Remy Cromwell entered the room and sat into his puffy chair with a groan. He massaged his stiff right shoulder with one hand while gripping a glass of imported wine in the other. He glanced towards the windows to his messy and poorly decorated office, noting the pitch black sky that awaited him outside. He grimaced when he realized how late it had gotten. He had just spent several hours entertaining his guests, which was a polite way of saying ‘driving off a bunch of nosy assholes.’ A time-consuming and stressful process to be sure.

He then shivered lightly at the gust of cold air and fresh white powder that came through the open window. Even if winters here in the Empire were significantly milder than those in the Republic, it still got cold enough to snow during this time of year. Not enough for it to pile up and become a problem, but just enough to bother the joints of aging men like himself. Frankly speaking that damned window should not have been left open at all, but his well-meaning assistant had recently acquired the habit of ‘airing out the musty old office.’

Not wishing to suffer the chill any longer, Remy somewhat reluctantly got off his chair and shut the window closed. He then turned to the fireplace in the room casually hurled a Wizard’s Firebolt Spell at it. The magical projectile seemed like a pale imitation of a Fireball, which wasn’t too far off the mark. Fireballs and Firebolts were almost identical, but with two key differences - the latter flew significantly faster, and more importantly they didn’t erupt into a blaze when they struck something. Just the right thing to get a cozy fire without burning down half the building.

Remy sat in front of the now crackling fireplace and took a sip of his drink, letting the combination of the two calm him down.

BANG BANG BANG

“Mister Cromwell! I have urgent news!”

His moment of relaxation didn’t last long, though, as there was a fierce knocking on his door, accompanied by an all too familiar voice. Remy let off a tired sigh as he set his glass down on the nearby table. He then got up and opened the door to find a raven-haired young woman wearing a heavy robe and a worried expression on her face.

“What is it, Grace?” he asked in a clearly peeved manner.

“Ah, forgive me for interrupting you,” she apologized hurriedly, “but dire news just came in from up north!”

“Everything is dire news these days, isn’t it?” grumbled the older gentleman as he scratched his chestnut brown hair. “What is it? Did those Inquisition bastards accost another of our members on a whim, again?”

Just because they were doing their Goddess’s bidding or whatever didn’t give them the right to do as they pleased. Like earlier this evening, when they barged in here and demanded the release of the guild’s records without even bothering to acquire the proper warrants. Acts like

that showed how little they knew of how the world worked. Divine duty or not, this grand Empire had laws and due processes for a reason. Those upstarts had to respect the rules of the nation they lived in first, and only then worry about serving any sort of other power. Of course they'd be turned away if they randomly started waving their righteousness around as if it gave them any sort of authority over others.

"N-no, sir! This is serious!" insisted Grace as she held up a piece of paper in front of her boss. "This is a list of our people who have gone missing or were found dead in their homes over the past ten days!"

"What?! Let me see that!" he said while snatching the list out of her hand. "… Nineteen in total? Are you sure this is accurate?"

His assistant didn't answer though. All she could do was stare nervously at him while awkwardly jerking her head at the document. Remy turned his gaze back to the list in his hands and, after actually reading through it, made a rather troubling realization.

"I recognize these names," he muttered. "Aren't these all Taboo holders?"

Grace nodded erratically with a quivering lip. It would appear she had made certain conclusions based on this trend, which he immediately moved to dispel.

"Calm yourself, girl. I can assure you this has nothing to do with those fanatics at the Church of the Dead. They've been making the same threats and ultimatums for years now, but nothing has happened. Their recent bout of barking isn't any different. I'd say this is the work of someone using them as a smoke screen to kill law-abiding citizens rather than Mortimer's grim reaper."

Even if certain Gods considered the practices carried out by a specific subset of the Order of the Black Wand as 'unethical' or 'heretical,' they were not against the Empire's laws. The country was not a theocracy, meaning that government should really take precedent over religion. Not to mention that if **any** deity could claim jurisdiction upon human lands, then that would surely be Teresa and not Mortimer. Admittedly Cromwell wasn't the most pious of her followers, but he was the head of an organization that managed over a thousand magic wielders. His loyalties lied with the emperor first, the guild second, himself and his family third, and the world's self-serving deities were a distant fourth.

"Are… Are you sure, guild master?"

"Nobody can be absolutely sure of anything, my dear," he responded cryptically, "but it's far more likely that the one doing this is a vigilante rather than a chosen one of the gods."

"Vigilante? You mean like that Demon Tamer guy in the Republic?"

