

Card Apprentice Daily Log

#Chapter 2661: Reporter Conard Cabe - Read Chapter 2661: Reporter Conard Cabe

Chapter 2661: Reporter Conard Cabe

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City

"Go ahead, kill me. I've already done my part. I reported the truth to the world," the man shouted as he lay slumped against the wall of a narrow back alley. He was drenched in filth, soaked with urine, vomit, and refuse, his back pressed into the grime-slick stone. "I posted everything on the Grimoire Network. By morning, all five regions will know what I uncovered. There's nothing you or your masters can do now."

His clothing was impossible to recognize, shredded in multiple places and darkened by layers of dried and fresh blood. One trembling hand clutched his grimoire, while the other pressed desperately against the gaping wound torn through his hip, blood seeping between his fingers.

Standing before him was a man dressed like an assassin crossed with a jester, his face concealed behind a grotesque clown mask. His posture was relaxed, almost casual, and the condescension in his gaze was unmistakable as he looked down at the broken figure at his feet and burst into manic laughter, "Hahaha! Hahaha—"

The laughter cut off abruptly. The clown bent down, bringing his masked face close to the man lying at his feet, staring directly into his eyes as though trying to peer into his very soul. The man did not flinch, meeting that gaze with stubborn defiance.

"Did you really?" the clown asked quietly. "I could kill you a second later. Check your post. See if it's still there."

The man held the clown's gaze for a moment longer before doubt crept in. Unable to suppress it, he looked down at his grimoire. The post he had made was gone. It had been live for only a few minutes before being erased. He couldn't comprehend what had happened, and the fierce determination on his face slowly crumbled into helpless disbelief.

The clown lowered his head further, bringing it almost cheek to cheek with him, and whispered, "Looks like your work here isn't finished. The world will never know what you uncovered, Reporter Cabe."

The clown then shifted slightly, locking eyes with Cabe once more. "Now that you know this," he asked softly, "do you still want to die?"

This time, Cabe let out a low chuckle. "Didn't you see the post's discussion? My job's done, mate."

The clown immediately accessed the post's discussion thread. There were only a couple of comments, both from a single reader.

[Anonymous1897: What are you smoking, bro?]

[Anonymous1897: Holy shit, the post just got deleted by the authorities. So, it wasn't a conspiracy theory, but the truth. Fortunately, I copied it and shared it with my community as a gag. The world needs to know about this.]

Even as the clown finished reading, both comments vanished.

[Anonymous1897: User has deleted the comment.]

[Anonymous1897: User has deleted the comment.]

Seeing this, Cabe burst into genuine laughter. The sound grated on the clown's nerves, prompting him to snap, "What are you laughing about? It's just one person. I'll kill him too. His death will be on you."

"I have no doubt about that," Cabe replied, his laughter fading as his voice steadied. "But thanks to me, the truth is already out there."

"The fate of worlds," he cried hoarsely, "has never been shaped by grand heroes or hollow theatrics, but by single individuals who had gone above and beyond to do their duty and refused to yield in the hardest of times."

"Mark my words, no matter how many people you and your masters kill, you can't hide the truth forever. It'll surface sooner or later—ah!"

Not waiting for him to finish, the clown plunged his hand into the man's chest, tearing out his still-beating heart and crushing it without hesitation. As life drained from him, the man forced out his final words in a fading whisper, "Signing off... Reporter Conard Cabe."

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I stopped in my tracks to take a closer look at the reporter. He seemed familiar. He was one of the stubborn reporters Clown Mask had killed in her future vision for the Circle.

In that vision, Clown Mask had assassinated countless card apprentices from different professions on the Circle's behalf, yet this one stood apart from all the rest. It was his final words that had given the present Clown Mask, whose mind had already been fractured by the future vision, the will to endure the Circle's brutal training, once more in the current timeline and eventually rebel against the Supreme Leader. Fight against them while pretending to be one of them.

Clown Mask's future vision had been a single, long, painfully vivid dream. She did not emerge from it unscathed. To her, it had felt real, as though it were truly happening. In those few fleeting seconds, she had lived out an entire lifetime.

In that future, Clown Mask had long since submitted to the Supreme Leader. As a result, the present Clown Mask, armed with the knowledge of what awaited her, already carried the heavy shadow of the Circle and the Supreme Leader deep within her mind. And she had been little more than a teenager at the time.

When she emerged from the future vision, she had no will left to resist the Circle or the Supreme Leader. She had no intention of fighting back and chose instead to go with the flow, believing that submission would at least spare her from further ordeals.

Yet in the moment she resigned herself to that fate, a single bright memory surfaced. The one good thing that had come from it all. Her daughter.

That fragile comfort shattered almost as soon as it formed, crushed by the memories that followed: her daughter's tragic birth, her brief and painful life, and her inevitable death.

And yet, buried beneath that grief, another memory stirred. Cabe's final words echoed back to her, cutting through the despair like a blade. The fate of worlds was not decided by grand heroes or hollow displays, but by single individuals who had gone above and beyond to do their duty and refused to yield in the hardest of times.

In that moment, the Clown Mask understood. Her daughter had existed because she had endured. Cabe's discovery had spread and helped the Hero Aba Windsor because he had refused to break. Those who endured through suffering and pain, who did their part without yielding, were not rendered meaningless even by death.

With that realization, Clown Mask bent to her fate that day, not in surrender, but in resolve. She chose to endure, to survive, and in doing so, to one day bend that very fate to her will.

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[AN: Clown Mask disguises herself as a male. Her true gender is revealed only later during the high school tournament arc. While many within the Circle already knew, the outside world remained unaware.]

Chapter 2662: Ruler Of The Card World

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City

"Reporter Conard," I called out, signaling the Fine Gold Guards to let him through, after the Hive Spirit confirmed he was exactly who I believed him to be. An honest man, who respected his profession perhaps a little too much, and cherished his family just as deeply.

"Master Wyatt, you know my name?" Conard asked in surprise as he stepped out from the crowd and came to my side. Behind his professional composure, I could sense a quiet admiration directed at me.

"Yes," I replied calmly. "I've read several of your works. You do good reporting." I let that settle before addressing the questions he had raised earlier. "You must have heard of my criminal rehabilitation and reintegration program. Demigod Redfall, Yin Widow, and the other members of the Sin Army are all rehabilitated criminals, sworn to serve for the rest of their lives. They are living proof that the program works."

