

Brand New 1721

Chapter 1721: Sacrifice

Elayne stood and fought, screaming in agony. Mustering all her strength, she absorbed the nether and demonic energy, combining and compressing it.

"A portal...! At least...! T-The children have to live...!"

"What do you think you're doing?!"

The Demon King of Death stomped the ground angrily, his claws rushing toward her.

However, a flame flickered and barely stopped him.

BOOOM!

"E-Elayne...! Ack...! Run...! Elayne run...!"

It was Mark, somehow maintaining a fiery form, shifting back to normal constantly, burning through his life force to sustain his power for a mere second or two.

"Elena...! ELENA WAKE UP!"

"M-Mom?!"

Elena, in tears, saw her mother crawling toward her.

Elayne pointed her finger at her daughter, opening a portal between them.

Small roots sprouted around Elena, grabbing her and her friend and dragging them into the portal.

"W-Wait! No! Mom!"

Elena screamed in horror as she saw her mother piercing her stomach, pulling out a small sphere made of wooden roots.

Inside, a tiny life pulsed with a beating heart...

The sphere reached Elena's hand a second before bony claws pierced Elayne's body, dragging her into the abyss.

"Please... protect... your... brother..."

"Mom! MOM! NOOOO!!!"

Elena screamed, crying as she and her friends fell through the portal. It was meant to lead to Earth, but it distorted and glitched, transporting them to another location entirely.

"Nnnggh...! Aaaagh...!"

Elayne cried but managed a faint smile, as the Demon King of Death noticed what she had done.

Yet he didn't seem to care much.

"Hah, so that was it? You sacrificed your last chance to escape to let others live... Truly, you're the noblest, Yggdrasil..."

"That girl will one day... come after you and kill you... I can assure you of that..."

"Hoh, is that so? Well, I'm glad to know that one day, another great Death Apostle will join me. Now, Yggdrasil, you and your friends are mine."

Powerless, Elayne could only watch as she, Mark, her familiars, and her friends were dragged into the depths of the Netherworld.

Nether embraced their bodies, searing through their life.

"A-Ah... so this is... what it feels like to die..."

Elayne felt the last warmth of her body fade, replaced by an overwhelming cold.

The shivering chill was so intense it filled her with terror, and she screamed in horror.

The Demon King of Death laughed, hurling Elayne, her friends, and her familiars into an abyssal pit.

Elayne's senses flickered, returning briefly before fading again.

She saw Mark beside her, his red flames flickering and then vanishing.

Rita, Jenny, Lily, Belle, and Silver fell with her.

Katherine was nowhere to be seen, nor was Goldie.

She hoped they were safe, wherever they were.

THUD!

Then she heard a loud thud, followed by a sharp crack.

Her entire body was crushed into pieces.

Nether consumed her lifeforce.

Slowly, as she drifted into the darkness of death...

Elayne fell asleep, unable to bear the horrors any longer.

But deep down, she felt a faint relief.

At the very least, the children... were safe.

.

.

.

An indescribable amount of time passed.

Elayne didn't know if she was awake or still trapped in a dream, endlessly drifting through darkness.

Eventually, when she regained her faint senses...

She found herself bound by ghostly chains, wrapped around her body and soul.

A sharp, unrelenting pain overwhelmed her soul.

"A-Ah... Aaahh..."

As she tried to speak, she couldn't. She had no tongue.

Her face... she couldn't feel it.

The only sensation was a deep, unending cold.

When her vision fully returned, she saw where she was.

She was among thousands of others, bound by chains, marching endlessly across the Netherworld.

Bbzzttt...! Bbzzttt!

Something strange floated before her weary eyes.

"S-System?"

It was a system window, glitched, displaying corrupted numbers, skills, and data.

It was... her Avatar's System Window.

Because she had fallen into the Netherworld, connected to Arcadia, her System Window was trying to reconnect with her soul but was unable to stabilize, growing increasingly corrupted.

"Ugh... Where is this... What... happened to me?"

She looked around, realizing these people weren't alive. They were skeletons, zombies, or ghosts.

And she? What was she?

With horror, Elayne approached a nearby river of nether.

In the reflection of the green, ghostly liquid, she saw her face...

Still somewhat recognizable, but pale, covered with wounds.

Her hair had turned completely white.

She examined her hands. One was intact, the other just bones.

Her legs were also mere bones.

Something had gnawed at her flesh while she slept, leaving her face mostly intact for some reason.

"Ahh... maybe to recognize me?"

Elayne didn't want to dwell on it.

A powerful urge to simply "give up" consumed her entire being.

Any fighting spirit she could muster was quickly extinguished, replaced by eternal subjugation.

She wanted nothing more than to lie down and die.

"I want to die... let me die... let me rest in peace..."

As she muttered to herself, the other undead beside her groaned loudly. She could faintly hear their inner voices.

They were all saying the same.

"I want to die..."

"It's so tiresome..."

"I need to rest..."

"Everything hurts..."

"It's so cold..."

"Where... where are we going...?"

Elayne pitied them. She glanced at the skeleton behind her and noticed something.

His gray hair was mixed with dark brown...

And that ring on his right hand.

"M-Mark...?"

She could hear his voice.

"Elayne... Elayne... Elayne... Elayne..."

He kept muttering her name repeatedly. Did he even recognize her? His eyeless face seemed to stare at nothing.

He was just... a skeleton.

"Aahhh... Aahhhh! Ma... rk... Maak...! Aahhh!"

Elayne cried miasma from her eyes, halting her march and startling the skeleton behind her. She hugged him tightly.

"A-Ah... Aaah... A-Ahh..."

The skeleton kept groaning, but his empty eyes flickered with faint red flames.

He slightly regained his senses...

"E-Ela... la... la... layn..."

"Ma... rk...!"

They embraced, refusing to let go, as the march of undead halted. The others stared at the couple absentmindedly.

As they wept together, a figure approached.

A tall black skeleton in dark blue armor, its ghostly face showing displeasure, carried a long whip made of snake bones.

"Who do you think you are to interrupt the march?! You lowly creatures! Move! Move now!"

With a furious, ghostly voice, the armored skeleton roared, swinging his whip and striking both the zombie woman and the skeleton.

"Aaahh..."

"Uugh..."

Yet they remained, clinging to each other, enduring the pain searing their souls together.

"Tch! So damn annoying! Another damn pair of lovers! Ugh... disgusting."

The skeleton sighed as his bracelet glowed.

"Move."

TRUUUM!

"Nngaaaah!"

"Aaahhh!"

The ghostly chains around their souls inflicted endless agony, forcing them to march again, moving like automatons.

"We were supposed to reach the barracks a day ago! God damn it! MOVE FASTER!"

The furious undead kept whipping them.

For an unknown duration.

The undead marched endlessly.

Elayne felt her mind decaying, much like her body.

Eventually, in the dark caves of the Netherworld, they reached a vast area surrounded by a forest of black wood and white bones.

Flowers with glowing eyes stared at them.

A massive fortress, built from black wood and bone, loomed ahead.

There, countless undead soldiers were forced to swing swords and spears, inscribed with cursed runes to enhance their strength.

"Here we are, young recruits! Gehehehe! Prepare yourselves. True hell is about to begin! We will shape you into proper soldiers for the great Demon King of Death! Together, we shall conquer Earth and Arcadia! Those who don't make it will be ground to dust and turned into Yin Ghost Pills, so you'd better work hard if you don't want to be eaten!"

The "general," as Elayne assumed, laughed maniacally as he entered the fortress. The gates opened, and the undead marched into the immense city surrounding it.

"A necropolis..."

As Elayne walked inside, she saw undead everywhere. Most were soldiers, marked by ghostly chains, but some were unchained, likely "citizens" or something similar.

With a weary expression, Elayne observed the somber, dark necropolis. Ghosts flitted about, zombies traded rotten meat or organs, and skeletons purchased beast bones to augment their bodies.

"Ahh..."

Elayne could hardly think. The more she tried, the more pain she felt. She relinquished her thoughts and obeyed orders.

But deep within, a small, dormant spark of Will lingered, waiting to awaken.

Chapter 1722: The Netherworld

Eventually reaching the barracks, the undead were not given individual rooms. Kept in that area, they were instructed to begin honing their weapon skills.