The Sandman's infamy as an extremely capable Warlock had spread beyond the borders of the elven nation. Especially after the clash of the two Overlords during Armageddon Day, which more or less marked the end of the war. That particular event had caused rumors to spread that

the masked mercenary was somehow able to direct one of the most powerful beings in existence. There was no way a guild like the Order of the Black Wand, which dealt with the ‘darker’ side of magic, would fail to take notice of such a thing.

“It might as well could be him, given that this is happening so close to their border,” said Cromwell while scratching his chin. “Until we get to the bottom of this, however, we have a responsibility to our guildmates. Compile a list of all active Taboo holders and gather what guild officials are present for an emergency meeting. I’ll be down in a bit so we can discuss how to tackle this.”

“Yes, sir!”

Grace promptly left the office to carry out her duties, allowing Remy to shut the door behind her. He walked over to his desk and drank the rest of his wine in a single go. He then turned to face a seemingly empty corner of the room and spoke to it.

“Alright, come on out. And you really need to stop setting off my alarms on purpose, you’re gonna get yourself burnt to a crisp if you keep doing that.”

The towering figure of a brown-scaled raptor clad in a leather bodysuit and wearing a white skull-mask appeared out of seemingly thin air. He also had a hooded semi-transparent cloak with ever-shifting colors draped over his back. It was an exceptionally flamboyant garment entirely at odds with the one wearing it, so it was only natural Remy’s attention would be drawn to it.

“A Prismatic Cloak?” he noted with a raised eyebrow. “Since when do you need one of those?”

“Ssssince my lassst hit took a heavier toll on me than expected,” hissed Accatau in response.

Even if the one standing in front of Cromwell wasn’t actually the Hero of Death, that statement was not entirely removed from the truth. Unlike the real deal, however, Boxxy did not have access to the Obfuscate Skill. It was a high-Level Rogue technique that allowed one to slip through magical detection measures, such as anti-intrusion enchantments or a mimic’s MLG. The shapeshifter had gained awareness of this ability back when it first absorbed the body of Mortimer’s chosen, but did not possess anything that could replicate the effects. It therefore had no choice but to willingly trip the place’s magical security measures with the intent to take Cromwell down hard.

Thankfully, it would seem that wasn’t necessary in this instance, as the guild master acted like he was personally familiar with the original Accatau. Boxxy therefore decided to roll with it for the time being.

“I assume you’re here because of this?” he asked as he tapped the list of victims on his desk.

“Why elssse?”

“What, don’t tell me you’re going back on our deal!? I already paid up for next year!”

Now the Mimic was finally able to start connecting the dots. It would appear that the Order of the Black Wand had avoided Mortimer’s executioner by buying him off. The greedy lizard-man was without a doubt the type of person who would put personal gain before his divine duties. The only question was how come his patron allowed such a thing to happen. Then again, this was the God of Death **and** Commerce, so perhaps he wasn’t entirely against mortals repenting for their crimes with their wallets.

This was all mostly conjecture though, so Boxxy’s on-the-spot conclusions regarding this ‘sin tax’ could have been entirely wrong. They were also completely irrelevant. Whatever deal this man had with the previous Hero of Death was now null and void, he just didn’t know that yet. The Mimic would’ve liked to get a slice of that pie too, but that would be difficult under these circumstances.

Difficult, but not impossible.

“Thissss isn’t my doing,” it lied. “However, I am willing to help you find this impossstor. For a price, of coursssse.”

“So it’s about money after all, is it?”

Remy sighed deeply as he practically collapsed into an armchair. He had to admit, he did not want to let go of those Taboo holders, as the exorbitant membership fees he forced upon them were a good source of revenue for the guild. Not to mention there were certain highly profitable Quests that demanded a Necromancer’s unique skillset or a Hexcraft user’s intimate knowledge of curses. All strictly legal undertakings that had gone through the proper channels, of course. Regardless of what those Inquisition upstarts seemed to to think, the Order of the Black Wand was a legitimate place of business. Well, aside from the whole bribery thing, but every other major guild was doing it too. It was just how things were over here.

Cromwell had unfortunately failed to realize that said casual corruption was precisely what the Inquisition was trying to put an end to. That, and also investigating any possible links between the guild and the former spymaster, Edward Allen. Even as a fugitive, that man still had way too much influence, so it was important to be vigilant.

“Alright, fine,” declared the guild master after thinking things over. “You find and stop the one responsible for ruining my investments. Only then will we talk gold.”

“Eekssssselent! Then could I trouble you to share a copy of that list of potential victims?”

