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559. ATDSVT-Past to Present

[VIRUS CORRUPTION DETECTED!]

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Even during the first life, Shizun had been immediately recognizable to those who knew him. His students, for one. Yue Qingyuan for another. The moment he smiled, he was immediately known, even though his past lives, the first two seen, had been female.

As a woman, Shizun walked like she knew her own worth, she didn't take mincing delicate steps nor did she express shyness. As a woman, Shizun walked with the grace and innate pride of noble blood, to be precise... she walked with the kind of sway that riveted male gazes to her form, back straight, chin up.

By the third life it had become brutally obvious that no matter how strangely short, or startlingly tall, these people... Shizun's people... were all startlingly beautiful, each in their own way.

Well, those of them who looked human. Even the nonhumans had an alien fascination about them, an elegance that was in even the most strange being. Even the small rat-beastkin form had an odd grace and elegance in its shape and movement.

They were literally living works of art.

By the third life, it had also become startlingly obvious that these were recurring people. Not merely recurring... Reincarnating. Consistently. Reincarnating. While their bodies were always different, some things, mannerisms, expressions were constant.

A hundred people kept reincarnating in relatively close proximity to each other, often meeting up in predictable groups... though the full number of reincarnators was unknown.

By the fourth life it was obvious that most often Shizun could be seen with the same nineteen 'brothers' and 'sisters' over and over.

Shizun of course, was always heartbreakingly beautiful, and unlike some of his kin, he consistently was 'human' in shape.

'LordofFire', 'SnakeGod', 'Stormy' and several others had also been reincarnated as general-brothers in service to the same Emperor in this lifetime. In truth, since the numbers of reincarnators varied, in the third life, there were only twenty one of the normal larger group of sixty reincarnators represented.

In one of the few lives that all the reincarnators could be found together, Shizun had been an elven princess who had led her people through an icy wasteland, to get to a promised land on the other side, one of the elven tribe's royal family's many members.

'Trap' had also been a princess, and Shizun's aunt. 'Cyan' had been one of that family's princes, a cousin of theirs, 'Artemis' had been a female elemental who had helped them across. 'Auk' had been a forest elf weaponsmaster.

'All Seer' had been an elemental who had helped them settle into the promised land, 'AlPharazir' had been a human mariner king whose people sought alliance with the elven tribe,

Becerril had been a human married to a forest elf, Kender and a Hobbit respectively, negotiating alliances between their tribes and the newcomers, and 'Necron' had been a dwarf king of an established kingdom, who had negotiated an alliance between his kingdom and Shizun's.

AncientFox had been an elemental who had married a human wife and an elven wife from the mariner's tribe and Shizun's own people, throwing his lot in with them without a qualm.

Umbrae, Stalker and Masaki had been from different human forest tribes, and had been exceptional hunters.

Silvan had been a forest elf tribal noble. Portal and Amphibia had been, as could be expected, human mariners. Mat had been a human shipbuilder and his partner.

Squiddy had been a human mariner.

Blue had been a human forester.

Meister, Kami, ChrysClerk, Kimi, BrokenBow had been forest elf archers.

Cyrus, Ophidian, and ElderSoul had been human nobles from an established nation.

Mad had been a human merchant, FSBirman had been a human archer. Seraph and Waltz had been female human nobles. Gideon had been a captain of the guard. Gandhi had been an artificer. Omnis and Gryphon had been knights. Prophet and Lythal had both been artificers. Sum had been a human mariner and captain of a sailing vessel.

Windy, Walker, ArcaneBandit, Wardragon, CrazyKitsune, Diploduck, Kade and Delta had been mercenaries. Sandman, Marquis, Facehugger, Shapeshifter, Roboninja, Ryuujin, Samarqand and Gladius had all been human commanders, each with troops.

Khuzdul, KnightWings, Auberon, BluePen and LycoDrakensis had been dwarf lords of great renown.

Bloody, Lana, Anemone had all been noble human ladies. LazyCat had been a human merchant.

Professor, SV, Author and KingofBooks had been scholars of note. Jacob, Fellblade had both been weaponsmasters. Sideways had been an elemental. ObscureBennu and ArgentKnight had both been trackers. LDrych, Lurk, Talon, WelcomingStorms, Mizuki, Marca and Velsp had been shapeshifters.

Dakka, Thas, Mecha, Dawn, Blackstone, Dimension, StygianAperture, DivineDaevan had all been guardsmen. Scrivener, Biles, AureateLark, Emerald, PervertSage, OcularSage, GibbousLuna and Academic had been famed teachers. KalEl, and Kerosene had been knights. Tyrant, ImperialPeace, Kov had been paladins. Psycho, Mew, Whee,Chas,Dei had been hunters and beastkin, Myrrdin, Cruiser, Compiler and Crowbar had been kender artificers.

The Jade twins, Dusk and Ghost had been human cavaliers, Fitzgerald and FerrousForge had been smiths, Scryer had been a human forester, Stormy had been a paladin and Hecate had been a female elemental.

Marius, Tyrant and Charon had been human nobles from a merchant city. Tanuki, Rabi, Drakon and Phoenix had been forest elf archers. Rifter had been an elven pirate.

Midgard had been a human tribal leader, and female to boot. What had been a female elemental.

Rekt,Lance,Jackinati and BlueEagle had been human knights of a third human nation. LordofFire, LastPrimarch, SnakeGod, SoloFury, AngelKnight and BestPaladin had been paladins serving under a different deity.

These people were quickly mired in what would be known as the Wars of Wrath, their respective groups and nations fighting side by side as an alliance of 'goodly races' against monstrous beings called 'uruks', 'balrogs', 'dragons', 'werebeasts'... among other things.

During the life wherein Shizun was an elven princess and eventually Queen, she had set up an alliance with Necron's Dwarven nation.

They fought side by side for LITERALLY CENTURIES. It wasn't unusual to hear Necron's people's voices raised in their customary battlecries of "BARUK KHAZAD. KHAZAD AI-MENU!", followed by the calls of elven archers who were firing into the ranks of their enemies.

It was in fact a great shock to Shang Bo, who had learned the use of axes of all kinds, to learn that the axe techniques he was using...were 'Necron's.

While those of Heiying's polearm techniques that had come from Shizun instead of his family were also the same polearm techniques used by the elves of that past life.

When they were in their final battle, when he was old and grey and she was still young and vibrant as the elves were...he said, "You know, you could take your people home. You've got millions of years ahead of you. You don't have to stay."

Shizun's answer was "Fuck that, I'm not leaving you."

"I'm old and I'm going to die anyway, I'm a crotchety old bastard at the end of my lifespan... but you don't have to. You'll regret it if you stay."

"Bro." Shizun had smiled at him, warm and amused. "Bro, I regret NOTHING."

They both died at the hands of flame demons called balrogs and their corpses were retrieved by their heirs who buried them together and built a massive paired statue of them. Together. Standing as they used to, with Necron's shield raised, his axe on its downward swing and Shizun's spear stabbing forward.

Because of reasons.

During the fifth life, it became glaringly obvious that Becerril always, invariably found and married his three beloveds. AncientFox always, unerringly married his two spouses.

These had quickly become ludicrously obvious- where one arrived, they would often wait for the others and the moment their spouses arrived, were found as reincarnations, they got married.

After Trap had married AlPharazir and AllSeer the first time, they fell into the same pattern. Where one was, the other two would also be.

InsaneGod, Prophet, What and Silvan were also practically inseparable, often going in as a four-person raid group.

Shizun was most often around Auk, Artemis, Sum, LordofFire, Rekt, Cyrus, Cyan, Necron, Hecate, Ophidian, All Seer, AlPharazir, Trap, Stormy, Midgard and KalEl, though his actual six-person raid group always had 'Auk', 'Midgard', 'Cyrus', 'Necron' and 'Stormy'.

Stormy and KalEl were clearly the 'younger brothers' of the group. Midgard was the one most often caught facepalming in the background while the others were pulling shenanigans.

Where Trap went, AllSeer and AlPharazir would immediately follow, so even though they were in the larger raid group, they often worked as an autonomous unit.

560. ATDSV-Past to Present-Yue

Shen Qingqiu had once told Yue Qingyuan that the most stable marriages he had ever seen had been in threes. He had mentioned that three of his raid group members had married each other. He had also looked confused and frustrated when he had been told about dao partners, and the strictures about dual cultivating, because to Qingqiu, they had made no sense. At all.

Yue Qingyuan had thought Qingqiu had been taken advantage of, because of that and certain other statements that had confused him. He had thought Shen Qingqiu had been propositioned... among other things, because Qingqiu had a clear delineation. Sex was sex, love was love, marriage was marriage and energy sharing was energy sharing. The fact was, sharing energy in any activity whatsoever was... just energy sharing to Qingqiu. It wasn't 'special', apparently, from what Yue Qingyuan had gathered.

Well, now he was getting an eyeful and it was becoming startlingly clear why Qingqiu didn't put importance on dual cultivation strictures or energy sharing strictures.

Qingqiu had told the truth. His people married in groups. More to the point, these people made clear delineations. Sharing energy was, to Yue Qingyuan's shock, something that people in Qingqiu's past lives did with their friends, family, children and spouses.

Sex was apparently something done for enjoyment as well, not as a binding thing.

FRIENDS of any gender or species had sex with no strings attached, if what some of these people got up to was an indication.

Marriage on the other hand...There were two kinds of 'marriages'. One was a stipulated-time-limit political and economic contract, and the other was a multiple lifetime, permanent bond.

People were very clear about what kind of marriage they were entering. A timelimited economic or political marriage lasted only the specified, written amount of time on the contract, though such things could be renewed and recontracted if such things were wanted, with the assistance of a judge.

The other, rarer but highly sought after kind, the permanent marriages, spanned not merely one lifetime but multiple lifetimes. It was actually apparently normal for one member of a triad or quartet to wait for the others to reincarnate and then no matter what gender or species, they... just got re-married. Again. Right there.

The kind of loyalty that it would take for such a thing, the ability to immediately recognize one's spouse, was mind-boggling.

Qingqiu, by his own admission, had plenty of children, and those children began showing up around the seventh lifetime... but no known permanent spouse, nor lover ever showed up in the Pavilion. It was utterly baffling.

If anything, it was even more confusing that so many of Qingqiu's children had gotten married, but Qingqiu himself had not, to the point that Qingqiu's friends had taken to offering him concubines in various lifetimes specifically because they were worried that he would be alone, while the rest of them had paired or grouped up.

People in raid groups and raid parties had specific roles. There were the tanks who were living shields and heavy hitters. There were rangers, scouts and thieves who handled traps, collected loot and scouted.

There were Healers and Spellcasters, the former being what kept his fellows alive when they were injured, damaged or poisoned and the latter being the equivalent of glass cannons, with powerful spells but requiring the tanks, rangers, scouts and thieves to keep them alive between spells. There were long range combatants like, say, archers who counted as long range artillery along with the spellcasters. And there were close up fighters who worked with tanks to keep their long range projectile users, their healers and spellcasters from being killed.

It wasn't unusual for party members or raid group members to marry each other in groups, no less.

After all, your party member was often the person you entrusted your life to.

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The energy bolts were flying, robots were coming this way, in entire detachments.

AlPharazir was deflecting the bolts with his blue blade of light in a stunning display of swordsmanship.

"You. Shall. Not. Pass!"

It would have been much more intimidating if he hadn't been a small, bearlike creature with a high, squeaky voice at the time.

Behind him, Trap who was resplendent in a slim, androgynous and short purple scaled and leaf green eyed clad in what was little more than a gothic lolita corset and lace edged gauze bloomers and All Seer who was tattooed in crimson and black wearing imposing sith robes were wielding their respective purple and red blades to cover his blind spots.

"HANA, YOU GUYS BETTER HURRY!"

Orange skinned, golden slit eyed and pale haired Hana was cursing a blue streak in Huttese with a slight accent and wielding a sonic screwdriver on the nearest console to try to make the metal door slide open so they could make a run for it, her elegant forehead ridges scrunching up with more worry than usual. "Come on, you useless piece of bantha-crap, opeeeeen uuuuuup!

Her two female partners, an insectoid female with a spectacular figure and a busty purple lady with enticing orange-golden eyes and tentacle fronds instead of hair were busy transferring data into drives.

"Smuggle energon cubes, you said!" grumbling was soon heard, and the sound of pattering tiny feet, skidding down the hallway. "The Seperatist Cybertonians will be grateful, you said! Profitable, this is not!" The tiny green.... creature... with the wide ears, clad in a snazzy purple coat with a wide brimmed hat embellished in rainbow feathers was lifting a massive sack without apparent effort. "Lucky you are, that this way I was coming or rancor food you would have been!"

"Look, how was I to know that the eezo traders had already gotten to them first?!" demanded his sexy purple striped, blue skinned partner, clad in leather and straps, as she shot down droids left and right. She must have been thrice his size, and was carrying a vast array of what was obviously weaponry. Well, that and more shining jewels than you could shake a stick at. "It's not like I run into Elcors every day, you know!"

