

Death Magic 1001

Chapter 1001: Ereena

“All in favor of retaliation, please raise your hands,” a quiet vote, many chose silence of thought. Weighing the pros and cons – years of peace laid in the balance. Alphaia showed their teeth and the message, confirmation of war grasped the heart of the room. Hesitation would bring downfall – therein laid the quandary of battle. Mutual destruction, one sends one, the other retaliates by sending three, then, the former sends their whole arsenal. Regardless of the angle, the thoughts carried – destruction laid as the final destination. The tide shifted. Minerva rose her palm, Ela followed, and so, many council members, ministers, and noble homes accepted their fate.

“I see,” the king scanned the entourage, majority rose their hands. Minority laid with Eira, Elixia, and éclair.

“Fighting fire with fire,” added éclair, “-is the best option when dealing against a stronger opponent. However, as we are the strongest, is it not fair that we ought to set an example?”

“Set an example how exactly?”

“Pardon me,” Elixia pushed shoulders and stood in the forefront, “-my lord, might I be permitted to speak?”

“Go ahead.”

“Hear me,” she took a step and swept the room with her words, “-we are strong, that much is true. Hidros’ become a pinnacle of strength, fortune, and intellect. Culturally speaking, by a core driven by the adventurers will; we seek blood. We seek vengeance. Most importantly, we don’t falter. Under his majesty’s close direction and lady Minerva’s close guidance – our military comprises one of the best units the world’s seen. Amount of money we spend training our soldiers, the technological marvel brought by GateSix and the University of Rotherham – esteemed council members, we have an option that doesn’t result in mutual destruction. When deadlock stares two opponents, there is but one way – overpower the adversary. If Alphaia’s willing to use bombardments as a threat, then, by all means, we should reply in kind,” she clapped, a holographic display materialized, “-as shown on this map, we’ve marked the spots where a potential launch can occur. It’s a broad area. Under normal circumstances, coordinating such a large attack would be reckless and foolish,” she smiled; “-however, we don’t need to bring an army.”

.....

“Say no more,” Igna interjected, “-military affairs will be discussed in private. We must not risk the chance of leaks. This council holds greater minds within our kingdom. Elixia’s hint should have given a glimpse into what lays ahead. Therefore, when war breaks, the military and royal family will centralize their power. Will you put your trust in my hand?”

“We’ve done it before,” said one.

“-and will do it again,” they nodded, “-majesty, as protector of our nation, we humbly ask for thy strength in defending our nation.”

Lavish business of war. Elvira saw her stocks diminish from various buyers all belonging to a single point; Alphaia.

So it was, preparations for war. Lucifer Dawnstar's engagement with the current Empress of Alphaia had a greater effect. The council room emptied and the king was spotted heading for his office. There, as he entered and settled in his chair, the door tapped and a strong presence entered. White hair flowed as it shut, sharp eyeliner and unblemished skin stared a hole through Igna.

"Big sister," the head rose, "-I see you're doing well. Take a seat."

novelusb.com

"Listen," she walked, "-I know we've stayed distant for the past few years. My duties and your responsibilities saw us under the same roof but never on the same page. I heard all about the conflict from my spies. Alphaia's bluffing. They don't have the means to launch an aerial attack. Besides," she sat, "-the protective barrier we've powered and raised should be enough to counter any attacks. I don't see the reason why we must act so harshly."

"Big sister, as wise and dignified as you are – I won't make the mistake of underestimating a foe. Lucifer's there, that is all we have to know. I've restrained his wings and channeled its influence in bettering my element," he paused, "-big sister, the years have taken their effect. The presence is strong to the dismay of your expression. There's a chipper side – the ice-empress's living her best life. A nice family and happy atmosphere. Hidros is no longer a single man's court. Earlier, abstaining from the all-out attack and choosing safety, doesn't befit what I've learned to expect. You forgave the empress and all of Alphaia's wrongdoing."

A messenger tapped, "-may I enter," they asked from outside.

"Mine," said her gaze, "-enter," she spoke, and the lock clicked.

"My lady Eira, we've received news from our contacts in Alphaia. The leadership is willing to negotiate on the matter of battle. At the risk of destroying the world, both parties share the same concerns. It would also seem that the free lords have protested their selfishness."

"There," she turned, "-you heard the man, they're willing to give peace a talk."

"Think so?" he averted her gaze and pondered in the distance, "-Ministry of Internal and External affair, the matter falls into thy domain. Do as you please. I do warn thee, once they declare war – we shan't hold back."

"Give us time," she rose, "-I will make sure it doesn't have to come to war," Eira hurried out of the office where a crowd of ambassadors waited. She checked her watch, "-is the flight ready?" they stormed into the main hall and hastened.

"Yes ma'am," answered another, "-both parties have agreed to meet at this location," a mark showed a familiar location; north of Dorchester, past the Vigrant Archipelago deeper north-east, lays an island hailed as the Ocean's pitstop. The merchant nation of Dermolise.

Clocked figures brushed through Igna's window, "-majesty, allow us to handle the matter."

'The order of Nightwalkers,' he paused, '-are the key to victory. To win without the destruction of what I hold dear, there must be change,' a ripple in space and time heightened his focus, the very same chill went down Eira's spine, her heavy lashes turned at the fading ground, '-Igna...'

Silhouettes wrapped in white and gold, '-the students are here,' *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* from office to the well-cared orchard, "-welcome to Orin." Before he rose students bearing the crest of Lucifer. '-Strong auras,' he observed, "-mutes." No response, "-I heard much of Lucifer's academy having their top students become mute and faceless. The masks are dashing to the extent of... well, let's say it's not that attractive."

"..."

"I at least expect some courtesy," the shoulders lowered, he tapped his waist to summon Orenmir, "-hear me loud. I will not hold back, not even against students." No response, smaller of the group of five lunged. Claws of pure essence rose in wings, a golden armor materialized ethereally – the outline and stance pointed to martial arts. First, attack the student dove head first and threw a punch. Igna side-stepped effortlessly and forced the student into changing stance for a counter-attack. A sudden tremor shook the ground, Igna's lightning-fast palm halted shy of the student by which, before he could step away, Igna dug into the student's skull. '-show me your memories.'

"My friends, I promised that I would become the best one day. Making good on my promise, I was granted the honor of becoming our lord's direct servant. I know what it means, my soul is going to be eaten for our lord's revival. I will do what is needed, and for that, I ask that you forgive me, my friends, I will remain the best and fight. Nothing will ever change my mind," the young student fell, the mask cracked to reveal a dashing boy.

"First down, four to go," he stared at the remainder, "-who's next?" two figures teleported behind. Blades narrowly missed Igna's neck and heart for he ducked, the small opening allowed for a swift counter – Orenmir's cries resounded – the blade sheathed, "-make a bit of sound at the most," Igna held a beheaded head by the hair. The third attacker was spared – he fell to the ground with a missing arm, "-what are her memories?"

"To change the world, we must change ourselves. I was born into nobility; my power and strength are assured. Lucifer's academy hasn't seen the best of me... then why, why do I find myself in a locked cage, why am I alone, why doesn't anyone listen. He always listened, he was there for me, I will become strong, I will serve my master – wait for me, I will give my all," the shrunken cheeks dropped, a flash of threads impaled the maimed third attacker, "-to save my friends, to save my family, I have to defeat the Demonlord. The one who stole our lord's wings, he who made our realm grieve, I'll do anything to make it right. I want to see her smile; I want to see her happy. I don't care if I have to sell my soul, I will become a weapon, I will become the heart behind our master's rebirth."

The remaining two, a boy and girl from the outlines; summoned weapons. The stance was refined and well-balanced, "-Too bad," he vanished and instantly summoned crimson daggers, "-I don't care to prolong a worthless fight," they died instantly from stabs to the heart, "-your memories."

"Please, don't make me do this. I don't want to die yet, I have to support my family, I have to live for them, I have to fight for them. Please, don't take my soul, I'll do anything else, please just don't kill me," the boy's body fell, the girl's memories followed, "-my lord Lucifer, please, allow me this favor, let me

become you, let me take all your pain and grief. Let me appease your soul, take my soul, take my body, take my sanity; anything to satisfy my lord's wishes."

A gust blew. Igna exhaled at the bloodied mess, *Souls who've been lost and are bound to this world for perpetual suffering, heed my call. I, humble servant of death, grant thee salvation. Follow my voice, tis the place where the dead are reborn, tis the place where wrongdoers are to be purged – in my name, those who are to be judged, will be judged, and those who are to be saved, will be saved,* a purple orb opened and swallowed the fallen. He bowed in prayer, "-your memories won't be forgotten, foolish children," the eyes opened, "-come out already, Ereena."

"My, was I so easy to figure out?" reality itself faded, a demoness approached dressed in the dark. Blood-soaked regard, leather outfit and spikes at the end of her boot and accessories, "-Ereena, I told you, that getup is only realistic in games, not real life. What's Lucifer's whore doing here?"

"Oh come on, don't play cold with me. Are we not friends?"

"Ah, a friend is a rather harsh label. I prefer we remain strangers. What's the idea with them?"

"Didn't you find my present amusing?"

"No, what's the point?"

"The point is," she reached into another dimension and pulled a severed head, "-take a look at this," the charred morsel fell at Igna's feet, "-check," she said. Protrusions left Igna's fingers and snapped, more memories saw the other make sense, "-Artanos, Lucifer, Zeus, and Lixbin," he smiled, "-they're working together. Why should I worry about that head?"

"Take a closer look," she breathed, "-a closer look."

'What's wrong with her?' the focus heightened, '-wait, why do I see myself... this body, these people, I remember,' the eyes widened, "-ACHILLES!"

"HA-HA-HA-HA!"

"What have you done?"

"Achilles," she smiled, "-didn't you feel the change in time, didn't you feel the way destiny evolved?"

"Don't tell me..."

"Yes we did," she smiled, "-we don't need the sickle of Kronos. Trust Artanos and his unsurmountable prowess to find a way for us to control time. I must say we're grateful. Miira's teaching has greatly benefited the Eipea Empire. The higher you are, the harder you fall. I would truly consider checking on your comrades – the timeline's changed. This is the meaning of going against gods – be careful," her amusing nature straightened, "-been a long time coming. In focusing on yourself for the past decade, you've allowed us to move freely. Not a good look, Igna. Anyway, I'll take my leave, I hope you liked my present, sweetheart," she blew a kiss – the rupture shut.

Chapter 1002: True leaders of Plaustan

'History changed, part of it did. Ereena was right. There is a rupture in space and time. I need to go, now,' teleportation scrolls in hand – the somber Rosespire skyscape flashed for a similar skyscape bracing the Plaustan horizon. The tower of Aria/Aris laid at a particular angle. Medieval influence mixed with the growing technological advancements. Streets were asphalted and buildings sturdy. The town felt no more different than in memory. '-there,' the senses horned, '-a rapture. He approached the town square, before rose the pillar of Achilles as opposed to Staxius.

"Here rests the mighty adventurer who came close to claiming level 99 of the tower of Aris. On behalf of the people, we humbly thank the mighty Achilles, hero of the tower, for her service in making the tower a better place," read the monolith. Igna stepped backward and narrowed, '-Achilles' died. Ereena, what games are you playing...'. Another pulse hailed from the clamors of the market street. He rushed over, skipping over shady alleys and landing in the midst of a battlefield. Prices lunged from one tent to the other, merchants screamed – explosions of charismatic sellers gathered moths to flames else buyers to produce. Tan complexion, darker heads of hair – demi and non-humans, such were the crowd.

'This energy,' he ambled and soon exited the market street. A line of cluttered houses rose. Lines of clothes went from one roof to the next. The alleys tightened. The smell of rot permeated open drains – regardless, he marched until light in the distance. Cacophonous prison swapped for the tranquility of a forsaken back alley. Garbage bins lined the already narrow passage, it carried to a dead-end where the concrete walls changed for solid-brick walls. The latter climbed forth until a break – white against the reddish brown; a window from which waved a dirty cloth.

'Energy's potent here,' wind shuddered, ethereal wings carried him over the mess and into the room. A palette of brown, red, gray, and black marked the interior. Cheap furnishing – broken down wood, a singular lightbulb around which flew flies, and a present but static sound of electricity. *click,* door opened to blond hair and fair skin. Deep blue pupils rose from their discouraging downward scan and rose, "-Igna?"

"Viola," he returned, "-the energy was yours." She stood strangely with hands on her heart and sweat-ridden brows.

"Why are you here?" she crudely returned, hastily brushing off the tightened grip around her chest, "-don't you have a kingdom to care of?" a slight shuffle then a sudden drop, floor-boards creaked, "-go away," she laid on her back and sighed, "-I need time to think."

"No you don't," he pulled a stool and sat at her bedside, "-I need to know what happened!"

.....

"Caring now, are we?" she glanced away, "-man, this is very awkward and pathetic. I have nothing to say to you..."

"Explain, what have I done?"

"You'll truly go to any lengths... should have expected that much from the Devil. Man, just leave already, I rather die alone than in your company."

"Quit this melodramatic bullshit," he slammed her mattress, "-Viola, for the love of God, tell me what happened?"

"Igna," she rolled her head towards him and paused, "-do you have no shame?"

"No, I don't. Tell me, I want to know!"

"First answer me this, why did you kill Achilles?"

"I-" the thought of someone's death, '-might be someone I killed some time ago,' but when the name said Achilles, Igna suddenly covered his mouth and gulped, "-what are you on about?"

