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Chapter 68: Chapter 66: All according to plan

[Versantis]

[Outskirts]

Mikoto watched aimlessly as various wooden structures were erected all around the corpse of the dragon, with wooden platforms evenly spread about. On them were people with dark robes adorned with blue outlines, along with strange hats and small blue capes hanging off their shoulders. They were scholars of Emberreach, he had been told, practically drooling over the sight of the dragon, scribbling furiously with their quills on their books. That much actually made some sense.

The corpse of a dragon was a rare find, and dragons were a unique species. Other than scholars, there were knights as well, wearing traditional full sets of heavy silver armor decorated with patches of cloth colored dark blue.

They had bound the numerous cultists he had dispatched, attempting to question those conscious, but they were unresponsive. That might have to do with the fact that the better half of these cultists were reanimated corpses, emitting an apparent putrid aura. While some lacked mana, some had an insignificant amount, the latter few being living corpses, but that hardly caught his attention.

Instead, his gaze drifted to the side, where Professor Eugene stood, focusing on the silver-haired man with pointed ears, Ser Asaun Monclair.

"Elves exist here too, huh? That's interesting, but I'm more focused on that ring," Mikoto thought as he peered at the ring on the knight's gauntlet. It was a simple silver ring with intricate patterns on it. He rubbed the face of his mask, feeling the mark Rheya gave him stinging like crazy. Was that the object she was after? If so, it would make things easier for him.

It seems he was much luckier than he thought; he doubted the mark Rheya gave him would have reacted this much if it was not her object. Now all he needed to do was take it, but how to go about doing that. Using magic would leave a trail even if he hid his trail with illusion magic. So he would have to go about it the old fashioned way, but he was no thief unfortunately.

"Geez!" Mikoto heard someone heave a heavy sigh beside him. Glancing to his side, he saw an annoyed Mirabella leaning against the rocky wall of the cave. She looked pretty annoyed, or a more apt wording would be pissed.

"You seem annoyed," Mikoto noted, and the princess huffed.

"These damn Verdantis knights are annoying!" she exclaimed, glaring at a group of them, he could not help imagining the sheepish expressions on their faces.

"Interrogated you too, huh?" Mikoto asked, and the girl nodded.

"They asked me all kinds of questions, as if I'm part of this nut-job cult," she clicked her tongue. "They ought to treat us better."

"True, these bunch are too skeptical," he stated with a hidden lopsided smile. "Honestly, we were the ones to find the dragon corpse." Their interrogation was annoying but most likely necessary to them.

"That's what I'm saying!" Mirabella seemed overly excited that her opinion was shared. "But honestly, I'm more concerned that these cultist psychos were trying to resurrect some dragon."

"I mean, is it really that bad?" Mikoto questioned. One dragon could not have been that problematic.

"You should really brush up on your history," Mirabella deadpanned. "A lesser dragon like this could topple a city with ease, not to mention only magic like Familial Arts will affect it, or conventional weapons."

"Eh, pretty sure I can beat one, easy."

"Because you're 'strong'?" she dryly asked, already knowing what his next words would be.

"Exactly, I'm impressed, my apprentice."

"I ain't your apprentice."

"No need to be bashful."

"I ain't bashful."

Mikoto wanted to continue the banter, but approaching footsteps interrupted him. It was Ser Asaun and Professor Eugene.

"Are you two well?" the professor asked, stopping in front of them.

"We're fine," Mikoto stated, ignoring the stinging sensation behind his mark. "These cultists aren't really all that."

"Bunch of weaklings," Mirabella spat.

"Oh my, what a beauty!" Asaun exclaimed, surprising both Mikoto and Mirabella as he focused on the princess.