"Bait, you are, Silvan! Too sexy for your own good!" lamented her green skinned fellow, as he beat a set of droids to pieces with his shiny pimp cane. "Lucky you are, that love you like a sister, I do! Never forgiven shall I be! Disowned by Cousin Yoda, we shall be!"

"IF WE LIVE THROUGH THIS, I WANT TO RETIRE TO CORELLIA AND DRINK PAN GALACTIC GARGLE BLASTERS UNTIL I PUKE!" A gorgeous, red haired, blue skinned and antennaed woman yelled, as she dove through the chute, with what looked to be some rare cultural artifacts in hand.

"Less squabbling and more looting, guys!" came the call as Becerril came down, narrowly dodging a pipe. He was currently a bald, greyish skinned creature, clad in bright blue and green. His blue skinned, tentacled lovely asari wife was carrying what was clearly schematics for the death star rolled up in a tube, soon followed by his other two wives came slip sliding down the chute, voluptuous green orion lady after sexy red skinned twilek.

"Did anyone bring a transport out?! I think the rebels will pay big bucks for these plans!"

"GUYS, HEADS UP, I'm bringing the party to you!" A gorgeous male with dark hair, slanted brows and pointed ears, clad in a billowing black leather coat, with a pair of lightsabers came running down the hall, dodging an energy blast. His massive, armored space turtle partner shot back. "INCOMING!"

A massive creature's maw closed down on several droids, as a droid patrol of reinforcements fell afoul of the monstrous beast Ji had just named 'The Party'

"NICE WORK! Booze, this party must have!" exclaimed the green little man. "For in need of moonshine am I!"

"Well..." the gorgeous pointy eared man grinned.... very recognizably. "More like five hundred year old romulan ale! But we all have to get to Necron's ship first!"

"Finally!" Hana cried, as the door finally slid open and every last one of the group ran pell mell down the metal hallway like bats out of hell.

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"I GET KNOCKED DOWN! BUT I GET UP AGAIN! NOTHING EVER GONNA KEEP ME DOWN, MY FRIEND! KNOCKED DOWN, BUT I GET UP AGAIN! NOTHING EVER GONNA KEEP ME DOWN!"

You have apparently not lived until you have seen a literally tub thumping, drunk, space turtle. In armor. With a metal tub in hand, I might add. In basso profundo.

"FISHING THE NIGHT AWAY! I'M FISHING THE NIIIIIGHT AWAY!"

Drunk Vulcans aren't really any better. Drunk Vulcans trying to fish with makeshift fishing poles made out of string, duct tape and left over metal and glowy blue bubbles in the bar's lit up ornamental fountains are just ridiculous. Pretty but ridiculous.

"He drinks a whiskey drink! He drinks a vodka drink! He drinks a lager drink! He drinks a cider drink!" was the raucus calls of the crowd as the drinking contest continued.

The tiny raccoon [Fitzgerald] was giggling as he lay on his back cuddling a massive liquor jar. The two floating cats [Mew and Dimension] were making out between glowing bottles. Four massive men who would have put statues to shame [KaEI, Stormy, LordofFire and Snakegod] were still competing and a giant tree [Cyrus] was making happy cooing noises as he patted a bemused skeletal man in a loincloth [Sideways].

When the raid group partied, it partied hard.

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563. ATDSVT-Past to Present

[VIRUS CORRUPTION DETECTED!]

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"MY PANTS!" The scream of an enraged bouncer sent four winged three eyed birds flying off in a panic.

"These are not the pants you are looking for." The butt naked, incredibly well,built but very bald jedi said, eyes glowing blue, one hand held up to halt the blue skinned alien bouncer he had just stolen the expensive, purple, shiny leather pants of. His gorgeous, curvaceous, golden skinned companion had the foresight to grab the nearest drapes to wrap herself in, but he himself had not been so lucky, having woken up much later with a truly epic hangover.

Hence robbing the bouncer of the bar in which their bags and clothing had been stolen by sneaky twilek call girls.

"Those are not the pants I am looking for." The bouncer said blankly, eyes glazed over.

"The pants you are looking for are in your neighbor's closet. The neighbor with the hot wife." The jedi continued.

"My pants are in the closet of my neighbor with the hot wife." The bouncer continued chanting in response.

"You must bring him the barrel of moonshine in your garage." The jedi continued.

"I must bring him the moonshine in my garage." The bouncer droned.

"What the hell are you talking about, Stormy?" hissed the jedi's confused, red-haired companion after the jedi had sent the bouncer off. Sans pants.

"Remember that batch of moonshine Ji made out of sandwyrms excretions, that Antarean Honey and that hot spring water from Malfeas? The one where the blood apes drank from that got them boozed up for weeks?" Stormy asked, grinning fiendishly.

"You didn't." His green eyed companion, Midgard, stared at him in horror.

"Oh, yeah, I totally did. I mean, I diluted it before I put it in that barrel, but yeah. That poor bastard and all his neighbors will be so stoned they will SEE THE FUTURE." Stormy grinned, like an utter, demented bastard.

"...Let's hunt down those call girls and bail before the inevitable stoner orgy!" Midgard hissed, grabbing his arm and running for their lives.

"SERIOUSLY?!" The words echoed through the dank, dark dungeon.

Wing feathers bristling and clad in a rich purple and sapphire blue togate robe, Ji did not look impressed. At all. Heiying knew that expression. That was Shizun's 'What the hell were you thinking?! No, never mind, I don't want to know' face.

The beautiful, blond, winged man certainly didn't fit the surroundings.

Behind bars, an attenuated dark eldar wearing a commissar's hat over his travel stained leathers smiled sheepishly, while his two companions, a white haired, victorian gothic lolita princess wearing a tribble boa and a red clad, masked being with a nest of mechadendrites were absolutely... unrepentant in the face of their friend's ire.

The masked being was even playing with a batch of holocrons like they were puzzles.

"I can understand why Rifter did it. He's crazy enough to challenge an entire group of chaos marines to a rock concert.

But you two?!

Why the hell would you idiots even traffic sandwyrms in the first place?" Ji looked profoundly disgruntled. "Those fuckers are endangered and quarantined for a reason, you know! They're only supposed to stay on desert planets because they'd turn normal planets into desert planets the moment they have enough for a breeding population!"

"I was thinking," the masked being grinned, its clockwork jaw widening in an unnatural smile. "...that All Seer's wedding is coming up again. And we need wedding presents. And we all know how he feels about sandwyrms."

There was a moment's pause as everyone remembered (and the viewers got to see) a dark haired, well-built young man with glowing blue eyes and cranberry stained lips screaming "SHAI HULUD, MOTHERFUCKERRRRRRRS!" at the top of his lungs as he rode a thrashing, bucking massive, mountain sized sandwrym through a crimson desert, with his lovely (notsureif)girlfriend giggling, arms around his waist, and his white haired, cackling boyfriend sandsurfing behind them, using the beast's tail as his surfboard.

Good times, good times.

"We also know how he feels about that absolutely lovely sandwrym mead you make..." Cyan wheedled, batting her lovely pale eyelashes. "Please, Ji? They would be oh, so happy."

"Godfucking damnit, you win." Ji covered his face in his hands. "I'll fucking do it. I'll go pay your bail and use my ship as collateral."

"We knew you'd see it our way." Necron smirked smugly.

This was not the first nor the last time that Necron and Cyan got locked up because they had engaged in shady space smuggling activities, and G posted their bail and stood guarantor for their crimes.

Those bastards. Gods, he missed them both, those sneaky, scheming little shits.

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564. ATDSVT- PAST TO PRESENT

[VIRUS CORRUPTION DETECTED!]

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The elven city was exquisitely beautiful. Its ornately carved, elegant marble buildings gleamed in the light of the dying day. Its tall, pale columns, beautiful domes, angled roofs, lace-like pavilions and towers brought to mind the organic shapes of leaves and flowers. It was a city of a thousand fountains and pools, built around a series of waterfalls, hidden within the steep walls of a mountain range.

It was also under attack by the forces of an evil god that had finally found it.

Auberon rallied the troops as the bells rang their alarums, the ladies and children were to be evacuated.

Werebeasts and monsters such as vampires and gigantic spiders had began to emerge from the tunnels they had dug, with an army of orcs, goblins and trolls, led by cyclopean, and multi armed giants.

As the sun painted the marble steps crimson, what they had taken to be a mountain range unfolded its massive wings and raised its head arrogantly, crimson eyes fiery, opening its maw to reveal the gleam of flame in its throat.

....And Trap took one look at the mountain range sized dragon, squealed like a fangirl and said with stars in hir eyes, "He's beautiful! I MUST HAVE HIS BABIES."

There was a long awkward moment as everyone on both sides of the battlefield looked at hir in shock and various degrees of horror. Yes, even the goblins.

"I WILL RAISE THEM AND RIDE THEM AND CALL THEM SQUISHY AND THEY WILL. BE. MINE!"

No, that statement didn't really help.

AlPharazir coughed and asked, "As pets?"

Hir's enthusiastic nodding left everyone else feeling relieved.

Even the balrogs.

Nevertheless, everyone shuffled and crab walked just a little bit further away from Trap anyway. Just in case.

Well, everyone other than AlPharazir and AllSeer.

The battle resumed as had been originally planned. Trap who was currently a white haired beauty of indeterminate gender in....very feminine clothing with lots of lace and silvery armor, AlPharazir who was currently a flame haired elven male of possibly Feanorian ancestry and AllSeer who was currently a Prince of Amber now naturally moved to engage the dragon.

(Fortunately not in 'that' way.)

Bloody, Anemone and Lana immediately headed for the vampires as their current forms which were female as usual, would suit that battle best. Bloody was a Belmont, Anemone was currently a senshi, and Lana was currently a blonde demon hunter from DMC.

Kalel was a kryptonian, Stormy was a Primarch, Necron was a dwarf king to match Ji's elven princess (and sorceress) and Cyrus.... well Cyrus had gone full kamen rider. Their group

headed for the monsters, giants and trolls. Auberon and the elves would handle the orcs, goblins and the evacuation of everything that could be saved.

Trap, AlPharazir and AllSeer had decided on sneaking into the dragon pits to steal dragon eggs. Because Trap loved dragons. Trap loved to raise dragons, loved to fly on dragonback and neither of his two spouses could resist the lure of having a dragon to ride.

Clearly since the dragon nests were held by the evil god, in the massive fortress built into the walls of a massive extinct volcano, surrounded by the hellish landscape of cracked volcanic rock, obsidian shards, lava bubbling in streams and pools, with rare sources of drinkable water, scorching sands, acid pools and sparse vegetation.... they would need actual backup on this one.

This is why there was quickly a recruiting drive. Sum who was going in as an Asgardian Dragonborn and Amphibia who was going in as a Slann, immediately agreed to go because it meant that they could free the slaves whom the dark god had taken.

Ophidian on the other hand, had to hand in a resignation form for the forces of evil.

"I'm defecting from the forces of evil." He told his shocked supervisor.

"What?! But we need you to invade a planet this weekend!" His supervisor, a massive crimson Djinn, flailed.

"I'LL BE BACK NEXT WEEK, MY BROTHERS NEED ME!" Ophidian said, as he tossed his glorious, flowing pantene-commercial-worthy crimson hair and made a... suitably dramatic exit.

Then, as could be expected, his former coworkers attempted to stop him on his way out and he proceeded to punt them out of his way in a glorious martial arts montage.

"FREEDOM IS THE RIGHT OF ALL SENTIENT BEINGS!" echoed through the fortress as the trio of communists... broke into the dungeons. As in, literally broke in. Broke the walls like the Kool-Aid Man with a cry of "OH YEAH!"

Trap's group was stealthier. If you can consider suddenly changing the guards's genders en masse and then brutally slaughtering them while they were barely started on getting used to their sudden grotesque shift in balance as stealthy. If you can consider massive explosions being stealthy.

If you can consider being the 'Terror That Giggles In The Night' to be stealthy.

In short the demon god's fortress was shortly a massive clusterfuck.

....this was not helped by Ji's stealing the Silmarils right from the Demon God's crown and taunting him with them, yelling, "FETCH!" ...right before catapulting them both in different directions and engaging the NPC raid boss in battle to cover her companions escape. With the elves and dragon eggs.

Yes, in this life, in this campaign, she got pasted by the Demon God in question. As in reduced to paste by his massive mountain range breaking hammer, but not before she had inflicted a crippling injury on the raid boss in question that would cost it a ludicrous amount of time to regenerate, thus buying the elven and dwarven and human nations time to regroup, rebuild and grow in strength for the next War of Wrath.

The thing about Trap was, hir wasn't just androgynous or genderfluid... Hir took great joy in going around in feminine clothing, or obviously female bodies, while calling himself 'manly'... which caused everyone within range to reassure hir that hir is the prettiest princess...which made hir preen himself like a peacock on full display, and say hir was the "MANLIEST KING" whenever hir was in an obviously female body, wearing feminine clothing, while calling hir's husbands hir's 'waifus'.