“Do you, now?”

That line made Cromwell start having doubts regarding this Accatau’s identity. That should not have been information the world’s supposedly best assassin would ask for so openly. On the other hand, their previous interactions were limited to a few choice words and gold changing

hands, so he was hardly in a position to judge him based on personality. But that uncharacteristic entrance and the odd sense of dread he felt whenever he looked at the brown-scaled lizard gave a distinct feeling of something being out of place.

"… ?"

The guild master did not have to consider these suspicions for long, though, as he soon found himself physically unable to rise from his seat. His entire body had gone completely numb seemingly all at once, and his efforts to shout for help were proven to be fruitless. Only his eyes responded his commands, but even his vision grew blurry as some foreign substance took hold of him. With his last bit of strength he glanced towards the empty glass in his hand, realizing he had been affected by a powerful paralytic poison.

His visitor then got closer and leaned in, placing a scaly hand on the man's head. Cromwell was a prisoner inside his own body at this point and could do nothing to resist as he was effortlessly picked up and thrown face-first into the ground. Boxxy then stabbed at the nape of his neck, inserting a clawed finger deep into it. It deposited a worm-like Puppet Parasite inside, which easily took control of the immobilized guild master. Even if the high-Level magic user's mind was formidable against magical domination, his underdeveloped flesh was unable to resist the intruder from hijacking his nervous system.

The doppelganger then fed the man a dose anti-venom, instantly curing him of Drea's demonic venom. The meat-doll rose up from the floor, nodded at its 'parent,' and then left the room in order to carry out its mission. As for Boxxy, it began rooting through the busy office in search of information relating to the guild's operations or item stores. It was just too bad it wasn't able to play along with the human until it secured additional funds for its 'services.' The Mimic already knew the charade couldn't last though. It knew very little of the deceased Hero's mannerisms, way of thinking or personal history, so its cover was doomed to fail from the start. The only reason it was even in that form in the first place was so that the dearly departed Accatau would take the blame for its handiwork on the off chance that a witness escaped.

And its insurance policy had worked out, though not in the way it would've hoped. It wasn't going to complain about it, though, as it managed to avoid open combat and causing a huge fuss. Doing things quietly was preferable, as this was the the Lodrak Empire's royal capital, otherwise known as the city of Oshinas. The Inquisition were everywhere and there was no telling what sort of dangerous people were lurking around. Something like openly attacking a guild master in his own office was a dangerous undertaking, as it would surely attract the wrong kind of attention.

Though perhaps the Mimic was doing things **too** quietly. The Quest said something about sending a warning to other mortals, but would the message get across if they didn't know for sure who was responsible? It had been going around 'dressed' as Accatau just in case it was seen, but perhaps it might have been better if it allowed itself to be spotted a few times. Much

like the Mercenary Guild Quests it did in its infancy, the customer would not be pleased if their task was completed in a way that defeated the purpose behind it.

Now wasn't the right time for that, though. It needed to gather information before it went full hog on the Order's ranks. Strictly speaking, even though it got through twenty five of its targets - that list the girl Grace brought was missing a few names - there were far too many of them. They were all spread throughout the Empire's territory and possibly beyond, so getting to all of them within the time limit was going to be difficult. It would've been outright impossible if not for the monster's ability to cover great distances with Transfamiliar.

The Quest would've been a cakewalk if not for that unreasonable time limit. The Eyes of the Dead God highlighted all of its distant targets as shimmering spots on the horizon, but the Skill could only provide the monster with a direction. Without knowing which ones were the farthest and which ones were the closest, planning an optimal route between so many points was impossible. It may have gotten rid of a good chunk of them up north, but that was only because a group of eight of them were working together. And as far as the Mimic could tell, the rest of them were significantly more spread out.

There was a way around this, of course. Initially the Mimic had thought to 'borrow' the records of all its targets from the guild. Using that it could plan its route, not to mention it would know all their Jobs, Levels and Skills in advance, allowing it to devise efficient takedown routines for most of them. That was why it had arrived here to begin with. But, as it listened to the urgent report, it got a better idea. One that would be impossible without Cromwell's involuntary cooperation.

This being a guild headquarters in the Empire's capital, it was only to be expected security would be tight. Boxxy had a lot of trouble breaking in, and still managed to trip a number of silent alarms, as Remy himself attested to. The Mimic wasn't worried, as it was confident it could take the man if it came to combat, as he wasn't even an Ultimate Skill user. Having the one in charge not be the most powerful one felt rather backwards to Boxxy as a monster, but it understood why things were this way. It was also thankful for that, as controlling the man would've been much more difficult otherwise. But now that it had gained dominance over him, it could easily bypass the various identity-verifying enchantments around the place. Something that wouldn't have been possible if it personally tried impersonating the guild master.