"You killed her for your selfish gain, She did so much for us, she did so much when we needed help, why would you go and hurt her like that, why would you kill her, tell me, WHY!"

"I didn't fucking kill her!" he thundered, "-VIOLA," death's aura escaped, "-tell me," a sinister voice spoke, "-do you trust me?"

"..."

"..."

"No, of course, I don't."

"Then," the expression blanked, "-I have no use for you either," the fingers latched around her visage's contours, "-I care for people around me, there's a limit. Tell me, Viola, if you don't want to speak, who am I supposed to consult?"

novelusb.com

"There you go," she exhaled and gripped his palm, "-I guess he was right, you're nothing short of pathetic."

'Her fingers are weak,' he blinked, the sincerer presence eroded, '-she's sweaty, her temperature's hot, the breathing's heavy and the belly,' the clouded vision cleared, "-Viola, are you expecting?"

"What the fuck?" she returned, "-of course not, you idiot. That's a pillow."

"There," he rose his hands and smiled, "-there's the snarky response I expected. Viola, you don't have to answer what I'm about to say, perhaps it's the truth, or perhaps it's only the product of an overly imaginative mind. Was the one thee referred to as earlier an emissary or someone related to Lucifer or Artanos – did my killing of Achilles come from their mouth, is all of this proven or mere hearsay?"

"Asshole," she slapped his hand and turned over, "-go away, this conversation is over. I'm done, Igna, you hear, I'm done," the door slammed, and the opposite side of the house faced onto the guilds. Adventurers passed with little whispers; "-poor guy must have gotten rejected."

"I'd feel bad if I were in his shoe."

"Who knows, they say fighting brings those involved closer."

"Sure, they do... closer to death," laughter followed.

'I don't believe it,' he walked away, '-Viola said no... what in the world happened? Does she hate me that much?'

A small window peered onto the street. Her silhouette merged with the shadows of the room, ‘Igna, you monster, it’s best to face this trial on thy own. I’m only doing my job,’ she coughed, blood sprayed on her palms, ‘-don’t have much time before my other self comes to collect. The world’s changing, and you’re at the center of the change. Igna, don’t be discouraged, I know you’ll find the answer,’ she pulled onto her V-shape shirt, ‘-any mention of the truth and my soul gets captured by the curse...’ a darker presence loomed, “-was that enough,” narrowed Viola.

“I suppose it’ll do. Lord Artanos’ is pleased with thy involvement. We hope to count on thy assistance in the near future, dear reluctant associate.”

Bafflement carried the body to a nearby tavern. The smell of men, booze, and lust frequented the dirtied floorboards. Various tables leered at the well-dressed visitor; none spoke save the unwelcomed stares.

“What can I get you?”

“Strongest stuff you have,” he returned unexpressively, “-I’ll also take a room and some of your produce.”

“Is that so,” the barkeeper lowered his stance, “-a gentlemen like yourself ought to be served our finer produce. Head to the back room, I’ll have someone come to escort his majesty.”

‘Hold on,’ he locked onto the barkeeper where an affirming gaze confirmed the speculation, ‘-a spy’s retreat for work within Plaustan. Man, color me impressed.’ He passed the curtains into a clearer room. A twist toggled a passage on the side.

Neon lights sparkled in the distance, and the passage closed shortly after, ‘-guess there’s no turning back,’ he walked hands in pocket, his mind ever-so weary of the situation. The lights read, ‘-Twin Jellyfish Bar.’

“What a pleasant surprise,” he entered a somber-lit lounge. Deep music played, performers held the stage, and the stacked bar served drinks and narcotics. Bodyguards hauled a deceased man out of the premises, “-get that weak ass fuck out of’ here,” exclaimed the bartender. The performers nodded at the dead man and continue dancing.

“What can I get you,” fired the bartender, “-you look new, tell me sir, what do you want?”

“Best drinks and a nice place to think.”

“Right, that’ll cost a pretty penny.”

“Money’s no issue,” he fired nonchalantly, “-also, if you have any virgins around, do send them to my room, okay?”

“My,” the bartender greatedened his smile, “-you are just the type of man who we like to serve,” thus, a waiter came for escort. Drinks and snacks arrived in stride – the rented room was large and exclusive, rivaling even that of a five-star hotel. He sat on the soft mattress and dug his face into his palms, ‘-what am I even doing...’

Knock, knock, the door opened to a line of unusually younger-looking ladies, “-have your fill,” said the bartender, locking the door behind. The afraid expression and downward-facing stares, “-for fuck sakes,” he said aloud, “-girls, what’s the youngest age?”

“Fourteen,” said a skinner one.

“Oldest?”

“Fifteen,” added, they all bore demi-human features.

“Damn,” he laid on his back, “-this is pathetic... well, what’s done is done,” bravado returned, “-line up,” he ordered – soft cries and moans followed – jars of blood filled, “-good,” he said having finished draining their blood, “-you girls can go.”

“Are you s-s-s-s-sure?”

“Hey, believe me, I know this type of business’s frequent around the world. Sad to hear but the world’s a filthy place. I require the blood of a virgin to quench my thirst. You’ll forget this ever happen,” he sipped and sat, “-how about this, offer me your soul and I’ll grant each one of you a wish.”

When it came down to it, the stories matched. Sold by parents to slave brokers. Illegal trafficking of demi-humans – prostitution, Igna could but bat an eye for his family was also involved in such a trade. They all shared the same wish – they wanted death, having never experienced anything more than feelings of desperation and helplessness, they knelt facing the wall, “-and so it shall be,” he snapped, *Blood-Arts: Extria,* blood flow reversed and instantly exploded their hearts. A painless death, “-innocence,” he chuckled. “What a joke,” *snap,* white flames charred the corpses into ash.

Narcotics slowly drifted the mind out of the always speculative prison. ‘What am I even doing,’ he wallowed in selfish enjoyment as the minutes turned hours. The door exploded to men dressed in uniform, “-Igna Haggard, you’re coming with us!”

“My lady, I think we have the wrong room. There’s no trace of anyone save that man on the bed. He looks to have drunked himself to sleep.”

“Impossible, I swear the bartender said this room was home to a deviant.”

“Well, doesn’t look like it.”

“Show me the security tape,” they ordered. The film played and showed nothing out of the ordinary, “-my lady, it seems we might get the wrong person.”

“Regardless, we’re taking him in for further interrogation,” the bed no longer held the man in question, “-what in the world?”

“You asked for me?” a somber voice spoke behind the crowd, “-I must object to the grave error of imposing on my relaxing time. Tell me, why are members of Thunderstain here?”

“King Igna Haggard, you’re coming with us.”

“Fine,” he shrugged, “-long as I have something to drink during the ride. Also,” he glared, “-if anyone tries anything, I’ll make sure death comes painfully. Now then, that’s settled, shall we?”

Seemed the journey wouldn't be so long – a simple elevator shaft sufficed. Thunderstain headquarters sparked in a sort of futuristic décor. The multiple footsteps echoed rhythmically. '-You owe me one,' read the interface.

'I know,' replied Igna, '-thank you, Elixia,' they continued walking, '-seems the data was accurate. If I want to find the truth of what's happened, I need to have access to information. Who better than the guardians of Plaustan. I wonder how the leader's fairing.'

The main office came into view, a few comments were exchanged and the room opens accommodate only the king and rather younger-looking lady, "-pleasure to make your acquaintance, King Igna."

"And you are?"

"Rose Edelina, a nightwalker associated with the Sabbath clan. Welcome to Thunderstain, the peacekeepers of Plaustan."

"True leaders of Plaustan, I'm pleased to finally meet the elusive shadow protectors."

"The title's not that great, more of a hassle. So, tell me, majesty, why would you come here?"

'She took the bait. Guess playing the pathetic king had its merit. Rose Edelina, you haven't changed from so many decades ago – I do wonder what you think about my appearance. Surely the similarity with Staxius must have struck a nerve.'

Chapter 1003: "-Undrar... UNDRAR!"

"Here on business. A little birdy told me Plaustan was home to a marinade of stranger things. Curiosity brought me by. Lady Edelina, might we have a private chat?"

"Of course," she gestured; the room cleared. Igna's stern gaze remained as long as the room held intruders. Once gone, he eased and focused on the elusive leader. 'Rose Edelina, head of Thunderstain faction, an organization of spies and thieves. The current trade is information – for the right price, anything is possible. Aunt Elvira and Edelina seem to have a very friendly accord. They left decades ago; leaving behind two amazing supercars. Heard bits and pieces of their newer activities, but never thought much. They chose silence and cover as opposed to the fame and fortune that comes with being strong. Didn't expect her to be a nightwalker. By the smell of her blood, her appearance, and aura, she was turned by a lesser nightwalker, someone of Viscount rank. My ploy to catch her attention's worked.'

"Majesty, I do beg your pardon for any affront my workers may have caused. The girl especially, she's a compass for righteousness. Her religious belief in Tharis has brought plenty of problems. Talented as she is, her quirk is very undesirable. Who am I to complain, her activity seems to have brought his majesty to my doorstep. Therefore, tell me, my liege, what can this humble servant offer?"

"Humble servant," he paused, striking a stern posture, "-I should be the one thanking you for the honor. I'm no man of lifeless compliments. Your accomplishments and excellent stewardships made Plaustan a better place. the efforts greatly beneficiated the palace, we know Plaustan is in right hands."

"You honor me, my liege. Shall we get to the matter at hand?"

“Right, my visit,” the façade of idle chatter vanished, “-I need information, more specifically about Achilles and Kniq. What happened after the guild disbanded, how did she die so easily, and why does the town venerate her actions?”

“Astute of you, my liege. You’re correct. Achilles’ death was nothing short of heroic... so would the guild want us to believe. Truth of the matter, we don’t know how she died. Her body was found lifeless and without mana on the 99th level. It would have remained unseen lest for a powerful group of adventurers led by students of Leko’s Academy. Achilles’ team was found decomposing. The tower strangely refused access to the 100th floor. And that about covers it.”

.....

“That’s all?” he leaned, “-here I thought there was more to the mystery. Guess it’s enough for one day. Rose Edelina, it was a pleasure to see you again.”

“...”

“Hold on a moment,” she interjected just as he reached for the handle, “-a pleasure to see you again?” her frail figure rose timidly, “-are you him?”

“The resemblance is uncanny,” he returned coldly, “-and that’s all we have in common. My uncle had a weird way of making friends. By the trembling of your thighs and the look on your face, I think, well, it might be a good time to not bring up old memories. Until again,” he crossed into the clean, minimalistic hallway.

Night would come swiftly – the booked inn had less of the gallantries the king came to take for granted. The single chair, single table, single meal, was eaten in a single bed, single window, and single door room. ‘a loaf of bread and some stew,’ he ate, ‘-a good meal that’d taste better with the usual faces. Memories of the old days,’ he eased as the curtains drifted, “-tonight’s going to be another sleepless night,” an interface toggled – Elixia commented through a chat-box, “-how’s the cold food,” she inquired with a smug sticker. He swiped, pushing the box to the side, only to have a miniature Elixia leap into the display and pull the box, “-don’t ignore me,” she wrote with one hand firmly on her hip and the other pointing. “-Got it,” he replied to a deluge of information from across the globe.

Details oceans apart seemed closer than what actually was here. That night, under the moonless sky, a haunting incident would force Igna into action. A similarly deserted room thickened. A domain sneakily expanded; “-you’ve come to collect?”

“Yes. The strong decide who lives and who loses. To show our might, I must do my lady’s bidding. I apologize, Lady Death, for it’s time to return to thy other self.”

“Damn,” she sighed, ‘-if only Achilles didn’t die, if only we lived in the previous timeline, I would have had a simpler and fulfilling existence. They foiled the tapestry of destiny, she’s going to return, there’s no stopping lady Destiny,’ horse hooves galloped. A rupture tore into the domain effortlessly, “-Undrar, God of Death,” proclaimed the rider, “-and you must be the emissary from Lucifer.”

“No, I belong to lady Ereena, I belong to the queen-consort of demons.”

“Right, I’m here to collect my other self. You best leave,” she climbed from the headless steed and drew a scythe, “-else, I’ll have no option than to exterminate your lineage.”

“Understood,” the domain retracted, “-long as she perishes, my duty is complete.”

“Okay,” the god of death turned – chains birthed from the agony of the sinful crawled from the lower realm and bound the demon, “-WHAT IS THIS!” they cried.

novelusb.com

“Protection,” she answered, “-can’t have you pull any tricks,” the focus horned onto Viola’s trembling body. Undrar lowered to one knee and held out her arm, Viola coughed and extended her hand in return. They clasped hands and crossed fingers, “-Viola, I know the pain and suffering were hard to endure. I know how the shift affected your life and those around you. You were cursed to not speak the truth, forced to be a slave to that vile Artanos. There’s so little we could have done. I’m here, you don’t have to suffer anymore, relinquish all the pain, and allow me to share the burden. Viola, we’re one of the same, you deserve freedom and rest – allow me.”

“Okay,” said a feeble smile, “-Undrar, take care of him.”

“I will,” she smiled, Viola’s soul shattered like broken glass and turned into dust, which was absorbed by Undrar.

“HA-HA-HA-HA-HA.”

“Why are you laughing?”

“Lord Artanos was right,” smirked the demon, “-you people are all the same.”

“What about serving Ereena...”

