

Death Magic 481

Chapter 481: Crossroads

'A gun and a sword,' strapped to the belt and loaded around his waist, Igna limped to a run. The body had yet to recover – the night wouldn't end just yet. Over the distance where the moon touched the shadowy walls of the castle-walls came gunfire. 'I found them,' thought he hiding behind a wall. Group C accidentally walked into a closed alley. The roofs were malevolent. Shady figures dashed about from roof to roof. Some thought it be cats, others, the assassins, what was real was their predicament. Leonard's injury showed no sign of stopping. Lampard's stamina of carrying waned, Rena's troubled mind disarrayed per the death of a comrade. Jen had it worst, she was face naught but an inanimate object molded by regret and terror.

"Lord Goldberg," said they dropping off the roofs – four silhouettes veiled in black. If not for the fruitless shine of a neighboring window; they would have come as ghosts, "-give up this unnecessary effort. We're here to take you back home. Come, and I promise none of your friends will be hurt."

"Is t-that a promise?" added the fatigued tone restlessly. Listless were the blinks and slow were the breaths – fever, increased heart-rate, the wound took its toll.

"Yes," smiled the supposed leader, "-we're here to only take you back. Nothing more, nothing less, what is it you decide?"

'No way,' thought he watching threw the walls, '-they're highlighted as Black, on the threat-level. I can't fight them; this is a fruitless endeavor. If I die there might be no telling what happens. I need to survive and save them, but how... I'm so useless.'

"Listing possibilities," voiced éclair, "-Call on the support from Lady Courtney, use Phantom's influence to remediate the situation. Second, fight and escape, and thirdly, leave and forget they were your friends."

"I appreciate the help," said he sarcastically, '-calling on support from mother seems viable. I don't want to do that. I also made a promise to lady Haru about not fighting. My sword isn't strong, I'll lose if it's a defensive battle.'

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"Ok, we yield," said Lampard putting a strong foot forth, "-promise me Rena and Jen are set free. Assassins never return empty-handed, bring my head to the leader if that's the price. I want the girls to be free." Under normal circumstances, they'd argue against the idea. Alas, tiredness and stress from the run made for a puppet-like behavior. Leonard lost his resolve, Jen her sanity, and Rena her clarity. Only Lampard stood as the wise one, a wise amongst fool.

"Why should we agree to those terms?" snickered the attackers, "-we could take all thine heads and leave. Why compromise."

"You sure about that?" he placed Leonard into a headlock, "-I'll be damned if we die. I don't care, I'll kill him if you don't let those girls go. I know well they'll be fine – I'm ready to take the karma for slaying a companion."

“Don’t be harsh,” said the leader, “-we’ll agree to those terms. Let the young master go.”

“He’s injured.”

“Don’t move and leave him on the ground.”

“Ok,” placing the boy down, “-I’m sorry for this,” whispered he backing away. The lonesome response was a weightless grin. “Jen, Rena, wake up. We might be set free.”

‘The deal looks like it’s going to be ok,’ through the walls – one of the figures reached for a hidden dagger. ‘A TRAP!’ he turned the corner a little late, the dagger left the man’s hand for Leonard’s throat.

“Calculating trajectory,” flashed across,” -aim here,” an ‘x’ highlighted the path. On steady feet, the trigger pulled and the pistol shot back with recoil – a heavy mass of energy cut across the air to interrupt the blade. “Igna, accept my spirit into your body for this instant. The backlash will be severe – allow me to control you.”

“Will we win?”

“Yes.”

“Then, I accept.” The closest made for his neck while the others took for Group C. A dazzling flash of light followed with the body dropping into a profound sea of greenish-blue. Water bubbles ran to the surface as he sank. Peaceful blue turned dark-crimson and finally, black, inky black. There in the realm of no questions and no answers silence permeated within. Nothing, simply nothing, no thoughts, no emotions, no sense of self, only the batting vision saw and not at the same time.

‘Silver-ranked adventurers,’ the eyes reopened to a slow world.

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“Welcome back, master,” whispered a familiar tone.

“Who is this?” asked an emotionless voice.

“Thy loyal and humble servant, éclair, my lord.”

“éclair,” holding his temple, “-I see; my memories are separate from the actual host. I’m me but not, what a conundrum. How is this possible?”

“Master, the details do not matter at this moment. I forcefully pulled thy conscience from the dormant Death-Element. Please, the time-limit isn’t much; deal with the pests before young Igna is corrupted.”

“You called onto me for this pettiness,” the dagger halted inches from the heart. “Who even are you?” asked he pinching the blade – a look of regret spun into the attacker’s gaze. “Doesn’t matter,” a kick had him break the opposing building.

“What’s wrong with that kid?” turned the leader, “-go on, tend to him.”

“On it, sir,” they rushed.

'Really?' a side-step dodged the premature attack, 'have they become this weak?' countless strokes and combinations stacked atop one another. In no way did he seem phased or troubled, slight motions sufficed. 'Time limit is running low,' *slash,* a spin,

-bang, a gunshot; hunters became the hunted. Two heads fell and another one blown away.

"Thank you for saving Igna, master."

"Mention not, I shall return to the long slumber. I can't wait for the day where our memories join, the day where I make my return to this world accompanied by the ire of a decade brewing inside. Lucifer and Zeus will pay, all who stood in my way will pay, heed my words, éclair, I will return strong, I will be calamity reincarnate, I shall destroy the heavenly domain for revenge."

Senseless sight kindled, life pulsed, and consciousness pulled by a man in silvery-black hair. 'What happened?' a bloodied blade, a steaming gun, and four people dead.

"Enemies have been exterminated. Igna, what I did was to ensure your safety and those of your friends. It's one time only, next time, it will be the death of those around you. Heed the warning well, tis up to thee to protect, not those around."

"Yes, I understand, call an ambulance for now."

"On their way," said it smugly.

"Thanks," the desolate roads led to the unconscious Leonard. 'For the sake of love and friendship,' he reached to hoister him upright, "-come on buddy, let's rejoin the others."

"Igna, is that you?" cried Lampard, "-is it truly you?"

"Yes," Leonard's weight collapsed onto his knees, Lampard narrowly caught him. "Everyone's out of it, what's the matter?"

"I can't explain, all I want is rest." Local ambulances soon rushed the place followed by police. There, Igna took command and explained the situation. The slaying of four men based on self-defense wouldn't run, normally that is. Away from the companion's fading sight, "-I'm part of the Haggard Dynasty. My actions were crude, strong decisions had to be made. The Goldberg sent assassins after us, their bodies are here to see. If there is any question, please refer to the Goldberg's first then my lady mother."

"I see no harm done here," voiced the officer, "-we'll make sure the incident doesn't escape to the public." So, the strenuous path walked by Jen and Leonard came to a crossroad. Fate would decide next, acceptance or rejection, love or family, the conclusion to said tale would be known after the hospital trip. Red flashes pirouetted down the street towards the hospital. The Adventuring Academy was contacted through which next of kin were informed.

'I'm home,' sighed he clambering off a different bike, 'I can't move on,' he reached the lift to land headfirst on the hardened floor. The lights blurred into a somber sleep.

"Be more careful next time," smiled Courtney leaned against a pillar, "-you did well. éclair told me what happened," she carried him to bed. The solitary apartment revived; Igna slept with cheeks against her back. Frail as she looked, Courtney carried him as if a backpack. And so, the 24th of December, a long

one at that, ended. It was then that she heard the voice of her brother thanks to éclair – rather, her other-self.

“What a dream,” he awoke to a well-lit room. Setting onto the fluffy carpeted upper area, the curtains further forward were opened, the rising sun cast inky black shadows onto the scenery. A noire-styled painting reminiscent of bars, the typical kind one would find hanging on the walls. Opposed to a canvas, the landscape laid in the open for all to capture. On impulse, he took a picture and uploaded it to Hwan (a social media platform where sharing photos were most prominent). Thwan was also another platform more focused on jesting or quoting sentences from other users. The two were linked and could be used dependently or not. The viral video about him cooking was on a differing website named Lokka – there, one could find countless videos from all over the planet. Tis was the trifactor of Arcanum Influence – Hwan, Thwan, and Lokka.

At the end of the day, it amounted to nothing but a whim. The popularity granted by Lokka calmed to have a milder following. After rejecting so many times by the press and magazines, Igna’s presence faded.

“Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“Lady mother, why are you up so early?” turned he holding a warm-cup of tea.

“Don’t you remember what happened yesterday?” she leaned against the doorway tormented by perpetual yawns, dark-circles made her already melancholic face into pure woe.

“No?”

“You came home half-dead and half-asleep. I know what happened,” she slid onto the comfy couch, “-nobles and stuff. I said to not get involved in politics...”

“I apologize, mother.”

“It’s fine,” she turned the television, “-I’m going to meet lady Goldberg later today. A mother should clean up her son’s mess,” she peeked over, “-isn’t that right, my dear son?”

Cough, “-sorry, I only wanted to help my friends.”

“I know, nothing wrong about it. I’m still going to hold you accountable for the bike’s destruction. No more keeping secrets else I’ll throw you to the dogs, you hear?”

“Yes mother, I’ll be more open next time.”

“Good,” the channels flicked faster than he could read, “-go meet them before work. A nurse called me earlier, someone’s looking for you.”

“Alright,” jumped into the chef’s outfit, “-see you later, mother.” Familiarity made him drop the ‘lady’ mantle when addressing Courtney. They became close.

After being informed of the incident, the Adventuring Academy tried to contact the parents to no avail. Thus, nothing more was done. As told by doctor’s, injuries weren’t grave. Only lack of mana and fatigue. They did use magic to heal Leonard’s legs. The paralyzing effect bound him to bed for three days at most.

“Hey,” the large white room opened to flowers followed by Igna.

“Hey,” waved a still drowsy Lampard.

“Feeling better?”

“Yeah, I guess. Last night was an adventure – man, being chased by adventurers was scary,” the articulation stopped, “-I’m sure you died last night, Igna, what happened?”

“I don’t know the specifics,” he eluded the question, “-what about Rena and Jen, are they ok?”

“See for yourself,” he pointed.

“So peaceful,” mumbled he at the sleeping ladies.

Leonard’s bandaged leg was itchy, he’d often try to scratch with a plastic spoon, “-Igna, thanks for yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it. What happens next, what’s the path you going to take? I’m sure you realize it’s not simple anymore. Family or love?”

“Love, I think,” said he smiling vaguely, “-I’ll break ties and start over. The Dungeon Quest is a good opportunity to earn money. Once my leg is healed, I’m heading to Coria,” in that instant, the words stopped short of Igna’s mouth. He could have spoken but restrained himself. Leonard’s attitude was different, the want of moving forward was strong and so, Igna happily gazed upon his comrade.

Chapter 482: The End of Winter Festival

The exchange of might against the Goldberg made the rest of the week seem heavenly. The talk between Lady Goldberg and Lady Courtney went smoothly. Dukedom or not, they had an obligation to obey and serve her majesty the Queen, and the queen was bound under the Federation – in a round-about way, made the Haggard’s standing fearsome. She vowed not to start trouble; Leonard was cut off the family line. A noble to a commoner the next, they broke ties with ‘get-well’ flowers at the hospice. Her mother personally came and said in a mild tone of ‘respecting his decision’. In the end, love prevailed bearing unfathomable consequences. Looking back, who knew if it’d be such a good idea. Group C witnessed the whole ordeal, Jen felt pitiful for her actions. Stealing from the kind Igna, betraying him more than once, the boy never once held ill-will.

Date: 31st December X100, a year reached the end. The days continued; memories amassed slowly made up the lost past.

‘Security sure is here.’ Night-shift began, people from all over the continent came. The special event, Xius’s concert. It garnered media attention as well as the public, such a staple of the entertainment business. The story of Emi Muko, the mal-treated girl of Alpha touched the hearts of many. Her stain heavy past all but fueled the fans rallying around Xius. A group of misfits joined as one to conquer the stages – their manager was also praised. Apexi was sponsored on behalf of Phantom. The line-up consisted of S-Kiss, H Jewel, Xius, First Romance, and a solo artist named Selphine. They were the pride of singers and artists around the continent. Through those idols on stage could the younger generation dream. ‘Look at them working hard,’ thought he managing two stations effortlessly. Tonight was the last, and the staff knew. Chef Joe’s energetic persona amplified beyond belief.

“GO ON, COOK!” added he slapping Igna’s back.

“Y-yes,” the shock took his breath away, “-where’s lady Yuki?”

“Went to visit mother nature. Hey, get to cooking, we’re near the finish line,” a flip and the aroma of meat permeated across the queue.

“Ingredients have been used. All who paid, please wait and the rest, I’m afraid the restaurant is closed.”

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“Already?” fired Igna.

“Yeah,” said she, “-the supplier is running low. It’s not only us who’ve been cooking.”

“I suppose,” the stalls at the center were proof enough.

“How’re the orders going?” came a refreshed Yuki, “-Jola?”

“It’s complete, ma’am, we’ve done it. Loron sold-out its stock.”

Time showed 22:30, the concert began an hour ago. Far as it seemed the singing and music made way to where they stood. Customers left holding smiles rumbling stomachs. ‘The Winter Festival is reaching the end.’ Wiping his forehead, a visit to the washroom was in order. ‘-Why are they moving so suspiciously?’ wondered he grinning at Emma and Emmy. They’d most obviously whispered behind his back. ‘What are they up to?’ and so, the tiredness of a week’s work caught up to him. The experience working for so long and dealing with so many customers brightened his horizon. A line beyond which laid an unexplored land of taste.

