

Card Apprentice Daily Log

#Chapter 2601: The Big Picture - Read Chapter 2601: The Big Picture

Chapter 2601: The Big Picture

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Southern Capital, Fine Gold Capital Branch, Teleportation Hub

"We are not doing anything to him. He should have known better than to employ unfair and hostile practices when starting his business," the other voice retorted.

"You do you," came the reply, "but what business of his are you actually after? As far as I know, all of his operations are in the Southern Region. The central government has no jurisdiction here, and he has the Southern Royal Family's unconditional support in everything. So what exactly are you planning?" The voice had convinced they saw through their intentions, now found themselves confused once again as the pieces refused to fit.

"We've already informed you. Our business here is done," the other voice said, turning to leave. His companion chuckled and followed. But before they could depart, another voice cut through the clouds. "I heard you were looking for me."

"You? What are you doing here?" One of them asked, startled to see the one they spoke of appear right before their eyes.

"Why does that matter?" I replied calmly. "You were coming to find me, and I found you first, saving you the trouble. So tell me, what business do you have with me?" I asked with a smile, giving a brief nod toward the mature form of the Aria Art. I guessed she was a member of the Art Family and was on duty today.

What truly surprised me was that the Southern Royal Family had not only refused to receive those demigods, who were clearly the Masters' hounds, but had also barred them from entering the city altogether, delivering their response and ushering them away without delay.

It seemed they had taken my being ambushed at the Brothwork Family's Morningstar Manor to heart. I appreciated the sentiment, but it also filled me with unease. Could the Southern Royal Family, and the Southern Region as a whole, truly withstand the Masters' inevitable retaliation?

The Masters would not take direct action themselves, but they had countless ways to bypass open conflict and still inflict harm upon the Southern Region. Trade was one such avenue. Imports and exports flowing between the Southern Region and the other regions could be choked off or manipulated with ease.

Unlike me, whose roots were shallow and shielded from every conceivable angle, the Southern Royal Family and the Southern Region had roots that spread far and wide, leaving them exposed from too many directions. The Masters could not target me directly, but the same was not true for the Southern Royal Family or the Southern Region.

No. I didn't have all my bases covered.

How could I have overlooked something so obvious?

The Southern Royal Family, and the Southern Region as a whole, which had once been my strength, were now my weakness.

These Masters' dogs were never here for me. They were here to use me as a wedge, to antagonize the Southern Royal Family until they made a single reckless move. One mistake would give the Masters ample justification to retaliate, while simultaneously preventing the other royal families from coming to their aid.

Once the Southern Royal Family and the Southern Region were pushed into trouble, I would have no choice but to intervene. Yet as long as the core problem remained unresolved, no amount of support I provided would truly save them from the Masters choking them. At best, I would only be delaying the inevitable.

I had planned to wait for the three mischiefs to overthrow the Masters, granting them a few more days of borrowed life. But these people were intent on forcing my hand.

"It's regarding the massacre at the Brothwork Manor, We have numerous witnesses claiming that you killed Brolock Brothwork, along with his kin and aides present in the manor, over a rivalry in the pleasure card market. Please surrender. You will be given the opportunity to defend yourself in court. But if you resist, you will only make matters worse for yourself," the demigod said, restraining his emotions as he presented the case against me with practiced ease.

Yes, these Masters' dogs were scared shitless. They hadn't expected to run into me here. How could they not be afraid? After all, I had killed nearly four dozen of their

colleagues, each one stronger than the two of them combined. Now, forced to face me directly, it felt to them as though they were conversing with death itself.

I wanted to kill them as well, but I didn't. If I did, the Masters would immediately tie their deaths to the Southern Royal Family but not me. These men were sacrificial pawns from the very beginning, and they knew it, which was despite their fear of me they dared to dictate the false case against me to me. They wanted me to kill them out of anger.

Killing them would hand the Masters exactly the justification they needed to openly target the Southern Royal Family and the Southern Region, and to sell that narrative to the other royal families restraining their hands from helping out the Southern Royal Family.

"Hey, the central government has no jurisdiction here, and Wyatt is under the custody of the Southern Royal Family. If you want to arrest him, follow proper protocol first," the mature Aria look-alike shot back immediately, playing straight into the Masters' scheme. They were betting on the Southern Royal Family opposing them on my behalf.

"Madam Art, please stay out of this. This is a matter concerning the Central Government. The Southern Royal Family has no right to interfere," the demigod thundered, summoning all the courage he could muster. "If you continue to insist on intervening, we will have no choice but to assume that the Southern Royal Family is challenging the authority of the Central Government."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Madam Art snapped. "Didn't you just hear me? He is under the custody of the Southern Royal Family. If you want to detain him for the crimes you're alleging, then you must follow proper protocol. If anyone here is challenging authority, it's the Central Government, for challenging the authority of the Southern Region within its own territory. Get the hell out of here, or I will detain you guys for blasphemy against the Royal Family."

Chapter 2602: No Middle Ground

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Southern Capital

Listening to Madam Art threaten to detain them for the crime of blasphemy against the Royal Family, the two dogs of the Masters could not hide the joy flickering in their eyes. After all, she had unwittingly found a way for them to complete their mission without dying.

If Madam Art detained them while they were carrying out their duties as officials of the central government, the central government would gain the justification it needed, while they themselves could keep their necks and live to face death another day.

Yet the one in charge of the pair could not help but wonder: what if the Southern Royal Family chose to release them and even issue an apology? In that case, their mission would be deemed a failure, and a fate worse than death would surely await them.

Still, if one of them were to die in detention while under the custody of the Southern Royal Family, everything would change. At least the other would be allowed to live. And why could the one who survived not be him?

He knew that if they fought now, both of them would die. There was no escape. After all, they had been sent here to die. But if they were detained by Madam Art, he could finally set his plan in motion and claw his way out of here alive.

"Detain us? You dare?" the demigod roared. "Have you ungrateful mongrels forgotten your place? The Southern Region is an affiliated region under the central government. While the Southern Royal Family maintains sovereignty over the Southern Region, it has pledged multiple obligations to the central government. How dare you forget them? Do you want us to dig up your ancestors' graves and have them remind you?"

