

## 134: Inferno

“...*What?*”

A chill ran down Gaven’s spine as the Baroness’ steely locked onto him. A sudden tension filled the space between them, and the frigid night air was forced aside as the temperature rose.

“...You took *care* of her?” the woman asked him. Her speech was still as emotionless as always, but there was a dangerous tone in her voice now.

Gaven fought down the instincts that told him to step back and reach for his hidden blades. It had been annoying enough to make his way back after jumping off a several hundred-meter-high tower back in the Sanctuary, but now he had a pissed-off boss to deal with as well? Could it be she actually wanted the Countess to *live* after all this? There’s no way she was that stupid. She couldn’t know that he hadn’t been able to make sure she died, could she? There was no way. Besides, the poison would have taken care of the woman by now.

Surprisingly, he found his mouth slightly dry as he opened it. “We couldn’t have anyone spilling the news of what happened, could we? So yeah, I took care of her.”

He met the Baroness’ eyes and stilled. There wasn’t just anger hidden there. There was *rage*.

“When did I *ever* command you to take care of her?”

Small flames burst into existence behind the woman, licking the ground like hungry spirits. Was this her doing? He hadn’t even been certain if she was a mage or not.

“Ehm, right... Seems like I might have been a bit hasty,” he said, skipping the usual daring smile he often wore around noble-types. He was starting to suspect the woman actually *wanted* the Countess alive. But there was also the possibility that she was just angry he didn’t do exactly what she said. “But you said you didn’t have any further use for her, yeah? And not to bother with getting her out of there? With people like her, you can’t exactly keep her locked up for all eternity, so dealing with her as soon as possible saves us a lot of trouble and her a bunch of misery. Not like she was living much of a life before you picked her up, so this makes it easier for everyone, yeah?”

The flames behind the Baroness grew in size, and the strange crystal ball in her hand suddenly lit up a soft white. Around them, the temperature continued to increase, and the woman stepped closer to him. The look in her heated amber eyes told him all he needed to know.

That was not what she wanted to hear.

“*So you killed her?*” The heavy-laden words rang through the air for a moment.

Gaven stared at her.

Blazes... he’d misread her, it seemed. This woman was crazy as well.

He raised his hands in the air. “Never said that.” He knew better than to dig his grave even deeper at this point. The Baroness was a noble, and some nobles didn’t give a rat’s ass if they were doing something stupid or not. If they thought you went against their will, then you weren’t making it out unharmed. “She was still alive last I saw her. Used some strange cube that made her just up and disappear, so for all I know she could be in the nearest town over telling everybody about what we did here.”

The Baroness peered at him for a long while. “...You *poisoned* her.” Now, the words left with barely restrained anger.

...Well, damn. He’d almost forgotten that there wasn’t much this woman didn’t know.

Silence fell between them. The flames behind the Baroness danced to some unknown rhythm, beating and pulsing like they could barely contain their intensity. Sweat was beginning to form on his brow from the heat, and the tension was almost palpable.

Then, he moved. He spun around and the world around him turned into a blur of red as he *shade morphed* away. It hurt to do so, but he was cutting his losses here. He’d taken enough valuables from the Augur’s chamber to get a decent payday even without the Baroness, and his life was more important than some old locket.

In his world of red, a wall of deep scarlet appeared to block his path. He immediately stopped, and the world returned to normal as the effect ended and a wall of fire stood before him. With a frown, he stared at the flames and looked back at the Baroness. *Shade morph* was a skill he’d spent over two years learning from an old vagrant near the Unresting Steppes. Only manifest magic could affect it, and even then, its effect was usually more than halved. Those flames hadn’t looked weakened at all, though.

At the center of the clearing, the Baroness raised a hand.

Gaven’s instincts had been honed from years of experience, and they guided him to move as dozens of odd-looking fireballs popped into existence around him. Once more, he *shade morphed*, turning into a red mist just in time to dodge a shower of water and steam where he had just been. He reappeared a short distance away, touching the shoulder that had originally been injured by the Countess. He’d reacted a bit too slowly and had been hit while *morphed*, and it stung more than it should have.

He glanced at the Baroness again, who had started moving towards him. This blasted woman was crazier than he thought. And he wouldn’t have pegged her to be a mage that was this strong.

Yet another assault bore down upon him, but this time he was ready and evaded it in time. As the world turned red around him, he aimed towards the edge of the clearing where it closed into the dense forest. More scarlet barriers emerged to block his path, and each time he had to exit his ability and reactivate it to change the direction. Clearly, the woman wanted to stop him from escaping, but there weren’t enough of these walls for that. He repeatedly *shade morphed* his way forward, moving in an unpredictable pattern as he relied on his instincts to dodge any other attacks aimed at him and avoid getting caught between several walls of fire.

He had dealt with his fair share of annoying opponents in his time, but this sure took the cake. Usually, he could just zoom through whatever they tried to throw at him, but he suspected that would hurt a lot if he did it now. He'd never been good at any of 'em defensive techniques.

Luckily, he had yet to encounter anything that he couldn't get away from when he set his mind to it.

Another assault weighed down on him the next time he exited *shade morph*. The Baroness tried to cage him in a barrier of fire, but he was already out even before it had completely formed. Now, he was nearing the end of the clearing.

