

## Death Magic 361

### Chapter 361: Prince Easel

"Cake, I've spotted something rather curious," said Staxius with a frown, "-can you come here a moment?"

"What is it?" she stumbled to a stand and shuffled about. The clean office was a little slippery, especially for one who had yet to sleep.

"It's this," he pointed, "-Easel Run Gard. The general from the Western Army; I thought that he was killed in the revolution?"

"Now that you mention it," she paused with fingers to her chin, "-we did receive an order for weapons of about a full-platoon."

"Has it been sent?"

"No, the payment is yet to arrive. We're waiting for the bank transfer, why, is something the matter?"

"Most definite," he stood sharply, "-have them ready the jet, I'm leaving for Easel Run Gard this instant."

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"Sure..." she hesitated, "-what about going to Arda, are you not longing to see home. It's been more than a year since the last visit. I'm sure people wish to see their king."

"Is that so," he stared out the window, "-if they waited one year, I suppose another month or two shouldn't matter. Besides, the Queen should be fine."

"Why the urgency all of a sudden, are you to tell me that Phantom will cancel the transaction?" she asked in an overly dramatic tone.

"No, Phantom won't back down from the offer. We're an arm's trader, the neutral party. Nevertheless, I have a duty to keep an eye for the young prince. There's the foul scent of revolt brewing, I must leave right away."

"As you wish," she smiled, "-suppose things never change, do they?" stood in relief, she washed as the figure left the room. The air turned lighter; the atmosphere less tense. 'There's no denying Boss's presence,' she stepped to peer outside. 'Phantom's grown so much, all thanks to his efforts. Fighting a war, leading a company, protecting a family, the pressure had made him so much stronger. People can tell from a glance that he's not to be trifled with. The never-aging pretty face, Blood-King, may thy mission end in success.'

The elevator opened to the reception of which hosted stairs onto the upper floors. People in suit walked, businessmen, and women from all over the globe. Each step taken caught their attention, most glanced away. Uninterested, he walked to the front door where a luxurious car waited. Inside, they drove to the airfield farther down.

"Boss," said an attendant, "-over here," the door opened with a jet-readied to take off. Lines of golden paint went across the black-body. The engines were those made by Phantom's research group. A jet

produced by his company. Walked onto the carpeted stairs leading into the leathery interior, the engine started with a calm sound. They were soon to have air, smooth as breathing.

'The remnants of the civil war in Easel Run Gard. The general should be dead, where in the world did he procure that amount of money? As far as I know, their coffers aren't that big to allow for such a purchase. Even if a resistance group were to take over the capital city, there's no way they'd be able to get away,' the jet name V12 flew, and made strides to the continent. Messages were exchanged between Queen Gallienne who was yet to end her celebrations. As for Arda, a rather heated message from Serene made its way onto the phone. Breathing a chuckle at how absurd her demands were, the plane flew. Lizzie, on the other hand, was taken by Rosetta who waited at the office. There was no need for word as responsibilities were known to both parties

Dusk turned to night, the sun vanished and the moon shone. The jet arrived on the continent. A smooth landing later, he got off with no particular interest. The pilot was ordered to remain on standby. The airstrip was but a piece of land on a flat hill. A small hangar and building owned by Godfather Renaud. \*Click,\* pulling the chains of a closed garage, '-it's still here,' he smiled. Pitch dark, a flick had the lightbulb on. A rug rested over the outline of a bike. Black turned grey from the dust, '-can't believe Cake's indulgence came in handy.' He referred to the time where Cake spent a fortune on a bike that couldn't be ridden in Hidros. There were places but it wasn't as much fun. To counter the problem, she decided to take it to Easel and build a race-track off to the mountainside. An area for entertainment and relaxation. The workers of Phantom needed time-off, thus, the private race-track was soon to accommodate a hotel with access to the beach. A press toggled the engine, it roared the same as Void. Helmet on, he bolted down the side and onto the road. Taking a few twists and turns, he headed Northwest inside the Eastern continent. Empty, the scenery was but a fleeting moment of unnamed figures. Beach to forests, the drive continued late in the night.

