

## Death Magic 491

### Chapter 491: Chosen one

"Frost, Anna, Ila, Cole, Rena, Jen, Lampard, Leonard, and lastly Igna. These are the nine students from which you can choose from," said Denver loudly. "All excluding Igna and Frost will be ranked to Tier-9 Obsidian."

"It's still early for them to be ranked up," argued Fletcher, "-they are nothing more than greenhorns."

"My decision is final. Besides, you've seen their prowess, it will be fine. The ball is now in thy court, Lady Beth, who are you going to pick?"

"A five-man," sighed she, "-that's the most we can have for the raid. Babysitting anymore might come to harm our synergy."

"Don't underestimate our students," said Melisa, "-Pegasus's raiding team will be fine. You have Lady Misna's party too."

"Yeah, yeah, I guess," her arms crossed and face sunk. A decision had to be made.

"We don't have all day," voiced Denver, "-there's the paperwork for their advancement to consider."

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"Fine, fine," she shook her head, "-let me think. I'll go for Frost, Anna, Rena, Lampard, and Jen."

"Mind I know the reasoning behind?" wondered Lady Haru.

"Frost is a mage and fighter. Anna is the same, her conjurations are powerful. Rena is fast and capable of handling ambushes. Lampard is the spear, he'll break defenses and move forth. Lastly, Jen, her fire-power outmatches most of the archers I've seen. Giving her a Rare-type bow should garner interesting results."

"Won't argue with that line of thought." The room came to an understanding.

Igna breathed fresh air by a lonesome tree inside the unexplored park. Granted, there were trees around, just not in the immediate vicinity, the ground shadow under the foliage was deserted, almost deprived of 'life'. The mind wandered left to right, questions about what he is raised to the forefront. Never did the thought of being an awful being in the past cross his mind. Innocent as a babe; the reality of one's karma settled. In the battle, in the fight, controlling the pawns, pulling strings, planning, outsmarting the onlookers, it felt nostalgic, familiar, and homely. No amount of satisfaction from hard-work could honestly compare. Time went on to be 14:00. Those chosen by Beth were gathered at the cleaned arena.

'It's like nothing happened," commented Rena, "-a few hours ago and it is a warzone."

"I know," nodded Jen, "-very scary."

Anna and Frost took their time to arrive. "Hello, Lampard," said Frost grabbing his shoulder.

"Get off me," he shrugged, "-didn't you pathetically give up earlier?"

“What you say?” he side-glanced, “-you trying to pick a fight, huh, punk?” they butted heads.

“Calm it you two,” said Anna, “-anymore close and you guys might kiss. Oh the memories...” referring to a particular incident, the duo jumped back.

“Whatever do you mean,” said Frost coyly.

“It was nothing,” gritted Lampard, “-no more talking of the past.”

“Jen and Rena,” said Anna, “-you two are from Military-arts, right?”

“Yes,” they nodded, “-we’re part of Group C.”

“Cool,” she smiled, “-I’m Anna and this here is Frost, we’re from Group A.”

“You two did nicely during the battle,” praised Frost, “-and that other boy too, what’s his name?”

“The mage yeah?” intervened Anna.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Leonard,” fired Jen.

“Yes, the pretty boy,” laughed Frost, “-obviously, not as pretty as I am.”

“Shut it,” mumbled Anna.

“Ok,” it sent shivers down his back.

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\*Clap, clap, clap,\* two ladies entered from the eastern doorway. “Are you who we nominated earlier?”

“Yes,” added Melisa walking from the opposite side, “-these are the students thee called for.”

“Good,” she stopped with hands behind her back. “-Anna, Frost, Lampard, Jen, and Rena. You were chosen out of nine other spectacular students to lead an expedition with Pegasus and Lady Misna’s party,” to which the latter nodded in acknowledgment. “We will part tomorrow. We’ve got the backing from the director as well as the instructors. Excluding Frost who’s in an independent Guild, you four will be on display for interested parties. I’m certain I don’t have to explain why it’s so important.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the palpable severity of her body posture and mannerism let a pearl of cold sweat escape. The sky-lighting glimmered of Jen’s bigger forehead.

“Lady Beth,” interjected Anna, “-might I know of the other unchosen candidates?”

“Sure. Cole, Ila, Leonard, and Igna.” The look on the students didn’t seem satisfactory, “-I suppose I’ll give my reasoning on why you were picked. Cole is good for sneak attacks and finishing monsters. He’s very skilled and compliments Frost’s fighting style. Though he’s not perfect, he misses easily and does novice-like mistakes when alone. Rena’s the better version of his skill-set, at this moment anyway. Ila, I didn’t see much of her, she forces herself to not outshine Anna, it’s a bad habit, and her strong personality might create team-work issues. Leonard is a mage, one who trained at the academy – he’s very skilled but weak-willed. He won’t do anything unless forced for has to save someone. He’s no

match to Anna's supportive arsenal of spells. Lastly, Igna, the boy belongs to the Trader's Guild. He showed good swordsmanship but not great. For an average joe focused on trading and day to day life, he'll manage to fend off bandits. I can't expect much from that frail a man."

"Thank you, ma'am," they bowed allowing the speakers to leave.

"Guild Lady Melisa," whispered Anna, "-is Ila's personality that bad?"

Chuckled, "-no, no," her head shook and her mouth kept on staying calm, "-ok, I'm lying. Her possessiveness is a problem we all have to deal with. Anyway, get ready for tomorrow. It's going to be a long trip. Don't allow this chance to slip through, grab and forge thy future."

Up inside the faculty office, Lady Haru wanted to question Denver's blatant misjudgment of Igna. Everyone was granted a tier increase while he remained Tier-10.

"Don't give me that look," said he dropping his legs off the desk, "-I can't overrule the Ardanian Guild's ranking. I'm sure you understand this matter fully."

"Are you mad?" she smirked.

"Mad about what?" the supposed light-weight newspaper slammed onto the table.

"About me going behind your back and signing him to the Ardanian guild."

"No."

"If you say so," she locked the plant-filled small office and skipped along the corridor. The seductively shorter-dress swayed to the point of showing what hid beneath. Needless to say, the office-workers were enchanted by the up and down. She did it purposefully, wanting to see men squirm and be reprimanded by the ladies. 'What should I do next?' she exited to see a truck bearing Phantom's crest. 'What are they doing here?' upon closer look, the cap-wearing deliverymen scanned the area senselessly.

'I must have dozed off,' yawned Igna climbing the stairs. éclair rang an alarm so loud it deafened the left ear leaving a high-pitch buzzing. "It sure was fast."

"Transport from the capital to here is easy. They're waiting for you," added éclair.

"Excuse me," asked Lady Haru leaning forward, "-what is Phantom doing here?"

"Waiting for our employer," returned the man unimpressed by her provocations.

'Damn it. Those working for Phantom are nulled to my attempts at seduction.'

"Are you from Phantom?"

"Yes, and you must be Igna Haggard," he soon ran and ignored the guild leader.

"Could you please sign here, and here," as one took care of the papers, the other opened the truck and showed the merchandise.

"Very fast service, I'd say," he climbed to check – obviously, éclair did all the scanning and verification,"- all in order. Is it possible to have it deposited further back?"

“No problem.”

“Lady Haru, what are you doing here?” the truck made for the Workshops.

“Wondering what brought Phantom here. Did you cause trouble?” her ears shuffled.

“No, it’s business,” he explained the finer details.

“Good, good,” gently patting his head, “-don’t waste time, go see to the customer.” The fleeting figure walked away silently. ‘-It’s for the better if he doesn’t experience the dungeon. Why did Lady Courtney have to teach him swordsmanship? I sense traces of dark-mana, is she trying to reawaken the king... best leave it to her discretion. Granting the Haggard name is an overwhelming responsibility. She knows best what to do, after all, the lady is him in a way.”

As usual, the workshop banged away with explosions and young traders haggling for experimental goods. The truck came as a surprise at first to then be forgotten. Gayae’s workshop held more bikes than normal.

“Are you there?” the shout muddled into the cacophony, “-yo, are you there?” he banged the metallic door.

“I heard ya,” the dim interior had a tall shadow exit, “-what’s the matter with you, can’t you see I wrote no more orders for today, god, you going to make me old.”

“Sorry to disturb.”

“Igna, it’s you,” he reached the grease-stained hands.

“Yes, well, I’ve brought what I promised.”

“You’re kidding,” he turned the corner, “-where is it?”

“In the truck,” pointing back.

“Damn, from Phantom,” they walked over, “-I guess you really are a rich dude, aren’t you?”

“No, no, I’m just paying them from the money you’ll give me.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, I believe you,” the distracted words held no weight – same to how Haru often left men breathless, the engine had him drooling. “-it’s the real deal, oh my god.”

“I told you, didn’t I?” shrugged Igna.

“Thanks, man,” he jumped off, “-thing is, I don’t have all the money right now.”

“Cool by me. I’m staying at Kord’s Eatery. I’m fine as long as you bring the cash.”

“What are you?” he paused; “-how can you trust me so easily?”

“You have a place in this already crowded workshop. The popularity shows by the number of bikes, there’s no way you’ll do something so stupid. Besides, the dedication in crafting a dream is not something worth using shady tactics to accomplish.”

“Right,” he gave another firm handshake, “-if you ever have problems, come by my shop, I’ll give you a discount.” And so, a relation of trust was established. The day continued by him working at the Eatery. He pestered the chef about all sorts of questions. The man was forced into answering and demonstrating the boy’s answers.

The evening drew close, “-welcome,” said Igna mounting the front.

“Hello, roommate,” said Anna, “-I’ve brought some friends.”

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“Take a seat then,” he led them to a slightly larger table.

“Igna, I didn’t know you were working here,” inquired Lampard.

“It’s you,” voiced Frost, “-the pretty boy who helped us win the fight earlier. Man, I’m confused why you didn’t join the adventuring guild.”

“Not my intent really,” a saddened half-smile towards Jen and Rena quieted the atmosphere, “-I’ve only really trained to use a knife for cutting vegetables.”

“It’s a shame,” spoke the silent Cole, “-having a party-leader like you might make the difference. I mean, we were all stranded and left to the monster’s mercy. If not for the courage you showed, we’d have been dead.”

“No need to flatter me,” he remained stoic, “-anyway, welcome to Kord’s eatery. What would you like?”

“Today’s special,” voiced Anna. Everyone followed suit.

“Alright,” he made for the kitchen, the chosen eight of before conversed. Many were focused on how to fight monsters, what strategies to adopt, and such. Jen and Leonard flirted away from prying eyes. Anna could but tease the love-filled girl.

“Igna, get to cooking,” shouted the loud owner.

“Alright,” bandana wrapped, his domain stirred in a pot.

“Guys, guys,” voiced Anna, “-look, he’s going to change.”

“Change, what is he, a monster?” asked Frost in jest.

“You could say so.” Knife aimed and ready, the eatery fell silent. It had been two days at most. Words went around fast. The arrival of a beast garnered more publicity than any other campaign. Kord turned the boy’s cooking style into a performance, and he didn’t mind for it was his way of finding answers.

“The explosive taste, I can’t wait to taste more.” Compliments filled the murmurs.

“Lampard, weren’t you roommates with him, what happened?”

“Frost, please, don’t ask such obviously intrusive questions,” objected Anna.

“I don’t mean to hide anything. Group C had a fallen out, he went his way and us our own.”

“He’s my roommate now,” added Anna, “-don’t get any wrong ideas,” she said in jest, “-I don’t care what bad blood you share, as far as I’ve seen, he’s a well-mannered gentleman who doesn’t bear any ill-thoughts at me or any other.”

Chapter 492: Horizon

The combat trial ended without much bother. The students returned to normal their normal lives when put in perspective, the test was nothing short of common. Other peers and upper-class men listen to their tale with mindless attention – just as a babe recounting a story in inaudible groans and mumbles, it soon dwindled to naught.

The 6th came as Lady Beth and Misna readied to carry the students towards Coria. A train ride to the capital followed by them moving in trucks towards the hills.

‘Here they go,’ thought he at the precipice where night and day merged to be one. The sun raise was shadowy somber black while the sunset was amber and varied. What did it mean, who knew, the thing that mattered was seeing the few companions off. Anna, Lampard, Frost, Rena, and Jen. Their weapons and gear shone poorly, the smiles did all the talking, the idle stare before someone of authority (Lady Beth) was stomach-turning. Unlike the prior day, she stood in the company of other fighters with preceding reputations.

“Good luck,” mumbled an awkwardly silent Leonard, “-it’s so hard to let her go, I feel like if I don’t stop, she’s going to go away and never turn back.”

Thinking of his sentence to be the fear of being alone, “-she’ll be fine,” added Igna to quell the insecurity, “-Anna and Frost, not to mention Pegasus will be there watching. I can’t see how this can go wrong.” Oh, wrong was it, a truth he’d learn later on, the 6th, a fateful day that forever changed Igna’s growth.

Time spent in the kitchen gave room for improvement. The apprenticeship of the students ended after the 9th, most were changed to the ways of food making. The passion of giving one’s best lived in the hearts, as well as the insults, humiliation, and borderline assault.

“Pathways and opening leading to naught, slivered around the gentle hills of Coria. It took around 3 hours from Juei, due to the lackluster roads, and another 5 on foot, to climb the first hill. Many adventurers took the climb as a test, if one can’t endure the first night in the relatively ‘sound’ hills, tis back home. The peaceful, not all the time, the atmosphere was a welcomed addition for seasoned fighters teaching the ways to novices. Along the paths craved out of literal blood and sweat, crashing against mother nature’s natural barrier, the expedition team would arrive at an outpost. A small camping area warded by barriers strong enough to push Tier 9 and below monsters.