His thunderous outburst was cut short when Madam Art slapped him across the face. The strike was sharp and precise, knocking every tooth from his mouth in a single blow.

For a brief second, I sensed an unfathomable power radiating from her. It was the Art family bloodline at work, carrying the effect of subtle reality distortion. I had studied it before, back when I was searching for a way to help Aria with her condition. She bore both the Art family and the Royal Family bloodlines, the two clashing within her. As a result, despite possessing an unparalleled lineage, she was unable to shine in an equally unparalleled manner. That was why I set out to devise a method to make the two bloodlines complement one another instead.

"How dare you? You are obstructing official business. Don't blame me for being cruel," the demigod snarled as his shattered teeth regrew. Fixing her with a cold stare, he continued, "What's with that look? Do you want to kill us, servants of the central government? Is the Southern Royal Family planning to rebel against the central government? Are you prepared for the consequences?"

"Shut up. Just shut up," Madam Aria thundered, irritation lacing every word as she invoked her bloodline ability to augment her voice, amplifying it, adding crushing authority and intimidating to it. When the demigod finally fell silent, she issued a final warning.

"Just because you are servants of the central government does not give you permission to commit blasphemy against the Southern Royal Family. This is your last warning. If

you dare utter one more word about the Southern Royal Family, I will take action against you."

I could see it in Madam Aria's eyes. She wanted nothing more than to tear those two dogs of the Masters into a million tiny pieces for everything they had said about the Southern Royal Family. Yet she restrained herself, forcing down her raging emotions and stretching her waning patience as far as it would go. She understood that they were here for something far greater than merely burying me under a mountain of false charges and making preposterous claims over what's mine.

She did not want to become the spark that allowed them to set their schemes in motion, nor did she intend to be anything less than an iron wall standing in the way of their conspiracies.

What she did not realize was how grave the situation truly was. It was far worse than anything she could imagine. It was not just me who was in danger. The entire Southern Region stood on the brink of being slowly choked to death by the Masters, unless the Southern Royal Family surrendered me.

The last time I had ever considered the possibility of my enemies targeting the Southern Royal Family and the Southern Region was when I handed over the production, distribution, and sales rights of Silver Milk Powder to the Southern Royal Family. Given the circumstances at the time, I knew that neither I nor the Southern Royal Family could stomach and digest the full weight of the profits from that venture. That was precisely why, after securing my royalties and a respectable percentage of the shares, I dumped all the operational burden onto the Royal Family.

Back then, I was not particularly worried. I believed the Heatsend Royal Family would distribute their share of Silver Milk Powder's production, distribution, and sales to the other royal families and the central government, while extracting additional political concessions in return. In my mind, it would settle into a neat, win-win arrangement.

However, this time was different. The Masters were not here to negotiate for profits, but to ensure their own survival. Because of that, there was no middle ground, no compromise to be reached. Either the Southern Royal Family surrendered me to them, or they would destroy the Royal family and the entire Southern Region along with me.

After being punished by the divine retribution of the Card World's will for actions they had carried out unchallenged for nearly a millennium, they finally understood that this time, their opponent was different. I was not like the countless geniuses they had suppressed or slain with a casual flick of the hand during their long reign over the five regions.

Chapter 2603: Owning My Mistake

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Southern Capital

That divine retribution was a wake-up call for the Masters. It warned them that the times were changing, and that if they failed to act, this could very well mark the end of their era and the dawn of a new one. So, the Masters chose to act, seeking to preserve their reign over the five regions by strangling the herald of the new era while it was still in its crib.

I blamed myself for all of it. If I had not shown off by signing their ridiculous World Decree, none of this would have happened. They would not have been struck by divine retribution, nor would they have grown so wary of me to the point that they were now willing to threaten one of the four royal families with extinction just to get their way.

It was not as though I had acted without reason. I simply never expected the Masters to come after me through the Southern Royal Family and the Southern Region, turning what the world believed to be my greatest source of strength into a glaring weakness.

Because of my existence, the three mischiefs were no longer what they had been in the Clown Mask's future vision. The Supreme Leader and the Matron were the most heavily affected by my presence. As for the Emissary of Light, I had yet to encounter him, making him the least affected, or perhaps only indirectly influenced, by my existence.

What was truly interesting was that none of them had grown weaker because of me. On the contrary, they had grown stronger not only in terms of realm, but in their overall means as well. All three had broken through to the demigod realm far earlier than they had in the Clown Mask's future vision.

Even though I had stolen the Soul Pupils from the Supreme Leader, he had somehow managed to raise his undead card demigod army ahead of the timeline shown in the future vision. That could only mean one thing: he, too, had broken through to the Card Demigod Realm. I suspected he had the backing of a demon or devil merchant, most likely Giddion Grim.

As for the Matron, despite being exposed as Sansa Baylor and placed on the central government's most-wanted list due to her entanglement with me, she overcame the odds and broke through to the Card Demigod Realm as well, keeping pace with the other two mischiefs.

Lastly, the Emissary of Light. Because of the incident involving Giddion Grim and the rapidly spreading fear of a second demon invasion, he had gained a far greater number of followers ahead of schedule. That surge of faith allowed him to ascend to the Card Demigod Realm and push further ahead with his plans of becoming the True Son of the Card Celestial.

Despite all the variables, all three of them were growing and advancing at an astonishing pace. As a result, they had drawn the attention of the Masters. Especially the Matron and the Emissary of Light, since unlike the Supreme Leader, neither of them were loyal servants of the Masters.

In fact, in the future vision, these two had never even appeared on the Masters' radar until much later, when they aided the Supreme Leader in killing them after returning from an unsuccessful raid on an unranked dungeon. This time, however, they were already under scrutiny.

That realization worried me. If this continued, it could affect the success rate of the three mischiefs overthrowing the Masters. Because of that, I decided to make myself a sufficiently powerful distraction, one large enough to blindside the Masters and keep their focus away from the three mischiefs.