Then it was as if the Blazes themselves opened up in front of him. A sea of flames burst into existence from nowhere, blocking his path in a wide half-circle and casting an eerie glow over the trees beyond. Even after only staying in his real form for a short moment, he *felt* the heat. One breath was enough to sting his lungs, and plumes of smoke rose from the plots of dead grass that hadn't been outright swallowed by the fires.

He searched around, but the flames were everywhere. Everywhere except behind him.

He looked back, where the flames had now shifted to create an eerie tunnel of fire between him and the Baroness. She was walking through it with an imposing air, her previous robes having disappeared Viles-knows-where. In her left hand, she held the crystal sphere Gaven had gotten for her, and in her right hand was a short dagger. For some reason, she was also wearing a freaking *tiara* on her head. With her eyes fixed on him, she moved ahead as if she were leading an army, the flames closing in and trailing behind her like followers behind their queen. The flames nearest Gaven roared even higher, illuminating her approaching face with a fiery glow.

He clenched his teeth, feeling the heat rise behind him as well. What was with this insane difference from before? Had she been holding back at first? What even *was* this kind of spell? How much mana did she have?

He glanced back at the inferno behind him, blocking his escape in that direction. He might have been able to force his way through the earlier flames, but he couldn't be sure about these. Just standing here felt like being baked alive. Not to mention that this woman might literally burn down the entire forest just to get to him.

Suddenly, his instincts warned him of another attack. Or rather, they *screamed* at him.

A raging tempest of fire swallowed him, as if the morning sun had been pulled down and squeezed into a pulp before being thrown at him. He tried activating *shade morph* to flee, but even disconnected from the material realm, the flames followed him, tearing through space as they forced him towards the Baroness.

With a scream, he reappeared a short distance in front of her, catching himself on his slightly burned hands. He'd tried to defend himself, but his techniques had been shredded through in the blink of an eye.

“Let’s talk this out!” he yelled, gasping for breath as his lungs burned. “I-I get you’re mad...” he croaked. Even talking hurt. How in the Blazes did she remain so unaffected? “The Countess might not be dead yet, yeah? If I help ya, we might be able to find her in time to get to her, so let’s not do anything hasty here, kay?”

From behind, the flames were inching closer to him once again. He forced himself to stand up as he *shade morphed* away, reappearing a short bit to the side of the Baroness. He opened his mouth to speak again — to say anything that could convince her. Then, as their eyes locked, he froze.

She hadn’t listened to a word he said. There was only death and pure rage in that glare. He wasn’t leaving this clearing alive if he didn’t act first.

He pulled out two blades hidden in his belt.

This was the last time he was taking a job from a Vile-cursed noble.

Triggering a few of the body-enhancing techniques and tricks he’d learned during his time on the streets and as a member of the Vanguard—most weren’t things you wanted to use unless you liked puking yourself out on the ground afterward—he threw a quick glance to make sure the coating was still there on the blades. Then, he activated *shade morph* again and moved towards the Baroness. He was running low on energy, so he would have to deal with this quickly.

Yet another wall of fire appeared before him. He immediately canceled *shade morph* and skirted to the side of the flames. Then, while the woman was focused on conjuring another assault against him, he threw both his daggers.

Her reaction was quicker than he thought, and one of the daggers was completely engulfed by a sphere of fire, obscuring the woman from his view. The other one, however, he’d seen glance her shoulder.

He pulled out another set of daggers, ready to dodge another assault and search for another opportunity, when all the flames surrounding them suddenly stilled. The flames protecting the Baroness calmed down for just a moment, revealing the woman as she shot an intense glare. There were traces of blood on her shoulder, but it was a lot less than he’d hoped for. That hadn’t been Specter’s Tears poison, so it wouldn’t be enough to take her out.

Forcing himself out of his reverie, he threw both daggers towards her again. This time, barriers made of water appeared to slow their momentum, right before another set of fires swallowed them up. He wasn’t even sure if they got close to the Baroness.

Another moment of silence passed, then *everything* moved. It was as if the entire clearing churned and a forest of fire stormed towards him from all directions, engulfing him in the blazing conflagration. He screamed as he tried to fight back, clambering for an escape. But the flames moved like they were alive, roiling and shifting in impossible ways as they eroded his body. He blindly fumbled around in this ocean of red and fire, the pain drawing out for what felt like an eternity.

And then it all disappeared.

Gaven fell to the ground, not even managing to breathe, though he wasn't sure if it was because there was no air or because his lungs just weren't capable of it anymore. The dark clearing surrounded him, illuminated by the pale light of the moon that hung in the sky above. Weakly raising his head, he bore witness to the destruction around him. Over half of the clearing was nothing but charred black, weak embers of fire spread out among what remained of the vegetation. And yet, despite that, the trees bordering the clearing were completely untouched.

For just a moment, he wondered if one of the six Blazes actually *had* descended on this clearing, simply to spite him and the choices he'd made.

Striding through the chaos she had brought about, the Baroness stopped a step away from Gaven, staring down at him.

He tried raising his arm — tried to *shade morph* away, but there was no energy left. He couldn't even bring himself to speak.

One last time, he met the woman's eyes, looking into the rage there. Now, it was mixed with something else.

He almost wanted to laugh.

He wasn't even sure when he fell for it, but he supposed he only had himself to blame for forgetting even the basics. Funny couldn't even begin to describe it.

This was what happened when you had faith in someone.

The Baroness raised a hand.

“...*Filth.*”

The single word was said quietly, in a tone entirely unlike before.

And then Gaven's world turned to ashes.