and for all... when Shannon's eyes flitted to a corner of the room.

"Hey, gigolo."

"Don't call me gigolo. What?"

I looked in the direction she pointed and saw a small bug fluttering about.

“Shannon’s not shocked by a bug?” the second head spoke up. “Still, are there supposed to be normal bugs inside of a dungeon?”

At his words, I immediately pulled out a dagger and threw it. The blade flew through the air, and though it didn’t hit the tiny target, the fact I’d drawn a weapon had caught everyone’s attention.

Novem scooped up her staff pointed it, and fired off balls of fire until she had eventually burnt it to ash. Once it was gone, I immediately looked at Shannon.

“What was that bug?”

Cocking her head, she replied, “That wasn’t a bug. It was like a lump of mana imitating a bug. I saw a thin thread, so I think it was connected somewhere.”

“Shannon...” Miranda raced over. “Where did the thread lead to?”

Her sister’s serious expression made Shannon falter back a step as she said, “O-Outside of the room. Too far away for me to tell.”

“A bug made of mana?” the fourth head explained. “Come to think of it, I’ve heard of an Art that works like that. It’s used for surveillance and recon. Looks like you’ve been seen.”

When I gripped the Jewel, the third head calmly replied, “I understand where you’re coming from, Lyle, but no. We will not permit the use of Arts.”

I thought they’d let me use them at a time like this, but it was hopeless. There was someone—a human—watching us. I hoped it was just out of curiosity, but I wasn’t so optimistic.

“Wh-What happened?” Sophia asked, looking around.

“Don’t ask me,” Aria said, confused. “Lyle suddenly drew his weapon, so I thought he was getting in a fight with Shannon again.”

Hey, I wouldn’t go that far with Shannon.

Clara adjusted her glasses and explained, “Lately, there has been an increase in cases where adventurers are attacked by fellow adventurers. I didn’t think they would come this far down. I’ve heard they usually target people on the

upper levels.”

“Milord,” Novem turned to me with all seriousness. “I think this is an emergency. How about your Arts?”

I mulled over it, but my ancestors definitely wouldn’t permit it.

“I won’t use them.”

Miranda looked at me expressionlessly. “Are you sure? They’ve come all the way down here where there’ll be no witnesses. They might be waiting for their chance to get us.”

I wanted to get rid of my Art restriction this instant to scan for information on our enemy. But it just wasn’t permitted.

“Until you defeat the boss of the thirtieth floor, we will not allow the use of our Arts,” the third head said. “Give it some thought, Lyle.”

What was he even saying in a situation where we were being targeted? Irritated with my ancestors’ reception, I gripped the Jewel in my fist.

“I need some time to think. Can you leave me alone for a bit?” I told Novem and Miranda before hopping into Porter.

Not long after I climbed into Porter, I laid down and closed my eyes and then entered the Jewel. Now, standing before my seated ancestors in the round-table room, I set my hands flat on the table and made an earnest plea.

“Please, give me permission to use my Arts. I don’t think this is any time to be worrying about the assignment.”

“No can do,” the second head immediately replied. “You guys can manage something like this on your own.”

“‘Something like this’?! We’re being targeted by fellow adventurers!”

“You already noticed the possibility that someone was targeting you back when you were aboveground,” the fourth head pointed out flatly. “That was days ago, right? Don’t tell me you never thought your opponent would actually make a move. It’s your duty as party leader to consider the likelihood of things like this happening. You made a mistake—don’t act blind to it.”

I winced at his harsh words, only to hear the third head chuckle.

“Look at you—you’re already faltering. If *that* was enough to get you to back down, you shouldn’t have brought the topic up in the first place. Although...I don’t want to completely abandon you.” He turned to look at the other men seated around the table. “How about we offer him a bit of advice?”

The sixth head folded his arms and smiled at this suggestion. His smile wasn’t friendly like usual, though—there was something belligerent and almost frightening about it.

“These other adventurers could just be observing you out of curiosity,” he pointed out. “In that case, you won’t have to do anything. But there’s also a chance they’re searching for prey, and there’s also a chance they’re out to get you specifically.”

If they’re randomly searching for an easy mark, they’ll probably chance targets as soon as they realize we’ve noticed them, I thought. *But what if they’re out for us specifically, like the sixth head suggests? What’ll they do if they’re noticed then?*

“An all-out assault,” the seventh head said indifferently, answering my

unspoken question. “Although they may call things off and wait for another opportunity. There’s also a chance they’ll attack you aboveground, but that would be no fun. Don’t you agree, Lyle?”

I didn’t reply; despite the slight levity to the seventh head’s words, he clearly wasn’t at all amused about my party’s current situation.

The second head sighed, wrapping his hands behind his head and pondering the matter.

“Folks like these tend to be persistent,” he said after a moment. “They’ll do the worst things you can think of without a second thought. If you don’t address things now, your comrades will have to live in fear because of the sadistic whims of those scoundrels. You’d never allow that, right?”

I shrunk back into my seat, still not replying. *I get it, you guys are all trying to intimidate me into doing something,* I thought crankily.

“Lyle...” the fourth head said slowly. He pushed up his glasses, and the lenses caught the light in an ominous way. “This situation has already progressed to its final stage. Either you take them out, or you’ll get taken out yourself.”

It would have been one thing to here those words from one of my other ancestors, but the fourth head’s opinions tended to be relatively moderate. That he’d leaned so far to one side was notable.

As I took in his words, the fifth head added, “Battles don’t just happen out of nowhere—not unless someone picks a fight. This situation, however, is different. You could have done plenty of things before it got to this. Hell, you even stepped in and saved other adventurers who said they’d been attacked in this dungeon. A good deed, but you missed the most pertinent information: some nasty people have been lurking around in Aramthurst’s dungeon.”

The sixth head flattened his lips, erasing his aggressive smile. “Not to mention you made light of it when you found out someone was tailing you. Were you just being naïve and thinking they wouldn’t take things this far?” He clicked his tongue. “That’s no good. No good at all.”

The third head used a hand to comb his blonde hair back, revealing his forehead. There was an intensity to his expression that I had never seen before,

but brought to mind his past as a hero of Banseim who had had his named carved into history. Given his usual care-free attitude that fact was easy to forget, but reality was, he'd had fought in far more battles than I ever had.

"This is happening because of your mistakes, Lyle," he said sternly. "Before you rely on us, you should reflect on your inadequacies. You should have added to your party's numbers and looked into your enemy as soon as you caught on."

True... I thought with a sigh. *I could've been targeted for any number of reasons. Recently, I've been making a fortune with the cart trying to develop Porter, which is enough on its own to make me stand out. Then adding on the fact that all of my comrades are beautiful women...*

My thoughts were cut short when the fifth head folded his hands atop the table and said, "While Lyle is worthy of criticism, all we're doing now is wasting time. At a crucial moment like this, the most important thing is to quickly take action. And Lyle...do you think you'll be able to kill a human?"

I looked him in the eyes; he was one hundred percent not joking.

My hand wandered up to my chest, clenching tightly into the fabric of my shirt. It's not that I had forgotten, but the current conversation made clear that the men surrounding me had all been feudal lords—they were all warriors who'd had to fight and kill their fellow men.

"Just leave this to us," the second head cut in. "We're good at this sort of thing."

"In that case..." The third head's facial expression shifted; there was something different about it, something that I hadn't seen before. "I'm curious about the enemy's movements."

"Indeed," the fourth head agreed, his glasses letting off an eerie light. "Now that they know we know they're here, will they change their plans or not...? They seem to have some convenient Arts, so they've likely hardly ever been noticed before."

The fifth head's eyes narrowed. "You'll have to teach them you're not some prey on the run. You're a wild beast ready to fight back."

"Yeah!" the sixth head boomed, his voice a strange mixture of amused and

angry. “And if they’ve just done this out of curiosity, then we’ve got to punish them appropriately! If they’re the ones picking a fight, they can’t complain if we flip the script.”

I glanced at the seventh head; he’d hidden his lips behind his folded hands, but I got the sense he was smiling.

“Lyle, don’t hold back against scoundrels,” he said sternly. “There’s no need to. Go teach them who it is they picked a fight with.”

Why do they always have to be so reliable at times like this...?

***

On the twenty-seventh floor of Aramthurst’s dungeon, right at the top of the slope that led down to the twenty-eighth floor, the team of adventurers Zalsa was leading had begun to panic.

“They *what*?” Zalsa snapped, his voice rougher than usual as he whirled angrily toward his comrades. “Hey, you! Yeah, I’m talking to you, halfwit! What’s the meaning of this?”

The adventurer Zalsa was speaking to crouched down, curling into himself as he apologized. “F-Forgive me, Mr. Zalsa! One of the girls noticed my bug, and then they starting throwing knives and fire at it! I couldn’t avoid their attacks, and... I didn’t think they’d catch on to me so quickly!”

Zalsa stared down at the man with irritation. He’d only accepted the man into his party since his Art came in handy scouting—basically, the man could create bugs which he could then send out to investigate areas and then transmit information back to him. With such an unparalleled ability to gather information, he’d naturally become the eyes and ears of Zalsa’s party.

That said, he’d rarely ever failed at his job before. That only irritated Zalsa more.

Nothing is going as planned, he thought, enraged.

“We’re not alone this time, you damn fool!” Zalsa roared at his comrade. “We’ve got Benil and that damn brat with us! If I make a mistake, those two are going to make me into a laughingstock! Read the goddamn room!”

Zalsa stepped forward, almost as if to attack the other man, but his other comrades stepped in and held him back.

“Calm down, Zalsa!” one of them said in a rush.

“He’s right!” one of the others agreed. “No matter what anyone says, that party still managed to conquer the fortieth floor. The fact that they’re this skilled shouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Now that it’s come to this,” a third man said soothingly, “why don’t we contact the other teams and—”

Zalsa flailed his arms, catapulting his comrades into the ground. “You didn’t know what convenient Arts they had, huh?! That’s the story you’re going with? You *idiot,* are you trying to make a fool out of me?! If we ask for help right now, it’d be the same as me telling the others I’m a dumbass!”

In that moment, Zalsa realized how much his party had underestimated the capability of Lyle and his comrades. They had looked into them before they’d launched this attack, but all they’d discovered was that every time Lyle had challenged the dungeon without Professor Damian, it had ended in miserable failure. Little did they know, Lyle had been restricting the use of his Arts that whole time.

Ruffling up his hair, Zalsa said, “Change of plans—we’re going on the attack. Since it’s come to this, we’ll ensure they can’t rest and whittle away at their stamina...” Zalsa paused, sensing something was wrong. “Wait... What’s that sound?”

The adventurer in charge of gathering information sprung up, his eyes widening. “They’re here, Mr. Zalsa! They’re coming right at us!”

It was at that moment that a large moving box—apparently called Porter—appeared, climbing up the slope from the twenty-eighth floor. Zalsa and his men scattered, backing hurriedly away from the vehicle’s path once they took in the sheer magnitude of its size. The few that didn’t move in time were sent flying when Porter rammed straight into them.

Zalsa’s men watched on, tense, as Porter stopped and a lone young man disembarked. All they had to see was his blue hair to know that he was one of

Zalsa's targets. Plus, since he was male, it didn't matter even if they killed him on sight. Still, no one moved. There was a feeling of fear in the air.

"What're you all doing?!" Zalsa howled, drawing the rapier from his hip. "That kid's Lyle! Kill him—he'll be the first to die!"

Lyle's eyes narrowed as soon as he saw Zalsa's rapier, but Zalsa didn't notice. He was glaring at his men, three of whom took the cue and reached for their weapons before plunging toward Lyle in a rush.

Lyle had positioned himself in front of Porter, whose body had been parked sideways in a fashion that blocked off the rest of the corridor. Zalsa cackled as he watched his comrades rain down on the boy; there was no escape route in sight.

"Just you try laughing at me now!" he shouted. "All that's left is to take care of the women!"

Sure of his men's victory, Zalsa's mind shifted to pondering over what he'd do with the remaining members of Lyle's party. Before he got too far, however, he saw the entire group of his comrades collapse to the ground.

Zalsa froze, his mouth dropping open.

From what he could observe from where he stood, his fallen comrades were groaning with pain and covered in blood. For all three of them to be taken out simultaneously, with such ease... These were some of the most skilled members of Zalsa's party—he'd never even imagined such an outcome could be possible.

Zalsa's gaze flicked to Lyle, who was still standing in the same position, just with two sabers in his hands.

He's dual-wielding... Zalsa thought blankly, then flinched when Lyle raised the sword in his right hand to point it straight at him.

"Are you the leader...?" Lyle demanded.

Zalsa could instinctively tell the energy in the air had turned—his men were faltering now that they'd seen the most skilled members of their party effortlessly taken out. That theory was proven by the inaction of Zalsa's comrades—despite there being an entire group's worth of them, not a single

one of them moved to attack Lyle.

This is not good, Zalsa thought. *Not good at all.*

If he made the wrong move here, Zalsa knew he'd lose his entire party. First one of them would run, then another, until finally the whole group would scatter. The only reason they hadn't run yet was that they believed he could win against Lyle. Zalsa could feel it in the way all his men were watching them, their eyes glinting.

I don't have any other choice, Zalsa realized. *I have to fight.*

He knew his men were hardly better than a group of bandits who targeted adventurers. It took some smarts to lead them, but Zalsa knew strength was what they respected most. The only reason they allowed him to act big and order them around was they knew he was stronger than them.

Zalsa's fists clenched. *You pieces of trash!*

This was why he had never once opened his heart to his comrades—he knew that if he gave them the slightest opportunity, they'd turn on him in seconds. After all, Zalsa had often done the same to others himself.

Zalsa steadied his breath. As he inhaled, his nose filled with the smell of blood. The blood of his comrades.

Perhaps the stench should have unnerved him, but Zalsa had long grown used to it. He'd attacked dozens of adventurers parties with his comrades, and they'd committed all sorts of atrocities as they stole away all their valuables.

Glaring at Lyle, Zalsa used his free hand to push his hair from his eyes and his other to ready his rapier. *You damn brat! I'll be thorough with all your comrades especially. I won't kill them until they cry and beg for forgiveness!*

Zalsa fell into a fighting stance. It was quite a few measures more beautiful than one would expect, given his personality.

"How brave you are," Zalsa called to Lyle. "Truly, I commend you for your reckless courage, charging alone into such a large group."

Lyle only continued to stare at him, undeterred. His blue eyes gleamed faintly, nearly the same color as the blue gemstone that hung at his chest.

“It’s too late to make excuses,” Lyle said. “I was listening in on your conversation. Although...there *is* a lot more I’d like to hear from you.”