\*Flash,\* came reflection from the sun against the mirrors onto the helmet. The drive took the entire night for roads were difficult to move about especially off the main road. Forest and hills to a sudden opening leading down close to a river. Melancholic mountains rose over the horizon, the peak shrouded by clouds in front of which laid the capital-city Lesbo. No particular uniqueness apart from the Green-colored palace atop a tiny hill. Staxius clutched forth and sped faster. The combination of sunrise and speed felt as if the birth of heaven, idyllic, and devoid of stress.

'Here we are,' he pulled to a stop near the gates.

"Who stands there, do you know not that tis the residence of royalty, commoners aren't allowed unless given a formal letter," said a guard with a rifle.

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"Don't you know who I am?"

"Sir, I don't have time to entertain curious visitors. The palace is tense as is, please, make a U-turn, else we might use force," courteously and understanding, the guard spoke kindly.

"Will this suffice," white hair ending in crimson fell as he pulled the helmet, "-I've come to see his highness."

"Majesty the king of Arda," startled, the mind was left empty, "-e-e..."

“Do report my arrival for it was rather abrupt.”

“U-understood,” off ran the guard.

‘Now then,’ the eyes lit with a crimson-flame. The All-seeing eye toggled, ‘-everything looks normal,’ he thought and scanned the area. “There you are,” he mumbled with a breath, “-the General has been hiding as a spy all along.”

Inside, the calmness changed as swift as tides. Waves of catastrophe crashed as a man ran up to the Prince with a gun, “-DON’T MOVE.”

“What is it you want?” replied the Prince unbothered by the gun.

“Why are you not scared?” asked him who held the trigger.

“There’s been countless assassination attempts on my life, there comes a point where a man grows out the fear. What’s the demand this time, are you here to take my life or my wife?”

“Ahh, Prince Easel Run the III, it sure has been a long time,” approached a blading man with no particularities.

“Do I know you?”

“I’m offended that you’d not recognize a loyal follower,” the face reverted, “-tis I, Miller.”

“Did you not die?” returned the prince.

“I did die,” he laughed, “-but then, an angel came to me with a message. It said to do what was needed to kill you and in exchange, I’ll be granted power. However, I don’t plan on killing thee just yet. I’m going to take control of the army and take what is ours.”

“Seriously?” sighed the Prince, “-are you going to take over the army. What’s the basis, if thou think I can be bullied into surrender, then dream again. The Kingdom is united by our bond,” he locked fingers with the princess, “-do what you wish, Miller, Easel Run Gard has been linked for the ages to come.”

“Linked,” laughed Miller, “-if the marriage was all it needed to have peace, I suppose the world wouldn’t have been in such a place now, would it.”

“I suppose you’re right,” footsteps echoed, “-if the bonds of two people sufficed to have world peace, then, there would not be any reason to have weapons.”

“Who are you?” turned Miller with a frown, “-interrupting my soliloquy was a bit rude.”

“Let me guess, you’re going to blame the world and unfairness which brought you to the conclusion of asserting dominance over others to have what you want?”

“M-maybe...”

“Please,” \*snap,\* he walked without stopping. The General and he who held the prince hostage died without a second to blink. \*Blood-Arts: Extria.\* The ability to control the blood of any living being in a radius of 25 meters and less. The range depended on the vampire’s strength. Extria was one of the skills acquired after years of training. One that awakened one day as if a dream.

“Disgusting,” said the Prince, “-King of Arda, please, do be mindful of the floor.” Tan skinned, light-brown hair, the face of a child, the heart of a mother, the charm of a seducer, and the courage of a hunter, tis was Prince Easel Run the III. A boy who came to rule at a young age, and at a young age he had to fight alone and survive. Many of his brothers were killed, a battle for the throne, a battle he won in the end. It was he, after being used as a puppet, to marry the Princess. The rest is history.

“Stoic as always,” replied Staxius with a smile at the Princess who stared the bloodied mess.

“Heartless as always,” replied the Prince.

“Don’t you get an attitude with me,” from formal, the guard dropped to informal.

“Oh please,” he rolled his eyes with a pull of the tongue.

“Come here you little brat,” after which, the prince was put in a head-lock, one friendly and in good faith.

“S-stop,” he begged with belly laughter, “-what brings you here?” a few sniffled followed.

“Something piqued my interest, and here’s my visit.”

