

Death Magic 451

Chapter 451: Town of Meke

Dark roads with darker alleyways led outwards of the town. The buildings changed to be lesser well-made than those center-bound. The standard of living seemed unequal. Each time they went past a dim alley, noises of which were mostly screams and sword slashes would be heard. The feeling of caution it gave was palpable. Misna was very much on edge. Aiea, Konne, and the want-to-be hero Arnold walked with the boy in the middle. The trip lasted a few minutes till a building; two floors high, barely away from the slums, made its grand entrance.

“Welcome back, lady Misna,” said a traveling warrior.

“Good luck on your travels,” said she nodding at the pleasant man.

“Before I forget,” The large mess of armor stopped with the metals ringing against one another,”-the guild leader is wanting an audience. Go meet with him, there was a call from the officials at the Azure wall.”

“Will do,” her expression changed as the man moved away. Normally stern and assertive, the tightly close lips relaxed, her fingers mildly jittered against the armored leggings. It gave the sound and impression of galloping horses.

“Lady Misna, is something troubling you?” asked Aiea with great interest.

“No, let us say things have gotten somewhat tedious. Go on, head into the store, and deliver the loot, we need to go to our guild.” Thus, the party dropped the items at a proxy building to allow ease of access back towards the wall. Some of the more expensive and lavish guilds were fortunate enough to buy proxy buildings (imbued with drop-boxes that linked with the central guild) at the outposts. The efficiency meant more time to go back and forth between fighting and saving.

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“Where are we going now?” asked the boy with caution.

“To our guild,” added Misna, “-See that building over there?” she pointed to multiple with one standing out by the rotting paint. “That’s our guild, a bit misplaced but hey, time changes without anyone’s intervention.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked him turning to Konne.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he faced away.

“Let me explain,” interjected Aiea, “-our guild, L’Eveneo was once in the top 30 mid-tiered guilds in Oxshield. We were mainly tasked with fighting and being the vanguard in multiple expeditions. The old party was one of the best, until a fateful day...”

“...Never mind that,” her wandering mind returned, “-since that, we’ve dropped in popularity and financial means. What you see is the representation of what it means to survive in an ever-growing market. Our headquarters might be closer to the famed center; however, people aren’t attracted.” The conversation ended as soon as Misna pushed open a rusted iron door.

"I'm back," her voice echoed with them going one after the other.

"Lady Misna," replied an elf dressed in a maids outfit, "-the master is waiting in the office," to which she continued sweeping the floor.

"So big," voiced the boy.

"Yeah, you could say that," facepalmed Konne, "-it's meant to be full of people, not this empty mess of dust and trash." A dimmer hall headed towards the eastern wing.

"Come on," interjected Konne, "-let's go to the training ground," he pointed with the rifle.

"S-sure," they soon left the empty hall with a singular maid effortlessly sweeping the floor. Funny thing was that she never moved, her duties were always the path leading into the office.

The training area, a yard at the back hidden by other buildings. Targets for shooting practice, training dummies for swordsmanship, and a running track. "We might not be that consequential, still, the guild has what it had back then," added Konne with a hint of regret.

The office of the Guild leader was more or less a bar. He who led stood behind a counter and cleaned glasses. "Lady Misna," smiled he, "-welcome home."

"Thank you, guild leader," she took a seat.

"Here," a glass of ale had her spirit heightened.

"Now," from casually cleaning to sternly glaring, "-I've received a call from the Officials of the walls. They say you have taken in a boy who magically appeared on the battlefield. Care to explain?"

"Forgive my asking," she interjected, "-I figure young Arnold to do a better job recounting the preceding events."

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"Young Arnold is involved?" he laughed, "-send for him," the tag flashed Silver.

Minutes turned into hours, the boy remained outside watching the training. Each member took turns going in. Each time one would return, the expression was of utter desperateness. Their bravado all but extinguished without an inkling of rebirth.

"Alright everyone," the harsh figure of Misna walked into the arena, "-I'll be taking the boy to the guild. The Leader must have given an idea of what is to come. Don't regret the decision, saving a life is a noble thought, yet, we need to think of ourselves. Another mouth to feed will but break the balance we so hardly tried to create and maintain."

No response came as the stances were preoccupied with watching the floor. Only Arnold saw fit to angrily throw axes at the practice targets. The actions had Konne clench his fist and Aiea listlessly watch the cloudy sky.

'I guess it's time for me to leave,' thought the boy standing sharply. "Thank you for having saved me back there. I'll try my best to repay kindness someday. Goodbye for now!"

'He knows,' went across the mind, 'he knows we're going to abandon him. Still, he smiles and doesn't care, what a strong man.' And so, as the thoughts of amazement at the boy went from one to another, Misna took him by the hand and leaped to the outside.

The walk that continued was long and silent. "So, do you really not have a name?"

"I might have one," he replied, "-but I don't remember." The passing of adventurers and traders grew denser by the second. The center of town was ever approaching and with it came the masses.

"Is that right," she soon glanced at the building with ropes attached from one end to the other. Sometimes clothes would be hung, and the other times, underpants. She purposefully took the longer road – a path that went into the residential area before the town-square.

"Listen to me," said she, "-with nothing to your name, there's not much you can do." She stopped shy of a boutique selling antiques, "-look at this flyer, can you read it?"

"Says to come to the guild if one has found a dog."

"You can read, that alone can get you places. Looking at the frail body, there might not be many people searching for weaklings to do their jobs."

"Lady Misna," he voiced with a frown, "-why are you trying so hard for an unknown. I have an idea of what might have happened inside that room. You and the others were shunned for having saved another. You lied to keep their morale up, the story inside and out is utterly different."

"How did you?" her mouth opened.

"Don't know," he shrugged, "-when I sat quietly and watched, I could somewhat get an idea of what was happening. I don't know how that's possible, but my mind said that was the case..."

"Look at you," she laughed and patted his head, "-I guess you'll be able to survive if left alone. Still, let's get to the guild. They might have a job or two to get you started."

Town square, a place of crowds and yells. The town looked on from above was circular. The square was divided into sectors. Four to be exact: Traders, Crafting, Fighting, and Miscellaneous. The centermost was a tall tower with stars and a crescent moon at the highest point.

"Here we are," said she with a laugh, "-the central guild. Be careful of scams, the traders are here to make money. The center is another fight, a fight of wit and charisma. Nonfighter guilds have it hard to deal as well, their battlefield is even more so troublesome than monsters."

Looking for Tier 6 and higher for a trip into the Tower of Aris, shouted a man with his whole breath.

"Lady Misna," halted he tugging on her shirt, "-what's the Tower of Aris?"

"Oh, that?" she frowned, "-that's a place where only the strong are allowed. The tower of Aris is a never-ending dungeon where a party has to climb and fight the stronger monster. Many have tried, and many more have died. It's not a good place, people often betray another for the sake of gold. Come on, we're losing time," to which she grabbed his arms.

Stairs at the four cardinal points gave access to the guild. From far one might not have noticed, the sheer scale of this tower was preposterous. Stand on the stairs and one couldn't see the roof. Inside, the center was filled with guild-people welcoming many with smiles. Stairs and elevators left to differing floors. A screen on the right showed the current bounty, quests, and items of interest.

"Come on, don't get lost now," said she holding firm. They took the elevator to the 5th floor. No name to indicate the location, the doors opened to an empty corridor. She walked and arrived at a lady dressed rather classily.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm Misna, Tier 5-Ruby adventurer."

"I see," the lady lowered her glasses, "-you've come to deliver the civilian found on the border?"

"Yes."

"Very well, please, head down the corridor, Lady Melissa will decide what is to happen next."

"Where are we?" they ambled across a hallway with paintings and shut windows. It felt long and desperate.

"The Orphaned Child division. Being an adventurer is hard, thus, the guild instated a special unit to take care of the unfortunate children who might lose their parents in the war against the monsters. It's the best I can do as opposed to leaving a child in the wild."

"Lady Misna, granted I might not be as tall as you, I do think I'm a teenager at least."

"Look at you," she patted his head further, "-it's not as bad as you think. After all, I was also placed here a few years ago," the tone came across as reminiscent.

Knock, knock,

"Enter," said a lady with long brown hair.

"Pardon the intrusion," said Misna.

"Are you?" the lady's eyes locked with the boy, "-that's not possible, is it?"

"Lady Melisa, do you perhaps know this boy?" wondered the lady.

"Must be my imagination," said she, "-please, take a seat." The awkward exchange had left the trio speechless for a few minutes. She behind the desk couldn't lift her face from the boy.

"Ahem."

"Do pardon my rudeness," her face blushed, "-I'm sorry for gawking. It's just that you remind me of someone I knew so long ago. I suppose he did change suddenly, still, there's a certain connection."

"The man," voiced he, "-what happened to him?"

"Died around five-years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," voiced them both.

"No need to apologize," breathing deep, "-Lady Misna, is that the boy?"

"Yes, tis him."

"I understand you don't remember your name as well as how you ended up on that battleground?"

"No, all I know is that a voice said wake up and so I did to be on that field of terror."

"Understandable, anyone awakened on that mess of a border is bound to be traumatized. Going by looks alone, I'd figure the age to be seventeen. Do you have any skills?"

"No he doesn't," voiced Misna, "-the boy can read and is rather talented in the ways of speech."

"How do you figure?" the brows locked into a battle.

"A gut feeling," she smiled.

"What about you, boy, what do you want to do?"

"The Tower of Aris," mumbled he, "-I want to go there one day."

"Come on," her voice raised, "-I told you that place is a mess!"

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"Lady Misna, please let the boy speak," a reminiscent feeling came from the way the boy spoke.

"I don't know why myself. The fight against a monster is scary, the beasts are fearsome. There's a part of me that wants to jump into the fray and fight."

"I see," she smiled, "-normally I'd not recommend this to anyone else, however, why not join the Adventuring academy for 1-2 years. Depending on the capabilities a guild might come to like what thee do. Might I add that the academy isn't based on battles and fighting, there are other fields of studies."

Chapter 452: Lyoko Igna

"I'd like more information on this supposed Adventuring academy," exclaimed she who had taken a very much personal interest.

"The Adventuring Academy is known for being a place where young talented people rejoin and grow. Similar to university where the one's vocation is to learn and achieve their goal. The Adventuring Academy is the same with the exception that it's geared towards the more modern way of living."

"About the fee," asked the boy, "-I'm guessing education doesn't come cheap."

"Good question," thought she gently pushed back her long hair. "It does require money, but not as much as one might think. I think around 2,000 Exa should cover the expense for a full-years' worth."

"2,000 Exa..." Misna's eyes closed. The reality was they couldn't spare a few meagerly Exa let alone that fortune of an amount."

"Lady Misna," said the boy placing his hand atop hers, "-thank you for saving me from the monsters earlier. I think we should part ways here. You said it yourself, I have the capability of surviving."

“Lady Misna,” catching onto his intent, “-I think the boy should be left alone. The Guild will take care of him from now on. May fortune befall thee on the many travels to come.”

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The stance was of a lady beyond the ability to help. She clambered to a stand, threw the last look at the boy and guild-lady, then made for the door. No words, no exchange of goodwill, nothing, she left with the door shut tight. It echoed with the same vigor of a prison cell.

“Lady Melisa,” voiced he strongly, “-could you explain more on the Adventuring Academy?”

“Sure,” the expression eased into a neutral stance, “-the Adventuring Academy was implemented around nine to ten years ago. The monsters grew tiresome, and the market became full of youth wanting to prove their worth. You see, adventuring is one of the many ways to live and become wealthy, excluding business. A certain organization backed the project and thus the enormous academy was built. You need to understand our continent. Since the memories are lost, I should go through this first. We’re the Argashield Federation, one of the more powerful and rich kingdoms out there. Let that sink as we were once viewed as weaklings without a future. A certain man is due credit for the change that has come of us today. The Federation is primarily focused on merit. The more worthy and hardworking one is, the farther he shall go in life. Long are the days of nobles and peasants, don’t get me wrong, it still exists but the accord overshadows that filthy past. To the matters at hand, the Adventuring Academy is farther north of Meke, on flatlands surrounded by forests. The perfect place to teach the ways of battle without backlash from the populous. There’s a special train that goes to and fro, the students are given limited but valid access to the Azure wall. Something most of the current adventurers don’t have. The screening process is long and tedious since the Wall stands to be compromised. Thus, more people flock to the town of Aria, a place where few students practice. The climb of the tower has been an undergoing quest for more than a decade. By the latest report, there’s still no end to how big it is. Some theories and physical observation have seen the structure grow with time. Well, there’s more information at the academy. So, are you interested?”

“Hefty amount of information for a boy who doesn’t have a name. Lady Melisa, the funds, you surely know that I don’t have the capital...” the sentence ended with a frown. The lady had rested her elbows on the table and smiled. “Excuse me, is there something wrong?”

“No, not at all,” she sighed, “-you do remind me of that man so much.”

“Really?” he shrugged, “-about the academy.”

“Interested I suppose?” coyly lobbing her tone across as if having caught an exotic pray, the following grin was just as bad.

“Yes, I mean, there’s nothing much I can do. I’m in the guild’s care, you choose and see fit.”