“Congratulations!” sparkles flung across the room, a banner rolled from the ceiling, Igona flung confetti awkwardly, Emma and Emmy tried hard at opening a bottle of champagne whilst Joe facepalmed at Igona’s attempts. Jola held another banner upon which Lady Yuki nearly tripped and fell.

“What’s this about?” the face felt fresh by the nightly wind.

“It’s a farewell party,” said Emmy, “-you’ve completed your training at Loron.”

“I see,” he bowed, “-thank you all for teaching me. I’ve gotten more experience and matured under your tutelage. I’m deeply grateful for the opportunity, lady Yuki, Chef Joe, Emma, Emmy, Igona, and manager Jola, thank you again.”

“Don’t sweat it,” they hurdled.

“As I’ve said before,” smiled lady Yuki, “-Loron will always have a vacancy for you, my prodigy.”

“Tis as she says,” came a rougher voice, “-I guess it wouldn’t hurt having you around.”

“Look, sister, Chef Igona has a soft heart for Igna,” teased Emmy.

“Yes, sister, he’s very much a kindhearted person,” added Emma.

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“Shut it you two,” he gritted, “-whatever.”

"You've gone and done it now," laughed Joe followed by the others. A pleasant atmosphere of belonging warmed his heart. The teary-eyed smiles seemed like diamonds falling onto the carpeted floor. None held ill-will, to think it was only a few months ago the journey started. A table was soon garnered with celebratory snacks and drinks. Igna spent most of the time chatting about recipes and the plausibility of Dungeon Cooking. Emma and Emmy entertained and provided very crucial information on what he sought after.

It didn't cross his attention yet, lady Yuki vanished from his entourage. 'Where's she?' he scanned around softly holding a glass of wine.

"Igna," a tap on the back startled him.

"Please, don't do that again," said he bearing wine-stains on the dirtied shirt.

"Shut up," said Lady Yuki, "-here, this is a parting gift from us."

"You can't be serious, I can't accept this," the body reclined from her gesturing hands.

"Take it," she pushed it against his chest, "-tis to commemorate you being here. Wherever you go now, the spirit of Loron will stay by thy side." An apron designed by the staff had their signatures embroidered. Adding to it – a bandana. "T-thank you," a droplet escaped – "-it means a lot," he dug into his shoulder and buried the tear against the shirt, "-I appreciate it."

"Well then," said she, "-go enjoy the festival, tis my test."

"Will do, teacher." The backpack felt light, he waved at the silhouettes of his multiple teachers. The more steps in-between, the farther they went – still, until he couldn't see, the arms carried on waving.

"I have readied the Bike, please head to this location."

"Thanks, éclair," the path soon led to the melodic concert. Raw energy moved in waves, the crowd was massive and the people all sang. The performers played masterfully, the speakers screamed and the camera crew filmed. 'This is awesome,' taking a modest spot at the back, he sat upon a close stall and listened. The talent at display blew his mind. How could people be so good?

Time continued, song after song, time passed without his knowledge. The head swayed to the rhythm and soon, the crowd faded into silence. The next performer, Xius. Heavy footsteps entered; a solitary man glared about with guitar in hand. Another followed holding a bass, then came the drummer, and lastly, the singer. No words exchanged, nothing said, breathing cut. A heavy screech nearly ruptured eardrums, the guitar was just plugged in. *thud, thud, thud, thud,* the downstroke of power chords, slow and painful, slow and somber, slow and menacing, to lastly, slow in pace. The fingers darted around the fretboard, the guitar shrieked with distortion, the drummer joined, the bass dropped an ever more somber bassline to build into a pent-up feeling of reckoning, *clash,* the drummer halted the train, the singer hummed into lyrics accompanied by bass alone, Sugar dropped notes here and there, the drummer kept a monotonous build-up going, the pent-up frustration was here, the pitch rose to finally break into utter harmonic pleasure. The release came with headbanging and screams. Emi Muko's singing wasn't only melodic and beautiful, the same Eve-like character held another talent, the art of screaming. Her second persona would greatly be influenced by Sugar's dark-style of playing as for Dei, she stood in the background as the Godfather, directing the symphony by stomach-turning vibrations.

'This is why they're so popular,' thought he swallowed by the band, "-Xius is AWESOME!" What felt like five minutes was an hour, the screen displayed a giant clock – the crowd sang till it hit 00:00, whereby they screamed, "-HAPPY NEW YEARS!"

'Time to head home.' Just like that, a year came to a close. The dungeon expedition was rescheduled to be on the 2nd of January. Per notifications from the expedition master, the underground pathways shifted – the risk of it crashing forced many onto the hill.

'I'm returning to the Academy tomorrow,' dropped in bed, sleep carried onto the next day.

Attention to all students: practical exams will be hosted on the 4th of January. Anyone outside the academy is to return immediately. The Coria expedition has been postponed indefinitely. Anyone who signed to partake will be compensated for the travel fees. No additional compensation will be given.

'What a great morning text to wake up too,' yawned to a blurry sight, '-why's my door opened?' mild chatter came from downstairs. 'Who can it be at this hour?' he climbed the stairs to spot multiple shoes taken off. '-Visitors?' time showed 10:00, '-must have overslept,' he turned to the kitchen and began breakfast.

"Igna, come here," came from the rest area.

"Coming," two simply scrambled eggs sufficed, "-good morning mother."

"Good morning, darling," said she sat with three expensively dressed individuals.

"Auntie Courtney, you never said you had a son?"

"Please, explain this to us, we're quite confused."

"I want food."

"Calm it you three," she turned with a disastrous expression, '-come here,' said it, 'come save it,' it begged. "I'd like to meet my son, Igna Haggard."

"Igna Haggard?" paused a handsome blonde hair man, "-how is it possible you have a son?"

"Hello," said he, "-I'm Igna Haggard, it's a pleasure to meet you," the eyes could but wander upon a melancholic lady bearing silvery-white hair. Her handsome face did make for many questions.

"Well then, I'll let you introduce oneself," she slipped not before winking at his distress.

'Really?' puzzled at why she did so, '-smile, I guess.'

"Igna Haggard," said the man, "-I apologize for the late introductions. I'm Julius Arnet Haggard," he gave a firm handshake.

"My name is Lizzie Haggard," curtsied the younger of the three.

"I'm Eira Haggard," said the other, "-nice to meet you," her voice didn't fluctuate.

"Are you members of the Ardanian Royal family?" asked he by éclair's assistant. The latter brought up information that could perhaps help the conversation.

“Yes, I’m quite peculiar to hear you’re the son of our aunt. I still don’t believe so, are you a scammer?” the narrowed gaze right into the soul.

“No, god forbid,” he refused, “-tis lady mother that brought up the subject. I have no memories of my past – I only awoke a year ago. Why are you here?”

“We come to the capital each year to wish happy new year’s,” replied the young princess, “-aunt Courtney is sometimes lonely without us.”

“Hold on there,” said she stumbling into the rest area, “-I’m not lonely,” came through the multiple boxes stacked on one another.

“Let me help you,” offered Igna, presents stacked onto the low tables.

“Do you know how hard it is to shop for you?” her complaintive tone felt natural.

“Auntie, please,” interjected Eira, “-drop the phrase and answer Julius’s question already.”

“Is that really a tone you should address me with?” her motherly glare stopped Eira’s words, “-considering what you’ve done,” the threat enough had her lower the insolent gaze. “As for the question, Igna here is my son. We’re related by blood for he’s also directly tied to my brother.”

“How come?” wondered Julius, “-I don’t see the white hair.”

“You won’t,” she smiled, “-the inheritance is of Vampire-Blood. Igna’s a nightwalker, a noble one, I’d guess around Duke ranked?”

“He’s that pure-blooded?”

“It’s possible,” added Eira, “-Aunt Courtney is our father’s twin sister.”

“Then it’s settled,” her hands clasped in joy, “-Igna, meet your cousins.”

‘What am I supposed to do?’ the gaze fell onto him; ‘-I’m related to nobility. Didn’t she say not to get involved? Mother is the worst, I swear,’ looking for a way out, the redundant comment of Lizzie wanting food, “-highness,” he held a hand to Lizzie, “-would you like for me to bake some pastries?”

“Pastries?” she stared up, “-sure,” she held his hand and went to the kitchen.

“Lizzie?” paused Eira, “-is that really Lizzie, the shy girl who never opens to anyone?”

“Did she just take his hand?” empty blinks followed their movements.

Chapter 483: Azure Path

“That’s Igna for you,” came a pleased and satisfied half-smile, “-I’m not lying about anything,” said she strongly, “-Igna bears the blood Haggard blood. He’s my son, and nothing will change said fact.” The startled Eira and Julius dropped onto their seats.

“Whatever you say,” came a disrespectful sneer from Julius, “-I don’t accept this one bit. So, is he going to be part of the running for the crown or no?”

“Don’t even dare,” glared Eira, “-none’s going to speak of the crown. We swore for it to remain secret.”

“Why not,” he argued, “-why not,” the tone felt hesitant, “-father’s disappearance came at a bad time. Mother’s been dealing with pressures from so many parties it’s all so hard to bear. What can we do, I’m afraid Arda might collapse.”

“Shut up,” voiced Eira, “-mother’s fight just as hard as we are,” underneath her breath came regret.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” he glared, “-I suppose the kinslayer must not have the will to face the truth. You killed father by aiding those individuals, all to be acknowledged.”

“Julius,” she glared, “-stop this instant.”

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“Else what,” he remained nonchalant, “-you going to commit fratricide too?” There and then, countless ethereal books conjured in a circle around Eira, her face gleamed with killing intent.

“No more of that,” came a rather cavalier Igna, “-Mother, and my dear cousins, would you partake in some snacks?” he dispelled her magic without a sweat.

“How dare you,” she rose hard, “-how dare you dispel my magic,” her hand motioned for a slap, *smack,* “-auntie,” she gritted, “-what are you doing?”

“Protecting my child,” said she held onto the princess’s hand, “-Julius, Eira,” her tone sharpened, “-I’m disappointed. Can’t believe you’ve forgotten,” she mumbled to a stop.

“Please, mother,” spoke Igna, “-there was no need to stop the princess. It’s fine, tis her right as royalty to smack down any who disrespects her,” the expression remained stern, “-I accept her punishment. It’s no matter, really,” a tilted grin illusioned flower petal sparkling out his body, a conducting sentiment of friendliness and acceptance, the warmth it brought lowered the will to fight.

“Big sister Eira, brother Julius, come, come,” scurried a little Lizzie, “-we baked some cakes,” said she excitedly.

“Come on,” turned Igna, “-you have cream on your cheeks, did you sneak some?” the eyes pressed in jest.

“No,” her legs crossed and fingers played suspiciously.

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“Sure,” wiping the stain, “-would you like to partake in the snacks, tis a new year’s welcome party, is it not?”

“You bet it is,” said Julius patting his back, “-Igna, I have got a feeling we’ll be good friends, cousin.”

“Me too,” they laughed as if childhood companions, “-Prince Julius.”

“No, Julius for short, or just call me cousin, it doesn’t matter,” the pure smile gave no room for caution, rather, the openness of his heart (as it seemed) was a very good trait. An unyielding ‘godly’ charm. Hence, they moved to the kitchen where pleasantries were exchanged over the snacks. Igna took to making a few ‘exotic’ meals for the guests. Opposed to staying in the dining or rest area, a bottle of wine was brought onto a table next to the cooking station. They watched as he cooked, Julius didn’t stutter

and leaped head-first into a new realm. He helped and so did Eira followed by Lizzie. Dispelling Eira's summons earlier garnered a seedling of respect into their hearts; being a nightwalker an all also added to said respect. So, the royalty of Arda accepted Igna as a close cousin (who bared no want or greed of the throne. He was very much in line after Lizzie).

"Delicious," exclaimed Eira holding a pleasant smile, "-did we make all of this?" asked she bewildered by their lackluster efforts turning into such a grand display of knowledge and skill.

"Brother Igna is awesome," said Lizzie, "-I love him for his food," she laughed.

"Tis cousin Igna," added Julius playfully.

"No, no," her being 11 years old was still grounds for being an infant. Her maturity came later than most as most of the childhood was spent studying music. It didn't bother much as being a princess was engraved into her mind and heart. Memories of a forgotten past also came as flashes and in dreams – mild changes in her personality were overshadowed by the 'childishness'. "-Cousin Igna feels more like a big brother. He is a brother since Auntie Courtney is my father's twin sister."

"She's got a point there," said a light-hearted Eira, "-the food sure swayed my mind and emotions. Aunt, I didn't know you had a son, well, I'll be damned if it is any other way. Wouldn't you agree, Julius?"

"I suppose," he sneezed, "-sorry for what I said earlier."

"Words of anger don't mean much in the grand state of things, I know you meant well, tis for our lady mother." The pleasantries continued till noon, phone numbers and social media were exchanged. Julius took to Igna strongly and even made plans to hang out soon. Under the clear blue mid-day sky of Hidros – a rarity considering the habitual greyness; guards clad in green adorned by white and gold uniforms stood holding salutes. Guns holstered, daggers for emergencies and an overwhelming magical potential, dark-elves, dwarves, and beastmen.

"Tis where we part," said Julius rolling down a window, "-Cousin Igna, don't forget to speak regularly. I'll see you soon."

"Yes, cousin Julius, fare-thee-well." Eira and Lizzie waved and nodded; the white limousine veiled in gold at front, sides, and back, dazzled into the distance where it climbed the hill into the unknown. The new year's greetings extended to the Royal family of Hidros.

