

Descent 801

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Aina looked down toward the kneeling Rafthin then toward Leonel. By now, wouldn't Leonel have done something? So why was he just standing there holding back a laugh?

In these last couple years, Aina had gotten better at controlling her coercion to the point that it no longer leaked without her direction. So, that sort of primal desire everyone had when they looked at her was no longer there.

Unfortunately, there was only so much she could do aside from this. Even if she covered her face, the annoyances would come. She hadn't had to deal with such things in the last two years, but it seemed that she would have to get used to it now.

That said, there was quite a simple answer to all of this.

Aina's hand flashed to the side and caught Leonel's arms, subtly pinching his skin as though blaming him for not doing something.

Rafthin's expression froze, his mouth half open as he had been prepared to give another long spiel.

His head slowly turned toward Leonel, but all he received in return for his glare was a shrug and an almost sheepish smile.

"Better luck next time."

In the distance, the Head of Rusted Blade's expression darkened. Rafthin was truly not a bad student, but his understanding of timing and place had always been off.

Had he done this after the first round, there wouldn't have been an issue. But, to be embarrassed in such a fashion before it even began would only dampen the mood of the others even more.

'At least maybe now he'll actually take this seriously. How ridiculous.'

Rafthin rose from his knee, patting it until it was free of dust. Without a word, as though nothing had happened, he strolled off into the distance.

"Emna! My beautiful future wife!"

Leonel really didn't know what to say to this... But, as the saying went, you missed 100% of the shots you didn't take. It seemed that Rafthin had taken this philosophy to heart.

Leonel swept a gaze over Emna. She was a beauty with overly pale skin and short cut black hair. All over her body, sheathed daggers could be found. Just from a cursory glance, Leonel was able to pick out over a dozen tied to her small frame. It was obvious that there were many more in some definitely less than obvious places. PANDA NOVEL

Of course, Leonel hadn't looked toward her to compare her to Aina. Rather, Emna should be the name of the Head Student of Crimson Hall.

With another sweep of his gaze, Leonel managed to pick out Wissan who should be the Head Student of Misty Woods. He was quite an obscure and lowkey character. A bit chubby and even wearing glasses. He was definitely not the first look one would have in mind for a Head Student.

However, Leonel was still able to pick him out based on his strength and the subtle atmosphere of those in his immediate surroundings.

'I guess that's enough reconnaissance. About time this starts, right?'

"Be careful."

Leonel paused mid movement, looking back toward Aina with a raised eyebrow. She wouldn't usually say such a thing when he was clearly up against inferior competition. Yet, she had said it anyway.

He looked into her eyes and nodded, a light smile spreading across his face. ρ??ϕ???

At that moment, the elders moved. One of the mysterious four from Valiant Hall along with three others, one from each of the Organizations, dashed forward, sprinting along the waving pillars as though it was flat ground before disappearing into the distance.

The youths remained jostling for position, waiting for the elders to reach the target destination just over ten kilometers away.

Anxiety filled the hearts of the Valiant Hall students. It felt as though they were surrounded from all sides by hordes of enemies, nearly outnumber ten to one.

It was then that Leonel slowly strolled into the backline, not even attempting to push for a frontline position like the others. Looking off to the side, he made eye contact with Apestus.

Apestus' glance was quite placid. But, when he noticed that Leonel looked toward his twin daggers again and shook his head, he felt a spark of rage that he immediately calmed.

'He's not the enemy right now. There are bigger fish to fry.'

Apestus looked away, a bestial aura wafting out from his body. His limbs seemed to lengthen, his pupils turning into slits.

Leonel raised an eyebrow. 'Hoho, how mature of you.'

Leonel smiled more brightly. If they all accepted that their enemy wasn't each other, then this would be easy.

'Since you've made such a smart decision, I don't mind helping all of you pass.'

Leonel's palm flipped over, causing a jet black spear to appear. Chains hung all over its dark body, whipping about as the harsh winds lashed against it.

“BEGIN!”

A booming voice came from the Rusted Blade Head. But, before anyone could react, a massive pair of white gold wings appeared to Leonel's back.

As though a leaf blowing in the wind, Leonel, who had been behind them all, shot past the entire group, his foot landing on the first pillar before anyone had even stepped off of the roof.

Leonel's body waved about, swaying from side to side along with a narrow pillar. His face was the picture of calm and composure.

For some reason, even without him saying a word, those at the very front came to a grinding halt, their rising feet freezing mid air before they could even take a step forward.

An eerie silence filled by the sounds of howling winds filled the space, leaving many at a loss for what to do.

There were easily hundreds of other pillars to jump to, all of which could be used to wrap around Leonel, so why did it feel like no matter which one they picked... it would be a death sentence?

“Alright everyone, we're going to have a very simple exercise.” Leonel smiled lightly. “The game is pretty simple, even a toddler could follow the rules, I promise.

“If you're from Valiant Heart Mountain, it's safe sailing ahead.

“If you're not from Valiant Heart Mountain, it's not.

“Simple enough, right?”

A stunned silence hung over the surroundings. If it wasn't for the howling winds, there wouldn't have been any sound at all.

Surprisingly, it was Apestus who broke this silence. He sprung forward, landing on the pillar by Leonel.

In truth, he half expected to be attacked, but all he received was a grin in return. That was the only sign he needed to shoot forward, his body displaying an agility and flexibility most couldn't match.

This change seemed to shake the other three organizations out of the stupor. What had this young man just said? Who did he think he was?

The three organization Heads all looked toward Hutchin at once, frowns deeply etched on their faces. To this point, there had been a subtle centering of the past events that all seemed to revolve around this young man. From the snicker in the beginning to this point, everything seemed to point toward him. Yet, they hadn't noticed until this moment.

Hutchin didn't say a word nor did his face give away any emotion.

Of the three organization Head, the last was a middle aged man from Misty Woods. His eyes seemed to sparkle with something imperceptible as he gazed from Hutchin to Leonel and back again.

"What are you all waiting for? There are over a hundred of you and only one of him. Did we waste all the resources we spent on you?!"

Hutchin frowned the moment he heard these words. But, coaching from the sidelines also wasn't against the rules, especially since it seemed as though the race hadn't even truly started yet.

A flash of determination crossed the faces of the youths who led the pack, a tinge of rage coloring their gazes. That was right, what did they have to fear?

