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Chapter 41: Chapter 39: A necessary journey

[Luminare Academy]

Victoria could not help but frown. It had been the greatest day of her life thus far. She, Gwendolyn, and her mother went out together for what seemed like the first time in ages. They enjoyed cuisine, they laughed, they walked, and they enjoyed themselves.

Her mother was healthy and no longer bedridden. That one fact alone filled her with a joy she did not know she was capable of. After so long, her mother had been healed; she was no longer pale and sickly. She was full of vigor like never before.

It was why she neglected the academy for today, though very uncharacteristic. But she just wanted to spend time with her mother. A smile crossed her face; she could not remember when last she was this happy. It was not an exaggeration to say that it was the best day of her life; it was no doubt much the same for her little sister and her mother.

But all good things must come to an end. She was at home, yet the message had reached her all the same. Professor Eudora was making use of telepathy to contact certain students. The range of the ability was kind of absurd, she would admit, but it was quite impressive that she could extend it so far.

But Victoria knew how the professors mental magic worked; it was a simple process of tagging one with their own mana. From there, it would be easy to pinpoint the specific person.

("To initiate telepathy, I believe the sender must focus their intention on the recipient and visualize a mental connection forming between them. This connection acts as a bridge through which thoughts and emotions can be transmitted instantaneously. The sender then projects their message, whether it be a simple greeting or a complex idea, across this mental bridge to the recipient.

The recipient, in turn, must be open and receptive to the incoming message and tune into the sender's frequency to receive it. This requires a certain level of mental clarity and sensitivity to pick up on the subtle signals being sent. Once the message is received, the recipient can interpret it in their own way and respond back through the same telepathic connection.

Telepathy was not limited by physical barriers such as walls or even great distances. I have heard it can transcend space and time, allowing individuals to communicate with

others across vast stretches of land or even more. The strength and clarity of the telepathic connection depend on the individuals involved, with some being naturally more gifted in this form of communication than others. Quite nifty.") She concluded that, when it came down to knowledge, few could compare to her in that aspect. She was even held in higher regard than most other spawn of Almeric.

("Though Professor Eudora excels in magic regarding the mind, no doubt due to being a spawn of the love Goddess.") She thought it was quite amusing, though. Despite being the spawn of the Goddess of literal love and beauty, Professor Eudora was still single. Though she supposed she was not one to talk, she was pushing twenty with still not even a date.

"But so is Fiona; hmmm, new material I can use to tease her." She mused.

But back to the current situation: she was loathed to leave her mother so soon, but she had little choice. The headmaster himself had requested her, it seems. And there was simply no 'ignoring' someone like Aleister.

"Now I wonder what dear Headmaster Aleister wants with me. I doubt it's due to my absence; I'm hardly that relevant." Though she supposed there was not much use in thinking of it now, She would find out when she got there in due time.

So quickly, making her way towards a set of stairs, she walked on them and stopped midway. A simple thought crossed her mind as the area around her sprang as the stairs seemed to ascend. Though the sudden action did not seem to bother the blonde girl as the constant spinning and ascending of stairs came to a halt, walking up, she stepped onto the top level of the academy.

From that moment forth, it was just a matter of walking down a long, expansive hallway. Wooden floors with velvet carpets draped upon them and a row of paintings depicting the previous headmasters of Luminare Academy. She did not stop to admire the sight as she advanced to her destination.

A large black oak door with golden patterns woven into it, it was the headmaster's office. The one and only room within the top floor of the academy, she did not know why. Mayhap, the headmaster, wanted to remain on top by himself; she did not care.

Raising her delicate hand, she knocked on the large door. A few seconds passed before she heard a muffled 'enter'. So, not wasting time, she pushed past the door. She could not help but immediately take in the sight of such a grand office.

The walls were adorned with paintings of all shaped, ranging from what looked like heroic battles to noble deeds from fairy tales, while lights cast a warm light across the room. A large carved oak desk sat at the center of the room, its surface cluttered with piles of parchment scrolls.

Behind the desk, a high-backed chair of rich crimson velvet loomed, its arms decorated with carvings of dragons and griffins. The headmaster himself was seated there, of course, his piercing blue eyes immediately zeroing in on her as if to gauge her worth.

Further bookshelves line the walls, filled to bursting with what she could tell were ancient volumes and magical artifacts. A large, crackling fireplace cast a glow over the room, its mantle lined with curious trinkets. A suit of armor stood guard in the corner to add further glamor.

Though, while entering, she and the headmaster were, of course, not the only two present.

She first spotted the brilliant white cascading white hair of Lucinda. Upon noticing her gaze, the girl merely sent her an awkward smile. The reaction was expected; Victoria had not long ago asked the girl to help cure her mother of Blightscurge. Yet even she could not manage it at the time, no matter how proficient she was with magic.

Healing did not work, even when it was from Lucinda. And restoration was too dangerous, as the effects of time magic were unpredictable. Alas, the spawn of Octavia felt guilty for not being of help, despite Victoria telling her that it was fine. Though she supposed it was just in the girls nature.

Now she also took note of Princess Mirabella; the girl just looked annoyed to be here.

And then there was a woman with raven hair and lilac eyes. With an impossibly large bosom, which she *did* not envy. She had rather large mana reserves, so she must have been someone of importance, which is why the lot was called no doubt.

And there was another blonde present—the Gregory heir and prodigy, she presumed. She had the same nasty glare as her dear father, said glare being directed towards someone in particular who leaned against the wall.

Victoria could not help but have a genuine smile cross her features as she took note of that eerily grinned mask. Mikoto, the one to whom all her gratitude was directed. He was responsible for saving the life of her mother when no one else could. Her heart could not help but swell with joy; it was just a dream come true.

The masked boy threw her a glance as he nodded his head in acknowledgement. She would have liked to converse, but Headmaster Aleister spoke up.

"Good, everyone is present." He started, his eyes scanning over everyone present. "I'm sure some of you are wondering why you were called."

"Obviously." Mirabella rather crudely replied. "And what's this hag doing' here?" She questioned as she gestured to the lilac-eyed woman.

"Come now, little Mirabella." Guinevere merely smirked despite being called a hag. "We've not seen each other in a while, so why so crude?"

"Because I don't like you." The princess merely spat, electing a mock look of hurt from the court mage.

"So hurtful and savage as always." Guinevere responded.

"Wh-" Before Mirabella could retort, Aleister spoke up once again.

"This is court mage, Guinevere. She is part of the reason you were summoned." Aleister clarified.

"What would the king's personal sorcerer want with us?" Agatha spoke up with a frown.

"We will be getting to that in a moment, but I'd like to ask you something first." The headmaster stated: "Would you all consider yourselves strong?"

"Ah? What's the point of this question?" Mirabella questioned.

"It's just for curiosity sake." Aleister answered with a smirk. "I'd like an honest answer." Suffice to say confusion was found with most in the room.

("Quite the random question.") Victoria mused. ("But it is linked to why we were called for. So is this a test, mayhap? To see if we are qualified for something? Or is it really just to satisfy the headmaster's curiosity?") It was hard to tell what was going through the headmaster's mind; his eyes were as blank as his face.

("Hm, I think I might have the gist of what is going on.") Lucinda's eyes momentarily darted to Guinevere. ("Lady Guinevere is here, so this is no doubt about the festival next month; they're here to recruit more contestants.") The few here barring Mikoto certainly were a good enough choice, but they were too young and inexperienced safe for Victoria. ("But knowing Aleister, he has already thought of something; his strange question is no doubt him wanting to gauge their character.") She surmised.

("What's with that dumb ass question?") Mirabella thought with a frown. ("Does it even matter if we think we're strong? At the end of the day, results matter, not what someone thinks of themselves.") The princess concluded.

("What is the purpose of this question?") Agatha mentally hummed as her eyes bore into the headmasters; his gaze was blank, yet they held an intensity to them. Though different from her father's, she did not feel intimidated. ("I just feel so insignificant when I gaze into his eyes. His gaze holds power, different from that of the Chaosmaw. Does he hold true strength?")

("I could go for some chocolate.")

Sigh

Aleister sighed with slight disappointment as he shook his head.

"So long to answer a simple question, that simply will not do. Fine then, I'll pick." His gaze all but latched onto Mikoto's lithe frame as he smirked. "Mikoto, was it? How about you answer my question? Do you think yourself strong?"

The others gazed at him as they too awaited an answer. Suffice it to say that everyone in the room had a keen interest in the masked boy.

Agatha knew he was more than meets the eye; she had briefly battled him after all. And despite having conversed several times, she could not discern the enigma that was Mikoto Yukio.

Mirabella just wanted a chance to properly pummel him, as she never got a chance. Then again, she would be lying if she said she was not curious about the masked boy. Especially based on what his mug might look like, he was probably hideous, hence the mask.

Lucinda just found him overall odd; who could blame her?

Victoria actually knew how powerful he was. She knew he was the one who destroyed the entire forest after all. But she did not care about that; Mikoto was an *angel* in her eyes. A mysterious force that helped her in her time of need.

While Guinevere, well, she was just interested in Mikoto's absurd mana reserves.

"I'm pretty strong." Mikoto answered casually.

"A straight and honest answer; I like it." Aleister grinned. "But how strong?"

"It depends on what I'm doing."

"I see." Aleister murmured before continuing. "Let's see, if you and I were to battle, do you see yourself winning?" The answer for most people in the room was obvious. Aleister, while not an Inheritor, was still powerful all the same.

After all, he used to be a general for the Galadriel military force. On top of being the spawn of Aragorn, He was even hailed as the kingdom's most powerful sorcerer on some occasions. A first-year academy student obviously had no chance, realistically.

"Well, you're a spawn of that destruction, God, and you have some serious mana reserves." Mikoto stated. "So it might cause me a little trouble."

"But tell me honestly, Mikoto. If we were to have a battle to the death, would you lose?" Most could not help but be confused by the strange turn of events. It was as if he were mainly targeting Mikoto for whatever reason.

But despite that, Mikoto answered without hesitation.

"I would win."

Chapter 42: Chapter 40: A necessary journey II

"Good, great. I approve." Aleister spoke with a grin as his eyes bore into Mikoto; the man seemed uncharacteristically ecstatic. Some in the room could not help but feel unnerved by the sudden happiness. Especially Lucinda; she was very much used to the headmaster.

He was her own personal trainer at one point; not many in the kingdom could keep up with her rate of growth, so she was mostly self-taught. But Aleister was one of the few who could stand on equal footing with her, to some extent. He was by no means an emotionless man, but then again, he was not one to just express himself.