"You must be Princess Mirabella," the knight gave an exaggerated bow, taking her hand and planting a kiss on it. Mikoto withheld a snort at the girl's utterly confused expression. "Apologies for the constant questioning from my company. It would do them well not to be suspicious of everyone, though they hardly ever listen to me despite me being their captain," the man sheepishly laughed as Mirabella wiped her hand against her skirt. "The royalty of Galadriel certainly holds much beauty. You must let me paint you one of these days."

"Not a fuc-" Mirabella was interrupted by Professor Eugene clearing his throat.

"At any rate, good job, you two," the professor praised. "The scholars are nearly finished examining the dragon corpse. After they're done, we'll be regrouping in Emberreach. I doubt we've seen the last of this cult."

"True, fanatics like these hardly give up. It might be best to destroy the dragon," Mikoto advised. Professor Eugene nodded as he opened his mouth to speak, but Asaun jumped in front of him.

"Oh? And who is this mysterious fellow?" the knight rubbed his chin, studying Mikoto. "Hmm, I'm a connoisseur of beauty and all that is mysterious."

"That so?" Mikoto didn't see the point of the man's statement.

"My intuition tells me that mask hides some beauty," he stated confidently. Mikoto hummed.

"You're wrong, unfortunately. I'm handsome." Denial was a stage of grief.

"Ah, seems my intuition failed me," the man relented with a sigh.

"Getting back on track..." Professor Eugene cut in again. "We should convene back in Emberreach with the others."

"Lucinda and the other blondie are busy somewhere, though," Mirabella stated.

"Worry not, knights will be sent out to retrieve those two," Asaun informed. "I dare say I am rather excited to see the beauty known as the spawn of Octavia."

("What a weirdo, someone should get the FBI on this case,") Mikoto joked. ("But I should find a way to get that ring. Stealing from a knight captain does not seem like a good idea. I'll figure it out.")

[??]

In the vast expanse of the dark room, every detail was perfectly crafted to convey an atmosphere of imposing grandeur. The air was heavy with a palpable metallic smell. The floor beneath was smooth and glossy, broken only by the occasional rivulet of darkness that snaked its way across the surface.

At the heart of this vast chamber sat a makeshift throne, crafted from dark, metal rising up on a dais. The back of the throne reached up towards the ceiling, its edges angular.

Upon the throne sat a figure clad in dark, heavy armor that seemed to meld seamlessly with the shadows that surrounded it. The armor itself was a masterpiece, sleek and streamlined yet bristling with an aura of power. Plates of midnight black metal encased the figure's form, each one etched with patterns.

In the gloom behind the throne, gears and machinery churned and whirred, their movements obscured by shadows. Chains and cables hung from the ceiling, their ends disappearing into the darkness above, while strange, pulsating conduits of energy snaked their way across the walls like veins.

Selwyn Von Auerswald leaned his head on his gauntleted hand, his red eyes seemingly glancing at nothing. However, as if tearing through the darkness of the room itself, a tall figure emerged.

"My, my, what an ominous room," Nybbas commented as his eerie eyes scanned around the dark room. "I dare say your siblings have better taste."

"You bring news, demon?" the crown prince asked, his tone one of apparent and extreme boredom.

"That's right," the demon confirmed, walking to a nearby wall and leaning against it. "Seems the corpse of that lesser dragon was discovered." There was no change in Selwyn's expression. "A shame really, I even went out of my way to use necromancy on some corpses to increase security."

"It matters not," Selwyn finally spoke.

"Oh? And why is that? The souls we gathered would go to waste on just a single dragon. The plan will be in disarray," Nybbas reminded. Selwyn scoffed.

"I care not for the plan o you demons," an empty smirk crossed his face. "I am merely here to seek prey. I've found none worthy in Vel'ryr, though mayhap I should battle the other dragon should it be resurrected."

"I dare say you are more battle-hungry than I," Nybbas chuckled. "Either way, we've nearly acquired enough souls for the ritual. However, we are still short a few. Luckily for us, there happens to be an untouched town full of savory souls," he spoke with a grin.