That was one of the primary reasons I went to the central region in the first place: to showcase my strength and lay out my future plans for the five regions. However, I crossed the line when I chose to flaunt my power by involving the World Decree. That was far more than the Masters could process. It shattered the worldview they had accumulated and reinforced over the course of countless millennia.

For ages uncounted, they had repeated the same actions until those actions became their unquestioned norm. Because of that, when divine retribution finally struck them, it did not feel like punishment for wrongdoing. To them, it felt like being punished despite having done nothing wrong at all. Nothing was more terrifying than that, and it made no sense at all.

That single incident had shattered their entire framework of laws governing the use of the World Decree. As terrifying as that realization was, what frightened them even more was the existence responsible for it. Me.

I had always expected the Masters to come after me. What I never anticipated was that they would do so by holding the Southern Royal Family and the entire Southern Region hostage.

"Should we take that as a threat?" the demigod asked heavily, listening to Madam Art's warning. "Has the Southern Royal Family grown so rebellious that they now dare not only to shame the central government's servants, but also to threaten them—"

"Silence!" Madam Art invoked the Silence rule, empowered by her bloodline's subtle reality distortion. The demigod was instantly rendered mute, his soul energy and rule power collapsing in on themselves. The two nearly plummeted to their deaths, but she caught them with her intent sense before they could fall.

"I warned you enough times," she said coldly. "Now I am detaining the two of you."

"Madam Art, please stop. Let them go," I called out, finally steeling myself to do what needed to be done to prevent all of this.

Madam Art paused, a frown creasing her brow. Then, a gentle smile softened her expression as she reassured me, "Don't be rash, young man. I know what I'm doing. The Southern Region is not what it once was, but it can still protect its citizens, especially its children."

"Madam Art, what I mean is that I plan to surrender to them and face my date in court."

The moment those words left my mouth, a familiar voice shouted from afar, "Wyatt, have you lost your damn mind?"

Chapter 2604: Madam Ambella Art

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Southern Capital

Hearing me say that I intended to surrender to them left the two central government demigods utterly stunned, Madam Art included. Before either of them could voice their disbelief, a familiar shout rang out from afar. "Wyatt, have you lost your damn mind?"

"Queen, Princess," Madam Art said at once, bowing respectfully to the newcomers. They were none other than Soldier Queen Colleen and Ann, the Southern Heir's twin. Though they were all extended family, they upheld strict hierarchy in the presence of outsiders, careful not to undermine their standing or prestige.

I nodded to them as well. However, to my surprise, Ann was still a Card Emperor, even though her soul energy signature closely resembled that of a semi Card Demigod. Either Anna's good-bad daughter origin card was not as perfect as rumored, or Anna was deliberately punishing Ann for going along with their mother's schemes, pushing her further down the Extreme path.

Anna was clearly hesitant to continue along the Extreme path, fully aware of what it would do to her despite the power it granted. Yet, Ann kept her in the dark about it. That much was evident in Anna's decision not to take Ann along when she went to hunt down their scumbag of a father. Also, Ann wouldn't meet my eyes. Things couldn't be more obvious. After all, she was the 'Good Daughter.'

"Ambella, take them away and detain them in separate cells," Colleen ordered, addressing Madam Art without waiting for my explanation.

At her command, the demigod in charge of the two central government envoys stared at Colleen in shock, wondering if she could somehow read his mind. Had he known that the Southern Royal family would truly dare to imprison the Masters' servants in cell blocks like common criminals, they would have resisted when Demigod Ambella moved against them instead of allowing themselves to be captured so easily.

He had assumed they would be placed under house arrest in one of the Southern Royal family's guest residences. Now that things had come to this, he saw only one remaining option: to take his own life in his cell. He knew his partner would never do the same, convinced as he was that they had successfully completed the Masters' task without being killed. From the faint glint in that fool's eyes, it was obvious his partner was feeling rather pleased with himself.

He had no choice but to kill himself. If he did not, both of them would remain alive, leaving the Southern Royal family with a possible way out when the Masters openly started their offence on the Southern Royal family. If that happened, the fate awaiting them would be worse than death.

So he chose to end his own life instead, knowing that his death would become his dumbass partner's saving grace. That realization troubled him more deeply than the fact that he was about to die. Only then did he truly understand the meaning of the saying, *'The Lord takes care of fools and drunks.'*

He blamed himself for being too smart. As for my claim that I intended to surrender, he did not believe it for a moment. Even if I were willing to sacrifice myself for the sake of the Southern Royal family and the Southern Region, he was certain the royal family and the people of the southern region would never agree to it. A part of his mind also screamed that I had only said it for appearances, to uphold my image as the Southern Hope.

"Yes, Your Highness," Ambella Art replied, moving to escort the prisoners away. She had taken only a few steps before stopping and I appeared before her stopping her in her tracks, adding, "Madam Art, please wait. There is no urgency to take them to their cells."

"Ambella, you are authorized to detain anyone who interferes with your duty. Even if it is the Southern Hope," Colleen ordered firmly.

The command left Ambella momentarily uncertain. As a member of the Southern Royal family's extended circle, she was aware of my contract with Anna. Confronting me directly was simply not an option. If they did, Anna, the Southern Heir, would inevitably bear the consequences. Using a soul whisper, Ambella reminded Colleen of this fact, explaining that the only way to resolve the situation was through communication, not force.

"Sometimes I can't help but wonder what he was thinking when he chose her as his heir," Colleen muttered, voicing her frustration with both her husband and their granddaughter. Then she met my gaze and said flatly, "Whatever you want to say, save it. I don't want to hear it. Let Ambella do her duty."

"I—" I had just opened my mouth to plead my case when Colleen cut me off, her anger erupting. "I let you go to the central capital against my better judgment, and look what happened. I should have known better than to place my trust in a kid who's still wet behind the ears. I've had enough of this. Starting tonight, you will live in the Royal Palace until the next academic year begins, at which point you will take charge of the Southern Academic City. That's final. I don't want to hear another word about it."

