

Void

Death throes and screams of despair filled the air as the thieves died in the street.

“Please, we didn’t know! Take everything that we have, please, just don’t do this,” a man on his knees pleaded. He pressed his head against the ground, his horns biting into the dirt. The rest of the village, those still alive followed suit.

The man standing in front of the crowd among the dead, stared at them with eyes that were all black. The man’s face tentacles twitched, but otherwise he didn’t react to their words.

“I beg of you, master,” the man—the headman of the village begged again. “We can give you anything that you want, just please, spare us.”

Finally, the cthul turned his eyes from the prostrating man and looked around. The townspeople were all on their knees, their heads touching the ground. They were afraid, terrified even. And rightly they should be.

“You attempted to rob me,” the man, his voice reverberating strangely in the air, said to the village head.

“Apologies master, it was a mistake,” the headsman said.

“How many other travelers passing through your village did you do this to before me?” The cthul asked and silence was their only answer.

“Forgiveness, great master,” the man said softly.

“The Void forgives nothing,” the cthul said. He looked around the small village, no one met his gaze.

He turned around and walked away. He heard them shuffling behind him, talking softly as not to draw his attention as he left the village. He knew their relief, and knew that it was misplaced.

He reached the edge of the village and then turned around looking at it. There were barely a few dozen houses in the village, and one small inn where he had stayed for the night. The entire village took up perhaps a few thousand square meters of land. Not a big place at all.

The man raised his hand toward the village and focused.

[Boundless Void]

A pillar of darkness stabbed down from the sky, in an instant engulfing the entire village. There was no sound, no light, no nothing, only silence and the dark. A moment later the pillar dissipated, leaving only a round bore where the village once stood. The hole reached down into the ground, so deep that nothing could be seen beneath but the dark. The river that flowed next to the village was engulfed as well, and now its water fell down into the dark.

The man felt the heat against his skin, and he reached into his robe and pulled out the amulet that had been in contact with his chest. The simple crystal flashed with a faint white light three times and then the man heard words in his head.

Meeting; Four Dusk, Plateau;

The man sighed and then put the amulet back inside.

He turned around and started walking.

* * *

Horn

The screaming warrior charged, his hammer raised high above his head as if he was going to smite his opponent into the ground. But as he reached his target, the minotaur dodged to the side and then his axe swiped, taking half of the charging warrior's head clear off.

The last warrior fell and the minotaur laughed.

"Is that all?!" He yelled as he raised his bloody axe high above his head.

"You complain?" a demasi woman asked as she approached, walking among the dead. "There were three times more of them than there were us."

The minotaur nodded seriously. "Yes, that was not nearly enough." The entire field was filled with bodies. The battle between the two kingdoms had been brutal, and the dead were almost piled on top of each other.

The woman shook her head, taking his words as a jest. "Well, the battle is won, your contract with us is done," the woman said as she looked at the minotaur. "Any chance that we can convince you to change your mind, maybe join with the company?"

"Nah, I'm just going to go and find another war to fight in," the minotaur said.

The woman shook her head. “You should come with us Vesterius, the tournament is a great opportunity. And we plan on joining the team matches, with you on our team we can go far. Perhaps even show ourselves enough to become High Rankers,” the woman tried to sound calm and composed, but the minotaur could see that she was desperate.

“I’m not interested in that, I don’t want to become famous. War is what I love and that is what I will continue to do.”

“You can fight powerful people in the tournament too.”

Vesterius laughed out loud. “Perhaps, and perhaps not. I have no need to test my strength against others while half the world watches.”

The woman opened her mouth to speak but then closed it in defeat. She nodded her head and started to turn.

“Well, this is goodbye then,” she lingered for a few moments more.

“Until we meet again!” Vesterius waved with his bloody axe and then turned, walking back toward the camp to collect his reward. Fighting with mercenary groups could be very lucrative, if you were good enough of course. His plan was to head south immediately, as he had heard that there was another war going on down there. If he was lucky he could get there before it ended.

As he walked, he felt heat rising on his chest. Vesterius frowned, and pulled out a small crystal amulet from its place against his skin. It pulsed with white light three times, and then he heard words in his head.

Meeting; Four Dusk, Plateau;

“Well, shit. There goes that plan,” the minotaur grumbled and put the amulet back in its place.

He hurried toward camp, intent on picking up his reward as fast as possible. He had places to be.

* * *

Shuffle

“So, you in or you out?” The human man across from him asked.

Mal narrowed his eyes as he looked at his cards. His hand wasn't all that good if he was being honest, but the pot in the center of the table was substantial. Enough for him to risk it.