Leonel's light smile didn't fade. His wrist flexed, his jet black spear following an elegant arc.

A surge of at least a dozen dove forward, all of them aiming for a separate pole from Leonel.

"Well... I tried to warn you. Chain Domain."

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

In that moment, it seemed as though the world was enveloped in black. Whether it was by coincidence or on purpose, even the elders couldn't move out of the way. In the blink of an eye, a world of darkness and whipping chains covered a more than 500 meter radius. PANDA NOVEL

Before they could react, all dozen youths who stepped forward found themselves wrapped from head to toe, their bodies frozen in space and a look of twisting pain on their faces.

"AH!"

Screams filled the skies as they struggled against the chains.

Whatever defiance they had had vanished in an instant, fear coloring their features as they realized the only thing keeping them suspended in the skies was Leonel's will. The moment he no longer felt that it was necessary, they would plunge to their inevitable deaths below.

"See? Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."

Leonel looked down toward the seemingly endless abyss below.

These pillars were so high up for a reason. They were purposely built at a height where the atmosphere was sparse, leaving the perpetual hurricanes with less substance to work with. It could be said that this was the safest location on the entire planet. PANDA NOVEL

What was most fearsome wasn't the several dozen kilometer drop below, because with their strength, it was impossible that they'd make it all the way to the bottom. Before they could even make it a few hundred meters, they would be shredded to pieces by the violent winds.

At that moment, a small group of three individuals leapt into the storm, but Leonel pretended as though he hadn't seen them at all. It was clear to everyone that they were members of Valiant Heart.

"Thank you!"

Leonel smiled when he heard this, nodding lightly.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to protect them like this later, so he might as well do the best he could now.

In the past, his Domains could only stretch out about 10 meters, even less within a Fifth Dimensional world unless he fueled it with Universal Force. But, at this moment, not only was Leonel not using Universal Force, but his range was already 50 times greater.

This was the benefit of King's Might.

It was then that the sickening sound of bones snapping sounded. The dozen figures that hung in the air at Leonel's whim screamed out in pain, their bodies shivering uncontrollably as they were thrown back to the pillar.

"Consider this a warning." Leonel spoke lightly. "I might not be so nice next time."

Another group of Valiant Heart Mountain members shot forward. No one dared to stop them. If Leonel could so easily deal with them crossing into the air, given the range of his odd Domain, just how hard would it be to stop them from interfering.

It was when the fourth group gathered the courage to move forward that a voice called out.

By this point, the three organization Heads were popping blood vessels. Of all the ways they had expected things to go, this was most definitely not one of them. And, to make matters worse, it almost felt like a slap to their faces that Leonel's Domain covered them as well. It was as though he actually dared to give them, as mighty Fifth Dimensional existences... a warning?!

Luckily, Wissan stepped forward.

“Don't you think that this is a bit too far?” He pushed up his glasses, his chubby body weaving through the crowd until he stood at the very edge of the pillar's roof.

Leonel's smile didn't fade as he looked Wissan up and down. Rather than rebutting, he asked a simple question.

“And what wouldn't be too far in your opinion?”

“That would be allowing the race to continue as designed, of course.”

“Mm.” Leonel nodded. “Well I disagree.”

Wissan expected Leonel to say something else after this, but he simply stood there, waving about on his pillar with a smile on his face.

At that moment, a chuckle came from Wissan's back before a light slap landed on his shoulder.

“It seems you finally lost a war of words, Wissan. I always told you that that shit doesn't matter. All that does is whether my blade is bigger than yours. What do you say, Emna? How about we have some fun? If we wait any longer, I won't be able to be first anymore.”

Emna didn't respond, just the same as always. Instead, she immediately took action. From within the midst of the group, she tore a path through the air, seemingly not worried about getting caught up by Leonel's chains.

"Oh?" Leonel's brow raised.

Since he had gained his Chain Domain, this was the first time anyone had so confidently seen through its deficiencies. He had to say, for Emna to accomplish this with just a single look and a moment of observation was impressive.

'I wonder, could I have her as one of my Generals too?'

If others knew what Leonel was thinking, they'd rightfully label him a madman. Was this really the situation to be thinking about such things?

As Leonel was lost in thought, Emna had already crossed half the distance. It wasn't until then that he sprung into action, his chains suddenly lashing out at her.

But, as expected, Emna reacted quickly. Two daggers seemed to almost magically appear in her hands.

She twisted in the air, hooking the tips of her blades into the links of the chains and using them as anchors to send herself flying forward at an even faster speed.

There was no doubt that her agility and flexibility were both off the charts. Beyond this, her judgment, senses, decisiveness and reaction time were all impeccable. The more Leonel observed, the more he wanted her.

Emna had definitely seen through the weakness of his Chain Domain. At any given time, most of the Domain was made up of a net of illusory chains that could manifest into a true physical form at any time. However, 'could' was the operative word.

It took energy to facilitate this change, firstly. And, secondly, chains didn't manifest out of thin air. This meant that the only chains that could manifest and lash out were ones that could already be seen.

The third weakness was one only those with incredible senses would pick up on. There was a shift in the energy around the chains that would manifest, allowing one to pick out which would gain physical form long before it happened.

It was clear that Emna had already pinpointed each and every one of these weaknesses and was even using it to her advantage.

‘Interesting...’

Leonel’s spear spun in his hand, expertly blocking Emna’s strike. PANDA NOVEL

‘The shortest distance between two points will always be a straight line. Unless you can somehow attack from two points more than two meters apart simultaneously, I’ll always be able to block your two daggers with a spin of my spear.’

‘And now... You also don’t have any footing left and I definitely won’t manifest anymore chains for you. So, what will you do?’

Rather than having these thoughts as a form of a taunt, Leonel’s eyes shone as though he was testing someone, almost like he was giving a job interview rather than fighting a life or death battle.

The pillar Leonel stood on was just two feet wide and it was still in the process of whipping back and forth in the wind. There was definitely no space for another person to step onto it. And, even if there was, why would Leonel allow that?

Emna, though, dealt with this issue without a single shred of awkwardness.

Using the momentum of her failed strike, she dove backward, agilely landing on a pillar ten meters to Leonel’s right.

Leonel’s eyes glowed. ‘She already had her escape plan mapped out from the very beginning. She struck with her left dagger far heavier than her right, forcing me to compensate for the power imbalance.’

