# The Strife of Tribunal

*Book 2 of the Brigante Ark Series*

Bort Patgia

For God, who became my eyes and ears to know the wonders of this world. For my family, who became my first windows in life. And for my friend Leslie, who didn't get tired of reading my writing and listening to me.

# Chapter 1

‘For many reasons, I thought that the thing I despised the most would be the one that would be the least helpful. Also, I thought that by being indifferent would help me keep my composure. I was wrong. That day dawned on me with frightful clarity. The world isn’t conspiring to change for it is already ever changing since before and as now. I was the one who was changing. I wasn’t ready to accept the truth. Yes. I am in denial. My beliefs were shattered and I am not prepared to face such a harsh truth. So, I feigned ignorance and continued onward with no consideration on the early realization. Then, she came to me, wholly herself, and I was a fool not to meet her eye to eye. Not to realize the gravity of her importance. The importance of her existence to me. She knew what I was craving for and she didn’t exploit it. Instead, she questioned me; she showed me how to attain it. By the time I realized that I didn't need to stop myself, it was too late. I was on the other side of the world and she was too far away. Not that I worry that much. I’m worried about her safety of course, but I’m confident we will meet again. If we met for the second time, there is no doubt that the world will make it for the third time. The next time our paths crossed, I will see her in her eyes. I know it, because everyone has their pull and someone who’s pulling are the ones we know as the Call of Fate.’ - From Alastor’s Memoir

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Three weeks passed since they got home. Linda told him what happened after the explosion. Their collaborators requested them to keep their connections hidden. They agreed with it, but this does not exclude their director Rod. Of course, he agreed to hide and keep this a secret. He understood the grave situation they are in and advised them not to tell others as well as it would stain the reputation of the organization.

For now, the Glade had not accepted any kind of request from the fixers throughout the continent as they were busy rehabilitating the compounds that were destroyed during the rebellion of the Renegades. The other directors reluctantly agreed with the decision to cease some of their transactions across the continent and outside since there was a lot of death and injury on their hands, they might as well focus on their damaged rears. They have a lot of resources hidden in their banks which was why they were not worried about stopping their operations temporarily.

The heads of Glade were busy sorting out funds while continuing their activities. The trainees' practice as of then continued, but the lack of officers called out for desperate pleas they requested for the dispatched mercenaries to come.

Though, not all of them, there were other mercenaries from the Glade who came home to help the current situation they were facing in. There were familiar faces that came, but Alastor didn’t mind coming to greet them. He had matters that should deal with first, like training Sherry at the old compound.

The compound wasn’t in any way possible as a place to live. The structure was destroyed into ruins. The intention was to allow the trainees to feel like they were in a war zone so that they will take the practices seriously.

On top of the wretched balcony, Ken watched Alastor and Sherry sparring.

Alastor easily parried another of Sherry’s useless attacks. Then, he caught Sherry’s fist and twisted it. His palm cut through the wind and locked his feet behind her before he pushed her to the ground, outbalancing her stance against his strength. Clearly, it was her lose.

Alastor lent her a hand and she stood with a painful grunt. Sherry dusted off her uniform.

“What’s with this training?” She asked. Sherry had repeatedly stated before that she was prepared for the harshness of the training, as long, she was able to get stronger, but Alastor had something else in mind. “I thought you were going to teach me how to use magic.”

“It is too early for that.” Alastor said.

“Uh, hello… I kicked Theo’s ass back there. I’m supposed to be treated special.”

Alastor unconsciously lifted his brow and threw a chilling glance at her. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He put a barrier and consideration of her position, including his. She was still a kid at heart.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. There are things that you need to know before jumping to a self-conceited conclusion.” He said

“I’m serious here. I’m ready to learn magic.” She rested her hands on her waist.

“If you are, then how about you show me the power you execute against Theo.”

“Err.” She stammered and looked down. “The thing is that I can’t access it anymore.”

“Ah-huh. Very well, if you can’t use that power then there’s nothing you can do when you engage in physical combat given that you’re lacking experience.”

Sherry was set on edge with Alastor’s fair view of argument. He was glad that she saw it that way and they continued sparring until the afternoon.

Sherry was beaten into pulp by Alastor. At least, she put up a decent fight. Unlike others in his year, it took them weeks just to get recognized by their instructor to be able to combat.

At the end of the day, Sherry broke down tired. She tried her best but her effort was squashed easily by Alastor. He was far too harsh on her.

“That’s enough for today. You can go back to the mansion now.”

“At last.” Sherry gasped. Her head hung low. The crisp air made it hard for her to inhale properly as she walked unsteadily out of the compound.

Ken jumped out and glanced at Alastor cautiously.

“It is so unlike you.” Ken started.

“What? Being harsh on her?” Alastor asked. He carefully turned his neck around.

“Yes,” Ken said. “But also letting the training end early. Normally, we’d end at 6.”

“Oh, that. Since Rod permitted me to become an instructor, I use the liberty to end it early because I don’t want to miss the dinner.” Alastor walked and chose to sit beneath the shade of the tree. Ken followed.

“That’s unfair to us. We have to pack up and stock for supplies before eating.”

“Well, I guess I’m just lucky.”

Ken retorted. “I can become an instructor too, y’know.”

“Yeah, right – right.” Alastor ignored his prattling. “You can dream.”

“Hey!”

Ken waited for Alastor to rest and enjoy the breeze for a few minutes before walking.

“What do you think about her?” Ken asked.

“About Sherry?”

Alastor slowed down a little. The wet clay beneath his foot made it hard to walk without getting dirtied. Gray clouds began to swirl ahead the blue sea. He looked at the ship docking at the port with interest. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gary swatting the mosquitoes.

“Yes.”

“She has the spirit, but lacks talent.”

“You think?”

“Yes, and I don’t think that anytime soon she’ll be ready.”

“Is that so?”

“You know the procedure, Ken. It takes more than a gift to be ready. A talent with no training is like spilling coffee to a rock.”

Ken’s brow arched. “Your figure of speech does not make any sense, you know that, right?”

Alastor's hearing didn’t work properly this time, he might have missed a few words in Ken’s sentence. He rubbed his nose.

“Precisely, that wouldn’t make sense. Honing the body enables us to adapt in different situations.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Ken muttered.

As they came past the thick trees, they saw the lights from the mansion twinkling from room to room and to the red light that sprung above. The red light indicated that everyone should get back to the mansion before the curfew. Their feet sprang on top of their strength and kicked the ground, sprinting towards the mansion. There were also trainees coming rushing back. Some were briskly pedaling their bikes and parked outside.

Time passed and they finally made it. Ken took a moment for a heavy breather. Alastor was unaffected by the long tiring run. Alastor headed to the dining area wherein the trainees picked up the plate and line for the food that the staff displayed in an orderly manner. He glanced at the fried pork and brewed stew. He used the knife to slice it and minced it through his teeth. As usual, the pork was tasty and bearable, unlike the stew. He did not feel any disgust for the food, yet the stew somehow was bland.

Alastor looked around and saw the students added their stew with pepper and salt and then mixed it. He mimicked and when he tasted it, he finally understood why they eat it like that. He learned something tonight.

His dinner ended up with a full stomach.

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Alastor had another nightmare again. It was the time when he felt no hope against Theo. The concept of Death did not cross his mind once before. He was always confident that there’s always ways out, but it doesn’t mean he was a slacker. He always kept his guard high, no matter what, but when it comes to Theo, there is no coming out alive if you stand against him, not alone.

He jumped out from the bed, rasping for air. The heat in his body from the nightmare made it impossible for the chilling wind to cool him down. He got out of his room and to the kitchen drinking water. Then, he washed his face in the bathroom before going out to the balcony and climbed on top of the roof.

He heard a faint voice. Alastor got alert by some unknown presence and saw Linda sitting beside him. She wore a robe and does not seem to have anything beneath it. He avoided and glanced away. He doesn’t even want to think about it.

“Geez. Is there any time you’re not jumpy.”

“What’re you doing here?”

“Can’t you guess? I can’t sleep too.”

Alastor lay down flatly on the tiles against his back and scanned at the stars wildly blinking.

“Thank you.” Alastor said out of nowhere.

Linda’s brow rose. “For what?”

“That totem you gave saved me from Theo. Where did you get it by the way?”

“Some merchant was selling at the Jules Market called me out and offered me a discount. I thought it was a bogus at first, but when I saw the magic symbol engraved in it, I knew it would be a perfect fit as a gift for you.”

They were silent for a while. Alastor’s eyes flickered the moment a shooting star streaked in a split second. He remembered something.

“Where are they, Linda? Reia, Glox, and the other kids.”

He hadn’t heard of them for a while, the directors were too busy handling transactions across the regions and didn’t come across to his mind to ask about them. Until then.

“Rod said that he didn’t allow them to get here.”

“Why is that?”

“Because of the Renegades. Instead, they were sent in the Shahaya along with Henrick.”

“That’s good.”

“Why do you care about them? This is the first time I see you’re worried about someone.”

“I can’t help it. After all, I owe her, she saved my life.”

“I see.”

The chill wind finally got through his senses. Alastor took a deep breath before going back to his room. Alastor sleep deeply with no dreams.

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There was no doubt about it, they heard the loud stomp somewhere in the forest for the second time. The party of mercenaries of the Glade that were once an adventurer pulled themselves together before they continued to pack the meat that they’d hunt together.

They traveled together for the past seven years and managed to survive the harsh world. They weren’t supposed to come back here if only the Renegades didn’t revolt. No matter how hard they convince themselves that it was not worth coming back, they can’t turn their back on the home that honed them into the warriors that they had become.

Dice prepped up the lockers of the wagon behind the Comodo that they had borrowed. His party members Laura the marksman, who’s an archer, and Octagon the healer, who was also capable of doing fire magic went inside the wagon guarded the food stock they hunted together. They heard it again, a faint rumble coming out of nowhere. The animals' clattering had halted to silence. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the crows and birds alike flying and scattering.

“Laura, Octagon, guard our rear!” Dice shouted.

Laura prepped up, placed the three arrows on the bow, and kept gripped steady forward. Octagon held his staff and began to chant. The red stone that embedded in the staff shone bright and three transparent layers of walls began to emerge.

It was a standard procedure when there was a possibility of conflict. It was one of the strategies they come up with over the past seven years of adventure, when the monster’s strength was unknown, they would go in a defensive position, Dice would usually go to the frontline as the swordsman and initiator while Laura will support him in distance, Octagon’s role was to only heal if there’s any injured or will use magic to deal damage on the enemy, but mostly he would minimize his attacks to be able to heal whenever his comrade was hurt. He was the only healer of the group, thus he had to conserve his mana. Given Octagon’s role, he was critical for their succeeding fight.

Laura may have used it in combat but she was useless when it comes to magic, the only thing that could be relied on was her Inquiara Magic, shadow foresight, it’s a magic that allows the user to increase the senses to the maximum to predict, counter the enemies attack. On other hand, her other spell that was too risky to use in closed space.

Laura breathed heavily. The wind was disrupting her senses and because of it, it was hard to utilize her Inquiara Magic. Her senses began to filter out the noises and barrages of the environment one by one as her instinct finally kicked up. She felt an ominous presence moving erratically over behind them. She trembled for a moment in a sudden realization of the true nature of the beast that was coming for them. Laura cut off the layer of the figure and continued to sense it.

“What do you think, Laura?” Dice asked. “Is it good or is it bad?”

“Bad, really, really bad.” She nervously said. The sweats began to trickle down. “I can tell that it’s a big one.”

“If it’s out of our league then I reckon that we shouldn’t stop moving,” Octagon said.

The Comodo’s eyes sharpened as it sensed something odd, it automatically pursued the other route and ran steadily in a spiky path. It was heading in the opposite direction of the Glade. The wagon wobbled as they ran through. The rocks made a loud crunch as it went beneath the Comodo’s sharp claws and foot.

“Wait! Hey! That’s not the way back to the Glade.”

The Comodo cried. Dice was about to whip it but Laura shouted at him.

“No! I think this is the right thing to do. We need to shake off this beast. Right now, we don’t have enough manpower to stop it. It would do more damage rather than the other way around.”

Laura held high her bow and nocked three arrows. She pulled the string and again she used her Inquiara Magic. Her sight was locked upon the enemy. Mana began to pour the arrows and lighted them in red, blue, and green. She let out the string and the arrows pierced through the wind. The strength that was embedded in it tore the trees and when it reached its destination, it exploded and created a tornado that was along with the scorching flames and ice that can disrupt enemy’s movements in a centralized location of the twister. It was one of her Inquiara Magic, Triple Beam Elements.

“That will hold the enemy long enough.” She said.

“Oh boy. You just have to jinx it.”

The tornado of flames and ice suddenly broke and tore into shreds as the giant figure leaped out. The sun’s light stung their vision and was unable to see the figure above, but they could tell that it was coming after them.

“Hold on!” Dice shouted.

Even without the harsh pull of its rein, the Comodo knew what it needed to do. It exerted more energy and ran at an incredible speed, just at the same time the monster crashed to the ground. The earth itself shattered and trembled. Fortunately, the drop didn’t fall on their heads. If it weren’t for the protective walls that blocked the boulders and debris, the food stocks would be squashed and dropped right to the ground. Octagon and Laura glanced, dumbfounded at the wreck that the monster caused.

“And unfortunately, I’m wrong.” Laura said.

“Well, this day couldn’t get any worse, right?” Dice asked.

A loud rumble shook the environment then it was followed by a loud screech. They instinctively held on to their ears hearing the shriek of the enemy.

“We better camp for now, but we must send them a distress signal.” Dice said. “Octagon, do it.”

Octagon nodded. He raised his staff. A red fireball shot up to the sky and scattered to pieces. They headed immediately to the mountains and hills and hid in one of the caves. Octagon cast an illusion spell to the entrance of the cave as part of the mountain’s body.

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Back in the Glade. Alastor was just starting to pile up the seeds in the storage room. While Ken was busy sorting out the cargo boxes, Linda and the other trainees inspected the materials in the weapons and mason room. There are a lot of weapons and materials that were destroyed and were rendered useless, but Linda was not someone who was going to throw them away without thinking for a second about what they could be of use. She meticulously inspected one by one and outlined suggestions on what to do with it. Of course, they were useless and ordered the trainees to clean it up. The broken swords and other weapons melted and remade and mixed the materials.

They were in the middle of transporting it when suddenly a trainee burst inside the room.

“Linda. There’s an emergency. Director Rod wants to talk to you.”

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“I’m sorry, what?!” Alastor's voice echoed. The officers paid no heed and came out of the room in respect of their privacy. “You let them borrow Liber?!”

“It’s just a Comodo. If something happens to that Comodo, I’m going to compensate for it. Name the price.” Rod confidently said.

“One hundred and twenty.”

“Deal.”

“What about me?” Cid asked, motioning forward. He side-eyed the gang with contempt.

“What about you?”

“I wasted one hundred thousand Haz for these kids to pull their stunt.”

“One hundred thousand Haz?!” He furiously stood and glared at them. “On what earth are you thinking of wasting a huge amount of money?!”

Cid’s dead eyes fell upon Alastor and Ken. They shivered as they felt a chill run down their spine.

“We got desperate, so we gave it all.” Cid coldly said.

Rod’s restless eyes were covered by his hands in disappointment. “Where did I go wrong? You were supposed to be better than this.”

“Yeah, I know that you expected more of us but we faced a not-so-human enemy, a sly demonic existence that manages to build an enterprise as we all know an Arbiter. So, please, give us some slack.” Alastor said with a stricken face. He was demanding and risking his huge gambit that Rod would listen to them.

“Please, let us stop this argument,” Linda interjected icily and asked, “Tell us, what kind of emergency is it that you have to summon us immediately?”

Rod sighed. “As you all know, we lacked food supplies here, hence, I request the former trainees here to gather some supplies out in the forest, to hunt down animals. They’ve been hunting animals and collecting herbs, but they’ve reported that there’s an anomaly that exists and they’re not willing to investigate it, because no one truly knows what’s out there, and frankly, I don’t think it is advisable to go on, given that we lacked manpower here, so I can’t take the risk. I suppose I don’t have to say that the Night Tide is three weeks from now. It would be hectic days from here on out. As much as possible I don’t want any one of you to get into trouble and get killed for whatever it is out there.”

“So, what now?” Alastor asked.

“A student from the outpost saw a red-light flash across the sky. Something must have happened to them and that is why you’re all going to search and rescue.”

“How much?”

“You’re asking that now?”

“We’re professionals.” He reasoned.

“Damn kids,” Rod said. “You have no sense of responsibility at all.”

“You’re the one who gave Liber without my permission.”

“Fine. I’m going to add ten percent to your accounts… except for you Cid.”

“Why?!” Cid furiously asked. Of course, he would be infuriated by this thought.

“Because you failed to do your assignment.”

“I did not,” Cid replied. “Actually, I have a lead.” He proudly said.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, but these kids blew up my cover so blame them too. Nonetheless, I managed to gather some data regarding their activities.”

“Well, whatever. That’s not my problem. You better start immediately looking for their traces.”

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The four of them ran at top speed inside the forest. Since they have no carrier, they use their feet to travel. They went to the location of the red flash. It was not easy. It took them four hours to get into the location and must fight monsters along the way.

Surprisingly, there were only a few monsters within the area. Some of them were low in threat levels, such as a buggy beetle, a beetle that was about 8 feet in width and 5 feet in length. The monster’s chestnut shell can produce some sort of sticky white liquid and should anything attached to it will be stuck while its parasitic pores will release and slowly get inside the victim’s body until it’ll get paralyzed for the monster to eat it. It may be deadly but it’s easy to counter at a certain distance with the use of magic.

Ken was observing the surroundings, unsure of the road that lay ahead.

“Are you sure this is the way, Linda?”

“Pretty much,” Linda said.

“Pretty much? That doesn’t sound good.” Alastor said.

“Well, the watch-guard in the outpost said that the flare came from this direction.”

Alastor sighed and slightly closed his eyes for a second. “So, are you saying we are basing on the direction of the flash, not the specific location?”

“You expect that we’d do a locator spell?” Linda asked.

“My point exactly,” Cid said.

“We can’t,” Linda replied icily.

“Why?” Alastor asked her.

“Because the very rare people who can do it were killed during the insurgence.”

“Damn it. It would be convenient if we have one.” Alastor spat. He covered his eyes from the merciless beating of the sun.

Cid who was least passionate about their search sat down on a trunk drinking beverage on his hip flask. “Well, it’s ten in the morning. We still have time to find them. I suggest you should give it a rest.” Cid said after he groaned over the bitter booze. “I have a feeling that it’s going to get doozy later. Might as well take the time and rest before the main event.” Cid whispered to himself.

Ken brought some food for himself and started eating the potato chips and having his fermented juice hang on between his thighs while sitting down.

“You want some?” Ken offered a bagful of junk food.

“Err, no. Why would you bring useless things to eat?” Linda briefly turned away with disgust.

“Because they’re tasty. As long as they’re filling my empty stomach, I’m good with it.”

Alastor went to scout the area to check the vicinity whether there are any monsters or not. It was his instincts that dictated him to do it. It’s better to make sure than sorry.

He couldn’t get off from his head the fact that they’re still accepting missions declined his thoughts of any possibility of vacation. Even though he doesn’t particularly dislike his line of work, Alastor had his limits as well as others.

“The coast is clear,” Alastor reported to Linda, to which she nodded in approval. He sat down next to her.

“Man, I don’t get it.” Ken tiredly said, still munching loudly with his food. “I thought at long last we’re going to have a vacation.”

“Can’t say I can’t disagree.” Cid said and groaned. He waved his hand. “I was imagining I’m on the beach within the weeks after my mission, but turns out the Glade has been compromised by some assholes.”

“We clearly need a break,” Ken said, rubbing his forehead.

“Yep.”

“I don’t know but we don’t have the right to complain, honestly, since we’re still bound to contract to the Glade and our affiliation is somewhat made enemies. So, I think it would be convenient that being part of the glade benefits us as a back-up if we’re in a crisis.” Linda said.

“Very inspiring words, Linda, very inspiring,” Ken said sarcastically. “It’s not like everyone knows our faces.”

Alastor turned his head around. “You do remember that there were three members of Canary that knew our faces, right?”

“Sometimes, I wonder where the maker put your brain. In your ass or on your butt? Hmm, I couldn’t tell.” Linda said.

“They’re the same,” Ken said.

Linda gasped. “It is.”

“Look, guys.” Alastor interrupted. “We don’t have time for this. There are three missing persons and no one knows what they’d ended up with. So, please, focus.”

“Easy for you to say Boy Scout,” Cid said. “Most of the time you’re busy hitting that new recruit, literally.”

“Cid, you will have your time on hitting girls once we’re done helping to rebuild the Glade, and for your information, I’m well invested to become an instructor and it’s not an easy task,” Alastor replied.

“Well invested? What does that even mean?”

Cid’s questions were left hanging in the air as the others followed Alastor through the forest. He poured his hip flask to his mouth once more before prepping up and followed them with a sudden motion.

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“Did someone bring a flashlight?” Laura asked. They were walking down the dark rocky cave for quite some time. Liber cried. It agreed with her conjecture. It was really hard to make out the field in the thick darkness.

“Hold on,” Octagon said.

Suddenly, a fireball appeared and floated within his palm.

“Whew. I thought we were dead.” Dice said.

The three of them went down to the downhill rocky slope.

“Hey,” Dice called out to Comodo. “Stay there.”

The Comodo snorted and ignored him. Liber curled and went to sleep.

Together they ventured further and saw the huge charred graffiti across the cave. Then there were bones scattered around the soiled land. The foul smell of decaying meat had them back away and cover their noses.

“This is a monster’s den.” Dice said.

“I heard that there’s a monster somewhere that’s residing within this area,” Laura replied.

“Guess we have the answer now.”

Octagon inspected around and produced a strong fire that effaced away the shadows. He saw footprints that are thrice larger than the wagon.

“Guys?”

“What?” Laura asked.

“You might want to see this.”

Octagon pointed out the footprints.

“Uh-oh. We’re toast.”

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They finally reached their destination. When they saw the decapitated animals, claw marks on the trees, the tracks of the wagon wheels they followed it and saw a portion of the land wherein a hole that was dug deep in razor sharp manner. The others began to scan the area while Linda and Alastor were left to analyze what they could come up with.

“There’s no bodies nor my Liber. I bet that they’re still alive.” Alastor said.

Linda thought otherwise. “Whatever this is, it’s something big. The smartest decision that would be plausible is to find a safe place to hide until we arrive.”

“Hmm, since that area didn’t work for them, they might as well find new geographical areas where they can hide.”

“Are you thinking what am I thinking?”

“Yep. And it’s going to cause another headache.”

Ken and Cid came back from scanning the area.

“So, do you have any clues?”

“Yes.”

“And where would it be?”

“In the mountains.”

“Shit. No kidding. That area was forbidden to us.”

“Although it pissed me off too, I think they made the right decision. Bringing whatever monster chasing after them, it would do more damage in the Glade.”

“I agree.” Linda said. “They’re pretty smart. That’s what you’ll expect from a Class A mercs.”

“There’s a lot of mountains stocked up. It will take us forever to find them. It’s like searching a needle in a haystack” Cid said.

“Stop whining. We need to start searching for them now. There’s no telling when that creature will return.”

“Yeah. Whatever those things, they made their tails wag and turned their shit off away from us.”

They’ve realized that they must proceed with extreme caution. They knew very well that some monsters were living within the mountains, which was why they were prohibited to go beyond and evade places that are open for the enemy to attack them.

“We’ve been going out for hours.” Ken tiredly said. “Don’t you think they’re dead?”

“They’ve been gone for a day. There might be a chance that their ass is still intact.”

“Hmm. Fuck it.” Cid said. “Seven hours of free sighting and there’s still no trace. They hid their asses well. We couldn’t find them as if they'd completely disappeared.” There was an exaggeration of his last word. “Or maybe they went AWOL.”

“Cid, calm down.” Linda held his shoulder. “Or you’re going first.” Her concerned expression suddenly turned in the other direction and switched to deadly serious.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good.” Linda walked forward. She was scanning the terrain. “Now, if we were them, where would we hide in this tundra?”

“Trenches. Beneath the mountain.”

“The problem is where to look.”

A sight caught Ken’s eyes. It was the wheels track the fade off in the woods. “Uhm, guys. You guys might want to look at this.”

“What is it?”

They went and followed the tracks until it led them to a dead-end beneath the mountain.

“I hate to break it to you, but it’s a dead end.” Cid scoffed.

Alastor, who was the least pessimistic, picked up a stone and threw it at the base of the mountain. Their eyes squinted as the rock bounced back from inside of what seemed to be an illusion as if something had deflected it.

“Or maybe not,” Linda said.

She began to chant and her hands began to gesture.

“Postus Retilious.”

The wall of illusion began to deduce into dust and the entrance of the cave appeared before their eyes. They went inside, but Linda chanted the illusion spell again. The entrance was sealed again.

“What was that for?” Alastor asked.

“That illusion was chanted for a reason.”

Ken cast a fireball magic.

“Well, no use to whine now,” Cid said. “We might as well move forward.”

They moved forward. They felt that the atmosphere was crawling on their skin. Alastor sneezed as he shook his head.

“What the hell is this place?” Cid asked. “It reeks of black magic.”

“Yeah, no shit.” Linda said. “It’s all over the place. It may not be strong, but dear lord, it’s mind-wrenching.”

“I hope that this will go soon.”

“Speaking of which, I haven’t seen Tin these days. Where has she been?” Ken asked.

“She’s busy. She’s part of the stock team and went with the others in the sea to gather stocks from the other country.”

“I wish I was in her position,” Ken said. “I could use a vacation right now.”

They stopped when they heard a faint gasp. Ken flew his fireball to the source and in surprise, a face lurked out and blew off the fireball. What happened next was that they were ambushed. By the time that fireballs emanated, flew around, and the three suspects walked out from the shadow.

Linda felt something crawl in her arms, saw out of the corner of her eyes a binding spell firmly wrapped around while the others were in a pause as the tipping point of their weapons was in their heads.

“We’ve come here at peace.” Ken briskly said.

“Who are you?” Dice asked.

“We’re the rescue squad,” Linda said. “We came here to rescue you, just to be redundant and clear.”

“How ironic. You look like the ones who needed saving more than us.” Octagon said.

“Spare us the mockery,” Alastor said. He looked up to them, squinting his eyes to memorize their faces despite the lack of visibility. “If it isn’t because of dark magic, we wouldn’t be in low spirits.”

Laura sighed. They retract their weapons on them and call Liber. The gang stood by.

Liber was carrying the wagon of the stock foods and cried happily as he saw Alastor. The Comodo ran to him and demanded. Alastor petted him with relief before sitting beside them with the fire in the middle.

Dice began to explain how they got to this point where they were given no option but to stay put while waiting for the rescuers.

“We've been sitting ducks here since yesterday. We need to formulate a plan. Look, I’m not going to die here, chicks are waiting for me.” Dice said. He plucked out the wine cork and relentlessly drank it. “I would rather die wrapped in the arms of a woman rather than that monster.”

“All right then,” Alastor started. “We’ll have to make a trap.”

The goal was to finish setting up the trap before sunset. Likely, because of their proficiency, they were able to pull this off and began to execute the plan. Ken who was the fastest of them all unwillingly volunteered to become the bait was covered by the blood.

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The stink lingered in the air and was caught by the sharp nose of the primate monster that was disrupted in his afternoon snack. It threw its food away and began to scurry towards the source. The monster leaped off, disrupting the rest of the animals and monsters. It growled and shook the nearby trees. The wind flickered the leaves and the birds flew away.

Its gigantic body emerged from the whirling dust and its arms stretched to reach Ken. He shifted his weight and dashed backward. The primate unleashed its fury as it grew its claw and tried to reach for Ken, but this time Linda summoned ice wall magic to block the attack.

“Here it goes.” Linda declared.

The pristine ice exploded and sparkled. The monster howled at them. Its pair of wide eyes loomed in bright red along with its terrifying jaws and crooked fangs. The monster had a distinct grotesque veins popping all over its body—a result of being exposed in miasma.

“Ken, you can speak its language, right?” Alastor asked.

“No.” Ken said. “I thought it’s your cousin.”

“Inside the cave, now!” Linda ordered.

The others camouflaged in the darkness and waited patiently for the monster to enter. The primate’s head lurched in and its forty foot size body struggled to get inside so it bent to get inside and began to explore the cave.

It went deeper inside and glanced around. Its instinct sharpened as it sensed a threat coming from his right side. It was a fireball that was directly shot on its face. It momentarily stammered, and in that instant, Liber sprinted past the monster. It tried to grab Liber but failed as Dice, Laura and Linda fired its back with various kinds of magic. It stumbled forward to gain distance. Just as they planned, the monster went straight to the hole they made. Various hooks began to emerge and pierced its skin, effectively holding the monster. It roared as they got away.

“Run inside the fucking wagon!” Alastor shouted.

They went inside and Alastor pulled the reins. Liber cried and dashed. Looking behind the cave the inside exploded and the smoke began to trail outside into the sky. The boulder crumbled down and blocked the entrance.

“If you can’t kill it, bury it alive,” Alastor said.

“So far, so good,” Linda said. “It will buy us some time.”

“No,” Laura yelled. “You just jinx us.”

Their breath left their lungs as the base of the mountain was eradicated into a loud explosion and the monster sprung out. The primate monster roared as its chalked skin grew bright red.

“Oh fuck!” Cid shouted as they peered behind the window.

“Yep, we are dead.” Dice added.

The monster grabbed the nearby trees as if it were a plush toy and threw it at them. Alastor guided the Comodo aside. Liber struggled to evade due to the constant uneven road. It made it harder for the Comodo to maintain its speed.

“Why are we running by the way?” Alastor asked, dazzled by hitting his head against the wagon. He cursed under his breath.

Dice raised a brow. “Uh, because it’s a rampaging shithead that is obviously out of our league?”

“Yeah, that was yesterday, but now we have the manpower. We kill it and we have more food stock.”

They stumbled on to that realization and grinned. Liber stopped and was ordered by Alastor to get away. They waited for the enemy and stood their ground.

The enemy landed in front of them. The monster’s eyes grew bright red as its claws swiftly aimed at its first target. Linda blocked it with her ice wall and Cid and Ken blasted it with fire magic. The monster blocked it with its bare hands. Ken pursued the opportunity of lack of vision and strengthened his fist, he launched forward, hitting the stomach of the enemy.

The enemy fumbled and was not able to counter as Laura and Octagon bombarded the enemy with fire and wind magic. Alastor sprinted as he held high his sword, he sprung to its leg and cut the part where the nerve lies on. The right leg was leaking with ribbons of blood. The enemy kneeled as Dice and Alastor cut off the monster’s left leg.

The last thing that the monster recalled was the light that blinded its sigh as it was blinded by the fire magic of Ken and Linda’s ice magic. The enemy was completely overwhelmed by the number and couldn’t react properly on which it should attack first. Alastor rolled over evading the enemy.

With the blinded enemy, they were able to thoroughly damage it, but its moves became more agitated and threw off Octagon, Linda, Ken, and Laura. Dice leaped over with his sword plunged into the monster’s chest. Alastor also cut off its tail as it tumbled down and fell over the ground. Alastor leaped over its neck, slashed its throat before it could even draw its last breath.

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As soon as the dawn broke, they traveled out of the forest. The journey was not without any conflicts. There were numerous familiar monsters they have fought, but with ease they vanquished them. Conveniently, the conflicts added more rations and had more for them to eat while they were on their tracks. The storage already filled the spaces inside the carriages and adding too much would put strain more than Liber could handle.

“Not to meddle or anything, but it would be wise to stop adding more for now,” Linda said.

“Why?” Laura asked. “It would be such a waste to leave those potential rations here.”

“No, I agree with her.” Dice said.

“It would be unwise to overworked Liber. The additional load will lag him. We can’t afford to stay here any longer.” Alastor said.

“He is right, do not forget, the Night Tide is fast approaching. There’s so much preparation that must be done.”

The Night Tide was a one-week event wherein the moon will shine brighter at its height during midnight. The light of the moon will affect the monsters and will become wild, granting them enhanced strength and even animalistic instincts. Some monsters are also affected psychologically by mysterious phenomena which makes them unpredictable and dangerous. Most people knew that it was dangerous and must be careful during times of the Night Tide.

Others are strong enough to overcome the trial and were not afraid to deal with the aberration. Some warriors from neighboring nations see this as an opportunity to test their might, strengthen themselves and brace for the upcoming change.

“Sacrificing our speed over the weight is not worth it,” Alastor said. “So, it is best for us to minimize the risk of exposure to the upcoming danger.”

“I agree with Alastor,” Octagon said. “Now let's leave, before monsters will come to steal our stocks.”

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They finally made it out and saw the mansion on top of a hill. Over the northeast, they can see the field for training. Some trainees are practicing their swordsmanship with the use of a wooden sword, abiding to the rule. It was the law of the Glade, using real swords was forbidden to use during mock training, and one should only use wooden swords. The use of real ones was only allowed when there’s a test or in actual combat.

It was a long tiring afternoon, almost all of them had neither strength or had a strong will to be noticed when they entered the Glade. Linda ordered one of the trainees named Bennett to handle the stock foods they had gathered to the stock room before joining them inside.

“I’ll head to the directors’ room. You guys take some rest.” Linda said.

“Will do,” Alastor said.

The others immediately spread out.

“I will also head to the director. Let me accompany you.”

Linda nodded. Dice glanced at Octagon and Laura.

“You guys should take some rest too. Do not worry, this won’t take long.”

The moment the two of them were left alone, Linda and Dice start to discuss.

“I hope I’m not the only one who noticed the reek of black magic in that cave.”

“Worry not. That is the reason why I want to join you to report this uncanny event to Rod.”

“Good, because we need to dispose of the rats that are the cause of that monster mess.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

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It had been decided, Rod and the other directors orchestrated a plan for the upcoming Night Tide. The forces were divided into groups. The Medic Team, from the name itself, are the ones who are responsible for tending the wounded people. The Melee Team are the front liners so to speak, they are the ones who will engage in close combat against the enemies.

The plan was already laid, but there are so many things that they must do and prepare. The trainees spend most of their time training while shifting duties. The event might take place one week from now but they are hectic and tireless. Aside from that, some trainees must be dealt with the utmost dedication.

A chain of explosions resonated in the forest as Sherry continuously jink and evaded the landmines that Nathaniel conjured.

“No wonder why your friends spoke so confidently about you, you got some spunk, kid,” Nathaniel said. It appeared that Sherry can’t hear him, but, nonetheless, she was still gallantly avoiding the air bombs.

Alastor was the one who asked for Nathaniel’s assistance with Sherry’s training. Since Sherry learned hand to hand combat and had grasped it with magic, he thought that it was time for her to learn how to apply it in real life scenarios.

They were observing her dodging the air bombs from the higher echelon of the ruins of a building. Nathaniel’s incessantly conjured and planted his magic to the ground.

“This air-bomb magic of mine not only can be planted on the terrain but also in the air. You sure you don’t want to fully utilize my abilities?”

“No,” Alastor strictly said. “It would be too much for her. For now, let us test and help her improve her instinct and senses.”

“Okay then.”

Sherry leaped and hung on the branch of a tree before Nathaniel’s air-bomb exploded.

“Hey!” Alastor shouted. “That is cheating.”

Sherry glared back at him, “This training is for survival, right? What’s wrong with using the environment as an advantage?”

There was a hint of annoyance in his tone, but there was a truth in her words. Regardless, this training had a different purpose. “I want you to learn to be cautious and use your senses properly, not to rely on your advanced enhancements or the environment.”

“But my enhancements are the real deal. I can even see the mana planted all over the place.”

Alastor snapped out and whispered to Nathaniel. “Do it, Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel grinned. He enigmatically waved his hand. Several dust began to spin and form. Sherry picked up the cue and saw the multiple compressions of air, although she missed one. The nearby air compression exploded at her back. The shockwave sent her flying back to the ground and with a stroke of misfortune, she landed nearby the landmine and to another. The chains of explosion dissipated her screams. Sherry was lucky enough that next time she landed was a safe zone, but it was too far for her to relax.

Observing from the high level, Alastor decided to jump down and deliver a surprise attack to Sherry. She felt the wind sharpen up above and saw him with his sword directed at her. The pit in her stomach swelled and burst energy through her veins. She propelled as the energy came out from her hand and evaded the attack. Alastor pulled the sword struck from the earth and turned around.

She noticed the pattern of the landmines and the land where it was safe. The feeling that was exhilarated suddenly hushed down and her senses went back to normal.

“What was that?” She asked.

“That is your innate power kicking up from your mind.”

“Is that the result of my enhancement?”

“Absolutely not. That ability comes from you, not from the bionic enhancement, but from your human side. Tell me, what do you feel?”

“I- for a moment I felt that there’s a heat swell on my stomach that burns me with such energy. I never felt that much sensation, but I think I like it.”

“It looks like you momentarily tap on your ability.”

“Say, how do I retain it?”

“Through training, of course. That feeling only comes in the moment of danger. Your senses will sharpen and would be able to deliver a counter offense against the enemy. That was based on the Hunters technique which was passed down in the few outsiders until now, but only exceptional people were able to fully muster it and were able to perform it with expertise.”

Sherry smiled in amusement. “I guess I’m one of them.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, kid. It’s one-time luck to use that kind of power. You will need more training to attain that kind of ability.”

Sherry grinned. “All right, all right. Show me it then. Give me all that you’ve got.”

Alastor gripped his sword and went head against Sherry.

A matter of moments, Sherry regretted challenging them head on. She was put on an edge with Alastor's aggression and Nathaniel’s compressed bombs. She was barely able to judge the air bombs and Alastor thoroughly cut her. Sherry coughed as she leapt out of the swelling smoke.

“That’s – that’s enough, shit.” She kneeled. “I can’t hold on –much longer. Timeout.”

“That's all you’ve got?” Alastor asked.

“It’s not fair. There are two of you guys and there’s only me.”

“Well get used to it. This is how we trained. We pushed through our limits and challenged the odds beyond our abilities.”

“Crap.” Sherry stared detestably at them. “I was not expecting this.”

“If I were you, I would train my mind to get ahead of physical strain. One day, if you’re in actual field combat, you would be able to utilize every strategy that has been taught to you.”

Her eyes gleam in determination, “Then I will endure it. Even if it cost a lot.”

“Good for you, but I’m afraid you are out of juice. Let’s do this again tomorrow.”

Sherry’s body gave up on the ground but Alastor caught her and carried her on his back.

“Hm, not bad, kid.”

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Early in the morning. Linda and the others helped the head technician named Farahd. She lent him the screwdriver as he climbed in the ladder in the ship to fix the bolts and was finally able to let the shroud wide open. Next, they headed to the engine room and fixed the turbo machine that was destroyed a few days ago.

“At last, we should be able to travel across the sea.”

“Yes, it is,” Farahd said, inhaling the salt breeze. “Since, we were able to fix it. Why don’t we try it out?”

“Why now? The tide is nigh. We should hurry and hide in the mansion until the Night Tide comes.”

“Well, considering the lack of sailors, we might as well train the others to sail a ship as well, even though they’re essentials or not. But I would reckon they might be useful in the future.”

“Very well.”

Farahd commanded the crew to prepare the ship and hold on to the position before he went to the steering wheel. They set sail across the sea. Whilst he was maneuvering the ship, the fellow crewmates threw the nets on the sea.

“This is how you catch a fish.” He said to Linda.

Farahd waited patiently, his ears sharpened and eyes scanning at the waves. He saw the sign, picked up the timing of the wind and went to maneuver it northwest. The ship turned sideways, sped briefly, and stammered Linda. She wobbled hard and managed to catch a rope to balance. She was feeling sick.

“Maybe a little warning next time.”

A moment passed and the ship finally stopped from maneuvering to steady gait. The crew began to pull the net to dock. It was a feast of harvest indeed. The net was so full of fish that even the fish on top could crawl and escape the net.

“You see what I did there?”

“That is impressive. Will you teach me?”

“With pleasure.”

And so, they began to depart the ship, and Linda was taught the basic lessons from the captain himself.

She quickly grasped his teaching and began to recite it one by one. It requires timing where the sailing winds would come. Whenever the winds came, she maneuvered the steering wheels in the directions so that the speed would boost and would be able to catch fish. In certain lengths of her success, Farahd commanded her.

“Hey, we’ll have to draw”

“Why? We could catch more.”

“No.” Farahd firmly said. “There is no need. Too much fish will only be decentralized and unbalance our cycle. If we gather too many sea creatures then there will be no more for us next time.”

Linda nodded. She was not that ignorant to not recognize the emergence of the balance of nature. It would be foolish to upset it.

“There are consequences should we catch the hatchlings. There will be no more harvest for us should they be caught in our stride!”

“Yes, I understand. No need to get stingy on it, jeez.” She nervously replied.

The night finally appeared before their eyes and the sunset was opposite to it. The stars burn bright above as the magenta clouds begin to disperse into blackness. The tide of the night finally came. The sea began to behave incoherently. The tide comes high and low and high again, which makes their ship unstable to sail.

“We need to dock before the tide will consume us all!”

Farahd steered around and went to the underground cave and sealed the entrance. It was hard and rough. Farahd anticipated the abnormal tide occurrence. Well, it was expected to happen ever since the Night Tide is coming.

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The night when they separated.

Alastor made it clear to him, he can take care of that monster by himself. Glox's role, for now, was on guard duty. Frankly, whether Alastor told him or not, he will undoubtedly be left to aid the women and the children, especially Reia, who was the heiress of the elven tribe. He cannot let her out of his sight, now that she was close to her, never again will let her do her own bidding after the plight she had to face for the past months all by herself.

Glox ran in the forest, not even the slightest of monsters’ intrusion were able to halt his pursue. His eyes were filled with emerald mana and felt the danger revolving around the people that he was after. His speed increased and the gale of wind howled by. Monsters sprung out of the darkness, the very same kind that Alastor faced, but was not as strong. Glox knives began to emanate light.

“Get out of my way!”

As he swung the light extended. The darkness was dispelled easily. The monsters in the shadow flee. By the means of his speed, he was able to catch on to them. Reia used protection magic against the monstrous shadow, while the others used their guns against it, but it seemed that it was impenetrable by any physical means, and by the look of Reia's situation, she cannot conjure offensive magic without leaving safe from the other monsters’ attacks.

Glox leaped with his knife sabers and jumped to the enemy. The monster howled and drew away from his attacks. Reia saw him got out of dark enclosure.

“Glox. I'm glad that you are here. What happened to Al?”

“Don't worry about him. Worry this demon in front of us.”

“Right,” Reia replied. “Sherry, take the kids and take cover.”

Sherry nodded and take the kids behind the boulder far away from their fight.

The monster sprung and glided down. Glox's reaction time was slow, luckily, Reia conjured protection wall magic against the enemies’ attacks and was followed by fire magic. The magic blasted the monster away. The smoke whirled when Glox spurted wind magic to increase his speed. His knife pierce through the monster. It did not tax too much when the enemy was stunned by Reia's attack.

Glox felt the heaviness of its flesh when he pulled out the knife emitted by holy light.

“It seems that holy magic is effective against his kind.”

“Yes, it seems so.”

The monster was crippled and its form was finally revealed. Clad in dark attire, the pang revealed and horrid eyes brimmed in red.

“A vampire?” Glox asked himself. “This can't be. How can such a creature conjure such dark magic?”

“Let us pray to find the right answer later after we finish the enemies. Here they come!” Reia said.

“What?”

Other shadowy figures began to spring out in the darkness. Reia's concerned eyes led to Sherry and the children hiding behind the boulder. Her hands raised and conjured a sphere around. The shadows bounced back and burned. There was a low pitch of shrill when they died.

“That should hold them for long.” She said.

“My lady, should we withdraw?”

“Does it look like we have another option?”

As much as he wanted to grab her away, she would eventually hate him for abandoning the child, so he chose the latter.

“I'm afraid, not.”

“Good, ‘because I hate running away from a good fight.” She smirked. “Foul creatures, do not think you can have it your way. By the blessed power of the elder gods, I will end your wicked existence here.”

Reia conjured wind magic to disrupt their senses and vision, allowing her to create illusions. Her palm was placed against the shadow’s chest. The monster gradually felt the heat and it was too late to withdraw as it was now under her spell.

“Fiaraga!”

The monster erupted in flame and turned to dust in a matter of seconds. He whirled around cutting them off in the fatal parts of their body. The rest of the monsters didn’t stand a chance against Glox with the aid of holy magic as their weakness.

“You've done well, my lady.” He complimented.

“Same goes for you.”

The monsters slowly backed down and retreated.

“That is right, fend off, before I'll kill you all.”

Their actions had not diverted Glox's premonition. He felt a disturbing presence that exerted *its* effort to hide its presence.

“I believe it is not the end. Raise your guard, my lady.”

A shadow hopped and crashed at them. The blast of wind caught them and shook off their balance.

“So, these are the beings that disturbed our hunting. Oh, I love a good challenge.”

In a single swift the dust whirling around dissipated. A man in a grandiose outfit emerges. Their eyes can tell the immense dark mana circling around him.

“A bishop vampire?”

“A bishop?” He snickered. “I'm flattered to be compared to that kind, but forgive me for the misgivings, I am not. I am just a mere captain of this division. You'll have to read more about us, not just concluding from tiptoeing.”

“Impossible. Your dark mana exceeds the normal ones.” She said. She was surprised that something like him existed.

“I am normal.”

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Please enlighten me with your strength. I have heard that your lot causes commotion and a headache to my allies over here. I cannot imagine how tremendously powerful you are.”

“I am well confident that we will meet your expectations.”

“Well then. Shall we begin?” He goaded.

Glox led the charge. His weapon flashed in white light and lunged over the vampire, but no matter what he tried, he couldn't hit him. From right to left, the vampire easily evaded Glox. He shifted his position and with one punch, Glox was blown away.

“Is that all?” The vampire smiled.

On the contrary, Reia caught him surprisingly from behind. Her fire and ice magic inflicted the enemy. His clothes burned, showing the skin having a second-degree burn which was worsened by her ice magic.

“Hm. Now come to think of it, the two of you come from the elven tribe, am I correct?”

“So, what if?”

“Nothing. I find it curious how secretive tribes are out of their nest. Is there something that lured you away from your home?”

“That is none of your business.” Reia strictly replied.

“Oh, but it is. You see, vampires and elven races are sworn enemies.”

“Do not flatter yourself. Every foul creature is the elven's sworn enemies.” She replied.

“Nonetheless, I must take the two of you seriously. I cannot allow the two of you to go unattended. My master will be pleased if I offer your heads to him.”

“My lady, I'm afraid our friend here is beyond help. He is deluded.”

Her hatred towards vampires reflected in her eyes. She despises them for the fact that they caused chaos during the previous war of blights. In the majority of the previous eras, the vampires were the ones who mostly inflicted the elven tribes.

“Do not take us so lightly, vampire. Blink, you'll get a stake. Blink twice, you'll get burned.”

He sighed and closed his eyes for a second. “You cannot fathom what I can do. You don't even know what kind of -”

Before he can finish his words, Reia conjured fire sword magic and pierce it through the vampire's flesh.

“The third warning, close your eyes and you'll get both.”

His eyes fixated on Reia. Just now he felt the most terrifying thing that any being then can do to make him feel vulnerable and do harm to him. The fire magic had set his entire body on fire. The billowing dust had covered his charred naked body. He swung his arm and instantly he was covered back to his clothes. The wounds healed too.

“I must confess, you are strong. But not as strong compared to the others I have fought over hundreds of years.”

Glox immediately went to her side when he felt the malicious aura conspire to strike Reia.

“My lady...”

“I know.”

The vampire's strong bloodlust aura leaks all over the place. Several monsters around the vicinity had left hurriedly. The pangs appeared, his claws grew, veins popped out on his skin and his eyes did ever grow brighter in red.

“My lady,” He glanced back at her. “I believe we should head out. We can't take him down. Not with our strength.”

“I reckon you dare.”

With a single snap of his fingers, the other vampires went and engaged Sherry and the children. If it weren't for the shield she conjured, they would be dead for now.

“As far as I remember, protection magic as long as the expended mana holds on. Now, this is a challenge for you, defeat me and my acolytes will conspire with no one again. Deal?”

Reia held Glox's shoulder, she looked at him with sincerity and in her voice, “I know what you are thinking, but I made a vow to those children that I will save them and keep them away from any here. You and I both knew what it meant to become an orphan, especially when no one keeps your innocence away from any conspiring environment.”

He fell into contemplation, “That, I cannot argue. Fine, we will beat him and show the mighty power of elves.”

“Show me more!”

The vampire shouted as he launched an attack. There was no mistake about it, the moment his knife sabers met the vampire's arm, he felt for a moment the hardness of it. It was nothing like he had seen before. Of course, not only was he was a warrior, but Glox was also a mage. He had studied magic and the art of swords ever since he was in his teen years, he was able to muster how to conduct a reiteration magic, a type of offensive magic that allows the user to weaponize and prolong a certain element into a weapon. He was not a stranger when it comes to enhancement magic, such as increasing his speed wherein with the power of wind magic. He was able to increase his speed, but there are also side effects of using such abilities, it takes an amount of willpower, observation, and analysis when to shift his weight to change his direction to evade or attack in order to effectively utilize his magic. He knew very well that his greatest asset was also his greatest drawback.

Glox knew that in every magic there was always a downside to using it. Enhancement magic like changing the body mass, durability, and instincts was part of it.

Reia glided down and shot fire magic to the free-falling enemy. With a single swift of his arms, the magic she conjured deflected.

“Is that all you've got?! You got to do better than that!” He mocked. “And here I thought that the elves are supposed to be powerful. Where has that legendary strength gone?! I hope your fellow kind does not show the same. It would be disappointing to recognize that the strength of your bloodline dissipated.”

“Insolent!” Glox shouted. “To think such a mere vampire, mock our kind.”

“This 'mere vampire' you have spoken of holds the key to saving those bunch of blood bags. You are at my mercy.” He replied. “Perhaps you will reveal more if I press more stress.”

For a moment, the vampire's action had embarked their thoughts in awe of his capabilities. A dragon shape made of fire sprung from his hands and spit fireballs to attack Sherry and the children. Sherry held the children in an attempt to catch the blast whenever the wall of protection broke apart. On the other side, the fireball attack did not spare the vampires and killed at least some of them before fleeing.

Reia attempted to attack the flame dragon, but he was intercepted by the vampire.

“I believe that is cheating, my lady. You were supposed to be playing with me.”

Glox immediately parted the vampire's aim and guided his saber knife to parry his attack.

“You have to admit using children to hold us as a bargain is pretty low.”

“Yes, I agree. But like what you have described me, I am despicable and insolent. So, it is no surprise that I will pull off a dirty trick.”

“May the gods burn your soul in the afterlife.”

“Your gods only made false promises that I can assure you.”

With the given space and time, Reia managed to perform another magic to shift the tide of the fight on their ends. She withdrew and placed her hands on the earth. Her senses became clear even when she closed her eyes. The wind, the monster’s presence, the vampire, Glox and hers. The very essence of earth courses through the plants, rivers, trees, flowers, seas. She felt the energy flowing and channeling to one another.

“No! NO!” The vampire shouted.

The vampire kicked Glox aside and went to Reia.

“So, you finally saw your mistake?”

The vampire can feel the presence of the unknown energy greater than his and to the other.

“You wish to see our might, right? You will be getting it first-hand.”

Reia floated above.

“Dieseart onivichs.”

A pure light energy swirled around the fire dragon. It engulfed and twisted the aberration leaving it to dust.

“I finally understand now.”

Her voice echoed. Whenever she tried to manifest mana and the mystic energy, she felt her head become heavier in seconds.

“Understand, what?”

“The reason why you are not the same as the others.”

Annoyed by her remarks, the vampire leaped and confronted her but he had blasted away without even touching her.

“What kind of magic is this?”

“A holy spell. Ever since the start, you don’t stand a chance against us.”

“Impossible.”

“It is possible.”

“This magic you possess; this is not something that an average elf can wield. What are you?”

“Something greater than you.”

Reia threw a sphere of light at him, but the vampire had a devil's luck. The light did not kill him, but it did more damage to him. As of now, the vampire felt the burning light that pierced his chest. The enemy staggered back, shivering in cold touch of light.

“Damn you. I did not expect that –” He coughed blood.

“That what?” She intervened. “That we are ignorant? That we are outdated because we isolated ourselves from the outside world? Do not underestimate our kind.”

The vampire grinned. “Perhaps, you are right. I should not have underestimated your kind. But don't underestimate me.”

The vampire quickly moved away and sprinted towards Sherry. The monster destroyed the wall and attempted to feed on one of the children, but Sherry blocked her and as a result, her blood was the one who served to feed the vampire.

“I do not care who you are but you will do good.”

In an unexpected event, Sherry's chest began to pulsate violet energy. The energy blasted the vampire away from her. The vampire stood in disbelief.

“How can this be?! You hold the power of the blight?! Y-y-you, insignificant speck?!”

At the same time, something broke through Sherry's mind.

“What did you do to me?!” She shouted. “What did you do to me?!”

Before the vampire could do anything more harm, Reia blasted the vampire.

“Sherry, it's going to be fine...” She tried to assure her but Sherry burst into madness, her eyes became ferocious.

“Stay away from me!!!”

Glox pulled Reia away before Sherry could do anything harmful to her.

“Don't try to do a thing to her Glox. She's not on herself.”

“That is precisely why we should kill her. She will do harm in any way means necessary.”

“I can c-c-c-c-control it.” She tried to relax and exhale. “I-I-I know... Al or Ken, they can help me.”

“Sherry, wait!”

In a blinding light, Sherry was gone. Thankfully, the children are no harm anymore.

“Should we go after her?” Glox asked.

“No. We will go to the rendezvous point. Let us hope that the gods will take care of her.”

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Reia’s memories were fresh as the fruit she was eating now. It rejuvenated her nerves as she drank a juice that slipped down her throat. It had been three weeks since they came here. All was to thank Henrick, he had guided them in Shahaya Island, a lone huge island that was across the sea. At first, she was mad about why they were not taken to the main mansion of the Glade, but after she knew about the uprising of the Renegades, she willingly complied with his instruction and allowed him to take them to Shahaya.

This deserted island was far from the mainland and was safe from the nation's radar. They were welcome as guests. The children were taken properly and given a bath. At first, they were hesitant to come over and join the other children, but soon enough they were able to adapt and make friends.

All those hardships were paid off as she can see that the children can live a comfortable life, free from worries and danger. She may not agree with their way of living but she was glad that the heads of the Glade allowed them to choose their path on their own while at the same time they are getting benefits with some minor chores that was out of the spectrum of danger.

Most children around nine years old are free from the malicious world while still learning. There was nothing more important for her than to protect the children’s innocence at all costs, even if it meant to delay her goals.

She knew that such a system was bound by the external force and restricted itself from outside influences. She knew that there was something more than the pretty face and sweet talks from the people in the Glade including Henrick but she did not want to probe any further to upset their courtesy of accepting them as their guests.

Reia stared at the bottom of the cliff onto the shadow part of the sea. Her thoughts reminisced the times when she was with her fellow kind. Glox followed her discreetly, he noticed that her face longed whenever she was preoccupied. Glox easily leaped on the adjacent stepping stone and onto the clearing then stayed by her side.

“It isn’t like you, why did you leave her?”

“I have my reasons.”

“Would you kindly share it with me?”

She paused for a few seconds. Even for herself, it was still unclear what she just saw. A vision came to her mind and at that moment, she knew it was right to let her do as she thought the right thing to do despite the emergence of the situation.

“I peered into the future. I saw a glimpse of the future, her and *them*, being part of the circle of a conflict. I became submissive on time at that moment, it tells me to let it happen. I’m so sorry, I can't even explain what has happened, but the sky abhors it, yet time still bids it to happen. I don’t know what will happen next, but what we have is time and preparation for the conflict.”

Glox saw the sorrowful expression of Reia. He unconsciously brushed his chin and lifted his gaze on the sunset.

“What to do now? Do you intend to spend more time here?” He asked.

“No. I have seen enough. Let us fare… tomorrow, at dawn. For now, allow me to enjoy whatever moment is left for me to accompany the children for one last time.”

“I understand. Very well then.”

He bowed and vanished in a leap.

She made her way down the hall. Some children are busy attending and assisting the staff in the kitchen, while the others are busy in their rooms playing, or keeping themselves busy with children’s books and learning different things, just like what any other normal child would do. A smile stretched on her face.

A child called her out. She struggled to climb up the stairs with her small legs. She nearly tripped over the paper plane over her heels.

“What is it?” Reia softly asked.

The little girl presented to her a doll on what seemingly resembled her figure. It was made of a potato sack with buttons similar to her eyes and her hair comes from the skewered rag that sewed to its head.

“Aww, thank you. It’s wonderful.”

“Thanks. Take care of Gigi, she’s very special.” The little girl giggled.

“Is that so?”

She did not need to ask, by the look of her face, she can tell that she put any effort into making the doll. She ran back to the room where the children are taught how to sew. She came across what seemed to be the training ground and to the western side where a building was on construction.

The thin cold air stays still for a few moments as the wave crashes at bay. It was the moment that the ring from the bell sent a shudder crept to her body. She felt the atmosphere gradually warm and she teleported on the rooftop and waited. She observed and waited patiently for what was about to happen in a matter of a minute.

The sky was clear as crystal. The stars twinkled brightly as the moonlight streaked on the surface. But the light did not last and was replaced by the color of the blood. It struck her again; the chilling atmosphere began to grow intense again. She saw the trails of reddish smoke miasma all over the place in the form of mist.

“What is happening?”

She stopped in her tracks as soon she saw a large group of men from the Glade preparing. The melee warriors guarded the mages on the shore, dressed in robes. The archers began to climb on the towers and on the roof. They all wore light armor and bucklers fastened in their arms. The mages chanted in sync.

“Ugania de forma shureido.”

In their palm, a white ball shoots out to the sky and begins to disperse into a dome. It was to protect the mansion from the upcoming strike of the enemies. They are prepared.

When Reia saw the rushing Henrick, she immediately flew and landed in front of him. Dazed and exhausted on his tasks, the tall and dark lad shook his head and halted. His face was long and pale.

“Will you explain to me what kind of anomaly this is?” She insisted, but Henrick removed her from blocking his path.

“It’s the Night Tide.” Henrick turned around. “You didn’t know?”

“What?” His explanation was easily swayed by her ignorance of the situation. “I don’t understand what you mean. Will you explain it to me more properly?” It was more like a statement rather than a question, but he understood her plight.

“Look, as much as I want to enlighten you, there isn’t much time. The monsters will rampart any moment now, we must prepare. And you must hide inside the mansion… make sure to keep the children safe there. You will be safe there while we drive away these monsters until the end of the night.”

The factions began to mobilize, hefty, and pensive. The Directors have clearly already made the preparations for this battle. Everything was set and ready to take on monsters they will face, or so they thought. The wind traveled from north to east. The mercenaries were observing the land with such care not to miss any missteps from the enemy that might benefit them, after all, they haven’t entirely known the complete geography of the land.

Henrick held out his broadsword and sighed inward. His thoughts of how this battle will course is running back and forth.

The mercenaries were already prepared for the battle and as they waited, monsters from the sea began to jump onto the bay. The two parties charged against one another. Their howls erupted like a volcano.

# Chapter 2

The cloud shaded the light of the moon and the sea harshly rose to the shore, its salty compound drizzled on them. The leaves were crippled and detached away by the northern wind. The mercenaries of the Glade assembled outside wherein they are prepared and marching towards the fight.

The mercenaries stayed in different positions, the medics were behind the front lines and were protected by the newbies from the hands of the enemies. Alastor dashed and went to his line which was in the forest. He held his blade with care and swung lightly, feeling the lightness of his blade that was enhanced by the blacksmiths.

He sheathed it and rested his eyes, releasing his breath, and exhaled again. He continued his mantra, controlling his breathing as the voices of the other warriors dissipated when he closed his eyes. When he felt that it was enough he slowly opened his eyes only to be flinched and be annoyed by the flashes of Ken’s camera.

“Say cheese!” Ken delightfully pressed the button.

Alastor had enough patience to spare any kind of spoiled acts of selfish endeavor. He finally snapped. “If failure has a face, you’d be a match.”

“What?”

“I said, we’re going to face probably hundreds of monsters, and here you are, wasting your time taking some pictures.”

“Snappy, I like it. Now, pose another strike.”

Alastor unsheathed his blade and pointed it into his chest.

“Delete those images now!”

Ken gulped, he knew that he was not going to do it, but his expression bade him do otherwise. “Fine. What a buzzkill.” He began to delete the images and showed to him no record of his face, but the other images did not fail to catch his keen eyes. “See, I deleted it.”

“I can see that, but what about the others?”

“What about the what?” He gazed away and with a pretentious and innocent look.

“You know what I mean.”

“Shhh… you don’t need to tell them about this. This is for collection purposes only. You can say that I’m a connoisseur.”

Oblivious as often he can be, certain ladies line up behind him in silence and with an expression of an untamed beast, only that it was way more grotesque.

“Connoisseur?” Alastor grinned. “Tell that to them.”

Ken glanced behind and saw the ladies flashing in anger. His face turned pale and was struck on his position as their cold gazes crept to his bones. They came closer enough to feel the stench of their intentions. Ken slowly backed off but was bumped behind by a larger woman. Alastor left him and went to the frontline hearing the horrid scream of Ken and the rest was history.

Together they felt it, the erupting creeping sensation of bloodlust usurping from the sea to the forest and beyond the mountains. They were supposed to be the best, but even the men and women who reached the pinnacle of their strength can’t encapsulate the fact that they feared for their lives as well.

From the sea, they saw monsters that were above the usual level they had encountered. Some did not flinch. The only thing that differs between those people who tremble in fear and others who do not are their experiences. For some people, this was the first time they got into an actual fight as part of their regimen to test their strength. Those who could prove that they are strong enough would be the lucky ones to be an actual mercenary and get to choose their future endeavors.

Despite the numbers of the enemies, they did not waver and remained still in their position. The monsters varied with many kinds. From Spree Walkers who was a mammal with a similar structures as gecko with their bluish scale that was hard as steel and their dark swollen eyes that are capable of seeing their prey within 10 kilometers and their claws that was sharp as their teeth – to the brute humanoid Nightinhawks that scoured the sky with their wings and talons that was thrice larger than the human hands.

A warrior named Kazan and Linda stood in front and beckoned them to attack.

“Charge!” They shouted.

The entire mercenaries of the Glade unremittingly pay attention as they storm at each other. Each of them lives with the reputation of the Glade with no less fear in their conviction. Their great numbers began to emerge in the coast as their weapons lashed down at the enemies.

Fortuitously on their side, the veterans took out a large number of enemies and easily decapitated the Nightinhawks from abducting their comrades, but there were unfortunate ones that were not able to do anything.

Someone shot fire magic into the sky and amidst the battle, he was injured, but his objective was successfully sent to the residents in the four towers. The 16 archers began to stretch and aimed their arrows at the enemies and with their bows and strings began to stretch, the arrows erected and were released with such precision. Their arrows landed either on the wings or at the hands of the Nightinhawks.

The captives fell. Some were lucky to be outside of the warring zone, but some fell on top of the enemy and got injured as result.

Alastor leaped and struck down the enemy. He quickly guarded Ken when he saw that the enemy aimed his behind while Ken was hovering over two enemies in front of him. Alastor drew its attention to him and shields against its attacks. He refuted but it bounced back. The sword nicked. Though the scales are hard, a piece of it shredded.

Their ability to make their scales harder was quite arduous to penetrate, but it does not mean that their defense was completely impenetrable, it only does require strenuous effort to exude the right amount of level of strength. Ken with his Monk Magic, had his hands fired and with a single swift, he easily beheaded the enemies.

Alastor tried to put himself together after he received a blow from the enemy, a body fell to the sky and nearly fell on top of him.

“What the fuck?!”

Alastor jumped into action to protect the tumbled comrade. His sword blocked the enemy’s attacks. He deflected it perfectly and immediately swooped, then he landed a kick to its guts, redirected the hands away and pushed the tip of his sword to its head.

He helped the grunting fallen comrade to sit down. His lungs exuded effort to draw air while gasping in desperation.

“L-Left pocket… a p-potion.” He muttered and coughed blood.

Alastor picked out the bluish potion and made him drink it. No longer does he feel the unbearable pain and manage to stand on his feet again.

“Thank you.” He spoke and gave a long sigh.

“You are no longer capable of fighting. Go to the medic and rest.”

Alastor headed back to the battlefield and aided the others. He saw out of the corner of his eyes side-rolled and landed a thrusting punch to the enemy’s gut. It felt beyond its thick scale to its flesh the solidity of its fist – so much for it to take and fell onto his knees. Ken quickly twisted around, his fist trained at its head and went for it with no mercy.

Ahead of the battlefield, Linda and the others similar to her rank – simultaneously and effectively brought down the enemies. Even with their exceeding efforts the enemies seem not to reduce and keep coming ashore, not to mention the Nightinhawks who are abducting the comrades and up to the sky.

Linda took down a Nightinhawk that tried to take her with her ice magic. The wings froze and as a result of crashing, its wing shattered into pieces.

Kazan took out Spree Walker in regards to protecting Linda from outflanking.

“Seems there’s no end of them,” Kazan said in a troublesome tone. “I do not think that this is going to end well for us.”

Linda answered, “Have faith, Kazan. It’s not like this is the first time we fought these monsters.”

“You’re right, but you must consider that some of our troops are not in a condition to fight. As a matter of fact, not all of them have fully recovered enough to take a stand against the enemies, not to mention that there will be others aside to these two kinds that will appear.”

If it were to associate the Night Tide with absurdity. The very nature of this phenomenon allowed monsters to succumb under the impression of the spell of dark magic that will haunt and attack prey even their own fellow kind with insatiable bloodlust. This predicament did not only affect the ecosystem but the lives of the human beings that live specifically in countryside areas. Nonetheless, this skirmish will come to an end should the dawn touch the land.

From above, various explosions emanated throughout the surface, and the land was shaken by the battle of the Glade against the monsters. The bombardment was enough to send commotion in the mansion and the children inside were trembling by the unceasing affliction over the battlefield.

As Alastor effectively evaded and countering the attacks new enemies appeared, even still, they did not wane and continued to fight though there were casualties they managed to survive. The wounded persons are tended back to the medic. While the main forces focused on the fight in the front, they were oblivious that some monsters went the other way and headed to the mansion for their next victims.

Some of the main forces notice the change of the atmosphere and whispers of the grass, specifically those behind the lines. The archers from the towers began to shoot on the forest hoping that it would delay their march towards them, but unexpected enemies came too leaped on two of the towers. Sludge monsters flew and stuck on the curtain wall and slowly climbed up. The other two of the archers still helped the main forces while the other two were busy trying to shake off the new monster that was charging to kill them.

The message was relayed to Linda and Kazan.

“Shit. The enemies are heading to the mansion!” Linda shouted.

“I can see that!” Kazan replied. “The cadets can handle it.”

“No, they can’t! Those monsters are classified as ranked B and A. They can’t handle it. Rally our troops back to make sure that their attention remained undivided to us.” Linda shouted at him.

“If only the Rooks were here maybe shits would be easier.” He said to himself. Kazan called the nearest groups, “Hey! If any of you are capable of fighting, head to the mansion and help the newbies.”

The new trainees held their weapons. It was expected that they’d show a remark of fear and contemplation about themselves on what their future would become if they engage in the battle.

Five reliable trainees are responsible for their platoon. One of them noticed the suddenly shifted behavior of the forest. The trees trembled and the leaves shook loose and trembled. Observing from the higher echelon, the trees parted and the goo-ish monsters instantly fled out of the way.

One of them was capable of using Observation Magic. His eyes glowed and instantly he peered into the abyss and for a moment, the abyss peered back to him. The red eyes glowed menacingly and intimated him which was enough to disrupt his mental and physical state.

“What do you see?” His friend asked.

Suddenly, he felt a pit on his stomach, like it was being grilled and churned. He puked down the tower. His friends immediately came to aid him. The backup quickly got there and in great timing, they’re the ones who first take on the monsters that nearly outflank them.

The new trainees helped them to fight the monsters and show valiancy while the others remained in their position for the fear that they might get in the way of others.

Alastor decided to join the others in the mansion.

“Where are you going?!” Ken asked amid the heat of the battle. He luckily evaded the enemy just before the claws got his cheeks. His attention was drawn back to the monsters in front of him. Mages and swordsmen aided him at disposing of the enemies with a swift. He became wary of the movement of the enemies as soon as he heard the loud cry from the forest that the rest of the mercenaries of the Glade went to.

In the forest deep, a chariot with a grim rider began to appear and wreak havoc splitting and tearing the trees out of their way. Fifteen feet tall clad in rusty black armor with a deformed helmet. He rode a horse thrice larger than regular and much taller that was equivalent to three men. It vanished as if returning to the dark knight.

The dark knight held his sword and in one fell swoop, it overthrew indiscriminately the monsters and the mercenaries. It raised its dark sword again and on its tip glowed red.

Kazan immediately built a wall of fire. “Engage in a defensive position! Do not engage alone! I repeat, do not engage alone! Focus on defense! To those who can use protective magic contain that monster until we find out what kind it is.”

Dozens of mercenaries gathered and chanted magic that produced barriers in many kinds of elements from earth to fire, water, and pure mana. The other mercenaries focus on defending them from the monsters that aim to flank them.

Alastor was one of the people who focused on killing the monsters and stopping them from marching to their base. The archers were finally able to stop the goo monsters from climbing on top. Their attention willed back to the dark night but their attacks were meaningless to it as the arrows were black with mere aura.

The blade shone brightly in red as it swung its trails to the tower. The archers are not dumb enough to go wait for the enemy’s attack to hit them, they undoubtedly jump down to the roof of the mansion. One of them did not manage to make it gracefully and felt the pain creeping into his bones specifically on his Achilles heels. They aided him to the medic station.

Kazan pressed his communication device and contacted all the mercenaries.

“Can anyone tell me what that thing is?!” He shouted.

Inside the mansion, the heads are busy reading the books finding out what kind of monster it was. Rod accidentally stumbled upon a clustered several books. He got up and used a magic trick that allowed him to read multiple books at once. The books floated around him.

One of the members shouted in contentment and joy with an intense expression. “Finally! I found it!”

He contacted Kazan through a communication device.

“Kazan. This is director Pietro.”

“Sir, do you have any idea what kind of monster this is?”

Currently, the dark knight was destroying the barrages with ease. The magic casters’ strength slipped off and were unable to maintain layer by layer of the walls.

“That is what we called Deziun Alle. It’s a monster that came from the rift.”

“That shit came from Rift?!” He was staggered by his remark. “Shit. Most of us are below rank B and we have only a few rank A’s here.”

“I know that.”

Kazan questioned, “Does it have any weaknesses?”

“Not at the given moment. We will have to dig more, the information I found is from old mythology. In the meantime, have rank B who can’t assist in battle retreat and handle the lower-level monsters.”

“Yes sir!”

The communication ended. Kazan glanced at Linda who was busy. “Everyone! Those people who are rank A and below ranks who can use barrier and projectile magic come with us. The rest will hold off the monsters!”

Linda came over. “I will help. I'm rank A.”

“Very well. Let’s go.”

The directors and the trainees gathered all the textbooks to find out what weaknesses they possessed. In the middle of searching, Rod halted and beckoned Pietro.

“Pietro. Take a look at this.”

Rod gave him the book. This time it had information about that monster’s abilities.

“It can’t be…” Pietro muttered. His eyes reflected worriedness and horrendous expression.

The moment the last line of the barrier broke, Kazan led the attack. He was followed by his fellow ranks, most of them are melee fighters. The enemy howled like a warrior that had a lust for a fight. Kazan’s attack was easily deflected by the Deziun Alle.

The monster quickly delivered a horizontal attack that disrupted the formation of the mercenaries. Luck on their side, there were no casualties.

The indomitable strength of the enemy left them no choice but to continuously defend themselves. The mercenaries jump or use barriers to protect themselves against it. Kazan and the other two went behind and attacked it, but their swords bounced back and it wore a shield beneath its robe.

“What the hell?!” One of the men shouted.

“It looks like we can’t penetrate. We must blow it with a powerful attack.”

Kazan nodded. Linda sheathed back her blade and prepared an ice lance. Even still, her attack did not do any kind of damage against it.

“What a tough guy.” She can only mutter in astonishment.

“Sir Pietro, do you have any idea how to bring this thing down?”

Pietro gave a serious tone, “Listen to me very carefully, that thing was made of a spontaneous amount of dark magic. It is so strong that it can even neutralize any kind of elemental magic. The only thing that can damage it is holy magic.”

“Holy magic? The fuck? None of us know that kind of magic.”

“I know, that is why we want you all to hold them back until they come.”

“*They*?”

“We have sent a message to a hawk to request their aid. Even their appearances should be next month, but we don’t have that much time.”

“Sir, how many hours do you think they can make it here?”

“One hour.” He simply replied.

Kazan closed his eyes. “Alright then, we will do our best to hold them down.”

“Kazan! Look out!” Someone shouted.

He felt the killing intent behind him and he rolled over and evaded the blade of the enemy.

“Shit!” He cursed. The enemy did not stop there and attack him one more time. He used his blade to shield against it. “Fuck! Its attack is dragging me out!”

His body hardly landed on the trees. He quickly got up on his feet but still felt the trembling pain on his back. He pressed his communication devices and announced, “Everyone! Please hold that monster for one hour, until they arrive!”

“*They?* You mean the Rooks?!” Someone asked. “Is it true that they will come here?”

“Y-Yeah. Absolutely, the directors assured that they will come.”

One of the men grinned. “One hour, you say? Ok then, it’s been a while since we’ve been overpowered by some pesky monster. Let’s make sure everyone that within one hour, we’ll beat this fucker so that they won’t have the hard time to finish it off.”

His friend laughed. “Optimistic as always, but I can’t disagree with that. I’m not going to let *them* take all of the fun while we suffer.”

They all dashed and proceeded to ring their war cry. They attack the monster with the utmost of their strength and coordinated attacks. Whenever it tried to attack, someone would catch it and have the other people attack from its rear. Even if it had endurance and high durability, it was still confused about their incessantly changing of their disposition.

The valiant ones who charged first to it finally had lost their strength, the position that they no longer had an effect on regaining their strength, and thus, they were sent to the medic to tend their wounds.

Linda used her ice whip to attack the enemy and have her weapon wrapped around its sword to stop it from attacking. Kazan forced his way to stab the armor, but to no effect at all. The bastard sword bounced against its thick hide.

“Dammit!”

The enemy did not forget that it can use its left hand and punched Kazan halfway. The Deziun Alle grabbed the whip and along with it, Linda was thrown away across the forest. The other mercenaries leaped and attacked the enemy again.

The dark emitted aura suddenly grew stronger and spewed within a long distance to the mountain. It even knocked some of the rank B mercenaries and scared off the rest of the monsters, having them retreat back to the ocean and the forest.

The mercenaries stopped halfway and did not dare to cross blades against the monster.

“It seems that it’s pissed off.” The tall man said.

The monster’s shadow quickly grew and formed into humanoid monsters in a form of shadow. The mercenaries were so quick to defend their positions as they witnessed the urgent movements of the enemy. But their repercussions were outstripped by the rampaging monster, sparing no one.

The damage Linda received was not enough to put her courage down and she fought again. She used her ice magic to immobilize Deziun Alle’s feet. With ease, the monster broke the spell by melting it with its mere shadow.

Linda enchanted her sword and was prepared to defend herself, but as the monster came closer to her, a pang of fear suddenly rushed to her mind and locked away her confidence.

The monster raised its sword and in a swift, she closed her eyes.

There was a ring, a familiar one. She lifted her eye and saw Alastor defending against the attack. Their swords crackled and sparkled, but Alastor was barely hanging against the enemy’s strength.

“I understand that you’re beaten up, but hey, it’s not like your character to shit quickly.”

Alastor used protection magic and conjured barriers to push the enemy away.

Linda held Alastor’s arm, stopping him from moving on. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I know, but the enemies from ashore left. I saw that you’re getting yourself killed, so I decided to jump and aid you. You can hardly blame me after seeing you get your ass kicked.”

Linda got up. She chanted another spell. An Ice wall began to erupt and encircled the enemy. It was her Inquiara Magic: Ice Dome.

Linda encapsulated the enemy by incapacitating it, spewing the thorns of ice like rose and was frozen over before the explosion of the dome. The ice crippled away as it exploded. The Deziun Alle was frozen over her attack.

Alastor sighed and aided Linda to lift her on his shoulders. She looked restless.

“I can handle this!” Linda growled. “There’s no need for you to jump in.”

“Yeah-yeah. Tell me about it. You’re getting your ass kicked and you expect me to stand idle by?”

“Al, you’re a Mana Folder. What possibly you can offer?” The woman rasped, standing and finally got up on her feet, “You’d do more harm than good.”

Alastor hissed. He swung his sword smeared by the monster's blood and did not retreat despite her words of discouragement. His stature was tense and alert as ever when engaged in combat.

“I forbid you and yet it’s useless.”

“It never is. Now, thanks to the monster’s aggravation the monsters fled and we can focus all of our reinforcements on that monster.”

She snorted. “In the given case, I can’t deny it.”

The ice statue cracked open and with sheer strength, the monster broke free from the spell. Drought and not satiated, Deziun Alle sprang its gigantic sword – multiplied into several shadow swords that flung over the mercenaries. As soon as the others recovered, they went back and hid to tend their wounds.

“Is it real?” Someone asked. He was still hesitant to believe if it was real or just an illusion. His comrade on the other hand felt the other way and jumped over to him.

“Whether it's real or not, if you see a blade crossing its path to you, you don’t hesitate to dodge it!” His friend shouted at him.

As the first summoned sword landed on the ground the others followed, locking on its prey. The targeted individuals sprinted away and others created barriers to block the sword which proved to be insufficient on halting its speed and strength.

At the end of the line, there are a lot of casualties on their side.

Ken was spared when his comrades were able to dig a hole in the ground and generate an energy field to somehow lessen the impact of the sword.

“What a fucking bastard,” Ken muttered. “Not only does he have strong melee attacks, but he can also use projectile attacks.”

The other two who helped him were knocked down and unable to get up. The injury wasn’t fatal though but the mana they spend takes a toll on their mental and physical strength. Because of it, they’re convulsing.

“Damn it!” He bellowed and held his wrist, checking the two’s vitality, “You’re still breathing but its dropping. Shit. You guys needed to be tended back in the medic station.”

He raised his head and saw the other mercenaries engaging the enemy. Even still, they were easily oppressed and dominated by the monster's strength. They were all scattered from each other and one by one they got up and distracted Deziun Alle while the others carried their comrades to the medical station.

A certain man unexpectedly and finally showed up. He was apparently and intentionally taking a nap in his room but instead, he totally slept and forgot to join them. Only the strike from the sword that seemingly lost its way and found it stuck on his ceiling, nearly cutting his stomach and was one inch way to him.

“Damn it! I told those kids to wake me up!”

After witnessing how their fight against the monster unfolds, he changed and went to the stable where Liber was sleeping loudly in the barn. He shot the locker and woke Liber from sleeping.

“Wake up buddy. We’re taking you out on the battlefield.”

He rode the Comodo and took off.

Steadfast he went charging to the Deziun Alle. There are no more mercenaries who are fighting against it as they were all injured.

“Listen to me, Liber. Find Alastor and bring him to me.”

As they get closer, Deziun Alle raised its sword and cut through horizontally. Cid jumped off the Comodo and they successfully evaded the enemy.

He quickly cast a spell and threw the fire at the enemy. Just as before, the magic was easily neutralized. His boots dug on the ground and he evaded the enemy’s sword barely catching his hair before chanting another spell.

“Fireez Ampireture.”

A one inch of flame appeared and landed on the skin of the enemy. Deziun Alle simply gazed at it and in a matter of seconds, it grew, engulfing its body. Its sword slashed and the fire was absorbed away on the tip of it.

“Holy damn.” Cid uttered and he quickly conjured and manifested a wall of earth to protect himself against the attack of the enemy. But to no luck, he got injured in the process. An icicle sprung to its back and had the Deziun Alle bent on his knees. It was a fruitless effort but it was enough for them to save Cid from the enemy.

“You alright?” It was more of a statement rather than a question from Alastor. Cid looked at the wound on his shoulder.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Why the fuck did you bring Liber here?” Alastor brought his eyes forward.

“Hey. It may be far from a fighting Comodo, but it can do some tricks too.”

“Yeah, I know, but this is a different case. The monsters are literally the same level as the monsters back in Vesoga Plain. I didn’t buy him to die just because of some stupid monsters that are less worthy than him.”

“Guys!” Linda shouted. “I appreciate we got the band together but things aren’t going well in here.”

Deziun Alle broke free from the grasp of her spell and was now enraged by her continuous meddling. The monster glanced at her and felt the malevolent intentions.

“Is it mad of me?” Linda asked, she was unsettled by the fact that she was the center of attraction.

“Seems like it. That’s good. We’ll use you as a distraction.” Cid replied.

“The hell?!”

“We can’t defeat the enemy if we keep this up defending ourselves.”

“Do you have a plan?” Alastor asked Cid.

“Yeah. I have a hypothesis, but I can’t confirm it yet if that son of a bitch still moving. So, we need to find a way to somehow immobilize it first. But we need a clearing, where no one will get caught with our attack.”

“Count me in.” The bloodied Kazan stood up beside them, and snorted. He barely catches his breath. “I’ll help Linda in distracting the enemy while you prepare the magic.”

Cid nodded to show he understood.

Linda held her gaze for a moment before backing a single step as the Deziun Alle gradually came closer to her. Kazan with the utmost effort came by her side and prepared to aid her at any cost. Unconsciously, his body straightened up and clutched his sword hard. Truly, he doesn’t know what made him act this way, was it because he felt the excitement or his instinct telling him not to screw himself again?

The sword of Deziun brimmed and cast sprinkling lights that might blind anyone who looked at it. They ran away as they realized what it was doing. It aims to decrease the level of vision so that it could surprise them. Although it’s effective for a surprise attack, they already know who the targeted individual was. With its obvious regard to someone, it doesn’t take much effort to know who it was aiming with as its eyes glared toward a certain person.

They sprinted away from the source of light. They can feel the slow but terrifying and gradual movements of the giant black-cloaked monster. Under the impression of gaining an advantageous pace, a jet red flew past them. It landed and exploded in front of them, which was not too far. The blast was not enough to bring them down. They ignored the dull blossom of pain that enveloped their ears and their arms. They got up as soon as possible and continued to dash away from the enemy.

Their speed remains steady as they trudge over the mountain of bodies of the previous enemies that they’ve encountered. An open space away from the rest of the group was needed to somehow restrict the movements of the enemy.

“Shit! They never said it can use magic.” Kazan said.

 ”Just don’t look back.”

In his viewpoint, it doesn’t seem right to leave that monster unnoticed its movements and so, Kazan risked looking over his shoulder and saw the monster with a huge pace of walking with its sword raised to them emanated another flare. He saw the monster shoot it at them and soon they felt its heat. Another blast came to them, close enough for him to feel the air part next to his left ear stinging and whistle with incredible speed that caused him to slow down. Nevertheless, his mind was dulled enough to accept any more of it. This time they evaded the radius of the blast and didn’t get caught by the shockwave. It was too close, far too close. The quick passing of blast stole his breath for a second before gulping his tension down to the pit of his stomach.

They turned left and entered the forest. All that was left to hear as they entered was the deafening and animalistic roar of the monster that caused her to shiver convulsively before realizing she was marked. It was the same before, the path was too narrow for the monster to move quickly. It might destroy the trees but its footpace will decrease and in turn, give them time to flee to the training ground. The unimpeded traces of rumbling acceleration of the enemy can be easily traced as it gets inside the path. It effortlessly brought down the trees and scared the monsters that fled back to the forest. The speed of the enemy was beyond their anticipation. Both of them kept their pace steady and could not allow themselves to distract from the enemies that were glaring at them. Sacrificing a second of speed would likely give the enemy another advantage on catching up. Another animalistic rage of roar came to shiver them again, they were marked and it was coming for them.

They turn to an uncharted path of the forest. It was a shortcut to a certain part of the training ground. They haven’t still forgotten the necessity of a cleared field so that Cid can perform his plan. The stadium stretched across their eyes. It was wrecked though, it hadn’t been fixed ever since the incursion of the Renegades, but it was still good enough for them to use for luring the enemy. The cold breeze ruffled Linda’s hair as she caught her breath. She surveyed the surroundings to find a suitable hiding place while waiting for Alastor and Cid to come.

“Follow me.” Kazan willingly followed her into a vacant part of the stadium, where there was fallen debris that would help them cover.

A black blurry figure landed in the middle of the stadium and howled. It took aim with its sword and a flare blasted the nearby building. The enemy turned its back on them. The opportunity was enticing but there was no need for them to act rashly. They’d be sitting ducks for now until the reinforcements will come. The tense feeling sunk down as the enemy’s attention was not on their line of vision. Their footsteps remain in stealth and guarded as they risk a gaze on the enemy. They immediately felt the creeping presence of its gaze even though it was not looking at them.

“Shit.” He whispered. “What the hell is that?”

There was no reply. They’re prepared for the worse. Glancing at one another they nodded and began to count. It was a matter of seconds before the enemy came to charge and, at that moment, its giant sword came crashing down destroying the debris that they use as cover. To its surprise, they already parted ways and jumped out in the field.

Kazan bombarded the enemy with his fire magic, effectively grabbing its attention. Linda didn’t miss to witness the opportunity, she used her ice magic to hold down its feet. Kazan charged towards it and attacked it. His sword bounced back but obviously, he was not going to back down. Deziun Alle released its massive sword and swung it at him. Kazan managed to guard himself but the impact shocked him psychologically as the attack led him crashing to the ground. His consciousness barely processed what had just happened. His perception of time slowed down to a near stop.

His thought was vague, disoriented but regained his memory to breathe from his muddling mind. The enemy’s preparation for attack was intercepted by Linda by launching an icicle to the flare itself exploding right into its face. Rancid smoke swelled up. Its black cloak singed, part of its cloth was peeled and burned but its armor was still intact.

“Are you alright?” Linda asked. “Obviously not,” She answered herself quickly, stating the obvious. “Can you still fight?”

Kazan deeply inhaled and shrugged, “Still buzzed, but it’s nothing serious.”

The Deziun Alle’s finger slightly jerked. It was safe to assume that the monster was too – in shock that she indeed returned the favor to it. The blast from its attack had been powerful and proved that even the monster itself was stunned by it, even though it was completely an overstatement. She was unnerved by the blast and blatantly used her ice magic to restrict it, just to be sure. It was safe to assume that it was still conscious.

Kazan got up. There was a pause and he finally asked her, “It’s still alive, isn’t it?”

The question was rhetorical. She did not need a reply to confirm if it was still alive.

Deziun Alle growled and removed with ease the ice that encapsulated its lower body. Its massive fist raised and punched the air, then there came a mighty clap that produced an air ball; widely whirling as it compacted.

The air ball was ten times bigger than Nathaniel’s air bomb. He can tell the way the ground trailed along with the attack that it was heavy and impossible to deflect by any conventional means. They froze. Kazan’s smile was a little more strained. He was completely outmatched by the power of the enemy.

In a heartbeat, a yellow lightning streak havoc and repel the attack… and with the attacks canceling each other, they heard the explosion of sound, light, and tremendous force rocking them down. Linda’s first thought was Kazan. With his condition, he shouldn’t be with them.

