

A Journey Unwanted #Chapter 51 - 48: Massacre - Read

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Chapter 51: Chapter 48: Massacre

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

The village was nothing but a charred and twisted picture, an intense fire that had engulfed it in a matter of hours. The air was thick with the stench of burnt flesh, wood, and singed clothing, and the silence was only occasionally punctuated by the cawing of crows that circled overhead, their beady eyes fixated on the carnage below. Unlike regular crows, they were white in color, resembling the bird but not quite. They were Astrothians.

Agatha stepped forward, her boots crunching on the glass-like remnants of what used to be the village's cobblestone streets. The ground beneath her feet was a collection of shattered pottery, splintered wood, and fragments of lives that had been snuffed out in a matter of moments. The houses, now little more than blackened shells, bore witness to violence.

Her heart raced as she approached the first of many freshly mutilated corpses that littered the scene. A child, no older than eight years, lay sprawled across the scorched earth. The fire had been merciless, leaving the child's once-rosy cheeks charred and lifeless. The once-soft hair, now brittle and stiff, clung to the skull. Agatha's eyes traced the outline of the child's body, taking in the horrific details – the melted remnants of clothing, the twisted limbs, and the empty, staring eyes that seemed to follow her.

The next body she encountered was that of a woman, her face twisted. Her skin, blackened and peeling, revealed the bone structure beneath. The woman's hands were clenched in a permanent grip, as if she had died mid-struggle.

She spotted a group of corpses huddled together, as if seeking solace in their final moments. A family, perhaps, or friends who had perished together. They lay entwined, their limbs melded together by the intense heat. The colors of their clothing had been reduced to shades of gray and black.

As she moved further into the village, the scene grew even more disturbing. The bodies became more mutilated, the evidence of their suffering more pronounced. Limbs were twisted at unnatural angles, skin hung in tatters from charred bones, and the stench of burnt flesh grew stronger with each passing moment.

One particular corpse caught her attention – a man, perhaps the village blacksmith, given the state of his muscular arms and the anvil-like strength they had once

possessed. His face, contorted in a final scream, was frozen in terror. The fire had taken his life in the most brutal of ways.

As she continued through the village, her mind raced with questions and horrifying images. How had this happened? Who could have done this? Was it those Cultists? Why did they do this? She tried to imagine the terror that must have gripped the villagers as the fire raged through their homes, their lives, and their loved ones.

The final scene she encountered was the most disturbing of all – a pile of charred remains that seemed to defy description. It was as if the fire had consumed not just the bodies, but their very souls. The pile smoldered, sending up plumes of acrid smoke that filled the air with a choking, nauseating stench. She could not bare the sight so all she could do was distance herself from it.

Agatha stood there, trying her utmost not to relieve her stomach of the food she had digested, her heart heavy with what she was seeing. The image of the fresh mutilated corpses, the burnt village, and the overwhelming stench would forever be etched in her memory.

She blankly stared ahead as snow continued falling from the sky.

She had never seen this much Death. It was ingrained into her senses, she could not ever forget this. She always thought herself strong of will, but this. How could someone do this, not just kill men and women but children too?

What monster would do this?

Her right hand lifted to cover her mouth. The smell was so horrible, and even when she closed her eyes she still saw their mutilated corpses.

"Agatha." She slightly jumped at the voice before turning to look at who addressed her. It was Mikoto, of course. They had been partnered up after all. His face was obscured, she could not tell what the boy was thinking or what expression he had on his face.

Maybe he looked angry. Maybe disgusted. Or was there a smile on his face like his mask suggested? Or maybe he had no expression at all.

"We should inform Professor Eugene." His voice was low, barely a whisper though. Though she could not discern just what he was feeling upon seeing this massacre.

"No." Agatha managed to utter out that word, she imagined Mikoto was looking at her with slight confusion. "This was no accident, someone was behind the slaughter of these people. I...I can't just go back now, there's a chance they can still be nearby." Mikoto remained silent. "We....I have to stop this from happening again."

A chill wind howled as the silence continued. She wished he would say something, she was just thinking of the massacre now. Involuntarily she could not help but shudder, though she spoke of hunting down those responsible she did not know if she wanted to face such monsters. Did she really want to be face to face with such people?

It was laughable, her the Gregory heir shaking in her boots.

"You look like you're about to hurl." Mikoto finally spoke, Agatha looked at him confused. "Your legs are shaking and not due to the cold, you have a spell active to keep yourself warm no doubt." He continued. "And you're pale."

"And? What are you suggesting?" She asked defensively.

"You're scared." He stated matter-of-factly. Usually when someone would speak those words to her, her pride would have taken a beating. But she was so sick of it, so sick of playing the cold and uncaring heir. Sick of being what her father wanted her to be. So sick of what others expected of her.

And so sick of this uncaring enigma called Mikoto Yukio.

"So.....so what!?" She shouted out. "Do you see this massacre!? Children were killed! Mutilated! It's a damn massacre of innocent people! What did they do wrong, huh!? And how can you be so uncaring all the time!? Don't you see what's around you!? People are dead!" Her uncharacteristic outburst, while short-lived, seemed to take some energy as Agatha took a few breaths. She stared at Mikoto, at those narrow slits of his, just barely she could make out a single red gleaming eye.

"You're wrong." He merely stated, he raised his hand. Ever so slightly it was shaking. "Despite what you might think of me, I'm not some uncaring fool who would look at the corpse of a child and keep a blank face." Agatha could not help but stare at the boy with surprise. He was so freely admitting what he felt. "This sight all around me makes me want to scream in fear, the sight of the corpses makes me want to throw up. The scent of burned flesh and the sight of this all is ingrained into my mind." He heaved a heavy sigh as he ran a hand through his head. "I don't react because I'm accustomed to violence. I saw it all, children missing a limb being rushed to the emergency room, people so severely burned they looked deformed, and more."

"Point is I am fearful too if I'm being honest." He admitted. "Not at those who did this, but at the fact that living, thinking beings could do something like this. We humans are a malicious bunch, huh?"

Agatha merely looked down in shame. Mikoto was just a human too, a child at that, same as her. Yet she deigned to call him uncaring, she did not know what he had been through. Maybe his childhood was worse than hers.

"I...I'm sorry, Mikoto." She apologized, it was all she could do at the moment. "I just..." Mikoto just raised his hand to stop her.

"It's fine, Agatha, really I understand what you're going through."

"Still, I should better control myself." She stated. "These outbursts are unbecoming of me."

"Eh, I don't think they are." Mikoto stated as she looked at him in confusion. "Showing emotion means you're humane."

"Humane?" She questioned.

"It's a good thing, Agatha." Mikoto informed. "But still, if this all was the work of the Cultist then they're more of a threat than we thought."

"Then...it would be wise to regroup with the others." Mikoto nodded. She did not like it one bit, she wanted to go after them but she knew how stupid that would be. Agatha clenched her fist tightly, she did not know these village people but she would make sure those responsible would pay.

"Let us go." She stated as she walked past him.

("This massacre was recent.") Mikoto thought as he followed behind Agatha through the destroyed village littered with corpses. ("Usually that would mean those responsible should have been nearby, but no. I suspected teleportation magic but detected no mana residuals. And then there's the second thing.") His mind wandered as he passed a body of a male, unlike most, he was untouched by any flames. However, there was a scorch mark where the gaping hole by his chest was. ("A fire spell was my original thought, but still not even a spec of mana to be detected.") Mikoto pursed his lips as he tore his gaze away from the body.

This was all just too messed up.

Chapter 52: Chapter 50: News

[Galadriel: Luminare Academy of Arcane Arts]

"Are you certain of this, Headmaster?" Within the confines of the top-floor room, the headmaster's office, a concerned Professor Eudora directed her gaze at Headmaster Aleister as she posed her question.

"Come on, Elizabeth, why so formal? Just Aleister is fine when we're alone," the headmaster stated too casually, at least casually enough that rumors might have spread had others heard his words. She sighed as she spoke.

"Headmaster Aleister, Ruby and William, I can understand to some extent. Ruby, while rather uncouth, has a talent for complex magic. Her skills in healing, teleportation, and, as unsavory as it is, hexes are one in a million. Someone like her would no doubt be a very large asset if we train her properly," she started. "William, while he pales in comparison to his sister, has a natural talent for all types of magic. We might be able to improve him, but that all depends on him. But I must ask, are we really going to send *them* to the Festival?" Aleister hummed.

"Me and James discussed it. Barring those already selected for the curriculum, Ruby and William held the most talent, even among their older peers," Aleister explained. "Though I would have liked to have a full team for the Festival, seeing as this will be the last. Alas, Ruby and William aren't improving fast enough. Though perhaps they can improve some more and surprise me."

"So we exclude them from the Festival?" Professor Eudora surmised, as Aleister nodded his head. "But what about *him*?" she questioned.

"Adrian Graves, huh?" Aleister rubbed his chin as if in deep thought. "He is a must. His unique talents make him as useful as Lucinda, and since he's a third year, he definitely has the experience."

"But still..." Professor Eudora frowned. "Must we include someone like that in something as sacred as the Festival?"

"If we want a guaranteed victory, then yes," Aleister stated. "We have to pull out all the stops if we want to succeed." Aleister spoke with a glint in his eyes. "Of course, if it weren't for my curse, I'd be fighting too," he said with a sigh.

"Knowing you, Aleister, you would fight even with it," Professor Eudora surmised.

"Ha! You know me so well. Worry not, I won't go about fooling around," the man informed. "Besides, I have too much paperwork," he half whined.

"You're not a child, Aleister, so try not to complain," the headmaster just shrugged as she continued. "Though with that being said, those children's training is progressing at a steady pace. However, most professors here at the Academy are not fit to improve their combat prowess, safe for me, Alexander, and Melisande."

"True," Aleister agreed. "I would like to train with them myself, but as a spawn of Aragorn, the aspects I gained are not fit for training. But I suppose I can call in a favor. I doubt we can get Guinevere here again; she is no doubt too busy as the court mage," he hummed in thought.

"Aleister, though the training of these children is important, why is it that you saw fit to include young Juliana?" She could not help but ask. "Her situation is sensitive. You are not seeking to include her in the festival, right?"