He tapped one claw on the wooden table as he pretended to think about it. He made sure to make his whiskers flicker, a tell that he had been using all night, and immediately he saw the man across from him suppress a smile. The human thought that he had him.

Mal moved his Qi, his control precise and absolute, no one felt a thing.

{Field of Understanding}

He knew the positions of everything around him in an instant, and then he focused his mind.

[Switch]

The cards in his hands switched places with other ones still in the deck. "I'm in," Mal said.

The human showed his hand and grinned. "Well, well, it looks like I am the lucky one tonight."

Mal lowered his hand slowly, showing him his cards.

The human looked at the cards in shock. "That... that's not possible."

"What can I say, it looks like luck favored me!" Mal gathered up his winning and put them all inside his storage ring. Before the man could shake himself out of his shocked state, Mal stood up and looked around.

The man's friends were staring at him in surprise, and he smiled at them.

"I thank you for the company and the good time! The next time I'm in town we can do a rematch," Mal said as he made his way out of the bar and into the street.

He hurried down the dark street, hoping to get away before their wits caught with them, but then he heard footsteps.

"Wait! You fucking piece of shit! You cheated," the human yelled after him.

Mal stopped and sighed. He really shouldn't have done that, but... well, it was fun.

Mal turned around an innocent look on his face. “Cheat? Me? Never, and I resent your accusation kind sir! Do you perchance have any proof of such a thing? No? Of course not, well then there is nothing to be done.”

The human’s face darkened and he and his friends stepped closer. There were five of them, a wingless karura, a drake, and three demasi, flanking their human friend.

“Give me back my Essence, or I will take it from your body,” the man said angrily.

Mal opened his mouth to try and get out of it, but he noticed that they already had knives and clubs in their hands. He closed his mouth and a wicked smile blossomed on his face.

“You know, this will not end the way you think it will,” Mal told them. “So, I will give you this one chance to turn around and leave.”

The human snorted. “Yes, we should be very afraid of you. I’ve seen you around ravzor, you gamble and sleep drunk in the streets. You are no one and nothing. You won’t be missed.”

Mal shrugged, the smile still on his face. “What can I say, I enjoy a drink and the cold stone of your town’s streets.”

“Fuck this, get him,” the human said and his friends advanced on him.

Mal waited until one of the demasi swung a club at his face.

[Switch]

Suddenly, instead of hitting Mal the demasi slammed the club into the back of his drake friend, blasting him into unconsciousness.

Everyone stared at the drake as he fell to the ground.

Mal whistled as he leaned over next to one of the other demasi. “Wow, you could’ve killed him with that, you really should learn some restraint.”

Everyone jumped at hearing and seeing him among them. He grinned at them. “Last chance?” Mal asked, but they were already attacking.

[Switch]

A demasi stabbed with a knife and instead of finding Mal he found the human. His knife stabbed straight into the man’s chest. Mal danced around, them, switching places with them until they took down each other.

In the end only the wingless karura remained, staying back and looking at Mal with wide eyes.

“You... you are Maleatus Enis,” the karura said.

Mal’s smile immediately fell. “Aw, why did you have to go and say that? I was planning on letting you all live. But now...”

He switched places with the air in front of the karura and placed a hand on his chest. “Hey, you know what? Since I’m going to kill you and all, how about I give you a gift before you go? I know that the other karura Iterations look down on you guys because you can’t fly, the Ever Rising Currents and all that crap. So, how about I show you what flying feels like?” Mal grinned at the wide eyed karura.

Before the karura could respond Mal switched his position in space, exchanging air from high above his head with the karura’s body.

The cold air dissipated quickly and Mal turned around, he glanced at the unconscious ruffians, crossed his arms and tapped one of his claws against his other elbow.

“What to do, what to do... one of you could recognize who I was once you wake up. No choice, I guess,” Mal sighed and raised his hand. A moment later they were gone as he exchanged their bodies with the dirt from deep beneath the ground.

Suffocating and getting crushed by dirt isn’t the best way to go, but it wasn’t like he had much of a choice. He turned to go when he felt his chest heat up. He pulled out his crystal amulet and looked at it. It flashed three times and he heard words in his head.

Meeting; Four Dusk, Plateau;

“Huh, I guess that I know where I’m going then,” Mal said. He glanced up above him, squinting, but not seeing anything. “He’s gonna keep falling for a while... Damn, and I wanted to see him splatter. Oh well,”

He started whistling as he walked down the empty street.

* * *

The League

The small plateau was covered with trees and large rocks, but it was empty of any monster life. At the edge of the plateau near the cliff side was a small clearing, with six sitting rocks arranged around a fire. Each stone was

large enough that a person could comfortably sit, and in fact, one of the stones was occupied.