“The soul you absorbed, the life you took on as your own – it doesn’t exist. The Viola you’ve come to know was killed a long-time ago. Her memories and heart were transplanted into a clockwork vessel. They who absorb the latter shall also inherit the cursed lord Artanos bestowed.”

It came abruptly, Undrar’s strength dropped, and she fell onto the cold floor, “-luckily, the power of Death is more trouble than lord Artanos wishes to take. Instead,” the soul binding chains shattered, the demon’s chest split as if a door. A golden-haired deity emerged from the mess of blood and torn innards. The symbol of thunder laid on their neck. A darker presence materialized in a sudden jolt; two strong entities stared down Undrar’s fading strength. ‘-a repeat of the past,’ she gritted, ‘-they’ve inflicted the same curse they used to kill Staxius.’

“Dimension Orin,” said the golden-haired deity, “-what a wonderful realm. Such abundance of power truly is the pinnacle.

“Don’t be distracted, my lord, your body is yet recovered.”

“Oh, dear Lixbin, there’s nothing to worry about. Artanos has made certain the plan goes according to my will. And here,” he marched and gripped Undrar’s chin, “-is all that I wish to have. You people have caused much grief,” the supposed exalted voice deadened into an emotionless echo, “-I’ve come to take back what I rightfully deserve. The symbol of death,” he ripped her armor, exposing her chest and undergarments, “-there it is,” the pentagram laid in the middle, “-Death’s mark. The ultimate show of strength, the ultimate show of power. Weaklings must have never been granted such an honor.”

Undrar exhaled a laugh, “-Zeus, Lixbin; today marks the second time you tried.”

“Second time?”

“Of course,” she smiled, “-regardless of what happens to me, Death’s symbol will never be inherited by the likes of you.”

“What’s she talking about?”

Another portal opened, “-Death’s symbol can’t be usurped,” answered Qhildir, God of Philosophy, “-death’s one true property is that tis biased.”

“And?” the thunder god bellowed a roar, “-HOW DOES THAT AFFECT ME?”

“It means we can’t take the symbol by force. The wielder must willingly give the symbol else it shall self-destruct and find another suitable host.”

“So, take it then,” narrowed Zeus, “-Qhildir, expand your domain.”

“If I do that, this realm might be at risk.”

Zeus returned a stare as if Qhildir had spoken nonsense, “-does that matter?”

“Let’s take her to the heavenly realm,” suggested Lixbin, “-we’ll have more chances there.”

Zeus clapped, “-well, if we have to return, how about I have some fun first. Undrar, was it?” he knelt and clasped her face, “-I need heirs to carry my blood, I need warriors to rival the titans. Artanos gaining power, I can’t stand by and watch. If the element can’t be transferred forcefully, I’ll just have to make sure when you die, the symbol falls into one of our heirs.”

“That’s a good idea too,” added Qhildir, “-though, is Undrar your type?”

“My, unlike you, Qhildir, I do keep my women close and on a leash. Same can’t be said about your righteous Syhton, poor lass had no chance.”

Lixbin placed a hand on Qhildir’s shoulder, “-don’t,” he strongly said, “-you’ll be in more trouble. Let the supreme god do as he pleases.

Undrar kept her disgusted regard, “-supreme god... how bloated a title can it be?”

“Excuse me?”

“Zeus, you’re nothing. Why not sleep with one of your daughters while you’re at it. Damned lustful geezer. I swear, before you even dare to lay a hand on me, I’ll make sure you and your realm suffer a fate worse than death.”

“HA! And how will you do so?”

“Well, it’s not me,” she smirked with back against an open window, “-should have killed me when you had the opportunity,” a demented figure blasted into the room and shattered the building with a single strike. Debris exploded on the opposite street, crashing into other buildings – citizens were forced to evacuate, Undrar’s strength dimmed as she breathed, the curse dug wholly into her heart.

“And who might this be?” the three gods hovered.

“Don’t remember me?” echoed a darkened voice, “-you don’t remember me?” a trail of purple followed in a massive explosion, and Qhildir hit the floor. Protective barriers mean nothing – an array of crimson threads fluttered; mere contact sufficed for the threads to slice. Buildings were cleanly sliced in half, bodies of dead inhabitants and adventurers scattered.

“Alfred,” narrowed Zeus, “-it’s you.”

“Long time no see.”

“Zeus, we should leave, like now.”

“Lixbin?”

“Trust me,” narrowed the god, “-we have to leave.”

A numbing feeling went up the arm, Zeus lowered his gaze to no left arm, “...”

“Zeus,” the figure teleported behind and instantly shoved him to the ground, another explosion rattled the whole town. The dust settled over the creator, “-you fucker,” Igna punched and punched, breaking bones, dislocating jaw and breaking teeth – Zeus’ bloodied face barely breathed, “-enough,” a dark domain expanded, “-Igna, leave the supreme god alone.”

‘So dark, I can’t see anything,’ a pressure flung him across, he landed against something hard, “-damn,” *cough,* “-the hell was that?” even darker objects went through the chest, arms and legs, ‘-I’m nailed to the ground or a building... I don’t feel pain, I don’t feel anything. This sensation of nothingness,’ *thud,* ‘-I know it too well,’ worse fear came to mind, ‘-no...’

“NOO!”

“Igna,” thundered a distant voice, “-until the time is right for the battle, you must strive to become even stronger. At your strength who shan’t be able to carry the burden of Menka. Freeze thy heart and become the Devil this era needs,” the domain released, he fell and bled from the various mortal wounds, “-Undrar... UNDRAR!” no pain nor suffering, only her face flashed into mind, “-UNDRARRR!”

Chapter 1004: The Crossroads

Cough, cough, blood guzzled down her chin. Undrar painfully watched, her armor cracked, splitting Lixbin’s domain. ‘Undrar,’ screamed, ‘-where is she,’ the void eased, allowing the devastation to be thrust into center-stage. ‘-she’s there,’ her presence hung tight. Igna limped with one hand on his shoulder. Clean holes went through his torso, he bled profusely, lowered blood pressure took its toll, ‘-I feel lightheaded.’

“I-I-Igna,” Undrar held tightly on her chest, “-my heart, it’s, it’s...”

“Steady yourself,” he knelt and held her head over his legs, “-don’t do anything rash.”

“Igna,” came a kind smile, “-don’t worry so much,” her fingers rose to tap his chest, “-see, you’re healing,” darkness from the death element spread. A plague of death washed the ground into a pit of despair. Greenery or wounded bystanders melted – leaving a gel-like substance.

Watchers, spectators, names ring high and low, us, unknown to the world's reality, unknown to the world's knowledge, have lived in utter solemnness for millennia to come and go. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, beckons my might to be fully materialized without prejudice, reality is but my playground, neither god nor demon shall overcome my authority, face me in stride, face me in fear, reality's what I wish it to be for knowledge is the true strength: Realm Expansion, Shadow Realm Variant – Rantiam. A press of the palms altered the very essence of the air. A hemisphere of unknown origin cupped the crater, “-not making that mistake again,” he said, unleashing everything he held dearly, ” *O’ goddess forgotten by the ages, o’ goddess who spread victory and peace over the souls of true warriors. I, humble vessel for thy Symbol, plea to have a sliver of thy strength.* a faceless outfit of a dame rose at his back, she leaned and pecked his cheeks – the veins bloated into a golden hue. Energy gathered around the duo. *See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth,* pure white sprinkled with red and purple gaze upon the wounded Harbinger of Death.

“Igna,” her colder hands reached to cup his, “-it’s enough,” she smiled, “-Artanos’ curse has already taken effect. I was doomed the moment I absorbed Viola’s energy.”

“Oh, shut it,” he snapped; potentially world-ending grimoires summoned at each beckoning call, “-you will do well to remain silent, I’ll take care of the rest,” a warm hue flowed from his palm, “-I’ll do what I must,” and in the moments he spoke, knowledge from Origin and unaltered usage of ancient symbols granted by Alfred lit the field as if fireworks. For what seemed hours, minutes passed.

.....

“Enough,” said Undrar, “-the more you heal, the greater the wounds become. I don’t feel pain – my symbol’s destroyed, there’s no changing the truth,” she tapped his chest, “-the death element’s returned to where it belongs.”

“No,” he refused, “-no, I don’t care, I don’t want it,” he gripped her palms, “-if gaining the element means losing you... I-I-I’ll give it up!”

A fissure splattered dark energy unlike they’d ever sensed, “-my,” a gentlemanly voice approached, “-it would seem my pupils are in a rather tight spot,” a top-hat, a lavish suit and a silver walking cane, “-I see you’ve taken good care of Undrar.”

“Lord Death?”

“In the flesh...” he paused, “-something along those lines,” he waited opposite Igna choosing to stand and pour tea on a hovering tray. “Igna,” the gloved hands warmly caressed Undrar’s bloodied forehead, her tenseness seemed to ease, “-you have grown strong, what’s with that look of despair. Are you not an esteemed member of the Watchers, he who guards the Shadow Realm, protector of what he deems close. Looking at her state, there’s no saying otherwise – she’s dying. The afflicted curse has taken effect. You made a crucial mistake,” he sat on a boulder, “-escaping the curse of misfortune wasn’t the greatest of an idea. I guess it’s partly my fault too. I had hoped the Death Element to have carried Alfred, the cursed king, to greater heights. We made a deal, and in said deal, I was able to stop the growing atrocities. Guess it was the first time I ever chose to get personal. Alfred,” he spoke directly, “-we meet after a long time. I knew this day would come; I knew it was you the moment Staxius chose to enter the Hall of Rebirth. You’ve grown, were bested by the elites, and left in lingo between life and death. The sturdiness of your soul, the sturdiness of the capabilities as a vessel – drawing in Origin, making friends

out of demons and gods, and scheming thy way forth. Staxius, you knew deep down the reincarnation wouldn't allow thee to take hold of the host. Everyone inside," he tapped Igna's chest, "-entered thinking they could control the beast that lives within. Alas, on entering the beast' cage, they realized there was no beast to be found, only a cage and a lock. They who reside within are now the beasts. A poetic end I dare say. Duping misfortune is like tricking the devil. Once she knows, the lass shan't stop her hunt until the prey lays in complete waste. Igna, you stand at a crossroad," he rose his brows, "-a hard choice has to be made. The Death element yearns to return to its host. Undrar's element's broken and mine has reached its limit. If I were to die, the power would completely destroy the remaining self-control." Igna stared at Undrar's peaceful expression blankly, "-you feel it, don't you?" whispered Lord Death, "-the energy from within, the mana pool being refilled, the element's return. You feel good, you feel amazing, emotions and affection towards others become an object of your control, you choose to get angry, you choose to get sad. As the element returns, so does the curse of misfortune, the curse to start again, the curse to always suffer," Igna's gaze shifted from Undrar to lord Death. He sat with hands on his cane – a serpent ethereally swirled, its tail laid within Lord Death's heart, the body coiled around Death's torso to a pair of unblinking daggers.

novelusb.com

Hand of the Lamented, I bring upon the earth the powers of the shunned child, watch me, the heavens and cower for I, Alfred, have reawakened. Watch as tis my forthcoming, my return, and my message to those who dare stand against me, repent!

'What's with this person?' palms reached for the serpent, '-must be my imagination, no one's the power required to see, let alone understand or tam-' the grip tighten around its neck – he pulled emptily, or so observed Lord Death. 'WHAT?' the snake wrapped its body around Igna's left arm, '-how did he catch me!' it wiggled.

"Igna, are you okay?" wondered Lord Death, '-he's zoning out.'

"Lord Death," he rose his head and tapped, "-is this the curse of misfortune?"

"..."

"Pardon?"

"Teach, look, can't you see the snake?"

"What snake?" he narrowed, "-where exactly do you see it?"

"HERE!" he vehemently shook, "-on my left arm, the snake's wrapped, I hold its head between my thumb and index, can't you see?"

"No, I cannot."

A burst of energy flung Igna across, the crater rattled, '-my head,' he nonchalantly pushed off the indented place of impact, "-what's the matter with you?" the grip tightened.

"NO, THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU!" screamed telepathically, "-who are you?"

"No, who are you!"

“Excuse me, I was chilling in Death’s shadow, causing havoc and sowing despair. Whoever you are had to intervene and break my hold on his element. Do you know who you’re messing with?”

“A snake?” he returned logically, “-wait...” a smug grin appeared, “-are you the Curse of Misfortune?”

“M-M-Maybe?”

“AHA! So you’re the bitch who’s caused me and my other selves trauma,” the right knuckles cracked, “-I’ve waited for this day for a long time. Because of you Undrar’s... my family, those I deemed close to me... everything I built, you, it’s you, IT WAS YOU!”

“Slow down!” it fired, “-it’s true, I’m the one who causes misfortune. But then, why does it matter? You cause death, everything has a role to play. The weaver of destiny, the creator, the destroyer, the very soil to the very endlessness of space. Everything has its purpose. My question is how can you acknowledge me?”

“We’re in my domain,” he said, “-suppose you unknowingly revealed yourself... happens, don’t let it get you down.”

“Release your grip, oaf.”

“Fine, what will you do?”

“This,” it slithered up the arms and wrapped around his neck, “-I’ll stay here, we need to talk.”

‘The element beats anew, I feel my strength return. This feeling is what I longed for. No matter the extent of power I borrow from the Shadow Realm, it’s never enough – the smallest of droplet suffices to blow my enemies away. A realm shouldn’t be used to fight ants... wait, what am I thinking,’ drifting blond hair, “-Lord Death, what about Undrar?”