"Then I shall slaughter its people," Selwyn stood up from his throne. "If anything, it should help ease my boredom."

Chapter 69: Chapter 67: Pondering

[Verdantis]

[Emberreach]

The room was vast, stretching out beneath a soaring ceiling adorned with ribbed arches that seemed to reach high up. Massive stone pillars rose up at regular intervals throughout the hall, lantern sconces were affixed to the walls between the pillars.

Long wooden tables, hewn from sturdy oak, dominated the center of the hall, their surfaces polished. Each table was lined with benches, where some knights sat shoulder to shoulder, their helmets on the table illuminated by the soft glow of lanterns.

On one table, a rather unique trio sat.

"Damn, this food is pretty good!" Mirabella could not help but exclaim as she chowed down on a piece of steak.

"Could you be more uncouth?" Agatha questioned dryly.

"Oh, shut it, blondie," Mirabella shot back with a full mouth of food, this was not helping her image. Agatha shook her head as she took a sip of her tea. To her side sat Lucinda, who sat seemingly lost in thought. "That Asaun guy is a real creep, but at least the food here at his base is pretty good."

"You would do well not to use such crude wording on a knight captain," Agatha advised.

"Like I care, if you're gonna act like a creep, I'm gonna call you one," Mirabella argued, continuing her meal.

"While Ser Asaun may seem a bit too much, he is a good man," Lucinda finally spoke up, drawing the gazes of the other two.

"You know him?" Agatha asked, and Lucinda nodded.

"He fought in the festival last year, and he was quite skilled as well as powerful," her words, of course, elicited interest from the two girls. "His abilities with a sword far

surpassed my own. If I did not have magic on my side as well as my Familial Arts, then I would have surely lost our short bout," she admitted.

"Guess the guy wouldn't be a knight captain if he was not at least a bit strong," Mirabella mumbled, but Agatha's interest was more drawn to something else.

"I have to say I am quite curious as to what the Familial Arts of a spawn of Octavia are," Agatha stated.

"Ah, well, I guess I never did tell you all," Lucinda murmured thoughtfully. "I suppose there would be no harm in telling you. We will be fighting together in the near future." Lucinda gestured to her eyes. "This is a passive Familial Art called Chthonia."

"Chthonia?" Agatha repeated the tongue-twisting name.

"And what does it do?" Mirabella asked. "I doubt making your eyes a pretty red is all." Lucinda chuckled.

"Of course not. Chthonia helps me process and dissect any kind of magic or ability to give the full scope of it. It helps me broaden my processing ability for such things. With it, I can use any spells I see, no matter how absurd they are."

"Hold on, does that apply to other Familial Arts as well?" Agatha questioned, the very prospect seeming absurd to her. Lucinda nodded her head.

"I can." Lucinda admitted, "Though that's only because you're still using magic. At a point you'd be able to use the concepts your Gods reside over and then I'd be hard-pressed."

"Whoa, ain't you a little too overly strong either way?" Mirabella questioned. Agatha shared the sentiment. Lucinda could only give a sheepish laugh.

"Others certainly see it so," but she would rather change the topic to something that is not about how freakishly strong she is. "But enough about that, I have to say, where are Mikoto, Fiona, and Victoria? I have not seen any of them since we came to Emberreach."

"The professor said that the wolf girl and the other blondie were busy in some lab with something. Mikoto was with Professor Eugene; he wanted him as a witness because he fought with the fourth princess of Vel'ryr," Mirabella explained.

"Mikoto battled with Amaury?" Lucinda questioned. "And he came out alive?" There was some absurdity in that; she had met Amaury, and the girl held absurd power. She did not doubt Mikoto's prowess, but to think he would even survive. "How is Mikoto?"

"Same arrogant bastard as always; he wasn't even injured," Mirabella stated with a small smirk.

"Hmm, odd that you refer to Mikoto by name now," Agatha stated, glancing at the princess. "Was it not usually 'that masked bastard'?" Agatha questioned.