Zalsa chuckled. “Well sure, I would love to sit and chat. But once the conversation ends—"

With a slight motion that looked like nothing more than a single step, Zalsa shot forward, his rapier shooting toward Lyle’s chest. He grinned, assured of his victory.

A kid like that, taking me on? Absurd! I’m one of the best swordsmen in Aramthurst!

Zalsa’s pride in his skills wasn’t misplaced—he truly was one of the most prominent swordsmen in Aramthurst, and he went the city’s most famous training hall, where’d he’d mastered every skill they had to offer. He’d proved his abilities publicly, where everyone could see.

As for his choice of weapon, Zalsa had gone for rapiers because he was dexterous enough to aim for the gaps in his opponent’s armor, even in the heat of battle. It also might have had something to do with how much he enjoyed watching those he fought with suffer when his blade slipped through their defenses.

It seemed that Lyle, however, would not be such an easy opponent; he parried Zalsa’s thrust with one of his sabers.

Wh-What? How?!

Cold sweat flowed down Zalsa’s cheek as he leapt back, putting distance between himself and the young swordsman.

How did he manage to keep up with my speed? he wondered, a bit put off. *Could it have something to do with his Art? Or maybe he’s using a Demonic Tool of some sort?*

Either was possible, but Zalsa hadn’t heard anything about Lyle possessing any Demonic Tools. He also knew that the boy hadn’t been attending class at *any* of Aramthurst’s training halls, let alone the more famous ones. Based on that, he’d assumed Lyle only barely knew his way around a sword, but the move he’d just demonstrated indicated a skill a good measure above that.

Zalsa grinned widely. “You’re pretty good with a sword if you could keep track of that thrust,” he told Lyle. “What do you think about switching sides? You could always be my ally...”

Lyle didn’t reply, just wordlessly pointed his saber back at Zalsa. Zalsa’s eye twitched, but he forced his face back under control; he had to keep acting calm and confident if he wanted to maintain his power over his comrades.

“Well, well...” Zalsa drawled. “And here I thought we could get along.”

Stepping in again, Zalsa unleashed a flurry of consecutive thrusts. Sparks flew as his rapier clashed with Lyle’s sabers again, and again, and again. Each time their swords met, Zalsa could feel an uneasiness building in his chest.

Why’re you so strong? Are you even human, Lyle Walt?!

As Zalsa continued a desperate one-sided offensive against Lyle, the young swordsman easily avoided every blow—even the feints and the ones with Zalsa’s full power behind them.

Zalsa could hear his comrades cheering from the sidelines, confident in his superiority as a fighter. To them, Lyle must have looked like the lesser swordsman.

To Zalsa, however, Lyle looked like a monster. Not a single attack seemed to work the kid. Every one of his skills proved useless against him.

Left with no other choice, Zalsa decided to use the sand he held clutched in his free hand, which he’d gotten from a pouch he’d had hidden up his sleeve. He braced to throw it into Lyle’s face, and...

“*Aaagh!”*

Pain raced through Zalsa as he blinked through the sand that had scattered through the air around him. It was only then he realized what had happened—Lyle’s blade had sliced across his arm, causing his hand to spasm and release the handful of gritty earth he’d been holding.

Y-You bastard! Zalsa roared internally.

His wound burned as if it was on fire as he thrust his rapier at Lyle’s face, but the young swordsman only avoided him and countered with a headbutt.

This kid isn't just well-practiced when it comes to the sword, Zalsa mused. *He's well-versed in real combat as well.*

The realization sent a wave of impending doom through Zalsa. He backed off and used the back of his right hand to wipe his nose. It came back covered in blood.

"Zalsa lost?" one of Zalsa's men muttered from a few yards away.

"D-Don't be stupid," another hurriedly replied. "This is just one of his usual tricks."

"Th-That's right, he's obviously playing around!" agreed a third.

At times, he would purposely make his opponent think they had won before showing his real strength. He did this only because he found it amusing how quickly they would get on their high horse.

But this was different.

What's with this? Who's the one who said he was just some noble from the sticks? How could he be so strong at his age... Hmm?

But Zalsa picked up on something then Despite the large skill gap between them, Lyle had yet to land a finishing blow. Looking at his collapsed comrades, he saw they were still groaning... They were alive.

And although Lyle seemed accustomed to battle, he was very young.

Heh... Heh heh heh! I see, so that's how it is.

Come to think of it, that also explained why his comrades weren't present. There was no hint that they would attack from behind while Lyle drew his attention. If the same held true for every member of his party, that meant...

"You've never killed a man...have you?"

Lyle's expression contorted a bit.

Zalsa laughed. "Yeah, you see them now and then. Even when they had hordes of monsters to teach them how to kill, they hesitate when they stand before a human being! So you're one of *those* people."

Lyle remained silent.

By this point, Zalsa was done with playing the gentleman. He gave an unsightly face as he laughed.

“You really are stupid, all of you. You can kill monsters but not humans? You fool! It’s killing all the same, why act like you’re above all of this? But thanks to that, you’ll never win against me.”

Adventurers with a strong aversion to killing people were oftentimes young, or overly earnest. As long as someone worked in the adventurer gig for long enough, they’d eventually accept a job that had them sent out to war.

And yet, there are adventurers that avoided fighting people.

Zalsa simply couldn’t understand it. For adventurers, hunting other adventurers was simply the most efficient way to make money. Someone could spend weeks slaving away, hunting down as many monsters as they possibly could, and in just one battle he could reap all of the rewards.

He could sell the weapons and armor of those he defeated too.

If he went out to war, he could raid villages and loot all he wanted.

Zalsa and his men were no different from bandits.

“I don’t know what countryside ditch you crawled out of, noble brat. Are you trying to practice chivalry or something? Then die with those lofty ideals, stupid!”

Zalsa took a swipe at Lyle, and...

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The location was the twenty-ninth floor of the dungeon. They’d changed the location of their camp and were waiting on standby, fully armed. They couldn’t let their guard down when there was a possibility that they were being targeted.

Before she headed out, Miranda had stretched her wires across the entrance to keep out any would-be intruders.

Aria could hear a set of footsteps approaching.

“Someone’s coming. Miranda, maybe? Looks like they’re not on Porter.”

The ones who returned were Miranda and Shannon, and Boinga who had quite a dissatisfied look on her face. Miranda undid the wires and reinstalled them once everyone was inside.

Seeing that only the three of them had returned, Novem immediately asked, “What about Milord?!”

“He told us to head back,” Miranda said, shaking her head. “He wanted to charge in alone, and there was no time to persuade him otherwise.”

Novem glared at Boinga, her expression far more stern than usual. “You abandoned your master and fled?”

But Boinga looked equally frustrated as she refuted, “I insisted I wanted to remain! However, he said the other two wouldn’t make it back safely without me to guide them... I cannot go against orders.”

From those last words, it was clear that she had not done it by choice. Her irritated voice caused the rest of them to shut their mouths.

“H-Hey...” Shannon stammered, looking around anxiously. “It’ll be fine, right? He’ll cut them up on his own and return, right?”

“Is it too late to assist him? The enemy was very numerous, correct?” Sophia confirmed with a bitter face.

Miranda gave the exact figure. “According to Shannon and Boinga, there were twenty-five of them. Well, twenty-five at that location, at least. They seemed panicked, but I don’t know how they are now.”

Shannon’s orphic eyes allowed her to visualize and manipulate mana. Even if someone was far away, she could utilize the vibrations of mana to pick up their voice.

Shannon looked down and gripped her skirt.

“It seems like they still have other allies somewhere.”

Novem squeezed her staff and tried to leave the room only for Miranda to grab her shoulder.

“Could you let go of me?” said Novem. “I don’t have time to deal with you.”

Miranda remained unfazed even with Novem glaring at her. “Oh my, you can’t even trust your precious *Lord Lyle*?”

Novem had been against the plan from the very start. She only went along with it because Lyle said he would have a look and turn back if it seemed too much to handle.

She hadn’t heard a thing about him charging in alone.

“I can’t abandon him, precisely because he is precious to me. That’s why I was against it. Why does he always—?”

Aria turned to move too. “I’ll go ahead and help him out.”

“If I alter my weight,” Sophia said, hoisting up her battle-axe, “I can make myself light enough for Aria to carry me. We might be able to do something together.”

Clara cast her eyes down, “At times like these, supporters aren’t much use. Although I might be able to operate Porter if you take me.”

Everyone wanted to go to Lyle’s aid, but this time it was Boinga who stood at the entrance, her hands held out to stop them.

Aria grabbed her shoulder and pulled but she wouldn’t budge.

“Hey! Why are you getting in the way? Are you sure you’re not actually broken?”

Boinga shook her head. “It’s my chicken’s orders. You shall not pass.”

Her hostility was on full display; Novem held up her staff and prepared to cast magic, but Sophia held her down.

“Novem, wait!”

“Let go of me. I must go to Milord’s side.”

Shannon had been clinging to Miranda out of fear, so Miranda picked her up and sat her down on a wooden crate.

“What are you doing at a time like this?!” Aria yelled at her.

Displaying complete composure, Miranda smiled at her. “I am waiting faithfully for him.”

Can't you tell by looking at me? Her attitude seemed to say. And Novem quietly seethed.

"Ms. Miranda...it seems it was a lie when you said you would be Lord Lyle's number one. If I didn't know better, I'd assume you didn't care if he died."

Miranda expressionlessly replied, "Just kidding. We could still be targeted as we speak, so I'm just keeping myself ready for battle as instructed. I respect his opinion."

"If you're not doing anything, then isn't it the same?!" Sophia rebuked her in a strong tone. "That's just the same as abandoning him!"

When they saw Shannon dive back into Miranda's arms on the verge of tears, everyone's tone softened a bit. But even now as they spoke, perhaps Lyle was in a very dangerous situation.

Novem shot Boinga a sidelong look. *It will take too much time to destroy this automaton and rush to Lord Lyle. But there's no other option—*

Perhaps Miranda's threads were of no use against her as she didn't even seem to take them into consideration. She considered the optimum method to save Lyle and was about to act on it when Miranda laughed.

"How about you people trust in him a bit?"

Novem froze for a moment. "What are you trying to say?"

"Sure, he may be oblivious and a bit out of it. His mental age is around the same as Shannon's, I'd say. You can tell he's unreliable just looking at him, and I get why you feel like you just can't leave him alone." Miranda cocked her head to one side and spoke in a way to provoke the others. "But the guy I like... can handle this, no problem."

Novem turned towards her. "If anything happens to Lord Lyle, will you take responsibility?"

"It might, but probabilistically speaking, the chances of that are very low. Boinga, from your perspective, is Lyle weak? Is he going to lose to them?"

Still guarding the entrance, Boinga answered. "My chicken? Weak? Of course not. Even if he was weak once upon a time, in the past few months, his meals,

his sleep, and his training were supported by none other than me—by Boinga. There is absolutely no way he is weak."

"To me, it just looked like he was dancing around and taking strange poses," Aria frankly stated exactly what came to her mind. "I thought he was practicing acrobatics or something."

Both Sophia and Clara nodded, and Shannon seemed absolutely horrified that they had thought of it like that.

Boinga heaved a heavy sigh. "You really are underestimating me. Well, I can understand why you'd judge me on my appearance—given how adorable I am. However, my chicken has definitely not been playing around these past few months. Him losing is...impossible."

The automaton was certain of Lyle's victory.

Chapter 64: Enemy

I was overcome by nausea at the ghastly sight. I could not win against the discomfort that seemed to come from the very depths of my being.

It was a scene I had witnessed far too many times, but to think a change—the fact that it was now humans lying there—would make this much difference... I placed a hand on my chest.

My eyes drifted to a severed arm that lay on the floor, its fingers still firmly clutched around a rapier.

My ancestors could all see how pathetic I really was.

I vomited. This wasn't the time, but I couldn't contain it... Not after I had failed to kill the enemy.

"Lyle," the second head sounded displeased. "Why did you hesitate?"

The adventurers who attacked us had gotten away. Only the fallen ones remained.

Even that man named Zalsa had disappeared somewhere despite losing an arm.

"I... couldn't do it."

If I knew the reason, it wouldn't be so painful. But I just didn't know. The moment I lowered my blade to kill my foe, I ended up hesitating and pulling back ever so slightly.

As a result, I'd managed to take the man's right arm, but not the man himself.

The third head sighed. "Lyle, you need to do what you must. I imagine you'll have a high price to pay for this."

My ancestors had no hesitation when it came to killing people. They all came from different times and held different senses of values... but this was one conviction they held true to all of them.

The fourth took in the surrounding sights and offered a suggestion on what to

do from there. “I’d recommend torching their bags. They had some other goodies stashed in a nearby room, right? You should get rid of that too.”

Calmly, the fifth head explained, “There’s probably a higher chance of them begging their comrades for help, rather than flying into a frenzy and coming at us in desperation.”

“If they picked the other one, it would be easier to swat them down,” the sixth disappointedly said.

My comrades were all women. Shannon was still young, and I didn’t want to show her this scenery. My ancestors didn’t want Shannon to see it either.

The seventh head spoke in a tone where I could practically imagine the smile on his face. “They’ll be running around this monster-infested dungeon without any decent equipment or supplies. Now then, just how many of those idiots will reach their allies?”

“With that settled,” said the fourth head. “Let’s go to where their supplies are stored. Luckily, it’s quite close. Since you stationed Porter to block the way, the remnants were unable to flee in that direction. You should probably get rid of all of it.”

I wiped my mouth before hopping into Porter and driving to the room where Zalsa’s party had stored their supplies. Thankfully, Shannon and Boinga had given me all sorts of information on the location of enemies among other things.

Just as my ancestors had said before, I never needed Arts to handle them from the start.

Once I arrived at the room, I found the supplies.

There wasn’t anyone keeping watch.

I lifted up my hand and pointed it. An orb of flames drifted towards the stacks of necessities; quickly, the fire spread and burned everything.

“Now then, shall we head back?” the second head remained calm. “It would be idiotic to wait until our pursuers reach the girls.”

The seventh sounded invigorated. “If they have the guts to pursue, just

intercept and take them out. But Lyle... you must take out the enemy captain. Taking out the head of an operation is crucial."

Not quite knowing what to say, I returned to Porter, and started on the way back to the rest of the party.

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Zalsa had wrapped a cloth around his missing right arm. Once the bleeding had stopped, he finally headed back to collect his supplies, only to crumble at the knees.

In his left hand, he held a sword he had snatched from one of his comrades.

And before him, he saw only burned scraps where all his food and water had once been. His other comrades rushed out and checked through everything, but they quickly concluded that barely anything was in a usable state.