Using that momentum, she leapt backward, confident that I wouldn't be able to block her in time.'

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Leonel had obviously moved most of his illusory chains before him to compensate for the large mass of enemies he was facing, leaving Emna with more than enough gaps to shoot through on his right.

Leonel's gaze seemed to be lit with a fire as he scanned Emna up and down.

For some reason, despite having dealt with Rafthin's ogling for much of her life, Emna felt particularly uncomfortable at this moment. It was as though she was stark naked before Leonel and there was nothing she could do to cover up.

"Hey."

Leonel suddenly called out, startling Emna for some reason.

"I want you to become one of my Generals, what do you say?"

Emna was completely startled, her face flushing. One would have thought that Leonel had asked her to follow him into bed.

Aina's expression became a bit weird in the distance, though no one could see it beneath her mask.

Could this count as sexual harassment too...?

"Well, this probably isn't the best time to ask..."

You don't say...

Everyone seemed to be of one thought at this moment despite having stood on opposite sides before.

“... But, think about it. If you accept, I’ll make you as many Quasi Bronze daggers as you can handle.”

Emna and the others were completely speechless. What nonsense was this man talking about?

It was only those of Valiant Heart that understood Leonel wasn’t bluffing at all.

“Are you flirting with my woman?!” Rafthin snapped. “Dammit! This selfish bastard wants to hog all the beauties! Let’s go, Wissan!”

Rafthin shot forward, unsheathing his massive three meter long rusted blade. Compared to Emna’s approach, his own was far different.

A blazing Universal Force shot around him, the illusory images of a two Season dichotomy forming.

On one side, there was the harsh reality of Winter. On the other, there was the beaming heat of Summer.

This was the fifth weakness of Leonel’s Chain Domain. The fourth was the split moment it took for the chains to manifest from their illusory form. As for this fifth, it was that this time could be even further slowed and even completely halted under the influence of certain forces, among which were the Forces of the Four Seasons Realm.

Leonel’s wrist flickered once again, the aura of his spear suddenly unleashing.

At that moment, the presence of a Quasi Bronze spear made itself known.

Leonel grinned. These three Head Students shouldn’t be far from Raylion in strength, otherwise they wouldn’t be able to share a title with him. Though, Raylion no longer held it.

Leonel was quite eager to see the depths of their strength.

A resounding CLANG reverberated across the battlefield as Rafthin's rusted blade met Leonel's spear.

To the former's surprise, Leonel met him head on without much issue, the chains of the spear suddenly lashing out to wrap around his broad sword.

Rafthin quickly tried to retreat, but Leonel had reacted too fast. Though he managed to pull back before the chains could wrap all the way around, the momentum he lost from freeing himself left him far short of the pillar he was aiming for.

Rafthin plummeted down from the skies. It seemed for a moment that just like this, his life would be forfeit.

But it was then that what looked like an energy platform appeared beneath his feet, saving him from his fall and allowing him to jump back to one of the pillars.

Leonel raised an eyebrow, his gaze locking onto Wissan in the distance.

'An energy shield ability could be used with such flexibility, hm? His range is also not bad at all.'

Energies of clashing hot and cold reverberated around Leonel, the lingering impact of Rafthin's strike persisting. But, the harsh pulling and pushing Force didn't seem to impact Leonel very much.

"Attack together." Wissan said. "I will cover you."

Emna and Rafthin took the hint. And judging by their demeanors, it was clear that they were very much serious this time.

Leonel smiled for a moment before his gaze turned an eerie cold for the first time since the battle began.

The temperature seemed to plummet and the energies stilled. Even the howling winds slowed by a measure, all sound seemingly vanishing.

Bright white-gold wings appeared to Leonel's back once again, a surge of winds picking up around his feet as he shot forward, missing Emna's pincer from the side and clashing with Rafthin in the air. PANDA NOVEL

His spear skimmed across the flat of Rafthin's blade. The latter, who had been expecting another clash of strength, felt as though he was swinging against air.

This should have been the perfect opportunity. With Wissan's support, and Leonel's lack of the same, the result should have been obvious. The battle should have been decided the moment Leonel was foolish enough to leave his pillar.

However, was Leonel really such a fool?

Leonel slid by Rafthin in the air, wrapping to his back in a single motion.

Kicking out with his leg, he both used Rafthin as leverage to gather up his momentum once again and send him tumbling down toward the harsher winds below at a faster speed.

Wissan's pupils contracted as he realized Leonel's target was himself from the very beginning. But the question was, would he protect himself by placing several shields between him and Leonel to prevent the latter from reaching him? Or, would he save Rafthin? PANDA NOVEL

Wissan's expression changed. The speed Rafthin was suddenly falling through the air at was too fast. It didn't even give him much time to think about it all.

Not only would Rafthin soon be out of his range. But, even if he managed to stay within his range, the harsh winds would put a lot of pressure on his energy shields. There was no telling if they would last long enough to help Rafthin out.

‘Dammit.’ Wissan’s visage warped. He was so used to being calm and collected, but it felt as though a single move had already driven him into a corner. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be a battle expert?! How did you lose so thoroughly in a single exchange?!’

If it wasn’t for Rafthin being so easily handled, none of this would have happened.

What Wissan didn’t know, though, was that if every battle had to be decided in a single exchange... The last person you wanted to fight would be Leonel.

The fact that Rafthin was in the air and couldn’t easily change his attack method only sealed his fate all the more. In these last two years, Leonel’s Dream Simulations had practically reached a point of perfection in the Fourth Dimension. Now that his mind was in the Fifth Dimension, the gap was even more exaggerated.

It was then that Wissan met Leonel’s cold eyes through the air, his body involuntarily freezing.

Those eyes... Could they even be considered human?

Wissan forgot to act, hardly realizing it when Leonel had already stepped before him, his spear swinging outward. Even though Wissan was at the very edge of the largest pillar, a place that should have been plenty secure, he still felt as though he was quickly falling into an abyssal hell.

The pressure Leonel exuded was the likes of which he had never seen before. He could see endless bloody battlefields and a blade that carved through them all with a cold, calm precision.

The weight of everything Leonel had experienced bore down on his soul, sinking him beneath waves of despair, horror and pain.

His knees collapsed, his eyes rolling back. A sickly paleness took over his skin, the chubbiness of his cheeks trembling as he sunk to the ground.