“Are you alright?”

Kazan vaguely processed what she was saying. Moreover, he was irritated by dust. He felt a tremendous bolt of pain on his stomach, it had been hit by something hard, but whatever that was, it caused him to go down on his knee. He daringly closed his eyes, and his thoughts lingering he was certain that he would unlikely see the sunrise. “I need a break.”

“Aren’t we all?”

Before the enemy could do anything, it was restricted by binding spells. Then, a few silhouettes incorporated it with more lightning binding spells.

He heard Alastor’s voice behind her. “Good. You’ve brought it here. Now we can focus on it rather than worrying about what might happen to the Glade.” Alastor said. “Cid. What about the plan?”

Cid replied. “On it.”

Cid had already ordered one of the mercenaries to go to the main panel across the building to switch on one of the traps that they have built. Alastor and Cid carried Kazan out of the stadium. The empty space slowly parted. The Deziun Alle strained to jump off the field. Various fire magic bombarded it before it could reach the ground. Even so, the enemy was close to invulnerability, it doesn’t mean it was untouchable from employing force. The attacks changed the trajectory which lost the balance of the enemy and ended up falling in the pit.

The tubes at the side of the pit suddenly spurt out water with a mix of epoxy resin. The enemy was incapable of moving as the mixture of two substances was hard by the wind magic that the mercenaries use. The next step they took, they poured the pit with oil. The mercenary fingers flickered and hell was loose after the light landed on the ground.

The vindictive flames quickly spread and usurp the enemy. Amidst the hellfire, the monster’s sword shone bright and top to all. Cid manifested a rope made of fire. He whipped it through and got a grip on the sword at its hilt. It did not budge as he tried to claim it. It was like pushing a huge boulder in the mountainsides. The other mercenaries did the same and, on his lead, they used every ounce of their strength to pull the sword.

Alastor and Ken quickly help him by holding and pulling him.

“There’d be better a good explanation out of this,” Alastor said.

“Why are we pulling his sword again?” Ken asked.

“I couldn’t help to think that this monster may not be directly neutralizing our attacks.” He started. “Like Director Pietro said that the monster is made with a spontaneous amount of dark magic, but it doesn’t mean it can fully repel every attack. I’ve known monsters that are imbued by dark magic, but they can still be killed by any means, it’s just that… they’re very hard to kill.”

“And we’re doing this… why?”

“There are monsters that use relics as a weapon. I know that it sounds odd but there are creatures such as trolls or shaman imp that can create such items through rituals. Through relics, they can enhance their magic and physical strength tenfold. I had the feeling that this monster uses one too.”

“I doubt that but it’s worth the try,” Alastor replied.

Ken nodded. “Are you implying that his sword is a relic?”

“Yes.”

“Then very likely we can confirm through observation magic. The problem is who to call.”

Some people crossed Alastor’s mind. “I think I know some people.” Alastor used his communication device to announce throughout the people he was trying to reach out to.

“To anyone who knows where-so-ever Dice, Octagon and Laura please come to the training field.”

They heard his voice. “We’re already here.” Dice said.

“What’s up?” Linda asked.

The same as them. They’re battered and tired but there was still a fight in them. They can’t say the exact same thing to Octagon, he was badly wounded around his stomach area as they can see his shirt was bleeding through.

“You alright there?” Ken asked Octagon.

“Yes. It’s just mild but I’ll get through.” He wearily replied.

“So, what the hell do you want us for?” Dice asked.

Alastor stepped forward. “Do any of you know how to use observation magic?”

Laura raised her hand. “I do. Why?”

“Good. I need you to use it now and see through it what will happen if I use my magic on it.”

“I thought it’s invisible to magic?” She asked. “Why does it have to do with observation magic?”

Alastor and Cid exchange glances.

Cid sighed. “We’re working on a hypothesis. Just please kindly do what we request.”

She didn’t probe any further. In a matter of a second everything changed, as if the world turned into black and white. The green eyes raised as a flag for Ken to use magic. A fireball emanated and headed towards the monster. Laura observed how the situation unfold.

The fireball slowly peeled away and was absorbed into the sword. The rest of it dispersed as if they were made of smoke.

“What do you think?” Cid asked. “The sword did absorb it, didn’t it?”

“Sort of. It weakened the magic before absorbing it.”

“That’s good enough.” Cid breathed heavily. “Everyone!” He shouted. “Do whatever it takes to take that sword away from the monster!”

All began to use every magic they knew to pull it out. But their effort had come to naught. The monster did not budge. Not even an inch. It only stared at them with its unlit eyes. Certainly, the monster had enormous strength but it clearly doesn’t mean it would go off sooner. Minutes passed and they haven’t still gotten on it yet. It clung hard to its sword. He felt that their effort had brought nothing for them as the strength cannot relinquish the sword away. It wasn’t exactly what they expected to hear from it, but they could tell that the monster’s deep, hoarse and bone-chilling tone was mocking them.

Most of them thought that they finally trapped the enemy with its inactivity, they thought that the monster had come to the realization that it was useless to protest, but that wasn’t the case. It was too late to judge the result as the monster resigned from stationary and began to move. The cement crackled and their magic was easily extinguished. In a single swing, the flames vanquished. It was unlike any strength they had seen before.

Now that they saw the errors of their plan, they began to murmur about how they failed and now that this will end it. Kazan heard their cry and couldn’t help but to think so low of themselves but suddenly he remembered all of the harsh training, the pounding metals of chains that he used to lift a boulder and pull it under the radiance of the sun. He felt a surge of emotion that was unlikely he had felt before.

“Everyone! Do not lose your guts over some parlor tricks! Remember that we are the mercenaries of the Glade. We do not yield easily over a cumbersome circumstance; we stand against the odds! Recall everything we had gone through before this! Before this life has chosen us! Do not lay down your arms and fight!”

Slowly everyone gathered their strength and prepared for the fight. It may not seem to be but their spirits lifted over the memories of their past. It was the truth that some of them before were useless, good-for-nothing, slaves, and others that lived on so many painful years before they had come here. The Glade changed their lives, but in exchange, they must live in complete discretion and battles. The Glade did not force them to stay here, they were given the chance to choose what they will become, they can live freely if they ever choose to be done in this place, but some others are not, rather they chose the path of blood and money.

It may be understatement to claim that they chose to stay because they grew fond of their considered home, but in truth was that they don’t have the luxury of freeing themselves from the shackles of their past. Kazan was an example of that. At the early age of his life, he was nothing but a slave. They own a villa, somewhere in the province of Ulsyanil from the country of Sheore’a. One day, while he was doing his chores he saw a glimpse of trailing smoke around the neighboring forest, next to it was a small village that they exported with their wines. The next scene he remembered that day was a cannonball heading towards him. His head felt light and somber, a thundering pain course through his body. He slowly got up on his feet and started to walk sluggishly. His young body and mind are not sturdy enough to withstand the impact of the cannonball, more than over the countless fireballs that fall onto the sky.

Through the piles of rubles and the remains of their house, he found himself lost. No father, no mother. All was asunder. He gave up finding his parents and decided to save himself first and away in the middle of the battlefield.

He may not be bright like the others, but he knew when to fend off away if he felt that he was in danger. His instincts told him to avoid strange people for the next few days.

Unfortunately for him, he was wound and caught by merchants from the black market, specifically, hell-bent on slavery. His frail age was not spared by the people and received harsh punishments over some petty mistakes.

He was saved by the directors themselves when they were more physically involved in the matters. Raised and trained by those people who he considered as his mentors; he was able to retain some joy in his life.

They weren’t merciless and soulless as anyone from the outside world would think. Surely, they would assassinate those people who the client deemed to die, but they weren’t going to accept an offer blindly. There were some they accepted willingly, but only if they felt it was necessary.

Seeing that somehow their spirits lifted up, he led them to march.

“Listen, everyone! We have fought stronger bastards than this one, and this lad will be the latest to feel our fury.”

The cement crackled and spread quickly up to their footing. They felt the pressure centering at the monster’s place. In a split second, the stationary monster leaped and crashed on the ground. Some stumbled and were stunned, others were able to get out before getting hit by its sword. Some unlucky people felt its tremendous strength and fell.

A mercenary who wore light metal armor lifted his visor.

“If we fight a similar creature with the same level of this monster, I doubt that we will make it through the week.”

Ken replied. “Bad days are only temporary. We’ll make it through.”

The monster got to his feet and bent lurching towards Alastor’s position. He leaped away, rolled over, and evaded the swinging blade. It may have quick reflexes but Alastor is clearly able to bridge the gap between their speeds.

He raised his hand and conjured three transcendent walls making a distance between the two of them. The other mercenaries saw this as an opportunity to make their move. They bombarded it with magic.

The durability does not equate to mobility, thus the monster remained in the position distracted by the lights that the mercenaries conjured.

“That’s right. Keep it coming everyone!”

Through the smoke, Kazan roared louder the most, who appeared to be the one who motivated and led them all.

The Deziun Alle lurched forward and aimed its sword at Kazan.

The momentum of its speed astounded Kazan but also because of that his body grew so called and couldn’t move an inch. The blade was directed at him. Cid and Linda use coercive magic and build walls of fire and ice, but it was useless. With its raw strength, it tore the walls.

A second it took to be closer to Kazan. He felt its breath two feet away from him, drawing and wanting him dead. He felt the sharpness of the blade cutting through the air. He didn’t dare to close his eyes and waited.

A flash deflected the enemy's attack knocking it down across the field.

Unraveling from the swelling smoke, a daring man appeared wearing a brown tattered robe, underneath was a dark armor and sword hanging on his waist. Another one was a large man who held his giant battle-axe and wore heavy silver armor and an iron helmet that had five brown horns lined from the forehead to the back of the head.

The large man who was around 8 feet came later than the other guy who had the appearance of being energetic and youthful compared to the other one who was intimidating.

“Whoa, whoa. Easy there, fella. You got some pretty bull power there.”

*Who is this guy?* Everyone raised the same question as to the identity of these two. It was no surprise, they rarely appeared in the mansion. They never once take a vacation one or two days in the Glade, they were busy traveling across other continents, exploring and gathering information. Only a few knew about them.

He looked at Kazan. There was no malicious intent in his eyes.

“Are you fine pal?” He asked.

Kazan simply nodded. There was no words. The mana from these two felt humongous compare to anyone.

“Now that we’re here, you guys have nothing to worry about. Focus on treating the wounded persons. From here and out, we’ll carry on the task.”

His words were filled with confidence. He shoved his brown cloak and pulled out his sword from its scabbard.

“Come here you son of a bitch!”

He beckoned the enemy from wherever in the forest it landed.

The tall man called out his younger comrade. His voice was deep and ragged but a hint of a gentle character can be felt through his voice.

“Maximo, do you think it was wise that I should take the lead? After all, I defeated this kind of monster before. Not that I brag, but I am qualified enough to do the job.”

Maximo, the guy who easily put down the Deziun Alle on the ground hisses.

“Hey, Dorian.” Maximo snarled. “Just to be fair, you took all of the fun. You didn’t give me the chance to fight it.”

“Is that the reason why you’re so hyped when you hear that the enemy we are facing is a Deziun Alle?”

“Correct.”

Dorian shook his head and his broad shoulder shrugged. “Maximo, the only thing that can hurt that monster is holy or divine magic. And neither of those you possess. Hence, you must allow me to lead the battle.”

“Hey. Just this once, give this guy to me. You had your fun last time, now is my time.”

Dorian sighed and locked his arms, giving up on Maximo’s demand. Maximo’s persistence already told him that he was quite a hard-headed fellow.

Dorian looked at Linda. “Forgive us for the delay. May I ask who's the person leading the armada?”

“Me and Kazan. You can call me Linda.”

Dorian surveyed her and then to the wounded Kazan. “Ah, Linda. A befitting name for a cunning lady. May I ask for you to kindly tell the rest to back down slowly? Here on out, this battle will be messy.”

Linda nodded. “Everyone, listen to me. Helped the wounded persons and headed back to the mansion.”

 The group reluctantly dispersed and carried their ill comrade. The rest of the dead bodies are left behind. But of course, Dorian won’t let their bodies be humiliated. The bodies floated and started to fly away and headed to the mansion. The only people left to witness the battle are Alastor, Ken, Cid, Kazan, and Linda, including Dorian who’s sitting with cross legs in the air.

Dorian looked at them with a concerned expression. “If you don’t intend to retreat back, at least get close to me, so I can protect you from any harm.”

The group heeded willingly. There was something that this benevolent man made him seem a good man even though he possessed strength that they cannot fathom. It was nothing surprising for the rest of the members of the 10 Rooks. Dorian had this personality comparable to a caring old man that everyone wouldn’t be able to ignore a word of advice.

“Maximo, make this quick.” Dorian mumbled. “As much as possible, we don’t want to add another casualty.”

Maximo stepped forward and tilted his head to give Dorian a look. “What the hell are you talking about?” He asked. “Everyone retreated back into the mansion, right?”

Dorian dismissively shook his head. He spoke softly, “Do not underestimate that monster’s power, Maximo.”

Maximo didn’t take heed of his advice and took a leap towards the forest to find the monster. The air became steady, the leaves fell but it wasn’t distracting unlike the cold breeze passing by.

“Hey, mister monster. Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

Maximo scanned the surroundings with his Inquiara magic. His field of vision slowed down. *That monster can’t conceal his presence with that size*, he thought. A piercing vibration had caught his ears. He quickly jerked sideways and evaded the wind booming towards him. He observed the nearby trees that got hit by it, but it felt that there were no weapons involved in the monster’s assault.

“The fuck?” It was more of a statement rather than a question.

“I admire your tenacity, Maximo. But you don’t know the abilities of that monster and you’re out of your depth. Let me take over and I will end this soon.”

“How would I know if I can do it if you won’t allow me to try?” Maximo growled at him. “Just shut up and enjoy the show.”

The monster finally showed itself. It sprung out from the darkness. Evading the attack of the enemy, Maximo’s eyes observed the sword of Deziun Alle. He couldn’t tell what exactly it was, but he felt that it did not wind magic that enveloped the sword. He lurched back before the blade of the enemy cut his face.

“Shit.” Freezing over the breeze, he sneezed.

Deziun Alle launched forward with its sword swinging from its right. In an instant, Maximo’s presence became elusive. He was completely gone out of the enemy’s range and then quickly got to its back.

“Teleportation magic?” Alastor asked.

“Not really,” Dorian replied.

“How did he move so fast?” Ken asked.

The fire began to cover Maximo’s sword and in one fell swoop to its torso, the force threw off the balance of the monster, thus, it was blasted off away. The nearby trees were cut off clean and were under fire.

“That kind of attack is no good, Maximo…”

“Shut up,” Maximo interjected. “I’m just getting warmed up.”

Maximo delivered another strike to the enemy.

“I was going to tell you not to use fire magic. It would cause a forest fire and would likely give you a hard time breathing while fighting.” He murmured to himself.

Maximo’s incredible speed overwhelmed the monster, but his attack didn’t do enough damage to its armor. Maximo kept attacking from the monster’s blind spot. In slow pace, the armor peeled away from his attack, clanging and vibrating against his attack.

Alastor observed him very carefully. Compared to his attack earlier to Deziun Alle, Maximo was actually doing damage to its armor with only his brute strength. Maximo appeared to be teleporting from there and there, but whenever Maximo did it, there was a trail of light following him. Alastor came to a conclusion.

“He’s not teleporting,” Alastor said.

His words caught Dorian’s ears, “Oho. So, you can tell by now?”

“Then, what is it, Al?” Linda asked.

“He’s… he’s just using advanced magic. It looks like a reality shift magic, but it was something else.”

“It’s an advanced Inquiara Magic: Mobius Dive. His body was enveloped by his wind magic that allows him to move faster than our eyes can perceive. Though, that magic use a lot of mana,”

“Then, does that mean he won't last?”

Dorian laughed at the thought. He quit and replied, “No. Maximo wouldn’t be able to become one of the 10 rooks if he was not an exceptional warrior. Maximo possessed the highest mana out of all of us. It would take hell for him to be exhausted.”

The damage that the Deziun Alle received seemed to be nothing as it slowly repaired itself. He sneezed again. Maximo swerved around out of the range of the Deziun Alle’s attack and went to its behind.

“Right here!”

He attacked it fast and steadily at its chest before delivering a kick to its head. The enemy was stunned for a moment and took a look at Maximo. A pig-like cry reverberated throughout the forest. The flames were unlit and the branches of trees were shaken off before the monster broke to a sprint towards Maximo.

“That’s the spirit!”

Maximo grinned and he too broke into a sprint towards the monster.

The Deziun Alle’s staggered back, shaken off by Maximo’s heavy attacks, the monster blindly swung its sword to Maximo. It was all irrelevant to his speed. His physical appearance was doubled when in fact his fast movements left a trail of afterimages, one to ten afterimages began to encircle the enemy.

“Here he goes,” Dorian said.

Maximo’s movement following the afterimages began to slow down to walking. The movements of his hands became erratic and seemingly his sword swayed, dancing as he walked around the monster. He proceeded to conjure his Para-shift magic: Ten strike tonic fold.

All of his after images began to pursue Deziun Alle. The monster couldn’t allow whatever these things are to gain an advantage. When he swung his sword against what it seems to be illusions the blade slipped through the bodies, they have no mass.

The monster unwillingly froze for some unknown reason. Dorian's eyes squinted seeing a talisman sticking on its back.

“Oho. I rarely see that he’s using his brain.”

The images came past through the monster’s body in a flash. Thereafter the attack from the illusion, the monster didn’t feel anything at all for the first 5 seconds, but when it reached 9, the armor started to degrade, exposing its flesh. Its body slowly twisted, the silent wind suddenly turned into a thunderous clap. The leaves danced around Deziun Alle before the wind thickened and became a disastrous tornado.

The body of Deziun Alle couldn’t move freely. The splinters of the trees found their way to the monster’s flesh before it could fully regenerate and retain its original state. In the face of despair, the monster gripped and used all of its strength transferring lightning energy to the sword while being grilled by the trees inside the eye of the tornado.

The sword brimmed in lightning and in one slash the tornado split into two and was gone with another one incoming. It crashed and dazed Maximo.

“The bastard is tougher than I expected. Not only does it have abnormal endurance and strength, but it also has a high regenerative ability as well.”

Dorian stood, “Maximo! Are you done toying with that monster? Do you want to switch now?”

Maximo hissed, “Not yet!”

The showdown continued. Strength swelled within the two and with their loud howl. They strife against one another. Their power contesting, sword gnashing, and sparkling. The wind gushed the trees nearby to flatten them.

The monster stepped back and heaved again. Maximo repelled it with ease and with a heavy attack he broke through the defense of the Deziun Alle. The monster’s sword was outweighed and flung behind, stuck on the ground.

Maximo’s brute strength tore the armor of the monster. The Deziun Alle stumbled back and retreated, but along the escape of Maximo’s continued attack, the Deziun Alle felt the effect of the talisman that was placed on its back.

The monster was stunned. It forcefully moved its shunned hand to hold the talisman. The greater it attempted to get closer, the more the talisman resisted and electrocuted the monster from risking any further.

Maximo took it as a chance to engage it while it was under the influence of the talisman. His sword brimmed in light and used his reality shift magic. His incredible speed accommodated and enhanced the strength of his blade that shackled the large portion of the monster’s armor. This time the result of the seemingly endless pursuit of giving the monster a huge amount of damage has shown.

Unlike before, the armor this time slowly regenerated giving the monster a hard time to replenish its strength before it can retort to his attacks. Also, the speed dropped to where lower mercenaries can evade it easily.

He aimed again his sword to the flesh of the monster before the armor could regenerate. The light extended and pierced through the monster. The Deziun Alle oozed blood from the wound and to its helm.

“You felt that? Good.”

Dorian can see that he was capable of holding his own against the monster. Perhaps, he took him too harshly. But he couldn’t shrug off this feeling of unease. Even now, he can still feel the malicious intent of the enemy, it just feels off, like its attention is drawn from another without getting interrupted by the bout.

Even though the Deziun Alle was a monster, it was still considered a sentient being. Just like humans, it knows what it feels like to fear, to be put on edge, and doesn’t know how to get out of the situation, but it was not all sentient and conscious, it was a being made of darkness and naturally made to follow its animalistic instinct.

In a sudden moment of impulse, the Deziun Alle emerged in darkness, hiding, but the shock from the talisman didn’t keep him long enough in the darkness. The distance given by the small amount of time was enough for the monster to do its plan.

In its palm, a huge amount of fire emanated. Maximo grinned.

“Dumbass, putting distance won’t make any difference. If you’re not reluctant to come at me, then I’ll be the one who’s going after you.”

The concentrated energy was disrupted by Maximo when he slashed its armor and carved its light to its flesh. Even still, the flame its palms are enough to obliterate a landmark if pointed rightly to the target.

The moment it fell to its knees the flame burst and erupted, shooting toward the horizon. Everything went awry as they saw how fast the projectile streaked to the sky, traversing to the clouds and to another.

“It couldn’t be…” Kazan muttered.

“It’s heading towards the mansion… this is bad,” Linda added.

Dorian dazed at Maximo then back to the shooting flame. “If you allowed me to take over the battle this wouldn’t have happened.”

Dorian raised his hand following the monster’s projectile attack. Their attention turned to the ball of flame that stopped midway. It became smaller until it broke down, spreading into smaller flame-like fireworks after the loud boom, the sky went silent and cleared the clouds, clearing to gaze at the twinkling lights.

“That’s quite low of you, Maximo. Playing with your enemy is a bad habit. Please, be quick at whatever you want to do.”

“I know, I know.” He replied. “I’m wrapping this up.” Maximo nodded in acknowledgment.

“What is he doing exactly?” Alastor asked quietly, his voice was laden with disappointment. He was losing confidence in the members of the so-called 10 rooks. He just noticed by now that Dorian was eating a lump of dried meat. His cheeks are red from churning.

“Every monster has its own limit, even this one, and its abilities. Exuding efforts is the problem here, it takes a rigid warrior to stand against the monster. But for Maximo, it wouldn’t be a problem if he was kindly inclined to seriously take it down. Just like spells, the monster’s regeneration ability is rooted in its prowess, in short, the abnormal mana it possessed. Nevertheless, overusing the ability will weaken the user and that is what Maximo's aiming for, to strike the weakest point of the enemy. I don’t doubt that he would be able to defeat it, what I worried about is the casualties. That jerk would allow more to be injured just to have his fun.”

“Hey!” Maximo shouted. “I heard that!”

The smog of dust and grime dissipated as Maximo stepped forward at a slow pace under the neon moonlight which was partly covered by the clouds nearing over the moon. His sword held aloft and carefully as he tramped closer to the enemy. He glanced around the trees. The logs blocked off some roads.

“Shit, the directors are gonna kill me for the mess I made.” He tensely said. He stopped and scanned the gasping Deziun Alle. “I don’t want to get scolded again. Guess I’m gonna have to kill you.”

His heavy sword pointed forward. His speed remained unrivaled compared to the enemy. The tip of the sword pierce through but the solid body of the enemy wasn’t hit by it. The dark entity suddenly flung into a black gas spewing through the sky.

“This is bad,” Dorian muttered. “Maximo! Sorry but I'm gonna have to intervene.”

In an instant, the gale scattered and disrupted their senses. Dorian already made his way and leaped to the sky. The shadowy figure overtook the moon light as it wreaked havoc killing the birds and other monsters.

“What the hell are you doing old man?!”

“The monster just entered the soul ripper phase. Any physical contact will be unabated.”

“It’s my prey!”

“I know, I know. But you won’t be able to stop this thing now. It’s going to hunt souls for its strength to replenish. It might even get stronger if it exceeds the normal range of its appetite.”

Dorian’s ax began to glow and left a cloud of white dust and misty particles. Its warmth reached their senses. The monster felt the heat from the ax and glanced down. The clouds began to gather around and the shadowy figure leaped to cower behind.

“Useless!”

Dorian swung his ax to the cloud. He felt through the tip of its ax that it caught something, but only part of it as the cloud splits in half. The force dissipated some of the clouds and unveiled the injured Deziun Alle. The green liquid is oozing out from it as it leaped to another cloud.

Dorian kicked the air and directed his ax to the enemy.

“It’s really hard to aim without a fixed angle. Please, don’t make this hard on me. Let’s start this over again.”

The ability he performed surprised them. It was unusual for them to see someone skyrocketing towards the sky with only the force of kicking in the air, but nonetheless, nothing truly astonished them longer than this. All of their previous encounters, including the Arbiter, left a permanent reminder to them that there was something beyond them, and this power that came from a member of 10 rooks proved over again.

Dorian squeezed his eyes shut as he felt the air rubbing and drying his eyes, but he could still feel the portentous presence of the enemy luring his nose right to its ghastly body. Other than his intense training, the hard beating from the previous missions he had, his senses were sharpened to the point where his sense of smell and hearing can hear the rubble of stones and the whispering leaves clapping over the shrill of wind.

He opened his eyes and can clearly see black ghastly hovering through the gray clouds. Dorian kicked against the air again and this time he doubled his speed. Behind the small hill and the trees, the void of light filled the mansion.

When he was close enough, he conjured a spell. A bolt of purple lightning strikes the enemy out of black clouds that gathered together. The strikes continued and enveloped the enemy, shocking it continuously. It howled and fell down on the ground. The earth shook and under the smoldering smoke, the purple lightning sparkled, faint yet heavy rumbling like squall wicking away the smoldering dust of the peaceful grass field.

“Now, that you’re constricted, this should be a cinch. Unveil caput verus Draco.”

The ghastly figure began to change form and return back to its original state. Deziun Alle intended to resist the purple lightning but the more it struggled the more the lightning tightened and harder, it even saps its strength to maintain its closure.

His white lighted ax grew brighter, blinding, and warmer than it was. His Inquiara Magic: Divine Arson came fully into effect. He cleaved the ax towards the Deziun Alle. The moment it makes contact with it as Dorian strikes down, the white light enveloped the surroundings around 15 meters, towering as huge as their eyes can see on top of the sky.

It was unfortunate to the rest of the monsters that got caught up in the blast, they weren’t spared by the holy light that burns within its range. The tower of light shone so bright that it reached the eyes of the beings from far away.

Just watching how things unfold, Alastor couldn’t help but compare himself. All of the voices in his thoughts keep reminding him how inferior he was, it doesn’t stem from jealousy but rather self-deprivation. After he faced the Arbiter, he thought he could do better than allow the Deziun Alle control over their advantage and turn the tide of events, but instead he was given the thoughts that he was preordained to be weak. He kept telling himself that he’d become better, but the more challenges he faced the more it was harder for him to stand up for his resolve. The feeling of inferiority was proof that he was scared of not catching up with his wits.

His thoughts dissipated as the vicious ringing light calmed down and shrunk until it disappeared to no more. Except for Linda who was helping Kazan, they all went to the place and saw Dorian sitting down. His ax was stuck on the ground and no traces of Deziun Alle.

“Hey!” Maximo shouted. “Why did you butt in? That was my prey!”

All of them felt a chill crawling on their spine as Dorian turned to gaze, especially Maximo, he felt an intense feeling from his darting eyes.

“My interference wouldn’t be necessary if you have done the job.”

“I told you I have a plan.”

“Yet you continue to play with it. I know what you’re planning. You intend to deplete its energy so its regenerating capabilities would drop. But the only thing you did was to return to its original state. It would devour souls if it wouldn’t stop and the casualties that we swore to halt would add another more. Now, what do you think those people would think of us?”

Maximo looked down, realizing his mistake.

“Now, don’t give that damn look. You do know that it wouldn't do any better.”

Maximo did not reproach his subordinate because he feared that any more contradictions would lead to more conflict. Maximo might be hard to handle, but at least he was conscientious enough to see his mistake and repent for it to do better.

Dorian scanned Kazan. The more they waste time here the more his health declines.

“Pardon me Miss Linda,” Dorian stood and came closer. “But would you please sit him down for me?”

Linda softly nodded in acknowledgment. He carefully led Kazan to lean on the trunk of a tree. Dorian’s right hand was covered in a white hue as he touched Kazan. For a moment he grunted then screamed, exposed to the agonizing pain. Although it was quick, his mind succumbed into the darkness and his body laid to rest.

“He’s fast asleep, but he will recover. Don’t worry.”

It was too early to celebrate, there was still 6 days ahead – 6 days they had to endure until the spiteful curse would uplift and free them to continue on with their lives.

Alastor used to dislike this place, not because of the field but his memories in it, but the thing he liked the most was what would come after the long night. It was the time when the day cast away the cloak of the night while the orange light spread along with the stars. The sunrise made its way into the sky. At first, it was small but it will surely become bigger and brighter. At this time, nature was at its best, golden rays of the sun would give a bright color of orange that would streak to the clouds, meadows, and to mountains.

They all could agree on this thought, but it was simply too ludicrous for them to waste another more minute here. There are so many things to prepare. They walked to the path, graciously feeling the rays of cool and brazing to their eyes.

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It was a long and tiring week of surviving the Night Tide. The casualties, unlike the first, became minimal. It’s all thanks to the 2 members of the Rooks. Their presence made it possible for all to survive the hellish week. It wasn’t much to brag but they’re the ones who mostly take out the enemies.

“And that concludes our expedition, sirs.”

The directors nodded in acknowledgment. Dorian removed the helmet and intended to mat his beard, studying his reflection down the round table that showed various data. They sat along with the other 14 directors.

Maximo rose from his seat and walked towards the long window. The evening was upon the mansion. He observed how the clouds gathered up, forming over the mountain in the southerly directions. Before him, ablaze the torches that the mercenaries had arranged, lined up in 2 rows as if making a road towards the cliff. The orange light illuminates the laden sad faces of the mercenaries who have lost their precious comrades. Ambling casually, he allowed his eyes to pass over the rest of the group that was camping , remembering the people that they lost, feeling nothing.

“Very well, Dorian.” One of the directors replied.

“What do you make out of it, sir?” Dorian humbly asked.

“We can’t actually tell by now what they’re planning on gathering those materials for, but we are certain they are preparing for something,” Rod replied. “We have also evidence of Hemil Klust that are being mined in a city.”

“Great.” He frowned upon the news. “What’re we supposed to do with it?”

“Nothing for now. The whole city was under surveillance by the law enforcers. Even the Canaries are involved with this.”

“That would mean trouble if we probe any further.”

“Aside from all of that conspiracy, there is someone I would like for us to discuss, that girl, Sherry, I heard that she has a terminal disease.”

Rod replied. “Our best experts are already doing their job to determine how it will affect her, but they haven’t yet fully figured out the blueprints handed out to them. The good side is that the spreading of infection has stopped as if they were frozen and got absorbed back by Hemil Klust.”

“Not to insinuate, but how come we never voted if we should accept her or not. She is literally a walking weapon, regardless of undermining hostility, we must still consider some things before reluctantly accepting her.”

“Mister Oren, that is exactly the reason why we accept her,” Rod replied. “She barely grasped her own strength lest we should allow her to return to the normal world without knowing her capabilities. Give her some wide berth, please. After all, her normal life was gone before her eyes when Theo’s goons abducted her and used her for various experiments.”

“I know you’re just being careful Mister Oren, but Mister Rod has a point. It is best to keep the danger minimal and into our sight as possible.” Mister Orion added, “Undoubtedly, she still has some merits that Theo or maybe not his collaborators would from wanting her. So, yes, it is wise for both of us for her to stay here, guarded and trained until she’s ready to go back to the outside world.”

One of the directors, Mister Red replied to Mister Orion, “I must oppose letting her go. According to the reports of Linda and Cid, Sherry can be regarded as a rank A+ mercenary or more than it. She also had abilities that exceeded even their entire group. Her Inquiara Magic had not been identified yet, but with no doubt, it would be powerful once discovered throughout her training. We cannot deny that her existence is an aberration, and we must not allow her to cross the border at any cost.”

“Aberration?” Rod asked, laden with annoyance. “Do you hear yourself, Mister Red? She’s not an enemy, but a child. The Glade exists to help people in dire need.”

“That girl managed to put a scratch against an Arbiter, something that our mercenaries aren’t able to do. You can’t expect us to turn a blind eye to her prowess.”

Dorian had heard enough. He sat down and made his presence known.

“Gentlemen.” He raised his voice. “I understand the dilemma of your plight, but have you considered what must be done?”

“He is right. What must be done to her?” One of the directors asked.

They all exchange empty glances.

“Killing is out of options,” Dorian added. “Abandoning also is out of option and even letting her go is out of option.”

“What are you pointing at, Dorian?”

Dorian smirked. “I’m saying, let fate decide. If she should turn to the other side of the coin, we will undoubtedly put her down, but if she goes the other way, then we let her go.” Dorian continued, “We cannot strike our desire to something we have no control of.”

Maximo added, “He is right. What we can do now is to do our best to keep her in our light.”

The meeting concluded with an agreement of Dorian’s and Maximo’s statements. Their words became a way for their moral compass to handle. It may not be as satisfying as they intended it to be, but it was enough to solve their current problem. Other than Sherry’s situation, they also have rising problems against the Arbiters' activities in the other regions, Maximo and Dorian were assigned to investigate it but ended up with more questions rather than answers.

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It was midnight when they began the rite for the people who had passed away from the Renegades rebellion. The directors involved themselves in the rite as they’re the ones who became the parent figures for them. The bodies of the dead were cremated and were put all into a single jar.

Director Rod and Pietro led the rite and stood at the edge of the cliff.

“May your souls find rest in the next life. All of you may be gone but the sacrifice won’t be forgotten. We will carry you with us.”

Pietro opened the jar and poured it into the ocean, but the dust was carried away by the wind and disappeared into the clear sky.

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After the rite, Directors Rod, Pietro, Orion, and Red see Maximo and Dorian on the ocean. There wasn’t much time for them to waste here as they had their own expeditions waiting for them.

“So, we’re free to do what we want until we receive our assignments, right?” Dorian asked.

Orion nodded, “There wasn’t much we could make out of it. So, yes. You’ll be laying low for now. But you have to keep your eyes open out there.”

“I understand,” Maximo replied. “But what about the Renegades? Aren’t we supposed to stop and punish them for what they’ve done?”

Red shook his head. “Your missions are more important than they are. We already have our best men out there in the field tracking their movements.”

“Even still, some of their members are on par with us. I think a member of the Rooks should get involved in this case. Axel, Han, and Reito, perhaps? They remained docile for a couple of months.”

“Even if we wanted to, we have no idea where they are. They’ve completely gone underground and there is no way, including our fixers, to locate them.”

Dorian and Maximo exchange glances. Dorian replied, “We might have some idea where they are.”

“Really?” Rod asked. “If that’s the case then heed on them.”

Maximo replied, “Even if you don’t tell, we will give them a piece of our mind.”

Maximo put his helmet on his head. Dorian held his long arm ready to sprint towards the ocean.

“I hate this,” Maximo muttered.

“No one cares,” Dorian replied.

In a flash, they traveled at the speed of sound. As they moved in greater lengths, the sea parted in half. The mercenaries witnessing Dorian’s power were awed.

On Glade’s behalf, they will gladly put their interest aside and help them when they weren’t able to do so while they were away. All of the disturbing thoughts diminished away when the spiking cold of spray from the ocean crept to their senses.

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The dawn came earlier than expected, nonetheless, it was not an excuse to delay the training. Together with the other trainees, Alastor and Sherry did an early exercise run. The route they followed was from the forest to the mountainside, taking a turn over the hill and returning to the base where they did another set.

A 30 minute break wasn’t enough for Sherry. Most of them recovered quickly from the long tiring run, except Sherry. Sherry felt that her stomach would turn upside down, given that it was kilometers that they’ve run.

“You alright there?” Alastor asked and sat down beside her.

Looking to be tough, she forcefully shook her head and took a long tiring breath before facing him, “It wasn’t a casual stroll, so no, I am not fine.”

“Okay. No need to be so stingy.”

“You guys make this whole routine sound so easy.”

“Because it is. Well, for newcomers like you it won't be easy. After months of expanding your cardiovascular endurance, I doubt that you won’t be able to catch up with us.”

“Speaking of which, what’s next?”

“Nathaniel will be the one who’s going to teach you all about the basic principle of magic. He may not look like it but he’s experienced as I am.”

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Nathaniel stood on top of the stadium. His hair is unkempt. He was tired, an almost passive expression that already tells that he was not up to the task, but was forced to do so. He took out a small note, it was nothing but a summarization of the topics he will discuss. He was never an academic devotee. His specialization belongs to fighting monsters and all related to that, teaching kids was a big no for him. If it wasn’t for the additional fee he was tempted with, he wouldn’t waste his time staying here.

“Everyone!” Nathaniel shouted, “Please gather here. We’ll be starting our class within the minute. Find whatever suits you.”

Alastor was left behind to oversee Sherry’s development. Surprisingly, everyone seemed to be compliant. No one caused a commotion unlike before when he was a trainee like them. Picking, nicknaming, the usual pricks who would throw stones at the other group and cause fistfights, that was the usual thing they would do before.

He scanned the windowed position of the trainees. “This morning we will be discussing how magic works. Does anyone have any idea how magic works?”

Sherry raised her hand and haughtily said. “Um, aren’t you supposed to be the one who’s going to discuss what it is?”

“I’m asking to spare the whimsicalities of this class so that everyone would be participative.”

“Then how would that do better for us?”

Alastor smirked. A vein popped out on Nathaniel’s head, but he refused to break his calm demeanor.

“Because by doing so you would know how to be comfortable with talking upfront.”

“Then that would mean some who don't have prior knowledge would be left behind,” Sherry replied.

“No, they will not, because I will expand the idea into a simple yet understandable concept. Now, please, sit down. You’re interrupting the class.” Nathaniel started, “Now everyone, as we all know energies are part of our life. It exists in a not so obvious way. Energy can take in many forms, from the physical way, and in a supernatural way. The river, the wind, the heat of our sun that grants as another type of nutrient for the plants and trees to grow and to the planet that is tidally locked to our sun that keeps the balance of nature. Most importantly, there is energy that is supernatural, such as magic and any form of spells. This comprises the need for energy, one way to use magic is to use the energy that is stored within us, and that is our mana. The mana serves as our gas for us to use magic, without it, it would be impossible for us to use magic.

“There are three different types of amassing mana, nature energy, physical energy or our own mana, and dark energy. Now it is important to note that these types of energies has different purposes and can be used in different ways. Let us start with the basic one, the physical energy, this kind of energy comes from our body itself, and within it underlies our natural source of mana, now don’t be confused about the energy and mana, because these two come by in hand, you can say that they are the same thing, but uses different terms to easily sort out the difference between physical and supernatural. This energy that flows within our body can be regarded as our mana, with it we can use our magic, but it has limits. Only the person itself can tell if the mana’s capacity is approaching its depletion, but for some, they have a large quantity of it and can perform dozens of magic before dying out. To put it simply, physical energy can be regarded as our life energy or stamina and can be converted as mana to fuel our magic.

The second is nature energy, this energy comes out from nature itself. We draw magic from nature and store it on our bodies temporarily. Why temporary? Because of the side effects. While using it, our mind would be susceptible to spiritual entities and might cause disturbances psychologically, such as hallucinations, delusions, fatigue, and anxiety. Few people can use this ability and some are members of the Glade. Practicing how to use natural energy requires a tremendous amount of effort to master. Those who have mastered nature energy can convert it as mana that would replenish the strength and increase the capacity of the user.

The last type of energy is dark energy. This is an abundant type of energy, no sane mortal would use this kind of power because of its bad effects. Why is it bad? Because it’s obvious, there is dark in ‘dark energy’, the name itself speaks of trouble, literature-Ly-ish. Unlike the minimal friendly nature energy, dark energy requires the user to be devoted and hell bent on it, such extreme decisions are required for the user to use it. Dark energy would come from different sources, some would be totems and relics that are made directly by an evil entity. Weapons can be sources of dark energy too and there are actually cursed weapons that are locked in various museums in this world. The reason why it’s forbidden to use it is because of the side effects, it will torment the user, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Those only who have known darkness in their life are the ones who would be able to endure it and would be able to fully control it.”

One of the students asked, “If cursed weapons are dangerous, why would anyone think to display them in the museum?”

Nathaniel replied, “The knowledge itself is not forbidden, only the use of it. Some cities reluctantly display cursed objects and explain the history so that people would come to know how dangerous it is to wield one. But certain countries totally ban specific dark objects because it has a wide range of bad effects.”

Nathaniel continued, “Are there any other questions? None? Okay. Let us proceed with the next topic and that would be harnessing mana.”

Now that they have moved on to the practical lessons, it is easier to show them rather than explain them. Nathaniel raised his hand, focusing the flow of mana on his fingertips into gathering on his palm until it formed a ball of energy that turned into fire.

“After this lesson, all of you would be able to harness the energy and create magic, like this one I did just now. But before that, you have to learn to harness your mana by using the rock. If you can maintain this rock without breaking it on your palm, then you’re good to go to the next step.”

Nathaniel picked up a rock and harnessed mana that engulfed the rock and floated it in his palm, steady and complete. He started to explain that to make it float, they have to focus their attention on imagining the energy of their body flowing and submerging it into the rock.

Others easily did it, but most of them are having a hard time of their life performing it. Sherry was at utmost disappointment, she failed to grasp the steps of the procedure.

“Sir, can you please tell us what it feels like doing it?” She asked. “It would help if we have some perspectives on it.”

Nathaniel pondered and quickly came up with a simple reply, “You have to imagine that you’re the lightning. Your arm has to feel the shock pulsating harder and so on. Like getting a kick in the balls, or your elbow hitting something sharp, anything like that. The rest comes easily.”

It wasn't as simple as she thought it was. To fulfill his description, she had to tap on the dark side of her memory. Feel the shock, she thought. She dug deeper and remembered the time when she struggled to regain herself back from being manipulated by Theo. All her attention remained at that time, she neglected that she had to imagine the flow of her energy to manipulate and control it, which she failed to do. Everyone’s senses were interrupted by a ringing sharp light. In her palm, energy shot out in the sky, it dissipated quickly. She breathed heavily.

Nathaniel came to check her up with a shocked expression, “That’s quite overdoing we have there. Don’t forget, you have to control the mana if you want to do magic. It was never easy, to begin with, so be easy on yourself. Just calm down and do it again. Don’t worry, we’ll take it slow and easy.”

“I know, I know.”

Now that she had something to reach out for that feeling, Sherry continued to the task. This time she did not fail. She easily made the rock float. She gazes back at Alastor with a proud look on her face.

“I did it! I told you I have the talent, right?”

Alastor replied, “Don’t get too confident. The hard part is about to begin.”

When all of the trainees managed to get through the process, Nathaniel nodded in acknowledgment and continued to the next step.

“The next step will be chanting magic. In chanting magic, it requires the imagination of the user, the mana is no exception. You cannot use magic if it requires a large amount of mana, please, do remember that. To start off, focus the mana on the fingertips before chanting the words. Now, repeat after me, by the ablaze sun, by the ablaze life, I conjure thee, Fiara!”

A fire floated on his palm. The instructed trainees’ flames weren’t that great as his, their sizes vary, some smaller, others might be average to consider.

He laughed over their laden confused faces and explained, “I understand that all of you are confused as to why it is not bigger than mine. Aside from spending mana, emotions can also play a vital role in conjuring magic too. Emotion can strengthen any magic that the user wants to conjure, it can even exceed the natural endurance of the level of the desired magic.” He continued. “The more the emotions are heightened, the more it can affect the size and the strength of your magic. When I first tried to strengthen my magic using my emotion, I imagined the first person who betrayed me.” Nathaniel glanced at Alastor as he raised a brow. “I have a friend who borrowed my cassette tape, said the bastard he would use it to record music, but I found out that he lent it to the other student so that he could get more chocolate bread and pasta.” He paused briefly and continued, “Anyways, that’s all of it. Please continue to do it.”

Nathaniel felt a sharp gaze coming from Alastor but he did not dare to look back as he knew that inside Alastor’s mind, he was being stabbed.

There were only a few students who could exceed the regular size of the magic. Most of them were able to maintain their natural size. Once they managed to grasp it, they began to test it on some debris of the compound.

“If you are going to test your profound ability, please do not hit the trees, I repeat, and do not hit the trees, or else I will hit you physically.” He laughed and observed for a while.

“That is different from what I have remembered,” Alastor said. His presence was sneaky as a rat.

“Really?” He asked, shrugging off the moody ambiance.

“I never lied about recording music.”

“Hmm.”

“I gave that cassette tape to the fellow student because he’s the one who’s going to do the recording, not me.”

“What about the bread and the pasta?”

“I did his assignment so that he will record the music. The bread and pasta are the bonus.”

Nathaniel fell in silence for a while and realized his mistake. He sweats profusely. Thankfully, a student came to ask for his help.

“Looks like there’s a troubled student. Talk to ya later.”

He laughed and jeered off away from Alastor.

When all of them were satisfied with the new magic they have learned, Nathaniel summoned them.

“Before we end this discussion, there is the last thing I want to tell you about the incantations.” All of them listen carefully. “There are ways to use magic without invoking incantations, but it requires you to muster imagining it. It would take years for you guys to be able to do it but that lesson is for you guys to have to learn. That is all. You can go home now. Its damn twelve noon, you guys should be hungry.” His last statement was more of a mandate, but obviously, it was a reason to dodge a bullet.

“You’re not going to discuss that with us about that?” Sherry asked.

“For what? That level of magic requires the user to be skillfully experienced which you all lacked for now.”

They all reluctantly agreed, which was great because he is famished with all of the lessons he had to discuss for them, but it was worthwhile for his pocket.

Alastor couldn’t take it anymore of her jabbering. Sherry was flexing how she was talented enough to do magic and can manage to conjure magic so easily.

*She was ranting about how hard it was and now she’s over confidently showing off*, he thought. He shrugged off and gazed emptily at her. His bored and annoyed expression did not fail to creep on her senses.

“Are you angry?”

“Not actually, this is my face when I’m hungry. So, please, spare me with your sense of accomplishment. My stomach is not in the right mood to talk right now.”

It was not a lie. It’s even more tiring to sit down doing nothing rather than doing something. All of his energy was spent worrying whether she couldn’t do it or not, but she did not fail him and actually made his job easier. Her attitude, on the other hand, needs to be improved.

The mansion finally came to their view. After the days the mansion had faced getting destroyed by the Renegades and the Night Tide, it was finally recovering. The four towers that oversee four different directions have finally been reconstructed.

The holes in the mansion finally got replaced by sturdier roof tiles and received a fresh paint job. The road was finally paved by a greenery scene. The walls of the mansion were not charred in black anymore. Most of all, the rooms are fixed and the mansion got an extension for new available rooms.

They went inside past the fountain, and headed straight to the dining area just by right and across the stockroom. It was a simple yet delightfully luncheon for Alastor. He was enjoying the pasta, macaroons, and refreshing juice he ordered.

They were enjoying their food when his team went to sit down and eat lunch with them.

“Wow,” Ken greeted, “Eating macaroons in noontime, interesting. Can I have a bite?”

Alastor with a blank expression said, “Touch my food and I will kill you.”

Ken quickly glanced down and ate.

“By the way,” Linda started. “How’s the training of the newbie doing?” She asked Alastor. He wasn’t able to correspond to her question as his mouth was full.

“Good.” It was Sherry who replied. “It was great. I was easily able to use magic. The instructor did explain to us easily how to properly do it.”

“Who’s your instructor again?” Linda queried.

“Nathaniel,” Alastor replied this time.

“Nathaniel, you mean Nathaniel, the one who’s in a stretcher?” Ken asked, his face repressing to laugh.

“Yes, it’s me.” Nathaniel was standing behind him. “And that was two weeks ago, I’m recovered and can kick your ass if I wanted to.”

“Shit,” Ken muttered.

“You, a teacher?” Linda said.

“Hey, even I can’t believe it myself.” He sighed, “Things got desperate and I needed money.”

“Okay, what would you need the money for?”

“To travel. I’ve been stuck here for months. I need to get out of this place.”

“What’s wrong with staying here?”

“What’s wrong with staying here?” Nathaniel repeated, “Everything man. I should be getting my life together and start somewhere else, not to get stuck over again because of some lunatics bulldozing themselves to prove that they don’t want this place anymore. I won’t be as lucky next time if there’s another revolt that would happen. I might end up with no legs next time.”

They can’t argue with that statement. He nearly lost his legs during the revolt.

“If you want to go out, easy, walk.” Alastor coldly replied. “Use all of the lessons you’ve learned in this place instead of whining like a little bitch.”

“Listen to me you little shit!” Nathaniel snapped out and was about to choke him but Linda and Ken stopped him while Sherry silently observed them.

After calming down, Nathaniel tabled his resolution. “I know that I’m gonna be able to survive in the jungle with the skills I have but I am not going to go out there alone without any financial resources.”

“Wuss.” Alastor again coldly replied.

Nathaniel remained calm, “It would if you’re going to be a little more sympathetic here, Al. I would very much appreciate it.” He continued, “It was very easy to say, but there’s no guarantee that I will survive long enough before my pocket will find the money.”

“Who said that you’ll be spending all your time in the forest?” Alastor asked. “There’s an easy way to make money.”

“Like what?” Nathaniel inquired.

“Hunting. You can hunt monsters out there, sell their meat or any valuable parts of their body. Merchants have things over the exotic products if you know how to bait them. They even pay higher than any quest in the guild, but you must be a good whisperer for you to sell it.”

“If not?”

“Then, sell it to the blacksmiths, I’m sure they will find it useful.”

Ken and Linda nodded in acknowledgment.

Linda replied, “Those could work.”

Nathaniel put it into his thoughts, “Yeah.” His mood lightened up, “I guess that would do. But I still need money to travel to the next town and after that, I will make my quest.”

Alastor felt someone tap his back. It was the young lady before.

“What is it?”

She was slender and obviously a timid person. This time the lady did not look down with her blue eyes.

“T-the director wants to see you and your team.”

Alastor, Ken, and Linda exchange glances and stand up. There were still leftovers but that was no concern as the request matters the most, especially when it comes from the director himself.

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They didn’t waste any more time and opened the door with no such formalities. Seeing the director using his free time to do his leisure doesn’t take much credit. On the other side near the table of the director, the girl sat down on her own part of the office and started to arrange the documents. Her face was dread as a zombie, hard and stiff, and can barely make any expression at all.

The director, on the other hand, was busy reading a book, but his hearing is not dull as it may seem. In fact, he may be stronger than what others think he is. They all observed the room, it was clean and neat, which is clearly not his doing. Alastor would like to imagine that Rod was dropped by his parents when he was a child and did grow up misbehaving through some deceitful and devious way that even the parents could imagine.

Rod was never the man they thought him to be, strict, cunning, and straightforward. All they see him now is the semi-carefree old man, relaxing while his assistant was busy doing his job, but before they can laugh at that thought Rod made up his mind and put down the book carefully on the table. Rod removed his glasses and cleaned his eyes before facing them with a hard and stiff look.

“What’s with the call?” Linda queried. “You have a job for us?”

“Yes.” Rod nodded. He rose, stepped close to the window and peered into the cloudy sky. It wasn’t hurting his eyes until the clouds lifted up and divided allowing the ray to pierce through. He looked down and softly said, “As we all know, the Glade operation spanned the continents and received contracts from various clients from the underground world and including to the surface, but recently our supposed comrades betrayed us and because of that it caused a heavy toll to us. Which is another reason why we can’t be picky about the next job I’m going to give to you guys.”

“Spare us and get to the point,” Alastor replied.

“With the loss of the King of the Ylfon kingdom, princess Mola Teralhan took over the place and became the queen, but her candidacy came with a price. There is a faction among the nobles attempting to overthrow the monarchy and turn the tide to their favor, there were several attempts at the Queen but the two great generals protected her on several occasions. Then they resort to a tactless solution of demanding the tradition of marrying a male as to fill the position of the king, which sadly didn’t come out as they expected. And now, a new problem has arisen…”

Rod showed a map and pointed out some routes that followed up the path of some rivers and mountains from the Indigium Region and to the Leafol Region.

He continued, “An assassination attempt on a political envoy of the Ylfon kingdom recently happened within this part of the region.”

Alastor observed the points of assassination attempts and raised a question, “How sly, they managed to evade the assassins many times. I wonder what kind of political envoy they’re protecting.”

“That is out of the line of your question,” Rod said firmly.

“Look.” Ken started. “If they manage to evade the enemy this many times, why are they having the trouble to take them down or even so go back to the kingdom and issue a protection for the time being?”

“If they're as strong as you think they are, they wouldn’t have to put an effort to cover their tracks. Obviously, the enemies are more resourceful than they are. Not to mention, the enemies may have more magicians than the other party which puts them on edge.” Alastor replied.

“Fair enough,” Ken replied.

“You are right, Alastor. The enemies did have many resources to continuously pursue them in terms financially and manpower.”

“Which is why we’re here to escort them and make sure they will pass the border and make home safely. Isn’t that right, mister Rod?” Linda asked.

“Perceptive, but not quite. I do not know the nature of their politics but this person you’re going to guard must remain off the grid.”

“Off the grid?” Alastor asked. “What do you mean?”

“You will know the answer once you get in touch with them.”

“And where might they be?”

“A small town in the Indigium Region, Iyueghed.”

“Seriously? We want men and women in that region.”

“I know, that is why you’ll be dressed up to avoid unwanted attention from any authorities you’ll meet in there. Don’t worry, Cid will give you a heads up on what’s happening once you enter the kingdom’s domain.”

“Speaking of which, I haven’t seen the guy these days,” Linda said.

“I ordered him to go first. He has to attend something.”

“When will we head out?”

“Tomorrow.”

He felt their sharp gazes but it was nothing like hostile intention but rather a disappointment coming from spoiled children.

“I know that you have been to hell but most of our best men are out there, you’re all the last line that we can send.”

“Do not patronize us, Rod.” Alastor coldly said. “I am sure that this is more than protecting a political envoy. You might as well tell us what it is so we can prepare for the worst.”

Rod sighed and was quiet for a moment, then a long tire exhaled breath. Rod directly looks him in the eyes, “I had the same feeling as you are, but truly, I don’t know. That information was disclosed even to me. I don’t have any slightest idea what importance could that political envoy be.”

After a brief pause. “Fine. Sooner or later, we will find out whatever this charade you’re putting up.”

“You should flush your opinion, Alastor. The same goes for all of you. You might get the wrong impression and could interrupt the mission. What matters is to complete the mission.”

“The last time we shut up nearly caused our lives.” His tone was assertive but receded quickly over his tense breath, “But if you say so, then we have no choice.”

“Very well, dismissed.”

As they left, Alastor trudged his way back to his room, wondering what secret the employer holds. Retracing his thoughts, he decided to take time and sat down near the window. Alastor couldn’t shrug off the unease feeling that something is gone amiss. Nonsensical to think, but he has been acting completely vigilant ever since the incident in Kayon City. He was prepared to die, but after what happened his own guts betrayed him.

He wished he could retract his thoughts, but the fang got deeper and planted a seed that pestered him ever since. His thoughts began to float away as he gazed up to the sky. He lifted his feet and rested them on the window with his arms crossing on one another. He could hardly believe his luck had kept him alive all this time. A complacent smile stretched on his face. His weary eyes finally fell and slept, forgetting the problems under the shade of the clouds.

He woke up early in the morning. He already packed up his clothes in his bag. Alastor felt chilly as he stepped outside. Wearing a white sleeveless shirt and short pants was not appropriate for his outlook. His outfit became his bugle call.

Alastor carefully walked down the stairs and came to cross on the fountain. He paused and observed the flowers through the long windows and continued with the slow pace of strolling before turning right to the main hallway at the end of the strip, he saw Sherry, hunching her shoulder and leaning on the wall.

“You gonna leave me without telling me?” She asked.

“Damn,” He swore under his breath and murmured to himself, “I was about to tell you, but I guess someone already filled you in.”

There was a pause. The truth was he had no words for her. He was never the kind of guy who would give a damn over a small thing.

“I’m not mad if that’s what you’re worried about.” She finally broke the silence and spoke with warmth in her voice, “Much less you have the responsibility to tell me.”

“Well, honestly, I don’t have the intention of telling you that I’m going on a mission.”

Her smile wiped off. Her expression were telling ‘Are you serious?’, but then again, she said that he was not obliged to tell her everything. Although, it stung a bit when he said that straight to her face.

“Anyway, good luck. You’ve been a real help to me.”

“You should tell them that too. They helped you get out of that hellhole.”

Sherry nodded, “I already did.”

“Good.” He waved his hand and got through her, “Don’t worry about your training, Nathaniel will take care of you. You better be strong when I get back.”

Sherry warmly smiled, “I promise.”

Some trainees recognized what was the meaning behind his visage and gave him a wide berth for him to easily get through. Their behavior was a sign of respect and wish of good luck for their mission.

Alastor reached the entrance and went outside to see Linda and Ken ahead preparing the wagon with Liber’s strapped to it. A cheerful screech pierced the deafening silence, by that, their ears ring in pain. Alastor halted and briefly waited for him to continue. Clearly, the cheerful cry was meant for him. Liber broke off quickly, rushing to Alastor. Liber’s head purposely rubs against Alastor’s face.

He was uncomfortable but let him continue.

# Chapter 3

Let us start this story without giving it a name. A boy lived alone in a castle with only his cat as his friend. The king and queen aside from the maids are the only ones who are present in the castle. There were no children the same age. He never knew what it was like outside, only the clamoring laughed he heard from the capital. He was not completely alone, his father would also come to play with him, but only a little time that he could spare for his son. Nevertheless, he never finds it lonesome, because during his playtime he would spend most of his time reading books, bewildering himself with the wonders from the outside world.

If he didn't waste his time honing his swordsmanship, his tutor would keep him busy until sunset. Up above his room where he can see the rest of the beautiful country, he watched the busy lights flickering while the people gathered together in joy. Most villas are built on the mountain foot part of the country, composed by different designs, harmonious close-natures are mostly made of it.

In summer, the shops would be interconnected to the streets and would be cramped by the tourists. In spring, sailors would dock and reunite with their loved ones. There was so much that marvels his little mind, you might say he was a dreamer who wants to fly and travel all other places away from this lonely palace. He never cursed his home but he wished he could be something more than a child who kept stealing a gape through the holes of the castle.

Of all wonders he read in the book there was something that piqued his interest, the mayona apple. An apple that can grant the person to travel wherever he wants, but all of it was nothing but a child story. Even still, the little boy still hoped that he would find the apple… he never expected that he would have the opportunity to take a glimpse of it.

One night, the little child heard a whisper. He was hesitant to heed its call but the serene voice compelled him to walk fearlessly through the corridors and to the dark halls of the castle. He walked carefully with a slow pace through the descending stair that leads to the garden. The little boy walked straight to the wall of primrose. Behind the curtain of the flowers, there he saw a pallid vaguely formed shape of a woman sitting on the side of a fountain.

He stopped and surveyed her. She was never like the other people he had met before, but her glamour was indifferent to his mum. She was radiating the same warmth.

“Come here, my child.” She beckoned.

“He came closer out of his will. He can’t describe what he felt, but when she summons him, he can’t resist the words forming in her mouth.

“I heard your cry and so I came to fulfill your wish.”

“How do you know me?” He asked.

She chuckled lightly, “I know every child who yearns that they couldn’t have. I have different names but you can call me Allora.”

“Now, my child. I heard your wish of eating the mayona apple.”

The child asked. “Is it true that it can grant you the power to do anything you want?”

She stood and knelt before him to match his height.

“Yes, my child.”

She clapped twice and an oddly shaped golden apple appeared floating in her hand.

The brilliance of the fruit easily captivated and swayed his heart. The little boy’s little hand reached for the fruit. The lady in white gave it to him for him to relish and enjoy the power it will grant to him. The little boy slowly ate the apple, savoring its juicy taste that lingered in his mouth long enough for him to take another bite.

In the middle of his talking, a voice squealed behind him. He whipped his head around and saw the horrified expression of his mother. Her eyes widened as her arm stretched, her hands brimmed in light.

Her mother’s mien quickly changed as she saw the lady in white. The light in her hands was thrown on the lady. The moment it touched, her appearance changed from a benevolent kind looking lady to a horrifying dark hood that is under a red-eyed distorted flesh of face of an old hag. The magic that his mother used dropped the falsehood and pretenses that the witch conjured to his innocent young mind.

The apple he was holding became rot and smelled foul for youth like him to expose into. He dropped the apple and ran quickly to his mother. His face though was expressionless. There were no traces of human emotions. His mother could neither tell if he was in shock or could it be a curse from the apple he ate earlier. Whatever it was, the best researchers in this kingdom will find a solution to the curse inflicted upon him, she thought.

The witch growled and used dark magic to attack them. But the mother was not like any others the witch had fought. The light pushed back the dark energy, protecting them, and successfully overpowered the witch as a matter of the moment.

“You are too late!” Her rasping voice forcefully shouted. “The boy already ate the apple, there is no turning back on him. His soul will remain his, but his smile will be mine!” And with a horrible laugh, she flew before the knights of the castle could be caught up with her.

The mother who was filled with worries over his only son hugged him earnestly, not letting him go out of his sight. She thought with the witch gone, he would be back to his normal state, but another problem had arisen.

Many months have passed, but the little boy did not retain his ability to smile nor able to show any other expressions. The little boy underwent different treatments, but whenever he felt the pain, he refused to continue any further. The pain is too much for his little body to handle. In the end, the best people in the kingdom could fathom what kind of curse was laid upon him. As of now, it remains a mystery to all of them.

The little boy may have been able to live but the fruit of desire had taken away the only precious thing in this world and that is to feel.

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At brief intervals throughout their trek, the two came to this chapel that held an orphanage. The lady that wore a nice red denim skirt and oddly paired with a maroon vest visited this place yesterday. As soon as she heard that the orphanage was looking for temporary helpers, she did not hesitate to come by and help. The nuns were appreciative of her sincerity and allowed her to stay awhile playing with the children.

She was in the middle of tale-telling when a man in silver armor walked into the room. His damning visage with strict complexion halted the children from listening, and showed an expression of doubt and anxiety. She dazed behind, shrugging off the intimidating presence.

“I told you to wait for me in the cabin.” She said, suppressing her tone. “You’re scaring the children.”

The knight clearly had no idea what to do around the children. He looked around, stupidly. He snickered and scratched his head. Some of the xanthous locks dripped over his eyes and curled it back. The knight backed away.

“I-I’m sorry… but you know what circumstances we are in now. I can’t just let you simply out of my sight. As a knight, I have to protect you in the name of your late father.”

“I know, I know.” She ignored most of his words, “What are you doing here? And why are you wearing your armor? I thought we’re playing low for now?”

He briefly took a deep breath. This time he walked closer to her and whispered just enough for her to hear. “There’s a rumor in town that an assassin intended to kill the fake envoy that our troops carried on the Mistrake Mountain last night. The enemy is getting closer, my highness. We must leave.”

When she dismissively waved her hand, the knight left. He already knew what she was going to do and gave her the liberty to bid goodbye. She looked at the children and held out on the books.

“I might be gone for a while. Sorry, but the storytelling will have to wait until next time we meet again.”

One of the children asked, “When will we meet again?”

With sadness on her face, she replied, “I don’t know. But in the meantime, you must promise me that you will not stop reading and learning from these books. Okay? It may not look like it, but you’d find it useful in the future.”

Choosing not to damn herself with emotions any further, she stood and walked away.

A voice asked her one last time, “Will the boy be able to smile again?”

She glanced, “I don’t know. But we can hope, we can hope.”

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Considering that they were the target, it would be unwise to leave tonight. They must have a clear vision so that the enemies won’t use it to their advantage. But the way the enemy moved proved to be difficult to read since it did not hesitate to show itself whilst there was a whole squadron guarding the fake envoy. Nonetheless, they must continue carefully ever since the subject of the matter escalated.

They’ve been stationary in this town for three days. The small town was like any others she had seen, reeking the smell of pig from the farm, the sizzling meat frying inside the inn, and the polluted gas from the chimney. But like any others, it had some gems on it, it may not look like it but the town had an endeavor towards community helping and because of this, they’re glad that they chose to stay in this town for a while.

It was a matter of fact they had to remain vigilant; they do not know who was behind the assassination attempts but should ever she had fallen to the enemies’ hands the kingdom would be crestfallen and might cause an uproar among the citizens and the nobles. Strolling back in the cabin, the knight pushed the swing table uselessly open. She followed him inside, they sat and the knight ordered for the both of them.

“While waiting for the food, let us discuss what will happen from now on. I will hire a group of adventurers to aid us on our journey.”

The knight lay a map. It showed a layout of the entire region. His hands began to trail a path that was near to a forest and a river.

“Since the enemy made their move in the Mistrake Mountain, we should follow a path that would take too much time for them to catch up on us, thus we should head to Castellan Boundary. It is a rocky path but do not worry, the wagon we would use will be guarded by several vehicles, moving into three groups. As long as our plan does not leak, we would likely pass the border and make it back to the country.”

“I believe that won’t be necessary.” A man wearing a tuxedo with a cane said. He appeared out of nowhere. The knight was astounded. “The enemies already knew your obvious little plan.”

The knight quickly stood up and drew his sword.

“I don’t care who you are, but you have no business here!” He said with a threatening tone, but the plain, straight-jock face remained unaffected by the knight’s hostile words.

“Relax.” He said with a condescending tone. “I am no enemy. My name is Mr. Funny Man. I’m one of the Kris Krux. The majesty sent me here to deliver an important message.”

When she saw his sword still fixed towards the guest, she waved her hand dismissively. “It’s true. I know him personally.”

The knight hesitantly sheathed his sword and gave a wide berth to Mr. Funny Man sitting near to him. The barkeep delivered the ordered foods. Grilled meat, soup with vegetables, and of course the ale won’t be out of the table.

“There’s no need for me to tell you about the situation of the kingdom, right?” He asked her. She nodded. “The opposing faction of nobles are already making their move. With the loss of your father, your sister takes over the throne, but the line she’s walking is becoming thin. The nobles are indirectly forcing her to withdraw the throne in some other ways.”

She raised her brow. “Like what?”

“Proposing her to marry one of their sons. Aside from that, a graving effort to kidnap you.” He looked at her. “They aim to shift the balance of power into their own accords, something that we Kris Krux and the three generals won’t allow to happen. And that is why, you, sir knight Garafal Lebas must return to the palace.”

“My duty is to protect her. I won’t rest assured until we find whosoever trying to kill her.”

“I understand your reason, but you cannot deny you’re one of the three generals, your duty is to the kingdom. Your presence is gravely needed to show that our majesties remain strong.”

“But—”

“The order came from the majesty herself. The three generals must be present to show her strength remained composed. The Kris Krux, I, myself will take care of the majesty.” He continued. “You must return promptly to the castle to report to the majesty. She, however, cannot return for now. Not this time. We’ll have to wait for an entrance before she’d have to return. We can’t tell how many enemies we’ll draw out if we get close to the country, that is why we must know the identity of the enemy, and the only way to make that possible is to capture it.”

“Are you serious about this?” Garafal asked.

“Garafal.” She intervened. “If this decision was made by my sister, then I will oblige.”

The knight nodded. There was little else he could do about the matter.

After they ate, they waited and watched the knight talking to a person that had a vehicle. When the owner agreed, he told me to wait for him.

“What happened to the vehicle you used to get here?”

“I sold it. We don’t have the luxury to be flamboyant. But don’t worry, the transportations is ready for service, my lady.”

The knight told them where he hid the vehicles. After that, Garafal finally left them by buying a horse. Mr. Funny Man and the lady went back to the cabin to prepare.

“What path should we take from now on? I doubt that we’re going to the route he discussed.”

“We might take a detour.”

“What for?”

“I’ve enlisted a request from the Glade.”

She raised her brow. “Them?” Obviously, she did not expect that they would resort to such people. She did not know if it was true or not, but what she heard, the Glade mercenaries are a bunch of outcasts that causes an uproar in some countries for the past years, but there are also rumors that they have also helped some people, and the latest they were being connected to what happened to Kayon City. Such contrast eludes confusion to some, thereafter, they shouldn’t easily trust them to be part of their conflict.

“Before you say something, remember, we are in a dire situation, we have to gather forces as much as possible to protect the lineage of your family and the country that your ancestors fought so hard to enrich to what we know as now.”

“I understand the plights and the circumstances we are in, but if the other countries would know that we’ve enlisted their help, then we will be in a world of trouble. We have an alliance with the other 6 nations and we know how nosy some of the nobles can be.”

“Too late. I have made contact with their fixer. We will head to the previous town and wait for them.”

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The sun was directly overhead. It was 9 in the morning but the heat was wearing them off, especially Alastor. Alastor was the one who was in the front holding the harness. It was decided earlier that they take each turn every 5 hours. All of them were reluctant on Linda’s proposition but now that Alastor had experienced the intolerable heat, he regretted volunteering to be the first one to be the sacrificial pawn.

His face was dread and tired as dead. Only the unpaved road was indifferent to the green scenery. The trees are green, the grass are green, and the leaves are green. Every turn it was still green. This repeating scenery had made him feel woozy and sleepy. His face was lying down to them, beckoning if one of them was still awake amidst the heat. The inside was oddly comfortably shady. The two of them seem to be asleep. Their bodies lay uncomfortably on each side of the long seat.

The light that entered inside disrupted Ken temporarily. His eyes slightly open then shut off, covering it with his arm.

“Wake up, give me some water,” Alastor said. His sighting became blurred for a second. He shook his head ambiguously. “I’m dying here. Please, be quick.”

He felt his sweat trickle down to his cheeks.

Ken grunted before sitting up. There were two crates, the other one was their food and water that was contained within a bottle, and the other was for their equipment. It was unclear what kind of equipment it was as he woke up late.

Ken yawned. He opened the crate and picked up the bottle, handing it over to Alastor.

His thirst was finally quenched and felt freshen over the cold water. Seeing that they were able to get some rest, it would be wise to decide who was going to take a turn next to him.

“There’s one hour left, who’s going to take my place between you two?”

Linda lazily waved her hand. It had been decided.

“Very well.”

Alastor’s heart sank and was calm from the overwhelming heat, however, his eyes caught something far ahead, a figure almost its movement was fast as a silhouette. *It must be the effect of the heat.* He thought. His odd feelings were taken away by a gust of wind. It was a tedious thought and quickly gone before he’d overthink it.

He absentmindedly yawned and looked up. His preoccupied thoughts ceased as he looked down and quickly took a huge right turn away from being fell to the cliff. The insides of the wagon were affected thoroughly. Linda and Ken fell off from the seat and sprawled awkwardly on the ground.

Having successfully escaped the near-death situation, for now at least. Alastor sat down and caught his breath. Unbeknown, there were eyes behind him, gleaming in madness. The next thing he felt was the pinches coming from behind.

“Are you an idiot?! What were you doing?!” Ken asked, his face flushing in red.

“Alastor.” Another creeping voice came from behind. Her hand pulled him inside and took over his place. “It seems that you’re tired. I’ll take over from now on. You get some rest.” It was as simple as that. Linda didn’t bother to look at them and closed the curtain.

Alastor had no idea what just happened. He looked at the mess and started to clean and arrange everything in order. Ken rested back in his seat and slept for most of the time before taking a turn.

Given that their headquarters are on the far side of the region, it would take two to three weeks before they’d reach the rendezvous point. There was nothing to worry about, they knew that they’d have to wait and remain for weeks if they wanted to stay alive. It was given, the mercenaries are not some superhumans who can travel instantaneously at their heed.

Ken smiled over the gleeful sight of the field. Not so far, a village up ahead greeted them with the open arch gate. It was protected by guards, probably hired because of the lack of uniform. Through the open window, Alastor could see the streets of the village. The road stretched from here and there. The town had a calm cool air amidst the bright sunset. Thanks to Liber’s speed they were able to reach this village that would usually take three days to arrive.

Down the road, they saw travelers, merchants, some adventurers coming from a quest, they are battered and tired-looking fellas. It wasn’t much different from what they have seen before but they’re quite fascinated that this time this town got quite lively, unlike the last time they came here before.

They came past the old shacks of houses and turned right leading to an inn. Weary travelers, and adventurers cramped inside. The inn was big enough for two-hundred people to settle in for a few days. It holds no wonder why this place was always cramped by adventurers.

Linda went down and ordered the two to wait for her. A bearded, thick-browed middle-aged man came to greet her from sitting outside as if he’s expecting another traveler to find its way to their inn.

“Greetings Miss, welcome to our inn. How may I help you?” came a delicate voice of delight from the man.

“We would like to make a reservation for our Comodo and one room.”

The man stared at the Comodo and the wagon. A brow raised in suspicion.

“How many of you will sleep here tonight?”

“There will be three of us.”

His suspicion ceased and his smile stretched.

“That would be three-hundred haz.”

“Three-hundred?”

“Yes. I believe that would be a reasonable price since you have cargo inside that wagon.”

Linda didn’t say any further.

“Just turn left over that road and another left to get on our stable.” He went inside and slipped through the crowd. He came back with two keys, handed it over to Linda, and added a word of advice. “Just to make sure your precious garments won’t be lost; I suggest that you should hide them in your room.”

“Why?” Linda’s brows furrowed.

“There are some people who don’t know how to keep their hands on their own and might not even bring consideration even yours.”

Linda did not prompt and nodded.

Ken brought the supplies in the room while Linda sat near the window, her eyes scanning ahead as the sun finally rested and the moon from the horizon took over.

“So, what now?” Alastor asked.

“We rest for the night, replenish our strength, and proceed to our destination.” She replied and did not look back.

“How about the money?” He asked. She almost forgot that Alastor is the kind of man who was overly conscientious. “How much did Rod give to us as allowance for the mission?”

“Two-thousand haz.” She remarked.

“Two-thousand haz?” There’s a disappointment in his voice. “What did he expect us to do in this mission? Sightseeing?” Alastor sighed heavily. “Money is the main asset of our journey and if we don’t have enough of it, we will be limited.”

“What do you want us to do?” Ken asked.

“Accept some missions.” He replied. “That’s the most reasonable thing to do now.”

“Do you agree, Linda?” Ken asked.

“Yes. I see no problem with that. But we will accept only those who don’t go on rank A and above.”

“Agreed. It’s settled then.”

When they woke up early in the morning they went to a guild. Alastor’s eye scanned like a finger thoroughly the papers with job descriptions stapled on the quest board. Apparently, there were few A and C rank requests, most were compiled of rank B quests.

Alastor was on the verge of giving up when Linda pointed out a poster that she considered suitable for them.

*Beasts in the Berningham forest on the loose!*

The quest came from a lord of a land. His main business is the production of wheat and rice, distributed with a fair price of course. Recently, his land was being harassed by some unknown beasts. He hired mercenaries but few of them return alive. The lord had thought that it was a single beast that is responsible for all the mess, but the descriptions from the survivors have differences. Some said that it is the work of Beninghol, in addition, there was Liger, and others were Oniram.

Linda came to the counter and put the poster on the table in front of the staff to see if they were interested in it and asked a query, “Where will we find the lord of the land?”

“You’re interested in it?” The staff asked. “Most of the adventurers avoided it for days because of its peculiar case. I hope you will do the same.”

“Just answer the damn question.”

“All right. Go to the east gate and follow the path ahead. You would be able to reach a small town and meet some farmers. On that point, they will lead you to the mansion.”

“How long will it take to reach that town?”

“If you have a ride… 30 minutes. If you do walk, then I guess it would be 2 hours.”

Linda nodded and they went outside. A blanket of silence had been cast on the town and they smell a sense of irony. Last night was a hell of a merriment, but now the town is quiet like a ghost town.

They went to the inn and decided what right action should be taken. Linda explained the details she learned from the guild.

“Can we bring the Comodo with us?” Ken asked and looked at Alastor. “Liber would be a big help to us.”

Alastor shook his head dismissively, “Liber’s role is transporting. Any risk of injuries would prove to be fatal on our journey and might delay our schedule.”

“He’s right, but where should we leave him be while we’re out there hunting monsters?” Linda asked.

“That’s not a problem. We can talk to some farmers there to take care of it. We’ll pay as compensation for their service.” Alastor replied.

Linda reluctantly nodded, “If you say so.”

The strolling had been far faster than they expected. Through their journey there have been a lot of errors and miscalculations, the road was infested by monsters and strife is inevitable. It took them an hour to get to the town.

They felt eyes studying them. It had no mix of maliciousness, only curiosity as if they had already expected the outcome of their journey based on their laden dread and lifeless faces.

Alastor being himself was cold and unbothered by their silent tirade. He asked a pasture to take care of Liber with 100 haz as payment and another 150 haz when they will come back.

They were told that the road towards the lord of the land was up ahead of the hill. While the road did not show any kind of obstruction, it was tiring. There are no trees that block the heat of the stingy sun.

Taking a turn, they up ahead the sloping hill-like road to the mansion that oversees the rice field behind the luxurious house. On the other side was another field of trees that harbors different kinds of fruits.

They stopped in front of the large arched gate. Vines spewed and twisted over the gate. It was not old and rusty nor was the house out of the condition. The vines creeping are the ones that are out of control. It spreads all over the place.

When they’ve come closer, the vines' spikes grow. Linda was unsuspected of it but when they came closer, the spikes spewed out from the vines.

Linda quickly made a shield of ice. The spikes bounce back and fall. Alastor withdrew his sword and Ken equipped his bronze knuckles.

The spikes spurt out more and managed to break Linda’s wall of ice. They quickly dispersed away from each other to cover more ground. They deflected the spikes with ease. Ken slipped through the barrage of attacks and conjured a fireball. He threw it to the vines and it spread, turning into ashes.

“Good job.” Alastor complimented.

Ken smirked.

The gate suddenly opened as if it had life on its own. Tall stature with such gentlemanly aura greeted them with a curtly bow. The one who greeted them was obviously the butler of the household. He was taller than Ken by two inches. He was clearly trained properly and for his old age, his posture was straight. His suppressed bulking chest made it clear that he kept his usual training regimen despite his age.

“Forgive us for unruly greetings. Our lord has been prudent in choosing adventurers to take the job. Previous people who took the job have been slain by the beasts in the Berningham forest. We would like to avoid any unnecessary deaths as much as possible.”

Alastor nodded. “We understand your queries but your test is quite easy for us. You need to be better than that.”

“Is that so?” He asked. It was more of a challenge and question of his authenticity. “I hope your actions won’t remain as simple words. It will be disappointing otherwise.”

Linda intercepted, “Don’t worry, we’ll do our best. We’re not like other adventurers.” She confidently replied.

“Very well then.” He spoke. “Follow me.”

They all followed throughout the mansion. It was extravagant the very same as the others, but the difference was that defenses were built in the necessity of protection for the lord of the land. They felt a heavy sensation filled with suspense and distrust around the corner. They notice gazes around the corners inconspicuous regarding their presence. For Alastor, it made clear that they harbor suspicion about their arrival. It had been a long time ever since the constant failures that the previous adventurers have shown. It wouldn’t be much of a surprise if they considered the possibility that they’re bandits pretending to be adventurers.

They entered the luxurious house. The butler guided them throughout the lounge to the second floor and into an empty room. They were instructed to wait there and sat on the chairs on the round table opposite of what it seems a seat reserved for the lord that had a different design and golden linings on the chair. The tension they have felt has gradually decreased but still, the guards that move like an assassin remain their attention to them.

For whatever reason it was, they seem to be anxious enough to show excessive suspicion of their party. The lord of the land was held in high regard for agricultural purposes. They may be insignificant compared to the nobles and politicians but they have great significance in regards to local products and most importantly in the economic world. They’re the ones who make sure to supply the country’s demands in terms of domestic products by producing products just like rice, wheat, and varieties of fruits.

But not at all times their products are needed. The needs of the products also coincide with the season; if it’s summer, the need for refreshing fruits such as melons, coconuts, pineapple, and others would cause a boom in their profit. While in winter, wines, cocoas, or animals especially during the holidays would be in high demand in the market which do not possess all of the necessities.

Finally, the lord had arrived. It would be presumptuous to assume that the lord had a similar stature as the others, broad, slump, and stout. But this one is different, he may not be muscular unlike the butler, but his body is in good shape considering that most of a lord’s time would revolve around paper works and product management that they ignore their health and physical aspects of their body.

The lord immediately went to his chair and sat down. A dread expression settled on his face. He was fresh from the bath, but with the dark circles on his eyes, indicated that he hadn’t slept for days. With his dismay countenance, the room was immediately filled with anxiety and intensity. The situation he was in clearly was dire and needed to be dealt with. But more importantly, he was quite curious about them.

“For an adventurer, you are all quite young. Are you sure you picked the right quest?”

Linda lifted her gaze. “Yes, we are. Don’t worry, we are quite experienced just like the others.”

“I doubt it. Young people tend to move slowly and accept little quests to ensure the security of their lives.”

Actually, his suspicion was on the right track. Normally, young adventurers around their age would take it easy. Most quests they accept would be minimum to danger to none. It’s completely rational to think ahead of them like that but he seems to forget the fact some adventurers are hasty. In some sense, adventurers who are rushed ahead of their careers can be described as either smart or an idiot in a sense of need for fame, prestige, and power. But most Alastor had met along the road only wanting money.

Their adventurers, about the same as their age roughly knew anything about the world. They completely neglect the danger and unfortunately had their life ended at such a young age. The pressing matter now was how to convince the lord that they’re actually what they claimed to be.

“You can say that we’re not one of those people who are such slowpokes. We are blessed.” Ken said.

Blessed. If an adventurer was called that it would mean they’re on par with the experienced adventurers. The reason lies with their abilities that were honed through years of training at an early age. Naturally, Alastor would feel proud of this since they have started early at this career, but Ken’s words risk the subtlety of their real profession. He forgot that they should follow the customs of the norms to be inconspicuous.

“Is that so? I don’t mean to offend. But what kind of quest have you done throughout your journey?”

Ken couldn’t help it. “Exterminating monsters, such as Oniram, werewolves, Blue Klitz, but most of the time we explore dungeons.”

Lord’s brow furrowed.

Alastor stomped his feet. Ken did not react but only to suppress the pain.

Ken might have exaggerated it. Operation within dungeons is rare as sweet delights. It would normally take more than one group to fully understand and explore the dungeon which includes the older and much more experienced adventurers could handle. The reason lies with the exceptional observation and abilities that not many young adventurers could have.

Alastor coughed. “It wasn’t much to brag on, given that we weren’t the one who discovered it first. We were assured to make sure to fully explore and understand the structure of the dungeon.” Alastor explained elaborately.

“I understand.”

The lord nodded.

Alastor doubted he felt satisfied with his explanation, so he probed about the quest.

“So, tell us. How can we offer our service?”

“Before that…”

The lord held and rang the bell. The butler came in, strolling a cart with two sets of four tankards that were dripping with froth. They reluctantly accept it, except for Alastor. He hadn’t been able to drink booze for quite some time. Besides, he needs steady hands for later on.

As the lord relentlessly drank it until he was satisfied enough, anxiety fell over his face, remembering the days.

“As you read about the poster, my land has been infested by those pestering monsters. All started some six months ago, when the fruits were ripe and months of waiting for the rice field to come to fruition, a beninghol appeared out of nowhere and spread havoc. Now my guards have managed to kill the thing but it doesn’t end well.”

Linda looked down and thought deeply.

Beninghol is a dog-like monster that was roughly about ten feet and doubled the body of a bear. Its strength may not rival the evolved werewolves but its fangs are dangerous as it was.

Ken continued. “A beninghol, huh. Maybe that’s just a stray monster that unfortunately saw your land as a potential killing spot.”

Linda contradicted the thought. “No. Beninghol aren’t stray monsters. They’re territorial and even if they hunt, they wouldn’t go that far and usually hunt in groups.”

Alastor nodded in agreement. “Given that you’ve lived in this land for long, I doubt that there’s a chance that you’ve disturbed their habitat. They would have done it in earlier years of your occupation.”

“But still, their behaviors are odd,” Ken added.

The lord intercepted with a sigh. “Odd case, it is. But the odd activities had come and arisen yet as monsters appeared in my land out of nowhere such as liger and oniram.”

“This is an odd case indeed. I cannot find any reason why such monsters would act like this.”

The Lord shook his head.

“We have consulted over the adventurers but none of them successfully solved the case.”

“Then why didn’t you ask the police or any authority to help?” Linda asked.

“Darling, my land is over the border of the region and neighboring the Vesoga Plain, of course, no sane person would ever go to help in such a desolated place.”

Stating the fact, Alastor fell into his thoughts. *This is troublesome*.

“A tamer.” When Ken muttered those words, their attention gathered to him. “That’s the only thing I can come up with.”

Tamers are the kind of people who use monsters to battle. They are far more troublesome than the monsters or any kind of enemies. Crafty and witty, that was how most of the adventurers would describe them. They would utilize every monster’s ability to turn the tide on their hand. If a tamer tamed more than five monsters and had experienced, then, one tamer was enough to destroy an entire group. They’re so powerful that they can travel alone without any backup.

It may sound to be true, but there was a thing that is gone amiss.

“If all of this is done by one person, then he or she would have stated his or her agenda.” Alastor stole the tankard of Ken and flickered the flies. “But it’s a good guess though.”

The lord was silent for a while. He inserted his fingers on the grip and clenched it one by one. He heaved a sigh “Please, do what you can to solve this case. I will pay 50,000 thousand haz if you ever succeed.”

They all froze over his statement. They understand that he was in despair, but the price for the quest was quite over top on the hill. If they were good people, they would have to reduce the offer, but they’re not and they are, too, desperate to have money.

Linda broke off the silence. “Much obliged. We promised to exterminate the monster as soon as possible.”

The lord sighed in relief.

“My butler has already prepared your room. If you have more queries, please, do not hesitate to state them. I will support your quest as much as possible.”

It was too early for them to rest. And so, they nap for 3 hours before investigating.

The sky and clouds were tinged by orange and yellow with no source that can be found. Equipped with a light breastplate and fastened buckler, Alastor was confident enough to show himself outside. His equipment was similar to Linda but unlike him, she was equipped with headgear.

Ken, on the other hand, gave up most of the property of defenses and focused on offense and mobility. He equipped brass knuckles, light headgear, and chausses. All was made mixed in silver and iron. It appeared to be heavy to move but Ken was trained to use it, moreover the reason why he was the fastest of them three.

Outside, they heard the rapping of an ax. The guard with a heavy build easily cut off the log in to two. The others were busy talking to each other while some were scouting the area for security purposes.

They all felt a familiar yet strange feeling of someone gaping at them. Although vague, they are certain it came from the group of people that are sitting down and talking just outside the mansion. They shrugged the tense gaze and moved on.

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The sun’s orange rays drenched the calm rice field in tandem with the breeze. They had known mesmerizing as they witnessed when they came down to the village. The rice field was set into 8 rectangular figures that stretched over the hill far away from the forest that bears the fruits.

With the much welcoming spring to usher in a new season, the farmers have prepared planting and saw for the last three weeks that the lush green earth had been embroiled to bloom. In later days, the farmers would have known enrichment from the crops they patiently waited to grow. The results of last month’s harvest are the consequence of their efforts, but the scrutinizing gaze they felt from the villagers had foretold them that it is far from the truth. The dead glimpse in their eyes says otherwise. It had been a hoot for them to guard their land when the monsters came to attack them and ruined their crops.

The revelry had become foreign to them. It was normal for them to have revelries as soon as they have harvested the months of patience they have to endure, but when the monsters have arrived and were destroyed in their land, they have not known peace.