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The ‘relatively peaceful’ atmosphere as mentioned before wasn’t to add flavor to this text, no, far from it, dear readers. Stronger monsters ranging from wolves to Wein; bat-like creatures counting among the few able to use magic, pestered the area with sonic attacks. A single shout could knock a fighter out cold. These pests, the screamers of Coria, were placed in a more reserved spot. A swing or a gunshot sufficed to kill the creature. Though, when cornered, it could evolve into Wein-EV, the naming is incomprehensible; so is the charm of the adventuring world. Back to Wein-EV, the ghastly things

received an increase in speed, strength, and particular spell; Sonic Ravage. The latter is rumored to have taken out a squad of Tier-9 Obsidian adventurers. The lasting damage ranged from the loss of hearing to deteriorating eyesight. ‘The Newbie Killer,’ not entirely literal, the truth of those words was palpable.”

‘What is this?’ wondered Igna throwing a magazine to the table, ‘-I came here for answers and this is what I get? An article from an unmentioned author...’

“Looking for something?” inquired the gentle-looking assistant.

“No, no, it’s fine,” he returned politely.

“As you wish. Seek me out at the front if you need anything,” nodded the man. The academy library, not big, it barely held six tables and the shelves were mostly novels. Any material related to magic, science, anything educational, would have to be found manually or check over the Arcanum. éclair offered to do so, but Igna kindly refused.

“I have the data here,” wrote across the interface, “-come on, Igna, don’t be stubborn.” The date flashed Monday the 18 of January. ‘A week’s gone by since their expedition,’ thought Igna. It was common for an exploration mission to last this long, as a trainee chef, that world didn’t matter to him, or so was what he thought. ‘I had a dream last night. One severe and appalling, I saw the faces of my friends being butchered by an unknown figure – a demon, or something along those lines. It’s probably a nightmare... why thought, why do I have this feeling. Leonard’s word of not seeing her again feels ever truer.’

Floor 10, unexplored and riddled with traps and monsters. A party of 10+ people didn’t suffice, the cause of death for so many adventures laid in rest in a high-ceiling room. “How are we underground?” wondered an injured Rena holding her arms.

“Don’t know,” sighed Lampard using the spear as a walking stick, “-lady Beth, how are the others?”

“Don’t look back kid,” said she, “-this room is safe.”

“It’s a nightmare,” exclaimed Jen, “-I don’t want to fall here...”

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“Don’t worry,” said Beth breathing deeply, “-I still have my strength as a Tier-2 Gold fighter.”

“We were ambushed,” said Anna, “-there’s nothing more to it.”

“I’ve sent my party to the top,” said Misna, “they’ll return with backup. Rest up, things might get rough.”

“That’s an understatement,” voiced Anna healing those injured. Setting the students aside, the party now was Lady Beth, Lady Misna, a half-elf named Aiea, and Pegasus’s exploration team.

“Chill,” said one from Pegasus, “-the expedition led to some conclusive evidence. The dungeon evolved and so did the monsters. The death count was a given. It’s been happening to Aria too,” he nonchalantly echoed to the center, “-this is a safe zone,” a green tag swayed.

‘This presence,’ the locks of green hair slapped across her pale cheeks, “-a demon!”

“WATCH OUT!” cried Beth to no avail... the lasting words of it being a safe zone fell by five impaling lances. Red mixed with black, the demon hovered legs crossed – her robe floated the same. Lances

levitated to the right accompanied by a spiking shoulder guard wielding the face of a demon-god. The left side laid bare, three black orbs twirled menacingly.

"Is this why we're in such a mess?" wondered Beth reaching to her weapon.

"A demon of this caliber in this shit a place?" gulped Misna, "-I'll estimate she's a Mid-tier Demon."

"Yeah," breathed Beth, "-if we fight her, we'll be lost. Demons can't be measured by the tier system since they are sentient in a way."

"Even if we fight..." voiced Anna.

"We're dead," replied Frost, "-we need blessed items to do her harm."

"An exorcist or a member of the church," cried Rena, "-we're doomed."

"An exorcist..." Jen watched listlessly, '-the church,' she clasped her temple, 'not those memories,' she cringed silently, none notice.

"Are you ok?" turned Lampard.

"I'm fine," one knee to the floor, '-this is bad. Her aura, it's reacting against mine. Why did you have to be a demon,' the hue of her pupils changed.

"Jen?" smiled Beth, "-I know you were once part of the Exorcist sect of the church. We don't have much information about their teaching ways."

"Did you bring me here on purpose?"

They could but avoid her demanding glance, "-the demon, we need to defeat it."

'Fine,' she stood, "-for the sake of seeing Leonard again." \*Grace me lord under whom I serve, grace I, a lonesome devotee for I need strength. To purge evil, and to purge the darkness, I call upon the blessing of Quento, the God of War. Heed me, Glenda, Bow of Axle, I, Jen Qune, thy contractor, summons thee.\* A flash of light engulfed her outfit into melting rays of white, it wrapped around her chest and formed a skirt, a light-blueish bow rested on her back.

"Ok, Misna and the rest of the Pegasus, follow my lead." Firmed on the beast ahead, "-CHARGE." A golden arrow fired to split into countless arrowheads and rained onto the demon. Black portals conjured to block the projectiles – most hit to ground the demon. Pegasus followed suit in aiming for the exposed weaknesses. Demons were not targetable by humans unless granted the blessing of a god. The latter came after stride and effort – the likes of which sliver could endure.

Blow after blow, the battle reached its climax. The demon laid on all fours shadowed by a fierce blading aimed at her neck. "HAHA," a bubble of black expanded to push away the fighters. In a swoop, the damages sustained healed, the lances around the arms fired forth. The orbs rolled to trap any fleeting stragglers. Beth didn't take her attempts lightly, her swords readied for the strongest move she knew – as did Misna. The climax exploded into shades of fire, blood, blue, unknown to the eyes, the display was blurred. Beth's stance came to a slow, Misna froze with an opened mouth, the colors crumbled into grey. Grey walls, grey floor, grey bodies, grey blood, grey screams, grey tears, all grey and sluggish.

“NOT ON MY WATCH,” cried Beth breaking through the expanding vacuum, “-Final Form, Greatsword Technique, End.” On impact, the greyness imploded into the demon’s stomach.

“MOVE!” rushed Beth grabbing Jen and Rena.

“LET’S GO,” screamed Misna holding Anna, they ran and left behind the blood of comrades. Away clopped their feet to then end in silence.

“Was that it?” the hovering figure landed as a figure came out the walls.

“No, I didn’t see him today,” said a lady with short grey and blond hair parting down the middle, “-the inheritor of my lord has reawakened. He’ll show up, don’t worry about it, the one who will lead us will be here soon. The presence I felt a year ago is strong, and gets stronger, he’ll come, trust me.”

“As you say, lady M.”

“Igna,” called Chef Leko, “-you seem out of it today, something happened?”

“I guess,” he paused short of readying dough.

“Want to talk about it?” he rinsed his hands and walked over, “-try me, I’m experienced in matters of the heart.”

“The chef is also a master at warming one’s heart?”

“Enough jest,” he placed a heavy arm onto the shoulder, “-I’d like to think I’m more than a chef to you. I see you as a little brother, not even a friend, you’re practically family in speaking. So, what’s up.”

“I had a dream about my friends getting slaughtered. It’s weird, I know, it’s just like I feel something is waiting for me, I don’t know where or how there’s something out there that’s calling for me. My head is blank, the pressure of Cle too, I’m lost.”

“You’ve reached the wall,” he said in a slow and knowledgeable voice, “-the answers you need won’t come unless action is taken. I’ve seen you deteriorate in fierceness, Igna, take a break from cooking. I know practice makes perfect... it doesn’t apply to people like us. We’re masters of the basics, the basics do not need to be practiced, it’s part of us. Take a break from the kitchen, take a break for the academy – I’ll put a good word to Lady Haru. What do you say?”

“I’ve been here for less than a month, want me to go away that badly?”

“Not that way, you punk,” he gently messed up his hair, “-go out and experience another world of cooking. Taste is the culmination of culture, mannerisms, traditions, and is what represent one from another.”

“Taste?” he paused; “-I understand now. Thank you, chef, I’ll be going.” The stomps of the metal staircase felt appeasing.

‘He’s off to find answers. Go on, you have two weeks before the competition, bring me something only you can make, Igna.’

The jolly walk of discovery halted by a sudden message, “-Igna, sorry to inform, I have intercepted a damning message. The expedition team hasn’t responded to their outpost; the dungeon is silent; they’re mauling the possibilities of them being dead.”

“Dead...”

Chapter 493: Xenon

“How can they be dead, were they not with Pegasus and their best squad?”

“There’s no need to be so harsh,” voiced éclair in a demanding tone, “-I know the news came as a shock, it’s normal. Take some deep breaths and focus your mind.”

‘Sure, as if that’s going to work.’ Hiding the attitude, the eyes closed and heavy breaths helped settle the mind. The world ahead reopened to clarity and solutions.

“What are my options?” he asked stood at the side of the path. Students often glanced to return to their prior conversations. The head held high; the message was not meant for the reading of any mere unrelated students. Some would say it be classified. Raising the issue to another would be his downfall, the only card to play remained in the hand of éclair, the trusted assistant.

“I see the heart rate has slowed and the mind is at ease. Here are the options,” the interface flashed to allow multiple displays at once. Written on them were location, last report, witness report, counting amidst the complied databank. ‘They last made the transmission three days ago. There’s been nothing apart from Pegasus sending a crew to gather reinforcement. Their exploration team,’ as shown on a page, ‘-rank from Tier-6 Emerald to Tier-4 Bronze. A strong lineup at first glance. Anyone would be foolish enough to think they can be defeated so easily.’

“Correct,” spoke the earrings, “-the most probable conclusion is a monster of Tier-4 and higher, or beings not abiding by our ranking system, has made itself known. We can only expect the worse from this evolving wreck.”

“éclair,” sat under a covering willow tree deep inside the park; the leaves fell to resemble a person giving a hug from the back. The somberness, as it always was, felt nice, the quiet and silence allowed for deeper thoughts. “What are the actions being taken by the administration?”

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“Since the adventuring teacher has been fired, the students aren’t under anyone’s immediate jurisdiction. The blame will most likely be put on the expedition team. I doubt if they are found dead, charges could be pressed. They have to sign a contract stating their deaths, under any circumstances, is their responsibility. Tis the way said line of work is plausible.”

“I know that,” said he browsing the phone, “-I’m to guess Military-Arts is the same?”

“Yeah, the whole incident of harassment has raised suspicious gazes at them. I can undoubtedly say, the academy isn’t going to take action.”

“Enough speculation, I need concrete proof.”

“Here you are,” returned a smug tone. Damning proof in form of a recorded message between two high-ranking parties. Each spoke under masking software, the distorted voices made it hard to pinpoint the culprits.

“Students of the Academy have gone missing.”

“Is that so?”

“What are your orders?”

“Leave it be, the situation is under Pegasus’s responsibility. We cannot allow for more controversy around our already questionable reputation. Let them die, who cares, we’re not gathering any more forces for their rescue.”

“Will that not be an offense?”

“Don’t worry,” the distortion gave way for a chuckle, “-post a quest request at the guild, put it under a teacher’s name. If the press ever raises the question, we’ll say the academy tried to amass a rescue party.”

“I understand, very good, it shall be done.”

‘What a way to cover their asses,’ thought Igna at the disheartening message, ‘-nothing is clear as water, nothing is pure as light and nothing is without expectation.’

“What’s the plan of action now?” asked éclair.

“We’re going on an expedition,” said he after receiving a message from Leko. The Guild Leader agreed for him to travel in search of answers for the upcoming event.

‘If lady Haru accepted, must mean the competition will greatly benefit her purpose too. She’s playful but smart...’ he laid against the tree, ‘-what’s happening to me?’ the palm opened to try and grab the far away branches. ‘Ever since the combat exams, my mind can only think of ways to outwit my peers. My heart tells me to trust but my mind refuses to listen. I’m stuck in a loop, who was I really?’

“Are you ready to move?” asked éclair, “-the bike has been readied. I’ve contacted the Guild of your arrival; they’ll have supplies for the expedition.”

“Won’t it take money?” he stood, “-the Trader’s Guild isn’t going to help much, are they?”

“Not the trader’s guild,” an image of a certain materialized, “-tis one owned by Phantom. Xenon, yes, a blatant reference to Xenos the founder...”

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“Phantom... I said I didn’t want to use.”

“You have it backward,” he laughed, “-Xenon is an independent guild, one that accepts quests and requests. I can vouch for their strength, what better way to go on an expedition than in the company of elites.”

"Fine," he shuffled to the shopping streets where someone laid in ambush. Kord's ever full eatery seemed silent. A step inside showed not many people, '-did something happen?' he ambled till the counter, "-Mr. Kord, you there?" No response came, the few eating did so in complete silence. Thinking nothing of the matter, the apartment door opened to mild chatter.

"Hey, how are you Igna," said the loud landlord, "-I met this fellow along the way; he's a friend of yours yeah?" Blond hair and simple clothes, a nod came as a visual greeting. "I'll leave you to it," said he closing the distant door.

"Leonard," said Igna, "-what are you doing here?"

"I'll skip the details," he stood, "-Igna, I'm sorry, but I need help."

'Judging by the reddish eyes, the puffed cheeks, and dark-circle, he's not getting enough sleep. Does he perhaps cry at night?' paused on the questionable state, "-help in what?"