Leonel’s spear didn’t even get to land before it came to a grinding halt.

His cold eyes flickered for a moment, regaining some humanity. He looked at Wissan kneeling before him, his mouth bubbling with saliva, his nose running, and tears streaking down his face.

‘Hm?’

According to his simulation, he would defeat Wissan in three exchanges. By then, he predicted Emna would do something to save Rafthin, but their precarious position would quickly lead to their defeat as well.

But now, Wissan had collapsed before he could even do anything, resulting in Emna still diving through the air to catch Rafthin.

If he wanted, he could kill them both right this very moment and it wouldn’t even be very difficult. Clearly, even the thoughtful and meticulous Emna hadn’t expected Wissan to simply collapse just like this.

The area around Wissan cleared out, no one wanting to travel too closely to Leonel for fear that he would kill them all.

A heavy silence hung overhead, one even the perpetrator himself hadn’t quite expected.

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‘Seems this Wissan has quite a weak mind.’ Leonel thought.

This was the best explanation. Though, to be fair to Wissan, he was the first person Leonel had truly made eye contact like that with after awakening his King’s Might. But, Leonel still believed his analysis wasn’t very far off.

It was clear that King’s Might amplified more than just Leonel’s attack and defense. In fact, the amplification of his presence and aura was probably stronger than the amplification to anything else. If this wasn’t true, the result wouldn’t have been so exaggerated.

'I wonder, then, what would happen if I stopped using King's Might passively on my Chain Domain and used it actively? Would the change be greater than just an increase in range and size along with a lowering of the energy requirements?'

Leonel turned his head back toward Emna and Rafthin.

As expected, Emna had jumped through the air and caught Rafthin. Using a dagger attached to a chain, she shot it toward a distant pillar and began to swing her way over. It would truly be too easy for Leonel to deal with them.

Leonel reached a hand out, causing the expressions of the three organization Heads to change. But, they couldn't even make a move without Hutchin, the three remaining elders, and even Aina herself glaring toward them all at once.

Their expressions warped when they saw that even a little girl dared to do such a thing to them. But by then, it was already too late.

Stuck in the air and unable to change her trajectory, both Emna and Rafthin were bound in chains from all sides, only to be carried over Leonel.

Leonel separated the two of them into two separate chain bundles, then broke all of Rafthin's limbs without much remorse. As far as he was concerned, this was already mercy.

Even if he was more bloodthirsty, Leonel understood that it would be foolish to kill these three. The reality was that this Gathering was only taking place because these three organizations believed that they could win. If it came down to it, Leonel was certain that they would simply ignore all the restrictions and attack Valiant Heart the normal way.

For now, they were simply unwilling to pay the cost and chose this cheaper path. But, if Leonel pushed them too far, they just might drop all pretenses ahead of schedule, and that wouldn't be very good for him.

Leonel hoped for Valiant Heart's sake that they had a plan to deal with this, because even if Aina and he helped them to win this... There was no way that things would end so simply. PANDA NOVEL

Emna braced herself, ready to grit her teeth through her own limbs being shattered. But, why would Leonel harm someone he was trying to recruit? He simply left her suspended in the air and turned his head toward the remaining Valiant Heart members who had still yet to move.

“Well? Aren’t you guys going to go?”

Snapping out of their stupor, the remaining group jumped forward, disappearing over the horizon.

Leonel’s smile returned, his demeanor once again carefree.

“Well, I guess it’s time for me to go as well.”

Leonel dropped Emna to the ground and shot forward. Even as he disappeared in the distance and the Chain Domain was no longer a threat, no one dared to move and even the elders didn’t bother to force them to. p??J??????

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Leonel passed by numerous Valiant Heart members. Though he didn’t particularly care about his placement, there were only 20 spots but more than 20 Valiant Heart Mountain students. He didn’t really have much of a choice but to pass them by if he wanted to participate in the next rounds.

Of course, Leonel didn’t take this Gathering seriously because he knew what would happen even if they won. But, he was still curious about many things.

For one, this mysterious Third Party everyone kept mentioning that had still not shown up. He was also curious about the seeded geniuses the organizations were hiding.

Wissan, Emna and Rafthin were actually quite powerful. It was just that Leonel was uniquely suited to battling in strenuous environments because of his ability to use it to his advantage. The best chance someone would have at beating him was on as neutral a ground as possible.

To make matters worse, their teamwork wasn't very great. Without Wissan's hesitation, the battle wouldn't have ended so quickly.

Leonel was curious, then, about what geniuses the organization would actually place above them.

Not long later, Leonel made it to the destination with about ten having reached before him. At that moment, the mysterious elder of Valiant Heart had a rare smile on his face while the others sported ugly expressions.

Many looked toward Leonel, their eyes filled with a mixture of emotions, but he only grinned back casually.

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The inside of the pillar could only be described as luxurious. Delicate arrangements, precious metal fixtures, maids, butlers and servants as far as the eye could see...

The group of students was quite in awe of such things, but they understood that this made sense. It might have been hard labor to work a Two Star Disaster World, but one had to be powerful to survive.

These weren't normal 'miners' working here. These were powerful mercenaries, often with strength well into the Fifth Dimension, working for high end salaries. It only made sense that they would be treated appropriately.

Though it was the first time Leonel had seen such a luxurious labor force, he too was quickly able to accept it.

It seemed that whatever Third Party the organizations had commissioned was quite well off. But, they would have to be to dare to step into the business of such powerful Bronze Organizations. They would, at the very least, have to be infinitely close to becoming a Silver Organization to take such a task on. It was clear that they were very confident in themselves.

It was upon entering a wide lounge area that Leonel suddenly understood where his bad feeling just might have been coming from. His mind flashed back to memories of a fat merchant with jingling jewellery and chains as his eyes narrowed.

Above, a large, magnificent sign shimmered with all sorts of splendor.

MILKY WAY GUILD.

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'Is my luck really that bad?' Leonel smiled bitterly.

The issue with the Milky Way Guild obviously wasn't that Leonel was an enemy of them, but rather in what they might or might not know.

Leonel was certain that the fat, jeweled man was among the lowest ranking members of the Guild. He might even be selfish enough to keep the information to himself in hopes of making it rich on his own. But the issue was that this was only the best case scenario.

In the worst case... Well, Leonel might as well start picking out his casket now.