“Fine,” the drawers under the desk opened with a harsh pull. The force was unnecessary, with it having broken in other instances. “Here are the files,” they slammed onto the table, “-we’ll have to get you registered under an Adventuring name. Firstly, as an orphan, which you technically are, let’s find a name. Anything strike your fancy?”

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"A name," he paused, "-it's hard to come up with one on the spot..."

"Lyoko Igna."

"Huh?" her fingers nearly dropped the pen, "-Lyoko Igna?"

"Yeah," he laughed, "I don't know myself. The words just came from within."

"I suppose it's a sign," her hands moved to quickly fill the form, "-what about an adventuring name?"

"Kinless."

"Kinless, as in having no-one, I like it. Well then, Mr. Igna, you've been recruited by one of the professors at the Academy. Don't worry about the fee, we'll take a cut since the students make money while studying."

"I deeply appreciate the opportunity."

"Wait up young man, no need to be in such a haste. We'll be visiting the doctors to have an evaluation of the body and mind."

The day continued with the prior mentioned visit. The physician saw fit and legitimized the boy's story. He truly was an unknown left in a harsh world. If not for the help that came as a fluke in fate, the path would have ended in death.

Tuesday the 2nd of December arrived. Most of the night was spent on the train headed to the academy. Half-way between the Rosepire and Meke, the forest cleared into a massive compound. The train station was bigger than the one in the adventuring town.

'Suppose I have to try and dig my past or something. I'm old and must have had parents and people I know of. The memories I have are blurry and painful to recall. Melisa is a good person; she has a motherly feeling with each spoken word. This body of mine isn't natural,' staring his reflection on the window, '-my canines get sharper at night. It shakes me to my very core. There's something wrong since my thirst never goes away. The thirst remains even after I drink water. It hurts at times but then, it disappears. Whatever, I guess I'll figure it as I live.' *Screech* the train stopped at the crack of dawn.

"Alright students, please stand in line for the roll-call," ordered a man who just entered the cabin. One by one, they moved with massive backpacks and better outfits. Some chattered, others laughed and some showed off their prized items.

'What is it with them?' wondered Igna, '-wanting to fight, talking about honor and all that stuff. I don't see myself fighting on the frontlines, so why did I say I wanted to visit the Tower of Aris?'

Smack, "-I'm sorry."

"Watch where you're going," refuted the other boy who bent to pick the books.

"Once again, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, don't worry, help me pick up the books," said he rather hastily with his glasses nearly falling.

'What a strange boy?' after gathering the items, the boy with glasses took off without another word said.

"Welcome to the Adventuring Academy," said the same man now stood on one of the benches. The curved-metal-roof carried the commanding voice across. Three rows of 5 stood silently with arms behind their backs. The first five were girls followed by boys who filled the rest. "Forget about anything taught in school or another establishment. The Academy doesn't conform to rules or regulations. We're here to teach you how to become adventurers, the people who are 'free' in this world of ours. So, admission happens when 15 or more students have met the requirements. Lady Melisa here will continue the rest of the tour. Make sure to not cause trouble – punishments are far worst than you could have dreamed."

"Thanks for the harsh welcome, Mr. Vega," she smiled to take a more appropriate stance. "Since we slipped over introductions, I'm Melisa, Guild-Lady, and Advisor. This here is Fletcher Vega, Tier-4 Bronze Adventurer of Pegasus. He's also a trained mage from the famed Claireville Academy," the warmth of the tone froze, "-the adventuring academy isn't a place for jokes and playing around. Students will die, and many have died. Consider this, by studying here, thee art now official trainee warriors. Not to fret, there are other vocations such as blacksmithing and more as we give the tour." On that, she continued down a staircase that gave into the open. The largeness and the scale were beyond imagination. It left to a beautiful park of forest and greenery with buildings behind.

"The residential apartments are over there," she pointed in front, "-beyond the park. You'll each be assigned rooms unless housing has been decided otherwise." So far, the greenery and peace were inviting. Upon reaching the foot of the stairs, it turned right and elevated into one twice as tedious.

'This is the stairway to heaven,' jested a boy trying to lightened the load of the climb. It worked since most laughed. Finishing the arduous climb, a whiff of fresh air relieved the prior pain. Parking to the left that led into the office building. The stone path continued forth towards a peculiarly shaped statue.

"This here is the memorial of fallen adventurers. The names of a few known fighters are engraved on here, counting among the few is Deadeyes of Kniq. Od'pel of Blade's End and Megn of Hado."

Afterward, the tour continued to the actual academy. Three massive buildings of four-story high. They laid next to one another giving space for benches and a hangout area for the students in-between.

"Over to the right," she pointed, "-down the small hill is the Arena. Most combat and monster fighting will happen over there. The last buildings on our journey are the smithing and crafting area. Apprentices will be assigned to master craftsmen later in the day." The journey continued to the gymnasium/cafeteria (all in the same building).

"Here we are," the floor was of a soft material, "-the place has been cleared for recruitment. Go forth and see what job interests you. Return to us once it's done, we'll assign rooms and all should be fine." In that instant, the students split into multiple groups and dashed to various camps. Trading, craftsmanship, adventuring, magecraft, technology, science, and military-arts. Those seven fields encompassed what one needed to do to become a successful adventurer. The majority flocked to the Adventuring side of the gym. Some headed towards the craftsmanship and a few to the military-arts. None chose trading, the one heading the desk was a demi-human.

“Heads-up,” voiced Mr. Fletcher, “-Combat will be mandatory. Since this is an adventuring school, temporary guild-tags will be assigned.” On that, the doubt of many fell into a relief.

“Excuse me?” approached the lonesome Igna at the Trading desk.

“Hello,” said a lady with cat-ears and whiskers, “-I see you chose the trading guild. Let me warn you, we’re not part of Hidros, we actually belong to Arda. It’s the reason why most of the students choose to stay away.”

“Yes,” ignoring her words, “-it says here you teach cooking, painting, writing, and a few more?”

“Yes, traders are those who appraise items and sell for profit. We need to know everything from weapons to the undies you might be wearing.”

“Is it hard?”

“Very,” she laughed, “-most of the students drop out after the first week.”

“Then I’d please like to be in the trading guild,” he bowed courteously.

“You’re a very polite young man,” she smiled, “my name is Haru, Guild Leader of the Trader’s guild. It’s a mouthful I know, but what can you do.”

“Good to meet you, lady Haru, I’m Lyoko Igna,” the aura she gave was of threat and trouble. Despite it, the curiosity of being a trader couldn’t have been more palpable.

“Pleased to meet you, Igna,” her whiskers and ears fluttered. Behind were the suspicious gazes of the other students. ‘Why would anyone become a trader?’

‘Such a stupid job,’ so on and so forth, the gossiping never-ended. What was sure in Igna’s mind was, ‘-being a trader will teach me more than the other jobs.’

Chapter 453: Evaluation

“Bien venue to our Trading Guild,” said she with no other in the queue. Igna’s firm stance and unwillingness to focus on other matters was a good show of what was to come. Her whiskers rose with her smiling, her outfit was one of rather obtuseness. Skimpy, sexy, overly standoffish, plain old ripped off garments – tis the comments heard on the streets. The boys fixated on her well-formed chest; the contours were astonishing for a demi-human.

“Gather-up everyone,” yelled Mr. Fletcher with a single breath. They scrambled over to stand with chatter. Many of the conversations were to do with the trader’s guild. They joked about it never finding glory and being scammers.

“I bet he joined the guild because of her breast.”

“Yeah, I know – he felt bad for the lady and decided to help. What a shame.”

“Not really, he’s scrawny, he’d be more of a burden than an asset.”

“Could you guys kindly shut up,” said the boy wearing glasses, “-I care not for the opinions of fleas.”

“What’s wrong with you?” laughed the host of the inconsequential chatter, “-are you the serious type who can’t take a joke?” As annoying as a mosquito doing circles around one’s ears during sleep, Fletcher’s right-eye narrowed, the blood pulsed to greatly show his vein on the forehead.

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Clap, clap, the murmuring drop to silence. “Didn’t you hear to remain quiet?” The innocent smile flashing across the visage was tantamount to staring at a demon.

“Good,” said he now calmed, “-next we’re going to assign guild tags.” The double-doors at the back opened to blaze the dim interior. Guild-people in their respective outfits stood with white gloves and hardened expression.

“Alright boys and girls,” he waltzed to the front, “-we’re heading to the battle-arena. Now’s the time to show off any skill thee have. Don’t forget, merit and strength gets one far in life.”

‘Are they that excited for battle?’ thought Igna stood at the back of the line. ‘Look at him showing off that sword. Does he not realize it’s a weapon?’ the line moved at a slow pace, ‘-and him, bragging about slaying a goblin. Is battle that exciting?’ *thud,* ‘-not now,’ quick to hide his mouth, the lady noticed.

“Are you ok?” asked Melisa.

“I’m fine,” came the muffled words between the fingers.

“Look, the trader is getting cold feet,” said the same pest of a boy. The large figure, short hair cut unprofessionally, pimples, and scars of acne riddled the cheeks towards the chin. He would often smile and show yellowish teeth accompanied by a bad-breath.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Face the line,” voiced the lady angrily.

“Sorry ma’am,” he obeyed without remorse. Why would he care since the damage was done?

“Igna are you ok? I won’t put it pass to have the traumatic experience of the battlefield come forth.” Her reason for concern was due to how he had hidden his mouth. Slightly bend with the brows frowned as if to puke.

‘What do they know,’ he squinted forth, ‘-my teeth are getting sharper. Why does it have to happen to me.’

“Hey, hey,” she patted his back, “-are you ok?”

“Excuse me lady Melisa,” droplets of blood fell to the floor, “-I’ll head to the washroom.”

“Sure, sure, go, I’ll call on the nurse.”

“NO!” to which he sprinted back inside and made for the restroom.

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In the following minutes, the classroom arrived at the battle-arena. A coliseum made to resemble those in the scripts of the gods. Circular and gradually inclined to allow more seats – the add of modernness

with the comfortable spaces, a holographic screen at the center. A podium laid close to the seats and held many o' strange figures. The battle-ground itself was filled with cages and supervisors. Medical tents were spotted between the hallway leading inside.

"Wait here," ordered Mr. Fletcher who soon walked to speak with another.

"I'll head to the podium – be on your best behavior. It's not unheard of to have people die on the very first guild assessment," the warmly Melisa vanished into the ever-stretching passages.

'Come on, go back in,' panic set-in, Igna sat on a toilet with hands shaking. The canines and thirst grew to the point of nausea. He hurled a few times as the clock ticked. *thud,* 'finally,' the stall opened with a click. The plain-white shirt was stained in blood and turned reddish-brown.

"Are you feeling better?" the door opened to a lady who stood with crossed-arms.

"Yes," he smiled and faced the ground, "-just a side-effect of not eating I suppose."

"Is that so," she sustained the 'o' as means to imply of another matter.

"Yes, that's so," he returned with the same sustain on the 'o'.

"If you can make jokes, then let's return to the battle-arena. Down the hill and into the main entrance, the echoes of the orders given resounded inside. The students stood in lines and faced the podium.

"It's ok, go," she tapped his back and waved at the speaker. The latter frowned and continued.

"Listen up, the time for evaluation has come. Combat will be included; this will give a vague idea to the Instructors on what to teach. Guild Tags will be assigned shortly after. Make sure to not die," the veil lifted over the boxes scattered around. Metal cages with goblins and wolves in a weakened almost hypnotic state.

"Without wasting time, each student will fight in groups of five. Since we have 15, please split according to your row. From first to last, you'll be Team A, B, and C. I'll give five minutes to elect a leader."

Introductions followed shortly after. This time, the lines were mixed with boys and girls unlike earlier.

"Hello everyone," each group formed their clique, "-I'm Rena," said a girl with medium bright-blue colored hair tied in a middle-bun. Sharp nose, fierce eyes, and a darker-skin complexion with a beauty mark under her right eye. "I'm a sword user," said she confidently.

"My turn," said the boy with glasses. Dark-brown hair, a stoic expression with a solid mustache and goatee. "I'm Leonard, a magic-user."

"Hello, I'm Jen," smiled a very tranquil girl, "-I'm a trainee-blacksmith. I was trained in the ways of marksmanship, bow, guns, anything that shoots, I'll take." Compared to Rena, her eyes were smaller, the black hair was tied in a pony-tail leaving bangs covering her forehead. Her nose was round and small, the lips were gentle and always smiling.

"Lampard," came the abrupt voice of a taller man. He stood beyond the average of the class, dark-skin-complexion, very well-defined body structure as well as facial features. The muddied short hair complimented his weapon, "-a spear user. Leave the attacking to me," he said proudly.

Last came the one who had caught the attention of a few in not a good way. "Lyoko Igna," said he without adding much. The response was mixed, the girls stared with suspicion while the boys smiled almost sympathetically.

"Well met, Igna," said Lampard giving a handshake.

"Likewise," he reached and, *slap,* "-don't you dare," laughed Rena, "-no one has the right to shake the hand of the next Platinum Adventurer, especially a weakling." Leonard couldn't care less, Jen kept her listless smile.

'Idiots,' mumbled Igna quietly watching as the group formed around four members. They discussed strategies with Lampard being the loudest. Soon after, the five minutes was given an extension of twenty-five more. Group C assigned Lampard as the leader.

