

A Long Time Ago

The staff came down hard, and she barely managed to put her own in the way and prevent it from splitting her head open. She blocked, and took a step back, trying to create some distance between herself and her opponent. The boy followed after her, swinging his staff wide. She watched his movements, waited for the right moment, and then struck. She stopped her retreat and in an instant pushed herself forward, stabbing with her staff. The boy was taken by surprise, and she struck him in the center of his chest, knocking him back. He tripped and fell onto his back.

She stepped forward raising her staff high to finish it, when the master yelled out.

“That’s enough,” immediately she froze and jumped back lowering her staff and straightening to attention.

The boy across from her did the same, only with a groan. She winced as she heard him show him his pain.

“Number 217, that was disappointing,” the master said.

The boy bowed his head and spoke. “I’m sorry master I will—”

The back of the master’s fist hit him as he was mid-sentence, sending him flying across the sand. She forced herself not to react to any of that, and keep her eyes looking forward.

“I did not give you permission to speak, number 217,” the master said.

She knew just how much a strike from Master Filos hurt, she had been on the receiving end often enough. Number 217 should be lucky that the master hadn’t used his tail, somehow, that hurt more.

Their fighting instructor walked over to number 217 and glanced down as the boy didn’t move.

“Unconscious,” he muttered to himself. “Such a waste.”

He turned around with a disgusted look on his face and started walking over to her. She tried to suppress her fear, but she couldn't help it. The master approached her and looked down at her.

“Congratulations, number 414, you've done well,” Master Filos told her.

His words made her feel instant happiness, she had been trying so hard to become good with the staff.

“Your seventh birthday passed recently, had it not?” The master asked.

414 swallowed and then responded. “Yes, master.”

“I guess that a reward is in order,” he told her. “It will be waiting for you back in your room. Dismissed.”

414 bowed her head and thanked her master, before rushing off the sand of the arena and into the tunnels that led back to her room. Of course, one of the custodians escorted her, but he or she was wearing a mask and a robe and they rarely talked, so 414 didn't really count them as people. She only knew that they took care of her home. She didn't know much about it, aside that it was underground, and she hadn't seen much of it aside from the arena, a few other rooms, and the one she slept in. But it was all that she had ever known. In the back of her mind, she knew that there was supposed to be more than this, she dreamed of it sometimes, of something vast and blue above her, but she didn't know what it was. And she knew better than to ask questions. She needed to listen, to obey, that was all that was expected of her.

The custodian led her to her room, and 414 entered excitedly, wondering what her gift was going to be. The moment she entered,

she was met with an intruder. A tiny monster sat in the center of her small room, looking at her with big eyes and a tilted head.

Immediately, 414 got ready to fight, but a voice stopped her in her tracks.

“This is your gift,” the custodian said. “You are to keep it alive, if it dies, you will be punished.”

414 glanced at the custodian and then at the small monster. It didn't look that dangerous, and she wished that she could see how strong it was, but she didn't have access to the Framework yet. Slowly she stepped inside the room, approached it.

The custodian closed the door behind her and locked it as usual.

414 knelt in front of the monster, seeing its bushy tail swish from side to side.

“What are you?” She whispered.

The monster yelped, surprising her and then moved forward. She leaned back, but then pushed past her fear, she put her hand in front of her and the monster sniffed it, then pushed its head into it. She gasped as she felt the softness of its fur. It felt nice.

“You are so soft,” she said. It was small, about the size of her forearm, and barely weighing anything. It had long ears and a long tail. And it was covered in soft white fur. “I guess that I need to keep you alive then.”

414 nodded to herself, and decided that she couldn't fail at this mission. After all failing usually meant beatings or going without food, or... just going away, like some of the others that had failed and she never saw them again. She moved to the cot in the corner of her small room and sat down, the little creature nestled in her arms. A small smile tugged at her lips as she looked down at it.

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414 winced as one of the others in her class failed to answer a question correctly.

“Wrong,” Master Tessia said as she hit him with her rod across the head. “Class perk choices are not random, number 113.”

The Master turned her eyes to the rest of the room, and then spoke again. “Does anyone else know the answer?”

414 tried to make herself look small, she knew the answer, but it was better if one didn’t stand out.

“You, number 414, give me an answer,” the master ordered.

