

Evolution 167

Chapter 167: Whatever It Took...

Ha'vek turned around and walked back to the depths of his nest, sending whoever survived of his elites to collect the dead worms... Their bellies were full of warm Daywalkers' blood, and he had a job to do.

A job he was paid handsomely for by Lord Darius... Unlike Grave'Maw, he wasn't a true member of the Duskbound Order.

However, as a nightcrawler sponsored by them on the CRS Platform, he never said no to giving them a hand for a price.

Lord Darius had paid immensely.

"Five hundred map fragments... Hehe, I can enlarge my Venom Nation in the Boundless Expense without risking my ass in the Nocturnal Ring."

Ha'vek smiled from ear to ear, humming and whistling on his way back to the throne chamber.

A short while later, his elites entered the throne chamber carrying giant mud containers filled with blood.

"Don't drop them, Darius will be on my ass if the marble is too small," Ha'vek warned solemnly.

"Yes, lord."

They placed them on the ground, in the center of a massive, painted crimson array. It had Ilthorien inscriptions all over it with major runes highlighted in the middle.

No further ado, Ha'vek uttered the incantation to activate the Blood Refinement Array. Once he concluded it, the array started gleaming with a sinister light while the containers levitated above the ground.

Crash! Crash!...

The containers were ground into dust, leaving the river of blood to condense into a floating sphere. With each spin, the sphere shrank a little, but its color turned brighter.

This process happened for over a minute until the giant blood sphere transformed into a small marble, no bigger than a thumb...

However, its purity... was near perfection, not a tint of blemish was on its surface.

Ha'vek picked up the marble with a clean leaf, not wanting to dirty it. Then, he placed it in a special box with a red cushion, making it resemble a red pearl.

'Darius... The job's done. When will you retrieve it?' Ha'vek sent a dimensional message.

'Keep it in your Boundless Domain... I will retrieve it once the investigation dies out.' Lord Darius responded while heading to meet with Sir Alaric and the few survivors.

With a serious contract binding them, he wasn't afraid of getting double-crossed.

Ha'vek ended the call and pulled his dimensional key to his Boundless Domain, wanting to secure the marble as soon as possible.

But, just as he was about to utter the incantation, he heard a strange noise.

A sharp click echoed through the cavernous hall... Then again. Click... click...

Ha'vek paused, eyes narrowing. The sound didn't belong here.

From the far shadowed corner of the throne chamber, a dim orange spark flickered weakly in the dark.

Click... chh...

At last, a small flame finally caught.

Feng Ling leaned back against the stone wall, his ebony hair catching just enough glow from the lighter to reveal the edge of his sharp cheekbone and messy beard.

He brought the flame to his mouth. A cigarette lit. He inhaled once... long and slow... and then exhaled a lazy cloud of smoke into the high, still air of the chamber.

Silence followed.

Ha'vek turned slowly, pupils tightening into slits, his heartbeats accelerating nonstop... If this was his reaction, the elites didn't dare even to stare Feng Ling in the eyes.

His reputation preceded him...

"Care for a cigarette?"

Feng Ling's voice cut the stillness, quiet and bored... his extended hand holding the offered cigarette.

No movement. No fear.

Just the slow curl of smoke winding its way through the throne room like a question.

And all fell into heavy, stunned silence... as even the chamber itself seemed unsure how to breathe in the presence of such audacity.

"Feng Ling... Why are you here?" Ha'vek asked, his tone low and steady, but in reality... His emotions were a mess.

He kept thinking whether he should commit to entering his Boundless Domain, cast his Dominion for the second time in a row despite the risks, or ask for Lord Darius' assistance.

After all, his Blood Marble was in danger too.

Alas... If he wanted to think and talk, he should have accepted the cigarette first.

Feng Ling retrieved his offered cigarette and let out a long cloud of smoke in the shape of a saber...

The moment Ha'vek looked in its direction, he found himself staring at the back of his headless body from a weird angle.

'Huh... Am I...'

Pssss...

The answer arrived in a fountain of blood gushing from his headless neck... Thud, his body fell on the ground, and soon was followed by the others.

Still stunned, Ha'vek's eyes glanced to the side and found his elites' headless bodies lying in the chamber... their blood pouring down the ground nonstop.