"Hey boy, aren't you going to meet with your group?" wondered a man in smithing attire.

"Not really," he replied, "-they rather not let a weakling get in their way."

"Must be harsh," returned he with arms crossed, "-listen, being weak isn't a shame. Look at me, and look at the people up there, we all started small and became big. There's always room for improvement."

"Thanks for saying so," he nodded courteously.

"You have manners," he laughed, "-come on, take a pick, I see you don't have a weapon."

"How?" he shrugged, "-I don't know anything about swords and weapons. I don't even know if I'll be able to swing one around."

"Listen, kid," the hand slammed atop the table, "-no one likes a weakling. However, people respect a weakling who tries his best. Don't think one is weak, think of how to become better. And for a sword or weapon – tis the only partner that mustn't fail you in battle. Even if the world turns against you, the weapon will be by your side. Don't think, feel it."

'Feel the weapon.' It made sense in some twisted way. The table laid with multiple-sword: short-sword, long-sword, great-sword, and a particular one with a slightly curved body. 'So slender and curved, it reminds me of lady Misna.'

"What are you doing here?"

"Jen," startled by her appearance, "-nothing much," he shuffled back, "-looking for a weapon I suppose."

"A weapon?" she stood on her toe to peer above his shoulder, "-I thought you didn't want to fight, what's the deal?"

"I don't know really," a grin followed, "-just thought I'd get something to guard myself. You know, we don't really know what could happen."

"What of it, have you picked one?"

"Yes," he stared the smith, "-this one gave me a feeling of want."

"The curved blade, I see," he stood proudly with arms on the hips, "-the one who first introduce it name it Phia for some god-damned reason. It's a good choice, not a starter blade exactly but a good choice nonetheless."

"Phia," thought she casually gawking.

"Jen," said he.

"Yes?" her movements seemed a little drunkard.

"Why are you not with the others?"

"Don't know, I felt bored and tired of talking to Lampard. The Rena girl is as annoying as him I think."

"Don't you have any filters?"

"Obviously not," she laughed, "-people hate how frank I am. Well, I guess that would go the same for you."

"No actually," he returned with sincerity, "-frankness is the best way to make an ally."

"Ohhh," her head tilted as if a confused puppy, "-that's interesting," the monotonous tone could have said otherwise, -well then, Igna, I'm happy to be your first friend."

"You really don't have a filter," the last comment hurt a little, "-thank you for the offer. I appreciate it, first friend," they both laughed at the absurdity.

"What's with the two of them?" inquired Rena harshly.

"No idea," mumbled Lampard staring at a student on the other team, a girl with green hair and blue eyes.

Over yonder on the podium, lady Haru sat with legs crossed. "Melisa, are you sure that's the boy?"

"Yeah," replied she, "-he gives off a certain aura that's very much like that man."

"I suppose you're right," she smiled, "-how he speaks is peculiar too. I can't help but wonder if our prayers have been answered. Let's not get our hopes up, this can still be a massive misunderstanding. After five long years, desperation can make one blind to reality."

'I would argue that," snarled the guild-lady softly.

'I wonder if he really is the man I think he is. That boy looks identical to the king, well, before he turned into a vampire. He doesn't recognize me and doesn't seem to remember anything. Are perhaps the words of Lady Courtney real? She said with certainty that he was alive. If that's true, I rather keep him here. It might be selfish. King or not, that boy is named Lyoko Igna, a person unbound by the responsibility of leading a nation. If he finds bliss here, then who am I to interject. Igna, if you vow to become a trader, then I'll vow to make sure the identity remains a secret. If fate wishes you to return, then I shall do so, however, for now, thee art but a teenager. Grow and show me what is to come.'

"Everyone line up," yelled Fletcher once more. "Group A will go first, second Group B, and lastly Group C. I see a few took the liberty of speaking with our smith. Good thinking, a weapon is crucial for this

exercise. Group A, remain on the field. The rest of you, have a seat,” he gestured aggressively as if to push away flies.

Chapter 454: Group A, B, and, C

“There goes Group A,” voiced Lampard sat with elbows against his hips. The slouched posture gave a feeling of overwhelming confidence. Rena and Leonard remained at his side at the front-most row. The former would often gaze at the ‘leader’ of Group C with a feeling of want. Her cheeks, pale at times, would blush red in even smaller instances. Leonard for the most part kept his focus on the would-be fighting team. A certain individual had grabbed their attention.

A girl with green hair tied with a flowery band – her complexion was fair beyond reproach. No origin could be found since she came from another province. The boys didn’t stare due to hormones, no, granted her beauty was angel-like, it was her strength, the sheer aura of wanting to fight.

“Group A, bring forth the captain!” yelled Fletcher who gestured the guild-people to start preparation.

“Captain of Team A,” said she with the green hair loudly, “-Anna Igusta.”

“Good. I feel your determination. Now then, your opponent, as will the others,” a side-glance, “-is going to be the One-eyed wolf of the Azure Forest. These beasts are known for their bloodthirst with a ranking of Tier-8 Steel.” The strength level had the students gasp into utter silence. “We said prior, nothing will be held back.” The arena emptied with the beast growling and pulling on its chains. The dense glare it gave sufficed to have most of Team A shiver.

“Fight!” the chains broke with a clang. It dashed by leaving a trail of dust. The next instant without even tracking the movements, the wolf stood in their blind side and swiftly clawed at three students. They fell promptly with minor injuries.

“GET UP!” screamed Anna following the wolf, it turned with another growl. Face to face, it was twice her height, yet, the moment after it struck, she held a hand and conjured a magical barrier. It took and returned the impact sending the monster a few meters back.

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“Gather around me,” said she, “-melee go at the front, support, at the back, I’ll heal as much as I can, come on people, we need to win!”

As it so happens, the battle was being marked by the Guild-Representatives. They who sat with weird attire held pen and paper. “The green-haired girl has a lot of potential,” said one of them, “-she can fight off the one-eyed wolf but choose to heal instead. A selfless action to put her team before glory, I’m impressed.” The statement said it all.

Sadly, the selflessness brought the downfall of the other members. Facing imminent death wasn’t easy, broken morale from the first strike had them fight a losing battle. And so, one by one, the team broke – the healing and protection didn’t suffice.

“Useless,” mumbled she alone with the wolf, her blue eyes changed to red, “-Binding Forest.” A spherelike bundle of veins swallowed the beast, “-A thousand thorn of the Rose!” *snap.* A barrage of

projectile impaled the monster to end the battle. Her fierceness never dwindled as the face remained on alert.

“Team A, congratulation,” said Fletcher mildly impressed, “-those who have been injured will be tended. Team B, you’re up!”

The next row approached at a slow pace. Confidence was lacking, and when asked to voice their leader, none dared to make a move. “No leader, what a shame. Guess thee are to fight without a guide, very well, as punishment for not obeying my orders, we’ll release 4 wolves!” The words rocked the arena to its core, and just like that, the monsters were brought in.

“SIR!” voiced a rather enraged Lampard, “-it’s not fair,” said he passionately, “-I’ve seen people die at the hands of those wolves. A single one managed to destroy my village, and here you are trying to punish others without a care for human-life!”

“Shut it,” gritted Rena, “-sir, I apologize on his behalf, a troubled past, you know the deal.”

“Mr. Lampard,” came the daggerlike voice of Lady Melisa, “-troubled or not, you’re not the only one who has suffered at the hand of the monsters. All who stand here has had said experience. Don’t go thinking thou art the only with revenge in mind.”

“Lady Melisa,” interjected a member of Group B. Blue hair and bluer eyes, “-Lampard, I thank you for trying to stand up for us. It’s true we didn’t choose a leader. Tis because we don’t need one,” suddenly, the truth of Group B came to fruition. Each member stood with weapons and an air of malice. “-we’ve been on the battlefield plenty o’ time.”

“Adventurer Frost,” said Fletcher, “-I guess the prodigy of Blade’s End decided to speak up. I was wondering what need be done to rile that cold-spirit.”

“Sorry about that sir,” he casually scratched his head, “-can we begin with the evaluation?”

“I guess standing up didn’t matter in the end,” added Leonard gently parting his hair, “-Frost is Tier-7 Sapphire. A prodigy who climbed the ranks at a neck-breaking speed. There’re rumors of him drugging the path to the top. Mindless chatter of the weak,” shaking the head in dismissal, “-let’s see how he fights.”

The signal to start blew, and blew it did for two of the wolves froze to death within a second. The remaining two were killed effortlessly by the four other members.

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“Group B, they individually outranked the fellow comrades. I guess four didn’t suffice, what say you, Guild Representative, any remarks?”

“Always the cynic, aren’t you, Fletcher. Team B passes the evaluation, they each stand out as very versatile and experienced warriors. They’re a good batch, I can already feel the guilds fighting for those boys.”

“And you’re always the mysterious one, aren’t you, Mr. Denver.”

“The nature of the job,” he added slyly, “-bring out the last team, I have a soap-opera to watch.”

'And annoying as ever,' he thought to gesture the last group.

"Thanks for standing up for us earlier," said Frost with a smirk, "-I suppose heroes are always born stupid." On that, Group B laughed their way up the stairs.

"Pompous bastard," gritted Rena with intent to start a fight.

"Don't!" mumbled Leonard, "-there's no need for that now. Come on, let's go." Lampard led the way listlessly with a blank expression. "I guess they've pissed him off," laughed Rena, "-leave the front-lines to him."

'Each step I take, the closer we get. The battlefield smells of blood and iron, the stickiness of the dirt and humidity from Group B is annoying. Why does this feel so familiar, why is my heart racing? My mind says to hide but the body says to move.'

"Hey... HEY!"

"Jen, sorry about that."

"Stop spacing out," said she nodding upwards. The five stood with Fletcher peering down.

"Who's the leader, come forth."

"It's me, sir," said Lampard with a cavalier expression.

"I won't go into details and as punishment for speaking up earlier, you'll be fighting hordes of goblins as well as the one-eyed wolf. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir!"

"We've gone and angered them for no reason," laughed Rena.

"Listen, everyone," said Lampard, "-we'll be fighting a hard battle. Rena and I will take the vanguard, Leonard, since you're a mage, please do the best to support us. Jen, as a marksman, you'll be on overwatch. Goblins move quick and they don't take no for an answer."

"What about me?" asked Igna.

"You have a sword, don't you?" returned Rena coldly, "-keep to the side-line and leave the fighting to us. Jen will have your back since you two are buddy-buddy."

"I guess we are friends," laughed Jen standing farther back with Igna in tow. "-don't let her get you down. You came here to become a trader, didn't you? Leave the fighting to us. My quest today is to protect you with my life, a trader with an escort, how does that sound?"

"Sounds good," replied he empty, '-why does it feel so humiliating to be shoved to the side. I hate this feeling,' he glared, '-suppose that's what they think of weaklings. Nothing much I can do about it.'

In the distance, the cages opened to unleash three one-eyed wolves and countless goblins. They went straight for Rena who held two-swords. A dual-wielder, the sword-style that is rare, complicated, and useless. Only if the style is mastered correctly is then that the offensive power becomes a thing of remark.

The goblins closed in, a blink later following a twirl, the headless bodies fell.

“She’s getting careless,” said Jen firing an arrow with a burst of air. The pressure at which it shot took the heads of countless goblins and injured a wolf on the verge of ambushing Rena. Leonard summoned spirit-beasts to aid the fight. Lampard did naught but stand, the spear readied to pierce. “YOU DARED LOOK DOWN ON ME!”

CRACK. The walls shattered with an impaled wolf.

“Such offensive power,” voiced Denver, “-that boy has more potential than I’ve seen so far. Rena is strong and is getting stronger, the quick reactions, as well as her sword-style, are harmonious. Jen and Leonard might seem to not do anything; however, they’re truly supporting the group. Each member is helping one another to fight. I like what I see, except for that boy over there. The weak stature and unwillingness to fight are shameful.”

Hard as they may have tried, the battle remained at a deadlock. Lampard’s strength came to a standstill after the first assault. Leonard’s mana grew weak and Rena’s stamina dwindled. The fight had dragged on for a solid twenty minutes. Two one-eyed wolves and the ever-annoying green devils.

“How’s everyone?” asked Lampard with the group standing back-to-back.

“I have another ten-minutes in me,” said Leonard.

“Same here,” panted Rena.

“Running out of arrows.” The horde soon learned and surrounded the group, the situation grew dire.

“I have an idea.”

“What is it, Leonard?”

“If we charge the last two wolves, we might just make it. The goblins will keep fighting as long as those two are around. Show them our power and they’ll retreat.”

“Sure,” all agreed.

“Us three will charge the one to the right. Jen, I saw the destructive power earlier – you’ll be essential in this plan. Fire the last arrow at the other and don’t hold anything back.”

“Soooo demanding,” she sighed, “-sure, go forth then, Group C.”

“Don’t worry, Igna, we’ll be over soon,” said she turning to the boy sat with back against the arena wall. ‘Finally,’ he breathed as the nightmare would come to an end.

CHARGE spear at the front, the trio broke through and made for the wolf. Imprisonment spell held the movement and the two warriors fought with every remainder of strength.