In this time, he had pretty much ignored the threat of Shield Cross Stars. But, that was only because right after those events happened, his talk with his grandfather took up the vast majority of his mind. He simply didn't care about Shield Cross Stars because his thoughts were focused on something completely different.

Now that Leonel was quite confident in the response he would give to his grandfather, he suddenly remembered just how big of a deal being a wanted criminal of Shield Cross Stars was. If it wasn't for the structure of this police force and the approach Scithe and Anared's fiancée had taken, it could be said that Leonel would already be finished.

'... Really such bad luck.' Leonel shook his head.

Aina, who was standing right beside Leonel, didn't need him to explain what the problem was. The moment she saw him pause and felt the shift in his emotions, she connected the dots. She had been there when they met the fat merchant and definitely knew that the fat merchant had still been on Earth when Leonel's face was projected to everyone.

It was quite funny too. Had Leonel not dropped White City onto Earth, the fat merchant might have never known. But, who knew how many other Milky Way Guild merchants there might have been at the time?

As for where this fat merchant was now? Neither of them had anyway of knowing. But at this point, she knew to brace for the worst.

Aina's grip on Leonel's hand involuntarily tightened. PANDA NOVEL

Leonel looked over and smiled, the wrinkle between his brows having long since calmed.

The Milky Way Guild? Weren't they just a Quasi Silver Organization? Leonel remembered very clearly, their highest ranking member, Augustus Ovilteen, had still not even stepped into the Sixth Dimension yet.

This was still far beyond Leonel's current level, but what did it matter?

If they wanted to come, let them come. They'd be a nice and shiny stepping stone.

Of course, in all of Leonel's thoughts, he felt that the odds were still quite low. This was a high level planet and the people that frequented this place obviously had the status to match it. What were the odds a Merchant that had to do business in a small place like Terrain could ever be here? PANDA NOVEL

What he didn't know quite yet was that his luck was indeed that bad.

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In a control room located in a hidden department of the pillar were several monitors projecting images from all over the Two Star Disaster World. From a single look, one would have thought that this place was plucked right from Earth to be deposited here. But, upon further inspection, the reality was far more complex than this.

The images were projected onto thin glass sheets that hung about at all sorts of angles. There were clearly no electronics or wires to be seen anywhere in the room whatsoever.

It became clear fairly quickly that the 'technology' being used here were related to a complex branch of Force Arts. These Force Arts allowed the Milky Way Guild to monitor the whole of the planet for any activity of interest.

It was quite a complicated task to handle a Disaster Rated planet. There was more required than simply mining its resources. The location had to be protected, the weather had to be analyzed and predicted for safe and dangerous times, and any unexpected activity had to be properly reported.

As such, while there were a large number of high level workers, there were also a fair share of low level ones as well, many of them tasked with observing these monitors and passing on the necessary information to higher level officials for final decisions to be made.

It wasn't that Leonel didn't notice he was being monitored. He obviously had. The difference back then was that he thought it was only natural, not only because of the reasons just mentioned, but also because the Milky Way Guild wouldn't be a very good 'Third Party' if they weren't doing at least that much.

But now...

There were hundreds of men and women in this monitoring station, each of them focused on the four to five fluctuating images before them.

The task was usually monotonous. Most spent nothing but days on end watching winds whip across of rocks that had already evolved to not be very affected by their surroundings.

The ones that had it worst, though, were the pillar monitors. At least those who were tasked with watching the mines could observe powerful warriors breaking stone and shattering gems from time to time. But, those on 'pillar duty' only had the task of ensuring that none of their 'roadways' ever failed.

With the sturdy build of these roadways, such a failure might only occur once a decade. So, most of the time, those tasks with this job just watched as the pillars waved back and forth in the same, endlessly repetitive motion.

The Milky Way Guild had long since done that math, and hiring this drone of people to monitor for failures was far more cost efficient than hiring a Force Crafter to automate the whole process.

Those working here weren't complaining, though. They were paid decently and their jobs weren't dangerous. What more could they ask for?

However, there were still some among them that had no intention of staying in such a place for a lifetime, some among them who aspired for more and greater.

Within this group, there was one young man who was very obviously not the fat merchant Leonel had met. He got lucky on this day, getting to watch a competition on his section of pillars.

But, when he saw Leonel, his eyes narrowed. Leonel's luck was indeed quite bad.

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Havoc was indeed not the fat merchant. The fat merchant had never stepped foot onto this planet and had always been far more interested in increasing his wealth in other ways.

Havoc, however, wasn't afraid to stoop to any low to rise. The fat merchant had long since gotten used to his lavish lifestyle within the Fourth Dimension, he had no grand hopes of starting from the bottom of the Fifth Dimension and working his way all the way up again. The two were simply vastly different people.

One was as boisterous as possible while the other was quiet and reserved, laying in wait for the perfect chance to strike.

At first, Havoc didn't immediately recognize Leonel. Compared to the last time he had been seen, the difference was too great.

Leonel had matured by two years, firstly, making his jaw more defined, his back wider and his shoulders more broad. Beyond that, his hair was no longer long and its color, along with his eyes, were completely different.

For a person who had only seen Leonel once, it would have been easy to ignore the signs of familiarity and even possible to have even not connected the memories together at all. But, Havoc was different.

Compared to the others who had almost dead eyes as they scanned their monitors, his had always been like that of a hawk's, scanning through every detail with a meticulous tediousness that others wouldn't care to suffer through.

It took a while, but Havoc finally remembered.

Years ago, he had taken some work on Terrain. Unlike the fat merchant who frequented that world to begin with, Havoc had been there because that was where his research led.

Terrain was a world exceptionally close to Earth and there had been a more than 90% likelihood that when Earth opened its doors for trade, Terrain would be the first it gravitated toward.

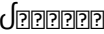
Havoc refused to allow lucky bastards like the fat merchant, without foresight and forethinking, to benefit from something like this. So, he had begun plans to carve out a foothold for himself. PANDA NOVEL

Unfortunately, because of the suspicious nature of all his covert actions, he had been flagged by Shield Cross Stars a lot like Leonel had been. But while Leonel managed to have his erased in just a few weeks, Havoc still bore his mark to this day, something that enraged him to no end.

Due to this mark, he had to delay a lot of his plans and could only barely get this job.