"Of course not," Aleister denied. "As a spawn of the supposed Demon God, we'd be branded heretics for including her."

"Then why train her?" Professor Eudora questioned.

"Hmm, you'll soon see. Patience, Elizabeth." At that, Professor Eudora could not help but sigh.

("Aleister, you and your secrets.")

[Verdantis]

[Briarwick]

Mirabella sighed as she leaned her head on her hand while back at the inn, which was now slightly empty. She was seated at a table along with Lucinda, Fiona, and Victoria. She had partnered up with Fiona, while Victoria and Lucinda were made a duo. Professor Eugene remained alone, while Agatha was partnered up with that masked bastard.

"So far, Victoria and I had not seen anything suspicious east of the town," Lucinda was the first to speak. "It was only a few Astrothians we ran into, nothing that suggested cultist activity."

"Same with us," Fiona spoke. "We looked into various caves and other places that might have served as a hideout, but they yielded naught."

"I must say, though..." Victoria started. "Agatha looked rather disturbed when she and Mikoto returned."

"It could be possible they came across something. It's probably why Professor Eugene and Mikoto are conversing in his room," Lucinda stated.

"What the hell could they have seen?" Mirabella questioned. "It must've been some disturbing shit." Agatha usually just held the same expression most of the time; not much bothered the girl. Yet, like Victoria said, she looked disturbed, horrified even. Just what did she see?

"Here you go!" The girls snapped out of their thoughtful looks as little Lily set a tray of hot coffee and treats on their table.

"Thank you, dear," Victoria spoke with a smile as she took a cup. Though she preferred tea, she supposed she could make an exception.

"You're a lifesaver, Lily. I could use some coffee," Fiona stated as the small girl gave a toothy grin.

"Thank you, Lily. Now remember, just don't forget about your other chores," Lucinda spoke as Lily rapidly nodded her head.

"Thanks, kid," Mirabella mumbled as she took the cup, though she did notice how the smaller girl was looking at her starry-eyed. "Uuh, is something wrong?" The princess could not help but question.

"Is it true!?" The girl asked with barely concealed enthusiasm, causing Mirabella to look at her with even more confusion. "Lucinda said you were a princess. Is it true!?" Mirabella blinked in confusion as she looked at the aforementioned girl, who just gave her a sheepish smile. So reluctantly, she nodded her head to Lily's question.

"So cool!" The girl exclaimed. "Do you live in a castle? Can you eat whatever you want? Do you get a lot of cake? Can you do anything you want? Did you ever go to a ball? I have to know!"

"Uhm...." Feeling overwhelmed by the train of questions, she did not quite know how to respond. Though she did hear the giggling of her companions, who no doubt found her flustering state amusing.

"I'm sure Mirabella will love to answer all your questions later. For now, maybe prepare yourself so I can teach you some small spells," Lucinda quickly came to the rescue.

"Really!?" Lily asked excitedly.

"Really," Lucinda confirmed.

"Then I'll get Zavier. Bye-bye!" Without another word, the girl all but bolted away. The girls could not help but smile at the young girl's enthusiasm.

"So cute to see you all flustered, princess." Victoria teased.

"I wasn't flustered!"

Meanwhile, in Professor Eugene's room, the atmosphere was more quiet. The man was seated on a chair near a wooden desk in his room. Said room consisted of a simple bed and wardrobe, along with the chair and desk he was using.

Professor Eugene sipped on a cup of coffee before placing it back on the desk. He directed his gaze at the other occupant of the room. Leaned against the walls a meter

from him stood Mikoto, arms folded and, as always, his expression hidden behind his mask.

"How many?" Professor Eugene spoke.

"Twenty," Mikoto answered.

"Hmm, how large was the village?"

"Not too big, but I think more than twenty people lived there," Mikoto stated. Professor Eugene nodded in interest.

"Indeed, either the remaining few escaped or were captured by those responsible," Professor Eugene surmised.

"Was it those cultists?" Mikoto questioned.

"It is possible. They may have been taken as sacrifices."

"Tch, bunch of psychos," Mikoto snarled. "If it was them, did they honestly kill men, women, and children for something as stupid as appeasing the dragons they worship so much?"

"I would not try to think of what goes through the heads of such heretics," Professor Eugene said. "But Mikoto, are you sure you wish to continue this mission?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"What you saw was something no child should experience," Professor Eugene sighed as he slightly bowed his head. "I apologize as well. You and Agatha witnessed that because of my negligence. There is no shame if any of you back down."

"It's fine, Professor," Mikoto just waved him off. "I won't lie and say I wasn't affected by what I saw, but I'm used to seeing corpses."

"I see," Professor Eugene merely held an unreadable expression. "Nonetheless, if it was the Drah'lurahr Cult, then we must act quickly, lest other smaller towns suffer the same fate."

"Agreed, though there is still one thing."

"What is it?" Professor Eugene questioned.

"Back at that village, at least fifteen people died due to that fire," Mikoto stated as Professor Eugene's eyes narrowed. "The five other corpses were killed by a scorching projectile. I assumed it was magic, but there were no mana residuals."

"A weapon then?" Professor Eugene questioned.

"My thoughts too. But that's all. I'll be going." Mikoto moved past Professor Eugene and exited the room.

The professor merely watched him leave as he remained thoughtful.

("Mikoto, with each passing moment, you grow more mysterious. I have no clue what you are thinking of or what your goal might be. It is clear you hold little trust for those around you. But what kind of person are you really?")

Chapter 53: Chapter 51: Mentality

I would like to pose a question on morality.

Is it truly wrong to kill a person? Ask anyone that question and you would get very different answers. At the end of the day, though, it all comes down to one single thing. Who is it that you killed and why is it that you killed them?

Killing is indeed frowned upon in the eyes of some. But some humans came together and agreed that some people were too vile to walk the earth. That is why the death penalty was created in some countries. Some people simply did not deserve to live.

But then again, who were we mere humans to decide who lives and who dies? Should that right not be given to a higher power? Should humans really dictate who lives and who dies?

Honestly, I do not care either way. I only saw that those who would murder and rape innocents deserve to die. Though I often asked myself if I could kill them, if I were to come across such a scumbag of a human being, would I be able to kill them if I had the power?

I always believed so, many would. Taking the life of a scumbag should be easy, no? In actuality, for me at least, it was very easy. But that is only because I happened to know the scumbag I killed.

And I knew him well; he was family after all. But that was neither here nor there. It is a simple fact that the old man was scum. Taking all his frustrations out by beating his wife and daughter. He prevented himself from beating me most of the time; he was convinced I could continue his oh so glorious legacy.

He deserved to die. And I never lose sleep over it.

But sometimes I ask myself, would I be able to kill again? It was so easy the first time, but if I came across another scumbag, would I be able to succeed in killing them? Maybe.

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

The wind howled as the snow fell, now atop a snowy cliff, a pack of Azure Wolves stared down their would-be prey. The wolves had fur as white as the snow itself with heavy radiating azure runes etched into said fur that matched their azure eyes that glowed.

Mirabella remained unbothered as she stared down the pack of five. They circled her, their paws trudging through the heavy snow, yet they seemed to have no problem moving through it. Mirabella just placed a hand on her hip as she awaited for them to attack.

And they did. One of the Azure Wolves sprang forth. Momentarily, its body became a white blur as it closed the distance between them in naught but a moment. Seeing this, Mirabella merely brought her right hand up in a reverse chopping motion.

And then its body split into two as if cut with an invisible blade, its organs splattered out from its now half form as its blood stained the snow. Though another one was quick to attack after their fallen brethren.

It lunged at her, its jaws snapping hungrily, trying to sink its teeth into her flesh. But Mirabella was too quick. Extending her right palm, a dark blue circular glyph formed inches in front of it. In the next instance, a bolt of lightning shot out from her glyph, striking the wolf dead center in the chest. The force of the strike caused the wolf to convulse and burst, sending shards of ice and snow flying in all directions.

Before the other two wolves could react, Mirabella raised her hands once more, summoning a torrent of flames that roared around her. The intense heat engulfed the wolves, causing their fur to blacken and curl as they yelped in pain. The hungry fire consumed them with, melting the snow beneath them and sending plumes of steam through the air.

The last wolf, sensing its impending doom, tried to turn and flee. But Mirabella was relentless. With a simple use of destructive air, she weaponized the wind itself, channeling her magic into a sharp blade of mana that sliced through the air and cleaved through the wolf's body in a single fluid motion. The beast fell to the ground, its blood staining the snow crimson as it let out one final, mournful howl.

Mirabella did not spare it another glance as she instead threw an annoyed glare somewhere else.

"Some help you were," she spat as she stared at Mikoto, who was kneeled close to the edge of the cliff overlooking the vast snowscape, as if there was something only he could see.

"Quit complaining," he uttered back as he stood up. "You've been doing fine without me, and besides, these Astrothians don't even reach Class C in terms of threat level."

"Regardless, are you seriously gonna let me do all the work?" she questioned. Mikoto shrugged, and she resisted the minuscule urge to roll her eyes. Normally, she would have assumed Mikoto was weak, but after seeing what he pulled off at the ship against the Dread Sea Crawler, she was at least convinced he was somewhat strong. The only problem was that he was lazy. "By the Gods, why did I have to be partnered up with you? Blondie was much more preferable."

"Feelings mutual, princess," she threw him a glare at the title, but he did not care. "Professor Eugene wanted us to rotate with each other so we can grow more accustomed."

"I know that," she huffed, folding her arms under her chest. "But what am I supposed to get accustomed to? You've been doing jack shit."

"With my great charm, obviously," she snorted at his words before shaking her head.

"What were you even looking for over the cliff?" she questioned.

"I was looking for any mana signatures that might belong to people. I doubt any normal people would be out here in the cold outskirts," he explained as she raised a brow.

"How could you even tell the difference between an Astrothian mana signature and some humans?" she never quite really understood how most sorcerers were able to detect the mana of others. It was a skill she was yet to acquire.