My voice carried evenly as I continued. "That is why I urge world leaders to consider granting criminals, even the most heinous among them, a second chance through this program. I give you my assurance. If even one of them breaks their vow or steps out of line, I will bear twice the punishment alongside them."

"As for whether I am building a personal army, whether today was a display of power, or whether it was meant as a challenge to the Southern Royal Family," I said, meeting the gathered gazes, "the answers are yes, yes, and no."

"Yes, I am building my own forces," I continued without hesitation. "I do so precisely so I no longer need to rely on the Southern Royal Family's limited resources, resources that can be used far more effectively and efficiently where they are truly needed."

"And as for my relationship with the Southern Heir," I added, glancing toward the crowd, "if it still hasn't been made obvious enough, then there's little more I can say to clarify it."

"Master Wyatt, what about the victims and their families? And what about your relationships with Jill Norley and Susan Tucci?" Conard pressed on, his tone steady but unyielding. "As the future prince consort, don't you think it's somewhat insulting to the Southern Royal Family, the Southern region, and the Southern citizens that you're involved with other women besides our future ruler?"

Once again, he struck at the questions everyone was thinking but none had dared to voice, especially the last one.

"Take a breath, Conard. I'm not running away," I said with a short laugh before answering him directly. "What do victims and their families gain when criminals are simply locked away and kept alive on taxpayers' money? Peace of mind? No, they don't. At the very least, under my program, those criminals work to repay their sins."

I continued without pause. "After their daily needs are met, the remainder of their wages while working under me will be used to compensate their victims or the victims' families. You can find the full details on the criminal rehabilitation and reintegration program page on the Grimoire Network."

"As for Jill Norley and Susan Tucci—" I began, but my words trailed off as my gaze drifted to Susan, who was watching the interview along with the others. When our eyes met, she didn't look away. Instead, she stepped forward and answered in my stead.

"Hello, Conard," she said calmly. "I'm Susan Tucci, Wyatt's exclusive manager and girlfriend. You seem to be under a misconception. Wyatt will not be Anna's prince consort. She will be one of his queens."

"Madam Tucci," Conard asked, barely containing his shock, "are you saying that Master Wyatt will be the next Southern Ruler?"

The entire venue fell into a graveyard-like silence, every breath held as they waited for her response. Behind Susan, Anna and Jill stepped forward, coming to a stop at her back, their presence adding weight to the moment.

"No," Susan replied without hesitation, her voice steady and assured. "He won't be the next Southern Ruler. He'll be the sole ruler of the entire Card World."

The world seemed to fall into absolute silence at her declaration, as though even the air itself had frozen. Even I found myself staring at her in disbelief. *'What in the world are you saying, woman? Are you trying to get your husband killed? Now the entire Card World will see me as an enemy. I know women can hold grudges, but this is taking it too far.'*

Yet when my gaze shifted to Anna and Jill, they didn't look shocked or uncertain. They agreed with Susan. No, more than that, they looked as though this was already a settled matter between them.

Unable to help myself, I summoned my grimoire and checked the time, a single thought echoing through my mind. *'When did these three grow so close? Just how long was I stranded in the Way Beyond?'*

"Madam Tucci, you're pulling my leg, right?" Conard said hurriedly, clearly trying to give Susan an opening, a chance to retract her statement. "This isn't something to joke about on an occasion like this, especially with so many powerful eyes and ears present."

Susan, however, remained unmoved. Her expression didn't waver, nor did she attempt to soften or take back her words.

It was Anna who answered instead, her voice carrying like thunder across the venue. "What do you mean, pulling your leg? There are countless worlds within the Myriad Realms beyond our own. The very existence of demons and monsters is proof of that. To face such external forces, we must stand united."

She continued without hesitation. "For too long, we've been divided, left vulnerable to threats from beyond. How much longer are we expected to remain on the defensive, repelling one demonic invasion after another? When will it be our turn to take the fight to them and end this cycle once and for all?"

Anna's gaze swept across the crowd. "To do that, we must unite. And I believe Wyatt can make that happen. He is not merely the South's hope. He is the hope of the entire Card World."

Chapter 2663: Anna's Great-Grandmother: Seraphina Heatsend

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City, Teleportation Hub

With Susan openly announcing my bid to become the ruler of the Central Region, and with Anna backing that claim, the crowd remained frozen in silence, struggling to process one shocking revelation after another. Even as understanding slowly dawned, no one dared to cheer or jeer. Graveyard silence once again filled the venue.

Meanwhile, many of the unfamiliar faces who had come hoping to meet me, such as the family members and party companions of Agong Young, began to slip away quietly. They no longer wished to be associated with me. As maddening as that realization was, I understood their perspective.

With a few words, Anna and Susan had turned me into the world's enemy, a singular existence threatening the established order of the five regions. The Emissary of Light no longer mattered. Nor did Gideon Grim. Neither did the looming second demonic invasion. From this moment on, they would want to eliminate me first.

Even Conard, who was known for always asking the right questions, was left completely stumped. The revelations were simply too much for him to process. He had been prepared to die to report the truth, but this was different. Faced with this, he would rather quit than report it.

At first, he had been overwhelmed with pride at being singled out by the Southern Hope. Now, that pride curdled into regret. He should have kept his mouth shut. Yes, as a journalist, he had always pursued the truth no matter the cost, but this cost was far too high.

What unsettled him, and many other Southerners, even more than the Southern Hope declaring his appetite for World Domination, was the revelation that the Southern Heir would be only one of his queens. She was the Southern Jewel. How could she be one queen among many instead of the sole queen? The very idea felt absurd.

If his strength had allowed it, he would have seized Southern Hope by the collar and demanded, *'How dare you corrupt our princess, you beast?'*

Finally, suppressing his turmoil and forcing his thoughts into order, Conard asked solemnly, "Your Highness, Southern Heir, is this the will of the Southern Royal Family and His Highness?"

"No," Anna replied firmly. "My family and grandfather know nothing about this. This decision is mine and mine alone. Once again, it has nothing to do with my family." To drive the point home, she added without hesitation, "Also, I am no longer the Southern Heir. My great-grandmother, Seraphina Heatsend, will soon be holding that position."

At Anna's declaration, Conard's knees nearly gave out. Still, knowing the capricious nature of their Southern Heir, he immediately pressed on. "Then... is this the will of His Highness?"

"No," Anna said lightly. "But I've sent him a message. I should receive confirmation once he reads it. Grandpa never says no to me."

Hearing that, I could only slap my forehead in sheer frustration.