"Most of you are either brainless or have rotting brains, so I'll go out of my way to explain what you must do here!" said the leader. "You will choose a weapon and learn to wield it. By practicing relentlessly, you may eventually acquire a Skill related to it! You have one month to learn a Skill. If you fail, you're deemed talentless, and your souls and corpses will be grounded into Ghostly Yin Pills to feed those more talented than you! So work hard!"

"Uuhh... What about rooms to rest?" a ghostly figure asked, one of the few capable of speech.

"What?! A room?! Hah! You don't have such privileges. You're lowly walking corpses!" the general laughed. "You haven't even forged a Nether Core, and you think you deserve a room? As Undead, with ample Nether in the air, you can work tirelessly! Sleeping isn't in our vocabulary."

"Uuh..." the ghostly figure sighed, looking down.

"Those who manage to acquire a weapon skill early will receive rewards for their talent!" the general continued. "Learn a Weapon Skill within three weeks, and you'll receive a Curse Rune of your choice. Two weeks, you get two Curse Runes. If any of you somehow master the skill in a single week, you'll earn three Curse Runes and a few Ghostly Yin Pills, which can help you reach the First Stage of Nether

Gathering. Now hurry and move your bones. Choose your weapon! Once chosen, there's no turning back!"

Every Undead was required to select a weapon. Elayne waited nearly a day until her turn arrived. She gazed silently at the weapons for a moment.

The selection included rusty swords, spears, axes, small hammers, and a limited number of bows and arrows.

There were no farming tools.

"..."

"Hey, pretty face, are you choosing or what?"

"..."

Elayne ignored the instructor's words and continued staring.

A few strands of thought coalesced as her gaze settled on a sword.

Her skeletal hand reached for the rusty blade, touching it.

And then...

BZZZTT!

A glitched system window appeared before her face, displaying something indecipherable.

No other weapon triggered this reaction, so she chose the sword.

"The sword, huh? Don't cut that pretty face of yours with it, lass! Gyahahaha!"

"..."

As Elayne gripped the sword, she thought she might access her swordsmanship skill.

But no such skill surged within her as she moved the blade.

Yet, it didn't feel like she had nothing.

Though her system was glitched and broken, certain fragments lingered...

By slowly recalling those fragments, Elayne began to swing her blade with deliberate, measured movements.

Eventually, a familiar skeleton approached her, also wielding a sword.

"Ela... yn..."

"Ma... k..."

Elayne smiled faintly, grasping Mark's skeletal hand as they swung their swords together.

It was all they could do now.

Despite everything, deep down, they were grateful to be together even in this state.

They knew the only way to progress in this world, to understand its nature and find a way out, was to adapt.

And to overcome this challenge...

Even as their minds eroded and fragmented... strands of hope persisted, intertwining with their sword movements.

Day after day, night after night...

Relentlessly, they swung their swords up and down, vertically and horizontally, without pause.

As they did, Elayne gradually gathered her thoughts, striving with each sword swing to collect her memories and recall who she was.

Slowly, memories of what had happened resurfaced within her consciousness.

She had saved her daughter and the children.

Her little son too.

But the others... she didn't know what had become of them.

Oberon was likely still in Avalon, spreading miasma and causing chaos.

Those she left behind... she worried deeply about them, and the more she worried, the stronger her resolve grew.

As she swung her blade, memories of those she loved began to blossom, undeterred by the unrelenting cold.

She glanced at her chest, noticing a large hole where her Spiritual Heart and Magic Circle had once been. They were gone.

Her Spiritual Heart Beasts... could they be gone too?

"..."

Her Physique was shattered, and after her death, she had lost nearly all connection to her Avatar.

Yet, the System somehow endured, recognizing her soul as its owner, though it was now glitched and chaotic.

She had lost almost everything.

"No... not everything..."

She closed her eyes, focusing deeply as the days passed, delving into her soul.

There, she sensed something...

Deep within her ghostly soul, she saw a bubble.

"...!"

A bubble of spirit and soul energy, preserving everything.

This bubble contained many things.

A tiny fragment of her original Spiritual Heart.

Distorted Runes of her original Magic Circle.

And...

"Gardenia...? Ignis...!"

Both were in a state of slumber, unable to muster strength without Spirit Energy.

But that wasn't all. She also saw three cocoons, likely her Spiritual Heart Beasts, which had retreated into the depths of her soul.

And...

There was something more.

Another "soul" within her.

This faint, spiritual soul had a distinct shape.

"I-Irene...?"

It was the soul of her destroyed weapon.

She smiled silently.

There was nothing she could do about them now.

She lacked the strength.

But perhaps... her foundation in this world of death, decay, ghosts, and curses...

It wasn't as dire as she had imagined.

Mark might be in a similar state.

And wherever Rita, Lily, and Jenny were... she vowed to find them.

"Belle and Silver too..."

By recalling those she loved, these bonds strengthened Elayne's mind, and the endless exhaustion felt less overwhelming.

Unknowingly, she was cultivating her own Consciousness.

"Elena... please... be well... Mama is going to be okay... please... don't worry about me..."

As she shed black tears, Elayne continued swinging her sword tirelessly with Mark.

And...

After a whole week, a strange system window appeared before her.

[Congratulations, you have learned the Skill: [ERROR_INPUT Arts: Lv?/X]!]

Her sword glowed with a mysterious, bizarre light. Strange colors swirled around it, forming distorted, digital patterns.

Mark, too, had grasped something else. His sword was enveloped in ghostly blue flames.

"Ohooo?! What do we have here?! Two recruits mastered it in just one week! Well done! I underestimated you two foolish bags of rotten meat, but perhaps I was wrong...!" the general laughed. "You definitely have talent! Come with me!"

The general, delighted by their progress, led them deeper into the fortress to a large room where a shadowy, ghostly being wielded a cursed needle.

"Hey, Cursed Needle, I've brought two talented ones! Imprint three Curse Runes on them!" the general said, nudging Elayne and Mark forward.

"Hmmm... a sword skill in one week?" the shadowy being mused. "You were perhaps great swordsmen in life... very well, huhuh... Here, choose three Curse Runes to inscribe upon your Corpse Bodies! They will enhance your abilities beyond imagination."

The "Cursed Needle" presented ten black, mummified fingers, each inscribed with a different cursed rune.

Curse Rune of Decay.

Curse Rune of Ghosts.

Curse Rune of Agony.

Curse Rune of Pain.

Curse Rune of Resentment.

Curse Rune of Madness.

Curse Rune of Bones.

Curse Rune of Rot.

Curse Rune of Flesh.

Curse Rune of Nether.

Each Rune granted a unique ability to an Undead's Corpse Body.

"Do you want an explanation? I'll explain them only once, so listen carefully," the Cursed Needle Shadow said.

"The Rune of Decay amplifies your decaying power, strengthening your presence.

The Rune of Ghosts enhances your soul's ghostly essence, allowing you to project it beyond your Corpse Body.

The Rune of Agony grows stronger as you suffer, giving you resistance to Dark Magic.

The Rune of Pain is similar but builds permanent strength over time through prolonged suffering.

The Rune of Resentment increases magical power based on your resentment, boosting your potential for Curse Magic.

The Rune of Madness drives you berserk, granting momentary bursts of power.

The Rune of Bones strengthens your bones, if you have any.

The Rune of Rot improves your ability to regenerate rotten flesh.

The Rune of Flesh makes your flesh tougher, if you have any.

Lastly, the Rune of Nether enhances your ability to gather and manipulate Nether. Now choose."

"...!"

"...?"

Elayne and Mark hesitated, reflecting on what they'd heard.

After some thought, their choices were made.

Chapter 1723: The Missing Cat

Kajithe was terrified out of his mind.

He didn't know what had happened.

Or how it had happened.

But at some point, a strange entity capable of traversing space had captured him.

The being's black, shadowed hands dragged him into a different dimension and cast a peculiar spell on everyone else.

Unable to act, Kajithe watched as Elayne and her party forgot his existence and continued without him.

He was forced to witness everything being lost.

Daddy Sardine had told him that his threads of fortune were linked to Elayne.

If he had been there, that small additional help...

It could have prevented this catastrophe.

"If only...! If only I could've helped...! No...! No...! Avalon...! Our world...!"

Wrapped in shadow tendrils, Kajithe watched in horror as the Netherworld began to devour Avalon, spreading Nether and Miasma everywhere.

Demonic entities roamed the once-vibrant land, and undead wandered freely.