‘Guess it’s my turn.’ Straight and powerful, Jen drew her bow. A whirlwind of pure destruction gathered at her feet.

‘A trader doesn’t need to fight,’ the eyes closed, ‘-I guess they really don’t need me.’ The outlines of multiple bodies grew apparent. One managed to slip past the assault team and snuck just shy of Jen.

'She's about to die,' the eyes opened with the whole arena coming to a stop. '-No way in hell am I going to sit back,' dropping the sword, he jumped.

FWOUP the loud explosion of the arrow hit the target instantly. 'Well, there goes another bow,' sighed she dropping the broken weapon. "-Hey, Igna, it's over," said she glancing over the shoulder. *Crack,* warm liquid hit her face. 'Blood?'

"I guess I managed to protect you," laughed he with a blade coming out the stomach.

"Igna?" her posture slumped.

"Are you an idiot?" he pulled out the weapon from the front, "-don't worry about me," quick to turn and stab the green devil, "-the other team needs support," he fell to his knees, "-my sword is there, take it and go. I probably can't use it anyway." Thus, he fell headfirst with blood gushing as if an open tap, '-this is so familiar,' thought he, '-I'm going to die and still, there's no fear. I know with certainty that I'm coming back to life.'

YAAA, the other goblins fell at Jen's hand.

"Aren't you supposed to guard the little weakling?" inquired Rena.

"Shut up," refuted she, "-the 'weakling' saved my life and yours too. Be fucking grateful since he died to save pompous assholes like you!"

Chapter 455: Group C

"That's enough!"

"Lady Haru..." shuddered the ruthless Fletcher, "-please reconsider. Interrupting the evaluation might reflect poorly on our teaching methods."

"Instructor," she leaped into the arena with the finesse and grace of a pro-diver, "-I care not of what happens to the school. I will safeguard the very few members in my guild, do you understand?" she landed with force which cracked the prior hardened ice.

"Instructor Fletcher and Lady Melisa, the semester's recruits are very much interesting. I see Guild-Leader Haru has found herself someone she fancies. Best leave her to her devices. My evaluation is complete as far as concerned. Have the students visit the guild by latest Friday," stood with files in hand, '-this batch seems promising. Time will show if they have the guts necessary to become climbers.' The tall figure vanished inside the passageways.

Below, Group C was at a loss by Jen's words.

"What do you mean died?" wondered a troubled Lampard.

"Move out of the way," ordered the Guild-leader pushing aside the students. The gruesome terror of battle, the loss of a comrade, a human, was there on full display. In name and mind might they have thought to be ready, the truth was, even experienced fighters dealt poorly with death.

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"Jen, please tell me," the spear dropped with a heavy thud, "-will Igna be ok?"

“Why worry now?” returned she with anger, “-wasn’t it the plan all along to let the weakling not get in the way.”

“Stop lashing out,” refuted Rena, “-that’s why we don’t need people like him on the field. It will affect our morale and lower expectation of what we can achieve in battle.”

“Would you two shut it?” returned Leonard, “-Jen, tell me what exactly happened?”

“I fully intend to blame this on you three. I never saw it coming, a goblin split past YOUR line of defense. The next thing I knew, the arrow was released and he stood with a dagger running into him from the back. The pain must have been awful since he pulled it from the tip and managed to deliver the final blow. The pain... can you imagine? THE PAIN OF PULLING A DAGGER AND STABBING... whilst,” her stance broke, “-b-bleeding to d-death.” The decrepit description tightened her stomach – it was as if someone had wrapped a noose around her belly and pulled. The urge of wanting to hurl cut short with the last image of Haru approaching the boy.

‘Look at him,’ she watched with curiosity, the tail and ears wiggled, and soon, her heels stepped into the pool of blood. ‘If you are the man I think you are, the injuries should start to heal any minute,’ she knelt and soiled the perfectly clean dress, ‘-come on,’ his head rested on her lap, “-Staxius Haggard, wake up.” The fist jittered in reaction to the name.

“Lady Haru,” *cough,* “-Is that you?” the vision felt blurry.

“Yes, it’s me,” she smiled, ‘-Lyoko Igna, you truly are the King of Arda. The man who led a whole continent into an age of prosperity. It’s time the continent gives back the peace you so graciously fought for.’ His lost blood returned from whence it came. ‘Sharp canines, the crimson-colored pupils which showed after you fell.’ Alteration she spotted soon reverted to the norm.

“Lady Haru?” multiple steps stopped shy of her back, “-will he be ok?”

“Who knows, maybe,” her reply came off as standoffish.

“Everyone gather!” screamed Fletcher, “-Representatives of each chosen subject are waiting outside.” Troubled and worried about the situation behind, the students kept facing forward. Discipline was crucial, that much was spelled out in the prior battles.

“On another note, might I add that the wolves were nothing more than Tier-10 Porcelain. The weakest of the food-chain. We lied to try and keep a semblance of safety, well... what is done is done, welcome to the Adventuring Academy!”

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Tuesday the 2nd of December ended with the assignments of the room. Two bunk-bed per room without restriction on gender, age, race, and, specialized fields. Tis was but an all-out first come first serve situation.

‘A white ceiling,’ the weirdly comfortable nap broke, ‘-wasn’t I killed?’

“Look who decided to wake up,” said a lady dressed in skinny jeans and a leather jacket, “-Lyoko Igna.”

"Lady Haru," subconsciously sat upright, '-it's 16:45. Must have been around three hours. The injuries seem to be healed.'

"Did you perhaps tend to my wounds?"

"No, god forbid the day I apply first aid to another living person. The last I did so happen to be the last for my patient."

"A very encouraging start," he barely managed to give a warm grin.

"No need to fret," she laughed, "-I was messing with you. Before you ask questions, I'll give a summary of what happened." The tidy spotless room lightened with the outside shining ever brighter. "You basically died in that fight prior, the doctors' sort of wanted to have the death certificate signed, well, nothing of that matters. Surely the realization must have hit by now, you're not human. Far from it, from the canines to the immortality, you're a vampire, nightwalker, and being from Arda. Your kind is rare and of the noble trait. I don't mind teaching how to utilize the power, it's up to what you want."

"Vampire or not," the face held no care for her words, "-I swore to become a Trader. Lady Haru, please teach me the ways of the adventuring world. I want to know. Even despite how I pathetically lost earlier, there's something more aggravating and it's not knowing. I want knowledge, I want to know how things work, I want to understand people. My memory is gone and I think learning everything might bring a few parts of my past back. Whether it's good or not, I don't care, I want to learn," all the while speaking, the head slowly lowered as if begging.

"Rule one of lady Haru's personal teachings, never look away when asking for a favor. Watch the other and be confident, lie to yourself I care not. Don't look hopeless, it's unbecoming. I have a shop in Meke, my students often stand around the grand-market and voice their words to attract customers. There are around 10 people, including you, who are under my care in the Trader's Guild. The majority of them hail from Arda. As fate would have it, they are in the Ardanian branch of the Adventuring Academy. So, dearest Igna, you're the only student of mine in the Hidros Branch. Competition is hard, making a living without fighting will be twice as tough," having said all that, her priority remained upon his expression and aura. "Do you still wish to become a Trader?"

"More than anything," the ironclad resolve had her whiskers flutter.

"I'm pleased," she stood, "-since I'm the Guild Leader, I won't be able to babysit your progress. Instead, you will have to learn the ropes in the company of the other Masters. For today, here's the room number and key. Your training starts tomorrow," she handed over a phone, "-you'll use this to give me a weekly report. Remember, you're a vampire with the powers locked behind a massive gate. The regeneration is slow – it's the only ability of worth. Be careful young novice of the Trader's Guild, I'll see you around," she reached for a helmet on the adjacent bed.

"Also," shy of the door, "-go to your room before 18:00 for a surprise." The loneliness of the room soon became overwhelming. 'So, this is the start of my life,' he shuffled to the closest window, little cactus rested in plant-pots. 'I have to go meet with the cafeteria lady tomorrow,' the phone displayed messages from Lady Haru with a sticker of a cat, '-I wonder what sort of person she'll be.'

The medical bay was inside the gymnasium on the ground floor. Pushing aside those self-closing doors, the outside felt different. More people moved into groups, some with sports gear, others with weapons,

and some with pickaxes. Towering behind the groups was the main-buildings of the Academy, with some on the roofs and others in the class. Trees and bushes were planted to accompany the greenness of grass. Stone-paths saved the plants from tramples of iron-boots or armor. Being glared at and given the side-eye was the norm. 'Everything feels on edge.' Worries on the back and anxiety of tomorrow waiting heavily, the word 'surprise' gave a much-needed motivational push.

"I can't believe you guys are in Military-Arts," sighed Jen.

"What do you expect," shrugged Rena, "-it's not like I enjoy your company." The class was dismissed.

"Whatever happened earlier was out of the scope of possibilities," added Leonard calmly. The medium-sized classroom had members of differing Groups

"I still don't get why a mage would come here instead of Magecraft," inquired Rena as they stepped into the not so crowded halls. The buildings were separated into sections depending on the subject.

"I've learned magic for more than a decade – Military Arts is the next goal," said he without much thought. "What about you, Jen, why did you pick Military-Arts?"

"I want to become an officer of the Azure wall," the reluctance of the prior battle had her on the verge of a mental breakdown.

"What about you, Rena? I thought you were going to be by Lampard's side.

"My choice isn't related to him," she pouted; "-besides, he wants to become a Hero. I want to support him with the best of my abilities," her pace slowed with the setting sun perfectly slapping her cheeks.

"Jen," she stopped, "-I'm sorry for what I said earlier. It was insensitive of me to just cast him aside like that. I won't take back my views on weaklings needing to stay out of fights. I'm sure Lampard personally feels responsible."

"By the way, you two are acting..."

"Leonard, don't you dare say it," gritted Rena, "-we're nothing more than people who had to fight in a Group."

"I suppose you're right," he shrugged, "-it was pure and utter luck. When you think of it that way, Igna's sacrifice does seem pointless. What if he was in another group, I bet Jen wouldn't have even spoken to him."

"Luck," sighed Jen, "-I've yet to hear from lady Haru."

"Don't worry," they soon left the building, "-I'm sure a scroll or potion will do the trick."

"Hey guys," hailed Lampard from another batch, "-how's military arts?" the tall figure stood behind the trio as if a guardian.

"Pretty standard," said Leonard texting another.

"Oh. you know, military stuff," added Rena with a hint of embarrassment. "What about you, how was Adventuring class?"

“A lot of strong people,” he beamed with squinted eyes, “-I can’t wait for tomorrow. Our group will head to the Guild and get temporary tags.” None would say it outright, Group C had a definite connection. The quirky personalities would soon come to understand one another.

“Out of curiosity,” they arrived at the same dorm, “-what room did you get assigned?”

“Room 60 in Block D,” mumbled Rena.

“Same...”

“Same...”

“This must be a joke,” facepalmed Jen. The dorms were four buildings of six storey’s high. The capacity for each was around 60 – 80 depending on the arrangement of the beds. As luck would have it, Block D rested closer to the outskirts of the forest. A fragile-looking iron-fence held the border. Paths went vertically and horizontally across the buildings to join at a sitting area.

“You must be Group C,” said one of the attendants, “-take the elevator and settle in the room. Return to the cafeteria before 19:30, the Dorm-lady is very peculiar on being timely.” The climb felt long and awkward.

“I guess this is fate?” added Lampard in jest.

“Oh, shut it,” refused the two ladies adamantly. Leonard kept to his phone. Floor 6 soon flashed with a quiet ‘ding’.

‘I fail to see the surprise Lady Haru mentioned.’ Sat facing the window, Igna stuck his head inside a book the dorm-lady kindly gave earlier. ‘The way to a men’s heart is through his stomach,’ read the title.

“Listen, I’ll compromise if we have to live together,” the door barged opened.

“That’s fine with me,” returned a heated Rena.

“What are you guys doing here...” wondered he with an opened mouth.

“A GHOST!”

Chapter 456: Block D

“Not a ghost,” argued Jen pulling the door farther.

“Chill,” whispered Leonard hiding the phone, “-you’ll break the damned door.”

“No, hell no,” she waltzed across to pull his cheeks, “-is that you, Igna?”

“‘eah,” the reply came with mispronunciation with her continuing to pull. “Please stop.”

“I’m glad you’re alive,” nodded Lampard with a load off his shoulders, “-I really thought you died there,” he held out a hand, “-since we’re going to share a room, let’s be friends?”

“Sure,” the firm grasp shone a flicker of relief across their faces. Rena didn’t seem all too pleased. She remained by a bed unpacking her backpack without care of what happened to the left.

“I’ll take the bed by the window,” voiced Igna, “-it’s better this way.”

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“Won’t you get cold?” wondered Jen seeing the discrimination of the placements. The bunk beds were farther inside and kept warmer while the fifth bed laid rested against the corner. Windows would always be kept open unless rain.

“I’ll be fine,” came a soft response, “-look at the time, we have to meet with the Dorm-lady.”

“Alrighty everyone,” said Lampard with chest, “-let’s head to the cafeteria.” Hence was room 60 of block D. Between the chatter and unpacking, time passed quickly. Rena and Jen were yet to engage in conversation. Rather, Rena grew acquainted with Leonard while Jen took to Lampard. There was no reason for a grudge. Seeing the atmosphere lightened, Igna retreated to the given blankets with a book in hand.