I remained silent, waiting for Colleen to cool down. I had always seen her as the caring elder I never had, so whenever she became unreasonable, I couldn't help but find it endearing. In her own way, she truly believed I needed protection from myself. Well, considering the things I've done lately, I think she was actually on to something.

"Are you calm now?" I asked after some time had passed in heavy silence.

Ann and Ambella observed in silence. They both knew Colleen's temper well. It took a great deal to provoke her, but once she was truly angry, heads would quite literally roll. They feared that if I continued to press the issue, Colleen might behead the two demigods from the central government on the spot.

"Why are you still standing in Ambella's way?" Colleen thundered, then added in a cold, stern warning, "Young man, I am telling you now, I know methods to detain you without triggering the clause in your contract with Anna."

"Oh, I believe you," I replied calmly. "I haven't forgotten the time you kidnapped me. It's still fresh in my mind."

Chapter 2605: Who Is Stalking Whom?

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Southern Capital

"So why are you still not moving out of her way?" Colleen asked, frustration seeping into her voice. She genuinely did not know how to deal with me, especially with force being her last resort.

"Because I want my day in court and to clear my name," I replied. I deliberately avoided saying that I did not want the Southern Region to suffer because of me. Openly admitting that would have been unwise, given how many powerful enemies I had made,

each one capable of terrorizing an entire region. I was not afraid of them, but I refused to let the Southern Region become collateral damage.

Colleen and the others stared at me in disbelief. None of them believed I was naïve enough to think that surrendering to the central government would earn me fair treatment or due process. To them, it was obvious that I was saying this because I had no intention of revealing what I was actually planning.

"Young man, stop with these charades. The Southern Region is not so helpless that it needs to sacrifice a child for its own safety. Let the adults do their job. You focus on growing what you do best and making us all proud," Colleen said firmly. The words were admittedly a little cringeworthy, yet they warmed my heart all the same.

She wasn't finished. "The Southern Royal family promised to be your sword and shield, and we will uphold that vow until our dying breath. I know your intentions are noble, but what you are doing right now borders on insulting our honor. Wyatt, I am asking you to let us do our job."

As I listened to Colleen, an overwhelming, aspirational warmth spread through my body, rising from my heart. In that moment, she truly lived up to her title of Soldier Queen.

Though Colleen's words were good to listen to, the truth was impossible to ignore. If the Masters set their sights on the Southern Region, it would not take them long to choke its economy to a crippling halt. The first and most to suffer would be ordinary families, households, small businesses, and obviously the Southern treasury. I could not allow that to happen, and the only way to prevent it was for me to surrender and resolve the immediate crisis.

As for my personal safety after surrendering, it was the least of my concerns. With my current strength, my identity as a Demon Merchant, and the Card Celestial watching over me, I was not worried on that front. Even so, I could see only two possible endings to this path: either I would confront the Masters head-on and kill them/ die in the process, or I would be forced into hiding, my name etched onto the top of the central government's most wanted list right above Gideon Grim's.

However, just as I was about to press my intent to surrender even more forcefully, Ann's soul whisper reached me.

'Wyatt, stand down. There are many forces at play here. Follow our arrangements. We know what we are doing. This isn't our first rodeo with the Masters. We clash with them every other day. This time it's more serious, yes, but we still know what we're doing. Step back and watch us do what we do best—'

'Drive this region into an economic crisis?' I cut in sharply.

I simply could not bring myself to trust the Southern Royal family to handle the governance of the Southern Region when their opponents were the Masters. The last time I had trusted them... I was doing it again now, trying to shoulder everything by myself. I knew I needed to place my faith in the Southern Royal family and let them do their job, but when it came to me, their track record did not inspire confidence.

In the end, I stepped aside, moving out of Madam Ambella Art's path and allowing her to detain the central government demigods. Yes, I chose to trust the Southern Royal family one more time. They, too, had witnessed the Clown Mask's future vision, and I believed the Southern Princess had her own designs when it came to dealing with the Masters based on what Ann said.

Thinking back on it, the Southern Princess had spent the past few weeks traveling across the five regions, meeting reputable world leaders on various diplomatic missions. She even used my VR-Slime cards as gifts. Then finally, under the pretense of the second demon invasion and Gideon Grim she arranged many assemblies with these world leaders. At the time, I had assumed it was solely about the distribution of the Silver Milk Powder across the five regions. Now, however, I couldn't help but suspect there was far more at play.

If the worst came to pass, I would release relief funds for struggling households and businesses. I would also use the situation to relocate people and card apprentices to Freedom City in Lil' Red Storm, increasing trade between Freedom City and the Southern Region. With Dalia and the Devil Merchant Code at my beck and call, I was confident I could compensate for any import-export shortfall.

It wasn't a long term solution but it would help the southern citizens to continue with their regular lives without any hitch until the three mischiefs have dealt with the Masters.

Seeing me finally relent and follow her arrangement, Colleen's expression brightened into a satisfied smile, as though she had just achieved a great victory. She slowly floated over to my side and said, "Don't worry. We know what we're doing. If we couldn't handle issues this small, the Masters would have swallowed us long ago. Have faith in us."

I simply nodded in response, having placed my trust in the Southern Princess. Time and again, she had proven herself a formidable adversary. I trusted that she would never gamble with her family's survival unless she was confident of winning.

Chapter 2606: Seeking Ann's Help

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Southern Capital

"Let us head to the palace. Your room is still empty, kept just as you left it," Colleen said, resting a hand on my shoulder. "For a change, your mother-in-law is home. You can meet her over breakfast tomorrow morning."

I wasn't surprised that Colleen still treated me as her grandson-in-law. After all, the Southern Royal Family never had an issue with me becoming their son-in-law. Their concern lay with Anna's unhealthy obsession with me. They believed that, as the next ruler of the Southern Region, such fixation would interfere with her duties as the future Southern Ruler. That was precisely why they had conspired against her, pushing her further down the Extreme path.