Their once respected and beloved King, brainwashed by a powerful demon, had become the Ruler of the Netherworld's puppet.

"Daddy Sardine...! Everyone...! Queen Khione... Guhh...! I have to escape this place!"

Kajithe roared in anger, finding himself in a strange, desolate pocket dimension.

Shadows surrounded him, a dark blue sky loomed above, gray fog-like clouds drifted, and bizarre black creatures, formed of miasmatic flesh, flew everywhere.

"W-What is this place, nyaaaaa?!"

As he screamed in horror, something heard him and began moving toward him.

A massive, incomprehensible monstrosity approached.

"So you have awakened, little thread of fortune. Fortunately, I recognized your importance and severed that thread before my master's plans could fail again..."

"W-What! How did you know this...! How...! Why?! Who...! Who are you?!"

Kajithe roared, unleashing all his accumulated spiritual power at once. Dozens of colorful cat spirits began gnawing and slashing at the shadows binding him.

"Who am I?"

The monstrous black entity bloomed like a dark lotus, revealing its identity within, causing Kajithe's mind to warp and teeter on the edge of madness.

A glowing divine being from another realm appeared, resembling a youthful girl of nine years old.

She had long white hair and eyes forever closed.

Her flowing white hair wrapped around her body, forming a white dress.

Threads of her hair spread everywhere, as shadows obeyed her will.

"Y-You're...! A Deity! A True Ancient Deity?!"

Kajithe vomited blood as he discerned the identity of this ancient being.

How?

How could such a being call the Demon King of Death her "master"?

It was utterly absurd!

And yet...

"The Alien God of Death visited our Realm and offered us a grand bargain. My sisters rejected him, but I, bored by their neglect as the youngest, accepted. I, the weakest of the three Fates, chose to fulfill my lord's dreams. Through his empty gaze, I saw my ideal world and the path to achieve it."

The youngest of the Fates!

Kajithe knew her name!

It was her.

The most ancient being, a horrifying existence!

Clotho.

"I weave life into existence, but that doesn't mean I cannot alter or sever fates... though not to the extent of my elder sister, who can end life with a mere snap of her scissors."

"Why?! Why?! Why?! Why are you telling me this?! NYAAAAGGH!"

Kajithe convulsed, vomiting blood and crying blood, his body writhing in agony as the truth of such an ancient being, who dominated laws themselves, was imprinted into his very soul.

"Little kitten, your kind is quite intriguing. You're perhaps the only spirit race with an affinity for Fortune, tied to Fate and Destiny. I've always wanted a cute pet cat, but my sisters never allowed it... so you're going to become my cute pet cat."

"No, nyaaaah!"

"Eh?"

"I will never yield, not even to gods! Daddy Sardine...! My loyalty lies with him alone! HISSSS!"

Against all odds, Kajithe displayed a brave face, hissing at an ancient goddess like Clotho without hesitation.

The girl laughed, however.

"Hahahaha! What can a pitiful little kitten do? You are now within my domain, and you cannot—"

"Even if it costs my Spiritual Heart, I won't yield!"

FLAAASH!

"W-What are you doing?! Wait! I want you as my pet!"

Clotho panicked as she saw Kajithe begin to detonate all his spirit power, his body glowing as countless cat spirits erupted from him.

BOOOMMM!!!

"Ngh?!"

Clotho shielded herself with her shadowy creatures' tendrils, realizing Kajithe had vanished completely.

"He killed himself?! What...! How— No, he's not dead! His thread... is alive! I can feel it!"

Clotho gasped, realizing Kajithe had employed an incredibly risky yet intricate technique, harnessing the power of the Threads of Fortune themselves.

She quickly opened her domain, scanning the now-corrupted spirit forest, but Kajithe was gone.

"He destroyed his spiritual body and used the remaining energy of his Spiritual Heart to travel as a spiritual soul through the Thread of Fortune connecting him to his benefactor?! How... incredible! My foolish sisters always said we shouldn't study this race, but the more I learn about their power, the more intrigued I become! Hahaha!"

As she laughed, Kajithe traveled along a golden road, finally arriving at Khione's Kingdom.

Everything was in chaos. Khione was mobilizing everyone.

She had no intention of fighting, however.

Having learned that Elayne and her friends had not only lost but perished, she decided to flee before the Domain of Death could ensnare her and her people.

"We must hurry! Quickly! Enter the Storage Paintings! There's no time to gather your belongings. Your lives are more precious than anything else!"

With Chloe's assistance, Khione urgently stored hundreds of fairies and other spirit races at once.

Kajithe arrived just as his race was being evacuated, appearing before Daddy Sardine, who was flying out of his building.

"Kajithe! I thought you had died! What happened? The Fortune I read...! It was suddenly severed by a strange, divine force!"

Daddy Sardine displayed an uncharacteristically intense expression, his usually calm face revealing shock, horror, and sorrow.

"D-Daddy Sardine! A goddess! Clotho herself has arrived here! She is targeting our tribe! We must flee! We have to escape somewhere beyond the Domain of Death! She can move freely through it!"

"W-What?! This is...! Beyond my wildest imagination. I cannot believe it...! Is our world truly coming to an end?! Who is this powerful being that can command a being of her caliber?"

"S-She said it was an Alien God...! Another, different Netherworld, originating from another world, is merging with our own!"

"...?!"

Chapter 1724: Don't Give Up

After hearing everything Kajithe had to say, Daddy Sardine paused in thought. He nodded, conjuring a glowing orb from his hand and gently placing Kajithe's spirit soul within it.

"You've done well, Kajithe! Rest here and slowly reform your spirit body. I will ensure the information reaches the Main Branch of our Family and Lady Khione."

He praised Kajithe for his efforts, assuring him that he could now rest and begin the gradual process of reforming his spirit body. The information would be relayed to the Main Branch of their family and Lady Khione without fail.

"T-Thank you...!"

Exhausted beyond measure, Kajithe whispered his gratitude before slipping into a deep slumber inside the crystal orb. Daddy Sardine's Spirit Power enveloped him, hastening the regeneration of his fractured spirit body.

"No, wait!"

Just as silence settled, Kajithe's eyes snapped open. He had heard screams. Two voices. Survivors.

"Daddy Sardine!"

He called out urgently to Daddy Sardine, who turned with a weary sigh, asking what was wrong.

"What is it now?"

"A Fairy named Katherine survived! And an Ancient Golden Koi, named Goldie...! They must be alive somewhere...! We need to rescue them. They were friends with Elayne and her family!"

Kajithe explained that a Fairy named Katherine and an Ancient Golden Koi named Goldie had survived. Somewhere, they remained alive. They had been close to Elayne and her family, and they needed to be rescued.

"...! But entering the Death Domain is risky! It's almost a death sentence, Kajithe!"

"But...! They... although our time together was brief... they're friends I cannot abandon."

"Hmm..."

Daddy Sardine hesitated. The Death Domain was perilous, nearly a death sentence for anyone who entered. But Kajithe insisted. Though their time together had been brief, they were friends he could not abandon.

After a moment of silence, Daddy Sardine nodded again. He conjured a massive, glowing ball of yarn that expanded outward, unraveling into dozens of vibrant, cat-shaped familiars woven from magical threads.

He sent them forth with a command to find the two survivors.

"Rainbow Yarn Cat Familiars, go find those two!"

"Meow!"

The familiars meowed in unison and darted into the Death Domain, weaving through the nether and miasma, searching for signs of life within the decaying forest.

Daddy Sardine watched them depart, then turned back to the orb. He had done all he could for now. It was time to move on.

The cats ventured into the Death Domain, braving the nether and miasma while searching for any signs of life within the decaying forest.

"I have done everything I can right now, Kajithe. I'm sorry, but we must go now."

"I... okay..."

Kajithe felt frustrated with himself.

If only he were stronger.

If only he hadn't been so lazy and unwilling to help!

Perhaps if he had been more alert, he could have noticed that Clotho was stalking them.

It was his duty, and yet he had ruined everything!

"My son..."

Daddy Sardine sensed Kajithe's worries.

"Don't blame yourself for what happened. A power beyond your comprehension appeared and snatched our fortune. There was nothing you could have done."

"But even then...! Elayne and everyone else... they're dead...! After everything they did, they were like our heroes..."

Kajithe cried inside the orb, overwhelmed by sorrow.

There had to be something he could do.

Anything!

"Ah!"