It was no wonder why their dread-laden faces had overdriven their desire to go out in the rice field to check their crops for they had feared that their life would be gone to waste and become the prey for the monsters. And with that thought, their harvest had come to a minimum to none. They fear that if they stray from the nearer rice field, they will come to meet death. This plague of thoughts had become a hindrance to fully gathering the supplies they needed for the exportation.

The lord cannot blame them for their inaction. He knew that it would cost them their lives if they had ever gone far beyond his guards’ reach and it heavily taxed his conscience if he let them die in vain.

The villagers had thought of them as intimidating, given what they wear, it can be hard to oppose their thoughts. But their misgiving had been swayed off when they got to know them and all went smoothly on their part.

The villagers had said that they recently stopped taking care of the crops ever since some of the guards have been wounded by the monsters. That was last week.

From time to time the monitoring had become too seldom. Instead of harvesting rice, they focused on harvesting fruits that are close to the mansion and have better security than the far part of the rice field. The downside to this is that the marketing revenue will decrease.

The group had talked to the villagers. They have learned that most of the attacks occurred in the hill which is the northeastern part of the forest where they harvest the fruits. So, they have come to investigate the place.

They saw a scorched part of the land, nearly the size of a beninghol which was nine feet. The trees had torn off from their respective place and the claws, varying in sizes, had made their mark across the land.

Felt the odd displacement of traces that they had to presume; Alastor raised a question.

“Hmm.” He crouched and investigated the traces, “How odd. The marks from there and here implies that a battle between two monsters had taken over. Unlike these marks, the traces back in the forest are far older, maybe over months before being laden by the moss and regrown branches.”

Linda crossed her arms and moved towards the marks. “It might be possible that the monsters brawled over the territory that they have found. But then again, it’s far-fetched to the truth. I don’t believe that it is simple as it is.”

Ken had noticed a presence behind the hill where they were overshadowed by the shade and had covered them under it. He dashed and leaped over the top of the hill. He came down and passed over the tree before preparing himself for the unexpected.

Ken walked carefully and thoroughly observing the trees. He witnessed that there are marks and damaged trees in the forest. When he felt that a presence had struck a chilling gaze at him, Ken immediately made a stance and quickly guarded himself.

His eyes caught a silhouette fast as bullet piercing and hiding in the shadowy part of the forest. Linda and Alastor had realized that Ken was out of their sight and went over the hill as a hotspot to scan the area.

Linda glanced at Alastor who remained silent for a while. She knew that he was silent all the time in the mission, but his aptitude of uneasiness had gotten over her nerves.

In fact, she was right. His mind had been veering from the right track.

“What’s on your mind?” Linda asked.

“I was thinking how we should deal with the monsters?”

“Deal? You mean, kill them?”

“Yes.”

“That comes later. We have to identify them first before we conduct our plan,” She paused talking and headed down the hill after seeing Ken, “But seriously, what’s going on inside of your head?”

He sighed.

“About the Renegades.”

“What about them?”

“I’ve been wondering why Renegades betrayed us.”

“I can’t say that it’s easy to ignore, since it feels like the top brass didn’t tell us the whole story.” She continued. “But one thing for sure, just like anybody else, the Renegades are only following their desires for more.”

“Desires huh?”

She nodded. “When weak people have grown fond of peace, they willingly try to keep it that way. But when strong people have grown bored of peace, they will do everything to tear it apart.”

“So, you’re saying Aurelius and the others are but a warmonger?”

“It’s not as simple as that.” She shook her head. “We can’t even say what the hell are they trying to do, but they’re on to something big. Unfortunately, the Glade is on the list. If they intend to leave the glade, they could have done it quietly.”

“But they chose to show their fangs.”

“It’s a reason for them and for us to break the chains.”

“I get it, now. But allowing them to walk away like that, has its negative precipice on our part. If the enemies should know that our first line of defense had turned their back on us, eventually, they would make us easy and might come after us.”

“Don’t gloat over that. We weren’t feared because of our secret weapons or our numbers, they feared us because of what we as individuals are capable of.”

He did not reply.

As they pressed forward to Ken inside the forest, a shadow had leaped and tackled Ken. He was able to guard himself and continued to bounce. His fist barely touched the unknown enemy.

Linda conjured ice magic to block the way of the enemy. The ice crept and quickly formed into a wall circularly. The ice wall caught the light of the sun and as a result, it reflected and phased through, revealing the enemy.

It was a beninghol. The beast bears yellow fangs, its skin dark, red eyes spewing smoke – a window to conjure spells. The beninghol was rougher than they usually encounter. Its height was speculated around ten to fourteen feet. The gray and dark skin was easy to distinguish from its dog-like family of creatures.

“Son of a bitch.” Ken ushered those words under his breath.

Alastor drew his sword. Linda conjured an ice sword and they came to aid Ken. The forest in the northernmost part of the mountains was shaken by the destructive wind. All animals left and evacuated the area. They braced themselves and waited for the right moment.

“A beninghol, huh.” Alastor started. “Oddly enough, it hunts alone. I guess the leader of the pack doesn’t need its lackeys.”

“You shouldn’t worry about it. We should prepare for the rest of the pack.” Linda replied.

The monster gritted its teeth and showed its fangs. The sharp fangs are enough to threaten and scare away any kind of hostilities that pertained to disturbing it. Ken’s sharp nose had caught something unpleasant in the air that came back to the monster as the source. It was something familiar before, a rotting flesh that minced and gulped in its mouth.

“Nah. The pack isn’t coming.” Ken said.

“How can you say that?” Alastor asked, clutching hard to the handle of his sword.

“Because they’re dead. Look.” Ken pointed at the monster’s mouth.

Their eyes magnified to its teeth and saw blood few meat leftovers that stuck on it. It’s all clear now. The beninghol appetite might have grown stronger and expanded its desire for more food, but the rest of the pack wasn’t able to provide enough. There could be various reasons why they weren’t able to provide, but that's none of their concern anymore – they were instead used as its food.

The beast in front of them had the same instinct as the humans; it calculated them, sizing them up and formulating the best way to break them apart. Just as hard as it gritted its teeth, its magenta eyes were also narrowed, mincing them on its thoughts.

Linda began to explain, “We will make an opening for you Ken while I and Alastor will do our best to damage or cut its legs and then you will land heavy attacks on it.”

They nodded.

“Let’s go!” Linda shouted.

They divided while Ken was on the back, waiting for the right opportunity.

Alastor sprung forward, his sword trained forward. He jerked sideways and blocked its claws, the buckler clang and his bone quivered. Linda spun and went to its behind and managed to cut off its skin and flesh. The monster’s attention was completely disoriented when they simultaneously came after it. They retreated and began to encircle it around.

The monster didn’t wait for them and the beninghol went head to Alastor. It growled as its claws swung horizontally. Alastor managed to quickly conjure an invisible wall, but it wasn’t strong enough to counter its attack, hence he was thrown away, but with no damage to bear, his light armor protected its back.

Alastor pulled himself up from the rubble of branches of trees and logs. He was about to get back on his feet when the beninghol’s fangs stretched in front of his face. All thankfully to Ken, the beninghol was sent flying with his heavy kick.

The monster winced in pain for a moment and slowly with his dark gaze turned over to Ken. All of its murderous impression pointed into one single being.

“Don’t let your guard down, man,” Ken said.

Alastor coughed over the dust and gripped his sword. He rose from kneeling and ignored Ken’s calling. Alastor began to sprint with his sword pointed at its target.

“Hey! Didn’t you hear what I just said?!” Ken shouted, but his words dissipated as the ruffling noise of leaves scattered over the places. Ken went in the other direction.

The monster halted its movements and gazed over them, deciding which it would attack. At the given moment, the monster decided to lay its fangs to Ken. Linda and Alastor were completely ignored.

Ken paused and leaped backward. He was expecting that it wouldn't reach him, but clearly, he miscalculated it. Obviously, the best way to survive is to shield his organ parts, but it would require sacrificing his arm. He was prepared to use his left arm to shield himself but Alastor’s *parete invisible* blocked the attack. The force of impact against the spell bounced the monster’s claws and gave him time to roll aside while the enemy broke to pause on his tracks. Beninghol was prepared to leap. Linda’s sword grew shards and swung it to the enemy. The fractions of ice began to grow and produce another more as it shot to the beninghol. With the glorious execution, the monster’s balance cracked and held its breath. The beninghol felt a jolt of pain as most of the shards landed on its body.

It was an opportunity for them to kill it. It was a well-made decision, except that they have missed the vital part of their body.

They all sprung to the beninghol.

The monster endured the pain. Ken was caught by surprise when the monster motioned and leaped sideward. Its body crashed into Ken. Then, with all its might, the monster pushed its way forward. Linda quickly got out of its way, but Alastor wasn’t as lucky as the beninghol’s head tossed him aside.

Alastor felt excruciating pain swelling in his chest. He gasped for breath and in the sum of it, he managed to endure and in turn, the blood flowed properly and slowly eradicated the throbbing pain. He kneeled and shook his head before glancing forward.

Linda broke and sped off to its legs. She successfully cut two of its legs and immediately retreated before the claws reached her.

Alastor got on his feet. As the enemy turned around to set its attention on Linda. Ken and Alastor gather their strength. Alastor plunged his sword on top of the beninghol’s body, while Ken began to dash off its field of vision. Ken’s fist flared and exploded the moment he hit the enemy.

As the monster trembled down, Alastor pushed the sword deeper and the flesh croaked in grossing way. He dragged his sword up to its head. Blood and some chunks of its flesh spurt out and hang on Alastor’s body.

Alastor pulled away, his body soaked in blood. He attempted to get closer, but Linda stopped him in the middle tracks.

“Stay right there.” She warned, her eyes meaning it. “Gross.”

Alastor blankly stared at her.

Linda conjured water and washed him with it. The repeating process took over 4 minutes before she was comfortable enough that he was clean and didn't have an unpleasant smell that would turn her stomach upside down.

“So,” Ken started, and leaned his back against the tree. “What do you think? A stray or a fodder leader?”

“Both,” Alastor replied.

“A beninghol leader would only resort to cannibalism if there’s no food for it to eat, but then again it’s not an easy choice. There must be something that made it resort to cannibalism.”

Alastor heaved a sigh, “Likewise, we need more evidence to make sure we’re assuming right.” He continued and asked Linda. “By the way, since when did you learn how to use water magic?”

“Recently. I am exploring the horizons of my abilities. I found out that I’m capable of not only water magic but also fire. It’s a long story.”

Ken observed the dead body of the enemy. His thoughts are on the same page as his grumbling stomach, but when a laden image caught his eyes, his desires dissipated in an instant.

“Guys, look what we have here.”

He rose and walked towards the humungous body. He cleared the blood and got a clear image of a mark on its back. It wasn’t clear because of the cut, but it was enough as a hint to stitch their thoughts.

Again, they all drown in the same murky pool of thoughts. The forest quieted down as the moon rose from its hours of outset. They estimated that it’s early seven in the evening. The monster was used as their food as it would be a waste to let others eat it, beside, Ken was the one who was insistent to deep fry it. It was common courtesy for some adventurers to leave the dead monsters on the way as a respect for nature, but not all others were courteous like them.

After the dinner, they moved on, leaving the smoldering smoke and ashes behind. As they ventured, they saw monsters that are on post mortem. The sight was unappealing to see. All that was once alive monsters butchered others mercilessly.

They turned and entered a path. That was when it all began when the forest had fallen into a haze. The milky gray mist began to stretch and completely shrouded the forest. They would like to entertain the thoughts that it could be a sign of elves or any other mystical benevolent creatures except that it was eerily silent that drives a chill to their bones and spines.

Slowly and smoothly, the fog flowed and fluidly drifted in the air. They remained to stick to each other as they pressed forward into the unknown.

They ascended on the path. With each step, the fog grew thicker and harder to see. It was miraculous enough for the light of the moon to manage to pierce through the cloud of mist and offer them light, but it was still useless, their vision was still shrouded in white.

Up to a certain point of ascension, they came across a lake. It was enchanted, that's for sure. The view enchanted their attention, they didn’t even notice that the mist became thinner. The lake was deep, bluer than any other lake they have seen. The moon capped ahead and the light made it more vivid and magical. It was polished like a caerulean, perfect and still. Instead of going on the right track, they neared on the leak, enough to observe the view. The trees shaded them from the piercing light.

A gentle timbre of voice sang in melody.

In the middle of the lake, the still water trembled calmly and a lady, all in blue, appeared from the water, seemingly levitating. Its small feet touched the water and created another set of ripples. It walked in the water and headed towards them.

Their aloof faces clearly indicate that they’re under the spell of it. Of all, Ken was the most enchanted. His eyes remained fixed to the woman. He felt it. A minor jolt of pain in his right hand. It was insignificant, but another bolt of pain erupted. He held his hand, bearing the pain as his veins grew thicker enough to laden on his arm to his palm.

With his senses coming back to him, he saw the lady that enchanted them was seven steps away from them. He shrugged off the pain and slapped his two comrades.

They shook, flinched, and lurched backward.

“No thanks to me.” Ken declared. He massages his right hand’s palm to ease the pain.

Alastor who was still processing what just happened ignored Ken’s remark and narrowed his eyes as he clutched his sword while still on the scabbard.

“We got fibbed, aren’t we?”

Linda replied back to Alastor, “More like enchanted.”

The lady in the lake stopped motioning. Its blank eyes are sizing them. It did not move an inch or dare to lift its muscles.

Ken asked himself, “What the hell is that?”

Alastor withdrew his sword, “Who cares?! Let’s attack it while it is still confused.”

Alastor dashed forward. His speed was unrelenting and his murderous attention directed at one point. A rush of adrenaline coursed through his body.

“Al, wait!” Linda shouted.

In fact, the mystical being was not completely hostile at all. It simply awaits what to transpire for it to judge what appropriate move she will do. Now that Alastor chose to retaliate with hostility, it forced the creature to engage in combat.

Before he got closer, the lady in blue shrieked. Its crackling and piercing voice disrupted their senses completely. They all bent and covered their ears. The covering was not enough to block the voice.

After the seemingly long 10 seconds, they stood, face twisting in pain.

Linda felt something liquid dripping in her ears. She smeared it and looked at her hands. The red liquid slowly dripped out of her ears. They all still felt the ringing tone that vibrates their eardrums for the moment before the senses come back from being numbed.

Linda immediately created an ice wall between them and the creature, grabbed the two, and went ahead of the path, disregarding the notion of rationality. When she felt that they were far away enough, she broke to pause. They pant and sat on the ground.

“Why?” Alastor asked. “We could have taken that thing down.”

“No…” Linda quieted down and inhaled a lot of air before replying, “That would be unwise.”

“Unwise?” Alastor raised a brow. “That monster is obviously dangerous. By letting her go, we couldn’t say how many victims will fall under her spell.”

“Killing her would be worse.”

“How?”

“That thing is a water imp.”

They all froze in a moment. They believe her. Linda’s voice was too serious to jest.

“Water imp?”

Linda nodded over Ken’s question.

“I thought they would be smaller,” Alastor stated.

“That’s a Nuno you’re talking about.” She continued, “Imps have different maturations, all depending on their environment.”

“If that’s true, then what it is doing here?”

“Clearly, an imp would not protect a simple lake.”

The word ‘imp’ had different kinds that varied in stature, but all of them have the same interest that was to protect nature.

“I don’t know, but I do think that it’s only trying to protect its territory.” She stared at Alastor. “And your provocation endangered us all.”

It was stated that killing an imp would cause a devastating calamity. It was not a lie. The role of the nature imps was to protect nature and help remain the balance between the world of monsters and man.

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It was surreal. It was unsure when they were out of the haze, but the moment they escaped the breath of the enchantress they came across other paths again. They stand still, unsure which path they should go.

“Should we split up?” Alastor asked.

Those words are considerable, but that would draw more risks on their line. In the end, it was Linda who will make the call.

“All right, then.” Linda declared. “The question now is, which is which?”

“Simple.” Alastor turned around. “You and Ken would go left and me, alone, venture the right way.”

He was about to go but Linda stopped his shoulder from going further.

“Are you sure? If we just think about it, maybe…”

“Are you worried about me? Is it because I am Mana Folder?”

“It’s not that.”

Even if he was considered the low-ranking level class of warrior, Linda is still regarded as a capable person and as a respectable fellow warrior. His capabilities of improvising plans in the middle of battle and creativity despite being clearly outwitted never cease to amaze her.

“We don’t know who we are dealing with. Perhaps sticking together is still the best idea.”

“Don’t worry,” Alastor said. “The more ground we cover, the closer we get to the answer we sought.”

Ken intercepted before Linda retorted back to him, “Just leave him be. He’s right, the more ground we cover, the closer we get to the answer.”

Ken wasn’t going to let himself be left hanging without giving a proper send-off. He was a jest to the bone, after all.

“If the monsters scared the hell outta you, don’t hesitate to scream like a little girl!” Ken shouted.

And of course, Alastor is not someone who will let that slip out of his ears. “I’m not you!”

“Pisspot.” Ken grinned.

The road Alastor followed slightly bent to the right. It seemed so normal for the next second until it came strangely. He had no idea what just happened. Moments ago, the road was straight, he could smell the humid grass lingering on his nose, the road was unpaved but no clumps of rocks had let him trudge throughout his strolling.

No matter how he shook his head, the distorted view won’t stop bugging him. He continued to walk, swaying similar to a drunk person, except this was no lethargic reaction, and someone must be responsible for this. Hotness shot up. He felt light-headed and everything inside him was burning. The trees, the road, and the grass had left his vision pitch black. That feeling lasts only for ten seconds, but it felt like forever for him.

The first thing that came to his sight was the clearing. He was sure that he was walking down the long road not too long, but he felt that he was in a strange place that he was not sure if this was part of the planet.

The long road was far beyond him as is standing now in a clearing, a slate. In the very center of the slate, there was a man lying in the large flat stone observing his pocket watch. He was wearing a dark red coat and underneath, though rugged, he could tell that it was an expensive piece of dressings. His hair was white as the moon. He slid his pocket watch when he noticed Alastor staring at him. Alastor saw some grains of bread and some foods that he barely knew.

“I was wondering when you will come.” Finally, he broke the silence and cracked a grin.

The man’s appearance can be either described as having the mind of an adult or having the attitude of a child. Nevertheless, he posed a threat, clearly base when the flat stone finally disappeared and saw the bones of monsters laying in the ground.

“And you are?”

“Your consequence.”

Alastor’s brows queried.

“Suspicious face, sketchy. Hmm, you’re the one who’s pestering the don of the house.” Alastor declared.

“My, my. Aren’t you a judge-y one?”

“Still, you’re the one who sends off the monster to pest the villagers.”

His grin turned to a shade of seriousness.

“I take that you’re a tamer?”

“A tamer? Quite far fetch.”

Alastor shook his head and dismissed his words. “It seems that you’re a liar as well.”

A silence took over a while and then the man nodded on his statement.

“I can’t blame you for your ignorance, after all, the hunter clan’s abilities are not known to the public.”

“What are you talking about?”

“For your information, I am a Tribunal Hunter.”

Alastor who was unfamiliar with the term, raised a brow, “The fuck you talking about?”

The man appeared to be disappointed and glanced away.

“So, you really are ignorant.” He coldly said.

Alastor bent; his sword withdrew from his scabbard.

“Sorry pal. I don’t give a shit of whatever you are.”

“Before we engage in combat, may I know your name?”

“Are you high right now?”

“It’s a common courtesy between two warriors. But if you insist not to tell, then… My name is Hannibal.” He bowed down.

“Don’t care.”

Alastor dashed. His sword swung vertically. Hannibal caught Alastor’s sword with his palms and held it tightly. Alastor couldn’t believe that he was a force in a contest between strength by Hannibal.

“Oops. Gotcha.” He grinned like a child. “Missed. Am I the only one who’s getting bored here? No?”

Alastor gritted his teeth and turned his sword, overpowering Hannibal’s grip.

Hannibal spun over behind and pulled his dagger out of his coat. Alastor felt and heard the hiss of the blade and quickly guided his sword at his waist, blocking Hannibal’s blade. Alastor lurched forward, prancing away. Gaining a clear view, Alastor had a glimpse of the blade. The knife was incredibly sharped for its size. The double edge resembled him, but the pattern was wavy and roughly around two feet. Despite the odd appearance, his blade was still sharp compared to him which was blunted from killing previous monsters.

“Between our blades, who's going to break first?”

Hannibal’s sadistic smile crept and licked the blade up to its tip.

“A simple question yet requires a surplus of effort to prove.”

“Why don’t you come closer and find out.” Alastor goad.

“You don’t have to say.”

The two clashed. They exchange blows. Evenly and sharply crossing their blades at each other. Alastor evaded his attack and lurched back waving his sword at Hannibal. Of course, his attacks were nothing special, and quickly Hannibal bent over and evaded.

“That’s a close one.”

Hannibal said and panted as his balance back to his feet. He dashed and surprised Alastor with his speed. Alastor’s instinct kicked in and automatically deflected Hannibal’s attack. His eyes widened witnessing Alastor’s quick response.

“What was that?” Hannibal amusingly asked. “I never knew someone so quick to react. You may be special or an expert.”

Alastor was astonished too. He had never felt that chilling moment. His pulse took over him and without registering to his mind, he quickly blocked the enemy’s attack.

“But it doesn't get easy.”

Just three feet away from Alastor’s behind, the ground cracked, and a beninghol, but half the size of the leader crawled out and leaped over Alastor. His perception began to change again and his left hand automatically raised itself and conjured shield magic. The monster bounced off and was knocked out.

“Again? What was that?” Hannibal cackled as he pushed his blade. “That must be some kind of an Inquiara Magic. How amusing. Skipping chanting is impressive too, although I doubt about the quality of the magic conjured.” Using the shield as a foothold, Alastor gathered his strength and pushed back. He managed to draw distance and swung his blade. Hannibal went sideways and was about to plunge his blade to Alastor, but Alastor deflected, and slammed his buckler at his face. Then Alastor conjured a transparent wall. Hannibal’s cheeks turned red as he turned around.

“That is not funny. My face is my main benefit.” Hannibal waved his blade, a wind magic erupted and destroyed the transparent wall. “Now let’s level up the playing field.”

It wasn’t much of a brag that he managed to skip the chanting, but the strength quickly receded for Hannibal to easily break. It was taught to him back in the Glade that skipping chanting requires an enormous amount of will and focus to create it perfectly. But Alastor’s magic only temporarily perfected it. Surely, he had done it before, especially when he fought Theo. Alastor’s abilities were pushed to its limits that his senses dulled distinguishing between reality and the world of the unconscious.

The time is nigh. The moon settled on top of them, at the center of everything. Hannibal leaped behind and a variant of carantal appeared and caught him.

“That shithead told me that you don’t look strong.” Hannibal hissed. “It seems that he’s wrong. Of all times, you manage to outwit the monsters I’ve prepared as a trap.”

“Monsters?” Alastor rested his blade for a moment. “The only thing that we caught is the leader of the pack of Beninghols.”

Hannibal’s disconcerted. “I’m sorry what?”

“The rest of the monsters that we saw are the dead ones.”

Hannibal was able to discern lies and truth, and hearing Alastor’s words, he doesn’t seem to lie. He cracked his head to find the right words and finally came up. He nodded and faced Alastor once again.

“That sounds right. No wonder why beninghol fell into madness.” Hannibal grinned but behind those are pity and broken emotions. “It seems that our experimentations failed. Lucky is truly on your side.”

“*Our?* So that means you’re not the only one who’s into this.”

“You’re catching up well.” Hannibal mockingly said.

“And I guess that *one* is one of the lord’s guards.”

“Very perceptive.” Hannibal commended.

“It’s nothing to brag of. Not with such hostile eyes spewing right to us.”

“Hmm. Haha. I guess his undiscerning motives have some merits over your quick achievement, but finding the truth doesn’t mean winning.” Hannibal looked at his right, “Isn’t that right, Jett?”

The wind disrupted and fluttered the leaves. A shadow extended outside the borders of the trees. The man leaned over the tree. Unlike Hannibal who had a petite figure, the new guess was bulkier and had more mass compared to the two.

“Oh? You’ve been watching us all this time?”

His companion, Jett, raised his broadsword and carried it on his shoulder, and walked forward with a serious expression. His dissatisfaction was hidden within his composure.

Jett hissed. “Enough darting around, we’re leaving.”

Hannibal raised a brow. “Eh? But what about…?”

“The experiment is a big failure. There’s no need for us to stay here.” He coldly said. “Plus, this is a perfect chance since the lord’s attention is far from us.”

Hannibal briefly contemplated. “I guess you’re right. But we should kill them while we still have a chance.”

“Suit yourself. We will meet *after* you finish your job.”

Hannibal chuckled, it was all but a laugh of a blood-thirsty man. “Well then, shall we continue?”

Alastor felt tremendous amounts of creatures, all their murderous intention directed at him. A bunch of beninghol, the same size he defeated just now.

Their claws and fangs flash as they leap on him.

Alastor created a chantless spell of two transcendent walls that gave him a wide berth to escape their attacks. He swung his sword sideward and cut off the head of the beninghol. Rolled and leaped evading more incoming attacks. Without breaking a sweat, he cut off another three beninghol. Alastor’s senses heightened and even predicted the enemies’ attacks. This allowed him to move fluidly, countering the enemies’ attacks with his sword and using chantless magic to protect himself.

At some point, Hannibal ordered his dogs to withdraw.

“What’s the matter?” Alastor asked. He played with his sword. “You thought it’s pointless, didn't you?”

“No.” Hannibal shrugged his head. “I just realized something.”

A smirk written on his face. “For some while now, I noticed that you’re not using any kind of magic except that wall magic. Thus, I came to a conclusion… you’re just a Mana Folder after all!” Hannibal broke to laugh. “All this time, I’m having trouble against a mere weakling. You certainly are lucky.”

Alastor hissed. “So what?”

“You are not worth understanding anymore. I was worried that you might be a Hunter, but it turned out that you’re just a disappointment. My, my, what has gotten with your comrades to think it’s a good idea to let you go all alone. But nonetheless, now I know what you are, I know how to deal with you.”

Hannibal whistled and the Beninghols' mouths began to emit fire.

“Shit.”

The enemies shoot out fireballs. Alastor leapt and used his sword to deflect some of the fireballs, but alas, he was caught on. He blasted and his back broke against the trees.

If it weren’t for his breastplate, he would’ve been drop dead by now. Although his worries about the enemies’ abilities are logical, it was his superfluous thoughts that delayed his decision. *The* unknown innate ability that allows him to move reflexively, despite his panic attack.

“Damn it all.” He muttered under his breath. Alastor got up and intended to return the favor. “That fucking hurts.”

Hannibal laughed. “Then, what will you do now? Given that your abilities are limited. This is going to be interesting.”

“I’m going to return a few favors to you.”

Alastor inhaled, taking the nervousness, and broke a dashed. His speed is hanging with beninghol. With playful sword skill, he managed to kill four of the beninghols. After that, he created five walls slanted directly to Hannibal. A stairway was created with his creative imagination. It was at this moment Hannibal knew what he was going to do.

“What?”

Hannibal steered the bird up high, out of the stairway’s range.

“Fool, I can see your move.”

A fireball flung out of the bird’s mouth. Alastor used one of his new abilities; which is to cover his sword with mana. He discovered this kind of ability while he was in Vega Plain, but he never fully explored it as he was busy on the mission.

He threw it like a javelin and the fireball was split in half, diverging away from his path. The sword flung and pierce through the bird’s neck. The monster couldn’t let out a voice as his throat was clogged by the blade. Alastor leaped and in surprise, Hannibal swung his blade, but Alastor evaded it and jumped, he spun and delivered a spinning kick right into his face. The force had Hannibal back to the ground, his face head-on first.

With the spell breaking, the monsters left. Out of pile and rubbles, Hannibal crawled his way out of the ground. He chuckled. “You’re good, far too good to be a Mana Folder. I thought that you were supposed to be weak.”

Alastor plucked out his blade greased in blood. “Who told you that?”

Hannibal hissed.

“You shouldn’t judge people because of what label that person has,” Alastor strained and slash the sword in the air, removing the blood that stained it. “It will be your damnation.”

“Perhaps yes, perhaps not.” Hannibal spat blood, “I thought you’re just a simpleton, perhaps you may be more than that. Are you sure you’re not a hunter?”

“Again, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Guess not.” Hannibal shrugged his shoulders.

“Please, do tell me. What the hell are you doing in this place?”

“We were experimenting.”

“Experimenting what?”

“You see, we Tribunal Hunters have certain abilities; we can copy the abilities of monsters we have slain. We can control to a certain extent the monsters to do our bidding. But the downside is that the more we are controlling the more the monster will reject the user, the most important in controlling is willpower, but it proves to be bothersome when it comes to combat. Thus, some of us resort to something else,”

“Slaving.”

“Bingo! Some of our members use magic to slave the monsters and begin experimenting with them. But our clan leader decided to ban it because it violates the oh-so law of nature.”

Alastor fell into his thoughts and began to analyze. “If it’s banned, then I guess you turned your back on them.”

“Perceptive, but not quite.” Hannibal rose and gazed at the moon. “We were able to connect the lifeline of the monsters to ours and because of that, we gained much more power than we had expected. We were able to prolong the abilities. Jett and I are on the next expedition of our experiment when you come here.”

“And what is the next phase of your experiment?”

“Of course, to enslave the water imp in the lake.”

“Now I understand. You guys are the reason why that water imp is so hostile.”

“Yes.” Hannibal confessed, “We attempt to lure it and capture it, but that shit proves to be hard to get.”

“You know well the consequences of trying to kill an imp, right?”

“Yes, we know, and frankly, we don’t care.”

His words prove that he was dangerous to let go, hence, Alastor trained his sword at Hannibal, but a bird came to pick him up.

“Don’t worry, we won’t do anything for now!”

Hannibal left with a grin on his face.

Alastor wandered throughout the forest. He skipped past the left road they had followed as a shortcut. Not too long, he found them inside the ice dome that Linda seems created to protect themselves against the monsters of Hannibal.

Alastor cut it off and saw them laid on the ground, unconscious. It seems that they’ve been caught in that man’s illusion, thus putting them in a position where they can’t protect themselves. In the nick of time, Linda was able to put a barrier between them and the monsters, hoping that they wouldn't be able to break inside, which was quite right because all of the monsters were called upon and fought Alastor.

They woke in a few minutes, while Alastor remained on guard.

“What happened?” Linda grunted.

Ken sluggishly got up on his feet. He caught his breath.

“It’s the enemy’s illusion. Come on, there’s a lot we have to discuss.”

After a while and a long explanation by Alastor about what happened, Linda came to a conclusion.

“I thought the hunter tribes on the Coastal region are pitting against each other. Well, it’s not our concern.”

“What will we do about that sensitive information?” Alastor asked.

Obviously, if they report this to the lord of the land that information would likely be received by the governments, including the canaries. She saw no disadvantage to their quest.

“Of course, we will tell the truth. It’s not like it’s going to affect the Glade in some ways. Our current objective is the money and to assist the political envoy.”

Ken nodded. “We have to come clean as an adventurer, that is.”

They have come early to the mansion. As usual, the guards are protective and assertive when they see them. Getting closer, they have realized who they are and reluctantly allowed them to go inside.

They headed into the room where they met last time. They call the butler and explain the sensitivity of the information, hence, the butler wakes up the lord early in the morning.

Coming inside, the lord yawned.

“I understand the trepidation, but a man needs to sleep.”

“We’re very sorry if we wake you up this early.”

“Now we’ve come here. What’s the matter?”

“One of your men, Jett.”

“What about him?”

“He’s behind all of this,” Alastor said with no hint of lying.

“That’s preposterous!” The lord’s voice flared.

The butler who was silently listening held off the lord’s shoulder.

“We’re not lying. Look at his quarters, you’ll see he has already left the place.”

The butler went to the window and shouted at the guards to find Jett.

“That’s impossible, Jett is one of my formidable guards.”

“He and his companion Hannibal were doing experiments in the forest.”

“What kind of experiment is it?” The butler asked.

“Slaving experiments. They aim to extend their copying abilities by connecting the lifelines of the monsters to them.”

The lord raised a brow.

“Oh, and I kinda forgot to tell you, they’re Tribunal Hunters.”

“What?!”

“We suspect that they’ve fled their tribe.”

“If that’s so then I guess we will have to contact the police for this matter.”

A guard came and said what they had expected, and Jett left the place. The reason for his leave lies in their group’s explanation, but the truth was, they’ve reached their quota and must find a new place to continue their experiments.

“Very well. As for your compensation, I will deliver it as I promised, only you must promise that you mustn’t tell anyone about this.”

“We understood.” He humbly replied.

They didn’t waste any more time and got on their journey. There was a little reason to stay.

As soon as the dawn broke and streaked the land with its elegant lights, they left the mansion. They paid the caretaker of Liber and rode towards their destination. Alastor was in the front driving, while the two were in the back.

“I can’t believe we solved the case quickly.” Ken cheerily said. “It’s a new record.”

“I suppose,” Alastor agreed to his statement, but it doesn’t feel right to feel that way, “but we were only able to do that because the enemies are also done in that place.”

“Dude! Even if we got lucky, we shouldn’t worry about that, at least we got fifty-thousand haz. We don’t have to worry about our travel. By the way, Linda, I saw a shop in that village. Maybe we can buy a whole pack of beef jerky.”

“No.” She firmly said, “We must use this money wisely. Needless I have to tell you; we might bump into something unexpected.”

“Don’t spiral on something you have no control over. Now, don’t resist, give me some money!”

Ken lunged and tried to take away the chest that Linda’s holding.

“No!”

And so, the two argue as they continue their journey.

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Somewhere miles away from the conflict, Jett used his web ability to create a swing. He slept in there, waiting for Hannibal to come. Not too long, he heard the flapping of wings and he landed near him.

“About time.” Jett yawned and observed Hannibal. “Did you finish the job?”

Hannibal’s stiff face told the rest.

“So, you did not.”

“They got lucky.”

A man got out in the shadows. His face was illuminated under the light of the stars. His thick slacken hair was black as the sky. “Or you became quite arrogant and let your guard down.”

“Shut up, otherworlder.” Jeff barked.

The man laughed.

“Now, now, you two hold your horses.” Jett gets himself in the middle to stop the two.

Hannibal hissed. He harbored little trust with the person he referred to as ‘otherworlder’, but because he helped them with their experimentation, he would have trashed him the moment he met him.

“Don’t get riled up. There are monsters nearby. You might wake them up. I doubt that you can use your power in your current state.”

“Why you?!” Hannibal gritted his teeth.

“Hey enough!” Jett shouted. “You,” He pointed at the man named Abel Newtman, “Shut up. Your provocations are not helping.”

“Geez, fine.”

“Hannibal, there was a ship docking just ahead, there is supposed to be a medic there.”

Hannibal right now was sleeping in a room. Should Abel haven't prepared the ship, Hannibal would be in a world of trouble.

The majestic ship creaked and groaned as it swayed leading outside the river and to the ocean. The sails rippled, fat, and flapping with the wind. Jett went to the quarter-deck and stared out at the yellow-crested sea.

“We’re very glad you’ve come with us,” Jett said, expecting the man from behind.

“Well, of course, I won’t let anything happen to both of you.”

“Right, because we haven’t made our promise yet.”

Abel nodded. “I still need a body of a Mephistic Hunter.”

“Hmm,” Jett grumbled. “For your revenge. You want to return the favor to your brother that betrayed you, what was his name again? Oh, wait, it’s Hive.”

“Oh, this is so much more than an act of revenge. The Ordinals must suffer for what they’ve done to me.”

“Right, so, how come the Mephistic Hunter will help you and your plan?”

“That’s for me to know.”

Abel grinned and left.

A blanket of eeriness fell over his shoulder. As a matter of fact, none of them truly trust Abel, maybe because of his character. He was everything that they needed the most, almost, bold, cunning but unpredictable. His character remained disguised and this strange behavior of his kept Jett in constant check to be careful of his movements.

Now, he doesn’t seemingly draw any kind of hostile behavior against them.

# Chapter 4

The town was under extensive silence when they came. The people provided accommodation, but they were all cautious. The guard did even interrogate them before letting them in, questioning about whence they came, and what they did before they came here. Of course, they have to remove from the explanation that they were members of the Glade. They’ve only told a version of the truth, that they were travelers and came to take a quest before leaving. The guard was suspicious but seeing no hostility, he allowed them to get in. It’s not like he has another choice though. The town needed adventurers alike to take on several quests. They just didn’t have the manpower to tackle the problems.

Ken brought a bag of bread back to the wagon and summarized he learned what was happening in the town. Nothing, but filled with dreadful news.

“Apparently, this town was terrorized by some group of people.” Ken started before filling his mouth with water. “It all started in the adventurer’s guild. They came barging and interrogated, but the adventurers, as they had always been, did not comply and the rest is history.”

“Whoever they are, it's either they have the balls of steel or dumbly brave,” Alastor stated.

Taking a wide turn, they saw the charred ground and some houses damaged by the fight. They rode on. In the middle between armory and potion shop, the tavern was stationed while the guild behind it was under construction. There were trucks filled with bricks and several machinery for construction stations with purposes.

When they parked their wagon on the back, paid for the fee, and went on. The moment they stepped in, all their gazes gathered at them as if they’d felt an unfamiliar presence that walked in their turf.

“Uh oh,” Ken muttered.

A man wearing a tuxedo jostled through the crowd and stepped into the scene. His dark sunglasses glinted for a moment. He had a warm aura, but because of this, they raised their guard. He had the impression of someone from a nation’s intelligent unit.

“They’re not enemies, calm down.” He spoke with such formalities. The adventurers began to disperse and went back to their businesses. Though, some were still looking at them. “I suppose the three of you are adventurers?”

Linda nodded. “Yes. We came here for a request before moving on.”

“Is that so?” The man was more like asking himself. “Is this related to any political envoy?”

They all paused, shocked and astounded. Alastor held Ken before replying. It’s all convenient for him to ask them about that, it was either they were tested by the man or just a plain trap by the enemies.

The man nodded and said as if he saw the bound of apprehension, “I understand. Come, follow me.”

They followed the man through the back door and to their wagon.

“Quite perceptive bunches. I assume that you’re from the Glade?”

They didn’t reply.

“I understand your silence. Until you’re not certain of my identity you can’t carelessly leak any kind of sensitive information, but your suspicious behaviors are obvious, you need to act better next time if you don’t want to get caught. Well, don’t worry, I’m not an enemy. I’m the one who enlisted your help. Director Rod already briefed me with your appearances.” He side-eyed them, looking from head to toe.

“So, it seems,” Linda said.

Their impervious attitude settled down.

“My name is Mr. Funny man.” He introduced himself and removed his sunglasses. His sharp eyes resonated with strictness.

“Are you shitting on us?” Alastor asked. “What kind of name is that?”

“The one that is funny.” He said with a blank expression.

They’re not sure what to say. They couldn’t even tell if he was joking or not.

“Come on. I’ll be leading you to the house.”

Mr. Funny Man hopped in front and held the reins. He slowly whipped and the horse neigh. The carriage wobbled slowly. They all resign from talking to him as they’ve been stuck on his words earlier. They went inside and heard only Liber’s cheery cry before leaving him to a caretaker.

A moment passed. Mr. Funny Man parked the wagon outside the house. It was small, made in cement and hue bricks. The colour of magenta on the walls almost faded. The furniture inside was simple; several cushion seats, a fireplace in the front, paintings that were hanging on the edges. A lady caught their eyes. She seemed to be cooking something and appeared to want not to be disturbed as she locked the door leading to the kitchen. They could only grasp her figure through the small window.

They went further to the lounge and Mr. Funny Man pressed a slab that was invisible to their eyes due to the color, hence, camouflaging. The floor seemed laced in four corners and elevated, heading to the underground. A moan escaped when it opened. They were led ahead and saw the road was split into two.

“Where to now?” Ken asked.

Mr. Funny Man went to the right. They quietly followed.

“Don’t get confused, it’s real.” He said. “All the doors have different functions, but all you have to know is that we’re heading to the lounge where the political envoy rests.”

The cold, and the gray walls along various colors of doors indulge them with vertigo. Linda held Alastor’s shoulder, hanging in balance. Ken was touching the wall, dizziness filled his head. Alastor was able to keep his head straight, but later on felt a tremendous droopiness.

“It seems you guys can’t handle ‘by long’ effects. It seems we have to hurry.” Mr. Funny Man said he could tell they’re struggling.

“By long effects?” Linda asked.

“It’s a secondary effect of my Inquiara magic.”

“Wait,” Alastor paused and used his hand to hold on to the wall. “All of this is Inquiara Magic?”

“Yes,” He nodded, “Inquiara Magic: Edertum.”

“What a troublesome ability,” Linda muttered.

“Man, I think I’m gonna barf all of those loaves of bread.” Ken broke down, one kneeling on the ground.

“Get a grip. It’s not that far. Come on, you’ll get used to it.”

The moment they came inside, it felt like heaven. All their nauseating feelings had eased and felt an overwhelmingly warm refreshing air.

“This lounge can heal ailments, mostly.”

Alastor smelled a familiar scent and he began to look around as if he was obsessed by it.

A woman came out of a room, she wore a simple but attractive dress. Her black hair lingered the fragrance of cherry apple. The moment she hung her head down, her eyes traveled and caught his gaze. It locked for a brief moment and they both broke it. They sat down on the couch. In front of them are Mr. Funny Man and the lady.

“I would like you all to meet the political envoy, Miss Caroline.”

Caroline bowed, her presence exhibited a curtsy of a royalty, “It’s pleasant to meet you, everyone.”

They assumed that she would be straight and strict, but her humble behavior told them that she was gentle as a babe. She exhibited how nobles would normally behave, elegant, well-mannered and perfect response. But Alastor knew her voice well, the accent of the common tongue still laden which they failed to take note. He couldn’t blame them though. This is the first time they met someone from a royal lineage.

In return, they formally introduced themselves.

“Yo, my name is Ken.”

“You can call me Linda.”

“And I’m Alastor.”

Alastor began to ask himself about her existence. She was fairly young to be a politician and certainly the last time they met she was enjoying her free time. The fact she told him about wanting to visit her sister harbors no lies. Her decent and trustful attitude made him feel reassured when he first met her. But now it bores only more questions.

*And the fact that she is nowhere to be found… it couldn’t be it, but it’s too convenient that she’s a political envoy for such a young age.* Alastor’s thoughts scramble, but he can’t jump to a conclusion without confirming.

He dared to raise the question, “Mr. Funny Man, could that be that Miss Caroline is the…”

Without a second thought, he told them the truth. “Yes, she is the second princess, the second line heir of the throne, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“The second princess?!” Ken shouted in surprise. Linda elbowed him. He groaned. “Damn.”

“I know that this mission is bigger than what the fixers told you, but please, we’re willing to pay you a large sum of money just to help us.” Mr. Funny Man bowed.

Caroline pulled him over, “Please, you don’t need to bow.”

Her doleful eyes caught Alastor’s observing gaze. He tore his attention off her.

“As for starters, we’ll wire you seventy thousand haz, and if you successfully complete the mission, we will give you another one-hundred thousand haz.”

They all paused. Taking on bandits, monsters, and thugs alike are one thing they could take on, but a guide for a political envoy on top, it could put them in an unwarranted situation. This mission is risky. All of them are uncertain if they should take the job since they’re going to guard the princess and they may as well be targeted by powerful people.

“Before we get to that, let me ask you this,” Linda started. “Why us? The Ylfon kingdom has powerful warriors, don't they? Kris Krux and other talented warriors may be stronger than us three.”

“As you all know, the kingdom is under conflict between the factions of nobles and the royalty herself. They were pressuring her to give up the throne or marry their sons for the sake of tradition. They even attempted to assassinate her, but with the full force of the generals and the help of Kris Krux, their leash remained. Still, the problem did not recede.”

“Then why not grant the request of the nobles?” Ken asked. “It would be easier that way.”

“Because of what we found out, there are reports of some family of nobles negotiating with the Indine nation and the Hayan Empire.”

There is no need for Mr. Funny Man to keep this kind of information. He knew very well the network of the Glade. It will be a matter of time before they will receive the information.

“I’m sorry, what?!” Ken shouted in surprise. No people haven’t heard of those despicable nations. But what was surprising, was that the Indine nation would collaborate with the most hated country of all, the Hayan Empire.

“Them again?” Alastor said.

Mr. Funny Man shot him a glance.

“For the past few months, they’ve acted oddly but stopped gathering together for some time, hence, we’re not able to collect evidence to point out the people representing the nations. We can’t yet call out the Indine, but we will have to be thorough in order learn their whereabouts and transactions. Though, we have some suspect that a person came from Hayan Empire. He’s a man who came out from nothing, Theodore Koel Juvel of Kelby Hives.” They all froze. “Did you happen to be involved in that event?”

They all very well knew what he meant. Alastor hastily shook his head. His eyes unwavering with lies. “No. No, we are not.”

Mr. Funny Man stared at them with intensity more than ever.

“For real?” He asked again.

“For real,” Alastor repeated those words with a firm face. He blatantly lied again in his face. “The Glade has nothing to do with it.”

The rest of them were completely still and looked down, frightened by his expression. Gradually, Mr. Funny Man’s intense gaze receded and the quiet aura brimmed again.

“So, I have been told. Most of our men were focused on defending the Queen herself and identifying the traitors of the kingdom.”

“We understand the situation now,” Linda stated. She held his gaze on him.

“Very well. Are you still going to accept the job?”

“We’ll think about it,” Linda said.

Mr. Funny Man shouted suddenly. “Are you going to accept it or not?!” “Sir, yes sir!”

With his sudden, abrupt roared voice, they stood sharp, agreed and said in sync. Mr. Funny man was hiding his smile. Alastor held his chest as if he was having a heart attack. His heart beating fast and his face flushed in red, showering in sweat.

He heard a giggle. It came from her. Alastor gazed at Caroline, but she completely averted her eyes away and stopped giggling.

“Shithead,” Alastor mumbled under his exhausting breath.

“What did you just say?” Mr. Funny Man asked.

“Nothing.”

“On the second floor – below this floor you can occupy the last three rooms. You guys are grown-ups, so you decide which room you want to use. It’s all the same after all. You go and rest for now. Tomorrow we will plan how we will embark on our journey.”

They all stood and once again before leaving, Alastor risked a glance at her, but her attention was completely on her camera. He turned back and started walking.

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He woke up at eleven in the evening. Alastor wanted to wake up Linda and Ken to talk about the mission, but it seemed they were falling deep asleep. And so, he ventured down and went to the refrigerator to drink cold water. For an underground hideout, it was well ventilated and the air smelled floral fragrance.

Just as he climbed up the stairs, a crashing sound had caught his ears. He proceeded up and followed the source of the sounds. The house was quite large, just like a mansion, but built in a maze and labyrinth. It took him a while to finally reach the room. He slowly tilted the knob and get inside. It appeared that Caroline was watching a movie with her small box projector. Caroline appeared to be sniffing while eating a handful of popcorn while holding the bowl.

“So, what’re you watching?”

Hearing his cold, and eerie voice, Caroline shook and squealed.

“What the hell?!” Caroline rapped her crunchy profane words. Alastor was stunned by it. “You scared the hell outta me!”

The once humble and well-mannered lady he witnessed before, became untraceable to her current behavior. He wasn’t completely disappointed. In fact, he was expecting to know more of her. Their conversation was left trailed back in that small town.

“You’re a princess, huh?” He asked, hunching his shoulders.

“Yep.” She raised a brow before turning away. “‘That a news to you?”

“Oh yeah. I thought you were a photographer, an artist.”

“I never lied about that.”

Apparently, when he came to the movie at the end, where the protagonist sacrificed himself to save the girl from the monster, she was cursed to be killed. Caroline began to look for more movies and picked the closest one.

“So, the – ought to be the second princess are currently enjoying watching movies and eating popcorn while the rest of the kingdom are in conflict.”

“Hey!” She glowered at him. “What do you know about me? You can’t just barge in and judge me like that.”

“Sorry,” He lowered his head. “I don’t mean to offend you. It’s just hard to believe that I easily believe a sly fox like you.”

“If you have any trust issues, keep it to yourself.”

“I know, I know. I just can’t help spiraling about it. You have me completely under your charm.”

“Oh yeah?” Caroline turned her bronze eyes on him, keenly interested in what he had to say.

“Yeah,” Alastor mockingly said. “I wonder. Why was an important person like you in *that* place with no guards or any kind of assistance?”

“I told you before that I have my way of evading dangers.” Caroline looked disappointed. She returned, selecting movies.

“That’s not the question, princess.”

“What can I say, I’m a woman with many faces.” She grinned.

“Again, what were you really doing back there?”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I was doing my thing in photography.”

“Ah-huh.” Alastor refused to believe her. It has to be more than that.

“What about you, the oh-so adventurer lost in that field?” Caroline probed. Her eyes narrowed to him out of judging. “Admit it, you weren’t supposed to be there. You were doing something naughty in that place, weren't you?” She gasped.

Of course, Alastor won’t back down. “And what about you? *Did you get lost, baby boy?*” He laughed remembering that.

“You remember that? You weren’t supposed to.” Caroline said while holding her breath from exploding caused by embarrassment.

“Yes, I do.”

“I was being funny at that time because you seem to be out of place.”

“Yes, I understand. I am completely out of place.” His grin told that he was not done with it and there was gonna be more. “That’s quite a low blow. Please, don’t get offended by that.” Alastor grinned.

“Whatever.” She hissed and glanced away.

They fell silent for a few seconds.

“So, what the hell are you doing here?” She asked.

“I just want to meet you and to thank you for what you did for me back there. If you weren’t there, I would be dead for real.”

She didn’t respond. Caroline twirled her hair and looked away.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“I said thank you.”

“Ah-huh. You’re very much welcome.”

She fell into her thoughts again. Caroline had been seemingly avoiding meeting his eyes.

“Are you lost baby girl?”

“Get out!” She roared and Alastor quickly got up.

“Yes ma’am.”

The second he heard the loud thump outside, Alastor decided to go to the other room. The effects of Mr. Funny Man’s Inquiara magic no longer affect him. He managed to piece himself together as he got inside the room two doors away from them.

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From the coldness outside, the atmosphere inside became warmer. The leaves and the grass varied in colors, almost like from a fairy tale. A leaf landed on his forehead and he caught it before falling down. Another violet leaf caught by his hand and a pink one, then he let them go after amusing over the rarity and they swayed along with the wind.

Ahead of him, he saw Mr. Funny Man instructing Caroline about how to use protection magic. The protection magic that she was studying was a basic tier, the one that forms a ball and engulfs the user to protect from the outside’s attacks.

Caroline was concentrating her mana on forming the protection magic. She was having a hard time, indeed. But unlike Alastor, he can conjure it easily as he spent most of his time manifesting and controlling his mana since he was a Mana-Folder. The case was basic for him, at least. The protective magic was barely completed. A sphere wasn’t fully manifested as she was lacking the power of imagination to spread her mana into forming it.

“My lady, remember to use your imagination into projecting your mana to conjure protective magic. This rule is basic to all of magic, remember that.”

“I know, I know.” Caroline inhaled. She clearly ignored his advice.

She was succeeding in forming it, until a crack trailed across like a web and everything fell into pieces and flung away, landing in a different part of the land. Mr. Funny Man dodged the shards easily. Alastor however, raised his palm and used a chantless wall magic. The shard of the remainder of her protective magic stuck on his thick wall, disappeared in white, and bluish dust of mana. Caroline saw him and instantly came to him with a familiar sense of worry. She was acting benevolently just not making any kind of suspicion while Mr. Funny Man was around.

“Are you hurt?” Caroline asked. Her face blushed in red.

Before she can come any closer, Alastor threw a don’t-come-near-to-me look. And of course, she perceives it. Caroline back one step away.

“I’m fine.” Alastor finally replied.

Although he was strict, he was never a gloomy man, unlike the first time they met, just different, open but dissimilar.

“That is quite a feat, Mr. Alastor.” Mr. Funny Man commended.

“Just call me, Al.”

Mr. Funny Man nodded. “That magic you have pulled, right now, is a mid-tier, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I see. You must be quite skillful. After all, not all men and women can use chantless magic.”

“Chantless magic?” Caroline asked.

“Just as the word itself, a caster can conjure magic even without reciting the words of the spell. By that, the caster can engage in combat more easily.”

“How is that possible?” Caroline asked like an innocent child.

“Three factors: Experience, time, and practice. People who can’t use chantless magic had spent their time honing their mana and recitals. Like what we’ve discussed earlier, incantations and imagination come by hand, but as time passed by, when the user chant the words, the imagination will automatically come along with it, the more the user uses the magic, the more the user will easily be able to conjure the magic and by the right time, the user can manifest the magic without the need of incantations.”

Alastor added, “But chantless magic also had its own downfall. For the chantless magic to be effective just like the chanted one, the user must be really good at controlling the mana to make it stronger, or else it will easily break down. Emotions also play a vital role in conjuring too. The more intense the emotion, the more mana can be exerted and the more powerful the magic can be, but the mastery of syncing imagination and forming the spell must come first.”

Caroline’s eyes instantly glimmered and whirled to turn to gaze at Alastor.

“I didn’t know you’re that strong, Mister Al.”

She came closer. The mercenary’s foot twitched, he was going to back away if she leaned closer.

She added, teasingly, “And you’re quite knowledgeable too.”

“It’s nothing to brag of. I only knew a few magic’s, ‘cause most of the time I trained to control my mana.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I’m a Mana Folder.”

Those last words rang over Mr. Funny Man’s ears.

“A Mana Folder?” He asked again though he heard it clearly.

Alastor was never the man to tell a lie about himself nor allow anyone to make a mockery of him. So, instead, he told him the truth with confidence.

“Yes. I am a Mana Folder.”

Never once did Mr. Funny Man hold prejudice against Mana Folders but he knew that their abilities are lowest among the ranks of the warriors or even other kinds. This man even under the contract was one of a few that was forcibly bearing the fate of the kingdom, but Mr. Funny Man didn’t know what he was until now. If this was a recruitment camp, Alastor would be expelled immediately and might make a mockery among other recruits, but he was not one of them and he considered his background as a member of the largest mercenary organization, the Glade before judging if he was capable.

“Madame Caroline, it seems that our lesson will be postponed.”

“But why?” She asked.

Caroline can tell that a murderous intent began to swell behind his dark tinted glass.

“Mister Alastor,” His expression turned grim, “I would like to challenge you in a mock battle.” He declared.

Alastor already anticipated this. He knew from the beginning that Mr. Funny Man would not turn him away. It was too late for him to request for a replacement, now that the days are ticking and the enemies are not waiting for them to make their move and because he anticipated his desire, Alastor already anticipated that he will not fail to satisfy him.

Caroline was two yards away from them, a perfect safe distance for her to watch them fight. She sighed as she curled her hair with her finger.

*Is this really necessary?*

She cannot comprehend the reason why Mr. Funny Man suddenly worked up when he heard that Alastor was a Mana Folder.

*How big a deal is it to be like that?* She asked herself again.

Caroline wanted to intervene but seeing how serious Mr. Funny Man is, she was afraid to do it. Mr. Funny Man had different faces, most were warm, but when he was pissed, that was the time you’d consider begging for your life. All she can do right now is to watch how things will unfold when these two settle their differences.

“After you, Alastor.” Mr. Funny Man said.

“How generous.”

Alastor dashed. The light of the artificial sun bounced off against his sword. Mr. Funny Man saw his sword his position in advance and he ducked followed by a series of jink. Mr. Funny Man kept prancing around until he felt that Alastor’s efforts were leading to nothing. His sword did not even reach the target. Alastor heard a disappointed grunt.

“Is that it?” Mr. Funny Man asked.

Even moving constantly, Alastor was still breathing with ease.

“Are you sure it’s fair to you that I’m the only one who’s using a sword and you’re not?”

Mr. Funny Man nodded, “Yes.”

“Suit yourself.”

As soon they finished talking, Alastor swayed his hands. Mr. Funny Man raised a brow, his gaze remained unaltered. Alastor lunged forward. In return, Mr. Funny Man evaded again, and he took a big step back only to find himself cornered by the invisible wall that Alastor conjured earlier. He glanced around in a split second and saw that both of them are inside the four edges of invisible walls.

*That movement earlier wasn’t meaningless at all. This man is certainly something.*

A smile stretched on his lips.

“Fine then.”

The moment the tip of his sword was about to cut Mr. Funny Man’s face, Alastor felt a sharp, whistling wind that cut his cheek. In a sudden motion of encircling wind, Alastor was blown away. His invisible walls were torn as the destructive wind shook the trees. Caroline shielded her eyes with her arm against the rupture of wind. The leaves were torn by and scattered, exploding in the wind.

Above, about ten feet high, Mr. Funny Man floated.

“That’s not fair.” Alastor protested. “I can’t fly, you know.”

“You’re a mercenary, I’m pretty sure you can do more than complaining.”

In his palm, wind gathered. It was creeping, and shrilling. The leaves that were floating were rendered to dust when they caught on the flow. Mr. Funny Man swung his arm. Alastor felt a heavy atmosphere crushing the leaves. He glanced to his left and saw the invisible force rearing over him. He offered a frustrated moan before he rolled over and jumped, then leaped backward, evading the attacks of Mr. Funny Man. As Alastor used his arm to roll as he bent, another shockwave came to him again. He used his sword to shield himself. His back trembled in pain as he landed on a tree. He kneeled for seconds and got up.

“Is this the only thing you can do?” Mr. Funny Man asked. “Prancing around like an idiot?”

*Just wait and see.* Alastor spoke on his thoughts.

Alastor waved his hand and quickly, the invisible walls floated everywhere.

“Oh? Are you trying to limit my movements again? Interesting. Come on.”

It was quite the opposite. Alastor’s floating invisible walls weren’t conjured to limit his movements. He glided and evaded another attack, he leaped forward like a bullet to dodge perfectly four consequent attacks. Alastor immediately got on his feet and sprang. He used the invisible walls as a foothold.

Mr. Funny Man quickly gained distance before him. He felt threatened that the mercenary was gaining advantage. At that moment, he realized his biggest mistake.

*This man, those walls weren’t meant just to limit my movements, but to use as his foothold?!*

Alastor sprang from one foothold onto another, his fluid movements confused Mr. Funny Man as to where he would land. He was stuck in the middle of the walls, struck in awe. His composure was broken when Alastor exhibited his uncanny wittiness.

*Alastor, you’re a sharp man, indeed. You may be a Mana Folder, but your creative imagination is an element that can catch an enemy off guard. Your mind is a force to reckon with. If you put your mind to killing someone, I doubt that you would fail. Perhaps, I was too harsh on you.*

As a matter of a moment, Alastor had quickly gone from his field of sight.

*Where is he?!*

Mr. Funny Man frantically looked around. He finally grasped his objective, but it was too late. Alastor was on top of him. He was overcome by the shadow but still, the light of the artificial sun had hurt his eyes. Even his vision was obscured, he knew Alastor’s position.

Wind gathered in his palm.

*I won.*

Alastor was six feet away from him when Mr. Funny Man threw the strenuous wind at him. A grin stretched on his face, but it was too early to assume his success. His celebration was shattered when Alastor’s figure quickly dissipated. He was able to follow the fluid shadow as two of his invisible wall footholds shattered in pristine lights. It landed on his right and swiftly lunged towards him.

He was about to leap back but he was distracted by the eyesore light reflected on his blade. It appeared that Alastor had forgotten that this was just a mock battle when he saw his eyes reflected a killing intent.

Another shadow flung and grabbed Alastor down. The ground rumbled as they crashed on the dirty earth. The swirling dust quickly dissolves. Ken was on top of Alastor.

“What the hell are you doing, Al?”

Ken held his right hand, restricting him from any attempts to raise his sword while his left foot was on Alastor’s left hand and his left hand was on his throat. Ken had him completely pinned down. Ken could feel Alastor’s murderous intention leaking through his unusual aura.

“Alastor,” Ken started again. He didn’t alter his strength. “Snap out of it.”

In a matter of seconds, Alastor’s murderous intention halted. He looked up, blinked, confused why they were in that position. He didn’t say anything until he was fully conscious of himself. Ken remained steeled in his position, uncertain if he was truly in control of himself.

“What happened?” Alastor groaned.

“I’m supposed to be the one who’s asking that,” Ken replied.

Mr. Funny Man landed. His composure returned to normal. He walked towards him and extended his arm to hold Ken’s shoulder.

“There is no need for restriction, Ken. We were having a mock battle.” He said.

“I can hardly call that a mock battle. He intentionally wanted to kill you.”

Ken helped Alastor get up. Alastor remained clueless about his actions, betraying no evidence of him remembering what just happened. Ken was under the impression that he was not fully himself yet, and realized he had wasted his breath earlier trying to appeal to any sensibilities of a half-conscious man.

Alastor took a deep breath. He could barely recall what he did earlier. Caroline came closer, appearing to be worried.

“Did anyone get hurt?”

Alastor peered up at her disinterestedly. Suddenly, he felt hotness shoot up and his body shivered and sat down. He felt drowsy.

Caroline offered her healing abilities, at least, to ease his uneasiness. The greenish light filled onto him, providing a sense of clarity.

“Did I hurt anyone?” He mumbled.

“No, but you nearly killed one,” Ken exclaimed.

“No worries,” Mr. Funny Man said it without harboring detestation. “I was quite impressed with how you displayed your abilities.” Mr. Funny Man began to explain to Ken, “If there’s anyone to blame, that’s me. I may seem to have provoked Alastor, to unleash his true combat ability. I was merely testing him after he appeared to use a chantless magic earlier.”

It was a big lie. He and Alastor knew it themselves. They knew pretty well that if Mr. Funny Man told them the truth about having doubts about Alastor being a Mana Folder, it would create an awkward atmosphere between him and Alastor’s comrades. So, it was better to use that as an excuse to avoid any kind of judgment that would affect their relationship.

“I’m sorry too. It appeared that I went overboard. It won’t happen again.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t do it again.”

“Agreed.”

Ken was undoubtedly oblivious of what happened between the two.

“Ok. You better not tell Linda about this. She would freak out.” Ken said.

“Very well.” Mr. Funny Man dryly replied. His poise returned. He gazed at Caroline, “Mademoiselle, let us continue your training next time.”

Caroline nodded. She glanced again at Alastor who’s profusely sweating. She seemed not that worried that Alastor may hurt Mr. Funny Man at all. She very well knew the difference in strength between the two. What she should worry about was what if Mr. Funny Man would go all out. Thankfully, he was able to suppress his strength when they fought.

What matters the most was the strength that Alastor exhibited. Not only was he smart, but he was strong too. One thing was for sure, that strength comes with a price, maybe his soul, his humanity, or his past.

From now on, Mr. Funny Man will definitely never forget in his mind the day a lower-class warrior nearly ended his life because he let his guard down.

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Alastor doesn’t feel himself lately, in fact, he hadn’t been himself for a while. Ever since his innate unknown powers manifested, he felt that he was not in control. Surely, he had the awareness of surroundings, until it gradually slipped, but his movements were willingly on its own. It felt like a puppet, but he couldn't pinpoint what drove him to do what he didn’t want to do. His temperature would shoot up, his body would become upset and he would tremble as if he was losing his sense of reality.

Alastor cupped the water from the faucet and splashed it on his face to feel himself, the coldness, the reassuring sense of security that he hadn’t lost his sanity. He felt his face stiff and hard. The water trickled down on his chin. He plastered his hair as he observed his reflection in the mirror.

He remembered the feeling, the twisting, mind-boggling perception at that time – the heat and dulled his senses into thinking he had fallen into madness but only to find himself in the darkness.

The energy he felt back then was similar to Sherry, the difference between the two was that he knew he could resist it, but something else was forcing him to.

Before he could let himself drown in his own misery, someone knocked on the door. He saw the knob tilted and Ken entered.

“You alright, pal?” He asked.

“Yeah.” Alastor nodded and grabbed the towel, wiping his wet face. “What’s up?”

“I’m just checking. Oh, and Mr. Funny Man wants us to gather at the lounge.”

“Be right there in a minute.”

“Al, are you sure you’re alright? Because lately, you’ve been acting strange.” Ken questioned. It hadn’t slipped on his eyes that Alastor had been acting weird lately.

Alastor turned his gaze at him and saw his face that expressed concern.

“Yeah. I’m, I’m fine. Nothing sleep can’t do. Don’t worry.” A forceful smile stretched.

After that, Alastor went his way back to his room. He wiped off his sweaty face with his palm and opened the closet. He wore a black shirt and blue denim coat. His scabbard hung on his back. His brown pants were laden with metallic kneecaps and his chest equipped with light armor. His buckler, on the other hand, was of no use anymore, it was damaged thoroughly in his previous fight. It was better not to fix it as it would only burden their finances. All of his clothes were packed in his bag and carried as he went to the lounge.

They all came at the same time. In front of them, a map had been set on the table. Several pieces marked some routes, red and black. There were a few black pieces rather than red ones. The red apparently indicates that the route cannot be used while the black was the complete opposite.

Mr. Funny Man sat down. He quietly observed them for a while, especially Alastor, and then he began to add another red piece to a certain route. When he entered the room, his expression was understandably hardened, contrasting to the three on the other side, as completely calm. *Do they truly understand the gravity of the situation?* He asked himself. Whether they’re in their right heads or not, their judgments and actions matter, after all.

“Let me guess,” Alastor said as he scanned the map, “The red ones are the unavailable routes and the black ones are the ones that haven’t been confirmed that the enemies marked yet?”

“Yes.” Mr. Funny Man nodded and said with a strained expression. His finger traced to a certain place, a route that led to a mountain. “Several days ago, when the princess was trying to escape the eyes of the enemies, we hired adventurers and mercenaries to spread false information, in which they followed them to the Mistrake Mountain.”

“That’s awfully close,” Linda stated.

“Not as close as this town,” Alastor replied.

“And there is that.” She nodded. “They have a vast network it seems. No wonder why you guys are having such a hard time covering your tracks.”

“Then what’s the hold-up?” Alastor asked.

“There are several highways that haven’t been marked yet. I would like to hear your opinion.”

They all fell silent for a while. Ken looked ahead and thought of something.

“Why don’t we try a different approach?” Ken asked.

“What approach?” Alastor asked. He took his eyes off the map to look at him.

“Let’s disguise ourselves as merchants,” Ken responded.

“I’m sorry, what?” Linda asked.

“Actually, it’s not a bad idea,” Alastor replied. “But we need to do something about the princess’s appearance.”

“I’ll handle it.” Linda declared.

“You will?”

“Yes.”

Their eyes suddenly struck someone who was descending from the stairs. Holding her yellow dress that was the length of her kneecap. Her neck was adorned by her golden necklace with a green gem in the middle, she carefully descended with her fair lady-like figure and pink sandal. Her hair was fashioned by braiding into two thick tresses.

Caroline occupied the seat next to Mr. Funny Man.

“I agree, we need to do something about her appearance.” Mr. Funny Man stated.

“I’m sorry, what? You didn’t like my dress.”

“No, no,” Linda replied. “It’s not like that, princess. There’s nothing with you or your dress. It’s perfect for you honestly.”

“Excuse me, Ken. But what kind of merchandise are we going to sell out?” Alastor queried.

“I am not sure you will like it…”

After Ken explained to them, Caroline can only express her discontentment.

Mr. Funny Man was slightly amused about his plan. “Bold and provocative, but it is still effective. I’m sorry, princess, but we have to do it.”

Caroline knew that they were in a dire situation but to do something like *that* is out of the line. What she was annoyed about was by the fact that they made her feel that she doesn’t have a voice for this.

“Absolutely not.” She puckered her lips and slightly closed her eyes. Her cheeks dripped in red. “It doesn’t mean you’re the ones who are going to lead the mission, you can do all you want. I am still a delicate, decent young lady, you know.”

Alastor’s brows jerked in a second. “Then what do you want us to do? Why don’t you formulate a plan? I doubt that there’s nothing you can answer.”

“I didn’t say your plan is ineffective. What I’m saying is humiliating. But fine, I’ll agree just this time.”

Alastor held his breath and calmed himself down. It was better not to rile up. They’re still getting paid, after all. Linda aided her to the room to help change her appearance.

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The sunset was dipping on the horizon and slightly burned red as it streamed to the windows until it was replaced by the darkness and the blinking lights on the sky. It was completely silent for a while, but then music abruptly came from the tavern startled the birds on top of the ceiling made in brown tiles. The adventurers who started the revelry seem to capture a monster that had a high price on its head and treated the rest of the adventurers with drinks and food.

Mr. Funny Man that was carrying a box of supplies went to the back, the door opened and he dropped the crate that led to the wagon that Liber’s guarded. The door vanished and he conjured another door again. He went inside that led to his room, leaving the revelry behind. Apart from the curt and the festivities inside, the town people proceeded with their business. What more can be said – this town was the least annoying and less populated unlike the previous town they visited. The people are also communicatory. They know well how to keep a customer. Even the wineries are fine with their delicacies. In fact, some of the adventurers they knew that once lived in the Ylfon kingdom, resided in this town for over some years, so, they’re like a family to them. Whenever there’s trouble, the adventurers would come to help very quickly, even if there was no payment.

A merchant who had closed his shop and was about to get inside felt an ominous presence on the road ahead. Two men wore a black robe and a man who appeared to be an afoot soldier that was injured talking to them. The rest of the foot soldiers who wore bronze armor and various weapons had killed their town's guard.

Decided to get inside, he felt cold as he moved a step close to his doorstep. He looked down and saw the tip of the blade pierce on the other side behind his body. As the blood dripped, darkness followed.

“Why did you kill him?” A womanly voice under the robe appeared behind and asked him in a cold tone.

“We can’t risk any townspeople to spread the news and have the adventurers in the tavern expect us to come. We must do it silently. The failure of our foot soldiers had proven that a direct attack would do no good.” He calmly responded. “Now, do your thing and clad them with your magic.”

The woman’s right hand gathered mana. The foot soldiers came and the line behind her. She waved her hand and the mana became a cloud of white dust that allowed them to camouflage on their surroundings. They walked in front of all the invisible soldiers with silent footsteps.

The only thing that could be heard among them was a rustle of wind and the rest was the clamor of laughter coming from the tavern.

The music had stopped when two mysterious figures suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The swing door opened uselessly as if the wind was responsible for it, but the adventurers who are even tipsy notice that the wind became still. They can only hear the faint noise of footsteps. A tankard suddenly fell from the table to the floor.

The adventurers who had a good laugh earlier turned their attention to them.

“What’s this?” The leader of the group asked. “You guys’ beggar or something? Well, don’t worry, good folks! It’s our treat tonight. So, feel free to take a seat.”

“My, my. How generous.” The lady replied. “That’s not what we’ve come here for. Although, we’re quite famished from a long walk. We could use some break.”

The man beside him had interrupted and whispered to her. “Just get over it.”

She continued, “Where are they?”

“Where is who? One of his party members asked. “Are we playing guess who right now?”

They laughed. The glasses ting as they cheered.

“Miss, can I call you miss?” He dared to put his hand on her shoulder. “There’s no need for a threatening voice. We’re all friends here.”

“Then, would you kindly tell us where the princess is hiding?”

“What?!”

They were about to grab their weapons underneath the table, but they were struck by something on their neck.

“What is this?!” Someone at the corner, shrieked and howled in pain when he was stabbed at shoulder then got slit on his throat. Blood squirted all over the table and to his comrade. Soon, others were struck.

Finally, the effect of her magic was unveiled. The soldiers appeared with their swords and spears thrusting through the sensitive parts of their bodies. Thankfully, not all of them were completely defenseless. Some wore armor and a helmet. Guarded by their equipment they quickly drew their ax, swords, and other weapons.

They can fight, yes, but with the unexpected, they were left defenseless. The killing was done quickly and efficiently. In the end, they were slaughtered with only few remains.

“Now, tell me. Where are they?”

He smirked. “I don’t know.”

“What could you possibly gain out of this?” She asked again. “She’s not from this country nor this town and region.”

“Useless.” Her comrade said briskly under the hood.

“So, you’re going to use it?” She asked.

“Of course.”

His eyes flashed in green. His magic allowed him to peer through the houses even though there was a wall within the town. Finally, he noticed a certain isolated area that had an unusual build beneath it.

“Gotcha.”

“You found them?”

“Sort of.” He said. She ticked an eyebrow due to the cryptic words. “They have some underground hiding spots.”

“What a waste of time. You could’ve used that magic earlier.”

“This power comes with a price, that’s why I seldom use it.”

She hissed. “They’re useless now.”

Unknown to them, the man’s hand slowly slid at his back to get his dagger. He quickly unsheathed it and tried to attack her, which is the closest one.

“As if we’d let you.”

An invisible force blew him, throttling his body through the walls and crashed at the border of the town. When the rest of the adventurers outside tried to get them, they all vanished in plain sight. No traces or clues were left for them to follow.

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Mr. Funny Man felt a presence outside the underground house he built peered through. It’s a creeping sense that he felt from their stalker. He quickly got up and zipped the bag of the princess.

Caroline created so many paintings. This made Mr. Funny Man replace the old tattered wagon of Alastor with a much bigger one.

He conjured a door and threw it inside.

“Hey!” She cried. “Be careful. Those aren’t cheap just for you to know.”

“I’m sorry, princess. But it seems the enemies knew where we were. There isn’t much time.”

Mr. Funny Man grabbed the princess and threw her inside the door. Caroline fell on a luxurious red cushion and bounced on the ground.

Mr. Funny Man walked down and found Ken and Linda.

“Where is Alastor?” He asked.

“He’s in his room,” Linda replied. She quizzically raised her head. She felt doozy, but was able to bear it. Ken was moaning as he steeled his mind. “Is there something wrong?”

“The enemies knew where we were.”

“What?”

Mr. Funny Man conjured the door. “Please, hurry inside.”

“What about Alastor?” Ken asked.

“I’ll find him. Don’t worry.”

Mr. Funny Man scurried outside, quickly and silently. He opened a door that led to Alastor’s room and found him with his belongings packed in his bag.

“What?” He asked.

“Come here. We need to hurry.”

Alastor did not ask a question. The urgent tone did not escape his ears. He followed him and opened a door.

“The enemy finally made it to us.”

“Shit,” Alastor muttered.

“You need to go by yourself.”

“What about you?”

“I’m gonna stall them and buy you guys some time.” He said calmly, “Remember, you were hired to protect the princess.”

Before he could say anything that contradicted him, Mr. Funny Man pushed him inside the room and he fell in front of the wagon, passing him the role of a coachman. Liber cried.

At the same time, a person crashed down the hallway and then was followed by another hooded person. The two casually observe the hallway and the doors. Mr. Funny Man locked the door.

“For an underground hideout, you did quite well building this place. I take that this is your Inquiara magic.” He spoke. “This place brimmed with an unbelievable amount of mana.”

Mr. Funny Man didn’t reply.

“Benny, it seems that this person in front of us is a mute.”

“Seems like it, Karen,” Benny replied.

“Where’s the princess?” Karen asked.

Again, he didn’t reply.

“He’s also deaf.” Benny chuckled.

Both of them unleashed their blades and dashed to Mr. Funny Man. But he remained stationary and raised his right palm tilted as if there was a knob in front of him. The entire room tilted at his command and they all stumbled while Mr. Funny Man remained in his position, unaffected.

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It seemed that they’re in a garage of some sort. The door swung wide open in front of him and the green light emanated from it. He opened the small peephole door and saw them apparently not in the best condition, it was as if they had ridden a roller coaster. He surveyed Ken and Linda, who were sitting and groaning. The Inquiara Magic must have affected them again. A pair of bronze eyes peered on the other side. Alastor was startled and was taken aback.

“It’s me, Caroline.” She pulled back and he could see the upper part of his body. “Where’s Mr. Funny Man?” She asked.

“He’s buying us some time.” He looked back. He doesn't see her face when she reacts.

“What?! You left him?!”

“It’s not like we have another choice, princess. The enemies’ appeared all of a sudden.” Alastor hastily explained, but it seems that his words were meaningless to her.

“I don’t care!” She yelled. “We must go back!”

Caroline tried to open the door, but she miserably failed. The entire wagon was enchanted it seemed. She glanced at Alastor. Her eyes reflected that she felt betrayed.

“What did you do?!” Her voice flared.

“Listen to me! He gave us a chance to escape!” he yelled back. “We can’t waste that opportunity.”

“Al, I am not a damsel who requires constant help. I can take care of myself.”

“And so, you have said. But right not now those bastards wanted to kill you so badly, that he even had to sacrifice himself. Do you think that he will be glad knowing that you put yourself in danger and waste his sacrifice? Remember, you are the second princess, Caroline.”

Caroline fell in silence as if cold water had splashed on her face.

“Yeah, I thought so.” Alastor turned around. “Now, you sit tight while I’ll make sure that we can escape.”

Alastor galloped, shouted, and the wagon jolted.

“Liber, I know that you and I haven’t had time, but I need you to push yourself and throttle us out of here.”

The liber let out a prideful cry. His eyes fired up. Even if Alastor won’t tell him about the reward, he is looking forward to his efforts.

With a final cry, Liber pulled the carrier with all his might. The ground rumbled as he made his way outside the door. The road led them near the boundary of the town. The town behind was belched with flames, licking from the tavern to the nearby cruck houses. Several cries and clamor of swords hissing and crashing at one another rang from miles away until an explosion took over. There was less they could hear. They could see some guards were climbing on the bell tower, fighting hard, but fruitless. Someone already set the tower ablaze. The towering smoke was thick and covered the moon.

When they successfully got out from the borders of the town, the tendrils of the trees reached them, and the moonlight barely hung on the road to illuminate the path. The wagon rattled along the forest trail. The people inside were shaken up when it stumbled and rumbled for a moment. Linda peered through.

“Al?! Where are we?”

“Outside. Mr. Funny Man had to stay so he can buy us some more time.”

“Sorry, I just felt a little doozy.”

“Little doozy?! You guys were out for like 5 minutes.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Please, take on for us for now.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

A moment passed, Alastor felt a few rumbles coming from behind him. He risked a glance and saw a few trucks and horses from behind.

“Ah shit. Everyone! Please find something to hold on to. We’re in trouble.”

The truck flew past him and steady its speed in front of Liber. The enemies on their copper armors held their crossbow and aimed it at Alastor and Liber.

“What the hell is happening out there?!” Caroline shouted as she struggled to balance.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Alastor conjured a wall and blocked the enemies’ attacks. The bullets bounced off against the transparent wall. He then places his hands on Liber and coated him with protective magic.

Alastor banged the wagon with his fist. “Linda! Ken! Wake the fuck up! We have company here!”

“What the fuck?” Alastor could only mutter those questions.

Both doors opened, and Linda and Ken climbed on top of the wagon.

“At least someone should protect the princess,” Alastor said. He then coated the wagon with protective magic. The arrow bounced and snapped under their vehicle's wheels.

“Don’t worry about it,” Linda responded. “Focus on keeping the wagon running. We’ll make sure these bastards won’t follow us.”

Linda sharply breathed and leaped on the truck in front of them.

“Hello, boys.”

Linda immediately froze the heart of the first person she touched. Her ice sword conjured and began to cut her way. It was a close fight, so she had all the liberty to swing mightily without worrying about friendly fire. Ken shifted his weight around and saw the horses from the back. Arrows spewing over aimlessly. Ken’s feet began to emit flame as hop and struck the first unlucky person with his feet. He pulled the horse and fired the next person.

“The princess!” Alastor shouted. “Shit.”

There’s a soldier that managed to slip their vision and reach the doorknob. When he opened it, a white light blasted the soldier and fell to the ravine.

“Don’t worry! I’ll be alright!”

Caroline began to shoot the foot soldiers that came closer to her. When Ken came to knock the enemies’ off-balance, Caroline pulled the door, and with all might to defy the pressure of the wind, she locked it.

Ken used the horses as a foothold, diving to horses and to another. Ken found himself on a semi-loaded truck. The enemies had something he never expected. Guns. A lot of guns.

“Whoa, whoa.” Ken immediately stopped in motion when all of their guns pointed at him. He threw his hands in the air. “Guys, they have guns here.” He spoke to them through the ear speaker.

As Linda slashed the person, she observed. Two trucks are currently chasing after them right now.

“Which one?” She questioned.

“The one on the left.”

“There’s two of them. Which left? You know what. Just jump over to a horse when I say so.” Her ice sword began to stretch as she poured mana on it.

She leaped straight up and threw the ice lance to the truck. It whished, pierced and struck the driver. “Ken, now!” The truck halted and in turn of events, the truck behind crashed onto another. Ken managed to steal a horse from the enemy and quickly caught her hands when she fell.

“Thanks.” Linda hoarsely said and climbed behind him.

“Don’t mention it.”

An arrow whizzed past them. It was followed by several arrows. Linda raised her palm and looked behind. A ball of ice emanated and threw it on the ground. It began to divide and spread on the street and because of that the horses slid and stumbled.

There is still a truck ahead of them. Ken shakily stood and leaped towards it. The moment he landed, he jab in the throat the first person in his sight. The martial artist twirled, his knee crushing the enemy’s ribs. It was followed up with his quick-witted attacks. He heard a yell from behind, he switched position with the stunned enemy, and heard a squirt of flesh. The sword struck down the comrade’s head. Ken ducked, evaded a strike, and then bristled with a jab at its chest. It didn’t matter if he was wearing armor, the force of impact made through. His power alone threw the enemy off the vehicle and rolled over the dirt. He grabbed the blade and plunged it to the driver from behind. There was a stiff groan when Ken leaped over and drove a vacant horse. A loud explosion rang behind. The quietness was brought back then after.

They landed at the front seat, startling Alastor.

Ken huffed. “So, when’s our next stop?”

“We’ll be riding for 2 days before we reach the destination.”

“That’s awfully long,” Linda grunted.

Liber even cried.

“I know, I know.” Alastor couldn’t disagree either. “Once we’re far away, we will take a break.”

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It all seemed to be true that they had captured him, but it was all a big lie. Benny and Karen broke his illusion for the 6th time and still couldn’t pull themselves out to end him. Mr. Funny Man sat down and drank his coffee in the middle of an empty space. It was all white and seemingly never-ending. When Mr. Funny Man tilted the hallway the two fell straight in the room and that was when it all began. They were trapped in his spell and began to hallucinate.

“So, you broke my illusion again.” He stated and commended them, indulging them with his petty words of encouragement. “I am quite intrigued. There are very few people who were easily able to break my spell. You two are exceptional.”

Karen rose from crouching. “Black suit, powerful, and versatile Inquiara Magic. You must be the one they called Mr. Funny Man. The leader of the Kris Krux.”

“Indeed, I am.”

“I met one of the Kris Krux before,” Benny said. “Ms. Sunny Dale? Is that her name?”

“Correction, it’s Mrs., she is my wife.”

“Ever since you trapped us here. I guess you want something from us?”

Mr. Funny Man sighed and sipped his coffee. “Yes. I want you to tell me who are the nobles from the opposing faction that hired you people.”

“What makes you think that we’re hired?”

“Come on,” Mr. Funny Man dismissed denial, “The nobles won’t be able to create such warriors without the palace noticing, and at such a short time they were able to mobilize assassins to hunt down the princess.”

Benny smirked. “You’re not just the leader for nothing.”

“But still,” Karen talked back. “We will not talk.”

For quite some time now, Karen observed his footsteps of where it came. He saw black linings that form into a door.

“You made this room for interrogation, am I right?”

He didn’t reply.

“Then, I guess. The effects have only limited this space.”

Karen sprang and crashed onto the wall. Benny was able to follow her while Mr. Funny Man stayed behind enjoying the last of his coffee before opening the door and watched them struggle to stand up. The two heaved a breath and unleashed their blade to him.

“I’ll cut open your chest and grab your heart as you watch, crushing it with my own hands.”

As Karen finished her words, she lunged forward and slash her blade vertically. But it passed through him as if he was made of mist.

“What?” Benny blinked twice.

Mr. Funny Man smirked. “I was never there, to begin with.”

The whole place began to rumble. Dust and dirt began to crawl their way out of the walls and ceiling. As his image began to disappear, Karen doubted again if they were still in the illusion. But clearly, they can feel the rumble and smell the grossing odor of land.

“Shit, are we still in his illusion?”

“No, this… this is real,” Benny responded.

They went back and jumped on the hole back in the house. Then it was sealed by the earth.

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Karen is still infuriated by the fact that they were tricked. Benny, on the other hand, was quite amused by what he had found out just now. All her profane behavior had become a nuisance for his ears.

“Karen, Karen! For once, shut your mouth. Instead of yattering bullshit, why won’t you help me formulate a plan as to how to track them.”

Karen took a long breath and with the last of it, she screamed out of frustration.

“Feel good enough?” Benny asked.

“We have one job and we weren’t able to accomplish anything. We were so close. This is close to getting our hands on the princess.”

They got in the house where a few of their men waited for them. There were horses for them at standby.

“Why do we have to use horses?” Karen queried. “Did the nobles not give the Renegades enough money to buy us some appropriate modern vehicles?”

“Maine told us that we can’t waste money that luxuriously. They allocate the money for others deemed to be more important than this one.”

“Tsk.” She hissed. “Simply to speak, they just don’t want to give a shit about the nobles.”

“It’s not like it.” Benny dismissively spoke to her. “It seems that they believe that a number of our men can do the job and send the two of us.”

“That’s quite bold for them to assume. We don’t even know what kind of abilities the enemies had until now.”

Benny sighed. He looked over the mess they made on the town. “I understand your disappointment.”

“We tried so hard to block the possible roads they might go, but we got outwitted by the enemies and tricked by a single person.”

There was a pause in their movements when there’s a sudden rumble almost like there’s an earthquake. Up ahead, they saw the villagers, men, and women along with the adventurers, all their heavy rally directed at them.

“Damn it. We’re cornered.” Every corner road was occupied by the villagers and they’re at the tall border. Benny used fire magic to blow it and make their way. They successfully got out but some of their men were caught by stakes and arrows before they could even move out. Their horrid screams reached them and the soldiers could only close their eyes.

A soldier got closer to them and reported the situation, “Ma’am, our men were able to track them down on one of the roads we blocked just near this village.”

“Take us where it is,” Karen ordered.

And the soldier politely nodded and went ahead first.

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Up in the sky, Mr. Funny Man was hovering ahead with his flight ability. His eyes scanned below watching the vehicles burning, horses that became astray, and several dead bodies on the ground. Ahead, he detected a bluish color that was spread like paint. He smirked.

“It seems that they live upon my expectations. That’s good. At least the princess is in good hands now… even though I'm away.”

He flew past the forest and across the river. He finally saw the wagon and Mr. Funny Man carefully descended and sat beside Alastor.

“Son of a bitch!” Alastor profaned. “I thought you were dead.”

“No. Quite the opposite obviously. I was interrogating the enemies, but it seems they managed to break my spell and are not willing to comply. When I felt the enemies’ presence around this wagon, I immediately went out to find you guys, but it seems there’s no need for me to intervene.”

“I told you we can handle a lot of situations.” He wiped the sweat on his face.

“And so, I have seen the result.”

“Did you just come from above?”

“Yes. I can fly, remember?”

“By the way, it’s not going to be easy. The enemies are using guns.”

“Come again?”

“I couldn’t believe it too, but whoever is supplying them, they must have a lot of budgets to buy some guns. But don’t worry, the princess is safe. Ken and Linda made sure they weren’t given a chance to use the guns. I doubt they will ever use it since it might endanger the princess.”

Mr. Funny Man sighed in relief. “Very good. Then, I’ll take my rest.”

“Yeah, you better do that. We need energy in case of an emergency.”