Conversely when hir wore an obviously male body, hir would preen even more when hir called himself 'pretty' and thus encouraged people to call hir the prettiest princess. This was why hir's guild title was 'Prettiest Princess'.

It was confusing as hell. Trap was confusing as hell in general. Hir changed others' gender for fun and games.

After the fifth time hir called himself "MANLY LIKE MY AWESOME FATHER!" while in a gorgeous female body with very visible curves, Ji gave up on ever comprehending hir.

This horrible mental conundrum was laid out before the audience, whose brains weren't exactly equipped to deal with it either.

While Bloody, Anemone, Hana and Lana were consistently female, AllSeer and Ji could be male or female, and AlPharazir was consistently male in all his reincarnations as were Stormy, LordofFire, Cyrus and several of the other reincarnators.

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565. ATDSVT- PAST TO PRESENT

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Shizun's brothers and sisters (whose gender and race varied from lifetime to lifetime) became rulers quite often.

'Cyan' in one lifetime, had become a king by marrying a princess after rescuing her from a murder attempt and 'ElderSoul' had followed his lead, saving his own princess to marry her.

Other lifetimes had them building kingdoms, like Necron and Auberon did.

Still others had them born as princes and princesses.

However the most popular method of gaining a kingdom was through right of conquest.

By contrast, Shizun's method... well, it couldn't even really be called a method.

The fact was.... It was like feeding stray cats.

Feral cats.

Shizun tended to settle into some place in the wilderness and then use his doton and mokuton to make whatever style of palatial building, compound, farms and ponds he felt like making.

He obviously had made such a paradise for himself, seeing as his servants were all golem constructs of whatever materials he felt were right for the time being.

The fact was that Shizun's mastery of doton and mokuton were unparalleled. That meant gorgeous palaces fully furnished, and whatever Shizun felt like growing for food.

And that sort of luxury tended to attract... visitors.

The first time Shizun came out to see tribesmen... really primitive tribesmen...picking fruits from his garden, he sighed and just laid out food.

After that,it just... snowballed.

Like feeding stray cats, while Shizun didn't approach them, the primitive tribe kept... coming back. And eating all the food. And moving in closer and closer because the forest was dangerous, don't you know, and they were being hunted by something out there!

Shizun just covered his face with his hands and then laid out more food.

Then the tribe brought in their women and children.

And then Shizun left out even more food. And eventually set up proper shelters. Which, as one thing led to another, left Shizun with having to teach them crafts like cooking, agriculture, weaving, and writing, because the poor sods had literally no idea what to do with anything.

Finally Shizun just gave in and adopted the lot of them. Close to a thousand people, scrawny and skinny and puppy eyed.

Of course this had its drawbacks.

For example, the first time a rival tribe came in to try to steal and raid, Shizun ripped into them like an angry mother bear on berserk, protecting a lairfull of cubs.

The raiders had come with horses and blades, looking for slaves.

Shizun punted one unfortunate individual so hard that he went flying above the trees until his sudden and inevitable fall back down.

Then Shizun grabbed the most cowardly looking raider, and strung them up, as... well as his disciples had taken to doing. And then held up a massive spider, which twitched its legs in disgruntlement before he put the creature on the poor fellow's face.

The second time around, Shizun then held up a truly massive snake and made as if to put it onto the poor man's pelvis.

The resulting interrogation was very fruitful and very rapid. Shizun then pulled the poor sod off the tree after ascertaining where his tribe lived, and then punched him into the air to join his friend.

After checking the trajectory, Shizun nodded to himself and then set out to hunt down the tribe that had come after his adopted group of feral not-cats.

The resulting invasion was short, sharp and to the point. Explosions everywhere, and Shizun breaking their city wall like the Kool-Aid Man before stringing up ALL THE NOTABLES AND ALL THE ARMED MEN upside down on the walls' remnants before he... tore the slave market apart and took every last one of the slaves with him.

And in a final token of insult, he took all their children too.

Of course, he hadn't expected that so many of the mothers would follow him.

That was actually the typical path that these things followed.

Shizun would build a palace, any tribes in the vicinity would move in like feral cats, hoping for food. Shizun would feed them, they would come back. And keep coming back. And somewhere

down the line, someone or the other offered Shizun a crown because clearly Shizun provided for them.

It wasn't as if Shizun ever needed anything from them either. Anything he wanted, he could make for himself. He didn't need their tribute. He didn't need their anything. They.... basically just kept putting Shizun in charge because CLEARLY Shizun knew what he was doing.

Even in more or less civilized realms in certain lifetimes these things played out.

Putting Shizun in any proximity to a war torn area led to him feeding people and tending to their wounds as...as humanitarian aid and he or she kept getting given a crown.

Because anyone throwing in with Shizun got fed and medicated and in too many cases, Shizun taught them some agricultural methods and crafts and any medical procedures or healing techniques that could be done even in these conditions so they could look after themselves.

As for expansions... those mostly happened because Shizun really didn't take invasions or attacks on his... stray not-cats well. He tended to get very upset. Explosions and gigantic plant golems bashing all the things in their way like a ferny Gojira levels of upset.

***pg.622

566. ATDSVT-Sun Jin

When you left a group of Sentai (whatever the hell that is) fighting an evil cultivator or demonic cultivator that is their destined rival, you generally expect that will be the end of it, right?

Apparently this was wrong, because Sun Jin is awakened by the sound of zapping or rather thunder booming. As was Daomei who was cuddling him like a teddy bear, an act which Sun Jin allowed with great forbearance and tolerance last night.

And petting him while he did it until he was practically purring was not inappropriate at all, godsdamnit. Half of Cang Qiong thinks they're engaged anyway.

Ah. There is a Sentai twitching at the door. He looks kind of slightly crispy and sooty around the edges. His clothes seemed to have taken much of the damage, they look like they were ground zero of an explosion. The other three males look like they suffered the same fate, while the sole female looks disheveled and almost pristine.

Clearly the four men took most of the damage to save her. Equally clearly they only managed to endure the first layer and haven't triggered the second. Yet.

If they had persisted in trying to break past it, they would all have died.

"We just came to thank you for your help." said one of the men. Under normal circumstances he would have been considered handsome, as would the others. They have the standard built like a bear guy, the tall, thin polearm guy, the short, thin, kind of delicate guy who could probably pull off a nice crossdressing....and then the all around heroic looking fellow.

"But we were injured by this trap you laid." The man continued, trying to lay the guilt on thickly.

"Oh, that's in case of demonic cultivators." Sun Jin says mildly, standing at the door... fully armed. As is Daomei who is looking profoundly disgruntled at having his cuddle time ended. He only recently got the chance to cuddle openly and then *this* happens. Daomei is about ready to throw all of these five people out of the nearest window.

"Oh." Well that deflates the man's attempt to try for guilting. Now it is clearly time for the new tactics.

"Have you thought of joining our sect?" The lovely lady smiles at Sun Jin, clearly about to try feminine wiles.

"I already am in a sect." Sun Jin points out. "Both of us are in Cang Qiong Mountain Sect."

"Well, yes but surely if you joined ours then you would have higher to climb in rank..." the lady continues, displaying the typical blush and bashful perfect white lotus demeanor, glancing at him every so often to see if it is having an effect. "I mean, Cang Qiong's Qing Jing Peak and Bai Zhan Peak probably have successors by now..."

As the spiel goes on, Sun Jin thinks, 'And you want us to bring our training to your sect for free, right? Since if we defect and change sects you basically get access to our stuff and everyone is already assuming that Shizun's personal apprentices in one of the arts- mokuton, or doton is going to be the chosen child, huh?

Not interested. Daomei looks like he's all but growling. This amuses me, and it's cute but I have no idea why it's so cute.'

"I'm quite happy with my sect." Sun Jin says decisively.

"As am I," Daomei glares at the girl. He doesn't like her. He doesn't like her being near Sun Jin. He doesn't like her white lotus act!

"And, I'm also in a relationship" Sun Jin pats Daomei's shoulder, startling Daomei out of his homicidal urges. "With this man."

Daomei lights up like a lantern. Smugly he smiles as the girl turns crimson with humiliation, frustration and embarrassment, and starts preparing for an exit with a little dignity. She apparently expected him to be really into her, and has probably tried this innocent white lotus

thing on other recruitment pitches before, while the other four men talk about how awesome their sect is.

Except they had to skip the awesome sect talk because Cang Qiong is the best. Obviously.

Sun Jin will, of course, want children to carry the Suli family name, but he is still young, and that is a matter for much later. He is not in a hurry.

If he can find any other descendants or cousins, he probably won't even need to consider that, because he can probably raise one of their offspring.

So the priority is to try to track down anyone with the blood other than himself. While he did have the discussion with his uncle and he was planning to go looking for the other men who had designs or pressed their suit for his mother, that will go much faster if he can send these people off before he goes looking for them.

***pg.623

567. ATDSVT-Sun Jin

In general, after seeing off a group of sentai, one would hope that the rest of your day goes well and having dealt with them the rest of your day is free, right?

You would hope that your tasks would be done, right?

But no.

No.

First the Sentai, now, after having interrogated his mother's former suitors and admirers among both nobles and commoners it becomes obvious that none of them could probably have martialled enough influence or funds to get a cultivator to do anything. Sure, some of her admirers were still bitter and salty but checking for guilt of deliberately siccing cultivators on the Suli..None of them fit. Of course, that didn't cover the probability of some guy just leaving rumors around, lies to try to get other nobles or possibly cultivators to attack.

In fact, there had actually been a few rumors about such things, but they had mostly been about his father's cultivator friend who was according to everyone around... Very, very dead.

As in confirmed dead by witnesses. As in found as a literal corpse who died peacefully when his body gave out on him, buried and cremated it dead. What the hell.

Why would the Suli have been attacked for a dead man?

Then of course, his day got even weirder.

First the Sentai.

Then the creepy old man clad all in white, with the long, long beard which he keeps stroking. Wanting to talk to Sun Jin about something important.

Something about his family's past.

Fucking goddamn drama llama! Why is it always the weird people?! Why can't people just give him straight answers?!

Fuck this. Where's his crystal?

"Shizun, there's a creepy old man stalking me and I don't like it!" Sun Jin snapped immediately, as Daomei headed the old man off at the pass, so as to speak, blocking his way.

The old man looks appalled.

"Didn't I tell you to just lightning blast the pedobears, Sun Jin?" Shizun's voice came through the crystal free and clear, soft and calm.

"I can't kill him, Shizun, he says he knows something about my family." Sun Jin wanted to sulk. Wanted to interrogate the old man but he could easily tell he was stronger than the sentai who had been here earlier. Not as strong as Shizun, of course. It would likely kill the old man before Sun Jin could wring information out of him by force, and anything else wasn't confirmable without much more effort in terms of scrying, now wasn't it?

"Did he make you an offer you couldn't refuse?" Shizun sounded resigned, and the sounds of packing could be heard in the background.

"Kind of." Sun Jin frowned at the old man who looked hurt at such distrust.

"I'll be heading right there. Do not go into any inns with that man. Do not take any food, drinks or treats from him. Do not go into secluded corners. Always stay in a well lit open air public area... Take Daomei with you at all times... Remember, there are always creepers that like the idea of feeding young people drugs or gu to try to control them or take advantage of them..." Shizun's words weren't really helping the old man's self esteem or self-image either.

"Daomei's always with me, Shizun." Sun Jin consoled him.

"...Take a long halberd with you too." Shizun grumped anyway.

"Already carrying it, Shizun." Sun Jin consoled him as the old man looked hurt and increasingly more upset.

"That's my good boy." Shizun said, clearly pleased.

His plan clearly ruined, the old man switched to plan b. Flimflam.

Or rather, act all offended and then go and spill information in public that could not be confirmed without even more goddamn effort.

"I have never been so insulted in my entire life!" The old man said, frowning. "I am a righteous cultivator, not a creeper a demonic cultivator or evil cultivator! Your words are unfair! Your teacher is unfair!"

"My teacher is right that if you had anything you knew that would actually help me and if you were really righteous you wouldn't need to take me to a secluded place to tell me about it." Sun Jin pointed out.

"It concerns my sect and its artifacts!" The old man frowned, drew himself up.

"I don't care about your artifacts." Sun Jin pointed out. "All I want is to know about my family."

"It involves your family!" The old man snapped.

"Try again," Sun Jin stated patiently. "The Suli clan and Sun clan have no artifacts. Have never owned artifacts."

"I didn't say they owned them!" The old man looked frustrated. "There are a lot of stolen artifacts on the Suli land, protected by a formation. Some of them are ours."

Uh huh, try pulling another one, Sun Jin thought. It has bells on it. "Go on," he said comfortingly instead.