After realizing that everything he had heard so far was driven entirely by Anna's personal whim, Conard stopped treating her words with the same weight. He promptly bypassed both her and Susan and turned instead to Jill, shifting the topic.

"Madam Jill," he asked formally, "do you also believe that the Five Regions should unite under a single banner to confront external threats such as the demon invasions? And if so, who do you believe should lead a united Five Regions? The current central government?"

"I don't know about uniting the Five Regions or confronting external threats. Because I'm not a fighter but an innovator," Jill said bluntly, "So, according to me, what is needed is a regime change. Because of the monopolies enjoyed by the Royal Families and the major noble houses, the economy of the Five Regions has stagnated for far too long. That only changed when Wyatt introduced the VR-Universe."

She didn't slow down, her words gaining momentum. "I say free the market for all. How long are you going to keep crippling the wheels of innovation? The VR Universe is the perfect example of how innovation can boost the economy. And as its creator, I believe Wyatt is the best choice to lead a new regime, one focused on economic growth rather than old grudges and outdated traditions."

As she spoke, Susan and Anna stared at her as if silently asking, *'This isn't what we discussed.'*

Jill didn't care in the slightest. She raised her voice and shouted, "Free the market to all! Let innovation breathe, and capital will follow."

Finally, someone gave the crowd something they could cheer for. They quickly forgot the outrageous revelations Susan and Anna had made earlier and began to applaud and shout in unison, the celebration resuming as if nothing had happened. That was the nature of crowd mentality. They neither dared to oppose nor openly criticize Anna, after all, she was the Southern Jewel. Instead, they chose to latch onto something safer and more appealing. Profit for all.

"Madam Jill, aren't you from one of the major noble families?" Conard pressed on, continuing to do his duty despite the overzealous crowd already bent on cheering and celebrating. "Is your family willing to relinquish its monopoly and truly open the market to the common folk?"

Jill's true background remained a mystery to most of the Five Regions. Given the audacious schemes she had used to amass vast wealth, and the fact that she had emerged from them without so much as a scratch, rumors had naturally spread that she belonged to a major noble family. She had been asked about this many times before, yet she had never confirmed nor denied those claims. Solidifying this misconception.

"Don't lump me together with those bigots. I am the sole descendant of Demigod Norley, the unnamed founder of the Five Regions," Jill declared, her voice carrying across the venue. The cheering crowd gradually fell silent, shock rippling through them.

Without waiting for Conard to ask another question, she rose slowly into the air, her presence commanding every eye and ear. When she spoke again, her voice was clear, resonant, and impossible to ignore.

"Look at the people beside you. Look at your loved ones," Jill said. "Speak your wishes without fear. Speak them without financial chains, without inherited limits, without invisible hands choking your potential. For too long, your dreams have been measured by what you were allowed to want."

She spread her arms wide. "From this moment onward, begin to imagine a future where innovation is not punished, where ambition is not taxed into submission, and where talent is not buried under tradition. A future where the market is free, where ideas rise or fall by their own worth, and where progress belongs to everyone, not just a chosen few."

Her gaze swept across the stunned crowd. "We promise you the dawn of a new age. An age where opportunity flows as freely as will itself. An age where the Five Regions no longer crawl forward, shackled by the past, but surge ahead, driven by possibility."

Jill smiled, sharp and unapologetic. Susan, clad in her armor, and Anna rose into the sky as well, coming to stand behind Jill. The three of them positioned themselves back to back, facing the crowd from different angles.

In unison, their voices rang out across the venue.

"Welcome the new era."

"Welcome the age of innovation."

"Welcome your hope, the true ruler of the Card World, Dalton V. Wyatt."

Chapter 2664: World Domination

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City, Teleportation Hub

"Wyatt, control your women before they become the death of you," Asong's voice rang in my ears as I watched my three queens in utter befuddlement, my mind echoing with a single thought, *'What in the world happened while I was stranded in the Way Beyond?'*

I turned to her and replied dryly, "You should control your friend. She and her sisters are going to get their lover killed."

"Woah, you're shameless," Asong blurted out, clearly flustered, using indignation to mask her embarrassment. "Now that you've got your harem, I guess it was only a matter of time before you set your sights on world conquest."

"Since you already know that, how dare you address the True Ruler without proper honorifics?" I said, leaning into the joke, unconcerned that others might misunderstand. After all, I did intend to unite the Five Regions and rule them so I can focus on the Dark Realm. It had simply happened sooner than I planned.

"That's not funny," Asong replied, her smile freezing as her tone turned stern. "Tell me you don't actually plan on conquering the world."

"World conquest?" I said lightly. "No. I'm planning world domination."

Asong frowned and couldn't help but ask, "How are those two different?"

"World conquest is what you attempt when you lack the strength to stand alone," I explained calmly. "You rely on alliances, negotiations, and borrowed power. World domination, on the other hand, requires none of that. Absolute strength is enough. Resistance becomes pointless."

I met her gaze, making my meaning unmistakably clear. This wasn't a proposal. They were not being asked. They were being informed. They can accept it or try resisting it, it was happening.

"You've all gone crazy," Asong exclaimed in sheer disbelief. She could hardly accept that the boy she had once seen as a ray of hope for a better future was now becoming the spark for a new regime, one that threatened to ignite civil war across all Five Regions.

Just as she was about to lament that she had placed her faith in the wrong person, the boy spoke, as if reading her thoughts.

"Don't worry," he assured her calmly. "No innocent blood will be shed. This is world domination, not conquest. Besides, it isn't my style to make others fight for what I want."

After reassuring Asong, I turned my attention back to the venue. Most of the crowd had already dispersed, and those who remained were either working for me or people with nothing better to do.

No matter how well-crafted or awe-inspiring Jill's words had been, they carried little weight. These were people barely getting by, and for them, lofty promises meant little. They were not enough to erase years of ingrained loyalty to the Royal Family and traditions.

I understood what the girls were trying to do, but this was neither the right time nor the right place. Timing and location mattered. That was precisely why I had worked so hard to secure Morningstar University as the stage for announcing my plans.

However, before I even had the chance to execute the first quarter of those plans using Morningstar University as the platform, they had unveiled everything to the entire world, without regard for preparation, timing, or setting.

Now that it was out in the open, I had no choice but to move forward and make the best of the situation.

The Masters, who had been looking for an excuse to reach me by targeting the Southern Region and the Royal Family, now had more than enough justification. From this point on, they would pressure the Southern Region and the Royal Family to hand me over to them on a silver platter.