414 turned her eyes forward immediately and then started speaking. “Class perk choices are given based on the Class, rarity, and personal achievements and feats, master.”

Master Tessia nodded her head. “Correct,” she said and then moved on with the class.

414 sighed in relief, Master Tessia seemed in a good mood. She often tried to find the tiniest little mistakes in the answers and use them as an excuse for punishment.

The rest of the class went by quickly, and afterward they were all escorted back into their rooms.

The moment 414 entered her room, she was assaulted, an attack coming from up above her. With reflexes beaten into her over many years she quickly grabbed the attacker and pulled him up in front of her.

“What do you think you are doing, Mr. Fluffy Tail?”

Her attacker just squeaked at her, and she couldn’t help but smile. It had been three years since she had received him as a reward, and she couldn’t imagine her life without him. She brought him close and

rubbed her nose in his soft fur, eliciting a purring sound from the creature. She went to her bed and sat down, with Mr. Fluffy Tail in her lap. She was exhausted from today's lessons, and she was worried about the upcoming test.

The masters were all keeping quiet about what it was going to entail, which made her nervous. Mr. Fluffy Tail had to have sensed her feelings because he nuzzled his nose around her neck, hitting her collar. She pulled him away as it was uncomfortable, she had been growing, and would need a new collar soon, perhaps after the test?

She closed her eyes and started to hum quietly, petting Mr. Fluffy Tail softly on his back. The custodians didn't like it when they made such sounds, but 414 liked it. She had found something in a book once, about a skill called singing. It was a way of making pleasurable and harmonious sounds with one's voice. She tried not to do it too often, since the custodians didn't like it. But it helped her relax, and Mr. Fluffy Tail liked it.

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414 stood in the center of the arena, Mr. Fluffy Tail in her arms, the three masters standing in front of her. She had been woken up in the middle of the night, and brought here, along with the critter in her arms. She didn't know why she was in the arena, but she guessed that it had something to do with the test.

"Number 414," Master Liron—the greatest of the masters—spoke. "You've had that monster for a while now, right?"

414 nodded her head quickly, knowing that making Master Liron wait was not a good idea.

"Did you name it?" Master Liron asked.

414 froze, she didn't know if she had been allowed to do it. No one had told her that she couldn't, but no one had told her that she could either.

"Tell me the truth," Master Liron said slowly.

414 swallowed and then looked down at the critter in her hands. "Mr. Fluffy Tail," she said.

"Ah, Mr. Fluffy Tail, a nice name," Master Liron said. "Now, number 414, it is the time for your test."

414 buried her head in the soft fur in her hands. She kept her eyes closed, she didn't want to see what was next to her. She wasn't the first to take the test.

"Open your eyes child," he said. And she knew that she couldn't disobey.

She opened her eyes and he grabbed her chin, then turned her head to the side where one of the other girls laid on the sand, blood scattered all around her. A tiny creature, looking almost exactly like Mr. Fluffy Tails was bleeding next to her.

"That is what will happen if you fail this test," Master Liron said. "Do you understand?"

414 nodded her head hurriedly, she didn't want to fail.

"Good," Master Liron nodded his head, and then pulled out a dagger from his belt and offered it to her. "Number 414, I want you to kill Mr. Fluffy Tail."

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414 curled up on the floor of her room, crying, blood covering her hands. She was shaking, and she didn't know how to make it stop.

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Mr. Fluffy Tail, screaming in her arms.

A sound startled her and she stood up, ready to fight as the doors to her room opened. A custodian entered, followed by another collared girl.

“Number 414, this is number 93. From today, you will be sharing this room,” with that, he turned around and left.

414 didn't even have the time to process what was happening. She looked at the girl in the pale orange light of the gemstone on the ceiling, and recognized her as a demasi by her small horns. Then she noticed the blood on her shirt and her hands, and then she knew that 93 had done the same thing she had.

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“Please—” 414 said as the pain lessened. She couldn't even see from the tears, everyone around her were just blurred shapes. She was tied to a chair, light pushed in her eyes.

“Don't beg number 414,” Master Filos said. “You are better than that, take the pain, learn from it.”