"Your turn now," said Lady Courtney embracing him from the back, "-promise to be good to your companions. I value loyalty and honesty over strength, you hear?"

"Yes mother," he bent to touch her feet.

"What was that?" asked she confused by the peculiar gesture.

"It's respect," said he, "-touching the feet of parents is tantamount to asking for blessings. I read it in a book, supposed it felt right."

"Aww," she grabbed his cheeks, "-then, may the future be bountiful in both good allies and excellent experiences. Don't forget to practice the sword daily, I don't want you to lose to anyone. Don't be so quick to call onto the power inside, try fighting using the body and techniques only. Being able to control the vampiric blood is a boon, yet, a curse. Boon as thee art unrivaled, curse as thee will be bored for lack

of work. I won't vouch your body and mind is ready to handle the Night-walker rank. Train and learn, that is only if thee wish to become a fighter."

"Thank you, mother," he nodded, "-thanks for half-a-year of kindness and training."

"Are you a fool?" a slap across the head had her chuckle, "-I'm your mother, don't forget it."

"Sorry, sorry."

"You destroyed the previous bike when saving friends," her stance tightened, "-I'd give you a stern lecture, though, when I met them, they were grateful. So, here," a pair of keys dangled off her curled fingers, "-a new bike to travel the world. It's fast, like unnecessarily fast; a special build from Phantom. Consider it a gift from me and Elvira, she was adamant about you having it."

"Are you sure?" the beast slept peacefully under the dimness of parking. Purple striped with black, large tires and a very gentle yet sharp body, a sport's mobile at first glance.

"Yes," said she, "-it's equipped with the AFR, meaning, éclair can use it too."

"Oh," fingers went up and down the handle, "-she looks fast. What's the name?"

"Banshee X0."

"Banshee X0?"

"X0 means unreleased, not everything Phantom makes is for the public, within our arsenal lies few but rare 'X0' items. Things never meant for the outside world, ranges from nukes to kingdom ending planes. The Banshee X0 was a project to test the human resistance against the wind – the faster one goes, the harder the pressure is, and so, they made it to test said theory. Long story short, humans can go damned fast. Banshee hails from the bike's unique scream, I won't reveal too much. Wear this," she threw a body-suit, "-it's protection, always wear it before a ride. Tis easy to fit and wear around the body, I want no excuses." The black-suit had writings and wings marked at the back. A very punk-like design as showed by the seductive white silhouette of a lady on his arms.

"Fits nicely," said he. A push toggled the beast, "-I'll be going now, mother."

"Have you taken everything?"

"Yes, all the essentials are in the backpack, thank you," pulled onto the road, a map hampered by what he saw.

"Follow this route," directed éclair. On the main road, the bike drove along the border of the linking road of the three districts till a larger one heading south. Highway 39; relatively filled by merchant trucks and cars, he sped for there were no speed limits. A road stretching onto infinity. The shadow of the Capital faded at the back as it soon vanished from the mirrors. The scenery turned to green flat-lands bearing both ghastly light-brown dried branches and weeds. Over yonder were other roads a few kilometers away leading to stranded villages and towns. To the right after a few hours, came the southern railways. No heed at the changing view, the ride lasted a long 10 hours. It was only when the sun to the west turned amber-orange that the surrounding forest came in view. The shadow cast by the change of time was grim, spots of orange escaped through the pine-trees guarding a narrower-lonelier

road. There were no lights anything, if left to the dark, it was obscurity that awaited. Luckily, the gouge-like feeling from the bordering trees soon gave to a crossroad.

'Adventuring Town of Meke to the right and Adventuring Academy to the left,' read the signs beyond which laid a cliff overlooking the Azure wall. The roads, opposed to before, went through a few 'gentle' hills which culminated in such a view. An undiscovered landscape if not for the bike. 'This view,' he drove closer to the edge where a singular railing prevented from the deadly fall into other trees. 'I'd have never discovered the beauty of the world without it. Who knew something like this excited, the paths north and south were always gentle inclines or slopes. I took the main-road then turned a few times into the upper-hills to then arrive here. éclair must have known of this place.'

"Azure Path," said éclair, "-that's the name of the view. We're on a hill, the height might look impressive, but tis still a hill. Not many people know of this road, it's a given, since carriages are still used in the lesser advanced towns. The Azure path is more of a scenic road that strains one's vehicle. It takes longer to arrive at Rosespire threw it, except, when one needs to head for the Adventuring Academy."

"Awesome," the images burnt into his mind, '-this view is something worth the travel.' Helmet on, he continued till for another hour until reaching the academy. A hurdle over the tram-rails and the destination reached. The dorms twinkled shrouded by a moonless night. Stars tried to only fall short of shining bright. Driving along the stone path felt relaxing. The park was still full of people, duos to be precise. Couples sharing memories and deepening their bonds. What more could they want?

'7 months,' thought he coming to the dorm, '-I've changed. A year has gone by since I woke without memories. Didn't expect to be related to the royalty of Arda. Come to think of it, I haven't had the Vampiric impulse in a while. Might be the slaughter I cause during the incident against Lady Yuki. Damn, I forgot to message Lady Syndra.' Parked outside, the photo of Azure Path taken earlier uploaded...
clop, clop, clop. 'I'm back.'

Chapter 484: Shopping Street

Chatter whispered from the upper windows, the moonless night, when staring up, had the same beige colored windows twinkle as if the stars. Center of the dormitory paths, the square of said community had a change of pace. The benches and few scattered tables were replaced for a mantle atop which rested a new building. Modest in size, and length, the 'room' featured three ways to enter. Atop a plain wooden board was 'Adventuring Guild'.

'Doesn't take the experience to see what happened here,' thought he walking around, '-I did hear students complain about not having enough time to head to the capital to deposit their items. I mean, they could pass through Meke and do it there, well, the added convenience is a plus.' Returned to the starting spot, *thud,* '-not again,' he fell to one knee, '-talk about being obnoxious,' the sharpening of the canines and nails made him shudder, '-calm down,' he pressed, '-calm down.' The more resistance he threw, the harder grew the impulse, '-blood, kill, revenge, I need them all.'

'Who's speaking?' *tsst,* a prick inside the pants numbed the left-leg.

"Good," said éclair, "-I've injected a potion to soothe the impulse. You need to have blood soon."

"Alright, thanks," the numbing felt more of a call to reality. Bag in hand, he climbed the dorm building to room 60. The adjacent rooms were silent, most were presumably asleep, all, except the closed door '60'. Shadows darted about the escaping light below the door – it felt weird, 'I can't just enter. What if it's awkward, man, who knew returning would be so painful.' Inhaling the warm, slightly leathery odor of the corridor – *click.* 'I'm home,' the words formed but didn't escape. Jen and Leonard were hanging out atop the bunk bed with Lampard and Rena sat opposite. A floating table moved about with cards in their hands.

"Hello," said he casually ducking below the table and throwing the bag on the bed, "-it's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Hello, Igna," replied Jen a little confused, "-you're back?"

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"This view sure brings back memories," said he peering over the table glued against the wall, "-what about you guys, when did you return?"

"Around a few days ago," said Lampard dropping to the floor, "-Igna," he came to grab his palm, "- thanks for what you did at the capital. I'm afraid our group wouldn't be the same if you weren't there."

"Hey, it's fine," said he, "-don't worry about it." The welcome wasn't what he envisioned, 'they're cautious, the friendly atmosphere prior changed. I should have seen this coming, I'm not Group C... why do I keep on returning to the place that doesn't care for me. Jen's more on edge, Leonard looks to feel guilty, Rena's just sneering at me while Lampard holds the same 'corporate' smiles I've seen at the capital.'

"Let's talk tomorrow," he offered to then hid under the blanket and let fatigue do its job.

"He's sleeping already?" whispered voices of whom he couldn't recognize.

"Yeah, that sure was fast."

"What do we do now?"

"Don't talk too loud, else he'll wake up."

"He's part of Group C, yet, why do I feel so on edge."

"Don't you remember how he died and suddenly came back? Igna scares me, I don't think he's human."

"Who cares about that, he's saved us countless times."

"Maybe that's because he doesn't have anyone else. We should just ask for a dormitory change, come on, let's be honest here."

"Rena, stop it, I know how much you hate him, but still."

"Lampard, I'm stating the truth, a team needs to trust each other. Don't know about you, but the feeling we held during the stay at the capital hasn't changed. I might have gotten to know him a little... doesn't suddenly make us friend," the murmurs soon faded to silence. The next morning came early, about 04:15 early, the outside still slumbered in the nocturnal hours. 'I better leave this place,' thought he

gently stepping into the hall, ‘-their conversation revealed more than enough. Good thing I took off the lenses before arriving,’ the phone materialized the items, ‘-I should really find a place.’

“There’s an apartment for rent at the shopping district, give it a try.”

“An apartment?” images, location, and monthly rent showed, ‘-50 Exa per month,’ the mouth cringed, ‘-that’s damned expensive, too expensive.’

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“Forgot to mention, Lady Yuki deposited the combined wages of the 7 months of working in the bank, 500 Exa. Adding to the total of 50,000 Exa found on the Legionnaire of Mothra, the balance now is 10,050,500 Exa.”

“You don’t need to remind me,” said he skipping down the stairs, “-I have a fortune. 500 Exa is more than enough to cover five years of living. Imagine the fortune mother just casually added to my name. It’s not fair, I have the money to buy whatever I want and still have too much left. How rich is Phantom, how rich is mother. The Mothra people had so much on them, feels bad to have stolen their goods. Well, tis life, I suppose. I don’t care for money; mother will take them back someday. I have to fend for myself.”

“Yes, yes,” said éclair, “-consider it the boon of having been born to a noble. Might I add, there are nobles out there who don’t even have as much as you have. I venture to say you can topple over the economy if left unchecked.”

“I understand,” said he pushing the bike past the yard and towards the shopping district. “You think they’re open?”

“Just walk in.”

The inner-street of the district, although not as big as the word district brings, was more of a shopping street layered by shops of differing kinds. Armory, Alchemy, things of expert quality stayed in said street. The shop owners weren’t mere old people or improvised merchants, far from it, the buildings were almost brand new, or so it seemed. Neatly cleaned, the street itself held no sign of dirt nor garbage. The apartment in question was a simple building at the center, ‘-Kord’s Eatery’. A fisherman carried heavy crates to the back through one-man sized narrow alleys. Here, the day started early, people were about the opening shop, reading their supplies, cleaning, and casually speaking to one another. A nice community of strong-looking individuals.

“Hey boy,” hailed a man next door, “-the street is closed, come back around five.”

“Sorry,” he turned, “-I’ve come for the apartment.”

“Did I hear you right?” turned the bucket-hat-wearing fisherman.

“Yes,” he nodded.

“Then you come to the right place,” said he with a contagious smile, the darkened skin, greyish mustache and goatee, not well-maintained nose hair, heavy brows and spots of black dotted around, “-I’m Kord, owner of this joint. Did you come for the apartment?”

“Yes, yes. I was wondering if I could check out the place first?”

“Yeah, sure,” said he, “-come on up,” he walked to the back where another set of buildings laid after, “-here’s the backstreet. There’s trash, and more, the staircase up is here,” metal and unsteady, it zigzagged towards the second-floor.

“I got to tell you though,” it opened, “-the rent is expensive, it’s the location and size of the place. You have five rooms, two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a toilet.” The door opened to an immediate corridor cutting across to the front. “-Here we have a toilet,” to the left laid the smaller compartment, “-opposite we have the kitchen.” They continued, “-a bedroom next to the toilet, here, and another bedroom next to the kitchen over there,” reaching the living room, “-here’s the open space, move in furniture or whatnot, doesn’t matter. As long as the rent is paid, I’ll put up with anything.”

“Nice,” the modest living room had a view onto the street below and the stairs to the academy a few kilometers away perched on its hill.

“Mr. Kord,” said a sharper voice, “-I like this place.”

“Missy,” he smiled, “-I’m sure as hell happy to see two customers interested.”

“What do you mean, two customers?” green hair flowed to stand menacingly, “-I thought this place was for rent.”

“There are two bedrooms,” said the man, “-I don’t care who or how, as long as money is brought, I’m ready to put up with anything.”

“You’ve come to rent as well?” inquired she sternly.

“Yeah.”

“You’re that boy who stays with Lampard, aren’t you?”

“You guys are acquainted, how nice. How about going half each? There are two bedrooms, sharing is caring, or so that’s what my old man said.”

“Going halves?” she paused, “-what do you think?”

“I’m happy as long as I’ve got a place to sleep.”

“Then it’s settled,” she made for Kord, “-we’ll take it, he and I shall be roommates.”

“Settled,” he smiled, “-please hand 150 Exa as a deposit for the first three months,” the shadiness of the tone was palpable, “-no cash, get out,” laughed he.

“Should we split the bill?” turned Igna to a blank Anna, “-she doesn’t have the money right now. Deposits are usual for staying in apartments, what is she thinking?”

“Do you accept transfers over the Arcanum?”

“Yeah sure,” he laughed, “-plenty of customers use Bank Cards instead of hard cash these days. Theft and murder for money are tiresome.”

“Alright,” said he with éclair completing the payments in the background.

“Ohh, you paid in full, how nice of you,” said the man, “-as a bonus, you can come to eat downstairs whenever you want.”

“Thanks, Mr. Kord, I’ll be sure to take up the offer,” the door closed and the heavy personality and fish odor left.

“Lady Anna, shall we decide who gets what room?”