Despite knowing the man for a good amount of time, he was still unreadable. Which is why the 'sole' spawn of Octavia found his outburst a bit eerie.

"Tch, c'mon, let's cut the crap already." Mirabella chimed in, somewhat impatient. "You going to keep dancing around on why you brought us here?"

"I must agree." Agatha surprisingly stated: "I mean no disrespect, but our time could be better spent elsewhere."

"Yes, yes." Aleister hummed, sparing Mikoto one last glance. "I suppose I got a satisfactory answer, so I'll cut to the chase. You were recommended to participate in this year's Sorcery War Gala, or this year's festival." Lucinda was not surprised by his words; she was always going to have to participate in the festival. Like she had to last year when she was going through her 'phase'.

But barring Victoria, the other three were first-year students.

"Forgive me, though I do not question the Academy's choice, but is it wise to send first-years?" Victoria spoke up, speaking Lucinda's thoughts. "And I myself am not that adaptable in combat."

"You were all recommended by various professors, and I trust my colleagues judgments." Aleister replied smoothly.

"I suppose you are not just going to send us straight in, should we agree." Agatha surmised.

"Correct, there was a special curriculum we developed." Aleister confirmed. "Of course we will not force you, so do you all agree?"

"Oi hag, my old man is okay with me participating?" Mirabella questioned, directing her gaze at Guinevere.

"Of course, little Mira." She answered, smirking at the princess's annoyance at the small nickname. "In fact, he encouraged it."

"Fine, I'll get to fight some strong guys, right?" Mirabella grinned. "Anything to improve my power." This was not an opportunity to take lightly. Not only was it a great honor, but it was also a great opportunity. ("I'll see you there, big sis.")

"I suppose I shall agree as well." Agatha followed suit with an answer. It was not like she could be confused; even if she was not recommended, she would be forced to participate. All due to her father, the festival was a rare opportunity to test herself after all. But furthermore, she would not deny that she was somewhat excited; despite being a first-year, she had the opportunity to participate in a festival in honor of the Goddess of war, magic, and navigation. She was somewhat honored.

"Well, I was always going to participate." Lucinda stated, as the only spawn of Octavia and an Inheritor, she had little choice herself. The kingdom would always pressure her to participate, and it was thanks to her master that she had time to at least prepare before she ultimately participated in her first festival last year. Then again, most saw this opportunity as an honor.

("It is a rare opportunity, I suppose.") Victoria internally mused. It was already a great honor to participate in the festival, even more so when one was recommended by a professor. But this curriculum Aleister spoke off, though she did not know the specifics; she assumed it was a training regime. She might be away from home for awhile.

("Just when mother is in full health...") She wanted to refuse, but she knew very well how that would turn out. Her mother always wanted her to take advantage of any opportunity that presented itself. She did not want to drag down her own daughter, even when Victoria deemed that not to be the case. She heaved a small sigh. She would be doing her kingdom a great service with this and no doubt making House Eizenberg proud. "I accept as well." She concluded that she would make her family proud.

"Is there a reward for participating, or something else? I don't want to be doing this for free." The words left Mikoto's mouth, and then he received incredulous looks from everyone barring the headmaster.

("Is this guy serious?") Mirabella could not help but think. Did he not know what the reward was for winning the festival?

("As uncouth as always.") Agatha could not help but think that, if there was anything that was constant with Mikoto, then it was just how unbothered he could be despite the situation.

"Hmm, you wish for a personal reward?" Aleister questioned. "A bit unfair, no? No one else will be granted one. The reward for winning the festival a total of a hundred times means a reward for the kingdom the individual represents, not the individual themselves. Their reward is the honor of serving their kingdom."

"I get that, but see, I'm pretty strong." Mikoto casually stated as he jabbed a thumb at himself. "I'm a foreigner too, so I'm not exactly loyal to Galadriel."

"Such confidence." Guinevere mused, a smirk adorning her features. "Is it just pride, or are you so sure of yourself?"

"Who knows? All I know is that I'm valuable." Guinevere hummed at his answer, her interest further deepening.

"I see. Well, I suppose if you put it that way, we could grant you something should you accept and succeed. Seeing as you're a foreigner, there can be an exception." Aleister explained.

"A deal it is, then."

"Good," Aleister stated before turning to Guinevere. "You take it from here."

"Alright, then we'll be going over your curriculum briefly." Briefly glancing at Lucinda and Victoria, she continued. "As I understand it, the two of you are in your third and fifth years, respectively. So you're not exactly lacking in experience, though you'll be included in the curriculum to get more used to each other."

"What exactly are the specifics of this curriculum?" Victoria questioned.

"Our other sister nation, Verdantis, has had some trouble there as of late." Guinevere started invoking slight confusion from most in the room. "You lot will be traveling to Verdantis to remedy a small situation there. As part of your training."

"Hold on, you mean to send us to another nation for a mere curriculum?" Agatha asked, befuddled. "Why can't we just remain in Galadriel? I am sure there is much that can help us here." She argued.

"You make good points, dear." Guinevere acknowledged. "However, the situation with Verdantis is unique, and it will surely be beneficial to you in the long run. But if you do not wish to stray too far from home, then it is fine."

"Tch, are you actually going to get homesick, Blondie?" Mirabella snickered.

"Quiet you oath." She snapped. "I do not care if I have to go far; as long as I can learn from this curriculum, then all is well."

"Alright then, if that is sorted out, I suppose there are no further objections." Guinevere started. "Good, then all of you will be leaving by ship tomorrow."

"Further, you will be accompanied by our ward expert, Professor Eugene, and an assistant teacher, Fiona." Aleister explained.

("Fiona, hm? This will be more fun than I suspected.") Victoria mused.

("Fiona, I haven't spoken to her in awhile. It might be as good a time as any to catch up.") Mikoto thought.

"Though we still have other students that might make the cut, those few will be trained here at the academy. For now, it will just be you few; be sure to be at the docks in the capital city at eight. Professor Eugene will inform you more about your task should you reach Verdantis. Now all of you are dismissed."

[Later]

[Luminare Academy]

"Whoa, I can't believe you actually got recommended." William murmured from his seat in the dining area, with Ruby next to him and Mikoto seated across from him.

"Indeed, I did not expect a bully to be recommended." Ruby dryly replied. ("As expected from you, Mikoto~")

"C'mon, are you still pissed about the training?" Mikoto questioned bemused. "I said I was sorry."

"Hmph!" The aqua-haired girl merely pouted as he just shook his head. ("How noble~")

"So you'll be traveling to Verdantis tomorrow?" William asked as he nodded his head in confirmation.

"Apparently. And don't worry, she may be pissed at me, but I'll still keep an eye on your sister." Mikoto stated.

"Heh, thanks, Mikoto." William smiled at the masked boy. "You're a really good friend."

"Nah, I would've been a good friend if I had stopped your sister beforehand."

"But you eventually did, no?" William spoke, waving him off. "And besides, I kind of deserved that beating. But thank you, Mikoto, for looking after Agatha and continuing to do so. I know she'll warm up to you eventually."

"I find that impossible. Mikoto is a bully." Ruby stated it matter-of-factly as Mikoto sighed. But then he recalled something.

"Right, I won't be at the academy for awhile. So William, think you can check something out for me." William looked at Mikoto in confusion as the masked boy reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I found this laying around; could you find out who wrote it and give it back to them?"

Taking the note and unfolding it, he just momentarily went over the structure of the sentences.

"A poem?" He questioned Ruby as she tried to take a peek.

"Yeah, I won't have time to see who that belongs to, so you think you could?" Mikoto requested.

"Of course, it's the least I can do." William agreed.

"Thanks, man." Mikoto spoke as he stood up from his seat. "Though I'm going to have to retire early, I have to get up early tomorrow. I'll make sure to bring souvenirs. See you."

"Bye, bye."

"See you, Mikoto."

With his parting given, Mikoto grinned to himself.

"Finally, some progress."

Chapter 43: Chapter 41: To Verdantis

[Galadriel]

[Capital City]

"H-how long will you be gone?" Gwendolyn asked with teary eyes, and Victoria could not help but smile at her younger sister. They were currently within the confines of a park, which Gwendolyn liked to frequent.

"Not long, little Gwen." She patted the younger girl on the head. "It will feel like but a moment."

"But I don't want you gone, sis!" Her sister whined, and Victoria could just shake her head at her younger sister's antics. She was just so precious, she was half tempted to stay and cancel everything.

"Come now. I may be traveling far, but there are benefits to this." Victoria stared back into her sister's large, teary eyes. "I'll get to bring you foreign treats."

"R-really?" Her sister questioned.

"I promise."

"Then I want a lot!" Her sister demanded with slightly more vigor.

"As you wish, little lady." Victoria chuckled.

"Come now, Gwendolyn; there is no need to pout because of your sister's departure." The familiar voice of their mother reached the sisters' ears. Victoria smiled as she took note of her mother strolling their way.

"Mother." Victoria was greeted with a heartwarming smile. It never ceases to comfort her to see her mother in full health.

"I'm so proud of you, sweetie!" Before her words could register, she was buried in a hug.

"Oomphf!" She forgot how strong her mother could be. "C-come now, mother; other people are watching." She said it somewhat shyly; her mother just giggled as she released her daughter.

"Let them see; I care not." Her mother declared it with a smile. "I'll express my love openly."

"Hehe, Victoria, you blushed." Gwendolyn stated.

"Hush, I did not." The girl stated while looking away.

"Now, Gwen, no teasing your sister. But you're going far, Victoria; have you packed all your necessities?" Of course she was worried, as all mothers are when their children travel far.

"Of course, mother, everything is prepared. But should I really go?" She questioned somewhat hesitantly.

"Of course you should, dear. This is not an opportunity to come lightly." Her mother reasoned.

"I suppose..." Victoria murmured, "Than I shall make House Eizenberg proud!" She declared.

"I know you will, Victoria." Her mother smiled at her daughter's enthusiasm.

"Hey, is Mikoto coming with you?" Her small sister asked as she nodded her head.

"He is."

"Hm, I still have not been able to properly show my gratitude." Her mother spoke with slight disappointment. "Rather uncouth of me, I shall make amends. He saved my life, and it is the least I can do. But his notes on Blightscurge he left only further puts me in his debt. It could save a lot of lives."

"I am sure Mikoto will understand, but I must be off to the docks now."