Shaking my head, I headed toward Cindy with Asong in tow and asked, "Where are the Freedom Fighters? Weren't they invited?"

"They weren't," Cindy replied. "The schedule was tight, and they were in the Lil' Red Storm Realm. It wasn't possible for them to make it back in time for the ceremony." She took full responsibility for the decision.

Through Cindy's demeanour, I immediately understood there was more to it than she let on. With Henricks stationed in the central capital searching for Ned, the link between the Freedom Fighters and my forces in Sky Blossom City had been disrupted. Cindy was being discreet in front of others, careful not to expose the shortcomings in my organization and management to outsiders.

Making a mental note about this shortcoming, I nodded at Cindy and said simply, "Good job." Then I turned to Asong. "What is it?"

She had been following me closely, and I knew her well enough to recognize the signs. She wouldn't trail me like this unless she wanted something. Just as she hesitated, gathering the courage to speak her mind, a jolly voice suddenly called out from behind us, "Boss!"

It was Aurelia, the only person I knew who was even more shameless than me. The young, Unstoppable Auriculean I had recruited and polished. She had defeated the Bright brothers single-handedly and taken charge of the Bright Lion gang. She wasn't alone. Beside her stood a tall, toned, and mature woman who closely resembled her, followed by a group of individuals who clearly formed the woman's entourage.

The moment they recognized the woman at Aurelia's side, the expressions of Diana, Cindy, Asong, and the others turned solemn. In unison, they bowed respectfully and said, "City Lord Malvin."

"Arise, there's no need for formalities," City Lord Malvin said, lifting her hand slightly as if brushing the bows aside, with a gentle yet encouraging smile on her face. "I'm just an old relic. You young people are the heroes of tomorrow. Don't bow your heads so easily, not ever again. Otherwise, I'll have to start worrying about our future."

Then she turned to me. The warmth in her expression remained, but her gaze was sharp and intimidating. She didn't beat around the bush.

"Master Wyatt," she asked plainly, "if you become the Ruler of the Card World, how will you be any different from the rulers we have now?"

Chapter 2665: Tess Malvin

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City, Teleportation Hub

Listening to City Lord Malvin's words, Asong was shaken to the core. As a politician, she understood all too well the Border City's significance and the political weight carried by the Unstoppable Auriculean family. They were the only ones who came close to outshining the Southern Royal Family's bloodline in the Southern Region and a strategic linchpin for all Five Regions against the Empire.

She couldn't believe that someone burdened with such authority and responsibility would even entertain the idea of challenging the existing order, let alone the current rulers themselves.

Yes, City Lord Malvin had merely asked what Wyatt would do differently if he became the ruler of the Card World. On the surface, it was a simple question. But given who was asking it, those in power would never see it that way. To them, it would sound like a direct challenge to their authority, an open crack in the foundation of their rule.

In their eyes, it would amount to nothing less than treason. The consequences would be absolute. The entire Malvin family, including all its branch families, would be wiped out.

Asong couldn't comprehend why City Lord Malvin would willingly take such a risk just to ask that question. Knowing the price Malvin was gambling by doing so, Asong found herself listening intently, wondering whether the answer would truly be worth the cost.

Susan, Anna, and Jill slowly descended next to their beloved. They had heard my conversation with City Lord Malvin. They, too, wanted to know what I planned to do after World Domination.

I scratched my head and let out a quiet breath, answering in a tone that was almost casual despite the weight of the moment.

"Honestly, City Lord Malvin, I just want to live a chill life," I said. "I don't crave power, thrones, or people kneeling before me. All I ever wanted was the freedom to do my own research, craft my cards, and live without constantly being dragged into other people's gambits."

My gaze hardened slightly as I continued without pausing. "But the world doesn't let you stay peaceful if you're weak. The more I tried to stay out of power struggles, the more they came looking for me. Criminals, rulers, demons, Masters... everyone wanted to decide my fate for me."

After a brief, deliberate pause, I shrugged and revealed, "So I chose the simplest solution. Becoming the ruler of the Card World. For me, it doesn't mean one with the authority to rule all, but one with the most freedom in the entire world. I'll take that seat not to dominate the world, but to stop others from interfering with my freedom and to secure as much of it as possible."

I met her eyes squarely and stressed, "I don't want to rule people. I want the authority to live life on my own terms. If absolute power is the price of a peaceful, chill life, in this world and across the Myriad Worlds, then I'll earn it."

City Lord Malvin's gaze lingered on mine for a long moment. Then she inclined her head in a formal bow and introduced herself. "Your Highness Wyatt, I am Tess Malvin, City Lord of Border City and matriarch of the Malvin family..."

At her words, jaws dropped all around us. The way she addressed me was a clear declaration, to me and to everyone present, that she had accepted me as the Ruler of the Card World.

"...please allow Border City and the Malvin family to be part of your journey," she finished.

"If that's what you want, then sure. Welcome aboard," I replied, extending my hand.

Our gazes locked as she took my hand in a firm grip, and we shook on it.

The turn of events was far too shocking for everyone present, especially for those who truly understood the implications of Tess Malvin formally affirming my claim as the Ruler of the Card World and allying with me.

Conard Cabe, who stood not far away, witnessed everything in vivid detail. What he had dismissed as a poorly conceived joke was now hardening into an unavoidable reality. His mind struggled to comprehend what he was seeing and hearing. Was this history in the making, or a tragedy waiting to unfold, or both?

Whichever it was, one thing was certain. The storm would sweep across the entire world in the form of Dalton V. Wyatt.

For a long, momentous beat, the atmosphere grew so tense and solemn that it felt as though even breathing aloud might shatter it.

Then there was Aurelia. Her shamelessness was potent enough to melt the thickest ice. She scratched the back of her head and asked innocently, "Boss, since my mother joined our organization after me, does that make me her senior?"

The question instantly shattered the tension. Laughter burst out across the venue from nearly everyone present, with the sole exceptions of Tess and her entourage, who remained stone-faced.

Before I could even respond, Aurelia turned toward her mother, a wide grin spreading across her face as she shouted, "Hey, cute juniors, drop down and give me hundred thousand squats—"

Slap!

Refusing to indulge her daughter's nonsense, Tess struck her across the face with such force that Aurelia spun through the air for several seconds before crashing into the ground, carving a human-sized dent into the pavement.