19:25 came as a shock, “-guys, we need to go, RIGHT NOW!”

“Why are you in such a hurry, Lampard?” wondered the nonchalant Leonard.

“Can’t you see we’re speaking?” voiced Rena harshly.

“Don’t care about the conversation,” he took her hand, “-we have five minutes to reach the cafeteria!”

“Don’t...” the harshness turned into a mellow sigh of discomfort; her cheeks reddened slightly. Jen noticed to then hide her laughter using a pillow.

‘She’s so in love.’

“COME ON,” urged he physically pulling.

“Let’s go!”

19:29 – the run down the stairs wasn’t pleasant. Elevators took longer to climb and descend. A tingling sensation numbed the legs. Sprinting down wasn’t advisable, ‘-who cares,’ thought they finally sat at the cafeteria. A lady in a warmly colored dress stood behind a counter with steaming hot food. The tables were filled one by one by other students. The guard of earlier arrived with a message. The lady nodded to what he said and bowed.

“I see that we have new students joining Block D,” she emerged out of the shadows of the kitchen. A massive lady with a hardened face of strictness. The forehead was riddled with wrinkles giving the impression of anger. The brows were no longer a thing of care, it grew to be stern. Her small walk ended towards the front as shown by a holographic display on the wall. News and music would play at lowered volumes. “Before the food is served, there are a few rules that need to be heard. We don’t condone violence or harassment of any kind. Be an asshole and bet I’ll have you skewered the next day. Block D is a place of learning, understanding, and eating good food. There are a free meal and a paid menu. If you got cash to spend, we’ll be happy to take ‘em. The first week will be more tiresome than the rest of the year. Be prepared now, else, things might get tough.” Her words came stiff as a drill-sergeant. Ladle in hand, the lady returned – leaving a taste of concern in their mouths.

“Don’t worry about her,” said a girl across the table, “-the Dorm-mother might seem big as a bear, but she has quite a soft-heart.”

“WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO TO THE SAUSE!” her muffled screams snuck inside with cutlery being thrown.

“Soft-hearted?” mumbled Rena, “-I beg to differ.”

“I’ll keep my mouth shut,” chuckled the girl nervously. And so, after the kitchen grew silent – food was served. Unlike other dorms, there wasn’t a set time to return, wake up, or sleep. They were free to do as was pleased.

The wind blew harshly, the light from the academy village was a pleasing dessert to the sight. ‘What a place,’ thought he stood over the edge of the building. ‘Tomorrow is the start of the journey here. I wonder what sort of people I’ll meet. There’s the matter of being a vampire...’ Curiosity was a demon by itself, ‘-I want to know more.’

“Hey,” the metal door slammed against the concrete wall, “-what are you doing up here?” asked Jen struggling to walk on the gust filled roof.

“Stargazing?” he returned with reckless abandon.

“GET OFF THE LEDGE, THE WIND’S GOING TO PUSH YOU AWAY!”

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“It’s fine. I have a strong grip here. It should be fine,” not bothering to face she who had come, the moving lights of the train carried into the night. The part, all be it a small patch of land from this height, had ant-size people taking long and romantic walks. Towards the left, the stair leading up from the station was massive and not well-lit.

“Can I ask you something?” she swam across the ocean of wind.

“What is it?”

“How did you have the strength to fight earlier?”

“I don’t know really,” he skipped off the ledge, “-I saw him approaching and figured if someone could turn the tide of battle, it would be you.”

“Is that right,” her face didn’t seem pleased, “-how did you know?”

“If I remember correctly, you said you were going to protect me? The armed escort for my items. How could I let that opportunity go by, if you died, I’d have been next. One instead of two is better in every way possible. I didn’t do it for favor or gratitude. I barely know my past and my purpose, there’s nothing deep about my words or action – it’s just the rambling of a Kinless boy,” he stopped a few steps later, “-how could I let my first-friend die?”

“You’re an idiot,” she ran to jokingly slap his back, “-anyway, thank you for that.”

Wednesday 3rd of December rose with the screeching of an obnoxious alarm. “Shut it down,” voiced Rena buried into her pillow, “-SHUT IT!”

“Sorry about that,” said Igna ambling across the room with a change of clothes in hand. The items given by the dorm were basic to start living with. Each floor held a shower-room and toilet for differing

genders. 'Today's the day,' thought facing the mirror. A shower later took the grime of yesterday away, '-the scars have healed.' *thud,* the impulse of thirst crawled outwards, '-not again...'

"Hey, Igna, are you ok?"

'What's Lampard doing here this early?'

"Yo, dude, where are you, is everything ok?" the voice echoed farther.

"I'm fine, don't worry."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, man."

'Just go away, I can't have people seeing me in this state.'

Time showed 04:30, '-I have to get to the central cafeteria before 05:00. That's what lady Haru asked.'

The climb up to the academy vexed he who had barely slept. The rumbling of engines grew apparent the higher he walked. Trucks were parked with people unloading vegetables and supplies.

'That must be him. Mr. Leko, the master-chef of the Trader's guild. It says here that he has restaurants in the major cities.'

"Yeah, put that one over there," said the man to the workers.

"Excuse me, but are you, Mr. Leko?"

"Yeah?" not obvious from far, the chef's face was young, very young. Neatly cut brown hair, square glasses, and clean-shaven jaws. The uniform was white with 'chef' embroidered. "Who's asking?"

"Mr. Leko, where should we take the meat?" asked another worker.

"The refrigerator, where else?" said he sarcastically.

"Sorry sir," bowed the man in embarrassment.

"Are you perhaps the young-one lady Haru allowed to join the Trader's guild?"

"Lyoko Igna, sir, she told me to come to meet you."

"I see," arms crossed, the face remained level to the truck. Supplies were taken inside one by one, "-I'm sure this was said before. The Trader's Guild is a place where one has to learn and become proficient in multiple areas. I see that she saw fit to have you train by my side for a while. Listen, boy, today's going to be a test. Cooking is a skill taken for granted by the populous. The culinary arts must be respected," he began to walk without warning, "-I'll teach you the ropes to be better than average. Tis you that must strive to become better. Techniques can be learned; skills can be mastered. The application comes with experience." They walked outback of the Gymnasium to climb to the third floor.

The ruffling of people moving about, the sizzling of food being cooked, the dampness in the atmosphere, they had arrived at the Academy's kitchen. A place where masters and novices worked alike. "You'll

wash the dishes for today,” said Leko. “-I don’t want any stray to be dirtied – keep them clean as if it’s the last thing you do!”

“Yes sir.” An apron laid beside the cleaning station, those in the kitchen gave side-eyes to then continue cooking.

“Hey buddy,” came a boy with multiple platters, “-I know you’re new and all, the kitchen here is a nightmare. You best do as the Chefs says.”

“Sure, thanks for the advice,” he smiled.

“I’m Bobby, everyone calls me Bob. Nice to meet you, man.”

“Lyoko Igna, call me Igna.”

“Alright man, good luck,” the orangish hair with freckled nose soon dashed to Lord Leko’s side.

‘Time to clean,’ and so, training to become a Trader started.

Jen and Rena awoke at 07:00. Leonard was nowhere to be found. “We have class at 10:00, right?” wondered Rena yawning down the hall.

“Yeah.”

Military-arts wasn’t time-consuming a subject. Strategies and ways of command were self-explanatory. The newest students were given more free-time to digest and assimilate the subject.

“You guys finally woke up?” jested Leonard in the company of Lampard.

“What are you two doing here?” they pulled a seat inside the cafeteria.

“Having breakfast, what else?”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” grimaced Rena, “-where’s the weakling gone?”

“No idea,” shrugged Lampard, “-I checked on him earlier this morning, well, I tried to, he just ended up vanishing.”

“Maybe he went back home,” laughed she, “-there’s no way he’ll survive in a place like this,” she took turns biting and drinking.

“The Adventuring class is going to get the Guild-Tags today, are you excited?” wondered Jen.

“I’m very excited since we’ll head for the Azure wall as soon as the registration is done.”

“Nice,” smiled Rena, “-show them who’s going to be the next Hero.”

In an instant, the group split into their differing spots to work. The trio of Jen, Rena, and Leonard, were given quite a rough time on the first day. The other groups seemed to have spread rumors of nefarious origins.

“They say the Rena girl is actually a whore who sleeps with the boys in Group C.”

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“Disgusting right?”

“No, hear this, I heard Jen is actually a boy.”

“That’s so mean.”

“It’s common, just ignore it,” said an upper-classman facepalming at the spark of youth. “It’s going to go away sooner than you think.”

Class ended, “-isn’t that Lampard?” pointed Leonard through the hallway windows. The Adventuring class was headed for the Guild.

“Man, how lucky are they to have the opportunity to fight so early,” gossiped across as if a whiff of odor.

“Rena, are you ok?”

“No...” she stuck to the glass pane, “-why is Lampard at the back of the line. He’s normally first and speaking proudly.”

“What does that have to matter with anything?” said Jen.

“You don’t understand!”

“I do,” she tapped her shoulders, “-come on, else they’ll think you want to kiss the window.” The harshness of the Academy was yet to be seen. Slivers of the displeasing truth couldn’t be but thrown aside to conform to the norm.

The clock struck 18:30. For a day without rest and food – Igna returned to dive head-first on the bed. Chef Leko allowed breaks, yet, Bob refused to give leeway. He remained adamant and kept on sending dirtied utensils. None really paid attention since the Chef left three hours later.

Chapter 457: Hidden Truth

‘It’s been a week and a few,’ forearm over the head, the sun outside rose with the chirping of birds. ‘I haven’t seen them for a while,’ thought Igna sat upright and peering to the left. The roommates slept with smiles and tired expressions. Time showed 05:55 on the 13th of Saturday. ‘I’m beat. Who would have guessed being an assistant to be so hard? I was promoted from doing the dishes to cleaning the floor and serving area. I don’t get if I’m supposed to be mad or not. I guess the weekly payment does make up for the job. 250 Exa to be precise. What can I even do with that?’

“Good morning Igna,” yawned Lampard on the upper-bunk, “-long time no see.”

“Yeah, sorry about that?” he yawned as well; “-should we be talking so loudly?”

“Don’t worry,” the broad figure chuckled and leaped, “-they’ll wake up soon.” The landing was a cold hard slap of flesh against the marble. Yet, he seemed to not be bothered.

“Good morning, Lampard,” coughed the mage at the abrupt landing.

“I’ll hit the showers,” proposed Lampard, “-want to come with, or are you going to sleep in?”

“I’ll come,” agreed Igna.

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Warm and gentle, the steamy water washed the week's tiredness away. "How was the adventuring going?"

"Killed a few monsters and got loot from it. A wolf fang goes for anywhere between 150 to 300 Exa."

'That's my pay in a single kill,' wondered he facing the showerhead. "What of you, Leonard, I overheard few things on the Military-Art class while working."

"Oh, yeah, we're fine considering. The rough treatment is something we've managed to overlook. Doesn't bother us anymore. Jen's had enough of fighting the improbable." In those words, the images of what happened weren't hard to imagine. Every day, the students of Group A and B, mainly the former, would harass those of Group C. Most of it was the perpetuation of rumors to the point where the teacher had to cross-check Rena privately. Her fierceness was what rescued them in the end – and soon, the teacher voiced that any act of unruly behavior be severely punished. It stopped for a while until Jen screwed up in a practical test. They were tasked to analyze the live-representation of a gun. Some thought it fun to conjure magic and destroy the model. She's been seen in a bad light ever since that day. The teacher doesn't acknowledge her presence and the students are to do whatever. On Friday when the trip to the Guild was planned, the teacher made sure she didn't come. Thus, her passage to the Azure walls on joint missions with other classes was cut.

"That's harsh," voiced he coming out of the showers. They went straight for the cafeteria where the girls sat with wet hair.

"Aren't boys supposed to be faster at changing attire?" jested Rena.

"Yeah well," they sat, "-can't do anything about that."

Jen's expression remained solemn silent. She would often gaze up then stare at the table. "Drop the sad expression," said Rena with a light push, "-everything's going to work out."

'We're being targeted,' in that spur of a moment, seeing her face felt as if a rock moved inside his body. 'What's the reason the Military-Arts class have turned against them. Why Rena and Jen – as far as I know, they're the only girls in that batch. The only girls, and pretty, are the boys trying to be idiots and claim hearts like that? No, impossible. Why did no one speak of the issue, why did Leonard say they gave up on fighting. Is there maybe a strong opponent in those groups, a noble or someone rich... The possibilities are endless.' His body was transported to a different realm, filled with blurry images, a place where Rena, Jen, Leonard, and Lampard laughed.

"Is he ok?" wondered Rena frowning.

"I think?" shrugged Leonard, "-oi, Igna, are you ok?"

"I got it," the dream broke with a shout.

"What's wrong with you dude?" wondered Lampard with reluctance.

"I got it," he smiled, "-I have the solution."

"Solution to what?" inquired Jen breaking the silence.

“To the harassment in Military-Arts.”

“You told him?” glared the girls, “-can’t you keep a secret?”