"Tch! What's it matter that I call him by his name now?" Mirabella asked with a quirked-up eyebrow.

"Oh, nothing," Agatha stated, glancing away.

"Oi, don't go saying stuff and not bothering to continue it," Mirabella spoke with clear annoyance in her tone.

("These two seem like oil and water; the smallest things can cause them to grow annoyed with one another.") Lucinda thought in contemplation. ("It would be good if we can all grow bonds with each other; we will be fighting together in the near future.") And so an idea hit her.

"Hey, you two, would you like to go see a play with me?" She asked; the other two girls looked at her in confusion.

"A play?" Mirabella questioned; she had seen her fair share of plays in the past. She was never that much of a fan of any.

"Hmm, what kind of play?" Agatha asked; she, however, had never seen one. Most of her entertainment came from books.

"They vary usually, but there's always a play in the city square of Emberreach," Lucinda stated excitedly. "Come on, it could be fun."

"Not like we got anything better to do," Mirabella murmured.

"For once, I agree," Agatha stated, Lucinda gave a bright smile.

"That's great! Then it's settled, to the city square!"

[Verdantis]

[Emberreach]

Emberreach, while not even the capital of Verdantis, was quite large, not quite as large as the capital of Galadriel though. But that did not diminish the grand sight of the city; it

was the exact opposite of what you would expect in Galadriel. There were way more places of worship, cathedrals, and churches.

As well as a lot of statues depicting the Gods; he even saw one for Rheyra.

"Quite the sight, is it not?" Ser Asaun stated; he, along with Professor Eugene, was walking in front of him. "Emberreach holds a reputation for being the city with the most places of worship, surpassing even capital cities," he continued.

"Yeah, I can certainly see that," Mikoto murmured as they passed by yet another large cathedral.

"Oh, but it just occurred to me that I have yet to ask for your name," the knight just realized. "May I have the name of you, mysterious fellow?"

"It's Mikoto Yukio."

"What a charming and beautiful name!" Asaun exclaimed. Mikoto blinked; the man was odd. That fact just cemented itself more as he spoke. "I have to say, out of all the students sent here, you are by far the most interesting."

"Oh? What about the spawn of Octavia? Surely she is more interesting," Mikoto argued, but Asaun merely chuckled.

"One would think so, but I find the unknown much more appealing than that which is very known," the knight informed. Mikoto hummed.

"You don't say."

"And as a knight, my intuition tells me you are quite the interesting fellow, Mikoto," Asaun stated.

"Maybe your intuition is right," Mikoto murmured, but he sought to change the subject. "But I have to say I love the ring."

"Oh, this?" Asaun gestured to the ring on his right hand. "You've a good eye."

"I sense magic from it," Mikoto stated, wanting to gauge for more information. "Where'd you get it from?"

"It was with me as a babe, according to my foster father," Asaun informed with a small, sincere smile. "I know not its origins, but I feel as though it connects me to my birth parents in some way." Mikoto internally sighed.

("Damn, I haven't even stolen it yet, and I already feel bad.") Mikoto shook his head as Professor Eugene spoke up. He had honestly forgotten that the man was here.

"We've arrived," the man stated as they came to a stop at a particularly large cathedral.

"So what are we actually doing here? I get that I'm a witness and all..." Mikoto trailed off as Asaun saw fit to inform him.

"One of the governing body members resides here, the archbishop," the knight captain started. "Though we have multiple witnesses that have encountered Vel'ryr troops, it could still be seen that those troops were deserters who stole technology from Vel'ryr to chase down their own goals."

"I see, I fought a hostile princess of the empire, meaning that would certainly be enough to find Vel'ryr hostile," Mikoto surmised.

"Indeed," Professor Eugene stated. "The archbishop will use a simple mind-reading spell to confirm things, but worry not, he shall only look at more specific memories."

"I don't really mind." It was a simple matter to keep memories he did not want seen hidden.