He looked at the skies, recalling something.

His sharp cat ears could help him listen to events unfolding and piece together what had happened inside the castle.

At one point, Elayne had told her daughter to run away.

Then he heard a distortion in space, a portal leading somewhere.

He had also heard that Elayne had a Domain on Earth, a sanctuary where Spirits could live peacefully.

Maybe...

Just maybe!

"I know a place where we could escape and take refuge, and we might even find some survivors there, Daddy Sardine!"

"Kajithe! I see... But... you don't intend to merely survive, do you?"

"Of course not...! Whatever it takes, I will do anything I can to help the survivors avenge Lady Elayne! Such a kindhearted person...! She will not die in vain!"

"Hahah... you've truly grown, son."

Daddy Sardine regrouped with Queen Khione and shared what had happened and his plans. She was deeply shocked to learn someone as powerful as Clotho was serving their new enemy.

With King Oberon under his control and even a goddess serving him, this Alien God, the so-called "Demon King of Death," had become an immensely threatening entity.

This was compounded by the fact that not only those two but also literal Demons from Hell served him, alongside all his Undead!

Without their King and with Khione's siblings still missing, the only option was to visit the villages, gather as many survivors as possible, and escape Avalon.

"To Earth, you say? I suppose it's the only way out... the mortal plane is a dimension where other realms cannot easily exert their authority or warp it as they please..." Khione said. "Elayne created a Domain too, a sanctuary for spirits! Perhaps she sent her daughter there. I must find Elena and help her in this terrible time!"

Khione swiftly set off into the skies with Chloe after securing as many people as she could, while Daddy Sardine used a teleportation scroll to travel to the Main Branch of his Tribe, beginning preparations to escape before the Death Domain could reach them.

Meanwhile, within the Decaying Spirit Forest surrounding the ruined Palace of Fairy King Oberon, a weakened fairy crawled through the nether and miasma, her decayed wings rendering her unable to fly.

"Aaagh...! Aahhh...! Elayne...! Uuugh..."

She wept constantly in agony and sorrow, realizing her dear and beloved master had been killed cold-bloodedly. She could barely muster the will to live.

"Ahhh... Why... why...!"

As she cried, she suddenly noticed something.

A presence lurking in the shadows.

A being began pursuing her.

"Aahhh!"

She ran as fast as she could, but white spiderwebs ensnared her, preventing further movement.

"No...!"

A giant spider-like monster approached, its upper half a pale woman with white hair and sharp red eyes.

She glared at Katherine with a smile, revealing her giant, monstrous spider mandibles.

"Heheheh...! Lady Clotho was right...! There's plenty of delicious food here..."

Katherine was terrified. This monster was unlike anything she had ever seen.

It wasn't merely an undead, and it carried an aura of myth within it.

"An Arachne from the Realm of Olympus?!"

"Ah, yes, it seems you know who we are. That's nice of you! Now, stay there. It'll end quickly."

Katherine tried to muster her spirit magic, but the thick miasma and nether contaminated her body and spirit heart, rendering it impossible.

"You're powerless here... I shall enjoy sucking your juices and devouring that crunchy, delicious spirit heart..."

The Arachne seized Katherine, opening her jaws and biting her neck, injecting deadly venom into her system.

"A-Ahh...! Uugh...! Ma... master..."

Shedding one final tear, Katherine slowly began losing consciousness, feeling her insides melting painfully.

"Now, I shall devour you thoroughly and—"

"MEREOW!"

"Wha...?!"

Chapter 1725: Diverging Paths

"Now, I shall devour you thoroughly and—"

"MEREOW!"

"Wha...?!"

The roar of a cat echoed as a giant rainbow paw made of yarn smashed the Arachne's head, crushing her into the ground.

"A... a cat?"

"Meow!"

The yarn cat seized Katherine and injected purifying spirit energy, healing her from the venom and rushing away as quickly as possible.

However...

"Where do you think you're going?!"

"RETURN!"

"COME BACK!"

Many more Arachnes pursued them, furious that one of their sisters had died.

In the distance, a titanic spider rushed toward the cat, making the ground tremble.

A monster among monsters, an Arachne Queen!

Sensing many of the Yarn Familiars dying, the cat spread its wings made of yarn and flew far away, escaping the Death Domain by a hair's breadth.

"Ah! K-Katherine?!"

While flying through the skies and rescuing others, Khione saw the cat carrying Katherine to her.

"Q-Queen Khione...? What...! What's happening? Who is this creature?"

"That is a powerful Yarn Familiar from Daddy Sardine, a Great Spirit Druid! He has saved your life!"

"O-Oh...! Kajithe...! Wait, why couldn't I remember him until now?!"

Katherine clutched her head in disbelief, realizing she hadn't recalled the endearing, grumpy cat until this moment.

It was as if her memory of him had been severed.

"It's a long story...!" Khione muttered, her eyes filled with sorrow. "Elayne lost...! But there's hope... her Domain! Katherine, do you know how to get there? The coordinates?"

"Her Domain?" Katherine asked. "What... Ah...! You plan to evacuate there?"

"There's no other place. Someone told me her daughter could be there. We must find her, help her, protect her!" Khione said. "It's the least we can do after her sacrifice!"

"E-Elena...!" Katherine murmured. "Y-Yes, I'll tell you everything I know...! But... I remember Goldie was with me... where is he?"

"The fish?" Khione asked. "I... I have no idea, I'm sorry."

"...Goldie, please be safe!" Katherine closed her eyes, falling asleep on the familiar's lap.

Meanwhile, in the far Eastern Seas of Avalon, a great storm churned the oceans. The Domain of Death was slowly creeping toward the seas, causing panic among the Sea Spirit Races.

In the Great Eastern Sea Palace, a large merman king stared nervously at the glowing orb before him.

The teleportation array to escape to another realm was still not functioning properly!

"This is my fault for not repairing it...! We haven't used it in eons, after all...!"

The King blamed himself as his people panicked across the sea.

"Guaaaah!"

"Huh?!"

Suddenly, he heard a loud cry as a golden star fell from the skies, crashing into his palace and causing part of the ceiling to collapse.

BOOOM!

"What in the world is this?"

The Merman King stared in disbelief at a giant golden koi fish groaning in pain, sobbing mournfully atop a pile of rubble.

"Sniff... master... sniff, sniff..."

"W-What kind of creature are you— Ah!"

The Merman King gasped at the entity's presence.

Despite appearing as a mere fish, it exuded the graceful aura of the Sacred Dragon Race.

"Impossible...! A Dragon fell from the skies? A golden koi dragon, at that! Is this our salvation?"

"Ough... Huh? Who are you?"

Goldie slowly swam upward, gazing at the small Merman King with tired, sorrowful eyes.

"Oh, great Sacred Dragon! Please listen to our plea! Save us! Our Realm is in grave danger! The Death Domain spreads everywhere. We will all be consumed if we don't escape!"

The King prostrated himself before Goldie, pleading for help.

"Please, use your Sacred Dragon Bloodline to create a Dragon Path to one of the Realms your Race governs! It's our only way out!"

"Huh? I-I don't know what you're talking about...! I'm originally from Arcadia, not Earth! And... my parents died long ago. I was living in a damn pond a few months ago, you know?!"

"But please! Please help us!"

"I...! How...! How do I even open a gate?!"

"Just think about it— Ah, use this!"

The Merman King handed Goldie the Teleportation Orb. Goldie held it with one of his fins, focusing his power on it.

Then...

Right away...

FLAAASH!

A golden dragon symbol flashed before him, radiating a vast amount of Yang Energy.

"W-What...?!"

Shocked, Goldie watched as the spatial power formed a giant golden portal, a "Dragon Path" leading to an Alternate Realm.

"It's open! Everyone, it's open! Gather up, run!"

The Merman King urgently called his people as they poured into the portal in terror, the Death Domain already invading the seas, with Undead Spirit Sea Monsters attacking the city's barrier.

"Lord Dragon, please come with us! We need you!"

The Merman King called for Goldie, who stared at the portal, dumbfounded.

"Master..."

He clenched his teeth, entering the portal and beholding a beautiful scenery of countless stars and a river of pure light guiding him elsewhere.

"I will make sure to avenge you! I will grow stronger...! No matter what!"

The once lazy and unmotivated spiritual beast of the Forest of Beginnings had transformed.

Having experienced a horror he never thought it was possible, Goldie had finally resolved to change.