"Goodbye, Victoria!" Gwendolyn shouted, once more a bit teary-eyed.

"Godspeed Victoria."

"Farewell, mother, Gwen." She gave them one last hug before walking off.

Elsewhere in the large park, an annoyed Mirabella stared at two individuals.

"Are you sure you would not have me accompany you, princess?" Lukas Stark asked, the armored boy's gaze locking into Mirabella's.

"Pipe down, Lukas. You have to look after this twerp, remember?" She spoke, directing her gaze to her younger sister, Valerie, who just huffed at her older sister's words.

"I'm no 'twerp' sister; I've grown some." She argued.

"You seem the same height to me." Mirabella spoke with a grin.

"Then maybe you should have your eyes checked." The younger princess stated.

"Uh-huh, whatever you say." Mirabella joked before glancing back at Lukas.

"Look, Lukas, you have to prepare for the festival in your own way."

"I know, princess, but I just think it would be safer if I..."

"Do you think I'm weak or something?" She asked as she narrowed her eyes.

"What? No! Of course not! It's just that, as one of the royal families royal knights, I just see it as my duty to look after you." He reasoned.

"You slow or something? Just take care of my sisters that are here in Galadriel. I'll be fine." She stated, and Lukas could not help but sigh. Among the three siblings, Mirabella was definitely the most troublesome.

"How long will you be gone, Mirabella?" Valerie asked.

"What? You going to miss me, twerp?" Mirabella asked with a smug smile.

"Of course not!" The younger princess denied it.

"Sure, sure." Mirabella let out an uncharacteristic, genuine smile as she ruffled her sister's hair much to the latter's annoyance. "I'll be off; send my regards to Big Sis." With a wave, Mirabella walked off.

[Galadriel Docks]

The docks stretched out along the coastline, a hub of activity with merchants hawking their wares and sailors loading and unloading cargo. The docks were constructed of sturdy wooden planks, weathered and worn from years of use, with moss and algae growing in between the cracks.

The docked ships loomed impressively over the dock, its towering masts reaching towards the sky. The ship's hull was painted a deep, rich mahogany, with carvings and gold detailing adorning its sides. The sails billowed in the wind, adorned with the sigil of the ship's owner, a fearsome sea serpent coiled around a sword.

The crewmembers scurried about on the deck, their movements practiced as they tied off ropes and prepared the ship for its voyage. Seagulls swooped and squawked overhead, scavenging for scraps of food left behind by the sailors.

The smell of saltwater and fish filled the air, as well as the distinct aroma of tar and wood from the docked ship.

Red eyes beneath a mask bore into one particular ship.

"Pretty-*nom-nice-munch*," Mikoto mused, discreetly shoving an entire bar of chocolate in his mouth. This world did in fact have chocolate, which made it way less crappy.

The large ship was an impressive sight as it sat docked at sea, its towering masts reaching towards the sky. The hull of the ship was made of sturdy oak wood, weathered and aged from years of sailing on the open sea.

"Mikoto correct? You're the last to arrive." The masked boy tore his gaze away from the ship as he spotted a rather tall man with a head of neat black hair and emerald eyes. He

was dressed in a simple yet decorative black suit with gold outlines and a lilac undershirt. "I am Professor Eugene, one of your overseers for this curriculum."

"Nice to meet you." Mikoto was greeted with a nod. "Are the others on the ship already?"

"They are; we'll be taking off in a moment. Have you already sorted any luggage?"

"No, I don't have much, really." Mikoto clarified. "But say that Guinevere chick said we were going to go to Verdantis to solve a problem. But she wasn't really specific about it. Mind filling me in?"

"I will, eventually. Though only when everyone is gathered together." Professor Eugene stated: "Though what I can say is that it will be dangerous. Especially once we're in Verdantis."

"Hm? How so?"

"Astrothians like to migrate up north; you know of them, correct?"

"Sure, they're magical beasts sorted into specific classes ranging from Class D, C, B, A, and S." Mikoto answered immediately. "There was also a Class Z help for creatures like dragons, but they're extinct."

"You're quite educated about Astrothians; Luminare Academy only starts giving classes about them for your second and third years." Professor Eugene spoke with a hum.

"Well, I had a pretty good teacher." Mikoto informed him as he remembered the muscle-headed Arthur, who was Fiona's father. Honestly, all that seemed so long ago. He was actually starting to feel old, even though he had not even aged.

Though he still remembered the day he came to this world. So clueless he was, in this vast, unknown world filled to the brim with absurdities.

("So much time has past...and still nothing.") All of this just served to remind him of the zero progress he had made. ("But that's about to change; Aleister promised a reward. I'll have him undo those seals on the forbidden section of the library. It's a loose hope, but maybe just maybe the key to an answer lies beyond those doors. There must be a solution.")

"All aboard! We'll be leaving for Verdantis!" A loud voice announced, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Suppose we should board the ship now." Professor Eugene stated as Mikoto nodded, following behind the man with a small sigh.

("I hope this curriculum won't last long. I just want to get all this over with so we can finish with this festival.")

("This journey is definitely not one I want.") He mused, ("I really hope this ship doesn't have any rats or mice, I could do without critters.") It would most likely be a long journey. A necessary one, to eventually progress on his one true goal.

To return home. To those few people he held dear.

Yes he would return home, no matter the cost. There was nothing that he would not give.

Chapter 44: Auxiliary Chapter 2

A/N: This is just a Chapter to showcase all the new characters I plan on introducing. Better to make it now so you know what some characters look like, though I'll be adding photos later. And the other Auxiliary Chapter is still there if some of you have forgotten how some characters looked like.

Name: Amaury Von Auerswald

Age: 20

Height: 180cm

Bio: ???

Name: Selwyn Von Auerswald

Age: 29

Height: 196cm

Bio:???

Name: Lyraeth

Age: 18

Height: 176cm

Bio: An overly excited yet bloodthirsty girl that happens to be the spawn and sole Inheritor of the Sun Goddess Sylvestra.

Name: Reylthorn and Lilith

Age: 12 & 19

Heights: 140cm & 169cm

Bio: The siblings and Inheritors of the time and space God Arcturus. They are an odd duo with Reylthorn worshipping his own sister a little too much.

Name: Aerinon

Age: 17

Height: 172cm

Bio: The spawn and Inheritor of the God of Darkness Xylohr. He is a reclose young man that does not get along with his fellow Inheritors.

Name: Adrian Graves

Age: 17

Height: 178cm

Bio: A young man in his third year of Luminare Academy and with a love for poetry. He has the unique talent of being able to tame demons and making them fight for him. He is quite disliked for it but he does not seem to care the least bit.

Name: Princess Astrid

Age: 20

Height: 176cm

Bio: The crown princess of Galadriel, a kind a just woman with a knack for magic despite her being a spawn of Aragorn. She loves her family and strives for a just world for all.

Name: General Mai

Age: 25

Height: 175cm

Bio: An airhead of a woman who somehow commands an army. She could not strategize even if her life were on the line but if you want an opponent pummeled then she was you girl.

Name: Dante

Age:???

Height: 171cm

Bio: He is strong.

Name: Emilia Von Auerswald

Age: 14

Height: 160cm

Bio: An arrogant brat with a knack for battle and she holds the title of sixth in line of the Vel'ryr throne. But most would agree she does not deserve the throne due to her brashness.

Name: Anuran Von Auerswald

Age: 22

Height: 180cm

Bio: Cold and unfeeling would perfectly describe the one third in line for the throne. Most would describe her as a monster and not just for her physical prowess but for her might as well.

Name: Isabella Trune

Age: 19

Height: 170cm

Bio: Spawn of the songstress Goddess Elysande and a kind girl with a passion for plays. But there are layers to a person, and there are many layers with this girl.

Name: Reynard Foxgrove

Age: 18

Height: 180cm

Bio: Prideful and flirtatious this lad is, he is an eccentric one who holds the title of the spawn of the great extraordinary and super cool and totally tall Goddess of the depths, sea and freedom! The Goddess Arielle

Name: Lyra Careworn

Age: Not polite to ask

Height: 170cm

Bio: A beauty like no other that holds the title of court mage of the great nation of Verdantis. Though she seems oddly peculiar.

Name: Cor'nella

Age: ???

Height: 10cm

Bio: A small pompous and prideful fairy assigned to Agatha and set to guide her on her path.

Name: Ysabel Lavinia

Age: 28

Height: 180cm

Bio: Lazy, strong and prideful. Things that clash and make up her character, the knight captain of the first platoon, this woman also has the habit of proclaiming herself as the strongest knight. A obnoxious claim but maybe there is some truth to her words.

Name: Ingrid Rosamund

Age: 17

Height: 172cm

Bio: Second in command of the first platoon of the knights in Verdantis. Cold and calculated she easily clashes with her captain. But she is a prodigy that climbed the ranks of knighthood and there's is a bright future for this young woman.

Name: Telluris

Age: ???

Height: ???

Bio: Amongst the Divine Beast Telluris is the most powerful, it is unbiased and only seeks to preserve the world and those who would inhabit it.

Name: Rhiannon

Age: ???

Height: 187cm

Bio: Mightiest of the race known as the Ancestors, her arrogance is broad but understandable with power equal to Great dragons and Gods alike. Though beneath the arrogance is something more humane, if you care to look.

Name: Rowena Isadole

Age: 23

Height: 180cm

Bio: Cold, calculated and merciless. Not things you would expect from the Inheritor of the Goddess Astrea. A Goddess who embodies the realm itself and sanctions and protects it. Yes Rowena is definitely the opposite.

Name: Maerwynn D'arce

Age: N/A

Height: 165cm

Bio: The Forsaken God Vagnir calls to her. She is his will and horror manifested in the flesh. She unnerves both friend and foe, is she even truly human?

Name: Vulcan Morton

Age: 20

Height: 190cm

Bio: Among all of the Inheritors of Verdantis, he likes to think he's the most normal one in a vast group full of individuals with issues. He is the Inheritor of the Goddess of light.

Chapter 45: Chapter 42: At sea

[???

The beach stretched out in front of me, a vast expanse of sand glistening in the sunlight. The air was warm and salty, carrying the faint sound of crashing waves and the lively chatter of beachgoers. Seagulls swoop overhead, their calls blending with the distant hum of boats on the water.

Palm trees sway gently in the breeze, casting dappled shadows on the sand below. The sea sparkles in the sunlight, its waves lapping lazily against the shore. Small clusters of shells and seaweed litter the beach, creating a natural mosaic of textures and colors.