Even then, it didn't have a lot of time to work with. Puppet Parasite was a Skill that lasted for only fourteen minutes - one for each of Boxxy's Shapeshift Levels. The Mimic had a very limited time frame to make things happen, so it continued rummaging around the man's office while being careful not to make a huge mess of the place. It found very little of use, however. There was a ledger containing some potentially incriminating information and a collection of four enchanted keys, but that was it. The drought was only to be expected, though. A guild master's office was hardly the best place to keep truly valuable items and records, as it was the first place a thief would look.

Which was partly why it had sent out its meat puppet, and also why it was glad it returned safely with the list it needed. On it were the names, Jobs, Levels and last known locations of all the guild's Taboo holders. It was everything the monster could've wanted, except that there were a lot more names on it than expected. However, it already knew which ones to look for - the Necromancers. There were precisely one hundred and thirty four of them on that list, matching up perfectly with the Quest's count once it factored in the final target - the guild master himself.

There was one small hitch, though. The counter in its head was currently reading a Progress of 25/133. Wasn't the total 135 just a few days ago? It scanned the glowing spots in its vision as it stared beyond the walls of the office, and it noticed that two of them had indeed gone missing without its involvement. Did they get taken out by a monster, perhaps? Or did they repent, amend their ways and rid themselves of their Taboo, thus taking them off Mortimer's shit-list? Either way, it would appear the Quest was updating itself in real time, which was rather convenient to say the least. Boxxy certainly wasn't going to complain about its job getting easier.

However, it still had two more things to do before it set out. It telepathically ordered the Puppet Parasite to steer Cromwell's body over to his desk. The man, still locked inside his own mind and unable to stop himself, then took out a piece of parchment and began writing down instructions. Once done, he finished it off by saying he was leaving on some urgent business to make certain arrangements to counteract this intruder, and that he would be back within a week.

The message was placed inside a special envelope and sealed with the guild master's ring, magically imprinting his identity upon the document, legitimizing it. Humans were a species that kept each other in check through power and authority - they would not readily question orders from a higher power, even if they were relayed second-hand. They would eventually catch onto the ruse, but it would already be far too late to stop Boxxy's plan.

With that out of the way, Boxxy grabbed the man's head and, after putting a good bit of strength into its arms, snapped his neck. The twenty sixth victim fell to the ground, motionless, with the now orphaned Puppet Parasite leaving his neck and dying with a few futile twitches. The body was picked up and thrown into the monster's Storage, after which it used Transfamiliar to depart the guild's head office. The djinn that appeared in its place had only just enough time to smile to herself before she disappeared back to the Beyond.

The doppelganger found itself standing inside a barn, about a dozen kilometers outside the city. The cows here were already killed and eaten not leaving even blood behind. Not only to satiate the monster's considerable hunger, but also because they were noisy and annoying. One would think they'd never seen a murderous magic-wielding monster before with how much noise they were making.

Once it had gotten reoriented, Boxxy took out Cromwell's corpse. There were several things it could do with a prize such as this, but it had already decided on a course of action long before the two even met. Unlike those Necromancers it had purged on Mortimer's behalf, this one

would not be eaten, for it was ‘clean.’ It did not carry the mark of Taboo, and Boxxy would therefore not risk contracting the stigma from what it was about to do.

“Cadaver Absorption!”

Following the chant, an array of familiar yet nostalgic translucent tentacles shot out of its body. They wrapped around the corpse and over the course of a brief two seconds sucked it dry to the point where it was just a pile of ashen bones within a pointlessly fancy robe. And then, something happened. Something that was both inevitable and persistently elusive yet at the same time.

[window]Your Cadaver Absorption was a major success![/window]

Cadaver Absorption had finally hit the jackpot on a high-value corpse.