"The adventuring expedition..." quick to bring up his phone, "-look, there's been an article on the subject. People have gone missing and the recent team has yet to respond, they implied the fighters are already dead."

'A leak?'

"Conniving journalists," commented éclair over the interface.

"What do you think I can do?" sat across, "-I'm not a fighter, far from it actually."

"I know," said he, "-the idea is mine either. Remember Ila?"

"What of her?" he leaned to scratch his cheeks.

"She's too proud to admit it, but we need your help. Me, Ila, and Cole want to go there and help. Please become our party-leader, there's no one here who can guide us as well as you," hands-on knees, he groveled.

"Don't do that," rushed Igna to raise the boy, "-it's no surprise you want to help." The friendly visage gave relief, "-come on," he held his shoulder, "-a noble shouldn't beg."

"I'm sorry, but I had to do it, it's the only way. I can't bear the thought of losing Jen, not anymore, I was against the trip in the first place. If she dies, I don't know what I'll do, I've already given my family for the sake of love...I can't."

"I understand," giving a tight embrace, "-I was going to help with or without you. Go wash up, bring the others later tonight, we'll go over what we can do." And so, the slumped distraught noble stepped onto the restricted back-alley. He gave no thought of acting strong.

'He's a total mess,' wondered Igna watching the desperate boy walk along the street, '-can love really make a person so miserable?' He'd bump into people, receive glares and blade-like comments.

'Sorry,' he'd say slowly behind woeful eyes and continue.

"As it is a dessert to cherish, love can also be the poison of those who tread too far into its ever-inviting arms. A delicate innocent-looking apple laced in venom. They keep on eating and eating; addicted

beyond recovery, wanting to feel the same ecstasy as before to only be dragged into reality. Tis the thing teenagers dream, an impulsive feeling of want. He left his nobility, his power, and fame, to be at his lover's side. Look at him now, she's gone, we don't know if she's alive or dead – I'm sure the weight is crashing him."

"You're right."

Later that night, Leonard, Ila, and Cole arrived to have dinner in the apartment. The eatery would be inappropriate for the discussion. A plethora of steaming hot dishes rested on the dining table. A change from eating alone or in the company of the guests below. Ila held a reserved look, Cole glanced around curiously. Leonard didn't naught but wait patiently.

"Tis the first time I have guests over," commented Igna wiping his hand, "-please, make yourself at home," and so, they paced about until Igna returned. "Shall we discuss the matter over dinner?"

"Sure," they agreed. Dishes passed about, and their plates filled.

"Before we start," voiced the host, "-does everyone know about the situation at hand?"

"Yes," they nodded with grins, the food warmed the inside out, the stress all but vanished.

'It worked,' thought he.

"Igna," said Ila first, "-I heard from Leonard about some information..."

"Oh, that," he took a sip, "-the academy isn't going to help with the expedition. I heard it from a reliable source. The article is true to some extent, something is lurking inside that dungeon."

"You insinuating lady Anna is dead?" her tone rose.

"Softer," interjected Cole, "-we've come here to ask for help, not start a fight."

"Please, listen to what he says," added Leonard.

"I don't like it one bit," she focused on her food.

"Can you please go into more details?" wondered Leonard.

"Sure," the conversation went on for longer, though it didn't seem outstretched.

"Basically, we don't know if they're alive and we can't expect the guild to help."

They moved over to the living room. The television played mournful piano pieces from the virtuoso of Arda. Meanwhile, Igna did the dishes with Cole's help.

"Are you sure about going on this trip?" wondered Igna.

"Why ask me?" he paused midway wiping a bowl.

"You're the only one who's looking at this rationally. I dare not tell the others, but, if Pegasus's team couldn't do a thing, what can us, students, do?"

"Listen, Igna," he rested the utensil, "-I don't know myself. There's the feeling of if I don't do something, I'll regret it for the rest of my life. I want to go and see them for myself, even if they're dead, I don't want the 'what-ifs' to haunt me down the line. It goes the same for you."

"I get it."

"..." An awkward silence forced Cole out of the kitchen. Igna kept on washing the same dish over and over again. What Cole said was true, having regrets might not be so good down the line.

As soon as he entered the living room, "-we've decided," exploded Ila. "-We're going to the dungeon," the adventuring channel covered Coria and it's raising problem. They touched the subject of increasing monster ratings. The caster had this to say, "-at the current growth, if our adventurers do not strive to become stronger, the strength gap might outgrow their control. We do not need a repeat of the monster invasions."

"I'm sure they're still alive," added Cole, "-you said it yourself, Pegasus is there."

"Time is against us. If we don't hurry, any sliver of survival is all but naught."

"I get it," he took a strong step forward, "-we're going to Coria."

"You'll help us?"

"Yes, under one condition."

"Which is?"

"We'll seek guidance from other guilds. Students alone have no chance, if we're going to support them, we'll bring what the world has to offer."

"And how do you expect that to happen?" shrugged Ila, "-Blade's end has a fortune-like fee and no other guild is as strong as them."

"You're wrong," he smirked, "-I know an independent group that'll help us."

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"Who are they?" wondered Cole excitedly.

"Xenon, Phantom's Guild. The company the legendary Xenos of Kniq founded."

"Shut up," they stepped back, "-impossible. Xenon is elusive, there's no information on the headquarters. Stop lying... at least give some believable lie."

"Wait and watch," said he, "-just you wait and watch."

Chapter 494: What friends are for

On those very same resounding words, Ila's defiant tone lowered to a breeze. He talked the talk, now was time to see if he walked the walk. Thus, the next day arrived by heavier bags and early birds. The eatery, short of opening for preparation was ambushed by the students. They agreed on taking the early train for the capital.

“Are you sure we’re going to get help from Xenon?” wondered the sly and unconvinced Ila.

“I have my connections,” said he rather awkwardly. Stating connection gave the impression of him being someone above the average household. It implied he knew people of bigger standing; one might expect nepotism and such. There was a bit of truth to the matter at hand, though, it was best to allude further probing.

Cole and the still zombie-like Leonard walked closely behind. Igna led the march, ‘-is this wise?’ he’d wonder for Ila turned her attention to some other students walking about. She held no tact nor discreet, her ability to enter people’s safe space and be friendly(it was how she appeared to the rest of the student body) was a commendable asset to have. Getting close, starting a conversation, unrelenting confidence in one’s mannerism and speech patterns, the easier it sounded, the harder it was. Considering the increasing numbers of peers her age who are afraid to order and talk to merchants, gathering confidence was hard-earned. Somewhere along the way, they must have stopped wanting to engage people in real. The Arcanum, the simpler it was to text a person, the harder it became to start up a conversation. None dared raise a brow, ‘-it’s the world evolving,’ thought the smart, ‘-they’re just smug,’ gritted the foolish.

Blazing from afar to slow at the coming of the station, the frosty air of the morning created mist about the headlights of the train. Dust or insects made rounds about the inviting source of light, a pair of never-blinking eyes approached ever so close.

“Come on,” said Igna, “-we have a long trip ahead of us.”

“Just where is Xenon’s headquarters?” wondered Cole curiously.

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“Outside the capital.” A vague reply to avoid the topic. ‘-I don’t know the address myself,’ a harmless lie to quell the uneasiness of early morning. The rare visitors exited holding elongated yawns. Most of them tipped their heads in acknowledgment. At this hour, the train was basically theirs. Igna sought to acquire first-class tickets.

“Are we not going to the usual compartment?” wondered Cole.

“No,” said he proudly, “-I was given a great deal on these tickets.”

“Really?” the tense, horizontal lips perked into slopes, her curvy cheeks lifted to reveal dimples, “-first-class?”

“Does it not read so?” added Cole sarcastically. Expecting her sharpened mouth to refute, the hand moved to cover his sight from the coming onslaught, deep down, it was an instant regret.

“I guess it does say, first-class,” the focus was on the luxury awaiting them. Nothing much happened, Cole turned to Igna with a smirk, they both hid laughter as he registered what the stealthy boy meant.

“Departure for Rosespire in five-minutes. Gather belongings and check tickets with the conductor. We wish you a pleasant ride,” said the intercoms.

“He sounds smug, doesn’t he?” snickered Ila.

"I guess," replied Leonard wanting to get out of the clouds.

Walls of brown layered by patterns made of black – for a private first-class cabin, there was not much difference. Suppose the silence, extra space, and grand view of the outside sufficed. Well, for the normal folk, who needed to go from A to B, it didn't matter much. The conductor came knocking on their door loudly, Cole answered and checked the tickets. The cap lifted, threw a glance at Ila, then returned to a tiny notebook.

"Pretty weird," said Cole softly locking the door.

"Gave me the chills," cringed Ila, "-reminds me of a certain person," the fierce brows gestured Igna. He gave no heed to the pointless provocations and instead focused on preparation. éclair aided in filtering the good from the bad, they compiled a list of reported quests, monster sightings, and a general layout of the dungeon. Preparation was the crucial point to anything in life. A gentle pull had the scenery move, and off they went.

An hour or so later, as the sun rose, \*knock, knock.\*

"Who is it?"

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"Leko."

"Come in." The door opened to a poster filled living room, the sofa had cluttered with beer cans, the stench of cigarette reeked from the curtains and walls. All and all, it was a filthy environment.

"Lady Haru," he said, "-may I come in?"

She replied with: "-didn't I give you permission already?" the mumbled and space in-breath pointed to something else engaging her mouth.

"I beg your pardon," he slipped through the ajar door, "-it's concerning Igna."

"What happens now?" she stepped out the bathroom, "-did he cause trouble?" white foam from the toothbrush dropped onto the dirtied floor, her slippers had seen better days. For once, her sleepwear was most appropriate, beanie, long sleeves, and comfortable pants.

"You sure have a bad view on the boy," said he subconsciously tidying the couch.

"It's rare for you to visit, so, what happened?"

"I sent him on an adventure."

"Didn't he just return from the capital, what could be the reason now?"

"I want him to experience a world of taste. He's been acting weird lately, I don't know if something happened. I was wondering," the spectacles flowed onto her face, "-is the guild hiding something?"

"No, not at all," her reply came forth true and sincere.

"I guess not. I mean, imagine if maybe a friend was hurt. I'm sure Igna would rush over to help. Can't help but wonder why Cole, Leonard, and Ila were with him this morning." He spotted them as they headed for the station, Igna even waved joyously.

"This talk is over," she returned to her own devices.

The trip continued for well over ten hours. First, the train would pass through Meke and turn towards the capital. Most of the time was spent sleeping. Leonard laid his head against the warm windows. Cole had his head upwards against the seat and Ila sprawled onto another a few steps away. 'Coria, the perfect place to train without getting injured. It's as is reported, I can't see anything suspicious. The generally low-tier is caused by the monster evolution, or so what the guild says. They mutate into worse monsters, perhaps refuge for the rejects... so many baby goblins killed, make me think of an orphanage. Like, why...' he wondered, "-why would a damned orphanage come to mind at this hour. Lack of sleep, perhaps?"

Ten hours turned to thirteen hours, "-the capital," he voiced, "-we're here."

"Really?" they awoke to see the beautiful walls stretch onto the heavens.

"Brings back memories."

"Yeah it does," said Igna, "-tis where your tale began, didn't it, Leonard?"

"I guess," the slower pace gave time to reminisce, '-it's where we fought, I went against my family for the sake of love. My mother rejected me and my being, the argument we had that day is ever resounding in my soul.'

"Son, might I ask why have you decided to go against my will?" the faceless body gestured strongly.

"It's unfair of you mother, why did you attack us without warning. I said the picture was nothing more than a show of affection by a friend."

"Surely you don't think me a fool. That picture has floated around social media and is known to the nobles. What will they think, a noble-born shouldn't be so adventurous with the normal populous. Our blood is pure and right, we've been shunned into silence, our honor has barely been restored. Our monarchs are turning the continent into a haven for low-borns. I will not allow my son to be tainted."

"Mother, tis you that is tainted," he refuted, "-you refuse to see the truth. The world you dream of has long given its last breath. Can't you allow me to have a chance at life? I worked my hardest at the mage's school, I trained day and night to please you and father. When the time comes for me to find solace and comfort in the arms of another, you see it as taint, how harsh must this injustice be?"

"Quite the childish squabble. Has the girl brainwashed you?"

"No."

"I gave you time to decide. Either come back or leave, what have you chosen?"

"Mother, I wish I could have had your blessing going into the future. Life has so many unknowns, there's no guarantee I'll be alive today or tomorrow. I hold no grudge, father and you will always hold a dear place in my heart, you gave me life, a well-sheltered life, good education, and a place to call home. I

wish not to be ungrateful. Time eventually comes where the bird has to spread its wing and fly. I promise to not use the Goldberg name, I relinquish my claim to the dukedom for the sake of love. May you have a nice life, I shall see you soon, I hope.”

“GET OUT AND DON’T COME BACK!” resonance of the scream, the sheer anger, and contempt, pent up feelings burst forth as if a volcano to stop at the neck. The burning sensation, the pain. It wasn’t sorrow, no rather, the reflux of stomach acid. Not eating for days shown in the skinner body size.

“Snap out of it,” said Igna, “-will a hero truly rescue his princess looking like that?”

“What do you mean?” he stared up.

“Look around you,” the muted surrounding revived, the greyness sparkled. Hue and color, he saw it; a semblance of hope, a hand being held out, a hand holding an apple.