"That man who was friends with your father was a demonic cultivator. He killed your father and took his place because he desired his wife! He hid his store of stolen artifacts in the Suli lands and we cannot break in to take it back because of that formation. Since you seem to be unharmed, surely you can go in and break this formation for us. We will then fight him and help you get your vengeance!"

Uh huh. Sun Jin was going to take that with a brick of salt. Clearly it was bullshit. The question was, how much of it was bullshit based on rumor, lies taken as truths and circumstantial maybe evidence and how much of it was real?

There were certainly formations on the Suli lands, after all. And someone was living there.

Godsdamnit, more drama. He couldn't wait for Shizun to arrive and if the old man was lying... well then he and his entire sect would have to be crushed like a bug.

"Were you with those..." sentai "colorful righteous cultivators earlier?" Sun Jin asked.

The old man puffed up like a peacock. "That is a good guess! Yes! We are from the White Heroic Condor Sect, and I am one of its elders, Elder Zo Dong!"

Uh huh. "You recruit a lot of teenagers?" Sun Jin asked even more suspiciously.

"I'm looking for an apprentice!" The old man puffed up more.

Oh good gods, Shizun was going to fall off his chair laughing again.

***pg.624

568. ATDSVT- A Cannon Fodder Interlude

Feixue could not say that she was satisfied but neither could she say that she was discontent.

Her marriage to the demonic cultivator had been found to be not valid thanks to the Emperor's will and her brother Aoguang had stood for her to help her get married to someone new. She had her dowry back and had made a new life for herself while the crown had taken all the belongings of the demonic cultivator and his nonexistent family. The man had been using a false name all the while, having taken the names and covers of his victims.

She had a residence of her own, which while it was not exactly what her father had owned, it was still quite good enough for her and her new husband who was from a scholarly family, to be precise, their third son.

Investigations implied that her former not-really-husband had been pulling this trick for a fairly long time. Or any teacher he may have had might have, they weren't sure.

Her brother Aoguang had demanded that she and her husband both swallow tiny jade beads and she had no idea why. He simply kept stating that his peak lord was making him do it.

How strange.

***pg.624

569. ATDSVT-Past to Present

[VIRUS CORRUPTION DETECTED!]
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The slaughtered remnants of an army stood testimony to the terror of a gigantic monstrosity that looked upon them with contempt.

A city destroyed, countless lives ruined by the might of the creature that had laid it to waste with a single blast, melting stone, glass and metal, crushing massive towers of stone and metal beneath its orb shaped shield as it floated aloft.

Playthings to be toyed with until they broke, it called humanity. Vermin that crawled upon the earth, it called them.

The Damned, it called them.

In the monstrous divine god-beast's wake, the first responders came in, to try to save what lives they could while the beast was distracted by the army.

Miles and miles of debris, of ruins, of rubble, of fires and smoke that darkened the sky, massive pillars of it. Ruined stone roads, cracked and rent. Torn pipes spewing water. Lightning crackling along the ground. Mangled corpses. Burnt corpses. Torn and severed body parts, heads scattered where the force of their separation by sharp shards of metal glass or stone had thrown them.

From various countries, various cities they began to come. Some were human in shape, others not. Some went to face the god beast, others to save the victims during the short window of time that the worst off could be rescued with hope of survival.

Shizun was among those who immediately went to work in extracting survivors from the ruins and rubble that had buried them as fires started and began to spread. Shizun and several others who sought out survivors and hauled them out, lifting rubble, vanishing and reappearing with survivors, tearing ruined metal structures apart to retrieve the crippled.

There were many, so very many who had died and so very many who had been buried alive, who had been injured by shards of glass, of metal, of stone. Myriads who had torn flesh, broken bones, horrific burns. Myriads who had suffered from smoke inhalation or poisonous gases, noxious and dangerous chemicals aplenty.

Shizun's teleportation skills came in handy; those who had it like him were quickly pressed into getting the survivors out without their wounds being opened further or worsened by any pressure. Their skill in teleporting victims out of rubble once scrying had ascertained where the survivors were, and that same skill at teleportation kept those people alive for crucial moments, allowing the teleporters to teleport out shards or shrapnel so the healers could seal up wounds.

Shizun, being both a teleporter and a healer, was very busy. Sideways was skilled at scrying, while Kalel had the strength to lift anything out of his path, and keen eyes to catch sight of survivors. As was expected of a kryptonian.

Many heroes had come. Some were of the hundred that had been seen earlier, others were not.

This was not the first time they had come; they had also come when monsters had invaded a city, torn their way through the stone streets and stone and metal buildings.

Then, too, these people had come, heroes all, to try to rescue what could be rescued and save what could be saved.

***pg.624

570. ATDSVT-Past to Present

[VIRUS CORRUPTION DETECTED!]

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A city of glass, metal and stone, built in the sheltering massive mountain range by the Hundred for themselves and their families, Shizun a driving force in its construction, his teleport and telekinesis allowing him to build far more quickly than most could try. Doton and Mokuton handled the rest.

Each of the Hundred had headed out to save their mortal families in this life. Several had been rendered effectively homeless.

Shizun was quite willing to settle everyone into the city. In fact, he was also willing to go out with teleport and search for any of the Hundred or their kin who could use a place to stay, setting them up in suites of rooms in the city's tall stone and metal towers.

Thus, the arrival of a small, floating pink cat with her family was not really unusual.

Neither was Shizun's offering her anything she and her family needed, from rooms to live in to furniture and clothing and food.

She was not the first welcomed thusly, nor was she the last.

***pg.624

571. ATDSVT-Past to Present

[VIRUS CORRUPTION DETECTED!]

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Time after time, life after life, Heiying saw Shizun take his friends, his brothers, his sisters, his fellow reincarnates in.

In the aftermath of a disaster, when his friends' home cities got invaded by twisted parodies of humanity ranging from mutants to zombies- some thing which happened more than a few time with distressing variations- when their homes had been burned down, Shizun was there, healing the victims, teleporting people out of the way, and offering them his home as a sanctuary.

The giant monster destroyed their homes in a climactic battle, possibly with giant golems or beams of death, Shizun was there to help with the aftermath and offer support and sanctuary to his fellows.

If he had an estate, he offered rooms in it. If he had built a city, he offered homes in it. If they or their mortal families needed jobs, he set them up with jobs. If they were out of food or clothing, he was willing to offer what he had, growing what was needed.

When they were lost and in need, he was the first to take up the rebuilding.

"My home is your home." He said, and his door was open.*

*actual evidence in alternate campaign docs on discord.

***pg.624

572. ATDSVT

The dowries of Chen Ah Rong's two daughters were luxurious and intimidatingly large.

Ran Yu Rong and Ran Dai Rong had certainly profited from their cousin Chen Wanyong's fondness for their mother, his gratitude for her kindness and his grandiose contributions. The finest furniture, the finest jewels; they were provided for like princesses.

Their cousins and half-siblings were not dowered anywhere near as well.

Naturally there was quite a bit of disgruntlement among the other young ladies of the household.

His insistence on visiting wasn't helping the nerves of the other, formerly proud and somewhat dismissive members of the Ran clan who had been kept off balance by his actions.

The concubines of Ah Rong's husband found their hold on his heart and pockets somewhat waning as was their influence on household matters. Despite the fact he enjoyed them more than his wife's company, he had to act with more propriety.

Then Wanyong gave his aunt and cousins each a wondrous figurine, horses made of metal that would expand to the size of a full grown battlesteed, embellished with enamel and gemstones in their eyes and saddles which could run without tiring. Very, very powerful horses.

And certain people in that household cursed his name in their hearts because now their ambitions were crushed.

Of course the legitimately born sons and daughters now saw more reasons to behave themselves, and project an aura of friendliness and respect if only because they could try to profit from it. Fortunately, Ah Rong and her daughters knew better than to be taken in, by now.

***pg.625

573. ATDSVT-GETEN INVASION

One world died. Then two followed. The next incursion after that, it was four worlds here stripped of all life and usable material. The next incursion, it was eight worlds there that were snuffed out, then thirty two were strip mined. Then sixty four worlds were reduced to floating stardust. Then one hundred and twenty eight worlds were devoured. Then two hundred and fifty six worlds were silenced. Five hundred and twelve worlds reduced to asteroids. A thousand and twenty four worlds exterminated.

At first that was considered... maybe still within limits, given that the Eastern System had more than a few troublesome bugs with a tendency to wreck planets.

Bugs in the system, glitches like Luo Binghe. Bugs and glitches that they too, had to crush or bribe with rising to become gods. Not creator gods, of course. Those could make entire galaxies. But gods of this or that planet. They tended to be territorial for the most part and could be bribed.

The Eastern system had a tendency to pit those against each other, in order to lessen possible damage to their holdings, as one such monstrosity was well capable of killing their own kind.

When the sixteen thousandth world was snuffed out on the other hand, the Eastern system now knew they were in some serious trouble.

That was exactly why they began trying to pit those glitches of theirs against the invaders.

It didn't go as they had expected.

For one, the invaders had better things to do with their time, giving their enemies the option to have their territories ignored. For another, the invaders... were worse than they had feared.

When one of the invaders took out a freaking galaxy, a science fiction creation made by a creator, a 'setting' for an 'interstellar war' that should have fed them the emotions and faith of countless living things, devouring it completely... The Eastern System panicked.

***pg.625

574. ATDSVT- Flashback-The G Side

When I build things for the System, I have my Avatar skin's full range of abilities.

So switching back and forth from that, to my body in the waking world then my body in the punishment zone is.... frustrating.

Being incapable of instantaneous teleportation is like having a second set of limbs, one I have always been able to use...crippled or injured. Being incapable of instantaneous scrying of the entire planet, lacking the ability to read minds, having my other senses dulled is like having my other eyes being blindfolded. Having my other abilities which I normally had in my build not available?

Incredibly frustrating.

Having to rely on talismans instead? Not acceptable. I have probably spammed creation of enough talismans of every sort to supply an entire goddamn army because of sheer screaming mental trauma and unease from... That.

There is a very good reason why I consider this shell to be subpar. So very subpar.

In most of my skins, I automatically have teleport, telekinesis, at least some kind of psionic ability, energy drain, transmute, energy manipulation, biokinesis, material creation, material transmutation and elemental manipulation.

While I have some in the dream and waking world, I don't have others. Yet.

Being incapable of what I used to run as feats is driving me up the wall.

Naturally, having ensured that my self destruct is in place after having purchased it with points, my next action was to go for the obvious upgrade.

But this upgrade I was getting with virus points, some of the items my brothers in arms and children sent me...and biokinesis. Not the system. It would be my first virus point purchase, and it would be a full body upgrade for my waking form because fuck if I was going to be incapable of fleeing like my ass was on fire. The first year was bad enough. The system refused and is still refusing to let me keep stored weapons in the punishment zone and thus I was at the constant lack of mercy of That Man.

I will never accept that happening in the waking world. In the dream world, I can just keep self detonating, but I refuse to be a helpless turtle in the waking world.

Plus, it will allow me even further multitasking.

FOR ART. FOR SCIENCE. THE POINTS MUST FLOW.

Naturally of course I will hide my abilities once I gain them. I don't want to get into trouble. Nevertheless.

I need my build back. Last time around, I was running on a fucking Octacore engine rig. Being this helpless is driving me batshit.

Gott in Himmel, I need my fucking build back!

***pg.626

575. ATDSVT- Past to Present

[VIRUS CORRUPTION DETECTED!]

[LOAD SAVED FILE!]

A tentacled horror in a snazzy suit with a monocle and a top hat standing side by side, arm around the shoulder of an exquisitely kingdom toppling redhead, an amber eyed, pointy-eared beauty clad in finest purple spider silk draped over truly dangerous curves, as they discussed how to build kingdoms and colonize barren dust bowls, drawing out various methods of terraforming while drinking tea and eating garlic bread and baguette slices with various kinds of cheeses taken from the buffet table of a fancy breakfast party.

An armored dragon hybrid walked with an Iron Legion, led by a knight in glowing crimson and gold armor. To his left a massive metal cat, ridden by a slim, cat-eared youth of truly indeterminate gender, wearing a top hat and frock coat with all the victorian era trimmings, which patted a massive grey cat, all of which were fighting massive leviathans of metal and organic material, which constantly disgorged cyborg creatures ranging from massive lamprey-leeche-centipede hybrids to spider-like monstrosities the size of cars and humanoid roboticized undead. The knights shot, stabbed and tore apart their enemies. The feline mech

simply crushed them. The cat eared youth simply shot them with lasers or sliced them with a laser cane-sword.

A lady made of light and solid metal standing on top of a massive mechanical biped, surrounded by technologically armored ninja and samurai, aiming her weapon at a massive metal space whale cyborg as the beast opened its mouth to disgorge an army.

Four great mechanoid warriors, a crimson lizard behemoth, a tiny green serpent creature with a top hat, mustache and monocle over his black cape sortying with a massive white dragon against armies of blue skinned giants which threw ice boulders and grew icebergs to be used as weapons.