Before 414 could say anything else, one of the custodians grabbed another one of her fingernails and then pulled. She screamed as she felt flesh tearing apart. Before she could recover, the custodian started again on another. She was screaming, and begging, but they didn't stop, not until they took all of them out as well as her toenails.

By the end, she was a weeping mess. She heard the master speaking with the custodians.

“That was good, heal her up,” she said, and 414 felt liquid being poured down her throat and her limbs.

“T-thank y-you m-master,” she managed to say.

“That was good number 414,” Master Filos said, and it made 414 feel grateful, and prideful that she succeeded.

“Now,” Master Filos started again. “Do it again, but cut her tongue out this time, she screams too much.”

Before she could protest, someone grabbed her head and forced her mouth open. Then they pulled her tongue out.

Hours, that felt like days later, 414 was back in her room. Lying in her bed, with number 93 holding her close as she wept. Whispering to her that it was all going to be all right.

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“This is a new part of your training, you will spend one day every week in this room,” Master Liron told her. 414 looked through the open doors, not seeing anything strange inside, except that it was bare.

“Go in,” master said.

414 took a step forward and entered. The moment she stepped inside, everything changed. It was as if suddenly she was carrying a great weight, or rather as if she was a lot heavier. She couldn't take a full breath, and she started to panic. She turned around, looking at her master through the bar window on the doors.

“Get used to that feeling, number 414. The better you adapt, the stronger you will become,” Master Liron said and then left her there.

She suffered in silence, knowing that no matter how much she cried out, nothing would change.

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414 dodged as the monster rushed her. It missed her by the hair and then struck a wall. She realized that this was her only chance, she was tired, and her wounds were bleeding too much. If she was going to win, she needed to do it now. She roared in defiance as she charged the disoriented monster, she put all her skill, all her strength behind one attack. She stabbed forward with her spear, aiming for the weak spot in its hide, just behind its eyes. The monster didn't react in time, and her spear stabbed through the flesh and deep into its body. It yelped in pain and tried to get away, but 414 followed. She pushed her spear deeper in, and the monster tumbled to the ground, its breathing slowing, until it finally stopped.

"That was good, number 414," Master Filos said as he walked into the arena.

414 leaned on her spear, trying to catch her breath. She was hurting all over, but she and tried not to let her master see any weakness as he approached. He had a control rod in his hand, which he would use to shock them through their collars if they disobeyed. Not that anyone of them ever would.

"Number 414, you are soon going to gain access to the Framework, are you not?" Master Filos asked as he looked at the monster's corpse.

"Yes, master," she responded.

"And you know what you need to do?" Master Filos asked.

"Yes, master."

She felt something tap her shoulder as Master Filos walked around her, keeping his control rod on her shoulder. "You don't need to hear what will happen if you make a mistake?"

"No master," 414 answered.

"Good."

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Number 414 blinked as she found herself someplace else. One moment she was inside her room, and then she was here, in a dark place that seemed infinite. She was sitting in a chair in front of a table, and across from her sat something else. Immediately she realized that she was sitting in front of the Dealmaker.

She inclined her head in respect.

“Number 414, welcome, today is the day you become something more,” the Dealmaker said.

“I... I’ll have access to Essence now?” She asked. She had seen the adults using it, and a few of the other kids had gotten it recently. She didn’t know how it was going to feel, what was going to change. But she knew that it was what the masters had been preparing them all for.

“Of course, but first,” Dealmaker waved his hand and orbs appeared in front of her. “One of these is your reward, for killing a monster before meeting me.”

Number 414, looked the choices over, but she already knew what she needed to pick—her masters had told her. She picked one of the skills and the Dealmaker nodded.

“Good, now. You may choose to buy something more, with Essence you have earned through your life.”

Number 414 looked at the orbs with longing, but she knew that she shouldn’t. Masters had a plan for them, and she couldn’t disobey. Regardless, she wouldn’t have enough Essence to buy anything of real worth.

“Thank you for the offer, but I... can’t,” number 414 said.

The Dealmaker tilted his head. "Of course you can, this is your decision and yours alone."

Ordinarily she wouldn't have dared to disobey the Masters, but something about this place made her not care as much. After a few moments, she turned her eyes from the orbs and looked at the darkness inside the Dealmaker's hood, then she whispered a word.