"It's simple really," he started but trailed off. He could not help but notice how tightly Mirabella was hugging her body, or that she seemed to shiver ever so slightly. ("And did she always wear leggings?") he questioned but shook his head of the thoughts as he continued. "Astrothians, while they come in different shapes and sizes, they all have roughly the same mana signature, of course some are larger than others. While for humans, most mana signatures are unique - they come in different colors, quantities, and densities, barring if you are a spawn," he exclaimed.

"I see," Mirabella murmured thoughtfully, surprised that she actually gained knowledge from someone like Mikoto.

"Anyway, there's nothing here, no Cultist or anything interesting," Mikoto heaved a small sigh as he fully turned to Mirabella. "Are you getting cold? You've been shivering for a while now."

"Tch, ain't any of your business," and just like that, she was back to being her annoyed self.

"Don't you have a spell that can keep you warm?" he questioned. She just clicked her tongue.

"I ain't good with this crappy kind of magic," she mumbled. "Too complicated."

"Ah, I see. Well, I could help if you want."

"Why would you?" she asked with a raised brow.

"The way you're asking that makes it seem like I'm some scum who won't help," she just shrugged.

"You don't seem like the type of guy to go around being a helpful person," she stated. Maybe it was due to the mask. A shame he had to wear a mask and hide his charming face.

"You want the cold away or not?" he questioned. She contemplated for a moment. She did not exactly trust the guy. Well, she did not really hold any distaste for him, just a very large amount of annoyance. Mikoto Yukio just seemed to be passively insufferable, but maybe he just liked being an annoyance.

"Fine, do what you want. Just be quick," she relented. Mikoto nodded as he approached.

"The spell me and the others use is a simple one where we manipulate our own mana that radiates from our body," he explained as he placed a palm on her shoulder. She slightly jumped at the sudden touch. Sending him a questioning glance, he continued. "We then change the properties of our mana to have certain properties, in this case fire. A small degree though, enough to keep us warm in this garbage weather," he explained, and in the next instance, the cold was gone.

Mirabella blinked. The warmth washed over her in an instant, the cold was so excruciating and annoying. Most of the time, it was hard to even focus on a spell or her sight.

"This is nice," she muttered.

"What was that?" he questioned as he removed his hand.

"Nothing," she merely stared away. "Thanks," she uttered lowly.

He opened his mouth to speak, but their eyes widened in shock as suddenly a massive explosion erupted in the distance. A fiery plume billowed into the sky, painting the

horizon with hues of orange and red. The ground trembled beneath their feet, and the intense heat from the blast washed over them, casting a glow across the landscape.

Mirabella looked on confused. "What the hell is that?" she whispered, her voice barely audible over the roaring fire in the distance.

Mikoto's brow furrowed as he scanned the horizon. "I'm not sure," he replied. "But whatever it is, it's causing a massive amount of destruction. It's covering like over 200 meters."

As they watched, a shockwave rippled through the air. The force of the explosion reverberated through the cliffside, causing icy shards of snow to rain down around them like shards of glass.

The sheer power of the explosion, coupled with the opposing of fire against snow, created a scene of unparalleled magnificence. It was beautiful in a way.

As the fiery glow faded into the dusk, leaving only wisps of smoke in its wake, Mikoto frowned.

"That was some heavy firepower," he mumbled. "The others are probably gonna make their way there."

"Then let's get moving."

Chapter 54: Chapter 52: Realization

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

The cave was extremely wide but ominous, dimly lit by the faint glow of phosphorescent fungi that clung to the walls. The walls themselves were rough and jagged, glimmering with moisture .

The ceiling seemed to stretch endlessly above, disappearing into the darkness. The floor was rough and uneven, littered with sharp rocks and slippery puddles of water that reflected the dim light in a ghostly manner.

"This cave is quite eerie, would you not say?" Lucinda asked as she avoided stepping on a loose rock.

"I suppose...." Her current partner for the exploration, Agatha, spoke in a low whisper. The girl was fairly quiet, which in itself was not odd. On the ship, Agatha had seemed opposed to interactions of any kind, only ever giving small inputs but mostly keeping to herself. But it was obvious there was something wrong with the girl.

Lucinda threw Agatha a glance, she slightly trailed behind her. Agatha's hair was disheveled, and her eyes seemed listless. They were just blank, more than usual at least.

("What had Mikoto and Agatha witnessed?") Lucinda frowned as she continued her train of thought. ("Mikoto had only told Professor Eugene but not anyone else.") Before her train of thought could continue, she took note of something.

"Hey, look!" Lucinda's exclamation caught Agatha off guard as she slightly jumped. "It's a baby Starbeast!" She finished excitedly as she pointed in a certain direction. It was a small creature reminiscent of a pup with black fur and patches of blue on its head and chest, its eyes were bright and blue, and there were something akin to wings on either side of its head.

Agatha stared at Lucinda in confusion; the latter was cooing as she cautiously approached the small Starbeast. The creature merely tilted its head at the approaching girl, the action causing Lucinda's smile to widen. After some contemplation, Agatha followed the girl.

Lucinda reached the small creature who still looked at her with childlike curiosity. Agatha just looked at it with confusion.

"It's an Astrothian, and non-hostile," she watched as Lucinda extended her delicate right hand. The Starbeast tilted its head at the action but nonetheless approached. If even possible, Lucinda cooed even louder as it rubbed its furry head against her palm.

"So cute!" She exclaimed, and even Agatha would admit that it was cute.

"This is a Starbeast?" Agatha questioned as she continued petting the Astrothian who seemed to thoroughly enjoy all of the attention. "One of the few non-hostile Astrothians."

"Yup!" Lucinda answered. "They're so adorable! Especially when they're so tiny." She softly squished the Starbeast's cheeks. "I always wanted one as a pet, but they only migrate up North."

"I see..." It was odd how enthusiastic Lucinda seemed with the Astrothian. This girl was supposedly one of the most powerful people on the planet. And her value was second to none, the fact that a war almost broke out between countries because they wanted her attributed to that fact. But here she was, gushing over a small creature. Agatha shook her head as Lucinda picked up the Starbeast.

("At the end of the day, she is just a human too, only slightly older than me,") she thought to herself as Lucinda approached with the Starbeast in her hands.

"Look, Agatha!" The girl again childishly exclaimed. "Is it not adorable? It's even staring at you!" Her childish enthusiasm was endearing, and the Starbeast was indeed staring at her with its big blue eyes that held curiosity and just looked so cute.

Unconsciously, Agatha reached out a hand and pet the Starbeast's head. It let out something akin to a purr in satisfaction, and even for Agatha, that was enough to crack a small smile.

"It is indeed adorable," she mumbled. Lucinda just giggled at her confirmation as she finally set the Starbeast down. It gave them something akin to a smile as it quickly ran away.

"Its mother is nearby, no doubt," Lucinda informed. "An adult Starbeast, while not hostile, is still formidable, even reaching Class A." Agatha looked surprised.

"That is quite powerful; if that is the case, then those cultists will not be here," she surmised. Lucinda nodded at her words.

"Indeed, I have heard Starbeast gain their name for holding the power of a star—whatever that may mean. But the cultists would not risk disturbing one," Lucinda confirmed. With that said, she turned to Agatha with a smile. "Now, Agatha, I know we have not been acquainted long, and it is none of my business, but I am aware that there is something bothering you. So if you ever need someone to talk to, then I would be glad to be of service. I would be even more happy to call you a friend, if you do not mind. As your senior do rely on me."

"Tha—" Agatha was interrupted when a tremor reverberated through the cave. It was not entirely severe but was extremely apparent. "What is this tremor?" Agatha questioned as Lucinda frowned.

"It's coming from outside," Lucinda surmised. "I can take us there more quickly, if you are fine with it." Agatha nodded her head as Lucinda placed a hand on her shoulder. And in the next instance, the crooked and expansive cave disappeared from view, replaced by the larger snowy landscape that stretched on endlessly. In the distance, they too noticed a large combustion of mana, covering at least 200 meters, maybe even much more. It quickly died down as the tremor subsided.

"That magic, it belongs to..." Lucinda frowned as she took note of the mana signature. "Let us make our way there."

"Right," Agatha nodded as Lucinda tensed at what they would have to face. She knew all too well.

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

"My, my, that was a rather large combustion of mana," Victoria mused as she stopped beside Fiona in a forest of snow-covered trees. The wolf girl nodded her head in agreement.

"And this mana capacity is astronomical," Fiona muttered.

"And I detect a few mana signatures heading there as we speak, dear Princess Mirabella, Agatha, and Lucinda," Victoria noted.

"If Lucinda is there, then they have whatever is happening under control, so for now we can continue our investigation here," Fiona stated as Victoria nodded in agreement before following Fiona.

Silence now quickly enveloped the two. Fiona was not so keen to talk to Victoria; that would just result in yet another bout of teasing. Of course, this was not something Victoria was going to slide, and so the spawn of Almeric contemplated on the perfect material. And then it hit her, a bout of inspiration!

"Say, Fiona, what is your age?" Victoria suddenly asked. Fiona stared back at the girl in confusion.

("There's that damn smug smile again.") Fiona frowned at the smiling girl but eventually relented with a sigh. She doubted Victoria wanted to make fun of her being too old, seeing as they were just one year apart. "I am twenty winters old."

"Twenty, you say, my, my." Victoria moved a dainty hand in front of her mouth as if she was shocked. "And yet still no lover?" The girl chuckled as Fiona's ear twitched.

("I knew it!") Fiona mentally exclaimed as she stared at the now-grinning blonde. "Twenty is a perfectly fine age to remain alone!" She quickly defended with but a tinge of red in her cheeks.

"That sounds like denial, dear Fiona," Victoria shook her head as if saddened. "No need for shame, Fiona, you're old and alone."

"Oh hush! You are almost my age yourself," she stated, Victoria shrugged.

"Still younger than you~," the blonde chirped.

"You are but a year younger," Fiona huffed. "And you have no lover yourself," she shot back as a pondering look adorned Victoria.

"Hmm, my suitors were much too unsavory for my taste," Victoria spoke, and Fiona could relate to that somewhat. Her father would never force her to get married, but that did not stop the suitors from coming.

She was a rare demi-human after all, a Solkari, and most of her would-be suitors saw her as nothing more than an exotic prize.