And so, Mr. Funny Man entered the carriage. He saw Caroline sleeping quietly with her head on the pillow at the edge of the corner. The others were also exhausted and fell asleep.

Mr. Funny Man watched her. He remembered back then when he was in his twenties. At that time, she met Caroline, she was 3 years old at that time, but she was quite elusive as little as she is.

She would always wander around the castle by herself until she met him. He was not that good at that child but when the little girl asked for food, he didn’t hesitate and gave her some of his homemade pudding, a delicacy that he ate quite often. It was not ideal food for a child, but she liked it anyway and asked for more.

Mr. Funny Man was indebted to her family after Jven Teralhan saved him during the war of tribes. He was one of the many victims when the Mephistic Hunters and the Gustafahl Hunters waged war against each other.

Ever since then, he made it his responsibility to act as her brother. But when her father became ill and died during the meeting of the 6 nations, she became distant even from her sister. She denied her heritage and began to travel away.

He expected that she was only passing the time but she never came back and that was when he began to investigate her whereabouts. He was able to gather some information and heard that she was selling her artworks and her beautiful captions.

If there is such a wishing star, then he’d wish that everything would turn back to the way it was, but he knew and definitely within his nature deeply understands that some pains are deeper that it can change the person from inside and out.

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At some point, Alastor awoke with discomfort.

He was lying, or rather half-sitting when he fell asleep. Alastor yawned and wearily opened his eyes. He stretched his limbs, an unpleasant weight of stinging around his neck that surged through his brain. That position wasn’t the best for sleeping. When a brilliant light broke ahead of him he was flooded by his reason, and startled by the fact that he dozed off. His hands moved and suddenly found the rein, but someone was holding it. He gazed to his right and saw Mr. Funny Man taking over the role. The ray of sun bouncing off from his sunglasses.

“Morning.” He greeted me.

“When did you…?”

“Earlier, I couldn’t sleep properly. So, I decided to go outside and found out that you’d fallen asleep. Just out of curiosity, how can you sleep without losing your balance? I can never truly grasp the notion.”

A smile formed on his lips. “It kinda happened during the training back in the Glade. It’s vague, but I remember when we were playing tag.”

“Tag?”

Alastor nodded. “We have to stay awake just to make sure our mark won’t be stolen. It’s kind of a strategic game, we’ll make a trap or plan an ambush for the enemy to steal their marks. The game taught us how to remain in balance out of instinct.”

Mr. Funny Man bemused.

“Anyways, I ended up in 2nd place.”

“Hm.”

“That’s nothing to brag about.”

But Alastor can’t deny it, it felt nice to be commended and appreciated. Alastor was never the guy that his fellow glade befriended until the end of their training. Mr. Funny Man took a wide turn on the right and came through a bridge. Another left turn through the thick bushes and tall trees. They sheltered in a deep part of the forest where they cannot be seen.

“Let’s take a rest for now.” Mr. Funny Man declared. “Your pet seems tired.”

“He’s not my pet. Liber is my partner.”

“A partner? Very well.” That was the oddest thing he had heard for a while.

They woke up the people inside and had them prepare some kitchen utensils. The crates that they’ve carried were put up to good use. Ken was in charge of chopping logs and preparing the fire for the pot to place. It was a mild and calm fire, just the heat they needed for. It was quite some time before the necessary ingredients were prepared. Water was put in first, waited for it to boil and then vegetables like potatoes, broccoli, and lettuce were drowned. The pork chops were washed, removing the preservatives and making sure that it was thoroughly clean. Lastly, ginger was included to remove the bad odor.

Caroline had spread five blankets set up, each one of them to sit down. Caroline carefully walked and got inside the wagon. Alastor was asleep in a fetal position. She slowly poked his cheek and pinched it. His eyes twitch and open for a split second. He could see why she prodded him to wake up. It was late in the morning. The stew bleached the air with a tantalizing scent of searing meat and onions.

“Breakfast is ready. Please, wake up.”

Her gentle voice did not fail to make him slightly open his eyes. Alastor briefly glanced at her and then got back to sleep, only responding with a heartfelt grunt.

“You can sleep later after you eat.” She said and insistently poke him.

Finally, he turned around and faced her. His eyes were still shut.

“If I eat, I won’t be able to sleep back.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to dump.”

“Gross.” That’s the only thing she can mutter and she left.

“Finally, some peace.”

When he finally thought that there could be peace, he was able to sleep. A creeping sense came from his behind, and cold drips of water suddenly fell on his face. And a certain face he flashed in his mind.

“Do you want to continue this shenanigan, for real?” Alastor asked. He got used to Linda’s creepy provocations but is still affected by them in some ways.

“She said that you’re not waking up, so I guess that a little scare away might do the trick.”

Alastor got up and sat. He sighed and stretched his arms before following her out. Ken handed Alastor with a plate, fork, and spoon. It was quite a delight and Ken never got over it even that’s an hour ago.

“Man, it’s been some time since I had some decent breakfast or any other else,” Ken said and stretched his arm. He was appointed to accompany Mr. Funny Man as his co-coachman.

“How come?” Mr. Funny Man asked. “Are the foods back in the eateries that bad?”

“Well, not quite, but you can tell that some of their foods were out cold and had to use a heater which is quite disturbing and triggering trust issues about their products. That is why homemade breakfast is the best of all.”

“Sorry if I question so much. I never tried going out and had to go to a locals’ eateries.”

“Nah. It’s fine. It’s kinda nice to hear that you can talk and all.”

Inside the wagon, the two girls are currently watching Alastor sleep in a fetal position. They thought he didn’t know but he was pretending to be asleep for a while now, spiraling in his thoughts about their behavior.

*What are these two doing? They’re waiting if I snore, drip my saliva, or something?*

Unknowingly, the two had a bet if he would drop with his face flat on the ground or in his back the next time the wheels would stumble on a rock and shake the wagon, but so far, he was sleeping strong and fixed in his position.

*Fall, fall, fall, please fall with your face first on the ground.* Caroline wished through her mind as she gawked at him.

Linda’s eyes remained to observe him. *Please be on your back.*

“He’s not going to fall any moment now, ain’t he?” Caroline whispered to Linda.

“Let’s just wait. Any moments from now. He’s going to drop dead.”

“Okay, okay.”

Alastor’s ears caught that they were whispering something, but could not decipher it properly. They were playing a long game.

*What the hell are they talking about?* He asked himself. *Shit, I can’t hear what they’re talking about, with all of these hustling and bustling noises.*

Their journey continued until they finally made their way to the next village.

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The town was composed of tall houses. The main road was wide but crammed with people coming out from here and there. The rest of the roads are quite a commotion. They came to the inn and left Liber for the staff to take care of. Ken and Linda came to the guild and issued a quest for them while Alastor and Mr. Funny Man gathered some supplies for their next destination. Caroline was back in the inn and rested. Apparently, the weather was too much for her, and she didn’t have any decent sleep for the past few days.

“Are you sure it’s okay to leave her in the inn?” Alastor asked.

He was quite well aware of the situation and cautious about the people around him. Even now, Alastor’s eyes are restless. His bags are prominent in his face.

“Yes.” Mr. Funny Man started and spun him a glance. “Have you ever looked at your face this morning?”

“My face has nothing to do with it.”

“You’re dry as a Salmon. You should go easy on yourself. I’ve paid for premium services on that inn. Her security is reassured. Don’t worry.”

A question mark popped on Alastor’s head. “What do you mean by Premium Services?”

“Do I have to repeat myself? It’s about security.”

“No, no.” Alastor shook his head. “Some places the word Premium Services has a different meaning.”

“Like what?”

Alastor let out an exaggerated sigh. Jostling through the crowds they broke through the market and finally had a breather out of the crowded place and back to the inn.

They had to climb to the 3rd floor and had to walk 12 doors away to turn left and had to cross another 3 doors to get in their room.

Inside, there were several rooms separated, each one for them. In the lounge, Caroline was leisurely wearing a pink silk robe with her hair interwoven. Her eyes glimmering in light for a moment. Her fingers were seemingly newly polished. She was currently reading some magazines, her legs crossed as she reached out a cup of coffee, sloshing everywhere and delicately guzzling the remainder.

“You were right,” Mr. Funny Man began. “This is not the premium service I had expected.”

“Me too,” Alastor nodded and leaned closer to him, “Me too buddy.”

“Hey,” Caroline pretended to glare and turn her eyes back to reading. “I’m right here. I can hear you guys even if you’re muttering.”

“What exactly did they do to you by the way?” Alastor clasped harder in his fervor thoughts.

“For starters, they treated me like a customer in a salon and spa.” She enthusiastically exclaimed. “I have forgotten how it feels good to have a makeover for once in a while. It is the best day of my life…”

Before she can begin yattering about cosmetics, Alastor lifted his eyes and rolled leaving her behind, and went to the kitchen. They had so much to prepare before they left.

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After packing the supplies, they heard screeching, the kind that produces from the friction of two things on the ground, and then came a loud crash somewhere in the lounge. Alastor immediately got off in the chair and went to the lounge where Caroline was tucked her back on the seat at the left side on the corner. Her face was totally shocked. On the front door, Linda’s seemingly annoyed expression stretched in a thin smile. Ken’s upper body crashed through the wall that separates the bathroom. He hurtfully moaned and got out of the hole he made. He scratched his head.

“Tsk.”

Ken laughed a little and removed his odd shape shoes. The backdrop was red and had golden linings. Wings etched at the side.

“The hell are you doing?” Alastor questioned.

Linda sighed, crossed her arms, and drummed her fingers as if itching to grab something. “The shoes itself is the reason, but the fault is clearly from the owner himself.”

Ken tried to swallow his own saliva but there was nothing as it became dry. “It’s an accident. Let’s not dwell in the past, shall we?”

Linda bowed down before Caroline, “Princess, if you may give the order, I will cut his head for his insolent behavior.”

Caroline shook her head and waved her hand, “There’s no need for that. Don’t overthink about it and don’t call me princess either. It’s not like we’re not traveling together. Carol will do fine.”

Alastor pushed his finger in the air and towards Ken. “Still, you have to control whatever magical shoes you’re wearing.”

Mr. Funny Man got out of his room and stared at the hole in the wall and at the group. “Don’t tell me you guys accidentally conjured magic and almost destroyed this room.”

“Not exactly. Hehehe.”

After explaining what happened, Mr. Funny Man used his magic to repair the way it was before. He took a long, deep breath through his nostrils before turning on his heel and pretentiously glaring at them. He glanced at the shoes.

“Mister Ken, while we’re in the inn, would you please remove those shoes? You might hurt someone if you have no control over it.”

Ken immediately threw them into his room.

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Linda and Caroline had prepared for their dinner. The rest got out of the room and joined together to eat.

“By the way, Ken, where did you get those shoes?” Alastor questioned.

“It’s called Hermes Sandals. I bought it at some armory store for quite a low price.”

“Figure out why.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those shoes of yours are defective.”

“Uh, no. They are not. The owner told me that it grants the user extra speed, but I need to control my mana to use it properly.”

“Is that so? Well, I guess you can use it to train tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

“Speaking of which,” Mr. Funny Man interrupted. “Miss Linda, I hope that you found an appropriate guild quest in town.”

“I actually wanted to talk about that.” Linda moaned over the satisfaction of the food and drank water before returning a reply, “The highest rank I could find only requires three members.”

“That is quite troublesome.” He lowered his head and ate. “I was planning to take on as many quests as possible.”

“On what purpose?” Alastor asked. He hardly concluded any reason for a delay.

“Simple, money and training for Princess Caroline.”

“Why-what about me?” Caroline responded. She blinked surprisingly. There’s a slight voice of protesting in her voice. “Do I really have to?”

“Yes. What’s better to do to improve your magic is by testing it on the actual combat.” He replied, wiping his oral area with a tissue.

“But the only thing I knew is basic healing magic and protective spells. My offensive magics are not that well to showcase in combat.”

“Don’t worry. You don’t need to do that much of a job. You’ll be only spectating and supporting us with healing magic and your protective spells.”

“But –”

“No more buts. If you want to get stronger you have to put yourself in combat.”

There was silence for a while.

“Fine.” She finally said.

Mr. Funny Man turned to Linda.

“There are two quests, right? What about the other one?”

“I think that it would be perfect for the princess. It's a low rank exterminating quest.”

“Exterminating quest?”

Linda nodded, “What kind of monster needed to be exterminated?”

“An Ozer bear,”

Mr. Funny Man questioned him. “Alastor, can you take down an Ozer bear?”

Alastor snorted. “Yeah. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“I am sure that he can take it down without our help.” Linda proudly exclaimed.

“Very well, Miss Caroline and Alastor will take the low-rank quest tomorrow and hunt down the monster before the sunset comes to pass.”

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As the first light streak in the sky, Alastor and Caroline went to the guild house.

After taking the quest, they went to the wilderness. It describes that the Ozer bear appeared over the western forest and had been causing quite a ruckus to the people who were living in the city side. The recent victims told him that the monster resides at the small mountain behind the elevated land. They had to walk for a few kilometers to reach their destination. Caroline was able to keep up even though they had been pummeling with hotness.

They finally reached a settlement of farmers. On the other side, there was wreckage displayed. It seemed that the monster made another victim of its ravage. The village leader greeted them and took them into her hut. It wasn’t big but it was suitable enough for people to live.

“My, my. Forgive me, I wasn’t able to tidy up my house. I didn’t expect that someone was going to accept this village request.”

The first thing that Alastor noticed from the old woman were old scars that were hidden in her seemingly cultural tattoos, but it didn’t stop in that. He saw several cuts in her neck and her collarbone.

Caroline shook her head. “Don’t worry, there’s no need for you to treat us with such hospitality. We are thankful enough for you greeting us. We will make our way and promise to do our job.”

“Ah yes, yes.” The old lady enthusiastically nodded. “The Ozer bear appeared a few weeks ago.” She then lifted her head to see Caroline and gaze for a while before continuing. “It was a quiet day just like the others. We make our daily living from rice products to animals’ exportation. All was well, but ever since there’s an incident that took over around that mountain, it affected our daily life as well.”

Alastor’s eyes darted around the corner and saw a painting hanging. It was a depiction of a happy woman with her partner who appeared to be grumpy.

“That’s when the first incident happened.” She whined and whimpered but suppressed as she continued. “My husband along with the other village men were cutting off some trees and chopping them when they were attacked by the Ozer bear. He sacrificed himself to protect the youngsters and fled back to the village.”

That’s when a single tear dropped to her cheeks and then followed by another.

“It’s foolish. He shouldn’t have fought that monster all by himself. He’s too dumb to act brave like that.”

Caroline felt a sting in her heart. She handed the old lady her handkerchief.

“Foolish or not, what your husband did is noble. You were lucky to have a husband like him. Few only dared to face their death and grit out what strength had left.”

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Alastor walked out and began to analyze the topography of the land. He strolled outside and familiarized every corner and part of it. He didn’t include the forest at that since it is far too dangerous for him to go alone. He came back to their given hut and mumbled lowly reciting his thoughts. Caroline already prepared their breakfast. After they ate, Alastor shared what was in his mind.

“Caroline, how many times can you use your healing and protective magic?”

“7 to 10 times.” She responded.

Alastor pondered again.

“Why? What’s on your mind?”

“I’m estimating,” Alastor responded. “It appeared that we’re going to face a mature version of Ozer bear.”

“So?”

“A mature Ozer bear can rival ten people's strengths.”

“I thought this was supposed to be a low-rank quest?”

“Yes, it is. But this kind of quest was more appropriate to those who can use elemental magic. I’m a Mana Folder, remember? Just like you, I can only use healing magic and protective spells.”

“So, what now?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll think of something.”

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It was three in the afternoon at that time. Alastor and Caroline prepared a trap, the most usual and the oldest of tricks. They offered a cow in the middle of the grass field. Caroline was hiding far away behind a log while Alastor was on top of a tree waiting for the Ozer bear to appear.

It wasn’t much longer when the wind shuddered from east and birds were rattled by a huge roar. The ground trembled with every footstep the monster took. Alastor was holding firmly to a branch of a tree.

The Ozer bear is twelve feet tall. Its body was made mostly of fat with its thick brown fur, effective to protect itself from the cold. The monster instantly launched itself towards the cow and quickly killed it with its bear claws. It took joy from drinking the blood. It was a temporary joy when Alastor used his transcendent wall to crush the remaining body of the cow.

The Ozer bear immediately turned its murderous attention to Alastor and roared. Alastor dashed and waved his hand. Several walls floated and blocked some ways of the monster. He sprang to his floating tramped and spun forward, cutting the skin of its broad shoulder.

He landed behind it.

Alastor groaned. “Damn. You’re tall.”

He sped off again. The monster spun with his claw. Alastor bent backward and slid but he was caught with his left leg. Alastor crashed to one of his walls and coughed blood. Gladly, the shin guard protected the majority of his leg with few minor cuts. The pants were tattered. Caroline, who was hiding a few feet away behind a tree, immediately rushed to his side and healed him. The green and yellow mana enveloped him and sunk on his body. Alastor felt rejuvenated from her magic. Her magic was quite different from him, Alastor’s magic only does is to seal the wound, but the pain would still linger for some while but hers included easing the pain.

“Thanks,” Alastor said. He got up.

There came another rumble again. Ahead of them, the Ozer bears charge with its head first.

Caroline quickly manifested protective magic. Alastor also helped her pour mana and perform a coerced magic. The magic was perfect but the monster was relentless in charging and had them dragged back. They gritted as they endured the bolt of pain.

“Carol, don’t lose your grip. You wanted to be strong, right? Now’s your chance.”

With the last push, Caroline used the last bit of her mana. The Ozer bear finally stopped and stumbled back. Its head was flaring in red. The monster howled in pain.

“Uh-oh,” Caroline muttered. “It’s pissed, ain’t it?”

The Ozer bear roared louder than before.

Alastor shakily nodded. “Yep, it is. Caroline, you need to get away for your safety.”

The monster raised its fat elongated arm and broke the shield. They immediately sprinted away. The monster’s attention is solely on Alastor and only his huge gait coming after him. The monster threw itself like a bullet. Alastor felt something whiz behind. He risked a glance and saw the monster. Alastor quickly leaped and evaded the enemy. His blade had found its way to graze the behind of the monster.

Once again, the monster thundered and furiously attacked him. Alastor leaped over his floating wall onto another to evade the attack. Caroline couldn’t bear to watch him struggle and she began to chant a spell. A sphere of water accumulated in her palm and began to shoot the enemy. Her attacks were meaningless, she knew that, but she was still not going to back down.

The monster was about to rush over her but a shield instantly fell down in front of it and blocked its way. Alastor spun around stabbing its back. The Ozer bear endured the pain and tried to reach him with its claws. With quick reflexes, Alastor slid and spun around stabbing one more time on its belly. The blood was quickly oozing out from its body as it felt its life is beginning to slip past through it, but a monster is a monster, its instincts won’t allow it to back down.

He immediately sprang when the monster was in his line of sight, but the gap was too near for the enemy to reach his position. Something exploded behind it. It was Caroline’s basic water spell attack. It was at that right moment Alastor was waiting for. He leaped with his sword raised and beaming in light. The last thing that registered in the monster’s memory was its perception turned upside down and fell into blackness.

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Alastor and Caroline come back to the village after they’ve slain the monster. The head was cut off clean and had to be wrapped in the head of the Ozer bear to censor the gruesome figure. They stop at the front door and remove their shoes as it was stained with blood. Entering the hut, the old lady seemed to be preparing for their snacks. When she finally packed it with fabric, she turned, tilted over her heels, and got to see the tired faces of two. She hurriedly came to their side with a motherly gesture over the two.

“Oh my. Are the two of you alright? Is someone hurt?” The old lady looked at Caroline at first, checking her for wounds. Then, she came to Alastor.

Alastor shook off her hand. “Don’t worry we’re fine.”

“Thank you for your concern. Just as you request, we’ve defeated the monster for you.” Caroline earnestly said. “It won’t be bothering you anymore.”

Alastor showed her the head of the monster, but she quickly averted her gaze.

“You don’t need to show such a gruesome sight.”

“Sorry,” Alastor said, lowering his head and covering it back. “I just thought it might be good taking this head as proof.”

“Thank you for killing the beast. Without your help, this small land of ours will be a food stock for the monsters.” The old lady clasped her hand. “Ah yes. I forgot. I have something for you.”

The old lady gave them a pack of food and a jar.

“What’s the jar for?” Alastor removed the tip and smelled it. It was unpleasant and he could tell that this was the booze they cultivated.

“It’s a fermented alcohol.” She replied.

“I’ve been longing to ask,” Caroline started. “Why not move away from here? Live in the city? I’m pretty sure you have family back there. Any sons? Daughters?”

The old lady shook her head. “I understand what you are saying, but whenever I see the life of my children I cannot bear to see that they must endure watching me over too. They have their own life now, and I have mine.”

“But you’re their mother.”

“I know, but it doesn’t mean I have to control their lives.”

“That’s not what I meant. They should take care of you.”

The old lady offered a half-smile. “My children, debts me nothing, darling’.

“Is that it?”

“Caroline,” Alastor cut off. “Don’t be nosy.”

The old lady sighed. “You remind me of my late husband. Grumpy, strict, and cold. He never gave me too much attention ever since we had our first child. All the time he’s busy on the farm, making deals with the city mayor regarding exporting rice and others. And even still we’re living smoothly, he cannot still rest assured. I knew from the beginning that he was scared of being a father and a husband, but I didn’t blame him for that. We married the same year as your youth out of wedlock. So, he was forced to give up his dreams. What he has done for our family is enough for me as a gift.”

“What about your scars?” Alastor dared to ask. “Where did you get them?”

“Oh, this?” The old lady folded a part of her clothes around her and showed them various scars. “I got these scars on several occasions. One was trying to help him and I fell, somewhere from his whips accidentally leading to me. None was his fault.”

His eyes remained a skeptic.

“By the way,” she ventured into her room and grabbed a stack of coins. “This is the only thing we can offer to you.”

The dangling noises came to their ears. They knew that all inside were coins, summed out of their remaining budget. Caroline as belligerent declined her offer before Alastor could claim it. “No, no. Please, keep it.”

“Why?” The elder asked. “Didn’t you accept this job for the money?”

“Yes,” Alastor promptly responded. His hands were about to reach the sack of coins but Caroline shoved it down.

“But we gained something valuable in the process too.”

“What is that?”

“Experienced. Our bout against the monster helped me improve my ability.”

“But still…”

“There is no need.”

The old lady took hold of Caroline’s hand and handed the sack of money.

“This is a token of our appreciation. Do not worry. With the monster gone, our land will once more flourish.”

“I really – really feel bad about this, taking your money while the men and women in this village are having a hard time.”

“Miss Caroline, you have a good heart. I hope there could be others like you.”

“Thank you for your kindness.”

The old woman nodded and offered a smile as she watched Caroline and Alastor took off.

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The sky was dipped in orange and red. The wind shrills while the birds are following the rhythm of the breeze. Caroline felt the warmth. Alastor did not.

“You’re a fool for trying to reject the money, you know,” Alastor spoke after her. The mercenary was ahead of the princess. They came across a meadow.

“Of course, I would decline her. They’re poor.” She grimaced. “If you have any amount of decency left in your heart which is none, then you would’ve understood them.”

Alastor sighed as he clung tightly the bag containing the head of the beast. “I really still can’t believe that you were able to survive that much long all by yourself.”

“Why? Because I’m a girl?”

“No. It’s because you’re naïve. Denying money is like denying food treated by some stranger.”

“By taking their remaining money, how do you think they will survive?”

“The old lady seems so confident about reviving their land.”

“You don’t really care about other people, don’t you? You only care about those who you consider friends or anyone that you can use.”

“This world revolves only in money. Without it, you cannot afford anything or survive that much longer.”

“No.” Caroline protested haughtily. “Your world revolves only in money.”

“Oh yeah? What do you know about me? You barely know me and now you have the right to judge? Excuse me, princess. I only wanted to gather as much as possible so you can get home safe.”

Caroline raised a brow. “Do you actually want to save me or are you only doing this just to get a large amount of money?”

Alastor had almost forgotten what his role was. And so, he didn’t reply. They were silent for a while.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter anymore. Let’s just go back and get some rest.”

After giving the head of the Ozer bear to the guild as proof of completing the quest, Alastor and Caroline sat down on the chair in front of each other. They unpacked the wrapper. The lunchbox contained delicacies that are very well familiar to them. Rice that had been marinated in soy sauce, boiled eggs, and some fried meat.

“Well, I can’t say I’m disappointed,” Alastor said and took a bite.

“It’s quite good,” Caroline stated with a delightful expression.

There was already a given cup in the guild that they use and share the booze that they receive from the elder lady from the village. The liquor had the mixed fragrance of honey, apple, and a small content of beer. It’s a well-blended mixture.

Alastor enjoyed the bittersweet liquid that melted in his tongue. Caroline, however, was not able to endure it and nearly spit it out but she gulped it quickly. She coughed a little, her cheeks burning in red.

“You don’t like it?” Alastor asked.

“No, no. I’m… I’m not used to it.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I haven’t been able to drink for a couple of years.”

“Don’t worry. The more you take, the more you forget what it tastes like.”

Alastor guzzled the remainder and decided to have another round of drinks. Caroline asked for more and served herself. Her face squirmed in bitterness. Alastor finished off the booze.

“Don’t push yourself, Caroline,” Alastor said. He took another bite. “Mr. Funny Man would be pissed if you’re drunk when we get back.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask this.” Caroline asked. She feigned ignorance of his previous statement.

Alastor squirmed at the bitter taste of the booze. “What is it?”

“What’s your takeaway with her?”

“Who?” He held his gaze on the food. “The old lady in the hut?”

Caroline nodded.

“I don’t buy her story.”

“Don’t buy about what?”

“Everything she said about her husband.”

“Really? How come?” She leaned forward, resting her right arm on the table.

“Well, for starters, I don’t believe that he’s a good husband. I don’t believe she’s happy at all.”

“What makes you think that? Is it about the scars?”

“Yes.”

“But she said that it was an accident.”

“Care,” he started with a sigh. “Long and deep scars like that don’t come from any kind of minor accident. It was done with such force and with harmful intent.”

“Ok,” she shrugged. “Let’s pretend that you’re right. What would you think that should’ve done if you were in her position?”

“Leave, of course. People that are capable of hurting you even if you show some affection are not worthy of spending a lifetime.”

“Maybe – no, it may be because she’s truly in love with him. People can change.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Listen, Al.” She coughed and sat back. “When you love a person no matter how ugly their past is, you would’ve come to still reach out for them.”

Alastor hastily shook his head. “No. That doesn’t make any sense at all. It’s like selling your soul to a demon with no price.”

“I know it doesn’t sound anything right at all, at first, but when you’ve come to know how damaged their past is, you would’ve come to appreciate their strength, ‘probably gained your sympathy, and because of that you’d do anything within your powers to lift them back to the light.” Caroline enthusiastically said.

“That’s naivety, Care.”

“That’s what love is about, well for me.”

Alastor held his gaze on her filled with spite. “If that’s the very definition of love, then I would daresay love is an idiot, a fly in a back of a dragon, a naïve warrior with no shield, a judge with no power, and a suicide. It’s like trusting someone to catch you with your back behind the cliff and the other is on the opposite. It makes you vulnerable to death.”

“Or maybe love is courage, accepting, and understanding,” Caroline responded. She ate and drank before speaking. “You know I’ve always thought my mother was a fool to marry my father. You see, my father is just like the old lady’s husband, he was busy running around, ordering to implement this and that, never had the time with his wife and too much little time for his daughters, but when my mum became sick, my father was fast as a Comodo and had canceled all of his meetings. It’s odd that it came from my mother, she was scolding my father for canceling his meeting for some building program. My father would come back with a sweet reply and my mum would evenly retort for canceling his plans and my father would shut her up by kissing her, which is quite idiotic by the way, since my mother is sick. What can we learn from that? We can understand that love goes hand in hand, accepting and understanding each other no matter what cost they’d see for themselves.”

“Sounds like parental issues.” Alastor muttered under his breath in which she did not hear as she drank the remaining booze in one swoop of her mouth.

“Am I boring you, Al?” Caroline asked.

Alastor had been silent for a while, this made Caroline feel uneasy. He shrugged his head. He promptly lifted his gaze up to her.

“Not quite. I need this. I’m famished by other people’s ideas.” Alastor replied at last. “Why did you leave your kingdom? I know that you didn’t leave just to visit that place and reminisce about the time with your mum.”

Caroline puckered her lips and consumed a small amount of liquor.

“Because I wanted to be free.”

“From what?”

“From being a royalty.”

“It’s quite difficult for me to understand, but your kingdom is the fruit of love out of your parents’ labors,” Alastor exclaimed. “Do you find it hopeless?”

“The fruit of their love is not hopeless, because their fruit is a beauty.” She smiled in a brief moment before her eyes sharpened, the beam was wiped off. “It’s the throne. The throne took away my family and pressured us. You see, because of the throne, my mother died and my father was assassinated just because they’re gaining power ahead unlike any other kingdom.”

“If that’s the case, why come back?” Alastor asked. The food crunched in his teeth.

“Because I don’t want to burden my sister. But the truth is, I desire to be free from all of it. Free so I can showcase my paintings, travel to wherever my feet lead me, and when I find some landscapes that are gorgeous to see I would’ve captured it with the lens of my camera.”

“What about you, Al? What do you desire?” This time she tasted the boiled egg. She peeled the shell carefully.

“My desire, huh.” He lowered his head. “Well, I don’t have any desires.”

“Not one? What about love?”

“I’m not interested in love.”

“Why?”

“An unconditional love is impossible in this world. Why? People say love is unconditional, but people marry because of the person’s status and achievements.”

“I think you misinterpreted it with desire.”

“No.” He looked up to her eyes. “It’s not a desire. It’s practical. You can’t feed someone with love and people of no value cannot find someone to belong to. Like I’ve said, love can be a suicide. Would you settle for someone who is ordinary without great achievement or status?”

“Yes.” She shot away. “Yes. I would. I know you don’t believe me, but I find it peaceful to be ordinary. Not being bugged by duties and responsibilities as such. Trust me when I tell you, there is nothing wrong with being ordinary.”

“Why does it sound like you already had someone in mind?”

Caroline looked at Alastor's eyes. Those belched-dark misty eyes that bore an enticing and tantalizing grip eluded so many questions that she wanted to answer. He drank and feigned ignorance of her next words.

“Because I already have.” A thin red smile stretched on her face. “You know who it is.”

“Hm.”

“If not love, how about status, power, or wealth?” She questionably and slightly tilted her head.

Alastor dismissively shook his head.

“Nothing? Come on, there’s gotta be something you desire. What about freedom?”

“Freedom is relative to what you are.”

Caroline raised a questioning brow. “What exactly are you saying?”

“Freedom is a luxury that humans cannot attain easily. It depends what power you have.”

“Are you saying it doesn’t exist?”

Alastor slightly nodded. “To some people. To some extent.”

“Please, do explain. I’m interested.” She gestured to the barkeep. “Beer here! Please keep it coming.”

“Why do you think wealthy people, including yourself, were not able to truly gain your freedom?”

“Well, for me, it’s because of my heritage.”

“Hmm. What about the wealthy ones?”

Caroline shrugged her shoulders. Even if she were able to get out of the castle, there are some places in this world and some perspectives she hadn’t been able to know yet.

“It’s because of their desire for money.”

Caroline offered a half-smile. “I see where this is going. So, you’re trying to say that desire itself is a hindrance to our freedom.”

“Let me finish.”

The barkeep came with a set of beers and left when his wife yelled. Alastor drank another round of booze. He writhed and licked his lips. He continued. “The desire for money by the wealthy men and women is just an example of why we can’t achieve freedom. Surely, I agree that some desires have come with favorable positions in our lives, but it doesn’t mean we are truly free, because there are people out there who still desire for something more and won’t stop anything just to get it. Hence affecting the other people, hence freedom and free will is impossible to fully attain.” Alastor felt his throat dry. He peered on the tankard. He could’ve sworn there was still half of it. He lifted his head to the barkeep and gestured for more. “I know people, some people who got too drunk with power got themselves killed, because they stepped on the wrong foot. We people are always bound to stomp one another.”

“So, not only is freedom non-existent but also free will?”

“Well, I never said that kind of freedom is non-existent but only limited, but yes in regards to free will.” Alastor nodded.

“Then what do you think about that old woman? Is she not free?

“No.”

“Even if she’s still away from the ill of this society?”

“Darling, she’s poor and even their village. Every day, they have to work. Even if they don’t want to, they cannot escape it. They’re slaves in that situation. Yes, they have the freedom of choice, but they don’t have the will to find a new settlement because they don’t have the will to do what they think is right, because they lack the power to do so. They allowed themselves to be oppressed by those people who said will compensate them in their endeavors.”

Caroline remained silent while drinking.

Alastor continued. “Too many desires will be the downfall of those who are not content and those who lack the power will never be free.”

“So, to be free, you have to let go of your desires?”

“Precisely, yes, but because of our situation we are not capable of attaining it. Only with power we can find freedom.”

“And why is that?” Caroline asked.

“It’s because of society and those people who keep wanting more. You see, society was built out of despair because we badly needed a sense of protection, but also because of that, a new opening has been made to those who are on top that want more. They waged war and deaths came to follow, expanding whenever they found the opportunity. The same goes for the minority too, they exploit people’s lives as if it’s meaningless to them. There was peace, but it’s nothing but a fragile stability that’s going to break. So, you see, even people who have the desire to gain freedom, are still inclined to be trapped in the dilemma of this ill society, but to those who are not and did not burdened themselves with roles thrust onto them, they have more choices, unlike those who are shackled in chains of the society.”

Alastor paused, observing the liquor inside the tankard.

“You know what’s ironic?” Alastor asked.

“What?”

“Humans created society to satisfy their needs of protection, security, and sense of companionship, but as ages go by, the society itself became their prisoner and stole away their freedom.”

“Is that the reason why you don’t want to love? Because the role and the desire can backstab you?”

“Desire is a poison that might kill you. It is designed to dehumanize the people.” He stared at her. “When we desire more than what we deserve, we are bound to lose a part of ourselves.”

“Then what about the money?”

“I don’t treat it as much of a desire. More like a basic need of my living. I am not shackled by it.”

“Then what about now?”

“What about now?”

“Are you free?”

Alastor paused. The barkeep returned with another set of tankards and hastily left. They could hear his wife yelling at him, and the place grew lively once more when a troubadour performed on top of a table as his stage.

Alastor smirked. “That’s an obvious question.”

“So, that’s it? Desires are a hindrance to absolute freedom and free will? What about our Call of Fate? Where does it go?”

“The only one who has the freedom and free will is the one who ruled above us, and as long as we desire, we are bound on trampling other people, whether it is out of good intention or not. Well, I don’t know about fate but one thing for sure, what we’re doing right now, it already writes our fates. We are tied to our fate and there is no way we can liberate ourselves from it.”

“What freedom do you have?”

“Hmm. I’m the one who has the freedom to choose. I am not bound by any nation’s pleasantries.”

“If you say that you have the freedom to choose, why stay with the glade? After all, you’re the one who said that those who are tied with society are going to suffer.”

There was a pause. Caroline’s question seemed right off the bat. She smiled beautifully. He gave an enigmatic look.

“It is not that simple.” Alastor promptly replied.

“Why is that?”

“The only reason that I’m staying in that the glade is my home. I was fed and learned everything in there.”

Caroline stared at his dark sullen eyes. She was appalled by the irony, but she didn’t call him out. She questioned him.

“You’re lying,” Caroline said.

“What?” Alastor stared blankly at her, surprised with her words.

“You don’t know where to go, aren’t you?”

“Because there is nothing to go to.”

Caroline swigged two more sets of liquor and set down the tankard. She crossed her arms and looked him in the eye as if she was testing him.

“You may claim that desires are nothing but designed to destroy us, but it’s not always gloom in the sky, desires can be a good thing too, in some mysterious way that the universe is threading on. Desires motivate us to achieve the best version of ourselves and help us to have a better life.”

“No matter what the process is?”

“Yes. It is not your fault for doing your best, as long as you’re doing it right…” Caroline paused and shrugged. “Sorry if I am so strange to you.”

“No need. It’s not like I’m affected or disturbed at all.” He paused, feeling parched and drank. He continued. “You know, I was never the man who’s tempted by anything nor the kind who wants to achieve something. In fact, it is not my will to live at all.”

“Then how come you still continue to persevere?”

“Because fate allows me to and I will continue to live as much as I want, never minding the people around and only for myself.”

“You know what I see on you, Al?”

Alastor raised the glass and consumed it, savoring the bittersweet taste and the aroma of the liquor.

Caroline continued, “You’re a man that doesn’t know a thing about yourself and that is why you can’t choose what suits you better to you. Listen to me, Al, it is unhealthy to lie about yourself, it is never good. You’re the first person I have ever known that has never been healthy for my entire life. You may continue with your charade, but one day, you’ll see… you’ll regret missing out on the pretty parts of this world. You have so much freedom yet you halfheartedly allow the devils to control your fate. You take fate so lightly that you don’t even bother questioning how low your morals are. Fate is not to be meddled with. By the way you live, you’ll preserve more than ever than those people that you have slain and more targets that are yet to come.”

“Care, you barely knew half of my life.”

“I know, but I can tell what you are.”

Caroline lifted her head from observing and playing the tankard, swirling the liquor. She met his eyes with a sullen face and doleful bronze eyes.

“You are the very definition of someone who is living, yet unmoving. You are so wrong about so many things. You think wanting is a poison, but it’s not. Maybe it could be the opposite.” She paused, finding the right words. “Maybe when we desire beyond ourselves, a part of us grows.”

Alastor stumbled on her very last words. He can only express his astonishment in his eyes. Words began to form in his mouth but it became mute when a loud rang of music erupted in the guild house. Alastor shrugged, never minding her words as Caroline watched the people merry playing with their musical instruments

When the tankard was near empty and the lively place had died out, Alastor swallowed the last of the booze. He stole a glance at hers. He decided to guzzle her booze. Caroline slept like a log for some time now.

Alastor felt a creepy sense lingering somewhere in his back, around 8 o’clock, he shrugged their gaze and proceeded on checking up on her.

Alastor who barely felt anything at all from the booze swiped her arms around his neck and piggy backed her. With her efforts exerted during the fight, she deserved at least a break and booze on her stomach.

They proceeded and smoothly jostled through the crowds until they took a wide turn where the clamor of the bustling crowds had slowly died in his ears.

The creeping eyes had reached his senses again.

*“Whoever they are, their lustful eyes are creeping to her. They’re quite bold to assume that I never notice it. Now, what kind of approach will they use against me?”* Alastor asked himself in his thoughts.

He can tell from behind that three people are following him. It was rushed and had a huge gait. Finally, a tall, muscular man appeared and blocked his way then it was followed by another two.

“Well, well. Look who’s going to have a good time tonight?”

All of them had an awfully similar face. Alastor couldn’t tell if they were triplets since they have different tones of skins and slightly adjacent noses.

“Young man, where are you taking that beautiful girl right there?”

They didn’t bother to hide their lustrous eyes and their overstretching smiles.

“Haha. It seems that you’re going to do something bad to her. As gentlemen, we cannot allow you to take that innocent young-looking girl alone.”

*So, that’s your motif, huh.* Alastor declared in his thoughts.

“I appreciate your concern but this lady is a friend of mine. So, please, don’t let this stop you a lot on your way. If you excuse me.”

Alastor was about to turn in the other direction but one of the ugly-looking thugs had blocked his way. He was getting annoyed.

“But still, there is no reassurance for us that she’s your friend, so you should give her to us so we can take care of her and treat her right.”

This time the thugs already made their objective clear. They had thought that with their intimidating bodies they could scare Alastor.

“No,” Alastor replied with a cold voice. “I know where this is going.”

Alastor reached his sword with his right hand.

“If I were you, I wouldn't do that. This town forbids the use of weapons, including those who are travelers and adventurers.”

“Is that so?”

Alastor withdrew his right hand from the sword and hung it back. He never took his eyes in front of him.

“So, you see, it’s useless. Give the girl to us now!”

The thug was about to reach Caroline, but he met Alastor’s hand. There was a crack of bones that reverberated to his senses. The thug pulled away. He looked at his fingers, three of them were utterly crushed.

“What did you do?!!” The thug screamed in agony as his fingers lay lifelessly.

The others came after him. Alastor could only fight with only his right hand while the other was supporting Caroline. Alastor evaded their attacks easily. His fist swept into the thug’s throat, the man stumbled back, bearing his throat, while the other guy successfully took hold of Alastor’s shoulder.

“Now I got you!” He declared.

Alastor’s knees quickly elevated, protruding, hitting his chin. He was stunned and when he tried to punch, Alastor two fingers pinned his eyes.

“That’s dirty, brat!” The thug pulled back, groaning in pain.

“There’s three of you and I'm the only one with a girl sleeping on my back. It’s not quite right ganged up by an armless person, don’t you think?”

The thug was about to pull out his dagger but he was threatened by Alastor.

“If you draw out your weapons, then I would be forcefully using mine too. You said it yourself that using weapons here in town is illegal, but then again, if I kill you all then there would be no one to stand accused at court.”

“Why you-?!”

“If I were you, I would back off. If I can manhandle you with a single hand while there’s a girl in my back, what makes you think you can take me down if I use both?”

“Let’s scream, for now, boys.” The man hissed.

The three had left with such horror in their eyes. This humiliation will continue to remind them for days to come.

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It was nine in the evening when they came. Mr. Funny Man was walking back and forth, his face was worried about what might happen to those two. Ken, on the other hand, appeared to be injured and had to use a bandage on his arm. Linda was around the corner reading books while enjoying her cake.

“Mr. Funny Man, calm down. They’ll be fine.” Linda had said it earlier.

He ignored her words and tried to find them earlier but Ken’s condition required his attention.

When he heard the door swing, he immediately took off at the door. His eyes quickly caught Caroline.

“Princess!” Mr. Funny Man rushed to their side. “What happened?”

When he got close, his nose caught a strange and familiar smell.

“Is she drunk?”

Alastor feigned ignorance. Mr. Funny Man’s dead stare eyes crept Alastor’s senses. A long humming came under his breath. Alastor froze at that moment. His legs were stuck as it seemed.

“What were you thinking?”

He had never seen him twice as strict as Rod and Linda. The unconscious woman suddenly lifted her head from Alastor’s shoulder and wearily scratched around her eyes.

“Oh, Mr. Funny Man. Hik-his. Don’t get riled up… we were only celebrating.”

His face suddenly softened.

“You get it wrong, princess. I am not mad, just worried. You know how dangerous it is at night. There are people out there that might do harm to you.”

“Dontcha worry, Alastor is here. He can even protect me with his left hand supporting me.”

“Alastor, tell me, what happened earlier?”

“Nothing, r-really.” Alastor stutteringly said.

“Alastor,” She playfully said his name, “Lying is bad. There were three jerks earlier who harassed us, but Alastor here beat them with his own hand.”

Alastor gulped when Mr. Funny Man’s stare intensified.

“Al, where did that happen? I will personally murder those shits.”

Linda rose and with her motherly strict look, she came intending to scold him, but remained quite when Mr. Funny Man set aside.

“Look, I already dealt with them, obviously they won’t be coming back.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Yes,” He nodded. “Besides, we’ll be leaving tomorrow, right?”

“Mr. Funny Man, I think it is better to scold them next time. I mean look at them, they're messed up. I promise you, there will be befitting punishment for his behavior.”

Mr. Funny Man paused and observed the two for a while before agreeing to her suggestion. He didn’t notice that Caroline fell asleep again.

“Yes, you’re right. Let’s do it tomorrow then.”

Alastor felt a relief in his heart when Mr. Funny Man left and went to his room. Linda came and knocked his head. He winced.

“What were you doing?”

“We were celebrating. Caroline did very well during the hunt. She was able to use her magic and support me very well.”

Linda sighed. “If I were in your position, I would celebrate too. But that girl isn’t like any others, you have to remember that she’s a princess.”

“I know, I know. She was pretty insistent, because the old lady back in the village gave us souvenirs of their products.”

“Hmph. I’ll take care of her.” Linda declared.

Alastor transferred her arm to Linda’s shoulder and carried her to her room. Alastor sat down and looked up to the ceiling. Ken walked across him and threw a bottle of water.

“Thanks.”

Ken nodded. After drinking, Alastor had noticed his injury.

“What happened to you?” Alastor asked and let out a breath of refreshment.

“I got in trouble because of this slipper.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Ken replied. “But I’m getting the hang of it. It’s just a matter of time, yes, I will surely master how to use those shoes.”

Alastor threw the bottle at the garbage can and he went to his room. His eyes went adrift, never minding his stench breath of alcohol that forms a white cloud for a second and his mind fully diverge to sleep.

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For quite some time, Linda had been acting strange lately. Her eyes have been observing far ahead, not minding the road ahead when she was taking the reign. Casting his eyes on her, Alastor snapped his fingers to spite her conscience back on the road. It appeared that it worked when she flinched and shook her head.

“Is there something you want to share?” Alastor asked.

“It’s nothing.” Linda shook her head. “I didn’t have enough sleep, that’s all.”

“You sure? Why don’t you let me take the handle for now? Just rest inside and have Ken stay here instead.”

“Don’t worry about me,” She exclaimed. “You’ve been reigning most of the time, allow me to return the favor.”

“If you say so.”

Alastor closed his eyes with his back against the wagon.

Linda shook her head and declined the thought of *their* unfortunate meeting. It was undeniably an odd coincidence for them to meet up.

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The road was long ahead, indeed. The sun wasn’t that mentally and physically straining. The wind was going along with the tide of the flock of birds traveling in southerly directions. Their conversations had struck in her mind and couldn’t quite understand why they were able to sneak between the two borders of the regions. Nonetheless, they weren’t harboring hostility towards her. Their meeting was more like two friends had met once in a while, but for her, they weren’t just friends, they’re the reason why she survived. Their conversation yesterday etched in her mind thoroughly.

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Before Linda got into the glade, she belonged to a certain tribe. A tribe that every nation knew and despised next to the Hayan Empire for the reason that they were notorious for using dark magic. Their tribe would abduct people, torture them, and would ask them if their heart wants an easy path ahead, that would be the time when they would agree to join their tribe. If they’re not, they’d be as good as dead.

Recently, it appeared that there had been some changes regarding how the tribe works, especially the heads of the tribe and now, her acquaintance made things clear for her in a way that she could not believe.

She doesn’t fully trust them but small talk won’t hurt her. It was a perfect opportunity for her to gather some information regarding how things are going inside the tribe that once tried to kill them.

It was early evening, the stars had equally embraced the darkness as the moon trailed its way ahead. Linda had told them to go ahead as she was in the business of buying some dress. Linda had gone through the main road and chose only a single outfit she was interested in. The red silk dress was folded and carefully put in the plastic bag.

After the hourly tiresome strolling, Linda encountered a certain shop just ahead of the market district and got inside to try it out. The newly opened restaurant was flooded by customers. The bustling crowd was completely alike to the guild, but unlike this shop, it had a certain elegant decoration. The restaurant was filled with the air of sophistication. The crystal chandeliers cascaded the intricate wooden carvings and the tapestries, the gilded mirrors that adorned the walls held an obscure elegance. It was noisy, but she didn’t mind it. It would be more uncomfortable if this place wasn't lively. The employees work in synergic movements and efficiently provide the customer needs despite their numbers. She was promptly greeted by one of the staff and guided to an empty seat around the corner. Linda nodded and carefully walked, evading to bump the chairs of the people. It was cramped and hardly moved. Thankfully, the ventilation was on, the hotness had stayed away from the refreshing cold air.

Upon casting her eyes on the menu, she was bewildered at the dishes listed on the paper in front of her. She carefully read it one by one. *One crunch Sunday*, *Egg-pot, Salamander’s broiled guts…*

All of the lists sound foreign, exotic, and not edible, but looking around the people who were eating, she was tempted to try. After all, she was still quite open to expanding her taste. Linda called one of the staff and assisted her in choosing what kind of food would fit for her dinner. Presenting with their intricate knowledge of the delicacies, Linda finally made up her mind. A juice from a rare fruit called Mormon, an egg-pot paired with meat from a monster known as Gilgax. She had to wait for another fifteen minutes for her order. The staff’s suggestions did not disappoint. Upon tasting the Gilgax first, she felt the tender, almost soft as a cheese, it’s as if the meat had no mass and yet she can feel the tender melting in her mouth.

As she reached the glass, two familiar presences sat in front of her, occupying the two chairs. It was a man and woman, they were strangers for her, but somehow, she felt she had met those two. A questionable brow had furrowed in Linda. Her eyes were questioning their intentions. If they were hostile she would conjure her ice twin swords, but it appeared that they don’t harbor ill will, but the possibility is still there.

The woman was probably the same age as her. She had polished skin and amber hair down to her neck. Her companion looks to be younger, around seventeen was her best estimate.

Who could they be?

The staff had cleared off her dinner and delivered cups of coffee for them.

“Well, well. Look at you.”

Finally, the lady spoke. She pronounced the words earnestly and warmly as if they were a family that had not seen each other for quite some time.

“And who exactly are you?” Linda asked.

For some reason, she felt awkward. The way she looks at her, her feminine voice, and her face. Linda unconsciously looked away from her.

“It has been a long time since we’ve met. I can’t blame you for forgetting my face.”

Again, Linda’s brows arched.

“We’ve met before. In fact, I’m one of the children that escaped the Mephistic tribe. Don’t you recognize me? It’s me, Reyna.”

This time her eyes narrowed for a brief moment, she began to realize and remembered. Her eyes widened in surprise. Of course, she knew her well before. When the heads of the Mephistic tribe were preparing to sacrifice the children, their mothers made a plan to escape along with the children. Her memories began to flood back and had taken her before. It was the time when they were children. That day an annual celestial event had taken over. The red moon basked the entire town with its ominous lights. Torches were lined and up ahead there’s an altar, three cups had been presented containing blood and poison. Linda, Reyna, and Reyna’s brother – Yuzu have been chosen as the sacrifice, but their mothers had prevented them and managed to escape with dreadful costs. Their lives have been taken and so, the children were left to survive on their own and chose different paths.

Linda can’t figure out what words she should pick. Her emotions are indescribable right now. She was unable to comprehend how it is possible but seeing them well and alive, she only had to believe.

“I-I-I can’t believe you’re alive.”

Tears that were once held back began to trickle down. Reyna held her hands and clasped them.

“Is it really you guys?”

Linda had asked more. It seems to be a dream for her to see them again.

“Yes, we are,” Reyna said.

“I thought, I thought…”

“We were killed? No.” Reyna let go of her hand before starting to explain. “When we fell on that cliff, someone saved us. For most of our childhood, we lived in the wilderness. We build our house and live quietly for some time.”

“Who helped you? I have so many questions to ask.”

“Where to begin, huh? There’s a lot that happened after we separated.” She was lost at words for a moment. Reyna clicked her fingers. “Ah yes. As we fell on that cliff, a tribunal hunter helped us escape and together we lived somewhere on the border.”

Reyna said it without hesitation but every word became heavier for her. Is it jealousy? Perhaps, but Linda understood that it was not their fault that they’re fortunate that there’s someone who helped them.

“Yes,” Reyna said as if she were reminiscing. “We live in that forest for six to seven years.”

“What happened to the person who helped you?”

“He died.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“I hope I can meet him so that I can express my gratitude for helping you.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s in a better place now.”

Reyna paused for a second before continuing, “So, after that, Yuzu and I travel out to the border and start our career as adventurers.”

“Really? That’s great.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I take that you’re living comfortably now?”

Reyna and Yuzu exchanged glances. Linda became suspicious over their odd silence.

“Yeah, we kinda, but we’re still living back there.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Linda asked, surprised at her statement. “Why?”

“Because it holds sentimental value to us.”

“If that’s what it is, then okay.”

“What about you?” Reyna asked and observed her. “You look glamorous. Have you already married to someone?”

Linda chuckled. She drank the coffee. “No. I haven’t. I’m still too young for that.”

For a moment, Linda’s eyes caught something outside the shop. It was Alastor and Caroline. For quite some time now she noticed that they’re closed, awfully too close as if they have known each other for some time. But come to think of it, there is no way Alastor would have known her long before they formally met because most of the time Alastor was in the glade and with his group.

Shaking her head, Linda turned her attention and gave a wry smile to Reyna. Despite what she’d gone through Reyna doesn’t seem to be losing her edge and the shape of her body. She was fit and appealing.

“Enough about me.” Linda exclaimed and asked, “What about you? I doubt that you haven’t found the person whom you want to spend the rest of your life with.”

Reyna offered a half-smile. “I have.”

“Really?! Tell me about him.”

At this moment, Reyna caught a glimpse of her childhood best friend, the one who loves fairytales, who believes that prince charming exists to save her from wickedness.

“It’s not him.” Reyna declined her thoughts. “It’s her.”

Linda’s brows furrowed in surprise.

“So, you um?”

“Yes.”

Linda was silent for a moment. She did not expect to hear that from her.

“Are you disappointed?” Reyna asked.

“No, no,” Linda said quickly. She didn’t want to misinterpret her silence as she began explaining her thoughts. “I wasn’t expecting that, you know, since we were children, you always dream about a prince charming to come and save you.”

“Well, he did come but as an old man.”

They chuckled. Hearing that Yuzu interrupted with an annoyed expression.

“Hey, don’t use our old man as a joke. One of these days he’s going to visit you in your dreams and it ain’t going to be pretty.”

“Sorry if I offend you, geez. If I remember correctly it was an old man named Ace who loves pranking us.”

“But it is still inappropriate…”

“Fine, fine.”

After that, Reyna’s attention returned to her. Linda’s eyes were solemn and heavy as if she missed half of her life with her friends. Yuzu called a waitress and ordered. The young lad ignored them and read a magazine out of his surcoat.

“I guess your path wasn’t that smooth, huh.”

“Yeah, well… yes. After we parted, I had to walk for two days before some travelers saved me and took me as one of their own.”

Linda looked down, trying to cover her face. Reyna peered quietly. There was a keen understanding. After confronting her emotions, Linda leaned against the chair. Her former self was illustrious and the child that believed in fairytales was already dead. She had made peace to that after she joined the glade.

“I am so sorry to hear that. Maybe, if we should have come sooner, maybe…”

Linda interrupted her. “No, coming back would mean danger to you. And it’s all in the past now. It’s useless to talk about what-ifs. Besides, after spending time with them I became an adventurer.”

Of course, it was a lie. Linda didn’t forget her position as a mercenary from the Glade. She had sworn that no matter who she was speaking with, she would share only what related to them.

Reyna can see how Linda changes that much. The dreamy child Linda was far from this current version. It may seem that Linda’s the ideal girl that everyone wanted to be, confident, beautiful, courageous, but behind that, she was damaged. Large cracks were hidden in her strong stature.

Reyna understood her very well. She hated to admit it, but there was nothing she could do to repair that damage.

“How about Yuzu?” Linda altered her gaze at him. “You seem…”

Linda paused when she saw how skinny Yuzu was. He felt her gaze and quickly understood what she was thinking.

“Not healthy?” He asked. The magazine was lowered. His order already came.

Linda nodded. “I was going to say skinny, but that would qualify.”

“Well, I’m not that really much of a consumer. Reyna here, however…”

“Not a single word.” Reyna said these words with a threatening voice.

“Fine, fine.” Yuzu surrendered.

Unlike Reyna, Yuzu was more of a timid person. He had that expressionless face that one might assume that he was bored, but when it comes to Reyna, he couldn’t even hide his sliver of fear. The youth continued to eat.

“By the way, what are you doing in a place like this?” Reyna asked.

“Um, I was taking a breather. I’m resting for now. I managed to save some money, so I think it's ideal to rest for a while.”

The rest was history for them. Reyna gave a small nod.

“What about you?” Linda asked.

“Oh um,” Reyna glanced at Yuzu. He nodded as if his permission was needed to let her continue.

“You see Linda. When we say we’re adventurers, we didn’t lie about it, but something happened and we took the opportunity.”

Linda arched an eyebrow. “I’m not quite sure what you’re getting at.”

“You see when we came home, we were greeted by Mephistic Hunters.”

“Come again?”

Reyna’s eyes wandered past, avoiding a direct contact. “They told us that the chief would like to make peace with us and including you, Linda. We were hesitant at first but…”

“Please tell me that you didn’t accept their apology.”

“We did.”

“Are you an idiot?” Linda put down her fist, almost slamming. Her intuition was right. They’re hiding something from her.

Reyna flinched at the sudden jump of voice. Yuzu’s attention was on them.

“I know that they don’t deserve to be trusted but they changed.”

“It’s obviously a lie. Don’t forget they tried to kill us.”

“That was before, Linda. Things are different now.”

“You don’t know that.” Linda said. Her eyes pressed hard on Reyna, locking with intent.

“We do and we’ve been there. They are not lying, Linda. The way that the tribe works has changed. It may sound impossible but they did change. They don’t use children as sacrificial pawns anymore to gather celestial energy.”

Yuzu continued. “They’re using an artifact. It’s called Satrican. It can harness and collect energy. A stranger, an otherworlder came to us and sold us that artifact. He explained its various features. It can even open a portal to the Limbo and offers many feats.”

“So, you see…” Reyna intercepted. “The Mephistic hunters have no reason now to sacrifice children. You can go home now.”

Linda began to collect her thoughts and took a deep sigh. “Even if you say that they’re not the one that they’re used to, I have no reason to come back to that place anymore. As you can see, I’m making a living here.”

Reyna didn’t probe. “Okay, I respect your decision.” Reyna gave her a sweet smile, if only Linda would bite. “Even still, it is nice to see that you’re happy and well.”

“I can say the same thing to you.”

“What about now? Where are you heading?”

“We’re hunting.”

“Hunting?”

“Now that we are officially back as Mephistic Hunters, we are hunting fugitives.”

“Of the same tribe?”

“No. From the Tribunal.”

“What?” Linda asked in surprise.

“Oh, don’t worry. They officially cut their ties from that tribe.”

“I might help you. Do you have any idea what they look like?”

“From what we gathered so far, the first one described a childlike behavior and has a white hair. His main weapon is a dagger. The other one is tall, muscular, and uses a broadsword. You got any clue?”

Linda clicked her tongue. Those people carried a sense of familiarity. She was in a dilemma about whether she should spare them or trust to give them the information. Even if she gave them that information, it would be no use because that was weeks ago, and there was no way of telling them where they are.

“Hey, Linda.” Reyna interrupted her in the midst of her murky thoughts. “You, okay?”

“Yeah. About that, a few weeks ago, I collaborated with some adventurers due to some odd attacks, I know it’s confusing but to summarize, we encountered them, but they escaped.” Linda ended it there. She can’t be reckless about sharing that information.

“Okay. Do you have any idea where they might go?”

Linda shrugged. Reyna nodded. She understood why Linda was so deep in her thoughts, her information after all was still a dead-end for them.

“I appreciate your help.”

“May I know what they did for them to deserve that Mephistic hunters would go after them? It’s okay if you’re not comfortable to tell me.”

Yuzu murmured something to Reyna. Linda could hear under Reyna’s breath saying it's fine. Reyna’s gaze returned to her.

“They attack some of our villages and cause deaths. We can’t just let them go with what they’ve done. Now, don’t let us get in your way, Linda. We will head-on.”

“Wait,” Linda called out before they turned their back on her. “If you finally face them, do not underestimate their abilities. They are formidable enemies.”

“We will proceed with care. I hope we’ll have the chance to meet next time.”

Before turning her back, Reyna gave a slight smile. They were gone out of her sight when she took a sip of her coffee.

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Looking up to the sky, Linda could only hope for them to have a safe journey. After their meeting, Linda felt that a part of her feelings that were drawn tight was loosened up. She smiled at the thought that they might probably meet next time. She heard Alastor yawn loudly and opened his eyes slightly. She felt a judgment passed down on her.

“Hey.”

His ghastly voice crept her out of her daydreaming and returned promptly to reality.

“You had a nice nap?” Linda immediately asked.

“Yeah.” He didn’t bother to look up.

It was brief, but Alastor can tell that she was daydreaming for some time now.

“You want to switch?”

“No.”

“Hm.” Alastor was keenly observing her face as if there was something in there. “You met some dashing guy, didn’t you?”

“What?! No.” Linda instinctively averted his gaze.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Then why do you look so flustered all of the sudden?”

“Because you just blurted that out of nowhere.”

“That is suspicious.”

“No, you’re suspicious.” Linda retorted.

“Hey, I’m not the one who’s hooking up with someone.”

“Oh really? What about you and the princess?”

Alastor became stiff and nervous, but his experience in interrogation gave him an idea of how to act naturally during instigation.

“I saw you last night.” Linda declared. “The two of you look like some sort of flirting, which is hard to describe. The two of you look like you haven't met for a while. I wonder…”

She chided him with a grin. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

But deep inside, Alastor feared. The same goes for Linda too. They will keep in mind that probing each other is like lying to a detective.

Linda did not go further and cast her gaze on the road. It was a long and straining day. The day had basked the forest and equally spread out above everyone. They entered a point where they were shaded by the tall trees. For some reason, Linda thought that Reyna might be looking up to the same sky as her.

# Chapter 5

The road ahead was not quite as they thought it was. As they went to the zigzag road, they came across various monsters. With the influence of Linda’s ice magic, they managed to evade the monsters. But it wasn’t going smoothly as planned. Some monsters are large enough to occupy half of the road, such as Poultry Cricket, a giant insect creature that had four limbs with the figure of scythe, suckers of an octopus, and its head was oblong in shape. The monster can be easily distinguished by its brown color and green color that mixed well, the result of evolution of the need of stealth for its prey. Although, its features weren't as effective when Mr. Funny Man detected its presence hiding beneath the thick bushes and trees.

While Mr. Funny Man, Linda, and Ken were in front, Alastor was at the back guarding Caroline. It was reasonable to say that it would be too hard for Alastor to fight it since the Poultry Cricket had exceptional agility and can use wind magic to blend with its attacks.

As of now, Linda blocked the enemy’s attacks with her ice wall. She continuously used her sword imbued with ice magic to perform a wide and precise pirouette to wound the monster. Ken sprinted in a wide turn and used fire magic to burn the side monster. The Poultry Cricket pulled back, howled, showed its fangs and blew the incoming fire magic away with one breath. The monster swung its two claws, Ken managed to roll and evaded the continuous attacks. He entered the range of Linda’s magic. An ice wall emerged to halt the enemy’s attacks. The claws were stuck briefly. Ken drew back closer to her.

“Ken! Don’t rush. That monster is faster than you.” Linda yelled.

“Then what do we do?” Ken asked. “We’ve been fighting this monster for quite some time now. I hate to remind you but we’re in a hurry.”

Mr. Funny Man who was observing for a while began to float. The monster was able to pull out its claws, and the ice wall crumbled.

“Linda, please use your ice shards to disrupt the enemy. Ken, wait for the right timing.”

They all glanced at Mr. Funny Man and gave a nod.

And they all followed his plan. Linda began to swing from left to right her ice sword. The shards flung all over the road and hit the nearby trees but her attacks barely hit the enemy. The Poultry Cricket began to move erratically and blocked all of her assaults, deflecting it with ease. The monster cried as if it was mocking them.

“I beseech you, a giver of life, a giver of breath, and a giver calmness.” Mr. Funny Man declared these words like a mantra and wind began to accumulate and spin around his hands. A fast moving wind had emerged and gathered around his palm, wildly and shrilled sharply. His magic completely disrupted the branches of trees and the leaves swirled around on the tornado-like attack that halted the enemy from moving.

“Mister Ken!” Mr. Funny Man shouted. “Use your fire magic now!”

Ken nodded and shot several fireballs. The flame and wind had merged and they could hear the screech of the monster, burning to crisp.

“Aren’t you going to help them?”

Caroline asked. She was observing for a while now, unknowingly to Alastor.

“What for? They got this.”

As the wind calmed down, a gust died down the swirling dust and revealed the burnt skin of the monster.

“That was great!” Ken cheerfully shouted. “That's cool coercive magic, don’t you think?”

Mr. Funny Man nodded. “Yeah, it was powerful, indeed.”

Just when they thought it was over, the monster croaked and emerged from being burned. Alastor felt the murderous intent that suddenly manifested. The trail of miasma hangs in the air. He quickly drew his sword and threw it to the enemy. His sword plunged on its neck, but it appeared that it was still moving.

“The fuck?” Alastor can only mutter his profane exclamation as the monster halted for a moment and strained.

Linda pulled Ken from being frozen and conjured an ice wall to block the sudden attack. Fire magic suddenly flung and appeared out of nowhere. The fireball hit the head of the enemy with no trace of flesh and finally, it stopped moving.

They all looked at Caroline whose hand was swelling with smoke.

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An hour later, Ken, Alastor, and Caroline sat quietly inside the wagon.

“Since when did you learn how to use fire magic?” Alastor asked. He never saw Caroline use fire magic since then.

“Just now.” She simply said.

“Now?” Ken asked again. His eyes don’t believe what she just said.

Caroline gave a nod.

“How?” Alastor asked.

“What do you mean how?”

“I mean how did you learn it that fast?”

“I just learned it from watching Ken.”

“You learned it by watching Ken do it?” Alastor’s exclamation was more of a question about her proficiency in magic. Never once had he encountered someone who learned elemental magic that easily. There were others who learned elemental magic through explanation and teaching and even if they grasped how to light a fire it would take a few weeks to fully control any kind of elemental magic. With consideration, there are those people who can learn magic in one day, they are considered to be gifted. Caroline may be from a royal lineage but that doesn’t excuse her as one to be seen as special, but seeing how easily she was able to learn it, Alastor may think otherwise.

“Yes,” Caroline nodded and offered a wry smile. “All steps of conjuring magic are the same principles, right?”

Alastor nodded.

“So, what I did is to control my mana’s flowing at one point and imagine a fire, and to make it more real I imagine the heat coursing through my body, then that’s it.”

Alastor sighed and closed his eyes quietly.

“What you did there is a chantless magic princess.” Alastor declared.

From narrowing, Caroline’s eyes widened in happiness.

“Really?!”

“Yes. It’s low tier magic though, but it fits to refer to as a chantless magic.”

“If I can use chantless magic, then that means that would apply to water magic too?”

“Hey, hey. Don’t get overboard. It is not that easy. You must train if you want to get used to chantless magic. If you’re talented as I think you are, then I daresay it would probably take only a month to properly conjure an effective chantless magic, given your training would be uninterrupted.”

Caroline squealed like a little child. Ken came closer to Alastor and whispered to him,

“Don’t you think you’re giving too much credit to her? Your words might go over her head.”

Alastor agreed to him.

“Princess, calm down. The finish line is far ahead and don’t forget there’s a bunch of people that want you. It’s best to tone down your obnoxious squealing.”

Caroline stopped with an expressionless face. She glared at him.

Ken gulped. “Hey man. That’s quite a shade you did there. She’s still a princess, you know.”

Alastor muttered, “Don’t worry.”

Caroline puckered. “Fine, but you’re going to teach me how.”

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Before they knew it, the town was clear ahead.

Alastor watched the changing scenery on his left as he sat comfortably. He was able to catch a glimpse of the buildings of the town down just far ahead down the adjacent road that was covered in thick trees. He never expected that they would be able to come this far. Liber continuously galloped on a continuous straight line.

When Liber swayed around, in a blink, the town was completely gone out of his view replaced by the running film of greenery. Once again, the distance gradually approached, and for another Liber took a wide turn descending to the slope. The scene was out of his eyes to reach again, but he can tell that they were closer than he anticipated.

They came across several streets and shops before they reached the inn. They rode on and passed the enormous building of the cakery ‘Apple-eyes’, known for their high quality baked goods. Alastor saw Linda stand over for ten minutes before she left. Her reasoning triumphed. She proceeded to the lodging.

Linda talked to the manager of the inn while Alastor came to the ranch just near to the inn. It was still too early in the morning but the sky was already beckoning a storm. The skylight had been completely replaced by the bruised gloomy clouds that began to crawl out from here and there. There was a breeze, foreshadowing the fury that had yet to come. Even still the cloud rumbled and after that, the clamoring voices became a low murmur.

Though this is not the first time that he saw a storm, there is uneasiness swirling inside him as if telling him that something’s going to happen. Out of the blue, thunder rang loudly as lightning lit up the dark clouds. Alastor was completely overwhelmed and startled, flinching over it. He heard a forcefully suppressed laugh of Ken and Caroline. Alastor had completely forgotten that he was in a restaurant sitting with the rest of them. His attention was completely on the sky. At least, the situation was calm for now. However, he cannot say the same thing to them. It may seem that Ken and Caroline found a way to piss him off. The seemingly hours of waiting had finally arrived. Several foods have been placed on the table. Each is unique and has different designs.

In the end, Alastor had no appetite to eat at all. He barely ate half of his food.

Mr. Funny Man’s eyes settle on his plate. “Is there something wrong?”

Alastor shook his head. “Nothing.” He blandly replied. “Just had too much yesterday.”

“Is that so? Well, you better prepare to pack some in case you change your mind.”

“Will do.”

Finally, Alastor had leisurely enjoyed his time to rest. The others were busy, Ken was helping the man of shade in groceries, while Caroline and Linda found something mutual. Dress. That was right when Linda talked about going to a dress shop, Caroline’s eyes began to glimmer and came to tag along. Alastor did not expect that she was on the trend. Well, she was a girl after all, and he can find it reasonable ever since she was busy traveling for the past months. It’s not a bad thing either. Caroline deserved a treat for herself now that she will be confined.

Alastor was in the lounge of the inn. Enjoying his coffee while watching how things unfold outside through the window.

“Hello, young man.”

An unfamiliar voice beckoned him. Alastor’s eyes withdrew from the window and looked at the old man. He didn’t seem like a beggar. His clothing can somewhat be compared to a noble. He wore an all-purple suit and pants. His brown coat hung on his shoulders.

Alastor could tell that he was in his sixties. The old man had a white curtly thick beard. The way he talked was gentle and calm.

He was not alone. A young gal curtly bowed and sat in front of him. Even though she had a fine slender body, she stood tall. With her glass she might be taken as his secretary, unlike Linda, this young woman appeared to have a gentler face and more feminine. Alastor already had something else in his mind, it was either a noble or a merchant from a big enterprise. But if he is on either side, it is still questionable what would a noble-like figure like him is in this town.

Alastor raised a brow after his quick observation.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not a mute, after all.”

The old man’s mocking words raised a question in his mind. But Alastor chose not to reply.

“You see, young man. We were currently looking for new…”

Alastor let him continue to speak and heard about recruiting new members to expand their webs in the market. Alastor had heard enough and gestured to stop. His voice was discerned to end the old man’s agenda.

“I’ve heard enough.” Alastor coldly said.

“Aren’t you interested in earning money?”

“It’s a hard pass. I have made a decent amount of money.” Alastor showed his sword that was resting at the side. “I’m an adventurer.”

The old man sighed. “And here I thought that you’re broke.”

Alastor’s brow jerks annoyingly.

The old man continued. “But it appears that we have to do this the hard way.”

Alastor heard a clutch on the secretary’s side and he looked down. He saw the gun pointed at him. There was a moment of silence. Alastor was completely oblivious that the lady had discreetly snuck her gun out of her jacket. A silence filled the air. Until now, what seemed to be a droplet of water landed on the window, the clouds grumbled and began to drizzle the dry land. As the rain continued, a familiar distinctively laughed emerged from him. It doesn’t sound like the kind of laugh from an old man.

“Although your attitude is the same, your instincts have dulled.”

Cid removed his beard to show his childish grin and put it back.

Alastor calmed himself down. “Cid, you son of a bitch.”

Cid laughed, “It’s a praaaaank! I can’t believe you got easily tricked like that.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Didn’t Rod brief you about my arrival?”

Of course. Alastor began to scan his mind. He remembered something about Cid heading out on his mission and would help them get in the kingdom’s domain, but clearly, they haven’t made it to the border yet.

“Why are you here? I thought you were going to meet us in Yuelon?”

“Well,” A heavy silence had suddenly dominated the atmosphere. “Something’s changed.”

Cid’s eyes cast on the window watching how the people had dispersed and sheltered some establishments. He craned his neck and glanced at the people from behind who were entering the store and cautiously tone down his voice.

“The assassins that the nobles funded, they’re gathering in various places in different cities. Even now, they’re spreading like insects, man. There is no way that you could cross without noticing through the border into the city. The only way out of this is to get her straight back to the palace.”

A silence fell over them. Alastor massaged his head and heaved a heavy sigh.

“Shit.”

“What is it?”

“It must be them.”

“Who?” Cid raised a brow.

“*Them*, the people who attacked us previously. We managed to escape them, but they…”

Alastor sighed and continued. “They were marking and camping some roads. These tactics of theirs are becoming a pain in the ass.”

Cid could only offer a small nod. “I understand. So that’s the reason why there are reports about men wearing in black suits and bronze armor attacking people on their way.”

“What?!”

Alastor was surprised about this. He only heard about marking roads but he didn’t know that they would go that far. Alastor rubbed his cheek.

“I guess that’s to be expected.”

“Yeah. Now that they’re desperate the political envoy’s life is in grave danger, they’re not going to consider a stealthy approach.”

“Is that the reason why you came here?”

“Yes,” Cid replied.

Alastor glanced at his companion. His thoughts spiraled about her.

When Cid noticed that he hadn’t introduced his companion, he let out a breath.

“Oh, um, this is my partner, Misty.”

“Partner?”

“Yes.” He naughtily smiled.

Misty’s eyes caught on his ridiculous grin and quickly elbowed him. Cid groaned.

“Don’t get the wrong idea.” She exclaimed. “I was assigned to assist him in his mission. Ever since the incident back in Kayon city, Rod has become stricter about our assignment…”

“Which I told him… it’s going smoothly.”

“You only had one chance to take a ride with her but you blew it up.”

“That is not my fault. These kids happened to be in the city and needed my help. I got distracted. How many times do I have to tell you that? Jeez.”

Misty fell silent, her eyes remained static.

Cid continued. “Anyways, we have to make sure that the political envoy will be able to cross the border safely.”

“Safely you say? There is no such thing as safety.”

“Yes, yes, I know. We only have a few men to spare.”

“I wish Rod would reconsider adding more men. Seriously, those bastards are gaining more advantage over catching us. I don’t how long we will manage this but shit, they have more men and have firepower.”

Cid nodded eagerly while his eyes closed. Alastor grunted.

“You’re not listening, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Cid resigned. “By the way, who is this political envoy? I still don’t know who this guy is.”

“It’s a she.”

Cid paused and broke to grin. “Really?”

“Cid, I will warn you in advance.” Alastor said stringently “Don’t. Just don’t.”

“Well, it depends.”

“There’s no dependence here. I’m gonna kick your ass if you lay your hand on her.”

Cid’s eyes widened. He was completely surprised as if a toddler who just learned a new word.

“Wow. This is the first time I heard such a protective tone coming from you. You sure you’re not having a fever for their bud?”

Alastor showed his fist. “Do you want this stick on your face?”

“No, no.” Cid playfully backed away. “I’m not going to hit whoever she is.”

“Good.”

“Returning to the concern, we need a plan. A strong one. Although we already had one before, I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“What is it?”

“Pretend to be a merchant.”

“A merchant? What’re you guys pretending to sell?”

“Paintings.”

“Oh really? Well, I doubt that would work.”

“I know, I know. You don’t have to remind me of that.”

Cid resigned and dismissed him. “The enemies are going to block and attack us. The only thing we can do is to push forward.”

“How?”

Cid firmly responded. “By ramming our way. It would be messy, that’s for sure.”

“Then what?”

It may sound desperate but they have no other choice. They were taught that they must be as stealthy as possible. They must have an element of surprise to have an advantage over the enemies. Cid’s suggestion is the complete opposite of what they have thought. Alastor could only hope that it was going to be well. It’s not like he doesn’t fully trust Cid. He did not know how Cid had helped them back in Kayon city, without him they wouldn't be able to sneak inside the chemical factory and obtain a series of information.

Cid had noticed Alastor’s wordless thoughts about his plans. Cid gently smiled. He was very much aware of the risks of his plan. Cid looked at him interestedly, recognizing his thinking face whenever he felt there was amiss.

“I know that you doubt my proposal, but it’s the option we have left. After we cross the border, we will meet with some people.”

“Some people?” Alastor addressed his worried thoughts. “You mean like us?”

“Not exactly. They can be trusted, don’t worry. They’re just some adventurers that owed me some favors.”

“Ok. And then…?”

Cid was hesitant to tell more as the people suddenly grew large.

“Can we just talk somewhere else?”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure. After the rain stopped, of course.”

Cid nodded.

Alastor interestingly cast his eyes at the group of people who were eyeing someone. As the man got up and jostled his way, Alastor’s eyes caught two certain women. Two thin figures stood in front of the crowd. They wore a luxurious dress and appeared to be caught by the rain when they got here.

They seem familiar.

Alastor recognized who they are.

Linda who bleached her hair with red, her blue dress delicately features and honed the tone of her body. Her burning red hair pulled back and knotted tightly on her top. She stood with such confidence. She turned slightly and he saw her aristocratic nose, her eyes kept wandering. She sighed and looked around.

Caroline did the same and changed her appearance. She was conscious of her surroundings, unsure what to do. She held her companion on her arm. She was completely wary of her blonde hair that was tied into a tight bun on the back of her head. Her green dress hung loose and exposed her long legs. Despite the uneasiness, she stood tall. Her bulging twins were covered by her dress. On her neck, the orange rock dangled. Her bronze eyes reflected in light as she turned over her heel.

Their eyes met.

Alastor felt somehow flustered by the way she looked. Alastor unconsciously looked down. The lady clutched to her and nodded, pointing at him. All men parted as the divines strode forward to him with magnificence and elegance. Some dared to approach them, but they were utterly rejected. They hopelessly stared at gals. When the ladies stop in front of him, all men’s attention is gathered to a certain man, Alastor. Just who is this lucky young man? The question circulated among them. Cid, whose face thicker than the walls of bricks had annoyingly started.

“Damn,” Cid whispered. “Is this the one? She’s thicker than what you’ve said.”

Alastor stared at him, almost with detest. Misty clutched his mouth to shut up.

He uneasily looked up.

“Um.” Caroline was unsure what to say but gathered her breath. “What do you think?”

Alastor was dumbfounded. “Yeah.”

The way they dress and look fresh, they must’ve gone shopping and gone to a spa. He never felt this before. His heart felt like it was about to explode. Alastor was sure that something is rising, and it is not his sword. Linda caught on and broke the awkward silence.

“Cid? What’re you doing here?”

Cid snapped. He hadn’t forgotten his objective. “Oh yes.” He shook his head. “Can we talk somewhere else… private?”

As they arrived at the inn, Linda and Caroline had changed their outfit, but their hair remained bleached. They sat on the sofa. Their expression meant business. Cid was in fact, for once in a while became serious.

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Mr. Funny Man sat across the long table. All of them were in the same mood.

“I believe I haven’t talked about this part of the plan.” Mr. Funny Man monotonously said. He glanced at every one of them. His suspicion had been cleared to them.

“We kinda thought you already knew about this…” Linda replied. Her eyes spoke with confidence. “Please, be rest assured, her life will be safe.”

Mr. Funny Man did not reply to her. Instead, his attention turned on Cid.

“What do you want to talk about?”

Cid gathered his thoughts and promptly out spoke the words carefully and thoroughly.

“The enemy had made their move inside the cities.”

Mr. Funny Man arched his brows.

“Which cities?”

A grave expression turned towards him.

“Most of them.”

Mr. Funny Man stammered by his words.

“The enemies had spread in various parts of cities back in the kingdom’s domain. We can’t even say for sure if the Yuelon is safe for the political envoy to shelter there anymore. Moreover is that the enemies had attacked several travelers in pursuit of the political envoy.”

“Hm. What then?”

“I think the only way to make it through is to prepare ourselves to ram our way in.”

There was a letdown of a sigh. He knew it very well. Even if they’re formidable individuals they have no chance of protecting the princess with the numbers of enemies, he understood that factor very well. And if even Mr. Funny Man uses his Inquiara Magic, it wouldn’t last that much longer. Most of Mr. Funny Man’s attacks require him to be alone, the reason was that his attacks would mostly affect the surroundings and the princess might get hurt in the process. For that reason, he hired the Glade Mercenaries to guard the princess while he was away. The assistance from the Glade might refer to as nothing but a reassurance for the princess's safety and as foot soldiers. Mr. Funny Man held his glass to centralize it back. He pressed it as if he were pressing his lackluster thoughts. He had never had much trouble this much before, but it was a trouble that he wouldn’t mind for the sake of the princess.

“Listen to me,” He finally got his grip back on his knees. “If we’re going to ram our way in, we have to make a few adjustments of our position.”

Mr. Funny Man began to lay out his plan for the upcoming days. The details were clear as the day.

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Mr. Funny Man bought a vehicle and position ahead of the wagon. Behind, Cid and Misty were on standby. Mr. Funny Man had explained the plan, it was simple yet efficient. The two are proficient when it comes to using guns. Cid made sure that his pistol and shotgun were loaded. Misty’s weapon is different on the other hand, she was using a gun that absorbs the user’s mana. It may look harmless, but once the user maximized her mana to the gun, it could be fatal.

Caroline was inside the wagon while Linda was in front. Out of them, Linda is the most versatile player, she can manipulate her ice magic from offense to defense. Her position was already given. Alastor and Ken would be in the horses defending the rear and both sides of the wagon.

With the vehicle leading the way, the wagon rumbled and followed. Liber cried as if notifying inside that they’re going to depart. Caroline merged her hands and prayed. Alastor grunted. The horse is the least desirable to ride. Horses nowadays are considered only to be used on the farm or only in the tutorial, but some royalties had used horses for their leisure time and those who were broke. The age of horse riding had been preemptively outdated.

Moving smoothly on the main road, they took the westerly path and came across the forest. Not too long, the road fork. Mr. Funny Man led the steering wheel to the left. Their path is curvaceous and rocky, but nothing had happened to lapse their mobility except that the wagon was rumbling and constantly jumpy.

And so, they thought everything was alright.

Mr. Funny Man caught a glimpse of something shining on the Cliffside. The figure grew into red and it grew closer to them. It was a fire magic.

Linda quickly raised her palm and countered it with her ice magic. The misty flowers turned the ball of blue flame into a pale, bluish wave. The pieces broke as they come past. The single enemy hiding at the side of the road was about to take a leap on the wagon but Cid’s bullet went right to its head. The loud ringing from his gun startled Caroline and felt through the wagon something came past the wheels.

“What was that?!” She asked. The aperture was opened.

“It’s nothing,” Linda replied. “Just a big angry animal.”

Alastor heard the rumble and felt through the land numerous people behind. He thought all of them felt it, but they were focused ahead.

“In the back!” He roared.

Alastor pulled their attention. Ken nodded over Alastor and decelerated. There are five vehicles behind and they’re getting closer. Fortunately, the size of the road can only occupy two vehicles at once, leaving them with the advantage to take a breath. They sprang and landed on top of the vehicles. Alastor didn’t mind the people behind and plunged his sword down. The driver is dead and there’s no one to replace him. The mercenary hopped back to his horse. It was quick and he swiftly ended it. The vehicle crashed onto the tree. Some foot soldiers survived and were picked up by the last vehicle.

Ken heard several clutches. Ken estimated in a glance that there were only seven people inside. With quick reflexes they systematically dismantled their weapons. They knew very well how dangerous it is to shoot in a closer distance, their comrades would receive damage as well that were meant only for the enemies.

The entire group had given up using their weapons and pulled out their knives. Ken, who’s bolder than ever, still dared them. A certain man charged forward. Ken bellowed and caught his wrist. He twisted it and plowed his head with his fist. Another two came forward. Ken delivered a roundhouse kick throwing the enemy out of the vehicle. He saw another two gain distance and brandish their swords foolishly, each he evaded carefully until he was cornered. Ken flipped backward and landed on another vehicle. His palm forewarned the enemies.

“By ablaze sun, by the ablaze life, I conjure thee, Fiara!”

The pulsating fire emerged and burned three of the enemies while the others jumped off. Ken quickly got off in the vehicle just a moment, evading the bullet from the driver. He heard the window break. His muscles pumped as he climbed and knocked on the door before pulling the driver out of the vehicle.

As soon as Alastor got inside the vehicle, he quickly aimed to jab the enemy at the nose, momentarily stammering them. One of the enemies managed to kick his front, but along the way, he pulled out a handgun from the holster of the enemy he stammered behind.

In a moment of urgency, Alastor's balance was shaken as well as the others of the vehicle in front of them that had briefly decreased their speed. Alastor forcefully aimed, bellowed, and struck one. The second attempt was a miss and pierced through to the other vehicle. Ken, who was steering the wheel in the way of the enemies, nearly got shot to his right.

His voice raised in concern. “I’m right here! Currently taking over the enemies’ vehicle! You might want to watch where you’re shooting at!”

Alastor threw the gun. His sword hissed loudly and sharply against the scabbard. His sword beamed in light and swung it circular motion. In an instant, he killed two people. He continued to stammer them by using his elbow or jabbing the nose of the enemy. All of his attacks started by stunning them before cutting their throat and stabbing their heart.

However, some enemies are no rookies. As Alastor cut down an enemy, another one sprung over and delivered a left hook that made him pause and staggered back. Alastor felt his gut’s upset. He retreated a few steps and weighed his options.

The eyes of the enemy returned to the weapon and didn’t hesitate for the second to lay his hands on it. Alastor quickly got up on top. The bullets pierce through the ceiling and nearly got him, he took a big leap over Ken’s vehicle and hungover. Just to think that they’re gaining the upper hand, several shadows had appeared in the bright sky. There were three of them and they landed on top of the wagon.

“Shit!” Linda cursed under her breath.

Liber cried, implying that he will be fine. Linda conjured an ice sword and leaped on top. Seeing they’re wielding swords; she conjured another one. She blocked every attack. Her sword extended whether the enemies intended to catch her off guard. As the sword of the enemy got stuck on her ice sword, she immediately kicked him out. Linda’s ice shards suddenly took over the enemy by surprise. The shards pierce through his head and his chest. He lifelessly fell. The chunk of flesh remained. The last enemy was more formidable than the others. They exchange attacks, blocking perfectly and using equal force to cancel each other’s strikes. She was so focused in front that she was completely open from behind.

Another enemy was about to get up and sneak to stab her from behind. Cid, however, got on his heels and shot the head of the enemy. Another set of enemies had appeared out of the forest. All dressed in black. They rode horses and had completely encircled them.

Misty flinched the moment an arrow came to her. She quickly ducks. There were noises of rocketing guns and arrows but they didn’t seem to damage their vehicle. She saw all of them seemingly floating in the air.

Inside, Mr. Funny Man raised his palm outside the window, twisted it, beckoning the trapped bullets and arrow in his web of wind magic. All of the enemies’ attacks returned to them ten-fold. Even the horses were caught in the onslaught too. Some survived but they all returned to the wild.

Misty helped Cid in killing the enemies that had managed to cling to the princess’s wagon. Alastor used the leftover weapons to shoot on the enemy. Of course, the enemies returned the favor too. Alastor conjured a chantless magical transcendent wall to block the attacks and protect Ken who’s driving behind him. Ken throttled and got closer to the wagon. Alastor ducked over as the wall he conjured began to fall apart. The shards turn to white mist as it falls.

Alastor had taken down fourteen enemies with his pistol. His eyes spite in effort to subdue them in an efficient way as possible. Again, he conjured another transcendent wall. Each bullet that made contact with the wall bounced and had the wall absorb the energy in the form of a wave.