As he passed through the portal and entered another Realm, light enveloped him from all directions.

Goldie stood in awe, gazing at the breathtaking heavenly realm he had reached.

Colorful heavens, countless peaks and mountains, and a vast azure ocean stretched before him.

But above all, a titanic dragon, larger than the mountains themselves, glared down at them.

He was merely passing by but noticed the unexpected visitors.

"Hmm? A large group of visitors this time...! Who are you?! You used an illegal method to enter the Azure Heaven Dragon Realm! As an Azure Heaven Inspector, I have the authority to annihilate all invaders!"

The furious, gigantic dragon roared at the trembling mermen.

"A-Ahh...! Please, senior, have mercy. I was the one who brought them here!"

Swimming toward the titanic dragon, Goldie expected to die on their behalf.

However...

"W-What?! You...! A Golden Koi Lineage?! Impossible! Wasn't your family exterminated over a hundred thousand years ago?!"

"Huh?"

"Hahaha! You should have said you were of the Ancient Imperial Lineage! Don't worry, junior, all is forgiven! Come with me to the Azure Sky Palace! I will personally ensure your slaves' survival if you do."

"I... okay, thank you, senior. And they are not my slaves..."

With no other option, Goldie reluctantly accepted.

He didn't know what strange and wondrous fate awaited him.

But he would no longer falter.

For his precious master, who had given her life to save him.

He would not stop until he could avenge her.

Chapter 1726: Survivors

Elena shook her head while screaming in pain, suddenly opening her eyes.

"Aahhh! Mom!"

She screamed without thinking, trembling uncontrollably and beginning to cry.

Elena barely noticed where she was or what was happening.

The only thing she felt was the sudden realization that the nightmare was real the moment she awoke.

And that everything she had seen had truly happened.

"Aaaagh!"

She screamed in horror and agony, slamming her head against the floor until she began bleeding.

This was the only thing she could do.

Scream.

In horror.

In agony.

In sorrow.

All the emotions she had to release.

"Uuuhh...! Mom...!"

As she cried desperately, she clutched something with her arms.

Suddenly, she realized she had arms again.

She had lost them in that fight.

But now she had them once more.

Her skin was blue.

And her vision constantly displayed glitching, flickering letters.

"What...! Ugh...!"

She felt sharp pain in her head as she heard the buzzing sound of countless data streams attempting to enter her body, which resisted them.

She screamed as the data tried to erase her entire being and replace it.

She fought back with all her might, her soul and body exuding a thick aura of black energy.

Eventually...

The pain subsided significantly.

But her entire being remained strange, warped.

"What...! What's happening to me?!"

She screamed in horror, staring at her blue arms and...

The small wooden ball on the floor, emanating a faint aura of life from within.

Elena's hands trembled as she fell to her knees again.

Crying loudly, she hugged the small wooden ball.

Inside was her little brother.

Unable to be born, her mother hadn't given up on him.

She had torn a piece of her own body and transformed her uterus into a sphere of life.

Celestial energy encased it, keeping the tiny fetus alive.

"Mom... Sniff... Mom... Aahhh... Haaaaha... Uuugh...!"

Ueagh..."

Feeling wretched, Elena vomited onto the grass beside her. Her head was spinning.

Slowly, she tried to calm herself while still crying desperately.

She struggled to sort her thoughts despite the horrific events that had transpired.

Despite...

Despite her mother...

"No...! No! No! Why?! Is this a dream?! It has to be a nightmare! Mom..."

She began crying and screaming in horror again, pounding the floor, unable to accept reality.

She tried desperately to "wake up" from what she believed was a nightmare.

But she couldn't wake up.

The truth was undeniable.

And the past... was unchangeable.

There was no way to alter the past.

Just as when her father died.

And now... her mother.

Her lips trembled as Elena realized this was her fate.

"I am fated to be alone..."

Gazing bleakly at the blue sky, Elena felt lost. She didn't know what to do or who to be anymore.

She felt like dying.

She considered slitting her throat right then.

To join her mother and father...

To end it all.

Somehow, her katana from BNLO lay beside her, sheathed.

She grabbed it, pointing it at her throat.

Her hands trembled.

"Mom..."

As her tears fell onto her sword...

"Aee..."

For a moment.

She heard a small, faint voice.

"...?"

She looked down at the small wooden sphere.

There...

That tiny life.

"Auh..."

It was trying to communicate with her.

Elena didn't understand how.

Or why this was happening.

It was merely a tiny fetus.

Yet it exuded a powerful aura of life, nature, spirit, and... heaven within it.

"..."

Her hands trembled as her sword fell to the ground.

Elena cried, gazing at the tiny thing inside.

A small soul, a faint spirit light.

"Aee..."

The small soul inside had somehow sensed her distress and tried to reach out to her.

Perhaps to ease her loneliness.

"I'm sorry... Uuh... I'm sorry... Aahhh... I almost... I almost left you alone... I can't... do that...!"

Elena hugged her little brother's soul.

Despite the pain, she came to another realization.

She had to protect this life.

Her dear little brother.

"Anna...! Right... everyone else...! T-They...! Mom... Mom sent them with me? Where...?"

She quickly regained her senses, scanning her surroundings.

She found herself in a vast grassland before a sprawling spiritual forest.

"A-Ah...! Wait, what?! Where am I?!"

She realized she wasn't on Earth.

The strange glitching sounds and flickering screens she had seen now made sense.

Elena had somehow arrived in Arcadia instead of Earth.

And she was, inexplicably, inhabiting her Avatar and her real body simultaneously.

"Ugh...!"

She felt another sharp pain in her head, realizing the cause was her two bodies attempting to overlap.

This bizarre phenomenon, which she had never imagined possible, was happening.

"Why is this happening? What...! Why?"

She tried to access her Status, and though she could, it was riddled with glitches.

While struggling to contain her sorrow and pain, she searched for other survivors.

"Elisa?! Anna! Monicaaaaa!"

She wandered the grasslands, gently carrying her little brother while trying to comprehend what was happening.

But it was so hard to grasp that she couldn't fully understand it.

"Mom made... a portal back home, but we landed in Arcadia... right in front of her forest?"

When she arrived in Arcadia, her Avatar had tried to manifest but then overlapped with her body.

Somehow, they were constantly attempting to merge.

She did her best to endure the pain.

It was utterly bizarre.

She had thought the Avatar was a separate entity.

However, it seemed to be an Astral Projection created by some form of higher divine magic.

This entity only appeared when she logged in.

Now that she was logged in, the entity was trying to manifest and become usable for her soul.

Slowly, she unraveled the secrets of BNLO's Avatars.

But Elena couldn't care less even now.

"A-Anna...! Someone? Ah!"

As hope began to fade, she spotted someone on the grass below—a red-haired elf.

She recognized her and ran toward her.

"Anna! Annaaaa!"

She cried while embracing Anna, who was convulsing in pain.

"Uuugh! Aaaagghh!"

"A-Anna?!"

"Nnnggh...! It hurtsss! My head! My head! Aaaaahhhh!"

"...!"

Elena realized it was the same pain she felt.

However, Anna had far less control over her body and magic, unable to resist the Avatar's aggressive assimilation.

"Don't worry, I'll help you... Nngh!"

Elena gritted her teeth, using her powers to transfer Anna's pain to herself.

Then, she saw countless glitching pixels and windows appear. Through sheer will, she began tearing them apart and destroying them.

As she did, her hands blazed with strange "glitched flames" made of corrupted data.

This effort helped Anna calm down and stabilize.

"E-Elena...? Ahh... what's going on? Where... where are we?"

"Arcadia..."

"...What? Ahhh! No! Everyone...! What the fuck happened?! Elena! Y-Your mom!"

"..."

Elena looked down, her face pale as candlewax, her eyes bleak.

"I... know..."

Anna quickly hugged her without hesitation, crying on her shoulder as Elena did the same.

It had all happened so quickly and so horribly.

They had truly lost.

"We have to... find the others..." Elena muttered, her voice devoid of life.

"Y-Yeah..." Anna nodded, swallowing hard. "I... I think I saw Elisa somewhere... Monica was with her."

"What?! Where?!" Elena gasped.

Anna led Elena to a small apple tree, where Elisa and Monica sat, eating apples while groaning in pain.

Somehow, the apples eased their pain, but it wasn't enough.