[window]28% of the target’s highest Job Level has been added to your own.
Level up!
Level up!
Level up!
...
Congratulations, you are now a Level 25 Wizard! INT +75. END +50. WIS +25.
You have learned a new Spell: Firebolt.
You have learned a new Spell: Icebolt.
You have learned a new Spell: Water Slicer.
You have learned a new Spell: Air Hammer.
You have learned a new Spell: Flame Jet.
You have learned a new Spell: Frost Mine.
You have learned a new Spell: Spark Blast.
You have learned a new Spell: Earth Spike.
You have learned a new Spell: Stabbing Rain.
You have learned a new Spell: Lightning Bolt.
You have learned a new Spell: Flight.
Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Legendary Intelligence.[/window]

Boxxy stood paralyzed as its mind was flooded with knowledge of the mystic arts. There was more to it than a large number of Spells suddenly being made available to it, though. A certain understanding and clarity unlike no other enveloped its mind. And for the briefest moment, the monster felt like it knew everything. It then instantly realized it was getting full of itself, as it most assuredly was not all-knowing. For one thing, it had no idea what that new Perk’s effects even were.

[window]**Legendary Intelligence**
Description: A being whose capacity for knowledge and understanding are the stuff of legends.
Requirements: Reach 1,000 Intelligence (INT).

Effects: Increases total magic damage done by all Skills by 50%.
Can recall events experienced in the last 48 hours with extreme clarity and detail.[/window]

A problem that was rapidly rectified, much to Boxxy's delight. The ability to accurately recall the last two days of its life must have been why it had briefly and mistakenly believed itself to be omniscient. It wasn't sure whether it was actually all that useful, though, as its memory was pretty good already. However, the Perk's other effect was quite exceptional in and of itself. Strictly speaking, although Intelligence (INT) did provide a passive bonus to one's offensive magic, it normally only applied to Spells. Therefore, having this thing amplify Skill-based damage to such a huge degree was rather unprecedented, but not at all unwelcome.

It was just a shame it didn't apply to much. There were only three things that it worked on, actually. The Acid Spray Skill that Boxxy lifted off a murk dweller what felt like a lifetime ago was one, the other two being the Blade Dancer's Winterlich Waltz and Flamenco de Fuego. Possibly also Chaotic Disposition, though that thing had a habit of hitting the enemy as well as itself, so the Mimic had mixed feelings about that one.

And speaking of Skills, it suddenly had four of those things to acquire, didn't it? Regardless of whether it would keep this Job around permanently in the future or not, it was stuck with it for the time being. Making the most of it was only a given, so Boxxy eagerly began expanding its already ridiculously long list of Skills even further.

[window]Proficiency level increased. Arcane Stability is now Level 1. INT +2. WIS +2.[/window]

First up was one that facilitated faster and easier learning of new magical incantations if one were to pursue that knowledge the hard way rather than deriving it from a Job. It also reduced the backlash damage suffered from botched or blatantly misused Skills and Spells, which was what Boxxy was actually after. This would allow the monster to reduce the strain on its body whenever it pulled the evasive maneuver whereby it slipped inside its own Storage to avoid large-scale attacks.

[window]Proficiency level increased. Mana Shield is now Level 1. INT +2. END +2.[/window]

Second on the list was a staple of all but the most idiotic of Wizards. It was the first piece of purely defensive magic that Boxxy actually had. Now it could finally outright block incoming projectiles and Spells rather than having to suffer their various debilitating effects. And if faced with something truly outrageous… Well, that was why it got Arcane Stability.

[window]Proficiency level increased. Residual Feedback is now Level 1. INT +3. WIS +1.[/window]

Next came something that would assist with prolonged magical battles. It was a Skill that caused each Spell cast to empower the next, which would in turn amplify subsequent ones even further. The boost was relatively inconsequential at the start and would fade within seconds, but its ability to stack up over time meant it could reach rather ridiculous magnitudes. In theory, it

would allow Boxxy to steadily gain power as a fight dragged on, assuming it was allowed to chant Spells in rapid succession.

[window]Proficiency level increased. Disruptive Barrage is now Level 1. INT +4.[/window]

Last, but by no means least, was an active Skill to take advantage of that brand new Legendary Intelligence Perk. One that would pepper the user's target with bolts of raw, mystic energy, which supposedly were especially effective against persistent magical constructs. The logic behind this choice was that it would help against undead, demons and golems, which were completely unaffected by Boxxy's Domination magic. Disruptive Barrage could be used on 'normal' targets too, though to a lesser effect. The main catch here was that the user would need to stand still in order to channel it, making them vulnerable. Still, it was better having it than not.

After settling all Skill-related matters and while still riding high on the sudden power spike, the shapeshifter moved onto trying something out. Something that always seemed just out of reach, despite its natural ingenuity. Something that it had tried time and time again to accomplish even though it clearly lacked the means to do until just now.

At dawn the next morning, a small subset of Imperial citizens reported seeing an unidentified flying chest soaring through the skies near the capital, cackling gleefully as it passed overhead.