“Why should I?” returned Leonard strongly, “-we’ve been roommates for more than a week. I’d like to think we are friends. Lampard is worried about you both too. Don’t think we don’t notice the soft whimpering at night, that goes double for you Rena. Our teacher is less than a reputable man, I shudder to think of what happened in that private fucking meeting. Do you understand?”

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“RENA!” the table echoed with Lampard’s slam, “-WHAT DID THAT DAMN TEACHER DO!”

“Nothing,” eye-contact broke for a second.

‘Something’s wrong, the girl who hated me doesn’t break eye contact. It’s only when she’s lying or hiding embarrassment. I’ve noticed it more than a few times.’

“DON’T YOU DARE BREAK THE FUCKING TABLE!” came the angered yell of the dorm-mother.

“Whatever,” he glossed over her warning, “-RENA, tell me right now, what happened?”

“Please,” interjected Jen, “-she’s done so much to protect both of us. It’s enough, the problem’s going to fade away. Time heals all, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t you dare,” glared Leonard, “-I’ve seen you get as hurt if not more than Rena. Those guys are ruthless, don’t think I forgot about the time the teacher sent you on that errand with half of the class.”

‘What the hell is wrong with the academy? Was this not the place for us to learn and become better. What deep routed secret is there in this place.’ *Ding,* a faint vibration broke the focus.

‘I suppose you must have noticed the wrongness of the Academy. People aren’t safe, there are murders and more that could happen any second. Igna, my dear student, this is Haru’s tip number 2, if you want to survive, make sure to be on the top of the food chain, no pun intended. I got the reports from the Chef, you’ll start cooking next Monday. Also, Bobby will be transferred to the Ardanian branch, I heard of the abuse of power. Any questions?’ came a message from the Guild Leader.

‘Is there any rule preventing murder? Will we be held accountable if perhaps someone ends up dying. What are teachers like, what’s the secret of the Academy.’

‘If you kill, no trial will be held. The Academy only treats those who are strong with privilege. That’s the policy of the Headmaster, the strong win, and the weak lose. I’m guessing that the girls of your Group were hurt in some way? Considering their strong, there’s going to be competition. You’re not only competing for a future but to be noticed by the upper-guilds. As for you, that doesn’t apply since you’re with me. Don’t dare even think of transferring... I swear I’ll be very disappointed. Anything else?’

‘Is trial by combat authorized?’

‘Yes.’

“Stop, stop... I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” gritted Rena, “-Lampard, let it go, I don’t...”

“Guys,” called he with a sudden change in intensity, “-I have an idea about how we can take care of the clique in Military-Arts.”

“What exactly do you mean?” turned the boys.

“I’ll need everyone’s help to pull this off,” a smug-like grin escaped, “-have you ever heard of Trial by Combat?”

“No?” they returned with empty stares.

“It’s where two individual fights over whether one is right or wrong. If a murderer pleads TBC, then if he managed to kill the envoy of the judge, freedom is granted. The Academy has the same system in place, we only need to formally challenge those who did us wrong.”

“Impossible,” sighed Leonard, “-out of the 7 students in Military-Arts, three of them are us and the other four are A and B combined. Not any old members either, they are those who were given Tier-8 Steel tags. We’ll get wiped if we fight them.”

“I don’t care,” voiced Lampard, “-arrange the fight, Igna. Tell them Group C will happily fight to get revenge for our friends.”

“I heard what you said,” came the dorm-mother whose body cast a giant shadow, “-a trial by combat. I’m well acquainted with the other students; do you want me to arrange it?”

“Would you please do so?” smiled Rena.

“Yes, the residents of Block D are my family, there’s a reason why I’m called the Guild-Mother. Come on,” she gestured, “-we’ll go to the office right away.” No time for wait, Group C dashed for the bureau where a stern man sat as the receptionist.

“A trial by combat you say?” he stared with frowns, “-sign here and here. We’ll contact the others soon. Except for an answer in two to three hours.”

“That was easier than I thought,” laughed Leonard.

“You behave now kids,” said the guild-mother heading back.

The sun blazed atop their heads, Rena and Jen’s faces were still riddled with worries. “Igna,” turned Leonard, “-thank you for telling us about the TBC.”

“It’s fine,” he nodded, “-I wanted to help my friends.”

“You’re a good guy, aren’t you,” said Lampard rhetorically, “-I do admit you had me worried earlier. That change in the aura, I mean, we all sensed it, something wasn’t right. Glad to see you’re back now.” One by one, they took to explore the academy village.

Meanwhile, over yonder at the staffroom, news of the Trial by combat rang in the teacher’s ears.

“How dare they!” he gritted over the phone.

“Don’t waste your spit. I’ve tricked them into signing four versus one. Funny thing is that the weak kid is going to die at the hands of your students.”

“What are the conditions?”

“If you lose, money and weapons from the teacher and student alike will be handed to Group C. If they lose, the girls will be killed ‘slowly’ as for the boys, we’ll reserve a place at one of the mines or something.”

“Such a bad agreement,” laughed the teacher, “-thanks for that, dorm-mother.”

“Don’t worry,” she smiled, “-as I said, residents of Block D are my family.”

The receptionist grew weary of the TBC and what the contract actually stated. ‘The students seem to not know the conditions. It’s her doing again.’ Quick to type up a report; a message flew across the continent to Haru’s phone.

‘Igna is going to fight against four Steel ranked adventurers?’ cut short in the middle of her business deal, the others stared blankly. “Someone take over the negotiations,” said she sharply. “-There are things I need to attend to at Hidros. You and you, come with me,” she pointed to shady looking figures. ‘What is she planning to do again. You’re not going to get away with killing another of my student, dorm-mother.’ A plane made for Oxshield without time wasted.

“Man, the park is awesome,” said Lampard laid with head under the ever-fresh foliage.

“I know,” smile Leonard, “-can’t help but be on edge for the trial by combat.” *crack,*

“Who’s there?”

“Woah, chill dude,” said a boy with dark-skin and messy hair, “-that’s my spot actually,” he crawled out the bushes.

“I apologize on behalf of my dumb friend,” smiled Rena.

“You’re pretty,” said he with a grin.

“Don’t get any funny idea dude,” threatened Lampard getting his battle-stance.

“I mean no disrespect,” he laughed to facepalm, “-you must be Group C, the people who are going to fight with the S-Top guild later.”

“S-Top?” inquired Jen.

“Didn’t you write the contract for the battle? Well, I thought I’d get some rest before the fight, guess the place is taken. See you later,” he vanished into the wild.

“I’m getting a bad feeling,” whispered Igna, “-the contract, what did he mean by that? What did the dorm-mother write?”

“Did we miss something?” a plethora of questions bounced off one another. The anxiety of the unknown whelmed the inside.

Mild gossiping of the spectators went around the battle-arena. The event was broadcasted to the whole academy. No-names fighters were calling on the TBC, thus, only a few showed up. Others were busy making money or getting stronger.

“Is this really what we signed up for?” wondered Lampard walking to a guard.

“Group C?” he asked.

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“Yeah, we’ve come for the trial,” interjected Leonard.

“So, you’re the idiots who chose to have a one versus four?” unenthusiastically facing the entrance, “-Lyoko Igna, I don’t know what you’re thinking. Let me give you a piece of advice, fight to kill, else you’ll die.”

“Four v-versus one...”

Chapter 458: Trial by combat

“Hold on there,” said Jen holding the guard’s shoulder, “-can you explain the meaning of this?”

“What is there to explain?” he refused to shrug off her hand, “-your idiots for wanting to do a Trial by combat in the first place. Should have been more careful when reading the papers. Such a waste to see and know someone is going to die,” paused during the onslaught of words, “-sorry about that,” he lightened. “Tis bad memories of when I was a student here. I lost a friend in a petty squabble similar to yours.”

“There’s nothing we can do?” wondered Rena with slow articulations.

“We’ve been had...” gritted Leonard, “the dorm-mother knew of the contract. That’s why she didn’t tell us anything.” The murmurs of inside grew into cheers.

“Guys,” said Igna lowering his head, “-I’m sorry for putting the idea of TBC in your heads. If only I was more careful in saying my words. Well, what is done is done. I’ll have to fight I suppose, what’s the harm in that?”

“IGNA!” screamed Jen, “-you know full well you’ll die in there.”

“I’ll do my best to win.”

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“FOOOL!”

No other words be said, the guard took him to the changing room. There, the smith from the evaluation stood with a mediocre expression. Filled with lockers and posters of past events, “-really got into the deep end, didn’t you.”

“Are you here to blame the mistake I made?” returned he putting on shoes.

“When did I say that?” he chuckled, “-I’m part of the Trader’s Guild. Lady Haru told me to keep an eye on you.”

“Is that right?”

"No need to glare at me," he patted the boy's head, "-here's the sword. Consider it yours. I've enchanted it with the blood of a few fallen beasts. Go and fight, it's hard, however, I think you can do it. Fighting against people can be a boon in itself. Observe their action and act, tis the advice I can give." On that, the door shut tight.

Alone in the company of only the faint scent of sweat, the murmurs of outside grew heavier by the second. 'Can I even fight?' wondered he staring at the ceiling. '-My body moved on its own when the goblin appeared. Is there maybe more to my past than I can remember. Why did I wake up on the opposite side of the Azure wall? Why does blood not bother me, is it perhaps that I'm a fighter too?'

"This is bad," said Lampard taking a seat at the back of the arena.

"I know," interjected Rena, "-if not for the shit we've been through... he'd still be here."

"Don't count him out yet," said a reluctant Jen biting her nails, "-I'm sure there's more than meets the eye. He did save me and killed a goblin. There might be hope, he said he doesn't remember anything of his past."

"You think he might have a background in fighting?" asked Rena focusing on the coming opponents.

"Welcome everyone to the first Trial by Combat in four years," voiced Mr. Fletcher with the screens broadcasting multiple angles of his face. "Today's event is a bit special. The contract states a four versus one. Steel ranked adventurers against a boy from the trader's guild. Some of you might think it's folly, yet, it's what the contract states."

Few left upon hearing those words. What remained were some teachers and around 30 students.

"Without much wait, let's see the fighters!"

On the left side came fully-gear'd Adventurers. The shiny armor, the powerful and expensive looking weapons. "That's unfair."

"Money is an asset as well," said a girl with green hair towards the right.

"Anna..." mumbled Lampard, "-what are you doing here?"

"I came to see what Group A was up to," said she coldly to move over, "-Is that your friend?"

"Yeah," said he with a hint of respect.

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On the right side, '-let's do this,' approached Igna with a sword in hand. Stepping onto the dirt felt nostalgic, the empty seats filled with imaginary people. The manifestation of a girl with white hair stood at his side. The blurred face seemed to smile and vanish. 'Is that a part of my memory?'

"Alright students," voiced Fletcher without using the microphone, "-since it's four versus one, anything goes. When one is unable to fight, I'll call the game, is that fair?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Any questions?"

“Let say if by mistake one of us dies?” wondered a smug figure at the front.

“Nothing can be done about it,” said he, “-trial by combat is a game of who can kill the other. Good luck, and as an adventurer, do try to restrain the killing intent.” The arena settled into a pin drop silence. He who supervised the event stood up above.

“Group C, oh group C,” laughed the same smug figure of earlier, “-there’s nothing you can do now. Your friends have very nice bodies, especially Jen. If it wasn’t for that guild-assistant Melisa, we would have become men by now. Well, whatever, the teacher said we can do whatever to her since she broke the expensive model.”

“Come on brother, let’s take turns fighting the dude. I’ll go first.” In a weird twist, they decided to fight him one on one to draw out the event as long as possible. First up was a boy in red armor with a battle-ax.

“FIGHT!” the instant the bell dinged, a downward slash nearly ripped Igna’s head to which he narrowly escaped. ‘My shoulders,’ the blade made contact as shown by the ripped shirt and blood.

“Pay attention to me,” a punch fueled by enhancement magic sent Igna crashing against the arena wall.

“My turn now,” said a figure in blue armor. He dashed in with a spear to land multiple hits on the arms and legs. After the combo was complete, another in light-leather armor took to firing arrows at the barely conscious Igna.

“I’m calling the fight.

“Don’t,” came a shady personage out the dark hallway, “-let them have some fun. If you call the fight now, the repercussion might be harder on you than him down there.”

“Mr. Golej, what brings you out of the office.”

“Wanted to support a friend to my family. You know the deal,” he lent against a chair, “-don’t want to incur the wrath of the family, do you?”

“Yes, I understand...” the feeling of powerlessness had him turn a blind eye.

The four made a diamond shape around Igna. Each took turns attacking with full-powered blows. Blood flew left and right.

“Why aren’t they stopping the fight...”

“Calm down Jen,” whispered Leonard, “-getting mad here won’t do anything.”

“This is cruel...”

‘Can’t even take time to breathe,’ another punch had him startled, ‘-I really can’t do anything in this state.’ Another blow to the back of the head had him fumble and fall. ‘I’m weak... here I thought waking in the Azure wall was a sort of sign.’

“Juren, DON’T STAB HIM.” In the passion of battle, he who used the sword gave a downward thrust to the boy’s heart. Fletcher didn’t call the fight, the crowd sat in shock, the absurdity of letting four onto one was devastating.

“WHY DID YOU KILL HIM?” they hurdled over the body.