A demasi sat on it, and looked out over the cliff at the moon illuminated wilderness that spread all around her, while the fire behind her gently crackled.

A while later, she heard the sounds of someone approaching and turned around just as a large minotaur walked into the clearing from behind some trees. He was tall and wore a white mask over his face.

“Cloud,” the minotaur rumbled as he walked in.

“Horn,” she responded from behind her own green mask.

The minotaur shifted. “That is a shit Codename, you know,” the minotaur said as he found his way to his stone and sat.

“It is your fault for missing the meeting where we assigned them,” Cloud told him.

“Bah, as if we need all this secrecy,” Horn responded.

“It is more than necessary, I assure you Horn,” Cloud told him.

His response was only a grunt. Before either of them could speak again, a soft popping sound could be heard and a slim ravzor man wearing an orange mask appeared already sitting on his stone.

“Heya guys! Hey Horny!” He waved his hands at the other two.

“Shuffle,” Cloud greeted him.

The minotaur lowered his head and his eyes glared at Shuffle from behind his mask.

“What did I tell you about calling me that? And about popping in near me unannounced?” Horn asked.

“Hm...” Shuffle hummed and tapped his claws against the stone he was sitting on. “That I shouldn’t do either or you will take my head off?”

“Right, so why are you still doing it?” Horn asked.

“Uh, why is my head still on?” Shuffle challenged.

“Boys,” Cloud warned and both of them shifted slightly.

Shuffle turned to look at her and bowed his head in her direction. “Sorry, not gonna happen again. Probably,” he then added.

Horn growled, but then someone else stepped into the clearing. A cthul with a black mask over his head, his face tendrils peeking out beneath it.

“Hey Void!” Shuffle waved at the newcomer immediately.

“Cloud, Shuffle,” the newcomer said, then after a beat turned to meet the last person’s eyes. “Horny.”

“Well, fuck you too Void,” Horn said. As Shuffle exploded in laughter. Void ignored the minotaur as he glared at him and took his seat.

A human woman walked into the clearing, wearing barely anything, her combat garment covering only her chest and a loin cloth beneath. Her hands were bound with red bandages that were nearly the same shade as her skin. Her golden eyes peaked through her blue mask and looked over everyone present. She put her fists together and bowed over them in greeting.

“Harmony, welcome,” Cloud said as the woman straightened and walked over to take a seat, her toned muscles looking impressive as she moved.

“What, no hey Shuffle, how’ve you been Shuffle, did you get over your broken heart Shuffle? Just bow over your fists and that’s it?” Shuffle asked in mock outrage. “You wound me girl, and here I thought that we had something special! The least you could’ve done was leave a note before sneaking out in the middle of the night!”

Horn looked from Harmony to Shuffle and then back again. “Him? Really?” He said in surprise. “I thought you had better judgment than that Harmony.”

“What?” Shuffle said. “I’ll have you know Horny, I am adorable as they come! No woman can resist me! When I try, of course.”

Horn turned on Shuffle. “Stop calling me that!”

Shuffle opened his mouth to speak, but Harmony beat him to it. “He was... satisfactory,” she said, and Cloud saw both Shuffle and Horn visibly calm down.

Even Cloud herself felt the effect of Harmony speaking. She shook her head to clear it and then coughed.

“Please, keep your personal affairs out of this circle,” Cloud said.

Everyone nodded at that, and they quieted down as they waited.

They didn’t sit in silence long before another person walked into the clearing. A demasi woman, slender and tall, her tail long and slim.

“Welcome Sorrow,” Cloud said.

The woman looked around the clearing through her brown mask and nodded her head in their direction before taking her place next to Void.

“Well,” Cloud said. “That’s all of us then, we can begin.”

“All?” Horn asked. “We are still missing one.”

Everyone looked at her with questioning looks.

“Command is unable to attend. The cabal is holding meetings of their own, and he needs to attend, to do otherwise would incur suspicion. Especially this close to the tournament,” Cloud answered.

“Fuckers,” Horn cursed.

“Focus, please,” Cloud said and saw him shift in embarrassment. She then continued speaking.

“The reason for this meeting is several fold. First, Command has sent me some information regarding cabal plans for the Third Iteration. It seems like the war is closer than we thought.”

“Really? The Third thinks that they can win, now?” Shuffle asked.

“What they believe I do not know, our agents in their Empire are not highly placed. What Command has told me is that the cabal expects the attacks to begin halfway through the Centennial Tournament.”