Umbrellas dot the sand, their brightly colored canopies providing shelter from the sun's rays. Beach chairs are scattered about, their loungers reclined as sunbathers soak up the warm rays. Children dart in and out of the water, their laughter mingling with the sound of crashing waves.

"Are you seriously wearing jeans and a hoodie at the beach?" I sighed as I heard an annoying voice. Turning my head to the side, I spotted my sister. Like most women on the beach, she was dressed in a skimpy black bikini.

"Does mom know you're prancing along with barely any clothes on?" I asked, and the little shit just rolled her eyes at me.

"It's called a bikini dipshit. Not everyone is so sociopathic to go to a beach fully dressed." She stated as I scoff.

"You calling me sociopathic? Aren't you the one who mutilated the old man's corpse?" I questioned.

"Eh, you got the killing blow." She shot back, and I sighed.

"Point taken." I admitted in defeat; there was no point in arguing with this little shit. "Anyway, where's mom?"

"She went to the bar to get a drink." She informed. "Honestly, she deserves a couple."

"Yeah." When the old fart known as our father died due to 'a robbery gone wrong', the police had hounded us for weeks. Looking to crack the old man's case, scummy as he was, he was still a very respected doctor.

"This is nice." Hinata suddenly uttered.

"What are you babbling about?"

"I don't think I've ever felt as free as I do now, you know." She stared up at the sky that held the endless blue sky with formless clouds. "We probably would've never even gotten the chance to step on a beach with that bastard around." I merely stared at my younger sister. Her eyes merely looked blank.

("That shithead may be gone, but there's still damage.") I thought to myself. Mom and Hinata were way more affected by him. I could take the beatings and the insults, but they...

I raised my hand and ruffled her hair.

"W-what the hell was that for!?" She demanded, and I just chuckled. "What the hell are you laughing for!?"

"Forget all about it, Hinata."

"Huh?" She just looked at me, confused.

"You're safe. You always will be." I stated that as she stared at me wide-eyed. "I'll always make sure of that. Even should it cost me my life." She stared at me some more, seemingly surprised by my declaration. Until...

"Pftttt! You dweeb-hahahahah!" She burst out with laughter.

"Oi, what the hell are you laughing for!?" It was now my turn to demand an answer.

"You read too much manga, hehe." She took a breath as her laughter quickly died down. "That probably sounded cooler in your head."

"Tch, shut the hell up. Last time, I try to cheer you up." I spat out as I turned away, missing the warm smile that crept onto my sister's face.

"How are my two munchkins doing? Bonding, I hope." Me and Hinata turned to spot our mother approaching us. Unlike this twerp, she at least saw fit to put on a bathing suit, though she still got leering gazes.

"This twerp is bullying me; give her time out." I immediately ratted her out.

"Nuh-huh! He's bullying me!" She defended.

"Mom will obviously pick my side; I'm her favorite." I stated it matter-of-factly.

"Fumu, the two of you are too much." My mother spoke with a chuckle.

"Just Hinata; I'm quite well behaved."

"I don't know about that." My mom merely sheepishly replied. "Maybe if you stop getting into fights at school."

Knock Knock

"Hah!" My sister triumphantly yelled.

"C'mon, I'm not that bad." I defended.

"You're that bad/You're that bad." Simultaneously, they replied.

"Oof. Attack on all sides." I joked.

Knock Knock

"We're just joking, dweeb; no need to cry." Hinata spoke with a smug smile.

"Now, quit teasing your brother." My mom came for the defense with a chuckle.

I smiled to myself; this was nice. Hinata was right; though I was no fan of beaches, at least it was nice. As long as I was with Mom and Hinata, everything was fine. It would be fine.

But nothing was fine. This was all a dream, after all.

KNOCK KNOCK

Mikoto's arm shot out as his fist collided with a wooden wall, sending splinters flying. He sat up from his bed as his tired, ruby eyes scanned his surroundings.

The walls were made of sturdy wooden planks, weathered and worn. The dim lighting cast a soft glow over the room.

The room was furnished with heirloom pieces, including a heavy oak table with ornately carved legs and a matching set of chairs with plush cushions. There was a large hearth in the corner, crackling with a warm fire and casting flickering shadows across the room.

A massive four-poster bed dominates one side of the room, draped in rich burgundy curtains and piled high with soft furs and cushions. The bed was adorned with intricate patterns of gold and silver thread, adding a touch of luxury to the otherwise rustic decor.

He recalled being in a cottage within the ship on his way to Verdantis.

Knock Knock

"Mikoto, are you there?" He heard the muffled voice of Fiona from beyond his cabin door. Mikoto sighed heavily as he ran a hand through his face, his rosy lips curling into a frown.

("What time is it?") He could not help but think as he moved off his bed and towards the cabin door. Opening it, he was met with the familiar sight of Fiona.

"As ever, you're a late sleeper." The wolf-eared girl spoke with a smile. "And you have bed hair,")

("So cute!")

"How late is it even?" Mikoto questioned as he let out a yawn, wiping the tears away. Fiona could not help but find it more cute.

"It's already late afternoon." She informed.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously." Fiona shook her head. "Honestly, Mikoto, I forgot how late you slept in. Furthermore, I'm surprised you could even sleep given how this ship is constantly rocking back and forth."

"I'm a deep sleeper." He muttered, "Though kinda hard to fall asleep with these damn rats scurrying about," He shuddered.

There was something deeply funny about Mikoto being scared of rats. Though given his dainty and delicate appearance, it fit. Fiona shook her head.

"Right, anyhow, get dressed and head to the deck. Professor Eugene will start briefing you all on what is expected of you once we dock in Verdantis." She informed him as Mikoto nodded his head.

"Roger, I'll be there in a sec. See you, Fiona." Giving the girl one last nod, Mikoto headed back to his bed and took a seat.

Humming to himself, he took the mask that rested on a desk. He could not help but feel a sense of comfort while staring at the eerie, grinning mask. Ironical, he used to dislike it.

But now...

In a way, it was a part of him in some weird way.

"My real face, huh?" Mikoto let his body fall back into the comfort of his bed as he stared at the dull wooden ceiling. His snow white hair spilled onto the bed, his petite frame still. He looked more like a beautiful masterful doll rather than a boy.

He did not know why, but he felt tired, not physically but mentally.

He did not know how much longer he would last in this world. It was ever hard not to think of home, especially when memories plague him. He was getting restless; he was fighting towards a goal he did not even think would work.

He raised his right hand to his face, it was so small, dainty, pale. So weak and unfamiliar, but even so, he let the hand brush through his face.

"Honestly, what are the chances that the forbidden section has what I'm looking for? What if it does not? What is the backup plan?.....There is no plan; I'm betting everything on this."

"Damn, I really have to look into other avenues. But world-traveling magic is unheard of. Who could even help?"

The boy sighed.

"What a pain!"

Chapter 46: Chapter 43: At sea II

[Sea]

The main deck of the ship was a chaotic scene. The wooden deck was somewhat worn and weather-beaten, with thick ropes and rigging crisscrossing overhead. The sailors were a mix of men and women, dressed in slightly dirty clothing and wearing hats to shield themselves from the sun. Some were scrambling up the rigging to adjust the sails, while others were manning the various ropes and pulleys on deck. The sound of creaking wood and shouting sailors filled the air, blending with the crashing of waves against the hull.

The billowing sails caught the wind and propelled the vessel across the sea. The water churned and splashed against the sides of the ship, leaving a foamy wake in its path. Seagulls circled overhead, drawn to the ship by the promise of food scraps thrown overboard by the crew.

To the far side, a group of individuals lingered. With a glance, it was easy to tell that they did not belong to the crew.

"Tch, where the hell is that masked bastard?" Mirabella asked in annoyance.

"Well, I had just woken him up," Fiona spoke up, wanting to come to Mikoto's defense. "He is probably getting dressed as of now."

"Say, Fiona..." Victoria spoke up, getting the pink-haired girl's attention. "Have you happened to see dear Mikoto without his mask?" She asked with barely concealed curiosity. Even Agatha, who stood a few meters from the group, could not help but have her interest piqued.

Professor Eugene himself seemed to be the sole exception of not having any interest in how Mikoto's face looked. It was not uncommon practice to keep one's face concealed.

("I suspect the boy must have his reasons; it would be wise not to pry.") He thought to himself as he stared at the group of students and Fiona. ("Then again, I suppose I can let them be.")

("Mikoto...") Leaned against the wooden railings of the ship, Lucinda tested the name in her head some more. ("I've heard his name before, but now I am definitely sure it is similar to master's.") Her master was a man who hailed from a small country far East called Doma. He was not especially adept with magic, but his skill with a sword was unparalleled. ("Heh, I still remember the harsh training to this day. It never fails to send chills down my spine.") She could not help but think with a silent shiver.

She shook her head to free herself of the thoughts. She would admit she herself was curious about just what Mikoto's face looked like. ("Though I do recall his words back in detention.")

"The reason I hide my face? 'Cause I'm too damn handsome!"

"What does it matter if she saw the guy's face?" Mirabella questioned. She looked disinterested.

"Come now, princess, you must be a tad curious, no?" Victoria stated, glancing at Mirabella, who just clicked her tongue.

"Just Mirabella, that princess crap gets annoying real quick." With a huff, she continued. "And what's there to be curious about? That mask must hide an ugly mug."

"Well, he isn't ugly..." Fiona murmured lowly in defense, but Victoria heard her loud and clear.

"Oh?" A mischievous glint sparked in her eyes as she went in too close. "So he must be rather handsome, yes?" She asked the now sheepish wolf girl.

"W-well I-uh..."

"Come now, we're all curious, Miss Fiona." A smirk adorned the blonde girl's features at seeing the flustered Fiona, who cleared her throat, trying to regain her composure.

"W-well I would not use the term handsome, per se..." She thought of the best way to describe Mikoto without really describing him too much. He did not really exude a masculine energy; in fact, he was...."Cute."

"Huh?"

"Hm?"

Mirabella and the rest looked at her in some confusion, and she realized she had blurted that out too loudly as well.

("Very smooth, Fiona. Very smooth.") She could feel her face burning red from embarrassment. Victoria held a smug smile at having once again successfully teased. ("This little bastard....she got me again!")

"Seriously? That guy's cute?" Mirabella did not seem to believe her.

"Fumu~ Most interesting." Victoria would have pried for more information, but she was interrupted by a voice.