“Don’t know,” a ritual circle burnt in white flames, “-she’s going to die one way or the other. Igna, you can’t help the situation.”

“I think I can,” he knelt, “-Lord Death, you were thinking of separating her soul and sending her true form through the circle of life and death.”

“Yeah, it would be a shame to lose her...”

“The Bringer of Death won’t die on my watch,” he pressed his palms, the ritual symbols shattered for a greater magical circle, her eyes reopened, “-Igna?”

“Undrar, take it easy. You won’t die, I won’t let it happen.”

Ancient Magic, Spatial-Arts: Disruption, a slash severed her core, the hand of the lamented dove into said core and crawled – color faded from her cheeks, the breathing came to a slow stop – her presence vanished bit by bit, ‘-I knew it,’ he gripped, *I am the slayer without fear, I am he who shall be the last of what thy see. Heed mine call, thou whomst dared to fight the natural order, tis the day thou ought to be destroyed, Ancient Magic – Astral Binding,* a clockwork worm found its whole body riddled with golden lances, *-knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing,* pages claimed the paintedesque landscape, *-Book of Rue, on the first day of the devil’s awakening – the ancient art of creation falls, for the conjurer is a priest sworn to the gods

but led astray by evil. The anti-god, the devourer of angels, the embodiment of evil, cursed King Alfred, reaches the heavens and swallows Creation's heir, gaining the powers of Creation. Fashion into life a perfect replica, grant the symbol of Creation; Yeve,* the body of a higher-tier entity rose blankly, Igna panted heavily, *Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration.* Undrar's soul disappeared, only to reappear seconds later, *I beckon the souls of the Shadow Realm, be free,* a whirlwind blew from the Box to the vessel. Igna collapsed and coughed, the beating element raced, "-got you," a soft expression caught his fall, "-you really did it," said Undrar, "-you saved me..." he rose his hand and pressed her cleavage, a line of symbol manifested above the hand, "-still have a job to do," he smiled, the symbols impaled his hand, spraying blood and breaking bones, "-I return thee thy element," the last symbol pushed, the hand dropped and lost consciousness.

'My powers,' she stared at her arms and legs, Death's armor returned, her element beat thrice the strength it held previously, "-what happened?"

"My," lord Death smiled, "-seems my heir has grown stronger than ever before. Reality is nothing more than a game – your element, it's reported. This domain, the Shadow Realm, is the real deal – a never-ending torrent of pure power. He discovered the best was to utilize the element – forsaking his own strength for the sake of a place where he could borrow said strength. I'm impressed."

'Igna Haggard,' the serpent hissed, '-strong and weak, who are you, what are you, what's your potential... I'm excited.'

Chapter 1005: Curse of Misfortune

Vases of golden hue crashed. A decadently decorated hall suffered the poison of chaos. Chandeliers fell from their suspended elevation. Wall-paint smeared, carrying scarp and nail marks. A group of gods laid about at the center. At that precise moment, the debris and mess caused by magic, seemed as if an invading army, a circle of relative cleanliness became their case. A moat of unperturbed marble tiles separated beauty from ugly.

"How could we have lost!" fired a wounded Zeus.

"My lord, there was nothing we could have done," followed Lixbin, "-we mustn't forget that man is the reincarnation of Alfred. Look at Qhildir," they threw a foreign glance at a lounge chair, "-look at him, he's wounded beyond repair. Inflicting such bodily harm on a high-deity, we must not act brazenly."

"I know," he gripped the chair's arms, "-defeat tastes bad either way."

Footsteps arrived from the side, "-speaking of defeat," added Lixbin, "-we were able to hold off the invasion. Seems Artanos is no stranger to under-the-table deals. What are your orders, my lord?"

"Well, until Lucifer is ready to rule the Aapith nation, we keep to ourselves. Ready the chariot, we're going to recruit gods from the alternate domain. As for Igna, he'll remain in dimension Orin. Let Artanos decide what's to become of that thorn."

The messy hall cleared. Zeus' blond hair was spotted nonchalantly gripping a maiden and pulling her into an empty chamber. Lixbin all but sighed and turned, facing the wounded Qhildir, '-Igna Haggard, you're

nothing compared to the man we scouted. How about some salt,' a casual clap summoned a seductive outline of a noblewoman, "-you called, my lord?"

.....

"Cleopatra, go pay the mortal realm a visit. I'm sure you can find a way to bring back old memories?"

She smirked, "-with pleasure," and disappeared in a mist gate.

'Until again, you pest.'

Evening turned dead of night. screamed the haunting nocturnal melody. Forests screeched and tapped, the wind blew and whistled – leaves and twigs fell. The slow crackle of a fireplace warmed what little remained of consciousness. "Lord Death," said a voice interrupting his firm stance through the window, "-why not head home?"

"What home?" he glanced over his shoulder, "-the Hall of Rebirth's not a place for me to return. I left for good. Choosing a life of nothingness over the possibility of causing harm. Suppose even death is afraid of being eliminated. The nothingness, the emptiness – those thoughts bring a man on the verge between strength and cowardice. One wrong move, one wrong play and it's over. How's Igna?"

"He's going okay," she returned.

"What about you?"

"I feel fine," she turned her wrist, "-nothing's amiss. Feels better than ever, even my death elements returned."

"Your element's returned," he exhaled, "-nothing's that simple. Igna failed in many ways."

"Sorry?"

"Don't you understand... Viola, the sudden shift in time and space, the altered timeline. No matter the change, even if they were to travel in the past and change major events – the affected would be forced into a different line. In time, there's no definite place of origin. As Kronos remarked, 'time's nothing more than an illusion of decay.' Higher beings are guilty of returning to the past – changing history and play, it's nothing out of the ordinary. How the world changes depends on the perception of the residents. To them, their actions and way of thought, basically their lifetime, is the correct timeline. Couldn't be farther from the truth. One word encompasses all; Redundancy. Granted, the very idea is convoluted, it has to be. One point splits into paths, the latter take on paths on their own and expand without intervention. Such is the way alternate universes, alternate worlds, and differing dimensions, are born. Bringing that explanation to how it affects the present – Achilles' death opened a rupture to be exploited. She was a key figure in how Staxius established himself at the top."

"Do you mean Igna's not a king anymore?"

"No," he added softly, "-that's the strange thing. They killed Achilles without knowing her true origin. Staxius' entourage consists of people who don't exist."

"I'm confused."

“Don’t think of it literally, think of the reason. If you take something that never existed out of an equation, what remains is the unaltered solution. We swapped timelines, one where Achilles was bested in the tower. Therefore, nothing really changes for Igna, nothing changes for anyone, nothing save the death of Achilles as opposed to her survival.”

novelusb.com

Undrar held a frown, “-in other words, Achilles’ dead, nothing more, nothing less?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “-what are they trying to get is the true question.”

“Complicated thought experiments were never my forte. Lord Death, you should really return to the Hall of Rebirth.”

“I would, but I have duties elsewhere. Kronos and I managed to survive Artanos’ attacks. Keep it from Igna, we’re content on living the rest of eternity playing chess and drinking tea.”

“Lord Death,” she paused, “-you’re a lousy liar. Give my compliments to lord Kronos.”

“Whatever,” he shrugged, a portal opened, “-wait...” came a breathless cry, “-lord death,” Igna crawled to the other room, “-wait, wait,” he clambered against the table and coughed blood. “-I beg of you, please wait, teach.”

The portal closed, “-what is it, Igna?”

“Teach, I have a proposition,” he gulped, “-instead of a pocket dimension, why not join the Shadow Realm.”

Taken aback, Lord Death pulled away, “-and, what would I gain from joining your realm?”

A forced smile sliced the pain and glared, “-better tea and more entertainment.”

“My,” he chuckled, “-you are insane, you know that?”

“Teach, I hear loud and clear – the god of death and ruler of time wish to abstain from the heavenly matter.”

“Yes, you heard correctly.”

“Then join us,” he exhaled, “-join our faction.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“No,” the aura suddenly tightened, “-make a decision now Teach.”

“What’s the point of deciding,” another portal opened to a gray man dawning a white robe, “-long as we have entertainment, I’m happy to join.”

“Kronos,” a disappointed facepalm came from lord Death, “-guess we’ll accept the invitation.” Portals opened, and Kronos and Lord Death joined the Shadow Realm. The welcome ceremony prefaced by Intherna would be quite the fiery celebration. The moment the auras snuffed, Igna dropped from the table and fell harshly, ‘-my head,’ it rang, ‘-it pains.’

“Igna.”

“Undrar,” he forced himself against the wall, “-head on home. The soul and body need time to understand each other. I’ll be fine, trust me, just go away.”

“Is this resentment from what Viola did?”

“No,” he said, “-nothing like that. I- I’m just, I need to rest. The lonelier the plain the better.”

Horse neighs imploded, the current Death Reaper straddled her steed and narrowed, “-Igna, next time you’re in trouble, say the word, I’ll come running.”

“Thank you,” he smiled, “-I appreciate it.”

Silence befell the cabin, he pulled himself to the fireplace and laid on his back. A thunderstorm brewed, “-Serpent, you there?” a slithering entity crossed the corner of his eyes and climbed on his chest, “-yeah, I’m here.”

“Good, let’s have a conversation tomorrow.”

“Okay?”

Meanwhile at the palace, “-éCLAIR!” the prime minister’s office barged.

“It’s midnight,” came a yawn, “-what’s the matter?”

“The master,” she echoed, “-I don’t feel his presence anymore, neither the mana nor the location.”

“Give it a rest,” he rolled over and forced his head into the pillows, “-the king is whimsical. Give it time, he’ll return as if nothing happened.”

A heavy fog gripped the next day. Igna’s consciousness opened to the same wooden roof, ‘-guess I’m alive,’ he sat upright and scanned, ‘-body feels great and my heart,’ palm on the chest, ‘-the death elements returned, my mana’s full, I feel amazing.’

A shadow flashed, “-who’s there?”

“Me,” returned telepathically, “-come join for breakfast.”

‘The serpent.’ Face to face against the entity, “-who are you?”

“I don’t have a name; I have an origin and an untold story. Care to listen?”

Igna looked outside and refocused, “-please.”

“I don’t have a name. My first memory came during a war. Titans and gods fought, blood was spilled and the Death Reaper flew over the battlefield. He took anyone and everyone, those who crossed his might those who went against his will, nothing was out of the question. My purpose, as had been burnt into my mind, was to remain at his side. I soon realized my presence had more than a pleasant surprise. That Death Reaper suffered fates worse than death. He watched as the demons slaughtered those, he deemed close – the built legacy came crashing down. Once he died, I was teleported to the next heir, and the same here, I watched as the man lost everything. It went on for who knows how long – that abundance of freedom allowed me to think. No one ever suspected my existence – neither gods nor

demons could ever see or call to me. They never had the power to beyond the veil. I was caged, unable to speak or act – my only purpose was to cause ruin. A hiss or a simple misguided thought could bring havoc to anyone I saw as boring. Then, it happened – I joined the entourage of Lord Death. He's a man I respect. He understood the curse and knew there laid a greater force behind it. He and I built a connection. And so, I willingly forced myself not to inflict pain. He gave me no reason to do so, the man's not power-hungry and only did the best when was required of him. Our time spent together went on for a long time, and I cherished every moment. Thus, came time for the inheritance, a young boy was chosen – Staxius Haggard. He was far smarter and preferred leading from the shadows, the way he uses the element and tried to circumvent my curse... I had to teach him a lesson. I acted, again and again, and he rebuilt again and again, the more I fought, the stronger he grew, I was scared and felt useless. People around him died, he paid no heed, acted strong for the sake of appearances, and continue to battle against misfortune. He died – forcing me into limbo and reincarnated into you. I couldn't attach myself as there was no element to be had – he'd found a way to hamper my powers. Nevertheless, I fought and eventually did affect your life. It would be lived shortly as the pull of Lord Death's element forced my departure. I couldn't do anything, so I watched."

"Seems your backstory's not that interesting."

"Yeah, it shouldn't be interesting. I'm. I don't know, I'm something tasked with spreading the seed of misfortune to those tainted by greed. Suppose I'm the guardian to the Death Reapers, the cultivator."

"Well, Curse of Misfortune, it seems we have a problem."

"What problem?"

"You're the reason why so much's happened to me. What does one do when they're face to face against the one responsible..." the torso leaned over, "-you take out the root of the problem. A simple snap of the figure and the existence could be wiped. Good as that would feel, I rather not incur your wrath. Death Reapers are incomplete – the weapon's lost. Stories of how and when it was lost are muddled – there's nothing to be had."

"Right, that farmer's tool," it stared emptily, "-I was born from the scythe."

"Huh?"

"My creator, at least I think he's my creator, saw the potential and created a limiter. The weapon won't ever be wielded for the very core itself have been crushed."

"I'm confused, what about the other story?"

"Who knows. An object of fantasy. The weapon won't ever be wielded."

"You're wrong, I did wield Daemonum Gladio... Staxius did, he was blessed with the weapon of the Death Reaper."

"Cursed," it returned, "-Daemonum Gladio's a cheap imitation, a plague that restricts the power of one who's too entuned with the element."

"What's the point," he slammed the table, "-Death Reapers are strong but forced to suffer because they're strong. We're cheated by ourselves, forced to act and watch..."

“Such is the paradox of Death,” it hissed, “-Devil, how about a contract?”