"But I must say I am rather interested in Mikoto," Fiona spluttered at the unexpected words.

"Y-you're not serious, right?" She asked, and Victoria just gave a teasing smile.

"Who knows?" She questioned. "Maybe, maybe not. Worry not, I shan't steal him from you, I'm only joking," Victoria relented. Fiona would have sighed with relief, but that would just be what Victoria wanted. "Mikoto is rather young, but when is his name day?"

"I believe he said it was the 26th of August," Fiona answered, and then it hit her memory like a truck.

"What a coincidence," Victoria mused. "That's the day of the festival." She glanced at Fiona and could not help but stare at her with a quirked-up eyebrow.

("How could I forget when it happened to Lucinda, how violent she was!? And Mikoto is almost sixteen winters old!")

This was bad.

Chapter 55: Chapter 53: Is that a gun?

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

The large destroyed town sat ominously on the landscape, its streets now quiet and deserted. The buildings that once stood proudly are now mere shells of their former selves, with crumbling walls and collapsed roofs giving a glimpse of the town's destruction.

The town square was a expanse of snow-covered debris. The fountain in the center lay dormant, its statues broken and covered in a thick layer of ice. Surrounding the square are the remains of once grand buildings, their facades now weathered.

The narrow streets wind through the town like a maze, leading to more dilapidated structures and abandoned homes.

Yet the town was only recently destroyed, despite how it appeared. Mirabella frowned as she scanned through the town.

"What the hell happened here? Did that explosion cause this?" She questioned, but then a grimace found itself on her face. "What about the people..." Before her train of thought could continue, she was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Pri-Mirabella?" She turned to the voice and took note of the head of white hair that blended in with the snow. It was Lucinda, along with Agatha.

"You two." She noted. "Are you here because of that explosion too?" She questioned as Lucinda nodded in affirmation.

"Indeed, we came as fast as we could." Lucinda confirmed as Agatha spoke up.

"But where is Mikoto? Was he not paired with you?" The girl questioned with a tilt of her head, and an annoyed expression found its way onto Mirabella's face as she spoke.

"That bastard ditched me, said he saw something interesting and just left on our way here." The girls deadpanned at her words. Agatha shook her head.

("How very like Mikoto.") Agatha internally mused. She may not have known him long, but she knew Mikoto was a person who did what he liked. Mikoto had what she wanted, a sense of freedom. She shook her head of the thoughts as Lucinda spoke.

"The person responsible for that outburst of mana is still in this destroyed city." Lucinda started. "And we don't have to worry about any people being caught up in it as this city was abandoned due to the severe amount of Astrothians in this area." Mirabella could not help but heave a sigh of relief, and Agatha seemed much the same mind.

"But I know this mana signature well." Lucinda stated, prompting confused looks from the two. "It's Lyraeth, spawn and Inheritor of the Sun Goddess Sylvestra."

"Seriously?" Mirabella questioned. "What the hell is an Inheritor doing all out in the boonies?"

"I know not. But this blazing and bright mana is definitely hers." Lucinda spoke as Agatha started right after.

"Have you met this Lyraeth before?" Lucinda nodded her head at the question.

"It was one year ago, honoring the Goddess Octavia via the festival, it was my first festival as well. We had battled, yet at the time I was uhm...not in the right state of mind."

"I read something about spawns of Octavia growing rather violent when they are sixteen winters old." Agatha murmured. "Old texts say this is due to the Goddess Octavia's former lover, the God of Navigation being killed by the twin trickster Gods. Octavia had grown vengeful yet she could not take vengeance. However, I recall the text also stating her God brethren bid her to wait sixteen winters and summers so her anger could be lessened. Though I am not sure if this is the case."

"You are quite knowledgeable, Agatha." Lucinda stated, somewhat impressed. "Though it is true that on one's sixteenth nameday, you feel an inexplicable rage and thirst for violence." Lucinda sighed as she recalled. "Though a spawn of Octavia is only born around once every one hundred years, there are still records held of the other spawns of Octavia as well as their Familial Arts, so it's rather easy to confirm."

"All this is interesting and all, but what are we supposed to do with this Lyraeth chick?" Mirabella spoke as a thoughtful look adorned Lucinda's face.

"Lyraeth is known for her violent tendencies, as outsiders she may attack us. Even if I am a familiar face." Lucinda stated as Agatha frowned.

"As an Inheritor yourself, could you handle her?" The blonde asked.

"I can, but our chances of winning would skyrocket if you two support me should battle be unavoidable." Lucinda stated. "But I must avoid close quarters as I have left my sword at the inn."

"Alright, if that's the plan, then let's get this over with." Mirabella spoke with some anticipation. She was looking forward to what an Inheritor could do. If she were being honest, she was hoping for a battle, just to see if they could push this girl to use her Arcane Ascendance. If there was a chance she could obtain that power, then all the better.

Beside her, Agatha was much the same mind. She wanted to get stronger, not for her scumbag of a father but for herself. She had a new goal, maybe it was just a trait of being the spawn of the Goddess of Prosperity, but she did not want innocents to die.

("If I were to be an Inheritor, my power would increase.") She reasoned. ("I never saw myself as some saint, but I shan't ever forget those few in that village. Innocents dead just like that. I want to protect those who cannot fight for themselves.") A smile crossed her usually stoic face. ("I see, is this my calling?")

"What are you smiling about?" Mirabella questioned.

"Nothing." The girl merely glanced away. She felt complete in a way; she had found a purpose.

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

Since coming to this world, many things surprised him. Magic, the Gods and their spawns, the Astrothians, and many more things. But as time passed, the shock of these things merely lessened, and everything that should have been absurd just became the norm to him. But it seems this world still had surprises in store for him.

Around him lay the unconscious forms of five people. They were all dressed the same, in a black robe adorned in red with an amulet on their chest with an intricate red pattern. Along with that, they all wore white masks with black lines decorating the cheeks, while a red gem was embedded into the upper center of the mask.

All five were unconscious, save for one who was leaned against a stone, gripping the bloody stump of where his right arm used to be. His breathing was heavy, but Mikoto paid him no mind. He was too busy studying the object in his hand.

It was something akin to a large and thick rifle, sleek black in design with radiating red lines decorating multiple sections of the rifle. There was even a trigger and cartridge; he was holding a gun. A rather high-tech one at that. All of them were carrying them, imagine his surprise when they just whipped out guns.

"What? Did Americans get isekai'd too?" He joked as the conscious cultist spoke.

"F-fool, you've done naught to impede us by eliminating this small group." The cultist coughed behind his mask as he tried to continue. "Our brethren will still continue without us! They will—" He was silenced as Mikoto aimed the gun at him, specifically the stump of his arm. The cultist could just pull his left hand away from the stump as a red bolt of condensed light shot out from the rifle with unseen speed.

"Aaaaagh!" A shout of pain ripped through the cultist's throat as the shot hit its mark.

"Hmm, neat. It cauterized the wound." He noted. When he had happened upon the cultists, they had just immediately attacked him, so he had responded in kind, but not before he had taken note of something strange.

("Everything in this world consists of mana, be it the very earth, trees, humans, and Astrothians. That's constant in this world, but these cultists....") Mikoto frowned, and as if driven by instinct, a look of disgust morphed onto his face as he stared at the creature. ("They have no mana at all, not even a pathetic amount.") Mikoto could not help but find them unnatural. Which is ironic considering he came from a world where magic was naught but a fantasy.

"Y-you will not stop us." The cultist still writhed in pain as he let out heavy breaths. "Our dragon Gods wi—" He stopped as he stared into the hollow slits of Mikoto's mask. A red

eye gleamed and glared at him as if he were naught but trash. Lower than even the scummiest person on the planet. The glare pierced through his being and dismantled him.

"Shut it, scum." Mikoto approached him slowly, and the cultist wanted to back away but could not. The boy threw the rifle to the side as he stopped in front of the downed cultist. "You'll take me to your hideout." It was not a request; the cultists knew it. He could not steel himself to deny this masked boy. "Filthy animal who can't even use magic."

At least killing them would be easy.

"You're nothing but animals. I'll be ridding the world of you lot, and doing it a favor."

Chapter 56: Chapter 54: Ruins

[Galadriel]

[Outskirts]

The ruins were a sight to behold, Ruby's eyes stared wide with wonder. "Wow, this place is pretty cool," she exclaimed, her voice echoing off the stone walls. "I wonder how old it is."

William answered her. "It has been here for more than fifty years," he said, pointing to a faded inscription on the wall. "It was once a castle, home to a noble family."

Adrian ran his fingers along the rough stone walls. "Judging by the damage, some battles must have been fought here," he mused, his voice low. "It's like stepping back in time."

As they wandered deeper into the ruins, they stumbled upon a courtyard overgrown with tangled vines and wildflowers. A fountain stood in the center, cracked and dry. Ruby skipped over to it, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. "It wa-, must have been so grand back in its day."

William nodded, his brow furrowed in thought. "Yes, it was likely the centerpiece of the castle's courtyard, a symbol of wealth and power. Most nobles do love their over-the-top fountains."

Adrian glanced up at the crumbling towers that loomed overhead. "It's amazing to think that this place has stood here for years, weathering the passage of time."

The three walked in companionable silence, their footsteps echoing through the empty halls and corridors.

"Quite the unique place the Astrothian took as its lair," William noted.

"Indeed," Adrian agreed. "It most likely knows we are here. Class B Astrothians are not to be underestimated, after all."

"Is it really strong?" Ruby questioned, and the two boys nodded. ("How I detest acting clueless. Hm, I wish dear Mikoto was here.")

"It is," William confirmed. "Though it is hard to tell which Class B Astrothian this may be. I find it strange they picked this to be our training exercise, especially when Juliana is not even involved." Adrian seemed to share his sentiment of confusion, which Ruby did not.

"It is rather unorthodox, but perhaps it will pay off soon," Adrian said. The two looked at him expectantly, but he just shook his head. "Never mind, there was something I wished to talk about."

"What is it?" William questioned.