That aside, he ended up getting swept up into the war not much unlike many others who had come from different planets and had thus seen the projection of Leonel's wanted poster.

Until this point, Havoc had simply stored this at the back of his mind. Though the reward was exceptionally handsome, it didn't matter if he couldn't find or locate Leonel for himself.

But as time passed, Havoc began to notice something odd. 

Outside of that time on Earth, he had never seen a single wanted poster for Leonel. This was odd, especially since Leonel was supposedly a Tier 4 Fugitive. Shield Cross Stars should be doing everything in their power to find him, especially since he should be the only criminal of that caliber in the Milky Way. There was no excuse for him to have been ignored for so long.

That was when Havoc's senses went off. There was something not quite right about all of this.

So, he began to monitor Earth as well. In the last few years, Earth, having entered the Fourth Dimension, began to open itself up to forms of trade and communication with the outside world, making this task far easier.

And, as expected... Earth didn't even receive a warning for destroying a ship of Shield Cross Stars and neither was Emperor Fawkes placed on a wanted list either.

This made even less sense than Leonel's wanted posters not having been placed anywhere. It just didn't make any sense.

However... Havoc had an advantage others hadn't. During his stay on Terrain, he became quite familiar with the merchants that frequented the small planet. With how meticulous he was, how could he not take the time to know his enemy?

After realizing that something was wrong, Havoc began to reach out to them. Using tactics that were sometimes covert and sometimes even overt to the point of threats, he managed to piece together a narrative that he was fairly certain was true.

Firstly, the charges levied against Leonel were, in all likelihood, false.

Secondly, the true perpetrators were the Cities of Terrain.

Thirdly, for Shield Cross Stars to neglect this, and given their odd actions in detaining him when he hadn't done anything wrong, likely meant that the Cities and Shield Cross Stars were in cahoots.

Fourthly, for them to take this path instead of countless others they could have, this meant that Leonel's background was most definitely not simple. It was difficult to tell if these were connections he had through his grandfather – since Emperor Fawkes remained untouched as well – or if they were ones he had alone. Either way, it didn't particularly matter.

And fifthly, if he could learn all of this, he was certain that Shield Cross Stars could as well. But they hadn't either because they didn't care to, didn't want to, or very few of them were aware of this matter to begin with.

From Havoc's understanding, it was definitely a combination of all three.

This meant something quite simple. He would be a fool if he simply ran out of this room, shouting at the top of his lungs that he had found a wanted criminal. Even if he got some immediate gratification and even a large part of the reward, his life wouldn't last very long afterward.

But, there was one piece of information he had been holding close to his heart. As cautious as he had been with everything else, he had been even more cautious with this one.

That Mistress Heira of the Keafir family had disappeared that day according to the information he had gathered. But, what was more important was her full name now that her marriage would no longer happen.

Heira Ovilteen.

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“You’re making another gun? Didn’t you say you preferred your bow?”

Aina, who had seemingly decided to not leave Leonel’s side ever since she learned he might very well be in danger soon, was watching Leonel Craft for the first time.

Well, this wasn’t necessarily the first time. She had been in the vicinity before, but this could be considered the first time all her attention was on him completely. Usually, when the two were working in the same room, they would be in their own worlds. But this time was different.

“I didn’t have the skill to make anything better than a bow in the past.” Leonel replied. “But this doesn’t mean I’m abandoning my bow.”

Leonel had far more flexibility with a bow than he ever would with a gun. The maneuvers he could make, most of which relied on his ridiculous coordination and calculation abilities, would always be beyond anything he could do with a gun no matter how he built it. Sometimes the most ancient way to do something was the best way for a reason.

However, there was a reason the gun had surpassed the bow, at least on Earth.

For one, the learning curve was far steeper. And secondly, the power would never be able to match up.

In the past, Leonel had reached an odd state where his Crafting skill wasn’t high enough to surpass his personal strength, thus resulting in him not being capable of creating things that would truly help him in battle.

He quickly outgrew his pair of pistols. He couldn’t form consumable items he found worth using in battle. And, the ultimate almost ‘slap’ to his face as a Crafter was his Spear Domain Ring.

If there was one Lineage Factor Leonel always neglected before he spent two years diligently breaking down and rebuilding his weaknesses, it was his Spear Domain Lineage Factor. But, there was a very good reason for this.

When you had access to spears of a quality far beyond what anyone else had, it became too easy to rely on them. PANDA NOVEL

Just think about it, Leonel had access to Quasi Bronze spears before he could even make a Tier 5 Craft. And now, he could pull out a Quasi Silver spear with a thought, but he had yet to even successfully Craft his first Fifth Dimensional Craft.

When it came to his Snowy Star Owl Lineage Factor, following the branches and sub-branches was as easy as just choosing a path on a forked road to follow.

When it came to his Metal Synergy Lineage Factor, it was even simpler. Just choose your Ores to absorb and break open those layered, chained doors when the time was right. It couldn't have been more straight forward.

But what about his Spear Domain Lineage Factor? How did he measure his progress? Was it by mastering more spears? Was it by strengthening his way of the spear? Was it by improving his Domains?

Leonel even felt that he had learned and understood more about his King's Might Lineage Factor in just the few days he had had it than he had for his Spear Domain Lineage Factor even with years more time.
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His King's Might was simple as well. It gave an amplification to all his abilities with an emphasis on his Domains and his aura or presence. As for how to improve it, that was even simpler: Just increase his burden. The more people who trusted and relied on him, the more people who were loyal to him, the more powerful his King's Might would become.

One would think that the best way to improve Spear Domain was just to conquer more spears within the Spear Domain ring. After all, the Lineage Factor stemmed from this mysterious ring, right? In fact, the ring was able to appear within the Zone while even the Segmented Cube hadn't been able to, so it was likely even more unfathomable than Leonel knew.

But Leonel didn't believe things were this simple.

For one, doing so ended him relying too much on the strength of his weapon. And secondly, there was an elephant in the room he hadn't addressed.

There were billions of Morales family members. Among them, there were many who had awoken their Spear Domain Lineage Factor. But, there was obviously only one ring.

So how had they improved theirs?

The next logical answer was with Universe Cycles. Wasn't that how everyone improved their skill whether it be with a weapon or an Element?

However this only made it more complicated for Leonel. His Universal Cycle comprehension wasn't tethered to a single weapon or Element. He had grasped it to its purest form and could apply it to anything, which left his spear in somewhat of a limbo.