Zalsa looked down at his lost right arm.

"That damn brat... Now you've done it!"

His anger was growing. He's lost a majority of his comrades, and the gap that had been left by the loss of his skilled fighters was the most painful. All that remained were small fries and baggage carriers that were of no use in battle.

Even if they had the funds to replace all the supplies and equipment that had been lost, it wasn't so simple to replenish lost comrades. To make matters worse, he had lost his dominant hand.

If he went at it in earnest, it would likely take several years before he could form a party on the same scale as before. No, it wouldn't even be strange if it took a decade.

"You've...left me...like this. I'll never forgive you!"

The blood was rushing to his head, but still, Zalsa thought rationally about what to do from here.

It's impossible for us to escape the dungeon on our own. Benil will have to pick us up. If we can just take out that damn brat...take out Rudall, we'll have some funds to work with. I can get a prosthetic arm, regain my skills, and next time for sure...

Once he'd thought that far through, he heard the sound of a group approaching the room.

"Monsters again?"

He held up his weapon at the ready, but the one who appeared was Benil, his hammer over his shoulder.

"Benil! Hey, my brother!"

Zalsa smiled, having found hope in this desperate situation.

Benil approached him. "Your buddies came all the way to the floor we were stationed on. And when I rush over, what do I see? They really did a number on you, Zalsa. Who do you think is going to clean up after your mess?"

Zalsa wanted to snap back at Benil's high-handed attitude, but as he was now, he was overwhelmingly weaker.

"Sorry, Benil. That damn brat was stronger than expected."

"I don't wanna hear your excuses."

Benil lifted his hammer high in the air.

"B-Benil?" Zalsa's face stiffened up.

Benil looked around at Zalsa's comrades and said. "You lot, decide whether you want to follow me or die. If you don't follow me..."

Zalsa tried to escape, but he was injured and his stamina was depleted. His desperate attempts amounted to nothing. The hammer came down and smashed his head to pieces.

"This is what happens."

Everyone sword then and there to follow Benil.

The adventurer stroked his beard. "Zalsa, I've always hated you. Your fake gentleman act made me want to vomit." He began counting how many comrades Zalsa had left. "Ohly eight of them, huh? Well, I'll bet the monsters cleaned up the other ones, and there's no use worrying about it. From today onwards, I'm your head honcho. You got that?"

Now with his numbers bolstered, Benil stroked his beard and thought of what

he’d do now. “Zalsa was a bastard, but his skills were the real deal. If the brat could beat him, he’s too dangerous.”

Benil was a careful man. Turning back seemed like his best option, but first, he would have to report to his client Rudall.

When I met back up with the others, everyone seemed far too concerned about my injuries.

“Are you hurt at all, milord?! Please take your shirt off at once.”

A concerned Novem came straight up and started to strip me. I could not muster the willpower to resist, but I did want her to leave me alone. I just wasn’t feeling too great.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry, I’m just fine.”

“I can’t do that. What are you going to do if the enemy laced their blades with poison? I need to make sure at once.”

Boinga wearily chimed in, “This damn chicken does not have any external injuries. I have confirmed it.”

However, Novem simply ignored her and closely inspected all over my body.

Aria and Sophia chastised me.

“Are you an idiot?!”

“Why did you go to fight alone?! Do you not trust us?”

I spent a moment puzzling over how I would respond to them, when Novem gave them both a stern glare.

“Please keep quiet for a bit.”

They shut their mouths, overpowered by her air of intimidation. Meanwhile, Miranda brought me a wet towel.

“Don’t you think you should let him rest for now? I don’t see that usual composure of yours, Novem.”

Novem’s hands froze. From the Jewel, I heard the same voices and yet, unlike last time, they didn’t sound reliable at all.

“If only Miranda had a bit of restraint.”

“Hmm, is this one of those catfights I’ve heard about?”

“Why is my stomach starting to hurt? We’re just memories, aren’t we? I don’t even have a body. So why must I suffer...”

“I...think Novem is being a little overbearing...”

“Yeah, please don’t make it sound like Milleia’s great-granddaughter is the only one at fault.”

“Well...you should probably rest for now. You’re pretty tired, aren’t you, Lyle?”

Physically, I wasn’t that fatigued. But mentally...that was another story.

“Novem, I’m really not injured. Don’t worry. For now, I just want to get some rest.”

Novem seemed to fall into a slump as she looked at my face. “Is that... so. What about food, then?”

“Not now. I don’t want to eat anything.”

Even if I ate, it felt like I would just vomit it back up. What was this sickening feeling?

Evidently, Novem was genuinely worried about me, and she stayed by my side until I reached my sleeping bag.

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Rudall sat atop a large stack of supplies, and from his high perch he looked down at the quivering adventurers as though they were nothing more than refuse.

“You pieces of trash. What give you the right to offer *your* opinion to *me*?”

His eyes drifted to where Benil and several of his comrades lay, dead. The reason the other adventurers were so afraid had to do with the spell Rudall had cast.

In Banseim, and in nearly every other country in fact, being a noble meant being a magician. For it was magic—a rare and valuable ability—that gave them their authority. A clear and evident difference in power existed between those who had magic and those who did not.

Their corpses were burnt to a crisp.

They were stronger than Rudall; they had far more combat experience. And

yet, they fell dead all too easily before the might of magic. True magicians who could exercise magic to its full potential did exist among the academy's student body.

One of Rudall's friends called out to him, "What should we do with the rest of them?"

Since they were also a noble and a magician, Rudall would not treat them like garbage, nor would he grow irritated.

"I wouldn't mind if they all disappeared here, but if they want to do my bidding, I could graciously permit it. After all, I did want some pieces I could use in Aramthurst."

"Oh, not bad," his other friend concurred. "It's so inconvenient here, without all the servants I had back home."

"Yes, hiring the survivors could prove interesting. Hey, trash, you better work like your life is on the line."

As Rudall and his buddies cackled away, they were surrounded by armed knights. These were the cream of the crop, the finest men he had summoned from his house.

But there, Rudall recalled the report the adventurers had given him. "I heard those adventurers were supposed to be strong, but it turns out, they're worthless. They got done in by some noble from the boonies."

"You expected too much from an *adventurer*," one of his friends said with a shrug. "So what do we do now? Wait here to attack them?"

He knew for a fact that Lyle's party would have to pass through the room they were in on their way to the surface. Targeting them at that time would be easiest.

Rudall thought for a moment. "Right...if possible, I'd like to see something interesting."

Lording over the trembling adventurers, Rudall smiled. The two ill-natured adventurer leaders were gone, and ultimately it was the noble Rudall who remained. Infighting had killed most of their forces before they could even

launch an attack.

Somehow, this noble boy seemed far more sinister than all the monsters lurking in the dungeon.

***

The night came, the night went. Boinga had kept watch for us the entire time. We all slept until she woke us by banging a ladle against a frying pan.

“It’s morning. Please get up. Oh, what perfect weather for a dungeon! Not that I can even tell what the weather is, down here.”

Seeing her so energetic this early in the morning, I reached for the book I’d been using as a pillow. The book on names.

I tucked it away in my bag and yawned. I felt terrible.

I didn’t know why, but it was just awful.

All through the night, I couldn’t tell if I was asleep or awake. It felt like the inside of my head had been stirred up and I couldn’t forget how it felt like to slice through a human.

I wrapped my arms around myself as Novem approached me.

“Good morning, Lord Lyle. Would you like me to wipe down your body?”

I hadn’t even noticed up to that point, but I’d evidently sweated up a storm in my sleep.

“Sorry. Could you please?”

Usually, the ancestors would have started mouthing off at me there. *How dare you make little Novem do something like that*, they’d say. Despite my expectations, it was a very quiet morning.

Then Miranda arrived with a pail in hand.

“I got you some hot water, Lyle. *I’ll* wipe you.”

She emphasized a certain word, but I ignored it. Right now, I could only nod.

I felt terrible today.

Novem looked at Miranda, quite clearly having something she wanted to say,

but she stood and smiled at me. “I’ll prepare breakfast then,” she said as she left.

I muttered a feeble, “Thanks,” to her back. And then, Miranda began wiping me down.

“I woke Shannon up and had her look around,” Miranda whispered. “It doesn’t look like there are any humans around.”

Apparently, she’d woken up even earlier than me. I looked over and saw the little girl looked very sleepy.

“Sorry for the trouble.”

Miranda smiled. “Oh, it’s fine. You did your best yesterday. And so?”

Presumably, Miranda was hoping for information on the group that had tried to attack us. I replied, “They seemed very accustomed to targeting adventurer parties. Although they seem to have other allies, they weren’t on the twenty-seventh floor, so I think they’re further up. I burned their supplies. The ones who ran have probably met up with their comrades by now.”

Miranda nodded a few times.

“It would be nice if they could just pull out like that. I mean, they should—they’ll need food and water for those that fled to them, after all.”

With an increased personnel count, they would need food and water to match. The more survivors there were, the more the noose would tighten around their necks.

“They seemed to be targeting us specifically. I collected their guild cards, so we should confirm a few things once we return to the surface. We might have to live cautiously for a while.”

“There’s not much we can do about that,” she said, reassuringly. “If that’s what’s going to bring us safety, I can put up with it. More importantly, Lyle...about the next floor boss. How about you leave it to me?”

She leaned her weight against me. She must have already cleaned herself off as I picked up the faint scent of soap.

“Miranda’s kinda, assertive, no, what’s the word... Aggressive,” said the third.

I guess he was trying to say she was more than just assertive.

Clara and Shannon were safe inside Porter, while everyone else was on foot holding metal plates. These were shields to block those beams of light—Boinga called them *lasers*—and they had been personally made by the automaton.

Holding up her shield, Sophia noted, “It doesn’t feel very reliable.”

It had been made very thin and light, and just hitting it normally would leave it dented. It seemed to be slathered with some sort of paint, and this was supposed to block the lasers of that cylindrical boss monster.

“How very rude of you to mention that,” Boinga said, holding up two shields herself. “Even if you make it nice and bulky, it would be pointless against that turret.”

The cylinder had about the width of two grown adults and was at least three meters tall. It was incredibly heavy. As it turned out, the guild had simply dubbed it *Heavy Cylinder*.

It floated around unstably in the air, and when it rammed someone with its massive bulk, an adult would be crushed flat.

And so, it was pointless to bolster the shields to take physical attacks. They were made solely to block the beams it fired from its single eye.

“Are you really going to do it alone?” Aria asked Miranda.

Miranda showed off the knife hanging from her hip alongside various other tools. She was the only one out here without a shield.

“This should be more than enough. If anything happens, protect me. Okay, Lyle?”

She singled me out, and Novem stared at her coldly.

“Novem’s been a bit scary since yesterday,” the second head muttered.

The second, third, and fourth heads were kind to Novem, but the fifth head onwards showed more kindness to Miranda and Shannon. Even the fifth head, who was usually so uninterested in anything, seemed so terribly curious today of all days.

“Isn’t Miranda better than Novem...? Novem spoils Lyle too much.”

The third refuted this, as though he simply couldn’t let that statement stand. “You’re saying poor Novem, who sold her own dowry to serve Lyle, isn’t worthy? That’s a bit much, don’t you think?”

Opinions were divided and a fight was brewing, but I ignored it all.

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” I told Miranda.

She smiled and replied, “Just watch me. Aria and Sophia were not the only ones working hard.”

The thirtieth floor. We all stepped into the boss’s room at once.

We took the lead, holding our shields out. Miranda and Porter followed from behind.

A devastating ray of light fired from the cylinder’s eye. The one who caught it was Sophia.

“I-It really blocked the light—I mean the laser?!”

Sure enough, the shield fulfilled its purpose and took the attack.

Miranda leaped out from behind Sophia and threw something at the boss. Swiftly, Aria rushed out in front of her to cover her from any incoming shots.

“Clay? What’s that supposed to do?”

She had thrown a long, rectangular block of clay, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. Once it struck the cylinder, the clay deformed and stuck.

“No, that’s...”

Novem seemed to notice something. She was about to say it, but Miranda got her explanation in first.

“It’s not just any clay. Just do this and—oh, watch out for the light and sound.”

Miranda threw a knife, which stuck into the clay. A moment later, the clay let off a massive flash and exploded.

“Huh?!”

By the time I realized it, the cylinder was spinning in the air and colliding with the walls. Once it smacked into the ground, Miranda threw another block of clay at it.

“Oh dear, how sturdy. I guess one just wasn’t enough. Its weak point should be...here, perhaps?”

She aimed it at the cylinder’s eye and tossed a knife again. As soon as it stabbed in, there was light and smoke, and then the boss was flying through the air. The sounds of explosions echoed through the room, and it felt like my ears were about to bleed.

And as the sounds put me in a daze, the cylinder stopped moving entirely.

“It has ceased functioning,” Boinga said as she approached it.

Miranda turned back to us. “It was a lot easier the second time, right? After seeing the first time you fought it, I thought it might be easier to take it down like this. Luckily, it went well.”

“W-Wait, don’t tell me she was making bombs?” the sixth head asked, dumbfounded.

The seventh head, on the contrary, seemed excited. “What magnificent firepower. And then, there’s the clay! It looks so easy to carry around. This is incomparable to those burst arrows—those toys we were playing with!”

The man who loved bombs was, of course, intrigued by what Miranda had created.

“Are you walking around with a lot of that clay?” I asked Miranda as I approached her. “I-It’s not going to go off, is it?”

Picking up on my concern, she showed me her special knives.

“I set it up so they’ll only explode when the clay comes into contact with these. Well, I have to make them by hand, so quantity is still an issue.”

She could, apparently, make her own bombs at home. Thinking back on it now, I’d been on the receiving end of her bombs before, and it was not a pleasant experience at all.

“Hand-made!” the seventh head exclaimed, his excitement only building.

“Wonderful. Now that’s Auntie’s descendant!”

The sixth head was stuttering. He seemed to be in a complicated state of mind. “H-hey quit it. You’re making Milleia sound like a crazed terrorist. She’s not like you.”

For a moment there, it was like he was implying that the seventh head *was* a crazed terrorist, but that wasn’t important. I looked at the cylinder that had begun to release smoke from its insides.

Clara stepped out of Porter. “I’ll collect the Demonic Stones and materials, then.”

“What a strange lifeform,” said Shannon, who disembarked alongside her. She timidly prodded at the boss Miranda had defeated. “It’s like it’s not even alive.”

Its innards were certainly mechanical rather than organic. It apparently only ever manifested in Aramthurst’s dungeon, and what a peculiar monster it was.

“With that, my Arts restriction...”