"Then let us not keep the archbishop waiting any longer," Asaun stated as they entered the cathedral.

Chapter 70: Chapter 68: Moon

[Verdantis]

[Emberreach]

Title: Whispers in Winter's Embrace

Scene: The City Square of Emberreach

As the curtain rises, the City Square of Emberreach is revealed, blanketed in a thick layer of snow. Buildings with timber-framed facades line the square, their windows glowing warmly with candlelight. In the center stands a makeshift statue of a long-forgotten queen, her figure partially obscured by the falling snow. A lone figure, Veronica, a young woman with striking bright blue eyes and long salmon-colored hair, dressed in a white dress adorned with lines of gold, stands at the base of the statue, gazing up at it with reverence.

Veronica speaks, her voice trembling and nervous.

"It's said that the Queen once walked these streets, her presence a beacon of hope in our darkest hours. But now... now her statue stands alone, a silent witness to the passage of time."

She brushes a delicate hand against the cold stone of the statue, her breath forming small clouds in the frigid air. From the shadows, a figure emerges, hooded and cloaked in dark fabric.

The stranger speaks in a low and grating voice.

"The Queen's legacy lives on in the hearts of her people, even as the world outside grows colder."

Veronica startles, turning to face the stranger with a mixture of fear and curiosity.

"Who are you? Why do you speak of the Queen as if you knew her?" she questions.

"Some say I'm just a traveler passing through, but others... others know me as a keeper of secrets, a seeker of truths hidden beneath the surface," the stranger states with a smirk.

Veronica narrows her eyes, studying the stranger's face for any hint of deceit. Her eyes briefly scan the crowd, noting a familiar pair of red eyes, but she quickly turns her attention elsewhere.

"What truths do you seek in Emberreach? What secrets could this town possibly hold?"

"The kind of secrets that whisper through the streets at night, carried on the wind like echoes of a forgotten melody. The kind of truths that linger in the shadows, waiting to be brought into the light," the stranger whispers as he slightly closes the distance.

"I don't know what you're talking about. This town may have its mysteries, but I have no part in them."

The stranger reaches out a gloved hand. "Everyone plays a part, whether they realize it or not. The question is, will you embrace your role or turn away from it?"

Veronica hesitates, torn between the safety of ignorance and the allure of the unknown. The stranger's words hang in the air like a challenge, daring her to take the first step into the mystery.

"What do you want from me?" she questions with a trembling voice.

"Only what you're willing to give. The choice is yours, Veronica of Emberreach. Will you remain a bystander in your own story, or will you seize the opportunity to become something more?"

With that, the stranger fades back into the shadows, leaving Veronica alone in the snowy city square. She stands there for a moment, the weight of their words sinking in,

before finally turning to leave. As she disappears into the night, the snow continues to fall, blanketing Emberreach.

("Damn, this is so boring!") Mirabella thought as the crowd clapped their hands and cheered at the brief play. Agatha and Lucinda seemed way too invested. "What even was that?" the princess murmured.

"The play was inspired by a storybook of a young girl named Veronica who was the child of a queen," Lucinda excitedly explained. "She never knew it, but one night a stranger approached her and offered knowledge, just like we see it here." The girl seemed way too excited about the play.

"Hmm, it does seem rather interesting," Agatha stated. "I'm assuming there are more acts to this play?"

"Yep, there are. This one, in particular, is my favorite," Lucinda stated as she gestured for the two to follow her. "Isabella, the lead actor, is a friend of mine. Let's go say hi." Before the two could get any words in, Lucinda already rushed backstage. The two shrugged and followed. It was not long until they made it to the back of the small stage in the city square.

There, they saw the lead play actor conversing with some other elaborately dressed individuals. The salmon-haired actress immediately took notice of them, her expression lighting up as her eyes zero in on Lucinda.