Feng Ling pulled Ha'vek's severed head to match his face level. Then, he put out the cigarette on Ha'vek's forehead, leaving a slight black mark.

Ha'vek's eyes turned soulless; the last thing he heard was:

"Smoke break's over."

Feng Ling collected Ha'vek's head, his crystallized seed, and the box with the red marble in it... placing them in his dimensional wallet. Then, he went on and cleared the nest's treasury, leaving nothing behind.

When he finished, he walked out of the nest, stepping across the aftermath of the battlefield.

As he glanced at the dried-out corpses of Daywalkers around him, he reached out to two people and disclosed calmly, "It's done... I have the evidence."

"Good job."

"Sigh... With this many casualties on our side, I don't feel like it's a win..."

One voice was unfamiliar, but the second one had just conquered an Abyssal Lost Nest.

"Lord Idriss... Don't forget what I said in our last conversation... casualties aren't a risk in this game... they're the price of playing." Feng Ling said while lighting up another cigarette under Mao's judgmental eyes.

Lord Idriss went silent for a moment, recalling the day he was approached by Feng Ling... He remembered the details of their conversation vividly, as it was the reason many modifications of his plan were changed abruptly.

Close to a month ago, they met on the same restaurant's rooftop, and he told him that he needed his assistance to unearth the moles and, quite possibly, the one who ordered the hit on his daughter... The second half was all Lord Idriss needed to partake in the discussion.

Feng Ling went on and told him that he highly suspected Lord Darius to be the mole. He had traced up every clue he found, and they all led back to Sir Alaric, which in turn, Lord Darius.

The peculiar order to task Mantis to gather more than a hundred low-ranked Daywalkers for a mission that required no less than twenty.

Dra'Webra's attack on the Harrowing Forest nest that left their forces weakened... Sometime later, the Sunstrike Agency struck it down after it stood strong for decades.

A perfect coincidence, one might say.

Also, the fact that none of them found out about the hidden tunneling network, leading to Dra'Webra's nest.

Although such clues were nothing but speculations, they drove Feng Ling to dig deeper into the Sunstrike Agency's history... What he found made his heart boil.

Almost periodically, the Sunstrike Agency either loses a decent number of members at once in an expedition or a few members spread out across multiple years.

In such a cruel world, such results were the norm... But it wasn't the same for Sunstrike Agency.

Before their members could die, they would start a marketing campaign for new members, ensuring minimal strength loss.

But at the time, even this looked normal since other agencies do marketing campaigns as well.

However, with all of those coincidences, something must be up, and once Feng Ling heard about the upcoming Sunstrike Agency's major expedition... He knew that it was time to make his move.

In his eyes, he figured out that the moles must be requiring something important to the Duskbound Order... Something that needed a lot of corpses.

What's a better place than an expedition?

Once Lord Idriss heard this much, he realized that Feng Ling was on to something indeed.

"I have never trusted that two-faced prick... But, to place a hit on my daughter? He made it much more personal." Lord Idriss uttered coldly, sitting across the table from Feng Ling.

"If that's personal... You should hear what I have next." Feng Ling said calmly, holding a half-smoked cigarette.

Feng Ling told him that he had a strong suspicion that Lord Darius was planning to sabotage The Blood Hunters' expedition.

He needed blood, and fast... His expedition was too good a chance to pass up, striking two birds with one stone.

Lord Idriss questioned it at the start, but he told him that if he needed confirmation of his assumption, he should move the expedition's date much closer.

Once Lord Idriss did this and heard the news of the Sunstrike Agency's also moving theirs to compete against them... Their rivals, it clicked.

No more doubts... Lord Darius was the mole. But, knowing was one thing, and obtaining proof was another.

Lord Darius wasn't some hillbilly from a mountain... He was considered one of the founding fathers of the Heliodor Region's current world status.

He helped the region climb the World Regional Ranking if even by a few ranks. He had also done much more and was a beloved Daywalker across the region.

If they wanted to bring him down, they needed genuine proof... Ironclad, unquestionable... Only then would everyone support them and turn their backs on Lord Darius.

Thus, Feng Ling and Lord Idriss orchestrated a plan... a risky plan that would put a lot of lives at risk, but if it succeeded, they would have more than just evidence.

First, the raid could not be official... If the raid was official, and only ten members would fight it off in a Death Game, Lord Darius would have a tough time targeting them.