Fun fact, the new Anna, who had emerged from seclusion within Field Marshal Lorn's Mystic Dimension, also regarded me as her future husband, in accordance with the arrangement imposed by her family.

How did I know this? The Dummy Ring was still on me. If she truly had any objection to marrying me, she could have reclaimed the Dummy Ring the moment she emerged from seclusion, or at any time thereafter. Yet she never did. If that wasn't a clear, if silent, acknowledgment of her family's arrangement, then what else could it be?

Or maybe she simply hadn't remembered it, and I was overthinking everything. Yeah, right? A card apprentice would just forget that one of their six item card slots was not only unavailable, but permanently active. There was no chance of that.

Clearly, she had accepted the arranged marriage, believing it to be the best outcome for the Southern Region. As the future ruler of the Southern Region, she was willing to sacrifice herself for its sake, let alone marry someone she no longer had feelings for. Not to mention, someone who was in scandalous relationships with other women.

That was the Anna I knew and fell in love with. A sentimental fool, unwavering in her convictions, never hesitating to offer herself up for what she believed in and loved.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. That breakfast will have to wait. I came in a hurry to borrow Ann. I was hoping she could help me locate Anna in the Northern Region," I said, rejecting Colleen's invitation and revealing the real reason for my visit.

Ann and Anna were connected through their origin cards. With Ann's help, locating Anna in the Northern Region would not be difficult. If only Anna had equipped a VR-slime card, I wouldn't have needed Ann at all. I could have tracked her myself.

"Why go through all that trouble to find her?" Colleen asked. "She will be back in a few days anyway. Just rest in the palace until then. She will be delighted to find her fiancé waiting for her victorious return." She pressed the matter of my marriage to Anna more aggressively than ever.

It seemed my scandal with Jill had given her a sense of urgency. If it were up to her, she would have married Anna and me off immediately. Unfortunately for her, her granddaughter was still in the Northern Region, hunting down her own father. Honestly, I was surprised that neither Colleen nor Ann were bringing up my relationship with Jill. It only deepened my belief that only I was having a hard time accepting polygamy.

"Your Highness, I'm just worried about Anna—" I began, intending to persuade Colleen to let me go and help her. After all, Anna was alone in the Northern Region. Now that the entire world knew she was hunting her own father, demigod Gainover might already have begun preparing to face her.

Given the complicated relationship between the Southern and Northern Regions, and between Demigod Gainover and the Northern Region itself, I wouldn't be surprised if the Northern Region's local forces, and even its royal family, chose to aid Gainover against his daughter. According to the Clown Mask's future vision, Demigod Gainover had married Anna's former schoolmate and rival, the Northern Princess Ivanka.

However, before I could begin to dictate my concerns and try to persuade her, Colleen cut in coldly. Her voice was firm, leaving no room for argument.

"Wyatt, this is Anna's journey. Only she can walk it. Others cannot walk it for her. She has gone to confront her demons, and once she is done, she will return to claim her birthright. I know you are worried about her, but if you interfere now, all you will do is hinder her growth. Have faith in your bride."

Also, now that the Masters have made it clear that you've become a thorn in their side, it's best that you remain here in the palace instead of running around. The Southern Region can afford a war with the Masters, but it cannot afford to lose you. Stop foolishly placing yourself in harm's way. I heard what you did in the central capital. Everyone did. Just because you are strong and capable doesn't mean you are invulnerable. Don't underestimate them, there's a reason why they have been around since the founding of the five regions, while many geniuses that shone brighter than them eventually fell."

"No, I won't make the mistake of underestimating the Masters. But that doesn't mean I will sit by and wait for Anna," I declared, not giving Colleen a chance to cut me off again. I turned to Ann and asked, "Will you help me locate Anna, or not?"

"Wyatt, I—" Ann dragged out her words, unable to decide. After all, as the 'Good Daughter.' She could not decide for herself. Her family would decide for her, and only by continuing to follow their will could she remain a good daughter. That was the nature of her origin card. She was bound by her obligations and duties, while the Bad Daughter, Anna, followed her heart, pursuing absolute freedom without reservation.

"Yes or no?" I pressed Ann. Seeing that she still hesitated, I shook my head and bid my goodbye. "I will be back with Anna."

Chapter 2607: The Northern Region

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Southern Capital

Hearing my words, Colleen finally lost her patience and resorted to force just as I prepared to leave. The surrounding temperature plummeted in an instant, and my perception of time slowed dramatically. Somehow, Colleen's ability bypassed all my defenses and directly affected my bodily functions and soul pathways, particularly the chemical reactions and soul circuits within my brain. My thought processes slowed, dragging my perception of time and my reflexes down with them.

She appeared right beside me, clearly intending to abduct me as she had before. However, my Hive spirit reacted immediately, erecting a limitless celestial barrier between us, an endlessly stretching expanse of space that severed her influence. Colleen's ability no longer affected me directly, though its residual effects lingered, taking longer than expected to fade.

Only then did I truly grasp how terrifying Colleen's compression-based temperature manipulation had become. Had she invoked her domain, I would have been completely defenseless, and she would have succeeded in capturing me.

Fortunately for me, she underestimated me. I didn't count on her to make the same mistake again so once the effects wore off, I immediately activated the Demon Codex, using the Devil Merchant Code's inter-realm travel function to teleport out of the Southern Region and into the Northern Region, specifically the Northern Capital. This was where Gainover had last been sighted and was believed to be hiding.

"That crazy bitch," I cursed as I arrived on the outskirts of the Northern Capital. I hadn't expected Colleen to be reckless enough to attack me. Either she genuinely believed she was saving me from myself, or she was willing to risk Anna facing the backlash of a contract breach to stop me from doing what she considered foolish and unnecessary. Knowing her, it was the former. She truly believed she was protecting me from myself. Hopefully, I was right. Otherwise, Anna would be in for an unpleasant surprise. But given that Ann seemed fine, my judgment was mostly correct.