But is really alright for it to be that simple? With everything that’s led up to it, that was surprisingly anticlimactic, I thought when Boinga suddenly tackled me to the ground.

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

I was pushed down, and as I looked back, I was greeted with a scene—a scene of Boinga impaled by arrow after arrow, her back turned towards me.

Flames erupted from where the first had stuck into her, then the next instant her body was encased in ice. The ice shattered as she was swallowed up in winds and lightning, but that wasn’t the end of it. There were more spells coming, and they were aimed at me this time.

But all of them were blocked by Boinga, who had become a shield for me.

I could no longer see the maid who was always messing around. Even when I told her to back down, she ignored me and stood there.

Once the seemingly incessant barrage of enchanted arrows and spells finally came to an end, all that remained was a ghastly silence. The eyes of my

comrades turned towards the entrance, but I could not take my eyes off Boinga's back.

"Hey, Boinga!"

I raced over to her. She had used her arms to barely protect her head from damage.

"Wh-Why did you..."

She had lost everything from her right elbow down. Small bits of lightning discharged with a crackling sound as the red liquid poured from her abdomen. I could see a twisted mess of something in her, the same color as polished steel.



Apart from her shielded head, nearly every part of her was in tatters. The pigtails she had been so proud of were burned and disheveled, and the maid uniform—the one she said was all she needed—was unrecognizable.

Boinga's skin was the same color as any human's. The liquid that came out was red too, but her internals were definitely machinery.

She was an automaton.

Had she been a human, she would have died instantly from that.

"Why did you cover me?!" I cried out.

Her red eyes flickered as she gave a disjointed answer. "What are you saying? You are a damn chicken—and my master. I'll put my body on the line to protect you. After all, I am...a maid," she said, and then she finally couldn't remain standing any longer. Boinga crumbled at the knees.

I caught her and held her tight.

That was when a lone man appeared, clapping his hands.

"A love story between an automaton and a human, huh? Well, that certainly was a sight to behold. It's the greatest comedy I've seen in weeks."

Next to the smiling man, there were two men around the same age as him. They had seven guards, all clad in black.

Behind them, the room's entrance was clocked off by a number of men who looked like adventurers. I recognized a few of them—they were the bandits who had tried to attack us.

The guards in black were clearly not adventurers though, judging by their movements. They were elites.

Miranda raised her weapon, her eyes sharpening.

"Rudall... What are you doing here?"

If Miranda knew him, he had to be either an academy student, a noble... or both.

I lifted up Boinga's unmoving body as the man named Rudall flashed Miranda a repulsive smile.

“Miranda, I am heartbroken. If you were just a little smarter, you would have naturally chosen me. We’re both court nobles from the same royal capital. We’re no strangers to one another.”

Miranda’s eyes shifted to confirm the number of foes. She shifted ever-so-slightly to protect Shannon. Clara seemed to take the hint, taking her position in front of the little girl, and Aria stepped out to protect them both.

The surrounding adventurers held their weapons in quivering hands. A great number of arrows—enchanted arrows floated around the vicinity of the young noblemen. Their tips were all pointed at me.

I gritted my teeth. The words of my ancestors flashed through my mind.

The third head said I would pay a high price—and I couldn’t help but think he was referring to my comrades, and not me.

“Why did you target us?”

My question seemed to irritate him as Rudall furrowed his brow. “Silence, you noble nobody. I was the one who was supposed to marry Miranda. And you, some countryside noble who was kicked out of his own house, had to come and steal her away. Do you understand how I feel? It’s truly a miserable feeling.”

“I have absolutely no relationship with him,” Miranda immediately refuted. “We’ve spoken in the academy a few times, but that’s it. Sure, our houses may have some association, but there were never any talks of marriage.”

The students around Rudall laughed. “You heard her, Rudall. So what are you going to do?”

“She really is just an oblivious princess, huh? She should have just submitted and married Rudall.”

What the hell are these people talking about? Don’t tell me this is all just some twisted, misplaced resentment. In that case...what am I...?!

I strengthened my grip on Boinga.

From the Jewel, I could hear the fifth head’s voice. “Lyle, don’t take them seriously. Folks like that, they grow up at home misunderstanding every little thing in life. Once they convince themselves of one thing—marriage or whatnot

—they think that's how it has to be. It's as simple as that. Unfortunately, these idiots are born with power."

Since they could use magic, Rudall and his friends held no weapons. The floating arrows didn't seem to be magic, however—perhaps this was one of their Arts.

Rudall looked at Miranda and clicked her tongue. "I show you a bit of kindness, and you just take advantage of it. And here I was, willing to keep you around as my woman even if you're secondhand."

"You've been acting real shameless and stuck up this whole time," Aria finally had to speak up. "Doing all this to get Miranda? You're the absolute worst!"

Rudall and his buddies laughed at that one. Only the seven in black were silent. They had not said a single word yet.

"Are you an idiot?"

"Wh-What?! I'm not an idiot!"

Although it was spur of the moment, her response did not offer much confidence.

The second head wearily said, "You're an idiot because you react like that."

With his vile smile, Rudall shifted his eyes to Porter. "Forget about her. Our goal is that thing over there. Porter, was it? Miranda was just a bonus. Do you even understand what it is you've made?"

I was ready to run out at any moment.

"A wagon that doesn't need a horse," he triumphantly went on. "Anyone and their grandma will want to get their hands on it. If we can monopolize Porter, we'll make a fortune even if we sit tight and do nothing. Who needs a woman, then? Albeit, the title of Viscount Circry was a little appealing."

Sophia shifted only her eyes to steal a glance at Porter. "So from the very start... you were after Porter. Not us."

"Why would I want a woman like you?!" Rudall spat. "As long as you've got money, the ladies will flock to you all on their own. I'm not going to go after an adventurer who's just like a solid lump of muscle."

So the girls were just a side goal, and their target was Porter.

“Hmm, he at least has a good pair of eyes,” the fourth muttered.

Sophia was shaking. “Now you’re just mocking me... In the first place, you destroyed Boinga for some petty reason like that?!”

Hearing Boinga’s name, the three men burst into laughter. “Boinga, she says!”

“Not a hint of good sense there!”

“No, you’re wrong about that! It’s got enough sense to torment my abs like this! You deserve some praise!”

As they laughed, I thought. *I should have given her a better name*.

The room echoed with their laughter as I slowly set Boinga down on the floor. I set her to rest gently to ensure she wasn’t damaged anymore.

Rudall spoke up again. “Right, since we have the real thing, we could reverse engineer it, but it might be more fun torturing the information out of you folks. Trash that cries and pleads for their life—what a riot.”

How could these people possibly be human like us? Or was this just how the nobles of Banseim were?

As I gripped the hilt of my saber, Boinga looked at me. “Chicken...no, master. I’m glad I met you.”

“Don’t talk. I’ll get you to Damian soon.”

“I...failed to wake...to open my eyes...in the era I was made...”

“Give me a minute. Once it’s all over, we’ll head straight back to the surface. I don’t know if stamina is a concept to you, but save it until then.”

I ignored Rudall and all his lines that were just poison to my ears and spoke to Boinga. Rudall clearly didn’t take kindly to that.

“Still playing with dolls?” he spat with a click of his tongue. “Aren’t you getting a little carried away?”

I could feel a faint heat from the Jewel. My blood was boiling. If it came to it now, I knew I would have the resolve.

I stood and turned my eyes towards Rudall—but my mind was elsewhere. The vast boss room was a perfect circle. Rudall and his lackeys had appeared at the entrance connecting to the twenty-ninth floor and had stationed adventurers to block it off.

However, these adventurers seemed to be no more than sacrificial pawns to him, as their placement was quite haphazard. The confused adventurers were no more than meat shields.

I confirmed the enemy numbers.

“Hey, are you listening to me?”

I ignored the man’s contorting face. There were over forty enemies in total. The biggest threats had to be the magic and the arrows—and the three men who could use them. As well as their seven guards.

The entire room was within range of the second head’s Art. Everything was well within my field of perception.

“It’s been a few months. Use it well.”

Although its effects were minute at the moment, the third head’s Art began to mess with our foes.

“Well, the challenge was to defeat the floor boss. You can do whatever you want from here on.”

The fourth head’s Art raised my movement speed.

“Good grief. They should have gone all-out from the start. Why are those boys running their mouths in front of an enemy?”

The fifth head’s Art conveyed the surrounding terrain to me.

“They had superb timing for an ambush. Why can’t they understand they relinquished their own advantage?”

The sixth head’s Art showed me just how many enemies were hostile toward me. Most of them were just following Rudall out of fear. They were not keen on fighting.

“How about you teach those court half-wits about the real world, Lyle?”

The seventh head's Art...well, I wasn't going to use it for now.

"They are incredibly irritating, but...you probably should not kill them."

I rolled the Jewel with my fingers. This was my way to signal my refusal.

"It's a bit late for any of us to say murder is wrong," the fifth head answered. "But have a look at who's behind you."

I focused the second head's Art on the area behind me and realized Shannon was shaking uncontrollably. She was terrified of the situation, and of what had become of Boinga.

"I'll bet you want to tear them to pieces this instant, but you shouldn't leave a scar on Shannon's heart. For your own sake—don't kill."

I wanted to refute him, but Shannon was already at her limit. If she saw so much death, she would definitely be traumatized. This was what my ancestors were more concerned about.

But, looking at it the other way, there was absolutely no other reason to keep these bastards alive.

After seeing me fiddling and gripping the Jewel, Rudall's face turned redder and redder. He was at his limit too. In a different way.

"That's enough! Say goodbye to your limbs!"

Rudall's friend sent volley after volley of enchanted arrows flying my way. The arrows were aimed at my arms and legs with incredible precision, so they were very easy to predict.

Miranda tried to get in front to cover me, but I rushed forward before she could. Miranda looked at my back, startled.

Novem lifted her staff, while Aria made her move. Sophia brandished her battleax.

It wasn't just sight and sound—all sorts of information was flooding into my head.

"It's been a while since I felt this sensation."

Acclimating myself to what I had gone without for several months, I held out

my left hand. The opponent was a magician, but so was I. I formed a defensive wall of mana—a mana shield centered around my hand; the arrows and spells burst as they crashed into the surface.

“Battles between magicians can be quite flashy,” the seventh began to explain. “But as long as there’s not a huge gap in skill, it’s all show and no substance. Because your foe is going to have a mana shield too.”

This was certainly unfair as far as the average person was concerned. Only magicians had the means of blocking powerful magic.

Seeing such a stale end to the Arts and spells they were so proud of, Rudall and his cronies kicked a few adventurers forward.

“Fight, you weaklings!”

They hurriedly raced at me in a panic.

“In the end, it’s gotta come down to blows!” the sixth excitedly said. “That’s the best way to kill a magician!”

Ultimately, a battle between magicians without a massive skill level became a war of attrition. The best way to end it was to simply close in and use brute force. Our foe had sent adventurer melee fighters in to do it for them.

And that wasn’t a problem. After all, I had the Arts of our founder. A very simple and clear-cut Art that boosted my physical abilities.

One of the adventurers sliced at me, so I grabbed his arm and chucked him toward Rudall. He was caught by one of the black-clad guards.

Those guys are going to be the most trouble. It’s annoying that I can’t kill, I thought.

Avoiding the slash of one of the black-clad figures, I hammered a fist into his face and sent him flying into a group of adventurers, knocking them all down.

A nearby adventurer lowered a weapon that looked like an iron ball on a stick at me. I caught its shaft with my left hand.

“Eep!”

Staring straight into the adventurer’s stiff face, I mustered some strength into

my hand and snatched the weapon away.

“You, how many of your fellow adventurers have you killed with this?”

After I posed the question, the man suddenly started looking around. The third head’s Mind Art was messing with his psyche. Feeling intense fear, he was most likely seeing the ghosts of those he’d killed.

“Y-You have me all wrong! I was just following orders! So it’s not my—”

He was being noisy, so I silenced him with a kick to the solar plexus. As for the iron ball, I threw it at another adventurer.

“Oh my, the adventurers are starting to hesitate since they can’t seem to take Lyle out,” the third head laughed.

Just as he said, the adventurers who were further from Rudall’s men took off down the corridor.

“I-I didn’t sign up for this!”

“I don’t want this anymore!”

“Don’t... Don’t come any closer!”

“I’ll kill every last one of you if you run!” Rudall screamed.

The enemy camp was in chaos.

Meanwhile, Miranda used her Art to fire off threads to capture some of the black-clad men approaching me. Two of them were wrapped up and incapacitated in her sticky threads. She went on to throw two knives, which stabbed into the thighs of Rudall’s two friends.

“Eek! It hurts. It hurts!”

“Blood. It’s coming out!”

They let out pathetic cries.

Before I knew it, Aria and Sophia were moving too. The butt end of a spear met one of the black-clad men’s abdomen in a fierce thrust, and this same man was then smacked down with the flat of a battleax.

The remaining men moved to surround Aria and Sophia, but Sophia lifted up a

nearby adventurer. Lightening him with her Art, she swung him around and threw him at the mysterious group. The adventurer regained his original weight the moment he left her hands, and the men moved to avoid him.

So, the adventurer ended up smacking straight into another adventurer and rolling together a fair distance along the floor after that.

The instant she saw that the black-clad group's movements had been disturbed by Sophia's throw, Aria came at them, smacking one with her shaft to knock him unconscious.

Neither was losing out against the other adventurers, or even the group of elite troops.

Novem provided support from the back while Miranda restrained adventurers one after another.

And soon, there was no one left around Rudall.

"So you're the last one left."

Standing stock still, Rudall's eyes raced around in panic. Then, he locked onto Shannon who was still quivering.

He pointed his hand at Shannon, but I did not make a move. Miranda was looking at him with murderous intent, but I raised a hand to tell her to wait.

She twitched and froze.

"This is what you get for acting so stuck up!" Rudall yelled as a bolt of electricity flew from his hand.

The bold flew straight for Shannon and Clara, only to be clocked by a mana shield along the way.

Rudall's friends sat on the ground groaning. The group in black had all been taken out.

The adventurers had run, and only Rudall was left standing. Even his prided magic had been blocked by Novem from the back line.

With staff in hand, Novem said, "You won't breach my defenses with something on that level."

The situation had taken a complete turn as Miranda began to bind everyone who was still there with her Art.

Standing before Rudall, I placed my saber back in its sheath.

“I-I’m sorry. W-we’re both nobles, right? There’s all sorts of stuff, right? You know, maintaining relationships and...” Rudall began to butter me up.

It irritated me just listening to it, but I slowly approached him. With each step, his tone became friendlier and friendlier. Far more friendly than I would have liked.