Chapter 1006: Cruse Ortun

“Contract.”

“Surprised?”

“Yes.”

“What’s surprising about that,” it hissed, “-drop the act. I can feel the anger and rage. A layer of indifference started to pile upon thy heart. The Death Element’s returned home. It’s amazing, the way the element accepted the change, the way it responded – there a bond I can’t ever experience.”

“Death Element,” palms still over his chest, “-it feels weird to have him back. I don’t have the words to describe such feelings. It’s, I don’t know, it’s nostalgic – the best way I can say it. No matter, the contract, care to explain?”

“I’m the curse of misfortune. Despite my uncaring appearance, the ‘no-emotion’ portrait on my scalp, and the serpent’s gaze, are all an act. I can’t express myself. I want more, I want to experience much of what the world has to offer. Of course, as a newly inherited Death Reaper, I’m bound to stay at your side.”

“Is that so?” a brazen look washed the expressive contours, “-surely there’s a choice.”

.....

“There is,” it replied, “-there is a choice to say no. There are the options of not inflicting Misfortune, stopping my hobby won’t cause any harm. It’ll only increase my boredom. Then again, my powers are too tempting to not use... you know?”

“Suppose I can relate. Understood, Curse of Misfortune; make your case.”

“Payment will be me and all that I possess and stand for. By the look, it seems you understand what I entail. Reason for my change of heart; interest. You, Igna Haggard, have piqued my curiosity. I feel a strange attachment, a lingering feeling of, ‘-I remember this man’ a very weird feeling indeed. Tell me, are you hiding more secrets?”

“Wouldn’t be much of a secret.”

“My, thy tongue sure has sharpened.”

“Tell me, what is it that you wish in exchange?”

“Inclusion in the Shadow Realm. I want a vessel and ease of transfer between this form and a humanoid body. I also want to be involved in your entourage. Consider me a faithful guardian or a family-friendly spirit.”

“Family-friendly... coming from you, it sounds so wrong on so many levels. I heard the request and I accept.”

31st of January, a week after the incident; curtains split. A splash of sunlight shattered what little sleep was to be had. A discomforting groan escaped, “-it’s too early.”

“Too late,” returned a chipper voice, “-come on, breakfast’s ready.”

“Why not wake up and play some games like normal kids your age.”

“Please,” the strange addition left. The yet focus vision suffered a turnover back palm from Syhton, her black hair and radiant complexion faired badly against Igna’s indifferent expression, “-watch it,” he moved her hand, “-hey,” he leaned over and gave a soft peck on her forehead, “-you’ll be late for work.” The eyelids burst open, crystal blue pupils flashed, “-holy,” he chuckled, “-so much for waking up like a goddess.”

“Shut it,” she rose her arms and pushed his face aside, “-work is traumatizing.”

“Well, you are a superstar,” he smiled, “-comes with the territory.”

“Shut up,” she slid into slippers, covered her body with a nightgown left hanging off the bedside table, “-Julius’s a slavedriver. I’m going to the showers, want to join?”

“Not today,” he smiled, “-you need to look your best.”

“Right, the premiere,” she neared the door, “-I better see you at the cinema, else,” a cut-slicing motion followed, “-I’ll kill you.”

novelusb.com

“Yeah, yeah,” the distant sound of water flowed. He ambled to the balcony and unlocked the door. A burst of air flowed inward, a simple snap summoned a fireball, “-puff,” smoke lost to the windy morning. ‘Is this what calm feels like?’ he puffed, watching over the bustling city – Lei. The castle begged for the king to take time off. Elixia was very adamant on him not be present. ‘-People going to work, teenagers returning from the entertainment stripe, man, Lei’s become the new Odgawoan. Aunt’s been saying it for years... never believed it, never did until now,’ as he observed, an advertising airship hovered by – Syhton’s movie, “-the fall of Legiz,” featured trailers and very emotive pictures, ‘-first action movie featuring a female lead. Julius sure was gutsy, taking a gamble like that. Depending on how the populous receives the production, Apexi’ subsidiary Movie Company could take a massive loss,’ cigarette neared its end. Frosty outside swapped for a cozy interior.

“Good morning, Midne,” said Igna.

“Good morning, master,” she returned with hands busy cleaning the living room, “-breakfast is ready.”

“You do amazing work,” they shared a complex handshake and by the end locked arms, “-how’s the castle?”

“Doing alright,” she winked, “-better than when you’re around?”

“HA!” the lock eased for a fist bump, “-the portal’s ready by the way.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” a ring summoned, “-easy access. Go take a break, you deserve it.”

“Understood,” she wore the accessory and gleamed, “-finally, I can travel back and forth without waiting for éclair’s approval.”

“Have you eaten?”

“No, but I plan on catching the tram. Serene and I made plans.”

“Then go,” he stopped, “-forget the cleaning and go, I’ll take care of it.”

“But majesty...”

“Hey, no arguments,” he narrowed, “-are you so brazen to ignore a request from your king?”

“No but still.”

“Midne...”

“Fine, I’ll go,” she instantly swapped clothes and vanished. The apartment gathered its breath – having her around was like sprinting. Between her energy and contagious smile, there was no room to be sad or feeling down. ‘Sole reason the castle holds itself together,’ Igna joined a simply dressed table, compared to the lavish apartment, the difference added a hint of freshness, ‘-not because of me or the ministers. Without Midne, I’m sure the pressure would have killed their morale.’

“Rude to think without eating.”

“Good morning to you,” he said, “-how many times must I ask, don’t come into our bedchambers unannounced.”

“What, I’m no stranger to the bonding of flesh. Besides, they play that sort of thing all the time on the television after nine.”

“Seriously,” he paused, shy of biting a scrumptious sandwich, “-I granted you the body of a teenager, you’re thirty at worst and fifteen at best... I did say it would be better if I gave the body of an adult.”

“No, I want to experience what the younger people have to experience.”

“I’m sure you made many friends,” he rested the sandwich, opting to sip juice, “-speaking like an old man.”

“Right, the subject of friends.”

“Don’t,” Igna rose an open palm, “-I don’t want to hear excuses. If you can’t make friends, I can’t do anything.”

The boy rolled his eyes and focused on the immediate trial – breakfast.

‘Curse of Misfortune is now a student by the name of Cruse Ortun at Modie’s Private Academy. Came as a shock, he vehemently argued about experiencing youth. I did say it would be a hard trial, the world of a teenager revolves around pornography and acting tough. The mental age is on par with an enlightened one. Good thing I made the vessel handsome. Light gray colored hair and eyes, sharp facial features, and an impressive jawline. The body’s fit to be a world-class athlete and blessed with the Apprentice and Prodigy trait. He’s gotten a head start, I wonder how the students view him.’

“Joined any clubs?”

Cough, “-clubs?” orange juice spilled, “-n-no, I don’t t-t-think so?”

“Right,” Igna grinned, “-a hopeless old man in the body of a youth. Stop being so stuck up, Cruse. You have my blessing and my influence – as the child of a long relative, you were asked to join the palace...”

“Yes, yes, I know the story. I come from Iqavea, a son of an impoverished noble family who shared ties with the Haggard dynasty. I came to his majesty’s court to learn the ways of the world and build something for myself. I know, you had me repeat the lines until daybreak...”

“Did I now?” Igna averted the frown, “-Cruse, seriously, don’t be so uptight. You’re a teenager, don’t force yourself to act like anyone. Don’t try to fit in, believe in what you want, follow what you wish, and do what thy mind takes interest in. It’s fine not to fit in, it’s fine not to have many friends – though I’m sure that pretty face of yours has been the subject of various dramas.”

“Yeah,” he gloomily grabbed the half-empty cup, “-I had five girls ask me out on a date.”

“Good, accept it and go out.”

A sudden tap came heavily, “-don’t listen to him,” glared Syhton, “-Cruse, do what you want but never break a maiden’s heart. This guy is the expert in heartbreak, and I rather you never become like him.”

Beep, beep, “-damn, he’s here,” quick to pull his bag, “-I’ll be back later, have fun!”

“You too, Cruse, have fun.” Such was the start of an unlikely entity’s life within the mortal world. Syhton left the room later on.

The television played, Igna kicked his feet over the table and watched, “-nothing’s interesting,” he cycled through news, scanned previews, and eventually gave up, dropping the remote and turning towards the bar. Heavy drinks poured, ‘-a lonely drink,’ he gulped and sighed, “-I wonder what Miira and Lilith are up to?” as if fate – two scrolls dropped at his side, “-reports from Miira,” said one, “-report from Lilith,” said the other.

“Greetings Igna, I send this report with hopes that it doesn’t arrive too late. My trip to heaven city was insightful. Years have passed since Gophy’s disappearance – the heavenly realm seems to have forgotten a goddess by her name ever existed. I heard from Draebala, that our faction established stronger ties with the nobles and has made takes with the Eipea Empire. Latter was unimpressed and by Zeus’ comments, I doubt we’ll ever reach speaking terms. I was shocked when I heard from éclair, that they did launch an attack. My sources tell me it wasn’t planned, seems to have been a spur-of-the-moment action. Regardless, I’m choosing to stay – long as I don’t directly cross their paths, as possible inheritor to the title of Supreme god – Zeus’ faction is scared.” Signed Miira.

“Lilith here,” read the other, “-the Aapith Nation’s nothing short of amazing. I’ve had so much fun here, the souls of the demented and endless supply of body have made my fantasies greater. Igna, I don’t know if I can help myself, the Aapith nation feels just right for me. My children are here, the answer to every whim, I even sentenced one of the council lords to leap into an erupting volcano, you should have seen the look on his face. Well, I was surprised to see him laughing and swimming. Dear Igna, I need time to reflect. I’ve had more fun here than anywhere else. See you soon,” signed Lilith.

A loud flame burnt the scrolls, “-Lilith and Miira have joined their respective factions. I can’t impose on them; they kindly guarded the Shadow Realm and choose to stay by my side despite my weaknesses. Who am I to interject if they find happiness. Cliché as it sounds, the greatest love is the ability to let go.”

Dring, dring, “-incoming call, Julius.”

“Hello?”

“Brother,” said a pant, “-where are you?”

“At my apartment, why?”

“Can you make it to this address?”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll be there.”

“Please be quick, it’s of the utmost importance.”

Helmet over his head – the king tore through the streets, pushing three digits on the narrow roads. The location came as followed; an apartment building placed a twenty-minute walk from Apexi’s studio. ‘This place,’ he slowed and stopped at the gates, ‘-the Apexi owned apartments.’

“Identification,” said the guard.

He took off the helmet, “-Will this suffice?”

“Young master, please, go in.”

Ambulances and police vehicles were at the ready. Julius’ frightened look turned at Igna, there, it seemed to ease, “-brother, it’s bad.”

“What’s happened?” Igna marched to the inspector, “-did someone die?”

“I’m afraid so,” said the inspector, “-we were called to investigate a foul smell. Our team found the body of Scott hung against his bedframe. Coroner’s primary investigation says it’s a suicide. I know it’s not protocol, but here,” he handed over a letter, “-these are the last word Scott spoke.”

.....

Chapter 1007: Next of kin

“What right do I have to speak on my death? Cowardice, I’m a coward, I was afraid to die without speaking my mind. Suicide, going out alone. I don’t know anymore, I’ve waited time and time again, always revolving around my desk, always holding my pen, always staring at the paper. I’m done, I’m finally done. My mind’s a mess, my body a wreck. People come and go, relationship changes – and the curse of life forces you to move forward. Everyone says to stand up and walk, crawl your way to the destination if needed... damned hypocrites. Motivational speakers, good-will distributors, they can all go to hell. What does it mean anyway, what does reality speak, what happens when it ends, I don’t know. Gods and demons are real, we live in an age where those mystical figures have shown their miracles time and time again, we’ve seen fighters reach the level of demi-gods and transcend the mortal limit. Igna Haggard, I know you’ll read this letter, I know it, you’re almighty, you’re powerful. Aceline... they took her from me. You took her first and promised her a life of relative happiness. She died, I know she

died so long then, I was there when her body was taken to Hidros, she died in Alpha. As if nothing happened, she reappeared. I was happy. I didn't care if I wasn't invited into her life, I was pleased to see her alive and well. You revived her, you definitely did, I know you're more than a simple King, you're far greater, a personage of a greater destiny. After the whole marriage debacle, Queen Eia's temperament... you allowed a simple promise to break Aceline's heart. She never spoke badly. She never complained. She'd always give a tender smile and brush off any pain she might have felt. The anguish, the anger, I wanted to take her away, I truly did. Yet, my efforts were nothing compared to the love you two shared. Her heart was taken by you, Igna, she always loved you. Even when the relationship ended, despite the years and regardless if I were at her side, her eyes were always kept towards you. She admired and laughed – and kept me, even though I was to become her husband, far away. I know why she did it, I know why she wanted to get married. It was because of you, yes, because of you Igna. Realize how much she cared, realize how much her heart yearned, how much she wanted for you and her to be one. Then again, nothing goes according to plan. She was killed during our wedding... I was forced again to stand by and watch. Took me a while to regain my mind... here I expected her to be revived. Who am I kidding anyway, the King's a selfish bastard, I don't care what you say, I don't care what happens, you only brought her to life for self-satisfaction. Does playing with emotion get you off, does it bring a sense of pleasure and accomplishment? Of course, it did, you're the fucking Devil. My state of mind, my sufferance. It amounted to nothing; I was someone used to bring up the prestige of the 1%. Her death and my refusal to work – Lord Julius understood my pain and granted me some leeway until I figured out my path in life. I tried, believe me, I tried. Starting again with so many pent-up emotions. Her face is burnt into my mind, I can't forget and I can't forgive either. To you, Igna, who chose such a selfish way for Aceline to live... for having made her a doll, for having turned her into but a plaything, I damn thee. When the letter eventually reaches your hand, majesty, believe that I died knowing I was helpless. An indirect victim of your whims... does that matter, I'm just a name in the crowd, an organism that eats and defecates, we're just numbers and revenue, isn't it right, majesty. May hell be a warmer place than the colder realm without my lover. Farewell."