Aurelia never saw it coming. Still, thanks to her traits and physique, she quickly regained consciousness and recovered enough to crawl out of the crater. She then looked up at me and complained, "Boss, these juniors are way too arrogant and rebellious. Teach them a lesson for me, will ya?"

"Sorry, honey," I replied calmly. "You lost to her. That makes her your senior." As I spoke, I tossed her a storage card loaded with elixirs and potions for healing, recovery, and mental strength. "Take these and try again next time."

The moment the card landed in her hands, Aurelia sprang to her feet, and slipped it into her grimoire's card holder without hesitation as she thanked me aloud. Clearly, she had been exaggerating her injuries.

The real reason I rewarded her so generously was simple. She had defeated the Bright brothers and took charge of Bright Lions Gang far ahead of schedule than I had anticipated, proving she had been working harder than I had given her credit for.

Chapter 2666: Houndragon Platoon

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City, Teleportation Hub

"Let's find a better place to continue this party, shall we?" I said, giving the venue a quick scan. Declaring world domination had scared off all the fakes and the faint-hearted. A shame it turned out to be almost everyone except Border City. Quality over quantity, I guess.

"Your Highness—" City Lord Malvin began, but I cut her off gently. "Madam Tess, my freedom doesn't come from stepping on yours. If you get what I mean, skip the formalities."

"Yes, mother. Just call boss, Boss," Aurelia chimed in, folding her hands behind her back and leaning backward with exaggerated ease.

She immediately froze under her mother's glare, a look that clearly said, *'So now you remember I'm your mother? Where was that respect a few seconds ago?'*

City Lord Malvin controlled her turmoil and said, "Master Wyatt, before we go, with your permission I would like to make a few arrangements for my people."

"Sure go ahead," I had a pretty good idea of what she was talking about. The Freedom Fighters in charge of the city's array had already informed me of it.

After getting my silent approval, City Lord Malvin cast a glance at Cindy, Diana, and the others. Then she raised one arm calmly and said, "This is how it's done."

The sky answered her.

A deep, thunderous roar rolled across the city as a full platoon of Dragon Riders descended in perfect formation. Their arrival wasn't sudden or chaotic, but practiced discipline, like a marching army made of living legends. Massive shadows swept across the streets as colossal forms passed overhead, wingbeats striking the air in slow, disciplined rhythm.

Row after row of dragons flew past, scales like living armor, eyes burning with cold intelligence. The riders sat unmoving in their saddles, backs straight, banners snapping in the wind. It wasn't a show of aggression. It was a declaration of the birth of new power and authority.

These were SSS-rank Hounddragons, the dragons of the hunt. Their senses were so refined that scent alone allowed them to distinguish truth from lies. Their sense of smell could predict approaching calamities, glimpse threats seconds before they manifested, and instinctively judge true intent. They were the perfect sentinels, perfect wardens a card apprentice could ever find. They were a force whose mere presence meant no one could intrude without being noticed.

In Clown Mask's future vision, through Tess's generosity, the western and eastern forces learned that the Hounddragons could identify demigod worshippers hidden among their ranks, as their sense of smell exposed a person's true intent. By the time that knowledge spread, however, the damage had already been done, it was too late.

After circling the city once, the formation tilted upward in flawless unison and shot into the heavens, vanishing beyond the clouds as suddenly as it had appeared. The city soon settled back into silence as the Hounddragons took up their positions above it, ensuring that none of the Emissary of Light's fanatics could enter without being detected.

Fortunately, Corey had taken Lil' Baem with her into the dungeon seal. Lil' Baem and Dredre being in the same place sounded like a disaster waiting to happen.

But it wasn't.

Dredre was no longer a helpless little pixie. She could travel freely between the planes of the living and the dead, resurrect the fallen, and wield the 'Breath of Erosion' without limitation. If anything, it was Lil' Beam that needed to be careful. One misstep, and it would meet a painful end, its soul tainted and tormented by the Breath of Erosion.

A pixie who dared to taunt Dalie, a celestial, was hardly going to be intimidated by a giant serpent.

"Master Wyatt, with this Houndragon platoon watching over your city, no pest will be able to enter without being noticed ever again," City Lord Malvin said with quiet confidence.

Her generosity confirmed my suspicions about why she had come to me, and why she had chosen to act now of all times. There were many factors at play, but this had to be the decisive reason as to why she stepped forward while others hesitated or abandoned the idea altogether.

"Thank you, Madam Tess. That's very thoughtful of you," I said sincerely.

At that moment, Diana stepped forward and guided us toward the TSR Guild, where she had already made arrangements for me to entertain my guests. Meanwhile, Asong hurried to Anna's side, who lifted her and carried her along without a word.

...

Inside the TSR Guild's main hall, after the initial small talk, most people gradually returned to their duties and filtered out, leaving behind Anna, Jill, Asong, Tess and her entourage, and finally Aurelia, who was still shamelessly trying to assert her seniority over her mother by standing right next to me. I guessed she was trying to collect interest on all the neglect and hardship she had suffered growing up.

Seeing that Tess had already demonstrated her sincerity, I didn't waste time testing her further and asked directly, "Madam Tess, how can I help you?"

"This..." City Lord Malvin hesitated, clearly worried that I might misunderstand her earlier gesture as a transactional move rather than an expression of loyalty and conviction.

However, now that the question had been asked, she knew there was no point in retreating. Straightening her posture, she met my gaze and spoke plainly.

"Master Wyatt, at the risk of sounding rude, I would like you to share the technique you used to cure those manipulated by that false herald who calls himself the Emissary of Light," she said. "Many of our innocent citizens and brave soldiers have fallen prey to his sinister ability. Thanks to the presence of the Hounddragons, we were able to detain them before they could do anything they would later regret. We could not find a way to cure them, so we imprisoned them instead. With your grace, we wish to finally cure them and put an end to their suffering."

Chapter 2667: The Other Capital Of Southern Region

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City, TSR Guild Headquarters

"Divine Enlightenment."

Just as I had suspected, Tess approached me even after everyone else had fled, despite hearing me declare my plans for world domination, because after witnessing me cure those suffering from Divine Enlightenment, she had already chosen her side. A side where she would not have to sacrifice her loyal citizens and brave soldiers for some distant "greater good" that had no place for them.

The circumstances of Border City were dire, financially and otherwise. They were so strained that even the City Lord's youngest child had to take on mercenary work just to earn resources for her practice, while the older ones juggled two or more jobs. One was their duty to the city, and the rest were taken on simply to earn enough to keep their realm progressing and prevent it from falling behind.