"Sorry I'm late." The aforementioned Mikoto stepped on deck, approaching the group. Mirabella shot him a glare.

"Done getting your beauty sleep?" She asked sarcastically as Mikoto came to a stop in front of the group.

"Yep." Mikoto said, tapping the face of his mask. "Need to maintain my good looks. Though I doubt you would know anything about the term."

"Why you-" Before Mirabella could retort, Professor Eugene stepped in, so no arguing could begin.

"Alright, everyone is here; we can begin the briefing." Mirabella settled for another click of the tongue as she glared at the sea as if it had wronged her somehow. "Verdantis and Galadriel are not that far apart, but our journey will be another week or maybe more, if the wind remains steady and the sea levels stable."

"That is all well and good..." Agatha spoke up. "But what are we specifically to do once we reach Verdantis?"

"I'll be getting to that in a moment. Firstly, it would be prudent if you all are capable of a spell to preserve the warmth within your body. Up North is especially cold," he informed as he continued. "Also, we'll be docking in a small town once we do reach Verdantis."

"But say, Verdantis is known for its abysmal amount of Astrothians, no?" Victoria murmured. "Once we reach further North, will there not be a chance of this ship to be attacked by any Astrothians at sea?"

"Well, that's where we come in." Her embarrassment having died down somewhat, Fiona spoke up. "As you all can see, this ship is meant to transfer supplies to Verdantis. We were not a part of the schedule, but Professor Eugene managed to secure us passage by promising to protect the ship should any Astrothians attack. You all should be capable of spells way beyond most tiers, so there should not be any trouble."

"Makes sense," Agatha murmured.

"But it's gonna be a pain," Mirabella stated. "With all these plebes around, we can't use any large spells."

"Not like you need large spells to kill anything big," Mikoto said matter-of-factly. "You just need precise ones." Mirabella just scoffed as Professor Eugene nodded, then he spoke.

"Exactly, consider it part of the curriculum. The Astrothians, that is, we'll be encountering larger ones the further we go North," the man informed.

"That is troublesome," Lucinda murmured. "I heard Dread Sea Crawlers frequent the oceans up north."

"The hells a Dread Sea Crawler?" Mirabella asked the question most themselves were wondering.

"They are species of sea serpents, also known as the Deep Sea Reapers to sailors everywhere," Lucinda started. "Their bodies are tough enough to withstand the immense pressure in the deep pressure, and they can manipulate the ocean to some degree. Or so I heard."

"So the chances are likely we'll encounter one," Agatha noted. "It would no doubt be trouble."

"Indeed," Professor Eugene nodded in agreement. "But now we'll get down to briefing with most of everything else covered. Now Verdantis, while a large nation and capital, its military might pales in comparison to that of Galadriel and Vel'ryr," the professor began. "Though it makes up for it with the amount of Inheritors that are born there, so-" Before he could continue, he was cut off by a confused Mirabella.

"Hold on, Inheritors? What the hell is that?" She questioned in confusion. Mikoto and Agatha were much in the same boat.

"Ah, forgive me. While not really a secret, it is also not something widely known," Professor Eugene spoke as he turned to Victoria. "I could explain it to them, but mayhap you can do so more thoroughly." The girl nodded with a smile.

"Of course, professor." Clearing her throat, she began the explanation. "Inheritors are the true chosen. More special than spawns, if there is a one in a thousand chance of being born a spawn, then there would be a one in a million chance of being born an Inheritor. To be more specific, Inheritors have the ability to ascend, so to speak, using something known as Arcane Ascendance."

Agatha and Mirabella perked up at the mention of the familiar term.

("While I and the princess were battling that Chaosmaw back in the forest, he had mentioned the same thing...") Agatha internally mulled as Victoria continued.

"They reach what we call 'false Godhood.' But do not let the name fool you; once these Inheritors ascend, they are frighteningly powerful."

"How powerful?" Mikoto asked.

"It would depend on the God who blessed the Inheritor, as they are in a sense also spawns. But for example, were a spawn of Aragorn to ascend to false Godhood, they would have the potential to wipe out the world. But Lucinda here is an Inheritor herself," Victoria informed and immediately gazes honed in on her, causing her to let out a sheepish chuckle.

"How many Inheritors of the same God can there be?" Mikoto raised yet another question as Victoria hummed while rubbing her chin.

"I cannot say for certain; an Inheritor can be created one of two ways," the girl stated, holding up two fingers. "The first is being lucky enough to be chosen, but the second, though extremely unlikely, is still very possible. Train, reach enlightenment, and ascend. Though to really answer your question, it may or may not be possible."

"I see, thanks Victoria."

"You are most welcome, dear Mikoto." She replied with a sweet smile Fiona could not help but find annoying.

"I could not have said it better myself," Professor Eugene stated as he directed his gaze at Agatha and Mirabella. "Aside from your obvious skills and magical prowess, you two were also recommended because there is a chance that you two are late to 'awaken'." The two girls looked at the professor in surprise.

("Father never mentioned something like Arcane Ascendance. I can't imagine a man like him not having any knowledge of it....") This was certainly a revelation. But she did not know if it was a goal she wanted to work for. She was conflicted.

("A chance to gain even more power?") Mirabella grinned to herself. ("Count me the hell in!")

"If you don't mind my asking, Professor, who are all the Inheritors of Verdantis?" Mikoto asked, mostly out of curiosity.

"There are five in total," the professor began.

"There is Lyraeth, spawn and Inheritor of the Sun Goddess Sylvestra. I have heard tales of her being a particularly violent one. Then there is Inheritor of the God of darkness

Xylohr, the Inheritor's name is known as Aerinon. We've not much information on him, so we'll move along."

"There are the siblings Reylthorn and Lilith, blessed by the God who governs over time and space, Arcturus. This goes without saying, but they're the most dangerous and powerful of the few Inheritors. And the mightiest Inheritor, the Inheritor of the strength God, Dante." Professor Eugene explained.

("A Goddess of the Sun, a God of darkness, and a God who governs over space and time, huh? And then a God of strength as the strongest?") Mikoto, like the rest, was soaking up the information, but for a different reason. ("I'm sure I can do it; all I need to do is see it once. Like I made Agatha's magic my own, I'll do the same to them. And ascend!")

Chapter 47: Chapter 44: At sea III

[Sea]

("This could be it, my backup plan.") Mikoto grinned beneath his mask. ("I might be considered a novice to more experienced sorcerers, but with this blessing, only Lucinda could compare. I just need to see this Arcane Ascendance once, and like Agatha's magic, I'll make it my own.") Their short bout within the forest gave him all the information he needed. Seeing Agatha use Creation Magic just made it easier.

His eyes were special; he could discern and deconstruct magic with a glance and look into it with such extensive detail. It was how teleportation magic came easily, and it was easy to see how Creation Magic functioned.

("It's a simple process of envisioning what you want to recreate and having a blueprint in mind.") With that said, it was a hassle to use. ("But it holds more potential than any other type of magic. With enough mana and a clear picture, you could just create a Godly being. Agatha has some serious potential.") But back to the Ascendance.

("Reaching false Godhood would push my magic to greater heights no doubt. And then maybe I could do it. If all else fails, I need a backup plan to get back home.")

"But we are getting off track." Mikoto's train of thought was halted as Professor Eugene spoke up again. "The reason I mentioned Verdantis military might is because of how thinly spread the army is. Most are tasked with keeping the Astrothians at bay at various sections of the nation. Though Verdantis does not suffer from Astrothians alone."

"Cultists, correct?" Victoria spoke, drawing confused looks. "The Drah'lurahr Cult more specifically."

"The what now?" Mirabella could not help but blurt out upon hearing the tongue-twisting name. Much the same were Mikoto and Agatha's reactions.

"They're heretics who worship dragons as their Gods," Professor Eugene explained.

"Dragons are long extinct," Agatha said, somewhat confused. "They worship a species that no longer walks amongst us?"

"It is said when Gods still walked amongst us, some dragons were their equal," Lucinda spoke up, providing some insight. "Though these are only historical records, but mayhap these cultists took them too literally. Of course there were the Greater Dragons."

"Whatever the case, their numbers have been growing as of late," Professor Eugene continued. "And Verdantis is spread thin, as I have stated. Seeing as Galadriel and Verdantis have the most stable relationship, the court mage Guinevere had sent word that Galadriel would lend support."

"That support being us. So this is the curriculum? Taking care of these cultists?" Mikoto questioned as Professor Eugene nodded. "I'm guessing these cultists are actual trouble."

"They are not to be taken lightly. I assume you are all familiar with the fourth tier of spell casting?" Professor Eugene asked as Mikoto nodded.

"Sure, Tier 4: Forbidden Spells: The tier spells are considered too dangerous to be used by any spellcaster and are often deemed illegal or outlawed. Examples include spells that manipulate minor aspects of life and death, mind-control spells, and spells that summon or control dark creatures such as demons." Mikoto gave a textbook response as Professor Eugene nodded, impressed.

"Meaning the cultists will make use of spells like necromancy; this is no doubt how they boost their numbers," Fiona murmured.

"It is likely," Professor Eugene stated. "But to end off on just what we'll be doing, well there is no defined why to be doing this. We must eliminate all cultists we come across, as well as the very source."

[Luminare Academy]

William never felt this tired ever in his life. His bones were sore, his legs hurt, and his lungs burned. And he was rapidly inhaling and exhaling like some extremely tired animal. Luckily he was not alone. Or maybe that was not really 'lucky' so to speak.

Running beside him in the forest was Ruby. Dressed in a similar outfit to him, their 'training' outfit. It consisted of a simple white shirt along with baggy black pants and

boots of the same color. She did not seem as exhausted as him, surprising given how unathletic she seemed.

"Do you know why we were even chosen?" The aqua-haired girl questioned leisurely.

"I've no clue." He answered back; he would have let out a sigh were he not so exhausted.

Ruby seemed much of the same mind. But it seemed some God had mercy on his poor soul as their goal came into view. Their professor Fergus stood, a mean look still present on his aged but refined face. Though he was not alone, next to him was a fuzzy grey-haired girl with horns. Juliana was her name if he remembered correctly; she was dressed in a white shirt with black shorts. She was breathing softly yet rapidly as well.

Both Ruby and William came to a skidding stop in front of the professor, William kneeling over and inhaling air like his lives depended on it. Well, it did.

"Bah! You brats are too slow!" Professor Fergus spat. "Even this scrawny one was here before you." He said, jabbing a finger Juliana's way. The girl just gave a sheepish smile.