“I can’t imagine how you feel,” every word burned into his heart, “-giving everything for a person and now, said person might be lost forever. I dare not say I comprehend. Which is why I’ve remained silent for all this time. Matters have changed now,” out the main-station, Cole went on to buy tickets for Rotherham. Igna and Leonard sat face to face at a fast-food joint. His tone turned for the worse, “-you asked me to lead us into battle. Therefore, as the leader, I’d like to take every precaution I can,” the apple now rested on the wooden table. “Frankly, you’re a burden.”

“How can you say that?” the mouth moved lifelessly.

“No one is going to mourn your death. Ila and Cole came per your words. It thy responsibility to not let them die. They have futures and might be in love like you are. I know you haven’t been eating, the body looks like shit. Here is my offer, take a bite out of that apple, or walk away right now. Remember, walking means not seeing Jen again.”

“Don’t underestimate me,” \*crack,\* ‘-what was I doing? Self-pity isn’t going to do much. Licking my old wounds, what a joke. There are lives at risk. I need to save Jen. I didn’t spend my childhood learning magic for nothing.”

“Good,” smiled Igna, “-the apple actually contains magic. A restoration-type spell, it’s what the shopkeeper said anyway.”

“Igna, I’m thankful.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Cole soon arrived with the tickets. Ila finished her bathroom break.

“Look at you,” voiced Cole, “-Leonard, are you feeling ok now?”

“Better than ever,” said he loudly, “-I’m sorry for all that. I needed someone to reach out a hand. Might not seem much... but it worked. I don’t know what came over me, I just know, I have to save something precious to me.”

“Finally,” exclaimed Ila, “-a noble crybaby decides to man up. About time, dude. You realize how much I had endured by Igna’s hands?”

“Ila...”

"You guys," he laughed with a glistening tear, "-I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Stop it," sniffled Ila, "-you'll make me emotional, I hate it."

"I seriously don't know how to thank you," the tears turned into heartfelt showers, Bystanders stopped with concerned looks, seeing such a pretty boy cry made many o' girls flutter.

\*Paft,\* "-there's no need to say anything," said Igna tightly hugging Leonard. "This is what friends are for."

"Thank you..."

Chapter 495: Leader of Xenon

Are you guys finished?"

"Sorry about that," sniffled Leonard, "-I'm better. My mind feels at ease, a heavy burden was just lifted." The train headed for Rotherham arrived, the impromptu party unknowingly headed for the event which would carve their body and soul, questions about reality and what it meant 'to be'.

Time became a luxury, the expedition party's number dwindle. From around 20 strong to only, Lady Misna, Beth, and the students. Earlier, as the demon enraged to slay her companions, many of brave champions forced their wills onto the leader. 'Getaway, we'll buy time,' said they with pride, a sense of duty. In those moments, heroes or villains didn't matter. Where normal humans would resort to fleeing, the adventurers stood strong, casting spells, executing complex maneuvers to only end up dead. They sacrificed themselves knowing the family would mourn the deaths, knowing they'd leave behind a copious amount of hassle for the next of kin. Bravado that saved many of younger adventurers in the past. Mentor willingly died for their students, the tales were never-ending.

As luck would have it, Rena stumbled onto a crack in the dungeon walls. Beth quickly ordered the rest to follow suit. A barrier was summoned to prevent monster detection. A babe of fire burnt ever so shyly. Frost pressed his head against the ground, no footsteps and no other presence. They finally had a moment to rest.

"What's the plan now?" asked Anna to the leaders.

"We wait," said Beth, "-fighting isn't an option." Blood clots, mana exhaustion, low supplies, they were cooped up inside for more than a day. Rescue never came, Lampard boiled into a fever. Jen's right arm began to turn dark, the skin-tone and look of despair on Rena was proof of the condition. Monster poison, infection from their dirtied blades. Frost was more or less fine, considering the situation. If a battle broke; only Beth, Anna, Frost, and Misna would be able to guard themselves. Rena's strong personality cracked under the pressure. Seeing Lampard in pain ate from the inside.

"Shouldn't the rescue team be here?" asked Anna.

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"I doubt it," said Frost, "-that's if they made it out alive. I don't think we hold much hope for survival. Either the monster kills us or we die of hunger." The food ran out slowly to the point of single bites being a meal. The smell of rot soon permeated. Beth fought to keep her mental state sane. Rena fell first to the point where she'd sit in the corner and weep, giggle, and soil herself. Jen's face blanked. Lampard

fell into a deep slumber. The situation was dire, Frost and Anna forced themselves by regularly taking short naps.

The reality was, they had no clue how long they were stuck. Counting from when Anna found the crack, it took six to seven days for the news to reach the academy. Only on the eighth did éclair reveal the news to Igna which happened to be the 19th of February. Anna's mana focused on maintaining the barrier and the ever echoey room plunged into darkness.

"We have to do something," said Misna running to Beth. "Forget starvation, it's insanity that I'm worried about."

"I know," said she, "-we don't have any option. Going out there is suicide. I'm not going to hold any hope of rescue coming. I doubt they'll agree to move and leave their friends behind. The choice is; Rena, Lampard, and Jen must be sacrificed if we plan on running."

"And we can't possibly have that. The rescue team has died, I think. Else, we would have had some clues."

"The demon is still out there; I can feel her presence even now. She knows where we are but doesn't attack."

"Jen's having a hard time," whispered Anna, "-lady Beth, Frost sadly had to freeze her arm else the poison..."

"Yeah, I know. We can't do anything," cried Beth, "-please, someone, come and save us."

20th of February, Rotherham came in sight after a long 6-hour trip. Night had long sprawled its shade over the continent. Time displayed 22:00, the station gave a feeling of uneasiness. Three blinking lights were spotted in the far distance.

"I've heard bad things about Rotherham," added Cole.

"Really?" inquired Igna, "-it doesn't look that bad to me." The train departed; the station emptied to an empty street at the entrance. Few cars rode to and fro, no taxis and no information.

"There's no one here," commented Ila, "-looks like a ghost town."

"It is a ghost town," added Leonard, "-Phantom controls the area around here. Mother told me about their activities once – the dark-guild."

"The dark-guild?" gulped Cole, "-the rumors are true."

"It's only rumored," said he, "-I'm no way going to vouch for my mother's words."

"Enough of that," said Igna ambling down the short stairs, "-standing isn't going to accomplish anything." A two-lane road carried onto the horizon accompanied by regular lamp-lights. The poles weirdly rose to then disappear, '-hill.'

"Igna," said Ila holding his shoulder, "-hold on a minute. We came here thinking you knew Xenon. Please don't tell me..."

"You're right," he laughed, "-I was told to come here. The rest is..."

"IGNA!" shouted Leonard, "-how can you be so irresponsible," the would-be rant stopped short. "-I mean," the head lowered, "-our comrades are in danger. We need to help them as quickly as we can."

"No need to tell me twice."

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Soon, the sound of the engines rumbled over the hill. Numerous headlights drove towards the station. Distant to then up close in a matter of minutes, "it's the dark-guild," whispered Cole, "-look at those cars, they've come for us!"

"Stop joking. There's no way to see who's behind the wheels. Maybe it is an escort for some VIP."

'She's right,' thought Igna, '-the name reads...' the interface revealed the truth. The cars turned right and went around a building to stop at their foot.

"We should really get going," whispered Cole taking a step back.

"Yeah, I agree," they shuffled to the station, "-Igna, are you coming or not?" shouted Leonard.

"Leave him," said Ila. The row of cars reflected the starry-nights; multiple doors opened at once. Blonde hair exited the middlemost car, Igna didn't seem phased. "Ila," paused Leonard, "-wait."

"What now?" she reluctantly held onto Cole's bag, "-who are they?"

"Royalty," said Leonard. Guards armed to the teeth gathered around the duo. "Igna doesn't know how powerful they are," he stomped towards the crowd, "-opening his mouth will offend the prince. He might get killed." The urgency showed in Ila's compliance.

"Why did he have to get involved in the upper class?" cried Cole jogging to match Leonard's long strides. Two-armed figures halted further advancement, "-let us through," begged Leonard, "-my friend is in danger." The mountainous figures made no such moves. The handsome man graciously fixed his hair. Eye to eye, Leonard thought of the worst-case scenario. Not bowing, a blatant disregard to his social standing, '-we're done for.'

"Cousin Igna," said he.

"Cousin Julius," they hugged, "-I didn't think you'd come to receive us."

"Cousin?" the jaws dropped, "-IGNA, IGNA," screamed Ila, "-you owe me answers," she forced her way inside, "-what do you mean cousin, how can someone like you speak to a prince so casually?"

"My apologies, young lady," fired Julius, "-might I ask why you use such a patronizing tone whilst addressing Igna?"

"Highness," she knelt, "-pardon my manners. I got carried by the confusing sight of such a meeting."

"I'll disregard the blatant disrespect," he turned to Igna, "-cousin, is she your friend too?"

"No, far from it," he smiled.

"Good. There's no benefit from associating with people of her kind. What of the two boys over there?" the circle broke as he walked to stand at their face.

“Acquaintance,” said Igna, “-Leonard here is noble.”

“Yes, I know,” he smiled, “-Leonard Goldberg, the boy who gave all for the sake of love. It’s the courage I admire.”

“I’m flattered, highness.”

The short conversation was an obligation. “-Igna, I need to discuss the matters further, shall we head to the hotel?”

“Lead the way, cousin.”

Shy of his car, “-what of those three. I’ll allow the boys to accompany us. The girl is welcomed to stay the night under the starry sky.”

“Stop joking,” laughed Igna.

“I’m merely teasing,” he gave a handsome smirk. A gesture instructed the guards to accompany the guests. Throughout the journey, the cousins made small-talk and laughed loudly. They grew close over social media.

“He really said Cousin Igna?” wondered Cole, “-I didn’t mishear, did I?”

“No you did not,” sighed Leonard, “-didn’t he have amnesia. What is he hiding from us?” then and there, the memory of a silvery-white-haired lady flashed, “-his mother. I remember something along those lines.”

“Being related to royalty, doesn’t that make him a noble too?” wondered Cole.

“I don’t know,” turned to Ila, “-what do you think about this?”

“I don’t care,” she pouted, “-I can’t believe Igna is related to the prince Julius. A retired idol that reached world-wide success alongside lady Emi. The story is fascinating. Apparently, he joined Manager Scott’s tutelage after graduation. Phantom acquired the crumbling Apexi and began there. He decided to study the art of management before going onto the stage. The first-ever show performed was alongside the youngest princess of Arda, the virtuoso. He matched her beautiful notes into a...”

“We get the idea. Don’t go fangirling on us.”

“I’m such an idiot,” slow soft headbutts against the car window followed until Phantom’s compound. It arrived at a beautiful reserved hotel. Green, flower-filled archways headed the road. They stopped after a round of the statue.

“I can’t believe you used to sing.’

“Yes, yes,” they walked shoulder to shoulder. “Butlers, please take care of our esteemed guests.”

“My lord, my lady, please follow us this way,” the grey-haired man damning force the trio out of the area.

“I need to speak with Igna.”

“Do so at a later time,” luggage was carried to the skyscraper facing rooms. Each was twice the size of their dorm-room at the academy. Igna and Julius moved to an office on the higher floors. There, a hovering display rested above the desk.

“Cousin Julius, can I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why are you here?”

“Oh, yes. I guess it’s weird for royalty to welcome guests. You know my uncle is the owner of Phantom. Sister Eira is the next-in-line to the throne, I’m second. I don’t care about the mantle of king, honestly. I rather work here, makes me feel closer to my father. Lady Elvira has been at the top, I’m just an assistant. She tasked me to over see the Guild Program. You know, as a test of some sort. Tell me, I know the general idea of what happened, why do you want our help?”

“I’ve come as a customer. I don’t expect to be given free treatment. It’s business, I know. Name the price, I’d like to hire a team to clear Coria’s dungeon.”

“Clearing a dungeon,” the arms crossed, “-quite a tall order. Aren’t you asking a bit much?”

“How much will it cost.”

“The look of determination,” he smiled, “-that’s what I like about you, cousin. The deal, Xenon will pull all their resources into clearing Coria’s dungeon.”

“Naturally, I’m coming with.”

“Clearing a dungeon is hard enough, we’re not going to promise you or anyone’s safety.”

“Deal,” a handshake affirmed the deal. He phoned multiple o’ people, giving single sentences of explanation. “We’re going by air. The train will waste our time. The departure is tomorrow at 10:00. I’ve received the money from éclair already.”

“Already? No matter,” he stood, “-this place is truly amazing.”

“You said it,” the formal tone dropped, “-it’s all the work of a single man.”

“I wish I met him,” said he, “-King Staxius Haggard. By the way, this might be overstepping boundaries...”

“Go on, no need to hold back.

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“What’s the state of Arda. I’ve been wanting to ask about the queen. Princess Eira did say something about her being ill?”

“Mother...” a long silence loomed.

“Actually, I’ve lost interest.”

“Don’t,” the door opened, “-I’m not opposed to telling you. It will have to remain between us.”

“Wait, how can you trust me?”

"You're a Haggard, aren't you?" he laughed, "-if you didn't realize, Haggard is also my family name as is Lizzie and sister Eira. You have a right to know the family problems."

"Then I'm all ears."

#### Chapter 496: Dungeon

By what seemed to be an eternity, Julius took long breaths and gathered his thoughts. The fair-skin paled into oblivion, there were times his aura didn't seem normal, times where the presence felt more than just a prince. Igna paused and waited in anticipation. *éclair* would have usually triggered a sort of notification on what was to be discussed. At this moment in time, the spirit remained silent, as is a normal ethereal being.