“I’m grateful for thy gut feeling, big brother, it’s saved me plenty of o’ time.”

“Don’t mention it,” smiled Staxius who patted the prince, “-be more careful from now on. The war might have ended but the threat still looms.”

“I know, I know. Since you’re here, stay for dinner. You’ll be leaving later tomorrow right, Arda awaits.”

“What is it with people and Arda these days, it’s the fifth time that someone told me to go back. Am I that bad an influence.”

“It’s not that,” laughed the boy, “-I’ll tell you since you’re big bro. Queen Gallienne and Queen Shanna have organized a festival in your name. I hear it’s going to be super-fun. There will be people from all over the globe. I heard that even Prince Ernis of the Wracia empire will attend.”

“Prince Ernis you say,” a pause with the gaze wandering upwards, “-will that not go against the will of the Emperor. A festival in my name, what in the world are they thinking about.”

“Hear this,” he interjected joyfully, “-there are rumors that your son-in-law, will be attending.”

“You’re kidding me,” he sighed with the eyes wide open, “-are you serious, he’s coming. Give me a break,” the last words felt the same of a child refusing to do homework.

“It’s rumored.”

“What about you, Easel, are you coming?”

“Yeah, everyone from the Argashield Federation is coming.”

“I suppose I should leave now then.”

“I knew you’d see it my way,” smiled the Prince, “-I’ll be there soon, wait for me.” Staxius stepped out with the signature wave. ‘A festival in my name. What’s this all of a sudden. Why now, what’s the point.

Now that I think of it,' the bike roared, '-the last five years was more than tiring. Things happened and I never got time to fully comprehend

Those around me. I was so focused on winning that I forgot what was precious. Wait, what even is precious to me now?' he shot down the hill, '-My best friend and companions died. What's the point, it's all useless – I'm tired.'

## Chapter 362: Welcome Back

A passing dot in the sky, the Jet flew out from Easel Run Gard and traversed the clouds onto the never-ending blueness of the sea. Blue above and blue below with white scatter of clouds. Through the hublot he watched with arms crossed. A screen lit in a flicker, messages from Serene came as if avalanche. It reached the point where mute was toggled. 'What will happen now?' he thought as the scenery came to a standstill. 'There's no way there will be conflict. The monster trouble is being handled by qualified people. The training has helped boost the tenacity of the new breed of humans. Their skills have soon surpassed the sorcerers. Claireville Academy has suffered a loss in applicants, the popularity of mages is dropping. Fighting oriented monster-slaying academies are the focus of the public. Monster slaying is the pillar holding Hidros's current economy. If it wasn't for the 5% tax of all the earning from drops, we'd be in a bad spot. I wonder how the guild in Arda is doing, it's been so long. It's quite a scaring prospect that the monsters are evolving the same as the adventurers. Will we never get a break?' lost in the never-ending waterfall of thought, a singular reflection brought the mind to a startled. 'Damn it,' he thought, '-my son-in-law is coming to visit. I so wish to not see his face again.' Opposed to a frown, he smiled, the son-in-law was in actuality a good person. One that respected Staxius fully, one that loved to have fun and act serious depending on the situation. More than then, the idealism the boy followed was of equality. Their rule might have been monarchist, however, the people were given an ample amount of space and freedom to do as they wished. The Alpha Empire was what he envisioned Arda becoming one day.

"Boss," spoke the pilot.

"What is it?" he asked from across the fuselage.

"Lady Cake asked us to head for Arda and not land at Rotherham."

"Very well," he sighed, "-take us to Arda, the run-way should have been built by now," and off they flew.

Later in the journey that took more than a few hours, they passed over Dorchester. Staring downward one could see the scorched remnants of the Mage's war. Their destruction was on par with the new weapons. Castle Garsley was replaced by a train-station. The town transferred over to the noble district named Garnet's Town. The Train-station was given the name of The Silver Guardians. All in lovely memory for the companions that died without experiencing the joys of parenthood. Or so that was what he thought for the ladies did experience the joy. They watched Eira grow, shame was it that they could not have attended her coming of age.