A superhuman, superbly curved lady clad in armor, holding hands with a darkly slim elven maiden, a wedding with two brides and not a groom in sight. There were however, plenty of bridesmaids, and an audience of thousands, as the tentacled horror and a horned dragon god blessed their vows.

An exceedingly attenuated inhumanly thin and elegant elf clad in green, blue, silver and purple with a small blue cat on his shoulder standing by a group of space pirates, two curvaceous blonds and two thumbs up, rakishly grinning...right before he challenged a massive, darkly armored blue warlord and his entire army... to a dance off.

While the other attenuated elf with the pirate finery and the commodore's fancy hat made the electric instrument *wail* in a melody that sent the blood racing.

A viking, helmed and cloaked in silver and grey, standing at the right side of a smiling young king in green and gold with a horned helm, his golden mother and weary one eyed father smiling to his left. His brown haired sister clad in green and gunmetal grey holding a lightning hammer aloft as her lion helmed husband raised a cup golden as his sword. That very same group holding court and discussing war tactics against svartalfar fleets in a room that like the rest of the palace, was built of solid gold, ornately decorated with massive gemstones, and overlooking a wide land full of fertile farms.

A cloaked, grey skinned, dark haired elven maiden with a tiny squid creature sitting in her pocket was playing cards with a man clad all in crimson and white coat and tie, his upside down friend wearing a skin tight blue and red outfit, a dark haired man wearing massive metal wings, a smiling fellow clad in blue armor that crackled with lightning, a crimson and black ninja, a massive white haired man and two armored goblin masked knights.

A tiny little female, little more than a doll of pink and yellow, sitting on the shoulder of a massive grey knight feeding starving dark-skinned tribes in the desert and setting up trade deals with the others of their guild members for help in rebuilding wrecked villages, but better, because reasons.

A pair of teens, wielding pure psionic force working with a blue haired maiden to evacuate civilians from a collapsing building.

A pair of truly gigantic knights, clad in yellow and red and gunmetal grey and silver respectively, fighting cyborg nazis and robotic undead side by side with a group of ladies and gentlemen clad in shades, snazzy charcoal suits and tactical gear, a red haired assassin back to back with a purple clad master archer.

A righteous cultivator (jedi) was fighting side by side with a group of mutants, a vampire working hand in hand with a demonic cultivator (sith) lord and a pair of sorcerers, male and female, hunting down human traffickers and slavers.

A full guild and no two people looked the same, some looking more monstrous than others and unlike in this world and its righteous cultivators.... Their appearances had never truly mattered.

So what if more than half of them hadn't looked human? So what if some had been machines or beast formed? They had been heroes fighting side by side, one and all.

And Shizun had been one of them.

To be precise, Shizun had been the redheaded beauty. The one throwing flowers at the wedding as one of the bridesmaids. The one helping build new villages. The one cutting mutually beneficial trade deals as a Queen of an orphaned people.

Heiying would recognize that smile anywhere.

***pg.627

576. ATDSVT

*Carry on my wayward son,
There will be peace when you are done.
Lay your weary head to rest,
Don't you cry no more.*

Metaria Sun-Eater had started out as a mere wisp of sentient, smoky, life-energy eating cloud tinted black, with the tiniest little pinpricks of light for eyes. One of many tainted lives corrupted by the embodiment of Chaos.

Perhaps had things been different, she would have started out eating ambient radiation, then found a living planet to devour the tiniest life forms without pause, growing larger with each meal

of life, draining its victims to dust until she devoured an entire world and eventually kept devouring energy sources one after the other until it was fully grown.

Metaria's fellow dark stars certainly had gone that path before and been hunted down by bright stars, called senshi, for it.

Metaria however, had lucked out in the draw, for she had gotten herself bound to an energy manipulator. Or rather, had been picked up by a bemused mage when she had been flung, disoriented, out of the place where stars came into existence.

Papa, as she called him, had been quite willing to continually feed her energy, both his own and energy that he had processed.

If anything, he had actually treated her as she was an infant. His infant to be precise. He sang her songs and taught her human things, like stories, art, music and reading. He carried her everywhere, hid her in his clothing or in his own body to keep her safe from larger predators and shared the energies of his kills with her.

Naturally she grew at a much more rapid pace than her siblings in the dark void of space ever did.

The difference of course was, that a dark star that spent most of its time in space before taking a living planet spent its formative years in such a way that it considered planetbound beings as prey or tasty vermin.

Metaria grew up being nurtured by a planetbound being that treated her as if she was his own child, one that read her stories and explained things like ethics to her.

People, Metaria learned, were not food. Well, Nice people like Papa were not food. Bad people were definitely food. Shoggoth-things were food. Deep One Fishmen were food. If it ate people that were nice and tried to eat Papa, it was food.

Animals, plants, fungi, microorganisms and other living things that weren't people were definitely food. In fact, animals and plants and fungi eaten by humans were to be eaten twice. The first of course was that Metaria ate their life energy, the second was that Papa and those like him could eat the leftover shells or rather meat once he was done.

She lived quite happily with her Papa. She had been contented and comfortable with him.

The problem, of course was the bad people who kept trying to end the world that Papa had been trying to save.

True, their summoning all sorts of monstrous fungus people-things or tentacled flying things or black tar tentacle things and other 'horrors' that made human brains hurt was feeding her quite nicely. True, there was more than enough of various kinds of 'monsters' that ate people to be her food.

It didn't mean that she was happy that they were upsetting Papa and leaving a mess.

Papa had quickly leveraged her presence and her appetite to help him in exterminating things that ate people.

Things went well. Papa had risen in value in the eyes of those around them, because he helped people, saved people, kept them safe. The shiny things Papa wore indicated status and since Papa wore lots of shinies, it meant his status was high. She had grown strong.

Then disaster struck. An invasion, one larger than Papa and his friends could handle. An ally turned into an enemy, betraying Papa and his friends for power, stealing one of the weapons that shielded the people and running off with it to live in luxury, leaving the rest of his people to die.

And when the traitor's actions had left their people vulnerable, the 'monsters' had come in force.

Metaria had been strong enough, of course. Strong enough to devour the enemy.

The problem was that Papa had not been. His body had given up on him, his energy channeling had burned him out over and over again, until, finally it fell apart. And then he was gone and all that was left to Metaria was ashes.

Metaria, enraged beyond words and beyond coherent thought, had puffed up, screeching in fury and thrown herself through the portal that the monsters that had forced Papa to his death had come from.

She would kill them. She would make them stop existing. She would eat them all.

TBC

***pg.628

577. ATDSVT

Carry on my wayward son.

There will be peace when you are done.

Lay your weary head to rest.

Don't you cry no more.

When Metaria got picked up by Papa again, Papa was a She. Physical gender aside, new body aside, Metaria was so happy to see her that she didn't care.

If in the previous life Papa was a noble magic-knight with long, straight black hair and dark blue eyes, in this one she was a Sage, a member of a royal court, engaged to its prince, with long, wavy crimson hair and blood red eyes.

Papa was always pretty, she knew.. It was a pity that while everyone else liked and respected Papa, Papa's so-called fiance didn't appreciate or value her.

Metaria didn't like him at all. The man was a spoiled brat who didn't take his duties seriously. Just because Papa was given to him in an arranged betrothal, he took her for granted.

A proper noble defended their people, Papa said! A proper noble looked after their people, Papa said! This one didn't even bother to take his lessons seriously because he didn't want to!

Bah!

Metaria was proven right when the brat absconded with the planet crystal, eloping with the neighboring empire's princess, leaving his people and Papa behind without caring that the artifact belonged to the planet's people and wasn't his to give away.

Then the princess' mother used their natural disgruntlement as an excuse to take over their homeland and seal them all away with the capital city in a barren underground prison dimension, one full of deadly radiation, with no food, only water.

Papa had to rebuild an ecosystem from what materials from the capital were sealed with them.

That meant Metaria warding people from radiation by consuming as much of it as she could while Papa was changing their physiology to not only deal with it but also thrive in these places.

It meant creating massive amounts of fungi, several of which were bioluminescent. It meant making bioluminescent everything. It meant converting every possible amount of biomass and protein source to something that could survive in the dark and radiation.

Fish Farms were built. Blind fish, eels, mollusk, slugs, shrimps... all these had to be raised. If possible they would be raised to as large a size as possible.

Fungi, moss and lichen farms were built. Every single plant that could be adapted to live in the dark and feed off the energy was modified.

Every bit of waste that could be converted into fertile soil was converted. every method of growing food that could be done was being done.

Every insect was modified to be of use to them, after all, insects, arachnids and the like could be used.

The rebuilding was a great task and one for which Metaria was willing to convert the radiation into energy for Papa and her people to use.

For once, their roles had been inverted. Now Metaria was the protector, the one that kept poisons from hurting people.... and Metaria liked it.

It couldn't be helped that changing people to survive the radiation meant changing what they were, but at least even if their bodies changed, they changed to something stronger. Besides, scaled or brightly colored, whether they had gained wings or plant, animal or insect traits...they were all still pretty.

In its heyday, the Insufficiently Lit Kingdom was eerily beautiful in its own way.

Gigantic stalactites and stalagmites had been converted into intricately carved apartment buildings, it seemed, connected to each other, and to the ground by stairs and landings and walkways, like a spiderweb that connected the many crystalline spires and metal fixtures of a chandelier.

Some room, homes and apartments had columns carved to resemble lifelike trees, complete with animals, insects and birds.

Their ceilings were wreathed in stone leaves, flowers and vines, resembling a forest canopy.

Their walls were bas reliefs of forest scenes, lit softly by glowing, faceted crystals. Some rooms had blues, greens and purples... others had yellow and green, veined in gold and silver.

The adjoining bath house or bathrooms and some of the other rooms were carved to resemble ocean floors and coral reefs, rounded and curved everywhere. Here and there one could see, in the open or hidden among sinuous seaweed, aquatic creatures including fish of all kinds. The glowing crystals were encased in a sort of webbed lamp, mimicking the fall of light through water.

The furniture itself was fluid and made of what looked to be polished corals.

Still other rooms had walls painted with a variety of murals, ranging from elegant gardens, rivers and other freshwater forms, forests, to seaside scenes. These had more conventional lighting-

white or yellow glowing crystals in sconces and furniture of elegantly carved wood or an ivory or bone-like material in sinuous patterns that matched or enhanced the themes of the murals.

Some sleeping rooms didn't have furniture at all. Instead, they were plushly carpeted to the point that one's feet sank ankle-deep into soft material, with raised forms as soft mattresses; there were a plethora of soft pillows and cushions of varying sizes. There were what an outworlder would call 'beanbags.' At best, there were small, low, portable tables.

Some rooms or apartments had ceilings of moulded plaster that only an outworlder would recognize as being based on the baroque or rococco periods of art, with walls and moldings and furniture to match. Their lights were white or yellow crystals in ornate sconces.

Other rooms had ceilings and walls painted with murals that were three dimensional- ranging from realism to chinoiserie in their themes. Their furniture was chosen to match the themes of their paintings. Their lights were more softly colored and blended in with the painted areas around them.

Yet other rooms were clearly based on what outworlders would call mosques, with repeating geometric patterns painted on the ceilings and inlaid into the floors using colored stone chips, with intricate fretwork and inlaid screens and brightly painted furniture, sometimes with accessories of gold leaf or bronze and silver. The lights used for these were stark white.

Some other rooms had simpler columns carved with abstract or filigree patterns and with ceilings inlaid all over with glowing crystals in all the colors of the rainbow, to make an effect like that of stained glass through a cathedral window.

And still others were simple, large expanses of woven mats, polished wooden or lacquered pillars and broad beams, myriad painted screens and paper sliding panels; dyed blinds and curtains; shining red or black lacquered, or polished wood furniture inlaid or touched with gold or mother of pearl. Their lamps were like firelight.

Libraries tended to match the rooms or apartments they were adjoined to.

Those buildings could be seen from a distance. The roads were well-kept. Even their fields were laid out artistically, it seemed, as they followed arcane writing, that was in itself beautiful.

As any visitor entered the outskirts of the city, they would have noticed clean, well kept little homes, ornamented with carvings and surrounded by small, brightly colored gardens went round and round exquisite water fountains and lovely quiet pool-gardens began to aggregate into gracefully tall spires of buildings, carved from the stalactites and stalagmites of the caves, and connected to each other by beautiful weblike bridges; the city's versions of mansions and condominiums, apartments, public buildings, schools, libraries, hospitals, dormitories, orphanages and offices, among other things. Workshops were everywhere. Some signs were

written in human languages, though each youma-run shop had a personal mark, icon or seal denoting their nicknames instead of human words.

They would have enjoyed walking leisurely through a bazaar and market that was every bit as active as any such place on Earth.