“I-If you want money, it’s yours. How much do you want? I’ll get you more than a countryside noble has ever seen before. So, you know.”

I smiled. “I don’t need it. I can make it myself.”

His eyes wandered. Looking at my comrades, he seemed to come up with a brilliant idea.

“Then I’ll get you women! As many as you like!”

“I don’t need any.”

There was only one thing I desired.

Rudall’s face sunk into despair. “I-If you kill me, my house won’t stay silent! Do you know who I am?! I’m—”

I was finally close enough to put a hand over his noisy mouth.

“Hey, can you just shut up? I’m in a very bad mood right now. I shouldn’t have to tell you why, right?”

Rudall tried to point his hand at my head and cast a spell. With my free hand, I grabbed his arm and crushed it. The sound of his flesh tearing, his bones breaking resounded through my body.

Rudall writhed and tried to scream, but his mouth was covered and he couldn’t let out a sound.

He began to thrash with tears in his eyes.

“It would be a whole lot easier to cut you down here and now. That’s what I want to do. But I can’t.”

The Jewel was silent. It felt like they were observing my actions.

“Come to think of it, you said some...interesting things.”

I released him, thrusting him back. On his behind, Rudall began to plead through his tears. “Please forgive me. I was just trying to threaten you a bit, honestly! I-it’s true. But they... those adventurers got carried away!”

He was pinning the blame on someone else. Was there anything he wouldn’t say just to get through this? I grabbed his hair and pressed his face into the floor.

“You wanted to, what was it again? Torture us? I think there was something else too. What were you going to do to my comrades?”

The pain in his arm and the fear he felt had caused his nose to start dribbling.

“Forgive me. I’m not the one who said it, it was those guys.”

His immobilized friends began to protest at his betrayal.

“You’re selling us out?!”

“You’re the one who said you thought up a nice way to have fun!”

Miranda kicked one of them in the face and stomped on the other’s head.

“Keep it down, would you? You must understand what it means to target me... to target Shannon.”

Miranda hailed from a viscount house of the royal court. A historic house that held positions in government. After plotting to kill the daughter of such a house and to hide the evidence—well, to put it simply, even if they escaped to the surface, all that awaited them was ruin.

I gripped Rudall’s hair strongly, paying no mind to the strands that were ripped out in my grasp.

“So how is it really? You’re going to tell us everything, right?”

The third head’s Art gradually exhibited its effect. Rudall stopped crying from the pain, his eyes losing their focus. He went on to absently answer the question.

“I thought I could make some money. I had heard rumors that Miranda had

invited a man to her house, and it irritated me, so I thought I would torment him and steal Porter."

His motive was simplistic. Although I appreciated the fact that he noticed Porter's true value, I could never forgive him for attacking us.

"Was there anyone giving you orders?"

"There was not. When I contacted my House, they sent money. I got a letter that said they would look into it back home. They wanted me to send Porter back to them to investigate."

I felt disgusted. "Did you ever consider you'd be in a war with House Circry?"

"Since things would get complicated if House Circry stepped in, that part would be covered up," Rudall indifferently answered. "As long as I tormented Miranda enough that she wouldn't be able to go against anything I said, that would solve the problem."

"He's trash," the seventh head said, plain and simple.

I had to confirm one more thing. "What did you plan on doing with Shannon?"

"I don't need a girl who can't see, so I intended to leave her in the dungeon."

Miranda's eyes turned grim.

I let go of Rudall and ordered him to stand. With a clap of my hands, Mind was released; once free, his face contorted again, and he started to fall right back down on the spot. I grabbed him before he could.

"You might consider this suffering, but this isn't nearly enough."

"Huh?"

Rudall had a spaced-out look on his face as I hammered my fist in. As my knuckled dug in, his front teeth caved in while his nose was smashed.

I could hear him scream something as he flew and tumbled over the ground, but Miranda quickly apprehended him.

I looked down at my fist which was still quivering in rage. "You attacked us for something like that?"

He tried to kill us, just because he wanted some money and because we

irritated him a bit.

Novem called out to me, “Milord, Boinga is...”

I turned to see that Novem had draped a blanket over Boinga as she lay there. Rushing over, I sat so I could peer into her face.

She was conscious.

“Master...there’s no time. May I say...one more thing?”

I held it in and said, “Stupid. I’ll take you straight to Damian. He’ll have you good as new.”

I didn’t know if Damian really was capable of repairing automatons. But that was all I could tell her... that was the only hope I could cling to.

My tears oozed out.

With her one remaining hand, Boinga wiped them away with stilted movements.

“You won’t make it. And...Professor Damian can’t... Before that, just one thing...I actually liked the name Boinga...quite a bit.”

“I’m sorry,” I grabbed her hand. “To be honest, I thought up a proper name. But I could never tell you... I was afraid you’d tell me it was no good again. That everyone would look at me like that again.”

I’d been thinking about it for a long time. But I could never bring myself to tell her.

Binga smiled. “Then could I...hear it? I’ve been...waiting...all this time...”

Gradually, the light in her eyes was fading. It wouldn’t be long before it fizzled out entirely.

“What, you’re making it sound like this is goodbye.”

Aria silently hung her head.

Sophia wiped her eyes.

Clara silently stared at Boinga.

Novem sat down beside me and closed her eyes.

During this time, Miranda continued to keep watch over the tied up foes. She was ensuring I had the time to focus on Boinga.

Her voice was gradually waning.

“There’s no...time. So...before that.”

I wiped my tears. And I spoke the name I’d been thinking over for so long.

“Monica... It’s Monica. I’ve thought over it time and again, but that’s the name I like best.”

She smiled. “Mo...ni...ca... A good name...it is. I...was...happy,” she said to me as her eyes slowly shut.

Suddenly, it seemed like the power had drained from her body.

Shannon shook her head. “No. That can’t be! It’s impossible. Why...this is impossible!”

As Shannon flew into chaos, Clara held her and calmed her down. “It’s alright, Shannon. That’s enough. Let’s let her sleep. Boinga... Monica protected Lyle.”

“No. That’s not—!”

I heard their voices, but the loss of Monica was making me lose strength myself.

“If only... I had a better grip on things.”

“Milord, don’t blame yourself too much,” Novem gently told me.

“If...only...I...”

It was only after I lost her that I understood just how much she had done to me. She was always mocking me and calling me a chicken, but she always put me first.

If I was just a little...kinder...to...Monica...

The Jewel was growing hectic.

“H-hey. Isn’t he kinda being drained?”

“Quite rapidly, yes.”

“What exactly is going on here?”

“Is it Boinga? No, wait, it’s Monica now.”

“...Ah.” The seventh seemed to recall something. “That girl did say it. That there’s a line between her and Lyle, and she uses it to replenish energy. I also remember hearing something about self-repair...”

I was quite acquainted with this feeling of helplessness. Back when my total mana pool was still low, the ancestors in the Jewel would drain it away by arguing.

It was similar to this feeling.

No, my mana was being sucked away even more intensely than back then.

Novem was the first to notice. “Lord Lyle? Umm, your complexion is gradually growing worse. A-Are you okay?”

I glanced at Monica. Her eyes were closed. It looked like she was soundly asleep, but while maintaining that expression—only her mouth moved.

“Repair complete. Using data to conduct optimization of body. Commencing reboot,” she said in a monotone voice.

“She spoke?!” cried Aria.

She and Sophia had frozen together in a bizarre pose of surprise. “D-don’t tell me she’s coming back to life?”

I looked back at Monica. I couldn’t feel...any strength...anymore.

“D-Don’t tell me...you...”

Upon opening her eyes, she looked at me and smiled.

“Reboot complete. Transitioning to normal operation mode,” she sat up and kissed me.

Then, she jumped up, spun in the air, and touched down. With impeccable elegance, she pinched the sides of her skirt, bent her knees, and lowered her head.

The cover drifted through the air.

“Boinga—Monica reporting for duty. From now on, I will *always* be by your side.”

It was a beautiful curtsey. She caught the falling cover and swiftly folded it up.

“Y-You...tricked...me.”

My mouth could barely move. My vision was blurring and swaying—and presumably, my whole body was swaying with me.

Novem grabbed me and supported me up. “Milord?! Don’t tell me you drained away all of his mana?!”

Monica gave her body a cutesy twist. “I don’t remember saying a single word about leaving. Still, I didn’t know you were mulling over my name all this time, my dear chicken. In fact, I was growing anxious that you’d forgotten all about it, but you really are the best master after all.”

Her burnt, disheveled pigtails had somehow been restored to their usual state. They were silky and lustrous. Her red uniform also looked as good as knew.

She had all her arms and legs and it didn’t seem like she had been injured anywhere. *No, do automatons even get injured, to begin with? Maybe I should say she was broken instead.*

My thoughts were so disorderly that such an inconsequential notion crossed my mind.

“You’re kidding me...” I muttered my last words before entrusting myself to Novem and falling limp.

“Lord Lyyyyyle!”

“Chickeeeen!”

I heard Novem and Monica, but I could no longer move. I was dead tired. From everything.

Chapter 65: The Cleanup

Once Lyle was unconscious, Novem rose to her feet. She lifted him up, intent on loading him onto Porter.

“Taking care of that chicken is my job!” Monica protested.

But Novem coldly replied, “Whose fault is it that he fell unconscious to begin with?”

“That’s precisely why I need to take responsibility,” said Monica, who would not back down a single step. “See? I’m perfectly operational now. I can look after him just fine.”

Watching them quarrel and make for Porter, Miranda approached Shannon.

“Shannon, are you okay?” Miranda said, exposing the big sister side that still persisted within her.

Shannon nodded. “Boinga... no, I mean Monica repaired her own body. She sucked up that damn gigolo’s mana to do it. Don’t you think that’s ridiculous, sis?”

Shannon was incredibly confused, precisely because her eyes had witnessed such vast swathes of mana flooding out of Lyle and into Monica. Her previous outburst had not been because she had taken Monica for dead.

Miranda shrugged and cautioned her, “Quit calling Lyle a man gigolo. Oh, on another note, I have some business to attend to. I’ll be going off on my own for a bit.”

Shannon grabbed her sleeve. Compared to when they were in combat, Shannon had calmed down somewhat, but she was still anxious and afraid.

“Alone? That’s dangerous, sis.”

“I’ll be alright,” she told her as her eyes turned to all the bandits littering the floor. They had been bound with her adhesive threads.

Around ten of them had escaped in the heat of battle.

Miranda headed over to Sophia and said, “I’m going go and have a look over there. Can you watch over these guys while I’m away?”

“Please refrain from acting on your own,” Sophia hurriedly tried to stop her. “Some of the enemies could still be lingering around, and it’s dangerous. And more than anything, it will disrupt the unity of the party.”

Seeing Sophia offer a far more reasonable opinion than she would have offered before, Miranda chuckled a bit.

“Oh my, it looks like you have a good grasp of the situation. But it’s nothing drastic. I’m just going to seal the entrance. Lyle can’t move, so we should take every precaution.”

Hearing that, Aria approached her. “Then I’ll go too. It’s dangerous to go alone.”

Miranda looked around. “It’s fine. I think it’s more important to keep a watch over these guys. I made doubly sure all those men in black were tied up properly, but to be blunt, there’s something uncanny about them. I want at least two people monitoring them at all times.”

The men in black robes were undoubtedly skilled. The only reason they had been taken care of so quickly came down to Lyle being far too strong. And they certainly were uncanny—as far as Miranda could tell, they seemed to have a complete lack of emotions.

It bothered her to no end.

What are these guys, exactly?

Plenty of them were injured. But though the adventurers were groaning and moaning, the men in black did not utter a single word. This was not because they were dead.

“I’m counting on you,” Miranda said as she left the room and entered the corridor that led to the twenty-ninth floor.

Miranda’s Art allowed her to emit threads from her body. She could produce threads ranging from sticky ones to durable ones. And with these threads, it was possible to seal off pathways and set traps.

Normally, it was a breach of adventurer etiquette to do such things in the dungeon. Arbitrarily sealing off route would just bring trouble to the other adventurers. But currently, on the floor they were on, there were nothing but enemies and allies.

It was possible that the bandits that fled would come back to attack them again—although that possibility was incredibly low.

Walking down the empty corridor, Miranda produced threads around herself. The threads twisted and turned as if they each had wills of their own as they wove themselves into a mesh structure. Once she had formed the skeletal frame of a large, carnivorous feline, Miranda snapped her fingers.

Despite the fact that the dungeon's corridors were made of concrete, dirt from who-knows-where suddenly amassed around her creation, adding flesh to her skeletal base.

Back when she had fought Lyle, she had used this same method to create a spider. This time, however, she had modeled it after a panther.

Once she'd finished up her panther—her sculpture a tad bit larger than the real thing—Miranda hopped atop it and raced down the corridor to the twenty-ninth floor.

Miranda scanned her surroundings.

"I need to give my thanks to Lyle..."

She had realized that Lyle had purposely refrained from killing their foes. He'd presumably been mindful of the mental state of the rest of the party—and particularly Shannon, who was still young and innocent.

"But I'm a woman who pays back her dues."

The panther raced forth, and from its back, Miranda searched for signs of the men as she entered a nearby room. There were no monsters to be found. Presumably, Rudall and his men had dispatched them as they chased after the party.

Once she entered her third room, she muttered, "This is the place."

Several of the escaped adventurers had gathered within.

Jumping off of the panther, Miranda brushed her hair aside.

“Get them.”

The panther roared before assailing the adventurers there. It didn’t kill them, but the adventurers attacked by a panther that was larger than six meters in length quickly fell unconscious.

Once the room was still, Miranda entered herself.

She looked at their bags.

“Oh, they were hoarding quite a bit.”

Food, water, and tools. A mountain of consumables.

Standing before the goods, Miranda smirked.

She found their water supply and dumped it out in its entirety. Although the liquid splattered over the ground, the dungeon had its strange way of dealing with waste, and it would absorb most of what was discarded. She watched the water vanish as though the solid floor had become the parched desert sands. And in its place, she filled the jugs with *magically produced water*.

“I’m not that naïve. You’re going to regret ever targeting Shannon.”

And with that, Miranda hopped back atop the panther and returned to her comrades.

***

Back on the thirtieth floor, Aria approached one of the bound men in black. She only intended to retrieve his weapon, which had been dropped nearby, but she was still as cautious as could be.

When she took a side glance at the man, she saw that his eyes were hollow.

“Seriously, what is all this? Miranda goes off on her own, and Lyle’s down for the count...”

That was when it happened.

The man faintly whispered, “Lady Ceres...”