"Ok," the brows lowered, "-Lady Mother is ill. Not physically... more mentally," he'd pause and stutter. The vocabulary seemed to fail him, "-I can't find the proper word," he turned hopelessly for answers.

"Take your time," said Igna, "-how about a summary instead?"

"Sure," the pressure alleviated. "I'll say it how I remember, is that fair?"

"Alright with me."

"The Queen of Arda has been fighting hard for the past few years. After my father's disappearance, the noble faction as well as the public sector have gone and tried to lay waste to the monarchy. The newer generation of houses aren't pleased by the merit system. They argue that our culture is vanishing per the visit from Oxshield. I know, it's stupid, we children of the throne, have fought to keep the peace. To a certain extent, the rebelling factions were dealt with by Phantom or the Blood-King's Faction. The nightwalkers single-handedly brought all to the norm. Still, nothing is as easy as it seems. The noble party tried to assassinate young Lizzie at some point. Needless to say, I personally handled the affairs. The internal matters are more convoluted, point is, the queen is tired from all the fighting. I'm proud to have her as my mother," the grandeur of his intonation, the way the emphasis was on how great of a person she was had Igna anxious. "Now, cousin," he moved closer, "-this is between us."

"What's the matter?" he reached ear first to Julius.

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"Ever since father vanished, a certain man came to our mother's side. He's been there for the longest time; a man of god-level beauty, a man of charisma, and a man of power. In a way, I guess mother sees the father in him. I don't know their relationship as of yet, it's been behind closed doors and I think, it might be for the better. Father shows no sign of coming back..."

"This man," voiced Igna, "-how strong is he?"

"Very," he smiled, "-I vaguely sensed his mana, and from what I've seen, it's amazing. The tier is far beyond platinum."

"Cousin, do you see this man as an equal to your father?"

“No, of course not,” he slapped his knees, “-no way close. The similarities are there... I wasn’t charmed. Princess Eira shares a close bond, as for Lizzie, she doesn’t care much. Her focus is on music, it’s the remaining memory of father.”

“The Queen seems to be alright then.”

“For now,” whispered Julius, “-for now. It’s getting late. Have dinner and be ready for tomorrow. The expedition is soon approaching.”

“Thanks, cousin,” a private elevator headed to the lower hall.

‘There are not that many people around,’ he rambled about, following the map displayed by éclair, ‘-a hotel of this magnitude...’

“For visiting guests,” said éclair, “-anyone who deals with Phantom is free to stay for however long they want. Comes as a show of goodwill.”

‘More like showing off their gains.’ A buffet of deliciousness aroused the hunger-beasts. Like a magnet to metal, the nose locked onto the juiciest, mouth-watering, dish. As if the mountain of goodness didn’t suffice, a fountain of flowing champagne was on the side.

“Over here,” wave Cole sat on a brown-color bench.

“Quite a peculiar spot,” said Igna holding his food, “-the view of the garden sure is nice...”

“Are you being sarcastic?” interjected Ila.

“No, I’m being serious...”

“Nice,” she veered away, “-there’s no point talking to you, is there.”

“Don’t look away so quickly,” said he holding half a smile, “-I noticed how the eyes glimmered when talking to Cousin Julius. Are you perhaps a fan of his idol days?”

“Not just any fan...”

“What you say?”

“I SAID,” she turned, “-NOT JUST ANY FAN,” a necklace burst out her top.

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“Talk about creepy,” said Cole in jest.

“I mean,” said Leonard, “-lovers do keep pictures of one another as a reminder.”

“Do you have a picture of Jen?” asked Igna.

“Yes, matter of fact, I have a lot,” he proudly showed the phone.

“Cool,” shrugged Ila. “Igna, I know we don’t get along. Still, I need a favor.”

“An autograph?”

“How did you know?”

“Already have one,” he handed a handkerchief, “-Julius gave it to me earlier.”

“GIVE ME,” she snatched it, “-his scent,” the eyes mellowed as if a cat, “-it’s on here.”

‘You learn things everyday...’

Away from Rotherham, preparation for the expedition went underway. A hangar opened to house a cargo helicopter equipped with the AFR. Supplies for a prolonged battle were stored, elite members of Xenon made the trip to the base. Those trapped in the dungeon reached the last sliver of the fight. Food ran out, a decision had to be made, survive, or perish in this vile place.

The next day, on the 21st, one of the many airfields became active. Engines groaned subtly; the ever-stretching landscape came as a shock. The landing strip went for a mile’s on end, bear in mind, it was only one of the countless more. Troupes in black jogged rhythmically.

“How powerful is Phantom?” wondered Cole standing shoulder to shoulder with Igna.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged, “-the company is massive, that’s for sure.” Gunshots muffled from the firing-range, small explosions simulating a tough battle.

“Hello everyone,” said Prince Julius climbing atop a crate. Those hurdled inside the hangar approached. One holding a massive rifle and another with swords at his back. Following them were two more, two ladies, one wearing a magical robe and the other holding pistol and daggers, “-please gather around.”

The hand behind their back, the rising sun mischievously blinded him. “Today’s operation comes per the request of my cousin, Igna Haggard. I’ve called on the top four fighters in our guild. Please,” he gestured to the students, “-introduce yourselves.”

“My name’s Ko,” said a broad figure, “-I’m a gunner. Long-range or short, it doesn’t matter. My rank is Tier-2 Gold, from the Ardanian Guild,” bald cut, tribal tattoos on the face till the neck. An armored chest-piece, black gloves, and an evil smirk.

“Mine is Tonza,” added the other with the dual swords, “-an executioner and renowned bounty-hunter,” same height with a lesser muscular body, emphasis of the outfit was mobility. He seemed more agile than the others.

“I’m Miya,” said the lady in white-magical robe, “-supporting mage, healer, exorcist, and trained doctor. I’ve brought back people from the brink of death,” her blue-hair complemented the ocean-blue pearls on the robe. Neither was it short not long, a perfect size for mobility.

“Guess it’s my turn. The name’s Scarlet. Previous hitman of the assassination sect. Anyone who gets in my way will die. I’ve killed more human than I’ve done monsters,” a mask covered her visage, bangs rested shy of her brows. The sharp incline of her nose gave some sort of hint on how the face was.”

“Don’t get it twisted,” said Julius sensing doubt on Ila, “-these four here members of the strongest people in the continent. If we were at war, you’d call them tactical nukes. Unleashing their skills onto the world would be the start of anarchy. The mission has been briefed. Cousin, éclair should have shown the plan for today. Explain it to the students. Drop your bags over, the couriers will handle the unloading.”

Stood at the side of the curved hangar, Cole exchanged glances with Ila. She remained focused on trying to spy on Julius over yonder. Leonard's hand trebled.

"About the briefing," voiced Igna, "-we'll start by cleaning the dungeon's upper floor. Securing an exit is a priority. I've hired them to clean out the dungeon, not the rescue of our friends."

"What you say?" they turned; "-you did what?"

"I hired them to clear out the dungeon."

"What about Jen," gritted Leonard, "-I thought we were going to save her."

"We are," he replied, "-we'll do it by our own means. Hiring such a fearsome guild to rescue a few people isn't worth the money. I had to get the most of what I paid. I do hope you realize how expensive they were," glancing Leonard, "-if the dungeon is cleared, others who are trapped will be saved. Imagine how many people had to suffer through what you did because of an unfortunate turn of events. What if someone sent help, thinking broadly is the best way."

"I understand," nodded Cole, "-I admire how much faith you have in others."

"For once," said Ila, "-I agree."

"Out of curiosity," sighed Leonard, "-how much did you pay?"

"About 40,000 Exa."

"..."

"THAT MUCH?" they screamed.

"It's only the initial cost," he facepalmed, "-after the dungeon is cleared, they're free to add additional charges."

"How are you going to pay that much?"

"I have savings I can reach for."

"That's still a lot of money," cried Cole, "-I feel guilty now."

"Don't worry about it," people gestured for them to board to a helicopter, "-I promised to help."

Soon, the ground became ant-like, the forward momentum glue many to their seats. The party of elites wasn't talkative. Neither seemed to befriend – the tenseness of the atmosphere made the propellers silent. Casting a look of concern at Julius, he returned with a gentle smile as if to say, '-don't worry, we're good.'

Open-green fields turned to checkered patterns of different colors. Farming lands are arranged neatly. Roads stopped to become dirt-paths, the flatness grew into forests, and soon, the hills of Coria were insight.

'There's no place to land,' figured Cole at first glance. The pilot said otherwise – a few seconds above the hill, he fixed onto the center, a crater of sorts with cracked grounds.

The landing lifted dirt and other unwanted particles. “-We’re here,” said Julius, “-Cousin, come with me. Ko, get on securing the perimeter, the chopper will become our base.”

“You need something, cousin?” they walked into the forest.

“Yeah, come with me,” said he, “-the opening to the dungeon is beyond here.” A logged cabin faced the east. The wood underwent decay, the door was broken, nature reclaimed its property.

“Why alone?” he wondered.

“I did some digging yesterday,” said Julius, “-the dungeon is not a place for newbies anymore,” the vile aura off the compound had Igna stopped. “You feel it now, don’t you,” said he, “-whoever is inside that place is dangerous, very fucking dangerous. I don’t know if it’s a demon or something else, we have to be vigilant.”

“Are you scared?”

“No,” he chuckled, “-I’m a fighter too. Well, more of a spellcaster.”

“What sort of ability do you have then?”

“I’m a Creator, my ability is Creation. I can make just about anything – as long as I understand vaguely how it works, gold, diamonds, nukes, you name it, and I’ll create it.”

“Damn, does it not make life easier?”

“Not really,” he shrugged, “-we already have money as is, making more might break the economy. Weapons are already advanced. I use it scarcely. The question is you, Igna, what abilities do you have?”

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“I can cook.”

“Seriously,” he facepalmed, “-didn’t aunt Courtney teach you how to fight?”

“I know how to use a sword and pistol. Don’t expect anything beyond that.”

“What about the vampiric powers, aren’t you a noble-born...”

“Only activates when I need to run or fight. It’s fairly limited, I’m immortal and have slow-regeneration. The strength and speed boost aren’t much. In all respect, I’m a novice fighter.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he smiled, “-I’m not a creator for nothing,” \*snap,\* three angel-like bodies materialized. “Meet my guardians, Past, present, and future. They’re puppets of unrivaled abilities.”

“A scouting party, good idea.”

“Setting up the camp will take time.”

‘The time has finally come, my first expedition,’ an unsteady inviting charm whiffed past his body. ‘-Did someone grab my hand?’ the gust of wind felt lively, ‘-is there someone waiting for me?’

Chapter 497: High-demon

The angels ventured inside at a walking pace. The normal outside was fueled by longing, the emotion described in many love tragedies play at the theaters. The lover is killed, found dead, or kidnapped for money; not to spoil, the ending is always bad. It's similar to a burger inviting the chubby boy of the group, the one who has to waddle inside. Or the coffee of which a pretty lady wishes to drink.

'What is wrong with this place?' they stood idly; the sun reached its peak. Returned from whence they came, the makeshift camp built and settled at an astounding speed. Leonard and Cole helped Ko and Tonza. Ila tried hard to get along with Miya, though, she kept pretty quiet and worked. Forgetting the social side of the scene, progress was being made – it was enough.

From a lonesome cargo chopper to have tents sprawl around, a sleeping area, preparation, storage, protection would be left to the AFR. The turret always moved side to side, none knew when it could rattle death.

Another tent stood as the briefing area. A command center of sorts. Julius was supposed to stay outside for the expedition. Letting the trained individuals do the fighting as he only watched from afar and controlled the pieces.

"I'm coming with," said he stood before the gathered figures.

"If the guild leader says he wants to come," interjected Ko, "-who are we to object." The rest affirmed the decision.

An hour had passed, many were ready with armor and weaponry, potions, and scrolls. The moment of truth etched ever close. Anxiety filled the hearts of Ila and Cole. Leonard didn't seem bothered, or rather, he was too focused to be scared. Igna's mind went between '-Dungeon Style cooking and rescue.'

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"Tonza and I will lead the front," said Ko, "-everyone else, stay a meter apart. Don't be grouped up, spacing is important. Watch out for traps and dark passages. Monsters tend to use the darkness for ambushes." Breaking twigs and pushing leaves, the doorway to Coria stood grandly. A post-sign had, '-enter at your own peril. Recommended Tier 9 +'.

"Sure, took the advice by heart," commented Miya.

The first step inside sent chills down the student's back. Xenon's men were experienced and felt naught. From the soles of the feet to the hair on the head, a glittery, electric-like jolt struck the body. The smell, distinct and repugnant – the smell of the rotten corpse, blood, and organs. The outside's brightest hour failed to impair the inside. Unlit torches hung at intervals; light sources that long gave their due. After the entrance came to an immediate crossroad. '-Floors 1-3' was on the left, '-floor 3+' on the right.

"We're clearing the dungeon," said Julius, "-let's start from the first." They followed suit.

"Cousin, what about my friends," inquired Igna.

"Don't worry," he gave a gentle tap, "-I've sent my angels to seek them. We'll have an answer soon. For now, don't you have a cooking competition to be worried about? This is a great chance to experience the dungeon-style I've read so much about."

"You had to add said detail?" the upper-floor was cleared swiftly. Certain parts, unattainable by normal means, were broken and smashed. Tonza spared no humanity in slaying the goblins and their offspring. A long three hours later, "back at the start," said Julius.

"We went around in circles?" asked Cole.

"No," refuted Igna, "-they purposely took the long-way around."