"Regarding your absent friend, Mikoto," Adrian started. "I am rather curious about him. It is not every day you get foreigners in the Academy, after all. I want to know what kind of person he is." A thoughtful look adorned William's faces. William did not find it all surprising that Adrian was curious about Mikoto. It was his poem that was found on Mikoto, and that is not mentioning there is probably no shortage of people curious about the masked boy.

"Well, it is hard to discern Mikoto's character," William started. "Though we have been friends for a while now, I can safely say he is not a bad person." William stated as Adrian hummed.

"No, Mikoto is a bully," Ruby dryly stated, not really meaning her words. "When we fought, he hanged me by a tree with my uniform." She huffed, and William gave a sheepish chuckle. ("Of course since it's Mikoto I forgive him,") She silently smiled to herself.

"You're not gonna let him forget that, huh?" William mused as Ruby rapidly nodded her head.

"I heard he wears a mask at all times," Adrian stated, gaining back their attention. "Have either of you seen his face?"

"Afraid not," William said with a wry smile. "He never takes it off, not even at lunch."

"I have," Ruby stated with a raised hand.

"Oh yeah, you did mention that," William noted as Adrian spoke.

"Oh? I am rather curious as to what he looks like."

"Well, he had the most beautiful re-"

Suddenly, without warning, a thunderous crash echoed through the ruins as something massive burst through a dilapidated wall. The ground trembled beneath their feet as the large Astrothian emerged into view. Its towering form was a sight to behold, with scales that shimmered in various shades of blues and greens. Its body was muscular and sinewy, decorated with patterns that seemed to glow with. The creature's eyes were a blend of fiery orange and deep purple.

Reacting swiftly, Adrian raised his hand. Two demons materialized before him, seemingly tearing through the fabric of reality itself as if it were mere glass. The first demon, with jet-black skin and crimson eyes, stood tall. Its muscular frame was decorated with ruins that seemed to writhe and twist with a life of their own. The second demon, had an almost ethereal appearance, with translucent skin that revealed pulsating veins of molten color beneath. Its eyes glowed with a green light, and its elongated limbs moved eerily.

William extended his right palm towards the Astrothian. With a surge of mana, a torrent of flames erupted from his hand. The intense heat radiated from the fire, caused the surrounding ruins to shimmer and distort.

Despite its colossal size, the Astrothian displayed astonishing agility as it effortlessly leaped into the air, evading the onslaught. Sensing an opportunity, Adrian swiftly commanded one of his demons to unleash a spell.

Though that seemed unnecessary. Something else leaped high in the air, they could only see the outline of a woman. Said woman flipped through the air and eventually towards the Astrothian. She extended a leg, it collided with the creature's back with a loud reverberating impact as an audible crack echoed as well.

The Astrothian barreled to the ground hard enough to create a large crater along with a shockwave that kicked up dust. The three covered their faces as the woman gracefully landed in front of the unmoving beast.

William studied her; she was a beauty. That much was an understatement. She had perfect round eyes where two blue orbs sat. A button nose and lush full lips, it was like every feature of her face came together to make her this beautiful. She had a head of flowing lilac hair that only added to her beauty. Her attire was strange, but he recognized it; she wore the upper sections of an ao dai white in color and adorned in gold while the rest of it was a tight black form-fitting suit showing off her figure.

The woman gave a wide smile.

"Hello there~" She waved at the trio who gave confused looks. "Sorry, I'll be killing you now~" Before confusion could settle in, she disappeared from view in a blur.

"I hope you don't mind~" Their eyes safe for Ruby's widened as she was suddenly between them. And then she attacked.

[Verdantis]

[Briarwick]

Professor Eugene sighed as he made another cross on the map laid before his table at the ground floor of the inn. He looked at the detailed map of the Verdantis region with the various crosses on all the landmarks.

("As fanatic as the Drah'lurahr Cult is, they are adept at covering their tracks.") He mused. They were known to be a hard few to catch, but this was absurd. ("I've visited multiple locations now, yet not even a trace of them.") He would have to brief Fiona and the rest of the students on what they might have seen.

("I'll have to resume my search soon, but still, there is what Mikoto had said.") The professor briefly pondered over his words. ("Scorch marks yet no sign of mana being used, the Drah'lurahr Cult might have a stock of weapons.") His contemplation could not continue as he felt two people behind him.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Those are a lot of crosses."

Lily and Zavier curiously stared at the map. They were the innkeeper's children if he remembered correctly. They were rather curious children with a knack for magic, according to Lucinda.

"What are you looking for, old man?" The boy, Zavier, asked curiously.

"Nothing important," Professor Eugene merely answered as he folded the map.

"You should ask us, mister! We know a lot!" Lily boldly proclaimed.

"I see," Professor Eugene replied.

"You don't seem all that impressed, old man," Zavier accused.

"I am," Professor Eugene stated, yet his expression did not change. Zavier still seemed rightfully skeptical, but luckily Lily spoke up.

"Hey mister, when is Lucinda and the princess gonna come back?" Lily asked. "I made drawings I want to show them!"

"I know not, but they may reappear soon. They are not far." His words made Lily sigh dejectedly.

"You two munchkins still have chores, no?" The two children jumped as they suddenly heard Lucy's voice. Professor Eugene watched the owner approached.

"M-mom!?" The two exclaimed.

"Now you two stop bothering Mister Eugene, and do your chores or no desserts." At the threat of having dessert taken away, the two wasted no time in making their exit.

"Sorry about that." Lucy threw a sheepish apology Professor Eugene's way. "Those two get easily excited.

"I do not mind."

"Well, that's is good." Lucy spoke with a smile. "It's nice seeing those two so energetic again."

"Children are an energetic bunch, I suppose." He murmured.

"Yeah, having new clients is a breath of fresh air, and Lucinda is a Godsend." Lucy chuckled. "I haven't seen Lily and Zavier so happy in a while." She stated, her voice low as a distant look found its way into her eyes.

"And why is that?" He was not exactly curious, though it would be rude not to keep the conversation going.

"It's just that my husband passed away two years back." She sighed. "It was harder on them than it was on me. They could not accept that they would never be able to see their father again. Ah, I'm sorry for dropping this baggage on you."

"It's fine, and I am sorry for your loss." Professor Eugene spoke in a sincere tone. "You have lovely and strong children." Lucy smiled as she opened her mouth to speak.

But suddenly, a pressure enveloped the atmosphere. A tense and thick pressure that permeated all, it was like an intense heat that touched everything. Not something one would find in Verdantis. Lucy fell over, but Professor Eugene was quick to catch her.

"W-what is this?" The woman questioned; it was even hard to speak. It felt as though even her lungs were on fire. Professor Eugene sat her on his seat.

"Someone's expanding their mana too much, it's clashing with your own mana and overloading it, filling your body in and out." He quickly explained as he raised his hand towards her. Momentarily, a purple hue enveloped her, and then the discomfort was gone as fast as it appeared. "A ward that blocks any offensive mana, I'll erect one over

the town, check on the children." Lucy shakily nodded her head as Professor Eugene made his way outside.

He frowned as he found the people in the town in disarray. Most were kneeling over or leaned against something for support. The sheer pressure and properties of the mana melted the snow off some buildings.

"Their bodies are taking in too much mana, much more than they can handle," he noted as he raised his hand. Around the large town, a translucent purplish barrier formed with glyphs all around it. This kept out the excess mana flooding the area.

Professor Eugene frowned.

"The Inheritor of the Sun Goddess..."

Chapter 57: Chapter 55: Filthy animals

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

The outpost was perched atop a snowy mountain, its structure blending in with the harsh landscape. The main building, made of dark steel and concrete, stood tall against the biting winds and snowflakes. Its dark walls were made of a sleek, nearly indestructible material that gleamed under the harsh fluorescent lights. The windows were tinted black, preventing any glimpse into the secrets held within. The only visible entrance was a heavily guarded gate, flanked by two towering turrets armed with advanced weapons.

There were a lot of soldiers stationed there, clad in thick, black armor that seemed to absorb the feeble light of the overcast sky. Their helmets, adorned with a single red visor, gave them an almost robotic appearance. Each guard held a sleek rifle, their fingers poised on the trigger, ready to defend their post at a moment's notice.

Beyond the gate was a maze of buildings and structures, all constructed with the same dark steel and concrete as the main building. The air hummed with the sound of machinery. There were smaller structures, each one seemingly identical to the next, serving as barracks for the guards and prisoners alike.

In a large courtyard surrounded by high walls, a group of prisoners was being escorted to a smaller building off to the side. The prisoners, dressed in tattered clothes, were chained together and prodded forward by guards with electrified batons. Their faces were gaunt and weary, bearing the marks of their harsh confinement.

Mikoto watched in silence as the prisoners were ushered into a dark structure. He had a good view of the large outpost from on high as he was currently high in the air.

"Didn't even think technology like this existed in this world," he murmured. The cultist he interrogated had directed him to this outpost. He had put the man with his other comrades after he was finished with him. Of course, he had used magic to make sure they were restricted. But still, there was that irksome feeling, especially when he was staring at the guards.

"No mana either, what the hell is this?" He questioned to himself. He had no reason to hold such distaste, yet it was too evident within him. He shook his head. "Those prisoners are villagers, no doubt, but why kidnap them?" His question was left unanswered as he took off the blazer of his uniform before igniting it in flames. He was left with his black long-sleeved button shirt and gray vest. "No need to make it obvious that a student of Luminare attacked this base," he mused as he hovered closer to the ground. In no time, he was in the outpost as his feet touched down onto the ground. "Time to take care of some animals."

Immediately, some of the guards took note of him. There were around fifteen where he landed, and it seemed they were not content to engage in any conversation. He saw one hold a hand to his helmet and talk, no doubt informing others.

The guards immediately leveled their rifles at him. The air crackled with energy as beams of light exited the barrels of the rifles and streaked towards him, melting the snow that fell around the bolts of light. Raising his hand, he channeled his mana, creating a translucent red barrier that came into existence just in time. The lasers slammed into the barrier, scattering sparks.

Seizing the moment, Mikoto raised his free palm, summoning flames, the fire erupted forth in a large torrent, engulfing the surrounding area. The snow sizzled and evaporated upon contact, and the fire spread large enough that buildings within the outpost were consumed by it, collapsing in showers of molten debris.