The Bazaars around any visitor as they entered the heart of the city on their way to the lovely stalactite-stalagmite buildings of the residential quarter, were a scintillating sight. Everywhere, there was something to see. There was the shine of polished stone, the gleam of metal, the glaze of pottery or porcelain, the bright, vibrant, rich colors of varying kinds of cloths, fabrics similar to cottons, silks, velvets. The intricacy of lace and embroidery. Thread-wrapped items, weavings, tapestries, rugs, carpets, lengths of various kinds of fabrics painted, wax-resist colored, dyed in beautiful patterns, stuffed toys or toys made out of knotted or knitted fabric. The displays were myriad and gorgeous. Wafted along by the wind was the scent of delicious festival foods, and the sweetness of perfumes.

Tents and stalls of various sizes in myriad vibrant shades, with signs and lights set amidst sculpted edible fungi gardens with fountains and seating of bright fabrics, and selling everything from jewelry to furniture. The sweet scents of perfumes, incenses, scented oils, soaps, flowers... the heady, savory scents of many, many variants of foods. There were craftsmen and women, some completely human, others with varying inhuman features selling everything that could possibly be sold. Larger craftsmen and artisans' shops lined the street and paths.

Several people, both seemingly human and inhuman, could be seen sculpting small ceramic toys and items, carving exquisite furniture or glazing brightly colored porcelain and pottery... There were people who wove fabrics, carved or sculpted lovely toys. Brightly colored glass items ranging from bottles, drinking vessels vases, lamp shades, sculptures, beaded curtains, beads, jewelry boxes, caskets, pots to windows and doors.

Intricate wrought metalwork, etching and engraving in items from jewelry boxes to gates, from lamps to furniture, dishware to charms, hair ornaments and jewelry shone under the myriad small lights.

There were shops selling ornate bracers, pauldrons, other armor pieces; shops selling corsets, vests and bustiers in materials ranging from leather to metal to fabric and lace. There were people who crafted masterpieces ranging from panels for wall decoration to journals, ornaments, pendants, pottery, miniature items like dollhouse food and sculptures out of brightly colored clay similar to polymer clay.

There were shops selling furniture, combs and containers cunningly fitted together out of carved bone, various kinds of wood or stones and minerals of varying kinds, with marquetry, inlay, parquetry, veneering, painting, mosaic work, enameling, gilding, pietra dura, wood staining, stenciling, decoupage, lacquer and fretwork quite well represented.

Buskers strategically placed at appropriate distances so as not to impede passersby or each others' chosen music, played on various instruments, ranging from variants of the drum, the lyre, the koto to the lute, accordion to flute... and were well compensated for their art.

Exquisitely beautiful prints, cards, murals, wall panels, folding screens, picture books, wallpapers, paintings, sketches, calligraphy, illuminated texts, illuminated pages, intricate designs of all sorts, painted eggs, painted wooden balls or panels, paper dolls, paper in varying colors and covered in intricate designs, exquisite journals and pictures of every kind along with materials for making such, were also sold by rubricatores, miniatores, illuminatores, and artists of various media, ranging from acrylic, watercolor, oil paints, to mineral pigments and pastels.

There were stalls selling weapons, shining gemstones, beaded jewelry, a large variety of fabrics and finished clothing for sale which ran the gamut from woven, knotted, knitted; they were exquisitely embroidered, brilliantly colored, shimmering iridescently or beaded.

There were well-made blades, utensils, minor enchanted artifacts, toys, gemstones, clothes... and then there was the food. Frogs were fried, stewed, roasted. Lichen stew and casseroles; large, steamed snails, clams and mollusks, crustaceans of varying sorts with sauces or dips. Savory spiced slug-meat and lichen-bread rolls, mushroom breads, lichen-pastries covered in sweet-lichen glazes. Slug-kebabs, steaming hot, glazed well by brown, sweet and slightly spicy, sweet-lichen sauce. Truffles, lichen, fungi of various textures ranging from soft to crisp and crunchy, and mushrooms were sliced up or simply served cooked in sauces or soups, or raw with dips. Giant slugs of many variants were carved up, freshly killed and their meat roasted for passersby to purchase with the local coinage. And these people still used precious metals.

And there were children everywhere, with their parents, staring here at a well-crafted doll, or at carved 'ushabti' like warrior figurines and toy furniture or there at a detailed carved Earth animals, made of various kinds of stone, wood, bone, ivory, tortoiseshell and other materials.

These people wore silks and other fabrics with ease, bought the spun thread or woven fabric for their clothes from the strange insectoid-featured spider youma, and moth and butterfly youma, either dyed them, painted them on their own or bought them pre-dyed, woven or sewn from other denizens of the same Realms. They were on the whole, in fairly good health. If one ignored the fact several of them were inhumanly colored, scaled or feathered, winged in various manners, had pointy ears, or claws and fangs, or other animal features, this could have been any prosperous city.

Alas, such Golden Ages or Silver Ages never lasted.

In the end, while Papa had used every skill she had to try to keep everyone safe, while Papa had managed to keep them alive for longer than anyone else could possibly have hoped for, their people still eventually died off, leaving Papa and Metaria alone.

Papa, because Papa was the strongest of the natives who had been sealed and Metaria because Metaria ate radiation for tea.

When Papa's brothers, Midgard and Artemis finally found Papa again and managed to get them all out of there, everyone had died, and Papa had buried them with her own hands.

Metaria liked Papa's brothers. They comforted Papa and soothed her when she was a wreck and when they heard of what happened, they declared war on the empire that had locked them all up to die.

That Empire didn't last long at all, and the victory was bittersweet for Metaria who had been happy while their people had lived and still kind of missed them.

Well, no matter. Papa would rebuild. Papa always did. And she would catch everyone else on the next go around.

***pg.628

578. ATDSVT

*Carry on my wayward son
There will be peace when you are done.
Lay your weary head to rest
Don't you cry no more.*

Ruin started out as one of Metaria's adult relatives. Where Metaria was the embodiment of Hunger, Ruin was a bodiless being, a shadow with a near infinite toolset, the embodiment of the universal constants that everything that could go wrong would go wrong at the worst possible time. Decay, deterioration, destruction, entropy. As such a thing that was born and lived within the darkness between the stars, it had no true understanding of humanity.

It was G as a senshi, in that life's slim, androgynous, purple eyed and flame haired form that had bound the being into human form. To be precise, she bound it into the shape of a human male, a little baby boy who depended upon his 'mother' for everything as any child of that age would.

A physical, living body has many things that a bodiless, humanoid shaped being of shadow and bad luck has never had.

The senses of touch, taste and scent for example, were a revelation to a being that had never had a body.

So was being hugged, petted and cosseted, when Ruin had only ever had the dark chill and emptiness of space, or a planet at its mercy.

G was a very tactile parent. There were bedtime stories. There were cuddles. There was being carried everywhere and delicious food. And petting. So much petting.

Ruin's first words were, "Pet me, puny mortal!" They remained his favorite words for much of his childhood.

Ruin eventually gained a gender identity, a very limited understanding of human behavior and a sense of his preferences.

His preferences in food and physical sensations were the first to be formed. His hoard of objects (especially soft objects) which he kept because of their textures and shapes kept growing.

That is to say he had a massive hoard of stuffed toys and anything else that felt and tasted nice. The only thing keeping his hoard of food in check was the edible items' expiry dates and his own tendency to have the things he came into contact with accelerate their decomposition or deterioration.... mostly by accident.

Ruin grew up as any normal elf, dwarf or human child raised in a good family would; he doted on his mother.

He has, as a result of this childhood, more understanding of family interaction and relationships than any self respecting eldritch abominations would like to admit to having.

Alas, a sweet and comfortable life with a loving mother could not last forever.

Ruin's sweet dream, his idyllic childhood was ruined by an assassin who attempted to seduce his mother and when that failed miserably because G had no interest in the assassin in question, the assassin simply slew her in cold blood to try to take her mantle, her planet and, as the assassin believed, control over Ruin... as Ruin had pretended to offer his services and respect because of binding spells rather than real loyalty.

The assassin did not live long nor comfortably. His death was brutal.

When Ruin found his dying mother, he screamed bloody murder and the resulting tantrum destroyed the palace and wrecked a large amount of landscape.

"Don't worry," his mother said, through bloodied lips. "We'll see each other again on the next go around."

He would hold her to that.

As for the senshi of the other planet who had sent that assassin, and who thought to use his mother's artifacts to control him....She thought wrong.

Ruin simply pretended to go along with her belief that he could be controlled so that he could get close enough to see her face as he destroyed her and everything she valued.

After that, he simply went looking for his mother again, because he knew all senshi reincarnated unless their stars and crystals were snuffed out.

He found her, and from that point on, he would never leave.

Naturally when his mother was taken from him on the eve of apotheosis, he did not take it well at all.

***pg.628

579. ATDSVT- Past to Present (From a different POV)

Stormy felt his Avatar Skin's age with every rock he pulled himself up and over. While only in his mid-thirties in this Game, the mountains could exhaust even the fittest of men. Most of them were towering peaks with icy crowns and jagged bodies. They were a common sight in this craggy world and were old friends of the people who lived beneath them. He had entered this Game as the Scion of House Guilliman and had spent most of his life in Game building up the territory.

As could be expected, this involved politics, something which he preferred to avoid whenever possible, leaving his Vizier to handle most of the maneuvering while he focused on improving infrastructure and literacy, among other things. Like Gladius and Samarqand in previous Games, he had set up innovation after innovation, built roads, bridges, proper sewers, improved farming and the like.

It helped that he wasn't alone; this game had twenty other Players, at least two from the same Guild as he was, which gave him a voting block and plenty of assistance in his projects. As could be expected, G had undertaken improving the agriculture and food production of the realm as well as innovations in crafts, fabrics, dyes, canning and medicines. If it involved plants, arts or crafts, G was generally on it, and if Hecate wasn't there to handle the Medical Upgrading, he tended to take it on too. His goal in Game was apparently to set up communal aquaponics, aeroponics and hydroponics gardens capable of feeding entire cities.

Thus far they had gotten canning introduced, machinery and factories with assembly lines for the production of cheaper goods as staples, better roads, improved sanitation, a hospital, better

medications, thriving fabric and dye production businesses, improved forges...which was why he was taking a break to enjoy the scenery before heading back to work.

He pulled himself onto an outcropping of rock and took a moment to rest. Wiping sweat from his brow, he grinned down at the men trailing after him. "You lads wanna give up, yet!?" he yelled.

He was met with a few surly curses and boasts. Stormy laughed before taking a swig of his canteen. He leaned back against the rock and smiled up at the cloudy sky.

This wasn't the prettiest of worlds, he knew that for certain after so many Games, but it had a rugged charm about it. He had been elected Consul of the world, first among equals, for almost ten long years in character, and still the world found ways to transfix and dazzle him. The many mountain ranges trailed up and down into the perilous ice poles, and the thick, thin, and roaring rivers married into the oceans. Every mountain was a welcome challenge for the hardy people to traverse, and they did so often.

Stormy chuckled and rested his chin in his hand. It felt good to just relax and enjoy the world, instead of trying to rule it. For now, His Vizier could be trusted to run things in his absence. He was a good man, if a bit vain and ambitious. Stormy knew he could trust him with his life. Besides, he wasn't so old that a little mountain climbing would kill him.

Grinning, he cracked his knuckles and began to climb again. It wouldn't be proper if the younger NPC party members got a lead on him.

The little girl felt the cold keenly. She huddled deeper into the ripped, torn, black and white fabric that hung over her. It looked to have been part of a dress, one for a much larger and older person. The ground was hard, rocky and she didn't like anything she could feel around her. She was miserable, frightened, and confused. She started to cry.

Stormy's ears twitched. He stopped climbing for a second and listened to the wind. *Was that the cry of a babe*, he thought. He shook his head in disbelief a second later. This was one of the tallest peaks in the area. How could a child be all the way up here?

Cold! And her body felt too unwieldy to get up and walk. She was too uncoordinated to even crawl. She balled herself up even further under the torn, ruined cloth that was her world, shivering. She wanted to go home, but what was home? Images flickered in her mind and yet she couldn't make sense of them or anything. She wailed even louder, demanding someone do something about this, the shrillness of her cries increasing as her discontent grew.

"What the hell?"

That was the cry of a babe! No doubt about it. Stormy yelled down at his men, asking if they heard it too. The ones closest to him did and they quickly caught up with him as they climbed to the nearest plateau. Stormy was a few meters away from the origin of the first cry, when a second cry split the air.

"What's going on? Who leaves children in the mountains?" He asked himself the question, but he honestly didn't want to know the answer. Sudden horror stories of mountain witches and mythical beasts came to mind, but he quickly discounted them. This was no time for reminiscing on old fairy tales. Something was very wrong here and he had to find out why.