“Igna,” ire filled the tone and step, “-how dare you pay without my consent!”

“I apologize,” he stood strong before her intimidation, “-I figured you didn’t have the money at hand. Your body language told so, do forgive me if I assumed wrong.”

“Are you trying to buy my favors?” her greenish eyes were relentless, “-what’s the scheme here?”

“No scheme,” he laughed, “-I’ve paid for the first three months; why don’t you pay for the other three months. It wouldn’t matter then.”

“Sounds like a great idea,” she returned to the empty living room, a single television, a ragged couch, and a nice enough view after the olden-styled window.

“About the room situation.”

“Pick which one you’d like, I don’t care,” said she holding a pillow tightly. ‘Autumn’s Blossom re-run,’ flashed across the television.

“As you wish,” the catchy opening made its way towards the kitchen, ‘-that show is old. Watching a re-run, how nostalgic.’ In the end, he chose the room beside the kitchen. A singular bed, a single door wardrobe, a table, and a single-window showing the alley. Compared to before, this here was decrepit, the opposing building had cooling units with goo-like waste loitering about. ‘A roommate should make it fun. I’m going to bed; my eyelids feel like steel.’

Later as the sun rose, soft chatter broke into a full-blown argument. ‘What’s all this ruckus, the living room sure is lively,’ a shameless chuckle at the pun opened into a warzone.

“My lady Anna, you can’t be seriously thinking of rooming with another. It’s unacceptable, I won’t allow the griminess of a boy to corrupt thy soul and body. What if he does the unthinkable?”

“Good morning.”

“You,” came a girl with hair tied in ponytail alongside bangs dropping shy of her brows. The latter were bold and gave the impression of perpetual anger. Her rounded nose slightly bridged, held square-glasses, “-how dare you room with my lady?”

‘What’s her deal?’ a glance at Anna showed no emotion, she stared listlessly at the screen. ‘And what her deal too?’

“Ila, stop bothering him.”

“But my lady,” her slender figure stomped away, “-I must ask for him to leave. Couldn’t you have asked me to be your roommate?”

“Give it a rest,” sighed Igna.

“You, don’t you dare address me in such an insolent tone.”

“Girl, you got issues,” he turned and ghosted them.

Chapter 485: Reunion

‘What was her damned problem?’ the ground approached steadfastly.

“Hey there, boy,” said the fisherman, “-what are you looking for?”

“Nothing much,” said he checking the time, “-was curious about the eatery, tis all.”

“Oh, so you like cooking?” the hefty arms twisted into a horizontal slice, “-how much do you know about fish?” he asked rhetorically and hung the larger creature to dry.

“I’ve never seen such a water-based monster before.”

“Obviously not,” the smile gave a sense of pride, “-this right here is the Kord. I know, I named it after me, and rightfully so. I first caught it around a decade ago, you know, when the monsters became active. It’s docile and doesn’t disappear after being caught or killed. I’m telling you, it’s a fish. The damned Guild thinks it otherwise, they say it’s different from living things,” the words slowed to a normal pace, the would-be rant stopped before long. “Sorry about that,” said he dousing the fish in a yogurt textured liquid. “I have a habit of going into unnecessary details. So, what did you want to know?” No reply came, the boy gawked at a few live specimens. ‘I can see why the guild thinks it’s a monster,’ thought he squatting for a better look, “-the one eye is haunting. It’s staring right in my soul, the fins and tail are colored in rainbow, what the hell is this?”

“That’s the antenna,” said the fisherman, “-it helps in sensing prey.”

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“How did you go about cleaning and eating?”

“I cleaned it the same as any normal fish. The flesh of Kord is rough with a mellow taste. I don’t get it myself... honestly, I think it’s the best thing ever. You can taste and do just about anything. No part of the beast is wasted, that’s the happier part.” Time showed 07:15. “Mr. Kord, can I help?” the sleeves rolled, “-I’m a cook.”

“You sure you can handle the beast?” asked he smirking, “-it may be docile – still,” the pause felt long, “don’t underestimate the power of a cornered rat,” emphasis on the underestimate. A sense of caution rose within, he stared at the beast, the antenna, the eye, the pupils expanded to a pitch-dark circle.

“A cut straight across here,” instructed Mr. Kord.

Chop, the pressure of slicing through the ugly creature cringed a little. As disgusting as it looked, the texture of the inside was the same. Reminded to pressing one’s sole onto a cockroach, the crispy sound gave chills, so did the Kord.

“Don’t be alarmed,” said the man, “-you’ll get used to it after a while,” the unassuming smile gave a sense of relief.

"Igna, time for school," said éclair plastering a massive red blinking clock across the field of view, "-Lady Haru awaits."

"Phew," wiping the sweat, "-Mr. Kord, I've prepared the fish to be fried. Will this be ok?"

"Good, good," changed into a plainer and easier outfit, "-good pair of hands-on you boy," he slapped his shoulder, "-most of the workers I hire quit by the end of the day. You don't seem bothered by the prospect of eating such a disgusting thing."

"No," before laid countless morsel of yet to be fried batter, "-the change from raw to cook is always nice to witness. Such an ugly creature is reborn anew for the enjoyment of another."

"Well then boy," he smiled, "-consider yourself an honorary staff of my eatery. Running this joint is easy enough, if you'd like, I'll pay you for helping in preparing the fishes early morning."

"I'll be glad. I have a favor first."

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"Go on," the buckets of living Kord were taken to an enclosed space in the dark, "-what favor?" a massive tank glowing white and blue held small to medium-sized Kord.

"Can I come with you when you set off to fish for more?"

"Sure, but I doubt I'll go anytime soon. You see," he stood, "-I've gotten more than enough to last me a year or so. They reproduce faster than you think – the best part, the fishes feed off weeds."

"Alright then. I'll head to the academy, for now, goodbye, Mr. Kord."

"See you later, take a few croquettes on the way out."

"Will do."

Filled by a sense of familiarity, the day woke firmly. Scattered rainclouds were about. The shopping streets filled with students on their way to the academy, the crowd included adventurers and helpers alike. A frosty chill settled, "-you!" glared Ila, "-don't get any wrong ideas," her fingers gestured menacingly. Anna followed blankly, '-what's her problem?' He cut and throttled across the park following a dirt-path. The ground was moist, each step dug the soles into the mud. It took ten minutes, the path wasn't limited to a flat-landscape, no, on the contrary, the path twisted around hedges, tall grass, tightly packed trees guarded by the foliage of branches and twigs. 'A park' or so he thought, described the nicer place of hangout – not the still untouched forest before construction. 'The staircase,' the path stopped and merged against grass, it continued to the cleaner-stone path. Clueless students examined the boy who came from seemingly nowhere. Commonsense said to not go deeper into the unexplored forestry, though he had done so on mere curiosity. The price for such an endeavor was spoiled shoes. 'Glad there's a tap,' not good as new, most of the dirt was cleaned. Lady Haru sent a message a while back, *-come to the gymnasium as soon as lectures start.*

Over yonder, farther than Igna's reach, Group C hurdled in the cafeteria. "Have you seen Igna?" asked Lampard scouring the landscape.

"No," returned a tired Rena, "-maybe he left early?"

"I don't buy it," said Leonard, "-he took all his belonging, surely..." a moment's doubt pricked his throat, he frowned.

"Something the matter?" asked Jen.

"Yes," the mouth felt dry, "-he's gone."

"How can you say so, come on Leonard, he's not running away again, is he?"

"Lampard, it's the truth, my friend," the head lowered onto the table, "-we've pushed him away. You girls are conniving and selfish; the conversation yesterday... you knew damned well he wasn't sleeping... Rena."

"Don't blame me," she shrugged, "-you continued the conversation, I merely brought up the subject." Divide between them quarreled into an argument. Lampard and Leonard were happy about the return. Yesterday was nothing more than the awkwardness of not knowing what to say to an old friend. Especially after the friend had done so much, their debt forced a deadly silence, one the girls took advantage of.

"Who cares about Igna," added Jen, "-the guilt is here..." sugary flutters enchanted the angered Leonard. The hidden clenched fist ease into an open palm. He couldn't argue, her innocent gaze... a poisonous act of greed. Her actions meant all but one thing, '-you're nothing without the backing of the Goldberg. I'm the one supporting us both.' Debts left and right, Leonard's world of love and comfort turned to a suffocating cell of torment. His lover, the one who vowed to protect showed the true terror of being a 'couple'. Rena as the confidant didn't bode well for Lampard either. Puppet masters looking upon their toys.

Not to take away credit from the duo, the boys realized it a long time ago. Their many nights of drinking and consoling one another revealed how much the girl's expectation weighted their feeble heart. 'Igna's the beacon who could have taken us to a better land. A better place in life, a bond they wanted to form and share.' Strength in unity; they knew how strong Igna was. Not physically, the boy was a man of his word and integrity. Regardless of the trouble, he'd rise and conquer, or fall and stand again.

An exchange of mundane head movement called for the white-flag. Thus, Rena and Jen hardened their grip, there was no escape – doomed to forever be indebted.

'The gymnasium,' thought he climbing the metal stairs, '-I need to see Chef Leko.' The staff-door sparked by the fire-filled cooking station.

'Igna's coming back,' the prospect brought a smile. The assistants ran about preparing today's meal. Murmurs of the unusually good mood changed ears the same as ingredients changed hands. 'Did he pass the Medusa of Cooking's trial?' *Click.* One word flashed, '-Igna.'

"Hello Chef, I'm sorry for being late." There he was, dressed in the chef's outfit. The boy Leko waited for so long, the only person that understood his goal of Dungeon-style cooking.

"Igna," hands-on the chopping board, "-welcome back."

"It's good to be back," said he holding a cheerful smile.

“Who’s that?” the assisting line-up revamped with newer recruits. The pressure of teaching novices brought more trouble than due. “I don’t know?” shrugged another hard at chopping.

“Don’t waste time,” voiced another, “-the stagiaire isn’t over.”

One thing stood out; the assistants wore uniform-like attire. A mix of the normal chef’s outfit with an element of being a ‘student’. A badge on the chest resolved the confusion, ‘Leko’s Cooking Academy.’

“Chef Leko, are they students from your school?” said he with a frighteningly friendly tone. *Gulp,* the students were scared for the boy, ‘who the hell is he much to speak so openly to the chef?’ or so went around their minds.

“Yeah,” Leko returned the courtesy, “-alright Igna, show me what you’ve learned. I’ll handle the finer details, prepare the ingredients; I’ll lead, and you follow, is that acceptable?”

“As you wish, chef,” the gifted bandana locked his hair in place, “-bring it on!” Orders came one after the other, the assistant choked at the simple procedure, more were preoccupied with who the new addition was. Fine-dining is a status of one’s standing. Many big-names in the culinary world from wholesaling to hotels and restaurants often sent their heir to Leko’s Academy. Rare was it for someone to not be of the upper-class. Baby-sitting the silver-spoon fed daunted Leko, the inaptitude of many caused heart-break. What could he do, what would he do?

Presently, Igna saw, noted, and took action. Those falling behind were reprimanded, “-stop cutting the cabbage and focus on the fish. You, the broth lacks seasoning, use the spice-bomb at the counter.”

‘Good,’ thought Leko silently, ‘-he’s taking charge and noticing the faults,’ the pot stirred with molten lava-like texture.

“Excuse me,” gritted one, “-who the hell are you?”

“The same can be asked of you,” returned he wiping the fingers, “-do you have a complaint?”

“Yes, I’m Sai from the Eiko Dynasty, my family owns resorts along the beaches of Plaustan. It’s inadmissible to have us, children of high ranking to run around the kitchen aimlessly per the orders of an unknown.”

“Is that right,” he glared, “-should I write a letter to the Eiko Dynasty instead?”

“What letter?”

“An expulsion letter,” he smiled, “-Chef Leko, the aptitude level of any student of Leko’s Academy is subject to scrutiny, am I wrong?”

“No,” came a lowered voice, “-anyone who performs badly is and will be expelled from the academy.”

“You heard it first hand,” smirked Igna, “-Sai of the Eiko Dynasty. Status doesn’t matter in the kitchen, either you turn and work or get out, decide.”

“You will regret this,” he mumbled back to work.

“Where did you find these apprentices anyway?” wondered Igna casually handing the necessary items.

"You're an idiot," he laughed, "-I'm glad you came back. My passion for cooking was starting to falter from the pressure of the academy."

"Please chef, this isn't time to reminisce, we have customers waiting." The focused face of the prodigy of Medusa screamed of talent. No wasted motions, the flow resorted to an acceptable state.

'What was I thinking?' he grinned, '-I lost my way. Thank you Igna, the pressure of dealing with so many nobles scrambled my aim. What does it matter if you're noble or not, anyone who doesn't perform will be eliminated.' The devilish like resolve erupted, "-SAI, STOP TALKING SHIT AND PREPARE THE FUCKING MEAT."

'He's back,' laughed Igna. The long-awaited reunion was more than he thought. Leko stood beside a young man with a bright future and no credentials. Depending on where he continued, one needed to have the assurance of an academy, a chef, or a restaurant to prove a person's worth. As it stands, Igna had nothing more than a few compliments.

Chapter 486: Cle

'These two,' demoted to washing dishes. Sai, who raised a commotion around an hour ago, at the start of service, peered with envy. The audacity of throwing his weight around was reduced to naught. The way Leko and Igna moved, the way they spoke using facial expressions, and minute changes in posture. They were truly made for one another, a pair of hands working their hardest to prove the food they cooked is the best.