More guards trudged through the snow towards him, but he did not care.

With fifteen guards rid by the searing blaze, Mikoto wasted no time. He shifted his focus, drawing upon another elemental aspect. Lightning crackled in his palm, arcing and snaking. A bolt of electrifying mana lanced out, striking a guard squarely and sending a surge of electricity coursing through his armor.

The lightning spread like wildfire, jumping from guard to guard in a chain reaction. Each strike was accompanied by a blinding flash and a deafening crack, the guards convulsed and staggered, overwhelmed.

"You animals just keep coming," he scoffed as he raised his right hand.

Twenty large swords materialized behind him, with a swift command, they launched towards the remaining guards with incredible speed. The swords pierced through armor and flesh alike, striking and leaving a trail of incapacitated.

"Hex: Distortion of gravity," Mikoto spoke as he raised his hand to the remaining guards.

The ground beneath the guards began to warp and distort, pulling them downwards with a force they could not resist. Snow swirled and gathered around their sinking forms as they struggled in vain against the intensified gravity. Mikoto watched as they sank deeper and deeper, their armor creaking under the strain until they were immobilized in the snowy ground.

"That was about fifty; this place is huge, though, so there may be more," he noted as his form vanished from the massacre. Reappearing in one of the structures, it was dark and expansive with the only source of light being what looked like prison bars made of a harsh blue light. Beyond the bars were the damaged forms of women, children, and men. They numbered around twenty, shock and fear graced their features as they took note of Mikoto.

He could not blame them; they surely had seen better days.

"It's alright, I've come to save you," Mikoto snapped his fingers, and within the cell, there seemed to be a tear in reality as something akin to a red portal materialized. Some scurried away in fear, and others merely did not care, as if they had given up. "It connects to the town of Briarwick; you should get some help there. I recommend being fast; more of these guys may show up." Mikoto did not wait to see their reactions, so without another word, his form blurred and disappeared.

In an instance, he was back outside where the various bodies of the guards were littered.

"Their signatures are disappearing; they must've gone for it," he noted; they were rather desperate if they trusted him so easily. He himself just wanted to be quick about it; there was no reason to waste time and comfort them. "Might as well blow this place up when they're." He raised his left arm to prepare a spell, only to find it gone. He glanced upwards to see it flying through the air.

"I am sorry, but I cannot allow that," he heard a voice state as he glanced to his side.

[Galadriel]

[Ruins]

Adrian sighed to himself as the woman's fists moved like lightning, he dodged left and right, narrowly avoiding the deadly strikes that seemed to cut through the air. Sweat beaded on his brow as he struggled to keep up with her assault.

However, he took the light opportunity to immediately back away. With a mere thought, shadows coalesced around him, swirling and twisting until they formed the shape of a large monstrous centipede-like demon. Its segmented body writhing, and its multiple legs clicked against the ground as it emerged, as if piercing through reality itself.

Its elongated body writhed, and its razor-sharp mandibles glistened in the light as it lunged at the woman, its movements were fluid and fast.

With a deft sidestep, she evaded the demon's initial strike, her ao dai fluttering. With a swift kick, she shattered the demon's head, sending shards of shadowy substance scattering into the air like shards of broken glass.

Adrian's eyes widened, but he quickly composed himself and summoned more demons.

The first demon appeared as a towering figure wreathed in flames, its eyes burning. Flames moving along its massive form, licking at the air and scorching the ground beneath its feet. With a gesture from Adrian, the demon unleashed a torrent of fire that engulfed the surroundings, scorching the stones and blackening the earth.

The woman, seemingly undeterred by the searing heat, moved through the flames with astonishing speed. Not a single ember touched her skin, nor did her clothes catch fire. With a focused expression, she closed the distance between herself and the fiery demon, her movements nothing but a blur of speed. Adrian managed to back away, but it was much too late for the demon.

In a swift series of strikes, she incapacitated the first demon, shattering its fiery form with strong blows that seemed to extinguish its flames and body alike. Adrian sighed as he gestured to his second demon. It was a dark wraith-like demon, with translucent tentacles prodding from its form.

A swirling mist emanated from the demon's form, tendrils of black snaking outwards and decaying everything they touched. The ruins of the castle crumbled and decayed under the influence of this mist. Adrian watched as her form merely blurred, his eyes widened as he leaped backward once more. She reappeared before his demon and with a punch that shattered the demon's core and a kick that dispersed the mist with a burst of force, she dispelled the dark magic with ease.

"I do hope this is not all," the woman spoke, seemingly disappointed. Adrian did not immediately respond; instead, he glanced at Williams' fallen form. He was leaned against a cracked wall with blood seeping from his head. Ruby was currently tending to him via healing magic, so he was left to fend off this woman alone.

"Oh, not at all," he spoke. Cracks seemed to form in the sky inches above him. An enormous clawed hand broke through it as he smirked. "This is one hell of a test."

Chapter 58: Chapter 56: Another princess

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

Lucinda sighed to herself.

"Just how did it come to this?" She questioned, her voice exasperated. She stared at the grinning girl that comfortably hovered in the air.

Lyraeth, her beauty betrayed her ferocity. The girl was no older than herself, with a head of short red hair and gleaming yellow eyes. Her skin was sun-kissed, and she had a rather elaborate outfit, consisting of a white jacket that was cropped up, showing off her smooth stomach. Along with that, she wore baggy blue trousers and heavy black boots.

"Must we fight, Lyraeth?" Lucinda asked from the crumbling building she was hoisted on. The spawn of the Sun Goddess cackled.

"Of course!" She answered, her voice excited. "It's been a year, I wanna see what you're made of! If you survive a few attacks, then I'll hear you out!"

"There is no changing your mind?" The girl shook her head as Lucinda sighed. "How very like you, very well."

Lyraeth grinned. The air filled with her mana that blazed through the entire area and beyond.

With a mere thought, large orbs of fire materialized around her. Each orb glowed with a fierce intensity, with a mental command, she launched the orbs at blurring speeds, their fiery trails streaking through the air like comets.

Lucinda channeled her magic and vanished in a flash of light just as the orbs of fire struck the building she stood on. The impact was cataclysmic, sending shockwaves rippling through the remnants of the town. Buildings crumbled, their stone walls shattering into rubble, and flames erupted, devouring what little remained of the once-vibrant streets.

As the smoke and debris quickly settled, Lucinda reappeared on another building, her stance poised and ready for the next onslaught. Lyraeth, undeterred by the destruction she had wrought, focused her magic once more as she turned to Lucinda.

With a sweeping motion of her hand, Lyraeth summoned an immensely condensed fire stream that erupted from her palm. The stream of flames spread wildly, engulfing everything in its path with blistering heat. The structures of the town groaned and collapsed under the assault of magical fire, sending plumes of smoke billowing into the sky.

But Lucinda was not idle. With a thought, she erected a barrier of mana that absorbed the onslaught. The barrier shimmered under the intense heat, but it held firm, protecting Lucinda from the brunt of the fire.

"Haha! Nicely done, Lucinda!" Lyraeth clapped her hands, not minding the destruction she was causing.

"Just one more attack and then we'll talk, right?" Lucinda asked, the grinning girl nodded her head.

With a roar, she tapped into the depths of her magic, summoning something akin to a miniature sun that came into existence above in the sky.

"Primordial sun," she chanted.

"Familial Arts, hm." Lucinda frowned as she prepared a defensive spell.

The miniature sun blazed into existence, melting the surrounding snowflakes and the snow collected on the various buildings, its searing light illuminating the entire town with blinding light. The ground trembled as the miniature sun expanded, growing larger and larger until it reached a critical mass. Then, with a deafening roar, it exploded in a wave of destructive energy that swept across the town like a tidal wave of fire.

The explosion was immense. Buildings were reduced to mere ash and debris, and the earth quaked under the onslaught. The sky darkened with smoke and embers, and the town lay in ruins, utterly consumed by the devastating power of the explosion.

Yet still unscathed, Lucinda stood on the blackened ground, even the surrounding snow was melted away.

"Woohoo! You passed!" She watched Lyraeth's feet touch down onto the ground, and Lucinda just looked at her exasperated.

("Thank the Gods I sent Agatha and Mirabella back to Briarwick,") she looked at the spawn of Sylvestra. ("Lyraeth is even more unhinged than I originally thought. Did she really have to destroy the entire town!?") The aforementioned girl merely approached her and threw an arm around her.

"So what brought you here?" Lyraeth asked, her tone much too casual, as if she had not obliterated an entire town.

"We are investigating the Drah'lurahr Cult," Lucinda informed, shrugging off her arm.

"Ooooh! So you're the support the kingdom of Galadriel sent?" Lucinda nodded in confirmation. "Hah! Talk about overkill."

"I take it you have orders to investigate these cultists as well?" Lucinda questioned.

"That's right, the geezers up top wanted an Inheritor involved," she confirmed, the 'geezers' she referred to were no doubt the governing body of Verdantis.

"But what of that mana explosion that tore through the city?" Lucinda asked, and momentary confusion found its way on Lyraeth's expression before realization found its way onto her face.

"Oh, that! Eh, I was dealing with some Vel'ryr tech," she stated, her tone ever casual. Lucinda looked at her confused.

"Vel'ryr?" She questioned. "What is their technology doing here in Verdantis?" Lyraeth shrugged.

"Dunno, they attacked first though so I just responded in kind," the girl stated with a grin.

"I... I see," Lucinda frowned, this was news to her. ("Vel'ryr troops in Verdantis?") This all left her with a bad feeling.

[Pain Nullifications]

("It was a simple charm that did as the name suggested, it rendered you unfeeling of any kind of pain. Usually there was an upper limit to how much pain just a single person could take. But that all depended on the person who used the spell. It also depended on mana quantity, the more pain that was absorbed the more mana was drained. If you are too severely injured and you lack the mana reserves then the charm will merely burn through your mana and be useless. But luckily I have an absurd amount of it.") Mikoto mused as he watched his severed left arm fly through the sky. He swung his head to the side as a dark blade scraped against his mask, shifting his heel he got a good look at the perpetrator as he leaped backward to create distance, a simple black circular glyph was in place of where his arm had been severed, to prevent blood loss.