Over yonder as the sun readied to sleep, came greenery. A sudden change from the deserted land of Dorchester. Tilted to the right, the Jet took to line with the air-field. The latter was built kilometers away from the capital, it served as a mid-point for Town Eden and the former. Trees cut reservedly as to not anger the Dryads. The forest was given freedom and so did they give modern architecture a try. The

Airfield held two run-ways of 2-kilometers long. Sufficient to allow for cargo and passenger planes to land. The border was opened to all, an order from the King. Ardanian Culture was one very intricate and full of stories and myths. The many races joined as one to share their experiences and grow. A unity of races, the idea of which Paradus hated with ire. Not as complex as Phantom's airfield, the Jet landed without trouble. The hangar was few as for the command tower, it stood as if a shadow against the tall-trees. Taxied inside one of the hangars, Phantom, was written against the metallic gate which split into \*Phan-tom.\*

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"Orders boss?" asked the pilot visibly tired.

"Rest up and go explore, Arda should have more than a few things to keep a young man entertained," he crawled over to the cockpit, "-keep this between you and me," said in a whisper, the pilot and co-pilot gulped. "There's a small village full of bunny-girls to the East, they're very accommodating, if you catch my drift," placing a hand on their shoulders, he nodded and left. Alone, the duo stared one another with smirks, a libido that soon had them in hysteria.

'Boys will be boys,' he thought and stepped onto the grey, dusty floor. A sudden glance made the neck-hair stand. A relaxing atmosphere turned rather tense. Peering over to where it came, a lady with long black hair, red lipstick, sharp facial features, a beauty mark under the left eye, and the death-stare of a mother. The outfit was of a skin-tight skirt which ended above her knees, it exposed her thighs rather becomingly. The shirt was one formal of white embroidered with frills near the shoulder. Her chest was covered by a notepad of some sort, one that she had tightly grasped.

"Do you have the slight idea on how long I've been waiting?" she spoke through gritted teeth, the glance turned to a narrow-eyed glare.

"A few weeks?" spun to match her glare, "-is there a reason to why you'd use such a tone with me?" Words of authority stuck her sense of duty, obliged, her eyes lowered.

"I apologize for my disrespectful behavior," she said with a bow.

"There's no need for that," he returned, "-I got you good, didn't I?" breathing a chuckle, she stared to a man who had made her a fool.

"Honestly," she stomped to give a light punch, "-Majesty, thou art always the ever so joyful child."

"I suppose," patting her shoulder as to say hello, "-should we head out?"

"With pleasure," turned with a clap, a luxurious car reserved to where he stood.

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"Isn't this the new model 8I-T0?"

"Correct," smiled Serene, "-it's the luxurious variant of an otherwise utility vehicle. Spare the technicalities, we need to head to the capital this instant," on that a butler opened the door to which he sat. The transport could be described as a love-child between the RFS and Void. A utility sports vehicle. It bore menacing-looking wheels and a bonnet that had features of a lion for the headlights gave said

impression. A statuette of a golden angel with her wings spread stood overlooking the road. Roared to a start, the interior moved, the vibration felt like invisible hands caressing one's heart.

Sat at the back, he peered out at the ever-static image of the jet.

"Majesty, is something the matter?" asked Serene who sensed the distress.

"Yeah," he turned and leaned forward, "-you two, step-out."

"M-majesty?" replied the driver, "-what is the meaning of this?" he asked rather confused.

"Did you not hear me?" repeated the king once more, "-I asked for thee both to step out." Obligated, they now stood outside.

"Is something the matter?" asked a worried Serene, the driver and his assistant, one a beast-man and a demi-human, were shocked. They stood with hands behind their backs waiting for an answer.

"Yes," returned Staxius after what seemed an eternal silence, "-I've decided," he reached for the door, "-I'll be the one driving," thinking they had done something bad, the duo's tense shoulders relaxed into a hunched posture.

"Excuse you?" asked Serene with a side-glance.

"Come on," he stepped inside, "-get in, I want to experience this beast for myself. I think it be right for a king to lead his stallion and not let another have the reins."

"What of us?" asked the Driver to Serene who stood melancholically.

"A truck's bound to come to pick up supplies later, I'll have them pick you up."