Igna glanced at the ambulance; a body bag rose into the back. He turned at the inspector, "-this letter, it never existed. Scott addressed his feelings and blamed me for the death. We can safely rule the death a suicide. I owe the man an apology. Never thought he'd be in such a mindset. Scott, dear friend, I couldn't help in life, therefore, allow me the honor to lay thee beside thine lover."

"Majesty," interjected the inspector, "-the letter won't be admitted into evidence if his majesty says so."

"Allow me to help. Scott's next of kin."

"Yes," he sighed, "-the harder part of being an inspector. I will get the car ready, please join me up front in thirty minutes."

The allocated time was used to examine Scott's apartment. Yellow tape barred the hallway – residents were asked to kindly evacuate and stay at a hotel. Beige walls and brown carpet added homely color – plant pots and what little light the blub shone whispered a shivering coldness. Julius led the way, they ducked under the yellow tapes, exchanged nods with the guarding officers, and entered the apartment, "-messy," said one, "-we've combed the place and found evidence of drug use." The attending officer scribbled the facts until shadows covered his notepad.

"Majesty," he bowed, "-lord Julius, how might I be of help?"

.....

Igna frowned at the attending recruits, “-we should leave,” the collective room exited one at a time, “-my liege, how might this humble servant be of help?”

“Tell me about the drug use?”

“As it looks, my liege.”

“Right,” Julius ambled, “-would be best for you not to report the drug usage. Scott’s death falls under the palace’s jurisdiction, am I wrong?”

“But the Department of Justice...”

“We will handle it,” he added coldly, “-now, carry on, we wouldn’t want people to get suspicious.” A muffled click followed.

“Brother, I know Scott’s death is rather sudden. I had my doubts and they’ve become true. He couldn’t get over Aceline’s death and chose to end his misery. A person can’t be happy if they don’t want to be happy. I gave him the apartment, an allocation, nothing.”

novelusb.com

“We never know what’s going on inside their heads. A girl fourteen of age killed herself. She was unlucky enough to be sniffed by the press. Who knows how many others decide to end themselves. The circle of life, as beautiful as it appears, can be the vilest, most disturbing law the world ought to follow. I know, don’t look at me that way. Going to see next of kin is my way of finding closure.”

“Self-satisfaction,” exhaled Julius, “-I wonder...”

“You better not,” he returned, “-Scott was a great man, a manager of unrivaled power. He’ll be missed.”

“Yeah, he will be missed. Excuse me, brother, I should return to my duties. Apexi must inform about his death.”

“Right, keep the door shut,” and so, Igna found himself alone in the living room. ‘Noodle cups, the smell of sweat and vomit. Empty beer cans and booze. Guess the death affected him more than I thought,’ careful steps led to the bedchamber, the light gleamed, and a noose was yet removed from the bed’s frame.

‘I can see it,’ he stopped in the doorway, ‘-how he died, the anguish and sudden decision. He went out without a fight, kneeling as the noose tightened. Actions have consequences,’ he exited the apartment, ‘-Scott’s, unfortunately, one of the few who I knew. What of the nameless faces who died because of my actions,’ a smile escaped, ‘-am I the type to care?’ the door opened to flashes and media coverage. The inspector stood broadly before a reporter and gave vague statements. Ambulances left shortly after – the sirens screeched.

The police car rode through the busy capital. Nothing changed, the churning of daily life continued, “-a shame he had to die like that,” commented the officer, “-my liege, might I ask a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why did you ask for the history of drug use to remain a secret. It’s not unusual to find starlets high on narcotics to die from an overdose.”

“Call it a moment’s whim. I rather the world know of Scott as a man whose hardworking ethic brought him wealth and fame. If the history of drug use is uncovered, well, the legacy will be tarnished.”

“Understood,” the broad figure carried into strange alleys and made the long trip to the residential district Onel. Juei, the sibling to Onel, was also considered a residential district; one for the rich and famous. Crossing the district limits brought home the stacked apartment complexes, the modest way of life, and the less hectic way of life. Every major city had its slums, Rosepire was no exception, “-been a while since I came to Onel, how’s the way of life here?”

“Oh, Onel’s mostly a place regarded for travelers and adventurers. Not that a place – can find cheap lodging and relative comfort. The residents are friendly – homeless shelters and healthcare made the area a haven for the lost. I dare say, my liege, the church of Syhton and Tharis has made sure it remains a place of worship and respect. There are also the local crime syndicates, local gangs, and casual drug traffickers. We know everything there is to know – if they get too powerful, the Order of the Nightwalkers step in and ends the progress,” the police car pulled into a quaint part of town. Houses here were well-built, the streets cleaned and the neighborhood peaceful, “-Scott’s next of kin, his older sister Laia,” they stopped on the driveway and exited. Childish giggles and noise escaped into their yard. Toys were left outside – the inspector gathered his breath and entered the porch to a swift volley of taps. The giggles paused, “-coming,” followed. The footsteps rocked at a hastened pace, “-I’m here,” a middle-aged lady twisted the handle, “-can I help you?”

“Are you Mrs. Laia?”

“Yes, who asks?”

“I’m Inspector Darwin. We would like to have a word in private.”

Her justified suspicious look ambled to Igna, “-pardon me, who might you be?”

“Igna Haggard,” he returned, “-my lady, please, there’s no need to fret. We mean you no harm and only wish to have a moment of your time.”

She froze, “-mother, mother.”

“Follow me,” she spun and shook her finger at her children. They stopped and climbed upstairs, wherein Laia guided her guest to the kitchen. Family photos and grandiose poses; there were even pictures of idol groups sharing laughter. ‘Divorced,’ went across his mind, ‘-no evidence of a father. The children’s reaction to their mother’s orders, speaks volumes.’

“Please have a seat,” she offered, “-I’ll prepare some tea,” her hand trembled.

“Mrs. Laia, we appreciate the gesture, it won’t be necessary,” they remained upright, refusing to sit. Igna calmly tapped Darwin’s arms, “-let me,” he whispered.

“Forgive me,” her gaze lowered, “-I don’t know how to act. This is all too sudden, am I in trouble?”

“No, no,” he returned with a reassuring tone, “-Mrs. Laia, would it be alright if I speak frankly?”

"I guess?"

"It's about Scott," he continued, "-he was found dead earlier this afternoon."

"D-d-dead?"

"Yes, Scott's dead."

"His death," she stumbled, '-he's dead... why?'

"We have reason to believe the death is a suicide," added Darwin, "-we're deeply sorry."

"The children," she side-glanced an open doorway, "-what will happen of them? The debt my husband left, the mouths to feed, why did you have to die, Scott, you idiot."

"Mrs. Laia, might I ask what happened to your husband?"

"He died a few years ago during the war. We recently moved here for a better education... without Scott, I don't know what to do. Taking care of seven kids, I'm sorry, you didn't come here for my story. Thank you," she nodded, "-where's he?"

"At the hospital," returned Darwin.

"Okay," she sniffled, "-I'll be there later. Thank you for making the trip, majesty."

Chapter 1008: Into the lion's den

Mrs. Laia, dressed in black and accompanied by her children; waited at the entrance. Their escort was a gentlemanly dressed Darwin. 'What is he playing at?' they arrived at an entourage of close personnel. Fellow workers from Apexi, acquaintances, and friends were present to mourn the untimely sad death. The autopsy ruled the death a suicide; no sign of foul play. Igna opted for a place in the background, allowing for the grief and sorrow to do their due.

"Keep an eye on Darwin," said a worried comment.

"Inspector's doing his job," returned Igna, "-well, by the look he has towards Laia, I do wonder if the man's thinking with his head or all the blood has rushed downstairs."

"Should we not stop him?" whispered Julius.

"No, let them be," he said nonchalantly, "-look at Laia, she's got her manipulating face on. Did you ever think about why the children shared no commonality? I'd guess they're from different fathers. Why did she not have family pictures of her husband? Let me tell you, don't trust appearances. She smells of lies and deceit."

Igna's cynical approach; based on observation and intel from Elixia – painted a damning picture. Laia, or so she'd had them believe to be a helpless housewife plagued by the seed of misfortune, was nothing more than an opportunist. Said trait, albeit a good feature when used accordingly, could turn the simplest of deeds into an ambiguous hassle.

Scott's body was placed at the morgue after the autopsy. Darwin helped compile the finer details of the case, the death certificate was issued, and the will would be read later on by a lawyer from Apexi's

legal team. The lines formed, respects paid, few words exchanged and last farewells given. Igna and Julius waited ominously in a separate room.

.....

"Brother, are you not going to visit?"

"No, what's the point?" he shrugged, "-I've already seen the dead body and paid my respects. Go ahead, I'll be here."

"As you wish," Julius rose with a slightly annoyed frown; the door pushed just as he were to grab the handle. Dark brown hair, fairly tanned skin, and golden jewelry murmured a soft, "-I'm sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for," said Julius, continuing his way. The new personage remained at the doorway, her feline gaze wrapped itself around Igna, who simply kept an unexpressive mien.

"Terribly sorry," said the lady, "-but is this where I may find Igna Haggard?"

"You're looking at him," he thundered, she took a few steps inside – a flick of the wrist by Igna closed the door immediately. The brown hair, caught by surprise at the sudden closure, had her face away from Igna, "-look at tha-" wind escaped her chest violently, and her whole body crashed against the door; a thud echoed along the tranquil hallway.

"You think I wouldn't notice?" Igna had his right arm pushed against the lady's neck, whilst the other held both of her hands above her head. A pool of tentacles rose arms which firmly locked her legs in place – a dense, suffocating aura escaped. Tiny decorative plants eroded, the light dimmed – bicolored pupils glared a crimson shine, "-e-e-e-enough," he eased on the strangulation, "-Cleopatra, how nice to see you again," the facial features altered, the canines sharpened, pure rage burnt within his eyelashes, "-oh it's very nice to see you again."

It was then, that a lump locked her throat, '-I was foolish,' reality came to fruition, '-Igna Haggard is the reincarnation of Staxius... I'm dead,' countless pricks stole her tongue, her breathing lessened only to greatedened the look of sadism within Igna's eyes.

"Bow," he ordered and forcibly bit her neck, slicing an artery in the process. Loss of vision, inability to think, the fading of the world, and numbness dropped her voluptuous frame. *Ancient Magic: Teleportation.*

"Brother?" Julius returned, "-no one's here?" he pushed his head inside, scanned the room, and pulled back, "-not here," he echoed. Syhton tilted her head and crossed her arms, '-I swear I sensed his presence.'

"My lady, they're ready to move the body," said Ester.

novelusb.com

"Understood, let's carry on then."

A puff of smoke imploded inside the castle's dungeon. "-Who's there?" ambled a man holding a lantern. A shadow cast two figures against Theon's master torture chamber, a tall, handsome figure side-glanced with emotionless eyes. Light from Theon's cage softly distinguished features not common, the sunken

cheeks and long claws, a pair of softly incandescent wings, “-Theon,” he spoke deeply, “-I bring a present,” *snap,* the inner anger eased.

“Majesty,” widened Theon, “-I barely recognized you.”

“Well, things happened,” he dusted his shoulder and pants, “-I’m calm now,” evidenced by the reversion, “-here’s today’s prize. A fine specimen – she’s under my influence, might have nicked one artery when mauling, accidents happen. Nothing a little healing scroll can’t fix.”

Theon skipped inside, stood onto a slab of rock, and hooked the lantern. Many other lights followed, brightening the view of macabre and painful-looking instruments. He reached for a knapsack and pulled a scroll, “-using scrolls in this day and age feels overpowered,” he whispered and unrolled the item over her stomach.

“Why so?”

“Knowhow on its manufacture’s been lost. Most high-valued scrolls have been bought by collectors. As for us, we know how to craft the scrolls. GateSix’s stingy on rationing.”

“I’ll put in an order,” returned Igna, “-you do burn through quite a lot.”

“Well, I have to,” he painstakingly readied his tools, “-else they die easily. We can’t have that happen.”

“I’m here, don’t worry, you can go overboard, she won’t die, that much I promise.”

Theon’s face gleamed, “-well, enough chitchat. Our guest, will she wake up anytime soon?”

A rusty tray laid beside her head. Theon jovially skipped to another cupboard. The latter rolled until it rested at the foot of a stone slab. “-Master, will you be assisting?”

“Yeah, I’m here to watch her suffer,” he narrowed, “-she deserves everything you have to offer. I won’t leave until I’m satisfied. Trust me, I won’t allow her death either.”

“Won’t allow her death?”

“No,” he smirked, “-Theon, you were right at a time. Being soft sows’ trouble – the short-live kindness only benefits a very few.”

Two sharp claps readied the room, “-majesty, my expertise ranges from physical to sexual torture. Which do we start first?”

“Sexual torture?”