Once I calmed down, I surveyed my surroundings. I was on the outskirts of the Northern Region, at a location that had been deliberately selected and prepared by my calamity gems from the Sinner Squad. I had sent them to the Northern Region earlier to investigate Gideon Grim's past after learning that he originated there. When my calamity daughter gems failed to uncover anything valuable about that bastard's history, I instructed them to explore the Northern Region more broadly, thinking the preparation might prove useful someday. As it turned out, that day had arrived.

The Northern Capital's third main entrance lay a few kilometers away from my current location. I activated my Myriad Devil Transformation, shifting into one of the many carefully prepared aliases the Sinner Squad used for operations across the Five Regions. After all, my calamity gems had inherited that same Myriad Devil Transformation ability of mine.

I disguised myself as a middle-aged, handsome Card King. Then, I used the soul energy manipulation to materialize soul energy into a refined, noble and in-fashion winter attire that matched the status and preferences of my current identity and location. Once every detail was in place, I flew toward the Northern Capital.

At present, I was far too recognizable as the Southern Hope. Given the tension between the Southern and Northern Regions, I wanted to avoid unnecessary trouble. That was why I chose to disguise myself as a Card King, an existence considered little more than a bottom feeder in a first-tier city, let alone the capital itself.

As I reached the city's entrance, I found a long line of card apprentices waiting to enter the city. Each of them was being thoroughly vetted before being granted permission. Tourists and workers from the southern region were denied entry outright. Only those with a documented history of business and employment in the Northern Capital were allowed in, and even then, only under short-term permits. Any violation risked heavy penalties, including the loss of their business and employment visas.

It still wasn't enough for me to assume that the Northern Royal Family had already sided with Demigod Gainover at this point in the timeline. Their actions could just as easily be interpreted as an effort to maintain order within the capital. After all, supporters of the Southern Emperor had dared to travel from the Southern Region to the Northern Capital to show their support, even at the risk of their lives. No one understood the tension between the two regions better than they did.

I didn't know whether to call those people foolish, or to commend their unwavering loyalty to the Southern Emperor. What concerned me more was that I had already confirmed Gainover was hiding within the city, simply by overhearing the crowd's chatter. Given the capital's heightened security, I couldn't help but wonder how Anna planned to enter the city and assassinate her father.

What worried me even further was that, without Ann, her voice of reason, by her side, Anna might choose to storm the city directly in search of Demigod Gainover. Even a ten-year-old would know better than to attempt something so reckless. But Anna was an Extreme Path Partitioner. It was highly likely she would favor a direct approach, refusing to strain her mind even in the slightest.

Standing in line as I waited my turn to enter the city while I still mentally debated whether I should remain at the gate and wait for Anna here, or enter the city and wait for her there. I didn't even bother to consider the possibility that Anna was already inside.

As much as I didn't want to underestimate her, I still doubted she possessed the patience and discipline required to infiltrate the capital without drawing attention.

If she truly had that level of restraint, the entire Five Regions would not have learned that she had broken through to the demigod realm and entered the Northern Region to hunt down her father, alerting her prey long before she ever laid eyes on him. Frankly, I couldn't find a single reason to defend her on this point. What had the Southern Royal Family been thinking, allowing such information to leak?

Chapter 2608: The Beautiful North

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Northern Region, Northern Capital

All five regions were protected by their own greater array formations, thin veils designed to detect Card Emperors and trespassers of higher realms. Each city also possessed its own major array formation. These arrays did far more than simple detection; they protected and defended the cities and their citizens against any threats. This was especially true for the formations covering the capital cities.

They had been erected to defend against the monsters that emerged from the dungeons, but now they were being turned against card apprentices themselves.

Under normal circumstances, Card Emperors and Demigods could not simply walk into another region or city without being detected, unless they were equipped with black cards. These cards were used primarily by operatives of the four royal families and the central government when executing operations across regional boundaries.

These blank cards were symbols of alliance between the central government and its affiliated regions, silent warnings that discouraged either of them from harboring reckless intentions having grown comfortable in their array formations.

I believed Anna was also equipping a black card, given that the Northern Royal family had yet to locate her. Instead of finding her trail, they were forced into a state of high alert, scrutinizing everyone who entered the city. They had no idea where she was or when she would arrive.

What surprised me most was how Anna had managed to avoid being found or spotted even once by the Northerners so far. It was truly beyond me.

If I had to guess, I would say it was not merely luck. More likely, she simply had not yet crossed paths with anyone strong enough to detect her. After all, she was a demigod

who had forged Extreme Divinity. Regular demigods never stood a chance against her when she was only a Card Emperor, let alone now.

In the meantime, I had been calling her through the Grimoire, hoping we would meet up and plan how she could hunt her prey, which had fortified itself within a city protected by an SSS-rank array formation and hundreds of demigods. However, my calls to her either went unanswered or were abruptly cut, but never blocked. I did not know what to make of it.

Perhaps it was only in my head, but I could not shake the nagging feeling that she was deliberately avoiding me. The only way to be certain was to get her to meet me.

If she truly was avoiding me, then how would I ever get her to meet me? As that question crossed my mind, an idea took shape. Deciding to act on it, I chose to enter the city instead of waiting for Anna outside. Not to mention it was reckless. The city had multiple entrances, and I had no idea which one Anna might use to break in, assuming she was even planning to do so.

Soon, I entered the Northern Capital without any hiccups. The Sinners Squad had been meticulous when creating documents for our aliases.

The moment I stepped inside the city, a wave of warmth washed over me as the cold embrace of the Northern wilds finally released its cold grip on my body.

Heading in, I found myself intrigued by the city's architecture, streets, and overall layout. Everything was designed to withstand the Northern Region's brutal winter that lasted year round, while still functioning as a proper metropolis. To my surprise, the entire ground beneath the city was heated through a separate array system. They had given new meaning to heated floors.

Now I truly felt as though I had entered a fantasy city. I had never experienced a similar sensation in any other city across the Five Regions. The Morningstar Campus came close, but it was not a city. All I could say was that whoever had built this place had put immense care and thought into it. They had to, if they wanted it to endure such brutal weather and last for millennia to come.