His teeth grind as he grows impatient. Alastor decided to shoot the wheels of the enemy. One by one, the tires had become flat. The wheels guzzled and grind in the dirt as it crashed into the nearby trees. Not too long, it exploded. A smirk stretched over his face.

“Al!” Ken shouted.

Alastor came closer to him. He didn’t seem to mind the bullets as his wall was holding strong from the attacks.

“What?”

“Get down, find yourself a horse.”

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

Alastor saw a horse and he leaped. He landed perfectly on top and made his way back to the wagon. Ken had steered the wheels to the previous vehicle and blocked its way. There was a moment of cat and mouse before the enemy had finally given up. Ken quickly pressed the break and the back of the vehicle crashed on the enemy’s car hood. He jumped out of the vehicle. Ken was dizzy, but still caught a wild horse from the enemy and rode it. Before he could fully get away from the enemies, he threw a fireball at the vehicle and what followed was a chain of explosions that destroyed several vehicles and got stuck in the road.

Seeing how Alastor and Ken finally settled, Linda became more aggravated to end their fight. As their blade crashed on one another, his sword froze and quickly crept on his skin. He felt numbed after the frosty ice had completely covered his hands. When he tried to break it, his hands were completely severed from its limbs like broken glass that shattered in the ground. He shouted in pain. There was no blood because the nerves had been frozen too by her magic. Linda beheaded the man. The blood painted over the wagon and also her sword. She swung and loosened the ice that covered her sword along the trail of blood.

The scenery had completely changed from the clear sky to the Rocky Mountains.

Alastor wondered how long they were fighting so that they hadn't noticed that they were in a completely different part of the region. Alastor knocked over the wagon. Caroline who was praying the entire time was pulled back in reality. All the horrid noises had finally ceased, but she was still hesitant to open it. Her eyes simply peered through the peephole.

Alastor saw it. It was unlikely that she ever got to see herself in a position where her life is at stake. Contrary to his thoughts, Caroline was more concerned over them rather than herself. She was afraid that because of her they might lose their life. She didn’t want anyone to die for her.

“You okay there?” Alastor asked.

Caroline simply offered a single nod. She needed some time. Everything was too shocking and very quick for her. She never had the chance to get her grip before facing a life-threatening situation. In fact, there never was.

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They finally came closer to the threshold.

It had been an hour since the enemies struck them, but it felt like forever for them. Nevertheless, they didn’t seem to be tired. In fact, they’re fired up as ever. It was already a given for them to raise their guard. They can’t be easily reassured that there are no more incoming attacks.

Mr. Funny Man had already made it clear to them; they have to remain on guard at all times. Alastor was never the man who slept with his back against the wall. He was prepared to carry on regardless of the pain that jolted around his ribcage. His face contorted in pain.

Out of a sudden, the door swung uselessly open. The wind had flushed in her face. Her belongings were shaken. She carried a bandage as she saw Alastor flinching in pain.

“Hey, Al. Y-you, okay? Are you hurt? I—”

“Princess, please, do us a favor, get inside NOW.”

His voice was filled with cold passive-aggressive words that pressed her thoroughly. She reluctantly went back inside and tightly shut the door. All she wanted to do is to help in any way she could. She borrowed her head on the pillow. Caroline could only let out her frustration by shouting while her head delved deep on the cushion. She hated this part of her heritage. Ever since she knew the price of being royalty. People had to protect them with their lives at stake. No person should ever be burdened with this kind of duty.

This thought had been a pin on her heart and even now it stung a little. The thought someone had this much power was the reason why she left. More specifically, she hated the nobles that turned her world upside down. Her expression went poker-face after she let it out.

Not long after, she heard a crash ahead of them. Her slim hands forcefully slid open the window and hung her head. The wind had flashed over her face as she cast her hand to slightly cover her eyes from the chilling wind.

The vehicle took a wide turn. Caroline had seen three figures that emerged from the trees and glanced only at them running vehicles. Then, the gust of wind erupted, and blew in their ears.

“Al switched to me now!”

Linda shouted at Alastor. He came closer and leaped to sit on the driver's seat. Caroline heard a loud thump on the roof and then another one.

Mr. Funny Man and Linda had intercepted the other two while the last one had followed their trails. The enemy sprinted, barefooted. Their speed increased.

“I entrust the safety of the princess to you, Mister Alastor!”

Alastor nodded and made their way. Misty who replaced Mr. Funny Man in the driver’s seat squealed as a mystic bug suddenly appeared and crashed on the windshield. The vehicle was slightly altered but she was able to maintain it thereafter. Cid was pissed.

“Where did you learn how to drive?!”

Just when Misty thought the enemy was dead, it suddenly moved fitfully. It flew and curled. The string pointed at her. Misty immediately snatched her gun at her waist and shot it. It was within point-blank range, there is no way that the baby size monster could have evaded that attack. A smoke had swelled and vanished in thin air. The front windshield shattered and scattered.

“Cid, incoming on the front!” Misty roared.

Cid got on top and started to shoot the flying monsters.

“Great! Shitheads are on our back and monsters on our front! Great, just fucking great!”

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Ken, who was on his horse, struggled to aim at the enemy. Due to the movements of the horse, everything was erratic. He closed his left eye and when he had a chance, a fireball thrust in the air and got the target. The person in the cloak was blasted away. Ken stayed behind to ensure its rear was covered. He hissed. He rubbed off his inner clothes and removed the cloak. His amber hair flustered over the wind.

The enemy’s attack was nothing to her. Her body was two times bigger than a regular man's. She had a bulky body which would explain how she withstand the attack. In fact, the enemy, Yenne doesn’t need any protection, besides wearing protective gear would only hinder her movements. She was a martial artist after. Her body was made to be tough like steel. The only thing was that the fireball had halted her because of the force. Yenne scratched her head. She was sent here as a support for Karen and Benny in any way possible. Yenne was supposed to be assigned in training but was dragged out due to the failure of her companions. Yenne saw them take another wide left turn. Yenne sighed and began to stretch. Her bare skin was only covered by a grey sports bra and tight short pants.

“Why, oh, why do I have to do this bothersome job? How hard is it to catch one person? Geez. I wonder what prey awaits me.”

Yenne smirked. She kicked the ground and dashed through the forest. Yenne’s right arm bulked and the veins popped through her fist.

“A direct assault would do no good for me, huh. Well, let’s try the other way!”

In one swing, the trees flew over as their roots tore like there was some kind of tornado crash on the site. The trees were sent flying on the other side.

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Alastor frantically conjured magic. The chantless transcendent walls appeared and blocked a few of the trees. Suddenly, a chunk of wood came to pass and hit the wheels, causing it to disrupt. Because of it, Alastor was forced to veer the wagon near the cliff just to avoid the tree. It wobbled wildly and barely avoided death.

Liber cried, grateful.

Out of the darkness, a deep brown hand had emerged and the seven feet tall woman appeared to leap over the wagon. Cid had noticed the sudden brisk of the atmosphere. Cid revealed another gun. On the side in the hilt, light manifested on the meter. The feature of the gun is similar to Misty, it absorbs the user’s mana to use it. Cid was unable to use it the first time because he cannot properly control how to spend his mana properly. It took him weeks to master it. A white light shot out from the gun. If he remembered well, he was told that a single shot from it is equivalent to a mid-tier spell. The enemy flinched.

Yenne felt the heat. She knew what it was. But power like that would do no good for them. A fireball appeared out of nowhere and deflected Cid’s attack. Yenne was about to reach the wagon until she felt something grab her pants. It was small hands from Ken that changed their trajectory and rolled over the dirt for over ten seconds before they stopped. She got up first.

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Benny picked himself up from being dragged in the forest. He let out a brief chuckle before removing the cloak. Benny looked up at him.

“That is quite bold of you. Leaping fearlessly to your death and all.” Benny said.

Mr. Funny Man was however unscathed. “So, we meet again, huh. You didn’t learn anything last time, didn’t you?”

Benny beamed widely. “Yes, I have, but this time, it will be different.”

A loud booming sound came at his left. The shockwave came, rushed on its path. Mr. Funny Man couldn’t see the attack but he felt that it was coming for him. Slimmed like a weaver, Mr. Funny Man drew back and flew away.

The shockwave came past in front of him. He gazed at his side and saw several trees spewing at him. Mr. Funny Man used his wind magic to block the attack and change the trajectory. Mr. Funny Man’s attention was caught by a blade coming in front. In a single swoop, he caught it with his bare hand.

Benny laughed in amusement. “You are certainly something, Mr. Funny Man. I expect nothing less from the leader of Kris Krux himself.” Benny complimented.

“That attack,” Mr. Funny Man started. “It’s a sound blast, isn’t it? Made by compressing the noise through the influence of sound waves.”

Benny grinned. “You thought you’re the only one who has an invisible attack, didn’t you? Too bad, you and I are the same.”

Mr. Funny Man remained unreadable. Mr. Funny Man swung his hand and a vortex of wind fluidly made its way like a snake to Benny. Benny did not move. He raised his palm and ear ringing erupted. The compressed wave of noises erupted and forcibly dissipated the wind.

Benny threw a mocking grin at Mr. Funny Man.

“You see what I did there?”

Mr. Funny Man removed his glass. He lunged at him. Mr. Funny Man’s palm began to emit a wind vortex. However, Benny already made his move. He ran away and got inside deeper in the forest. Deep, heavy, and deadly. That was what Mr. Funny Man is depicted in Benny’s thoughts. A dozen appeared and came to pursue. The wind vortex hissed like a snake that found its prey. Benny leaped and rolled on the dust and coming across a cliff, he found himself in a dreadful situation.

The fourteen wind vortexes had shown its fangs and emerged into one dreadful snake.

“Oh shit.”

“You see what I did there?” Mr. Funny Man returned the question.

Benny gritted. “So what?! Just because you made a bigger one doesn’t mean it's impenetrable! I’m just gonna make my noise shockwave stronger!”

A loud hissed of grinding forces emanated in his palm. The shrill of noises gathered in a formed sphere. Benny directed it to the entity. Like an exploding balloon, the sphere of compressed noise and matter had reached its maximum limit. A loud boom rang and lay ho, the ravaging blades of winds and the compressed noise itself destroyed the trees within the range. The only left was the swirling dust and breeze that whistled its way.

Benny grinned and walked five steps forward before realizing that Mr. Funny Man’s presence was still around. His observation magic had automatically activated. Benny’s observation allowed him to see trails of mana everywhere. The manas around took the form of a string. He surveyed around but to no avail.

Mr. Funny Man was quietly observing Benny. A smirk formed on his lips. Mr. Funny Man as of now was peering through his Inquiara Magic. A door, invisible to his eyes, appeared behind him.

The slightest creaked from the wooden door alerted him. Benny pulled out his blade and swung to his back but only to hit the air and stopped midway. Mr. Funny Man’s hands gripped him in an attempt to pull him inside. However, Benny had kicked the other hand and broke free. Benny lurched backward and waited for Mr. Funny Man to reveal himself. Mr. Funny Man got out and started to levitate.

“Hoh.” Mr. Funny Man started. “Is sensing intention part of your ability as well?”

Benny slightly nodded. “So, what if it is?”

“It’s quite troublesome.”

“This time will be different.”

Benny grunted. He began to gather noises and compress them again. The shrilling bomb of his nose compression magic was continuously bombarded and effectively evading his wind magic of Mr. Funny Man while the both of them kept safe while canceling each other’s attacks.

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Linda got up prepared to face the perpetrator. She glanced around but saw no one. A white puffed under her breath appeared as the cold wind swayed it. She looked at her arm as a cut appeared completely unknown in her range of vision. Instantaneously, she heard whizzing around her back and the steamy bloodthirstiness lingered in the air. This time she was using her rapier that was completely wrapped in ice.

Linda spun over her heels. The crackled ice cut through the wind. For a moment, the light glimmered brightly and momentarily blinded the invisible enemy. Karen winced and lurched back away. The spell had been broken.

“Simple yet annoying ability,” Linda stated. “But I have to admit, your ability is perfect for assassination. You know, we could use people like you.”

“It’s a hard pass,” Karen responded. “My boss paid me a lot and frankly enough.”

Karen’s body began to glitter in different colors and once again vanished in Linda’s sight.

“Fair enough,” Linda muttered.

Now that the enemy’s ability had been completely revealed, Linda can’t carelessly let her guard down. She may have sharp senses but there are still those that do not sound right. The last time she managed to stun the enemy, she felt her bloodlust, and because of it, Linda completely sensed her. But now there is nothing. She can’t feel any change in the atmosphere as if Karen’s presence had completely gone.

“Could it be?!”

Linda considered the possibility that the enemy might have left her. She was about to dash away when something tried to cut her back. The armor she wore bounced off Karen’s blade. She quickly swung her sword around, but in vain. The cold shadow of Karen’s completely slipped through her sword. Another cut appeared in her legs. Her latex suit was torn and exposed to a part of her skin.

Karen gained a safe distance before Linda could cut her. Karen’s attention is simple as it is. She aimed to weaken the enemy, reducing the blood in her system, in that way she won’t forcefully use too much mana, but it appeared that Linda won’t be taken down that easily and she won’t go down without a fight.

Linda plunged her ice sword into the ground and filled with blue light that extended throughout the sky and began to crept all over creating a massive dome. As the icy plain unveiled, the ice crept up to Karen’s knees and several pieces of ice bloomed like flowers. Karen had found herself stuck in her position. Linda immediately found her prey.

Karen frantically swung her sword to detach the ice but was ineffective to no less. She was highly strung. Her breath ragged. It appeared that the only option she had was to impede Linda’s attack. Karen bent back with her sword swung diagonally. Karen’s sword pertained to hitting Linda’s right arm. Though, it may seem to be a clean hit, the tip of Karen’s sword was far from the truth. Their swords met. In a split second, the friction produced sparks.

If Karen would be able to bounce off Linda’s attack, then she’d quickly swing it back to cut off her wrist or maybe her entire arm. That is if Karen would prove to be successful. The ice beneath her feet cracked. The momentum of the force took a toll on her legs and because of that the ice fragmented bit by bit, more convenient to Karen. Even still, she was still within the territory of Linda’s Inquiara Magic, Perdagetton Frostbite, thus, there was still a possibility that it might affect her body somehow. A grin broke on her lips. It appeared to be that fate favored her.

The blade hissed and just as Karen expected, Linda bounced back. As she stumbled, Karen got back on her feet, she hastily paced forward and swung her sword. It was at this very moment, the seconds seemed to slow down as she caught the condition of her sword. It was broken in half. The attack earlier froze Karen’s sword without her noticing it.

“You bitch!”

“Too late!”

As Linda came forward, Karen pulled back. That was her mistake. She didn’t consider the distance between them. She let her fear dictate her decision. It was all too late. Even if she gained distance away, the tip of Linda’s ice sword extended and cut her collar bone.

Blood sprayed on the ground as Linda whipped her ice sword in the air. Karen winced. The weight of the pain had coursed through her body. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't. The pain jostled throughout her body. The flesh wound was still oozing blood and her entire body shuddered. She croaked, fell on her knees before her eyes devoid of life, and she lay rest on the ground.

The winter finally fell upon them.

Linda ceased in her tracks as she noticed a snowflake in the ground. She gazed at the sky. The dome was beginning to fall down and she saw the cloud turned to white. She pondered when the winter started. Another trickled down from the leaves. She beamed widely over the thought of the snow.

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Yenne forcefully dragged Ken’s feet, throwing and smashing him on the ground. Ken was, however, covering his head, enduring the torment of Yenne. Ken forcefully turned the tide, he got a hold of the ground and jumped. His right hook arched and swung right into her face. Yenne was stunned. She let him go and moved back.

“You got some spunk,” Yenne responded.

She had the face of a thirsty warrior. Ken was certain of it. The combatant in front of him is also a martial artist. Ken crunched his fingers and joints as though preparing for his fight.

“Are you a martial artist as well? Yenne queried. “I’m pretty sure you are.”

“What do you think?”

Yenne smirked. “This ought to be fun.”

There was silence. Their eyes are sizing each other. And when the leaf touched the ground, they sprung to action. Their fists met and shook the surroundings. The shockwave had the leaves fall from their respective branches of trees and rustled along with the wind. The pulse of shockwave melted and the silence came back.

Thereafter, they exchange overwhelming attacks. Her fist to his face, his knees to her stomach. Another fist flew in her left. She winced and felt Ken’s attack through her ribs. Yenne moved back and turned to deliver a roundhouse kick. Even Ken responded quickly by blocking her attack, his small body had its limit. He felt the heaviness of her attack as his elbow endured. He felt a tinge of pain as her legs withdrew. His breath barely caught up as another set of swinging fists came to him. Ken moved back evading and blocking her attack, but each time used his arms to block her attacks, the pulsating pain was becoming more unbearable to the point that her attacks swished past his cheeks.

Ken cast his eyes and observed the pattern of her attacks. His breathing paused. He heard her whizzing on his right. Ken smoothly caught it. Ken’s foot whispered on his left when slid it back. His fist swung and lashed blindly, felt his fist make contact on her jaw with her muscle and he heard a crack.

“Not half-bad. I felt that one.” Yenne said.

Yenne wiped off a small portion of blood that ran down on her lips.

“Tell me—”

Ken wasn’t considerate. His body twisted and his fist swung. His right hook went through and successfully laid to her face. Ken’s attack was powerful enough for Yenne to crash on a tree. Yenne quickly got up, angrily.

“Hey, hey. If someone is talking, you should listen.”

Ken wiped off a speck of dirt on his face. “We are in the opposition. What else should we talk about?”

Yenne’s eyes widened in anger. Her smile was twisted like a killer thirsty for blood.

“I’m going to wipe that smug face of yours!”

Yenne sprang forward. Her right leg swung and followed by another fist swung on Ken’s right, in which he successfully blocked it. Even now, the tingling pain hadn’t left his arms. His fingers too are hurting due to his bronze brass knuckles. He hurt but he keeps doing it. Ken returned the favor. His fist reached her face and another pushed through her stomach. Yenne endured the pain and head-butted him before pulling back. She threw a disgusting glance as she noticed he was wearing brass knuckles.

“Tell me. Where did you come from?”

Ken remained persistent not to tell. “That’s only for me to know.”

Yenne smirked. “Your attacks… feel familiar. Did Alfahon monks teach you the way of martial arts?”

Ken did not reply, but his eyes are enough for her to boldly assume.

“So, you were trained by Alfahon monks from Alfahon Mountain.”

Ken’s eyes averted. “So what?”

“That makes us both come from the same kind.”

Ken’s eyes widened in surprise. He was unsure if she was telling the truth, but he felt that she was not lying. Even still, she was an enemy.

“Really?”

“Yes, but I left early before the Hayan Empire destroyed that place. You?”

He paused. “I was there.”

“You what?”

“I was there when they were slaughtered. I’m the only one who survived that day.”

Instead of having the feeling of sympathy, Yenne was rather more interested.

“That must be the reason why you are so well. Your instincts have been sharpened when you were younger and your techniques are not half-bad, though, it could use some upgrade. Hey, kid, considering that we came from the same kind, is there any other way we can solve this without harming each other?”

“No. You guys wanted to use her for your own gains. You must be stopped at any cost.”

Ken’s decision is firm. The woman in front of her is indeed a threat.

“It’s quite surprising that a belligerent woman like you would want to negotiate.”

“I may not look like it, but I can be considerate sometimes.”

From calm, Yenne’s bloodlust came back and this time it’s different. She was filled with malevolent intention.

“My name is Yenne. You?”

“Ken.”

It was appropriate for both warriors to reveal their names. It’s a sign of respect before they all go out.

“Well, Ken… as a warrior, do you think using brass knuckles is appropriate?”

Ken understood very well. He was discontented as well. He is only using it to suppress his newly found ability.

“I know that you’re hiding something… powerful.”

Ken responded. “Speak for yourself. You have the body of a mammoth.”

“Oh yeah?”

“But I understand you. It’s really hard to fight with these things on.”

Ken set loose his brass knuckles. There was a clang as it fell. Both warriors marched forward until they’re three feet away from each other. Ken and Yenne stood quietly. Ken’s eyes quietly watched her. He was feeling the ringing pain of her fingers from being freed from the constriction of the brass knuckles. He was bearing it.

The scars on her body became clearer as the sun was out of the trees and set on the horizon. Yenne was an experienced woman. She devoted her life to fighting and defining her life through blood and death. But lately, she doesn't feel the same turmoil, the same excitement. Her entire time with the group she joined was boring. She didn’t face enemies that could thrill her, make her feel excited. It was until now that a fellow warrior from the same kind as she was found excited.

After sizing each other, the two let out a roar. There’s a thundering strike that completely shook the road and the forest. It was their fist that produced that seemingly blast of a cannon. Each struggling to fend off one another. In the end, they chose to move back and formulate a plan to strike.

Ken initiated the attack. He leaped over her left and jinkled to the other in an attempt for a feint attack. By the time Yenne tried to catch him, her fist only slipped through his afterimage. All of a sudden, she felt his fist connect on her stomach. She let out a cry of pain. Afterwards, she smiled. Ken withdrew, back flipping away. He was well-muscled, had acrobatic skills, and is considerably strong in his age. His hand twisted forward, his hands summoning the breath of fire.

Yenne only had time to brace herself and spun once to evade the fireball and move forward. She moved aside, nearly catching her with his attack. She breaks her neck and her muscles when she spreads her legs.

Her boots planted on the ground as she dragged her heels to catch the fireball and created momentum, returning it back to Ken. Ken’s brain stuttered for a moment as his eyes took in more light from his own magic when his fireball came back. His muscles became rigid and stiffened, but he knew that it was coming back at him. He tried as best as he could to avoid it. Finally, Ken wasn’t given much time for aversion. He fell. The smoke moaned on him. Yenne’s shadow overcast upon him.

“Attempting to stop me by stunning and followed it up with countless magic attacks. I’m impressed with the creativity.”

Yenne’s fist steeled. When she struck him in his guts, there was a tremble and spasm while his exhalation was interrupted by the pain jolting through his veins and organs. She pulled him up by wrapping his neck.

“But you know pretty well how sturdy my body is.”

“Damn it.”

Ken coughed. Pain had blanketed his body.

He desperately tried to break free from her grasp but to no avail.

Yenne finally decided to throw him.

Ken back hit against the log of a tree. He allowed himself to absorb the hardness and let out a grunt of pain.

“Shit. You’re one tough bastard.”

His spasm ceased. Ken exhaled and with the last second his eyes brimmed in determination. Yenne had noticed it. Their gazes are alike, one that is prepared to go all out, to sacrifice a part of themselves to succeed for their cause.

A mighty drive of their boots against the ground pushed the ground to crack.

Their hands clenched into a fist

And when they met the shockwave from both of their fists created a sharp whistling wind that scattered and rustled the leaves and trees.

They let out a roar.

“You exclaimed that you have impenetrable skin, I would like to find out how true is that,” Ken said. The smile on his face diminished. The pain hadn’t subsided yet.

Yenne started to hop back and forth. “Come then.”

Ken launched himself. At a certain point, Ken’s footwork began to turn to an odd movement.

Ken continuously jinks from left to right like a boxer coming for his opponent. Several afterimages came later which confused her.

Yenne’s muscles swelled. Her attention was all on him.

Her eyes kept altering to where he was next position. She knew that his feint movements were just part of his plan. It isn’t something she can ignore given that Ken had promising skills.

In an abrupt development, Ken’s movements became faster. His afterimages emerge forward. She clearly saw it. He threw his fist like a bullet aimed at her right.

Yenne threw up her forearm forming a defensive block.

Ken smirked and appeared on his face. His figure slowly became a thick fog and vanished in thin air. On her right, which was supposed to be the least of her worries, caught her off guard. It was too late. Yenne was on her feet, but even still, she cannot block him. She blamed her reserved bulks for weighing her down.

Her face stiffed for a second when she remembered that her weight is also her main asset. Yenne’s worried expression returned to confidence.

But Ken’s smirk did not wane.

That was what he was completely waiting for.

The moment his fist made contact with her skin, there was a loud explosion.

Ken got up. The explosion that he created also drew him back a few feet away. As he waved the smoke of dust, he got a closer look at the site. There’s a shallow hole in front of him. Yenne’s presence is unknown.

He glanced at his right hand. It wasn’t damaged, but the ringing pain still lingered on it. His newly profound ability doesn’t hurt him like hell anymore, unlike before in his training.

Throughout the series of combat exercises, Ken developed his new ability, but at first, it had a drawback, the exploding fist takes a physical toll on the user. It wasn’t the usual thing he would gamble, but seeing how Sherry trained and the others, he couldn’t help but feel sorry for himself.

Ken felt a tingling in his back when there was something that caught his attention. His head quickly turned left and saw white light that shot throughout the sky. He knew very well who the person behind it was, but he couldn’t help but drop his jaw. He never imagined that Linda would use her Inquiara Magic.

Ken heard about her Inquiara magic. She was completely forbidden by the directors to use that power. He understood the effects of magic. It would completely affect everything its surroundings, there’s nothing she can do to hold back her magic once she activates it.

The white light spread and formed into a white dome. The wall crept down and settled firmly. Gladly, they’re outside of the field.

Out of the silence, Ken heard a blast.

He pushed through. Not too far, he saw Yenne slouching against the tree. He heard a disappointing sigh from her. Yenne appeared to be harmless from the earlier attack.

Her eyes traverse at him.

“Hey, you!” Yenne called out. “You know what this thing is?”

Ken didn’t reply.

“Just as I thought. This wide range of Inquiara Magic came from one of your allies. None of my comrades are capable of this anomalous kind of magic.”

“It seems that your body is tough just what you had claimed to be.” Ken started. “You’re unscathed. You have my deepest appreciation.”

Yenne threw him a questioning glance, one that is out of the ordinary.

“You’re saying what now?”

“I’m saying,” Ken started on his combat form. “You’ll be my living punching bag.”

Yenne who’s completely stunned began to laugh exaggeratingly.

“I don’t have the right to say anything, but that attitude says something. I’m sure you didn’t get that from the monks.”

“What’s the matter? You’re not going to save your comrade?” Ken inquired.

“It doesn’t matter now. They're as good as dead inside that dome.”

“You’re quite emotionless.”

“I won’t go as far as that. It’s not like they mean something to me. After all, they’re just disposable pawns.”

Ken grunted.

Yenne stretched her legs and arms.

“Very well,” Yenne said. Flames started to engulf her body. “It’s time to get serious.”

“What are you doing?”

“This is my Inquiara Magic, Flame Aberration.”

Even from such a short distance, Ken could feel the intense heat coming from Yenne. It was unlike his fire magic, this one is unrelenting, bestial, and calm.

Yenne looked down on him.

“I have observed your attack patterns. You’re using Dancing Backwater Dragon style, am I right?”

“You’re right. It’s about time that someone should know my martial style. Yenne, if you underestimate my abilities, I might burn you.”

Yenne laughed in amusement.

“You will burn me? Don’t make me laugh. Are you seeing what I am right now? I am the fire itself. You cannot touch me.”

“Interesting.”

“Even if you use your exploding fist, you won’t be able to reach me.”

“I would like to test that out.”

Ken tossed himself forward. His footwork this time is even more erratic, unpredictable, and irregular which was followed up by continuous feint attacks. One second Ken was in front of her, tricking her into delivering a punch which she quickly reacted by retaliating, but in vain as his figure phased through her.

Ken had completely wrapped her attention on his fingers. Yenne was in no doubt perplexed. Her eyes wander from here and there whenever Ken suddenly teleports out of place. It was so frustrating, so she had to do a foolish thing, she blindly attacked the afterimages. Even still she was not lucky, but it’s still better than to do nothing.

His movements are sharp and fast, almost comparable to a whistling wind. Yenne heard a shockwave from out of nowhere. It was far but she felt that it was coming closer, the presence came inside the wall of ice.

“Where are you looking?!”

Yenne’s attention was pulled back and saw Ken thrust his fist into exploding a tree that was tossed in the air. Yenne did not withdraw from her position. She stood still and turned the tree into ashes with her fire magic.

“Using your surroundings to fight for you, very creative! But you should know that an attack like that will not inflict anything on me.”

Several afterimages appeared afterward.

“This trick again?”

Yenne spun around. Her flames grew begrudged and wild that it appeared to look like a tornado of fire. The vortices of fire and wind rushed up and rotated rapidly. Out from the storming tornado, a rain of fireballs sputtered. The heat turned the air into humid, drenching, and oppressive heat.

Sleek and agile, that was a better way of describing Ken. He had ably dodged the attacks by slipping through the trees. Her attack was not without consequences. The fire slowly began to spread on the forest and seemingly could not be stopped by the vortex on its tracks. Ken was forced to stop on his tracks because of the hot wind flushing on his face. There he goes, his eyes stuck on the fire tornado. His attention altered his surroundings and saw trees begin to detach from the ground. Ken quickly reassessed the situation.

*If her magic is similar to the tornado, then that would mean it has a center.* Ken thought.

As the tree nearby was dragged by the air pressure, Ken took a hold of it and flew along. There was a moment when he was at the position on top, approaching the firestorm when a voice roared from inside. The waves of flames' hotness rose off and one by one it swallowed, turning it as gray ash. The intense heat evaporated the sweat in his pores. The smoke from it had become a hindrance for him to see it very clearly.

“It’s useless! There is no way in, kid!”

He got a clear look. There is indeed no way inside the storm. The center is thin for the air to get inside for her to breathe.

“How the hell can you breathe with such a small space?!”

“Dumbass, you just did all of that just to risk your life.”

Ken turned away his eyes from the vortices of fire. Ken struck the tree with his feet to leap on the tree and swung magnificently to another away from the fire tornado. He lunged downward, connecting to the branch of a tree, and climbed up to get on another one. Finally, he successfully landed.

Ken snickered. “Is that all you’ve got? You may be the center of force but it feels like nothing, honestly.”

“Oh, really?”

A set of fireballs came on his way and rays of blaze shoot out from it.

“Oh, damn it!”

Ken broke off. He sprinted away and used the environment as the shield against the enemy’s attacks. Alas, he was caught and blasted, rolling over the dirt and dust.

Ken coughed as he stood. The armor he wore is now useless. The fireball destroyed the strapped and cracked his armor which led to some part detaching.

His clothes are singed and burned. He removed his shirt and threw it on the ground. Ken’s breath became ragged. He closed his eyes, feeling the wind, thirsty for rejuvenation, only a briefed wind had made him feel respite.

Behind the red curtain of the blaze, Yenne had spoken through. “How unfortunate. You may be learned martial arts, but the monks didn’t pass unto you an Inquiara Magic now, don’t they?”

Ken’s eyes broke open. He smirked.

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It felt like yesterday.

It was the day when Sherry came to him. She was thanking him for saving her even though she was a stranger with a questionable background. He told her that it was nothing. He only did what was the right thing to do.

In fact, moreover, the reason why he did it is not just by the ethics he lived when he was at the temple with the monks, it was out of resemblance.

Sherry shared a spitting image of his late sister. The one who was left behind.

The fateful day was the same now.

The armada had found their way to breach through the rocky path with the use of their newly invented striker that is capable of mountain trekking. It was a disastrous day.

For the past months, the monks are helping the refugees from escaping the armada of the Hayan Empire. They’re lucky that the refugees managed to shrug off the enemies off their scent on their way here.

Apparently, the enemies are more perceptive than they’ve thought. They somehow picked up their trails and pinpointed the location of the temple which can be found in the highest reach of the Alfahon Mountain.

It can be located in the far east of the Jafal Region. The mountain is connected to the Great Wall of Mountains which serves as a boundary of the regions and nations.

They can run by following the mountain paths, but they’re bound to danger because there are some parts of the Great Wall of Mountains that remain unexplored and so… many have died… including his sister.

Glenda had long blonde hair, gem eyes that are awfully the same as Sherry's.

Ken was carried by a refugee when they were evacuating. On their way down the road, an explosion struck them and hung them dizzy. Now, Ken was the most unfortunate. The blast had sent his body flying over the cliff. If he wasn’t so lucky that he fell on the river, he would have died by that time.

After that, a group of people took him to the glade where he was trained and honed as the warrior that he is now.

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“If she were here by now, she would’ve to smack me for being a dumbass,” Ken muttered to himself.

Noticing the senseless fumbling words, Yenne laughed.

“You must have lost it.”

Ken shook his head. “No. I just realized something.”

“What is it?”

“I haven’t shown you my strongest arsenal yet and you have given me no choice but to use it.”

Ken’s body began to glow in red light.

His sudden change probed Yenne’s mind.

*“Is it another fire magic? No, that would be foolish. He already knew the impenetrable defense of my Inquiara Magic. If not the usual magic, then it could only mean one thing.”* The warrior grinned, broke in her lips and thought of it, *“He’s going to use his Inquiara Magic!”*

Tattoos flashing in light began to appear on his chest that trailed in his body. An image of a dragon flowed on his left hand.

“You know,” Ken started, “consider yourself lucky. You’ll be the first one who’s going to have a taste of my Inquiara Magic.”

“The honor is mine.”

Yenne ceased her fire tornado to get a better look at his form. She slowly came closer, thrilled and excited.

Once the flashing light extinguished, the rapid increase of mana calmed down to the point Yenne couldn’t tell what happened to him.

She laughed. “What’s with your Inquiara Magic? I can barely feel its power from here! Here I thought you have something more to offer.”

“Don’t underestimate me, lady.”

“Come on then!”

The two beasts launched towards each other.

Having closed to him, Yenne harnessed a vortex of fire and paused. Ken jerked sideward, smoothly evaded the attack. He came to her left. Ken followed up his movements by hitting her shoulder with a roundhouse kick. Despite feeling his counter, Yenne was still optimistic now that he is within her reach. Yenne blasted him at point-blank range. Ken withstand the attack and panted profusely. The tattoos had protected him against the merciless flame.

Yenne commented. “Is that the effect of your Inquiara Magic? How subtle. It appeared that fire magic won’t hurt you, huh.”

The two red streaks continued to clash. Each seizing the opportunity to flank one another. Unlike before, Ken’s attacks are now becoming sharper, heavier, and faster.

The random thrashing between two long red streaks abruptly halted, throwing themselves backward. They panted harder. Their sweat evaporated due to hotness and some turned into steam as the sweat landed on the molten rock.

“What’s with this Inquiara Magic of yours? Every time you hit it’s getting heavier!”

It was wise for him to not reply, Ken knew very well the importance of the element of surprise. He wasn’t going to reveal his secret as it would allow her to come up with a plan of how to counter his Inquiara Magic.

“In any case, I should wrap it up. I need to build more energy to feed the dragon.” Ken muttered to himself. “This woman in front of me… she’s the real deal.”

“What are you muttering about?! Huh!”

Yenne was getting impatient by now. She felt the life force of Karen getting weaker and another one who’s stronger than combined of their three’s strength. She was afraid.

The fact that Karen had been defeated was already rational, causing her to feel anger and despair. Yenne needed to lay her hands on the political envoy and get out of here before everything will be beyond her control.

Yenne’s cool head broke when she saw Ken grin. It was a big misunderstanding.

“Brat! You shouldn’t be dilly-dallying on your thoughts. I’m right here!”

The intense heat brought Ken back to himself.

Yenne rushed to him with her fire magic supporting her speed.

Ken grunted when he felt her fist connect his ribs. In Yenne’s fist, a fireball swelled and blasted him, thrashing him against the mountainside.

Ken absorbed the sweet pain and numbness. He grinned and thrust forward. His form took over the form of a red streak. The tattoos in his body began to emit red light.

Yenne thought he would go over her head, but Ken took her by surprise. His figure vanished, only to be left afterwards. He circled her and hit her shoulder, then there’s a blast. His exploding fist had a clean hit.

Yenne jumped back.

“You know I was taught by the monks that if someone begins to commit a sin it kills the person’s pure spirit. That was my motto as I grew up.” Ken started.

“Clearly you changed your mind.”

Ken gave a mental nod. “But I understand that there is something that cannot be avoided. There are people who will continue to kill for their own gains. There is no cure for their impurity. That is why I want – no, I must be ready to cross the line.”

“That is quite hypocritical, don’t you think so?”

“Yeah, but at least I’m on the right side.”

Yenne smirked.

“What’s so funny?”

“The way you view how this works.”

“You think that your choices are on the right path, but actually it is not. Right and wrong are irrelevant to other people, just as the truth. Those who live, the winner has the right to twist the story and use it to create paranoia. Believe me, I saw it many times, kid.” Yenne’s memory of her past flashes in her mind. “In the end, the truth is just a rule that anyone can bend.”

Ken stumbled for a moment. He hadn’t completely forgotten that he still wore the Hermes Sandals. For quite some time now, he has got a hold of how to use the sandals, but a small mistake of his stepping would likely lead to his advantage.

Yenne was quick, but Ken already saw her move and turn over his heels. His fist made contact with her face and exploded.

Yenne gnarled and roared. She sloppily swung her arm; however, his flexibility took over her large muscles. Another hit on her right rib cage. Yenne felt her nerves being riled by the erupting force. Another cry came out from her throat.

Ken swiftly evaded her right arm. His boots planted on the ground as he continuously jerked to avoid her massive fist. His flexibility was accompanied by the accuracy of his eyes. Ken completely had her within his grasp.

Ken stopped and broke to charge energy on his right fist. The charge-up was quick.

Yenne tried to block it, but even she had a limit.

Ken’s attack landed and forced her to back. Her boots dug on the ground for the purpose to withdraw the momentum forcing her to crash her back against the trees.

The stinging pain ended.

Ken felt the overwhelming surge of energy in his body. It was supposed to hurt but he did not feel anything from it. There was only rage, intense fury that abated and contained his body.

“I must say it’s quite educational. Thanks to you I was able to withdraw the power of my Inquiara Magic. I just recently developed it but I’m not quite \*sure what kind of effects it will have in an actual setting.”

Yenne looked over, her frustrated thoughts waned and grinned. “Normally I would be mad for mocking me, but we both grew up in the same house.”

Ken shook his head. “Believe me, I never mocked you. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be able to unshackle my power. As a warrior, you have my deepest respect… and condolence.”

Yenne laughed and flames whirled around her. “How amusing. Well then! Show me what you got!”

Ken’s body turned to flame. The dragon tattoo in his left hand took over a form.

The warriors roared as they showed the last bit of their abilities. Her fire tornado against his fire dragon. Yenne threw her fire tornado at him, but Ken did not stop. His speed remained unrelenting. His fire dragon ate the flames and slipped in.

In terms of power, the fire is deadly, its flames can burn anything, but the dragon is far more lethal. The dragon itself brews fire to live, much less it can harm him.

The dragon pierced through the vortices of flame. Its howl erupted and reverberated in the forest. The world around her froze as a blast of enormous flame in the form of a dragon came after her.

“Not bad, kid.”

Those are her last words as the massive fire dragon ate her, dragging her body in the far distance of the forest and the dragon turned upward then danced before crashing to the ground.

The towering red explosion had sent shockwaves that disrupted everything within the radius.

Ken bent and knelt. He grunted in pain, absorbing it and suppressing the aftereffects. His left arm is completely burned.

“So, this is the effect of my Inquiara Magic. Damn!” He slammed his fist on the ground. “I should have released it after I conjured it. I can’t feel anything from my left arm. I hope Linda knows how to fix this. If I use both of my arms, I wonder what will happen.”

Ken shook his head. “That’s the least I should worry about now. I need to move forward.”

“Mr. Ken.”

A familiar voice rang behind him.

“Mr. F? So, you already take care of the other guy, huh?”

Mr. Funny Man grimaced and disappointed. Ken was sure that his dissatisfaction was not centered on him, but something else.

“Not quite.”

“What?”

“It’s better if I explain as we move on. Come on, let’s go.”

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Earlier.

Mr. Funny Man flew away from the sound blast. Once again, his speed decreased, and turned back. He instantly conjured several vortices of wind, canceling Benny’s attacks. Their attacks came to a halt once they’d run out of breath. Benny panted heavily. Mr. Funny Man, on the other hand, appeared to be not affected by the large amount of mana he used.

“It appears that our Inquiara Magic are equal. What about in physical strength?”

Benny unsheathed his blade and pushed forward. However, Mr. Funny Man won’t just stand idly by. A vortex of wind came after Benny and postponed his plan. He leaped and compressed the sound waves, blasting the vortex of wind.

“Tsk.” Benny hissed. “Damn. I completely forgot your wind magic. You are completely impenetrable.”

Mr. Funny Man landed on the surface. His eyes are still stoic.

“Of course. What do you take me for? An idiot?”

Benny chuckled. “Well then. Let’s try again, shall we?”

Mr. Funny Man launched an attack. He swung his arm from here and there, the vortex of wind following his command and attack continuously attacked Benny while he dodged and evaded the sound blasts. His enemy were able to avoid any major injury.

The explosion between the attacks was destructive as a bomb. Their attacks cancel each other with furious consequential repercussions. Benny leaped over the branch of a tree. He used the sound blast to boost his speed and quickly turn away again, evading Mr. Funny Man’s attack. His blade swung on Mr. Funny Man’s right. Mr. Funny Man, however, was prepared. A razor of wind repelled Benny’s blade and bounced back on the ground. It was well-timed.

“Another trick on your sleeve. You’re quite resourceful.” Benny commended.

Mr. Funny Man grunted. “You think so? Let us see if you can say the same thing to the next one.”

“What?”

The ground trembled. Before Benny can realize the trap, the ground is sunk into the shallow ground.

“What the hell is this?!”

“If you didn’t let drop your guard then you would have seen this. Apparently, your boldness got in your head and rushed for a kill without a doubt.”

Benny gritted his teeth and groaned in frustration.

“You shit—”

In an attempt to use his sound blast Mr. Funny Man quickly used his wind vortex to overpower his attack. The vortex of wind pummeled him on the ground.

“Oh, and just for you to know… wind vortex is not my Inquiara Magic. It’s just a basic mid-tier spell.”

The violent wind ruptured Benny’s skin and his clothes, shredding them into smaller pieces. Benny’s scream was completely muted by the vortex. In the end, he was almost naked.

When the vortex calmed down, Mr. Funny Man ceased and set down his foot on the ground. Cuts were deep like from an actual knife. Benny’s flesh wounds are exposed and his blood is sprayed everywhere.

Benny’s throat had been cut to talk. He could only groan as his eyes laid slowly on Mr. Funny Man. He mouthed something.

Mr. Funny Man put his glasses back on. “Despite being a lower class, you’re quite troublesome… just for you to know.”

Benny forcefully muttered words. “All this time… you were hiding… your true… ability.”

“Yeah.”

“Then… why… did you… took… so… long…?”

“It’s a basic tactic. I want to know what you’re capable of and you’re reluctant to show it to me, hence, I began to simulate situations that might have caught you off guard. But because of your ability the part to engage you in close combat discloses it. The truth is… I can easily overpower your Inquiara Magic with my wind vortex, but it would use up most of my mana rendering me useless. That’s why I take the path of discretion rather than upfront assault… and you already knew how it goes.”

Mr. Funny Man was hoping that Benny would break to repent, but it seemed that he was not at all rueful. Benny’s grin spread on his dead expression.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s funny… because we… were… both thinking… the same… thing.” A horrid laugh followed in his words. “I, too, am not using the full extent of my Inquiara Magic.”

Mr. Funny Man didn’t take his bluff. “You’re lying.”

“Oh, believe… me.” Benny coughed blood. “Are you… familiar with the… Nion Hunters, Mr. Funny Man?”

It is a word that he hadn’t heard for a while.

“The Nion Hunters aren’t that significant than the Tribunal Hunters, Mephistic Hunters, Archaegian Hunters, and the rest of them, but they’re unique as the Primordial Hunters. Not only the Nion Hunters can manipulate energy at will, but they can also add effects similar to how you’re Inquiara Magic: Edertum did to us.”

“The point being?” Mr. Funny Man asked.

“For example, an Inquiara Magic that can replicate into a similar fashion of the original body. Not only the looks but a part of his personality.”

Mr. Funny Man remained clueless.

“What I’m saying is that this body is nothing but a replica of the original! Fool… you’ve been playing all along.” Mr. Funny Man’s eyes remained composed.

“What’s with your face?”

“You think by keeping me here would it not be safe for the princess? If that’s what you’re thinking then I daresay you are overcompensating, too arrogant. It’s too early to presume what’s the outcome, considering that they’re formidable warriors. Do not underestimate them.”

Benny grumbled and laughed in a ragged tone. “You’re the one who’s overestimating them… especially that boy. You know their limits especially that boy. Even those two in the front would take the lead, I doubt that they would be able to continue with the number of enemies that are going after them.”

Beneath the thick tint of his glass, Mr. Funny Man flinched.

Benny continued. “My real body… is coming after… them… now… hurry… or you… won’t make it in time.” He dreadfully laughed.

Benny’s life, or should be supposed to say, the clone’s life slipping in his eyes, until the light’s flickered out. Yet his heartbeat is still beating.

“If you’re going to die, then it should be on my terms.”

One last time, Mr. Funny Man got his blade and plunged on Benny’s chest. A last groan of life left his lungs. His body began to degrade into small pieces of light and lifted into the air, one by one blinking.

“I can’t believe he tricked me. I shouldn’t have left the majesty’s aid.”

Mr. Funny Man appeared to be worried. He was confident until now, his gravitas is completely unshackled by his thoughts over the matter. He sensed Ken’s presence just ahead of him and decided to come and help him finish the job. His enemy appeared to be stronger than Ken, moreover, the reason why he should intervene.

It should be closed right now. But halted in his tracks when a white wall blocked his way. Mr. Funny Man used his wind magic but failed in the attempt and in turn, the magic turn froze into a chandelier that traced the pattern of his wind vortex.

“Damn it!”

It would take him a few minutes before the white wall decimated into white light and shards before he continued.

He saw Ken bruised and battered. His left arm appeared to be burnt.

“Mr. Ken.”

Mr. Funny Man called out to him and landed on the ground.

“Mr. F? So, you already take care of the other guy, huh?”

Mr. Funny Man sounds disappointed.

“Not quite.”

“What?”

“It’s better if I explain as we move on. Come on, let’s go.”

Mr. Funny Man held Ken up and flew in the sky. He explained to Ken what happened and why Caroline is in a dire situation.

“The enemy completely got on our flank. I’m pretty sure Alastor, Cid, and Misty can handle them. Believe me or not, they’re formidable as we are.” Ken said.

“That’s precisely what I’m worried about.”

“I’m not sure what you are getting at.”

“Knowing them, they will cover each other until the number is going to be reduced, hence, the security of the princess would be jeopardized. They must remain on the run at any cost or else that guy would get ahead of them. Our detachment from the main carrier proved that it was going to happen again. We must not let that happen.”

“I understand, but what about Linda? Where is she?”

“Ken,” Mr. Funny Man’s voice stressed. “Don’t worry about her. She can manage all by herself.”

Even if Ken is in good condition, he was not in a position to fend off his orders.

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Liber hoarse loudly as it took a wide turn following the vehicle that Misty and Cid rode. Ahead of them was a narrow path in between the two mountains. It’s a perfect opportunity. Behind there was a loud rumble. Various vehicles emerged from the forest.

Cid on behind shouted at Alastor. “Al, you take the lead. We’ll take care of them from here.”

“What? Are you crazy?”

“We already are. Now, GO!”

Liber’s speed ascended and the vehicle halted.

“Don’t die on me, Cid!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

Cid got out. When he saw that they were far away, he used fire magic to destroy a part of the mountain. The rocks and boulders rolled down and occupied the road. The vehicles were reduced into a fire and got out before it exploded. The enemies march forward and start to fire at Cid and Misty. Their gunshots were random and seemingly not hitting them. They took cover behind the boulders and shifted whenever they felt most of the gunshots were at them.

The exchange of firing was powerful and earsplitting. The bullet punched its way through the boulder just near Cid causing a gaping hole in its wake.

“Hey, watch what you were shooting at!” Cid shouted.

The enemy turned in the direction of the voice and began to shoot.

“That’s the most unwise thing to do!” Misty said.

Now the enemies’ attention is divided and turned to her direction.

“Oh great!” Misty spoke to herself.

Cid laughed.

“Why are you laughing?!”

“Because someone is going to die!”

“What?!”

Cid pointed at the mountain. Misty stopped and looked up. They were so preoccupied with the battle they didn't notice that boulders were rolling over along the mudslide accelerating the descending speed.

“Oh, damn it!”

Cid heard her. He conjured a sphere protecting himself from the gunshots and covered Misty. Together they ran away. It was too late for the hooligans to notice the boulders the moment the rumbles became heavier.

Most of them were wiped out, and yet they are still dedicated to pursuing them.

Cid and Misty have the advantage this time. The enemies are completely stuck in a battle against the two.

“Do you think it’s a good idea to stay behind?”

“You got any better ideas?”

“Well…”

“Yeah, I think so. This is unavoidable. Our plan is to accompany the princess, but those bastards won’t shake off, so we kinda go along and derail from the original plan.”

“This is the worst.”

“I know. You don’t have to say that on my face.”

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Caroline stumbled and struggled to walk in an attempt to peep on the hole. They entered a clearing. A complete wasteland.

Alastor was mindful of his surroundings. He noticed the flapping of wings jink and shift their positions to confuse him.

“Around twenty, huh. Liber, please follow and don’t stop.”

Liber cried.

Alastor got up. His sword brandished in the air. His eyes cast on his back and saw a flock of brixies coming after them. They’re about the size of a baby. Their eyes are similar to a fly, though their skin and wings are blue and resemble the moth.

“Annoying pieces of shit.”

As the monsters ascended, Alastor swung his sword. The tip of the blade had only caught its wings and was no closer to killing it. The brixie avoided it and dived towards Liber.

Alastor knocked a brixie with his fist and backflip, landing on top of Liber. His sword successfully killed it in one swoop.

“It may not look like it but these monsters are smart.”

Liber cried.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I’m too heavy for you.”

Alastor got back on top of the wagon. He played his sword very well. None of the enemies got behind. With his quick responses and chantless magic of walls, the enemies had no other choice but to be slain by his sword.

When he looked down, he noticed the wings of the brixies struck on the wagon.

“Damn it!”

He cursed on himself as he got down and opened the door.

“Princess, are you alright?”

Alastor saw her in an awkward position. Thereafter, a water ball jacked on his face. Alastor nearly fell but his quick reflexes caught on the door and swiftly swung back to his seat. He heard the door locked loudly.

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Shut up. I’m fine.”

Alastor did not reply.

“Report.” She commanded.

“As we travel, the enemies outflank us, hence, they chose to stay behind to fight against the enemies’ commanders. Recently, Cid and Misty had departed to intercept the rest of the troops.”

“So, it’s just the two of us now?”

“Yes, but don’t worry, I’m capable of defending you.”

Alastor’s voice is stiff. Deep down, a doubt grew. He was still unsure of his abilities. He only had a few tricks on his sleeves. Unlike them, Alastor is nowhere close to getting his Inquiara Magic. He can only catch up to them due to his creative way of fighting but in reality, he was the weakest of them.

“I know you can.”

Caroline's words struck on his thoughts.

“I never doubted you, not even a bit. You don’t need to doubt yourself. Just do your best.”

Alastor’s weakening thoughts vanquished with her assuring words.

“I won’t fail you.”

As they ascended, Alastor caught a glimpse of the towering mountains that reached their peak on the clouds, in the highest sky. His eyes focused back on the road. A minute or less, he noticed trees falling on the ground from afar. It was a force that doesn’t naturally come from a normal person nor from a monster. This could only mean one thing.

“Liber!”

Liber sped off.

Alastor felt another presence following the first one.

“There’s two. Shit! We can’t stop now! All right, Liber. If you could speed up a little, I might give you ten sacks of green peas once we made it through the border.”

Liber’s eyes fired up. His feet throttled. They too comply with the change of speed.

“Shit!”

As they turn over, something sharp pierces through the leaves. Alastor tried to cut it off, but his sword only caught half of it and the other half made its way on Liber’s foot. Liber cried and his momentum disturbed. Fortunately, Liber did not trip on his feet and the wagon did not roll over as he had expected. Liber’s body trudged and slid on the ground and stopped on its tracks.

“Damn it,” Alastor swore under his breath. He checks the pulse of Liber. It appeared that he was still breathing well. His eyes cast on his legs and saw a needle just the size of an index finger. Alastor pulled it out and the unconscious Liber gave out a breath.

Alastor opened the door and saw the distressed Caroline.

“Come here, princess,” Alastor called out. “There’s something I need you to do.”

Caroline’s eyes are still shallow.

“Caroline!”

Alastor snapped and brought her back to reality.

“Huh. What did you just say?”

“I need you to do something. In case something happens, you run.”

Caroline shook her head.

“No. No. I will not. I will fight with you.”

“Listen to me. With that level of your strength, you’ll only get in my way and please, you’re their target, so you mustn't fall on their hands.”

“I am not going to leave you behind like Mr. F.”

“You said you trust me, right? I need those confident words and thoughts on me now, Caroline. Trust me. I know this is hard, but you have to endure this.”

Caroline reluctantly nodded.

“Now go.”

Caroline turned her back against him and carefully ran towards the forest.

At last, the two presence made their faces known as they ascended.

Alastor’s eyes quickly cast on the familiar face. The men next to him felt ignored.

Benny coughed. Sweats appeared all over his face. He pulled his garb and threw it on the wind. Different types of daggers hang on his waist and chest.

“You again?” Alastor started. “I thought Mr. F took care of you.”

“Well, he took the bait.”

“What?”

“Where’s the girl?”

The man asked. He had long dark wavy hair. His eyes flash in the dark part of the forest.

“I said, where is the girl?”

Benny could only hiss. The man’s appearance was out of his expectations. Benny knew him very well.

Ursax is a cold-hearted man. He is the very definition of a killing machine. He won’t hesitate to kill anyone on his way just to accomplish his missions. Ursax hit Alastor with a cold glance, and without a word, he reached for his single edge sword. Alastor did not reply. He swallowed his fear and did the same. He pulled out the knife from being strapped in his back. It was the knife that he stole back in Vesoga Plain. He held his sword and knife with a hard grip.

Alastor made his first move. The transcendent walls dropped around them. Most of the walls restrain Benny’s movement. His intention was clear. Alastor wanted to take them on one at a time. Alastor went to Ursax first. He performed feint attacks in an attempt to confuse the enemy’s field of vision. Despite the years of exhausting training, Alastor felt a shiver of apprehension as his kicks on the ground gave him a huge lurch forward. His sword slashed diagonally in the air. Ursax didn’t move. His huge arms arched and shielded him. The two swords hissed and brimmed in brilliant light for a second.

Alastor withdrew. It was at this moment Benny saw the opportunity. He made his move quietly and got on Alastor’s back.

“You’re mine.” Benny thought.

He hadn’t regained his footing, so the only logical thing to do is to use his knife to clash against the dagger Benny. Gaining his footing back, Alastor shifted his weight from bobbling. It was at this time he felt the cold touch of death on his neck. Benny was able to get out of the way and out of the range as Ursax pushed Alastor on the tree. Hard and grip. Unfettered and determined.

“Tell me. Are you that foolish to die just for a mere stranger?

“So what?” Alastor stood.

“You’re a mercenary. Not a soldier. How pitiful for you to die in a fight that you’re not part of. A complete joke.”

Benny got back on his feet.

“Hey, would you rather not include your comrade as collateral damage? And that boy is my prey. I got to him first.”

Ursax ignored him. It was the moment he was waiting for. Alastor’s fingers flinched. The transcendent wall had fallen on Ursax and crashed in the woods. Benny stepped forward. His dagger crashed against Alastor’s sword. He wasn’t blind to not notice the small figure of the mirror-like transcendent wall and managed to return the favor as well.

They fired at each other.

Benny’s sound blast Alastor and Alastor’s transcendent wall magic pushed the enemy away. Alastor felt the pressure of his attack as he crashed on the tree. The light armor he wore cracked. He already understood that his magic was stronger than him. But it was not the right time to amaze and certainly, it’s not ideal to give them time to recover.

Alastor turned his hand in Ursax's direction. In a single swing, the transcendent walls followed over and crashed to his location. The crashing glass of transcendent walls erupted and the tremors cut down the branches of trees.

“Very impressive.”

Alastor’s ears caught those eerie words. Through the swelling billowing smoke of dust, Ursax stepped out in the shadow as if nothing had happened.

“Most remarkable creativity, I must say. You are still the guy I remembered back in the old days. You did really well, Alastor.”

Alastor felt an eerie shiver of shock creeping on his back. The question in his mind ran back and forth. *Who the hell is this guy?*

“I know what you are thinking right now. You must be very confused about how I knew your identity.”

Alastor raised a brow. “How? Who the hell are you?”

“You mean you don’t recognize this face? This gash you gave to me?”

Ursax lifted and turned his head to the right. He showed a blemish on his neck on the left side.

“You’re the one who gave me this scar, Alastor. Don’t you remember?”

“I have no idea who you are pal. And I don’t care.”

Ursax is confused but then again, he returned to his poised demeanor and slightly nodded as if confirming something.

“I see. The memory suppressing spell is still intact. In that case, allow me to remind you… THROUGH PAIN!”

Ursax took a big leap. Alastor stepped back, balancing his weight to properly parry the incoming attack. Alastor rasped before Ursax swung his sword downward. Their swords bang, shuddered, and bounced as they connected. The rushing flow of rage in his blood made it possible to withstand Ursax attack. He felt the tremor of Ursax force clashing through their weapons connected at each other. Their weapons hissed and sparked. The force between the two weapons trailed to their bodies and to their boots. The ground trembled and the wind erupted. Out of the two, Ursax was the one who was not struggling, in fact, he proved to be taking over the fight. Alastor stepped back, bit by bit.

“What seems to be the problem? This isn't like you. A meager competition of strength like this is nothing. Show me what you got.”

Alastor finally had it. He withdrew.

“Coward!”

Ursax lunged forward with urgency, his movements driven by haste. Alastor reacted swiftly, whirling around to generate enough momentum to divert Ursax's initial assault. However, the subsequent attacks became relentless. There was an increase of effort. Gritting his teeth, Alastor pulled away. Ursax sword swish one fee away from his face.

“You’re not going anywhere!”

Alastor was astonished at Ursax’s astounding speed. He had anticipated it, yet it was startling. Ursax was aiming for a fatal blow. Before Ursax's sword can reach him, the small piece of transcendent wall from his palm activated and enlarged. The barrier thrust and propelled Ursax away with a powerful impact. The magic did not inflict any damage, but gave Alastor a breathing breath from the continuous assault.

“You all should know that magic like this won’t be effective against me.”

It was his strength that shattered the wall into dozens of glass pieces.

“I got him, ya!”

Alastor shivered as his eyes caught Benny’s shadow swiftly going on his back. In front of him is Ursax dashing towards him. The time reeled slowly. His mind was blank. Out of nowhere, Benny was blasted by a white light. Another white light blasted away Ursax.

“What… what just happened?”

Ursax recovered quickly and got up. Benny, on the other hand, is injured, he was shot on his shoulder.

“What was that?!” Benny shouted.

Ursax eyes looked around. His vision enhanced, but it was too late. Another white hue of light shot him in the arm and legs. It wasn’t fatal, but the damage packed a punch.

Six yards away from them Tin blew the smoke out of her gun. Her gun was modeled after a rifle, but only slightly different. It used the same principle as Cid’s gun. The handle can absorb the mana and store it on a core that can be found in the slide. It was called Mana Gun.

“Benny!” Ursax shouted.

“I got it!”

Alastor darted his eyes around. He felt the presence hiding behind the bush and the tree. He knew very well a person who thought like that.

“It appears that one of your comrades made his way here.”

“If I were you, I wouldn't underestimate her.” Alastor said. His eyes returned on Ursax.

“Her? A woman did that?”

“She may be skinny and all but that lass are capable as I am.”

Alastor grinned. This time, his speed increased and created feint presences in a form of afterimages.

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Tin beamed and threw out her bombs to Benny, not looking back. Having caught the sound of a clang, Benny assertively diverged away. With the environment they are in it would seem that he doesn’t need to use a protection spell. Tin drawback. Her double handguns pointed to Benny.

“Now it’s time for you guys to shine.” She grinned.

The bullets sputtered wildly as she pulled the triggers. Benny continuously shifted his position evading the bullets, letting nature itself guard him while looking for opportunity.

Seeing how the enemy hastily moves, Tin focused on running. She grabbed the landmines, tapped the ignite button, and threw it.

On the right timing, Benny stepped on it. Tin stopped in her tracks hearing the explosion behind her, yet she remained on guard. It would be reckless to let her guard down now. Best not to give in to lax. Rather than checking out, Tin stayed where she was.

Tin had fought monsters many times before. She trained with the other trainees every day of her life since she picked up her first weapon. She was always on the backbench letting the close combatants deal with the job. Though this isn’t her first time dealing at close range, she fought alone by herself before. It was to emphasize their individual productivity whether they’re capable of hunting alone.

Just this time… it felt different. Tin heard whiskers. There are several of them. She thought.

“Three… no, seven… What the hell is going on?”

The several presences allude to uneasiness on her. She wasn’t sure where or when they come out but she must not avert her attention. Tin’s tongue dried. Her body grew cold as she felt the bloodlust seeping out from the woods. This bloodthirstiness felt familiar. She experienced this once before, but compared to that, this is nothing.

She shook her head and flipped the switch at the hilt of her guns to switch bullets. Right now, she won’t be needing to use her mana. Her aim was to kill. A person from her back flung out. She reacted quickly. Tin turned over her heels and her guns rang. Her bullets didn’t miss. Considering their position, he was three feet closer to her. He was within point-blank range. The bullets whizzed through his brain. Tin turned around from the unbearable scene. There’s no need for her to check the corpse. She can tell with her observation magic that it’s nothing but a clone.

“That was a close call. So, when are you planning on showing yourself?! You call yourself a man while hiding in the shadows? How pathetic!”

“Oh, the dear woman of guns, don’t be so confident just because you took down one of my grunts.”

“Then show yourself, damn it. Don’t be a coward. That trick will only work once. You can’t fool me twice.”

“Who said about tricking you? I was just merely testing your skills, but it appeared you’re more than a plaid of the skirt.”

“What did you say?!”

“Now, now. Don’t get angry, shorty.”

“Instead of mocking me, why not show me what you can do? All this time you have done nothing but to let your comrades do the dirty jobs.”

Of course, she was mocking him but wasn’t sure if he would be goaded by her words. Tin heard a creaking. The nose of her gun followed the noise and shot it.

“You missed.”

She heard another indistinct noise. Another three clones appeared from different directions. They all wore different foreign dresses. Their attires are somewhat odd, Tin never saw anyone wear a cap with a red luxurious globe. The other two seem to be familiar, she was familiar with cowboys from another region, and well she saw some people wore like that on a farm.

Giving a thought about that matter can be explained by another time. This time she must do her job. The clones tackled her at the same time. There wasn’t a room for her to take a breath in. Tin approached the one who wore a luxurious robe. Her feet sprung and spun. He used his back to further her momentum and jumped straight.

Up there, her vision was clear as day. Tin completely saw the blade that came after her. One of them must have thrown it in an attempt to disrupt her motion but they missed. The blade only came passed on her side.

Tin smiled. It’s something that was supposed to be funny. Tin breathed in and started to twist like a tornado. Her bullets hailed down the enemies. The ammunition ricocheted wildly. Once there were no bullets, Tin landed at the same time. The enemies are completely decimated. Their bodies are completely grotesque. They can’t be described by conventional means anymore.

“Well,” Tin started. “Won’t you agree it’s time for the main man to reveal himself?”

The moment she felt the creeping sense of bloodlust, she paused. Her body froze. Tin forcefully lifted her spirits and broke off to the chilling chains that bind her. Her arms raise and aim in front of her where the darkness is creeping from.

“Damn it.”

She stepped back. Careful and slow.

“What’s the hold-up? I thought you were so eager to see *me*?”

This wasn’t what she was expecting.

“You were looking for me, right? Here we are.”

The ten versions of him stepped out from the shadow. It wasn’t the appearance of his clones that threatened her, it’s what he was emitting. They’re all emitting the same dark aura. Dread and cursed. The miasma flowed within their blood.

“What’s with this ridiculous amount of dark energy?”

Tin never felt this much before, much less this kind of hostility.

“This energy is relatively close to Theo but it’s different than usual. How did he acquire this kind of power? This is ridiculous.”

Two out of his clone dashed forward. Tin flipped over the switch of her guns to use her mana. Her reflexes are exceedingly fast compared to them, but still, even if that was the case she must be careful of their attacks. So far, Tin evaded their blades and countered them with her bullets. The location where she shot was non-fatal. Considering her mana consumption would exceed the damage of a single bullet she expected that it would do more damage, but it appeared that the enemy can still go on despite her efforts.

Tin uses the blade on her gun to parry the clone’s attack. She kicked him in his gut. The clone flinched. That was the moment she was waiting for. She swung her arms to stun him and shoot him in the face. A whizzed cut through the wind. It was fast. She wasn’t able to react quickly and got hit on her ribs. Her back crashed against the log of a tree.

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Alastor's afterimages blurred into existence, granting him the opportunity to slash across Ursax's chest. The second attempt, however, faltered. The sting of pain jolted Ursax's instincts into action. He blocked Alastor's attack with precision, his determination snapping into place. He readied himself for a counter, but by the time he reacted, Alastor was already five feet beyond his reach. The sword only reached the breeze.

The battleground offered ample space for their clash, its boundaries defined by the encircling trees. Alastor conceded to himself that some of his movements lacked finesse, moments of haste that were uncharacteristic. An attempt to outflank Ursax resulted in a swift rebuke – a blast of wind magic that sent Alastor hurtling through the air. The mercenary was quickly on his feet.

With a calculated maneuver, Alastor circled his opponent. His footwork was as impressive as it was elusive, offering no telltale sign of his impending strikes. Ursax's white cloak rustled as he suppressed his anger, maintaining a controlled facade. The subtle whisper of metal filled the air as Ursax drew a second blade from his belt, the blade emerging with a hissing exhale from its sheath.

Alastor wasted no time and launched an attack from behind, the sharp swish of his blade slicing through the air. Ursax's senses shifted, his attention drawn to the oncoming threat. He pivoted to his left, effectively parrying Alastor's sword with his own.

Yet Alastor had not forgotten that Ursax wielded another blade on his opposite side. He knew better than to overlook the potential downward swing of that concealed weapon. Swiftly, he maneuvered to intercept the incoming strike, their blades locking in a contest of strength.

They were now locked in a battle of sheer power. Though Ursax held a slight advantage, the struggle maintained equally. Alastor braced himself, his muscles straining as he put his weight into the push. Blades clashed, producing a symphony of gnashing metal, grinding sparks, and unyielding determination.

“What happened to you? The ‘Alastor’ I remembered was better than you!”

Ursax’s muscles tightened and employed force. Slowly but surely, Ursax pushed Alastor back. Despite the sparks created by their inhumane strength, he didn’t flinch. Ursax wanted to see for himself what made this man in front of him.

“Just as I thought,” Ursax started as if he was making a conclusion. “Poor ignorant boy. Shackled by those people. I pity you for falling for their words. If you were there, maybe, Augustus would have saved you from their lies.”

The name rang a bell on Alastor. His eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“So, you are one of them? Tell me. What do you know about Augustus?”

Ursax grinned and cracked his neck. “So, do you remember him?”

“Batshit. That motherfucker attacked our home. I will kill that traitor.”

To some extent, Alastor couldn’t care less about the mansion, he was more concerned about the people who live there, to those who have yet to have the opportunity to live their lives once again, to those who were robbed of their freedom, and to those who never had a home.

“Struck a nerve there, didn’t I?”

“Alright. If you’re not going to give me the answers I want, I’ll just have to beat the shit out of you!”

“I thought your mission was to protect the political envoy?”

“Consider this as a side mission. Given that you’re not cooperative, I guess I’ll just have to take you with me.”

“Take me? As a hostage? Buddy, you have no idea how wrong you are. That’s not boldness, that’s arrogance.”

“One last chance—”

“Or what? You’ll go all out on me? You make me laugh.”

“Fine then.”

Ursax didn’t reply. Only a grin appeared on his face.

As Alastor slowly loosened his muscles, his right foot trudged back, throwing himself off with a quick back spring. He landed with an audible thud.

Ursax, on the other hand, rotated his body, flattening out with great succession, and threw himself over Alastor in a form of spin.

Alastor shifted his weight, backed his strength to withstand the attack. Just as Ursax’s blades were about to reach him, Alastor threw his arms and their blades connected, but, to no avail, the force of momentum shook his balance. The entire force of his spin transferred to Alastor’s feet and was pushed aside with great strength. His boots trudged all the way on the edge. Alastor’s concern was transferred to Liber. A sigh of relief expunged knowing that they’re far enough for his unconscious partner to get involved. Seeing his eyes made Ursax tremble in anger. The broken composure made it available to witness as his grip tightened.

“This is beyond comprehension. Even if you didn’t lose your memory, you won’t still show a hint of emotion. I will knock some sense into you.”

Alastor's response was a stern, piercing stare that expressed his displeasure. He swung his arm, creating many mirror-like defenses that appeared in various locations all about him with a quick, trained move. It was difficult for Ursax to understand the protection system formed by these ethereal barriers, which appeared to dance in the air.

Ursax's eyes grew wider as he tried to comprehend the intricate interactions between the mirror walls of Alastor. Alastor was on top of him before he had time to completely comprehend the plan. Alastor quickly drew closer to them as the sound of his feet striking the ground resonated through the air. He dipped and swirled, his blade cutting with accuracy.

Ursax could readily predict the attack since it was almost too straightforward. Ursax move fluidly with his blade, deflecting Alastor's blow with it. He took advantage of the chance to attempt a right-handed counterattack at the same time. However, Alastor was as quick to act, hurriedly deploying a dagger to deflect Ursax's approaching blow.

“You know how sturdy I am. Why waste—”

Something wide hit his back. He felt the cold glass of the wall through his thick white cloak.

“It seems you forgot that I can manipulate these walls.” Alastor grinned.

Ursax crashed against the trees and made a break to the mountainside. The loud crash resonated with the billowing wind.

Alastor waited and not too long Ursax appeared out of the shadow. The blood from his forehead trickled down to his nose and to his chin. He spat out a tooth.

“Not even near to your savage nature.” Ursax muttered under his breath.

The fight is not over yet. The man in front of him didn’t even appear to be bothered by his attacks despite the damage he received.

“Although I admit you’re a good sparring partner, come on… Are you done with all of this? Is this really you, going all out? How ridiculous.”

Alastor hissed. “Talking big with no bite.”

“If this is all that you got, then I take that as my turn.”

Ursax put excessive force on his feet and sprung. The blade on his left flipped in a defensive position. His right arm swung downward. Alastor instinctively sidestepped to the right just enough to feel the blade past a hair on him. Ursax quickly descended and with a loud thud, he rushed to Alastor. They exchanged attacks. Alastor could barely keep up with Ursax fast and furious. Mostly, he relied on his instinct. Then the time he was afraid of came. Some of his attacks managed to break through and tear a part of his skin. Alastor could only do right now to block while darting around. A heartbeat of panic struck him. His movements are slowing.

Alastor’s defense was about to give up when something bolted him. Something inside of him twitched. His muscles swelled and his stance fortified. He felt his blood boil. Ursax felt Alastor’s breath held in his lungs. Then came a push. He felt through his blade the unbelievable strength that astonished his curiosity. Alastor then made something unexpected.

He bounced back and in a single sweep of his feet, Alastor appeared to be blinking back and forth just in front of him. Ursax senses heightened. His eyes cast hastily from his whereabouts. A sharp wind whizzed in his cheek. Red blood dripped from his jaw and his position was shaken.

Alastor's furious attacks left Ursax no room for him to breathe. He can see it all. The muscle movements, the reaction time, and his broken expression, all were available for him to read. Alastor bounced back with a quick shift of movements. He manipulated the transcendent mirror walls, dancing around them. Ursax was wide awake and calm.

The two warriors exchange attacks. Their movements are swift. They are almost on the same level in terms of combat abilities. It was thanks to Alastor's latent potential that awakened.

He heard a loud whoosh from his behind. Ursax turned around. His blades followed the momentum of the twist. The blades made contact and shattered the transcendent mirror wall. However, the upcoming strike is far from over.

Another came over which Ursax dodge, then another, his brute strength easily shattered it. Ursax followed the same pattern for some time. It was rough but his speed is nowhere decreasing. In fact, he was more keen than usual. He had no slightest intention to get caught by one of his attacks, again.

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She ran once before.

Ever since her parents were wiped out, she left the palace. She was sly as a fox. Her traces were never found by the royal guards.

It was an abrupt decision. It was all too sudden for her. Her father Jven left them with a smile but was returned to the coffin.

They mourned but only in a day then the next morning they immediately knocked on the palace doors demanding the next heir. It was a long afternoon for the nobles including the three generals to discuss who should take over the role as the ruler of the Ylfon Kingdom. There have been some complications among them considering the qualities of the two princesses.

Mola was assertive, had the mind of a leader, and taught proper etiquette at a young age. However, Caroline was slightly different, she was a bit of a rebel, she was not good at expressing her words, but she had ideas for the betterment of the people. She had a heart for those in poverty, more importantly, she grew fond of visiting an orphanage and playing with the children. In the end, they chose Mola to be the new appointed Queen.

That was three months ago. She was different, but she is firm on not taking the role as a princess.

If it weren’t for the revolting nobles who had wanted her head then she wouldn’t have been a force to return to the kingdom.

Even if she hated it, there is a slight regret in her heart. Her older sister, Mola, had been facing the crisis all alone. Maybe she shouldn’t have run away and instead fought together.

Thinking back now, Caroline doesn’t want to run away anymore. It sounds dumb, but it is right for her to help them. She never thought of them as mere mercenaries. She considered them as humans even though their name preceded negative views on the outside world, she opened herself to them. It may sound strange that she felt that way, but ever since she knew that Alastor was part of them, Caroline’s worries had eased.

She can’t explain it clearly, but when she first met him, she thought of him as someone who is daunting, who had a cold exterior that is impossible to penetrate, it’s the very same to his father. Naturally, a King would have a strong gravitas so that others won’t underestimate him, but deep inside he is a caring father. Alastor appeared too similar to his late father.

It was later that she confirmed that Alastor was not as bad as she thought he was. He may not admit it, but he had a heart despite all he’d gone through and she understood that. Whatever happened back then must’ve caused him to shut himself down and closed his emotions as much as possible. Something told her to avoid him, but knowing this it reeled her to know him, she must know him and she wanted to help him.

Alastor had spitting remarks to her late father and because of that, she will not abandon him just like how the others turn their back on her father.

It was a long run, but Caroline found her way back. Despite regretting running away, Caroline snapped from the truth.

The explosions are getting closer. Caroline walked heavily and firmly up to a sludgy path. She heard gunshots, hence she prepared protection magic.

She was indeed right. A bullet flung to her protection shield and fell to the ground. She turned right and furthermore followed the path and took the uncharted route.

Peering behind the wood, Caroline saw the unknown woman battling against four individuals who wear the same face but different in some features. They wore different clothes, they had different textures of skin and hair, and were different in height.

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Tin successfully killed one of them, but at the same time, she got hit by a man who had a built body. Regardless, she stood.

Tin rushed at him. The enemy’s huge arm swung and she slipped and flipped forward to evade a shadow blade. Her boots slide against the ground before bouncing back and shooting the enemy at his legs. He felt it and kneeled. Then she shot him on the head.

They all stopped.

The man applauded her.

“You’re good. Far too good. You’ve defeated 2 of my clones despite being outnumbered.”

“So what?”

“We are in dire need of skillful warriors like you.”

“Ah. You want me to join your merry boy band?”

“Precisely.”

“Sorry, I already got my own gig and I don’t deal with scraps.”

Benny raised a brow.

“Scrap, you say?”

The dark aura began to grow.

“That is the most imbecile thing I’ve ever heard. I gave you a chance to join us, but you refused me.”

Tin appeared to be unaffected but deep inside she was afraid.

“*Maybe I shouldn’t have done that.*” She spoke in her thoughts.

The dark energy gathered in his palm and formed a sphere. A bolt of lightning sparks that graze her and then was followed by more.

“I intend to take you alive, that is why I used my clones to restrain you but it appears I have to use all I got.”

The clones jumped away and vanished into thin air. The question came to her but as soon as Benny threw the dark sphere at her, Tin completely stood frozen.

It was at this moment Caroline jumped to save her.

“What are you doing here?!” Tin asked. “You were supposed to be running away, not the other way around.”

“Sorry, but there’s a change of plans.”

“What?!”

Caroline took a deep breath. She raised her palm and chanted.

“Cinque Parete Invisible!”

It was the spell that she learned from Alastor. Five transcended walls appeared and blocked the dark sphere. The force broke through the first layer and then another one.

“How come it’s not slowing down?”

“This is your first time using this magic, right?” Tin asked. Finally, she broke the spell that binds her briefly. She put her hand on Caroline’s shoulder and lent her strength. “If it is, then you’re completely out of commission, but thanks to me, you’re not going to get our ass kicked.”

Tin’s mana flowed to Caroline’s body.

Caroline felt the surge of mana transferring to her and to the spell. The crack from the third wall was repaired. The dark energy was starting to crack.

“You see that? That’s the right push.” Tin stated.

When the dark sphere reached the breaking point, it shattered and exploded.

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Each sword was aimed at their throat. Alastor parried Ursax's dagger and he parried Alastor’s knife. Alastor retreated. One of his floating walls fell and blocked Ursax on his way. Another fell down.

“Meaningless.”

Ursax swung his blades and destroyed the walls. He took a big leap. In the midway, Alastor smirked. It was all for another ploy. A wall smacked Ursax at his left and crashed into the tree.

“How bothersome.” Ursax murmured. He spat vehemently, though it did not provide any fatal damage.

Even if Ursax used magic on him, the walls would be able to protect him no matter how many times he threw him with magic. Given that Alastor can conjure a huge number of walls, it is best to utilize his mana in physical strength rather than compete with him with magic.

Alastor pushed forward with confidence. He was getting comfortable with the twitch as if his body grew accustomed to it. It was wishful thinking though. That kind of power was beyond his comprehension yet.

Alastor’s body gave up and fell to the ground. His body was shaking. The twitch brought pain once more. A jolt of pain coursed through his nerves.

“Damn it! What’s happening to me?”

Alastor couldn’t move a muscle even a bit. Her motor functions have shut down.

“Why?! Why now?! I am so close.”

Ursax beamed widely. “It appears that’s the limit of your body. Whatever that power resides within you, you cannot fully regulate it. For now, of course.”

“Shit. Shit. Shit.”

“It’s my win.”

A powerful explosion resonated out of nowhere. The towering fire endlessly climbed up to the sky that gathered their attention.

“What was that?”

Ursax used his observation magic. He felt mana from three different people. The two appeared to be fine, but the other one was on his knees.

“This can’t be. Benny got defeated just like that?!”

Alastor grinned even in his dire situation. “Poor guy. She blasted him away, I supposed.”

“Impossible, she’s alone and— oh.”

Ursax's panic expression completely wiped off his face and was replaced by a wide smile.

“It appears that the princess is not that far away.”

“What? Damn, that is naïve. I told her to run away.”

Ursax chuckle. “There’s no need for me to get into trouble anymore.”

“Hey. Can we have a ceasefire?”

Ursax kicked him in his gut.

“Impudent. Shut up. I thought you were useful once, but you became an empty vessel. I have no need for you.”

Ursax walked past him, disregarding him completely. Alastor couldn’t move his body. It’s as if his muscles shut down. The twitch twisted his guts. The pain had him fall unconscious.

Ursax didn’t look back and continued to walk.

“As much as I want to take you in, the mission matters the most and I don’t think you have any worth to us now.”

Ursax felt the tranquility come back to the forest. The wind erupted from behind and the only thing left was the wreckage.

Just as he came past the forest, water magic blasted him.

Caroline rushed to Alastor. She pulled him and caressed his head. Her healing magic started to do its job.

Tin glanced at the location where Ursax was blasted. She noticed the atmosphere grew heavier.

Ursax came out without damage.

“Hey, hey. What was that supposed to be? A water magic?” Ursax eyes cast on Caroline. He grinned. “There you are.”

“What of it? What will you gain from all this, huh? All of this death and chaos, you would go this far just for what? Your deluded ideas?”

“I am not obliged to entertain you, but if you want an answer, then so be it. Your existence will be the key for utopia.”

“Utopia, you say? Is this utopia supposed to solve everything that’s alluded to in this whole world?”

“Yes. You see, princess, you are far too blind to see the ugliness of this world. You never knew the cycle of distrust and paranoia that has brought upon us.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, we do.”

“This cycle you’re talking of will never end if you use violence to enforce your beliefs.”

“This very cycle was the very reason why we’re in the current situation and also has produced many Wars of Blights. And each time we look at the source of the conflict it is always because the elders passed down their paranoid outlook and the young men continued as it is until now. The elders waged war, young men were sent to the battlefield, children and women were the casualties, and the young ones will bear hatred to those who have come before them. So, tell me, princess, who’s the winner after the war?”

She didn’t reply.

Ursax continued. “Our goal is to create a utopia where violence and greed would not exist. We’ll be the last generation who’s going to bear the cycle of paranoia of the old men. Now, princess. Do not resist or I’ll kill both of them.”

Tin conjured fire magic and threw it at him, but Ursax swung his arm and the fireball dissipated.

His movements are swift. There is no indication that his power had waned. Ursax fist thrust on her stomach. She staggered back and fell.

Ursax pulled a blade.

He was about to cut her down but suddenly, a mass of water struck him. His foot fortified and withstand the attack.

“Great. Now what?”

The men in the shadows landed with a soft thud. They all wear white coats as their uniform. Ursax eyes laid on them.

“The Canaries, huh.”

There were 7 of them.

A young man that had hazel hair with a fair height stepped in front. He appeared to be the squad leader on their platoon.

Ursax said. “Fresh faces, no stretch marks. Yep, definitely newbies. What the hell. They’re sending rookies to a battlefield now? The Canaries must’ve lost their minds.”

The young man said, “If you’re aware of us, then there is no need for the proper introduction.”

“Watch your words, rookie. You’re quite arrogant for a newbie.”

“There’s a report about a ruckus around the border. It appears that we’re in luck. We caught you before you crossed the border.” He whipped his baton in the air and the tip extended its size. “As the law enforcers, you will abide.”

Ursax shook his head, grinning. “No.”

“What?”

Ursax flung forward. He swung a roundhouse kick.

The man blocked Ursax's arm. He felt a swish on his right and his baton automatically raised and parried the blade.

The other two Canaries moved against Ursax in which he responded splendidly to their attempts of attacks. While the others turn their attention to Tin and Caroline.

“Damn it.” Tin cursed on herself.

She’d wish that she had more mana left, but the previous fight caused so much damage to her body. She was barely manipulating her mana to conjure magic.

They came close, on guard.

Caroline, however, was unwilling to give up.

She shot a quick chantless water magic out of her palm. It was rather weak compared to before as it dissipated into a small one before uselessly making contact with the Canary officer.

In a swoop of his baton, the water ball dissolves.

Liber opened his eyes. The Comodo grunted as it stood on its feet. He saw Alastor lying still on the ground.

Liber’s eyes burn bright.

His mouth opened and a wide fire attack erupted from his throat. A line of flame parted the two parties. Liber rushed to them and along the wagon was dragged on the road.

Tin went to Liber and had carried the wagon to roll on its wheels. They carried Alastor's body inside.

Liber was hostile to the Canaries. His mouth spewed fire on them.

When Tin sat in the front, Liber automatically rode away. She was taken aback by Liber’s quick movements. Moreover, it appeared that Liber knew the right path of wherever he was taking them.

They came past the forest and turned over. Liber jumped off the edge of the road, down the sloping path, and threw countless fire magic to cut off the bushes that blocked its vision. The wagon was wobbling hard.

Tin held tightly the leash.

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Inside, Alastor slowly regained consciousness. The first thing that welcomed him was the unbearable pain. His face contorted and had to endure for few minutes. When the pain resided he sat straight.

His eyes opened and saw Caroline’s palm turned on him. She was still healing him. Alastor held her hands to stop.

“I’m fine. Don’t waste your mana on me.”

Caroline sat on her seat.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Tin looked back. She heard rustles.

“Shit.” She muttered under her breath. “Al! You take over the wheels.”

“What?”

Tin already jumped. She grabbed her pistols and began to shoot. Mana’s emitted from the pistols as she aimed for the three members of the Canary troops.

Alastor swung the door open and slipped through the front seat outside. Caroline saw his face winced in pain for a second.

He was enduring it.

And so, she followed him. She was worried that he might pass out once more.

Alastor’s eyes trailed to the sound of a thud. It was Caroline. She struggled to hang. Alastor grabbed her arm and pulled her to the seat.

“What are you doing here?” Alastor asked. “Go back inside, now!”

“No!” She shook her head. “You’re not going to make it if you continue to insist that you’re ok.”

“What are you talking—?”

Alastor’s body once again experienced the tremendous jolt of pain. His body was coiled.

“Al!”

Caroline held him from falling down. Alastor raggedly breathed as his shallow eyes watched her.

“Just sit there. I’ll make sure they won’t follow us.”

Caroline held the reigns and turn Liber’s direction back to the road.

“If I’m going to die, I prefer to do it while fighting.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Don’t say what?”

“You know what I mean.” She said without looking back. “You’d rather give up when it didn’t go to plan.”

“That is completely opposite of what I said.”

Alastor tried to take over but she shoved his hand.

“You’re going to sleep. You can’t fight in that state and even if you said you’re used to all-nighters, I will still not hand you the strap.”

The night is already fast approaching.

Alastor's eyes rested a bit. His thoughts fluctuated. Another ten minutes and he woke up. His bleak eyes travelled on her.

“Princess, if I say ‘I wanted to die’, will it make it easier for you to let me go?”

Caroline’s brow arched. Her tensed expression loomed.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?! Are you still insisting on fighting them? Forget it. And if you say another word, I will add more injuries to you.”

Caroline’s attention went back to the road and they entered the Grand Canyon.

“Why does everyone treat ‘I wanted to die.’ lightly as if it was another joke?”

Their journey thereon continued.

Somewhere around 7 to 8 pm they finally made it on the border.

Thankfully they haven’t caught up to them, but that was not all. They should be worried about the bandits that might come after their belongings, or worse, soldiers from their kingdom might’ve been posted within this part. It would sound right for them to watch over here since there have been reports of a ruckus around the area.

Alastor’s eyes were slightly open. He gazed at her.

Before he could say anything, Caroline already interrupted him. “I’m not a damsel in distress, don’t worry about me. You’ve fought hard back there. The thing I could do now is to take the wheel so you can rest. Go get some sleep.”

She was still unwilling to give up.

Alastor gave out a deep sigh. He wasn’t planning to goad her into his wish. Alastor was glad that he had fallen asleep, even if he didn’t admit it.

The stars of heaven bloomed and flashed in the velvet black like scattered moon dust.

Alastor was sleepy again. His expression dulled. His eyes weakened and closed. It was at this moment he was on the verge of unconsciousness when he heard a faint whoosh. His eyes cast back on the sky. On top, he saw a man wearing a white cloak standing.

“Yo.” The canary greeted.

Caroline noticed his baton quickly withdrew and attempted to crush Alastor’s skull. She quickly shifted the direction and the whole wagon shook. Through the thick forest, the intruder was knocked over by the branches. Alastor climbed on top of the wagon. His sword was ready. If it weren’t for Caroline’s quick thinking, he would’ve fallen over the road.