"Why must we even do physical exercise?" Ruby could not help but question. ("Things are so bleak without Mikoto.")

"Hah! Why the lass asks." Professor Fergus gave a laugh. "Oi! Scrawny brat, explain why you think we're doing this training." He said, directing a gaze at Juliana, who immediately just stuttered.

"W-well, I...I think...." She seemed to struggle to come up with an answer, so William stepped in.

"Because our mana is not infinite." The boy stated. "If we burn through our mana reserves, it would be wise if we have something to fall back on. Like our physical attributes." He answered.

"Correct, brat." Professor Fergus stated, somewhat impressed. "But you're one short." Professor narrowed an eye. "Where the hell is the other brat?" He asked as William gave a sheepish chuckle.

"Uhm...he said he wanted to enjoy some scenery." He answered, and Professor Fergus's eye twitched. He seemed easily annoyed by their fourth training companion for whatever reason.

"I'll be back, brats." Professor Fergus gave a huff as he started moving. "Training will resume once I am back; don't be loitering, you brats."

The three students merely watched as their professor walked off in search of the other student.

("I still don't get it.") William could not help but think to himself. ("Adrian, me, Ruby, and Juliana. Why is it that we were specifically chosen for this private training regime?")

"This is quite a bit tiresome." Ruby murmured, and he could not help but agree. The aforementioned girl not having much to do let her eyes wander; the various trees were just boring to stare at, so naturally her eyes were fixated on the most interesting-looking thing. "Are you a demi-human?" She suddenly asked, the question obviously being directed towards Juliana, who just flushed at the unexpected question. William could not help but sigh.

("You are a good friend, Ruby. But you must learn tact.") He could not help but think.

"W-well, in a way." Juliana gave a curt answer while a thoughtful look adorned Ruby's face. Ruby probably did not hail from any major city in Galadriel. That would explain why she was so clueless about some things.

Even so, Ruby was a curious girl, so she would continue prying Juliana for more information. And William understood Juliana's situation very well, and to say the least, it was a very sensitive one.

("With Princess Mirabella gone, Juliana has no one to protect her.") William could not help but frown. He recalled how others would berate the girl, just for her existence. It made him sick to his stomach. He did not know how people could be so cruel for something like this. "Juliana."

The girl perked up as she heard her name. Turning to look at William, there was, of course, confusion present on her cute face.

"Say, would you like to join Ruby and me for lunch soon?" He asked, Juliana just looked at him in slight bewilderment.

"Y-you want me to join you?" She questioned, somewhat confused. William just smiled as he nodded his head.

"Yes, I suppose we could use a new friend while Mikoto is away." Ruby hummed, liking the idea very much. "It could be fun; mayhap that Adrian will join us too."

"T-then yes, I would like to join you. O-only if it is alright." Juliana answered after some time.

"Then it is settled." William spoke with a bright and warm smile directed at Juliana. The girl could not help but feel her cheeks warm up. No one besides Mirabella had ever given her such a warm smile.

Chapter 48: Chapter 45: Dread Sea Crawler

[???

The large ship cut through the choppy waters of the ocean as heavy rain poured down from the stormy sky above. The crew of the ship worked tirelessly to keep the vessel on course.

The captain stood at the helm, his strong hands gripping the wheel tightly as he barked out orders to his crew. "Hard to starboard!" he shouted over the howling wind, his voice barely audible over the roar of the crashing waves.

The sailors scrambled to obey, pulling on ropes and adjusting the sails as the ship lurched violently to the right. The rain soaked them to the bone, but they worked with skill.

As the storm raged on, the waves grew larger and more erratic, crashing against the sides of the ship with a deafening sound. The crew fought tirelessly to keep the vessel from capsizing, their muscles straining as they worked in perfect synchronization.

"Brace yourselves!" The captain yelled as a particularly large wave came crashing towards them. The sailors held on tight, bracing themselves against the force of the water as it hit the ship, sending spray flying in all directions.

Despite the chaos around them, the crew never lost focus. They worked together seamlessly, knowing that their lives depended on their ability to keep the ship afloat.

Through it all, the sailors kept up a steady stream of communication, calling out to each other and to the captain as they navigated the treacherous waters. "Trim the sails!" "Secure the cargo!" "Hold on tight!"

"We've weathered the worst of it, lads," he called out to his crew. "But we're not out of danger yet. Stay sharp, and we'll make it through this storm together."

The sailors nodded in acknowledgment, the ship creaked and groaned as it continued to battle the elements, but the crew worked tirelessly to keep it on course, their spirits unwavering in the face of adversity.

Seemingly perfectly balanced, Mikoto idly stood on the main mast of the ship. He did not seem to mind the violent rain assaulting his body as he stood with folded arms. It was as if he were waiting for something. And he was.

("Ah, there...")

As the crew began to relax slightly, a sense of unease washed over them as the ocean around the ship stirred inexplicably. The erratic waters now churned even more violently, creating a swirling vortex of frothy waves.

The captain's eyes widened in horror as he caught sight of a large shadow moving beneath the surface of the water. "What in the name of the Gods..." he muttered under his breath, his heart pounding in his chest.

Suddenly, with a deafening roar that echoed across the tumultuous sea, a massive sea serpent-like creature emerged from the depths. It was unlike anything the sailors had ever seen before - a colossal beast with scales as black as midnight and eyes that glowed.

The serpent's long, sinuous body coiled and twisted through the water, its enormous head rearing up high above the ship. Its jaws were lined with rows of razor-sharp teeth, dripping with seawater.

The sailors on deck gasped in terror at the sight of the creature, frozen in place as it loomed over them. The ship seemed minuscule in comparison to the sheer size and power of the sea serpent.

The captain quickly snapped himself out of his daze, his instincts kicking in as he shouted orders to his crew. "Man the cannons! Prepare to defend the ship!" he bellowed.

The crew sprang into action, scrambling to arm themselves with whatever makeshift weapons they could find. They knew they were facing doom, but they were not about to go down without a fight.

As the sea serpent reared back, preparing to strike, the sailors braced themselves for impact. The creature's massive head loomed over the ship, its eyes fixed on its prey with a focus that sent shivers down the crew's spines.

The sea serpent unleashed its magic, fierce ocean hurricanes began to spiral and swirl around the ship, threatening to engulf the ship in their embrace. They swirled violently and threatened to tear up anything in their way. Something that would no doubt be an easy task.

With a lackluster focus, Mikoto extended his hands, and a shimmering barrier of pure mana materialized around the ship, deflecting the raging hurricanes with ease. The barrier crackled and hummed, holding back the ferocious onslaught of the sea serpent's magic. Mikoto's expression remained locked behind the mask, his gaze locked on the colossal creature.

"All of this should probably be more than enough proof," he murmured.

Mikoto extended his right hand and drew forth the essence of fire, molding it into a pulsating orb. The orb blazed with an intensity reminiscent of a miniature sun, casting a warm, golden glow across the deck of the ship. With a swift, graceful motion, Mikoto extended his palm, and the radiant orb hurtled through the air with astonishing speed, leaving a scintillating trail in its wake.

The sea serpent, caught off guard by the sudden burst of light, let out a deafening roar as the orb collided with its massive form. A blinding explosion of light and heat erupted in the heart of the ocean, sending shockwaves rippling through the water. The spray soared high into the sky, catching the sunlight in a display of iridescence, before falling back down in a torrential spree. The ship remained unharmed, encased within the protective embrace of Mikoto's barrier, as the colossal explosion subsided, leaving behind a tranquil ocean once more.

The crew members looked on with utter befuddlement. The creature that dwarfed the ship in size was suddenly no longer there. It was just gone just like that, furthermore, the rain and heavy cloud cover were no more. It had been completely eviscerated to nothing but ash.

The crew erupted into cheers and applause, their voices reverberating across the deck in jubilant celebration. Mikoto merely hummed as he leaped off the main mast and landed gracefully on the main deck. He received various thanks and smiles for being the ship's savior and whatnot.

He did not really want to deal with any Astrothians, but well, there was a reason for that.

[Earlier]

Within the confines of Professor Eugene's cabin, a large room with smooth wooden floors and walls, lanterns in every corner, a carpet draped on the floor, and paintings decorating the walls, the group idly stood. Mirabella was seated on the bed while Agatha stood not far from her.

Victoria and Fiona were situated near Professor Eugene, while Lucinda and Mikoto leaned against the wall.

"You want me to take care of any Astrothians alone?" Mikoto questioned, his words being directed to the ever-stoic Professor Eugene, who just nodded his head in confirmation.

"Seriously? You want this plebe to fight alone?" Mirabella almost scoffed as she crossed one leg over the other. "Look at his mana reserves. My little sister has more than him."

Agatha remained silent, not giving any input. It was hard to really gauge Mikoto based on how strong he was. Though it was brief, they had battled, he seemed at ease in that battle, he was even full of himself with that bout.

Despite her current distaste for the boy, she would admit that there was maybe a chance that Mikoto Yukio was, in fact, strong.

"Excuse me, sir, but as I said Dread Sea Crawlers frequent the sea this close north and they would be too much to handle for a first-year," Lucinda argued. "Could I at least support Mikoto?" Professor Eugene shook his head.

"I already have a gauge on what you all can do. Victoria is here for her intelligence, Mirabella for her destructive capability, Agatha for her versatility, and it is obvious why you were chosen. But I know little of Mikoto, hence I want to use this opportunity to see what he can do."

"But-" Lucinda was interrupted by a giddy Victoria.

"Oh, I'm sure it will be fine, Lucinda dear," the blonde stated, causing Fiona to give her a questioning stare. "I say we give dear Mikoto a chance." She said as she directed a smile at the boy.

("Barring me, no one is really privy to Mikoto and how strong he can be. He is a spawn of Octavia after all.") She thought, but Victoria seemed awfully confident in him.

"Still, a Dread Sea Crawler is registered as a Class A in terms of threat level," Lucinda murmured.

"C'mon, Lucinda, where's the trust in your future teammate?" He asked bemused. "I'll kill the oversized snake, easy."

"S-sorry." The girl could just give a sheepish apology. "It's just that it is hard to gauge your strength."

"Cause of his pathetic mana," Mirabella chimed in. Victoria just smiled knowingly, and Fiona could not help but narrow her eyes at the girl. Agatha, meanwhile, just looked at the two with a raised eyebrow.