"We're done for today," breathed Igna, '-the time is 2 o'clock. Suppose they'll get ready for the dinner service.'

"Hey, address the students," said Leko, "-you efficiently led a kitchen of newbies. Good effort, there's room for improvement – nothing experience can't fix," a towel landed atop a hand-guard. The white door opened to the grandness of the trial-restaurant.

'What good am I to give a talk?' cold-water ran along the warm hands, '-what am I suppose to say?' using a towel, the masses followed suit in cleaning their hands and rinsing their faces.

"Listen up," he called, "-gather around." Countless footsteps scurried to stand formally, they all watched in admiration, many were his age, and some were older. The latter didn't hold much thought to pride, as for the former, the fiery natural spirit of youth. "Every single one of you did good," said he sternly, "-mistakes were made, motions were wasted, and some dishes had to be thrown. Frankly, at this level, there's no way any restaurant will hire you as is. Take this experience to heart and learn, fail how much you can, a learning institute is the only place that allows one to fail, do mistakes, and be your worst. Don't get me wrong, being bad might hurt, the ego will be bruised. Still, learn, for when one master the basics, tis the basics that shall carry one to wherever the road might lead."

"I'm sorry, I don't have the time or patience to listen to someone without a background nor standing. I will not heed the words of an unknown. What if what you teach is bad, fake knowledge is worse than ignorance." The voice cutting across the masses wasn't of Sai, no, rather, it was a lady, a girl bearing red hair marred by locks of blue and green. The curved cheeks and ever-so pointy nose enhanced by the sharp-jawline and skinner body stature bared a resemblance to a doll as opposed to a human.

“Fair point,” nodded Igna, “-I agree. Fake knowledge is the bane to any students or lecturer for that matter. Though, I’d to say my experience isn’t based on fantasy. I trained for half-a-year, at Loron’s. Students of the culinary world must know of my teacher, the Medusa of Cooking, Lady Yuki Lordon. Thus, you may rest assured I shan’t teach anything without reason nor meaning.” The door swung as the head-chef reentered.

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“I second my boy, Igna’s words,” stood at his side peering over the students, “-the apprenticeship will continue for another week, after which, we shall hold the exams. Heed me well,” he glared, “-some of you are here without merit, which is fine. I’ll give a just warning, all those who do not perform adequately shall be expelled,” he turned to Igna, “-you too,” a heavy palm grasped his shoulder, “-as the prodigy of Medusa, you are nothing but a boy holding compliment. No tangible achievements. Come up with a dish for the exam; those atop the culinary world will attend said occasion. Lord Lordon and his wife shall be present.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “-all of you, return by four, we’ll go over the preparation of meat.”

“Understood,” they stormed the backdoor laying aprons on the back-table. Silence, Igna, and Leko stood trapped by a certain feeling of inquietude.

“Chef Leko,” he broke the ice first, “-what is the test about... Didn’t you say I was welcome to stay here?”

“Listen,” leaned against the cooking station, “-I want to see you be more than an unknown cook at the adventuring academy. The skills you showed earlier were pristine. I felt the same aura of Lady Yuki, which is a massive compliment. I see, or so, I’ve realized that she has taught you everything she knows in terms of techniques and mastery.”

“What are you saying?” the head swayed in dismissal, “-I went through her grueling training to stand in the kitchen with you, chef Leko. Why this decision, I don’t understand.”

“You misunderstood. I’m not saying you ought to leave the restaurant here. Take part in the exam, work hard, and impress the judges. The certification of being a chef doesn’t come easy. You can copy and make a recipe to the letter, yet, I’ve not known how YOU truly cook. I suppose the explosive taste is a part of it, what I’m getting at is,” he paused to stare deeply, “-this is the opportunity to find who you are as a chef, what is it that makes Igna, Igna, a specialty – a thing reflecting thy soul. The examination is nothing more than a place to showcase what you can do, it’s the perfect opportunity to make a name as well as be recognized as a chef. The ribbon around my neck,” he pointed, “-chefs are assigned colors depending on their skill and prestige. It’s a ranking system, the same as adventuring and anything in our society. Mine is red, the highest rank one can get. Red, green, blue, and grey – students have white, meaning nothing.”

“Lady Yuki didn’t have a ribbon.”

“Because she doesn’t need one,” he laughed, “-the lady’s rank is far beyond what we can measure. Her exploits are detailed and recorded; none will dare argue her achievements. There are countless stories about your teacher out there, can’t believe you never heard of one.”

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“She never brought up the...”

“What happened, something amiss?” asked Leko.

“Red...” he facepalmed, “-everyone I worked by wore a red collar, holy...”

“See, there’s more to the cooking world than you know. That’s why I don’t want to bind you here, go out and discover the world for yourself.”

“I get it,” the posture slouched, “-you win. I won’t argue.”

“Good, then come by the restaurant for the night service only starting today. I want you to dedicate more time to innovate, is that ok?”

“As you wish,” he removed the apron, “-one thing. What’s the date of the test?”

“Let me think, today’s the 2nd of January, the stagier ends on the 9th – graduation exams are on the 30th. This is perfect, it’s on the 2nd of February.”

“A reason why it’s independent of the 30th, I thought I was part of the exams?”

“No, I called it so for lack of a better word. The one you’re participating in is the annual Chef Ranking Competition or else referred to as Cle. It’s a massive event whereby students from all over the world gather in Hidros at the World Culinary Institute of Fine Dining to showcase their work. Access is given to only 10, and entry is only allowed when a person is backed by sufficient big names in the industry.”

“What about me, I don’t have that sort of backing.”

“Are you dumb?” he laughed, “-you have the backing of five red-collared Chefs and the Medusa of cooking. Igna, this is serious, you can’t fail at any cost. Any lackluster performance will shun the cooks who’ve granted their approval. It will reflect badly on them.”

‘Way to add pressure,’ thought he suffocating at the hurdle ahead, ‘-I’ve never made anything that substantial. I just followed recipes made by others... this is going to be hard. Ten world-class chefs coming to have their ranks assigned. Come to think of it, chef Leko must have gone through it too.’

“Chef.”

“No, I’m not going to reveal how the examination goes. It would be a waste of time; the setting is always different. One key is innovation, bring the best dish and ingredient you can find. Enough talk for today, head to the Trader Guild, lady Haru is waiting.”

So many words were spoken in the exchange it felt like an hour had passed. In reality, a mere fifteen minutes elapsed. The burden of training under masters so prestigious weighted on the shoulders. Until now, it had only been learning, following orders, and replicating. Cle came as a reawakening, a calling to show if he was made to be viewed as Medusa’s prodigy.

Out the gymnasium through the back-door, the view gave onto layers and layers of foliage. The leaves didn't give to show the ground, not once. Hard as he glared, green of differing shades continued until the horizon. 'Nature as far as the eye can see.' Along the stone path, into the blockier side of the academy, after the centermost buildings, came the workshops. A two story's high, wide monstrosity of building bearing opened gates – each individual gate hosted a mini-workplace for those in the crafting side of the academy. If not for the square shapes, one could have thought it is a beehive. The dirtied oily walls gave onto the dusty yard in front. Cars, to make-shift smithery's, and anything in-between. Shouting and the clanging of metal elevated the cacophony.

'Better not get involved,' he continued on the solitary walkway opposite the workshop. Tried as he may, the curiosity of those working the forge couldn't be forgotten so easily. Then and there, he spotted a thing of marvel, '-that bike,' thought he cutting across the crowded yard, '-it's the same as I rode at the capital.' The sun bared its fiery fangs onto his back, the mind could but admire the sharp-looking vehicle.

"What is it kid?" said a man rolling from under a car-trunk, "-want something fixed?"

"No, no, I didn't wish to intrude. It's just that I had a bike similar to this one here."

"Oh, look at you," he stood and held out brick-hard hands, "-that's the Augna Pro 22X. Or so I wish, the original thing goes for almost 75,000 Exa retail price. The rarity can have the price shot to 90,000, heck, I even saw a deal of 125,000 Exa on the grey-market."

"It's not the original?"

"No," he caressed the body, "-this baby doesn't work. It's only the body, the engine is too expensive to build. I promised myself if I can't buy, I'll make it."

"I see," he paused to wonder, "-give me a moment," stepped onto the yard.

"éclair, how's the bike I crashed?"

"It's in pieces, the motor came out more or less fine."

"Can I have it arranged to be transported to the academy?"

"Sure, but why?"

"Look up the market prices of the bike's engine."

"25,000 Exa, brand new. Secondhand about 15,000 Exa."

"Sorry for the wait," the boy showered by the sun returned, "-I'm Igna Haggard, a member of the Trader's Guild."

"Cool. I'm Gayae Boham, Mechanic and engineering student," the hard-hands reached for another grip, dark-brown skin complexion, shadowed by the deep and longing gaze. The sharp jaw grew stubby. The dark-blue cap with Y.N, in orange, fought against the pink-rimmed glasses.

"Nice to meet you. The deal is concerning an engine for the bike there," he pointed, "-I badly crashed mine a few weeks ago. It's in pieces, except for the engine, I must say, it's coincidence or a twist of fate."

“A coincidence from a member of the Trader’s Guild. I’ll believe so when pig’s fly. Anyway, what’s the price for selling the engine.”

“You give me an estimate,” he smiled.

“My budget considering the work, I can’t go above 14,000 Exa.”

“I’ll sell it for 13,000 under the condition that you take all the pieces, body included. I won’t vouch for the workability of the parts. Here,” he showed a photo, “-tis the state of what I’m selling. If you can make a body, reviving a dead bike may be child’s play.”

“I like how you think, kid. Bring me the wreck first, I’ll have the money readied by then, is that agreeable?”

“Deal. Nice doing business with you, Boham.”

“Call me Gayae, I’m the friendly neighbor mechanic.”

Chapter 487: Roommates

“Don’t thank me for a job I bound to do,” proclaimed éclair, “-besides, the transport will be handled by couriers. They’ll charge 100 for the trip.” Back to the busy workshop, he strolled past the larger path posed as the divide from grim and dirty to clean and somewhat nice. A four-story-high building with minimal effort on design. It looked plain, plain as it gets – nothing more could be said.

‘Here’s the place where most of the in-campus guild meets. I only came here during the introduction meeting. How’s lady Haru?’ in after the long corridors, signs nailed on various corners showed where to head. He followed suit with hands in pocket and a pathetic attempt at whistling. He resembled more of an idiot than a boy, though, none cared to comment for they were focused at their hands. The door of the Trader’s guild room opened paired with clamor as opposed to screeching. Rusted unlevelled hinges, he presumed to stand respectfully.

“Iгна,” a lock of hair swept the keyboard she used, her downward focus brought out the tidiness of her bun. A winding mountain-like built held by two sticks off which swayed gemstones, “-take a seat,” her outfit today was reserved, not much of her was exposed.

“Sorry for the lateness,” said pulling into his seat.

“No worries,” her fingers stopped typing, the screen’s glow onto her face dawdled in faint substance.

“Now,” the cat-like glare gave to a whiff of ire, “-about our deal of no fighting AND weekly reports. Someone’s been a bit careless, haven’t they.”

He winched, “-Sorry, my lady, things grew hard.”

“Things grew hard?” her eyes stopped at the desk though it intended to continue farther to his trousers, “-was it thy libido, staying with Yuki Lordon and her daughter, I must say, you’re quite bold!”

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“No, no,” the head shook into dizziness, “-nothing of the sorts happened. My goals never strayed, it was cooking, and cooking alone. I have a perfectly rational reason. Lady Courtney Haggard, the one you sent to save me during the fight against Yuki Lordon, is actually my mother.”

“I know,” she pressed her elbows onto the desk, “-tell me more about what happened. I know only what was relayed.”

“For once, she’s a great person. I enjoyed her company more than you’d know. The 7 months went by quickly. She offered multiple rewards, to which, I only accepted a few, you know, not working for what one has and all that. Then, came the day of New Year’s. To my surprise, my cousins, the Prince and two princesses of Arda came to visit. We began on odds end, by the end, cousin Julius and I were like best friends. Before you ask about the training at the restaurant, tis best we do not go over the subject. The tales are too intertwined to be remembered. I know the feeling, and it’s enough, I know the people, and it makes me blessed.”

“Well,” she sighed lowering the pressured arms, “-I knew something like that would happen. The fight you had, whilst saving Group C, although you tried to avoid the subject... don’t underestimate my information sources,” her aura gave mild space to breathe, taking a hard inhale could disrupt the balance, or so thought he at her mercy. “Saving your comrades of Group C from the Goldberg’s. I’m proud,” her lips nearly gave a grin, “-yet, the bodies found at the crash site were of members of the Legionnaires of Mothra. Be more careful, that sect is famed for being vindictive.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Anyway, about Cle, any ideas on a dish?”

“No,” the mind reflected onto countless experiences, “-I have a singular line of thinking. Dungeon Styled Cooking, what better way to express Chef Leko’s wishes. I want to continue what he endeavored to do; lady Yuki played a major part in risking her fame for the sake of a young chef. I don’t know the history, Chef Yuki and Chef Leko were once partners in the kitchen.”

“Yeah, she was a member of the Trader’s Guild. Her start was somewhat like yours, I think, well, the past won’t do much. Follow what the mind dictates.”

“Thanks,” he stood, “-I appreciate you calling for me.”

“Don’t worry,” the words followed till the door, “-if you’re going to follow the path of Dungeon Cooking, better get a good score at the practical exams. They’ll be picking people to go for the expedition in Coria soon.”