If even the City Lord's children lived under such conditions, it was easy to imagine the hardships endured by ordinary citizens. All of this stemmed from the same cause. Border City received little to no budgetary support from the Southern Royal Family, yet was taxed more heavily than the Southern capital itself. The central government and

other regions had offered aid, but as true Southerners, Border City had always refused it.

Not a single citizen resented the City Lord for her decision. To them, Border City was the living symbol of the Unstoppable Auriculean's patience toward the Southern Royal Family, for how they repaid his loyalty. In their eyes, Border City was the true capital of the Southern Region, and so it was only fitting that it shouldered the heaviest taxes.

More than half of Border City's population were the descendants of the soldiers who had once served under the Unstoppable General. Of the remainder many of them had personally served under the various City Lords of Border City during their time in the Southern Army. Even now, much of the younger generation of the city, were serving in the Southern Army alongside Tess's Heir.

No matter their achievements or accolades, once they completed their duty to the Southern Region, they would always return to Border City to fulfill their duty to their home. Over time, a saying began to circulate throughout the Five Regions: the sun might forget to rise one day, but the card apprentices of Border City would never forget their roots or their duty.

Each of them returned to Border City not for wealth or fame, but out of loyalty and gratitude. Fulfilling their duty to the city was their way of honoring that bond. This, more than anything, was why Border City continued to exist to this day.

Another reason was that every direct descendant of the Unstoppable General had, without exception, proven themselves worthy of that loyalty. Time and again, they lived up to the faith placed in them. That was why, even after learning the truth about Border City's circumstances, many soldiers who had once fought alongside them chose to immigrate there of their own will.

If I didn't know better, I might have mistaken Border City for a cult. But that couldn't have been further from the truth. It was simply that after experiencing what they had endured, one's perspective on life inevitably changed. Priorities shifted. The things you once worked and fought for began to feel hollow, while ideas you might have mocked before suddenly felt meaningful and worth pursuing.

Border City embodied one of the most common transformations seen among soldiers who had faced true combat, those who had clawed their way back from the jaws of death itself.

Those soldiers often couldn't put it into words, but they understood one thing clearly. Money and fame were not what they wanted to dedicate the rest of their lives to. Nor did they wish to remain tools for others to profit from, whether through wealth or reputation.

It was in moments like these that the experience of the Unstoppable General felt relatable to them. The choices made by the Unstoppable General at the end of his life

began to make sense to them. They felt compelled to look closer, to understand his path. And if what they saw resonated, they would abandon the lives they had struggled and fought to build, and start anew in Border City.

It was this gathering of like-minded card apprentices, along with their descendants, that kept Border City alive despite all its shortcomings. Together, they continued to prove to the Five Regions a truth that had become a saying: The sun might forget to rise one day, but the card apprentices of Border City would never forget their roots or their duty.

The only person to break Border City's long-standing tradition was Aurelia. Instead of joining the Southern Watch or the Army, she had joined the Bright Lion Gang. Considering the neglect and hardship she had grown up in the Border City, it wasn't surprising that she lacked any strong attachment to those traditions. And yet, at her core, she embodied everything one would expect of a card apprentice from Border City.

I glanced at Tess and the members of her entourage. Their expressions were tense and contemplative as they waited patiently for my answer. Breaking the silence, I said, "Divine Enlightenment is one of the abilities of the False Herald's origin card. It forcibly converts his enemies into his fanatic believers. The reason your people failed to find a counter or a cure to it is because it directly affects the victim's will."

"No wonder... no wonder," an elderly card demigod among Tess's entourage exclaimed, realization dawning on his face. "No matter how much I investigated, I could never locate the source of the change within them." He paused, then frowned deeply. "But from what I know, not even a Celestial can manipulate a being's will."

Hearing that, I couldn't help but burst out laughing. Then, I quickly reined it in and apologized.

"Haha, sorry. But that's honestly the funniest thing I've heard all day," I said. "That idea is nothing more than a small white lie, something passed down to keep overthinkers sane. Don't blindly believe everything your predecessors said."

My smile faded slightly as I continued, more matter-of-fact. "With the right means, or enough strength, it's entirely possible to bend even a celestial's will to one's whim. So, the notion that a being's will could never be tampered with is simply untrue."

Chapter 2668: Globinut Kernels

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City, TSR Guild Headquarters

"Please don't apologize, Master Wyatt," the elderly demigod said, gently deflecting my words. "It was my own lack of talent and capability that made me overly reliant on ancient knowledge. Instead of questioning it and seeking true understanding, I began to follow it blindly as truth."

"There's no need to be so harsh on yourself," I replied calmly. "Everyone has their own pace. Some flowers bloom in days, others take years. Don't sell yourself short, Demigod Cecil."

I continued, my tone sincere. "You've done remarkable work, especially breeding SSS-rank Hounddragons outside their dungeon and raising them as mounts without reducing them to card summons. That alone is an achievement few could replicate. I believe your best days are still ahead of you."

As I spoke, I recalled the dossier Hive Spirit had compiled on him. This was a man who could have joined one of the Top Ten universities, yet instead chose Border City, where he received only a fraction of the resources and recognition those institutions would have offered. All for the sake of his principles.

He was, without question, a man worthy of respect.

Hearing me address him by name, Cecil's eyes lit up with quiet pride. It wasn't his arrogance, but my recognition. Though I was far younger than him, my works and achievements carried enough weight that being acknowledged by me felt like an honor to him. He inclined his head slightly and said, "Thank you, Your Highness, for your generous praise."

"Hey, old man, don't make the boss repeat himself," Aurelia barked immediately, seizing the opening without hesitation.

Cecil, Tess, and the rest of the entourage all shot her a sharp glare. Aurelia, who never needed much encouragement to stir trouble, puffed out her chest and said loudly, "Boss, are you seeing these newbies? Their eyes are full of arrogance. I think they need to be taught a lesson. What do you say, boss?"

Despite the confidence in her voice, she retreated behind me at remarkable speed, fully aware that her mother was about to slap her senseless again, just like last time.

And she was absolutely right.

Tess's eyes were grim, yet her lips stretched from ear to ear in a wide smile as she addressed her beloved daughter. "Aurelia, sweetie, come to your mother. Let me take a good look at you. It's been a while since I last saw you. Have you lost weight?"