As I walked the streets of the Northern Capital, I wondered how labels like brutes and savages had ever come to be associated with its people as the city painted a totally different picture.

Beneath the night sky, the streets were breathtaking. If not for the snow clouds obscuring the stars, the view would have been even more spectacular. I had heard that auroras appeared in the sky during dusk and dawn, a phenomenon said to be truly mesmerizing. It made me reconsider everything I had heard about the Northern Region and its people.

I would not have minded retiring in a place like this. Far from dense human habitation, it seemed perfect for the quiet, unhurried life I had been envisioning for two lifetimes now.

As I walked through the streets, the Hive Spirit worked in the background, determining my exact location within the Northern Capital and calculating the shortest route to the demigod Gainover's domicile. It was then that I spotted a small corner café, ivy hanging from its roof and a chalkboard menu standing by the door.

Its aesthetic and ambience drew me in instantly. It looked as though it had been lifted straight out of an anime, with woodwork reminiscent of a nineteenth-century French or British parlor, the sort of place where a hero and heroine would have their first, fateful meeting. I could not help but feel drawn to it. Deciding to indulge the impulse, I put my plans on hold and stepped inside.

As I entered, the bell above the door chimed, and I was immediately greeted by a maid who reached for my coat. When my coat dissipated instead, she smoothly adjusted and led me to a table.

The café's interior did not disappoint. Dark, polished wood dominated the space, complemented by brass and gold accents that glowed warmly under amber lighting. The atmosphere was further enriched by the gentle soundscape around me: the soft clink of a ceramic spoon stirring a cup, the delicate tink of a saucer being set down.

Yes, I was in a proper café after a long time.

Chapter 2609: Kidnapping

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Northern Region, Northern Capital

Yes, I was in a proper café after a long time. Even the prestige café I visited in Sky Blossom City could not compare to this.

I passed a wall lined with cups and siphon brewers, crossed the checkered floor, and reached a tiny, marble-topped circular table that was realistically too small for two people to dine comfortably. It seemed deliberately designed to force couples to sit uncomfortably close to one another.

Just as I neared my table, my gaze fell upon a girl who appeared to exist in a different reality from the rest of the café. The light from the street outside, pouring in through the window behind her, was so bright that it formed a halo around her head and shoulders. Though we were indoors, a strange, gentle breeze lifted a few strands of her golden hair, causing them to drift upward as if she were submerged in water.

At that moment, she gracefully turned, and our gazes met for the first time. In that brief moment, the café walls and tables seemed to vanish, as if it were just the two of us left in the world. All diegetic sound in the background, the hiss of the espresso machine, the chatter of other customers, the music, cut to dead silence. The only sound that remained was a single, heavy heartbeat, my own.

The reflection in her eyes resembled a kaleidoscope filled with me, and me alone. Not the disguised version of myself, but the true me. How was that even possible? I snapped out of the moment and back into reality, only to hear the maid sigh softly, "Ah, youth."

Youth? What did she mean by that? I was a middle-aged man at the moment. Unless she was far older than she appeared. To my disbelief, she was a semi-card demigod. No wonder.

After taking my seat, I turned to look at the girl once more, only to see her friend joining her with two cups of coffee before activating the privacy array of their table. An impulse rose within me to use my Soul Pupils to spy on them, but I restrained myself, reminding myself that just because I could did not mean I should. Doing so would make me no different from a voyeur.

I sent the maid away ordering their best coffee along with a pastry, all the while finding my gaze drifting toward the golden-haired girl's table. There was something about her that unconsciously drew my eyes in her direction. I had no idea what it was that I saw in her eyes earlier, but I refused to let it unsettle me enough to spy on them.

Under normal circumstances, I would not have hesitated to violate someone's privacy, yet for some reason, when it came to this golden-haired girl, I found myself unusually reluctant. I had no idea why.

I deliberately lingered over my coffee and pastry, hoping to catch one last glimpse of the golden-haired girl. No, it wasn't romantic interest that stirred me. Rather, it was an unexplainable sense of curiosity and familiarity I couldn't quite place. Still, it seemed that such a moment was not meant to be. She and her friend never lowered the privacy array shielding their table. I couldn't help but wonder what they had been discussing.

Shaking my head, I settled the bill and left the maid a more than generous tip. As I stepped out of the café, my thoughts drifted back to the golden-haired girl and the lingering taste of the coffee. I hadn't even noticed the café's name, nor had I cared enough to check, let alone ask.

Following Hive Spirit's directions, I made my way toward Demigod Gainover's manor, quickening my pace as I set out to carry through my plan to force Anna into meeting me.

Upon reaching Gainover's manor, I conducted a brief reconnaissance to confirm his presence and assess the array formation enveloping the estate. Once I was certain he

was inside, I activated my soul pupils and focused on deducing how to dismantle the formation in an instant.

I had no intention of running into the city guards, especially those affiliated with the Northern Royal family, midway through the operation. I had heard more than once that the Northern Royal family's descendants were not to be underestimated, and after witnessing the brutal winter they endured, I found those words hard to doubt.

Moreover, the Southern Hope killing Northern guards or royal descendants would only further inflame the already fragile tension between the two regions. I needed to proceed with precision, keeping the scope of destruction limited strictly to Demigod Gainover and sparing any innocent bystanders. The last thing I wanted was to worsen the Southern Region's position while it was already locked in a dangerous confrontation with the Masters on my behalf.

It didn't take long for Hive Spirit and me to deduce a method to instantly break the array formation shielding Demigod Gainover's manor, allowing me to seize him and withdraw from the Northern Region well within the Northern Capital guards' response time.

Once my preparations were complete, I moved without hesitation. I deployed my Limitless Celestial Domain over both the manor and the array surrounding it. This time, the space within the domain compressed inward. When I released it, the space snapped outward, generating a suction pressure so overwhelming that, with a heavy clunk, the array encasing Gainover's manor shattered, its fragments raining down to the ground below.