“That’s nice what you did there.”

Caroline thumbs up.

Misfortune fell upon them. The shortcut had them fall over four feet high. Their wagon nearly trips over the road. Alastor went down and gave a mighty push through his feet while remaining hanging.

A flare whizzed behind him. Alastor barely evaded the incoming attacks and made his balance stable as he made it back on top of the wagon. His masterful play of sword blocked every projectile attack. The attack was too narrow and predictable. The fireball and arrows were repelled perfectly.

Another water ball skidded through the woods and made a curved turn towards him. Alastor made a single mirror wall to block the attack.

Then, an abrupt break happened. Alastor nearly fell but he leaped down. Caroline was silent.

He looked in front and saw two people. A woman, fairly young, had short black hair and a face of a stoic person. The other one was blonde and tall, around 5’8.

Alastor knew what the white cloak meant.

“Canaries.” He muttered under his breath.

“Surrender. The two of you are suspects for the ruckus back in the Indigium Region border.”

They whipped their batons in the air. A familiar spark hissed and cracked.

“I kinda forgot to tell you that they’re after us,” Caroline said.

“What? You should’ve told me sooner.”

“I did not expect that they would go that far to pursue us even though we made it across the border.”

Alastor was caught in his thoughts. He didn’t expect that this would happen. He hadn’t fully recovered from the fight against Ursax. His mana was drained from the fight. So, obviously, fighting them head-on is not an option. Running away is also not an option. Considering that they’re law enforcers, bribing is also not acceptable.

They’re cornered.

“Shit.”

Another three people came down from behind her.

The only reasonable thing to do now is to surrender and wait for the others to come and rescue them.

He prepared to lay down his sword.

He drew out a breath and then…

*What was that?* Those words came out of his mind.

He smelled a dry and woody odor of a cigarette. He’d never mistaken that smell. Alastor was well aware of that. He couldn’t determine where it came from. The smell is everywhere.

Seconds after then, the ground quaked.

All of them are alarmed.

*What the hell is coming?*

A shadow blanketed them and landed between the two parties.

The smoke of dust was billowing around him. With a single swing of his club the billowing dust dissipated into the breeze. His cyan hair and beard swayed softly along with the wind. He showed a grin.

“I thought that my men finally caught something. Well, it wasn’t food, but my cage could use canaries.”

The young man scoffed. He looked around and felt their presence. They’re outnumbered.

He raised his hand, indicating to retreat. They threw smoke bombs on the ground and they’re gone. Their savior looked back.

“Oh, we meet again.” Timber said. “Troublesome as ever.”

“You,” Alastor said. He quickly held strong his sword. “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” Timber repeated the question. “It is you who need something. Is that how you repay those who save your ass?”

Alastor looked over at Caroline. She was calmed and remained collected. She looked back and gave him a nod. Alastor put his sword back to the scabbard.

“Sorry about that.” Caroline started. “We had a rough ride.”

“I can tell.” Timber replied. “It is the canaries who came after both of you. So, you must have done something to alert them.”

It wasn’t a question. Timber is goading them to confess, but they both knew that it’s not going to happen and Timber knew very well why.

He received no reply.

Timber slightly shook his head. The people in the dark slipped away without any noise.

“Come.” The Timber called out to them.

Alastor was hesitant. He remembered very well what his men did to him back on Vesoga Plain. Looking back at Caroline, he knew that being with him is not safe, but what other choice he had it appeared that he had no intention to do something against them.

“Is he a friend?” Caroline asked.

“I wouldn’t call it like that.”

“Hey!” The Timber intercepted. “I won’t do anything to you guys.”

“Knowing you, I doubt that would be the case. What do you want?”

“How uncanny.”

“I haven’t completely forgotten what happened before.”

“Don’t worry about it. It won’t happen again.”

Alastor raised a brow.

“What does that mean?”

“I cut off my ties from that man.”

“You mean Theo?”

He knew who he was talking about, but he couldn’t help himself to confirm it.

“It’s not safe for a beauty like her to travel in the middle of the night.” Timber gave him a head-to-toe look. “Even for you.”

“Can you still go on?” Alastor asked Liber.

Liber replied with a cheery ‘Gruu’ sound. The Timber started to walk ahead of them and they followed. He hoped that they wouldn't notice the royalty he was escorting.

# Chapter 6

It wasn’t as welcoming as he had thought.

Timber brought them back to their base. Their camp was hidden by the two tall hills and giant trees. The people are busy doing their businesses, each having different roles. The others were adding more infrastructure to the old ruins of the temple with the use of earth magic.

One of his men held the leash of Liber. He looked over Alastor to ask permission and Alastor nodded in approval but before that, they carried out their bags. Liber reluctantly followed the man to the stable.

The more pressing matter was how they managed to get here without getting detected by the imperial guards or the nobles from the different areas. This proved that their group already proved to be worrisome. Well, that was not of his concern anymore. He knew Timber wasn’t any other like mercenary, he was well known in the underground world.

Climbing the mossy cobblestones, Alastor’s eyes shifted, surreptitiously observing. These men are nothing like those he had met before. Other than that, there hadn’t been anything caught on his attention which was odd. If he remembered correctly, Timber was a human trafficker.

*Well, a man can have different careers.* He thought.

They took a wide turn and Timber showed them their room. It wasn’t cozy, not dirty either. It’s considerably normal enough to sleep. Surprisingly the room had enough space with two beds on each side. It had a bathroom and a pair of towels.

“After you clean yourselves up, come outside, we’ll have a banquet.”

Timber shut off the door.

Alastor threw Caroline’s bag to her bed and he proceeded to the bathroom.

“Later gator,” Alastor said.

Caroline held his arm.

“Would it be nice if you let a woman bathe first?”

“Caroline, I truly understand how stinky you are right now. I would love to let you use the bathroom first but I’m stinky too and we both know how many damn hours’ women use in the bathroom before they can fully exasperate themselves.”

Caroline threw a cold glance at him.

“Well, I think it’s a good idea that you should rest. After all, you got yourself beat down.”

Alastor snickered. “You know, I do not think I need it anymore. I had enough naps. Besides, there’s a banquet, can’t miss that.”

“You’re such a jerk, you know.”

Alastor acted as if he got shot in his heart. “Oh, no, no. Is that what you really think it is? I’m offended. I mostly uphold gender equality with all my heart. So please, don’t misinterpret my treatment towards you.”

“Gender equality my ass.”

Caroline jumped on the bed and closed her eyes while Alastor silently went to the bathroom.

He got in, turned on the water.

The spraying stinging cold water struck on his face and trickled down on his naked body. He laid his head down to fill his back and went to rub his skin. He found his soap and began to rub on his skin.

Alastor felt the mild and gentle bubbles cleansing his body. The sound of rushing water invigorated him. Alastor adjusted the pressure of the water but it was still cascading down his body. His shampoo dropped on his hair and he began to rub it into his hair, bubbling. Minutes passed; Alastor reached out for his clothes. He got out, rubbing the towel over his long hair. He wore his casual clothes. He wore boots, black trousers, underneath his dark surcoat was a deep blue shirt.

“Hey, your turn now,” Alastor called out to her.

Caroline instantly rose from her fetal position in the bed.

“Finally.” She declared.

She ran past him and locked the bathroom.

Alastor threw the towel on the basket and picked up his sword.

“Caroline, I’m gonna wait outside.”

He didn’t wait for a proper reply and quickly went out. He sat down on the bench. Alastor patiently waited for her. He closed his eyes and counted with a mumbling mouth.

Ten minutes…twenty minutes… thirty minutes…

*“Damn, that woman. How many minutes does it have to take to have a shower?”*

Alastor knocked on the door.

“Caroline?”

There was no reply. He knocked again. This time with more pressure.

“Are you done?”

Still no one.

Alastor shrugged his head and tilted the knob. When he got inside, he saw her bareback. She was in the middle of putting her dress on. Caroline turned around when he felt someone’s presence. When her eyes met him, there was an unbearable screech.

Alastor used his hands to block his eyes.

“I’m blind!” he shouted.

Alastor was blasted away with Caroline’s wind magic. His back crashed against the wall and grunted when he stood.

“Damn, she got me good.”

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A few moments later, Caroline finally got out.

She wore pants, a pair of boots, and a maroon vest. There was only silence between them as they walked out of the temple and the faint clamoring laughed from the people outside.

And there it is, the people are having the time of their life.

Timber saw them freeze outside of the crowd. He sharply whistled, beckoning them to come closer.

They sat down on the log of a tree as they watched flames in front of them roast the meat on the stick. When it’s fried enough, a lady, younger than Caroline gave them each one of it.

Alastor stared at the food. His brooding eyes questioned.

“Don’t worry.” Timber spoke out. “We didn’t put a drug on it.”

“You better be.” Alastor coldly said.

Timber smirked. “Still with that punk attitude.”

“You can hardly blame me with my skeptical approach.”

“Yes, I know.”

Caroline interrupted. “Just what the hell happened between you guys? I’m so sorry, I haven’t formally introduced myself. I’m Caroline.”

“The pleasure is mine. I’m Timber, the leader of the free folks.” Timber replied.

“Forget it, Caroline. It’s nothing important.” Alastor coldly responded.

“Your expression tells otherwise.” Caroline’s voice insisted. “I sense something between you two.”

“Alastor, stop being a prick.” Timber said. He was eager to make friendly conversation.

“What the hell actually happened to the two of you?”

“We tried to kill each other.” Alastor hit her with a glance.

“Well… damn. I wasn’t expecting that part. I guess you two had a rough patch.”

“You think so?” Timber asked. “Wait until you hear how he tried to settle the score with me.” He laughed. “The kid got some spunk.”

“So, who won?” Caroline asked.

“Me, obviously.” Alastor quickly replied.

“Because I let you.” Timber interrupted sharply.

“You retreated.”

“Hm.”

Alastor glanced at him. “Why did you save us?”

“Because you’re just like us.”

Alastor raised a brow.

“You told me the same thing before, but I don't even get it. What do you mean?”

Timber looked at Caroline.

“May I borrow your friend, Miss Caroline?”

“Where are we going?” Alastor asked.

“Just out for a walk.”

“Ah-huh.”

Caroline was reluctant and held Alastor’s arm.

“Don’t worry you’ll be fine.” The Timber said. “We’re not that evil. They won’t hurt you. There is something I wanted to discuss with Mr. Alastor in private.”

Caroline let go of him. Alastor gave her a wink and stood, following Timber.

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The lake view is the sanctuary for animals and for some people, but by the time they get there, it was all but a total blanket of silence. Alastor was paying attention to the field. He wasn’t sure if this is a safe place. Nevertheless, Timber had something to say for him. Alastor observed his tall stature from behind as they walked towards the lake. He observed him for a while. Something had popped into his mind.

Alastor took a wide berth. He fortified and made a roundhouse kick. Almost, Timber’s arm moved swiftly as if it was automatic and caught his calf. Timber gave an over-the-shoulder look and smirked. The corner of his eyes brimmed in green light.

“You're really trying to press my button, aren’t ya boy?’

Alastor grinned. “No. I was just testing you. It’s been a while.”

“I doubt it. If I were to deduce, you just want to settle the score with me.”

“The last time we fought, it was a draw.”

“Little prick.” Timber announced. “Hold down your Comodo and listen to what I am going to say.”

Timber threw his legs in the air. Alastor sighed and sat down on a bedrock.

He drew out a bottle of beer he got from them and plucked out the sealing with his teeth, spitting it out on the ground while watching Timber kick a speck of dirt and sit down.

“So, how long have you known your parents before they dumped you to the glade?”

Alastor winced for a moment, annoyed. “Wow that is so not awfully a personal question.”

“I don’t mean to offend but it is all part of my investigation.”

“And what again you’re investigating?”

“In particular, your origin.”

Alastor did not flinch and looked at him straight in the eyes.

“If you truly understand what I am just like what you said earlier, then I don’t think you need to ask me that question.”

Timber snickered. “You are sharp as your mouth, Atta boy.”

“Instead of investigating my origin, why don’t you tell me about exclamation before? No matter how I put it, I don’t find similarities to you guys, especially you.”

Timber laughed then a moment he paused and coughed. He sighed before continuing. “Very well, huh. Where do I start? Ah yes, I have to make it simpler for you to understand. For starters, these people – my people are Tribunal Hunters.”

Alastor, who was in the middle of savoring the beverage, nearly burst out.

“I can see that you’re surprised.” Timber let out a brief sigh. “We Hunters are blessed with the ability that allows us to see the mark.”

“The mark of what?”

“The mark of a Hunter.”

Alastor pretended to look and inspected his own body. “As far as I’m concerned, I ain’t seeing anything mark on my body. You sure you ain’t seeing something else with that gem eye of yours?”

“Oh, I’m sure I’m seeing it right.” Timber replied as he observed Alastor’s clavicle on the right part of his chest. A mark ‘Υ ‘appeared to be beaming in white light but that appear to be visible only in Timber’s eyes.

Timber continued. “You don’t seem to be surprised?”

“Because I know it is not true. If I’m one of the Hunters, I should be able to know that by this time of my life.”

Timber pondered on his thoughts. He glanced back at Alastor. “Well, if you don’t believe me then let me tell you the history of the Hunters.”

Timber stole Alastor’s beer and drank all of the remainder. He continued. “It all started with the Seven Wonders.”

Alastor raised a brow. “You mean the gods who came before?”

Timber chuckled. “They are not gods, just mere apparitions that represent the characteristics of all living and non-living things. Ashura-Tenrei, the Indomitable Will. Cyfer, the Never-ending Passion. Sylvette, the Paradigm of Justice. Tyf, the Guide of Souls. Pryka, Provision of Life. Ifta, the Keeper of Order. And Jaksen, the Overlord of Chaos. These celestial beings helped form this universe and build the life as we now experience.”

“These celestial beings you spoke of, are you sure they’re not gods? They sound like gods to me.”

“They are not.”

“How do you know?”

“It was written on the transcript passed down by our ancestors.”

Alastor raised a brow. His interest was caught. “May I take a look?”

Timber looked back at him. “What do you think of yourself, lucky?”

“It’s a no then?”

“Obviously,” Timber continued narrating. “Sometime after endowing their grace, the celestial beings have grown tired watching the humans and the other species of the universe, and so they wanted to create more new species. Not just to satisfy their curiosity but also to turn the tide between the world of mortals and the supernatural at balance. We Hunters were created for that purpose, but the first line of Hunters was not born here on our planet. They spawned from another planet. It had many names, Gaia, Midgar, but is currently known as Earth.” Timber spat saliva and continued, “The celestial beings left them with the given purpose and that is to make sure that the world between mortals and supernatural remained in balance.”

“So, I have been told, but how many Hunters are there?”

“Many. In fact, if we combined our world there could be more than 7 types of Hunters. The first one was the Primordial Hunters; they’re made to be hard to kill. They may not be able to conjure magic but they can cancel any kind of magic if they will, other than that, they possess superhuman strength, super agility, and kinetic observation skills. The second to spawn was the Gustafahl Hunters, they are the ancestors of werewolves and alike to it. Aside from their superhuman strength, they can harness celestial energy in order to create magic. The next is the Archaegian Hunters, they’re similar to the Mephistic Hunters, but only that they have full control and have their own dark energy and do not need to perform rituals to gather dark energy. The Mephistic Hunters, on the other hand, have to gather dark energy. There are a lot of ways to do it, such as celestial events or using nature itself to convert it into dark energy and store it somewhere, by which they can use magic to some extent. The next is the Tribunal Hunters, we can copy the ability of any monsters as long as their level is not too far from us or too low. With sheer will, we can also control a monster, although it has a drawback.”

Alastor intercepted. “The more controlling and demanding the command, the harder it is to control them.”

Timber nodded in agreement. “You are right, despite controlling them, they are still aware of their surroundings, hence they can resist the spell and if they deem the order to be not to their liking they will resist which is why a bond is required.” He paused. His eyes turned to suspicion and then continued. “How did you know about it?”

Alastor's eyelids swelled. He wasn’t supposed to say that. “There’s no use keeping it to myself. Oh well. We encountered monsters that were controlled by a man named Hannibal.”

Timber’s eyes widened. “So, you have met that traitorous bastard, eh?”

“Yeah,” Alastor replied. He might have ignored the word ‘traitorous’.

“I assume that they’re still experimenting.”

“Yes.”

“Have you successfully killed them?”

“No. We got separated. So, I have to fight him alone and his lackeys, but he escapes. I was overwhelmed.”

“I understand.”

“What is it they want?”

“They want to experiment to control the monsters without any drawbacks.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“NO!” Timber was also taken aback with his tone. “I apologize.”

“They really did get on your nerves.”

“You can say that. Listen, we Tribunal Hunters live with a code. ‘We mess with nature. We have to make sure that humans won’t screw with nature and vice versa. It has been passed down that we should be the medium for man and nature to coexist, that includes the monsters and animals, too.”

“So, you’re like forest rangers but still enslave the monsters like what would a poacher do?”

Timber stared at him for a while and so Alastor did too.

“You’re an asshole, you know that, right?”

Alastor put on a proud face. “I’m not ashamed of it.”

“Scumbag.”

Timber responded and heard a chuckle. Alastor stopped laughing. His eyes met the strict expression of Timber.

“All right. I’m gonna stop. By the way, you said before that *they’re* still experimenting. Would you mind telling me why they are so obsessed?”

“It all started with the idea of his father, Jonathan. He was not a madman at that time, just a curious scientist who wanted to further the study of the Tribunal Hunters. His body, on the other hand, gave up before he could fully realize his research. His son, Hannibal, and his former colleague Jett took over his research, and later they developed how to use the power of the mark to prolong the ties between a Tribunal Hunter and a monster.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? If you can fully control a monster then you’d have the advantage over a battle. It’s an opportunity that I wouldn’t want to miss.”

“Are you even listening to me? We, Tribunal Hunters exist to make sure that man, nature, and the monsters coexist. Enslaving the monsters would upset the balance of nature, something that we are trying to avoid. We don’t fuck with Mother Nature and Mother Nature won’t fuck with us. Simple as that. Jonathan wants to extend our influence of the monsters to a noble cause, such as moving wild monsters away near human settlements, protecting monsters that are endangered, and learning from them.” Timber continued. “Hannibal and Jett didn’t read his intentions right. They wanted to enslave monsters and mobilize them as troops.”

“For what purpose?”

“Chaos. They wanted to profit from the monsters as a private army. Jonathan wanted to unravel the truth and further the knowledge of us Tribunal Hunters, but it ended on the other side of the railway.”

“I can see where you’re coming from. But why didn’t you kill them?”

Timber paused for a while and sighed. “I couldn’t bring myself to end them. Even if I wanted to, it would be a disgrace to his late father.”

Alastor raised a brow. “Disgrace? You’re only doing what you think is right. Frankly, now that I know what he was capable of, I would gladly take him down.”

“You think you can take him down?”

“Well…”

It was wishful thinking, but Alastor knew himself that it would take a tremendous effort to clash against him. Hannibal had stronger features that would be used to his advantage.

“You’re not sure of yourself?”

Alastor didn’t reply.

“I guess that makes us even. I can’t kill and you don’t have the means to defeat him.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who let that runt run amok.”

Timber waved his hand in the air, dismissing his words.

“Enough of that. I’m going to teach you the innate talents that every Hunters have.”

“And that would be?”

“The eyes that can see the marks.”

“Please,” Alastor pleaded. “Do elaborate.”

“Every hunter can see the other part of our world. It is without a doubt a convenient skill, but the ability varies because of the blood we possess.” Timber pointed at his eyes. “Your eyes could hold a unique skill as well. With proper training, you’d be able to use and apply it to your battles.”

“Yes, yes. Let's just say I believe you, but what about my heritage? How can I start my training without knowing what kind of Hunter I am?”

“You don’t have to worry about that for now. As I said, we’re going to focus on how you’re going to identify the mark of a hunter. It’s a basic one, so don’t let it go over your head. This is a stepping stone to know what you really are.”

Alastor asked. “Why? Why are you helping me? Is there anything you can gain from this generosity?”

Timber smirked before turning around and replying. “I’m a keeper of balance, it’s my job to know what there is in existence.”

“Hm. Then what about those kids back in Vesoga Plain?”

Timber coughed. “Well… I wasn’t planning to sell them on black markets. Our objective at that time is to infiltrate the network of Theo through the influence of Hoarder. I became his henchman for a while but it did not last long…” He paused.

“Because of me.”

“Yes.” Timber nodded. “It was an inch on getting his trust and you blew it up. But it wasn’t all bad. You see, if we ever come to Kayon City we would have been detained or else gotten killed.”

“Then I assume you heard the news elsewhere?”

“Yes. As soon as my men told me about the uprising, I didn’t hesitate to take them down.”

“That’s awfully cold for someone who claims to not want to upset the balance.”

“Hey, killing bad guys is keeping the balance on tight. I never once claim that killing is out of the options. Of course, we Tribunal Hunters have some lines to cross if we want to maintain the balance. Anyway, let us start.”

“How does this work again? Do I have to chant a spell?”

“It’s kind of complicated. The incantation is hard to visualize since this isn’t like any other elemental magic.”

“Then how would I be able to conjure it if I can’t visualize it?”

“We are going to take a shortcut. Hold still.”

Timber covered Alastor's eyes with his right palm. Alastor felt the heat rising from his palm. It was gentle and calm.

“Repeat after me. Benedicite, superi, nos ac permitte invocare oculos, qui ultra videre possunt.”

Alastor repeated. “Benedicite, superi, nos ac permitte invocare oculos, qui ultra videre possunt.”

In a matter of seconds, Alastor’s eyes felt stinging pain, his thoughts scattered, and his thoughts were absent from reality as Timber uncovered his eyes. Alastor endured and it didn’t last ten seconds when he regained his vision.

He looked around and saw the world in black and white.

Alastor saw energies with different colors swirling around. And there was a pause. He looked at his own body and noticed the pulsating light coming from his chest.

“Wait. What the hell is this?”

Timber did not reply.

Alastor looked over with an unamused expression.

Timber was in his utmost humble countenance. The green light had a certain shape pulsating hard on his chest. Alastor’s eyes squinted along the wincing of his face.

“I can see it now,” Alastor mumbled.

“But not clear. You need some time to control that visual kinetic ability.”

Alastor sat down and closed his eyes. His mind fluctuated, breathing the cold night air. He raised his head slowly.

“What did you do to me? How did it happen?”

Timber kneeled. “I bestowed you with an ability.”

“Means?”

“It means I passed unto you my ability to detect magic.”

“I never heard that anyone can pass an ability to another person.”

“It doesn’t mean it did not exist. You just haven’t heard of it.”

Alastor understood what he meant. He sighed and waited for his eyes and mind from throbbing to recede.

“Alastor.” Timber softly said.

Alastor stared up at him. He was yet to reclaim his stability.

“Yes?” Alastor asked, shrugging.

“You seem to be different. I can’t quite put my finger on it. But you feel different after we met back in Vesoga Plain. I wonder why a daunting man like you became so… how to put it in words? You’re much more talkative than I thought of you last time.”

“Do I look like someone who’s out in the open?”

“Yeah. I was expecting you’d be more resistant.”

Alastor chuckled. “What can I say? They gained my trust, even though we screwed up a lot.”

“I can see that.”

“I despised them at first, but I realized after that, there isn’t anything I can do, that is why I just have to learn how to ride the tide,” Alastor explained. “But it doesn’t mean we’re in an impasse. You may have helped us, but I will double it.”

Timber stifled a laugh.

“You don’t have to. I didn’t do it just to get paid. I have my reasons.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. So, what now?”

The heavy sensation finally left him. Alastor stood sharply.

“You’re going to train. Not only the visual kinetic ability. There are useful abilities that I passed onto you.”

“Is it permanent?” Alastor asked.

Instantly, Timber laughed. “You’d wish. While it is true that Tribunal Hunters can copy and give an ability, it’s only temporary.”

Alastor stabbed him with a glare.

“Then why did you give it to me? You’re basically wasting our time.”

Timber waved his hand in the air. “Don’t get a hasty friend. I didn’t say you can’t make it on your own.”

“I'm at a loss for words.”

“You see, what I did to you is basically giving your mind the blueprint of spells, making you familiar with it. In that way, you can access that magic until you’re able to master it.”

“Sounds like cheating. I like it.” Alastor lifted a thumbs up.

Timber grunted. “Damn it, kid. Don’t get hooked up by the idea. This is only a consideration. Besides, not all of those abilities you’ll be able to master. You have to consider having a strong affinity for a certain element.”

Alastor’s enthusiastic expression did not cease. “So, what? At least I have more options other than my overused spells.”

“It appears that it’s already 9 pm. You might as well rest.”

A cool breeze had ruffled Alastor’s hair as he turned his back.

“I had a nap earlier. It would take more than a breeze to bore me. I want to know more about the Hunters you spoke of.”

Timber yawned. “If you want to know more about them, then you can go to the library.”

“And where would that be?”

“Enter the hallway, next to that is the small section of the cafeteria. Walk past that and you’ll see a creaky wooden door, you’ll find the library.”

“You have a library?”

“This is our base, after all. It’s normal to keep our passage intact.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Alastor shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the Temple.

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On his way, he met Caroline sitting on the stairway. The beacon of light encored her presence. Her eyes looming over the horizon. All her mindful gaze halted when she heard the rustling leaves. Her eyes quickly settled on Alastor.

“Is something wrong?”

He was observant as ever. Caroline declined and shook her head.

“I’m fine.”

Alastor looked back at the people having a revelry around the bonfire. He moved back and sat down next to her.

“It’s 9 pm. Go to sleep.”

“I think I’m gonna stay here for a while,” Caroline replied, ignoring his words.

“Darling, you’re five foot tall and two inches, you need a lot of sleep.”

Caroline threw him a glare and smiled bashfully to play off how much she loathed his statement.

“I’m over twenty. I don’t think I need to sleep early. You, on the other hand, are injured and need bed rest.”

Alastor slowly rose. His eyes allay from hers. Alastor turned and sauntered up to the temple before looking back at her.

“Since when did you become a nurse? You know what? Never mind.” Alastor pretentiously ignored her and walked away, but he wasn’t going to be left with the ties uncut. “Perhaps you’re right. You’re over twenty, so I don’t think you need to sleep early just to gain an inch.”

Caroline flinched and furiously looked back at him. She snapped.

“What does that mean?”

Alastor smiled smugly and made his way to the library. He didn’t waste his remaining time on this place as he began to study at the library.

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It was two in the morning.

The hall was cold as it was deadly silent. The tribunal hunters had already gone to their room. All was left for the silent cold night.

Alastor, who entered the library, saw two long diverted sections. There were small windows on the side of the wall that gave birth to the light of the moon, but still, it couldn’t reach the other side of the room.

The lingering smell of the candle lamp lightened the darkest part of the library.

Alastor coughed over the dust of the book as he opened it and sat in front of the table. The old book had a sweet, musky smell of wood, fainted in vanilla scent. It’s irritating, but without the smell, the library would be lifeless, and perhaps, he’d fall asleep too. Even though he thought he couldn't fall asleep without smelling it.

The book was all about the history of Hunters.

It was long but worth taking notes on.

To summarize, he had learned the history of the Hunters. Timber’s description earlier was close to what he read, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. Timber taught him about being a hunter, but he was not told what kind of hunter he is.

It would be a matter of time before he would know the reason he hadn’t been told.

Alastor skimmed some pages and read the important parts.

“Though may different… the hunters have the same symptoms…” Alastor read on his lips. “The twitch. It is the proactive hostility caused by the awakening of abilities of a hunter.”

He heard the faint footsteps that echoed and got closer behind the door. He was in the middle of reading when suddenly the door creaked open. In the darkness, he held the handle of the candle lamp illuminating his face as he entered.

“What are you doing here,” Alastor asked.

“I was going to ask the same thing.” Timber slowly walked to him. “Are you still reading the books? It’s already midnight.”

“Yeah.”

Timber stopped in the middle of the way.

“I know you told me your interest in the hunters, but there is no need to put so much time reading it. I can lend some of my books, but it looks like there’s more than that. Tell me.”

Alastor heaved a sigh. He rose and returned the books from their proper places. He slouched and sat on the table.

“You never told me about who or what I am,” Alastor responded.

Timber replied. “That’s because you’re a late bloomer.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means your nature appeared to be late. Basically, you’re on the first step on discovering what you are.”

“What exactly am I?”

Timber shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Then what’s the use of telling me about the hunters if you can’t tell me what I am?”

Alastor shot an icy glare at Timber, but Timber was too invested in his thoughts and continued to explain.

“That’s what I’m hoping to know. I’ve brought you here for that purpose, but it appears that the development would require some time before I can pinpoint what you truly are.”

Alastor shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes. He rose and walked past him. Timber put his hand on his shoulder.

“Wait.”

Alastor didn’t turn around, except that Timber went ahead of him and gestured with his finger to follow him.

Outside.

Timber stretched his arm and turned on his heels to gaze at Alastor.

“Now, what??”

“We are taking a run.”

Alastor raised a brow.

“We are doing what now?”

“We’re going to run. A sprint.”

“I know, but what do we make out of it?”

“I just like the breeze flushing over my face.”

“Whatever.”

“I encourage you to join me.”

“Oh really?” Alastor also made a stance and prepared. “Where’s the encouraging part of your words?”

“Smartass.”

As Timber took his seemingly last deep breath, he broke to sprint. Alastor started to run. To where the finished line might be, he doesn’t know.

Timber peered behind and saw Alastor following him. Timber kicked the dirt off the ground. His legs easily pushed themselves against the ground. The wind blew against their face when the breeze had made it to the west just the opposite of their way. The dense path was beginning to disrupt his progress.

Timber entered the forest and followed the road ahead. He observed Alastor that was catching up to him and made a grunt. Alastor’s breath puffed a white smoke. A thin layer of sweat covered the nape of his neck. Keeping his breath steadily, he pushed harder and went faster.

“You’re fast.” Timber commended.

The difference between the two of them is that Timber appeared to be not out of breath while Alastor was seemingly tired out.

At great speed, Alastor could barely see and remember the paths they had come and passed. His boots pounded heavily on the ground causing mud to splash and stain his pants. Timber had led him to several routes for over thirty minutes. Despite the cold air biting his lungs, he could still feel his body working. His legs were running warmly and air entered with a short gasp.

Timber made it even harder for Alastor to follow. Timber quickened his pace and leap. His legs pumped, gaining more momentum with each push against the ground. At some time, Timber halted and so Alastor did it too. Alastor gasped for air. He kneeled and felt his heart racing fast.

“What the hell man?” The mercenary’s head was down, he felt queasy.

“Are you tired already?”

Timber didn’t make an exhausting face, more another reason to consider him as above normal.

“You’re tough.”

“Oh, it’s nothing to brag about. I’ve been doing this thing for over 30 years. Jogging for a few miles is a cinch for me.”

“A mile?”

Timber ignored him and walked to the woods. Alastor followed and saw the majestic forest beneath them. They’re on a cliff.

Timber grunted and sat on the ground crossing his legs. Alastor sat with him. Timber threw a flask of alcohol to Alastor which he easily caught by his hand.

Timber drank and coughed for a second before turning his attention to Alastor.

“I know you’re interested in your true heritage, and I’m enthralled to know it too, but the preceding of your development would take some quiet time. The only thing you can do right now is to wait.”

“Tell me, Alastor. Do you have any place considered as home?”

Alastor closed his eyes, soaking by the moon's cool light and feeling the breeze flushing over his face. The wind gently brushed his long hair back, and he inhaled deeply before turning his face back to Timber who had asked the question.

“There is. The glade.” Alastor answered.

Timber was perched atop the cliff, his nose buried deep down observing the forest below. His eyes close for a second, listening intently and open with a prepared thought.

“But you don’t think of yourself as one of them now, do you?”

Alastor elevated a brow. “What do you mean by that? I grew up there. They taught me everything I know.”

*This is going to be long before he realizes.* “So, you consider them as your family? Have you ever given it a thought that maybe they’re not what you think you are? Have you been skeptical about them?”

“I live in that place for many years. I think I know how things work in our little community.”

“Really? You never had any doubts? Not even a bit?”

Alastor’s forehead creased. “What’s the point exactly?” His voice slightly raised. “You can’t possibly understand what glade is since you’re just an outsider. What gives?”

“You are right. I don’t know much about the glades, or the directors, even the people who grew up there.” Timber continued and moved on. “Al… can I call you ‘Al’? People, who we think care for us sometimes, are the reasons why we feel hurt, betrayed, and alone, you know? You can admit that it’s only a mistake, but what if it’s not that way?”

“What are you getting at? Are you telling me that the Glade will betray me?”

“I don’t know, Al. I can’t tell. But I do know that those directors of yours are keeping a lot of secrets from you guys. Secrets that might destroy the bond between you two.”

“That’s utter bullshit.”

“You wouldn’t know, Al.”

“What’s the point of all of this bantering?”

Timber sighed. “I just want to make sure that you are aware of your surroundings, but it appears that you are alluded to by the haze. You see, we hunters have this preliminary symptom. A stepping stone in other words. Born from our repressed thoughts and emotions that boil our guts and have us on our knees.”

Alastor's face turned stoned.

“The twitch,” Alastor responded to the unspoken question.

“You are right. This twitch we experience is part of our awakening, but it also born the hostility of our unconscious thoughts. The causes may be different, but it is also proof of the influence of external disturbance.” Timber continued. “The twitch can also be the proof that there are people who abuse and do awful things to us without us consciously knowing it, but our unconscious can. You may say that this is a Meta, non-sensible load of shit, but it has repeatedly happened before and proved to be right. The more it is repressed, the more the twitch hurts and is hostile.”

“Then how to stop it?”

“The only way to calm down is by resolving the issue.” Timber responded.

“You didn’t answer my question. You said that resolving would calm the twitches, but it won’t go away that easily, right?”

“Yes.” Timber replied. “As I said, the twitches are part of the awakening of a hunter’s ability. Even if it would only appear sometimes, it doesn’t mean it would fade away.”

“So, it’s hopeless.” Alastor folded his arms dismissively.

“How about you? I assume that you already experience twitching.”

Alastor looked away and stared at the moon.

“Yes.”

“What does it feel like?”

“It felt something inside of me is trying to get out, rapturing, and the hostility overwhelms me. The dread, it seemingly never ceases.”

“How many times has this happened?”

“Last month was like two or three times. Well, yesterday, it occurred for like three times a row in one day.”

Alastor’s last word had snapped Timber’s curiosity. “Three times in a row in one day?! That’s awfully unnatural.”

“Well, I guess that makes me unfortunate.”

“How did it happen? Has this happened before yesterday?”

“No. Actually, it only occurred when I was in a battle, like when we fought back in Vesoga Plain.” Alastor explained.

“This is certainly something. I have never heard of this kind of case in my whole life.”

“Does that mean I’m fucked?” Alastor asked.

“Not actually. There is no telling what or why is this happening to you. But these occurrences prove that pointing out your kind is difficult.”

“So, what now?” Alastor question.

“There is nothing we can do for now. Time is the only thing that can tell. Time will talk about your truest self.”

Alastor rose to his feet, stabilizing against the wind.

“Another dead end.”

Timber agreed. “Yes, it’s another dead end.”

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Sometime after they got back to the base, Alastor was washing his face at the fountain just outside the temple. The thrill and the fleeting feeling of the twitch that had etched in his body and mind had become his waking call as if he was being beckoned by a higher authority. Nonetheless, he must remain true to himself and to the mission.

With his face washed in wetness, the gentle wind had made it easy for the cool water to seep on his skin, refreshing his tired stature.

“Are you still up?”

Alastor turned over the familiar voice. Caroline, bearing the coldness was in her thin pajamas and shirt, yet the cold air doesn’t bother her.

Alastor came closer. “I don’t have to remind you that we’re in unknown territory. So please, you can’t just go out without anyone who’s going to guard you.”

“Geez. I know very well what situation we’re in. No need to be so stingy.”

“And yet your actions continue to contradict my advice.”

Caroline shrugged. “I-I just need a breather, okay. I’ve been banged ever since those assholes came after me. I’m not a fighter nor good at magic. I’m just a gal who often stands by in the suburbs and does my thing with my camera and paints.”

Alastor did not reply. He felt that Caroline was just expressing her frustration over the recent events that took place after. She was mentally tolled.

“How do you manage to cope with this? Do you feel fear sometimes?”

“I don’t feel, Caroline. I adapt.”

She looked at him, not wincing against the harsh cold. “That explains why you sound like a jerk.”

“Look, Caroline. You’ve got to understand that it is normal for a man to feel fear. In fact, I do feel fear for my life too. But you got to suck it up, because if you let fear succumb you, you’re going to lose.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“No, it is not. It takes time. A lot of time.”

“I heard that people, specifically the higher-ups in the Glade used to throw kids in the battlefield, inexperience, whoever those who came back alive will be granted the rights of the privileges of mercenary. Is that true?”

Alastor paused for a second. Hesitation had reflected in his face before answering a confident answer, “No. That exaggeration was created to fear us. Although, in our training, our people have strict regimens.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Why is that?”

“If that’s true, then I would believe that you people are completely incapable of feeling anything. Have you ever hook-up before, Al?”

Alastor shook his head.

“Date?”

Alastor shook his head again.

“Blind date?”

“Am I supposed to get offended?”

Caroline beamed. “No.” She replied with a conclusion. “I guess you guys are for suckers.”

“Don’t underestimate our charm, Caroline.”

“Are you challenging me?”

“I thought you’re the one who’s challenging me?”

Caroline had a laugh. Alastor offered a half-smile.

“We may be living in a rural area, but it doesn’t mean we don’t know batshit about what women want.”

“What do you know about women, when you don’t even know yourself?”

Caroline was about to let out a chuckle when she felt his eyes pierce on her. It wasn’t hostile but it was implicitly locked on her. She felt fear but at the same time, she was flustered by his confidence. Caroline’s heart was pounding hard as he got closer. She gulped and took the nervousness in. Her gaze never left his dark strict eyes.

“You women pretend to be strong and don't rely on other people. You often lash out to those people who you think are lesser than you, who you deem to be a waste of time.”

Alastor came closer. His hands swept in and held her hand. It was firm, but not that hard. That was when she knew, he took her pulse.

Alastor continued, “When in reality, you want someone who can protect you, who you can be with, who you can be yourself.”

There was a brief pause.

The fragrance of cherry apples tantalized him. Those thin, red lips beckoning him to have a taste. As so his eyes filled with desire was inviting him. He was one step closer to her. She did not stop him.

When the moon settled on top of them and the Tribunal Hunter who was stationed on the bell had noticed it, he climbed, and pulled rope that was connected to clapper. The bell rang loud.

Alastor immediately withdrew away, he broke off from the trance. He started walking back inside, leaving Caroline dumbfounded. She was flustered.

Caroline had to wait for another ten minutes before going back to her room. She couldn’t sleep well that night neither did Alastor.

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Sleeping peacefully in her bed, Caroline was cradling the pillow to her chest. She yawned. She was already aware that it was morning. She could feel the radiance beaming through the blinder. Usually, waking up is a simple task for Caroline, but due to the recent events, she had apparently developed an unwanted behavior.

Still, with her eyes closed, she best ignored the door that creakily opened.

*It must be Al waking up early… wait, or so, did he? I didn’t notice him coming inside last night.*

Caroline felt something poking her cheeks three times. Her eyes twitch. She didn’t budge. She was still eager to pretend asleep. What happened last night was still etched hardly on her mind. She could not get it out of her head.

She heard the door open and a yawn.

“I know you’re awake, Caroline. Breakfast is ready.”

*How did he know?!*

“You might be probably wondering why I know.”

Caroline listened to him explaining.

Alastor continued. “Usually, the person who is asleep had their eyes gently closed, not tightly scrunched together. A sleeping person has a more regular, slightly slower breathing while a fake person will almost always try to imitate a slow, irregular pattern, but it takes so much concentration, the pattern will often change in a few minutes which you clearly did. When I poke you earlier, your eyes twitch, which indicates you’ve woken up minutes before I came. So, are you still going to pretend you’re asleep?”

Caroline had to go that far. She was definitely not a morning person and she’d wanted to extend her time to sleep, but the latter proves that it’s not going to happen.

“If not, then I don’t think you’d mind if I peek at what's under your shirt.”

It wasn’t a question. He was actually going for it.

Something whizzed fast and had Alastor’s expression in shock. His face turned around with his cheeks arousing in red. Caroline crawled out of her bed. She rose to her feet. She hit him with a cold glance. That was her way to act casually.

“I know you’re only joking, but if you had any funny idea, then forget it.”

She started to walk into the bathroom and had a warm shower. Alastor quickly snapped out and grinned. “Yes, ma'am.” He replied to the woman who was already gone to the bathroom.

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It was a quick change of pace. After they had breakfast, Alastor dragged Caroline to an open field. Apparently, Alastor had this idea to teach Caroline close-quarter combat. Ever since the enemies nearly laid a hand on her, he thought that it would be right that she learned how to fend off the enemies when if it happens, she’d be cornered.

They started with the basics.

Alastor taught Caroline how to throw a punch. Her arms stretched back with her hips tilting to the right. Like a loose cannon, her fist snapped. Alastor blocked her with his palm.

“Not bad, but don’t forget, the power also relies on your hips.”

“The fortitude of stance and the position of the enemy.”

Alastor responded. “Good.”

“Why are we doing this?” Caroline asked.

“Because you nearly got caught by the enemies and given that we’re just visitors here, well, it’s better not to take any chances. You agreed to train too. Don’t forget that as well.”

Caroline’s shoulders shrugged.

Her fist was unexpectedly flung. If Alastor had blinked, he would miss her fist streak and whiz past him, but Alastor’s reflexes are fast and he easily avoided her. They continued their session.

“By the way, when will we get out of here? Is there any backup plan for this?”

Alastor waved his hand dismissively.

“All of your questions will soon be answered. Don’t worry. We just have to sneak and enter the rendezvous point.”

“Then?”

“That’s it. We’ll patiently wait for them.”

Her nose burrowed down. Caroline’s sweat dripped.

“Hey,” Alastor called out. “Don’t worry. Tactical espionage is my forte too.”

Caroline lifted her face and smiled. And she charged. She threw up her forearms like a soldier using the butt of a rifle to stun the enemy, but Alastor slipped to the side. He countered with a slap of his palm straight into her face. Caroline stumbled back but stabilized. Her eyes were still determined. She marched forward with quick footwork.

Caroline went in with her right fist, but Alastor used his forearm to block and she made a quick turn, throwing her arm aiming at his head. Alastor read the situation calmly and with proper force, he parried and shoved it. She turned around again and delivered a roundhouse kick. Alastor leaped backward to evade.

“If you turn around once more, I swear you’re going all over the place,” Alastor said.

Caroline clicked her tongue. She hissed and sprinted. She made a huge leap and her right heel pierced forward.

Alastor did not move and waited for the right timing. With precision, his hands crossed and caught her feet, leading her to jump behind him.

Caroline’s fist quickly whizzed past him. Alastor gently lifted his left hand to lead her fist away. His palm slapped down to her face and he kneeled, his palm striking to her guts.

A bolt of pain made her tremble and lose her strength. Caroline coughed and puked saliva.

“I just want to ask. How or where did you learn those moves?”

Caroline wiped her mouth and looked up.

“I learned those from the movies I’ve watched.”

“Oh. I never thought movies could be a good source for learning combat.” The mercenary was clearly mocking her.

Caroline made a jump and Alastor reflexively slid his foot backward to gain a distance away from her ax kick.

Alastor stifled a laugh before gutting her with his palm and she stumbled backward.

“Are you sure you can still go on? We can take a break.”

Caroline looked on the ground. Alastor snapped his fingers.

“You alright?” Alastor asked. “You seem to space out their buddy.”

Caroline didn’t reply. Instead, she rose. She lifted the knee while turning the supporting foot and body in a semicircular motion, extending her right leg.

This time, Alastor returned the favor. He caught her leg and bent, fortifying his stance. Alastor firmly took a grip and threw her off. Caroline’s back crashed against the tree.

“I told you, if you use a move that turns around, you’re going all over the place,” Alastor said.

It wasn’t hard. Caroline was able to withstand the pain and rose.

“Damn it,” Caroline swore.

Alastor went the other way and onto the tree, he laid on his back after he picked up a bottle. He drank and poured his head with the water, refreshing his mind from the heat.

Caroline came and sat with him. She drank and closed the lids of her eyes. Caroline gulped for air. She felt as though her lungs might burst. She counted to ten to slow her mind. She was focusing on slowing her heartbeat and relaxing her mind so that she ignored Alastor's farewell.

“That’s it for today.” Alastor had said and stood heading to the forest.

The moment she opened her eyes, she was surprised by the silence and the shrill of wind.

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Alastor had already noticed earlier about the men’s behavior. Their automatic movements are out of routine. He’d guess that they’re taking turns on guarding, but he doesn’t know what it is. The mercenary was eager to know what it was, he could hear a faint moan of energy calling out to him.

He went from behind the temple and through the extending paved road to its end and entered the forest. A moment after, he saw two men walking back to the temple. Alastor immediately hid around the tree and bushes. He waited with stillness and held his breath.

When he felt they were already gone, Alastor quickly made a change in his pace and he broke to sprint. His venture was briefly cut short when he saw a pyramid. Not as tall as any other in this world, but still reminiscent of its shape. Alastor briefly took a breath and so he continued to stride.

As he got deeper, a thick smog of ominous ash had settled and crept over. The milky smoke had seemingly spread everywhere. Upon arrival, he was met by the unsettling gaze, creeping to his spine. Before he could respond, he felt the tip of a blade at his neck. Alastor did not dare to move.

“We are well aware of your relationship with our tribe leader, but that doesn’t give you the right to trespass here.” The man was stiff and hard, his voice the tone of a gruff soldier.

“Hold it.”

Timber coldly said as he came out on the pyramid.

“Sir.”

The man’s tone turned soft when Timber came. Well-disciplined and properly trained, a perfect soldier.

“What the hell is going on here?” Timber turned his eyes on the man.

When Alastor looked back, he got a clearer view. He is fairly tall despite his uneven and petite body, yet the strength and hostility he showed earlier might differ on his presumption. There is always more than meets the eyes.

Alastor was perplexed when Timber gave way and waved his hand inviting Alastor to come inside before turning his back.

“But sir!” The man protested. “This boy just violated and disrespected our sacred ground. Surely you cannot allow his insolent behavior go unpunished?”

It wasn’t a plea, but a question of authority.

Timber didn’t even flinch.

“I will handle this.” Timber confirmed his tone without emotion.

He didn’t attempt to retort and simply retreated to wherever he was hiding.

Alastor felt a chilling wind that harbored omen. He doesn’t like how Timber was silent as they walked on the long dark path inside the pyramid. Thereafter, Alastor felt something twitch his stomach. It wasn’t painful, but enough to serve as a warning. The visual kinetic ability that was bestowed upon him automatically activated. Despite the dim entrance, Alastor could see his muscle movement suddenly stiff and tightened.

Alastor instantly dodged on his right when Timber’s left fist suddenly swung towards him. The pressure felt like a knife that cut through the air, but that wasn’t the end. Timber swiftly dragged his feet forward to stop himself from getting away from the momentum, and he turned on his heels.

Alastor smirked. It was so obvious. Timber thrust his fist in the air. There is nothing to worry about. It wasn't ideal to attempt a hit. Then, Alastor’s confidence was obviously reflected through his broken grin. He thought that he had the advantage.

Then there’s a gut-wrenching pain.

A force had turned his confidence to a gruesome intolerable agony in a short span of seconds, before crashing on the hard cold wall of the pyramid. His back lay on the ground as he endured the pain. As soon as he turned his grounding teeth to calm, he looked up and met his stern gaze.

“How?”

Alastor was sure of it. There was no mistake in his calculation. Timber did not have enough distance to lay his fist to him and yet the tribunal leader managed to break the odds.

“You got confident with that ability I bestowed upon you, didn’t you?”

Alastor was silent. He crouched, groaning over the pain.

“It was common conditioning.” Timber answered the question that lingered on Alastor’s thoughts. “I made you think that you had the upper hand when I purposely misled you into predicting my movements. And when I confirmed with that smug face of yours, I went quickly in performing my plan.” Timber winked. “You won’t be able to see it either since it's magic. Physical magic that conjures a force from my fist. That kind of attack isn’t something you can block.”

Timber continued. “Even I was appalled by your brashness given how cool headed and perceptive you were the last time we fought. Hey, don’t resent me. You’re the one who trespassed without giving a second thought. Just be glad we are not totally evil.”

Alastor rose. “Yeah, yeah. You sure you’re not in the ’50s? ‘Because you hit like a 30 year old.” He spat.

“First of all, I’m in my 40’s. I may not be as active as before, but my fist is a load of bombs.” Timber remarked. “I’m not partly offended by the age comparison.”

Timber motioned forward.

Alastor wasn’t sure if he was being sarcastic, but nevertheless, it was worth the trouble to come here despite the brief torment he had to face.

The gentle cool wind that had made its way inside and had brushed Alastor’s long black hair back, and he inhaled deeply. The room was spacious but there was no proper ventilation aside from the small hole coming from the top of the pyramid and on some sides of the wall, so, it’s no wonder why Alastor was having a hard time adjusting to the location. The pyramid’s inside was suffocating.

Timber led the way, inserting through the massive corridors until they got inside from a small chamber.

In the center, a giant rock with a hole in the center in a circular shape lay on the ground.

“So much space, yet the center only has so much little to breathe,” Alastor said. “What’s that?” Alastor nodded over the odd-looking shape of a rock. “You guys trying to build a monument?”

“Al, that smart mouth of yours will get you into trouble one of these days. Best to keep it shut when you’re in a foreign place for your sake and others.” Timber said with a hint of condescension. “You of all people who came from that *place* should keep that in mind as well as the others.” Timber continued. “This monument you spoke of is an ancient relic that is scattered throughout the planet.” He said pensively.

“Relic?” Alastor exclaimed. “This size?”

“Yes.”

“So, what does this thing do?” Alastor asked, beginning to walk around, casually observing the said relic.

“Oh, it can do many things. The legends said that this *thing* was once used by the ancient hunters to travel on any other dimensions and planets.”

“Well, that’s convenient.” Alastor spurted in disbelief.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Timber asked.

“That kind of power only exists in billions of possibilities. I don’t believe this thing has the capability to do it.” Alastor responded.

“What makes you say that?” Timber inquired.

“Come on, man. You can definitely tell that it’s a hoax. A power like that would require a lot of juice and frankly, I can barely sense any mana out of it.”

Timber gave Alastor a wicked grin.

“Is something wrong?”

“You do know that mana is not the only thing that can be regarded as the source of power now don't we?”

But his challenging thought didn’t dissuade Alastor. The mercenary’s eyes furrowed questionably.

Timber answered. “There are other aspects in this world that can be used as fuel.”

“Like what? You’re not seriously referring to dark energy or celestial energy, aren’t you?”

“Could, could.”

“That’s complete bullshit. Those elements are hard to control. It would take a lot of effort to perform a ritual that would contain those kinds of energies.”

Alastor halted and stood in front of Timber.

“Think, Alastor, think. Did you actually think that we need those kinds of energies to harness to activate this thing?” Timber responded to him hastily.

Alastor gave Timber’s a second thought. Even what he was saying was amiss to reality, there was a truth in his words.

He dug deeper in his mind. Alastor searched for answers like some mad scholar bent to knowledge. He thoroughly scanned the entire section until he found one.

“Nature energy.” He muttered.

They were taught how to harness nature energy back in the old days in the glade, but rarely were able to use natural energy and perform it without any kind of complication. But for the tribunal hunters, it would be a cinch.

Alastor read in the textbook once, written that since birth a tribunal hunter possessed a shed of natural energy that they can use to perform magic and to copy the abilities of a monster. He didn’t consider that as a viable option as he assumed that he would need to exert a tremendous amount of effort to accumulate a large portion of nature's energy to activate it, but it turned out, he didn’t need one, he had an entire tribe that would help him to make it possible.

One thing that remained a question in his mind, how would they know that this little experiment of them if they continue will succeed? In a live and dangerous experiment like this, there will never be a second chance to do it again if they failed. Surely, Timber wouldn’t be so naïve about not giving it a doubt before proceeding to test it.

“I guess you don’t need to harness those if you had the entire tribe to help you.” Alastor proclaimed at last.

“Yep. We already have enough juice to jumpstart this baby.” Timber smiled knowingly. He said as he sat down on the cold pavement, watching intently on the ancient relic.

“But there is one thing I would like to ask,” Alastor said. “How do you know that your plan will work?”

“I don’t know.”

It wasn’t the reply he was expecting. Perhaps he didn’t hear it right.

“I’m sorry what?” Alastor repeated the same question.

“I don’t know.” And he got the same response.

“Under no circumstances, you’re allowing your men to walk and participate in an experiment that has no reassurance if this thing is gonna work?”

Timber rose and gave him a smirk. “There is nothing to worry about. The trial won’t happen until we dig more information about this thing.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Well, if we can’t find any more information on how to open this thing in a much more efficient way, I guess I have to round them around and give it a go.”

“Unbelievable.” It’s the only thing Alastor could say.

Alastor noticed dust falling from the walls. He glanced up when the entire pyramid suddenly trembled. And there’s a loud explosion somewhere outside.

A man rushed in. His face was filled with horror.

“My liege, we are under attack!” He announced.

“What?!” Timber snapped. “Who dumbass manages to find and attack us?!”

“I think it’s not a ‘who’, sir. It’s what.” His man responded.

Alastor raised a brow.

The man continued. “It was monsters who were attacking us, my liege.”

“Tell the captains to gather troops and engage in a defensive position. Just as we planned for escape, secure the women and children and those who can’t fight. Make sure you will make a way for them to escape if the situation gets worse.”

“What about Caroline, is she safe?” Alastor asked.

“I don’t know, sir.” The man replied and he fled towards the battlefield.

“It’s been educational and all but I need to go back and make sure she’s fine.”

“I’m coming with you too.”

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Alastor and Timber sprinted outside the pyramid and saw the gray ash of smoke that trailed to the sky from the temple. Men gathered around and faced the monsters valiantly. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the man who apprehended him earlier was swinging his sword in a wide diagonal, cutting off the skeleton and making a pirouette when he saw a spree walker.

A sharp squeal caught their ears. Several carantals dove upward and arched in the air. Their huge amber wings made it possible to carry their bulky bodies with dark spikes around its chest in the air as they rallied in the sky and spread, each having its own targets, including Alastor and Timber.

Alastor readied his weapon, flicking it with one whoosh and feeling the tremors of the heavy air. His heart started racing in anticipation.

The beak of the carantal swept and dove toward them. Alastor and Timber had to roll aside, barely avoiding the narrow attack. Its narrow beak sliced the land then arched up.

“Al!” Timber called to him. “You go! I’ll handle this!”

Alastor nodded and rushed back to the temple but it was not as easy as it sounded to be.

Alastor broke through the countless monsters. Some monsters he saw are familiar, others he had not fought and only read them in the books. He slashed and wounded every enemy his sword reached. His sword was carved deep into the flesh of a beninghol. Spree walkers came with its usual eerie way of movement. Alastor knew well how to counter these monsters.

The spree walker came to him clumsily. His feet trudged against the mud, hindering its movement. Alastor leaped forward, swung his sword, and cut the enemy before it could even react. He bounced back and cast a wall that blocked the other spree walker on his left. The spikes from the Spree Walker vambraces erected the moment it laid its eyes to Alastor. The flailing movements shifted into a constant sprint. It leaped to Alastor and swung its vambraces down. Instead of blocking, Alastor slipped, jerked around, and turned on its flank, plunging his blade on its back. He heard it take its last, jagged breath.

Alastor undid the barrier and threw his sword that went through the other side of its head. Along with that, he was able to well-timed block a nightinhawk.

Alastor reclaimed his sword and zoomed away from the monsters.

On his way, he helped some tribunal hunters cornered and in peril. They were thankful, but he was at an impasse. Caroline should be his first priority. Alastor wasn’t doubting the tribunal hunters. He saw very well how they work well despite the pressure.

It would complete an understatement to say that they’re not capable as the glade mercenaries, but the number of monsters is overwhelming them. A question was raised in Alastor’s. This attack was all too sudden. To say that monsters had gathered and came up with this attack would come up with numerous questions, such as their intellect.

Given that their movements and how less he observed their communication already alludes that the improvement of their intellect as invalid. And if it terms to evolution, well, that is something that is obviously out of the question seeing their primitive forms, but this is not the time to spiral about it.

Alastor hurled forward, cutting and pushing them away.

As Alastor blocked an attack, another enemy came from his flank. His left hand inserted on his armpit and conjured a transcendent wall, completely hindering the attack from its momentum.

It wasn’t all there is.

A horde suddenly appeared from the sky. A monster relative to carantal, epistis, carried the monsters, beninghols, spree walkers, skeleton monsters, and others. Alastor’s grin completely wiped off from his face as he watched them one by one surrounded him. He took a deep breath.

“Yeah, we are not doing this,” Alastor said.

Alastor swung his forearms and pushed over the two enemies away. After then, Alastor swung his hands like a dealer from a casino, distributing cards one at a time to the players, except, these players are monsters and he was not handing them out cards. In a matter of seconds, dozens of chantless transcendent walls appeared and killed most of the monsters either by splatting them on one to another or got caught by the blast of magics that was conjured by the tribunal hunters.

Alastor dashed sharply in a cold sweat, panting heavily, feeling his heart pounding hard beneath his clothes. He groaned and let his body get used to the tension against the cold west wind, while his stiff joints rebelled against the uncomfortable rocky path.

The fight is not over but the tribunal hunters prove that they can end it.

Alastor had witnessed their unorthodox way of fighting. They spelled countless spells that he had not seen any normal human can perform. Some of the spells he saw came from the monsters he knew. Alastor's interest is at its peak, but rather than joining them he chose to go the other way. In the entrance, a dozen monsters appeared to be slaughtered and more to come, and judging the body counts, the tribunal hunters successfully secured the temple.

Currently, the battle was focused on the graveyard below the temple.

Dashing, Alastor didn’t notice the transparent wall blocking the path, thereafter, he bounced back. His back crashed against the cold ground.

Alastor groaned.

“What the fuck?” He profaned before gathering the strength to stand.

Glancing up with tired eyes, he saw the two warlocks behind the spell. The two wore a leather hood. Alastor pulled himself uneasily to his feet. The transparent wall made a wobbly movement until it became still.

“What is this?” Alastor repeated.

The two tribunal hunters look at each other, unsure if they should disclose the information to him. At some point, they argued and could be heard bickering at each other.

It wasn’t long enough before they reached their stalemate and decided to take the blame on someone, at least that was what Alastor had assumed.

“We were ordered by our captain to secure the temple and under no circumstances we will let anyone come inside.” The feminine voice came to the one who stepped forward.

“Look, I only came here to look for my friend. I just want to make sure she's safe.” Alastor hastily replied.

“Who?”

“A girl, blonde, about my age, and she looks dumbass.”

Alastor didn’t fail to notice someone peering from the room at the end of the corridor of what seems to be the main hall of the temple. It was the young gal who Caroline had met the first night they came into the temple.

Alastor shook his head and turned his attention to them. “There is no need for austerity here. I just need to make sure that she’s not hurt and protected.”

The other hooded man steps forward just in between the transparent wall.

“Even if we wanted to, we can’t just drop the veil. This magic came from an elder titan that took us many weeks to copy and acquire this magic. We can only use this magic for a short span of numbers. It would be a waste if we just undo it.”

Alastor scratched his head and sighed.

“Damn it.” He swore under his breath.

“I assure you nothing can penetrate this magic. It would take hell to break through. So, while you are out there, how about you lend them a hand, and maybe everything will be over quick?” The young man replied.

“She’s fine.”

The young gal appeared from lurking over the shadows. The two hunters gave her a stinging glare. She was supposed to be hiding inside instead of peering on the battlefield.

Despite the glares, she willingly put up an act of courage and talked her way out.

“You’re looking for Caroline, right? She’s inside, she’s helping to tend the wounds of the hunters. If you like I can call her to come.”

“Don’t bother.” Alastor promptly replied. He continued. “As long as she's safe.”

As he turned back, Alastor caught a sincere and warm smile.

Alastor played with his sword. The mixed stale stench of blood, smoke, and the moss from the holy ground filled his nostrils. Alastor glanced down at the battlefield as he slowly descended from the stepping stones.

“This is going to be a long fucking day.”

Alastor muttered and darted around. He finally decided which prey was going to go down and he leaped with steady hands.

As if on cue, Alastor bounced back evading the slash from the spree walker. He vertically cuts before it can counter.

Alastor bellowed, moving forward towards the beninghol. He was able to deliver a fatal blow on its torso. It dragged his feet on the ground after it made a huge leap and turned, then sprang to him. The mercenary threw his sword like a spear and the blade cut through the monster's mouth, coming out at the other end.

Another monster came to him, an epistis came carrying a skeleton warrior. The epistis threw the skeleton warrior on the ground and as a result it stomped on the dead beninghol, splattering the flesh. Alastor also heard the rumble. He looked at his back and saw several monsters coming after him.

On the other side of the battlefield, the tribunal hunters saw what happened. The captain seemed to be worried. He automatically glanced over his comrade's head and shook his head towards Alastor.

Three out of his fourteen men nodded and rushed over. The rest of the group covered their flanks as the three motioned with haste. Alastor quickly moved back as the beninghol whizzed past from his left side. He huffed and dragged his right feet in a semicircular manner to his back before twisting his hips and cutting down the skeleton’s head.

Another spree walker came to his right and his back and attempted to swing their forearms. He quickly chanted the spell and moved his sword to repel the sword of the skeleton before doing a side roll and swiftly stabbing the spree walker. He undid the magic and from the body, Alastor dragged his sword, swinging, and cut the monster skeleton in half.

The other spree walker broke through the wall. Alastor hesitantly lifted his sword. He felt his hands shaking. Despite his call for strength, his hands didn’t properly acknowledge the force and consequently, he fell to the ground.

Alastor glared at the spree walker.

“Abomination.” He hissed.

A loud clang and a bright spark caught his attention. An unusual single-edge sword with odd curvature blocked the spikes from the forearm of the spree walker. Another two whoosh behind him. Clangs, groans and splattering of blood rang from his back.

The man before him quickly repelled the force from the enemy, making it retreat. He hastily moved and without even offering a chance of opening. He lifted his sword and descended with a whistle as it cut through its flesh. The body split into two and as the blood was drawn out, he swung his sword in the air removing the stain of blood.

The tribunal who had to help him offered his hand. Alastor shoved it and stood on his own.

“I don’t need help.” Alastor’s voice was cold and strict.

Though masked, Alastor felt the scowls from the other two. Alastor shook it off and glanced over at the enemies.

When he felt something odd, Alastor looked around. He sensed the air became heavy, still and there’s a pressure like the gravity was being doubled, in fact, it felt that the air itself was being bent to the ground.

That was the moment when Alastor looked up to the sky and saw a giant ball of rock hurling over the horizon and streaking from the sky towards them.

The hunter grabbed Alastor and leaped away from the center of the impact. Thereafter, as the giant cannonball landed, the ground shook, debris from what it seems to be an asteroid didn’t spare the monsters, their worlds were turned upside down.

Along with the impact, dust, smoke, and billowing fire erupted. A few minutes passed, when everything seemed to cool down, they came closer to the crater to take a closer look.

Alastor rose from kneeling as the last light of the wall of light vanished. The three warriors gathered while Alastor observed from a distance. They cautiously climbed on the slightly elevated land. One of them peered and waved his hand to stave the smoldering smoke away.

Alastor's senses heightened. His organs twitched. His knees dropped to the ground.

He was unsure whether the feeling of the trembling came from his repulsive heartbeat or from the ground. But seeing how others reacted, he guesses that it’s the latter.

Alastor witnessed a giant shadow overlapping their presence.

The three warriors who were close to it were struck in awe. Without a doubt, whatever that appeared right now is on a different scale compared to them, including Alastor. The elder one snapped out. He dragged the two with great strength.

Alastor was feeling the pain of the twitch and observing the giant arm over seventy feet high. It took a slight jerk of its arm to alarm people about what was coming next. They all ran away from the gigantic arm as it came down. Alastor gathered his strength to pull himself up. Though he can withstand the twitch, it holds a greater toll on his muscle movements, hence making him vulnerable to external influences.

It does not matter. Alastor had already made his way outside of the zone of impact. He felt the pressure of the air pushing down. He did not dare to look back. The moment he stopped a loud crash boomed behind him. The force of the wind had his posture unstable and rolled over the ground. Alastor unsheathed his sword and plunged to the ground to withstand the momentum.

It was brief but it’s disastrous.

Alastor couldn’t put away the stinging sensation. He was sure that it wasn’t just a mere imagination. It felt something pierce his body and he is right about that.

When he looked at the source, a small sharp piece of wood struck his legs. Alastor carefully pulled it out. It was nothing compared to his previous injuries, moreover, the reason he continued huffing and puffing baffled his mind.

“Just what the hell is happening to me?” Alastor asked himself.

When he made sure that there was nothing more residue left on his wound, he covered it with his white handkerchief, putting as much pressure to stop the bleeding.

Another rumble came to disrupt his senses again. This time the magnitude increased until the crater exploded like a volcano. Rocks and dirt showered from the sky. A huge shadow was erected in the sky.

Their attention gathered to the same source.

“This couldn’t be…”

Alastor felt his tongue dry. Stunned and confused, he didn’t notice a boulder propelling towards him. It was later he noticed it and snapped from his own mind’s constriction.

It wasn’t something he should worry about.

Alastor blocked it with his transcendent wall. It didn’t even manage to break through, only managing to put a single crack. Now, he returned from an inquisitive outlook. Before he could put his mind into investigating, the giant being had swung its deformed hand. On its trail, it killed indiscriminately the monsters and the hunters within the range. Alastor conjured multiple barrages of transcendent walls to block it from its tracks, but its raw power proved to be superior to his defense.

“Well, shit!”

Alastor leaped away and lunged himself over the air while bouncing using the transcendent walls that are floating in the air. He looked at his left and saw how close the back of its hand was to him. Alastor felt that it was a few feet away from him as the pressure of the air. Until he felt something pulled him. The gigantic gray wall whizzed and came past through at his side as Alastor landed and hastily moved forward. He looked at his waist and saw the chain wrapped around him. The tail of the hawser was unshackled and returned to its owner. It was the hunters from before who saved him.

“Thanks for the save.”

“Don’t sweat it.”

And their attention gathered back to the monster again.

“Is it what I think it is?” Alastor asked.

The hunter silently nodded. “It’s an elder golem.”

As they looked, the golem stared back at them with its yellow daunting eyes and unreadable expression. Its body is made of mass rock and dirt as if the planet itself gave birth to it. The deformed body of the elder golem bent down as if looking at each one of them.

Alastor held with a firm grip on his sword. He felt his body shoot down to a shivering state. He couldn’t get past it. The emotionless, passive, empty voided eyes struck his nerve into an immeasurable superfluous thought. Alastor lost his grip on reality.

The golem gave a wide berth of inhaling. The air made a gushing sound, the pressure began to usurp in one direction. Moments after, the elder golem stopped, holding its breath in its lungs. But the curious action began to manifest then after. The elder golem exhaled the air with a loud growl that put immense pressure on land, mainly aiming at the hunters including Alastor.

“Damn it!” Alastor shouted.

The hunters with him quickly cast a spell covering them under the pile of earth walls.

It was dark, but he could tell that it was not going well outside. Through the trembling wall, they felt the force of the attack. It was like they got hit by the force of a storm itself. The rumbling voice then took over and the shrill of wind passed then finally, there was silence.

As the wall of earth crumbled, they witnessed the land itself deformed, and yet the temple remained intact. It appeared that the protective spell they yatter about was not just an empty word after all. Their eyes scattered to observe and gather when they noticed dust along the wind swirled around in the middle of the paved land.

Like a sword swung in the air, the dust and smoke dissipated with a great force, unveiling the unscathed hunters gathered together in one place.

In the middle of them, the Timber watched banefully the elder golem with his doleful green eyes.

The elder golem seemed intently observing him too, taken aback with a curious thought. To some degree at least, it’s sentient.

“Have the rest of the group aim at his base. We will immobilize it, if not, at least let us make sure to minimize its reach.” Timber said to his men.

A man motioned forward stating his thoughts, “Sir, our men at the back of line already made a way for our people to evacuate. Shall we proceed?”

Timber nodded. “Very well, I want you to take the other 6 captains and proceed to help the civilians out of this place and back to our home.”

“Very well, sir.”

The man jumped out and went into thin air.

Timber returned his attention. The giant golem raised its enormous fist and dragged it straight down, instantaneously pounding the rest of the hunters. The ground shattered and broke into pieces. The rocky hand gradually pulls itself up. It may appear to be lifting itself up but seeing the struggling grunt of the golem would make him think otherwise.

Through the swelling smoke and dust, there he stood, unscathed.

With his hand, he conjured a barrier of wind, no, it was more like a whirling wind that stopped the fist from ever killing them. Timber already activated his Inquiara Magic, Wind Drive – Pestado Mulquez.

“That’s quite a lot of balls you have pal.”

Timber grinned.

“Scram!”

The rest of the hunters leaped out of the crater. They were divided into three groups; the two teams went on to the monsters. As they made their way, they conjured various lassos and whip-like some cowboy before throwing it off like a hook.

Alastor observed intently, his eyes eager to learn from them when suddenly he felt a strange sensation around his stomach. His eyes took off from the battle and his body felt light.

As he glanced down, a strong force made him levitate and dragged him out of the battlefield. Moments then after, the tight gripped he felt had vanished and along with it his boots dug and trudged with a halt. He looked around, noticed that he was a thousand feet away from the battlefield.

His anxious breathing huffed into a white, intensified by the ruffling noise of the grass. Alastor exhaled deeply, held his sword tightly in a guard position. There came silence and among the woods, a tall shadow had caught his eyes.

It squinted and in a sudden motion, it whizzed in the air. Alastor swung his sword diagonally to fend off the enemy. His precision didn’t fail, but the enemy appeared to slip through his attack. The person flung and along it grabbed Alastor, throwing him over the tree.

Alastor quickly rose, but the enemy finally took away and flew somewhere else. From the direction where it flew, someone made his presence known.

To describe in generalization, he is not in a healthy state. His eyes are burrowed in shadow. The eyelashes are ruined and his clothes seem that have not been washed for a few days, torn by his battles earlier.

Benny walked with haste, almost with no life.

Alastor formed a smirk on his face. His tense motion had held to calm.

“You want some piece of me too?” Alastor confidently stated.

Benny replied, “You’d wish I would stop only by that.”

Even by that, he is far, Alastor can hear his rasping breath leaving his malfunctioning lungs. Benny seemed to have dealt with a lot of monsters before he got here. Although he did not receive any kind of wounds nor did he appeared to be in his best condition.

“Didn’t Tin and the others kick your ass before? Why come back? It won’t be a challenge for me if we fight now. No offense.”

Benny broke a grin. “You seem to be confident.”

“I don’t usually boast myself, but after seeing your sorry state, damn, you must be desperate for a whooping.”

Benny poses a stance. The dagger had left its scabbard.

Alastor did the same thing and he beamed widely. His sword held diagonally. He was going to play defense and appeared to be waiting for the enemy’s initial move.

Benny’s eyes glowed, observing him.

“It’s been a few days and you manage to retain your mana in a brief short of time after fighting Ursax. You really are something.”

“Please tell me. Do you have anything to do with those monsters over there?” Before Benny can assumingly respond, Alastor concludes his own question. “Hm. I doubt that you can do it, given your state and all.”

That was when a bone-chilling struck his nerves.

Benny widely beamed and his eyes narrowed.

“Tsk. How?”

“I’ve struck a hard bargain.”

“What did you do?”

“Oh, nothing. You see, on my way here, I have met interesting fellas who apparently are hell bent on putting these people in their right places.”

Alastor fell in silence. In his mind, he connected the dots. The monsters' sudden attack and monsters that are rarely to be seen appearing in this unlikely place. It’s too convenient to claim that this occurrence had happened at random.

Alastor’s sweat froze and melted by his cold glands. He thought and reconsidered postponing this fight and told Timber what he had learned, but before his feet set to motion the ground moved wonky. It came from the elder golem[s stomps and the other source came close to him.

They dashed at each other. Alastor halted four feet away from him and he swung his sword diagonally which was easily evaded by Benny.

“I admire that you’re aiming for a quick kill, but your attack is too straightforward,” Benny said and another dagger appeared on his left hand.

Benny swung the dagger, hollering sharply in the air. As it came close, Alastor made a hasty shift of movement and felt the blade come past three feet away on his left. Just far enough away from him, Alastor followed him with his eyes. Benny’s movements are aggressive, fast, and sure.

He was hesitant whether his prediction was wrong or right, but he had already thrown his arm on right in an attempt to block and he heard a loud clang produced from two blades hissing against each other, but it didn’t end there. He hadn’t completely forgotten the other blade held on Benny’s right hand. It was too late to think, he had to do it. Alastor’s hand instantly moved out from his instinct. He firmly gripped the blade of Benny. Alastor felt gradually cold as the flesh of his left hand had opened and blood began to trickle.

“Got you!” Benny exclaimed as if he had finally won the match.

Alastor broke a small grin as possible.

“Almost… almost.”

“What are you going to do now? You’re a long way from your friends.”

“Do I look like I need them to beat the shit out of you?”

“In your current state… definitely.”

The air suddenly filled with haze.

“What the hell?”

Alastor muttered the question in the air as he observed intently the sudden appearance of a phenomenon.

A chuckle grabbed Alastor’s attention. Benny stopped.

“Do you know what this is?”

Benny instantaneously pulled away.

Benny finally replied, “As I said, I’ve struck a hard bargain. I helped them sneak all those monsters here without sweat and I easily did it.”

Alastor gaze, quizzical.

“Are they happened to be Tribunal Hunters as well?”

Benny clicked his fingers. “Bingo. It looks like the tribe leader had told you already about them. I don't know how you manage to befriend a tribunal hunter, let alone their platoon leader, but I had pulled you out of their sight, and alone and nobody is going to help you now.”

Alastor hissed. He grabbed the knife from his back, wrapped it within his fingers, and prepared.

Benny brimmed in confidence motion forward and as he broke to sprint, he felt his guts turn, his head spinning, and his vision twisting. A terror screech came as shadows represented deform creatures trying to get out.

“Go back to sleep! It’s not your time! GO. BACK. TO. SLEEP.”

Alastor didn’t know what was happening but Benny is on the ground and one can say it’s an opportunity not to be missed. He strode and broke on point in front of Benny, his sword swayed to his right. As the tip of his blade closely made contact with his skin, a force bounced him away. It felt unreal, the dark aura began to swell out from Benny. It felt similar to dark magic.

With a last long howl of agony, Benny dropped, flat face on the ground.

Alastor rose and slowly walked towards him with care and on guard. Hesitantly, he tapped the lying body and when confirmed not responding, he decided to raise his sword, prepared to end the man. He closed his eyes when a sudden strike of realization had occurred. An idea, and not a bad one. Alastor sighed and lifted Benny’s unconscious body and made his way back to the battlefield.

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The wind shook, and the ground trembled, while the leaves' whiskers quivered in response to the elder golem's howl. The tribunal hunters scattered, clutching tightly to the chains that restrained its arms and legs from moving.

The shackles were broken, unbound, and scattered everywhere. It seemed that the hunters had failed to immobilize its arms. However, this didn't matter, as they had successfully prevented its leg movements. Moreover, they could deflect its gigantic arm using wind magic. While it didn't cause significant damage, it was enough to repel its attacks—sufficient to counter with various projectile magic. Among the tribunal hunters on the sidelines, one watched from afar without intention to engage. Eventually, a young hunter who helped earlier noticed the mercenary running towards him.

“You…?”

“Yeah.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Fighting of course.”

“I thought you evacuated with them?”

“Evacuated?”

“Yeah.”

Alastor suddenly recalled someone at the back of his head.

“Where have you taken them?” Alastor’s voice was passive-aggressive.

“Why does it sound like we did something wrong?”

“Answer me,” Alastor demanded.

“Okay… okay, relax. The rest of the campers had guided them past the mountain to meet the other campers. There, the non-combatants will take shelter and back-ups will come to aid us.”

Alastor nodded in agreement.

“You had any rope?”

“What for?”

Alastor gave a look over the body he was carrying.

“Who’s that?”

“Let’s just say, he’s a prisoner. He may be involved in the sudden attacks of the monsters.”

“If that’s the guess then… hand him over to us.”

Alastor replied. “I was planning to, but you already have a big monster problem on your hands. So… I’m gonna meet Timber to let him know about this guy.”

“Wait.” The hunter called out to him before Alastor could turn his back on him, “You might need this.”

The young hunter produced a thin light out his palm and molds, forming a lasso that sprung like a vein and wrapped itself around Benny.

“That lasso restricted a person's ability to mold mana and conjure magic. It should be able to drain his stamina if he attempts to resist.”

“Thank you,” Alastor said.

The young hunter shoved him aside as a blade whizzed through him. The skeleton monsters and some others had gathered from behind them.

“They’re outflanking us.” He turned his gaze to Alastor. “Now, go! You should be able to find him behind the temple.”

Alastor nodded and didn’t waste time. He made haste while carrying Benny. Alastor leaped and slid, slipping through the battles of monsters and hunters.

On his left, a skeleton monster appeared. Its sword swiftly swung vertically. For a brief moment, Alastor’s eyes caught something sweeping past him. The blurred image zoomed past the enemy and had it halt from its tracks.

The skeleton cracked and crumbled. Behind it, a hunter had hastily turned around with his dagger following the momentum and successfully repelled the skeleton’s sword with a loud clang, throwing over its sword.

Alastor broke to sprint and ignored all of the monsters on his way.

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Inside the sacred ground.

Two men walk inside. Their movements are cautious and conserve. They are very well aware of the foreign structure of this place, hence, making their moves limited.

His dark eyes were caught by the dim light on top of the pyramid. Sound and tranquil, yet disturbed by the battle outside. Dust and pebbles shook and scattered by the slight tremor.

Abel and Hannibal went past through the corridors and found their way inside. Hannibal’s eyes scanned the giant rock with a big hole in the middle, strange signs and markings and all.

“So, you’re saying that on my way trip home is this giant donut over here?” Abel asked with a mocking grin. “This is pathetic.”

“Shh.” Hannibal motioned around. “You don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Hmm, let’s see.” Abel walked over and knocked on the rock. Hannibal doesn’t know what he was attempting, was he expecting that something would happen he messed with it, or was it a mocking suggestion. “Yep, I don’t see how this thing is going to bring me back to my homeworld. Admit it, this is a dud.”

“Patience, Abel, patience. I knew how to make things work. You think that I would bring you here just to waste your time?”

“Duh.”

“Buffoon. I have studied the sacred text and knew how to manipulate this thing. This would be a cinch.”

Hannibal gestured for Abel to move back away from the stone and Hannibal levitated. He began muttering meaningless words and his eyes turned to white.

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Amid the battle, Timber howled. He swung his swords from left to right. The leader of the hunters showed more enthusiasm than the others. He cast his eyes to his right and saw his comrades, starting to get overwhelmed by the number of the monsters. Overlooking at the situation, Timber threw his sword behind one of them, precisely exterminating a spree walker. Even his attention is diverted, he instinctively caught the sword of a skeleton monster and in a swift, he decapitated its head.

“Get some, you dumbfuckers!”

Alastor saw him and made a rush, ignoring the countless monsters and hunters that are at strife. He glanced over the glistered blood whisking over the air, tainting the land.

“Hey!”

Alastor attempted to call out Timber, but the loud noise of grinding swords and the wailing sounds mixed by the wounded hunters and decapitated monsters speak louder than his voice.

At some point, when Alastor motioned towards him, his foot accidentally tripped over the dead body and fell on the ground.

“Timber!”

Alastor’s voice was gruff and tired, but even still, he made attempt to call him.

Finally, Timber heard him. He looked over his shoulder and saw Alastor struggling to stand up. He turned around and gave him a mocking grin.

“About time for you to notice.” Alastor greeted him.

“How could I not, when you shout like a little girl?”

“Shut up.”

Timber turned his gaze on Benny.

“Who’s the slugger?”

“I don’t know, but this guy clearly knows what the reason behind this monster’s raid is.”

Timber raised a brow.

“You got any idea whose hell bent enough to take the heat on you?” Alastor queried.

By those words, Timber fell in silence, he wasn’t much of a bright person, but he was wise enough to tie the pieces together.

“It can’t be.”

Those words ushered out of his mouth as if a life sucked out from his breath.

“So, you do know?”

Timber didn’t reply, only gave a nod. Timber shivered, he felt a despicable and sinister intention abruptly spike, and they all felt it. A massive dark energy gathered and swelled like a tornado. The wind died, and the trees remained still. It wasn’t the end.

Massive red energy shot out from the temple. It was brief and quick, but they felt the pressure pierced through the heavens and the clouds were in pieces and at loss with the sheer force from that blast.

“This is not possible.” Timber muttered.

Unbeknownst to Alastor, Benny regained his consciousness. He attempted to break free, but the lasso tightened. Alastor noticed Benny’s struggle.

Benny used a wind magic to cut off the bindings and he slammed his elbow on Alastor and escaped from captivity. The mercenary painstakingly grunt and shook his head.

“I felt that one,” Alastor commented.

Benny cracked his neck and limbered his muscles before standing quietly, his gaze fixed on the towering light within the temple.

“You!” Timber gnashed as he shoved Alastor aside. “What did you do?!”

Benny smirked. “Me? I’m not the one who’s responsible for that. I’m just holding the end of the bargain.”

Timber's eyes held a dazed and confused expression. He wanted to make him pay, but the sudden emergence had completely shifted his attention, altering his focus due to the change of tides.

“I don’t have time for you.” Timber said.

“Neither do I,” Benny replied.

Alastor swung his sword, pointed at the pyramid’s location.

“Go! I’ll hold him off.”

“There are no chances you’re able to do it.”

In a matter of seconds, Benny swiftly motioned that even Alastor’s reaction couldn’t keep up. He felt the end of his boots planted on his abdomen. The erupting jolt of pain had completely thrown Alastor off guard. Ruptured with his senses, his body flew over and smashed over the log of trees, rocks, and then to the wall of the pyramid itself, where his body crashed.

The wall shattered and the rocks fell along Alastor’s body. He admitted that it’s his fault. He let his guard down. Alastor pushed his broken body to move, but he could only groan and stutter. He was well aware he hit his limits. He clicked his tongue and right before his very eyes, Benny stood with a profusion of sweats and a smile of victory.

“If you want to kill me, get over with it.” Alastor said.

“You sound defeated, where the tough attitude you showed back then is.”

Benny picked him up and went inside the pyramid.

“He’s still going after you guys.”

“I won’t worry about him if I were you. You’re going to get into the world of madness. Besides, the so-called Timber is currently occupied.”

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In the middle of the road that leads to the temple, Timber was greeted by an unexpected guest. Charred and broken grounds keep Timber from his place. It was clear in his face that he did not expect that the enemies had already laid traps. Looking furiously at Jett twenty feet away from him, he snarled.

“What the hell is the meaning of this Jett?! What are you planning to do with that *thing*?!”

“I don’t know if you heard this, but we’re just holding the end of our bargain.”

“You bastard. You have no idea what you are doing. It could potentially end us if your little experiment goes wrong!”

“Oh, I don’t think you should be worrying about us. You see, unlike you pathetic bastards we excavated knowledge from different cities and regions.”

Timber was taken back, unable to utter the words.

“Oh, you guys didn’t consider looking for reference outside of your little world, did you?” Jett asked. “Oh, how the mighty have fallen?”

“Whatever you're planning is, it’s not gonna work.”

“I’m not the one who’s stuck in the position.”

“I never said I was stuck.” Timber replied with a smile.

In an instant, countless silhouettes made of mana, resembling him, appeared and dashed towards Jett. The air seemed to ripple with their ethereal presence as Timber's clones closed in, moving with a synchronized precision. Jett's eyes widened as he found himself surrounded by these dark mist mirage-like figures, each bore Timber’s image.

The sudden onslaught of clones left Jett completely dumbfounded. His mind struggled to process the surreal scene unfolding before him. It was as if reality itself had fractured, and he was left grappling with the unsettling notion that he was facing not just one opponent, but an entire legion of them.

“If you’re curious, I learned these moves from the Phantom Demons.”

Jett motion was swift, his sword arching through the air, but his blade merely passed through the mist. In retaliation, the mist spun in its intangible form, its ethereal matter solidified when landed a forceful kick on his guts. The impact of the attack stole his breath for an instant.

Before he could recover, the clones surged forward, their movements a mesmerizing dance of aggression, fluidly and silently. Each punch and kick went in with precision. He was caught in a maelstrom of strike. His vision blurred as he fought to fend off against the torrent of blows.

Jett's hiss of frustration echoed through the tumultuous air. With a swift motion, he swung his sword around, channeling his energy to conjure a gust of wind magic. The shadow demons instinctively recoiled, their forms retreating momentarily.

“How come you get this strong?!”

“Don’t tell me, you didn’t study the monsters from the outside world. If you did, you would’ve gotten ten times stronger than me now. How disappointing.” Timber leaped while his clones continued to distract Jett. “You’ve betrayed me for more power and yet here I am, completely diminishing you. Pathetic.”

Overhearing the voice, Jett sharply looked up to see Timber bombing down to him.

Timber lurched forward with a mighty leap. His feet went straight to Jett’s chest, cracking his armor in the process. The shards were flying in all directions and the earth below shattered. He was pinned down. Jett felt his bones from his back to his front shattered.

Jett whimpered and remained stagnant. He was barely catching his breath when another punch made contact on his face. Jett’s head burrowed on the ground.

“You call this an improvement? I’m barely sweating.”

Timber scoffed and bolted.

Timber had fought monsters countless times, and each time, he would assess the situation, the weakness, how they move, how they respond, and assimilate his skills. But now, he was compromised, he didn’t know until Alastor told him what the true situation was. Of course, the thought that there could be someone responsible for this attack, but controlling a large number of monsters is impossible to think of. Only that, he never considered that they would have the guts to come back.

Timber made a promise to himself that if Hannibal would dare to continue his errors, then he would use every ounce of strength he had to stop him.

Lying on the cold, dusty ground, Jett's eyes squinted and began to chuckle. He gathered the dust on his palm and threw it in the air.

‘Lacc, Lacc, esoht ohw era detnaw.’

As he muttered the spell, the dust billowed around his head.

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Inside the pyramid.

Hannibal grinned due to the fruitful attempt on activating the relic. The caster looked to Abel with a wide grin. The relic’s light was blinding, enough to provide vision around them.

“Told you I can do it.” Hannibal called excitedly.

“I still can’t believe that this thing is a relic. I mean, look at the size.”

Suddenly, as Hannibal slowly walked to observe the reddish and bluish energy swirling below, his head felt a sharp ringing pain for a moment.

“Hannibal, can you hear me?” Jett inquired.

It was a psychic spell. Jett, he would only call whether the mission is done or there are some changes on the mission, but only he knew.

“Let me guess, you let him cross the border, didn’t you?”

Hannibal can totally feel Jett grin with the brief scoff he heard telepathically.

“Is that Jett?” Abel asked.

“Not now,” Hannibal replied to him. “How the hell did Timber take you down? You were supposed to be stronger than him.”

He heard no response.