"As if I'd fall for that trick again, Mother," Aurelia scoffed from behind me, using me as a shield. She knew that a single misstep was all it would take for her mother, with her terrifying abilities, to grab her across the room and knock her unconscious.

Tess's smile only grew wider. She calmly took out a storage card and waved it enticingly. "Knowing I'd get to see you, I brought your favorite snacks from Border City. Why don't you come take them and share them with your friends?"

"Really?" Aurelia asked, saliva already dripping from the corner of her mouth as she peeked out from behind me.

"If you don't want it, I'll send it to your brother," Tess said calmly, knowing exactly which strings to pull when it came to her children.

Her children might have believed they were neglected, but for a demigod who had once fought multiple Supreme Beings at the same time, watching over half a dozen children while fulfilling her duties as City Lord and family matriarch was hardly a challenge worth mentioning. If they had seen how her own parents had raised her, they would be begging for her forgiveness instead of complaining.

As for Aurelia being ostracized by her family and the city's citizens due to doubts surrounding her birth, Tess believed it was something she needed to grow accustomed to. No matter how many praises the world sang of the Unstoppable General or Border City, they were still viewed as outsiders. Better to get used to loneliness sooner rather than later. Compared to children who had been forced to pick up knives and fight for their lives, Aurelia had lived far more comfortably. If nothing else, it would build character.

"No, I want it," Aurelia blurted out as she rushed forward.

She was just as greedy as she was shameless. She would rather risk being slapped unconscious than miss the off chance that her mother wasn't trying to trick her this time.

The moment Aurelia reached for the storage card, Tess pulled it back. Aurelia immediately dropped to her knees, ready to beg for forgiveness, but a hand stopped her.

It was Tess. She looked into her daughter's eyes and sighed inwardly, *'The Aurecelian bloodline doesn't deserve a whimsically kind spirit like yours, my dear daughter.'*

She brushed Aurelia's messy hair aside and placed the storage card into her hands. "Go. Share it with your friends."

Aurelia nodded eagerly as she accepted it. Instead of leaving immediately, however, she equipped and rummaged through the card, took out two neatly packed boxes of tea powder, and handed them to Jill and Anna.

"Madams," she said seriously, "make the boss drink this tea with Goblinut Kernels. You'll hear good news within a month."

Before either of them could react, she stuffed the boxes into their hands and bolted out of the room as if running for her life. Seeing this, Asong burst into laughter.

Shaking my head, I picked up where I had left off. "Right. Where was I? To counter Divine Enlightenment, I created Celestial Empowerment. It uses celestial force to empower the victim's will, allowing them to resist the influence of Divine Enlightenment. It's built upon celestial force and my own physique, which is why I can't teach it to you."

At my words, the light in Tess's eyes, as well as in Cecil's and the rest of her entourage's, dimmed noticeably even before I could finish speaking. Ignoring their disappointment, I continued, "However, I can create a card that will allow those who can borrow celestial force from the Card World's will to mimic Celestial Empowerment. The card can also be used on oneself to resist Divine Enlightenment, though only to a certain extent."

Chapter 2669: Celestial Empowerment Cards

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City, TSR Guild Headquarters

Hearing that I could create Celestial Empowerment cards for them, Tess and her entourage immediately brightened. Their eyes shone with even greater brilliance than before. A card was far easier to wield than a technique that required a certain level of mastery before it could be applied effectively.

As for the restriction of needing celestial force to activate the card, it posed little issue for them. Many veteran semi card demigods and card demigods had long reached the 'One with the World' state, allowing them to borrow celestial force from the Card World itself. None could do so to the extent I could, but it would be more than sufficient for them to help free their comrades who had fallen prey to the Emissary of Light's Divine Enlightenment.

They had come seeking a technique to free their comrades from the Emissary of Light's sinister grip, only to be offered something even better. Celestial Empowerment Cards. It would save them enormous time and simplify matters greatly.

Yet they barely had a moment to savor that relief before another concern set in. The cost of the cards.

From the way Celestial Empowerment was described, it was clearly more than a situational counter to Divine Enlightenment. It was an exceptional support card, one that would remain valuable long after the current crisis passed. How would one even begin to put a price on such a thing?

From what they had heard of the Southern Hope, they knew one thing for certain. His cards, and his card-crafting services, were anything but cheap.

They had already presented their prized Houndragon platoon as a joining gift, a symbol of their sincerity in standing beneath his banner. That platoon was their most recently trained batch, and there were still another one or two years for a new batch to be trained.

Now, they had nothing of comparable value left to offer in exchange for enough Celestial Empowerment cards. Maybe they should settle on one for now and focus on freeing their comrades from their nightmares.

"What's wrong?" Anna asked, noticing the restrained expressions on Tess's face and among her entourage. Earlier, she hadn't interfered, aware of the tension between their two families. But after Aurelia shattered the ice with her tea powder gift and goblinut seed advice, Anna reconsidered.

At the same time, Asong tugged lightly on Anna's sleeve, signaling her stand down. She and Jill both understood Tess's predicament. They had found the cure they were seeking, but they couldn't afford it. And given that Anna's Royal Family was one of the reasons Border City was in such dire financial state to begin with, Anna stepping in now would only seem like mockery rather than help.

Before the awkwardness could spiral into something ugly, I spoke.

"Can you guys stay the night?" I said simply. "I'll prepare a thousand Celestial Empowerment cards for you by tomorrow morning. Does that work?"

I waited for Tess to respond, but she and her entourage exchanged quick glances before she answered carefully, "Master Wyatt... one will be more than enough."

"Don't rush. Hear me out," I said, asking Tess not to jump to conclusions and to let me finish. When she and the others nodded, I continued, "Here's the deal. Out of the thousand Celestial Empowerment cards, use as many as you need. Consider those cards as my gift to you. Then help me sell the rest for a ten percent commission. I know the commission is small, but Border City will have exclusive sales rights to the Celestial Empowerment cards."

I looked at Tess directly. "I don't need to teach you how to leverage exclusive rights, do I? In return, I want to see Border City more prosperous than the Southern Capital. I

want everyone who ever underestimated Border City to die of envy. Can I trust you to do that?"

At my words, Tess's eyes reddened, and members of her entourage clenched their fists, struggling to keep their emotions in check. Even so, a single tear slipped from Cecil's right eye. Then, as one, Tess and her entourage shouted, "Yes, Your Highness. We will not disappoint your trust in us."

"Good," I said with a nod. "Then I'll see you tomorrow morning."