"If things get out of hand, we will interfere," Professor Eugene informed.

"Don't worry, it won't," Mikoto stated. "I'll go wait for it to show up on deck, see ya."

[Present]

("Victoria, in terms of intelligence, it could be said she is way ahead of her peers. Even among her fellow spawns of Almeric. We are looking to expand her horizon for battle, to develop her intelligence even further.)

("Agatha and Mirabella are brimming with potential. Potential that can be unleashed should they be pushed to their limits. Then they can awaken and be great assets to the nation of Galadriel.")

("Lucinda is the single most valuable person in Galadriel. A war had almost broken out when she was born, nations wanted to have the single spawn of Octavia for themselves. Her worth measures up to the king himself. Her potential is limitless, with the right mindset no one could stand in her way.")

"And Mikoto..." Like the rest, he had watched Mikoto's 'battle' with the Dread Sea Crawler through a Zephyra Illusora. Though it was not a battle but a complete annihilation. Professor Eugene stepped onto the main deck as the sun started to peak through the clouds. The others were spread about on the ship.

"That guy actually managed to do it..." He heard Mirabella mumble to herself. She seemed about as confused as Lucinda.

"He really has that much mana? Enough to unleash a spell of that caliber? But why can't I sense it?" The spawn of Octavia questioned herself. "It could only mean one thing...."

"So he was holding back." He heard Agatha mutter.

The only ones who did not seem as surprised were Victoria and Fiona. The latter had recommended Mikoto if he recalled. And Victoria must have a way to perceive Mikoto's mana signature. Seeing as the boy kept it hidden.

("Keeping one's mana hidden means making use of illusion magic to make it seem less than it is. This works by creating layers of illusions, one can use one's own mana to break these layers and reveal the person's true mana capacity.") Professor Eugene mulled over the information. ("However, that is only possible if you possess more mana than the person who conceals theirs. Not even Lucinda could perceive his mana, and is this why Lady Guinevere held an interest in this boy?")

"Is his mana so absurdly large that it eclipses that of the court mage?"

Who was Mikoto Yukio? And where did he come from?

Chapter 49: Chapter 46: Briarwick

[Luminare Academy]

In the fleeting moment of waning dusk,
A young lad awaits in verdant stillness,
Beneath nature's gentle ebon canopy,
Clad in whispers of a soft zephyr's caress.
His hazel eyes, alight with curiosity,
Fixate on the ethereal scene taking shape,
A stirring revelation before his very gaze,
Where shadows dance and secrets awake.
There, beneath the love-kissed moon's tender might,
Stands she, the muse of an enigmatic tale,
Bound by a captivating, fair facade,
A celestial portrait of allure does not fail.
Her cascading tresses, spun of lustrous gleam,
Draped in milky strands of delicate white,
Like moonbeams delicately cast upon earth,
Emanate purity, adorned in lunar light.
Her crimson orbs, portals to an unknown world,
Reflect on the depths of some forbidden realm,
Enchanting, swirling, unfathomable mysteries,
Arousing the boy's curiosity overwhelms him.
A porcelain visage, kissed by moonlit dew,
Adorned with a pallor as pale as untouched snow,
The delicate canvas of a celestial deity,

Whose profound essence he yearns to know.
Silent footfalls, an ethereal dance upon petals,
Through moonbathed gardens, she gracefully glides.
The air trembles with a secret melody,
Tears of stardust gather in the boy's eyes.
Her every movement, a fluid waltz with grace,
Her gestures an enchantment born of dreams,
Her touch, an ethereal whisper in the wind,
Invoking a tempest of thoughts unforeseen.
Beneath a sky adorned with celestial constellations,
The boy remains transfixed, a mere mortal soul.
Entranced by this otherworldly apparition,
Transcending boundaries, traversing dimensions untold.
How does one encapsulate such resplendent beauty?
A flame of artistry within the boy's chest does rise,
Without words to grasp the essence of her being,
He is lost, entrapped in emotion's labyrinthine guise.
For she, the girl with white hair, red eyes, and pale skin,
Is an enigma that defies tangible description,
A tapestry spun from the silk of celestial secrets,
Breathing life into the boy's fervent transcription.
Thus, as the moon's tender glow begins to wane,
And the morning's golden veil delicately unfurls,

The boy clings to the memory, a phantom embraced,
Of the girl whose beauty transcended earthly bounds.

Hazel eyes studied the poem with a smirk.

"Some of my best work," the hazel-eyed boy murmured with a hum as he moved through the hallways of Luminare Academy. Though for some reason, he was receiving looks of distaste from his fellow students. Yet he paid them no mind.

("Now I wonder, how did this come to be in your possession, Mikoto?") He internally mused. ("This was meant for dear Lucinda, I even used an attachment spell.") He hummed some more as he tried to come to a conclusion.

The boy continued humming as he folded the piece of paper before tucking it inside his pocket. ("Well, William was the one who retrieved it for me, so I suppose I can ask him.") Those thoughts passed through his mind as he moved through the hallway, but he stopped when he felt someone poke him on his shoulder. He immediately took note of the familiar aqua-colored hair.

"Ah, Ruby." The boy gave a smile that did not quite reach his eyes. Turning to the girl, he continued. "Sorry I was not there for training today, I just had a bout of inspiration." The boy informed.

"That is quite alright, Adrian," Ruby spoke, not seeming to pay it much mind. "William was hoping you would join us at the dining hall." Adrian hummed as he mulled it over for a second before quickly coming to a decision.

"Hmm, why not? Lead the way." The girl nodded as she started to move with him following suit. They were not far from the Academy's dining hall, so they reached it relatively quickly.

As always, the dining hall was as bustling. With various students swarming around and enjoying their meals. Adrian followed after Ruby as she led him to a table in the far right of the dining hall. Reaching it, he took note of both Juliana and William conversing, the latter as always had a bright smile while the former looked as shy as ever.

William was quick to take note of him and Ruby.

"Adrian, I am glad you could make it," William greeted with a smile as Ruby took a seat next to him.

"Well, I am glad for the invitation," he shot back with an empty smile taking a seat next to Juliana, giving her a smile the girl just gave a sheepish one. "So how was Professor Fergus's training today?" The raven-haired boy asked. William heaved a slightly exasperated sigh.

"Well, you know, as difficult and over the top as usual," William explained, Ruby rapidly shook her head in agreement. "Professor Fergus is not as lenient as Professor Eudora when it comes to training."

"Professor Eudora is still too cranky though," Ruby murmured.

"R-really?" Surprisingly, Juliana spoke up. "I-I thought she was nice..." She mumbled lowly.

"True, but I much prefer Professor Melisande," Ruby muttered.

"Because she's too meek to criticize you if you slack off?" William asked with a wry smile.

"Yep," the girl shamelessly answered. William opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by a rather pompous voice and three sets of footsteps.

"Well, well. What a motley few." William and the rest turned to see a rather familiar face. He had neat black hair and emerald eyes, Isaac. He had his goons behind him, two specifically. A bald fat boy and a more lanky one with slick back brown hair, nothing really stood out about them. Nonetheless, Isaac's grating and annoying voice continued speaking.

"The Gregory failure," he said, directing his gaze towards William, the latter just held a blank face. "A nobody," he looked at Ruby who, like William, did not seem to care much at all about the boy's words. "The filthy demon spawn," Juliana could just avert her gaze in shame as the words left his mouth. "And the demon tamer," he all but spat as he looked at Adrian with contempt, the boy, however, just kept a smile.

"Be gone, peasants, I want this table," Isaac proclaimed.

"Nah," Ruby merely uttered out. It took a few moments for the single word to register in Isaac's mind before he glared at the aqua-haired girl.

"What did you just say?" He no doubt heard it but he was trying to be intimidating, which did not work.

"I believe Ruby said 'nah,' which if I remember correctly means 'no,'" Adrian explained as if talking to an idiot. This, of course, irritated the pompous boy.

"Who do you think you're talking to, cur!?" He demanded, all felt his mana pulsating and flaring. Meaning he was ready to use magic, to attack no doubt.

"Now, now. If you want to battle, let us not do this in the dining hall," Adrian gave a closed-eyed smile as he stood up from his seat. Behind him, cracks formed in the air as

if something were tearing through reality to get to this plane of existence. The cracks broke apart and became a large gap where a malevolent eye peered Isaac's way.

"Let us take this outside," Adrian spoke, jabbing his thumb at the exit. Isaac could not help but give an involuntary gulp.

[Verdantis]

[Briarwick]

There was a crisp winter air that cut through the large town, thick blankets of snow lay over every rooftop and cobblestone street. The wooden buildings bend under the weight of the snow, the town square had an array of market stalls now buried under mounds of snow, the colorful awnings barely visible through the frosty layers.

The streets were devoid of any usual hustle and bustle you'd find in towns, as townsfolk opted to stay indoors by the warmth of fires. Yet, the glow of lanterns illuminated the snowy scene.

It had only taken two weeks tops, but they had eventually reached Verdantis. This ship had docked by a small town called Briarwick. He could now see why Professor Eugene saw it prudent that they have spells to keep themselves warm.

"This place is full of snow," Mikoto muttered as he looked around. "Guess it makes sense, Verdantis is all the way north."

He hummed as he approached a small snow-covered building, pushing past the door he was greeted with a warmer atmosphere. It was an inn, rather large at that. The ground floor had a wooden floor with various wooden tables and chairs all around. Lanterns hung in corners to give the space a much warmer glow, it was relatively empty as it was late and most were asleep.

His group included, he had stayed up to explore the snow-covered town some more.

"Ah, you're back," he directed his gaze at the voice. It was a woman, long dark brown hair styled neatly and emerald eyes with rather defined and beautiful features. She was dressed in a simple dress adorned in white with an apron thrown on her. She was the owner of the inn, quite a nice lady. "Your friends already retired for the night, a shame little Lily and Xavier would've liked to talk to them some more."

"Kids will always be curious, I guess," Mikoto murmured. "But why are you up so late, Miss Lucy?"

"Just some late cleaning as you can see," Lucy stated as she swept the floors. "I was always a night owl. Can't ever sleep unless I completely tire myself out." She said with a chuckle.

"Hmm, I can relate to that, I guess," Mikoto took a seat at a table.

"So why is it you can't sleep?" Lucy asked.

"Too many dreams of home," he spoke with a distant look in his eyes that Lucy could not see. "Guess I just feel a sense of longing."