"O-ok..." they stared blankly as he sped off into the distance. The roads were big, bigger than in Oxshield and split in the middle by trees, a sort of natural barrier. Paying no heed to the speed, the foot remained steadfast on the accelerator. The borders of the forest soon let into a clearing with the Capital on the left. A massive tree that even the cloud couldn't do justice. The area around was less forest and more infrastructure. Houses and outposts were built around the capital, trading posts, a merchant gathering guild for those who were not in with the Trader's guild. Independent businesses are allowed to share the profit of most. The 8I-T0 was soon to arrive in the vicinity of the capital. A barrier stood strongly on the road, they pulled to a stop.

"What's thy business in Arda?" said one of the watchmen. A necessary precaution to have a certain level of security. The threat of terrorist attacks loomed as if an obsessed lover.

"Is this sufficient?" the windows rolled with the King giving a smile.

"Majesty!" bowed the guard who was quick to lift the barrier, "-welcome back to Arda, we've been waiting."

"See I told you," added Serene with the car advancing, "-the people want to see their king once more. The king who's done so much," her voice seemed unusually grateful.

"I only did what I thought was best, there's no need for all of this," the main-road split into a sort-of roundabout that climbed up to the first floor of the capital. A nonchalant bridge for vehicles built using magic. Rare was it for people to use said path as most nobles and guests of honor did so.

"Stop, stop," waved an elf with a baton.

"Name and purpose please," he asked whilst knocking against the window.

"Staxius Haggard, Ruler of Arda," came through as the reply.

"Please sire, we don't have time to mess and joke around," said the elf who had yet to catch a glimpse.

"Do face the people who you've asked the question." The elf seemed a little overzealous. A tell-tell sign of one slacking off or an excessive amount of pride on a certain matter.

"Aren't thee the talker," returned the elf with a glare.

"Care to repeat that?" smiled Staxius.

"MAJESTY," he stumbled backward, "-I'm s-sorry."

"Don't worry," came a voice from the other side, "-just have the portal changed to the third floor, we're headed to the castle."

"Lady Serene, I'll do so right this instant," he stumbled over to a booth and spoke via a telephone. The gate soon changed to a purple color.

"Guess it's time to say this," smiled Serene, "-welcome back to Arda, majesty," instant teleportation to where the castle stood. Grey with veins growing around the towers, the castle stood as majestically as always. The town in front was filled with activity. Many dressed in expensive clothes walked around the town which turned into an entertainment and commercial district for the rich. Big-name brands of clothes and electronics resided in the olden-styled buildings. Restaurants had seats outside on the stone-bricked pavement. The road was of the same style, bricked laid one by one opposed to the tarmac. Roared across, 8I-T0 caught the eyes of many, eyes that knew not the owner for the windows were darkened. Twist and turns later, they pulled close to the newly extended part of the castle, a garage with numerous cars and bikes hidden under a lovely slated bricked roof.

"This place sure has changed," parked, they stepped out to a rather empty yard. The path was of marble meant for the outdoors. Immaculate and clean, the yard else known as the garden, had flowers all around.

"Lizzie," a flash of green hair to the right underneath the shadow of a blossoming tree caught the eye.

"Papa?" the girl was soon to turn and give a large smile.

"Yes, it's me," quick on the feet, he rushed to her side. "What are you doing outside?" he asked with her in arms.

"Mother was showing flowers," her little chubby fingers soon pointed to Xula. She sat with a lonely stare, long white dress mixed with blue flowers and a stray-hat. She didn't notice as her focus was on a bee resting atop a gentle flower.



“Flowers are pretty, they attract many o’ visitors to have a taste of their nectar,” came a deep voice.

“They can also have thorns for those they wish not to partake in their nectar,” returned a dejected voice.

“Xula,” he reached out to her shoulder.

“S-Staxius?” her face swapped for one confused, “-is that you?”

“Does it look like anyone else?” a nervous smile had both stare away. It felt awkward and awkward was it to try to speak.

“W-welcome back...”

### Chapter 363: Relations

“If it isn’t the renowned King Staxius of Arda,” came a rather deep voice from the right. Escaping the ledge and onto the grass stepped he who was dressed in a lavish suit hidden behind a heavy coat of which the shoulders were padded, “-or should I say, father,” traversed onto the now darker green grass for the shadow of the tree protected against the sun, the man, or rather, a boy, of which the age was about 20, stood in awe. The visage matched one of a girl’s, a common feature of the many people acquainted over the years. The hair was of a light-brown color, a fair complexion with pierced ears of which hung jewelry. A glance at the hand displayed rings of many sorts -signet and counting.