"Lucinda dear!" the girl rushed towards Octavia's spawn and embraced her in a brief hug. "It has been too long!"

"You're telling me," Lucinda returned an equally enthusiastic smile. "Your acting was as great as always, Isabella."

"Please, you flatter me too much," Isabella stated as she glanced at Mirabella and Agatha. "Oh, but who are these two?"

"Agatha Gregory, a pleasure," the blonde gave a dull introduction and a simple curtsy.

"Mirabella," the princess gave an even duller one.

"A pleasure to meet you both," Isabella spoke with a bright smile. "I am Isabella Trune, an old friend of Lucinda here."

"But what brings you to Verdantis? Not that I am complaining, it's always good to see you," the actress asked.

"I, along with these two and a few others, have come to aid the kingdom of Verdantis with the Drah'lurahr Cult," Lucinda informed.

"Ah, those few," Isabella's mouth formed a frown. "Well, I do wish you well on that particular endeavor. But say, how about after the play, we reconvene at a café? I know just the perfect place."

"Sounds like a plan!" Lucinda exclaimed, immediately accepting. Meanwhile, Agatha and Mirabella just watched the two as they continue conversing.

("Such a pure friendship,") Agatha internally mused. She would be lying if she said she did not wish for the same type of companionship with a girl her own age. She threw a glance at Mirabella.

("Hmm, who cares? Who needs friends when you're strong?") Yes, due to her reputation of brashness, she had almost no friends. There is Juliana, but the girl was more like a little sibling more than anything. She would not admit it, but she did long for that kind of friendship. She glances at Agatha.

("Not a chance/ Not a chance")

As Mikoto walked through the massive doors of the cathedral, he was immediately struck by the sheer scale of the interior. Sunlight streamed in through the stained glass windows, casting bright colors across the stone floor. The walls rose high above him, decorated with carvings and statues that seemed to come to life in the light.

To his left, he saw rows upon rows of pews, each meticulously carved and polished. On the right, he spotted an ornate altar, adorned with gold and jewels and flanked by towering candles.

Above him, the ceiling stretched on for what seemed like miles, its arches and gothic design standing out. In every corner, there were reminders of the cathedral's history. From the faded frescoes depicting historical scenes to the weathered stone walls.

He trailed behind Asaun and Professor Eugene, taking note of two rather unique individuals standing at the center of the enormous cathedral. The first one he noticed was certainly the more peculiar of the two. He was dressed in fine, sleek, pitch-black armor from head to toe. The armor seemed high-quality and was adorned with patterns of gold.

Even from beneath his helmet, Mikoto felt his gaze immediately zero in on him. His own gaze was also drawn to this knight. His instincts that told him that Princess Amaury was powerful were practically going crazy here.

"Captain Asaun, it is good to see you." He tore his gaze away from the armored individual as he heard a soothing voice. The other person in the cathedral was a very androgynous man with long gray hair hidden beneath a hooded veil with a cross

decorating its center. He was dressed in white robes with a dull blue adorning most of the robe. "And you must be Professor Eugene from Luminare Academy, a pleasure. And many thanks for your assistance," the man thanked with a smile.

"Your words are too kind, Archbishop," Professor Eugene stated with a slight bow.

("This guy is supposed to be the archbishop? I expected someone more old and cranky.") Mikoto mused as Asaun spoke up.

"Archbishop Percival," the knight greeted with a swift bow. "It is good to see that you are in good health." Asaun then turned to the man in black armor. "And it is good to see you too, Ser Dante." The armored man, now named Dante, gave the elf a nod.

"Forgive us for this meeting, but this is the boy we spoke of through our communications," Professor Eugene stated.

"Ah, Mikoto Yukio," the archbishop stated, seemingly testing the name on his tongue. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise-" Mikoto was cut off when the man's eyes zeroed in on him with a questioning gaze.

"Interesting," the archbishop stepped closer to him, much to the confusion of most in the cathedral. "The moon Goddess."