"I suppose that makes sense," Lucy spoke in understanding. "I also came from Galadriel, came to Verdantis with my husband to 'make it big'. There was not a day that gone by where I did not think of my parents."

"Leaving family behind is rough, huh." She nodded her head at his words.

"True, but we still keep in contact with letters. Just a shame they can't come and see their grandchildren. The ocean is too dangerous to travel, and I am not all that proficient in magic."

"A shame," Mikoto murmured. "But how is life in this town?"

"It's fine, with this inn I make a decent load of money. You'd be surprised with how many travelers we get. But then again, this inn also acts as a tavern, so I get a lot of drunks," she finished with a chuckle.

"Hmm, but I heard up north here there were a lot of Astrothians. Do they stay clear of this town?" He asked.

"We only get smaller ones that are taken care of by our guards," she explained. "The larger ones are in more secluded places like caves. But we do have other problems."

"I see, well don't worry they'll be remedied soon," Mikoto spoke much to her confusion as he stood up from his seat, tucking the chair back in he threw the woman a hidden smile. "Thanks for the chat, Miss Lucy. I'll be turning in for now," he spoke as he approached the stairs and ascended them.

"What a strange kid."

Chapter 50: Chapter 47: Hunt for cultist

[Verdantis]

[Briarwick]

Mikoto gave a loud and audible yawn as he sat up in his bed. His white hair was a mess, and his eyes were droopy and puffy. Yet his beauty was not marred in the least, his visage was one that would entrance all. Mikoto would have scowled had he a mirror.

He gave another yawn for good measure as he ran a dainty hand through his wild mane of hair.

"It's gotten longer," he mumbled as he played with the strands, which seemed to be shoulder-length. It must have grown on the boat trip, and he did not really keep track. "What a pain, should I cut it?" He thought about it as he stepped out of his bed.

Throwing on his uniform swiftly, he took up his mask placed a wooden desk near his bed. Twirling it in his hand, he eventually placed it on his face. His hair shortened and darkened as his form slightly grew.

"Eh, I wear this mask almost always, no use in cutting my hair," he muttered, exiting his small room. The wooden floor slightly creaked as he made his way downstairs and to the main floor of the inn/tavern.

The inn was a rather warm place, outside even when the sun hung high, it was still extremely cold. Not many had the luxury of warming themselves, so that would explain why many were at the inn currently. There were a few fireplaces to keep themselves warm, and the food helped too.

"Guess this place works as a restaurant too," he mused as he saw the various tables that were filled with people gorging themselves with food. At least the atmosphere was more lively.

Mikoto quickly spotted Professor Eugene conversing with the owner, Lucy, at the counter of the inn. No doubt he was asking for more information regarding the Drah'lurahr Cult. Mirabella, Fiona, Victoria, and Agatha seemed to be enjoying breakfast at a table, while Lucinda was busy showing off magic to Lucy's kids, Lily and Xavier.

Mikoto approached Mirabella's group, and the princess was quick to take note of him.

"You sleep in too late, don't you have any sense of time?" She questioned, and of course, she sounded annoyed as ever. He began to wonder if it was that time of the month.

"Come now, Mirabella, Mikoto was the one to take care of any Astrothians," Victoria spoke from her seat, gracefully eating a small piece of cake. "He deserves his rest, no?"

"Yeah, cut me some slack. Mira... what was your name again?" If Mirabella did not look annoyed before, she certainly did now.

"It's Mirabella, dipshit!" She shouted, obviously garnering the attention of most everyone else in the inn. The princess flushed as Mikoto cackled to himself, taking a seat at the table next to Victoria as Fiona sent him an unamused look from across the table. Agatha did not seem to care much as she munched on some soup next to Fiona.

"Well, now that you are here, Mikoto, I suppose we can fill you in on what we need to do," Fiona spoke, sipping on her cup of coffee. She continued, "Professor Eugene already rounded up some information regarding where the Drah'lurahr Cultists might frequent. But the sources of their whereabouts are not concrete, and we have too many avenues to explore."

"So we'll be splitting into teams of two to cover everything," Mikoto surmised as Fiona nodded in confirmation.

"Indeed, we'll be off shortly. Professor Eugene is just busy seeing if he can pry any more information from Miss Lucy," Fiona stated. "But are you not going to order anything? You would do well not to go out in the cold with an empty stomach."

"Aww, it's so cute to see you so worried about dear Mikoto," Fiona's eye and ear twitched at Victoria's words.

"I am merely looking out for the well-being of my frie... ahem, student," Fiona explained with a slight slip-up.

"No need to be so bashful, Fiona dear," Victoria chuckled. "Mikoto is quite the catch."

"I remember telling you that you had the wrong idea," Fiona spoke, slightly exasperated.

"What the hell are you two talking about?" Mirabella asked, confused, same as Agatha.

"N-nothing, Victoria is merely speaking nonsense," Fiona blurted out.

Victoria seemed to want to continue teasing the Solkari girl, but quickly everyone's attention at the table was grabbed.

"Again! This time with fire!" A boyish voice shouted, turning to the source, they spotted Lucinda, who was seated at another table. Her seat was turned away from the table to face two kids, Lily and Xavier.

Lily was almost the spitting image of her mother, with shorter, brighter brown hair framing her round face and a set of similar green eyes. The small girl was dressed in a simple white dress. Her brother, Xavier, was only a tad taller, with darker brown hair, green eyes, and dressed in a black shirt with baggy dark green pants. Lily was nine if he remembered correctly, while Xavier was ten.

Both excitedly looked at the smiling Lucinda's open palm. Inches above her palm, fire suddenly burst out, and the two's eyes widened at the sight as the fire morphed itself into the form of a man. The fiery man seemed to be granted his own fiery armor as well as a blade.

"So cool!" Xavier exclaimed. "Now with wind!"

"Hey, no fair!" Lily whined. "It's my turn to ask."

"You already had your turn twice now," Xavier stated, looking at his little sister in slight exasperation. Lily merely started to pout as her eyes went slightly teary.

"No need to cry, Lily, look," Lucinda extended her other palm. Simultaneously, both her hands burst with magic. In her right palm, a miniature ice sculpture of a ballerina was formed, hovering above her palm as it did an eloquent dance. In her left palm, a small wind burst as the wind formed into something akin to a dragon.

"So cool!" Both exclaimed simultaneously as they stared star-eyed at her constructs. Lucinda just gave a bright smile. It never failed to bring a smile to her face when seeing children so happy.

"You gotta teach us, Lucinda!" Xavier exclaimed.

"Y-yeah! I wanna do it too!" Lily followed his lead, and their eyes that held so much admiration that it just melted her heart.

"Oh, I don't know," Lucinda let her words trail off.

"Please, we'll do anything," Xavier stated.

"Alright, if you two do all the chores your mother gave you, then I'll teach you. Promise." The two rapidly nodded their heads as they all but bolted away.

Lucinda just smiled.

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

The frozen landscape was quite the sight, he would admit. The sun hung low on the horizon as some time had passed now, casting a soft light that touched everything it could reach.

Each snowflake seemed to sparkle, creating a blanket of snow that covered the ground as far as the eye could see. The surface of the snow was smooth and untouched, save for the occasional gentle curve left by the wind. It seemed to stretch on for miles, broken only by the dark outlines of rugged mountains in the distance.

In the distance, icicles hung from the branches of trees, the trees themselves stood tall, their branches heavy with snow.

As Mikoto walked behind Agatha, the snow crunched softly beneath his feet, creating a rhythm that echoed through the landscape.

It was the first time he had been in such a landscape. Back home in Tokyo, it only got maybe a few days of light snowfall. Nothing quite to this degree. It was quite the view. Mikoto hummed as he stared at Agatha. Like Fiona had said, they were all split into teams of two to cover more ground. Professor Eugene must have known they had teamed up before, hence he was placed with Agatha. But he must have not known that Agatha was mad at him at the moment.

Currently, the two were on their way to a small village west of Briarwick. Apparently, a number of suspicious individuals were spotted there. If they were lucky, it would no doubt be the cultists. Still, it would be most wise if they had a set plan on taking care of any cultists.

"Agatha."

"...."

"Agatha."

"...."

"Aga-tha."

"...." Mikoto just sighed as he inhaled deeply.

"Agatha, Agatha, Agatha, Agatha, Agatha, Agatha, Agatha, Agatha, Agatha, Agatha, Aga-"

"What!?" Quite uncharacteristically, the girl exclaimed as she snapped her head back at him, annoyance clear on her face. Mikoto could not help but snort at seeing the unexpected emotions from the usually stoic girl.

"You still mad about what happened?" He questioned. The girl huffed as she turned around.

"You had no right to interfere with my vengeance," the girl uttered with narrowed eyes.

"When you wanted to maim William," Mikoto corrected as he shook his head. "Look, I'm no saint, but you honestly didn't expect me not to want to help a friend."

"It was a family matter," she shot back. "I was not going to injure him too seriously," she stated blank-faced.

"Uh-huh. Then I won't interfere next time, as long as you're not gonna maim the guy," Mikoto stated. Agatha threw him a glance with an unreadable expression on her face.

"You will not go back on your word once I confront my brother?"

"I won't. As long as you don't hurt the guy, pinkie promise," Mikoto held out his pinkie, but Agatha did not seem in the mood to make a promise of that sort.

"Alright, you promised," the girl mumbled lowly.

"Anyway, I know it's private, but what's the deal between the two of you?" Mikoto asked. It was something that had been bothering him for a while. Agatha remained silent for a while, contemplating before eventually speaking.

"He betrayed my trust and broke his promise," she answered vaguely.

"I see, but I'm guessing your father also had a hand in events," she nodded her head on instinct. "What a scumbag. Reminds me of my old man." Agatha involuntarily perked her head up in interest.

"Your father?" she questioned.

"Yeah, he was a doctor. Quite a well-known one from where I'm from. The guy only thought of his reputation," he started, and Agatha could not help but listen with keen interest. "Obviously being the oldest, he wanted me to follow in his footsteps. I studied a bunch of things for that. Physics, biology, and human anatomy among other things. Hell, the guy was a maniac, even brought me to work a couple of times. The shit I saw there... But still, that guy was hardly ever satisfied and still beat the shi-" Mikoto suddenly stopped, and Agatha frowned. She was so absorbed in what he had to tell.

"Look," Mikoto merely stated as he pointed west, beyond some icy landscapes. Black smoke rose in the distance.

"That direction..." Agatha muttered lowly.

"The direction of the village Professor Eugene told us about."