"M-Monica, it hurts...!"

"Where...! How do we log out... Aaagh!"

"Monica! Elisa!"

Elena rushed to them and, without waiting for a response, used the same technique as before.

Channeling her desire to protect them, she banished the bugs and glitches from their bodies, stabilizing them.

Then, she hugged them without another word...

She was overwhelmed with sorrow yet filled with relief.

At the very least, not everyone had died.

Thanks to her mother's sacrifice...

She and her friends had survived.

And so had her little brother.

"Mom..."

Elayne was truly a hero.

An incredible hero.

To the very end...

She prioritized the children's lives above her own.

"Elena..." Elisa cried desperately. "Your mom... Uuuhh...! Your mom...! Sniff... Uwaaahhhh!"

"Waaaahhhh!" Monica also cried desperately. "Everyone... Uncle Mark, Aunt Rita and Lily... Jenny...!"

"I can't believe it..." Anna muttered. "W-We lost... and... Ugh...! Damn it...! Damn it all!"

As they wept on each other's shoulders, the friends slowly calmed beneath the darkening blue sky.

The sunset on the horizon signaled something.

The world kept moving forward, heedless of their grief.

And it would continue even if they weren't ready to move on.

Chapter 1727: The Little Yggdrasil Sprout

"We have to move..." Anna said. "W-We have to find a way back home..."

"Can we even log out? Are we trapped in Arcadia?" Elisa asked.

"T-There has to be a way out..." Elena said. "M-Maybe a portal... a gate? I don't know..."

"Hm..." Monica nodded, her eyes filled with sorrow. "I... Eh? Elena, the little spirit, who is it? What is that?"

"T-This?" Elena wondered, glancing at the small wooden sphere. "It's... my brother. Mom was pregnant with Mark's child... it's barely a couple of months old..."

"...!" Elisa gasped. "I had no idea...?!"

"Me neither..." Elena smiled bitterly. "I have to protect... I have to find... a way for him to... I don't know... grow? I don't even know what to do...!"

"C-Calm down, Elena, let's think," Anna said, nodding. "For now... Ah?"

Suddenly, the sphere floated into midair.

It emanated bright light from within and flew into the Forest of Beginnings.

"W-Wait! Wait! Where...! Where are you going?!"

Elena chased after it desperately, growing more worried about her baby brother.

Her friends followed, as they all ran through the forest.

They entered with ease, finding many creatures and countless spirits inside.

This place still emanated the same vibrant life as always.

But Avalon had fallen to the Demon King of Death!

How could everything remain fine here while he constantly expanded his territory?

"Maybe the Gates of the Underworld remain closed? Then... or... I don't know..."

While thinking about that, Elena focused on her brother.

The little spirit flew in a certain direction without stopping.

Eventually, they reached it.

The tree at the forest's center, and the village beside it.

Various familiar faces appeared, noticing their presence.

"Ah, Elena!"

An adorable big squirrel appeared. It was Acorn.

"E-Elena?"

He noticed something on her face. She stared at the tree and the floating wooden sphere.

"A-Acorn..."

Elena looked back at the young squirrel-kin, her eyes filled with dread and sorrow.

"Um? What... what happened? Where's Lady Planta?"

"..."

"...?"

Acorn grew confused as Elena walked toward the tree, her face filled with disbelief.

The tree was still there.

Her hands trembled. She ran toward the Yggdrasil tree while her brother flew around it, then somewhere else.

"W-Wait!"

She chased after him, reaching a hidden place near the Yggdrasil Tree.

There, a large spirit tree sprout grew, though it was not fully formed yet.

Somehow, Yggdrasil had created a child.

"W-What is this?"

Elena grew confused, only to see her little brother merge with the small tree.

"W-Wait! No!"

She panicked and tried to grab him, but it was too late...

FLASH!

The little tree glowed brightly. It grew a little more, becoming a proper small spirit tree of the Yggdrasil lineage.

It overflowed with spiritual energy and... celestial energy.

"W-What's... What's happening?!"

Elena nearly lost her mind, but she heard the little voice again.

"Aeh... Aah..."

"...? Are you there, little brother?"

Elena caressed the tree and closed her eyes to listen better.

"Euuh...! Hya!"

"I see..."

Elena sighed in relief, realizing this was perhaps predestined.

This little tree was somehow her brother's "avatar".

Through unknown means even though she could not understand, Yggdrasil had probably created this little seed the same moment her mother became pregnant.

And so, this little tree grew along with her brother.

After reaching Arcadia, her brother was drawn to his "avatar" and merged with it.

She could hear his little voice. He was fine and comfortable.

With this, the child might grow up without problems...

As long as this forest remained protected.

"Then sleep... for now, little brother. You need to rest."

Elena slowly walked toward her mother's body.

Yggdrasil.

As she caressed it, her eyes widened.

She felt fluctuations of energy within it.

But...

At the same time...

It felt strange.

Almost... terrifying.

Her hands trembled as Elena stepped back.

"Y-You're not my mother..."

The tree's intent fluctuated, then calmed.

It had no soul.

And yet the tree remained alive.

Her mother was dead, yet Elena hoped the tree might still be her.

And yet...

It was and was not at the same time.

"Mom... She was captured by the Demon King of Death then...! Is she in the Netherworld? Maybe this is why the tree is empty now... without her soul? Ugh..."

Elena sighed, feeling a headache again.

"I have to get out of here but... my little brother..."

She looked at her brother's tree.

She hoped to at least plant him in her mother's domain.

Now that he would be in another world... she felt afraid.

"Will you be really okay? Really?"

She hugged the tree without letting go.

She felt a small, adorable, innocent warmth encompassed her body.

"Really?"

The warmth covered her even more.

"You promise?"

The warmth enveloped her body even tighter.

"Okay..."

Elena smiled as essence gathered in her right hand, imprinting a rune.

The rune took the shape of a small sapling made of green light.

"W-What is this?"

As she marveled at the small rune, Elena heard footsteps.

Before finding her way back home, she had to tell everyone what had happened.

But could she?

Elena looked at the peaceful village, dreading the horror they might face if they learned their great leader and goddess was slain.

What reaction would they have?

Would it be better to keep her mother's fate a secret?

While containing her own agony and pain, Elena tried to decide.

"Ah, there you are! Elena! What happened?"

Her friends finally caught up. Acorn came with them, alongside Nieve, who looked quite worried.

"I saw you running and got worried..." Nieve said. "Is everything alright? What happened to your mother or Mark? Are you coming alone this time?"

"I..." Elena's face twisted in utter pain, her eyes devoid of light. "I..."

Acorn and Nieve swallowed hard, sensing the dreadful feeling from Elena.

Then, they felt a chill down their spines.

They weren't stupid.

They could guess something horrible had happened to Elena and the others.

Her friends couldn't speak either. They were overcome by grief, crying silently.

At that point, two figures descended from the skies, drawn by the surge of negative energy.

It was Titania and Erebus.

"Elena...!"

Titania flew to Elena and hugged the girl with all her motherly love.

"T-Titania...! Ahhh...! Mom...! My mom...! Ngh...! Why? Why?!"

Elena cried in Titania's arms, hugging her tightly while weeping uncontrollably.

By now, they all knew what had happened.

Erebus's face twisted in dread.

"N-No... you...! What...? What happened to Planta?"

As he looked at the girls, they averted their gazes, crying silently.

"...You can't be serious! You...! You let her...! You let her die, didn't you?! You stupid, incompetent...!"

"Erebus, calm down..." Titania said.

Chapter 1728: You Have To Return Home

Titania maintained her composure better than anyone else.

Perhaps it was her age or the many losses she had endured through her long life.

Whatever the case, she met Erebus's eyes, urging him to calm down.

"Violence is not the answer..."

But her bright eyes revealed deep sorrow.

As a queen leading her people, she could not show that grief.

To cause fear and sorrow among them... she couldn't.

"W-What happened?" Acorn asked. "She was... um, captured or something? M-Maybe she's just wounded? We can heal her!"

"Y-Yeah! If that's the case, we can do something...!" Nieve nodded. "Please don't cry, it's... it's not too serious... r-right?"

"Ahhh..." Elena kept crying, unable to answer.

No response could only mean one thing.

Acorn and Nieve dropped to the floor, their eyes wide with disbelief.

"A-Ah... no... this can't be... L-Lady Planta would never..." Acorn muttered.