“Yes,” he nodded, “-many captives are most sensitives to said places. It’s entertaining when one forcibly takes what little dignity is left and crumbles it. Breaking their spirit is also not a viable option, the more they resist the better it is. Simple reason, once they give up, the screams and painful expressions stop.”

“Go on,” he smiled, “-show me your way.”

Cleopatra regained vision in a strange room, ‘-dark,’ she pulled to be stopped by chains, ‘-I’m chained?’ she blinked, a strange aura rose throughout the room, “-Hello,” a chipper smile leaped into her field of vision, “-my name’s Theon,” he smiled, “-and you’re Cleopatra, I know everything there is to know.

Don't bother speaking," a ball-gag tightened, "-we'll start with getting to know one another," a cold knife went down her chest to her thighs, her body instinctively curled, "-aha, you're very sensitive," he licked his lips, "-or is that something to do with this?" as if a magician, Theon opened his palm and displayed a small vile, "-a special concoction that makes women feel like ten-thousand bucks. "-Don't bother escaping either," the vile disappeared, "-mana's limited, things can get pretty rough," a moment's inspiration hit, Theon energetically turned towards Igna, "-master," he took out his phone and displayed a rather disturbing video, "-is this possible?"

"You're into some weird stuff," blinked Igna, "-I'm not here to kink shame... but seriously, tentacles?"

"A dessert is best enjoyed first and eaten later once the sugar becomes tiresome."

"Fine," a pool of tentacles summoned as if poles around the rectangular stone-slab, "-here," a smaller critter of purple hue, bearing big pupils, landed on Theon's shoulder, "-remote for the limbs. Have at it." The clothes ripped one at a time, the slimy, squishy, and disturbing texture of the limbs flopped throughout her body, she cried and moaned, only for it to be muffled, her eyes widened suddenly as the limbs approached her inner thigh. She screamed and spat the ball-gag, "-LET ME GO!" she fought, throwing kicks and wailed, "-don't come near me, freak-" Theon was no man of patience, a limp dove into her mouth, she gagged, the other tentacles locked her thighs open.

Igna grabbed a seat and ordered popcorn. Sathanas casually took the bucket to the dungeon. 'What's this?' near constant moans and gags resounded. She followed the sound and arrived at a rather disturbing sight – purple limbs stuffed countless orifices of Theon's new guest.

"Over here," hailed Igna in the corner, "-come, Sathanas, why not enjoy the show?" he smiled and shared the snack.

"My god," she ate, "-pops, you have some derange fetish."

"No, I don't. I'm pleased to have the mundane type of carnal pleasure. Look at Theon, haven't seen him have this much fun."

She took a handful and ate one at a time, "-father's torturers would be thrilled to see such a display. Torture there doesn't come close to what Theon has in store. He's weirdly intriguing."

"Rather not invest much thought into his head. You'll be surprised," father and daughter watched for the following hours as Theon slowly chipped at Cleopatra's body and mind. The humiliation, the mind games, the pauses, and the fake sense of safety.

"I can escape," sweat and fear slipped down her face and body, she barely stood, '-he's not here. What an idiot,' a sharp pull shattered the chains, '-the main door, I can escape.'

Alas, the trio waited in the same room, hidden by Igna's concealment spell, "-a false sense of security. Rising her hope and morale," Igna clapped, "-my, I'm very impressed."

"I endeavor to do my best."

"Hush," added Sathanas, "-here's the good part. Cleopatra sneakily opened the door, she tiptoed to the stairway and smiled, "-once, over door, I'll use magic and get out." She reached for the handle, an

impulse barged – Cleopatra flew and fell a few meters, the lock clicked behind a fiend. The footsteps resounded, it grabbed and threw her over its massively hairy and broad shoulder.

“Isn’t that Yelp?”

“It’s Yelp,” giggled Theon, “-my prodigy and member of the demon-clan.”

“Master,” the voice thundered, “-I bring the toy,” he threw her onto the slab – the fall cracked bones, dislocated her shoulder, and scraped part of her skin. The concealment spell undid, and the trio laughed and mocked the pathetic attempts.

“We had enough fun playing with tentacles, how about a real beast,” Theon snapped, the stone-slab summoned a layer of finely-grained sand-paper. “-Have at it, Yelp, take two hours and have fun.” The half-goat and half-man entity rose her legs above his shoulder and rocked, every motion scraped her back – the cries amplified.

“We should leave,” added Theon, “-Yelp works best when he’s alone. We’ll begin the real torture once he’s done. Let’s have a break.”

Dinner was thus served upstairs meanwhile Cleopatra experienced excruciating pain. Yelp didn’t once stop, he forced her into many positions and continued to ravage her body, tearing her orifices and dislocating her jaw at one point.

“Majesty,” the golden-colored dining hall brought a sense of ease, “-might I ask why my liege has taken such interest in that woman?” aside from the king, the maids and servants also shared a meal. His table or another, it didn’t matter – only the king’s seat was reserved, anywhere else was subject to ‘-first come first serve.’ Known to be a friendly man, the king expressly ordered the retainers to feel at home – many of the drinking sessions birthed from dinners were home to various fantastical tales. Thus, as good food and drinks warmed the retainers, Theon’s curiosity sparked.

“She betrayed my uncle a long time ago. You know, the Hero King Staxius,” how could he not, a massive portrait hung on one of the walls, “-guess it’s vengeance?”

“You called?”

Chapter 1009: ‘-life matters,’

“No, I didn’t.”

“I heard my name.”

“Was a matter of speech.”

“What was?”

“Calling your name.”

“...” Vengeance vanished; two hours passed. Sathanas waved a friendly smile and disappeared into the Shadow Realm. Theon and Igna followed the sound of agony. Dungeon opened to static energy, a feeling that’d raise one’s hairs held the atmosphere in limbo. “-Intense mana,” said Igna, “-did something happen?” a slow methodical tap slithered into focus. A ball of light replaced Theon’s lantern, “-this

feeling,” added the master torturer, “-don’t mind it, majesty, tis how Yelp expresses himself. The more joy and pleasure he feels, the more static electricity is unleashed. I wouldn’t worry, it’ll go soon enough.”

Blood, sweat, and tears. Cleopatra’s face was mashed into the arduous grit-like surface, Yelp shook violently, her skin was no longer present, and muscle and blood were glimpsed. Her jaw hung unnaturally, the sheer look of terror and pain in the sunken gaze; Theon strode forth, slapped Yelp’s shoulder, and spoke, “-good job, apprentice. Go on, I’ll take it from here.” The muscular beast unlocked itself from his prey, spun, and bowed at Igna before leaving in a portal. Without the demon’s shadow shielding the light – her exposed back and painful wounds came into view. There laid no skin on her back, her nether regions were nothing save a tangled mess, a dislocated knee, a dislocated shoulder, and a protruding fracture of the wrist. The left hand, relatively intact, rose at Igna, gesturing for mercy – her plea snuffed by a swing metal baseball bat, slamming the palm against the stone slab. A nauseating crack muffled into a guttural screech, “-don’t beg for mercy,” fired Theon, “-no one here is going to save you, no one. I heard what happened, I heard of the betrayal – two-faced bitches ought to die more than once.” Igna entered the frame, grabbed her hair, and pulled back, cracking a few bones in the process, “-drink this,” blood fell on her tongue. Her disfigured visage and painfully lethal wounds rejuvenated. The spotless coffee-colored complexion returned, and her feline gaze and handsome figure reset to a healthy standard.

.....

“Cleopatra, how was the lovemaking, did you enjoy it?”

“...”

“No response?”

“...”

“SPEAK WHEN MASTER TALKS TO YOU!” a nine-tail whip crashed against her back; “-AHHHHHHH!” Igna lifted her chin and slapped, “-listen here, Cleopatra. You’re not worth being sold as a slave, not worth being the plaything of a beggar. You deserve the seed of a beast; you deserve to be placed upon Judas’ chair. Coming to the mortal realm wasn’t such a great idea. Not only did you have the audacity to visit my kingdom, but you also had the nerve to step in a precious moment. What did Lixbin say, ‘go visit the mortal realm? I’m sure you can find a way to bring back old memories?’ he stopped and stared, “-I was right, wasn’t I? Congratulations, the job was duly fulfilled. You awaken feelings that had best been remained hidden. You will understand the meaning of pain,” he leaned into her ear, “-you won’t die, that much I promise,” the neutral expression moved away, her face locked against his, “-NO, NO, NO, NO!” impending doom, the anticipation of pain, the fear of the unknown, the devil had set the stage for the long-awaited retribution.

“Majesty, she won’t die right?”

novelusb.com

“No, she won’t. The blood of a nightwalker runs through her veins. She won’t inherit the powers, only the immortality. Drop some blood on her tongue if you go too far, she’ll recover.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes,” he smiled and sat, “-consider her a gift. Your very own canvas.”

News of the newest addition reached Minerva’s office. Minister of Defense threw her hands on her chair and stood – night moved into the following day.

“Minister, about the war conference, will Phantom be attending?”

“Take the matter to Elvira,” she said, strutting her way towards the dungeon, “-I heard the king’s been having fun,” her band of trusted associates stopped at a restricted part of the castle. A barrier took in biometric identification, “-I’ll return soon enough,” she said, disappearing into an ominous doorway.

“My god,” her jaws dropped, “-what have you two been up to?” Theon’s guest was placed on the wheel that extended limbs, “-just having some fun,” added Theon, “-this device here comes from the middle-ages. My, people back then knew how to make a spectacle. She’s gained a few inches in the process.”

“Good morning, Minerva,” mumbled Igna.

“Majesty,” she stopped at the entrance, “-what in the world,” her king stood with a sadistic expression, bloodied vest and an arsenal of surgical tools at his side, “-is that?”

“Oh yes,” he said, “-this is the first iteration of a dental chair. Once Theon’s done, I’ll have my chance to play.”

“THEON, MAJESTY!” she thundered, “-THIS GOES BEYOND TORTURE!”

“Really?” Igna shrugged and dropped blood into her mouth, her body rejuvenated, the machine disengaged. Theon nonchalantly went to the back, grabbed a bucket of boiling water, and poured it onto the exposed stomach, “AHHHHH!” she screamed, her skin peeled and bubbled, by which he sprinkled salt and dropped a mass of ice, “-AHHHHHHHHHHH!” the head dropped from shock, the lass transferred from one device to the next. Igna dawned a brownish red apron, additional drops fell, and the wound disappeared.

“Majesty, please,” Minerva entered the room and held Igna’s hand, “-don’t fall to the dark side, this is no way to treat another,” Cleopatra’s naked frame jumped from a splash of ice-cold water, she shivered, “don’t you feel pity for her?” inquired Minerva, Igna kept a neutral stance. Cleopatra moved her hand and warmly cupped Minerva’s. She bore an innocent look of repentance, her shiver muffled, ‘-i-i-it’s fine.’

“No you don’t,” Theon stepped in, pulled Cleopatra’s palms, and placed them on a chopping board, he pulled a pair of nail clippers and snapped, “-AHHHH,” the chair shook vehemently, Igna rose an open palm at Minerva.

“You should sit this one out,” he said, turning towards the rusted tools, “-her screams will only get worse from here,” Theon performed the manicure of dread whilst Igna prepared his tools.

“Igna, please,” the king ignored the cry and forced his fingers into Cleopatra’s mouth. A metallic restraint dug into her gums and held the jaw open – blood, pain, Minerva winced, clenching her fingers. Laughter escaped, Igna casually placed pliers on her molars – Theon snapped another nail, she screamed, any movement of her jaw plunged the restraints deeper, “-welcome to hell,” Igna grabbed and pulled,

stopping midway through taking out her tooth. Nothing would make her pain any more relatable, there was nothing to be said about how Cleopatra found herself. The pain would only amplify.

“Scott’s untimely death,” wrote various news outlets. The procession carried the manager to his lover’s side. They both were buried next to each other.

‘Despicable,’ narrowed Julius, ‘-what a disgusting sight.’ In a moment’s grief as Scott’s body was taken to Aceline’s side – the prince spotted Laia sneak away with Darwin. There needed no explanation, a shadowy figure materialized at the edge of the crowd, “-Laia’s having intercourse with Darwin in some nearby bushes. How should we respond?”

Elixia appeared behind, “-allow me to handle the matter,” she reached into her bag and pulled a pistol, “-should be a simple fix.”

Julius grabbed her palm, “-don’t shoot.”

“Oh, I’ve had enough,” she summoned a display, “-the will, Scott expressly said not to give any of his belonging to Laia. I dug deeper into her past – the paper trail stops. Laia here is no ordinary sister, she works for a defuncted international intelligence agency. They transferred leadership when the Alphan and Wracian alliance was formed. She’s been in hiding ever since Scott moved to Alpha.”

“What’s sleeping with Darwin got to do?”

“Darwin’s an idiot,” returned Elixia, “-son of a baronet granted access to the police force. He got in on his own merit... some personality issues have kept his promotion off the table,” a quick search brought various charges of assault and harassment to show, “-dude loves to bond.”

“Allow me the honors.”

“No, don’t kill her, not now,” said Julius, “-we’ll decide after Scott’s peacefully laid to rest. Does she know about the will?”

“No, no one does.”

“And I won’t ask how you gained access. Good job as always Elixia. I’ll inform Serene, we’ll discuss the will at the palace later.” Scott was laid to rest on the 2nd of February X127.