But for now, Mikoto paid that no mind, instead he zeroed in on the one responsible. It was a tall girl, maybe slightly older than himself. She had a head of pitch-black short wild hair and striking red eyes that fit perfectly with her beautiful face. Her outfit consisted of a silver chest piece adorned with pieces of red, along with silver sabotans and black gloves finished with a white coat wrapped around her form with the sleeves rolled up.

Then there was the blade she wielded that dripped with his blood that stained the pristine snow. It seemed like a simple enough steel blade, only it was black in color and seemed to absorb the light around it. The handle was intricately forged with a pristine gem in its hilt.

He watched her impale the blade into the ground as she rested both her gloved hands atop it.

"I am Amaury Von Auerswald, fourth in line to the throne of Vel'ryr," she boldly proclaimed. "You trespassed and injured my men, give up now and I shall show you mercy."

("Vel'ryr? One of the three main nations?") Mikoto mentally mused as he looked at the girl. ("And she's a princess? And she's all the way out here in Verdantis. Not to mention I can't sense a lick of mana from her. She's like the rest of the animals.") He frowned beneath his mask as he saw more guards trudge through the snow and towards him, yet they did not stand by their princess; instead, they recovered the unconscious forms of their comrades. Mikoto ignored them as he focused on Amaury. "Wouldn't have beaten their asses if they didn't kidnap villagers or conspire with cultists."

"Your words are air, boy," she stated, her tone low and her expression unreadable.

"Please, the Drah'lurahr Cult had the same weapons your precious guards had," Mikoto shook his head. "Ah, but what the hell am I doing? There's no use in arguing with a filthy animal. I'll just go ahead and take care of you."

"Bold words," she spoke, glancing at his severed arm that lay cushioned in the snow a few meters away from them. "Considering I easily took an arm, I shall be going for your head next."

"You got lucky, emo," Mikoto extended his right arm as Amaury swiftly took a stance with her blade. "I'll go for the kill."

("But still, my instincts are going haywire for this chick, she may have no magic but something tells me she'll be hard to kill. Considering I'm a spawn of a war Goddess, I shouldn't ignore it. Fine then I'll make a plan.")

With that, the snow was kicked under her feet as she shot forward towards him at blurring speeds no normal human should have been capable of. Mikoto's eyes slightly widened.

Chapter 59: Chapter 57: Null

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

The wind howled as Amaury charged forward with a speed that defied human capability. Her footsteps left deep imprints in the snow as she closed the distance between herself and Mikoto in mere moments.

He raised his remaining hand in a swift motion. Mana danced around his outstretched palm, coalescing into a swirling force of flames as a large red glyph came into existence inches in front of his palm.

["Throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."]

As Amaury closed in, he unleashed his magic, sending forth an enormous wave of fire that roared towards her like a beast.

The flames erupted from Mikoto's hand with a deafening sound, engulfing the area in a searing heat. The structures of the outpost trembled and groaned under the onslaught, their steel frames crackling and melting as they were consumed by the intense heat. The snow sizzled and evaporated upon contact with the scorching flames, leaving behind a charred and desolate landscape.

"Not enough," he heard her voice utter. Amaury was unaffected by the wall of fire before her. She charged headlong into the inferno, her sword still firmly gripped in her hand. The flames licked at her clothes, singeing the fabric and leaving trails of smoke in her wake, but she pressed on undaunted.

"The hell?" Mikoto could not help but blurt out. The heat washed over her like a baptism of fire, but she remained steadfast, her gaze fixed on him. The flames parted before her like a curtain drawn aside by a mere swing of her sword.

Their eyes met as she closed the distance, her blade slicing through the air looking to lop his head off. He narrowly dodged by leaning back, but she pressed on. She raised her blade and cut downwards, pivoting on his heel as he dodged, but she barely left any breathing room.

Her strike failed, but she just kept attacking. She thrust the blade forward to pierce his abdomen, but as he moved to dodge, it turned out to be a feint. She adjusted her sword and stance as she slashed at his chest. Though the blade only grazed him slightly, she unleashed an onslaught of attacks that might as well have been a blur.

Her blade nicked him more than a few times, and he was growing annoyed.

As Amaury pressed her assault, Mikoto distanced himself with a leap backwards. Dozens of circular white glyphs shimmered into existence around him, each one pulsating with his mana.

["Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory has risen upon you."]

With a gesture, he unleashed beams of light that streaked towards Amaury with blinding speed, their power carving through the outpost like a scythe through wheat.

But Amaury was not idle in the least. Her movements were quick, perhaps quicker than even his own, and unpredictable. She practically danced between the beams of light effortlessly. With each dodge, he left behind a trail of destruction in her wake, the beams carving deep gouges into the icy ground and shattering stone with explosive force.

("I see.")

Undeterred by Mikoto's assault, she surged forward once more, her sword carving through the air. But before her blade could find its mark, Mikoto's form blurred and appeared a few steps behind her, his hand preparing a new spell.

["He sends his word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow."]

He summoned forth an icy chill of the mountain itself, shaping it into a wave of crystalline spikes that surged towards Amaury with insane speed. But yet again, she was undaunted by the onslaught, her sword cleaving through the ice with a single, fluid motion. Her mere swing caused a shockwave that rumbled through the area.

As she closed in on Mikoto once more, he set his plan into motion as he leapt into the air with a graceful twist of his body, using her shoulders as leverage to propel himself higher. He twisted his body midair, his palm outstretched towards her face.

("He has to prepare an incantation first, I'll use that opening to strike the killing blow.") Though her eyes widened as a ball of fire condensed in his hand, a searing beam of mana streaked towards Amaury like a high-powered laser. But before it could find its mark, it exploded into a raging fire that engulfed the outpost in a blaze of destruction, consuming everything in its path. More sections of the outpost were reduced to melting rubble as the fire raged on.

As Mikoto landed on the ground, he backed away with a frown.

"Still alive, huh?" He saw a shadow move through the fire, and Amaury's form became all the more clear as she stepped out of the fire. Completely uninjured, even her clothes were barely burned. Normally, he would assume some manner of defensive magic was at play, but Amaury had no magic at all.

("Her physical abilities are absurd too.") It was hard to gauge, but he could practically feel the weight behind her strikes. She could probably cleave through his body with ease if he did not use any defensive magic when a strike landed. ("I've read somewhere that there were knights who gave up their ability to utilize magic in turn for superior physical attributes. However, I remember they still possessed mana; it was just that they could not make use of spells. That doesn't seem to be the case here; she has no mana after all.")

"Quite the decent strategy," she complimented, her voice relaxed as she brushed off some soot on her attire. "You used glyphs and incantations to throw me off. And then at the last second, you got a direct hit in. Were it anyone else, then that blast of fire would have burned them to naught but a crisp."

"You're resistant to magic, aren't you?" He deduced, but he immediately saw something wrong with his own statement. "No, that's not accurate." Mikoto frowned beneath his mask. "You're completely immune, or more accurately, your body is nullifying the magic as soon as it comes into contact."

"You're quite smart, boy," she gave a smile that made her features stand out all the more. "And yes, you are correct. So do you now see you've no chance in beating me?"

("Nullifying magic? Not even spells like that exist yet this girl without any mana can do that seemingly subconsciously?") That was absurd, and it was the ultimate late throw in. ("We could be a match in physical abilities, but I'm missing an arm, but c'mon let's see there should be a way through nullification.") He could not think of one now, but nullification was hardly invincible. ("But I ain't running away, I need to buy time to recreate my arm.")

"Are all of your men evacuated?" Mikoto asked.

"They are."

"Good, animals or not killing still leaves a bad taste in my mouth." Mikoto's feet lifted from the ground as he started levitating. "Sorry but giving up ain't my style."

He summoned forth two enormous circular glyphs of purest white, their edges shimmering with mana.

The glyphs expanded rapidly, engulfing everything in their path—the outpost, the surrounding mountains, even the air itself seemed to quiver in anticipation of the cataclysmic event about to unfold.

"Technique Development: Aetheric Oblivion."

With a grin, Mikoto unleashed his spell—a torrent of radiant mana that surged forth like an unstoppable force of nature. It swept across the landscape with terrifying speed, illuminating the sky further with its blinding light.

The outpost trembled and groaned beneath the attack, its foundations crumbling as if made of sand. The mountains surrounding it quaked with the force of the impact, their peaks shattering like glass before the might of Mikoto's magic.

Amaury stood her ground, her form bathed in the searing light of the spell. The beacon of light consumed everything in its path, leaving naught but scorched earth and rubble in

its wake. The outpost along with the surrounding mountaintops vanished in a blinding flash of light, swallowed whole by the destruction of Mikoto's magic.

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

"Whoa," Mirabella could not help but blurt out as a pillar of pure destructive light engulfed numerous snowy mountains in the distance. "That spell...."

"It seems everyone is content with throwing around large spells," beside her Agatha mused, though she could detect some measure of shock from the blonde. Despite what Lucinda had said, the girl had immediately sent them back to Briarwick when that spawn of Sylvestra became hostile. Begrudgingly they had listened, though they had busied themselves with sparring outside of town.

Though as they returned to town, an even larger explosion of light engulfed the area in the distance, eviscerating entire mountains swiftly. Along with them, townsfolk looked at the explosion of magical energy with shock and fear.

They could not be blamed; that level of destruction was absurd.

"I cannot sense the mana of the person who unleashed that spell," Agatha spoke with a frown. "However, I recall there being talk of a pillar of light tearing down the forest close to the Academy."

"That's my Familial Art," Agatha looked at the girl confused as Mirabella narrowed her eyes at the pillar of light that illuminated all. "Aetheric Oblivion, it's a spell designed to destroy. It disintegrates anything and everything by tearing through it at a subatomic level."

"Subatomic?" Agatha questioned, her voice laced with confusion. "I don't follow."

"Neither do I; it was that hag Guinevere who mentioned and explained what it did," Mirabella informed as the intense light of the destructive mana died down. "Come to think of it, that masked bastard also mentioned the same thing when he asked me to show one of my Familial Arts back at the ship."