"T-The tree is right there, she's alive...! She's...! Alive! Right?" Nieve asked desperately.

"The tree remains alive thanks to the forest. It is full of Lifeforce and Spirit Energy as the core of our Forest, which has become a small separate realm," Titania explained. "However... I felt it three days ago. Planta's presence... vanished completely from the tree."

"...?"

"What?!"

Acorn and Nieve stood shocked, and Erebus glared at Titania with fury.

"Why didn't you tell me?!" Erebus demanded. "WHY?! NO! NO! I CAN'T...! I CAN'T LET HER DIE AGAIN!!! NOT AGAIN! NOT AGAIN! DAMN IT!"

Memories surged within Erebus, of a distant past when someone dear to him died during the true Demon King's rampage.

That someone felt eerily similar to Planta, as if they shared the same soul.

"Some people are getting curious. Let's return to my castle for now... We must keep this between ourselves," Titania said, carrying Elena, who still cried, and flew toward the castle.

Inside, Anna painfully recounted what she remembered. Elena was too distraught to speak, and Titania held her, offering all the warmth she could.

"I see..." Titania closed her eyes. A few tears fell, but she kept her composure, looking at the girls and nodding. "It must have been terrible... I'm sorry, I'm truly sorry..."

"That bastard...!" Erebus, beyond his tears of sorrow, burned with rage. "That damn Thanatos! He's crossed far beyond his boundaries...! I'm going to rip his soul apart! I'll rescue Planta and the others no matter what!"

"E-Erebus..." Acorn muttered. "But... how can we do that? The Netherworld is full of dangers! The nether could kill us almost instantly..."

"It's no place for the living..." Nieve murmured, her face bleak and emotionless, her brightness gone. "We... we're nothing... it's over... there's no hope... only nothing..."

"No!" Erebus roared. "Elayne restored me to life by infusing me into that giant tree! We can do the same! Think about it! If we retrieve their souls and place them in the tree, they might be reborn!"

"...!"

Everyone looked at Erebus in surprise.

What he said... wasn't wrong!

"Even if that's possible..." Titania said. "We're in no condition to wage war against the Demon King of Death! Especially now that he's grown so powerful...! What can we do... I don't know..."

"We must tell Camilla," Anna said. "She was counting on my mother-in-law. Now that she's... gone, we need to inform her. We must find another strategy, another way... we have to gather forces and grow stronger than ever."

"..." Elena stayed silent, finally ceasing her tears. "Erebus... can mom really come back if we do that?"

"I... think so..." Erebus said. "We have to try... but damn it! That skeleton bastard... he's too strong, and he's expanding his forces and- We don't know what could happen next! It feels like something awful could befall us all- Ngh?!"

At that moment, Erebus felt it.

A sharp, piercing strike at the root of this world's reality.

Then, he heard a giant gate opening.

Instantly, a wave of invisible fog rushed in all directions.

"T-The Domain of Death is here! No! He's here already?! The gate opened ahead of time!!!"

Erebus panicked as everyone's eyes widened.

He flew into the skies, looking into the distance.

Hundreds of kilometers away, he saw a crack in space and time, revealing a black distortion.

From there, Miasma and Nether spread, beginning to contaminate all life in this world.

The sky darkened, and undead sprouted endlessly from the ground.

"Already?!" Titania asked. "We're not ready...!"

"He's overstepping his boundaries! He's defying the System...!" Erebus muttered. "But that will cost him. He won't move as fast as he wants...! We still have time! Don't give up, we must quickly decide what to do with what we have!"

"But first..." Titania said. "All of you must return to your world."

"What?" Elena asked. "B-But we can help...!"

"No," Titania said. "Planta... No, Elayne, saved your lives. Do you plan to waste them fighting right after escaping death?!"

"I have to fight!" Elena screamed, crying. "I have to avenge mom!"

SLAP!

"...?"

Elena fell silent as Titania slapped her face, making her come back to her senses.

"I'm sorry, I didn't really want to, but I had to do that. Elena... I love you like my daughter," Titania sighed. "But you can't win, not now... Are you underestimating us? We are people of Arcadia; we know how to handle a threat or two! Do you think we'll give up? We'll fight and find a way, I promise. But you... you have a home to return to, and people to inform of what happened."

"...!" Elena clenched her teeth but nodded, holding back tears she could no longer shed. "I know..."

"But... can we even leave?" Anna asked. "I-I don't know how..."

"I think... maybe this?" Monica said, pressing the logout button. "Woah!"

BBZZTTTT!

Monica glitched and vanished in an explosion of bright digital colors.

Everyone stared in shock.

"W-What happened? Did she die?!" Elisa screamed in horror.

"No, I felt her...! She moved between dimensions!" Erebus said in disbelief. "Y-You have the power to move between both worlds!"

"B-But we aren't even using the helmet..." Elena muttered. "W-What the fuck is happening?"

"Did we really merge with our avatars?!" Anna asked. "How will I explain to my mom that I look like this now?!"

"What matters is that you must return!" Titania said. "Go now, you must find a way to help us, but also grow stronger in your world... and protect it from Thanatos."

"...!" Anna nodded. "Then I'm going!"

"Me too!" Elisa said.

Both girls quickly vanished, moving between dimensions with a strange power.

One last thing remained for Elena to give them before she left herself.

Chapter 1729: What Can You Do

After Elisa and Monica left, Elena looked at everyone.

She had already told them about her little brother and the tree.

Even so, she gave them something.

It was a bag of Spirit Cores from Avalon.

"These Cores hold the power to awaken Spiritual Hearts... Acorn, I know you can find a way to make them work for your people," Elena said. "I... I have to go now. Please, everyone, take care. I will return... for my brother."

FLASH!

Elena pressed the glitched [Log Out] button, and her entire body was compressed and burned into a flame of glitched, buggy data.

Feeling sharp, burning pain all over her body, Elena moved between dimensions, seeing countless colors and sensing many membranes pierced by her body and soul.

And then...

TRUUUM!

A glitched portal opened, and she fell from it, landing on the grass.

"Ouch! Ahh... ugh...!"

As Elena groaned in pain, she looked around, finding herself in her house's backyard.

Many Spirits appeared, greeting her.

Even the Druids, in their animal forms, greeted her.

Her friends were there, speaking with them.

At the same time, others ran toward her.

"Elena! You're back!"

"A-Ah? Ahh..."

She noticed her skin was still blue, and she bore her horns and equipment from BNLO...

Yet they recognized her, perhaps because she coincidentally had a spell that allowed temporary transformation.

The same applied to her friends, causing no further ruckus.

"Elena?"

"What happened? Where are Elayne and... Katherine?"

It was Rose and Albert. They had a special rune from her mother, allowing them to enter the Domain as trusted friends.

A third person stood with them, a tall, imposing sorceress from Europe who had become her mother's friend.

"My, you're still in that form? What's going on? You came running through space... that's no simple spell. D-Did something happen to your mother?"

It was Olivia Coyett.

"Mom is... mom..." Elena muttered, unable to speak clearly.

"We've been worried. You said you'd return in a couple of days, but it's been a week!" Rose said.

"We've been guarding the Domain but... Something bad happened, right?" Albert asked. "What... what's going on?"

"Elena... we've known each other for a while. We've fought together," Rose said. "I see you as family. This goes beyond our organization's demands. This is personal."

"Mom..." Elena muttered.

"..." Olivia stayed silent, sighing.

She knelt, patted Elena's head, and hugged her.

"It's okay..."

"Ah?"

Elena was shocked. Olivia had somehow guessed everything

"With my Eyes, it's easy to tell what troubles someone's heart..." Olivia said, her voice pained. "Elayne... something happened to her, right? Something akin to death."

"...! Ngh..." Elena muttered, crying but shaking her head. "Ugh...! It's so frustrating...! I couldn't do anything...! Ugh...!"

"My god, you're just a child," Olivia said. "Nobody expected you to do more than you could... don't blame yourself."

After that, with the Druids and everyone else, Anna and Elena's friends explained as much as they could while eating, they were starving.

Apparently, when they traveled between worlds, much time passed, though it felt like seconds to them.

A week had gone by since they left, though to Elena it felt much longer.

Kaguya, the Cherry Blossom Dryad, appeared at some point. Feeling her master's soul vanished worried her.

Despite her master's absence, she anchored her existence to the Domain, saving herself from being sent back to her origin.