Apexi, headed by Julius, would hold a press conference later that day. 13:00, Apexi’s press room carried many reporters from various news outlets. Some national and others international. He’d arrive at 13:05, the crowd rose from their seats, “-please, sit,” he said and took center stage, “-I do apologize for the suddenness, and appreciate the swiftness. It warms my heart, truly,” the audience sat and waited, a live broadcast followed. “-Due to the ongoing investigation, questions about the case won’t be revealed. I can say this much, as of yet, no cause for foul play has been found. As you know, Scott was found dead at his apartment. It’s not just him, many others also died by their own hand. Suicide is a rampant problem facing Hidros, especially the youth. It’s a problem only awakening and encouragement can help. We pride ourselves on the culture of, ‘-survival of the fittest,’ and thanks to that, we’ve become a very prosperous nation. I speak with confidence when I say, our cultural intermingle with Arda and our many comrades overseas has broadened our society. It’s a treat to see every race getting along with each other. There are outliers, such is the nature of a community. People come in different shapes and sizes – our open-mindedness is the only weapon able to bridge the gap. In honor of Scott, Apexi’s

decided to hold a charity concert to raise funds for the suicide awareness society. Not only Apexi, Phantom, the king, and many other massive companies have pledged a considerable amount to provide aid to the needy. Though it's true the strong decide, it's also the strong's duty to help. To make good on their message – we plan for the concert to be a recurring annual event,” he bowed at the camera, “- together, let's make Hidros a place where younger folks don't have to contemplate their own lives. Suicide's plague is an illness we must eradicate. Without your help, the fight will be lost.”

Mention of the charity event went viral over the Arcanum. The heartfelt sentiment and focus brought those who thought of ending their lives together. The shining light was the first step. As the populous banded under the 'life matters,' charity event, Igna found himself on his knees. The kingdom rallied under an honest and humble cause. Marches and non-violent protests were held, and capitalist businesses were forced into joining the fold.

A beacon shone over Rosespire, as for Igna, he knelt emptily inside his bedchambers. He ordered none to enter his room. Curtains were shut, total darkness permeated the large space. 'Cleopatra, I tortured and tortured and tortured. It felt amazing, I loved when she cried and begged for her life, I loved it when she bled, I loved every single moment of it. Why... why then does my heart feel nothing? The brief moment of joy is gone. I feel regret, have I grown weak-hearted, or have I always been a coward... Getting back to the Death element, I thought I'd change, I thought I would become stronger mentally. No, I was wrong – something snapped, and I feel my mind going crazy. What should I do?' two figures appeared on each shoulder, “-Death element's back. No one can defeat us in battle.”

“They can't kill us, and even if they did, we'll return twice as strong. The resilience you have, Igna, is to be the perfect vessel. We can take over nations singlehandedly, we can defeat gods with ease... there's no fun in being strong.”

“Becoming strong without trial feels empty, and you should feel empty. Igna, you're one of us, act like it. The mortal realms don't need us anymore, it's time to ascend.”

“Transcending our limitations,” he stared at his palms, “...”

Chapter 1010: Hanna and Anna

He brushed the alter-egos aside; pulled his knee to his chest and rested against the bed's frame. The carpeted floor felt nice – all-encompassing darkness made no distinction between day and night. 'Transcending my limitation. The process is similar to the attainment of godhood, some call it enlightenment. Due to my curse, the title of god can't ever be bestowed. The only real option is to accept Syhton's blessings. With the Primo Progenitor's blood, I'll become an entity able to rival gods and demons. Even if we were to fight, I'm at a disadvantage. Powerful as the element stands – the improvements were nulled due to years of inactivity. I can make mana internally, that's one good thing. The capacity is far beyond what Staxius wielded, seems endless. Suppose being bound to the Shadow Realm and feeding its core would make it stronger. They talked about transcending my limitation... I don't have a clue where to start. Why do I feel like my presence isn't required? The drive to move forward, the passion I once had, the thrill of vanquishing my adversaries. I've hit a wall, Artanos' is the better version of me. Cleopatra, Lixbin, the other gods. Artanos' been scheming his way before I caught wind. The campaign against people closes, Aceline, Celina, Scott, Undrar – all designed to strike my confidence. Then again, those attacks could be a part of a greater plot. What's he thinking, what's the

endgame... they were right, you can't predict a man who doesn't know what'll happen himself. I have to move forward, I have to stand and I have to win. No matter the consequence, I must win."

4th of February came around, and Igna's sleep broke with the sound of marching. He slithered to the window and gazed onto the active crowd. '-life matter,' he scratched his head and yawned, '-today's the 4th.' A notification pinged, "-Julius's birthday," he wiped his eyes, and the doors tapped softly. "Enter."

Two figures wandered inside, Igna dawned his dressing gown and a cigarette in his mouth; the balcony door allowed for a casual wind to blow, "-who might you two be?" he puffed.

They held themselves with poise and confidence. The first of the two stopped midway and curtsied, the second followed. They bore pink hair and were dressed in long dresses. The outfit was reminiscent of summer despite the colder Rosespire.

"King of Hidros, Count of Glenda, and the Devil of Marinda, we would be honored if you were to hear our request."

'Their outfits,' he puffed, '-it's standard issues wear for outings by the Royal Academy,' he snuffed the cigarette and rose a stern gaze, "-before that, I would like to know your names and affiliation."

They stared at one another and giggled, "-majesty," they bowed, "-my name's Hannah," said one, "-and I'm Anna," returned the other, "-we're Prince Julius' daughters, your niece."

.....

"Hanna and Anna?"

"Yes, majesty."

"Call me uncle," he turned and sighed at the greater outside, "-how many years has it been? I remember our introduction, Hanna and Anna. Tell me, Anna, do you still enjoy your free time running around meadows?"

"Actually uncle, I've taken a liking to adventure," she returned, "-I passed my test when I was fourteen and obtained the rank of Tier 4 Bronze three years later."

"Stop standing there, come join me," he invited the duo onto the large balcony. View from his bedchambers faced the always-evolving Rosespire, "-what about you, Hanna?"

"I was recommended to the university of Rotherham by my instructors. I have to pass the Alchemist's exam first."

They strangely stared, Igna took notice, "-is there something on my face?"

"No uncle, it's not that," the hands remained pressed, "-it's just, it's just... we're happy."

"Sorry?"

"We've heard tales of you and our founder, King Staxius. Father told us all about the Haggard dynasty, it's amazing. We learned about aunt Eira, aunt Elvira, lady Courtney, lady Shanna, and important people who shaped the kingdom," Hanna's gaze faced the greater distance, "-to be born in such a prestigious

bloodline is an amazing feat. We learn of you and your father's travels to Arda and how you met the mother."

"Malley," he reminisced, "-oh she's a scary one, trust me."

"We know," they answered, "-more importantly, uncle, we learn about you."

"Yes, yes," added a chipper Anna, "-father's amazing too. He used to be a global superstar, people still come to him out in public for autographs."

"He's handsome alright, that father of yours. Seems his good looks have transferred, yes?"

"Alchemy, Magiology, painting, music," Hanna rose a skeptic gaze, "-Uncle, have you really mastered all those crafts?"

novelusb.com

"I wouldn't say master," he breathed, "-music, for instance, I can perform technical feats and play at an astounding speed, however, compared to a musician who's devoted their lives to the study, the way they play and express themselves is something one can't replicate. Painting is one of those hobbies I have to keep my mind sane. Magiology was founded by my uncle, it's obvious that one from our bloodline ought to continue the research. As for alchemy – the test is hard, I did so only to gain credibility. No one would listen without some adequate proof. The world works on a few basic principles, power, connection, and drive. Who am I kidding anyway, those small things don't matter."

"Amazing," gawked Hanna.

"It's as father said, sister, uncle Igna is very humble."

"Yes, yes," he turned and scuffled their hair, "-can't believe you both are eighteen years of age. Tell me, what can this old man do?"

They ambled inside and spun, "-almost forgot. Majesty, would it be okay for us to rent the ballroom?"

"Rent the ballroom?" the arms crossed, "-take the matter through the official channel. Elixia or Serene might be able to help."

"We asked and they said the matter is best handled by the king."

"Yes, of course, they did," he exhaled, '-they probably think this little meeting would better help our familial relation. Scheming little vixens.'

"Will you help, uncle?"

"Would you girls wait for me inside my office, I ought to change. The air's rather chilly," the voice heightened, "-Elixia, care to help them?" a shriek came from the hallway, "-majesty," she entered brazenly, "-you called?"

"Stop playing the innocent act. I needed a day to myself, don't worry. Care to escort our guest to the office."

Her sunken look curled into a pleasant smile, "-master, I will get right on it!"

'She tried to raise my mood, I have a lovely secretary,' he entered the walk-in closet to a deluge of lavish suits and accessories. Wealth in jewelry, precious gems, sought-after watches, and items from luxurious brands – many of the things taken for granted was the object of reverence for the common populace. Igna ended up choosing a three-piece navy blue suit.

"Hello," came a hiss, "-greetings pops."

"Hello Cruse," Igna casually fixed his tie and turned at a blemished face, "-my, did you get in a fight?"

"Yeah," he coughed, "-I tried making friends again... I followed your advice and decided to go after one of the prettier girls. I mean, I made good progress, introduced myself, and spoke about my hobbies and such, we even exchanged phone numbers. I was pretty happy and went to the washroom."

"You were ambushed by the upperclassman?"

"How did you know?" he blinked in awe, "-pops, do you read minds?"

"No," he sat down and tied his shoe, "-tell me, Cruse, where did you learn to call me pops?"

"It was brother Draconis, he said I was one of them... he said I was one of your children. Felt right so I said okay?"

"Little ruffian," he dashed towards the awkward gentleman and scuffled his hair, "-welcome to the family, huh?"

Big gray pupils stared vacantly at Igna, "-Cruse, are you sure you wish to become a part of my family?"

"We made a deal, didn't we?" he narrowed, "-I still have my powers as misfortune," he rose his arms to a tangled mess of snakes, "-I could ruin their lives if I so want. Tell me, pops, what do I do?"

The first order of business is to be acquainted with your siblings. Vanesa, Draconis, Raphael and Saniata."

"I met all of them, they all welcomed me to the family."

"And the guardian deities?"

"I only met with Intherna, the other two were nowhere to be found."

"I see, so you visited the Shadow Realm?"

"I'm living there for the past few weeks, pops. I go there after the school's over."

"Okay, okay, no need to get feisty. Cruse, if you wish, I can make it official. You'll join the Haggard dynasty as my son. Saniata has made a name for herself in the modeling world. Draconis is a renowned whimsical adventurer who travels the world. Raphael loves to travel as well, he's more of the stoic type, voyaging village to village and spreading the name of Miira and healing the sick. Vanesa... she's, what can I say, a bit strange. Don't get me wrong, I love her to death. Her personality and motivations are so simplistic it makes me laugh. They all share the name Haggard and go in and out of dimensions. About Draconis, he also takes trips to other dimensions and joins campaigns led by Vesper, you know, the conquest of other worlds. In another word, you're free to find your own path. Cruse, you're a student with a lot of talent and knowledge. It'll become apparent soon enough."

"Yes, I know, but... I can't make friends, what am I supposed to do?"

"Here's a word of advice, don't worry about making friends. The process is automatic, forcing nature isn't the greatest option. Try playing a team sport, friendly competition is always great to pass the time. Find a hobby, and go on a quest to learn about yourself. It's not hard, go with the flow."

"What about upperclassmen?"

"Well, next time they try anything remember, you're the king's son," he conjured a small object, "-here's a wooden sword," it laid squarely in Cruse's palms, "-infuse mana," the sword glowed, "-a good sword. Could have given you a gun... can't afford my kid to go on a genocide. Use magic if that's easier – no lethal spells, understood?"

"What if they're trying to kill me?"

"You've watched Death reapers fight... channel their movements."

"Okay," he smiled, "-thanks for the advice, pops," he scurried into the bedchambers and headed to the academy. The next order of business was the office. Elixia and the twins waited, the latter had their focus on paintings, "-Uncle, did you make these?"

"Yes," he marched and settled at the desk. The change in outfit and demeanor piqued Hanna's interest. Holographic displays toggled, "-come on, have a seat," he offered. Elixia took her place by his side and gleamed, "-about the ballroom, is it pertaining to Julius' birthday?"

"Yes," she nodded, "-we want to throw a surprise party. Morale's pretty low, I think a good party would brighten our moods."

"A party," he looked at Elixia, "-normally, a guest's list and preparations would commence a few weeks in advance."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Anna slammed a handwritten paper, "-a list of all the guests, snacks, and cost. We're ready to pay," she smiled, "-adventuring pays well."

"Good, very good. I'm impressed. You ask questions already knowing the answer. You may organize the party, consider the ballroom booked for the night. It'll take a while to get the decorations ready. What about Apexi?"

"We've spoken to Serene, she handled the invitations."

"So be it. Elixia, make certain the guests arrive here at least an hour or two before Julius. Don't worry about the budget, I'll cover the cost. Have Midne brought to my office," she opened the door, "-you called?"

'They had everything planned. My, the family sure is scary when they want to be.'

"Yes, I need you and retainers on high alert. Time nigh to shine, we'll host a party that'll go down in the annals of history!"

"Right..." she withheld her enthusiasm, "-majesty... we'll get it done."

"Rest is in your capable hands, Hanna, Anna. Prove to us the ability to plan a great event."

“Will do, Uncle.”

“Will do.”