Aria turned to him, startled. She hadn’t quite caught what he said.

“Did you say something?” she asked, glaring, but the man did not react in the slightest.

At the very least, if he could provide some information… But the black-clad man would not say a single word after that.

“What’s their deal? These guys?”

Aria sighed as she carefully backed away.

***

Clara was consulting Novem on what to do from there. Since Lyle was currently out of the equation, the girls would need to move on their own.

“It is dangerous to linger around any longer. We should start moving immediately,” Novem proposed.

Clara fully supported this. “I don’t mind, but what do we do about them?”

Novem’s response to this question was cold. She was no longer the girl who looked so dismayed as she worried for her dear Lyle.

“We do not have the leisure to drag them back above ground. Some of them are academy students—or rather, nobles. It will be annoying to deal with them.”

And it would be nothing but trouble if these men tried to get back at them over some misplaced resentment after that.

After Novem had said that, Clara could tell what she meant. *Yes, it will just be trouble if we turn them in to the guild*.

For better or worse, the academy held far more authority than the guild did in Aramthurst. Most of the students attending the academy were the sons and daughters of nobles and rich merchants—essentially people with money to spare.

The ones who’d attacked them were nobles. And anything that had to do with nobles was nothing but trouble.

“I agree with that too, but I’m concerned about what Lyle might think of it. After all, he ultimately did not kill them. Won’t he be against abandoning them

here?”

But Novem remained cold. Not a single iota of the devotion and self-sacrifice she had for Lyle would be directed towards her assailants.

“Realistically speaking, it is impossible to take all of them with us. Even if we just take back the ringleader—an academy student... At most, he’ll be expelled. Although House Circry might receive a report, seeing as he attacked the Circry Sisters.”

Sure enough, it would be impossible to transport over forty assailants. Even if they were to head for the surface while protecting them, they were limited on food and water. It didn’t matter if they robbed them of all their weapons—the fact of the matter was that Lyle’s party consisted of far fewer people than the ones they would have to transport.

Honestly, transporting people who they’d need to keep a constant watch over while traversing all the way back to the surface was the last thing Clara wanted to do. Not to mention that absolutely nothing good would come of taking them there, to begin with.

Given the short-sighted actions of their assailants, it was clear as day that the students would try to get revenge—even though it was their own fault that all of this had happened.

“I see. Then it might be best to get moving while Lyle is still unconscious.”

Novem nodded. “Let’s start preparing. They’re only getting their just desserts.”

This is not the usual Novem, Clara thought. She felt just a little afraid. *Is it because we were the ones being targeted*?

In any case, Clara got to work preparing to leave—

By the time I realized it, I was sitting in my own chair in the round table room of the Jewel.

My ancestors applauded me as they surrounded the table.

“You really managed to clear your assignment, huh? I never thought you’d

manage to do it that quickly," the third head said with a cheerful smile. Then he asked, "Lyle, what did you honestly think about this assignment?"

I looked at all the gathered faces and thought. "Was it... in order to make me aware of the fact that I was far too reliant on your Arts?"

I'd always relied on their Arts for almost everything. This incident was more than enough for me to fully realize that. The party was hardly functional, and I myself could hardly do anything without Arts.

Scratching his cheek, the second head said, "That's not completely wrong, but it's not everything either. What we wanted to see was how exactly you'd move when Arts were off the table."

"Me?"

My ancestors nodded.

"There are some bad aspects of being overly reliant on Arts," said the fourth head. "However, you were not wrong to fully utilize everything at your disposal."

The third head nodded. "Yes, it's only natural to make proper use of your tools. Although it's also important to know how to live without every convenience, you could also say that was not the issue."

Apparently, my ancestors did not see a problem with my fighting while relying on Arts. *Then why were they even testing me*?

Realizing that I still didn't understand, the sixth head gave a hearty laugh. "The point is, we wanted to see how you'd scheme your way through a situation when you didn't have Arts. To be honest with you, I think you could have been a bit more clever about it."

"The assignment," the fifth head expressionlessly took over, "Was to clear the thirtieth floor with your Arts restricted. The silver greatsword was off limits too, but that was not the problem in and of itself. Now listen, and think—clear the thirtieth floor without Arts. That was our assignment."

I pondered it for a moment...then realized, "Wait, are you trying to tell me...I could have used whatever method I wanted to?"

“Of course,” the seventh head snapped his fingers. “Did we ever say you had to achieve it on your own? We did not. In summary, you were completely free to do whatever you wanted.”

I rushed to my feed. “H-hold on a minute! Isn’t that strange?!”

“I don’t understand what’s so strange,” said the fourth, his head cocked curiously.

I took a deep breath and then spoke my mind to my ancestors.

“You put forward this assignment because you were concerned about my overreliance on Arts, right? Right?!”

The second head nodded. “Well, that was one of the reasons.”

I lowered my hands onto the table. “Then why would it be alright to do whatever I wanted?! I thought you were trying to tell us to work on our individual abilities, or coordination, or something like that!”

Yes, I was certain that they saw our lack of ability as an issue. I was convinced that was the whole point of this exercise.

“Well, that would have been my suggestion,” the second head said, folding his arms. “You’re in Aramthurst, after all, so I thought it’d be a good idea to work on your abilities and gain some new comrades. Now, that isn’t something you can do in a few months. Or even a year or two. I thought you’d do well to learn and train for ten years or so.”

But the third head laughed off his opinion. “You think so? That sounds like such a waste of time to me. I mean, Lyle would be able to use his Arts as soon as he completed the assignment. If it were me, I would just tag along with a party that was already capable of clearing the thirtieth floor. We never said you guys had to defeat the boss on your own.”

According to the third head, we could have just sat back and watched as someone more capable did the job for us. I was starting to feel dizzy.

“How does that resolve anything?!”

“But that would have been the quickest and easiest way to complete the objective,” he replied. “You’re a bit too earnest for your own good, Lyle.”

The fourth head sighed at that. “How many parties do you think are even capable of clearing the thirtieth floor? And you think one of them is just coincidently going to be headed there when you need them to be? You should refrain from doing anything that relies too heavily on luck.”

“I know, right?! Of course, I couldn’t do that!”

The fourth head calmly pushed up his glasses. “If it were me, I would have hired one of those parties to do it. A formal request should have done the trick.”

“So you’re in the same boat!”

The only way his opinion differed from the third head’s was in the fact that would have put out the request himself. Other than that, his resolution was essentially the same.

Although luck was no longer a factor, this came at a monetary cost.

“Financially, it shouldn’t have been a problem. You had the assets at the time. Well, I’m just saying that was what *I* would have done in that situation.”

Sighing at his awful opinion, I turned my eyes to the silent fifth head. Did this man also have a bizarre way to tackle the predicament?

The fifth head sullenly stared back. “What are you looking at me like that for? If it were me, I would have chosen a method that would benefit me more in the long run.”

“What sort of method... incidentally?”

“Right. Well, I’d start by recruiting a few strong or otherwise capable members into the party. Even if I had to pull them out of other parties to do it.”

Rather than wasting time training, the fifth simply suggested I recruit people who were already capable.

“No, if I could do that, I wouldn’t have had so much trouble!”

“Are you stupid? Your reputation wasn’t that bad at the start; it only fell after your repeated failures. Back when you’d gotten your name out there for completing Damian’s request, it would have been easy enough to pull in some capable adventurers if you provided the right terms. You could have even taken

them as temporary hires or whatnot—there were plenty of ways to go about it.”

Ah, I don’t want to hear anymore, I thought. But then, it was the sixth head who affirmed my train of thought.

“I get how you feel, Lyle. You want to tackle a challenge with your own party, right? I get you. I totally get you.”

“Right? I knew you’d understand...”

“Although if it were me, I would have collaborated with multiple parties to reach the thirtieth floor. Whether you wanted to hire them or recruit them, it would be a real pain to maintain those relationships for too long. We humans, we’ve got this thing called compatibility. For starters, I’d get us all to work together, and if it seemed alright, then I’d get them in on the party.”

According to the sixth head, if the issue was party size, I should have collaborated with other parties. I should have formed closer ties with my fellow adventurers; and if I did, perhaps they’d be willing to help out.

I’d spent so much time because I’d thought to do it just with the power of my own party.

“Lyle, it ultimately did not matter how you managed to complete the assignment,” the seventh head explained. “If you decided to train up your abilities for a few years, then surely it would have helped you out in the long run. You could have used your wit to clear it too. A sharp mind would certainly benefit you in times to come. Throwing money at it wouldn’t have been an issue. I know you’ll make far more money in the future. Whether you recruited powerful comrades or just hired them for the time being, who could have faulted you? Although making Porter did come as a surprise.”

“Yeah, that one was a shocker,” the third head delightedly exclaimed. “I never even considered you’d tackle the assignment like that. In a way, you exceeded our expectations.”

Even my ancestors had not expected that I would build myself a strong ally to help conquer the dungeon. Apparently.

I powerlessly fell into my chair. “You could have just told me...”

“We spelled out the assignment to you a number of times,” the third head said with a grin. “It’s your fault for not noticing.”

But on the contrary, the second head praised me. “Personally, I think this was for the best. Your party recognized what it was lacking and worked to better itself. Thankfully, Miranda managed to get those two idiots fired up.”

He seemed to believe that Miranda’s incitement had directly tied into their growth.

The fifth head cracked a slight smile as he stared at me. “In the end, there’s no true right answer. But having to come up with an answer anyway—well, that’s life for you. The important part was *how* you decided to tackle the challenge.”

“I feel like an idiot for mulling so hard over it.”

“Well, mull more, my boy,” the sixth head chuckled. “But after all the mulling, you must make the decision. Having no answer is the worst thing of all.”

“Come to think of it, what’s happening outside?” I asked, looking around.

The fourth head shrugged. “You’re unconscious, so we can’t tell. Well, we should know soon enough.”

Perhaps because I’d lost too much mana, the Jewel seemed to have lost some of its functionality. *Is that how it works*? I wondered. But according to the ancestors, it was restoring itself, so I didn’t have to worry.

“But Boing—no, Monica was a surprise,” the seventh head breathed a light sigh. “She could recover herself from that state. No, perhaps it would be better to say she repaired herself.”

And that kicked off a conversation on what I’d do from then on. Up until I opened my eyes, I continued to chat with my ancestors.

***

That night, Lyle’s party managed to reach the fifth floor of the dungeon. Alone, Novem slipped out of the room they were camping in and entered another room that was devoid of monsters.

She made sure there were no people around either before placing her hand

on the concrete wall in the darkness.

She was expressionless.

“I shall not forgive anyone who threatens Lord Lyle’s life,” she muttered. “Even if Miranda took measures, they were not perfect.”

From the point where Novem’s hand made contact, an artery-like red line surfaced on the concrete. This pulsating wall gradually began to influence the dungeon as a whole.

Novem closed her eyes. “Oh, there they are. Quivering, on floor twenty-nine.”

She spoke as though she could see their would-be assailants with her very eyes.

And Novem removed her hand. After opening her eyes, she returned to camp as though nothing had happened.

***

The attackers had gathered on the twenty-ninth floor. Rudall’s caved-in face had been wrapped with bandages.

Again and again, he muttered about how much it hurt. “Hurry up, people!” he complained.

Before Lyle’s party had set off, Miranda had dispelled the restraints. This had only served to wound Rudall’s pride.

“They’re looking down on me. Once we’re outside, I’ll thoroughly torment—”

Feeling a parchedness in his throat, Rudall pulled out a jug of water, enduring the pain as he glugged it down. The inside of his mouth was covered in painful sores.

“Goddammit. If it was going to be like this, I should have learned some recovery magic... Hey, what are you people doing?”

Now that he got a better look at the people around him, he saw that his friends and the adventurers were holding their bellies, writhing.

“M-My stomach...”

“Did the water go bad? Hey, someone get some medicine.”

“Why do I have to go through this...”

Everyone was suffering from terrible stomach aches. Nearly all of them had soiled their pants.

Rudall could feel his own stomach acting up, and as he turned pale, he suddenly felt the room shaking.

“Wh-What? What is it this time?”

He was beaten, his stomach was killing him, and he had been mentally driven into a corner. But what he saw next made him forget about all of that. There, he witnessed monsters being born from the walls.

Rudall’s eyes widened, and the same could be said for everyone else.

“Y-You’ve got to be kidding.”

It was not just one or two of them.

Among all the monsters that appeared on the twenty-ninth floor, only the most troublesome ones began to pour out one after the next, their mouths dribbling with drool as they came across easy prey.

Having only just spawned, they were evidently starving.

Rudall reached out his left hand. He fired a bolt of magic, but at most, he’d managed to take out two or three of them. Again and again, the monsters manifested.

“No. Not here!!!”

He fired another bolt but he was already hearing the screams. The assailants were being slaughtered, unable to put up any resistance.

Now surrounded, Rudall found that no more spells would come from his hand. He was helpless.

He wept and muttered, “P-Please save me...”

The exact words he himself had always ignored so long ago—back when he and his buddies would go off to attack adventurers in the dungeon. Rudall now screamed them again and again. “Save me! I’ll do anything you want! I’ll do anything, so save me! I won’t do it again! I’ll never do it again!”

He continued to plead to the monsters who did not understand a word of what he was saying.

The screams of him and his cohorts echoed through the twenty-ninth floor—through the dungeon. But there were no other adventurers around.

And so, the help never came.

Chapter 66: I *am* Kind

The day after Lyle's party returned from the dungeon, they were summoned to the guild. The reason being that a large-scale party that had entered the dungeon at around the same time was confirmed dead.

Although they were indeed involved in the incident, none of their party members reported it. It was clear that nothing but problems would come from reporting the fact that they had been attacked.

Miranda answered the guild's summons, along with Aria and Sophia.

This time, the guild was actually putting in some serious investigative work since some of those missing were students—worse yet, noble students. The Academy had strongly urged them to figure out what was going on.

The guild worker who interviewed them was a lanky, balding man with black-rimmed glasses. He took on a big attitude, as though the authority of the academy was his own.

Standing before the three of them, he persistently continued his questioning.

"Why didn't your leader come here?"

Miranda shrugged. "Our leader has only just woken up. He really overexerted himself in the dungeon, and he hasn't recovered enough stamina to answer your call."

Lyle had woken up that morning. He was certainly lethargic, but not in such a terrible state that he couldn't come to the guild. Rather than being unable to bring Lyle, Miranda knew there wouldn't be an issue as long as she took care of it.

The staff member seemed irritated. He would have usually kept his head down around Miranda, who was a noble as well as an acquaintance of Damian. But this time, he was backed by the orders of the Academy, so he had become a bit bold.