The second infant was much more solidly built. A boy, he was much larger than most babies his true age, and unlike the little girl, he was quite capable of walking once the disorientation was gone. He didn't feel the cold of the mountain winds, but he did feel confused and upset. He missed the golden warmth that was his. That had been with him since he'd come into being. Now it was gone. The metal pod he was in was no longer whole. The wind was cutting, but he was a sturdy little lad and could bear it. The pod had made a large crater in the rocky, boulder-strewn ground. It shattered the ground and a few large boulders that were too close to its drop site, scooping out a depression and leaving the ground gently steaming. It would dissipate soon because of the ambient chill, but for now, the area under him was still much warmer than the wind, or the mountainside not far from the pod. He hunkered down, hoping to be warmed for just a bit more.

Stormy and his men found the girl first. She was a tiny, delicate thing with downy soft black hair and big, tear-filled blue eyes. Stormy gently picked her up and held her to his chest. "Shush now, little one. You're safe with me." He looked around for any clues as to how she arrived in the mountains, but couldn't find anything but the tattered dress she was left in.

Warm! Safe! Big person! The little girl snuggled up to him, clinging to him, still hiccupping and sniffing. She had been so scared! But now she felt better. Safer.

Stormy examined his new charge carefully. She seemed to be naked under the garment. It was clearly for a tall, adult woman and sported an elegant train. It seemed to have been the dress of a noblewoman of high standing, of unfamiliar fabric, stronger weave than anything anyone had ever seen before, in black and white. There were pieces of half-melted jewelry there that looked to have been beautiful when they were intact. Perhaps it belonged to her mother? But from the damage the dress had taken, was her mother dead?

Stormy looked at the remains of the dress and jewelry with sad eyes. There was no sign of blood on the clothing, but the strong fabric did not seem to keep the dirt either. Perhaps it had

simply crusted and flaked off? There was no evidence of that. This was another mystery to add to his growing list.

There was no indication of any name for the little girl. If her mother had been here or survived to leave her behind there were still no letters and thus, no way to tell what her name was. He held the little girl and kissed her cheek. "Do not weep, anymore, my little star. I will take care of you now."

One of the men ripped his outermost layer of cloth into lengths to create a makeshift harness for the young girl. Soon she was wrapped tight against Stormy's chest and he could murmur words of comfort if needed. All she knew was she was no longer alone, and she'd been alone for a long, long time. She clung to the new big person fiercely, not wanting to ever be alone again.

"Now let's go find your brother, my little star."

The boy slowly walked around the site where he crashed. The warmth had faded and he was disappointed. His tiny hand poked and prodded at the sharp rocks around him. He'd hiss and squeak whenever they'd draw blood, but the pain faded away before he could cry. He shuffled back and forth, his tiny arms unable to free him of the large crater he dug. He sat down next to the metal pod he landed in and sniffled.

"Oh, we've found a big one this time."

He looked up at the strange words and sniffled again. A big man with a little girl strapped to his chest slowly slid into the crater. He walked up to the boy and laid a calloused hand on his shoulder.

"And who might you be, my little king? Are you the brother to this little star?"

The boy blinked at the words. He didn't understand them completely, but he could grasp the basic meanings. He gazed up at the sniffing girl and reaching up, he softly wiped a tear away.

"Perhaps..." suggested one of his men. "Look, my lord, he can stand and walk. The little girl can't. She's clearly the younger sibling."

The little girl blinked, hiccuped and grabbed for the boy's hand with tiny, strong fingers. He was bigger than her but he wasn't a big person. And he was warm. She made a surprised, confused cooing noise at him.

Stormy chuckled and hugged them both to his chest. "Be at peace, my little ones. I'll take you home with me. You'll be safe and warm, there. I promise you that." He kissed them both on the

forehead and smiled. He held them close together and compared how different, but enchanting, they looked. "The little king and the little star... this story will be remembered forever."

"Well, they're certainly a strong, attractive pair of children," agreed one of the men who had rolled up the girl's discarded clothing. "I can't imagine why any woman would leave her children to die up here... I think the little girl should have these when she is older. So she will have some way to find out about her past." They were, he believed, left by the little children's mother.

"The metal shell seems to have been designed and built of alloys stronger than anything we have," admitted one of the men. "The metals used in these pieces of jewelry are also out of our experience." He looked at both, and they tried to lift the pod, only to give it up as they didn't have a means for transportation. The survey team would return of course, as quickly as possible but there would still be a delay. The technology in its making looked interesting and was utterly unfamiliar.

The two children cuddled close to the big person and slowly, the little girl began to relax, though she clutched at Stormy's clothing still unwilling to let anyone out of her sight. She was clearly afraid of being alone again. What had happened to leave two innocent infants, one of whom couldn't even crawl, alone to fend for themselves?

Stormy nodded before glancing at the pod. "Hm, that could give us more clues as well. Mark this entire area for a survey team. I want to know everything that happened here." He firmly grasped his new children. "No child should be left like this..."

His men did as they were told and the sun was shining right down on them as they made the slow climb down. The little king clung to his back and the little star sniffled into his chest. Stormy whispered comforting lullabies to them so they wouldn't be afraid.

***pg.629

580. ATDSVT -Past to Present (From a different POV)

The problems began to manifest sometime later. Their first few years were normal, according to the NPCs but after that, it lost all similarity to a normal child's growth. The differences became far more marked in comparison to their playmates and previous companions.

G had to be called in so often for medical checkups and discussions that the man threw up his hands and moved into the palace, taking his work with him. After all, this wasn't the first Game in which their guild members had to move in together. It wasn't as if Stormy had a wife in Game to help him handle things, and while the NPCs all agreed he was doing an okay job for a newbie parent, two kids were fairly hard to handle for anyone without being a single parent and being one of two rulers of the planet too. It wasn't as if upgrades would build themselves.

There were the finances, finagling trade, funding infrastructure construction, funding innovations in machinery and tools... among other things. More than half the time he was called away for one conference or the other, called upon to make decisions that would influence the lives of everyone on the planet. Money had to come from somewhere, and that meant taxation and trade deals, concessions and negotiations... among other things. True, he had the Vizier and officials to do this and that, but even with a voting block and officials, that still left him plenty of work to do if he wanted things to work out.

In the past, the Roman Empire's Consuls were two people elected to rule for only a year. Here on the other hand, being elected Consul meant he served the people for life or until abdication, and like the Roman Consuls, he couldn't predict whether or not his reforms would be taken up by the next Consul if he abdicated. There was no shortage of competition among the NPCs and even among his fellow Players and everyone could be expected to work for their own interests, motivation and agendas. Fortunately his Guildmates generally had their interests coinciding with his own, but that didn't mean he could assume everything would go perfectly according to plan. The Game had randomized weather and events after all, and he didn't exactly have control of the NPCs.

If there were droughts or famines, he and his fellow Players would have to deal with it. It didn't help him that the landed nobility NPCs resented their laws and administrative reforms, as they were used to enjoying the wealth from their estates, worked by vast armies of slaves. Even his Vizier's actions weren't controlled by him, having come with the Game setting.

Remaining the first among equals was hard work, given that there would always be people who wanted the position and the influence. The Game of Thrones was no laughing matter and it wasn't as if this was a hereditary rulership that could be passed down. If he failed to do his job properly or let things slip past him, there would be trouble; his reforms and their upgrades would be abandoned.

At least his Guildmates were hard at work.

On one hand, the two children were quite intelligent, picking up everything they were taught faster than most NPCs, but on the other... The little boy for one was extremely sturdy but a quick check with the newly set up x-rays showed he wasn't baseline human as no humans had that many additional internal organs, some being obviously redundant as backups in case of any failure. Twenty two additional glands and internal organs, *Sweet Mother of God*, what the hell was he supposed to be?!

Then there was his sister. And while she had the normal number of internal body parts, whatever they were made of certainly wasn't human. Capable of interbreeding with humans, yes, but so much more durable that she could punch people through walls. As strong as her big brother but with a frame that looked deceptively delicate.

Stormy was disturbed to find that the boy he had named Roboute aged faster, or at least he gained in height and muscle quite quickly. He was showing signs of prodigious strength to match his intelligence and he was showing that he was growing in maturity to match it. Perhaps he wasn't old enough to be in a council with his men, but he was certainly shaping up to be a fine son and successor.

His little sister on the other hand, had the opposite problem. She remained smaller than her age and fragile in appearance. At ten years of age, she looked like she was closer to five.

Little Neherenia, called Helen as a diminutive, was quite capable of picking up on things she could find in a book or that were taught to her. Her intelligence, when tested, rivaled that of Roboute. Her coherency with language and competency in understanding when it came to the lessons were both rapidly increasing.

However, she was highly dependent on company. She didn't want to be alone if it could be avoided. She seemed to grasp for attention as often as she could, glowing with joy when she was complimented. She insisted on having a night light because of the sporadic dreams she couldn't remember the next day. Where most children would want to go out alone to adventurously explore the world around them, she preferred to follow G, Stormy or Roboute constantly. She insisted on holding their hands whenever it was possible.

"Robby, can I have more blue paint please?" Helen vigorously colored in her drawing of a small, furry animal commonly found in the forests. It was an unnatural shade of purple, but she didn't seem to mind. The proportions were not exact and the eyes were exaggeratedly large, but it was recognizable nonetheless. The 'ground' of the picture was green and yellow, but the sky was blotchy and mostly white, the coloring uneven.

Roboute was now much taller than she was. While she looked like a five year old, he looked as if he was closer to thirteen or fourteen because of his height, though he was more solidly built than most teenagers caught in such growth spurts. He was also completely comfortable in his own skin and seemed to be adapting to his increased height and range with an enviable grace. He gently pushed the plate with the blobs of pigment in it to her side of the table.

Today, their small family was at their father's hunting lodge for a short vacation from the legislation Stormy had been preparing. They had a week left before they would return to the city.

Because little Helen abhorred being alone, she often followed her father to his study when he was working whenever he was in the city. She often sat on the carpets by his feet, leaning against his leg and helped him with the paperwork. Often, the paperwork was about things she had no interest in, but since her daddy was happy whenever she showed initiative in helping him, she was pleased to do so. She much preferred this, though.

As Stormy watched Roboute gravely paint his very blue picture of the nearby lake and reassure his flighty little sister with a gentle pat on the head, he couldn't help but worry about their future. Would this strange growth rate mean that Roboute would wither much earlier as one of the fragile, old texts had described as a defect that manifested in some rare, unfortunate children? Or would he simply keep growing until he outshone and overshadowed his companions and then stop? Stormy hoped for the latter because the former would break his heart.

As for Helen, how would she fare when he was gone, if she kept growing this slowly? How would she get married? He might never live long enough in Game to see his grandchildren, because unlike both of them, and even unlike some of his fellow Players, he had gone in with a baseline human form.

There was no reason whatsoever for her to keep being this small. She had no allergies to stunt her growth. She slept easily and deeply. She showed no signs of weakness, weariness or worry. Her intake of food was normal and she wasn't a picky eater. She had no nutrient deficiencies whatsoever in the tests her concerned father had the doctors run and yet she didn't grow up as fast as those around her. In the end, the doctors and G himself simply told Stormy that this was perfectly normal for her and that no treatments were necessary.

Stormy put his worries aside. The work could wait for a time, and Helen was healthy and happy. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, the game was plentiful, and there was a lake he could see out the window that was full of fish just waiting to be caught. Perhaps later in the afternoon the three of them could sit side by side on the river bank. The water would be cool and just right for swimming.

It was a glorious spring day. The scent of aromatic tea, freshly baked cake, scones, and pie filled the air. and little Helen was having yet another tea-party. Like other little girls, she liked tea parties. The food here had all been made by her with G's assistance, naturally, and G had been keeping her occupied with arts, crafts, dancing and music. As of now, her sewing and pottery had improved quite nicely as she had been learning to make clothes and little clay pots, cups, bowls and dishes for her stuffed toys and dollies under his supervision, among other things. She was still getting the hang of baking, for example. G was getting her started on cooking as soon as he was certain she wouldn't burn herself by accident.

To her right, sat her teddy bear. To her left was the toy rabbit's chair. Beside that was G's seat, and directly in front of her sat Roboute and her bemused father.

"Would you like some pie, Robby?" she asked hopefully. Roboute considered the question gravely and nodded. "Yes, please." he said politely, his voice resonating, deeper than it should have been at this age.

Beaming, Helen sliced off a piece of pie and smeared butter on a scone, which she then put on the plate in front of Roboute. It was a pretty pink plate. Next, she filled his empty cup with too-sweet, too-strong tea.

Stormy raised his cup. "A bit more tea please, my little star." She was so easy to please, it made him happy to do these things for her. She beamed and poured his tea. He smiled back at her fondly. Such an eager hostess his little girl was!

Well, maybe she'd stop over-sugaring the tea when she was a bit older. For now, he simply poured more water for himself to dilute it.

"The pie is very good." Roboute praised his little sister, enjoying the way she preened. She had helped bake that pie, after all. It was good that Robby liked it.

G looked deeply satisfied, as he diluted his own tea. And surreptitiously took the bunny's slice of pie.