"I see, another spawn of Aragorn must be in Verdantis," Agatha surmised as Mirabella nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, whatever, now let's get back to sparring," the princess ordered.

"We just finished a bout," Agatha merely deadpanned at the girl. "I still need to replenish my mana."

"Pshh, imagine having a meager amount of mana," the princess shrugged with a haughty expression on her face.

"Imagine not being able to use intricate magic," Agatha mirrored the girl with a shrug.

"Tch! Who needs fancy spells when I can obliterate my enemies," she argued.

"That did not work so well with that Chaosmaw," Agatha mumbled, but Mirabella still heard her.

"Hey! You got your ass kicked too!" Her outburst just drew the attention of the still shocked townsfolk, but she did not seem to care.

"I recall you being beaten first," Agatha said as she glanced away, hiding a small smirk.

"Why you....tch, forget it, I'll train by myself," the princess huffed like a child as she turned away. "I'll get that Arcane Ascendance crap before you, and you'll be left in the dust." Agatha watched as she walked away before sighing to herself. And then she followed the girl.

Chapter 60: Chapter 58: Vel'ryr empire shenenigans

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

"This is a plasma rifle, if I recall," Victoria muttered as she studied the sleek black rifle with glowing red outlines in her hand.

"The Vel'ryr Empire soldiers usually have these," Fiona stated as she stared at the various unconscious forms of what she had identified as the Drah'lurahr cultist members. They were all apprehended by black chains that tightly wrapped around their forms. "What were cultists doing with this kind of weaponry?"

"I would surmise that the weapons were stolen, but Vel'ryr troops are hardly that lax," Victoria started. "But though it may be a stretch, it is not impossible to surmise that some soldiers may be conspiring with these cultists."

"For what purpose?"

"I know not," Victoria shrugged with a smirk. "I may be a spawn of a God of knowledge, but I do not have all the answers. But you sense it too, yes?" Fiona nodded her head.

"Indeed, these men lack mana, like pure-blooded Vel'ryrians," Fiona stated as her eyes glazed over their cloaked forms, momentarily stopping at one whose arm was severed.

"So we could conclude these few cultist members are from Vel'ryr," Victoria spoke with a hum. "It would make sense as to why Vel'ryrians are worshipping dragons as their Gods, considering the royal bloodline of Vel'ryr are vague descendants of Greater dragons along with a few others."

"That makes sense," Fiona mumbled as she raised her hand towards the downed cultist. "Still, though, that second large explosion worries me." She murmured as she prepared a teleportation spell. Though she stopped as she heard something, a single ear of hers twitched as she heard various heavy steps crunching the snow. She snapped her head back just in time for a bolt of red to whisk past her and strike a nearby tree, completely tearing through it.

"My, my. Seems I need to reevaluate my theory," Victoria mused as she stared at something, Fiona followed her gaze.

There were about twelve in total, all dressed in sleek but heavy black armor that covered the entirety of their forms, with radiating red adorning the armor. Along with that, they wore dark helmets with red visors that gave them an almost robotic appearance. They were all outfitted with the same sleek rifle Victoria had examined.

Though neither of the two girls focused on the numerous guards, instead they zeroed in on the large mass of machinery behind the troops.

Loomed like a sentinel, its form was an imposing blend of elegance and efficiency. Crafted seemingly from the finest alloys known to humankind, its surface shimmered with a lustrous sheen that seemed to absorb the light.

At first glance, its silhouette appeared almost humanoid, with broad shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist, yet, upon closer inspection, one could discern the subtle details of its design—all the curves and angles meticulously engineered for optimal performance in combat.

Its frame was adorned with a series of sleek, angular plating, each panel seamlessly integrated to form a seamless exoskeleton. From its helmeted head to the tips of its digitigrade feet, its face was dominated by a single, cyclopean optic—a multifaceted lens that gleamed. Its limbs were a marvel of engineering, each joint articulated with precision to allow for fluid and graceful movement.

"Magitech," Victoria noted as she stared at the machine, her eyes seemed to gleam with an otherworldly light momentarily. "That model, a Primus Mark II. Built for speed with excessive weaponry." Victoria informed. She glanced at Fiona to take note of the look of disdain that was directed at the Primus. She threw the girl a look of pity as she continued. "These are actual Vel'ryr troops and no doubt here to retrieve these cultists. I

assume you do not need any help, but keep in mind the average Vel'ryrians is somewhat resistant to magic." the wolf-eared girl nodded with a glare as Victoria stepped back.

"Magitech..."

The guards spread out around Fiona, encircling her in swift coordination. The snow around them sizzled and steamed as the plasma rifles spat deathly energy in all directions. She reacted with lightning-fast reflexes. She summoned small, mana shields all around her body, creating a seemingly impenetrable barrier against the onslaught of plasma rifle fire. The bolts of light struck the small shields all around her with a sizzle, leaving trails of smoke and the acrid smell of burning snow in the air as they dissipated harmlessly.

The figure of the Primus stepped forward. Its chest radiated with a large ominous red light, it grew larger and larger as the troops spread out further before a beam of red light shot out from its chest. It tore through the air with intense heat that melted the surrounding snowflakes and snow.

"How unsightly," Fiona spat out, scornfully.

With a fluid motion, she weaponized the air around her, weaving it into an invisible blade that effortlessly sliced through the Primus's devastating attack, splitting it into two harmless beams of light that fizzled out harmlessly in the cold air and sending the fragmented beams scattering harmlessly into the snowy area.

With the Primus momentarily staggered, she extended her right palm and crafted a massive lightning strike in the palm of her hand, channeling the immense mana. With nothing but a feral glare, she unleashed the crackling bolt of pure, unadulterated power, aiming it straight at the heart of the Primus. The lightning strike connected with spectacular force, enveloping the robot in a blinding light of energy that scorched the earth and rent the air with its deafening roar, leaving the Primus in a smoldering wreck.

She turned her attention to the remaining guards, who watched in stunned silence as their formidable weapon fell before the might of her magic. Usually using modern terms, it would take the force of carpet bombing to completely destroy a Primus unit. Magitech was the peak of Vel'ryr development after all.

With a flick of her fingers, she unleashed a torrent of mana, conjuring a swirling vortex of wind and that swept across the snowy expanse, lifting the hapless guards from their feet and drawing them inexorably toward its heart.

As the guards struggled futilely against the tempest that engulfed them, Fiona raised her palm, fire igniting itself into her outstretched palm. With a scowl, she shot the fiery torrent, the searing bolt of flame igniting the swirling vortex with explosive force. The air erupted in a deafening sound as the flames consumed everything in their path, sending

shockwaves rippling across the landscape and leaving nothing but smoldering wreckage in their wake.

The guards' bodies were all flung aside in different directions. Victoria watched the scene with an unreadable expression.

"The Vel'ryr Empire conspiring with cultists and sending soldiers to Verdantis," the blonde frowned. "This could be cause for war." She sighed as she approached the blank-faced Fiona. "Are you well, Fiona?" The wolf-girl heaved a deep sigh of her own as she turned to Victoria.

"Sorry, I just get too heated up when I see magitech," the girl spoke with a sheepish expression. "You know of my history, so you can understand."

"It's quite alright, Fiona dear," Victoria smiled. "Though it is nice to see you let loose like this. Mayhap if Mikoto saw it, it would increase your chances. He probably likes strong women."

"It's not like that!" Fiona defended, but her red cheeks just caused the blonde to chuckle.

"Alright then, it won't be an issue if I steal him for myself?"

"He's much too young for you!"

"What is age to love?"

"You'll get thrown in a dungeon cell," Fiona deadpanned.

"I'm sure Mikoto won't allow that," Victoria stated with a smile. "He is a kind boy after all."

[Verdantis]

[Outskirts]

Amaury fell as the wind violently hit her body. The foundations of her outpost and the surrounding mountains were blown to smithereens, so she had no foundation to stand on. Yet her expression was anything but fearful; instead, her gaze was locked into the levitating form of Mikoto.

"Did he cause all of that destruction just to see if a fall of this height would kill me?" That would make sense, seeing as magic was all but useless. But her gleaming red eyes narrowed as Mikoto flew through the air and toward her, his flight was impressive; he

reached her in less than a mere second. And then her eyes widened as she stared at his severed arm. A bony structure grew, taking the form of a skeletal arm and then veins, flesh, and his blood vessels. Before he regenerated even the skin, in almost no time his left arm was back, for good measure his shirt's sleeve was woven into existence once more. ("He has high-speed regeneration as well?") She mentally questioned as the boy raised his right fist.

Amaury raised her blade to block. The fist barreled downward and collided with her blade with a loud explosive noise akin to a bomb. She felt the impact reverberate through her arms as her body was launched further down by the force of the punch. Her body barreled to the ground and collided with it with an explosive noise as a wave of force resounded through the area, the snow kicked up in a frenzy.

Laying in a large crater of her own making, she saw Mikoto barrel downward faster with his fist outstretched. Amaury rolled to the side as she swiftly stood up and flipped backward. His fist collided with the already destroyed snowy ground with a cataclysmic wave that seemed to cause the earth beneath her feet to quake. The crater expanded under the force of the blow as rubble was strewn all around.

"If that hit..." Amaury frowned as she watched Mikoto lift his fist from the destroyed ground. "Some manner of magic that enhances physical abilities?"

"Not that," Mikoto stated as he lifted his fist from the ground and stood up, turning to Amaury. "See, this isn't magic, it's pure strength."

"Mere strength won't win you this battle," she stated with narrow eyes as she took a stance with her sword.

"Maybe I would lose if I was just some average sorcerer punk," Mikoto grinned beneath his mask as he jabbed his thumb at himself. "But see, you aren't dealing with the average sorcerer anymore."

"You seem rather full of yourself," she stated with a cold glare. "Pride comes before a fall." Mikoto just scoffed as he took a simple left-leading stance.

("I'll hold off on using any martial arts for now; I'll test the waters first.")

The snow parted beneath his feet as the ground cracked, and instantaneously he was in front of Amaury. ("I'll fight her with just my hands for now until I figure out a way through her nullification, and then I'll win.")