‘I see,’ the door closed. ‘I’ll need to fight to attain my ingredients. Dungeon Style cooking, I know the basics of preparation, any monster caught must be blessed and cleansed. Only then that a cook might take it apart for consumption.’

Arms crossed and lost in thought, he walked to the foot of the building. Here, seeing the many crowds, an idea came to mind. ‘-Mr. Kord might know more.’ Since Leko excused him from the preparatory work of the restaurant, it gave way for more free time and ease of movement. Attending wasn’t mandatory, he could drop in and out, after all, focusing on Cle was most important.

Three on the clock and trees on the paths, he headed down till the gates. 'Lectures must be over for today,' he glanced the right to spot students of differing fields. Out of the bunch, three individuals were highlighted, '-Jen, Rena, and Leonard.' Further up showed another three, '-Lampard, Anna, and Ila.'

'Hide, don't let them see you,' a failed attempt to slip into the masses. An oblivious Lampard waved the spear frantically calling, "-Igna, Igna, over here!"

"Hello," said he paused as the current flowed – few turned to stare, think, judge, and continue.

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"Where have you been?" asked he waving to Leonard over yonder.

"The Guild Office," said he, "-lady Haru wanted to discuss somethings."

"Hey Igna, how are you," voiced Leonard locking hands to then merge into a hug. "-Gave us quite a scare, you left... what was that about?" Over the shoulder stood the silent Jen and Rena. Leonard and Lampard's faces weren't normal, the lips laid flat as a line; dark-circles, a drunken-like speech manner.

'Guess the girls must have done something to them,' thought he.

"YOU!" a sharp slap-like voice froze his back, "-How dare you cross our path again?"

"Ila, you know Igna?" asked Lampard.

"Yes, I do," her tone changed when addressing the spear-man, "-he's a devil, a pervert, and a psycho."

"Would you please be silent?" fired Igna, "-I've entertained the childish games for long. Tis quite rude to throw around such degrading words at someone you don't even know. How about you come to stay the night, I don't care, sleep on the couch or the bath. Will that suffice to quell your doubts?" Stern and respectful, her lips stopped.

"It's fine," said Anna grabbing her shoulder, "Ila, I appreciate the concern," her hands moved to caress her long red hair, "-Igna here is my roommate. There's no need to babysit my chastity, he's a member of the Trader's Guild, I doubt he is foolish to harm and scar his reputation, isn't that right, Igna," her focus changed.

"Yes," he nodded, "-thanks for that."

"Wait, wait, wait!" yelled Rena, "-are you saying Igna is staying with Lady Anna?"

"What about the dormitory?" voiced Lampard.

"Don't worry about it," he smiled, "-it feels too cramped. Besides, the rooms are meant for four people, not five."

"Well," interjected Anna, "-Igna, shall we walk home, I'm done for today."

"Sure, as you wish," they left without another word said.

Leonard and Lampard could but clench their fists, the only ray of hope faded before their eyes. Rena and Jen relished the thought, whilst Ila shrugged. "I'll be off," said she abruptly, "-you better not get in the lady's way during the combat exams."

Returning home in the company of a friend felt nice. They spoke, or rather, he did most of the talking, whilst Anna nodded or gave one-word answers. Nothing seemed to trigger any interest. éclair was hard at trying to make conversation, the spark never caught fire, and in the end, they came to the park.

“Going around will take more time,” said he.

“Yeah.”

“I get the feeling you don’t like me that much,” he went for it.

“No,” she turned “-I’m not much of a talker.”

“Oh, is that so,” he chuckled, “-you do know how to form sentences. Lady Anna, are you afraid of the forest or dirt?”

“No.”

“Perfect, then follow me,” off the stairs and onto the grass, “-it’s a shortcut,” the same path as before.

“We’re not supposed to come here,” voiced she reaching the ‘forest’.

“No sign says no trespassing. Tis common-sense to not go beyond what is safe. I don’t care really, getting dirty is the fun of discovering something new. I doubt this path is populated.”

“Your right,” said she, “-I don’t feel any aura. The foliage is beautiful.” Now at the confusing hedges, “-Igna, you’re very eccentric.”

“Why do you say so?”

“I can’t get an idea on what sort of person you are. Sometimes you act kind, others, strange, stern, foolish, clever, there’s no meaning in your actions, what the hell do you think you can accomplish?”

“Wait?” he halted, “-you saying a person must obey a certain profile to be accepted?”

“Isn’t that common sense?” argued she.

“You believe people fall into differing genres, same as fighting, a sword can only be brandished to fight, not defend.”

“A sword was and is still a weapon for slaying a human’s life. A weak blade can never hope to save a life. It’s only used for striking another – isn’t that right?”

“It does make sense,” he paused, “-I’d argue... how about this. I’ll prove that a sword can be used for defense.”

“Are you sure?” she jumped back and readied an elemental spell.

“Yes, I have a knife, not exactly a sword, but a blade nonetheless. Here are the rules, you fire a spell and I’ll use this ‘weak’ blade to stop it from damaging the plants behind. No fire spell as it would damage the surroundings.”

“Alright,” her hands moved to form the symbol of Earth. “Come to me, Earth Arrow,” a dozen of projectile materialized, *-snap,*

'What's the point of this again?' the interface projected the would-be trajectory. Knife in hand, '-without my contact lenses, there's no way I could have seen this coming.' Sidestepped, '-Mana Cancellation.' A downward, diagonal, and finally, vertical stroke disenchanting the projectiles.

Fwop, "-I told you, a weak-blade can't defend."

"I'd beg to differ," blood flowed down the arms, "-I defended the trees behind. Meaning, I protected the lives I swore to protect – as, for me, it doesn't matter."

"Are you the type of fool who thinks self-sacrificing is the way to be acknowledged?" she walked over with a healing spell.

"Maybe," shrugging, "-my intent was protection, not victory."

"Protection is victory!" she exclaimed.

"No," the head shook, "-victory is crossing a bridge built off the remains of dead fighters. There's no such thing as a bloodless war, much less a peaceful one."

"We're different," said she healing his arms, "-it's not a bad thing. I'm impressed, no one has had the guts to challenge me headfirst."

"Well, you did hold back quite a lot as I used my full abilities. Our differences are heaven and earth, I just wanted to prove a point which doesn't seem any much clearer now."

"You did good," said she, "-I get people aren't bound by a single thing. I'm glad, thanks for that, roommate."

"Suppose I should thank you for healing me," and off they went crossing the park. The seemingly pointless argument gave way to a better view of one another. Anna, who had the habit of judging people based on her own experiences saw the world grew. As for Igna, the show of her power proved just how far he was from the combat students. Sword or not, the training alongside his mother achieved meager results. A day didn't go by without him practicing what was taught, he trained day and night to only be bested. The sting hurt, '-she's amazing.'

"You two are back," voiced the loud Kord handling the counter, "-come on in," said he, "-I've good food for you both." The customers stared enviously at the newcomers.

"Take a seat," offered Igna spotting a free-spot. "I'll go help the owner," he dropped the bag next to her table, "-Boss, can I help in the kitchen?"

"Sure, get them babies on the frier!" snorted the man.

Chapter 488: Combat Exam

"Here you are," a steaming flavor-filled bowl of goodness arrived in a tray, the fish on the porcelain added a slight touch of appetite.

"Where's my bowl?" asked another cheerful eater.

"On it," said he pulling the tray away, "-go have a shower once you've done eating. I'll see you later, roommate."

“Yeah, sure,” she veered to admire the reaching aroma of the meal. Her mouth watered and the stomach growled, morsels of vegetables often surfaced as if to say, ‘-hi I’m here, eat me,’ then returned to the bottom.

In no way was the eatery a comparison to the restaurant he worked. The place held sitting for a mere twenty people, long-table accompanied by small, round, benches. The dirtied walls from stains left by customers were cared for as if battle-scars. A singular fan rotated above with slight cries of agony. The noise went unnoticed as did the suspended television above the counter. Kord handled the kitchen and customers expertly. He didn’t need help. Still, Igna’s assistance was greatly welcomed. One after the other, plates were handed out to the customers; some came to eat on the spot, whilst many preferred takeaways.

‘This is delicious,’ the stoic face broke into an uncomfortable grin, ‘-it’s hot and spicy, my tongue is on fire, but I want more. This explosiveness,’ from her seat, she glanced into the kitchen where Igna showed his mastery. The roles rotated between him and Kord, the popularity of the fish dish was audible. ‘The same boy who failed and was viewed as a weakling. I can’t believe... is that truly him?’ Finishing her meal, she crossed the counter.

“What are you doing here?” wondered Igna handling a flaming pan.

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“I came to help,” she followed his example and wrapped a bandana, “-Old man, can I help?”

“Sure,” he smiled, “-a cute girl like you will increase business. Handle the customers.”

“Deal,” and so, the unlikely duo worked till six. Most returning students would come early for the takeaways. Once the minute hand moved to 18:00, the influx of clients came to a halt.

Outback, Anna dowsed her face in cold water. Igna stood sipping on a cold beverage.

“Good job out there,” complimented Kord, “-listen, it’s enough for today. I appreciate the help, though, I must say I’m not going to pay nor give discounts. The help is appreciated, don’t expect anything in return.”

“It’s fine,” said Anna, “-seeing those people eat and enjoy their time was a good experience. I’m not opposed to helping – it’s a change of pace from the daily grim fighting.”

“What about you?”

“I’m training chef, the experience is welcomed.”

“Good on ya,” he casually wrapped around the duo’s shoulder, “-I couldn’t have wished for more caring tenants. Go on, have a shower. I’ll have dinner ready.”

“Thanks, old man,” she took the back door.

“What about you?” turned Kord facing an amber low-hanging lightbulb of which presided over a few plants.

"I'm heading to the restaurant. See you later," locked to the plants, *-Gue of Lkon,* described the interface, *-a plant available only at the Azure Forest.*

'Interesting,' by the time he returned, the sun slumbered. The ever-filled day was naught but cooking and learning. 'First a monster, now an exotic plant. Mr. Kord is peculiar, he moves the same as a seasoned veteran. I could stand to learn more in his company.'

"Excuse me, chef," the metal steps blasted cacophonous complaints by its hinges, the latter had seen its fair share of films. From a proposal of courtship to the announcement of one being a father, the shadowy exteriors of the Gymnasium was room for a lot of secretive actives. 'I bet if the walls could speak, they'd recount the moments of despair and bliss experienced by the youth.'

"Igna," said he, "-come in. The students were waiting.'

"Waiting?"

"Yes," he thumbed to a tablet crowded by curiosity, "-the video of Medusa's prodigy."

"Please don't tell me," he arrived to tiptoe and glance above the masses, '-that's the viral video.'

"I'm sorry for what I said earlier," bowed Sai, "-the prodigy of Medusa is a worthwhile tutor. Please teach us the way," and so did the rest fiercely.

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"Here you are," said Leko, "-students. This boy here is younger and even the same age as some of you. Without financial backing nor family, he managed to make a name by fate and hard work. I won't say he's talented since I've seen firsthand how hard he works. In a mere six months, he's been acknowledged by Chef Emma, Emmy, Joe, Igona, and me." Murmurs of the names went to and fro.

"Didn't those five-win Cle? It's said their abilities are closer to Lady Yuki than anyone else."

"Yes, they have featured in the lasts culinary magazine. Chef Joe commented about a young boy who grasped his attention. Was he referring to Igna?"

"It's weird, why hasn't he been more popular?"

"That is simple," voiced Leko, "-Chef Yuki and I decided to not give him any media coverage. Fame is another beast. What he has to work for now is, performing at Cle."

"Forgive my rudeness," interjected Igna, "-I'm glad about the praise, however, I'm still a trainee. I've come to study, not be the center of rumors. Please, everyone, let's not forget why we wear aprons. It's not to be actors, tis to ultimately create a dish for consumption."

"Alright," he turned off the video, "-let's get to cooking."

"Yes sir!"

'Cold,' the night-service ended at 22:30. Except for the few waiting cars, the campus was deserted. The wind blew colder and harder. The apprentices split towards the dormitory. 'I don't know what to make.' Pondering the challenge, he dropped onto the stairs and crossed the park. Arrived at 23:00, he leaped into bed. Thus, the return went, the routine was set. Helping Kord in the morning, heading to the

restaurant and working till lunch, then return to the eatery and help for the evening, and lastly, leave for the night-service. 'I don't know what to do, I can't find inspiration. The dishes I try don't have much punch; the ingredients are lackluster.'

The 4th of February arrived in stride. The day began strangely, Anna for once woke early. "-Good morning," said he brushing his teeth.

"Good morning," she joined still half-awake. A beanie and short skimpy pajama, her stoic standoffish appearance crumbled to show a normal girl.

Splashing his face, "-today's the combat exams. Any ideas on what we can expect?"

"Not really," she shrugged, "-I don't know. One thing is sure all the students in our semester will participate."

"I heard a rumor about them choosing people for the expedition in Coria."

"Oh, that," she spat, "-yeah. Students matching their requirements will be welcomed to join the fight. The standard will be hard to beat, especially since Frost, me, and Lampard will set it. Anyway, it doesn't concern you," said she, "-I'll go get ready. What about breakfast?"

"The old man's got it figured," they cross to the kitchen, "-he packed it for us. I told him about the exam."

"We sure have a nice landlord."

"I agree."

On the said day, multiple examiners headed for the arena. Fletcher, Melisa, Lady Haru, and the ever-mysterious Denver. Beth, the vice-leader of Pegasus, a Tier-2 Gold adventurer, came to scout potential recruit alongside an independent party. A lady bearing crimson hair and eyepatch stood menacingly. The field welcomed the students.