With that, I turned to leave, already planning the array formation I would use to craft the Celestial Empowerment cards in bulk.

"Your High—Master Wyatt," Tess called out, drawing my attention. She spoke quickly, "We can't remain away from Border City for long. The Empire's card apprentices have been unusually active ever since the Emissary of Light broke through to the demigod realm. By now, they should already know I've left the city, and they may be preparing to make trouble. I was thinking of leaving Cecil behind. He can collect the cards tomorrow morning."

"Hmm," I murmured, sinking into thought.

Among Tess and her entourage, only Tess herself possessed the will and strength to resist Divine Enlightenment long enough to escape with her life. With a Celestial Empowerment card in hand, she could even give the Emissary of Light some trouble.

Without her by their side, I wasn't convinced that Cecil, or even the entirety of Tess's entourage, would be enough to safeguard the cards, let alone deliver them safely.

"Then let's do this," I said after a brief pause. "I'll arrange for a team of Platinum-grade array masters, led by a Diamond-grade array master, to accompany you back to Border City. Together, they'll be able to set up a teleportation hub in the city, just a single teleportation array overnight."

I continued, laying it out clearly. "Once that's done, Border City will be connected to my teleportation network. From then on, you can personally come every other day to collect a new batch of Celestial Empowerment cards, starting tomorrow morning. That should solve the problem, right?"

Tess and her entourage exchanged looks before nodding in agreement.

Turning to Anna, I instructed, "Anna, help them find Cindy and arrange the team of array masters, will you?"

"Yes," Anna replied with an eager nod, clearly seeing this as an opportunity to clear the lingering tension between her and Tess, now that they would be working together going forward.

Chapter 2670: Asong's Unluck

Date: Unspecified

Time: Unspecified

Location: Myriad Realms, Card World, Southern Region, Blossom District, Sky Blossom City, TSR Guild Headquarters

"Alright, Jill, see Asong out. I'll get started on those cards," I said, deliberately teasing Asong. She had clearly wanted to speak to me for a while now, but every time she finally had the chance, she hesitated and lost her nerve.

"She knows the way out. She doesn't need me for that," Jill replied dryly. Then she turned to me and complained, "Wyatt, you said I'd be in charge of the Slime Fairy cards, but they wouldn't even let me in."

Ignoring Asong entirely, I corrected Jill. "I never said you'd be in charge of the Slime Fairy cards. I already have capable people handling their creation. What I said was that you'd be in charge of selling them across the other four regions. Maybe not in those exact words, but that's what I meant."

I stepped closer, pulled her into an embrace, and spoke quietly. "Jill, you need to stop this. Why are you trying to steal credit from our own people? That's not a good strategy if you want to beat Susan and Anna, especially when they both have the home-field advantage."

"Wait, I thought you wanted us to get along. Now you're provoking me by bringing them up?" Jill asked, rolling her eyes. She knew exactly what I was doing, using Anna and Susan to push her into backing off. Even so, she had to admit the point I was making wasn't wrong.

She quickly realized that playing the cold, lone-wolf role here would only hurt her, not them. Susan was practically the girl next door to everyone in my organization, familiar and easy to approach. As for Anna, with most of the organization's employees being Southerners, they adored her by default. Now more than ever. Her marrying their boss felt like validation for the work they were doing. They couldn't have been prouder.

Which meant that, when it came to popularity, Jill was clearly the least favored of the three among employees. And if she wanted to become the principal wife, she would need to amass more fame than the other two. Otherwise, judging by how things were

going, she would end up dead last. And that was something she absolutely refused to accept.

"Gotta keep the pan hot," I said. "I want the three of you to get along, sure, but I don't want you ganging up on me like you did today. You've shown me how a woman's grudge can sneak up on you when you least expect it."

"Now that you know what the three of us can do together," Jill warned, pulling back slightly, "don't go sniffing around under other skirts." She didn't even bother acknowledging how much of my careful planning they had just flushed down the drain.

Well, in their defense, they were only acting in what they believed was my best interest. So clearly, they couldn't be wrong. I suppose this was entirely my fault for having the audacity to choose all three of them instead of choosing just one.

Jill slipped free of my embrace and added, "Think hard about that. I've got a few things to go fix."

With that, Jill hurried out, intent on correcting the damage she'd caused. She knew it was too late to change people's first impressions of her, but she also knew one thing just as well. As long as she helped them all make a ton of money, today's minor clashes would be forgotten, replaced with admiration, if not outright worship.

After she left, I turned to Asong and asked dryly, "You're still here?"

"Stop being an asshole," Asong said, fully aware that I was teasing, knowing she herself was struggling to say whatever it was she wanted to say.

"Asong, I've got very little time and far too many things to deal with," I said flatly. "Whatever it is, spit it out already."

"My party fired me. I had to vacate my seat in assembly. I'm effectively a civilian now," Asong said at last. She hadn't shared the news with anyone else, and didn't want to, especially not with someone who had saved her life more than once. Yet, she ended up sharing in a moment of weakness.

"Was this because of what happened today?" I asked. Earlier, her party members had been all smiles when they arrived to greet me, but the moment Susan started talking about world domination, they had vanished like smoke. It wasn't hard to guess what followed. They'd likely wasted no time cutting Asong loose to distance themselves. First, she'd been hunted by the Supreme Leader. Now this. Her luck was on a steady downward spiral.

"Does it matter?" Asong replied quietly, brushing off the question. She clearly didn't blame me for it.

What I didn't understand was something else entirely. Why was she telling me this instead of her friend, Anna?

"I guess not," I said, making no attempt to comfort her. Truthfully, I had considered recruiting her before, but now I had Jill, and Asong was far too rigid for the kind of organization I was building. If my secret about the calamity daughter gems ever came to light, I was absolutely certain she wouldn't be able to look past it.

Still, seeing her standing there alone, I couldn't bring myself to stay indifferent. I transferred an encrypted blueprint of the array formation for crafting Celestial Empowerment cards, that Hive Spirit had just processed, along with a short note, directly to her grimoire.

"I've shared a file with you," I said. "Help me deliver it to Dalie at Lil' Red Storm. Go find Cindy. She'll make the necessary arrangements. You don't mind, right?"

"No problem," Asong replied with a tired sigh. "I don't have anything better to do anyway." She gave a half-hearted wave and turned to leave.

Watching her retreating figure, lost and alone, I shook my head thinking, 'A glimpse of the future ought to cheer her up.'