“I DON’T KNOW, IT HAPPENED!”

“He’s dead,” sighed Anna, “-Lampard, your friend couldn’t have done anything in that situation. Letting a comrade die is inexcusable.”

‘Heir to the First Progenitor, wake up. The fight has yet to end.’

‘Heir to the first progenitor?’ he sat upright with a sword impaled deep within, “-peculiar,” the blade was pulled nonchalantly. The four who stood were speechless, “-Jen.” He pulled himself up whilst holding onto a sword. Broken and disfigured by the countless merciless attack, “-the battle isn’t over yet.”

“You cocky piece of shit,” screamed the one with the battle-ax. The latter swung horizontally. Igna ducked and aimed for the hands. Two strokes later, the massive weapon fell. It didn’t take long for the other to react. Arrows flew for his head, the swordman dashed into close-combat whilst the remainder stood still from the fear of having killed someone. The battle sunk into a mess of counters. Igna blocked and slowly grew to read the movements. After five minutes, he delivered the final blow onto the three others to then fall himself.

“The battle is over; the victor is none!”

“Lampard,” said Anna, “-who is that boy?”

“Lyoko Igna, why?”

“The last five minutes was the best swordplay I’ve seen in a while. I take back what I said about him being weak. There’s the muscle memory of a master-swordsman in that Igna. Too bad he’s in the Trader’s guild.”

“Did he draw?”

“Yeah,” laughed Ren, “-IGNA DID IT.”

“Stop this charade right away,” came a demanding voice, “-Mr. Fletcher, I’m disappointed this Trial was allowed in the first place,” guild Leader Haru walked onto the field. “The battle is over,” said she to the crowd, “-go!”

‘The same white ceiling,’ he awoke beside lady Haru once more. A day had gone since the fight. “A feeling of Deja-vue?” she laughed, “-good morning.”

“Good morning Lady Haru, what happened to the Trial?”

“It was canceled,” she smiled, “-the fight was unfair to begin in both men and terms of the contract. I’ve taken care of the issue of the rogue teacher. I heard from your friends of the ill-treatment. As part of the Federation and originator of the Adventuring Academy, such behavior mustn’t be allowed. I did my part in making sure the man pays for what was done. Don’t rest easy, there are more shady individuals here that you’ll ever see and know. Let this be a lesson,” she gently patted his head, “-promise me that you’ll never fight unless it’s self-defense.”

“What if I’m sent to the Azure wall or the Tower?”

“I doubt that day will come,” she smiled, “-what happened earlier was luck. The awakening of the muscle memory, I told you before, didn’t I?”

“Yes, nightwalker,” the head bowed in shame, “-I promise to not cause trouble again.”

“Good,” from a pat to a hard pinch, “-take care, for now, I won’t always be here to save you.” The dim and quiet corridor flashed with the door opening.

“Go, he’s awake,” said she with a gentle smile.

“Thank you,” said Lampard. And so, it flickered to return to darkness. The fight didn’t hold much importance in the mind of those who watched. What they saw was a mediocre half-dead man trying to fight and landing lucky hits. Well, tis the narrative lady Haru spread to have the focus lowered. The Dorm-mother was severely reprimanded by the council as for the teacher – hanged. Not publicly, no, hanged by the guards she brought along.

“You’re alive,” whispered Jen who jumped into his arms, “-I’m glad.”

“Be a little tactful,” said he in pain, “-I’m still hurt you know.”

“Sorry.”

“Good job out there, Igna,” nodded Lampard, “-I’m sorry. We’ve decided that starting today, all the fighting will be done by us. The pain of seeing a comrade be beaten so badly for our sake is nauseating.”

“I appreciate it,” he smiled, “-I don’t want to fight either,” the sunny sky out the window gave a feeling of rest. “By the way, Lampard, what happened to the monster drops?”

“You mean the wolf-fangs?”

“Yeah, did you sell them?”

“No, why?”

“I’ll buy them,” he smiled.

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“What do you mean buy?” he chuckled, “-take ’em for free once you return.”

“Let’s go, he needs rest,” interjected Rena.

‘The week started strong,’ the room emptied, ‘-I landed two times in the infirmary. The battle was a blur, I don’t want to go through that again. Suppose the ends justified the means. Jen and Rena seem more joyous, lady Haru did do what she said.’ And so, Sunday was spend resting.

Damp and cold, Monday 8th was harsher on the body. The supply truck came with the Chef supervising the unloading. “Good morning, Igna,” said he firmly.

“Good morning, chef,” he replied, “-I’ll head to the kitchen.”

Chapter 459: Life moves on

'Life at the academy is a far stretch from what I thought. I'm glad Rena's by my side though. The first week started off hard, I met this weird dude who she hated instantly. I didn't mind him much, he sort of has a resemblance to the village leader's daughter. Heh, makes me laugh. Back in those days, I was considered the strongest out of the spear-wielders. Our sensei even said I had the potential to become great. We never knew of where he came from; the leader found him one day in a ditch with broken armor and a burnt eye. Since that day, he swore to teach us the ways of fighting. Then Rena joined us in the training camp.' Inside the mind was a flashback of the time spent at home and with the 'sensei'. Outside was the mess of battle, monsters charging in horde with multiple healers at the back and the front-lines of heavy armor. Flashes of light followed with heads dropping, goblins were no match. The giant Azure wall stood at its back with the vastness of a mountain. 'She's strong,' the feeling of flesh being pierced, bones cracking, it all left a distasteful sense in the palms and fingertips. "Good job on killing the Sorcerer Goblin, Lampard, now get back," words came with a figure even faster. Green hair jumped into battle with a spell at her back and sword drawn for a downwards slash. Two Hobgoblins were killed instantly whilst she nonchalantly returned. "Good job," said she with an even more nonchalant face.

"Wow, Anna, that was amazing," said Frost with his pretty face and ever blue-eyes.

'The two look like a couple,' yawned he resting against the impaled spear. The instructor was Tier-4 Bronze of the Herb Guild.

"Mr. Kon, are we going back today?" wondered other tired-looking students.

"Another day and we'll head back," said he, "-some of you have leveled pretty nicely. The experience will help in better fights."

'What does he mean level up,' wondered Lampard holding onto the Guild-Tag. 'My stats have not increased a bit,' with it saying Tier-8 Steel, one of the higher-ranked in the class. 'Anna and Frost are the same tier but still so much stronger.'

"Alright everyone, group up, we're taking a break for today," said Mr. Kon calling upon the wall-guards. The elevator followed soon after.

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"Pretty nice for the want-to-be hero," mumbled Frost with a smirk, "-don't show off too much else we'll treat you the same as did the people in Military-Arts," the blue hair continued forth.

"Don't worry about him," soon came another voice, "-Frost is competitive."

"Anna, do you know him?" wondered he by her appearance.

"Yeah, we're in the same guild," her head tilted in confusion, "-didn't you know?"

"Not to my knowledge," a shrug dismissed the ignorance.

"I guess you wouldn't," she held her chin in disarray, "-why don't you know?" the words felt empty and her mind emptier.

"Anna, Frost, come here already," yelled the Instructor.

Meanwhile, at the Academy, the class of Military-Arts returned from a field expedition. The new instructor was a scholar from the Military with ties to the Royal Guards. On the first day of his appointment, “-I teach discipline and respect. Those stupid enough to go against my words shall be subjected to harsh punishment. I’ve heard of the prior incident of injustice. We shall NOT tolerate such actions. The ones responsible have been rusticated for a month, may this be an example. And no, they’re not at home – tis the military camp.” Said mention of the fabled yet dreaded place had the student shudder.

‘The instructor is smart and strict,’ wondered Leonard on the bus back, ‘-he’s taught us more than that corrupt fool. Jen and Rena seem happier with the changes, I guess it happened for the best,’ headphones on, the scenery changed with music in the background. ‘I’ve trained for battle, and still, I don’t want to use my spells in face of adversity. Father must be ashamed of such an unworthy son. The noble-life doesn’t miss me one bit. The freedom here is much more entertaining. Mother, wherever you are, your idiot son has managed to find friends. Keep watching from up above, I’ll be sure to make you proud.’

“Rena,” waved Jen with no response, ‘-I guess she’s asleep.’ Her head rested against an ever-shaking bus-window. ‘The moment of rest is nice. I wonder how long it’s going to last. I’ve changed quite a bit since I came here. Not really a talker and not really a friendly person, still, Group C is a nice clique. They did so much despite knowing us for a mere week. I like their company. I’m going to become the next Wall-Guardian, sister, I’m going to catch up to you soon, trust me on that.’

Rena’s mind was taken to the land of dreams. Her steps onto the imaginary world were floating and gentle. The watery surface turned waves into tsunami over yonder. The teaching of her sensei echoed one by one. The weak shall die and the strong shall live. Those at the bottom mustn’t be given choice to meddle with the top. The balance must be kept, yin and yang mustn’t merge. Grey isn’t the color of accomplishment, either black or white, nothing in-between.

A hurdle rocked the seats, “-what happened?”

“The bus jumped,” said Jen holding her forehead, “-quite a rough ride.”

“Did you get hurt too?” asked Rena with a mix of sympathy and humor.

“No... go to sleep, we have another three hours.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” The dirt-paths, hardly considered roads, headed to the Academy. The chassis was dirt-brown over the scattered pebbles.

“Igna, quick, here,” came echoes inside the kitchen, “-the meat’s about to be burnt. Come on, do something about it.”

“I’m on it, Chef,” screamed he jumping from the cutting station to the cooking.

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“LEE,” gritted the Chef, “-WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?” a whole dead chicken flew to land against the boy’s face. “-DON’T PLATE THAT BEFORE GLAZING IT!” The battlefield of the kitchen was harder since the one in charge had a temper as long as a matchstick.

"Is that normal?" wondered a guest from out of town.

"Don't worry sir," said a student with a smile, "-the restaurant gets far worst than this," said he with a smug expression.

"I mean if the food comes with a supplement of swears, who am I to judge?" chuckled the well-off man in a suit. He sat in the company of a stunningly beautiful lady. Compared to him, her order was simple and common. Her dress and accessories screamed fancy, yet the smile and mannerism said simply as in refined and well-mannered. Fancy, over the years, grew associated with the pompousness of the obnoxious whims of those with money. Long were the days where nobles were people of respect with praiseworthy behavior.

"Hey," gestured Leko, "-what's this?"

"M-meat s-sir," stuttered another recruit.

"Not meat," with the stance of a baseball player, the morsel pitched across the kitchen to rebound over the walls and end inside the bin. "-IT'S FUCKING RUBBER!" 1

"Sorry chef."

"Whatever," he pushed him aside, "-Igna, come here!"

"Yes chef," wiping the forehead from sweat, the man stared with determination.

"Good, I like the look in the eyes. I'll take over the chicken, you help them with the meat. If it comes out as rubber... bet your ass that the next thing in that bin is your head!"

"Yes sir!" he saluted to then take over the meat.

"Igna," whispered Joan, "-aren't you scared of making mistakes?"

"No," he took over the cooking, "-everyone makes mistakes. The chef knows that very well, trust in him. As long as you learn and show signs of improvements, he'll grow more understandable."

"You call that understandable?" he referred to the earlier threat.

"It's his way of showing love..."

"Love?" facepalmed he, "-couldn't be farther from the truth."

"Trust me," the morsel skipped in a sharp gesture, "-the first week I worked here was hell. I kept cleaning dishes, not fun at all. Consider yourself lucky."

"IGNA, HOW'S IT COMING ALONG?"

"It's done, chef,"

"Good, hand it over to be plated and come here, we're short on manpower." Hand in hand with the famed chef, he worked as if to complement the man's action. A symphony of mutual understanding. Those at this particular restaurant were nothing more than recruits. Chef Leko was usually alone in handling the orders after the recruits cracked under pressure. Having an assistant was rare since the talents were training in his restaurants in better environments.

“That’s us done for tonight,” sighed Leko lent over a counter, “-the staff will clean. Go home.” A few hours had passed, the light in the hall remained as the guests enjoyed the desserts.

“Thank you, sir,” voiced all.

“Wait up Igna!”

“Good luck, Igna,” said Lee and Joan with handshakes, “-we appreciate all the help you’ve given,” without much said, they scurried out the back. The metal stairs creaked with how fast they ran.

“You called for me, Chef?”

“Yeah,” he patted the boy’s back, “-we have some famous guests tonight. I called them to taste and evaluate your cooking. It’s been more than two months since that incident. I was surprised to see you the next day without injury. Guild-Leader is going to be happy with a talent like you.”

“Sir?”

“You seem confused,” he smiled, “-let me explain. The culinary world has evolved quite a bit. Meat is sourced for monsters and exotic creatures. Even the blood of devils isn’t spared from our blades. Goes to show how much we know of them. Never in my time did I come across a student who understands the teacher’s words and applies them to the letter. You didn’t only recreate but added and improved certain skills I taught. I’m happy, truly, there’s nothing more to say really. My doubts were settled tonight. The way you worked with me is fearsome, couldn’t have expected for a better assistant,” the glasses lowered, “-judging on their response, your future might be full of fame or destitute with regrets.”

“Sir, you give me too much credit. I learned from the best. There’s no room for excuses or failure.”