The current Leonel, though, believed that he had grasped onto something. It had taken time, but he just might have carved out a path ahead.

That said, though, his current focus was entirely on his new gun. Well, it was less accurate to call it a gun and more accurate to say that it was a sniper rifle. With the design he had in mind, it would be a behemoth of epic proportions.

What he needed wasn't a gun that could deal with canon fodder. What he needed was a steel giant that could blast a hole the size of a barrel through the chest of a Fifth Dimensional expert.

One would think that in the two years spent without Little Tolly or Crafting, Leonel's skill would have diminished, or, at the very least, remained stagnant. However, this couldn't have been further from the truth.

In a world with nothing to do and weeks, even months passing between battles, Leonel had nothing but time on his hands. There was no Aina to distract him, no drama to take up his mental faculties, and a mind that was constantly strengthening its ability to split everyday.

Not only had he conquered all of the Quasi Bronze spears in his Spear Domain ring, but he had lost count of the number of Crafts he had completed in his Dream World.

Even when he couldn't get his hands on Fifth Dimensional Ores to work on, he simulated their characteristics using the information he new about them to an almost 99% threshold toward perfection.

Leonel's skill had long since crossed into the Realms of a Bronze Crafter. As for his limits, he wasn't sure. But, he would definitely be using the Fifth Dimensional Ores the Valiant Heart elders so graciously gave him to give his enemies a good surprise.

Leonel didn't know, though, that he'd be receiving a surprise of his own very soon as well.

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Leonel couldn't help but chuckle to himself. This sniper rifle would have even more components than his Divine Armor, yet comparing the difficult he had in creating his armor versus how almost easy it felt to finish it, it was almost surreal.

"You're not abandoning the bow so I assume this gun will be very powerful?"

Leonel nodded. "Very. It will probably be able to blow a hole right through a mountain. If that mountain was in the Fourth Dimension, it would probably be able to level it completely."

Aina blinked, looking at Leonel's side profile.

If there was one thing Leonel never did, it was exaggerate in order to gain her awe and affection. Aina didn't believe he consciously did this knowing that she would like it. Rather, it was just how he was. He was confident enough in himself to feel that he didn't need to lie to impress people, and he had always been like this.

Plus, hadn't he already gotten her now? He had even less of a need to try to impress her now compared to the past. Yet, he had still said these words.

That only meant one thing to Aina: He meant them.

It had never truly sunk in for Aina just how good Leonel was at Force Crafting. Even before learning he had such a skill, she had been in awe of Crafters for a long time already. She could remember memories of her father speaking about the experts who forged the battle ax Heirloom she wielded even to this day. From a young age, she had been indoctrinated into believing how special they were.

So, when the day came that her man seemed capable of completing things even they found difficult with ease, it was so surreal that she sometimes forgot Leonel was on such a level.

Watching him focus so diligently on even the smallest of parts like this left her with an unknown feeling in her heart.

"... What about the recoil? Will you be alright?"

Leonel grinned when he heard this.

"This is what's so special about this sniper rifle. I built it with the specifications of my Metal Body and Snowy Star Owl Lineage Factor in mind. Even if it lands in the hands of another, it might as well be scrap metal.

"At its lowest setting, blasting a hole through the head of someone at Tier 8 and even 9 if their defenses aren't great would be as easy as me pulling the trigger. At least if this Tier 8 or 9 individual is in the quadrant of the universe, anyway.

"But, at the highest setting, if I go all out, someone at Tier 3 or 4, even 5 of the Fifth Dimension would definitely have to dodge out of the way. Though, I could probably only make such a shot once or twice."

Aina blinked, finding it all to be almost too ridiculous.

“That doesn’t fix the problem of recoil. You’d end up blasting a hole through yourself.” Aina frowned.
PANDA NOVEL

Even hearing this, Leonel’s grin only grew wider.

“That’s only if the bullet’s strength came from within the sniper rifle itself. But, that would make the design too boring.”

Aina raised her brows.

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The days passed quickly and the time for the second round was already upon them. Unfortunately, while the start of the second round wasn’t a surprise, the circumstances were very different.

For one, it turned out that the reason the Milky Way Guild agreed to act as their third party was if and only if they could profit from their internal struggle.

A fight for power between four of the Milky Way’s most powerful organizations? Who wouldn’t want to watch such entertainment? And, those who didn’t want it for entertainment would definitely want to know the outcome. This battle alone could change the landscape of the entire galaxy, or at the very least, the quadrant they shared.

Unsurprisingly, then, the Milky Way Guild sold countless seats, both real and virtual. By the time the Valiant Heart youths walked into the indoor arena the guild usually set aside for entertainment, it was packed to the walls with people. ρ???)???)???)???)

The atmosphere was rowdy and humid, the shouts of the people above threatening to be even more violent than the winds outside.

But, that was only the first surprise. And even then, it was only a surprise to some of them. It was clear that the others had already expected as much.

What they didn't expect, though, was for the established rules to suddenly be thrown away.

What should have been a simple elimination tournament with a perfect number of 32 had suddenly become something completely different. While Valiant Heart should have had the leverage to fight against this, for some odd reason, this change gained the approval of the Milky Way Guild.

It was clear that their supposed 'neutral' third party had a certain loyalty... and that was to money. There was no doubt that this change would be far more entertaining.

What once was a elimination tournament had become a nine versus nine rotation battle. The three organizations were no longer even pretending to be separate, opting to combine their strengths into one from the very beginning.

Just like this, Valiant Heart which should have had over 20 participating members was forced to cut their options back down to nine, three of which were already taken up by their seeded geniuses. How could they not be infuriated?

Yet, they couldn't even sulk and bask in this fury. It was simply too difficult. With the rowdy crowd only getting louder as the event was introduced, they couldn't even simmer, feeling as though the entire world was laughing at their struggles.

As Leonel listened to Hutchin slowly explain the changes, he remained silent. At the very least, Hutchin's own calmness seemed to say that he expected something like this. Either that, or this was just his disposition.

Hopefully, if it was the former, he had a plan to deal with this beyond today.

"I'll go first." Leonel suddenly said.

Many eyes looked over toward him, including Hutchin. Usually, they would save the most powerful for last. And though the elders weren't convinced that Leonel was this most powerful individual, he was at the very least not the weakest.