Helen liked parties. She liked to bake, and she loved fruit. She didn't seem to like getting her hands or her fine dresses dirty and she loved pretty things.

So, all in all, she was almost a typical little girl of her age. Smarter perhaps, but all in all, Stormy and G didn't have any problems with her. She didn't have that many questions, was easily soothed, enjoyed cuddling and was easy to raise.

Roboute was a completely different matter. Intelligent, mature, he'd already mastered riding and fencing, and seemed to have an interest in archery, hawking and hunting. These made him rather popular among the teenagers and young children of his fellow nobles.

He seemed to like interacting with his workers and oddly enough, he'd begun to mirror his father's disguised loathing for the slavery and abuses against the common people. And his desire to mitigate the effects on the population. That.. wasn't received as well as his other hobbies.

At his age, Stormy was going through the process carefully, putting it into law little by little. Easing their paths slowly with the goal in mind. He couldn't exactly simply outlaw slavery and expect everyone to follow his lead. This wasn't something he could control; the NPCs weren't going to follow his will unless they 'felt' like it, their actions were dependent on the randomized events but he could at least put laws in to regulate the treatment of slaves and improve the standard of living of the common folk. Roboute wasn't *hasty*, to be precise.. but he was younger and a lot more impulsive than his father.

Impulsive enough that in the past year, he'd started having a few... rather loud *discussions* with those older than he was, among the other nobility.

Not that the young men of the nobles knew he was that much younger than them. The fact of the matter was, where little Helen looked the part of a pampered little girl... Roboute with his questions and his love for books and his unusual height and build, was registering on others as a young man. He wasn't that old, the older members of Stormy's men remembered when he was found. But he *acted* like he was.

It was slightly worrying. Stormy was proud of his son's prodigious intellect, but he didn't need to be having trouble with his fellow nobles. He didn't need to be smoothing things over while he was trying to push his laws through.

And then, suddenly it stopped. Some of the other noble teenagers began to change their minds. Apparently Roboute was getting more eloquent. Coupled with the patience he was displaying right now, Stormy was hoping the boy would be able to harness it, to pave the way for a better future. For everyone, not just the nobles.

It was a pity the Vizier was becoming obdurate on the subject.

***pg.629

581. ATDSVT -Past to Present (From a different POV)

The Vizier was very annoyed and deeply frustrated. He'd originally been banking on the Consul's so-called reforms dying with him which was why he'd played the Loyal Opposition. It would have been so easy to just wait until the older man died, then to take over. A little poison to ease the way, if he didn't get carried off by old age.. But his children's arrival changed the entire playing ground. If either of them got into politics for real... Bad enough that the Consul had support in the Senate who were helping him with various issues, but actual successors would be a hassle.

For starters, several of his fellow nobles were getting quite resentful at the fact that their rights and privileges were being tampered with and that their children were getting suborned by the Consul's son into the boy's new faction. There was a growing undercurrent of disgruntlement, particularly among those of his generation and the traditionalists who saw possible disruptions of their way of living.

Where in the world had those two children come from? He'd heard nothing of any wife being taken from any of the nobility. There should have been gossip if Stormy had entered into a protracted engagement, but there had been none. The only ones living in his estate were G and the servants. The Consul had simply taken the two children to work with him one day, and stated they were his offspring.

Stormy had seemed to be married to the job as Consul. Of course there existed the possibility that he had fathered them on one of the *commoners*, but there was no evidence of that either. No highborn maidens or maids demanding he take responsibility. Could they be fathered on a mistress? Whoever it was would have been extremely discreet, because there was nothing he and his men could dig up on this. He'd *tried*. *Of course* he'd tried. If he could get any dirt on the Consul, he could have ousted him with popular support from his fellows. He could have blackened his name, tainted his reforms, made them much less likely to pass. But no, there was nothing he could use from that angle, to pry the man out of power.

It was as if the two children had been conjured out of thin air.

To figure out what he could work with, the Vizier naturally sent out his spies. If there was any trace of corruption, perhaps Stormy's young son could be persuaded to.. step aside. Or simply be distracted with something else.

Not knowing Roboute's true age, it was easy for the Vizier to make the mistake of assuming he was closer to adulthood than he actually was. He towered over his clearly younger sister..

Another mystery to add to the Vizier's frustration. The young man was older. He had to be. His height was closer to that of a young man, he had wide shoulders, a lean, powerful build that was quickly becoming more muscled, large hands and feet, and a regal bearing. As if he knew exactly what he wanted out of life. The boy didn't seem to exude awkwardness. He seemed to know exactly how to move.

The sister however..She couldn't possibly be older than ten. A pretty little creature of seven or eight was the Vizier's best guess. Extremely sheltered.

And the Vizier would guess that she was somewhere close to eight years younger than her brother.

Which implied that the man had procreated twice. And managed to keep the woman, or women, hidden both times.

Perhaps, if they were followed, they might lead the spies to some dirt. Except that was difficult to manage as the little girl was kept close at home, and her little brother had already been known to disarm footpads with surpassing speed.

Roboute calmly surveyed the shelves and tapped his chin in thought. It was rare for him to come to the markets himself. Usually an aide or a servant of the family would have the time to get their supplies quickly and quietly without much intervention from their employers, but Roboute felt like stretching his legs today. Protected by a few squads of his father's personal

guard and personally armed with both a gun and a sword at his belt, he led his sister out into the open to experience the liveliness of the city's market center.

The marketplace had been rebuilt from its previous form, which had been overladen with filth and cluttered with too many thieves. That had been five years ago during his father's prime, and the prosperity of the change was still for all to see. Vendors sold their wares without any fear from thieves since law enforcers patrolled the rooftops and alleyways. The streets were clean, as was the market itself. The stalls didn't show signs of wear, having been recently replaced by order, and payment of the Consul and his supporters, many of whom had been entrusted with various functions in the government.

G for example, had the agricultural revolution well underway, and the massive aquaponic, aeroponic and hydroponic gardens he had prioritized had come to pass. One could see far more green, at window sills, at balconies, on rooftops...

The Parks open to the public now had fruit trees and edible plants everywhere that anyone could pick for themselves, pavilions, built in benches, barbecue grills and fishponds. G had subsidized farmers and those of the populace that wanted to grow their own food in gardens, distributed seeds of herbs, medicinal plants, spices, fruit bearing plants among others. He had also undertaken and completed the building of dormitories to house refugees fleeing from disasters and buildings with both living quarters and workshops for people coming to the city to seek new livelihoods.

His initiative to spread around the tools and means of production including simple hand-powered machinery, subsidizing smaller scale craftsmen and businesses as well as funding the training of more craftsmen, mechanics and artisans was well underway. Small scale cheese-making, jerky-making, smoked meat and fish, pickling, bottling and canning operations were popping up like mushrooms in the mushroom farms. More small perfumeries, artisans selling incense, candles, scented oils, lotions, soaps, toothpastes and clothes dyes had followed, and the market district had gotten even larger.

The world was prospering under their fathers' administration.

Helen held on to his hand, eagerly looking around her. Everywhere, there were new things to see. Here, the vendors sold cheese wheels and melted cheese on bread. Beside them, the bakers' breads, cakes, scones, buns and other assorted sweet and savory pastries were carefully tended to drive any flies away. They looked warm and smelled delicious. The scent from the perfumers, the incense sellers and the florists wafted in the air, sweetening the atmosphere. The potters and glassmakers were side by side, keeping anxious watch over their wares and eagerly approaching the people who were inspecting what was for sale.

Brilliantly colored glass was a specialty because of their mineral rich mountain soils. The pottery too, was surprisingly colorful. Soft fabrics and tanned leather were kept in immaculate or as clean as possible a condition, near the shiny displays of the sellers of jewelry.

There, near the cheese and bread vendors were the vendors who were cooking meat, roasting slices of seasoned meat, roasted small fowls and various small game. They were surprisingly appetizing. Though the scents of the live beasts brought here to be sold were discordant notes.

Fine ponies and horses, lambs, sheep, goats... farm fowl.. They were kept at a discreet distance from the food and luxuries.

All in all, it was gloriously, colorfully chaotic.

Helen wanted to see it all. The roasting meat slices, the bread and cheese, and kebabs had her following her nose. The shiny jewelry and soft silks that shone in the light had her straining to see. It was clear she was new to the area.

Roboute, of course, had seen it all before. Unlike his vulnerable little sister who both of their fathers were protective of, he was armed, and quite capable of taking care of himself. The only reason he had guards today, was because of his easily excited little sister.

Roboute bought her a few cheese-sticks. "You like cheese, don't you? How about this flavor?" It was a white-colored cheese with many spices embedded in it.

Helen nodded. She liked everything she was given. She took the cheese sticks and, while nibbling on one, kept looking around her, clearly fascinated by all the colorful items. "Flowers, Robby!" she blurted out. "Like in the garden."

Some of the colorful blossoms weren't in the Consul's garden and it was those that caught her attention. Possibly they were wildflowers. Little Helen wanted to look at all the stalls and the vendors, scenting metaphorical blood, were already wondering if she would stop by their stall. Roboute, they knew, of course, because he tended to buy things. Mostly animals for the farms, or that beautiful white horse he'd taken a liking to. Today, he was accompanying a little girl, and seemed to be willing to indulge her. That meant more profits. The toy-sellers, one of whom had sold Roboute the very same pink tea set some months ago, lit up. Surely the girl would want a doll or a stuffed toy.

"It's yummy, Robby." Helen beamed. "I wish papa was here." The Consul rarely ever got out of work nowadays. The Vizier's continually raised objections were keeping him busy. She was starting to not-like the Vizier. Even if he had visited her party when their father had finally decided to present them to the populace and his fellow nobles.

Roboute nodded. "I do, too. But today's a rather busy day. More of his reforms have to be presented and passed through the senate. And other than Papa's friends, they like to drag their heels." The little king shook his head in disgust. It seemed that simply helping people was anathema to most members of the senate.

He distracted himself by buying a wildflower wreath for Helen. He placed it carefully over her head and smiled. "Now you're a little flower princess."

Helen giggled and posed jauntily with the wreath. Soon they were looking through the small stalls for interesting things. Helen had pocket money, of course, just like Roboute had his own allowance. Helen had never bought anything on her own before, even though she helped her father with accounting. She found actually being able to *spend* was a surprisingly heady experience. The bemused guards with them soon found themselves carrying some of the satchels with her completely random purchases. As one may have guessed, she was blowing her pocket money on shiny things, mostly toys, sweets and random foods she'd never seen before.

The little miss seemed to attract attention, her amazement at everything she saw was a pleasant surprise for the vendors. Meanwhile, the Vizier's spies were carefully monitoring the two as they made their way around the marketplace.

Roboute frowned and his eyes scanned the crowds around him. He might have missed the people spying on him if his instincts weren't screaming. He discreetly gave his guards a signal to surround his sister before unholstering his gun. He doubted that anything would happen, but it wouldn't hurt to be prepared.

The spies followed the two, carefully pulling back whenever they caught the guards or the Consul's son looking for them. They were recording the two children's movements, which might just be dangerous.

If they so much as approached his sister, Roboute would break their arms, and they knew it. He'd already been known to do such a thing to a threat before. He might as well do it again.

'The boy is protective', the report said, as the Vizier skimmed it. "Strong. Intelligent and perceptive. Completely in favor of Stormy's meritocracy from the way he interacts with the commoners. He's been taking cases to the consul's office. The girl is easily distracted, flighty, and enjoys playing around with her allowance."

But there was still no blackmail. And no news about the two children's missing mother. Or mothers. So he couldn't use that to drum Stormy out of office. He'd actually tried to find any sort of scandal between him and G but everyone he had interrogated or paid for information agreed there was nothing there whatsoever.

Perhaps it was time to seek other, more *direct* avenues to power.

The little girl was beautiful, elegant. She was a worthy prize to be married off to one of the other noble families and one that their matrons were already showing an interest in. She didn't seem to have much of an interest in anything but her family, following her brother, G and father around like an adoring puppy and basking in their approval. She was learning the ways of a noblewoman quite well, and would probably be an ornament to anyone who married her. She wasn't a threat to the Vizier's ambitions or the goals of his faction to retain their privileges and their wealth. She seemed to be the flighty type that liked her father's wealth too much to risk her inheritance by changing the laws on her own. All he needed to do was to ensure that Stormy's death looked as if it was accidental... Even if the girl saw the assassination, she might choose to keep quiet, or else, she might be easily removed from the scene.

The boy would be far more troublesome. The boy was a completely different problem, one that he wasn't equipped to deal with. The boy was tall, strong, and deeply espoused his father's ideas and ideals. He was already beginning to talk some of the more easily swayed youngsters among the nobles to see his point of view, and if he went into politics as his father's successor...

The Vizier would see his work go up in flames. That was unacceptable. So. He needed to find a way to get the boy out of the way.

He needed to manufacture a crisis to get him out of the capital. Again. What pretext could he use?

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