“Smart,” Void said, his voice soft and terrible. “It gives them the most chance of wreaking havoc while the High Rankers are away from their holdings. But they must have something more planned. The only thing that is sure to unite the High Rankers is a common threat. If the Third attacked... They would have to contend with the might of every faction in the core.”

“Just so,” Cloud agreed. “I do not know what their plans are, only that they plan to attack. Command has assured me that the cabal has plans in place to prevent any such war from erupting, even though he doesn’t know the details. Eratemus is the one who is charged with dealing with them.”

“And we think that he can stop them? Alone?” Horn asked.

“If anyone could take entire armies on alone, it is the old bag of bones,” Shuffle answered.

“Are we certain that we wish to allow him the chance?” Void asked. “Chaos in the core would be good for us.”

The others all seemed thoughtful, but Cloud shook her head.

“No,” she said. “We are not ready yet, and we need them for now. The domes are too much of a threat for us to try anything right now.”

“I concur,” Harmony added, and the others nodded a moment after.

“In any case, this is not the only reason why I have gathered us,” Cloud said. “There has been a development in the Under.”

“What kind of a development?” Horn asked.

“Gemheart and his company have uncovered a new dungeon, something unique. It appears that it is an Ethereal dungeon of great power. Gemheart had been severely injured. Enough so that he has enlisted the services of *the Healer*.”

Everyone looked surprised at that, as well as impressed. There were many healers in the core, but only one who was known as *the Healer*. And her serviced cost an insane amount of Essence, or future favors from those who were powerful enough to have something like that to offer.

“What could injure him so much that he had to call her?” Shuffle asked, suddenly a lot more serious.

“We don’t know, my people in his organization are not in the inner circle,” Cloud answered. “But what I do know is that he lost people inside, and that he then closed the dungeon and buried it. Command has confirmed my information, Gemheart has sent a message to the Bulwark of the Deep, warning her of an incredibly powerful dungeon. He recommends a team of dozen or more High Rankers for any attempt at conquering it.”

Everyone reacted at that. “Really? That is an incredible opportunity then,” Shuffle added.

“Yes,” Cloud nodded her head. “Which is why I have gathered you all. The others will all be too busy with the tournament, giving us a window to go and attempt to take on the dungeon and gain all of its spoils before they could.”

Everyone looked interested, hungry even. It has been a long time since they had found anything that could truly challenge them. Force them to grow beyond the level of power they had attained.

Sorrow cleared her throat. “I don’t know if I will be able to participate,” she said regretfully. “Not only am I expected at the tournament, but... the cabal has contacted me, at last.”

“Oh, so they finally noticed you?” Shuffle said. “Took them long enough.”

“We keep our power a secret for a reason,” Horn added.

“I know,” Shuffle raised his hands in surrender. “But I mean, they had to have been blind not to notice her, she is one of the most visible ones among us.”

“After Command, yes,” Cloud added. “But it's more that they were too busy to pay attention than any failing of theirs to notice. Regardless, this is good news.”

Cloud told Sorrow. “If they take you in, we will have two people in their number, that can only work in our favor.”

“That leaves only the five of us for this dungeon,” Void said.

“Not enough,” Harmony said. “Gemheart is not a fighter, but he can estimate power. If he says more than a dozen, then the things lurking in that dungeon will be incredibly powerful. Not to mention that it is an Ethereal dungeon.”

“Agreed,” Cloud sighed. “Perhaps we could find people that we can trust to take with us?”

Shuffle perked up and looked at Harmony. “What about that student of yours? The Speaker for the... whatever boy? The one that attacked the golden bitch a few months ago. He’s supposed to be strong.”

Harmony shook her head. “Kael isn’t my student. I only helped an abused and broken child, nothing more. Regardless, his ideals do not align with ours, and he does not trust easily.”

“Yeah, you helped him all right,” Shuffle snorted. “If half of what I hear of the boy is true, then you made him into a monster.”

“I only gave him the tools to overcome his own demons, nothing more,” Harmony said.

“Right,” Shuffle said, dropping the subject. “Still, we can find people, maybe just fodder to keep the monsters occupied?”

“Perhaps,” Cloud said. Finding people that wanted a path to easy power was never hard in the Infinite Realm. But finding ones that are trustworthy was much harder.

“Well,” Shuffle spoke up. “I for one vote that we attempt it. The rewards from such a place will be... substantial.”

Cloud looked around them. “What do you think? Do we attempt it, or do we wait?”

Slowly they all cast their votes.

Cloud nodded her head and stood up. “Then, the only thing that is left is for us to gather more information about it, and find more people to help us.”

Regardless of the danger, she couldn't help but feel elated. It had been too long since she really challenged herself.