"Good eye," said Ko, "-we've cleared the first floor. The second floor is over there," he pointed a few meters ahead, an oval-shaped tunnel. "Dungeon's come in few types, first the labyrinth, the bane of fighters with the only brawl. Second, the never-ending battle heavy; a challenge of fighting monsters until the supposed end. Those are the two main types, there's also the Void Dungeon, a place where no human needs to walk as they led to higher-plains, or so what the rumors say. The breeding group type, self-explanatory, and then the Hybrids."

"Coria is a hybrid type," added Scarlet, "-we should rest."

"Let's head outside then," added Leonard.

"No," the heads shook, "-if we leave, the monsters might respawn and cause trouble. As long as the killers are present inside, the dungeon will not respawn the monster. Clearing a dungeon means killing the leader first, we'll get higher monster drops and a chance at mythic level items. There's a safe-zone on the stairs." Led by a hip, Ko seemingly flows down the stair at how gracefully he moved. "Here," paused at the center, "-you see?" he turned and tapped the top of a small walk-way, "-a safe-zone."

"Damn," inside laid vast nothingness. An orb of blue shone in the middle, the ground wasn't spiky, few used kitchen utensils were left around a long-extinguished fire.

'This is where many people came to rest. I'm not surprised if some of them lost their lives here,' thought Igna dragging a rice-type bag.

"What are you carrying in that?" wondered Ila.

"Ingredients," said he tossed it at the orb, "-I'll get food ready, you guys have our sleeping arrangement's readied." He was left to do this own thing. Miya would sneakily cast her gaze onto the well-spoken man.

"Ko," her face fell into stone-cold cement, "-is that a goblin?"

"Yeah," he coughed, "-are we going to eat that?"

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"I'm worried about the poison," said Scarlet, "-someone should stop him."

"Not going to happen," voiced Tonza amidst their confusion, "-he's a trained chef. Look at the way the hands move, look at how he treats the meat. On the right is the unused remains of the monsters, as on the left, the prepared meat. He must have access to that drug I've heard about."

"The syringe," approached Julius.

"Guild Leader, might I ask who the boy is?" wondered Miya.

“Are you, perhaps, interested?” he mischievously smirked.

“No, nothing of that sort. He’s just peculiar, silent, and mysterious.”

“Come on sister,” added Scarlet, “-then, he’s definitely your type.”

“Stop teasing me.”

“Cousin Igna isn’t silent by choice,” added Julius.

“I’ve heard you use cousin when addressing to him. I thought it is a nickname or show of affection. Prince, is he related?”

“Spot on, Tonza, great eye. He’s related to my father’s twin sister. We share the same blood, half of it. He’s noble yet doesn’t care. I only saw him get serious when he’s in the kitchen. Oh, and that time too.”

“What time?”

“He stopped Sister Eira from running amok during our new year’s visit.”

“He stopped her?” she coughed, “-impressive. Then, Igna must be powerful.” The conversation went on in questions and answers. From Igna, they jumped onto those accompanying him and the dungeon itself. They soon learned of the expedition. Ko swore to find the friends, even if it was the last thing he’d do.

Thirty-minute later, the sudden explosion in scent straggled their throat. The heads could but turn, a pot stirred, a pan-fried, and behind moved the skillful cook. “Cousin Julius,” he called, “-would you please?”

“I’m coming,” said he ambling to the station, “-anything the matter?”

“Help out with plating,” said Igna.

“Me?” he shook his head, “-cousin, you sure are gusty to ask royalty to perform chores.”

“Those the words from the man how said he didn’t care about being king?”

“You and that weird sense of humor,” they bumped shoulders in jest, “-what should I do?” Bowls filled with the soup, the bonfire lit, and the silence enchanted the minds. The more they ate, the fiercer they felt.

“Can’t believe this is goblin meat...”

“The babe’s meat. The adults are salty and don’t taste good. The children are more delicious. It’s cruel, I know, but hey, the survival of the fittest.” Put before the contest of deliciousness, a few goblin sibling’s dead isn’t much.

Rest took 6 hours, and the expedition continued. Inside, time made no difference, day or night, it felt the same. Clearing the first, three floors were easy. The challenge was on the fourth. They wound up into an open space. The pebbles would drop from the dark ceiling.

“I had an odd feeling,” commented Cole. Each step echoed, the entrance to the lower-dungeon stood in the distance.

“Slow down,” said Ko, “-an ambush,” the ears scanned left and right.

‘Come on éclair, show me something,’ he moved left and right, the interface showed nothing.

“WATCH OUT,” cried Miya digging her staff into the hard-floor, “-magical barrier!” the spell barely protected the team. Bolts of black flew left and right – one grazed Leonard’s arm.

“Protection of the divine, holy magical barrier,” he conjured another above Miya’s.

“Boy, come here,” said she, “-you’re working for me now.” The spellcasters retreated to a safer spot. The floor rumbled by the dance of countless monsters. The veil of the ceiling unfolded into an army of Wein. The bats perched upside-down. Projectiles came from their mouths which opened at intervals.

“We’re getting spat on.”

“Ain’t time for jokes, Tonza,” cried Ko laying waste to the coming forces. The fight didn’t seem hard, the pressure was handled by the elites of Xenon. The rumors stood true, although the numbers seemed infinite, they fought and killed with singular attacks. Their strengths were unrivaled.

“Good thing they’re on our side,” said Cole.

“Yeah, if we were stuck in this predicament...”

“We’d be dead,” added Igna. The fight reached the end quickly, or so it seemed. A sudden shockwave had his heart pound. ‘-my head,’ he cringed and fell to his knees, ‘-something is coming,’ he desperately tried to stare the opening.

“Miya, check on Igna,” ordered Julius, “-he’s feeling worst for wear.”

“Are you ok?” she asked caressing his back, “-were you hurt by anything?”

“MOVE,” he screamed, pushing her out the way \*thud.\*

“WHAT HAPPENED?” The bloodied face of Igna fell backward.

“Mortal,” said a hovering figure controlling floating orbs, “-you dare thread on my domain.”

“Who are you,” stood Julius, “-why is a high-tier demon residing in this dungeon!”

“How dare you address me with such tone,” she fired an orb that blinked to crash onto explode millimeters away.

“Answer me,” said he lowering his tone, “-else,” the hand shone.

“I see,” she stopped, “-I’ve come for one purpose only,” a blink later, “-it’s to take this boy,” she held Igna in a princess-carry.

“Leave him alone!” cried Leonard.

“Shut up, fool,” two orbs blinked, \*magical barrier,\* it stopped inches from the face and bypassed the barrier. “Don’t oppose me.”

“How about a deal,” voiced Julius, “-you must know of those who were sent here.”

“The cowards?” she laughed, “-they’re alive. The monsters haven’t eaten them yet. Go to the last floor. I don’t wish to fight you, currently, that is, Creation.”

“Who are you?” the tone lowered.

“A servant of the God of Time. Prince Julius of Arda, heed my word. Monsters are strong, we’re getting stronger. The demons have no involvement in the issue. Another being wants to topple over Hidros. The answers can be found with Eira, the Librarian of Nexsolium, heir to Qhildir; she knows the truth. Five years ago, the world changed, and it’s her doing.” She vanished into a separate portal. The pressure released – most of them passed out. The monsters disappeared, leaving Julius stunned and at a loss for words.

“What happened?” wondered Ko.

“A high-tier demon,” said he, “-we had no chance winning against her.”

“Where’s Igna?” asked Leonard.

“He was abducted.”

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“WHAT?”

“Slow,” said the prince, “-we still have to clear the dungeon. I have a suspicion the lower floors are going to be easier.”

“Stop jesting,” commented Miya.

‘They don’t seem to remember what happened. An encounter with such a powerful being. Igna, I’m a sorry cousin, you have to find a way out yourself.’

“Where am I?” he sat upright with an orangish purple glow coming from an opened window. ‘-This bed,’ thought he stepped into fully warmed and carpeted floors, ‘-is massive and covered by fine lines of cloth.’ Curiosity got the better as he walked toward the swaying curtain. ‘What the fuck...’ two suns set beyond inky-black mountain ranges.

“You’ve woken up.”

Chapter 498: Totrya

“Don’t be startled,” said she calmly.

‘That was stupid of me,’ thought he ungrasping the ceramic flower-pot.

“I understand the confusion,” said she, “-it’s perfectly normal.”

‘You’re wrong,’ thought he, ‘-there’s nothing normal about it.’ He maintained eye-contact for the lady was beyond the realm of what he’d imagined. Her hair, instead of being dead, we’re alive to end with snakeheads. Each actively moved hypnotically, her arms and legs were scales. The reflection of the purple sun against the lady assumed to be a retainer, felt closer to home than usual. The way she gently

had her elbow around a chest-high drawer wasn't in the least formal. Rather, she showed friend-like familiarity.

"My," said she, "are you perhaps mute, or did the lady take thy tongue to?"

"No," he spoke slowly in fear of offense, "-perplexed is all," he turned to the landscape, exposing the back.

"Are you sure that's wise?" in what seemed to be a blink, "-exposing the back, I could kill you right here and now," the snakes moved close to his ears and murmured disgustingly.

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"Sure," said he, "-dying here might not be such a bad idea," both arms rested against the window-frame. The support allowed for a risky peep at the ground below, "-we're quite high. Besides, if you were going to kill me, why go through all this extent," said he. "I woke up in a bed made for the nobility, the landscape outside isn't normal by my standard. The people down there, I mean no offense, are not demi-humans nor humans. What is this place?"

"Astute," she stepped away, "-we're in Totrya."

"Impossible," he refuted, "-why is there two suns and why is the sky purple!"

"Let me finish. Have you wondered where monsters come from, why they appeared, how they breed, what is their purpose?"

"Never," he gave the fullest attention.

"Why would you," she openly ambled to sit on the bed, "-monsters are meant for killing, and getting rewards. In a way," her never-blinking eyes struck true, "-that's the purpose of the minions. I'll explain all of it, are you interested?"

"Yes," he moved to sit at her side, '-her face is oval, the nostrils are small but sharp, the eyes don't blink. What is she... a snake?'

"Good, then let me take you down a trip in history. The monster kingdom as is now, began far before this dimension's infection. Our founder, Scifer Rethem, the god of Time, went about the dimensions, killing, merging, and amassing an army to fight the gods. Hailed as the god-slayer, the divines were scared. The underworld couldn't have been anymore happier. Heaven, as is told by the priest, isn't that giving. They take more than they give, the grace bestowed is selfish and with the intent on taking twice the amount given. Demons isn't far from them either – they take, but more forcefully and garnered the hate of most. The God of Time became an independent party, his arrival had the higher-realm shudder. He's killed and absorbed the power of mid to high tier gods. Don't get me wrong, the goal wasn't to be powerful, he wanted to reunite and resort the god's pride and honor, he wanted for a father and son to make peace. He wanted for Kronos to be given the place of Supreme god. He who ate his children is projected as the antagonist... the reason was to hide the kids from the charms of 'mighthood'. I won't go into much detail about the history since it was lost at the passing of Scifer. Needless to say, the gods didn't take lightly to the amassing of power. Our founder was killed and dishonored. Before death, a friend of his mentor, the lord of death, proposed to safeguard his will and transfer the symbol of power to his heir. Yes, it's confusing, but bear with me. The Lord of Death had an heir, a being that rose to

power in a short amount of time. The one thing holding him back was the curse of the death reaper. In the end, the symbol of power from three gods was bestowed onto him. Fate sadly proved to be a heartless lady, as he would meet with the supreme god Zeus. Together, the gods sent a spy named Cleopatra to find who inherited the symbols of power. Zeus wanted power over time. The operation would not have been possible without the help of another party, an unlikely alliance, the underworld, the ruler of demons and evil – Lucifer. He wanted to control Death to rival Hades in his attempt at entering the Eternal Abyss. Yet, it didn't go as planned. The heir was found out and killed by his daughter no less. The conspiracy and betrayal sent him into a fury of which none can imagine. Before breathing his last breath, the symbols of power were scattered for only himself to recover. His soul and Death-element; per his orders and by the help of the Azure Dragon Miira; the Guardian of the Domain of Time, scattered the body and soul into the future. The reason, I presume, is to get rid of the curse of the Death Reaper. To be freed from it all and be the sword of revenge, the shoulder carrying the burden of those he's killed and those he has to kill."

Mystified at her words; the feeling of nostalgia – it felt good, thinking back, pieces of the locked memory cleared. The images of how he died, the feeling of the sword running through his chest and heart, the promise made, the decision to save the companions until the day rose again, "-it's worked," said he in a monotonous voice, "-my plan, my way," the voice and visage changed, the brown eyes turned crimson red, "-I remember. I remember. My name is Staxius Haggard, the heir to the god of death, and the inheritor to Scifer's will."

"I knew you would come back," said the lady, "-King Haggard."

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"Don't get me wrong," he added coldly, "-I'm not Staxius anymore. That personage has long become a myth and woven into history. Bring death to life only brings the misfortune of the past home. I'm Igna Haggard, a boy who loves cooking. The personalities were never different, I lost my memories to give birth to a boy who believed in humanity."

"Then who are you?" asked she, "-what happened to the boy I sensed a few minutes ago, did you kill him?"

"No," he laughed, the crimson eyes returned to brown, "-Staxius and Igna Haggard were never different. They're both me, and I am me. No one defines who I am, for I am what is, and what is, is me."

"Confusing much?" she paused.

\*Inhale,\* '-I know I'm Staxius. The past, the people I met, the dynasty I built isn't relevant. It's a new world, and Igna, rather, I, have friends, a family, and things to do. Today forth, with my memories awakened, I shall bury them to start anew.'