After two hours of explanation, everyone grasped what had happened.

It was, as expected, incredibly dreadful and despair-inducing.

"Oh my god, Elayne..." Rose muttered, her hands trembling as she rubbed her forehead, tears falling. "In this line of work, you get used to colleagues dying, but... Elayne was different... she was my dear friend... I... I'm so sorry..."

"A Demon King of Death..." Albert muttered. "Hellberos, do you know who this is?"

"..." Hellberos stayed silent. "I am a lowly demon. How do you expect me to know everything?! But... hm, I remember hearing that from the demons. As that girl said, he comes from another world, a parallel world to Earth. Our supreme king is also related somehow. So they're cooperating? This is the worst possible news we could have received."

"Avalon, such a grand and beautiful realm, overtaken already... I cannot believe the great Oberon was seduced and brainwashed!" Olivia exclaimed. "And Elayne...! I had so many plans with her. I wanted her to join my family, to grow together...! Damn it! Damn it all! This cursed destiny! This wretched fate!"

"So that game you were... experiencing was a connection to that other world too?" Rose asked. "It's hard to believe... but seeing what you've become... you merged with your in-game avatars? T-This is so ridiculous..."

"..." Albert sighed. "We must report this to HQ... Elena, I'm sorry, but we cannot keep this secret. It's urgent we inform everyone about the Demon King of Death as soon as possible! The existence of Arcadia... we already knew, but we had no idea a game was connecting to it. If we could have controlled that, maybe so many lives could have been saved... if anything, this is our fault."

"No... it's fine..." Elena sighed. "I... I don't even know how to look human anymore. Ugh... I don't think I can return to school or... resume anything I was doing before. Mom's soul is in the Underworld. Erebus said if we can rescue her soul, and those of Mark and the others, and place them inside her tree, maybe they can be reborn like he was."

"So by using the powers of another world, there's a chance!" Olivia's eyes sparked. "Elena...! If you and your friends truly mean to avenge Elayne and the others... and go to the depths of the Netherworld... then I can help you grow beyond your understanding."

"What?" Elena asked, confused. "W-What is it?"

"You will join the Clock Tower Academy of Magus!" Olivia said, crossing her arms with a reassuring nod. "There, you'll learn to channel your magical powers, master hundreds of spells, earn money, and buy all kinds of things! We can also investigate Arcadia together and find a way to rescue Elayne!"

"R-Really?" Elena gasped. "Joining an academy of magicians... ugh... that sounds really painful though..."

"Endure the pain," Olivia said. "Only through endless perseverance can we achieve greatness and reach our goals, however hard and impossible they may seem."

Chapter 1730: The World Forever Changed

"Only through endless perseverance can we achieve greatness and reach our goals, however hard and impossible they may seem," Olivia said, cheering Elena in her own way.

"Europe is also our homeland..." one of the druids spoke, the eldest, Grandma Jannis. "If you allow us, Magus, we could teach her and her friends the Ancient Arts of Druids and help them further awaken their Nature Souls."

"...!" Olivia showed interest. "Hmm! I like that idea! Unlike my fellow magus, I have an open mind, always welcoming new things! Druids are welcome!"

"B-But what about Mom's Domain? Are we going to leave it abandoned?" Elena asked.

"That won't be necessary," Kaguya said. "With Master gone... I have become the ruler of this Domain by succession. And... I have been hiding a few things from you. I can do this."

Kaguya snapped her fingers, and small pink runes resembling cherry blossom petals appeared on everyone's right palm.

"This is a Domain Key. With my permission, you can freely teleport here and back to where you are," she explained. "Of course, it has limits. You shouldn't abuse it during a battle, as it could cause spatial interference when teleporting amid a large clash of energies."

"W-What?! You can do this?" Elena asked, surprised. "Kaguya... you're not just a Dryad, are you?!"

"..."

Kaguya smiled bitterly at Elena's words but didn't say anything further.

She was among the most mysterious, and Elena began to unravel what she truly could be.

After all, Kaguya had used a powerful Divine Art, drawing on her own Divine Authority.

And only divine beings akin to gods could wield such power!

"You're not a spirit, you're...!" Olivia gasped. "A foreign god?!"

"..." Kaguya smiled bitterly. "By the contract, I cannot reveal my true identity. But... I love my master, and I just want to help. Please... don't doubt me."

"...Okay," Elena nodded quickly. "Thank you, Kaguya..."

"Yes, it's okay," Kaguya smiled. "Perhaps I could even contact Abe-no-Seimei-sama and Amaterasu-no-Mikoto-sama. Both blessed my master and granted their divine power to her Soul Trait... wherever she is, if they are willing to help, she could receive part of that power or even reawaken it, if it was taken away."

"You can do that?!" Elena asked. "W-Wait, hold on! M-Maybe through them we can contact Mom!"

"You're right. I will try to contact them!" Kaguya nodded, sitting in the garden and meditating while her soul traveled elsewhere.

Elena sighed.

"For now, there's no hurry. I can prepare for your arrival," Olivia said. "Are your friends coming too?"

"I don't know..." Anna muttered. "I will tell my mother the truth, but then... I will try to convince her to come with me."

"My parents probably wouldn't care," Elisa said, shrugging. "I just... want to grow strong, to finally find Auntie... she's like my mom at this point."

"Yes..." Monica sighed, her ghostly aura more intense than ever. "We are ready to go at any moment."

"I see... Anna, if you want, I can go with you," Olivia said. "I can help convince your mother, and we can tell her the truth together."

"R-Really?" Anna asked. "Yes, please... thank you."

As everyone prepared, Rose was about to speak but was interrupted.

"What?! Are you sure? You saw it? Here?! No... everywhere?!"

"Albert? What's wrong?"

"Hellberos just told me something—ah! Turn on the TV! We have to check the news now!"

"...?"

Olivia used magic to turn on the TV. Her eyes widened as every channel showed the same local news.

It showed something alarming.

"National Emergency! Over five hundred sectors worldwide report large gates releasing noxious elements. Undead-type monsters are crawling into the surroundings and fiercely attacking anybody they met! All Authorities advice for civilians to please stay indoors unless you're a hunter."

Despite the news, perhaps thanks to Elayne's Domain, no Gate had opened around this city, one of the few safe cities in Canada.

However, across Canada, the USA, Mexico, and South America, dozens of Gates appeared, sometimes one or two in the same city.

Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia faced the same ordeal, and all hunters were forced to the frontlines to defend their cities.

At the same time, Olivia received a message from her father, urging her to return home as many Magus were mobilized to fight the invaders.

"We can no longer keep our existence a secret," Olivia said with a smile. "I knew this would happen one day... Magus will go public after this incident, and even the Knight Lineages will have to reveal themselves. Thanks to that monster, the world will change forever."

Elena sighed, realizing nothing would ever be the same...

"Mom..."

She clenched her fists tightly, her Aura surging around her.

"I won't give up... I will find you no matter what..."

Shedding one last tear, Elena made up her mind.

The world was harsh.

Suffering was like breathing, it was everywhere.

One could never achieve anything without enduring it.

Elena had been protected and nurtured by her mother all this time.

Never truly struggling.

Until now... when a force beyond even her mother's strength appeared, shattering her world.

However, the beautiful moments she spent with her mother, all the times she was there for her...

Elena had not forgotten them.

All these precious memories gathered in her heart.

Remembering how much she loved her mother, and how her mother always loved her.

Elena closed her eyes, swearing not to cry anymore.

Until she could find her again.

With the death of the one holding everything in balance, the worlds began to change.

The breach between Arcadia and Earth grew closer, as if both worlds were beginning to mesh seamlessly.

Realms began to manifest their power further, and the entities within them could no longer ignore the outside world as they always had.

But evil remained relentless in its pursuit of destruction and chaos.

A giant skeleton oozing nether from his bones walked through a dark blue temple in the depths of Arcadia's oceans.

His empty eyes blazed with ghostly flames as he smashed the door before him with a single swing of his gigantic skeletal fists.

BOOOM!

The power of the void shattered all restraining barriers and seals. The monstrous demonic power that Merlinus had cultivated, merged with his own, had made him a truly god-like being.

Defying the system, Thanatos destroyed one of the many seals containing entities that could threaten the entire world.

"Rejoice, Demon King of Flood! You were meant to awaken much later, but I have decided to grant you the privilege of awakening and joining me now!"