“You let him.” He ushered those words hesitantly. “You’re such an asshole!”

“There’s no thrill if I kill him easily. Anyways, prepare, because he is pissed.”

“Fuck you.”

Just as he cut off the transmission, Benny stormed inside. An unfamiliar word was thrown aside.

“Well, if it isn’t our new BFF.” Abel gleefully greeted him. “How are you, Benny? I thought you were supposed to kill someone, or you already did?”

Benny’s face was clearly not in the mood for exchanging jesting words.

“It’s impossible for me to get my hands laid on the target now.”

“How come?” Abel asked.

“They put a barrier and this boy proved to be an inconvenience, now my mana was cut more than half. I don’t have any strength to bypass the barrier that Tribunal Hunters place around that temple. So, would you kindly help me get through that pesky barrier?”

“Are you asking?” Abel inquired. Not even a bit he likes the tone of his voice nor his words.

“I am not. I hold the end of the bargain. Now, do yours.”

“You know, before we offer our hand to someone, we usually use the magic words to cooperate,” Abel replied.

“What? You want me to cast fire magic and burn you?”

“Way less violence.”

Benny grunted. “Please.”

“Much appreciated, but sadly, I can’t help you, I have a journey on my own.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?!”

Benny instantly unleashed his blade. And, in a much childish manner, Abel backed away.

“Whoa! I didn’t say no one’s gonna help you. You have Hannibal here.”

“He’s right, Mr. Benny. I will assist you in captivating whoever this someone you want.” Hannibal exclaimed and walked between the two before Benny’s blade would plunge into someone. “Before that, I have to finish what I started.”

“And what are you actually doing?”

Hannibal began to wave his hand, muttering spells and conjuring lights made from his mana swirling around the portal below.

“This my friend is a locator spell.”

Thinking about the portal swirling in red and blue energy, Benny’s concern prompts him to ask. “Just what is it you’re locating?”

“A direction, of course, our friend here,” Hannibal looks to Abel. “He wanted to go to the other world, but it’s not that simple, he has to go through first to the other side, the Limbo.”

“Limbo. I thought it was a fairytale.” Benny replied.

“Not a fairytale. There were some prestigious people who managed to access this kind of magic and made a fortune from it.”

“So, you’re planning to do the same as them? Make fortune out of it?”

“No. Unlike them, we are not interested in exploiting resources from the other side. Only a fool would dare to do that. Limbo is not some usual playgrounds. It is filled with gruesome monsters that have ever known and those who are unknown.”

“That’s a waste.”

“Not actually,” Abel replied. “Aside from transportation, there are other things that the Limbo can be used for.”

“Like what?” Benny asked.

“Soul sucker. There is this spell, well, basically a curse. You put in a person and if they die, their soul will not move to the afterlife, instead, the soul will be teleported to the Limbo, but I recommend not to do it.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you won't be able to come back to any other worlds. The soul would be stuck in limbo for all eternity. So, not the best choice currently.”

“Then that would completely oppose your previous claims.”

“Obviously, yes. But there’s a working theory to reverse the curse so that the person can be transmuted back into the living world.”

“Would you like to share that with me?”

“No, he won’t.” Hannibal intercepted. “No matter how we convince him, he won’t share the information with us.”

“That sucks.”

“It’s work progress. I don’t want any of you getting in trouble with this. You should leave it to me.”

It was now Abel realized, Hannibal looked to be disturbed and he is. Hannibal was trying to ignore his presence, but each time he got closer, he could feel the heavy weight of the mana, bigger than the combination of the three of them, overwhelming him.

“You okay there, buddy?” Abel asked.

“Nope. He is coming.”

“Him?!” Abel’s relaxed expression turned to shock the moment he notices an overwhelming amount of mana coming towards them.

“Prepare yourselves.”

“No shit, Sherlock. You could’ve told us earlier.”

“You can hardly blame them for all of the talks and gibberish.”

Hannibal uneasily stretched his wrist and his right arm with mumbling spells.

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He heard a loud crash.

Alastor’s eyes gradually retain their light. The first thing he saw was the back of two men and another one who was seemingly preoccupied with chanting magic. More importantly, what is that thing glowing on the surface? He looked at them again, wearily, but his vision was surely coming back, yet everything was still hazy. He caught a glimpse that something big threw one of them.

“*‘*This guy is insane!’ One of them shouted.

“Al! Is that you?! Wake up!”

The moment he heard the familiar voice, Alastor mustered his strength to push himself up. Easy and steady. He raised his head, torn by pain. The man whizzed past in front of him and a loud crash against the wall. He heard a loud grunt.

Abel lurched forward, his fist arcing sharply in the air, making a successful solid hit Timber’s on his face. Another swoop in on his left and for the final cut, Abel dive-bombs on Timber, throwing off his balance. The Tribunal leader did not even flinch. In fact, Timber was even angrier. He returned with a hook, preemptively burrowing Abel’s head on the ground.

Benny, who was caught by surprise by Timber’s attack earlier, quickly stood and leaped over exerting strength on his arms, dragging Timber outside of the pyramid. Timber gritted his teeth, putting an end to Benny's attempts to further impede his progress.

“I have enough of this!”

Timber’s hands clenched into fists and he delivered a forceful blow to Benny's back. The impact caused Benny to stumble, briefly losing his grip, though he managed to avoid completely losing hold. Timber soon conveyed his frustration through his knees and hammered Benny on both sides. In that instance, Benny loses his grip and lies on the ground motionless.

Seeing Abel coming out from the hole Benny made and had dragged him into, Benny motioned forward. He spat blood. The rebels might have lost some teeth there.

“You insignificant buffoons… not only did you attack our sacred ground, but you attempted to use our sacred relic for your own selfish and destructive motives. You’re going to pay for it. That, I promise you.” Timber fixed his penetrating eyes on the intruder.

“Just to be honest, it didn’t cross my mind that one day we would be able to raid an entire tribunal hunters’ summer camp, let alone stand up against one of the leaders from your infamous coven of tribunal hunters. You know, I’ve heard that you were so keen on your beliefs such as maintaining the balance of nature and the coexistence of men and monsters, but I never saw you intruding human’s illegal businesses, rather, you chose to stay behind the lines letting us humans be demonetized from your precious mother nature. Why is that?”

As Timber bent over, Benny prepared himself, but he wasn’t expecting that he would’ve been slapped by the tremendous gap between their skills.

Timber flung over with his kneecap on Benny’s face. The Tribunal leader swept through, fast as a bolt of lightning. Abel was not given much enough time to draw back and deduce into action. Timber already encased his fist and hit the invader on his jaw. Abel flew past the trees and crashed hard. The case is clear as a crystal, in speed, he was outclassed by the leader of Tribunal Hunters. They could only delay the inevitable.

“Boy, you sure know where to hit nerves,” Timber said quietly. “Stay there and die.”

Jett could see Timber is heading inside the pyramid. He was puzzled. It was in his anticipation that he would be brutal, less frantic, and decisive. But he couldn’t see those elements he was looking for. And yet here he is, gawking over the horizon, never bothered how close he is to stopping their plan. He drew a breath and picked up a trunk of wood. Muttering some spells, the trunk shattered and divided, forming into spears imbued by wind magic.

Jett stood, unmoving. His eyes weighed and aimed at Timber's position. At his command, the bolts fired away.

Two steps away from inside, Timber felt a sharp object piercing through the wind. If he were a normal human, he would probably be unable to hear the sharp object nor able to feel the whistle of the wind. Looking over the sky, the dusk was fast approaching. Withdrawing his eyes from the sky, he witnessed over the wall the overlapping shadows against the sun. Before doing so, Timber took a deep breath. Right on time, he ducked. A bolt went past inside. Without looking at the proper places of the remaining bolts, Timber swiftly shifted his movements and positions, doubling his speed as the bolts came past him. For the finale, he caught the last bolt with his bare hand.

He remained vigilant. Timber could hear odd sounds of whiskers, and he was sure it wasn't caused by the wind as it is still as a rock. Something black whizzed behind him. As his eyes followed the trail, it only caught the bodies of Abel and Benny, thrown back inside. There was in fact a man, caught between the light of the moon and the sunset before passing on.

Timber holds steady. Calm and his eyes are closed. Felt the rumbling clouds that gathered, and the slight drizzle of rain enticing his senses by its cold grip.

Then after, cuts, sharp as a blade penetrated deep in his flesh. He ignored the wound, only to focus on the movements of the enemy. The calm light rain had passed, scuds of leaves twisting in a cutting wind had made it difficult for him to keep on the enemy. Moments after, he felt the speed decrease. That was the moment he was after. Timber turned his boots around and leaped over his left. His fist cladded with thick wind magic dive to the enemy. In Jett’s view, he managed to block the heavy attack with his blade.

Seemingly impossible, the blustering wind crackled and sparked some sort of green energy snapping with loud spurred in short outburst.

Overwhelmed in strength, Jett stepped back, one foot at a time and Timber felt Jett was losing his grip, it could mean that his strength is wearing off, but it could be the latter, it could be he was preparing in an attempt to shake him off. Like a flame from a candle, he flicked away. Jett sprung and turned back. Timber hastily motions forward.

In those four seconds of his life, it felt that he spent most of his time on this fight. The rushing wind flushed over his big, bold body. The leaves danced as they flew away.

Jett paced and pushed his feet on the ground. He whirled with his blade following the momentum, but not quickly enough. Timber blocked the blade with his wind barrier magic. Before Jett could pull himself away from him, Timber’s fist swept into his chest. Even though he didn’t receive the overall damage of it, he felt his clavicle cracked a little. Moving away was a wise move on his part. Had he received the full blow of Timber’s attack, he would be dying on his feet by then.

In a contest between the two’s speed, Jett already proved to be more troublesome than Timber. In the previous of their match, Timber easily quelled him with his raw strength and caught him off guard by his nimbleness. But compared with their current aptitude, his agility had decreased as a sacrifice to supplement his attack and defense. It was safe to assume that the Timber’s goal was to end this fight in one hit.

They stopped for a moment, but Timber had seen worse and reluctantly put his guard down, and Jett had only his respite for seconds before increasing his agility once more. His blade and his fist cross their path onto one another, banging and clanging. Sparks and howling wind vociferate from the clashing between the two.

Timber’s defense was good, but not as effective as Jett's. Better than his mana-consuming jabs, Jett had more reserved mana and stamina than Timber. His strenuous concentration will be his downfall, but he already knew that risk and even persisted in doing so.

As the last clang of his blade bounced off in Timber’s skin, Jett felt the last drop of his mana cladded as armor. A moment that he was waiting for. Timber was staggered back by the sweep of Jett’s leg on his left arm. He had barely mana to conjure a wind barrier.

Despite being in his 40s, it felt like he had spent most of his strength in a very short time. And he was afraid that this might be his end. Though valiant Timber moves, the younger and muscular Jett proved to be as efficient and skillful as he was. For the last minute, Timber could only evade the incoming attacks. His breathing was becoming ragged.

“You’re getting tired old man. A good night's sleep might suit you.”

“Asshole.” Timber silently replied.

“Just do yourself a favor and stand there and die!” Jett hollered. “You’re too old, and an old coot deserves a rest.”

Timber, who was done being mocked, pulled out his blade. Jett also revealed his traditional blade he earned before. They were parrying and clashing against each other with extreme precision and caution. Their fluid movements made their bulky body appear to be weightless, but, so far, Timber was the one who was receiving much more damage than Jett.

There was a slight regret in his thoughts. He shouldn’t have spent so much mana on such an exhausting spell, perhaps he could have held the line at least until the backup arrives.

No time to think. Jett’s blade nearly cut off the surface skin of his chin and backed away. Timber wiped off the blood on his mouth. They continued. Blows of attacks rained, but too many to fend off. Timber was taken aback by Jett’s attack. Timber braced himself and reluctantly swung his blade the moment Jett was out of his vision. Then after, something sharp flashed, quick and silent. He shuddered and touched his neck. It was red and liquid.

At this time of Timber’s life, he was not surprised that sooner or later someone will get him. But at the hand of a despicable man, no honor to keep, a traitor, he refused his death to be at the hands of a lesser man.

In his dying state, Timber still had his warrior countenance, stiff and hard, refusing to let his sword down, but it was lowered below his torso. He stared at him, detesting him. Finally, he broke and was on his knees. The cut on his neck was not deep, but his nerves were primarily slashed.

Jett had too felt the exhaustion of the aftermath. He had expected this, after all, he was up against one of the leaders of Tribunal hunters. He moved forward, one step away from Timber. He can never be reckless despite the damage had done.

“Do your worst.” Timber spat.

“With pleasure.”

Timber was never the man who hoped nor knew how to pray, but at the climax of his life, for the first time, his eyes beg for a miracle. And alas, he closed. The moment his head lowered; Jett raised his blade. He took a deep breath and swung.

Just as that moment.

The blade that was supposed to behead him snapped and shattered into many pieces. He felt Jett’s mana shaken. It was the moment that Timber was looking for. An opportunity that he must not let go of. His Inquiara Magic was already in effect.

Timber beamed widely. His head quickly raised just as his fist mounted on Jett’s chin, making him fly away and crash on the pyramid.

Gathering his strength, Timber gritted his teeth and stood. Still shaken, he struggled to remove the instilled trauma in his body.

Jett who were struggling to gasp for air, had already got a general understanding of what just happened.

Timber gasped, feeling the lack of oxygen. He picked a leaf, placed it at the surface of his neck, muttering spells. It turned green and bright, then it dissipated as if they were ashen smoke. He sighed in contempt and rejuvenated. The wound was starting to repair itself, although slowly. His mana was depleted in half, so he doesn’t have that proper compensation to properly heal himself. It was better than being on the brink of death. Only if he could laugh all of this aside, but it would turn out that he must take this matter seriously.

The towering energy began to whirl with its ominous screech. One might compare the horrid sound from a banshee scream. It is mortifying and yet, the dancing of light is majestic and wondrous. Regardless of the received damage, Timber sloppily walked towards the path.

“Almost there. I know I promise to your father that I won’t lay a hand on you nor lead you to your peril, but you’ve grown stubborn and obsessed with obtaining power.”

The Timber once again muttered spells. The trees, grasses, and the land itself grew dried, their life left them and was transferred to one single man.

He touched the land and closed his eyes.

“Forgive me for the insolence, but I must borrow your power this time so that I can have the means to stop this former hunter student of mine. I’m the one who drove him this way, so, it is right that by my hand I will end his chaotic charade.”

“By the means of ending, you don’t mean me, do you, Master?”

An eerie voice creeps in his spine.

Without a second thought, Timber turned at the sounding of someone’s voice. He swung a roundhouse kick but only to feel it didn’t connect. Hannibal bent backward and felt his knuckles swish on his nose. With a mighty push, a destructive force threw Timber away.

“I never have thought of this, but, that boy, is he your new pet?” Hannibal said and smiled. His eyes narrowed with contempt.

“What he is to me does not matter to you, Hannibal.”

“So, it is. I wonder, how long will you keep under your leash before he’ll disappoint you, or rather, you’ll disappoint him?”

“All this time, you’re still holding that grudge?”

“Of course, I am!” He shouted, not hiding his anger.

“I thought you’d be better than that.” Timber sneered. “You of all the people knew what you’re doing was wrong. We are the Tribunal Hunters. Our job is to make sure that we protect the balance of this world.”

“Protect the balance?! Do you realize how hypocritical your words are?! People from different nations who are greedier than me exploit this nature you are talking about and here you are doing NOTHING.” Despite the anger and turmoil inside him, Hannibal was still able to tame it.

“And you think lending your troll armies to nations will help fix it?!”

“At least I’m doing something.”

“This… this rally of yours, it will cause a lot of deaths. You and Jett will be responsible for those deaths including bearing enemies. You think you’re ready to carry that burden?”

“I already am.”

“And what about now?”

“What about now?”

“This raid of yours, what will you get out of it? What are you planning to do with that relic?”

“Oh, you mean the gateway?” Hannibal asked, watching the towering light.

“Please, don’t tell me you’re going to drag a monster out of it and attempt to control it. That would be completely foolish.”

“No. I’ve struck a bargain. There is someone that I should send to the other side, no matter what.”

“Whatever the end of the line, it mustn't be good. I must stop you at all costs.”

Timber put away his sword. It won’t be fair if he fought with a weapon as Hannibal didn’t bring any armaments, only his magic, and his martial arts. Hannibal came first to him. The crunch of boots on the ruck. Timber was also approaching.

Almost in sync, their legs stretched out straight, boots dug on the ground and fired several spells. Each cancelling and exploding in contact.

At some point, they stopped, and propelled one another.

Timber’s muscles are relaxed which gave off more speed compared to Hannibal, he was too tense and stiff, focusing his fist for more power.

In just short time of their fight, Hannibal did not expect the difference. Timber was already gaining the upper-hand. Hannibal could not bear to block his attacks and was overwhelmed until he received several fatal blows; on his pelvis, his forearms, and several parts on his ribs.

When Hannibal realized he was at disadvantage, he drew back leaving a trail of smoke that tore his former master’s eyes.

Timber was disappointed, but had to turn his attention towards the incoming enemies.

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Alastor had regained his consciousness for a while now. His back against the cold wall, he clenched his fist, and felt the absence of his sword. He looked around saw Hannibal mumbling the spells under his breath accompanied by shuffling squeaks of his boots. His footsteps paced, suggesting that the ground made of cobble was too slippery for him to walk, it could also be that he was tired due to almost an hour of walking and reciting.

Hannibal’s drawling voice filtered with eerie whispers overlapping his pronunciation of spells. Alastor noted the levels of spells, the magic he was conjuring, varied from mid-tier to advanced class of dark and elemental magic. It was a multijunction type of magic, mixed with dark energy. Conjuring multijunction magic requires the assistance of five mages or more, depending how complicated the spell is, thus in most of the known cases it is unstable. It was highly volatile and extremely dangerous. But watching how Hannibal single handedly recited the spells without mispronouncing the words and filtering it to fully utilize each effect, If he were to compare to other mages, he may be ranked as a high-count mage. A feature that any mere lower mages won’t be able to grasp in their lifetime. Only the talented are the only ones who can reach that kind of level.

The Tribunal Hunter ended it with a loud sigh. He kept his eyes to the portal below as if seeing what was beyond the vortex of light. Behind Hannibal, Alastor saw his sword on the corner of the wall. But here he was, looking at him, his intentions are unknown.

If they were to fight now, surely Alastor would lose. He barely regained his strength from the last fight. Clashing with a powerful mage and hunter would be foolish on his part. But what choice does he have? Only one. To fight. He’d rather die fighting rather than sitting.

They exchange glances for a moment. Eye to eye. Alastor remained to relax. His eyes remained on the target. The speck of dust passed over between them. He clenched his fist, his muscles tightened. And like a loose cannon, he fired, lurching forward and leaped as best as he could.

He already admitted to himself, dealing with Hannibal in close-range combat would be unwise. So, he must level up his playing field. He must retrieve his sword.

The mercenary braced himself as he got closer, but Hannibal remained in levelheaded as if his attention was elsewhere. As Alastor came closer, his protective spell was ready. He did not chant the words anymore for he already mastered how to use the magic without invoking the words.

Two steps away, Alastor conjured the transcendent mirror wall. His objective was to use the wall to block and make way so that he can snatch his sword back, but that won’t be the case here. For all his effort would fall to nothing as Hannibal vanished in a cloud of thin smoke.

Naturally, he’d be questioning his whereabouts. Considering how trickster he was, Alastor shouldn’t keep his guard down. More importantly, this was his chance.

As he was one step away from his sword, there came a crashing sound through the walls. Everything around him shook, throwing him mercilessly on his knees. It felt like there were two colossal beings clashing at each other.

Alastor heard a loud grunt, coughed, and spurting of blood. He traced the source of the noise and saw the two of them. Abel who stood, dizzily, pissed, and hurt, then there was Benny who was completely unconscious. They were battered by the Tribunal Leader.

The lights within were enough for Alastor to witness Abel turn with a nefarious glare. No jest, no more charade. His foot paced, hastened until broke off to speed.

Alastor drew his sword and started to swing the blade from right to left. And each time, Abel evaded it with a nimble maneuver of his foot. It would be an overstatement to say that his evasion is flawless, to some degree, he received cuts, streaks of deep red had been sprayed across the pavement but was nowhere near to critical. The mercenary played the sword, his wrist rolled over to confuse the enemy with feint leads. He struck at Abel’s torso, but was blocked by invincible force from his hand. It was followed by then with a whirl, the sword hissing in the air as he made a quick pirouette. Again, he failed. From Abel’s head to his knees, the mercenary’s attacks were parried. Abel saw through his attacks, and as soon as the sword came close to him, Abel casted a fire spell to clash against his sword. Obviously, a mere silver is nothing compared to a high class of magic. The sword was flung away and stuck on the ground.

They were on the same ground then. Their fists will do the rest. Alastor couldn’t agree more with this. He felt he would have been at a disadvantage if he kept using his sword, given that his swordplay had no effects on him.

Before Alastor could initiate his move, Abel already leaped, and his feet landed on Alastor’s face. As a result, Alastor stumbled back. He wiped off the dirt on his face and rose. His arms leveled up to his face just enough to guard him for upcoming attacks.

Alastor gave a heavy breath.

“Fucking hell,” Alastor muttered and spat blood.

He began to move forward. Heavy and steady and charged. Abel threw his left fist, but Alastor slipped, pushed the man with his elbow on his guts, his knees arch on Abel’s chin, momentarily stunned him. Abel, who quickly shook the dizziness, got back on his feet. Abel’s fist cluttered his face, which Alastor didn’t react properly, instead he moved back with spry. Unlike him, Alastor was severely tired, it was even a miracle he managed to stand up. They lunged at each other. Fists flung in the air, the sound of blood strewed on the ground, their bones crackling with hard crunch, and the sound of each impact echoing off the walls. Sweat trickled and glistened on their brows as they drew back and measured each other, circling around.

Alastor mustn’t waste his movements; he must be direct and heavy. He must conserve his stamina. Alastor knew that this man had previously fought Timber, looking at his situation before, he was clearly outclassed. Abel’s reaction from seeing him was a mere venting out of his frustrations to Alastor, which he knew too well.

Once they drew their last respite of breath, they heaved forward. Alastor was tired, bruised, and battered which brought a hazy vision. He sloppily moved without much apprehension about the enemy’s intention. Abel delivered a solid hit on his guts. Alastor staggered momentarily, but the wounded and desperate mercenary retaliated with a fierce uppercut. The blood from Abel spewed after he was thrown away caught on Alastor’s dark jacket.

Alastor had caught this time his front kicked. He threw him across the paved ground, rolling over until Abel hit the wall. Their fight seemed to happen so quickly, that there was only a small amount of time to process what had transpired. Alastor, for once, felt the joy of combat. Even still, they received a fair amount of damage. Their exhalations are ragged, slow, and heavy.

Abel struggled to stand up. Upon finding his footing, Abel charged forward. The two exchanged numbers of a fist like some thugs in a street fight. Only this time, both men are equals in terms of hand-to-hand combat.

While Alastor’s fighting style was more balanced, countering when only given the opportunity, Abel was more heavy, pure offense, and much less defensive. Abel’s attacks and motions are surreal, Alastor wasn’t even sure if his movements came from any school of martial arts, but one thing was for sure, most of his attacks are effective.

At some point, their fists managed to land on each other’s faces. They nimble back and were in agreement to take a breath. Their chest heaving hard.

Alastor commented. He was panting like a dying horse.

“For a guy like you, your martial arts are not half-bad.”

“You…” Abel croaked, the words catching in his throats. “Can tell…?”

“I don’t know where you learn your moves, it is consistent in shifting from style to style, but it’s sure hell effective.”

“Glad… to know. Hours of watching anime have paid off.”

“Anime?” Alastor hesitantly spoke the word, not sure if it was even a word from their language.

Abel remained riveted to the spot, his eyes staring at Alastor.

A heavy and loud screech had disrupted their senses. The light from the well began to swirl out. Alastor reclaimed his sword. Alastor observed for a moment when he noticed numerous symbols appeared before it trails around them. He swung the sword, hoping that it would do something against the light.

“Hey, you!” Alastor called out to him, “What the hell is this?!”

Even he doesn’t know what is happening. Hannibal didn’t once explain to them what were the effects of the spell, all he knew is that it would open a bridge to the other world.

Lost in thoughts, Alastor set his mind on the light. Until it zapped him, restricting him from motioning. Another wave of light came by, thereafter, they heard lingering inhumane screams coming from the portal, and the cry caused a chill up to his spine. Even Abel wasn’t able to move a muscle, his eyes mirrored in fear.

A beam of light shoots up to the sky, through the hole of the ceiling. The light itself outdone the moon. Its brilliance is majestic and enamoring.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Alastor gulped in his saliva while observing.

The light around them began to lift them.

He steeled himself against dark thoughts.

There was nothing he could do, no means of escape. He imagined, as so often, what would happen if their group had properly planned their escape rather than extemporizing their way in the region to the country. Wishful thinking it is, but right now, he had to prepare himself for what’s going to happen next.

*Rest your mind before the battle.* Those are the words he learned from Meil. In times of danger, the mind should learn to calm and prevent fear from alleviating.

*What about her?* As if like a ringtone, Alastor remembered her. *Fuck!*

The light pulled Benny first inside the well. Next is Abel.

“Hannibal! You fucking asshole! What the hell are you doing to me?! Where is it taking me?!”

Even Abel wasn’t able to resist the rope of light as it pulled him inside the portal.

The mercenary blinked, when he opened his eyes, it became brimmed with determination. He barely lifted his finger to the portal. Alastor conjured a wall but only existed temporarily as the light itself absorbed his spell.

“Fuck!”

As many times Alastor attempts, the light always consumes his spells. He ran out of time. The light had taken him away and into the void. He was devoured.

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For quite some time now an arousing question had lingered on Timber’s head. He was skeptical about his motifs. What could be so important that I must leave behind rather than helping his comrades take him on, knowing he was already in his tracks?

He only understood his motives so little yet even his skin makes him tingle.

All will be cleared soon.

A white beam shot out from the pyramid towards the sky.

“What the-?” The occurrence was the least he expected the most. His eyes went big as the bright light remained rampant. “What the hell did you do this time?”

Grinning like a child, Hannibal replied to him with eerie, chilling words. “I’ve liberated them.”

“What do you mean by liberating?” he asked, glaring at Hannibal.

Hannibal had smiled. Misfortune already fell on the hunter.

“What did you do?!”

“I’ve sent all of them in the limbo and also, I’ll release dozens of monsters from that hellhole.” Hannibal calmly replied. “It’s a perfect cover, won’t you agree? You won’t have to worry if the Ylfon Kingdom would find out you and your army of trollops are scouting here far from your home. This little incident that I concocted would be convenient for the both of us.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“As, do you? What were you thinking? You made a camp just around the border which can be easily traced by the kingdom’s soldiers. Even I, an outsider, didn’t have trouble tracking this place.”

“What’s the game plan, huh? You throw this glib and charades, yet here you are, bantering about my decisions.”

“I just wanted to know, how critical you are when it comes to tough situations, would you just leave your comrades behind, turn on that boy, or will you save your precious tribe?”

Timber couldn’t help it. He laughed with scorn. Hannibal’s words were an insult to him. Timber had honor, values, and morals.

“You think you’re so funny, do you? How about this, fuck off. I am nothing like you, I don’t sell out my friends nor compromise the importance of our tribe.”

“Do you? Correct me if I’m wrong, one of the things you value the most in the life of people, right? So, when it comes to a dire situation, how convicted are you of your beliefs? Will you save your people first, or will you abandon the outsider and prioritize your own kind?”

Timber’s eyes widened for a moment, realizing what he had done. He snapped, angry at seeing Hannibal’s delightful expression.

“How is this possible?” Timber asked Hannibal and moreover, to himself.

“Oh, don’t worry. I didn’t contact the Ylfon Kingdom about this small camping of yours. This is all on you.”

Timber turned to look at the temple. So far, it hasn't received any damage yet. Around it were cries of both men and monsters. Fire blazed and fecund.

“My guess is they’ll be here around 10 minutes. Give or take.” Hannibal replied. “Now. For the biggest question. What will you do?”

Timber glared and turned around to see the fires blemishing the terrain. He sharpened his ears and he could hear the soldiers faint marching in sync. They were getting close.

“If we’re going to get messed up, I’m taking you with me.”

Jett was in the passenger seat for quite some time, standing steady at ready behind the shadows, watching how their conversation transpires. When he saw Timber propelled forward, he made his move. Bounded like a horse across the meadow, into his fist, power accumulated. Jett gave a great lurch, stopping between them, his fist swung meeting his face.

It was like heaven and land crash at each other, the ground cracked, the trees collapsed and the wind had erupted and exploded.

“Hey there, old buddy.” Jett greeted cheerfully, “Sorry to tell you, but that won’t happen.”

“Till next time, master.”

As Hannibal held Jett’s arm, they turned into a silhouette, completely gone out of his sight.

“If he were telling the truth, then the troops from the Ylfon Kingdom would arrive. That’s enough time for us to gather the injured and escape this place.” Timber looked back in dismal. “Forgive me, Al, but my people need me. I’m sure you’ll be able to take care of yourself.”

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“What’s the point of all of it, Hannibal?”

The two stare at the chaos below the cliff. Expecting the worst outcome of their raid.

“I wanted to make a point.” Hannibal sternly replied.

“About what?”

“That Timber is just as selfish as we are. He pretends to be a saint but, in the end, he will cut the rope of those he doesn’t need, just like what he did to us.”

Jett didn’t reply. He watched as soldiers around the corner of the mountain marched down with the insignia of their country.

“It’s all over for them,” Hannibal said. “They won’t have access to that relic for a very long time. Only a few people knew about it, and I doubt that Timber will ever find it again.”

“You set a spell on a timer, didn’t you?”

Hannibal replied with a grin. “Aren’t I the sneaky one?”

“Yes, you are. That multijunction spell is quite useful.”

“I won’t regard it as much. That magic requires a lot of mana. I had to borrow the power of dark magic just to pull that spell.”

“In any case, we did our promise to Abel. He should be able to pass through the gate by now.”

“I won’t be so sure.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t make a portal directly to his world.”

“What?! So, it’s a failure then?”

“No. He’s automatically sent on to limbo. He will have to find his way home with the homing magic I set on him.”

“That’s a relief.”

“You expect me to not hold the end of our bargain?”

“No. I never doubted you once.”

“But you just did.”

Jett didn’t reply, instead, he pretended to cough.

“Let’s just move to our next destination, shall we? We still have to help Benny.”

“Yeah. Come to think of it, I didn’t see him since we were in the pyramid. Where could he be?”

“Maybe he already bailed?”

“I won’t be so sure.”

He had no idea how wrong he was.

Up high above, the full moon was at its peak, bleached the sky with towering blue light and with the twinkling dots. The beauty and its grace. And yet no one had their eyes on it.

# Chapter 7

Alastor was not sure how long he had been here. At first, he thought that a monster had engulfed him. The light passed around and in front of him was a complete darkness, an abyss staring at him. He couldn’t feel anything, let alone his body, as if his sense of self had been diminished, there’s only his mind and spirit, knowing what this was. Despite everything, he never felt a sliver of fear or panic. The portal dizzied him to sleep.

He wished all of this were just a dream.

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Alastor woke up from a deep slumber. The first thing that caught his eyes was the riverside. He felt something crawling on his back. He was unsure what it was, but it was huge. He felt the pressure by its footsteps. Alastor pretended to be asleep and remained motionless. For a quick moment, he felt and smelled the foul breath of the monster as its huge nostrils were sniffing at him. Then, the monster motioned around with the thought that the potential food is dead.

When he felt that the creature was no more, Alastor rose and groaned. His head hung. Dizzy and heavy. He looked around out of instinct and saw his sword lying on the wet gray clay. After he sheathed back to the scabbard, he felt his throat were dried, Alastor naturally came to the river.

It wasn’t an ideal place to drink due to the fact he had no knowledge of his whereabouts. He was always skeptical, but at least, it appeared that there’s no signs of enemies. So, he thought that it was fine to lay his guard down for a moment.

He scooped his hand to the river, relishing over the taste of the water on his mouth and rejuvenated. Alastor looked behind and saw the forest, a rather huge one. It lined up along the long river and seemingly had no end on either side, covered by thick fog.

Alastor began his search for life. He followed wherever the river may take him. Ahead of him, he noticed the birds hastily flew away, scared of something. He paused his walk when he felt something was amiss. Turning his attention back to the river, he noticed a bubble pops. He knew from that moment, it wasn’t natural. Then there’s another more. Popping one by one. To his surprise, the water soared high into the air from the river. The water sprinkled and sparkled elegantly.

Alastor rolled as a shadow emerged from its hiding. He came up, breathing heavily. The creature had unveiled itself to him. The monster was an unsightly one. It had a dark shell that covered its body and blue skin. It had teeth that are sharp as a shark, had a tail of a lizard, its feet are awfully long that is comparable to a spree walker along with its chiseled claws, shimmering scales and it possessed a body mass similar to an elephant.

“An amphibian monster, huh. I’ve never heard or read of a monster like this before. Must be a new one.” Alastor muttered to himself.

The monster growled; the red eyes were locked on its prey. Its eyes are measuring him.

“So, I’m your victim.”

Alastor observed, waiting for the right opportunity. The monster was unknown to him. He moved back without taking his eyes off the monster. Alastor withdrew his sword, feeling the handle through his fingerless gloves. In it, he drew comfort.

*Will it go directly at him or will it show one of its tricks?*

Every monster had their own tactics for catching their prey, despite their lack of intelligence they are still capable of developing their survival instincts and display their animalistic intelligence, let include the ability to show an element of surprise.

The monster did not move an inch. It remained perfectly like a stone or better, a statue. Alastor did not come forward. Below, the water rippled even though the monster lay still. Its body began to move closer to him. His clutch over the blade tightened harder. As it kept close, he felt its breath become heavier and ragged, its face turned to grim. Until then, the monster enacted loud compaction on its teeth, jumping, and nearly clutching his arms. The mercenaries were well aware and already made an advance leaped backward.

“Whoa! So, that’s your play, huh.”

He moved back with another single step and he conjured his signature transparent wall, blocking the enemy’s deadly jaws. The teeth were sharp like a shark. Its breath provided a nauseating stench as its mouth parted, assaulting his nose with the blend of toxicity and decay.

Alastor could still smell the lingering rotten meat and sulfurous fumes that lingered in the air when he drew back. His nostrils flared, and with a sudden burst of breath, he expelled the air off his nose with a sharp snort. Alastor swiftly came to its side and stab the neck, but instead, he felt that it didn’t pierce through, only at the surface of its skin and his blade slid against the surface of its thick shell.

Alastor tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't budge. The monster’s skin began to wrinkle, the tip of the sword was being absorbed inside the shell. The mercenary understood the dual nature of the shell, the monster can control it to be hardened and liquefied as it commands.

His face became troubled. “Well, aren’t you full of surprises?”

Alastor pulled his arm, his palm pushed with great strength, conjuring a transparent wall that forced to push the monster and pulled out the sword in the process. The recoil of the expulsion had Alastor thrown off his balance. The monster snarled, used its tail to wrap him and threw him on the tree.

Alastor coughed and spat blood. He used his sword like a cane to stand. He couldn’t tell where he got this much energy despite getting thrown and beaten for a couple of hours. Time seemed at a standstill as his lungs were catching breath, taking its time to process his next move.

*The monster is not faster than me, his shell must be that heavy, enough to weigh him down, that’s good. But the thing is, the raw power, a single crunch from it will entirely break an arm should I ever let my guard down.*

Alastor took a last deep breath before opening his eyes. The mercenary moved first, blocked the enemy with his transparent wall, and created another one that levitated. He leaped, stepped, and hurled himself into the air with great speed. As he landed behind the enemy, Alastor automatically swung his sword and cut off the enemy’s tail.

The monster howled. Its’ blue skin turned to red. The smog of dust and grime was pushed by the wind and dissipated. The hazy red light illuminating appeared to be small particles released by the amphibian monster.

Alastor covered his nose. He moved away from the monster while holding his breath.

“This is troublesome. Of all survival skills, you possessed the same berserk that the Minotaurs have.”

The monster heaved forward. Alastor had already anticipated the monster’s movements; hence, he conjured another four transparent walls. One by one, the amphibian monster broke through the walls apart as if they’re just pebbles stomped by a mammoth.

Alastor hurriedly ran away, ignoring the foreign language warning sign. The loud stomping of the monster was close behind, following him, so he didn’t stop. For the next few seconds, Alastor would’ve witnessed the animosity of the land.

When he looked to his left, he saw a giant figure. Over twenty feet, hurdling itself in the air. He observed below him; a shadow cast and it's getting bigger.

“Oh, fuck! What the hell is this place?!”

The giant figure landed and completely decimated the nearby trees along with the amphibian monsters that were following him. Apparently, the giant figure was a mammoth-like monster, although there’s only a small difference from the latter, but rather the monster had no eyes, it had four horns, and its trunks were sweating with green and violet liquid. Alastor observed the foreign liquids oozing out from its trunks. The liquid melted the grass.

At this time, Alastor couldn’t move an inch. His instincts are telling him not to move or else. Strangled by his fear, Alastor didn’t move an inch. He watched the monster as it came to him, the steps were enough to tremble the ground they were standing on. Cursing under his breath, Alastor closed his eyes. Moments after. He felt the monster came past beside him. Alastor waited just to make sure and when he turned back, the huge creature finally went to the other side of the forest.

Finally, he exhaled the last straw of anxiety and went the opposite way. He realized straight away that this might be different from what he had to bargain for. It could be that he is in a whole new world. That would explain why he had no idea of the monsters he encountered so far.

His first move was to look for any signs of life, gather information about this place, but apparently, he hadn’t seen any living being so close for him to talk. In the entire time, he only encountered monsters on his road. Most are easy enough for him to fend off, but his curiosity grew over time.

On his venture, Alastor found a ruin of a town. Alastor scoured through the remains of the town. Most of the houses are destroyed, buildings that are humming with darkness as the whining sky.

Alastor breached an old tavern. The hall was empty, only the tools of the past remained as its ghost residence. He went upstairs, checked each room, one by one. Most of it already had its own guests, cobwebs, and skeletons from those who lived here before.

Alastor went in. When he saw a foreign liquid, he studied it from a distance. It is much different than the mammoth. It was stickier than what he had seen before. The liquid itself lingered on the skeleton. He won’t dare to get near nor touch the liquid. Touching the unknown substance would only spell trouble for him, and he had no luxury for any more problems. Alastor decided to move out and to check the third floor. Nothing is new, all but the remains of those who had passed away. Alastor turned on right leaping over the broken floor. Looking through the windows, Alastor saw that the sky was as gray as this place. The clouds are so thick that even the light couldn’t even penetrate through it.

A faint mist of chilled air hung over the ghost town, its drear had unsettling ambiance as the tavern itself. The creaky timber of the wooden floor was lone enough to make someone question whether they were alone or not.

As Alastor cautiously crept along the edge of the hallway, a wheezing cough came by. He withdrew his sword and quickly altered his position, looking behind. His eyes surveyed every nook and door, it was only but a single window, swinging gently.

He was hesitant but when confirmed that everything was normal, he returned his gaze back to the door. One step behind and he halted. He pushed the door slowly, peering over the space. It was a sewing machine and a mirror on the back facing the window with a chair and a skeleton sitting on it. Alastor went inside and didn’t waste any time. He wiped the cobwebs in front of him and made his way to investigate the remains.

From behind, he caught a glimpse of a blade, a rapier on a person’s abdomen.

“It appeared that this person was attacked directly without hesitation. If that were the case then I guess that this person right here was asleep at that time, even so, that won’t explain why he didn’t hear the footsteps or the door creaking.” Alastor looked around and saw at the corner, a broken bottle. “Of course, alcohol, the greatest enemy of warriors. He must’ve fallen asleep. But still, despite that wound, he might be able to call for some help, unless…” He examined the blade and his eyes checked back at the shattered bottle. “It’s either he was poisoned by the blade or by the alcohol, but it appears the perpetrator does not intend to end his life as quickly as possible. It’s been fun and all, but I don’t want to assume any further since there’s nothing to support my theory about the motives of the killer.”

Alastor carefully removed the rapier of the body. His troubled eyes passed over the blade as it rose, analyzing its shape.

“If Linda's here, I am sure she would be amazed by the uniqueness of this rapier.”

He tossed it at the edge of the room where it wouldn’t put him in any harm. The corpse’s light breastplate had called Alastor's attention. He won’t deny that even as time passes, the fabric and the components of the light breastplate remain intact, it doesn't even degrade.

Alastor kneeled and joined his hands, praying, “Whoever you may be, I hope you find the light of the afterlife. Forgive me for the intrusion, but I need your belongings for my expedition.”

Alastor was never a devout person, but he knew when is the time to pay respect for someone let including those who passed away from the living. He rose and carefully removed the clothes and the breastplate of the skeleton. He put the clothes on the table next to the sewing machine. Alastor was not finished yet looking around.

Alastor pulled the knob of a cabinet; he found a black trench coat. He inspected the other one and he saw a pauldron, rerebrace, and leather vambraces that extended to his shoulder. Besides it, cuisses and leather straps are displayed.

“I wasn’t expecting this, but what the hell. I’m gonna make use of this.”

It was on the next cabinet where he found a needle, a scissor, and a thread.

“Perfect.”

Alastor pulled a chair and cleaned the sewing machine from the cobwebs that stuck for over the years. He enfolded the thread under the plastic hooks on the left and in the middle, pulled it to the right just before the needle, and hooked it on a small wire. He released the lever and the wire should pull a large loop of thread through the eye of the needle.

Alastor remembered before, he wasn’t very fond of basic chores, which included washing dishes, but he learned either way. As soon as he was sent out in the field once in an intel-gathering mission as a trainee, he learned what it meant to learn those despite that it was messy and bothersome for him since at the same time he was a trainee.

Alastor held the light breastplate, cut the light breastplate off the cloth then stitched it on the black trench coat and used the remaining unused leather straps to tack it in on the pauldron. Alastor shook off the coat, dusting off the dirt of the coat. He observed the trench coat then the clothes of the corpse. His clothes are no better than the extras he found, dirty and smell like a rotten corpse, but at least most of his are intact unlike the latter, the trouser was not used, the socks and the vesture can be used on the other hand, it just needed a stitch.

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If he remembered correctly, there was supposed to be a well behind the tavern. He hoped that it was not contagious. The place was abandoned for how long, so it was sound to assume that it was only a possibility though.

Alastor threw a bucket. He felt that the bucket hit the water way too deep as he heard a loud crash of the bucket against the water in the well. He pulled the bucket through the rope tied into it. He investigated the water thoroughly. He even used a leaf to make sure that it was not capable of melting. It turns out that it remained normal.

The clothes were put in the basin, but Alastor wasn’t even comfortable at all with his thoughts of including the light breastplate on washing it.

“It was one of the cardinal rules that any armor shouldn’t be washed because it might rapid the decomposition of the material, but…” He can smell the foul smell of the breastplate, differing from the rest. “I can’t stand the smell wearing this. Even if I wanted to, I already attached it to the trench coat. There’s no way I’m going to stitch and detach it for another hour.”

It would be ideal to use detergent when washing clothes, but this place had been here for so many years, he doubted that every era this place had developed their own detergent. To his luck, there were lye soaps he found in the kitchen drawer.

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Alastor had to hang the clothes outside and wait for them to dry. For now, he must hunt some animals for his dinner and breakfast. He didn’t know what time it was or how time worked in this place. The only thing that dictated him was his hungry stomach. To make things worse, in the hour of hunting, he only met monsters, unlikely to be edible. Besides, he was tired. So, he chose to hide and scram.

It would take him another hour to find a normal animal. A bird and a bunny had coincidentally landed in the same place at the right time. Alastor licked his lips. He prepared his knives and he quickly threw them on the two. Instantly, the two animals were dropped dead. He brought them back to the tavern where he stakes them and gathered the woods, rubbing them, so that the friction can produce fire. After the satisfying meal, he found a comfortable room and he slept.

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Alastor’s stay was longer than he wanted it to be since it had been some time, so he had a good day off. He had ceased dozing off and got up from the bed. By the time he took a look at the clothes and the armors, they were already dried.

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Alastor was clad with his homemade dress and armor. He exercised his legs to feel the weight of the cuisses. So far, he can feel that he can move freely despite the weight of the cuisses, the lesser the weight on the legs, the faster he moves. As a matter of fact, the set of armor heavily influences his mobility, but on the contrary, his upper body does semble with the pauldron and rerebrace, the two put too much pressure on his shoulder and his arm. But considering he hadn’t worn any armor for a while, the fault might be his lack of training. Even so, it would be unlikely for him to whine over a petty inconvenience. He found and had the armor for his keepings.

Strapping his sword at his back, Alastor made his way outside. From his pocket, he drew out an old map of the town. From where he came from was the southern quarter of the town. There are other three roads each from different quarters he hadn’t gone to yet. Given that he was unfamiliar with the place, it would be wise if he chose to refer to this town as the vantage point should he ever get lost or struck by misfortune.

Crossing over an empty bakery shop, Alastor had noticed a black tinted eyeglass. He inspected and wiped the dirt off with it and wore it for a test but he quickly removed it. He scratched his eyes, annoyed by it. That was to be expected, the climate nor the season of this place hasn't changed at all, and it appeared it will remain as gloomy as it was.

Alastor was about to throw the glass away when he heard a stutter from it. The tint suddenly changed into the color green. He felt through his fingertips that the eyeglass absorbed a small amount of his mana.

He wore it on and was surprised to see that the eyeglass itself is a magical item. The glass gave the user the ability to see through the darkness. Aside from that, the glass also allowed him to detect mana from any life force at a certain distance. He decided to hide it until the right time to use it. Alastor had finally gone out of town. He looked once more before leaving the view.

“I’m glad that I’m out of that shit town. I hope I never have to go back again.”

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On his way, Alastor was cornered by three monsters. The monster was a humanoid type. The face resembled a wolf, the body of a Minotaur, the legs bent like a grasshopper, and had slender arms with unusually long claws. They are maybe larger than him by five feet, but their heavy body wasn’t able to keep up with his quickness. Alastor lurched, sidestepped and evaded the wide sweep of the monster's claws. Then he used his transparent wall to block the second monster behind and he cut off the first monster’s arm and slit its throat before it could even have the chance to escape.

The second monster came, its claws swinging. Alastor had to leapt back and constantly evaded the attacks. The transcendent transparent walls shattered, Alastor conjured another transparent wall and blocked the third monster. Alastor blocked the second monster with his sword on its wrist and pushed it with his transparent wall, the tremendous force had it crashed on the tree. Alastor quickly undone the spell and vertically swung it, severing its head into two. The bluish blood sprayed on the tree and lay down.

The third monster was still alive. Its arm was broken. Alastor drew his knife at his back and threw it on its shoulder, staggering the monster. Alastor threw himself forward. It was a gamble. His sword flashed in the air. As he landed, the body of the monster dropped along with the decapitated head.

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Alastor came into the town by evening. How did he know? The town apparently had a clock tower and it appeared that it was based on a Roman Catholic sign. He looked around and noted the design of houses somewhat different from what he had seen back in his world.

“This design of houses resembles ours but they’re different and that tower is based on a Roman Catholic number. It couldn’t be…”

Alastor walked in the middle of the road. His eyes carefully the ghost town. The neighborhood seemingly lined row-by-row.

“I heard about the otherworld before, how there are some travelers that cross the borders in order to get on our world, but I never expected that there would be a resemblance let alone an entire town transported here in the limbo. How is this possible?”

Several people knew of their existence, the otherworld. It was believed that several otherworlders had come before and made an interaction first with the hunters and to some people. They traded knowledge and in return, they were taught about their magic. But something happened between the otherworlders and the residents of Alastor’s world. The reason and the cause, he didn’t know.

Ages have passed, but the knowledge has been conceded in some sectors of Alastor’s world. It was a privilege to walk on their road, explore their houses and their mansions. He felt that he became part of something unknown civilization.

As time passed by, Alastor had noticed the differences in their designs. Some houses outclassed the others, some are simple, but there were houses that are poorly made. The previous neighborhoods he encountered differ from each other, not just in terms of designs but geographically.

“There’s something wrong with this place. I can feel it.”

Alastor may not be a superstitious person but he felt that there was something disturbing out there. His eyeglass ping and he wore it. Suddenly, it shifted to night vision mode and saw several clouds of heat up in the sky. There’s no pattern so he couldn’t identify the source of it.

“Black magic. I don’t know how this is possible but the materials used in their houses are somewhat different not in class but the time they were made is questionable. The others have a line of electricity but about the others do not.”

Alastor had shifted the eyeglasses back to normal by touching the temples of the eyeglass.

He grunted. “I don’t like where this is going.”

Alastor remained true to his mission despite the eeriness that he had seen. He hurriedly moved forward. His breathing turned into steam as the temperature appeared to decrease as minutes passed by.

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Alastor found a temporary place to stay. The house wasn’t that big. It had four rooms, one below, he assumed that it was for the guest, and there are other three upstairs.

First of all, Alastor made sure that the electricity is on. For some reason, when he turned on the switch, the lights flickered. He wasn’t sure how their electricity still worked, but apparently, the circuit break had the same appearance from the one he knew. It was still functioning. What he did next, as he made sure that the doors are locked, security must be the utmost. He doesn’t know what kind of treacherous monster is out there, but if he wanted to have a good night, he must make sure that he wasn’t being targeted from behind.

After making sure that everything is under his control, Alastor made himself at home. He found in what appeared to be a refrigerator, there were stockpiles of food that he was unaware of. The only thing that looks delicious is a lump of meat.

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For quite some time, Alastor learned how to use their electrical kitchen induction. He cut off the meat into pieces, and found a pan and oil.

After his delightful meal, Alastor explored the house and found a bathroom. He swiped the curtain and behind he saw a familiar shape he hadn’t been on for a while, a bathtub. Alastor excitedly undressed and threw his clothes and weapons on the washing machine, turned on the heater and laid his problems down to bed.

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It was early in the morning when he heard the loud ring of the bell from the clock tower. Then something happened to him. Light from his arm came out and flew away. His eyes tracked and followed it. As he ran further to the main street, turning one right and another left, he spotted the source.

Alastor stared up in front of an ominous-looking manor. The manor never looked so welcoming from outside. The gate and the fence itself are covered by poisonous vines and roots to guard against intruders.

The rusty gates open, beckoning him to move forward. Alastor reluctantly went inside. Alastor’s eyes stretched and observed with caution as he approached the door of the manor. He relaxed with a groan. He thought he could have had a good sleep last night, but it turned out he couldn't sleep either. He only had 5 hours' worth of sleep and during his wake, he had to remind himself over again what happened back then.

The tower’s bell rang again. And the wooden door creaking open. The chandelier ignited to life followed by the lamps, one by one woke up in his presence. Alastor held his sword, drawing security from it. So far, this is the biggest manor he had ever been, but not as big as the glade. At the end of the two curved stairs are the heads of the dragons made from marble. The luxurious carpet laid down on every path his eyes had reached to see. Alastor stopped in the middle. Various paintings are mostly made of abstract gothic coloring. Something caught his eyes. On top of the wall, there’s an image of a woman. So pristine and milky, a seductive image of a lady.

Moonlight streamed through the windows when he heard footsteps upstairs. Her finger brushed on the wooden railing on the stairs as she came down with grace and elegantly, moving as if she were floating with only her white robe making a faint, flapping sound. She brushed her hair. Beneath the dangling raven locks, her viridity eyes resonated.

The grip of his weapon loosened. He wasn’t sure if it was because the lady is not a threat or she made him awake. At a certain point, the lady stopped on the last footing on the stairs. From a distance, Alastor can smell the strange yet beguiling perfume of sweet lavender.

“I never thought that there would be another residence of this realm. How curious.” Her voice was deep yet there’s a hint of femininity or even a femme fatale hiding in her white robe and she had an accent, not that he knew of.

Something snapped on Alastor. He held tightly the handle of his sword as she attempted to take a step forward.

“There is no need for hostility. As you can see, I’m unarmed.”

Alastor grunted. “If so, then how come you’re still here? How is this possible?”

“Is that a question of a matter of how I remain alive or rather why I didn’t return to my homeworld?”

“Both.”

“I’m afraid that tale requires breakfast. Come.”

Alastor was hesitant but he still followed her and came to the hallway. It appeared that she was the only one who lived here. The thought makes him empathize with her a little. He can see through the light the dusty footprints they made. Taking care of a mansion was too much just for a single person even if she’s a mage. As they venture, he saw an open room, inside were bookshelves filled with literary works, textbooks, and alike. Despite being unused and unkempt for a long time he felt warm. Comfortable, a familiar wrap of security.

The scent of a candle emerged as soon as they entered the dining room. The lady motioned and sat on her seat. The table on the other hand was rather long and covered on a creased red tablecloth while Alastor was on the other end.

“Is there any particular thing you want? Tea or do you prefer coffee?”

Alastor looked at her curiously, “I’d rather have water.”

“Very well then.”

In one snap of her fingers, a glass of water appeared on the table. Alastor sat down, he appeared to be perplexed.

“Don’t worry. I didn’t put any poison on your water.”

Alastor's hesitation waned when he heard her words. The lady doesn’t seem to be hostile at the moment, it was for the best to keep it that way. He gave a suppressed half-smile.

“You’re a mage?” He glanced back at her.

The lady conjured a sandglass and put it on the table. Alastor was unsure what that was for.

“I’d rather use the term sorceress.” She replied. Her eyes locked to him. “I’ll be as forthcoming as possible. First, who are you?”

“You can call me Alastor.”

Alastor was iffy. He couldn’t help but to mesmerize her. So, he looked and observed around like a fool.

“Mr. Alastor, forgive me for being uptight, but,” she admitted, the welcoming visage turned into a serious monotone. “You see, I haven’t met anyone for the last couple hundred years. I am quite intrigued about how you ended up here.”

Alastor glanced down. He doesn’t want to reveal as much information as possible. He doesn’t know who she was or what her agenda is. Before he could come up with a story, the sorceress interrupted his thoughts.

“Mr. Alastor, I want you to be honest. I dislike deception.”

Alastor finally looked her in the eyes. An astonishment appeared on his face. He grunted and smiled. “Something is telling me you don’t like insubordination.”

“I am very well familiar with the torture.”

Alastor didn’t reply. He looked at her green eyes before looking down. His attention was caught by the mountain under the garment of her chest. He quickly looked up, feigning ignorance. He shrugged, hoping she didn’t see his brief gawking. Then nodded sympathetically with her words.

“I’m also well aware of your distrustfulness, but I don’t know who you are nor what your intentions are.”

“Something we can agree on is similar.”

“We won’t go anywhere if we don’t start somewhere. You must tell me your name. It’s not fair that I revealed mine and you don’t. Where’s the hospitality of the host herself?”

The lady chuckled. “You can call me Noora.”

“Alright, Noora,”

Alastor told her about what happened. He was hopeful that maybe this woman would give him some answers as to what this place is and how he can come back to the other world.

“Well, that’s fucked.” Noora commented.

“I know.”

“At least you managed to survive so far. That said, you’re already impressive.”

“Hm, and you?”

“Well, our breakfast is not served yet.”

Noora looked down and saw the sandglass already filled the lower part. She looked back at him and winked.

For a moment, the mercenary reconsidered for a beer, but those thoughts would be completely forgotten as soon he saw from the kitchen – two glasses and a bottle of wine floating with no signs of anyone casted under invisibility and landed on the table. Next was the smell of ripe fruits and the scents of raspberry. And something else, the table bore silver plates, dishes, and cutlery. A turkey, already cut in pieces, slices of bread on the basket, and some meat that was deep dried were served in front of him.

Alastor paused, his face turned stoned and his jaw tense. His troubled thoughts are all over his face.

“Are you alright?” She asked.

Alastor snapped back to reality. He shook his head.

“Yes,”

Noora lifted her eyes before she grabbed a raspberry.

“You look like you’ve seen some ghost or something.”

“For breakfast, this looks like a feast,” Alastor commented.

“Well, after all, you’re the first visitor I had for many years. I won’t hesitate to throw a feast for you. It’s not like there’s anybody else I live with.” Noora bit a fruit, munching loudly. “We can continue our discussion while we eat. Don’t worry, I won’t dodge you.”

“I wasn’t worried, but surprised. Most of the people I met have tried either to torture me or murder me.”

“I supposed none of them succeed.”

“They all died trying.”

The lady poured the glass with wine.

“Isn’t it too early for a glass of wine?” Alastor asked.

“Do not worry,” she replied, “A bit of consumption is not that big of a deal.”

Alastor grunted, “If so,” he raised his wine glass, “pour me.”

The sorceress acknowledged with a smile, “As you wish.”

“A toast for our health.”

“A toast for your health.” She professed.

Alastor raised an inquisitive brow.

“I’ve been living here for hundreds of years. How do you think I’m not dead yet?”

“I’ll be damned.” He felt a warm sensation filling his stomach after he drank the wine.

Noora was studying him keenly and intently. The sorceress poured another after she drank.

“Do tell me, Alastor. How’s the outside world?”

“Still full of shits.”

Her face stretched into a thin smile and revealed enamel-white teeth from behind her small lips. The lady chuckled. “It appears that the world hasn’t changed. Not one bit.”

“Only it has gotten worse,” he grumbled as he took a small bite of the meat.

“Tell me about it.”

“People in my time, they have invented far more dangerous weapons.”

Her interest was caught, “What weapons?”

“A bomb in the shape of a spear that is capable of destroying an entire city in one fall.”

“That’s terrifying and yet marvelous. People in your era managed to invent such things, huh. I was hoping that it would be revolutionary, but people, the only thing they know is power and domination, never caring for those who do not want a war.”

“True,” he agreed and grabbed a piece of bread from the basket, “Those wars of blights had shaken the balance of nature. Monsters are more often active than the last 90 years. Even monsters who rarely appear have been terrorizing some parts of the world. I even met one when I was young.”

“Now this is a tale I would love to hear.” The sorceress said as she used her magic to levitate the tray of turkey towards her.

“I wasn’t at that time, but monsters such as Deziun Ale, Heligor, and Matras who rarely appeared wreaked havoc on some countries during the war, and their sightings steadily rose even now.” He gravely admitted.

“It’s not like I’m bragging, but I defeated Heligor before.”

“How?”

“It was during winter. When the bards ceased their songs and the soldiers retired to their tents, the Ophidianoidphrem broke through the barracks. The unexpected attack stunned our men who were drunk and sober. It took thirteen lives.” She ate a portion of the fruit, “I wasn’t able to respond swiftly at that time, but soldiers who aren’t sloppy as the others managed to hold the monster down. Little did the bastard know, I was already on its behind. I’ve struck the monster with the ash of mixed herbs of wolfsbane, northern axit, and trisitrat, and the odor put it to sleep.”

“Vixifot, isn’t it?” Alastor asked. Finally, he took a bite of the bread.

“You know your history. You seem to have history with a Heligor before.”

“It didn't sound very adventurous like yours.”

“Tell me about it.”

He coughed and drank a glass of wine. “We were out in the woods collecting logs when suddenly twenty feet Heligor appeared and tried to snack on us. My fellow kid got hurt, thirteen chicken wuss ran, and I was left fending off the monster until the rescue arrived.”

“That sounds surreal.” Noora quizzically cocked her head.

“Believe it or not, but it’s true.” Alastor said, looking at the food. “I was twelve at that time. Nearly ripped my head open. If they didn’t come at the right moment, I would be on a silver platter.” Alastor let out a sigh and licked his lips.

Awkwardly, Noora replied, “That’s quite unfortunate.”

Alastor straightened himself up from his slump position in the chair. He carefully cut the turkey pieces before chewing them in his knife.

“I was under the impression the first time that you’re a monster.”

“Rude.” Almost breaking to smile, the sorceress said. She began to slice the turkey and ate a portion.

“Forgive me. There were times in my early life that when I see a beaut like you would end up as an imp in disguise or a bandit pretending to be a damsel in distress.”

“Good news for you,” She raised the glass and smiled enigmatically. “I am neither an imp nor a damsel in distress.”

“It appears so. Surviving this long, you must be tough.”

Noora blinked. “It is. Living here alone taught me how to preserve myself.”

“I can see that.”

“Are you by chance a Raedavenian?” Noora asked.

The mercenary’s eyes were half-shut when she called him out. Alastor shrugged and shook his head impassively. He groaned and stared up properly to respond.

“No.”

“You look like one, by the standard of your dress of course.”

Alastor looked at his clothing. “And here I thought that this is just some rag suit.”

“Pardon?”

Alastor returned his glance at her, and answered, “I found this at the town’s ruin. Just north from here.”

Noora leaned her back against the chair. “Well, that’s a surprise. Have you met anyone?”

“No. Just you. Why do you ask?”

“Just hoping.”

Utter nonsense. Alastor had thought that her words were meaningless. She claimed that she lived here for hundreds of years, if there was anyone alive by this point, she would’ve known. But faith works mysteriously, maybe there was some truth in her words.

“What’s a Raedavenian?” Alastor asked.

“Name of denizens of the country of Raedav.” Noora replied.

“Never heard of it.” Alastor shook his head and drank.

“Where are you from?”

“Somewhere in the Indigium Region.”

“No wonder why you’re not so familiar with them. You live on the other continent.”

Alastor couldn’t understand her. He perceived too little information from her words.

“I live in the continent of Carton, in the country of Sutra.” Noora clarified.

“Oh,” Alastor sounded astounded, “I heard the continent but not the country itself. Sorry, geography and history are not part of my forte.”

“That’s fine.” Noora smiled enigmatically. “How are things going back there? The last time I was in that world, everything was gone ablaze. I was hoping that the war in my time would stop and never continue.”

“War of Blights.” Alastor filled in the missing blanks. “You are wrong. It continued to my generation.”

Noora nodded. “The Atmas continent was the center of attention back then. The government and the royalties of that continent influence mostly the nations of other continents and incited wars.”

“Apparently, people from my continent are a bunch of assholes.”

“Especially the Hayan Empire.”

“That and the others.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what groups I’m referring to. The hunters and the self-righteous Alexandria country.”

Alastor was watchful and silent. He saw resentment reflected in her eyes, but tired and dim as if she lost all hopes she got.

“You came from Carton continent, am I right?”

“That is right.”

“That explains the gaps.”

“The gaps, you mean the exotic beauty?”

Alastor chuckled, “What I mean is the accent. I never heard that kind of accent before.”

“Do men like you in your era don't know how to properly compliment a woman?”

“I don’t know about the others. It’s just me,”

“Well, I guess I can’t judge the entirety.”

Alastor ate after a long pause, “I guess they took something away from you.”

Noora knew what he was referring to. She cleared her throat.

“Something? No, they took it all away. My family, friends, and the kingdom I served.”

“You know, I lost my family too. I never met my mother and lost my memory of my father. Then, I ended up becoming a mercenary.”

“So, you kill people for money?”

Alastor nodded. “I do.”

“You and I are not so different after all.”

“Are you mercenary too?”

“You can say that. I’m a sorceress for hire. It was during the 293rd war of blights when I was hired. They gave me the rank of a captain and assigned me to train mages and soldiers. Naturally, when I successfully won in the plain of monsters, I was awarded and given the rank as a higher mage. But, the fall of our kingdom was reassured by the spies from other nations. Eventually, I confronted the traitor,” she paused, her thoughts choosing the right words, “the traitor had prepared himself, gaining an advantage by barrel bombs and foul chemicals, a dreadful result of his experimentations with alchemy. Just like that, he slaughtered most of my men. By the time I got to his room, he already conjured a spell. A wide one.”

“Then that means,”

“That spell brought us here and some parts of our kingdom’s towns.” She broke in.

“You said the spell brought your town here? Does that mean that he was teleported here too?”

Noora nodded and replied, “Yes. Unfortunately for him, the spell was unstable at that time. My guess is that he must have mispronounced his spell due to the rampant.”

“Or maybe the spell is not complete yet.” Alastor said thoughtfully, “How many did he take with him?”

“Hundreds, maybe it even reached a thousand.”

Alastor looked around, the silence and the loneliness had embarked on his mind, “What happened to them after?”

“They didn’t last long enough.” She said icily, “The aftermath was even worse than the situation when we were in the kingdom. The spell he did already sealed our destiny. We tried to subdue the traitor but he escaped. The remaining mages left behind had put their heads together and tried to solve a way out of this limbo, but to no avail.”

“The people?”

“With the death of our king, the people of our kingdom divided and built their own community. Each town was striving, but peace would break out eventually. Our sources are limited while the population prevails most, the scarcity of resources has forced the people to resort to violence. They waged war once on another. They plunge their blades and loot everything they have. But all of this chaos was orchestrated by one man.”

“The traitor of your kingdom.”

“Yes. It turns out that he needed their souls as a sacrifice to free himself back to the real world.”

“If that’s the case, what stops him?”

“Our mages have known some prayers, the souls of those people were freed to the afterlife, but… our faith is not strong enough to free all of them. It is easy to kill and chain them rather than to pray and free their souls to the light.” Noora looked down with a brief pause. She drank. “I want to show you something later, but first, we must finish our breakfast.”

They continued eating silently.

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The sorceress brought Alastor to the balcony.

Alastor approached Noora, silently and observed keenly from behind. Despite the times, the woman in front of her had the body of a twenty year old. Regardless of her original age, Noora has retained her grace, her movements are the ones who are born in royalties, flawless and smooth.

Her silky robe slid on her shoulder revealing her dewy skin. Her hair was midnight-black and it gently flowers on her shoulder. She had the lips of Hyacinth. It smelled sweet and very close to the lilac floral fragrance.

“What is the reason you came here?”

Her vocal voice woke him up from his daydream.

“I was hoping that someone could give me answers on how to get back to my world.”

“I know how.”

Alastor’s face brightened. “Would you please—” He stopped mid-sentence. “Surely you’re jesting.”

Noora giggled. “Yes and no. You know I detest deceitfulness.”

Alastor tried to be nice, but his patience is becoming thinner. Alastor was never the man who let time stand idly. When he sees an opportunity, he seizes it.

“Noora,” Alastor said firmly, “Enough with the games.”

“Why the grumpy look? ‘Can’t take a joke?”

“You know very well I am running out of time.”

“We’re always running out of time, but what’s the point of pursuing if not to enjoy the moments?” Noora looked at him sternly, judging, “Maybe we’re not so similar after all.”

“Never was.” He replied and continued, “Why did you take me here?”

“Look down.”

Alastor peered. Something was bleating, Alastor looked down and saw the farm behind her mansion. Goats, cows, pigs, on the other side of the tall fence are different types of vegetables.

Noora continued, “You seem to be troubled when the food is served. Did you actually think I turned into a cannibalistic animal?”

“I was under the impression that you’re some undead witch.”

Noora broke to laughter. “An undead witch?! You, Alastor, have the wildest imagination I have ever known. Is that the reason why you’re making that funny face earlier? And why did you still eat under that impression? Wait, wait, I get it now. For a quiet man, you assumed a lot.”

Alastor was not having it. Even he doesn’t find it funny anymore. He hung his head to the farm, avoiding her eyes. Alastor can observe the clock tower from the balcony. If he read it right, the time now is quarter to eight in the morning.

Noora held back her breath to stop herself from wheezing in laughter, “You have a strong conviction, but your level-headedness is the reason why you take some things wrong sometimes. Do not overthink Al, or you’ll lag behind.” Noora conjured a white light, extended through the corridor, “Follow this light and it will lead you to your room.”

“What for?”

“You need a bath and of course a decent sleep. Those bags of yours are sorely swollen. Don’t worry about the lunch, just snap your fingers and the food will be served.”

“Do I smell like shit to you?” he asked.

“Just bearable.”

“Then why do I have to take a bath?”

“Alastor, I’m a woman of eloquence, I do not take hygiene lightly. Now, chop-chop. Go to your room. When the small hand strikes at three, and you hear the bell’s tintinnabulation, find a room that has a faint light in the west wing of the manor.”

By the time Alastor turned around, Noora was already gone.

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Alastor decided to have a warm sleep first.

After that, Alastor went to the bathroom. Just as he expected, the water in the bathtub steamed and the temperature rose. He gasped the moment he sat down on the bathtub. The cold was biting. Alastor spread his legs and hung his feet. He closed his eyes and let the tension subside in the hot water.

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Alastor almost missed lunchtime. It was the loud ringing of the bell that woke him up. He yawned and stretched his arms.

Alastor wore only pajamas and nothing more. The weight of his items will do no good to him since the owner already proved to him that this is a safe place. Instead, he made himself feel at home. Walking through the long corridor, Alastor turned right, walked down the stairs, and went to the east wing where he entered the dining area.

What she had said, in a single snap, the foods, cutlery, and dishes flew from the kitchen. Alastor quickly ate his meal.

He promptly came back to his room. Alastor dived on his bed and burrowed his face. Moments later, his head lifted where the windows phase the light, naturally, his eyes felt stung from it, that was when he noticed a tuxedo folded properly in the chair.

Alastor sat up, bent over, and observed the tuxedo. His thoughts spiraled. He rose and went to the bathroom. He was going to shower again, only this time he was going to go for cold water. Alastor carefully washed his body, removing stains of dirt, especially between his thighs.

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Alastor looked at himself on the cheval glass. It was the most unusual thing he had ever seen, the tuxedo he wore was all black including the long sleeves with a red bow tie, with no designs and less in color. Although that was the case, he liked it.

Something appeared again on the chair. A fragrance of some sort, the color of the cologne is in an aquatic blue. Doubting, Alastor pressed the spray cap on his wrist, smelled aromatic, minty, and dewy. He looked back at the mirror, releasing a sigh.

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It was on time the bells chimed when he found the music chamber. The door, as if it had its own life, opened, welcoming him to come inside. Alastor reluctantly pressed forward.

As soon as he entered, a piece of music came to his ears and the dancing lights of a giant crystal chandelier. His eyes reached the corner. There, the proclaimed beautiful sorceress sat on the bench, her hands playing the keys of a piano. The jet-black wood seamlessly had told so many tales that were weaved by different hands. Her eyes surveyed the pieces with her fingers lightly running over the keys, playing in legato. The tone was mellow, but as soon as she hit the timber, the rhythm started to transpire into a darker tone. She poured her soul into the music with passion, mystery, and defiance.

Alastor walked over the corner. A bottle of rum and two bottles of glass perched on top of the piano. He snatched the rum and poured it in the glass. He drank it in one gulped and squirmed. It is best to drink the rum in one gulp and savor the taste of the lingering feeling of its sweet nectar on the person’s mouth. At least, that was what he believed.

The piano came to an end and Noora rose from her seat, but the keys themselves started to play, enchanted by Noora’s magic. She came to him only to steal the rum and poured herself a drink. Noora sat back, and as her legs crossed. Alastor felt feverish, he barely caught what’s the middle of her thighs, but he already felt his cheeks gradually heating. Her dark hair bounced off and flowered over her shoulder, covering her left eye. Out of obstruction, Alastor had a better view of her dress. Noora’s bare skin on her upper body was barely covered. Her bodice was wrapped in pristine violet. Just as her round greenish eyes, down to her waistline and to her flounce were all black, lastly, her skirt was slit widely to show off her long legs.

Alastor’s eyes never set off on her, admiring her shape, the hourglass body, until their eyes met. He remained impassive looking, and didn't want to make it obvious that he was startled.

“So, what’s this another charade all about?” he asked, in a desperate attempt to steer her thoughts and his mischievous eyes.

“I just want to talk about some things.” Noora replied.

“Like what?”

“I would like to propose to you a deal.”

“I’m listening.”

For a second, their eyes met.

“I will help you get out of this place under some conditions.”

“Spill.”

It was not like he had another option for him to deny her request.

“There will be four tasks you must complete. One of them might be happening now.”

Alastor raised a brow, “And what is that?”

“Spend half the day with me.”

Surely, he can accommodate, “Fine. What are we supposed to do?”

“As I said, talk about some things.”

Alastor grunted. He took his eyes off the rum and drank.

“Come let us dance.” The lady beckoned him.

As gentleman as he is, Alastor guided the lady. Held her hands firmly and whipped her in the center of the stage, gently catching her hips. Her hands automatically swiped on his shoulder, their hands joined and they started to sway in the clouds of rhythm.

“That suit looks good on you.” Noora commented. The chandelier glistened on her emerald eyes.

Alastor beamed. “Well, despite the lack of color I do not detest the choice. I doubt there’s a thing that won’t fit on my appearance.”

He caught her smile sideways as she looked over his shoulder.

“Tell me, Alastor, are you fond of fairy tales?”

“Never was.” He countered as he straddled her into a courteous turn. “I wasn’t the guy who likes reading bedtime stories as such.”

“How boring. Have you ever done anything fun in your entire life?”

“As far as I can remember, I never had a normal life, nor have the luxury to dream, just be indifferent.”

“Everybody can dream, Alastor, even those who were born misfortune.” She continued, “You know, I was never a believer before, I was never interested in everything, ‘till I knew magic. The beauty, its elegance, and grace allude me to become a sorceress. But I never had a taste of real magic in my entire life. It was something that even my entire career can never surmise.”

“Real magic?”

“Someone who can make me feel something which I was meant to be something more than I already am. I believe the right term is having ‘butterflies in the stomach.’ That is.”

“Oh, so you were looking for love? How cute.” Alastor sardonically smiled.

“It was here I had the time to read books and realize the things that I have missed. Most of the time I was the one who saves people, now, I want a prince to come and save me from this desolated realm.”

“I never thought you’re the kind of person who loves and wants to be the princess of a story.”

“What makes you think of that?”

“You’re powerful, capable, and mostly, you’re beautiful.”

Noora was lagging for a moment, processing his last word, and she smiled.

“Even a strong woman needs a compassionate and strong partner, someone who can make her feel safe and protected.” She finally replied.

Alastor firmly replied, “Fairy tales are dumb, it’s just but a dose of non-sensible hope, a silliness, and an illusionary dream.”

“True, I agree. But it won’t hurt you to have hope and have a dream, it’s what keeps us moving forward.”

Alastor was silent.

“Tell me, Al. Have you ever had this dream so real that you’re not sure of yourself you wanted to wake up?” Noora asked. She was staring at his eyes.

“I can’t say I can relate to it. No.”

“Well, I have,” She started. “I had this dream once before, a knight in shining armor, riding his horse and saving me from the monsters that wanted me as their food. He would brandish his sword and slay the enemies. He’d take me to his home and live happily ever after.”

“You’re lucky you woke up from that dream.”

“It is a dream, after all. But it’s not far from reality.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because you’re here.”

Alastor looked stunned. He was unsure what to say.

She smiled. “Will you be my knight, Alastor?”

“I’m not a knight, Noora.”

“Why not?”

“I’m a hired hitman. I kill for the living. Besides, the title of knight is for those who are noble, prestigious, and esteemed individuals. And I’m neither of those things. Don’t assume too much good in me.”

“You think of yourself so low.”

“I’m being realistic here.”

“And I’m being serious.”

“Men like me are not meant for saving people, we strive for the money.”

“You put your life on the line, letting the money decide your life. Aren’t you devaluing the importance of your life?”

Alastor guided her hand and twirled her into his arms. He caught her and continued to dance, letting the rhythm control their body, too lost in the music to halt. As they rocked back and forth, the chandelier began to glister in different colors, elegant just like the lady in front of him.

She continued, “You may not believe it yourself, but I do. You are meant for something greater.”

Alastor was silent and intently observed.

“Why won’t you want something more?”

“Because then,” he finally said, “I’d lose what I am.”

“You must be jesting.”

“I am not.”

“Maybe you’re just scared to lose yourself in the process.”

“I’m not scared of anything.”

She chuckled and sardonically smiled. “Sure, you do.”

Alastor groaned. “When we desire more than what we deserve, we are bound to lose a part of ourselves.”

“That sounds obsolete. Do you truly believe that?”

“I saw a lot of people gone mad.” He firmly replied. “Just as how they came high to claim their prize, they also fell down harder to the bottom.”

“What about now?” she asked.

“What about now?” he repeated.

“Do you not desire anything?”

Alastor knew what she was referring to. He didn’t need to ask. Her luscious smile, the quivering red lips and her inviting eyes made it possible to convey that it yearned for the warmth of another. Heat rose from his body.

“You’re not the first person who is intrusive about my history and way of living.” Alastor said, attempting to steer his thoughts from the turmoiling cardinal instinct.

“Is it a girl?”

Alastor nodded.

“And here I thought I was the only one.” Noora replied.

Alastor chuckled and replied, “Somehow, this girl has these uncanny thoughts about people’s lives of what should and what could be. She doesn’t seem to be bothered by what other people think of her. She’s stubborn, always enforcing her thoughts and challenging me.”

“And yet, somehow you’re not annoyed by her.”

“I never say I didn’t. Sure, I was annoyed at first, but I have developed tolerance with that kind of attitude.”

“Hmm. This girl. What does she mean to you?”

“You can say I’m acquainted.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah.”

Noora rolled her eyes, “I hardly believe that.”

The tune of the music changed into a slow, lethargic rhythm. The two followed with gentle sways.

“It’s the truth. I was never interested in anyone.”

“The way you describe her says otherwise.”

Alastor scoffed, the lights illuminating in his raven eyes.

“She’s only a friend.”

“I hope that’s the case.”

“Tell me, Noora. We’ve only met today, why are you so reluctant to draw comfort from me?”

“It’s a thing,”

“What thing?”

“It’s more of an imagination and my hope, unfortunately, that you would be my savior.” She paused for a second, “Moreover, because, I know men like you,” she drew him closer to her chest, “You pretend not to care, but deep down, you’re just like any other normal people, who have feelings, yearn for affection, and want love. You just don’t know how to reach it yet. You were never given a chance to explore.”

“I chose what I am, Noora, and I don’t need to explore to know what’s better for me.”

The chandelier changed again. The light had ceased and the chamber turned into a room of stars that speckled around them. The curtain unveiled the circular window as the moon came into the view.

“But, that outlook of yours is good as a dead man. Breathing yet not living.”

“I may be good as a dead man, but at least I’m a weapon with a purpose.”

“I know that you’re not fond of fairy tales, but please, be part of my fairy tale for the night.” She said, her eyes were pleading. “Would you?”

For the sake of fulfilling his words, Alastor adhered. “I will.”

She beamed and they continued to dance.

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It was five in the afternoon when they had their dinner.

Alastor and Noora had eaten their dinner in the music chamber. It was quick as if time expended swiftly under their nose. The two of them sat on their cushion chairs, just near the circular window, looking at the moon while savoring the wine. The food displayed in an arranged manner in a circular black glass table.

“I was told once before 'Being alone in a room doesn't mean you truly are alone, but when you have no one to hold onto, that’s the moment you are truly alone,” Noora stated. “I thought it’s a paradigm shift of philosophy from being stoic to straw narcissism, but the moment I was transported here, I have learned what it truly means. I have allies but I do not know if I can trust them. I am detached from my humanity at that time because people are fighting, divided by their interests. The only thing that keeps me breathing is believing in myself. What about you, Alastor, are you alone?”

“I have been always alone my entire life, Noora.” Alastor looked away from her. He shifted the way he sat.

“Stop dodging my question or I might lose interest in you and don’t slouch.” The sorceress said with steely gripped.

“I don’t know.” Alastor sat straight and shrugged his shoulders.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I have never immersed myself with the people. Sure, I made an acquaintance, but that’s it.”

“A temporary relationship.”

“More like a short-term transaction.”

“We truly are fated to meet.”

Noora’s whole attention was on the moon, admiring it, but something more, her mind was taken elsewhere in her previous memories, all the while Alastor had been watching her for quite some time. He was smitten with her bewitching beauty. He does not know when or why he was looking at her this way, all he knew was that he liked it.

“Alastor,” she said without looking. “You live for the cause of others, am I right?”

‘’Yes.”

“Then does that mean I’m your client now?”

“Unfortunately. We are under contract, so I guess, both of us are benefactors. You make the requests and if I will fulfill it, as long as you’ll help me get out of here.”

“Then I guess there is no reason for you to deny my second request.”

Noora brought her head down and gazed at him, giving him an eye, and held on him. Alastor blinked, studying her dazzled complexion. Noora rose from her seat, walking slowly towards him. She sat down on his lap and clutched her arm on his neck while her other hand delicately tucked and locked behind his ear. Her dark eyes glistened like a phantom.

Her face got closer to his. A few inches away, they can feel their breaths. The aroma of wine hung in the air, but he did not deny her. He felt her breath come past his ear. She leaned without hesitation and planted her lips to his like longing to be with someone like no one had ever kissed her. She wasn’t sure if he was going to reciprocate but as soon as she felt his tongue moving inside her, she didn’t hesitate. She felt heat rise in her cheeks as their lips locked, not battling for domination, but showing their passion.

His tongue pressed more, feeling a jolt of electricity spark in his lips. Their bouts of kisses were determined, firmed, and more curious. They’re drowning in the river of lecherousness. The two parted, panting, and catching their breath. He wasn’t sure if his reaction was rooted in his nature or the wine had tricked him into returning the kiss, but each second, his mind was being consumed by addictive pulses. He looked at her, baffled by the sensual theatrics.

“I need a minute.”

Noora rose, and walked trudging on her seat, her knees felt weakened by the intense kiss.

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Alastor washed his face and looked at the mirror.

“What are you doing, Al?” he asked to himself, astonished.

Alastor was unfamiliar with the feeling. He knew that he wasn’t supposed to feel that way, but chose to do it anyway. He was completely caught off guard by Noora and likely he won’t be able to hold back much longer if they continue.

“But it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’s a request from the client.”

He went back to the music chamber, but it wasn’t the same as when he left. He felt the heat had already gone. Noora turned around from the window. Her eyes were on the verge of tears.

“Did I make you uncomfortable?”

“No.”

“If you don’t feel like it, then I think we should stop. Let’s continue the dance and this will be the last.”

The dance this time was slow, less energy-consuming, and calm. The chandelier provided a flickering reflection as Noora rested the side of her face on his chest. She obviously saved the music for the last as she wanted to savor every second of it.

The time seemingly passed more quickly than they had anticipated. As the piano hits the last note, Noora lets him go.

“You can go now. I’m going to tell you my 3rd request tomorrow.” She said, did not dare to look up.

Before she looked away from him, Alastor caught a bit of sadness on her face, covered in a bitter smile.

Alastor walked away, wondering what he should do. The thought alone made him think about what had gotten to him. He wasn’t supposed to act and think like this before, but remembering her sad face poked his heart. Soon, he would reach a conjecture. He turned back and took off his tuxedo and threw it somewhere. He pulled Noora and leaned to kiss her. He was rush and passionate. His lips mashed in hers, feeling the soft and the warm of her lips as if he were a hungry wild animal. She retorted back, her mouth wide open, inserting her tongue battling back and forth, trying to dominate each other. Their liquid tasting each other as they eagerly pin their mouth. Noora’s fingers traced his belly, feeling its hardness. Alastor had noticed and took off his clothes, revealing his four pack abs as well as his scars.

“Do you mind?” Alastor asked.

“You showed me your scars, I’ll show you mine.”

The two continued their intense, sensual bouts.

His lips are warm and soft. She parted slightly, gasping for air, feeling the warmth of his breath, then they kiss again. She pressed her tongue again which he granted, tasting the bittersweet wine from her tongue.

The sorceress snapped her finger that transported them to her room. Alastor caress and took her to the bed.

The night ended filled moans and groans.

# Chapter 8

Noora woke up late around ten in the morning. She was alone, and he was nowhere to be found. She had not expected that her play would be well. Moreover, in the preceding events, she didn’t also expect that her night with him would also be wild beyond her imagination. It was entertaining for both of them in the earlier round, but the latter was more of a plight for her.

Thinking about what they have done, Noora’s face was flushed in red. She was supposed to be a woman of articulateness, boldness, cunning, and confidence, yet she cannot deny the coyness growing inside her.

*Is this what they call a butterfly in the stomach?* She thought.

Noora’s eyes traversed on her left and saw a tray of food, and a letter left on the silver platter.

‘

*I know that you needed to rest, hence I already prepared this food for you. The delicacies might be foreign, but I promise you, you’d like it.’*

*P.S. I’m on the farm. It appears that some problems need to be mended.*

A chuckle escaped her mouth. When she tried to stand, her knees suddenly weakened. As quick as the sorceress tried to get up, instantly she was pushed down by her own body. Now that her attention wasn’t diverted, she just now felt the stinging pain below, on the lower part of her body.

As much as she wanted to heal the pain, there is nothing she can do with it. Rather, Noora sat down, summoned the foldable tray table. One by one, the three cloche opened and floated over her. A silver plate, cutlery, and dishes such as omelet, soup, and roasted broccoli.

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Noora was able to walk in the shower and had a cold shower. She took it very slowly. Noora carefully removed the dirt off her body with her bath sponge. After what they’ve done, Noora feels her body was sticky, and smelled. Furthermore, this had already ingrained on her thoughts.

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She came down the stairs, trudging in her heels and holding her white duster dress. Prudently, yet elegant, Noora went to the east wing of the mansion and came through the door where it leads to the promenade. She came past through the curved road on her left, making her way to the large steel gate.

The gateway automatically opened in her presence and proceeded forward.

As usual, the goats are out of their fence, while the pigs are on the mud surrounded by a small oak railing. The cows as of now are on the grass field where the barrier protects them from any harm on the outside. Noora’s eyes drew to the broken windmill as she pressed forward.

Alastor as of now, grunting over the chickens hurdling over him while holding a hammer and attempting to flatten a curved surface of a blade from a rotor. Noora can’t help but laugh. The rest of the three remaining blades of the rotor remained intact, but it won’t function without their last pair.

Alastor looked around and saw her.

“Hey.” He started.

“Hey.”

“Are you fine?” Alastor asked.

“Yes.” She nodded briefly and continued. “You know, I thought losing my virginity changes me, turns me differently, like from the books I’ve read, but right now, all I can feel is soreness.”

Alastor laughed.

“What are you doing exactly?” Noora asked.

Alastor lifted his head to see the sorceress. “I’m fixing your windmill.”

“You could have told me about it. I can work more efficiently than you, you know. Maybe, you’re trying to impress me.”

He looked at her, indifferently, “Your dream must’ve been good for you.”

Noora chuckled. “I admire your bravado. I wonder how many girls have you lured with that level of confidence.”

“Do you mean in bed or by my charm?”

“I was being sarcastic.”

Alastor steered the conversation, “The only thing that is fucked up right here is this rotor of yours. I know how to attach it back, but I need rope – a strong one – to withhold the wind pressure.”

Noora’s hands wave in the air, seemingly dancing until various letters appear and float around. In a single stir in the air, the letters and symbols started to fly over the wrecked pieces of the windmill house, including the rotor, withheld in the air and started to gather back to their proper places. In a single flash, the windmill returns to its prime.

Noora said, “Quite convenient, don’t you think?”

“That magic, I’ve heard of it. Exclamation magic, am I correct?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Where’d you learn?”

“I learned this magic at the age of 14 at the school of mages from my hometown.”

“I heard it’s a difficult one. In my time, people only use magic based on incantations and some can also use chantless magic. People like you are rare.”

“Rare? I supposed that there are schools of magic that teach people this.”

He shrugged, “Never heard of it in our continent, but there are few places given that there are few people who can still use it.”

“Do you know the basics of it, Al?” Noora asked.

“No. I wasn’t very interested in the history of other continents.”

“Well, to start, incantations assume the form of magic, the imagination, the shape, the amount of mana, and precision. All of these are important factors in creating a perfect spell without any recoil to the user.”