"Well, so be it. Then can you please give a detailed account of everything that

happened since you entered the dungeon? For starters, did you encounter any of the individuals on this list?”

Aria and Sophia sat awkwardly.

Scanning through the list, Miranda answered, “We did not. Our party only went to clear the thirtieth floor and returned right after that.”

She lied with a smile.

The staff member lowered a fist onto his desk. However, his delicate fist only produced a slight, delicate sound.

“Confirm it properly! We’ll have a huge problem if you tell even a single lie!”

“A huge problem?” Miranda cocked her head. “It’s quite common for adventurers to die in the dungeon, isn’t it? Do you do this much investigating every time?”

His eyes locked on Miranda, the staff member frustratedly explained the situation. He wouldn’t have even done this much if he didn’t know that Miranda was the daughter of a viscount.

“The son of a noble is dead. The academy is pressing us to find out why. You’re a noble yourself; you should understand what I mean.”

The man from the guild seemed to sincerely believe that what he was doing was right. His firm attitude did not crumble even as he was faced with Miranda.

Miranda let out a slight sigh. “All right. And so?”

The man carried on. “Please tell me everything that happened in the dungeon. What monsters did you fight on which floor, and what actions did you take? Tell me in detail!”

“I don’t remember,” Miranda said with a shrug. “I mean, we don’t usually report that sort of thing. I’ll try to remember everything to the best of my abilities. Will that suffice?”

Seeing a vein rise on the man’s brow, Miranda went on, “Look, I understand that you’re giving it your all, seeing as it’s a request from the Academy and everything... But it doesn’t really matter how many times you ask me. My answer will be the same.”

The interrogation continued into the man from the guild finally grew weary and released the girls.

***

Once the interrogation was over, Miranda stepped out of the guild and stretched out. The guild was in quite an uproar since over fifty adventurers had died. It took a few hours until she was released, and she had evasively lied her way through the whole affair.

Aria and Sophia looked at her doubtfully.

“Miranda, I’m surprised you managed to keep up those lies for so long,” said Aria.

Sophia complained, “At the very least, we should tell the truth and have their wrongdoings exposed to the public. Why do we have to lie?”

Back when they were leaving the dungeon, Sophia had been the one insisting that they should have taken their assailants to the surface with them.

Miranda did admire her earnest and kind nature, but she knew doing so would have been pointless. So she remained cold.

“Then did you intend to outright tell them that we left them to die? Even if we brought them back with us, so long as they didn’t truly repent they would just try to take revenge against us. Telling the truth would only cause far more trouble. They got what was coming to them. They were destroyed by their own actions—how about you think about it like that?”

Sophia’s shoulders dropped.

It would have been realistically impossible to take all the assailants back to the surface. Sure, Porter was incredible, but it did not have the capacity to hold over forty people. Even if it did, Novem would not have allowed it.

Aria pressed a hand to her forehead. “Just leave it at that, Miranda. Sophia’s been mulling about it since yesterday. Unlike you, she doesn’t just think about herself.”

Her thorny statement elicited a smile from Miranda.

“Oh, I can’t ignore that statement. You’re almost making it sound like I’m a

cold-blooded woman who only considers her own well-being."

"Miranda, I think you and Novem are correct," Sophia said, shaking her head. "But I can't accept it. And, I know this might sound rude, but... Err..."

Sophia seemed to be chewing over her words, so Aria interpreted for her.

"To put it simply, yes. You *are* a cold-blooded woman. At least have some self-awareness. Thanks to you, our party is in tatters. The mood's gotten even worse."

With Aria so cynical and Sophia so discontent, Miranda said, "You two are being very rude. If you'll let me have my say, I am *very* kind."

They both looked at her, their faces screaming, "What part of you?!"

Miranda nodded. "If you don't believe me, then follow me. I'll show you the true essence of a harem party,"

And with that, she led the two of them off to who knows where.

***

A young man appeared at the adventurers' guild. Narx had entered at nearly the same time that Miranda had left, and as per usual, he dropped by the desk with a smile and chatted with the diligent receptionist lady.

"Is there any way we can enter the dungeon?"

The receptionist, her cheeks slightly red, received him even more politely than usual.

"Right now, we have a very packed roster, so that will be difficult. However, a large number of adventurers just died, so after they figure out the cause, I think they'll start looking for new parties to enter."

Usually, it would end with just a few words, like "Not happening." However, when she was faced with a refreshing pretty boy like Narx, few women would be able to take on that attitude.

"Really?! Then what can I do to get on that list?"

"Your party is a little too small, Narx. If you want to get in with four combatants and one specialized supporter..."

This exchange was being closely watched by a young man who had only just become an adventurer. His equipment was inferior to Narx's, and he fell short in the looks department too. He watched frustratedly as these two got along so intimately.

"When it was my turn, she told me not to talk about anything unnecessary since she was on the clock," the young man said, looking like he was about to cry. The party he belonged to was all men.

There were two famous harem parties in Aramthurst—Lyle's party, and Narx's party, that had recently moved in. The young man was naturally aware of the other women that surrounded Narx.

His senior adventurer looked at him and sighed.

"Wait, don't tell me you actually admire harem parties?"

"Of course I do! Day in and day out, it's a sausage fest all around! I need some solace in my life!"

His senior turned his eyes to a female party of three. They wore rather revealing outfits, but they were all incredibly muscular warriors.

"Well, there you go. Three lovely gals right over yonder. Why don't you try calling out to them?"

The young man vehemently protested, "Not those Amazon-like gals, I've got a thing for those delicate magician girls that just make you want to protect them."

"Hmm..." his senior replied, not the least bit interested in his comrade's tastes. "Then you're better off giving up."

"No way! I became an adventurer because I wanted to be popular. If I have to give up on my dreams, I'd rather be tilling the fields back home in the sticks!"

His senior looked at him with pity. "Oh, c'mon... have a good look around."

The young man did as he was told.

"There are plenty of female adventurers, aren't there?"

"There are, but everyone's a bit course, or rather, a bit too burly, don't you

think?”

The warriors were, of course, simply teeming with muscle. The other women were similarly stalwart, reliable fighters who wouldn’t lose out to the men.

“Adventurer women all end up like that eventually.”

“You’re lying! I mean, I’ve seen the party of that Lyle guy before. That was my ideal staring right back at me.”

As this young man seemed to envy what he had seen of Lyle’s party, his senior hit him with a dose of reality.

“That Lyle guy’s first-rate as an adventurer. Of course, he’s got women flocking around him. But in the first place, you ought to give up on harems.”

“Why?!” the young man demanded.

His senior’s eyes trailed into the distance. “One woman is trouble enough. Having multiple... yeah, that’s just impossible.”

Seeing a sympathetic look cross his senior’s face, the young man began to think... What problems could a harem party possibly have...?

***

It was a dimly lit alleyway that Miranda had brought them to, and there they witnessed an outrageous sight.

The ones before them were the party members of Narx, a man who Lyle had recently gotten close to. In a narrow alley where no one was watching, a tense air surrounded the gathered girls.

They were all glaring at one another. Aria and Sophia were nestled against one another, quivering at the sight.

“Bitch, you’re just a newbie. Quit getting so close to Narx,” the warrior woman grabbed the bespectacled woman by the collar of her school uniform.

But the woman in glasses did not stay silent. “Oh, hands off! You reek of sweat!”

“What’s your problem, huh?!”

It seemed like the other three were ganging up on their new recruit.

Huh? Huh?! What is this...

As Sophia watched in dismay, the situation seemed to grow even more complicated.

The woman dressed like a thief folded her hands behind her head. “Well honestly, you’re a bother too,” she said to the warrior. “Acting like you’re our sub-leader and giving orders whenever Narx isn’t around. And to top it all off, your orders are usually all wrong.”

The magician continued, “And you act as if you’re the one supporting Narx. It’s irritating just looking at you.”

This time, the warrior was the one taking it. But it wasn’t long before the thief was being rebuked by all the others. Before anyone had realized it, it had become a fistfight.

“Observe how they strike only where the clothes will hide it,” Miranda explained. “No man’s going to notice that, don’t you think?”

If they were injured, then surely Narx would notice. To ensure this didn’t happen, the four of them only punched places that wouldn’t stand out. Ultimately, every member had their turn being chastised and struck... And once that was over, they all went their separate ways.

Aria trembled. “No way. I mean, they were all smiling last I saw them. All four of them, together!”

Sophia had witnessed that very same scene. In fact, it had made her mindful —she had wondered why her own party couldn’t be the same.

“Th-They’re even worse than us.”

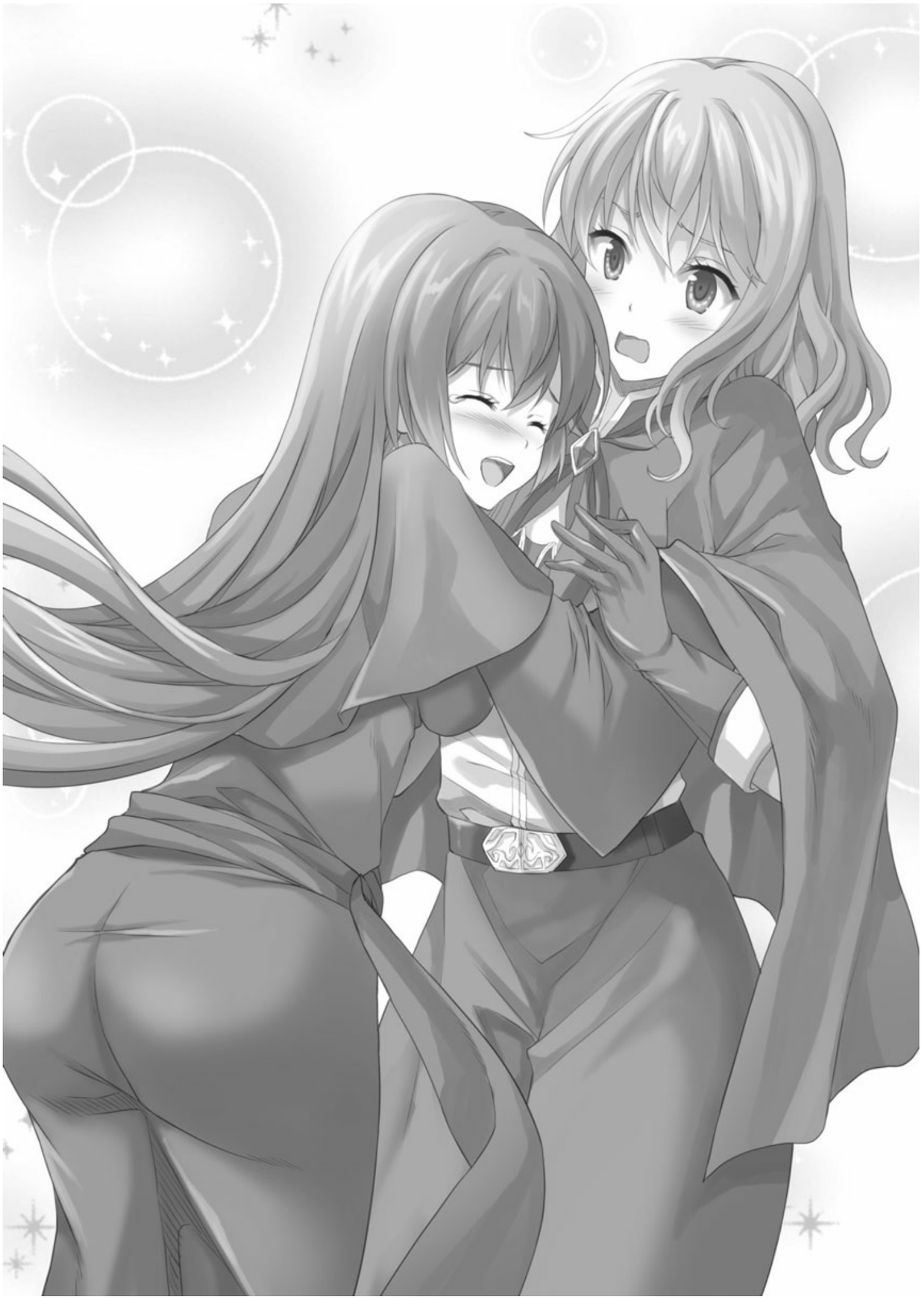
Miranda chuckled. “On their days off, when they’re not with Narx, they’re all generally off on their own. Sometimes they get together with their adventurer friends in Aramthurst and talk a bunch of smack about the other three.”

The women showered one another in insults and blows. This was a side of them that Narx did not know.

Miranda went on, “They do all sorts of stuff when no one’s watching. Sneaking around everyone’s backs. But I hate that sort of thing, so...”

“Miranda!”

Sophia clung to Miranda.



“I was wrong! I always had a slight inkling. Just maybe all those terrible things you said to us were for our own sake.”

Aria, for one, seemed surprised. “Huh? Really?”

Miranda had quite a troubled look on her face.

Sophia went on, “Now that I’ve seen those four, I’m convinced. If you really wanted to, you could have driven us out and lived alone with Lyle, but you didn’t. You’re still the same, gentle Miranda from when we first met! I’m... I’m so sorry!”

With Miranda crying and apologizing, Miranda could only give a bitter, awkward smile.

Even Aria was crying now. “Miranda, why are you so kind?!”

And now, with two crying girls on her hands, Miranda could only do her best to console them.

***

The next day, Miranda sighed in her room. “Hah, why did it come to this?”

Aria and Sophia were clinging to her from the crack of dawn, and Lyle seemed incredibly delighted to see that.

That wasn’t a problem in and of itself, but by Miranda’s plan, she wanted to maintain a moderate amount of distance from the two girls.

However, after seeing that muddled clash of female emotions the day before, their opinion of Miranda had risen far too high.

“Well... they’re idiots like Shannon, and I do like that about them...”

If they adored her, then so be it. They were no longer dolls that silently went along with whatever Novem did, so this time she planned to foster a moderate level of friendship.

In the first place, the reason Miranda had fired those two up—had been Novem.

Rather than Lyle, the two of them had blindly followed Novem, who occasionally gave orders and led them by the nose. She had been overdoing it,

and so Miranda tried to lead them in her own way.

After sitting quietly in her chair for a while and staring out the window, Miranda turned back to her desk and got to compounding. She needed to make more of her handmade bombs.

“Now then, next time I’ll contain the output a bit.”

She was about to get to work when she heard a pitter-patter in the corridor.

These footsteps belonged to Shannon, and she only walked like that whenever she was in a very good mood.

“Sis!”