“The ironclad resolve throughout my insults, assault even, are what makes you, you. Igna, I don’t care if nothing is remembered from the past. I’m making you my assistant.”

“Chef Leko, the guests have called on you,” voice a waiter.

“Come on,” said he pushing the self-closing door. Tables with emptied plates, joyous smiles, and relieved expression. Those sat were in a state of hysteria. Students and teachers alike – the feeling gave was of satisfaction. ‘-Did they enjoy our food so much?’ wondered Igna close to the Chef.

“Lord Lordon,” he bowed, “-lady Lordon. I must first show gratitude in you have made the trip to our modest academy.”

“Chef Leko,” said the man confidently, “-I’ve said it plenty ‘o time, my wife and I shall cross the seas to taste your cooking,” the glance gave the assistant a once-over.

“Might I ask how was the meal?”

“Succulent,” said he.

“The meat was tender and the tastes were complicated, the components worked well with one another. Mr. Leko, did you prepare this?”

“Lady Lordon...”

"It's not bad," she smiled listlessly, "-I very much enjoyed the freshness and new approach."

"To be praised by one of the greatest palettes, I'm very much so honored," he bowed.

"Did you try a new recipe?" asked the man strongly, "-I do suppose my wife's taste never fails."

"Actually," he chuckled, "-your meal was prepared entirely by this boy tonight."

"Excuse us?" the shock came suddenly, "-an amateur preparing our meal. Do you have no shame, what if we were poisoned by the fledgling's cooking, I'm disappointed."

"Husband," she held his hand, "-please, food isn't decided on a person's experience or stature. The boy cooked us a very succulent meal," the melancholic eyes laid atop on his face as if daggers. "Tell me your name."

"Lyoko Igna, ma'am."

"How would you like to come work for us?"

"Do forgive me saying," interjected Leko, "-the boy is currently my apprentice."

"Name your price," said she coldly, "-talent like him must be nurtured by the best. I'll take him on personally."

"Lady Lordon," breathed Leko, "-your one of the greatest pallets as well as one of the best chefs out there. The reputation speaks volume, however, I can't hand-over this boy on threats alone."

"How unpleasant," her tongue clicked in dismissal.

"Leko, come on," smiled the man, "-my wife wants him so badly, I've never seen her fight for a recruit. Ok, how about this, let us have six months to train him."

"Six months," he turned, "-sure." The guests soon left with the melancholic lady smiling viciously.

"Mr. Leko, why did you agree?"

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"Igna, this is a great opportunity to learn from a legend. Make the most of it – I'll wait for you. The talent is unparalleled, I can't argue and let this go-by, make me proud." In those words came the pride of a father, he spoke with great pleasure with the face shimmering at what was to happen.

Chapter 460: Future Goals

Ding, sounded a low-pitched bell. Smothered in the sweat of people with the addition of the opened-roof – the arena thrived in activity.

'It's over,' some breathed sighs of relief others bragged about not being defeated. Combat classes came to an end. The instructor for today was a passing member of Pegasus, he came to the academy per orders of the director.

It had been a few months since enrolling. Date, Wednesday 4th April of X100. The new year happened without much celebration. As the academy was in process of recruitment with the new batch, the classes and training had made the celebration a thing of the past.

The same couldn't be said about the rest of the world. Films were announced, many idols made come-backs, some retired, and the news of a breakthrough in Magiology shook the core of the research society.

"Damn," breathed Lampard heavily, "-I smell like ass," said he sniffing his socks.

"That's nasty, said Leonard pinching his nose. "-I still can't believe the time has gone by so quick." Both peered to the battle-arena where Igna was called to do additional drills. "A bit unfair isn't it?"

"I don't know," shrugged Rena returning from the changing room, "-he's skipped combat class ever since the first battle. I knew the academy would track him down."

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"Well, it can only mean the best," said an opportunistic Jen.

Later on, they joined at a local café inside the academy village. The owner became well acquainted with Rena. Her innate ability to befriend people of any age and races was scary. Their table rested outback surrounded by a quaint small white-fence presiding over a garden. Emphasis was on nature, and so, parasol covered seating had the boon of fresh air from the trees.

"Damn, Igna, I didn't think you'd be gone so long," voiced Lampard, "-what were you up to?"

"Nothing much," said he calmly taking a sip, "-tell me about you, I want to know what happened ever since."

"Oh, so and so," Lampard gave way to Leonard who summarized the events. Most of them revolved around Military-Arts having failed more than half of the students. The time spent in rustication didn't help in studies, and thus, when the exam came those who weren't present were kicked without a shred of doubt nor mercy.

"What about you, though?" asked Jen with her fork deep inside a slice of cake.

"Waiting on the answer."

"Answer?" wondered they with Lampard helping the maid in bringing the tea.

Message from Lady Haru.

'Hello Igna, I've heard from Leko about the opportunity to train under another chef. Considering our manpower is lacking when it comes to the world of food, I've figured this is the best plan moving forward. What do you say?'

'As long as you give me your blessing, I shall do as is needed.'

'Very obedient,' replied she with a dancing cat sticker.

'Learnt it from you.'

'Alright then, I shall have transport be readied. Pack your bags and wait for Leko's call. Expect to leave by later 22:00 tonight. Say goodbyes and all that stuff. Don't leave them hanging, they deserve to know where you're headed.'

"Will do, ma'am.'

"Hey, Igna, everything ok?" wondered Leonard puzzled by his expression.

"Yeah, I got my response," stood with pride, "-I'll tell you more later tonight. Lampard, here," he gave the address to the gymnasium, "-I want you to meet me up there at around 17:00."

"Sure..." and so, the boy left leaving all baffled. Their meal resumed without Igna, something they grew to accept.

The day continued with Chef Leko in the kitchen. Igna and the master worked tirelessly in trying new dishes. Most of which came out repugnant. The two could but laugh at the reaction of the taste-tester. Some had bad stomachs for days – borderline food poisoning.

A semblance of peace swept over the white-floor, lunch-time was over. "-Chef Leko, I need a favor."

"What is it?"

"Can I bring over a few friends tonight? I want them to know what I have planned for the future."

"Friends?" he paused, "-bring 'em in, I'll have a table reserved. Don't worry about paying."

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Yeah," he pushed back his glasses, "-a gift from your mentor."

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"Thanks," and thus, the afternoon turned evening.

"Guys," mumbled Lampard, "-Is this appropriate?"

"I don't know," shrugged Leonard, "-that's the dress-code he sent." Outside came the orangish glow of the passing time. Room 60 of Block D made noise.

"You sure they'll be alright?"

"It's fine," laughed Leonard, "-girls take longer to get ready. Let's wait outside till they are done," from room 59, which was casually lent by the other friends, the duo left in very formal suits. A dashing look for both, especially Leonard, he cleaned up the same as a noble or a prince. Lampard didn't fail to impress either, tall and dark – the staple of 'hot'.

"What's the point of this?" wondered Rena finishing her makeup, "-aren't we going to look like fools?"

"I don't think so," smiled Jen, "-I do enjoy wearing a nice dress from time to time. Besides, Igna said to wear formal attire, I'm surprised the school had the funds to provide."

"You're wrong, it's not the school that got the clothes. Comes from the Trading Guild," her head shook, "-well, what's done is done." They stepped outside and walked to the center.

“Stunningly beautiful,” commented Lampard, “-Rena, would you please let me escort you tonight?” the glow of the setting sun couldn’t have complimented his approach farther. On one knee with a handheld out, her face blushed instantly.

“My lady,” bowed Leonard in turn, “-may I please have this evening in thy company.”

“With pleasure,” curtsied Jen happy of the experience. The grim of the classroom, battlefield, and field studies, a very opportune moment for change. Arms locked, the two couples chatted casually as the walk to the gymnasium came to an end.

“This is new.”

“I know, we never visited the restaurant in the gym, did we?”

“No, don’t think so, the cafeteria pretty much had us bound.” A robust shiny door stood open with red-carpet along the stairs. Two butlers stood with smiles; “-might I ask for reservations?” came the elder.

“We were invited by Igna,” said Leonard confidently.

“Master Igna,” they nodded, “-please, come on this way.”

“You’re not scared of them, are you?” whispered Jen, “-I froze at their aura.”

“Oh, not used to the noble-style of living?”

“Are you?” whispered Rena from the back.

“Well yeah,” he turned blankly, “-I’m from a Duke’s family...”

“DUKE!”

“Quiet,” sighed Lampard.

“Yeah, I belong to the Goldberg’s,” upon saying so, the upstairs door opened to a fine establishment of dim lighting. Candles atop tables, people dressed in fancier clothes murmured to one another.

“Dude, I’m scared,” whispered Lampard, “-don’t we stand out?”

“Don’t worry,” said Leonard, “-there’s nothing to fear when it comes to fine dining. I’m confused how Igna managed to get us here...”

“Yeah, who’s paying?”

“Gentlemen and ladies, please, have a seat,” their table stood at the better area. A place with direct sight into the kitchen.

“Hello,” came a charming man with gelled black-hair, “-are you master Igna’s guests?”

“Yes,” nodded Leonard.

“Might I ask why everyone has been referring to Igna as master?” wondered Jen.

“Oh,” the sharp brows ease into a gentle smile, “-everything will be apparent soon. Please, have a look at the menu and order.”

“Pretty weird...” mumbled they slowly seeping into a debate over the food. Luckily, Leonard was present to answer their questions.

Inside the kitchen, things heated. The orders began to come in one by one. Glancing over the shoulder, the manager whispered something inside Leko’s ears to which he said, “-Igna, the guests are here. I’ll let you handle their orders.”

“No sir, I shall help the same as I’ve done for the past few months. I invited them to show instead of telling,” a spark of fire flashed across the face, the chef could but hold back tears. The question of how someone developed into a seasoned chef did cross the mind more than a few times. Lady Haru answered with, ‘Igna is special. He can learn and remaster anything you teach him. Things that take years to master take him more than a few months. Trust me, a boy like him is unique – we can only guide his want of learning.’ The symphony of food preparation filled the kitchen, orders came one after the other, and dishes left one after the other.

“Igna, take care of table 4’s order.”

“On it, chef,” focused on bringing his best, the hands moved at an astounding speed all the while being gentle.

“There’s so much pressure,” said Lampard resting against the table.

“Don’t do that.”

“Wait...” he rose with a shock, “-were we not told he worked in a kitchen?”

“Who?” wondered Rena.

“Igna, who else,” to which he pointed, “-look, that’s him!”

“Hold on...” squinted the others, “-it is him!” everything fell into place and soon their food arrived. The plating was appetizing and the aroma ravenous.

“Compliments from Master Igna,” said the manager gently checking the other guests.

Gulp, “-this is food made by him...”

‘Igna,’ paused Leonard, ‘-I’m used to fine dining. Our friends might not know how to judge the food, I’ll be the critic instead.’ *crunch,* an explosion of flavors balanced each other. The bites followed without stopping as the plates whispered, ‘eat me’.

“Wow,” an hour passed, “-I’ve never had food like this.”

“Leonard, why do you look so confused?”

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“Rena, this isn’t normal food... this is something I’d expect at a noble home or expensive restaurants. Not a restaurant in a gymnasium, I don’t buy it, who the hell prepared this?”

“That would be me,” said Igna with his apron folded and over the shoulder. “I’ve been meaning to say this but time wasn’t a luxury.”

“Out with it already,” snarled Rena.

“Chef Leko took me in as his apprentice. An opportunity came to learn more about cooking from a certain chef, her nickname is Viper of Lordon. No idea why or how it came so. Long story short, I’m going away for six months.”

“Six months...” silence loomed over the table, “-man, we never really got to know you. You always came to the room late and sometimes not at all. The mornings were the same; I sort of figured you wanted to avoid us.”

“I know,” interjected Jen, “-Lampard is right. I’m glad it was work that took your time, and not you ignoring us.”

“Igna, are you sure you said Viper?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Idiot,” a heavy facepalm shook the table, “-she’s the first-ever to introduce the meat of exotic creatures in fine-dining. Every disciple she teaches ultimately becomes one of the best in the world. I heard only the best are chosen. How did you manage?”

“I owe it to Chef Leko, he brought them to taste, and here we are a few months later. Now, how was it, did you enjoy the meal?”

“Obviously,” they laughed.

“Master Igna,” came a man in suit, “-transport has come to fetch thee.”

“Transport?” inquired Jen softly.

“Yeah. I guess I wanted to say my good-byes with actions as opposed to words. See you next semester,” on that, the boy vanished into the doorway.

“He made us proud,” smiled Lampard, “-Igna’s found his calling. We need to do our best too!”

“Guys... It’s not that simple. The Viper isn’t her nickname for nothing. She’ll devour just about anything, and that includes her disciple. The Lordon’s are shady, I hope he’ll be ok.”

Thus, the journey of a Kinless boy took to the vast capital of Rosespire. A luxurious car came to fetch with lady Lordon personally waiting inside. She sat seductively.

“Welcome, dear Igna.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Lady Lordon,” he eased into the big leather seats.

“We’ll see if you’re thankful after I’m done with you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing, driver, please.”

‘Learning cooking from a legend. I guess this is better than staying in the academy.’ The streetlights reflected along with the shiny car. The ride went smoothly, ‘-let the adventure begin.’