"You look resolved," said the lady, "-care to hear the rest of my tale?"

"Please do," said he with an innocent smile.

"Resuming from where I left off, we come to Monsters. Scifer wasn't a fool, he'd known one-day Demons and God would cooperate to fulfill their narrative. Tis the reason for the heavenly spell of World Break. The previous dimension he merged to build the monsters and their variant species, the

drops, and the new way of fighting was for a single goal. To gather and raise an army of God and Demon killers. Humans are weak but resilient, the dimension closest to Origin harbors more strength than any other. Living beings here are blessed by the gods who regularly intervene in worldly matters. What better place to set-up a training camp; yes, it's true. Monsters being killed isn't for naught, they grow, evolve, and gather experience. Those who surpass a threshold are forced into Totrya, though, some monsters often escape the system. That's how bosses are born, they're in no way bad or disobeying orders... the resolve to become strong is important for us. The stronger the world become, the better we get. Soon, when the humans gain the power of gods and break into their realm, the experience from those battles will elevate our army until the next king is ready to fight the heavens."

"It's a well-thought-out plan, making the world into a training area for his army. If only Scifer were alive to take the fight to the gods."

"What do you mean?" she paused, "-aren't you the inheritor of his will?"

"The inheritor went by the name of Staxius Haggard," he stood, "-mine is Igna Haggard. Allow me to be bold, fighting the heavens and demons as is now is foolish. The army is weak, I don't need to see to tell."

"Are you going to forsake us?" she stood menacingly.

"No, of course not," he headed for the purple night, "-I might have said the past is buried, I still have a few words to speak to Zeus and Lucifer. They conspired to have me stripped of what I gained. Time will bring their downfall sooner or later. I need to gather the Symbol of power and become strong if I want to lead the monster army."

"Good," she smiled, "-the heavens move at a slower pace than the human realm. They're not going to make a move soon."

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

"The bosses and monsters we killed, what happens to them, do they have memories?"

"No," said she simply, "-I mean, they know what's happening and are quite alright to dying. It's no matter, they're working to become stronger, we have the advantage of immortality, no matter the strength or the might of the blow, the monsters will always respawn until they've reached their goals."

"What of the bodies?"

"Not to worry, the body is temporary, it's the soul that holds their power. Once killed, the body is nothing than a stone, unaffected to us nor them."

"Good," he slumped onto the window, "-I was worried about my future goal."

"Huh?"

"Dungeon Style cooking."

"Please don't tell me," she facepalmed, "-are you cooking monsters?"

"Yes, and they are damned delicious when prepared right."

“Honestly, Lord Haggard – for the future god who wages war onto the heavens, you sure are eccentric.”

“Thank you for that.”

\*Knock, knock,\* she quietly pulled the handle, “-Vesper,” said a lady dressed in a simple dress with horns protruding out her head.

“Lady Kul,” said she, “-he’s awake.”

“Vesper, Kul?”

“Good,” she entered to hold his hand, “-I’m sorry for abducting you earlier.”

“Wait,” the eyes narrowed, “-I’m sorry for you being sorry,” he bowed, “-aren’t you the demon of Coria?”

“Yes,” said she proudly, “-I’m close to becoming a high-ranking demon. I need to kill a few people. Anyway, how was the sleep, the recovery spell Vesper cast must have worked.”

“Healing spell?” he turned to Vesper.

“No, a reversal spell. I turned back time on the wounds and unlocked most of the memories. I do hope it’s not inconvenient. You see, we need to know there’s someone out there who’s going to lead one day. Following the words of the founder religiously isn’t good for anyone.”

“Excuse you?” the windows dismantled into black hovering boxes to reform into a balcony, Vesper gave a quick push sending him onto the newly built platform. The purple night and darkened horizon flickered into light; the drop below gave onto a mosh pit. A whiff of cold air slapped across the face, the building behind was a massive castle.

“Hear me, people of Totrya,” voiced Vesper, “-I, the steward of the Founder, deem Igna Haggard, suitable to rule us onto tomorrow. He also has lost all to the hands of the gods and demons, he also has a vendetta against them, and he also wants to become strong!”

“YEAH!” the screams exploded into his ears, “-KING HAGGARD!”

“Vesper,” the face flashed in horror, ‘-what?’ he motioned.

“It’s a formality,” \*snap,\* wings flapped and a beam illuminated his face. The cacophony kept on growing, “-speak a few words.”

‘Really,’ thought he, ‘-it comes down to this,’ breathing deeply. “-Hear me, people of Totrya, I will be truthful. I’m weak, the will of Lord Scifer was bestowed onto my previous self, King Staxius. I was reborn as a new man, a weak man. Leading a campaign against the gods is the least of our worries, the people of Hidros are getting strong, monsters need to be stronger, and so do I. Therefore, I make this promise, I will not accept the honor of kingship until I’ve proven myself!” a strong gesture silenced the crowd. Vesper and Kul smiled, ‘-he’s worthy.’

Chapter 499: Lost one

“That’s not a response an unworthy king would receive,” said Kul grinning excitedly. Orbs of black materialized above her head to spin as if a halo. Vesper, on the other hand, kept her hands tied in the front with a lowered gaze. Her friendliness changed into one closer to a servant.

As Kul commented, the crowd below was loud, ungodly so. The screams and cheers, the clear pronunciation of his name echoed till the balcony perched upon the straight tower.

“Sure brings me back,” he stepped away, the balcony reformed into a window courtesy of Kul. Her ability extended to matter materialization. She could shape the world per her will.

“King Haggard,” approached Vesper, “-the people and I have decided. You’re worthy, despite admitting the weakness, they accepted you. You don’t have to worry about social class, how people are treated, or money. Monsters are reserved by nature; they barely speak to one another. Those social enough live here, in the alternate domain of Totrya. The province of Hidros is locked from the care less’s curiosity. I’m sure the memories of ruling Arda and creating the Federation is tiresome. Don’t worry, in our case here, the populous don’t care, the only motive is getting strong. The more one gains levels, the better.”

“Thanks for the explanation,” said he gratefully, “-when I heard of being king, my mind flashed to the hassle.”

“It’s fine,” said Kul, “-how are you feeling?”

“Normal actually,” he scanned his arms, “-should I be worried about something?”

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“No...” she turned to Vesper.

“The reaction tells otherwise,” the eyes narrowed.

“What she means is the aura and atmosphere of Totrya isn’t suitable for normal people.”

“Oh,” he smiled, “-I’m a nightwalker. I’ve only lost what was bestowed onto me by the gods. The death element and symbols of power. The blood of the first progenitor is what saved me in the first place. My eternal guardian has embedded herself in my soul, I feel her pulse, she kept me alive for so many years. Well, it’s not worth mentioning.”

“What’s the plan now?” inquired Kul.

“What is it you wish for?” asked Vesper.

“I want to be freed,” said he strongly. “-I appreciate the help in bringing back my memories. I seriously had no idea how to deal with... better not think about it. What’s the status of the dungeon, is my friend safe?”

“Lord Haggard,” fired Kul, “-I hope you don’t resent me for hurting the companions. The world out there doesn’t discriminate.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t care. Monsters are monsters, people are people, both have a goal, and both do what is needed to accomplish said goal. This abduction helped in resolving many questions.”

“Worry not,” said Vesper, “-before Kul takes you to Coria, I’d like for you to have this,” a small metallic dragon rested on her palm, “-please hold out your hand.”

“Ok?” a smile escaped at the adorably menacing creature. The silvery wings sprawled as it gave a yawn to crawl onto Igna’s palm and wrap its tail around the little finger. From awake, the beast gave into a slumber turning the eyes into jades. The shiny silver slept, and ring shrunk to match his size. “What’s this?” the fingers stretched for a better look.

“The signet ring of the King of monsters,” said she, “-that there is the ex-guardian of Scifer Rethem. It grants the user the ability to converse with monsters, understand their thoughts, and summon a few. By all means, the name should be, ‘demon-king’s ring,’ but our founder is a jester for he named it ‘-the Hobbit’.”

“Did he explain anything about the origin?”

“No, when we asked, he’d simply laugh and say, LOTR.”

Time passed at a faster inside Coria. The adventuring party continued farther into the dungeon. Monsters were less frequent, Julius’s angels returned with good news. A short-cut to travel into the last level of Coria, an airshaft working as an elevator.

“We’re not going down there,” said Ila adamantly. A crawl of a space which gave onto the darkness. She gulped at the mere thought of the dangers.

“Don’t be scared now,” added Cole.

“Says the boy who’s shaking,” she added in jest.

“Leonard, why are you spaced out?” voiced the prince.

“Thinking about Igna,” said he, “-I’m worried. Where could he have gone?”

‘They really don’t remember the demon,’ thought Julius, ‘-why am I the only one. The only way is forward. Cousin, be well, I’m coming for you.’

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“Ko,” he cut across the crowd, “-I’ll demonstrate using my angels,” the machine materialized, “-the shaft is an elevator. We can get to the others quickly.”

“I trust you,” said Ko, “-the guild leader need not waste his breath,” he slid to vanish into the shadows.

“Guess we ought to follow,” the narrow passage didn’t cause problem. Xenon’s team jumped with no question’s asked. Julius followed, leaving Ila, Cole, and Leonard.

“What are we going to do now?” asked she, “-jumping down seems like suicide.” Weird unsettling noises echoed about.

“How far are we already?” asked Cole.

“We went past level five. The area now is filled with undiscovered monsters above our strength,” staring the ground, “-I’m going,” he stomped, ‘-I’m coming.’ \*Woosh\*

"Egh, fine," she followed.

"What is this place?" wondered Leonard dusting off his shoulder. A massive open space of blue and white. Spiky pillars acted as support, the ground appeared as ice, though, it didn't feel cold to the touch. Armor pieces were scattered about, brownish dark matter was sprayed onto where the tools rested.

"There's been a fight here," said Tonza, "-the blood is old. I'd guess about two weeks or so. No bodies mean one thing," they wandered about, "-monsters ate the unfortunate."

"Rest in peace," said Miya making Syhton's gesture.

"Doesn't look so good, now does it?"

'T-that bracelet!

"Hey, are you ok?" fired Julius, "-why did you fall to the ground so suddenly?"

"This bracelet," said Leonard staring up, "-it belongs to Jen." The heart sank, a hammer slammed across his throat. The mind blacked out, the face paled, the breathing irregular, and eyes bloodshot.

"Hold it together," said Scarlet holding the back of his neck, "-breaking down here isn't going to do good." The harsher she became, the more distance grew the voices, memories of her smiling face, the times shared together, the love he harbored, the regret of not tagging along. He could only see her, and her only.

"Don't get so worked up," added Tonza following the trail, "-I think they're still alive." The dropped items and preserved blood were signs of them having ran away. Lowering weight and buying time; the armor was of four strong fighters. No sign of gear from those sent into the expedition. The only piece relating to them was the bracelet which had the lock broken.

"It must have snapped," said Ko, "-come on, get up," he gave a helping shoulder. The footsteps echoed out the great hall of ice and into the smaller paths. Everyone kept an eye out; Julius had a vague idea thanks to the angels.

"Look," said Tonza, "-the trail stops here suddenly. There are no drag marks; no evidence."

"A concealment spell," said Miya, "-has their mage maintained this for that long?" two knocks, "-it's strong, too strong."

"Can you break it?" wondered Ko.

"Obviously," a gentle tap of her staff and the whole thing cracked. The stench of rot exploded; there was something distinct about it. "-Smells like a body, a human body," commented Scarlet.

"I'll lead the way," said Tonza, "-Ko, watch out backs." The students followed silently; Julius kept at the outer ranks per request of the guild members in case of ambushes. The faint icy glow muddled into darkness, the more they walked, the stronger became the smell.

\*Bestow onto me a light!\* the golden rimmed staff blazed the entire hideout. On one side rested Beth and Misna, sleeping with clenched stomachs. Opposite them was Anna and Frost cuddling without clothes. Rena, Jen, and Lampard laid in the middle head facing the inviting ceiling.

"W-who are you?" asked Anna shrunk from hunger.

"My lady," rushed Ila.

"Frost," said Cole to his partner's side.

"We're just in time," commented Ko.

"Yeah," said Miya moving towards Jen. "-She's suffering from the monster's curse," knelt at her side, "-Guild Leader, I need permission to operate on her right away."

"How badly is she hurt?"

"Mortally, they smartly froze her arms. The only choice is to amputate the limb before it gets worse." Pale to the point of a ghost, Jen's breathing remained slow. Rena had her arms wrapped around Lampard, she didn't let go, her face held the fear of a beast.

"Lady Beth," voiced Julius, "-are you ok?"

"Help," said she gathering her strength, "-you finally came?"

"Yes," he gave a helping hand, "-just in time."

"No," refuted Misna, "-you can't save us," her legs closed, "-he'll be here soon. He's going to demand what is due for our survival, he's coming."

"Who are you talking about?" the aura shifted, Beth, Misna, Frost, and Anna's body subconsciously tried to hide.

'Something awful happened here,' thought Julius. '-Frost and Anna are naked, I don't suspect foul play from the two. Beth and Misna are strong, why are they acting so weirdly. They give the same reaction to the ladies we rescue in the underworld.'

"Who dares thread onto my hunting ground?" approached a darkened figure enshrouded in mystic and terror. With a large cape, white hair, and red eyes, he'd often lick his pale lips. "Are you humans so foolish to come to steal what I've taken under my protection?"

"Stay away," voiced Tonza, "-we don't want trouble."