"Are you ready to go?" shouted Anna.

knock, knock, "-coming,"

"YOU!" voiced Ila, "-how dare you answer instead of my lady?"

He closed the door, "-WAIT!" she jammed her foot, "-I'm sorry, let me enter."

"No," he sighed, "-I don't allow badmouthing idiots inside."

"Please, I was joking," her cheeks flushed.

"Look at that," came shouts from below, "-a girl is being kicked after spending the night," laughed the part-timers, "-she's wearing pink-striped panties, how cute."

"AHAHAHAH,"

"Igna," her voice deepened with ire, "-let me in."

"Stop teasing her," said Anna.

“Fine,” soon as he eased the pressure, the door flung open.

“LADY ANNA!” she jumped for a hug.

“Ila,” she held the impatient girl’s forehead, “-don’t get excited else I may fall.”

“My lady,” she gave to her knees, “-how can you bear such an insolent fool’s presence?”

“Pink-striped panties. Very strong words for one who has such a cheerful choice of undergarment,” a smirked led to his room.

“IGNA!” she stomped to only have the door shut in her face, *bang, bang,* “-open up, you disrespectful little son of a...”

‘A gun and a sword,’ the weapons laid on the bed, ‘-how will I perform in true combat. I’ve squeezed training into my already tight schedule. Compared to those who devote their time to the fight, there’s no competition.’

“Igna, what’s your purpose for today?” inquired éclair, “-what is the goal for the combat exams?”

“I don’t know yet. I need to make something for Cle, I need ingredients. Suppose going to a dungeon might broaden my horizon.”

“Deal, then I shall make it so the goal is accomplished.” Sword attached to the belt and gun kept inside an old jacket, ‘-I’m ready.’

“Welcome students,” shouted the menacing Fletcher stood atop the podium, “-we meet again after a year. The question of promotion to the second year will be to the instructor’s evaluation. The joint combat training is nothing more than an all-out fight between the respective classes. Craftmanship, Adventuring, Magecraft, Technology, Science, Military-arts and, Trading. Stand at the assigned areas.” Guides led the masses, and soon, Igna found himself alone at the southern-corner of the arena. Rena, Jen, and Leonard were grouped to the left whilst Lampard, Frost, Ila, and Anna were to the right. The front held the other field.

“I see the trader’s guild has a singular member,” gossiped the Adventuring group.

“Why is he even here?” argued those of Military-Arts.

“I see we have minimal members for the Trader’s Guild,” said Fletcher, “-Lady Haru, what are your wishes?”

“Let me have the microphone,” she walked over, “-Igna, nod if you’re going to participate.” He accepted.

“Then it’s resolved,” she dropped the mic creating an explosion.

“You’re quite trusting of that boy,” commented Beth.

“He’ll do just fine,” she sat, “-what of you,” turned to Misna, “-didn’t you find him at the Azure Wall.”

“Yes, he was nothing more than a stranded boy. Can’t believe he joined the Trading Guild.”

“I’ll explain the rules,” voiced Fletcher, “-tis simple. Survive the waves of monsters. We have brought in the summoner division of the army for this endeavor. Fighting against one another is allowed, though,

not advisable. Treat this as a recreation of a boss fight. The basics of dungeoneering have been burnt into your subconscious. Prove to me it wasn't a mistake."

'Good,' he gripped the sword, 'I'm glad it's not students versus students. I might just have a chance after all.' Weirdly enough, the group changed to form five-men teams of the same class. Supporting members retreated to the back, strong mounted the vanguard, and the skilled were dotted around to do burst damage.

"Excellent," said Mr. Denver, "-they know how to handle unknowns. A very good trait indeed." Mages were mostly supporting, except Anna who stood in the middle of the triangle-shaped formation.

'What about me?' wondered Igna.

"Move to the front," commented éclair, "-I've memorized the whole theory on how to fight in groups. Follow my lead, I know you've trained, it should be fine." And so, he walked, crawling his way across the multiple teams to stand alone.

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"He noticed the blind spot," voiced Beth, "-a smart boy indeed." The weakness in the triangle formation was its side. If the vanguard fails to have the monster's attention, they can break inside and lay waste to the support.

"What does he think he's doing?" wondered one from Military-Arts, "-he's out in the open. When the wave starts, the unengaged will push." Discord and mistrust amidst the students were nulled by éclair. He became the only voice Igna listened to, the guide in an uncertain battlefield.

"Everyone, get ready," a countdown beeped, "UNLEASH THE HORDES!" the platform opened, the ground rumbled, pairs of red flickered, and soon, evolved goblins jumped onto the field. Slower, bigger, hobgoblins ambled as heavier clubs rested on their shoulders. 'Goblins, again?'

"The bane of adventurers. The ever-evolving green devils. There are no other monsters that can rival their tenacity. A perfect choice to test future fighters."

Chapter 489: Teamwork

As they said, the tenacity of lower-tiered monsters compensated for the lack of firepower. Even so, they were by heart, weak, and many knew of it. Spells and gunshots made echo upon the start. The triangle formation, split into three stationed at each end, moved farther apart. The main-formation as the instructors referred to; largened to allow movement. The individual groups, split to have their own formations. Support focused on healing, others on barriers, enhancement, and more, fell into the Magecraft division who had to account for diversity. Therefore, the battlefield evolved within seconds of battle.

The vanguard was strong, ungodly so. Anna's statement of her, Lampard, and Frost setting the standards couldn't be any truer. They took on hobgoblins using strategy and coordination – Frost, a user of primarily a sword and shield, stood like a rock. Lampard jumped onto their greenish arms to strike at the head, eyes, ears, depriving the senses. Lastly, Anna, a terror on the field, conjured a mid-tier imprisonment spell; Rabbit's Den. It spawned a legion of white-furry creatures that impaled any who treaded on the field.

Military-Arts didn't falter, their group split into two. Rena ran to the front, Leonard joined the support unit, and Jen the guardian division. Their job, kill all stray and monitor the field. In the clamor of adrenaline and violence, the mind would blank at any moment. Group A, B, and C showed prowess in outfighting, outwitting, and outplaying the other students.

Up above stood with a hardcovered notebook, Mr. Denver watched holding uninterest. The name field margins underlined and graded the performances.

'Remembering name and faces, any minute detail, Mr. Denver has a photographic memory. A tempest working for the Guild's administration. He presides over the ranking from Tier-8 Steel till Tier-3 Silver. If he doesn't like the fighting style; bid farewell to adventuring. There are ways around his test, though, most independent guilds want that man's signature on a fighter's tag,' thought Melisa stood in arms-crossed. Her jurisdiction of monitoring the fight lowered to a mere spectator. 'He's come for the evaluation of adventurers, a ranking exam. If one performs adequately, they can by-pass the guild's ceremony and be given a higher tier. The reverse goes the same, we can expect people being degraded.' The grey cloud of questions and answers waned her mind into a state of, '-what am I doing?'

Further along the line, after the fearsome Denver, arrived Beth. Her being the vice-leader of Pegasus brought more adorned fame. The fighters below showcased their best to grab her attention. Being noticed would change lives. Pegasus dropped in rank during the last few years, she reached her early forties and took refuge as administrator as opposed to a fighter. Long were the days of blood and sweat. "They are quite skilled," said she fixed on the trio of Frost, Anna, and Lampard.

"Yes," added Mr. Denver, "-showing off abilities. A crowd-pleaser if I may add. Those three are being supported by three, look, there's her, her, and him." He pointed to Rena, Ila, and Cole." The latter was pretty unnoticeable, a lack of presence caused by his specialty; assassinations. Clocked in black, the only visible 'living part' was the eyes. The boy jumped from prey to prey, killing with one shot.

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"Good eye," voiced Misna, "-the vanguard is strong. Goblins might be too little a challenge for them," turned to Fletcher, "-how about calling onto the Summoning Division?"

"No, no," the head shook, "-we have yet to bring out the big guns," a sadistic half-smile gave chills.

'What can they be thinking?' wondered she frantically looking for a certain boy, '-what about him, how much has he grown since then?'

Below, away from the fighting stood Igna, alone and without purpose. 'The battlefield,' he thought with a massive top-side overlay blocking his sight. 'The vanguard is breaking, the attack unit of magecraft is getting too excited.'

"Would you like to try one of my ability?" asked éclair.

"What will that be?"

"The ability to process and calculate future outcomes."

"Can you calculate any situation I give?"

"Yes, you need but envision it for I have the power to read your thoughts and feelings."

“Bit creepy,” he shrugged, “-well, you’re an assistant I trust with my life.” And so, the spirit tracked his focus, ‘-the vanguard will fall. The goblins are starting to lessen their push. Something is amiss. We’re getting cut in numbers but they don’t press on, it’s not our fighting capabilities, far from it, it’s a telling sign of danger.’

Any lower-tier monster will instinctually back away to allow for a stronger monster, prompt a response from éclair.

‘What are they planning?’ for the first time, while most focused on the battle ahead, Igna sought the top for answers. Multiple portraits bearing names and personal information spouted, ‘-Instructor Fletcher is up to something.’

“Any possibilities the Guild has a Tier-8 monster?”

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“Affirmative, a 30% chance of it being an Ogre.”

‘I get it,’ he changed to the hobgoblins, ‘-they are tier 9 small fries. A tier-8 and even Tier-7 Ogre wouldn’t be hard to capture considering the people here. Vice-leader of Pegasus, a guild that has their hands in capturing and taming monsters. It makes sense now.’ The ambling beasts covered by shuffles of their bare feet. ‘éclair, can I join the battle now?’

‘Sure, have a blast,’ said it changing the hue from blue to red. The display moved to allow only crucial information, monster location in the forms of arrows, allies as white, and things of interest in black. No intrusive in the least, the addition of a fragmented piece of the overall map gave more situational awareness. éclair was a boon surpassing boon of gods and curse of demons alike. A man-made object which evolved beyond the point of recognition, the spirit was smarter than its creators and more powerful than kingdoms. The only command, ‘-serve and protect the master and his possessions.’

“Looks like the boy from the Trader’s guild caught on,” smiled Fletcher, “-Guild Leader Haru, your disciple sure is smart.”

“Whatever,” she rolled her eyes.

“Lampard, help me slay this hobgoblin!” voiced Frost pressured by bone-crushing swings.

“Can’t do,” said he crowd controlling a horde of thirty, “-if I move now, they’ll breakthrough.”

“They’re smart,” said Rena, “-they’ve parted to the left and right, targeting our sides. Frost, your alone on the front.”

“Where’s Anna?” the wind knocked out his lungs, *-cough.*

“At the back, we’ve lost the left side. Cole’s injured and Ila is with her.”

“Where are the rest of the vanguard?” asked he in desperation.

“Look behind,” said Lampard as if it was an easy thing to do. Pulling all the strength in his back foot, ‘-damn it,’ *Ice Barrage.* Ice projectiles summoned to impale and lock the hobgoblin in place. ‘Damn it, I did have to rely on my magic to survive.’ On all fours, he beheld a terrifying sight of reckless abandon.

The formation broke, the groups were independent, wanting to impress caused discord. There even hosted battles between individuals. Results, healers were overwhelmed and soon out of mana. The magecraft division was useless so late in the fight.

"This is a losing battle," said Lampard overwhelmed by greater numbers.

"I can't hold this much," added Rena using a singular sword. 'If only that pest didn't bite me earlier.'

"There might be no need to release them after all," added Melisa, "-they've succumbed to their own greed."

"The potential is there," the notebook filed furiously, "-who's the adventuring tutor here?"

"He's on break," replied Melisa.

"Tell him he's fired," he tore a piece of paper, "-teaching these kids to showoff instead of team-fight, what a worthless sight." It read the orders of termination.

"As ruthless as always," chuckled Lady Haru.

The dire situation saw Igna make a move. 'We need to relieve pressure from Lampard.' He dashed, hand at the ready to draw, '-Igna?' a blurry silhouette jumped to half the number, '-now for Frost,' pulling the pistol, '-got it,' a shot through the heart.

"Thanks for the help!" said Lampard plowing the remainder. An arrow blew the trapped hobgoblin to pieces. 'Right side is in danger,' Rena's stamina ran low, '-I don't have healing potion.' He sprinted, "RENA, DODGE!"

"Huh?" her brows lifted to see a gleaming blade take-over her spot. '-She's been holding this much, alone?' parrying and judging when to strike were foretold by éclair.

"Igna, what are you doing?" she asked rather stomped by the change.

"Don't mind me," said he, "-I've got the stamina for thirty-minute at most. Tell Frost, Anna, and their support to regroup on the front."

"Why should I listen?"

"This is no fucking time to be annoying. Do as I say, else we're done for."

She hid her head and made for the others. The orders went across the battlefield. 'Ten should be easy to kill,' thought he, "- a downward slash and," the last dropped, "-we're done." He rushed to the front where a cell-like barrier served as protection.

"Everyone here?" he panted.

"Yeah," said Rena having her injuries healed by Leonard.

"Who are you?" wondered Frost, "-never seen you at the adventuring..."

"No questions for now," he inhaled, "-the battle is going south quick. The students are focused on showing their abilities and not working as a team. We can't do much to help them; only lead by example. The stamina and mana consumption will allow for five minutes at most. Listen to me," éclair

showed their level of fatigue, “-Frost, Lampard, and Rena – I will need your fire-power to end the fight. Ila, Anna, and Leonard provide with cover. Jen, you standby, we might need you to end the monster that is to come.”