But Leonel only shrugged, not explaining himself.

In this sort of environment, facing this sort of hostility, you couldn't let your enemy linger around.

If Valiant Heart won by a close shave, there were any number of steps the three organizations could take and still come out clean. However, if they were crushed, whittling to nothing before the eyes of so many, even if they took those steps, they would only be seen as bottom feeders and shameless.

If Valiant Heart was lucky, the latter path should save them a few more years. Leonel would gladly accept these years too as they would only help him.

“Okay.” Hutchin agreed.

Leonel smiled and winked toward Aina, leaping for the stage to find a cloaked figure waiting for him.

‘This must be the first of their secret seeded geniuses? What’s the point of still wearing a cloak now? If I want to see who you are, it won’t be very difficult.’

Just as Leonel was about to pry through this person’s cloaked defenses, something he had never expected to happen, happened.

The cloaked figure froze, shuttering for a moment. And then, they yelled something that caught Leonel completely off guard.

“CAPTAIN!”

“Ah...” Leonel’s lips hung partially open.

‘Dammit...’ Leonel thought. ‘... This just got a hundred times more complicated.’

The cloaked figure suddenly charged for Leonel. But, when many thought the battle would begin, he suddenly enveloped him into a massive bear hug.

The rowdiness of the crowd continued for a while, thinking that maybe this hug was some sort of attack. When it came to the strongest individuals, after all, a bear hug might be among the most vicious ways to kill someone.

But, it became very clear, very quickly that this wasn't a vicious bear hug at all, especially when the cloaked figure set Leonel down, removing his cloak to reveal a beaming smile.

"Hey, Milan. How've you been?" Leonel forced a smile.

He should be happy to see his teammate, but this supposedly good thing was most definitely not one, especially if he was correct. Leonel didn't even need to look now to understand that most, if not all of the 'mysterious' nine geniuses that the three organizations had hidden until now were from Earth.

It might sound like Leonel was angry because he couldn't fight for Valiant Heart Mountain, but this wasn't the case at all. This was much deeper than that. It was the sort of problem that was giving Leonel a major headache just thinking about it.

If it was just about winning, what could be simpler than this? His teammates would forfeit long before he even had to ask. It was just the kind of men they were.

And, even if there were others from Earth that weren't his teammates, that hardly mattered. The fact they were from Earth meant that they had been training for the same amount of time Leonel had, and he didn't believe anyone who fit into such a category could defeat him, at least not in this segment of the universe.

What was the problem, then? It was a matter of flexibility and maneuverability.

Things might have been fine if the three organizations didn't know the relationship between Leonel and the others, but now that they did, it would be impossible to just hide them all away.

Using the snowglobes sounded like the logical answer, but he would need the actual chance to do so first. And, beyond that, who was to say that these nine were the only ones he had to worry about? What about the others that were likely still within those three organizations right this very moment? Leonel wasn't naïve enough to believe that only nine total had been sent out.

The only potential good news was that Leonel had a feeling that this was done in partnership with Earth. It was unlikely that these organizations would choose to forego this partnership, especially given Earth's potential... At least they wouldn't do so blatantly and without thought. This might give them a bit of breathing room.

However, even with this being the case, Leonel didn't believe that this would be a great deterrence. Not in the face of whatever value Valiant Heart Mountain's territory and the Milky Way Guild could provide, anyway.

Leonel's instincts were tingling all over. He could feel that he had already been found out, that a trap was being slowly closed in around him. He could understand that if the person he thought was behind this was, that this was definitely the approach they would want to take.

They wouldn't want him to die an easy death or be simply captured. They would want something that would help them to vent all the rage and frustration that had been brewing within themselves for over two years already. PANDA NOVEL

Milan blinked when he looked at Leonel's face and scratched the back of his head.

As Leonel's center on the football field, a position that was essentially considered to be Leonel's Head Guard, Milan was quite good at realizing when he had done something wrong. But, usually, it took some detective work. It had never been this obvious before, which could only mean one thing.

He had definitely made a big mistake this time. And, it was a big mistake that even Leonel wasn't confident in cleaning up.

He had all sorts of jokes lined up about everything from Leonel's hair to who that new beauty next to him was, but he couldn't even bring himself to say it any longer.

Milan scratched the back of his head. "Sorry, Cap."

Leonel opened his mouth to respond. But in the end, he sighed a smile and shook his head.

"Forget it. Maybe things will be more interesting this way. How many are with you?"

"There's Joel, Raj and Drake."

Milan's response carried an undertone of seriousness, his cadence even and his voice quite booming. It almost seemed as though he was speaking too loudly, but this was just his natural volume. He was quite used to speaking like this, especially given his original profession.

"Drake? The Rookie?"

Milan grinned. "He's already almost 18, Cap. I dunno if we can't still call him that."

Leonel smiled. "I guess you're right. By this point, he would have already taken our spots, huh?"

By this point, the entire arena had fallen into an awkward lull. The three organization Heads weren't sure how to respond to this sudden situation. This was especially so for the old man of Misty Woods considering Milan was one of his three hidden seeded geniuses.

"What's the problem, Cap?" Milan asked. "Do you need Valiant Heart to win?"

"It would help, but that's not the main problem. It also doesn't mean as much as it would have in the past anymore considering..."

Milan forced a sheepish grin. Indeed, it wouldn't mean as much anymore. Even if Milan was the only one in 'cahoots' with Leonel, the three organizations would still use it as an excuse to void the entire competition.

"Then what should we do?"

Leonel looked around for a moment, his eyes drifting toward a certain section of the arena where a few sat silently, many of whom wore masks. It was difficult to tell if they were hiding something or if this was simply their usual style of dress.

"That depends," Leonel responded, "Who else is here?"

"Everyone is from Earth, I'm not sure if you know them. But, there is that girl that used to follow her around."

Leonel's lip twitched. "'Her'?"

Milan blinked. "Don't worry, Cap. I won't mention her in front of your new girl. Scout's honor."

Leonel touched his hand to his forehead, feeling a headache coming along. How many times would he have to deal with this, exactly?

"That's Aina, you big lug."

Milan looked over Leonel's shoulder toward 'Aina' who still wore her mask, then back to Leonel.

"You met another girl by the same name? Do you have a fetish or something, Cap?"

The wave of dejavu almost made Leonel faint once again.