They wanted him to target them; they wanted him to waste his resources, attention, and nearly everything on bringing the Blood Hunters to their knees.

They knew if he went for it with the little time he had, his preparations would be sloppy and rushed.

As for them? They would do everything to ensure the success of the raid, even if it meant begging Seraphis to come out of his retirement and help them out.

Though they kept him in the dark, as they knew that if he heard a whiff about the plan, he wouldn't bring his students with him.

No students, no Seraphis... The only reason he joined was as a teaching experience for the kids... After all, he had retired.

As much as Lord Idriss hated doing this to his old friend, he knew that it had to be him on his side... If Lord Idriss requested a Solarbound from the other two agencies, Lord Darius would have smelled that something was cooking in the background.

He was that careful.

On the other hand, Seraphis was known to care only for his students and had nothing to do with the expeditions, raids, or anything of that nature.

Lord Idriss could never go for an unsupervised Raid with just him as a Solarbound, knowing that a mole might target them... It would be nothing but a suicide mission.

But, with Seraphis on his side... His confidence was unshaken.

This was his side of the plan... Keeping Lord Darius as occupied as possible.

It worked.

With Lord Darius's focus spread thin, Feng Ling was able to not only spy on Lord Darius's expedition but also get dangerously close without either of them figuring it out.

Lord Idriss and Feng Ling knew that his spiritual prowess was the best in the entire Northern District... Even if Feng Ling was confident in his camouflage abilities, he knew that if Lord Darius's focus was fully on his expedition, the entire place would be locked down.

Nothing entered or exited without him knowing about it... Using totems was too much of a risk.

If they wanted this to work, it had to be done right.

Thus, he remained close by until Darius realized that Plan A and B had failed, forcing him to kick off Plan C by entering the Rift of Binding Laws.

Once Lord Darius and Ha'vek were inside the Rift, Feng Ling snuck into the throne chamber and erased his spiritual aura temporarily, and merged his presence with the atmosphere... One of his innate abilities.

Then, he waited.

Feng Ling knew that Ha'vek would be advised to enter his Boundless Domain the moment the expedition concluded. If he went there and hid the evidence, their efforts would be for naught.

Only with such perfect timing could it work.

Although not much was said by Ha'vek, it was enough.

Of course, the High Chancellor of the Heliodor Region had to know... As the High Council and Government elected head, he was the only one with authority to permit such a mission.

Fortunately for them, but unfortunately for many others... The mission was a success, and Lord Darius had no idea that he was walking back to his damnation.

"Both of you, come home... You did well." High Chancellor uttered, his voice relaxed, "I will take care of the rest."

"Understood... High Chancellor."

Both uttered simultaneously and closed the dimensional connection. Feng Ling lifted his head and let out a long exhale, the stench of blood filling his heart...

"Mao... was it good or bad, what I did?" Suddenly, he asked.

Although he told Lord Idriss that casualties were an unavoidable outcome, deep down, it still felt wrong... Even for him, who had seen and participated in plenty of hellish missions and Death Games.

"It's neither..." Mao replied calmly, "You did your job as an officer. Thanks to you, your region will be safe for decades to come, maybe longer... Darius had to be taken down, whatever it took."

"And the lives we lost?"

"A few are better than all. Look at Seraphis' fallen nation... He chose to spare a few, and ended up losing everything." Mao shook her head.

"When will this ever end?" Feng Ling sighed... too tired of it all, his depression digging a deeper hole in his heart.

He knew that once Lord Darius was removed, the Duskbound Order would put another to supervise their region... It was a never-ending cycle.

Though still, Lord Darius' danger level was immense... A mole that high up only implied a disastrous fate to their region.

A fate involving not just Daywalkers, but also the millions of citizens under its sacred protection...

With stakes so high, Feng Ling couldn't afford to ruin the mission by saving the Sunstrike members... He could only watch them die, hardening his stoned heart further.

"That's the thing." Mao perched on his shoulder. "To evolve is to survive... and to survive is to suffer. Forever. Otherwise, why do you think everyone chases The Final Glorious Evolution?"

"The Glorious Evolution, huh... I see nothing glorious about it."

Feng Ling turned away, stepping into the shadows, the stench of blood following like smoke...