"Ah," the Dealmaker nodded. "Yes, you have enough for that."

Number 414 hesitated, she knew what would happen if the masters found out. But then she remembered Mr. Fluffy Tail, and decided that perhaps she was owed this.

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The kick sent her rolling across the floor and into a wall. She couldn't breathe right, something was wrong with her chest.

"Stupid bitch!" Master Filos said as he kicked her again. "I told you what you were supposed to do! And you disobeyed!"

She tried to raise her arms to block, but it was futile, he was much stronger than her.

"Singing? That is what you wasted a skill slot on? You ungrateful little worm," he reached down and grabbed her hair, then pulled her up by it. She didn't even have the strength to try and fight back.

Master Filos stared at her, his eyes filled with so much rage, more than she had ever seen him show. Then he grimaced and threw her across the room. She hit the floor hard and once she stopped rolling she remained down, unable to move.

"Take the bitch back to her room, don't heal her. Let her suffer until tomorrow," Master Filos' words were the last thing she heard before she lost consciousness.

When she woke up, she was hurting all over. She realized that she was in her room, and that number 93 was above her cleaning up the blood on her face.

“You shouldn’t have disobeyed,” number 93 said.

“I know,” she whispered.

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A year had passed since number 414 had gained access to Essence, and she had done well since then. She had raised all of her skills several tiers, and she was at the top in the fighting and physical categories. She had fought monsters and people daily, always to the death, sometimes barely surviving. Right now, she was gathered in the arena, standing in a line with the others. There weren’t that many of them left, a few dozen at most.

The masters were standing in front of them, with the custodians standing behind them.

“Today, you will be going to the Dealmaker, and you will be taking up a Class,” Master Filos said, then his eyes turned to number 414. “I don’t have to tell you what will happen if you do not do as we have asked. After that, each of you will be given a path. The real training will begin afterward.”

Number 414 didn’t know what exactly the masters planned, but they had been taught all about the three different focuses. She knew enough about each of them, that she could easily grow in power.

Then, as the masters gave their orders, she opened her screens and went to speak with the Dealmaker.

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The monster rushed at her, but 414 dodged to the side, then she reached with her hand toward the monster with her **{Disrupt}**. It stumbled as it lost its footing, and she pounced, she pulled her fist back and then punched.

[Perfect Essence Breaker] hit it in the side, and she felt it lose control of its power. Before it could react, she focused and triggered **[Inflict Agony]**. The monster dropped as it was hit by a wave of agony, and she jumped on its head. She hammered its head with her fists, and then, when she knew that it was close to death she triggered another of her abilities. She put her hands on top of its head and pulled with **[Essence Drain]**.

Quickly she felt its life drain away along with its Essence. And then, it died, and she stood up.

“Nice job number 414,” Master Filos said. “Now, sit and create Essence Crystals until your cooldown is back, we will prepare another monster.”

414 nodded her head and sat on the ground with her legs crossed, following her master’s command.

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A year later, number 414 found herself in the arena again.

“Today, is your graduation,” Master Filos said, as he looked at number 414 and number 93.

The two of them were standing one across another, waiting. They knew that they would have to fight, it was the usual way these tests went.

“But unlike your other fights,” Master Filos said. “This one is different. Only one of you will leave this arena alive.”

Number 414 blinked, not quite understanding. She turned and looked at the master seeing the smirk on his face.

“Whoever kills the other first, wins. Refusing to fight will mean punishment, and let me assure you, nothing that you have felt before will even compare to what you will suffer if you disobey.”

Number 414 shivered, her hands started to shake as she remembered another such test, long ago. She didn't understand the concept of cruelty, not really. This was her entire world, but at that moment she hated the masters.

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Number 414 sat in her room, her hands covered in blood of her only friend. She didn't even understand what a friend was, but if she did she would've known that she had killed hers. She stared at her hands for hours, with a blank expression on her face, not really knowing what to do.

Then she felt the ground and everything else around her shake.

She blinked, because something like that had never happened before. She stood as more tremors came, then she walked over to the door. She put her head against it, listening. She could hear shouting and... fighting in the distance?

She wasn't sure, but soon, the fighting got louder.

She stepped back and got ready. She didn't know what was happening, but she knew that she needed to defend itself.