I did not rush into the manor in search of Gainover. Instead, I immediately began to contract my domain, allowing the space within it to stretch endlessly to trap the manor inside it. Soon, the entire domain rested on my palm, no larger than a small marble.

"If you want Gainover, come find me where we first met."

Revealing my original appearance, I announced in a voice that carried to every nook and corner of the Northern Capital before departing the city and returning to Sky Blossom City using the Devil Merchant Code.

Just then, inside a corner café, a golden-haired girl seated at a window-side table shot her friend an annoyed glare and complained, "See? I told you it was Wyatt. You didn't believe me."

Without waiting for a response, she sprang to her feet and rushed out of the café, shattering both the privacy array and the door in her haste. However, she was already too late.

Chapter 2610: Anne Heatsend

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Northern Region, Northern Capital

"I shouldn't have listened to her, damn it!" the golden-haired woman cursed as she hovered above the massive crater where a manor once stood. Just as she prepared to leave, city guards swarmed in from all sides, surrounding her in an instant.

"Halt. Identify yourself. What happened here? How are you connected to this incident?" the city guard captain demanded, firing off his questions one after another without leaving her any room to respond.

When he finally paused and waited for an answer, the woman abruptly dissipated and vanished, much like a clone or summoned entity being recalled into its card. The guard captain's eyes widened at the sight, and he immediately barked orders. "Seal the city. No one enters or leaves. The Southern Emperor has infiltrated the city in disguise!"

"Sir, what about Dalton Wyatt?" the captain's deputy asked hesitantly. "Eyewitnesses reported seeing him at the scene, and the entire city heard his voice." He voiced his doubts, clearly unconvinced that the Southern Emperor was responsible for the massive crater now carved into the heart of the city.

"He should either be with her or come for her eventually. For now, focus on locating the Southern Emperor," the guard captain ordered, all the while praying they would not cross paths with the boy who had butchered nearly four dozen elite demigods, each equipped with time-related cards or runes.

Yes, he loved his motherland, but not enough to throw away his own life or those of his men for some no-name, cheating bastard who survived on his looks and deceived women at every turn.

...

On the outskirts of the Northern Capital.

"Stop struggling and cursing. I'm letting you out," a woman clad in combat attire muttered under her breath as she summoned her diamond grimoire and conjured a female figure, the golden-haired woman.

The golden-haired woman instantly morphed to resemble her summoner, yet her attire and hairstyle differed, giving her an entirely distinct aesthetic and presence from the woman in combat gear.

After glancing around, she spoke anxiously, "Anna, why did you leave the city? Wyatt told me to find him at the place where we first met. We met at the corner café. We need to go there now. He'll be waiting for me." She paused, a conflicted smile tugging at her lips. "The thought of making him wait makes me feel bad, but it also excites me. Wyatt is waiting for me. Let's go!"

"Hold your horses, Anne," Anna said, grabbing her look-alike by the collar. The sudden restraint made Anne yelp, "What gives?"

"He wasn't talking to you. He doesn't even know you exist," Anna said flatly. "He was talking to me. That means he's waiting for me at the place where I first met him, that old warehouse of the Guild Association Mall back in Sky Blossom City."

Anna understood her triplet well. As intelligent as Anne was, the moment the boy of her dreams was involved, she became no different from a lovesick fool, a hopeless simp in every sense. Anna despised both of her triplets. One was an incurable mama's girl, and the other was this idiotic romantic. Yet somehow, both of them were still smarter than her.

If not for this love-drunk fool, Anna would have never broken past the Northern border or infiltrated the Northern Capital, let alone relax in a cafe and begun planning the assassination of her scumbag father in his own home.

"Don't be smug. He may not know I exist, but I'm the one he loves," Anne snapped, a fanatical glint burning in her eyes. "I was born from Anna's love and obsession for him. That means I am the Anna he loves, the one he came all the way to this damned place for." Her dissatisfaction with Anna's words was so intense that she referred to her in the third person. If they were not one and the same, she would have already come to blows with her.

"Let's return to the Southern Region. This trip was a waste because of that whimsical boy," Anna said coldly, venting her frustration over the wasted trip to the Northern Region. Failing would have been one thing. At least then she would have had the satisfaction of trying. But this? This was nothing short of childish. She found it hard to believe that the man who had discovered silver milk powder and created the VR-universe, along with several other groundbreaking inventions, could behave so immaturely. Had she known he would react like this, she would have answered his call.

Yes, she regretted ignoring his calls.

"Don't you dare talk about him like that," Anne suddenly snapped at Anna, the outburst catching her off guard. "If you hadn't insisted on killing that jerk who ran away abandoning us instead of going to meet him like I wanted, Wyatt wouldn't have had to risk his life by coming all the way here to meet us. You're lucky nothing happened to him."

"Some jerk who ran away abandoning us?" Anna shot back, her voice sharp. "He didn't just run off and abandon us. If that were the case, I would've been grateful to him for keeping his filth out of my life. Instead, he ruined it." Her eyes burned as she continued. "You have no idea what Ann and I endured at Morningstar University. The mockery. The insults."

She scoffed coldly. "You're fortunate you were only born now, when we finally have the power to kill him and erase one more problem from our lives permanently."

Anna's fists clenched. She despised how easily Anne dismissed Gainover's sins. She wanted nothing more than to punish that lying scumbag with her own hands.

"Hello, we can share memories. I know every little detail," Anne said sharply. "It was horrible, yes, but it's been so long. Stop living in the past. There are far more important things demanding our attention right now. Stop wasting our time on that trash." She tried to pull Anna away from old wounds and toward the present and future, toward the one thing that truly mattered to her, her sole obsession, the love of her life.

"Also, there's something that's been bothering me," Anne added, her tone suddenly suspicious. "Wyatt should have had the dummy ring on him. How did you not recognize him? If you hid it from me, so help me god—"

"I swear I did no such thing," Anna cut in immediately. "His transformation skill is bizarre. He morphed the dummy ring so flawlessly that even the card within my grimoire couldn't sense it."

Anne paused, then nodded as she sifted through their shared memories of her beloved. She knew Anna was telling the truth.