“Shannon, please only enter after you’ve knocked and I’ve replied,” she cautioned her, and Shannon seemed depressed for a moment, but she quickly regained her smile.

Apparently, the reason lay with Aria and Sophia.

“I heard all about it, sis. I knew you were still my gentle sister deep down! And here I was thinking my sister had become a bit of a scary person!”

As her little sister said all this with a beaming smile, Miranda felt like holding her head.

Shannon was oblivious to how the world worked. She was incredibly easy to fool, and this was quite a concern for Miranda. For this reason, she had to correct her misunderstanding.

“Shannon... I am certainly kind.”

“I know!”

“But you see, that’s because Lyle wants me to be.”

“That’s right! Umm... What?”

After giving an energetic reply, Shannon began to question Miranda’s response.

As Shannon stared back at her, puzzled, Miranda said, “Now look here. I like Lyle. And since I like him, I don’t want any other women around him. You can follow that, right?”

“I...can somewhat, understand.”

Whether Shannon actually understood or not was dubious, but Miranda still had to correct her.

“It isn’t rare for a noble to have mistresses. So, sure, I’ll begrudgingly accept it if he has others. I’ll put up with it. That’s how much I like him. But let me make one thing clear... I am not trying to increase the number. I will never in a million years push even more women onto him like Novem.”

Shannon silently nodded a few times.

“Now let’s talk hypotheticals. I joined the party later than all the others, so let’s say I drove out all our comrades. What do you think Lyle would have to say?”

Shannon thought for a moment. “I don’t know!”

Miranda smiled. “It’s good to be honest. Anyway, I’m sure Lyle wouldn’t like that. And he would think I was a nuisance.”

“Yes, it’s unacceptable for that gigolo to treat my dear sis like she’s a nuisance!”

“Right. It’s unacceptable, right? In which case, what do you think is the best course of action I can take?”

“I don’t know!”

Miranda never got tired of watching Shannon coldly declare her own ignorance. In fact, she found that idiotic side of her to be downright adorable.

“That’s simple. Prevent any more women from joining. Meanwhile, I become the top contender of our current members.”

Flustered by her sister’s answer, Shannon timidly asked, “E-Err, sis? In that case, you should really stop freaking the gigolo out. You’re really scaring him.”

Now and then, Miranda would flaunt the quarrels between the female members to Lyle. Going off that explanation, this was an unnecessary action if she really wanted to be liked.

“Why, it’s necessary. If we got along on the surface, Lyle would think that

everything's going well, and then he'd get more girls. Lyle...is wonderful, isn't he? There will definitely be plenty of women going for him. And if Novem sees that any of them are exceptionally skilled, she'll try to make them join the party, so I really have to be careful."

Shannon was dumbfounded. Her own sister was making an unbelievable face. On top of this, she sincerely believed that Lyle was simply that wonderful—Shannon couldn't believe it herself.

"J-Just hypothetically..."

"Hmm?"

"If that damn gigolo didn't think kindly of all the fighting, or he wasn't interested in Aria and Sophia—"

With a straight face, Miranda answered, "I'd immediately kick them out of the party. Naturally. I'm able to do that much. It's not really a problem is it?"

Shannon was teary-eyed. "S-Sis, let's just say I became a hindrance..."

"I wouldn't dream of it. You're my adorable little sister, Shannon. Don't you worry."

Shannon's face made it clear that she wasn't the least bit relieved to hear that.

"My ultimate goal is to monopolize Lyle. It's better if the other women aren't around, but someone on Lyle's level might need a mistress or two. You know, he's a former noble, and he makes good money, right? So when the time comes, I want to limit it to our current members. Oh, if possible, I'd like to secure Clara too. We do need a driver for Porter."

As Miranda spoke of her ideals, Shannon listened in aghast silence.

***

A few days had passed since we'd finished the assignment. I went to visit Clara, bringing her to the usual library break room for discussion.

This time, it was not to talk about work.

"Truth be told, we're thinking of leaving Aramthurst. Not immediately, but

once we're all prepared, we'll stop by the royal Capital of Central."

We hadn't been in the city for long. But it seemed to be about the right time to move on.

There was a hint of sadness in her smile.

"Is that so? I'll be a bit lonely here. But I have earned a lot of money by working with you. And then, there was everything with Porter. It has been a very good experience."

"I do have just one request though. As thanks for your assistance in completing Porter, you asked for one just like him, right? Well, I do think it will take a fair bit of time to make another Porter."

Clara cocked her head. "Oh no, I'll be happy if you just give me the prototype."

"No, no, no. Promises are promises. Actually, Monica managed to find all the right parts at Damian's place, but we simply can't obtain a mana crystal. In order to honor our promise, I think I'll have to search for a crystal elsewhere."

Clara looked a bit surprised. "R-Really? I don't want one that badly."

The third head was being rather noisy. "Just seduce her like you always do!" he demanded. "Can you not do it when you're conscious of it? Hey, hurry and make Clara an official comrade!"

The book-loving third head also loved Clara. He would not stop insisting that I had to add her to our party.

"Clara, in order to honor our promise, do you want to come with me?"

Clara lightly shook her head at my proposal.

"It is enticing, but I will have to turn you down. I am a supporter, and Aramthurst has the library I hold dear."

To Clara, Aramthurst was surely a very nice place. But that answer was troublesome for me.

"I'm...not telling you to spend the rest of your life away from the library. But would you like to see the outside world? To be honest with you, I...I was locked

up in the family manor until recently, and I didn't really know anything about the world. I still don't."

Clara smiled wryly. "Honestly, I can tell."

"Y-You can? W-Well, to put it simply, would you like to go on a journey with the premise that you will return to Aramthurst someday? You can experience all sorts of new things in the outside world."

"Again, an enticing offer, but I—"

Growing impatient with Clara who would not take me up on my proposal, the third head noisily complained, "Put more effort into it! What's with you today?! You can usually string along women far better than that!"

What a terrible way to put it.

There, a thought occurred to me. "Come to think of it, Aramthurst gathers books from all over the world, don't they?"

With the topic of books brought up, Clara suddenly became talkative. She really did love them. "Yes. However, I can't say that they have everything. Each region has its share of books that are carefully stored and treasures, unable to leave. Even if there are other libraries like the ones in Aramthurst, oftentimes, you are unable to check the books out. I would like to read them, but this is one thing that..."

"Can't you just read them on-site, then?" I brought up the very simple fact that came to mind.

A realization seemed to set in. "You do have a point. A year? No, I could go around for a few years, and once I'm back, I can reproduce the books myself... Lyle, please take me with you. By all means."

She relented surprisingly easily.

***

Dropping by Damian's laboratory, I handed Porter's blueprints to Damian.

"Are you sure about this? If you started selling them, I think they're a lot more money to be made."

I didn’t just give him the plans for Porter. I gave him the blueprints for the prototype too. My reason was quite simple—I wanted funding. I decided to let the academy buy Porter’s design from me.

“I plan to move on, and I can’t spend all of my time on R&D, so it’s impossible for me. But, since we’ve made something so wonderful, I think we ought to spread it around. And the Academy can probably do that best.”

The fourth head sounded disappointed. “If Lyle was a merchant, this would have been his opportunity to become a big-time player in the industry.”

He was frustrated about it, but I was an adventurer. I did not intend to do business with Porter in my spare time.

Damian handed the blueprints to Lily.

“Fine. I’ll pass these along for you. I think they’ll pay quite a hefty price for them. Ah, could I also buy your prototype so we have a reference?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Damian scanned the design documents with a hand on his chin.

“Still, this will make large-scale transport possible. Maybe I should make one to use next time I make a purchase.”

The laboratory did require various resources to operate, and Porter evidently seemed like a very appealing option to transport them.

“So, when are you leaving?” Damian asked, looking at me.

“There’s some paperwork to do, so in about a month. We’ll go to Central, then decide on our next destination while we’re there.”

Damian shrugged. “It will be sad to see someone whose name I remember go away. Well, let’s hope we meet again, Lyle.”

“Of course, Damian.”

I’d come to know quite a peculiar person. Now that we had to say goodbye, I felt a little empty inside.

Epilogue

The house of the Circry Sisters had become quite tidy once everyone had finished preparing for the move. The house had apparently been bought for Miranda and Shannon to live in, but seeing as they were going on a journey, Miranda said it was no longer necessary. She quickly sold it off.

The property had officially been granted to the two sisters, and they were allowed to do what they wanted with it.

“You really did something drastic there, Miranda,” I told her.

She turned to me with a smile. “I don’t need it if I’m going to be following you, Lyle. I do hope we continue to get along.”

Although it honestly made me quite happy that she was directing so much affection towards me, it also made me a little embarrassed. Still...

“Miranda, is it okay if I put my bags here?”

“Miranda? What should I do with this?”

Aria and Sophia were carrying a plethora of bags. It was like that strained atmosphere in the party had been a dream. From what I’d heard from the two of them, Miranda had incited them to motivate their growth.

Now that the misunderstanding had been resolved, they now got along just as they did before.

“Give me a moment, Lyle. I’ve got some things to do.”

I saw her off as she walked towards the other two before glancing at Porter.

Early in the morning, Monica said she was going to do some modifications, so she had crawled under Porter’s body and was doing who knows what.

“If I attack this here, Porter’s performance will increase three-fold! Well, that’s a lie. But thirty percent! No, at least twenty...I think.”

She was noisily murmuring something to herself.

Clara was helping out with Monica’s work, and this had her rushing to and fro.

We were not going to be using a wagon train for this journey. This, thankfully, meant we did not have to worry about our time of departure.

“Milord,” Novem came over to me. “I’ve finished up the paperwork at the guild.”

Novem had gone to the guild to complete the necessary procedures in my place.

“Sorry about that. The people there start nagging me whenever I go.”

Skilled and talented adventurers were setting off for other lands one after the other. This had to do with the terrible service at the guild, but would the day ever come when the guild staff actually recognized this?

Novem looked a bit weary. “They have lost a fair few adventurers, after all. Apparently, the guild will be very troubled if we leave too. At least, that’s what they said to try to keep us..”

Rudall, Zalsa, Benil...a few mean-spirited adventurers had disappeared, and this meant there were fewer parties entering the dungeon. Looking at the whole, it wasn’t such a large number of people, but when profitable adventurers like us were leaving, they would try to step in and stop us.

Whenever I went, they’d nag all about how I’d gotten into the good grace of Damian, and that my leaving would be betraying his trust. It was really quite annoying.

I was very grateful that Novem was there to do the paperwork for me.

“How long do we intend to stay in Central?”

I could not provide an immediate response. “That depends on the situation,” I said. “I think it’s a little too early to head for the Free City of Baym, and I’d like to see a few more places before that. I hope we can find someplace nice.”

“I’m sure we will,” Novem smiled. “Well then, I’ll go get ready.”

Novem left to pack her own bags. As I stretched out and yawned, my chest swelled with expectations and dreams for the next land we would settle in.

The one who brought me back from my daydreams was Shannon. She had sweets in hand.

“What, did you come to complain again?” I teased.

She had been acting quite strange lately. Although we still fought, at times, she would make a sad face as she looked at me. Just what was going through her head?

“Here... you can have it.”

Shannon handed over a sweet treat that I knew was her favorite.

My eyes widened. “Is it going to snow tomorrow? To think you’d share your sweets... It’s not poisoned is, it?”

I was just joking, but she didn’t take it so well. Teary-eyed, she shook her head.

“I find you pitiful, so you can have it. In exchange, please take care of big sis. I don’t think I can stop her.”

What is she talking about? We’d just found out that Miranda’s personality wasn’t nearly as bad as we thought, and yet Shannon was the only one who seemed to carry a sense of grim resolve.

I tossed it into my mouth.

“Oh wow, this is delicious.”

Shannon continued to give me a sad look.

“Hey, quit looking at me like that. What are you so sad about?”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to know. But I sympathize with you a bit. Just a wee little bit, but even a damn gigolo like you can have my pity.”

“Quit calling me a gigolo! Wait, don’t tell me this is a new form of harassment?!”

I knew it! I hate little sisters after all!

***

Inside the Jewel, the men gathered and watched Lyle getting along well with Shannon. They all had serious looks on their faces.

They would usually have cracked a joke or two at the scene, but they were

dead silent.

The fourth head stared at the second head's face.

The man had mustered his resolve. He took in a deep breath as he watched Lyle.

As they watched Lyle interact with Shannon like they were brother and sister, all six of them knew he had grown quite a bit more robust. He was practically a different person from when he had started out, not knowing his left from his right.

The second head opened his mouth.

"I think it's a suitable time," he said.

The third head nodded to that. "I can imagine. As Lyle is right now, I don't think there's a single one of our Arts he can't learn. He'll surely be alright."

Lyle had learned the second head's Art up to its second stage. And everyone had sensed that the time was coming for him to learn the third and final stage too.

The second head bashfully scratched at his hair. "I do feel like watching for a little bit longer, but I don't want to overstay my welcome. I'll just be in the way. Lyle is all right."

The reason the memories of these ancestors had been brought back was simply to teach Lyle their Arts. At least, that was how they saw it.

And, once they had done their duty, they would disappear just like the first head had.

The second head looked at the silver greatsword that floated silently around the table.

"Hmmm, in my case, I guess a bow will come out? Or maybe that old man was just special? I'm so curious, but I'll never know the answer. Don't you think that's terrible?"

"Sure enough," they all said and shared a light laugh.

The second head looked over Lyle warmly. "He's still a bit hopeless in a few

places, but it's about time for me to take my leave."

The second head had decided to entrust his own Art to Lyle. He believed—as long as the other ancestors were around, surely they would guide Lyle in the right direction.

"It'll be a bit quieter here," the fourth head said.

The second head gave a troubled laugh. "On the contrary, he could be happy to see me go—that would sting a bit. Well, that's about right for me."

The third head nodded. "I guess so. In that case, well just going off the order, am I up next? I wonder how Lyle will be by the time the seventh head disappears."

"If he had a knack for drawing women who loved a little too much—I thought he'd end up the same as the sixth head," the fifth head jokingly analyzed. "But Miranda didn't turn out to be so bad. I think they'll be able to get along well."

"Please don't use me as your reference," the sixth said, sourly. "Well, for now, I think he'll continue to mature steadily. Let's go with that."

Lyle's grandfather, the seventh head, was so curious about Lyle's future he didn't know what to do with himself. "Here, I can see my own grandson grow up and find his place in the world. I couldn't be happier."

The second head brought it to a close.

"Right. I never thought I'd be able to see my descendants like this. Well, we're just memories. The real ones died long ago..."

A somewhat sad second head watched as Lyle fooled around with Shannon.