Her doors shook, and then swung open. Before they were even fully open she jumped forward, attacking the intruder. She managed

to hit them in the head, but then before she could even react, she was on the floor, her head slamming against it and making the world twist.

“Fuck,” she heard someone say.

“What are you doing! We are here for them!”

“I know, she surprised me,” the intruder above her said.

She could see down the corridor, it was filled with bodies of custodians. Her head hurt so much, and soon the pain became too much, and she felt herself slip into the dark.

“Shit, come help me with—”

* * *

Number 414 awoke in a world that was completely different than everything else that she knew. She was on some strange wooden house that was surrounded by nothing. Everywhere she looked she saw blue. Something about it was familiar to her, but she couldn't quite place it.

She had a warm and soft blanket around her shoulders, and a warm cup of liquid in her hands. It tasted better than anything that she had ever tasted. Around her were a few of the others, but far less than she thought there should be, not even half a dozen. She didn't know where she was, or what this was.

There was no sign of masters, and she was afraid to even ask these new adults. The first time she asked they had clearly told her a lie. They've taken her collar off, even when she tried to fight them. She knew that she couldn't allow them to take it, but she was too weak to fight them. Whoever they were, they were strong.

They were all demasi, and she saw them casting strange looks in her and the others directions. She even caught a bit of their conversations.

“Poor things—”

“Fucking monsters, doing that to children—”

“Should’ve kept them alive, just to make them suffer—”

“You think that we’ll be able to help them?”

She didn’t understand anything that they said. So for now, she decided to sit still and wait. Masters would surely come back eventually, and she feared that all of this was just another test.

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A few days later, number 414 found herself in a strange place. It was... she didn’t know what it was, she had never seen its like. She only knew that it was big. They were told to climb down from the strange house that she had learned was called an airship. They were led into a large empty place, with people waiting around.

Quickly they were separated, and number 414 didn’t know what to do. Adults were telling her that everything was going to be all right, but she didn’t know what had even been wrong. So she just sat in silence and listened. Eventually the adults realized that she wasn’t going to talk, and left her alone, shaking their heads in a strange manner as they walked off.

They had left her at a table filled with food, but she didn’t touch it. She wasn’t given permission to.

Then, a few minutes later she was startled by a voice next to her.

Number 414 turned and looked at a young demasi, probably close to her age. She had long blond hair and pale skin, and her horns were growing backwards.

414 blinked at the way she was dressed, it was unlike anything she had ever seen. A long and colorful clothing item that covered the entirety of her body in one piece, it even trailed over the ground!

“Hello,” she said.

414 blinked at her, then glanced around, trying to see if anyone was close by. She didn’t know if she should respond.

“Why aren’t you eating?” The girl asked.

414 looked at the food, and then back at the girl. There were no masters nearby, and the girl was younger, closer to her age. Perhaps she wouldn’t get in trouble for speaking with her.

“I wasn’t given permission,” 414 said softly.

The girl blinked and then tilted her head. “You don’t need permission silly, you are free.”

414 didn’t know what that meant. The girl stared at her and then sighed.

“My name is Selia, what is yours?”

After a few moments, she saw no reason why she shouldn’t respond. “I’m number 414.”

The girl blinked, and her expression changed several times in a short period of time. “That’s not a name. You should pick a new one.”

“I’m not allowed to do that,” 414 said.

“Of course you are,” Selia said. “Your masters are dead, there is no one left to tell you what to do.”

414 didn’t see how the masters could be dead, they were... they couldn’t die.

“How about I help you pick one?” Selia said, then she peered down at 414 closely. “Let’s see, who do you look like..? Hm... you remind me of one of my aunts. She died in a war, a few years ago, so I don’t think that she would mind if you borrow her name. She was called Erdania. What do you think?”

414 blinked. “I...” she didn’t know what to say.

“C’mon, try it out, say it out loud. *My name is Erdania*, see how it feels like.”

414 frowned, and then decided to humor the girl. “My name is... Erdania.”

“There!” Selia clapped her hands. “And what do you think?”

“I... I like it,” she said honestly.

“Good, then from this moment forward, Erdania is your name!”

Number 414—no, Erdania—didn’t know what to make of everything that had happened, her entire world had been turned upside down. But something deep inside her told her that things would be all right.