"I know you don't," he laughed, "-however, the people there entrusted themselves to me willingly. I saved them from starvation, I gave them food and comfort. All for the small price of their body and blood. What's wrong in that?"

"Stay away," voiced Tonza, "-I'm saying this once. Another step and we'll have a problem."

"How quaint," he laughed, "-please, there's no need for such hostility. I saved them, do I really have to repeat myself?" a step and he dashed for Anna's throat, "-this one here is particularly delicious," the hands reached around her chest and towards her legs, "-she got undressed for my coming," he licked her neck provokingly.

"MY LADY!" screamed Ila.

“Shut it,” a single glare had her onto the ground suffocating. “-I don’t wish to alarm anyone, I’m a vampire working for the demons. Turning side is very much entertaining.”

“Ko, Miya, Scarlet.”

“Don’t worry,” said the lady with her blade already reach for the vampire.

\*Slash,\* two well aim strike at his tendon freed the girl, whom, Tonza rushed in to save. Ko loaded the magazine with silver bullets and fired relentlessly.

“We need to go, like now,” voiced Julius.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Ko.

“We can’t,” cried Miya, “-we can’t leave them alone.”

“No choice,” said Beth, “-come on,” she pulled her arms and made for the exit. The event happened so fast the students reached the hall within seconds. The sad reality was, Lampard, Rena, and Jen had to be left behind. Leonard wanted to react... yet, the seed of terror embued by the nightwalker had broken the resolve. ‘-I’m running away,’ thought he staring Julius’s blond hair. ‘-I’m worthless...’

“Pathetic humans. Leaving the injured behind to save themselves. How very weak,” he hovered after them.

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“Quick, we’re closing on the elevator.” The crowd lessened one by one.

“You!” exclaimed the nightwalker, “-how dare you run away with my prey!”

“GO GO,” screamed Cole, “-MOVE, ILA, COME ON!”

“No,” her pace slowed and soon found herself at the back.

“THIS IDIOT!” cried Cole for she turned and charged for the nightwalker.

“LEAVE HER,” said Julius, “-SCARLET, MIYA, GO, TAKE THEM!” he went after the rogue girl. The frozen images of the students as he went after Ila burnt into the heart.

“Very nice,” her punch gained velocity, “-yet, the pathetic attempt is useless,” a swipe threw her across the hall.

“Stop this fighting,” ordered Julius, “-are you not part of the Blood-King faction?”

“I was,” he laughed, “-I was. Then, the demons approached with a better offer. The ways of peace are so boring. Do you know how much, us, immortals, have to suffer?”

“How selfish.”

Chapter 500: King of Kings

“How is looking for a bit of fun selfish?” said the man sorting his long hair, “-I’ve not tasted the blood and raw emotion of a human in my time spent in Arda.”

“Are you going to betray the Blood-King’s Faction? I’m sure Lady Serene isn’t going to be happy with the actions showed here.”

“She’s long past her time as our leader. The clan has become boresome, there’s no fun, and us immortal are only concerned with one thing, tis our entertainment, nothing more, nothing less.”

Julius stood calmly, the face showed no expression while the mind worked tirelessly. Those who took the elevator were above, fighting. The clanging of swords and firing of guns came in quiet shuffles below.

“Prince Julius, are you sure it’s fine to wait for thy companions to die? Remember, Coria doesn’t harbor me, no, there are other more fearsome creatures out there.” As he said so as if knowing what happened above; two Nagas, humanoid-snakes – torso of a man or woman attached to the scaly back of the reptile. Abilities ranged from immunity to damage and corrosive saliva.

“I’ll maintain the barrier,” cried Miya, “-Tonza, Ko, do your thing.”

“Leave the weak to me,” smirked Scarlet merging into the cavernous walls. She became one with the shadow, behind the Naga’s came demon infected beast or so-called zombies. Animal, man, plant, any living thing harboring a connection to Mana was subject to the curse. Fortunately, the demon beasts were merely overgrown rats. An average Tier-5 couldn’t handle the pest, though, she disposed of the troubles easily.

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One knee on the ground and physically shielding the tired Frost, ‘-come on,’ thought Ko starring down his scope. The fingers readied to pull, he tracked Tonza’s fight. The latter displayed unprecedented levels of agility. Dodging strike after strike, the spears of the Naga’s never connected. Side-step, over-stretching, it didn’t matter, he did as was needed. The arms moved so gracefully the illusion of him not having limbs dawned onto Cole. Leonard held the back and carried the unconscious Anna. Her green hair was muddled in red and brown, the exposed body showed bite and scratch marks. Blood clots formed mostly near her neck.

“They’ll be fine,” said Julius, “-Xenon isn’t weak.”

“How blinded are you,” cried the vampire dramatically, “-the poor lass has died on impact,” he pointed the wall, “-poor thing wanted to help her friends. Xenon might be strong... however,” the pitch swapped, “-fighting and protection, there’s a time where one has to choose one over the other.” The words resounded till the fight above. One of the Naga’s pushed through Tonza’s defense and ran the spear into Ko’s left arm. He jumped at the last second to save Frost.

“SCARLET!” a scream had the lady seemingly teleport, “-take care of the Naga,” he pulled out the poison-filled spear, “-Miya, heal me!”

“But?”

“Do it!” he paid no heed to the pain, “-we ought to get out. The higher we climb, the easier it will get,” stood upright, he stumbled to be caught by Tonza.

“Old pal, don’t worry. Scarlet and I got this. Take it easy and protect the kids.”

"Thanks," he fell, the liquid devoured the injured arms upwards to the shoulder.

\*Slash,\* "-sorry boss," said Scarlet, "-we don't have antidotes. The best way to save you is..." the limb fell, "-cutting off the arm." The downpour of blood stopped instantly by a blueish glow; "-I'll seal it until we get to the surface."

"Thanks," said he pulsing with adrenaline, "-now that the arm doesn't hurt," he pulled out a pistol, "-we have uglies to kill." No matter the hurdle, Xenon pushed forth confidently. The way the team rushed, leaving the student's safety inside a protective cage, was all-inspiring. Their backs and sweat fought the coming hordes. In that instant, as vision grew blurry, Frost, Cole, and Leonard saw wings. The wings of freedom, the personification of Knig.

The hall of ice awoke to emanate freezing mist. "The dungeon is getting hungry," added the nightwalker coyly, "-prince Julius, are you going to leave the team to die?" \*Clap, clap, clap,\* he headed for Ila. "Don't ignore me!" exclaimed he. \*Clap, clap, clap,\* no response until he stood peering over the unconscious Ila. She didn't hit her head; the body sure had seen better days. 'She must have slowed the impact using a spell.' The icy-wall displayed signs of fire.

"Prince Julius Arnet Haggard," lashes from a vein cracked the floor, "-do not ignore me," the eyes burnt in full. "-Royalty or no, I'm unbound by the kingdom. I'm my own person; I shall prove to all that the Blood-king faction is obsolete."

"Such confidence," said he pouring liquid from a golden bottle, "-what gives you that idea?" the potency from the fumes alone had the vampire turn away. "What happened?" inquired the prince, "-are you perhaps, revolted by the presence of relic-tier healing potions?"

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"Take no more steps," the lonesome vein scarred everywhere but the prince's location, "-I swear I'll have to kill you then?" the lashes retreated to sprout a giant rose made of red-crystal. "My blood-art is Rose's torn."

"Should I be impressed?" laughed he, "-doesn't scare me at all."

The visible tension under the nose, the way the corner of the eyes crinkled under the unyielding bravado of the prince. "-Stop fooling yourself," two tiny projectiles blinked to scar the prince's face, "-I'm sorry, did I injure your pretty little face?"

"Pretty little face," he snickered, "-where do you get all this bravado?"

"I'm allied with the demon-clan. Their leader will soon take his throne and lay waste to the world. The Blood-King faction isn't going to last. Arda will fall, and war will break out between Iqavea and Hidros, heed my word, prince, the oracle has foretold of the repeat of the great-magic war. The uncalm souls of the dead mages won't be soothed by a few buildings. Dorchester will undergo change, mark my word," he laughed, "-why not help the ruler of demons by killing the inheritor to Arda."

"Quite the senseless ramble," the icy floors and walls broke, the entire dungeon trembled under the pressure. Pillars gave to the aura, a portal twice the size of a man opened boldly. A strict and unshaken voice exited first. "Nightwalker, who said the demon clan accepted you?" no footsteps followed as the figure hovered into view.

"H-high d-demon K-Kul," the knees shook, "-why have you come?" the face dropped into a panic.

"To set one thing straight," three orbs shot for the immortal's head, "-the demon, monster, and vampire clan are different. You were led on," she laughed, "-poor nightwalker, getting stranded to befall the hunger of the monsters."

"You're a demon," the stance broke him to laid on all fours, "-how c-can you betray Kreston's faction?"

"Simple," \*snap,\* "-I was never part of them to begin with." Bones, flesh, nothing remained but the goo.  
"Prince Julius."

"Demon," he returned dawning an extravagant armor, "-are you going to keep my cousin imprisoned?"  
a star-shaped crest blinded the surrounding.

"Imprisoned?" she chuckled, "-there's no need to bring out a relic-level armor. I do understand the fear," said she casually, "-I didn't come across friendly, and you should expect so. Igna Haggard is more than your cousin," another portal opened, "-he's the next ruler of the monsters, our founder's inheritor."

'Systems activated.' The connection reestablished, '-feels weird,' thought he gawking the ring, '-éclairs become so powerful. Look at Julius, he's grown into a man. Whatever,' fixing onto the remains, '-he's my cousin. I'm related to him through Courtney. I'm not Staxius anymore.' \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,\* the sludge crystalized into an apple. \*Crunch,\* "-hello cousin."

"Cousin Igna," frowned Julius, "-what did she say about you being a king?"

"Cousin, I honestly have no idea myself. Let's leave the questions for another time," rushing for Ila, "-how's she doing?"

"Good, I healed her."

"What of the rest?" he stood to scan the area.

"They ran. I'm afraid a few of your companions had to be left behind."

"Cousin?" Kul sneakily pointed further in, "-don't worry about the demon. She's not interested in killing us. Take Ila and go, I'll catch up real soon."

"Sure."

It didn't take long to arrive at the 'hideout'. Cold, stink, and darkness was prominent. Why did it have to come to this? The question fell short as memories of Leonard, Rena, and Jen flooded. He knew who was responsible, the lady stood at his side without empathy. Joining hands with they who forced such a tragic sight. Who in their right mind would forgo the past and forget almost mechanically.

The steps stopped at Rena's growl. '-I did.' He bent over and held out a hand. She took the arm and bit, "-you don't look so good, do you now, Rena."

"éclair, evaluate her mental state."

"On it," said he doing a few calculations, "-the madness was triggered by darkness and solitude. A heart-shattering event occurred to tip her balance. Status unknown on her being sane again."

“Kul, don’t you have a method to reverse the situation?”

“No,” said she, “-Lord Igna, what transpired here was due to necessity. I hope you do not hold resentment towards our kind.”

“No,” he calmly pushed her cheeks into letting go, “-Leonard’s in a coma and Jen’s close to death. We need to get them to a hospital, quickly.”

“Might I offer my help?”

“No,” he paused, “-I don’t want people to know I’m the king of monsters yet. I know the mob mentality all too well. Help me carry them up fast.”

“There’s a portal returning to the top over there,” she pointed at the wall, implying the great hall. “The only requirement is completing the Dungeon.”

“Great, then I’ll complete it.”

“No need,” she smiled, “-the portal is already opened. Head on over.”

“What about you?” he asked.

“I’ll stay in Coria. Surely there’s someone strong enough to challenge me out there. I want to experience a hard battle. Once one surpasses the human’s limit, the fights become all too easy.”

“Well, good luck on that.” She cast a sleeping spell onto Rena and so, with his friends in tow, he hurled till the center.

“What will you be doing?” wondered she.

“Cooking,” said he smilingly, “-I don’t want to fight, not just yet.”

“Here’s a little tip,” said she, “-there’s a special type of fish that lives in the deepest reaches of Coria. The ice-hall here is far from the end. I’ve conveniently linked this,” she gave a bag, “-an endless supply of the beasts. They’re quite energetic. Master their taste and I’m sure the dungeon-style cooking will expand greatly.”

“Why though?”

“Consider it a gift for completing half of Coria,” a push sent him to the shadow-filled foliage before the dungeon.

‘I’m back,’ thought he, “éclair, can you control the helicopter?”

“Yes.”

“Take them to the hospital. I want the best doctors for their treatment. Use any means necessary.”

“Sure thing, master Staxius.”

“So, you knew?” he laid them inside, the rotors started, “-you knew I returned?”

“Not so much a return. I presume you’ll be staying as Igna Haggard. Doesn’t affect me one bit, I’m here to serve and obey. There’s another helicopter on way to pick-up the prince.” The great wind lifted the

grey-cage upwards. The trees and grass shivered at the pressure, the warmth of above, the dampness of below. He returned, Staxius was back as Igna. The man who began from nothing to climb to the top and create a dynasty that would continue growing. The friends made in the previous life were essential in his growth and what he had become today's was part of their reason too.

The tales of the coming adventures haven't ended yet. The world is once more on the verge of catastrophe – first came the mage's war, then monster's, invasion of beings from other realms, and now, the threat of World-War. Amidst the carnage; starting from scratch and intent on staying a chef, the want to keep what he has remains ever true.

'Hang on cousin. I'm coming.' Imprints stamped the dirt as he dashed inside with a smile. 'I feel pain!'