“I’m up for listening to him,” said Frost, “-ego in-face of defeat is foolish.”

“Glad to hear it,” he grasped the sword, “-I’ll take the gathering goblins. Frost, Lampard, and Rena, rest. I’m being serious, do not fight under any circumstances. Ila and Anna, you protect the three as for Leonard, heal them.”

“Igna,” approached Anna, “-are you sure?” she held his shoulder, “-I understand what you’re trying to do. There are three hobgoblins out there and countless others, do you really think?”

“No, I don’t,” he shrugged off her hand, “-I’m here to complete this exam. Fletcher will send an Ogre. Once he steps onto the field, end him.” And so, he dashed off to aid the broken ranks killing pest after pests on his path.

“I’m confused,” inquired Jen, “-why didn’t you guys argue his orders?”

“Listen,” coughed Frost, “-the fight isn’t as simple as it looks,” he fell, “-we’re fatigued and injured. He saw through our tough act. Strong as the tales about us three are, we’re still human with limitations. The tenacity of monsters, don’t underestimate it. Who’s that fellow anyway?”

“That’s my roommate,” added Anna, “-he proved a point today, people aren’t bound to be a certain way. He’s a training chef, and yet, chose to brandish a sword to help comrades and strangers alike. The commercialization of adventuring has made many ignorant of the importance of teamwork and unity. They want to be strong, alone, and fight, alone.”

“éclair, estimation on when the monsters will be summoned?”

“Five minutes,” said it, “-you’ll run out of steam after the first hobgoblin.”

“I know,” he reached the scattered remains of the Healing Unit, a singular wooden barrier held the conscious fighters.

“A hobgoblin,” cried one, “-it’s coming here, we’re done...”

“You,” a shadow stood on the barrier, “-how many of you can use healing magic?”

“Around 5,” said another holding a girl’s hand tightly, “-the rest of them are unconscious, we’re about to be killed.”

“Then, the five who can heal, rush to the marksman unit. I’ll hold the hobgoblin, gather and heal those who can fight, and retreat to southern-corner. We’ll end the fight there.” Unresolved expression wandered for a sliver of hope, “-look over there!” exclaimed Igna, “-the top of the adventuring class is readying to fight an ogre.” Its daunting growl trembled the very ground, “-if we let the goblins interfere, there’ll be no room for excuse. We’ll lose and more precious lives might be lost.”

“We’ll do it,” he let go of the girl’s hand to push for the other division.

'Let's dance, you and me, ugly,' the giant struck instantly, he narrowly dodged. Splinters of the wooden club grazed his head, '-I'm tired', slid under the legs, '-here, and here,' the sharp cuts aimed for Achilles tendons. A heavy shadow cast onto him, '-Oh shit,' he rolled, the beast slammed to lift dust. '-I'd have been dead,' side-glancing the front, they readied to fight. 'Guess we can rest easy now.'

Chapter 490: Sleeping one

'Rest easy,' absurd as it was, the battle neared a conclusion. Few healers who survived joined with the rest of the marksman unit. They were pretty beat, a hobgoblin was disabled momentarily. 'My stamina is running low,' thought he walking at a fast pace.

"Who are you guys?" wondered one holding a rifle.

"Healers," sighed they tumbling onto the remains of pebble-field haven. Another came in striking range, the arms lifted, time froze for those at the receiving end, '-their weakness is the legs,' slid Igna cutting the tendons once more. *BANG.* a blast had it topple backward.

"Finish it," screamed another.

'Finish?' stood at the beast's head, it turned with a look of defeat, the monster eyes glimmered as a trapped being. 'Why do I feel so?' sword in hand, a downward thrust pierced the skin and severed the throat, '-may you be freed.' It bled to then implode leaving behind few coins and a tooth.

"We've got another coming," screamed the same, "-get your head down."

The warning went unnoticed, *Lean back*. A gust swayed his hair, the monster growled in annoyance. 'Too close for comfort,' moved the club.

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"Come on boys," a barrage of projectile peppered the hanging belly into various spots of dark-brown. "I've got this," said another firing an explosive round. *Splat,* the sludge sprayed across his face, '-I'm beat,' fell onto his knee, '-I want to sleep.' Head to the ground, the slow heavy echo of impending doom came with chains scraping across the floor.

"He was right," said Lampard pulling himself with the spear.

"What are the orders?" wondered Rena.

"Same as Igna said," affirmed Frost, "-Lampard, you, and me. We'll deal as much damage as we can."

"Alright," they firmed their stance. Leonard used enchantments to level the playing field. No idea on the tier, the giant came to light with protruding canines reaching for the summit. A black chain ending by a reddish-brown ball plowed as he ambled. No attire, a modest piece of cloth wrapped around the waist, and few battle scars running across the bear chest. The skin-shade was lighter red.

"He's killed before," said Anna, "-the redder a monster is, the more people it's killed."

"He has the experience," voiced Lampard, "-but so do we." The foot crossed onto the field, those tasked in extermination stood at the ready. Lampard fell into a straight stance, the spear remained upright, '-Mountain Breaker,' thought he, '-never expected to use this here.

Rena had a sword wrapped in her hands. 'My fingers are numb, can't feel the grip. Still, it's going to be more than enough,' resolved, she skipped as if doing jump-rope. The more it occurred, the tighter grew the jumps until, well, none could see the motion.

Frost simply dropped his weapons and conjured an elemental armor. The ice-covered him from chest to feet, 'Ivory Armor.'

... 'faint echoes of steel. The group moves,' the eyes opened to a sorry sight, '-Rena, Jen?' adjusting to the light, the battlefield turned to ruin. Creators, fires, scorched seats in the distance, the Ogre ran amok ravaging the surroundings. 'What are the instructors doing?' peering up sought naught but the ugly truth. Most of them were impervious to the destruction, they wanted results, and thus, the freedom granted to the beasts, an unfair way of testing, overstepped boundaries.

"Where are you going?" the injured gathered at the extreme of the arena.

"To help?" he paused.

"Don't..." many sat with heads between their legs, some hid away behind mere handkerchief desperately wanting to forget. "The fight's been going on for more than ten minutes. They tried; I'm telling you, they tried. I saw Anna, Frost, Rena, and Lampard use their best attacks. It reflected most into what you see now." *thwep,* a body flew to end against the wall.

"RENA!" screamed Lampard, "-YOU PIECE OF," another swing of the chain knocked him opposite the girl. "We can't fight this," added Jen drawing her bow, "-let's retreat!" it fired to burst into faint powders that soon exploded. Pulling Ila by the collar they went further back. Leonard reached mana exhaustion; "-I can't keep the barrier for much longer."

"I'll take over," voiced Anna, "-got plenty in the tank. We need to regroup, where's Frost?" Amidst the smoke shimmered a gem, the flying silhouette of courage. "THE IDIOT!" a punch landed him beside Anna.

"Anna," barely conscious, "-this beast is higher than Tier-8. We've been had," said he, "-I don't believe it. It's a summoned monster from the Pegasus Guild, I saw the tag around the neck. This test is rigged, we're going to fail miserably. They know our weaknesses." It closed in on the injured.

"Beth, I think it's enough," voiced Haru, "-the students have shown their best."

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"No," refuted Fletcher, "-they need to know the hardship of overwhelming power. What if they come across such a monster, the dungeons are far more unforgiving than this. Frost and those bunch are strong, but not enough. Goblins are only the starting point, from here, the fight gets worse, and worse until either you die, or you bring down death."

"I apologize, Lady Haru," she nodded, "-I have yet to see actions worthy of future warriors."

'Run,' thought Igna, 'if I don't make it they'll die.'

"Igna, heed my words. This beast is far beyond your capabilities. The only option, run, retreat, save who you can, and run."

"I GOT IT," nothing else mattered.

"JEN,"

"Igna?"

"Help me hold Frost. Anna, restrict his movement, we need to run, like NOW."

"As you wish," she gracefully turned to blow a kiss, *Sleeping Forest." Legions of roots sprouted into hardened binds.

"Why are you here?" wondered Ila.

"You can't fight him," holding Frost's heavy shoulders, "-can't allow future heroes to die. Rena and Lampard should be fine, they eased the impact." Paced to a snail, the binds unraveled per the monster's raw power.

"Igna," sighed Jen, "-even if we run, where are we going to hide?"

"She raises a good point," added Anna, "-we can't escape. If only this was a dungeon, the retreating might have been an option. I don't see how we can back from an assessment."

"Surely the beast has a weakness?"

"Frost said it's controlled by someone from Pegasus."

"Pegasus?" no word need be said, éclair scoured the arena for traces of mana. Any threads a puppeteer utilized for command.

"Location found." It pointed to a figure sat atop a wall under a concealment spell.

"I have an idea. Anna, how much mana do you have?"

"A mid-spell at most."

"Good, conjure the worst one possible, make dust, I want smoke to cover the whole arena."

"Sure, no problem. Why, didn't I just say we can't escape?"

"No, it's tactics. They never specified what we can do," said he teetering on the verge of collapse, "-you girls have to do the heavy work. Jen, the one commanding him is there, right in front of the red-seat. Fire an arrow at him, I'm sure he's experienced."

"We need to apprehend him," voiced Leonard.

"Yes, that's where you come in play. Use the smoke to get close. Words have more impact than actions at times. Play the part and we're sure to finish this fight."

"IGNA!" came screams across the field, "-we're going to fight too," bullets flew anew, halting the advancement.

"What about me?" coughed Frost, "-I'm still here."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sorry for the earlier tactics. I didn't foresee such a turn of events."

“It’s fine, as long as we can end it.”

‘Yes,’ words meant more than actions. ‘Why do I feel so at ease whilst manipulating them? éclair and I deduced this to be the probable outcome. Why I had to sacrifice two to reach a winnable conclusion. Lower the enemy’s guard, strike when they don’t expect. Taking a heavy beating, using comrades as bait, it’s the moment of truth.’

Mountain Fog, the arena veiled in somber mist. They fell midway until the firing squad.

“It’s far enough,” said Frost, “-do it, Jen.” The stage was set. Igna’s hidden personality, the true him, the forgotten one or so the sleeping one, subconsciously interfered. From the moment éclair revealed the ability to calculate plausible future, he ran the various script in a flowchart. Events were laid in order and multiple variables were added until the most probable was found. The only time they stood a chance was by going for the overseers. Those at the top judging their abilities. ‘Maybe this is a part of me?’

The ending pawn moved; Jen fired an arrow bolting threw the mist towards the summoner. Off-guard, the concealment spell broke since as he switched to a barrier spell. The change gave time for Leonard to ambush.

“Dispel the Ogre,” said he, “-else I’ll burn you to death.”

“How can you say so... can’t you see I’m more experienced than you?”

“I apologize,” he laughed, “-I have one of the fastest casting time in the whole of Hidros. I doubt you pulling out a knife or changing spell will matter. My rapidity has been the downfall of multiple strong foes.”

“The fight is over,” said Haru, “-the students have found a way around your test.”

“No,” smiled, “-they’ve performed adequately. Using wit as opposed to brute force, a few people had to be lost. If this was real, I suppose the result is optimal.”

“Good,” smiled Haru, ‘-if not, I’d have given Igna the orders to use his vampiric abilities. A single command and éclair will trigger the impulse.’

“The test is over,” yelled Fletcher, “-congratulations on passing the combat exams.” The mist vanished to a mini-army of sleeping fighters.

“Good job on trapping me,” the ogre dispelled, “-I commend the efforts.”

11:00 showed on the clock, doctors were called to handle the aftermath. A grueling fight ending in a welcomed silence.

‘I can’t shake the feeling of bliss. Why am I so happy, why did leading them so sneakily feel good? éclair, do you know?’

“Leading others to victory using what means you have is part of it. You overcame a tedious task. Gathering the other students – and leading them to a worthwhile battle. The future I calculated was correct, Lampard and Rena would have most definitely died. From there on, you speculated how to use them, and arrived at a plausible conclusion. I’m impressed, it was very good.”

Denver's notebook highlighted students suitable for the expedition. Beth was only allowed to pick from what he had chosen. "You chose the stronger ones in the end. How boring," voiced she in a meeting room.

"No, no," he laughed, "-you have it wrong. The strong were nothing more than a pawn. Have you spoken with the students at all?" time showed noon.

"I don't think I have," added Beth. Fletcher and Melisa leaned on the walls for more answers.

"I have," said he proudly, "-the names you see on the wall were used by a mastermind. A strategist unlike I've ever seen before. You remember the boy who noticed the blind spot at the start?"

"Yeah, he didn't do much except run around."

"Wrong," he shook his head.

"What did he do?" asked Misna yearningly. Denver had the room on a leash, they wanted to know so badly it pained to ask.

"From what I was told, a certain boy ran from place to place, gathering, motivating, and rekindling the fighting spirit of those who gave to despair. He made optimal choices, didn't stand out, and supported. The most interesting thing is, as Anna said, '-I think he foretold how the battle would end. We would have no chance, the only way was to lure and attack those controlling the beast,' when I asked him how he figured so, the response was, '-No way would the guild allow for a murdering beast to enter the field. Killing young adventurers for the sakes of leveling up is foolish,' and I quote."

"You're telling me he led us to think they gave up?"

"Correct," said he, "-we witness what fearsome of a person he is."

"I mean, it's impressive, but using comrades as bait..." questioned Misna, "-can't help the uneasiness."

"Let me interject," voiced Haru strongly, "-the boy you so casually speak of is my student. Direct the questions at me, I will tolerate no smearing of his personage."

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