Alastor intercepted, “I already know the basics of incantations and chantless magic.”

“Al, you should listen to what other people are going to say.”

Alastor didn’t reply.

She continued, “Chantless magic, on the other hand, can only be achieved through the using the same spell over time, on the book records perhaps. But there are other ways to achieve it even though the user hasn’t used the spell that much. Alastor, do you know other ways to achieve it?”

“Intense image training. The user may be able to achieve chantless magic if they spend most of the time in image training, but it has drawbacks, it risks the person’s mental state.”

“That is correct.” She agreed, “The systems of exclamation magic on the other hand consisted both in some terms. Intense image training and the basic factors of creating magic. Mastery requires time and training as it requires so many steps to proceed, aside from the mental traumas and physical strains.”

“I take that those symbols have something to do with your inconveniences.”

“Indeed. We had to memorize the letters and symbols of our native language first before moving next to the common language as our civilization grew up with, and being able to incorporate it with the spell we wanted to conjure, but it wasn’t colorful as I'd first thought.”

“Because it wasn’t the gist of it.” He said in a conclusive tone. “The true trouble came in when you had to learn the Pravitga language.”

There are only a few native languages in Alastor’s world. Most in common, people used pravitga, and it was considered a national language in all continents. There’s a substantial number of nations or countries that speak in native languages.

Noora could remember all of it. The first time she spoke the words and conjured the letters and spells, it was nearly perfect, but the latter wasn’t the case. When she failed to utter the words and summoned the words, she felt her mind burn for a couple of minutes, but those minutes were like a lifetime in hell. The only thing that makes her sense comes back was the special elixir of teachers made her drink and would make her perform again.

Willingly or forcibly, the students have no choice but to do it. Others didn’t last long in school and dropped out, but for some, magic is a way of living, and a shortcut out of poverty. But for Noora, it was both.

Alastor stated, “You never had a good childhood.”

She shook her head and walked up close enough for him to hear her moderate voice, “My early years are not that bad. We were able to live as normal children with a roof and something to fill our stomachs.”

“Hm. I doubt that’s the case.”

“And you’re not?”

Somewhere deep in the promenade where the tropical oak trees sheltered them under its shadow, the two had themselves a nice picnic. Luxurious red silk lay on the ground, with a basket made of woven fiber open, unpacked by Noora, had the plates, glasses, a bottle of wine, utensils, napkins, and some basic necessities such as paper towels and cutting board.

Alastor sat, while furtively watching the woman who was putting an already fried egg, pasted the cheese on top of it, and added two pieces of bacon on her sandwich. Noora returned her gaze to him. She handed the sandwich to him and he gladly accepted it. Noora made another set sandwich for her.

“You’ve been busy this early morning, I see.” Noora started.

Alastor as of now eating the sandwich, and he opened the wine, pouring his own glass, then he drank before replying to her words.

“Well, you did let me sleep here yesterday, so it’s only natural to repay the favor you’ve done to me.”

“What favor?”

“All of it.”

She chuckled.

He continued, “Last night, a bolt of lightning struck on your farm. You should be glad. I was able to conjure a barrier before the animals, especially the cows and pigs, could come out.”

“I should be thankful to you then.”

“You are very much welcome.”

She started puckering her lips, “Now, what reward should I give you?” she asked herself.

Alastor stared blankly at the lady who was trying to lure him in.

“Don’t give me that look.”

She sighed, giving up, “Alright, alright, I won’t bother you.”

“You should be. I wasn’t in my best mood.”

“Why is that? Did the chores heavily tax your body?”

“More than that.” He replied with an exasperated sigh, “I’ve chased a monster outside of your mansion.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Believe me or not, but the monster appeared to dig a hole on the wall of your mansion.”

“That shouldn’t be possible. I sealed the place with a barrier. It should be strong enough to withhold a monster just enough for me to notice.”

“Well,” Alastor scoffed. “Your barrier sucks.”

She glared at him. Alastor felt his blood run cold. He backed away.

“Geez. I’m just kidding here.”

“I’m not mad because you defeated the enemy. What I’m afraid of is that you might have exposed yourself.”

“Expose to what?”

She didn’t reply. The light atmosphere had been replaced by a heavy tone.

“Is there something you’re not telling me, Noora?”

She stared at him for quite a while before sighing, “Before I’m going to spill more information, I must assure that the barrier is still intact.”

Noora rose from. Her hands locked to each other and began to mutter exclamation magic. Based on what he was hearing, she must be using her native language to conjure magic. Symbols made of light suddenly grew out from her skin and shot out to the sky. The entire dome of the barrier began to pulse for a minute. As soon as she desisted her hands, the barrier stopped pulsating and went back to its transparent form.

“What did you do?” Alastor asked.

“I added extra layers of barriers and fixed the walls to make sure that no monsters will be able to break in again.”

“That’s the least we should worry about now,” Alastor exclaimed.

“What is it?”

“I can say that the barrier spell you conjured is a mid-tier spell. That alone should be enough to stop a monster on its tracks even if it tries to break it. The question should we ask now is how did a monster like it manage to break through your barrier earlier and destroy a wall without even you noticing?”

“Ah.” Alastor snapped his fingers.

“Have you deduced something?” Noora asked.

“It might be just a big coincidence at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“It must’ve been looking for food last night. With the heavy rain overlapping your senses, and us… being busy… the monster was able to break inside, but thinking like that, the time frame would be in question.”

“I think the plants are the reason why it has been here until morning. You see, a rare plant, skavunska, is always active at night, the plant nourishes from the light of the moon. Whenever some animals or monsters would try to devour it, it would release a strong spore to put any intruder to sleep. That must be the reason why you found it active this morning.”

“That would perfectly fit, but how come I didn’t see any plant as I chased it away?”

“That’s because, during the morning, it sleeps underground. You should have killed the beast when you had the chance.”

“I wish I could. I have to chase it away first so that your beloved farm won’t be harmed and receive any more damage further.”

“I see. That means he’s not on to us yet.”

Alastor raised a brow, “What do you mean?”

Noora clasped her hand. “I would like to use this chance to explain to you how I will send you back to Radiya.”

“Don’t you think it’s too early for that? You have 2 more requests, you know.”

“Yes, I am well aware of that, but as I’ve said before, we’re always losing time. Do you remember when did I last stop telling you my tale?”

Alastor nodded. “You were talking about the traitor, am I correct?”

“Few weeks after the rampant, the remaining mages tracked down the traitor, but the bastard had already made his move. He tapped into the dark arts. He became a necromancer. The bastard even learns some spells from the mephistic hunters and tribunal hunters.”

“That’s preposterous.”

“He was able to control monsters to some degree with the assistance of powerful dark magic. Despite our efforts, in the end, we mages were taken out, one by one, until there’s only me left.”

“Simply to say, you abandoned them.”

That was a mistake on his part. She snapped and she slapped him, “You, you don’t have the right to lecture me about abandoning people! You have no slightest idea what I’ve been through!”

Alastor remained doubtful in her words, he was rubbing his cheek. “Sure, I do. If you truly care about your men, then you wouldn’t have to abandon them and die with honor along with them.”

“What good is dying if the enemy still lives?”

Alastor didn’t reply.

“Be careful the next time you utter words, Alastor. I don’t need a lecture coming from a man who lives for money and killing people.” She continued. “Tell me, did once in your life have you ever cared for anyone or show at least a bit of humility?”

“I have.”

The pain already left his face. They were fanned by the rotor. Waves of clouds began to drift as far as his eyes could see.

“That’s a new one. Are they still alive?”

“People die every time, Noora. I can’t control their destiny.”

Noora stared at him for seconds. His words are discerning.

“I take the next request to kill that bastard, am I right?” He looked at her after observing the farm for a few seconds.

“Yes.” The sorceress responded as she drank the last of the wine in her glass.

“You hate him that much?”

“More than you could ever imagine.”

“All this time, has this between us ever meant anything to you, Noora?”

She quickly replied, “No. There is nothing between us in the first place, Alastor.”

“I see. So, you’re looking to hire a gun to slay that monster.”

“No matter what era is, people use others to gain something, you should be aware of that.”

Alastor assumed that it would be a sunny day, he guessed wrong. The rumble of thunder caught his ears to the eastern direction and saw gray clouds gathering in phantom. The lightning flashed. Their day was disrupted soon after by the drizzle.

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Their lovely luncheon was three days ago. They started to discuss their next steps.

Before Alastor had worn his suit, Noora taught him a few spells to aid him in his battles. Most of the spells she thought of him are mana base magic since Alastor was a Mana Folder. Flamen, a spell that can blast a thing away with a powerful invisible force. Its power can even rival a mid-tier level spell just by adjusting its mana consumption. Biendo is a binding spell, it can’t just only restrict the person’s body movements but also disrupt the person’s flow of mana, hence, making a person completely defenseless. Another spell he was taught was Delitesco, it’s a spell that allows a user to boost its agility and detection rate all the while his detectability would shoot up, a perfect skill for infiltration.

Somewhere in their session, Noora was astounded that despite being a mana folder, Alastor managed to persevere in his profession. Of course, being him, Alastor remained humble.

He was generally instructed that if he wants an easy path, he should utilize the skills he was given. But if he faces the target, there is a huge possibility that he had to deal with his minions later on and Noora told her that over the years, the traitor had developed monsters that could be on par with an A and S class adventurer. Alastor himself was just recently given the rank as a B+ class but he that ranking is nowhere near to a real deal, his ranking only came from the glade. Noora told him that his abilities can help him exceed that system.

This thought gave him two options, deal with the lackeys before the upcoming battle or go straight to the main target and end the battle quickly. Choosing the latter won’t sound right for him, he doesn’t know what capabilities the enemies have nor does he have the confidence over his strength.

This request is a suicide mission.

Alastor was on the balcony. He was looking at the scrolls and potions in his sling bag. Aside from learning some skills. Noora gave him scrolls and potions for his journey. But even that additional rejuvenating items lifted his spirit, he can’t shake off the feeling of dread over this mission.

He tightened the strings and hung them on his back.

Noora came to him. She wore a white robe, a foreign black moon crest bore in her chest and some linings that crept all over her breastplate and to her chausses. Her boots made a soft thump as she stopped by.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

He raised a brow, “Why are you wearing like that?”

“I’m coming too.”

“What? I thought I was supposed to be the only one who’s coming after him.”

“Yes. But I didn’t say I’m not going to help either. I kinda missed telling you that part.”

“So, you’re going to handle the strong lackeys in that kingdom?”

“The chances that the stronger ones would appear on me are slim.”

“Wait. Why does it sound like you’re not coming inside with me?”

“Because I am not. I am planning to set a commotion on the other side of his domain. You, on the other hand, will find a way to get inside and make your way to the castle.”

“How will you do that?”

She winked, “Trust me.”

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By chanting a spell then containing it on the bottle. Noora stole a glance at Alastor. The mercenary turned on her pensively.

“Are you ready for this?” she asked.

“And what would that thing be supposed to do?”

“You’ll see, but first…”

Noora got a hold of his arm and locked her slender arms.

“No matter what happened, don’t let go of me.” Noora firmly stated.

“If I say I am not comfortable with this, will it make any difference?”

“No.”

Alastor sighed. “I guess so.”

“We’ve been together in bed, there’s no need to be startled with such little things.”

Noora threw the bottle on the glass. Naturally, Alastor used his arm in an attempt to protect his face against the shards. The fragments did not reach but phased through. It was as soon as he reacted, he instantly felt his body become light. He saw the ground zoom away from him as they dive into the sky. The cold weather brushed them. The mercenary shivered.

Alastor cried hysterically and Noora laughed haughtily.

“I understand your complexion, but there is really no need to panic. The spell I perform just now allows me to travel instantly with little restriction.”

He saw around him were the shards in the form of feathers, enveloping them with lights as they whizzed in the air. They came past a forest and onto the cliff, then across the three mountains, he saw a town and in the middle was a castle. Unlike hers, this domain spoke dread itself. Lifeless and shallow, that would be the perfect fit to describe what this place is. The travel to the enemy's realm was supposed to be two days, but her way of traveling only took those 30 seconds to reach their destination.

They had landed in a secluded forest, just a few miles away from the enemies’ domain. Alastor can finally catch his breath.

“Noora,” he stated, “The next time you do it, please, warn me first.”

“You’ll get used to it, although, this would likely be the last.”

“Remind me again why I shouldn’t leave you here.”

“Because you need me to get back to your homeworld, and I need your help to free the damn souls in his domain.”

Alastor spat. “You really knew how to screw men.”

“You of all people had already experienced that.” She pointed to a station in the eastern part of the wall. Noora continued, “Use the spell Delitesco to hide and wait for those monsters to be gone.”

“What would be the signal?”

“You’ll know once you get there.”

Alastor nodded.

The two had separated and went on their ways.

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With the spell delitesco, Alastor managed to slip through the woods and remain undetected from the marching patrols of undead knights. He climbed on the tallest tree he saw, not too large, but not small either, just enough to peer on the enemies’ post.

“I hope she’s just not bluffing.”

Any moment from now, Alastor felt that the ground was shaking through the trembling tree. It was, later on, confirmed by the reaction of the birds and some unfamiliar monsters running away.

He altered his eyes to his left where the direction of Noora’s. A giant tree, over 30 feet, sprung out of the ground, its roots growing everywhere. He could make Noora's figure, standing tall on the branch of the tree.

“Dimiscus! If you can hear from that lousy throne of yours, I came here to end our hundreds of years of grudge. As you can see, I’m a lot more powerful than the last time we have met.”

On top of the castle, Dimiscus peered through the window in his seat while drinking his wine. He chuckled over her statement and stood. His finger pointed in her direction.

Noora felt the air grow hotter. She glanced up and saw a red beam launching at her position. The sorceress had leaped and evaded the attack. The beam whizzed through the tree and exploded a few steps behind her. Roots began to spread over the hole of the tree and regenerated back to its former.

Noora chuckled. “Is that a confirmation that you accept my challenge? Well, certainly you will not back down to my provocations.”

The lady had conjured several spells. The spell was specifically made to summon creatures. The insignia added to the letters had bonded those creatures and to this world, for them to bridge for her bidding.

The ground shook, and one by one, the ground dug itself, revealing monsters from another realm. Tambawos – mythical creatures that had the appearance as humanoid but were made of wood. The next of her summons was a basilisk, a serpent-like creature, it’s tall as ten feet and is capable of petrifying its victims with its stare. Next was the beninghols with certain modifications, she trained them to listen to her commands.

The tall rusty gate groaned and the eroded chains clang against the pull of the crank handle on a wheel. As the gates opened, she saw behind the portcullis the undead knights wearing rusty full armors that were already in formation.

When the gates are finally open, the undead knights march forward.

“Onward!” Noora commanded.

As the sorceress monsters began to charge forward, the large roots of the huge tree started to grow mushrooms. It detached from the roots and shot out to the sky. Upon their entry, the mushrooms burn and crash on the barracks and old houses.

A continuous loudness occurred that broke the formation of some undead knights. Only a few of the undead knights were pinned down, some managed to pull themselves together and stitched back their bones with their armor and sword.

The army of undead and the sorceress monsters began their fight. The basilisks divided themselves into smaller pieces and started to crawl over the tambawos and beninghols and a few other monsters on their reach.

As the two clashed, the basilisks leaped and wrapped the undead knights, restricting their movements. Comparing the undead knights to them, their movements were sluggish, comprehensible, the only advantage they have is destructive power and numbers. Surely, the undead knights were able to overwhelm them in numbers at the start of their bout, but after a few minutes, the sorceress monsters were able to turn the tide on their side. The tambawos are the reason for her advantage. Whenever an undead knight ripped them, the mushroom would shower the wounded tambawos with its spores and regrew their body parts with swift.

The tambawo ripped its arm away from its sword and the beninghol burned the undead knight with its fireball. Aside from holy spells, fire magic can affect any undead monster. It may not be as lethal as holy spells, but if precise enough, it would fatally damage the monster.

Noora waved her hands once more, beseeching the roots to spew out another hail of mushrooms. This time, the mushrooms didn’t explode only but expanded and grew as to the size of a regular tree.

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Alastor had seen how quick the events turned. He was in complete awe seeing her power. Noora was able to neutralize a large sum of enemies while minimizing her loss. Comparing these two parties, they have the power that can match against a kingdom, let alone any of them.

The undead knights had fled their post and proceeded to the other gate, rushing to stop the intruders. Alastor hastily moved inside the walls of kingdoms. He swiftly pressed from corners to corners following the map she gave to him. At first, he was cautious of his surroundings, always peering in the corners to make sure that there was none, but it was the next moment he got himself into trouble.

Alastor made a sharp right turn, and to his astonishment, he encountered undead knights, the number was up to fifteen. He later realized that the spell was already on its limit when he looked at himself.

“Oh fuck.” He muttered under his breath.

The undead knights who weren’t fettered in confusion immediately drew their blades, charged. Alastor quickly shifted his gaze around.

Behind the lines of the undead, there’s an enclosure pathway. The problem is how he would be able to get through them.

Alastor evaded the first strike. He slipped through, sword in hand, and blocked the enemy’s sword. Then he used flamen to blast the enemy on his right. It wasn’t strong but the force was enough to lose their balance and fall on the ground.

Alastor slid down and slashed the enemy's leg, the following was the spell biendo conjured to the last enemy. He hiked in his spell transcendent wall flat in the air and flipped past them before skidding to the pathway.

The undead knights stitch themselves together, but before they can make a move, a fireball like a cannonball has crashed over them, followed by several more. Thereafter, roots suddenly crept out from the holes and sprung the trees out of it. Noora was aware of his situation as she observed from her position.

What entailed next was that her creation had wrapped the enemies with its overgrown vines. The trees had ensured that the monsters wouldn't be able to distract Alastor in his way. But the undead is without a doubt not going down without a fight.

A single undead archer from the rooftop picked up its horn, blew it. Its attention returned to Alastor as he dashed forward. The undead pulled the strings of the bow and let the arrow loose.

Alastor evasively moved in his right, barely making it through as he felt the arrow purred behind him. He then turned left to avoid the undead.

Thankfully, Noora had his back. The sorceress waved her hand and the vines of the trees followed her navigation and obliterated the undead in the pile of structures.

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Alastor came in front of the castle. The gate was locked and nowhere he would be able to get inside, not without getting unscathed by the archers atop of their respective towers. Regardless of their sluggish actions, the undead archers managed to detect him from the last second when he tried to hide. But, to no less, their vision is still limited.

Through the trees, Noora sensed the sudden halt of movements of Alastor. She understood the current predicament.

Another bulge of mushrooms appeared out of the tree and shot out to the sky. It was intended to hit on the tower, but to no avail, it landed outside the walls. Gigantic mushrooms and trees grew immediately. From there, monsters have spawned out from it. The beninghols and tambawos leaped from the trees over the towers and killed the rest of the monsters.

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Watching from his tower, Dimiscus had a laugh over their thwart against the undead archers in the towers.

“What progress she has made. Her monsters are strong enough to repel my undead knights.”

He poured himself a drink.

“They’re not even close to winning yet. No matter. The fun is yet to start.”

Dimiscus conjured a light in his hand. He clenched and threw it out of the window. The light turned to brim dust and it reached the courtyard.

The land shook and rumbled.

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Alastor mustered strength in his feet when the tremors appeared that would unlikely recede any moments. He drew his sword and plunged it on the ground, providing him a sense of balance despite the quakes persistent.

“What the fuck is going on?”

He can only protest in his word, unknowingly about what's about to happen.

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At the courtyard.

The land itself molded and bulged into fifteen feet tall golem. It was followed by then another four golems erupting out from the ground. The four golems bent, their feet steady and there was a loud resonating hollow sound caused by the recoil from their jump. The golem’s leap had caused a huge crater on the neighboring empty houses.

Unlike the elder that the tribunal hunters fought before, these golems are far less significant to the latter one. They may be small compared to the ones Alastor fought with the hunters, but they are more than meets the eye. They still hold a significant amount of destructive power that can breach through a wall if given the order.

At that moment, Alastor remembered the familiar chilling breeze that he had experienced the same as the one back from the tribunal camp. The golem left behind the wall broke through the gate as if it was just a meager tool blocking its way. The debris had fallen over the roof of the abandoned houses and structures.

The golem did not spare the trees and the giant mushroom and plucked them out of their roots. The giant turned its attention back to the towers where the monsters reside. It swung the two tools to the tower, completely demolishing the structure including the monsters themselves.

Alastor gulped and held the handle of his sword.

The moment it turned its attention on him, he swept in.

The golem roared and threw the tree over him.

Alastor slid through, conjured a few transcendent walls flat floating in the air, using it as a platform to get to the higher ground. As the tree came closer to him, Alastor made a huge leaped and flipped over the air, above the log, flawlessly evading it.

It wasn’t the end of it.

The gigantic size of mushroom was sent flying towards him next.

“Cinque Parete Invisible!”

Alastor cast over ten transcendent walls. With his spell, the tree size toadstool impact decelerated, but its weight had broken up to the last wall.

He raised his hand. “Flamen!”

A burst of light shot out from his palm, blasting the enormous mushroom just a few feet away from him. He pressed forward with haste. He saw the golem charged. Alastor submerged in the shadows of the structures. His movements were like a breeze, so swift and calm.

The golem started its rampage by destroying the houses and buildings, one by one. To no avail, it failed to locate Alastor.

While moving and watching in distance, Alastor felt a sudden twitch in his flesh. He felt his temperature shoot up and his cheeks were flush red. By the time he snapped out of it, he found himself charging at the enemy. He realized that his instinct took a hold of his body.

Alastor streaked across the debris and pile of rocks and deranged roads. He swung his sword with great speed, but in the process, his sword bounced back against the surface of the golem’s leg.

“Fuck.”

Something black flung over him. Alastor was completely thrown off to the establishments. He crashed into what appeared to be a restaurant with an awful smell. He wrinkled his nose from the decaying rotten flesh of the fallen undead knights with disgust.

“That was to be expected.” He spat blood.

Alastor felt through the ground the ceaseless tremors. He got up wearily, intently studying the place. He searched for the door and kicked it out open.

Alastor noticed that most of the alleyways are blocked by the fallen infrastructure. It was clear that this was the doing of the golem. The only thing that was available for him to escape was the clear paved road behind him, but he is not a man that backs down nor compromises a deal.

The golem itself is slowly jerking towards him, demolishing the infrastructures out of their way.

The afternoon breeze cooled against his tired face. He stepped forward, slowly, and his right came up and sped away. Alastor embedded his mana to his sword and conjured a wall flat on the ground, sliding off on the road, on time stumbling the golem forward.

Alastor made a huge leap and used the transcendent transparent wall as a way to boost his entry downward. He poured his sword with mana, brimming briefly against the sun and with one mighty swoop, the blade made contact with the supposed to be the neck of the monster.

Behind him, the monster lies on the ground, motionless and with no pulse of life. Somehow, his attack works. It managed to sever in half the base of its neck. The mercenary kicked the ground and off forward.

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Alastor had made it across the walls.

It contradicted what he thought. The castle was twice the size of Noora’s mansion, but it had long corridors, a few uncharted territories, but it wasn’t comparable to other castles. He, of course, set his interest in the architecture of the fortress. This had its own unique texture. The walls framed different colors and waves of design.

Alastor’s soft thumps of heels were the only thing that can be heard on these lifeless grounds. Not too far, he saw the stairs but before it was a gate that locked the path. The chains dangled as he lifted the padlock to observe.

Alastor began his investigation. He came through the halls and saw several places, but all of them were empty. The previous room which is the kitchen room was rather unsightly, the galley itself emanates a foul and offensive odor and he can smell it by just standing outside the door.

He moved on.

Alastor felt terrible, going in alone without proper orientation of the layout of the castle and with no backup when he knew that sooner or later something might happen to him.

Alastor shook his head, dismissing such negative thoughts. Suddenly, Alastor felt a breath on the back of his neck.

“This one is interesting,” said the unknown source.

Alastor leaped forward. His sword quickly withdrew from the scabbard as he turned, yet there was no one there.

That couldn’t be his imagination. He felt someone’s breath and heard a voice at the back of his head.

“What was that?” Alastor asked himself.

He remained vigilant for a couple of seconds before releasing an exasperated sigh.

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Alastor halted once he reached a hall. It was rather huge to consider this for a mere dining hall. The windows at his right have been concealed by thin blinders, it was hard to see as it blotted the remaining light the sky had to offer, and farther in was almost black.

Alastor stretched widely as he approached the front steps. The mercenary halted and let out a long, wordless sound of relief, feeling his muscles aching. He doubted that anytime soon his back problem would cease.

All was well at his end when suddenly a sudden expulsion of energy inside him disrupted his movements. It was the gut-wrenching twitch again, but this time it’s different. His mana is leaking out and his mind was in total heat.

Alastor groaned in pain as he endured the twitching flesh that incapacitated him. His head felt heavy and ringing. The room around him distorted into a pitch colorless ruin. This occurred for about a minute before he laid on the ground, breathing convulsively.

Alastor rested his eyes for the moment and took a deep breath. He was unable to wipe his worried expression. He hadn’t learned anything yet about what he is or what was even happening to him. He wasn’t given enough time for Timber to teach him about the hunters.

Alastor sat, he hung his throbbing head, lost for a moment over his thoughts.

“So, that wench managed to find herself a hunter.”

It was that voice again. Alastor stood wearily; his sword brandished in the air.

“I was beginning to think that I’m going crazy. Turns out you’re real after all.”

The man was on the stage, sitting on the stool in front of a piano, but he couldn’t see him because of the red curtains. Alastor did not notice the stage before. He must have concealed his presence and waited for him.

“I still am.”

The man behind the red blinders started to play with the keys. The progress of the tones is slow, mellow, and quite horrid.

Alastor started, “So, you’re that traitor that the sorceress yammering about.”

“And she must already fill you with a lot of information.”

“None of them are good. She didn’t spare me with the gruesome details.”

“That and her antics are not really good for my image.”

“You kinda transported everyone here to their own demise.”

The man behind the curtains asked, “Really, is that what she told you?”

“That’s all there is.”

“And you were obliged to do this?”

“Reluctantly, of course. She drives a hard bargain.”

“You should be cautious with a woman like her. They know how to manipulate people.”

“Oh, I’m already way past that. I wasn’t given much of a choice really.”

“Is that so? Then you must be inexperienced when it comes to a woman then.”

“Not as inexperienced as you are.”

“At the end of this, I will bask in your blood and you will drown in the eternal darkness of my sonata.”

“Bring it on.”

Alastor stretched out, propelled in the air in an attempt to cut down the man, but at the last moment, he swirled, the stage was gone in thin air as if it had never existed in this room.

“What the hell?”

As soon, a violin began to play. It was dark, monotonous, and uncanny.

Everything around him grew dark. The shadow seems to move around the corners of the walls as if it had a life on its own and observes him, seizing his being.

He grew pensive. Alastor lurched back. His palm rose, following the shadow moving around.

“Flamen!”

But his attacks are seemingly useless against the enemy as it slipped through, evading the attacks with ease. The shadow maneuvered at the entrance and the pitch-black sprung towards him.

Alastor quickly maneuvered to leap on his right. As it passed by, the black entity materialized before his eyes. Alastor had his hands reach to the ground, tumbling, and flipping over. He casted a transcendent wall, blocking the trajectory of a blade that was sent out pitched in the air. The black blade whistled sharply as it twirled and was stuck on the ground.

“This is quite curious. You’re faster than those undead knights.”

He heard the monster beneath the armor wheeze. The monster semble a noble knight only that its armor was tainted in black. The tip of its sword glistened for a second, it then traveled around, with protuberance spikes, tapering with shards, suddenly shot out, and hurdling in the air to him.

There was no strong source of light for it to refract such a beam, it could mean that the shards themselves are producing light itself. Alastor was dazzled by the fractions of light. No matter, the image is still in his mind even though he was blinded for a second.

Alastor conjured another transcendent wall and turned away from his position. He conjured another spell in an attempt to blast the knight but to no avail. His vision returned.

The knight jerked sideward, letting the spell come past at his left. The monster shot itself forward. The sudden movements had taken Alastor by surprise. Alastor motioned his sword up, defending himself as the knight clashed its sword against his. The force had his heels felt the pressure, backing him each second passed.

The crushing sense of disappointment had washed over his face. He knew very well that this monster outclassed the others or maybe even him. He could have restricted its movements for him to strike a fatal blow, but no, he was playing safe in distance under the fear assumption. Even if he berated himself over his foolishness, Alastor can only move forward.

“Fucking hell.”

Alastor inserted his hand, locked his palm onto the knight’s helm.

“Flamen.”

The pulse of the force sent the knight flying, crashing against the wall. It cried in anger as it stood, gaining its footing. The undead warrior's sword began to glisten, grew shards spike on its sword, and swung towards Alastor.

Alastor’s hand quickly conjured a wall, blocking most of the attack as some of the knight’s attacks pierced through but completely missed him.

As the knight growled, he conjured another set of walls that semble a maze, mirroring their images and vanishing back and forth. The motions of the transparent transcendent walls confuse the monster.

That was the moment for Alastor to draw his mana onto his blade. He pranced around as he came past the transcendent transparent walls one by one. Alastor stopped one wall in front of it and twirled around with the momentum of the sword clashing against the armor of the confused knight.

He felt that his blade connected, the chips of the armor clang on the ground as black liquid oozed out from the guts.

The mercenary pursued the opportunity. He charged. The knight swung its sword but Alastor slipped down. He stopped in his tracks, felt something grab his coat. It was the monster who had caught him.

Alastor braced himself as he was sent flying over the wall. The bricks broke, detached from the walls, causing his sight to blur. His teeth clenched, darkened eyes flaring. Alastor slowly reached for his sword and rose from crouching. He quickly moved as soon as he heard shards racing after him. Fortunately, he only received small cuts on his cheeks.

The mercenary threw himself in the air, hurling in tremendous speed, his sword strike. The knight swung its sword, parrying his attack with the rusty edge, the strength of momentum had caused the knight to stumble backward, growling over the mercenary.

The knight came at him. At first, it became blurred in his sight, but in split seconds, the monster returned to its form again, crying out of pain. The wound that he had given to it earlier had heavily lingered on the knight and affected its mobility due to the wound.

“Biendo,”

With his spell, the monster was wrapped in yellow light. It was followed by a powerful thrust on the gut. The sharpness was magnified by the mana tapering on his sword as he dragged the blade up to the chest, splitting its heart into two. The monster let out an exasperating howl, but that wasn’t enough to kill it as its heart would regenerate soon after.

It was said in the books that the undead can also be defeated if a holy or a divine spell was cast on the heart of an impure monster. It’s about time to test whether those books are telling the truth or not.

Alastor placed his hand on the chest of the undead when suddenly a red sigil appeared on top of them.

“The fuck?” He profaned under his breath.

Alastor looked in confusion. He doesn’t know what the sigil is all about, but one thing is for sure, it’s the monster’s last act of dragging him down.

“Hell no.”

He said and cast the spell Flamen. The spell pierced through its armor and made a hole out of the undead’s body. Its rotten chunk of flesh burst and scattered all over the ground.

“That’s one down and one to go.”

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As Alastor walked back, he saw a small hole on top of the door. He used his transcendent wall flat in the air and leapt onto it. It was all there all along, the key.

“I know what you are,” The man's voice rang across the hallway, “An aberration. The sorceress had allured you into this situation without knowing your worth. A worthless mana folder. You think so full of yourself, you didn’t even bring some of her pawns to aid you. Regardless, don’t you think she’s being overconfident? Both of you?”

Finally, he replied, “Considering that you’ve been hiding all this time, I take that as an act of cowardice.”

“This is a charade,” Dimiscus explained yet again. “I don’t intend to kill you swiftly. Those who trespass my peace have no right to leave in whole piece.”

“And you said that I’m full of myself.” Alastor sardonically smiled.

As he walked outside the hall, the entire place trembled. Soon after, the walls began to crack and the ground split open. He made a huge leap and landed on a concrete floor. Behind him was a hole.

Alastor made another sprint. He saw how the pillars and the walls had cracked and fallen on his head as he made his way.

“You jerk! Why won’t you come out and face me like a man?!”

“Oh, I’m not a man. I evolved. I’m way better than you are.” Dimiscus' voice rang through the hall.

Alastor had finally reached the gate. He opened the padlock and the rest fell to ash except for the chains. He picked it up and wrapped his upper body with it.

The stones rattle as he kicked the ground and evaded the collapsing floor above. He lunged on the walls, using it as his footing to climb up. He reached his chain, whipped it, and launched through the hole on top, the end of the chain had reached the window, helping him to climb.

Slowly with care, the mercenary picked himself up. He bent his knees and dropped a heavy breath. Carefully, he reached the side of the window to support him.

He was cursing under his breath, but he stopped and his eyes reflected with joy. The incident was but a fortune in disguise. The ruckus had led him to the throne room.

Alastor pushed the big door open. His sword was ready, sharp, and deadly. He knew very well that he was in the presence of the man of the castle, but he couldn’t see him, nor ascertain what could be his next motives. The entire courtroom was empty, almost, except the chair made of wavy ornaments, vases, windows, and the curtains on his left that were slit open, allowing the light to come in as if it had done on purpose.

“Dreadful, isn’t it?” Dimiscus' voice rang in the darkness. “This place was once a gathering place for royalties, to dance, meet, charade and all.”

“Not until you came and ruined the lives of these people.”

“True to that. I’m the one who’s responsible, but do not lecture me, boy. You don’t have a cleaner conscience than me.”

“Oh, I didn’t come here to lecture you.” Alastor stood straight. He was playing with his sword. “I came here to kill you.”

“Funny. You got convinced to fight in her stead, but unknowing of her true intentions and her nature.” Dimiscus chuckled. “What did she promise you of? Money? Power?”

“I wanted to go home.”

“Ah, yes. I’m familiar with the longing feelings.”

“You missed the part where I’m not as self-destructive as you.”

“For a young man, you have a foul mouth.”

“Well, everyone said the same thing about me. I guess I am a rude person, after all.”

The wind blew, cluttering the curtain. Alastor greedily breathed in the fresh air. The emptiness and the silence of the room was so complete that they didn’t even need to raise their voice as much. The enclosed walls served to reverberate their voices.

“I guess, we can’t be friends then.”

“I won’t count on it.”

“Have you ever wondered how her monsters managed to overwhelm my army?”

“Probably she’s better than you.”

“You didn’t even doubt her words and actions?” Dimiscus asked quietly.

Alastor announced with a firm voice, “You can’t goad me into thinking she’s not holding her words at the end of her bargain. Sorry pal, I’m not any other typical man.”

“No. But you already knew, deep in yourself, that she’s not the person who you think she is. You have just fallen into her kind words.”

“What is the point of all of this bantering? You came here to throw me a glib, and all of this nonsense. Can we finish this?”

“I’m here to give you a benefit of a doubt, but it seems that you’re reluctant in believing her lies. I guess there’s no cure for foolishness.”

The man stepped forward out of the shadow.

The light outside had cast his long dark robe, in its shoulder was a pauldron, a dragon carved in silver. Dimiscus pulled down his hood at the back of his head. The color of the burning sun reflected in white light and was pulled back into a tight top knot. A pure white mask with slits for his eyes and mouth with the expression of a sinister guise. A red emblem depicting the face of a dragon adorned the center of the forehead together lines of red streaks ran down from the dragon through the eyes and crossed its chin. His body was slim in stature, his appearance broadened by his black robe he wore over the regal outfit, red tunic, and black trousers. Nevertheless, he made an imposing figure despite being five-seven in height. His black gloves reached in the air. Gray ash gathered in his palm, then a thin handle glided down in his grasp, and the double-edged sword then appeared trailing with a spark of light at the tip of it.

They heard a sudden change in the sky. There was a clap of thunder, roaring as the storm, with bruised clouds weighed the air, gashing on the earth with the violent wind that had the trees and houses shaking. There was a soft breeze for a moment, then a flash struck across the window. Their eyes locked on another. They launched with the speed of a bolt.

Alastor’s eyes didn’t flinch for a moment as he slammed his sword against Dimiscus sword. Through the spark, Alastor can’t seemingly see the skin in Dimiscus mask’s eye holes. The darkness deeply penetrated the eyeholes with seemingly to no end. Even so, Alastor did not let it consumed his interest.

The mercenary retreated, then he twirled, followed by a series of wide swings. Dimiscus arm took the recoils with ease. Normally, a sword needed to be wielded by two hands in order to properly hold against the enemy’s force of attack, but Dimiscus had single-handedly grasped it which could mean two things; it was either a fool or had a mastery over swordsmanship.

Alastor was holding his breath, but his face appeared to be in exhaustion. Dimiscus smiled at the small victory. This time, Dimiscus returned the favor.

“I will have your screams as the strings for my ballad, your misery as the chorus, and your death rattle as the final piece of my music!” Dimiscus declared.

Dimiscus moved forward. He delivered a strong vertical slash then pounded another strike at Alastor’s torso which he poorly deflected it, allowing it to graze him. Each strike was heavy and was pushing Alastor back. The enemy continued with no signs of fatigue. Dimiscus charged forward, his sword slammed against Alastor’s sword, bouncing it off his hands following with his fist that connected to Alastor’s chin, leaving him to stun.

Alastor staggered back and grimaced in pain. Alastor reclaimed his sword and grabbed a pair of scrolls and potions from his sling bag. Relishing over drinking the potion, Alastor opened the scroll, the marks in it shone and flew over his head, slowly fading into faint light and completely blended with the environment. He was invigorated. The mercenary’s breath was gradually slowing down, moving carefully around the enemy.

The spell made him feel different. His vision became lighter as if the spell also lifted off the weariness in his body. Alastor had assimilated with the spell it seems.

Dimiscus remained imperturbable as he was sensing around the environment without moving in his position.

The mercenary carefully moved behind him. Alastor snarled with his sword arching downwards. Almost quick as lightning, Dimiscus's blade flashed behind, singing against the sword of Alastor. He stepped back, sidestepped with another arced. Again, Dimiscus delivered another even strike. Alastor’s hands are getting numb, tingling, and tired, from the constant whipping on him and his sword enduring.

Dimiscus was more disappointed rather than impressed. Alastor felt the same way, the potion did not offer him any advantages aside from healing and rejuvenating his stamina. Dimiscus held his own against Alastor despite the invisibility he possessed. He could feel the slightest changes in the air. Alastor reeled slightly, attempting to cut him off on his left, but Dimiscus parted in his position, turned and threw his weight, and overpowered his attack. The crashing sound of metals crashing against others ripped through the air, shattering the vases and windows. Alastor’s back was on the cold ground when he was taken by surprise by Dimiscus's wide slash. He rolled and chanted flamen to slide away.

By that time, Alastor had noticed that the invisible spell had worn out, but had the time to recover. His eyes caught Dimiscus’s left-hand burn. Alastor immediately flipped backward.

As Dimiscus whipped his flame at him, Alastor had conjured a transcendent wall, running flipping over the creations he made until he felt again the sharp pain. His flesh twitched, unbearable, bolting and numbing. The pain was like a sharp note to his ears, panning from low to high frequency.

Imposed on catatonic state, Dimiscus had him wrapped on his whip, and threw on the wall.

“For a babble man, you quickly lose your marbles,” Dimiscus said.

He dragged him again, whipping walls to walls, until a loud crash occurred, somewhere below the castle.

Dimiscus let the whipped lose and let go of the stunning mercenary. Started to look around in wonder

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Just below the floor, Noora coughed out from the smoke and debris. She whipped and the smoke of dust dissipated. She stood in front of a deceased golem.

“There are other ways to make a damn entrance, but this is one of the unconventional ways to do it. Not that it matters. Now, if I’m that bastard, where would I be?”

The sorceress looked up and felt the mana from two people.

She grinned, “Ah. I supposed I nailed it after all. Let’s greet that bastard, shall we.”

A fan of signs and blades appeared in her palm, shimmering in yellow light. She swung it up on the ceiling and for that matter, the man above her was alarmed and leaped away quickly.

“Not a flashy entrance, won’t you agree?” The sorceress exclaimed.

Dimiscus appeared to be composed, but deep down, his teeth gritted. “No.” He firmly replied, “What fitting to describe is disrupting my win.”

“Is that so?”

He nodded. “Look at the warrior you sent to me,” his sword pointed at Alastor who’s in an impassive state. “Pathetic.”

Dimiscus attempted to make a sprint, but Noora won’t let him on his way. She hurried forward. Her fan spread and swept in the air, blocking the tip of his sword.

“If the man can’t do his job, then the woman will.”

Another fan appeared. In one swipe, a barrage of wind magic had thrown Dimiscus away. Crashing against the wall, Dimiscus grunted.

“You’ve gotten better,” he commended.

Noora looked back at Alastor who was groaning over the intense pain. She was unsure what was happening to him.

“Al, I don’t know what’s happening to you, but you’ve got to fight it!” she called out to him.

Alastor hesitated to look at her, still groaning on the floor. “I-I can’t. This… is too much.”

“What have you done to him?!” She looked up to Dimiscus. Her jaw clenched.

Dimiscus replied, “Not that I’m aware of. No. It wasn’t me.”

“Whatever’s happening to you, Al, you’ve got to fix it and fast.” She told him before she motioned forward.

“You remember the last time we met?” Dimiscus asked her.

“Yeah. It was at the mountain; we were both looking at the same flower of Askingron. Too bad, I didn’t have the chance to kill you.”

“Well,” she whipped the fans in the air and from the leaves, blades sprung out. “Care for another dance?”

“This time I’m going to finish the job once and for all.” He declared.

Noora carried her fans like a blade, whipping the blades furiously at Dimiscus. He ran with his sword deflecting the four inches blade. The moment she stopped, Dimiscus used his fire lasso and threw it over her, but the trick won’t do any good. She was fast and quick-witted; it didn’t even intrude on her pose with the swing of the wind deflecting his attack. The failed attempt allowed her to smile a little.

“You’re not the only one who has a trick hidden under the sleeves.” She declared.

“I supposed,” he responded, “Let’s make things interesting.”

Dimiscus had the entire lasso wrapped in his left hand. She felt a force below her. Dangerous and massive.

“What did you just do?” she asked, her voice demanding.

He replied without looking at her, “You’ll see.”

The shake had grown stronger by the seconds.

Noora conjured a light that seemingly possessed Alastor and carried him away leaping out from the cracked wall. They landed on the branch of the giant tree she conjured. On it, she laid Alastor on the nest of leaves.

Noora came to him for a closer look.

“What happened to you, Al?”

Having jitters is an understatement. She knew very well that his condition is far from the sorcery she learned from her school. Noora’s palm was already on his forehead.

“No cold, but you’re too hot. The flow of your mana is on the wrong track. Running rampant and wild.”

Alastor grunted. His eyes close, enduring the streak of pain in his flesh and his mind. Noora settled her hands on his head, channeling her mana.

“I promise you. I’ll fix it.”

The moment she injected her mana in his stream, she heard his breath becoming steady, but still far from trouble. Her eyes were gone white. Images flashed in her mind. It was not of hers but was his. It was a brief moment but she pulled herself out quickly.

“What was that?” she asked herself. Her eyes glimmered in horror and in curiosity. “Al, I don’t know what’s happening to you right now, but please, you must tell me when did it start and why.”

Mustering the words, he stutteringly said, “I’m… I’m a hunter… a new one.”

Those words stammered her, “If you’re a hunter, then you must be in a transition state. It’s basically when you’re developing your abilities and honing your true self. I don’t know much about the transition states of the hunter, but I believe this fruit will help your pain be at ease.”

The sorceress conjured a fruit, a red and a swollen one, its size is one inch.

Alastor opened his mouth, savoring the sweet taste of berry, melting on his tongue. Moments after, his eyes slightly open. He mustered the strength to stand up, but his body fall, nimbly on his knees.

Noora quickly held his shoulder and hand.

“Hey. You stay here. You have done enough for now. Well… I’m the one who did the heavy lifting. Still, you did a great job distracting him from the fight outside.”

“I’m worried about that.”

Alastor pointed out at the castle, shaking, the dust seemingly crawling out from the tight spaces and from the outside wall. Then, there came a pulse, a small one, but they felt the heaviness of it from the distance. As the wave of pulse passed by, it gradually became more intense, until Dimiscus broke loose.

The last wave dismantled the entire castle into pieces like a cube but something kept them floating after, only to that, a monster, a snake-like monster sprung out of the castle.

“All these years, this is what you have been planning, huh, Dimiscus?”

Noora gaped in horror as she witnessed the fifty feet tall, massive size serpent reaching the moon. If the serpent is capable of flying, Noora would have fainted by now, but despite the lack of the ability to fly, it doesn’t mean she had the advantage in terms of mobility and certainly it is not a good idea to get close to it. In terms of range, Noora had the advantage, with her magic, she made certain that she would be able to put a great distance between the two that is if she doesn’t have baggage to worry about.

She glanced behind her.

“Al, I’m gonna have to leave you behind. That thing over there cannot be let loose.”

“Wait…”

From where he sat, he saw Noora had already leaped, sliding down on the roots.

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She beckoned some of the tambawos and pieces of basilisk to fight in her stead. The monster of Dimiscus easily killed made its way and ate all of them, without discrimination, including the undead knights.

“What the hell?”

The sorceress was astounded and horrified by the monster’s capability. In one sweep of its tongue, the wall of the western gate had been torn, reduced into none.

“Dimiscus, you son of a bitch. So, this is what you have been busy with. How the hell did you accumulate such dark energy to summon this monster?”

For better or for worse, Noora felt a rush of adrenaline spiking as she made her way by riding the roots to the land. She saw the monster turned, its head was jerking and finally launched onto her.

Her expression faded and commanded the roots to intercept its movements. It crept and locked the monster, but only decreased its speed, not resigning on its pursuit of her. She moved away, gaining distance, her root motion swiftly.

The sorceress swung her frail arms, throwing wind magic at it. She gulped. The monster hissed and cried as its way of the roots and breakthrough. Her attack meant nothing.

“Shit.”

Noora summoned the signs, arranging the alphabets, and then, she activated exclamation magic, one that restrained its movements. Pillars of lights came crashing down to the serpent, immobilizing it.

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The pain returned again.

Alastor winced and stooped. Images flashed back and forth in his mind, unknown origins for him and then, they became blank, but he felt that the images are familiar. Somewhat, despite the pain, he felt a warmth wrap his heart. And the warm feeling didn’t subside, instead, it helped him desist the pain.

There’s a gasp. Alastor's eyes turn white. The mercenary broke through the agony.

He felt new, reborn as if he found clarity despite the chaos he felt inside. The transition felt like a revelation, but to what? He doesn’t know, but whatever it was, he felt thriving.

Alastor stood. His mind cleared from the pain and the twitch of agony. His eyes studied the environment. He can see a wave of maroon and blue energy all around, even the monsters and animals alike have the same pattern as well. What was more intriguing is that his senses sharpened, from a distance he could hear the birds chirping, the strife between the monsters, and a cry from a woman?

His eyes turned at once on the source, seeing through behind the floating decrepit castle and saw Noora, struggling with all her strength to avoid the venomous saliva of the serpent by blocking it with the roots.

The mercenary breath. Calm and steady. He was feeling the energy pulsating inside him, chasing a glimpse of every part of his body.

At one final turn of his mana, he let himself fall in the air.

Everything in his eyes seems to be slower or is it just him becoming faster. Alastor bound himself to the moment. He kicked against the tree, turning ahead, climbed on the vines and roots and to the floating remains of the castle.

Passing by, Dimiscus’s eyes and he temporarily met. Yet, he doesn’t seem bothered by the fact that Alastor had recovered and received a new source of strength.

Alastor gave a great lurch as he heard a distinct screech of the ground from the distance. It was the giant serpent, struggling to create a room for it to crawl, but every time it tried to dig, the pillars of light weighed down, making it impossible for it to mobilize. By seeing the immense mana from the light pillars, he knew that such magic requires a huge amount of mana.

A king serpent can regenerate given a moment of time, but this one possessed high regenerative power. Alastor was well aware of that fact. If he encountered this one in the past, there is no chance he may have beaten it. But as of now, he became something else.

Alastor threw out his arm to reach a higher ground then he landed at the base of the serpent. He withdrew his sword and plunged it on its flesh. He started to run and dragged his blade. As he dragged his sword, the serpent hissed, crying over the wound opening. His body is moving on its own, injecting the flesh of the serpent through his sword with holy magic. As intended, the regeneration process was revoked to the monster’s end, and to no avail, it would regenerate like it always does.

The disoriented monster snarled and hissed. Then Alastor felt it trembled. Soon after, he knew what it meant. Spikes began to spring out from the skin, but it was different from what it would be like. The spikes are made of liquid, solidified. In a closer look, it appeared to be harmless when finally plucked out, but when an insect landed on it, the spike dissolved the small insect into thin smoke. It was then Alastor had picked himself up. He made a huge leap away from the quick-growing spikes. Lucky one. He used the transcendent wall as a board to hop on, flipped on the air toward the roots, gliding as he descended.

“I’m sorry. Would you like to try again?” he made it sound like a question, smug and satisfied. “Not so scary that you’re on a leash now. Eh?”

The giant responded with grumble and hiss.

Noora shouted, she was far ahead and closing in. “Al! Be careful! That’s thing is capable spitting acidic subs—"

There was an expression that described a moment when you realize that you had done something so wrong, and that was what he was in that moment. He was stuck in his position with nowhere else to hang in. In an attempt to prevent the unwanted consequences, Noora dove herself in the air and bombarded the saliva of the gigantic serpent with her wind magic, preventing the poison from catching him and her. But the serpent remained persistent. It certainly didn’t like the remark Alastor had left to it earlier.

She repelled most of it, but her arms frail, the spell cost her a considerable amount of mana and stamina. Ultimately, the roots raised and fortified their position, blocking the saliva from penetrating over. At least buy themselves some time to formulate a plan.

Alastor hopped over the walls and caught her in his arms.

“The hell are you doing here?” he asked. “You oughta get yourself killed.”

“You’re welcome.”

Noora's reply was hollow. He turned to give a dubious look.

“You got yourself a transition problem, at the same time, a big monster appears. Does it look like I have a choice?”

“Well, you have now. I’ll take the lead. You bombard it with magic from behind.”

He tried to avoid her curious eyes, but it seemed she had to say it.

“What?”

“Are you planning to let me off?”

He turned away, shyly. And he slowly caressed her down.

For some reason, Alastor couldn’t take off his eyes seeing how she stretched her arms writhing in discomfort.

“You sure you are fine?” he queried politely, “Would it be better if you let me handle the rest? We got a big fight next to this. Especially you. You have a score to settle with that guy.”

“I’ve seen worse. What’s a mere distraction to delay his impending plight?”

“Don’t be confident.” Was the last thing he offered to say, turning curtly. He looked at his sword, sharp but as he cast his eyes at part of the blade, there’s a tinge of a small crack, but it’s nothing fatalistic. It should be able to hold out for long enough.

“Here it comes!” Noora warned.

The root began to melt and turned to smoke. To tell the truth, it was more compelling for him if he should just leave and end the man sneaking behind it, but that would be a coward’s way out, and he is not a coward.

The two parted. Each of them had their own style of evading. Alastor used his transcendent walls to evade, leaping over the walls like a board while protecting himself by conjuring the spell – flamen. Alastor wasn’t trying to get away, but rather, he was trying to lure its attention away from Noora. All the while, Noora was skidding away by leaping from roots to roots.

Alastor conjured flamen, dissolving the liquid substance away. At some point, his legs tire out and so, he momentarily loses the strength to move, but the attack was not delayed on its track. The innate prowess as a hunter was gradually leaving his system.

Given no choice, Alastor felt himself, the mana surging, extending to his blade. He doubtlessly slashed in the air. A ripple of white light emerged, splattering the acidic compound.

“I can’t believe that it works,” he scoffed, “Noora! Whatever you are doing, you better do it fast. I take it back, I’m afraid whatever’s happening to me, it won’t last much longer!”

The sorceress, kneeling over the tree as she caressed a single bud on the log, jocundly responded, “I’m doing it as fast as I can. You better be ready, because it’s going to be a big one.”

The pillar cracked as the serpent struggled to free itself from captivity.

“Uh-oh. That doesn’t look good. Noora!”

“Yes!”

Noora jeered at her success. She holds her ground on top of the tree. In her palm, the buds were floating. In her release, it bloomed and flew. The bud had turned into a flower. Beautiful and dangerous. It showered the ground with its pollen.

The undead creatures had begun to deteriorate, their bones had slowly turned to ash, their weapons dropped and only the armor remained clanging against the ground.

Soon after, the serpent moved to and fro, squirming in pain as it started to smoke and melt into nothing.

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“Look how the mighty has fallen,” Alastor said, leaping at the center of the stage of the floating debris that was influenced by the unnatural force that was leaking over the palace.

“I admit, you two have beaten the army.” Dimiscus announced, “But do not take me lightly.”

“He’s right,” Noora added as she graciously hopped out from the root carrying her on top. “The bastard is tougher than you think.”

Alastor scoffed, “No. I doubt he would last against the two of us.”

Dimiscus turned to him, “Is that so?”

“You can act tough all you want, but you’re not gonna fool me.” Alastor derisorily stated, “You’re at the brink of losing your mana.”

“Alastor,” Noora intercepted, “if I were you, I wouldn’t underestimate him. Deception is his forte.”

“I can see it, Noora. His mana is nearly depleted. I don’t know what you did this morning, but whatever that was, it took a huge toll on you.”

Dimiscus smirked, “Perceptive.” He commented. “For a man like you, you possessed a special set of eyes.”

“That’s not the only thing I can do, mate. I can cut you in half too.”

The mercenary initiated the move. Alastor tossed himself forward, his sword flashing. The masked man blocked, jerked sideward, and leaped backward.

It was then the sorceress blew Dimiscus over, crashing against the floating concrete walls. Dimiscus managed to hang with his fire whip and threw himself, hopping from stones and slabs. His eyes caught a glimpse of Alastor using his walls to crash over the afloat debris, hoping to catch Dimiscus. It wasn’t a bad plan. Dimiscus thought of it. Alastor’s actions prove that he is more than meets the eye.

Seeing him, Dimiscus had some thought of what he should do. As he leapt over, he caught debris, pulling it with great strength, directing the momentum to the pair.

Noora did not fail to hear the noise of the debris crashing to one another, like blocks falling onto one another, a sense of consequence, only to that, the sequence was more fatalistic. She casted a shield from here and there, preventing the fragments from destroying the stage they were standing in.

Alastor on the other hand was more reactive than ever. His eyes narrowed behind the rubbles, ever so slightly. He found the man standing, watching over them in a distance. His feet sprung, leaping over the piles of rocks and wreckages, pulling himself over and leading to climbing again by summoning his transcendent walls plastered in different positions in the air.

Dimiscus was there, patiently waiting for his arrival. Behind the mask appeared a mad contorted smile. If it came from rushing exhilaration or from fear, he doesn’t care. All he wanted was to test his might to this young man who appeared at his doorstep. He was without a doubt looking forward to it.

At one last step, Alastor brandished his sword in the air, cutting it down to him. It was, of course, parried by his opponent. He withdrew and the two exchanged a series of attacks, dancing over as they leap over the piles of rubbles.

Dimiscus stole a quick glance at Noora as he evaded Alastor’s attack and he led him to his back, pulled out his fire lasso, whipped in the air, dividing into many as it wrapped the piles of rubbles, and he pulled it towards Noora.

“Oh, hell no!” she profaned.

Noora began to conjure letters, moving and forming its positions, performing exclamation magic. Bolts of lightning appeared, ricocheting from one another and blasting the piles of rubbles.

Dimiscus' action was with a consequence. A brief distraction is all it took for Alastor to slash his torso as he came in front of, whizzing quickly and silently. It would bring a sense of victory to him, certainly, but the moment he withdrew his eyes to his sword, it would raise his doubt to a reasonable pace.

“This is curious.” Alastor muttered as he ran by and landed on concrete.

The blood that was tainted on his sword was not the blood of a human, the befitting description would be an abomination. Gazing over the cesspool of blood, oozing out from Dimiscus’s body to the ground mixed in blue and green liquid.

“You’re not human anymore, are you?” Alastor asked, gasping.

Dimiscus smiled, “No. I have transcended primitive flesh hoods.”

“No, you’re not. You became an abomination.”

“It’s what we call evolution. Time by time, for millions of years, humans have proven that they can be moved forward, realigning their genetic structures by means of surviving.”

“But the only difference is that… yours didn’t come naturally.”

Dimiscus shook his head, “No. I forced it unto myself.”

“You just added my list of reasons why I should kill you.”

“You… kill… me? Do you hear yourself, boy?”

“You barely have any mana left. Your army has turned to ash. No monster left. No kingdom. Just a sad old man who cheated death for many lifetimes.”

“And I will continue to cheat her.” Dimiscus groaned and coughed, still on his knees. “No matter how hard you try, you will never stop me. You said earlier that I barely have mana left, right? You can only see what you chose to see. You can’t even feel the gravity of my power, boy.”

“We’ll see.”

Alastor sought to cut his leg, but Dimiscus parried his attack, effortlessly. And he flew away. Alastor chased him, yet he can barely catch up to him.

Dimiscus, was in fact targeting Noora. In his scope, the lady was open. She was left attended by the debris falling over her.

“Noora! Watch out!” Alastor shouted.

But it was too late. Dimiscus had her throat wrapped in his fingers. His hands grasp on her throat, leaving without air, and her heart, once quickly beating, slowdown in tempo.

Dimiscus strength would be enough to shatter glass or break a brick. He only needs four seconds to break her throat, but Alastor caught up, swept in, the sword hissed against the air up to cut off his hand, and blasted him away with flaming.

Dimiscus recovered from the attack. Still, the fatigue and weariness embarked on him. Undeniably, the mistakes are in his calculations. Despite the tough position Alastor was put in, he is still resilient to weariness. Alastor’s entire state was rather proving to be more infuriating than when he met him the first time.

Alastor followed the cut with a wide swing, but his moves were too predictable and open, leaving Dimiscus an open door for him to slip in, blasted Noora with fire magic that sent her spinning. The breastplate took the brunt of the attack, bleached with charcoal, and her nose caught the burnt smoke. He retained his hand, attaching to his wrist as if it was nothing to be put on with some effort. But at that moment, he got it all wrong.

Alastor had already been noted by Dimiscus's regenerative prowess, hence, the moment Noora had blasted away and he skidded through, Alastor threw a scroll upward, just had Dimiscus at the center of the stage and to the scroll, releasing a binding spell, wrapping in white light that is equivalent ten tons of steel. No matter how strong he is, there is no sense that Dimiscus would be able to free himself from the spell that Noora lent to Alastor.

Alastor disliked this plan at first. He wanted to end the fight by cutting Dimiscus’s head, but Noora prevented his gruesome thoughts. She already anticipated that he became resilient to death. He cannot be killed that easily. Dimiscus was ascending to a level they could not imagine to reach.

Alastor stood over and lent Noora a helping hand to stand. She was fine despite the damage, but the mercenary is on his limit.

Dimiscus stared at them, even his narrow eyes slightly.

“What is this?!” Dimiscus reprimand. “This is factitious.”

This time, Noora had gotten up on her feet. “Yes, it is. I had to use a Multi-coercive spell to transmute the shape and size of one-hundred tons of steel into a handful of rope. That is the reason why you’re on your knees and not stepping on my neck.”

Dimiscus snarled. “How is this possible?!”

Alastor flashed his sword on his neck, proving to him to stop moving or he’d be dead. “Noora and I had concluded possibilities on how to contain you, this… is one of them.”

“This is preposterous,” Dimiscus replied.

“Oh, I’m telling you, you’re a pain in the ass. You see, Noora had told me about the times when the two of you fought, and each time, she felt that you were holding something back, not in techniques, spells, or magic, but in the level of power. A person like you who is approaching the level of an Ark Renevae and Arbiter is very alarming, yes, but Noora, who has a bigger brain than me managed to come up with a proper spell how to detained you,”

Noora added, “With Alastor's quick thinking and proper judgment, the only way to immobilize you is to bring the ceiling on top of your head.”

Alastor added, “A befitting crown for a king of serpents.”

“You got lucky,” Dimiscus commented. His gaze was still on them.

“Yes, you are right, we are lucky. Lucky enough to suppress your movements to conjure any kind of spell that might put us in a perilous position and frankly, we’re glad you made it easy for us to restrain you.”

“Oh, dear, do not underestimate me. I will make sure to return the favor… both of you.”

Alastor kneeled on his level, still the blade is on Dimiscus neck. “Yeah. We know what you are capable of. But lucky for me, whatever this holy power is surging in me I was able to suppress your strength for quite some time.”

The mercenary got up and sheathed his sword back to scabbard.

“And what about now?” Dimiscus asked.

Dimiscus knew very well what they were aiming for. He had not forgotten what he had done to the kingdom that Noora’s served from the continent of Carton, Sutra.

Noora place her sharp fan at the back of his head. “You’ll finally face justice.”

“You… judge me? You’re not less of a monster than I am, Noora. You have also committed some sins, similar to me.”

Dimiscus turned his gaze at Alastor as if telling him that there is more than the pretty face that the sorceress was putting up, but he chose to ignore Dimiscus.

“Well, you have sins that exist long before mine, and I didn’t come to that resolution as an ultimatum, I will pay for it eventually,” Noora replied.

“So, to defeat a sinner, you have to become a sinner yourself.” Dimiscus smirked, “How poetic and stupid. You only proved that you’re a hypocrite, a pale version of myself.”

Noora’s eyes grew furious hearing his previous remarks, “Don’t you compare yourself to me! There is no sense in this universe of what you have done to innocent people!”

“Yes… yes, I agree. But what are you now?” Dimiscus asked, challenging her, “Don’t you think you’re overcompensating my sins to yours, you had committed the same sin, but a noble cause doesn’t exempt you from one. You are as dirty as me, Noora.”

Alastor turned his head on her, his eyes asking what he meant.

“That’s what I’m waiting for.” Dimiscus words were meant for Alastor, “A person can lie, but their eyes cannot. You too are curious about her. Noora, would you like to do the honor of granting him the right answer?”

“Do not speak to him that way.” She replied to him with a hint of fury.

Alastor finally intervened, “What is he talking about, Noora?”

“This is nothing you should be concerned about.” Noora dismisses him.

“For what it's worth, I don’t like being kept in the dark, so stop lying to me.” Alastor’s words insisted, hard and firm.

“Well, that confirms it. You didn’t tell him how you were able to accumulate such loyal and obedient monsters.” Dimiscus inserted.

Alastor’s eyes grew sharper.

“I swear to you, this matter is not alarming as you think it is.”

“Well, the way Dimiscus put it, I say it’s otherwise.”

Dimiscus, who was wrapped in between them, decided to put fuel on the fire. “Such a man of your caliber, do you really think that a considerably powerful woman as Noora is capable of accumulating a grandiose army as you saw?”

“I don’t pretend I don’t know, but the two of you live for hundreds of years, so…”

Alastor knew that he was only deflecting from the truth, but believing in the enemy would be fatal to his cause.

“Humor me.” Alastor simply replied.

“Those undead knights, there is no way I would be able to reproduce them by just chanting dark magic. I had to do it in a dirty way. You see, if a person dies within the limbo, their soul doesn’t just evaporate and poof… gone to wherever they’re supposed to be, their souls are stuck in here, invisible to the eyes of the living, but I found a way to retrieve their souls and encapsulate them in their primitive, rotten bodies.” Dimiscus said without lowering his gaze.

“How? That should be impossible.” Alastor could only mutter those words for himself in disbelief.

“Simple, her,” Dimiscus pointed out to Noora, “You see, Noora came from a specific and special bloodline of which is capable of capturing the essence of a ghost and trapped it inside of something.”

“You mean their remaining body?” he assumed.

“Technically, yes. But also, her people can seal them in anything they find suitable.”

“Is this true, Noora?”

She avoided his eyes. Noora couldn’t simply lie to him. Before, lying was a simple task for her, she had never been caught in her infiltration missions. Some would say that deception is her forte, but that was a long time ago.

She couldn’t even tell him deceitful words. The times when she had to torture people to get information had engraved a remarkable message to her conscience the moment when she was alone when she was given some time to think and reflect on her actions.

Now, grown and more mature than her prime, Noora had realized the errors of her actions and dearly regretted them. If he, where she was before, she would be able to easily lie to him, but that was not her anymore and she vowed not just for herself but also to those she had done wrong that she will not go back that way and make herself better.

But there are times when she has to make a hard call.

“Yes. I captured the essence of their spirits and used it to seal them inside of the monsters.”

Alastor fumbled answering, “I—I couldn’t believe it. Why? What had they done to you to deserve like this?” His voice slightly raised.

She came closer, “I swear to you, Al, I never meant them harm.”

“But you trap their souls inside of those monsters.”

“I know what I’ve done, and I deeply apologize to them and to you for doing this, but as you can see, Dimiscus cannot be simply left unattended. There just has to be something to be done.”

“Was it worth it?” he asked with contempt. “Their peace has been disrupted for years! Hundreds of years because of your vendetta.”

“Why do you care about them?”

“Because, people where I come from, we don’t kill for the leisure of being capable of doing it, we strive to kill those who want to wreak havoc. For some time, I acknowledge what you’re going through, but those people are dead, gone, they deserve to rest, not to be used as puppets for your own agenda. Frankly, I would be disappointed in you, but I was, in fact, worried for you.” Those very last words took her pulse. Alastor stood steadily, “Believe me when I say, there’s nothing good that will come out if it was motivated by revenge, vendetta, and selfish reasons. I have faith in you that you see to yourself what it has done to those people that choose this path, the same path as yours. The only way is to move forward. And the best way to revenge is to forgive. Deep down, I know you are not a bad person, Noora.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one who was trapped here for many years. Not dying on your terms, not being able to rest in peace without finding a way out of this place.”

“Honestly, I have no idea how you survived this, but you have a chance now. We can go out of here and get back to the real world where you can have a second chance in life, dance to those who you wanted to dance with, enjoy the culture, and do many things like traveling the entire continent or even the whole damn world. Just let them go.”

“Just for you to know, it was never my intention to go down this way. You have to understand that I did it to stop this man and end this once and for all.”

“You remember when I said I don’t want to desire?”

“I thought you had a screw loose on your head.”

“Maybe,” he chuckled and continued, “Every person has their defining moments on what they would become.”

“A tough call.”

“Yes. Here, right now, this is a tough call. Whatever you’re going to do to this man, will define who you are and you will carry that choice for the rest of your life whether for the better or for worse.”

“It was an ultimatum. Something must be done.”

“Still, enslaving.”

“Am I too late?”

“No, you’re not. You can undo this. Be free again.”

Noora came close to Dimiscus. Removing the mask that covers the hideous appearance of the man. Dimiscus's tied hair snapped and fell over his broken and pale face.

“All those years, and this what happens to you?” Noora asked him.

“All of us aren’t powerful mages to counter the aging effects.”

Noora smirked, gazing at him with temper and mockery, “But this is a side effect of your parlor trick, is it?”

Dimiscus didn’t reply.

Noora added, “How does it feel that after all these years of consuming power, it led you to your downfall?”

“It doesn’t matter. Living or not living, it’s all hollow to me. I don’t care if I die. You’d only do me a better favor by just killing me.”

“And it appeared that there would be no satisfactory way to do it.”

“Apparently not. So, what now? You're gonna let that man dictate your judgment?”

“No.”

“Then would you kill me then?”

“I didn’t say that either.”

“So, what is it?”

“I have other plans for you. One that you’d wish you'd let yourself die the moment you turned on us.”

“Eternal suffering it is.” Dimiscus scoffed. “Then I assume that there’s no warranty?”

“It’s an express to hell. You know, as far as I remember, you’re a fearsome warrior that terrified other countries. I wanted you dead, but I’m not that person anymore. But before we end these theatrics… why? Why did you betray us despite all of the things we had gone through together?”

“Because… YOU… ARE…. WEAK! With a powerful army, the king could have seized the other countries who threatened us, but no… our king is too benevolent to seize the price, and what is more annoying is that you backed his decision. That decision cost me, my family. That’s when I knew it, our country is no good with people like you.”

“So, that’s why. I guess both of us are driven by the same thing.”

“Kill me,” Dimiscus pleaded, he finally broke down. “End my life…now! I’ve lived long enough to bear witness another day to rise. Isn’t that the reason why you challenged me?”

Stress and tempted, she could only lash out by letting out a long-exasperated breath. “Heavens above knows how much I wanted to kill you, but you’ve broken me already enough, I won’t let you break the rest of what I am. Now, what will happen next will be either your salvation or reprieved in this life. It would be your own personal hell.”

At last, Noora snapped his neck and Dimiscus had gone silent. He was not dead, that was for sure.

“There are things that must be done.”

“Like what?” Alastor asked.

Noora turned around. She was looking at the monsters below. “For starters, I will release all the souls that he enslaves, but it won’t be easy. That would require a significant amount of time.”

“And I guess you’d be staying here?”

“As I said, there are things that must be done.”

“Don’t worry, here, you have all the time you need.”

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The end was nearing, and they’re three steps behind. Alastor kept the end of his bargain and now, Noora had to show hers. Dimiscus was chained and locked in her underground chamber. He was not happy with the rotting cell he was in.

All the while, Noora was planning to take Alastor to some part of the city. They came across a quiet road from the tavern and turned right. A rusty arching gate loomed ahead of them. Roots and vines creep from the ground and to the railings of the gate. Noora pushed the gate and a loud groan temporarily embedded in the air for Alastor to cringe.

“What are we doing here exactly?” Alastor asked. He was studying the domain.

“You said you wanted to go home, right?”

“Yeah, well, I could get used to sleeping. Also, I feel a bit peckish.”

“You… peckish? You’re a mercenary, I thought you were trained to withstand tormenting situations. Surely an hour or two won’t hurt.”

“You can be such a hassle, you know.”

She smirked.

It was a long walk. The path they have followed was lined with tombstones. Alastor understood most of the names that were based on foreign languages from the otherworld.

“This place,” he stated, “You’ve been here before?”

“No. But I did some mapping in the area using a scout eagle.”

“A scout eagle?”

“I ordered it to fly high enough so that they wouldn’t detect its presence.”

“Hmm. Then why did you take me here? I’m assuming it's not for sightseeing, much less historical learning.”

Noora chuckled. “You’re looking for a way home, right? The answer is here.”

The two of them stopped in front of a mausoleum. Alastor was about to step in, but Noora immediately pulled him back. She gestured to stay at her side.

“Wait. As much as I want to agree to proceed without worries, I’m afraid that the undead bastard places a trap spell on this door. Might even include the very floor inside.” Noora said.

She stepped forward, conjuring letters and symbols. Then, a crystal ball appeared, flew, and phased through the door. Red energy was absorbed along the way and it shot out to the sky.

“What did you just do?”

“All spells are rooted for mana, and mana itself is energy. All I did was absorb it and throw it outside.”

“Is that even possible? That sounds impossible.”

“Well, it’s a high-tier spell that can revoke spells of the opponents.”

“But that’s not easy, is it?”

“No. It uses a lot of mana.”

“It has unnecessary drawbacks. So much for my interest in it.”

Noora silently stepped in and pushed the door. Cobwebs and various artifacts linger on the altar and some hang on the wall.

“Is the person who lies here part of a cult?” Alastor jestingly asked.

“I’m not sure.” She responded.

Noora and Alastor began to observe every nook and corner of the mausoleum, unsure what he was looking for, particularly questioning the place.

“Really, Noora, what are we looking at by the way?”

She walked, almost floating due to her white dress. She touched the slab and gently pushed it. Alastor heard a loud moan below the floor and white smoke escape from inside. He moved backward seeing how the casket moved on its own, unraveling a stair that led below.

“It’s not particularly creepy at all,” Alastor commented.

Noora ignored his remarks and went in first. He hesitantly followed her.

Down the tight hallways of the chamber, Alastor sticked closer to her. The door above let out a grunt as it slowly closed until there was no light to guide with. Noora raised her palm, conjuring light magic. Prism of light appeared on her palm as she let it float by itself, trailing with them.

At some part of the chamber, they were greeted by a disgusting smell from what seemed to be a jail. It was covered by a thick metal door, almost impossible to cut through using his sword. It might blunt his sword.

“Ignore it. Dimiscus uses this underground chamber for his experiments, so it is in our best interest to focus on one task at hand.” Noora said, almost eerily because of the echoing sound reverberating across the chamber. “This tunnel should be able to lead us to our objective.”

“And that would be?”

“A portal.”

Alastor widened his eyes in surprise. They took a sharp turn leading down and at the end of the road is a huge metallic black door. Noora did it again, the same thing she did at the entrance. The crystalline ball absorbed all the red energy and shot out and they heard a loud explosion for the briefest of moments.

“That’s convenient.” Is all Alastor can say.

The door opened creakily, unhinged by the spell of Noora. It was as she expected, the circular rock plastered on the ground with a hole in it, but that wasn’t the only thing that caught their attention. Symbols and letters hang on the walls and some images of warriors appear on them.

“What the hell.” He made his words as silent as possible, but his eyes otherwise remained unkempt and continued to move towards the writings.

Releasing a gasp, Noora pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Ow.” Alastor pulled her hand away.

“This is it.” Noora announced, “But there is something different about this portal.”

“What do you mean?” Alastor queried.

“I can’t assume yet. Must investigate further. I will set a vantage point here so that next we can easily teleport here.”

“You sure know your scripture, huh.”

“Perks of hundreds of years studying and locking myself in the library.”

“Wow.” Alastor mouthed.

When Noora finished drawing a sign, she lit it in a single flick. She instructed Alastor to step inside. So, he did. He was waiting for the spell.

“Get some rest. I’ll stay behind and gather some information about Dimiscus’s manuscripts. There’s a lot to dig in here.”

Alastor sighed. “Be quick and be careful.”

The blue fire began to creep on him, and soon, he vanished out of her sight.

Noora turned around to observe the portal.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

It may not be able to see by the normal means, but in her eyes, she can see the mana of light and dark swelling, but instead, in conflict, they rode the same river in harmony.

“In what heavens is this possible?” Noora muttered as she touched a part of it.

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For two days, Noora was busy studying the portal. Alastor heard her studying some words ‘unknown locations’ and ‘less predictable altitude’ which makes it sound like bad news. Noora called him at the balcony of her castle at three pm in the afternoon. It wasn’t nice for him; he had a nice nap.

“Can you tell me what it feels like when you teleport here?” she asked.

Alastor strode, yawning and grunting. As he got closer, his nose caught a foul odor coming from her. She ignored his obvious sniffing and eyes of judgment.

“You’ve been busy for two days. It won’t hurt for you to take a shower, you know.”

Noora smelled herself, almost awkwardly.

“Well, this task is not like walking in a park, so…” she sardonically smiled. The sorceress held her eyes back to the notes. “Tell me the first time you got here.”

“When I was sucked into that portal, it felt like I lost the sense of time, and I… I don’t feel my senses… and there was nothing. I woke up near the river…”

She added, “… and got attacked by an amphibian monster.”

“Yeah.”

“You were lucky the monsters didn’t get you. That place is awfully active.”

Noora pulled a paper, rolled it over the desk, and showed him the schematics.

“You see this right here?” Noora pointed out a part of the portal. He casted his eyes upon the paper. “This looks like it depicts the latitude. Then this is the altitude, and the other one seems to be the appropriate location.”

“Isn’t that great? I mean with this we can teleport to a more precise location.”

“Not exactly.”

“Care to explain.” His inquisitive brow raised.

“This language is unknown to me. Now it may seem to be gibberish but I don’t know where this leads to you. Dimiscus somehow set a path for the location that is why I never touched the portal the moment we saw it.”

“Have you asked Dimiscus?”

Noora shrugged her shoulders. “No. He won’t talk.”

“I’ll make him.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s partially half-undead, nothing hurts him anymore.”

“So, what can we do then?”

“There are two ways. It’s either you give me some time to study the portal or I can open it to you, but I don’t know the coordinates and it might be unstable so…”

Alastor took a deep breath. “How many days are we talking, Noora?”

“Could be years or decades. This knowledge could be traced back ages ago. Frankly, I don’t know what the timetable is to decipher the manuscripts.”

Alastor fell on his deep thoughts. The only thing that made sense in his vapid ideas was the latter one and it is not safe contrary to the first. Risky, but might be worth it.

“I don’t have much of a choice either. So, let’s try option two.”

“What?!” Noora vociferate. “That is a very bad idea. I do not advise you to go with that option.”

“You suggested it.”

“I was being bloody sarcastic.”

“What choice do I have?”

“There is a risk, a huge risk when you enter those unknown coordinates. You might fall onto the lava, or maybe underwater, you’ll fall in the sky.”

“I must try.”

The sorceress, gagging, held her breath before releasing a sigh. He never noticed before that she had this behavior trait until now.

“Why are you so eager for your death? You really have a death wish, don’t you?”

Alastor put his fingers on his forehead while looking at the sword in his other hand.

“There are people that need me back in the otherworld. I told you, remember, I was on a mission when I got involved in this freak show and got my ass handed to this world. So yeah, I’d want to get home as soon as possible. I’ve been stuck in this place for almost two weeks. I can’t waste any more time.”

“If you’re keen with it, then have it your way. You’re not doing this for a woman, aren’t you?” She grimaced, and then turned to the manuscripts, folding them.

“Well, the woman is my mission.”

“Hm. Would you tell me what your mission is again?”

“It’s classified.”

“C’mon, there’s only two of us and a guy wrapped in a ball and chains. What could hurt by just sharing a teeny tiny bit of information?”

He chuckled. “Still no.”

“You never seem to be so secretive when we have our first breakfast, or luncheon, or dinner, even in bed.” She laughed softly.

Alastor shyly touched his head. After all, she was his first and as hers. Aside from that, this woman in front of him is quicker-witted than he expected.

“True. But only I did what I did under the impression that you’re a witch, which I happen to be right, so…”

“Ouch. So, that means, I’m just another woman on your mission.”

Alastor slightly tilted his head. “Yeah.”

She pretended to be heartbroken. “How could you? After all the dinners, the date, and the night we spent together…”

Alastor snickered. “Please stop.”

“Did I make you laugh?”

“Yeah.”

“Would that give you a reason to stay and wait for a while for me to decipher the texts without getting you killed in the process?”

“You know damn well that’s not good enough.”

“Are you sure? Because there is a lot of cooking that I’ve learned from the otherworlds that you haven’t tested yet.”

The otherworlds’ delicacies are indeed luscious in his taste buds. He can still remember the smell of meat broiled in soy sauce and other delicacies such as the risotto.

She looked directly at his eyes, pleading with her eyes, blinking and wide. “Care for a few days?”

“I don’t dislike the idea. But only for two days. After that, I’ll head home no matter what.”

“Did my puppy eyes just work on you?”

“No. It did not.” Alastor looked away. “The only thing that motivates me is the food.”

“You could’ve at least lied to me.” She snorted.

“Then I wouldn’t be here either. For that matter, I hope it will be worth a while when I stay here.”

“I already had something else on my mind.”

Noora and Alastor spend most of the days talking, eating, and dancing, but for Noora, the witch does not seem to be bothered by tiredness as she continues her expenditure on the manuscripts, scanning the notes with eagerness and with the mind of a scholar. Mostly, she spent her time studying the functions of the portal. She may have deduced one or two things from the ancient manuscripts.

“So, you’re saying that the coordinates were targeted to the other end of its relative portal?”

“Yes. To travel to a precise place, you must have known the latitude, etc., but that would spell an unknown form of teleportation, since we have no idea where the other end is.”

“Just like falling in the sky,” Alastor added to her explanation.

“But, those four small empty holes, you see, they seem to react to something, my guess is to the other end of the portal which is safe to teleport without getting drowned or falling. In theory.”

“In theory?”

“Theory is something you explain a phenomenon that occurs in nature.”

Alastor interjected. “Yes, I know, so I have been told. But I can put my faith in that. It’s just…”

“Just what?”

“I’m having a doubt actually. I don’t want to end up splat when I get on the other side.”

“Is that what they call jitters?” she asked.

“Well… no.”

“You should gather your things and meet me at the gateway beforehand.”

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It didn’t take a while for Alastor to strap his weapons, clothes, and light armor. Just like what he was instructed, he lit the insignia and the fire and devoured him, teleported to the underground chamber of the portal. There, Noora was standing waiting for him, but there was something odd that he couldn’t shake off.

“Hey, Al,” Noora called out to him. “You have a minute?”

“Sure. Considering that this is goodbye, I guess a small talk won’t hurt.”

“What will you do when you return?”

“Usually, I gather information about the scale of the land… trace where I left and attempt to make contact with the closest ally I could find. What about you?”

“Well, I’m not sure I would fit in, besides, there are other things that I should fix. Some souls needed to be freed.”

“You know, back in my world, I never fit into any groups, I didn’t have many friends. I don’t trust easily, maybe that’s why.”

“Then what makes me different?”

She grinned and shrugged.

“And please be honest.” She added.

Alastor looked away, sat on a chair, and briefly tapped his fingers on the desk.

“I can’t explain thoroughly, it’s just that, I feel calm with you.”

Her brow was furrowed, trying to hide the dimmed smile while looking at him.

“Would I assume that you’re hitting on me?”

“No.” he said, tonelessly, “You ask a question.”

“I see.”

“You are the third woman I know who is tolerable.”

“So, I wasn’t the only one? My, you are quite a playboy.” She smiled playfully.

“There’s something I would like to ask.” Alastor said.

“What is it?”

“What is your last wish?”

She stopped tracing the manuscripts with her fingers.

“I almost forgot.”

He couldn’t say if she ignored his question or was talking about the manuscript, but either way, she went to the portal, waving her hands, and activated the coordinates. The signs on the portal began to light one by one.

“Hey.” Alastor sighed heavily. “I owe you the last wish.”

“Does it matter?”

“I’m just intending on keeping my words. Now spit it out.” He replied, almost strictly.

She looked at him. She pressed her lips together with a sulk. “You wouldn’t like it.”

“Try me.”

She hesitantly stepped forward, three steps away from him. The portal breath escaped as the light emanated brightly. The swirling pool of energy was at best to describe magnificent.

“As you already know I’m a witch, but I never told you what kind of a witch I am.” Noora started to explain. Alastor crossed his arms, listening to her. “I am an Impiatic witch. Our kind uses people, animals, or any other beings who are conscious to extract their memories to fuel us. The more the intense the emotion is, the more we receive powers.”

“How does snatching someone’s memory give you power?”

“It’s not the memory itself, it’s the emotions within the memory we relish. I haven’t been practicing our ways since I learned exclamation magic, but in order to succeed, I needed you’re…”

“… My memories,” Alastor chimed and filled in. He was certainly disconcerted based on his tone. “So, what, you gonna mind boggle me to power you up?”

“I haven’t told you the side effects yet.” She earnestly replied with a grain of hope that he’d agree with her. She didn’t hesitate to tell him the truth. “You will forget some of your memories, but eventually, they will return for a few weeks or months. The loss will not affect your abilities but it could prove to be inconvenient, in theory.”

“In theory?”

“Through muscle memory, you might be able to access your memories again, bit by bit.”

“No… that’s not it, I can’t work with theory. What if I lose my skills? How would I be able to protect myself?”

“Forgive me, I wasn’t trying to freak you out.”

“Well, guess what? Epic fail.” Alastor said, his tone was rising.

“That’s the reason why I don’t want to tell you, Al. My wish is too much.”

At least, he can tell there was sincerity in her words.

Alastor heavily sighed, “If you’re powerful already with your exclamation magic, why do you still need to practice whatever your coven ritual was?”

“As you can see, I channel my powers to the undead individuals, so remove them in the equation…”

“You won’t have enough juice to travel back,” Alastor chipped in. She nodded. “You know, if we’re back in the real world, you would be judged with a crime against humanity. Some of those souls are stuck here for hundreds of years because of you.”

“I know and I took no joy from it.”

“Fine.”

“Fine, what?”

“I give you my permission to absorb my memory and my energy.”

She sighed inwardly before moving one step forward. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am. It’s not like I have another choice. As I’ve said, you can have another shot in life and I intend for you to live that chance. Now do it before I change my mind.”

Noora finally came closer, one inch away from his breath as she caressed his head with her two hands, grasping on both sides of his temples, feeling the soft sway of his long hair. Her lips tugged into a smile when she saw a flash of his memory, it was the time when he defeated Meil at a sparring match, then the time when Alastor went to the woods just like what he told her before, and there’s Caroline. She felt warm and joy but not from her, it came from him, more specifically he had unwarranted feelings for Caroline, and it was genuine. Probably the most genuine she felt for a while and saw his joy masked by his effort to hide it.

“It’s done.” She spoke.

“Really?”

It wasn’t worse than he thought. He felt slightly dizzy as he returned his gaze to her. Tense and concerned.

“What did you see by the way?”

“I saw you mastur—”

“Enough.” He warned.

She grinned. “It’s unavoidable.”

“Don’t make this awkward, this might be the last day we saw each other again. I won’t be able to promise that I’d be the same guy you’ll meet again.”

“I won’t compromise when we see each other again, that I can promise.”

She walked back to the portal, leaving the confused man behind.

“Hey, what do you mean by compromise?”

She didn’t reply to his question and moved on. “The portal is ready. Have you already prepared?”

He nodded slightly. “Yeah.”

“Then ‘till we see each other again.”

“Until we see each other again.”

The two had made their goodbyes. Alastor looked down the portal, took a deep breath, and inwardly winced. The last time he was absorbed, it wasn’t as pleasant as taking a vacation in a tropical country. He attempted to leap, but his guts made him turn. Before he could muster the courage, she pushed him from behind. It was Noora the last thing he saw before falling in the portal, laughing as she watched him fall in horror.

“You are such a bitch!”

The world around him turned to blur, stretching before his eyes. The stars passed around him or were supposed to be twinkling brightly, but he wasn’t sure if everything he was seeing right now was supposed to be what he thought they were. His mind burned, and he screamed at the top of his lungs, but it only echoed away. Seconds passed; he shot out from a pit hole. The moon zoomed and it went away, as he was pulled down by the gravity.

Everything was hazy.

# In his eyes: The man who knows

Long have I waited to see the end of this war that comes and goes for over a thousand years? Have the previous generation up to now have not learned what desire does to us? The Blight is strong to those who are selfish, malicious, and greedy. It does not bring the right for us to feel superior, only to make us the monsters that we always deny.

I too was a victim in the past and thanks to those people who gave me strength now I was able to see the current reality that we are living in. They called it peace, I called it the congregation of puppet masters. Little did they know, the world is on the brink of collapse. As of now, everyone is blind, I am not.

There is no truth, there is no justice, and therefore, I will show no mercy.

The gravity is too heavy for me to handle, that is why I need to change, even if that means I have to let go of the only family I consider. This boy will grow without me.

I will tear the good inside of me – the weakness that is holding me back. I can’t purge the darkness if I keep clinging to light, that is why I will become one of the darkness.

# About the Author

Bort Patgia was born in 2001. He studied psychology for four years. There are numerous things that inspired him to write novels, but the first thing was video games. Also, western literacies and Japanese novels had great influence when he started writing his first novel in late 2017. Bort loves to read fantasy and action novels; they stimulate his mind for creative instances. Sometimes, he chases dogs for thrills, sometimes the opposite. Lastly, he loves to drink coffee before sprint writing.

# Novels by Bort Patgia

**Brigante Ark Series**

The Shadows of Fate

The Strife of Tribunal

**Jaeger Series**

Season of Blood Moon

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The Strife of Tribunal

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