“If it isn’t my less than amiable son-in-law,” refute he the king. A twirl later so as to face the guest, the difference in height and aura could have made these two as father and son. A disparity of which didn’t hold much thought. Staxius’s well-built and emotionless visage against one of charm and friendship. He oozed confidence, an excellent trait for a leader lest the confidence grows overbearing and clouds judgment.

“May I ask where the princess is?” the eyes darted left to right.

“Princess Lizzie is at thy feet,” returned Staxius with arms-crossed, “-dearest son-in-law, art thee not the jester.”

“Do excuse my behavior,” he leaned to give the princess a high-five. It made an adorable sound with the girl bursting into laughter.

“If it’s Eira thou wish to see, I presume she’s off to her bed-chambers. I did sort of runoff to meet my darling daughter.”

“Is that so,” paused the son-in-law admiring the man he would once call father, “-if you’ll excuse me, I’ve many things to discuss. See you around, father.”

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“Good day,” replied Staxius of which the Emperor shuffled over the hedge and into the marble path.

“What do you make of him?” turned the king to the Queen who stood awkwardly. Her eyes peered downwards onto her fidgety fingers. A nervous response for having been apart. “Xula?” a quick tap against her cheek had her jump.

“Yes, what I make of the boy,” her gaze listlessly rested upon the boy’s back. “The Emperor is a good man; I’ve read the thoughts many o’ time. There is but one thing, he views thee as a man higher than his own father.”

“I’ve told him to not do so,” a sigh later, Lizzie brought a flower plucked from the hedge.

“Father, father!” she called whilst skipping around, “-flower, flower.”

“Beautiful,” he smiled, “-here,” taking the flower, he placed it atop her ear. It turned into a beautiful accessory complimenting her clothes.

“Majesty,” arrived Serene who he had abandoned a few minutes ago, “-let’s head inside.”

“Lead the way,” he gestured, “-Xula, we need to talk later,” a whisper only she heard.

“Papa, papa,” spoke Lizzie with a face of woe.

“Come on, you’re coming with me too,” he offered to which she cheered up. Hand in hand, they walked down the path. Not that it was noticeable, the place sure was changed. Changed to suit the needs of war. Along the path, they walked to come against a familiar fountain. Paying no heed, Serene’s pace increased. Murmurs came abundantly obvious with each step, and each step was it noticeable for a sort of tension suspended the air. Thus, they arrived at the stairs leading inside the castle. Guards stood overlooking the entrance. A bow and salute were the formal ethic.

“Majesty,” on the third-step reaching up, a butler with wolf-ears and blue eyes, “-welcome back,” said he.

“Rile,” nodded the King, “-what of the mansion, is everything good?”

“Yes, we were called by the head-butler to come in haste. It has been long.”

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“Very much so. What of the others, are they here?”

“Yes, they are inside the kitchen working per the head maid’s orders.”

“Goodness gracious, do take some time off once in a while.”

“Thank you for your generosity. We’d kindly accept the invitation if it was a hard task. You see, Head-maid Rosetta takes care of the mansion on her lonesome. We but stand around watching as the sun rises and sets.”

“Ha-ha,” he laughed, “-thou described her perfectly. A work-alcoholic, and one that is very efficient at her duties.” As they conversed, the steps seemed to climb themselves. Young Lizzie was but a wandering girl, the world was a new place. Her mind would go from one object to another, the bewilderment of each stare had captured the hearts of many.

Inside laid the same furniture, the same tiled floor, the same chandelier, and the same portraits. The only significant difference was the lack of precious items and collectibles. Before Arda reached what it is today, the King was faced with tremendous debt that occurred by the failing economy of Hidros. People were staved, child and babes abandoned for the sake of survival. A bad harvest, and more, the curse of

misfortune. In hopes of quelling the hunger, “-the people must have food to work, and for work, they must need food. A never-ending cycle of labor and reward. Arda as is now can’t but face the uncertainty with distress. Hence, I’ve decided to relinquish unnecessary belonging and share the wealth to those who need it. A loan of which I hope the populous may live and breed.” An exact quote from the day the capital newspaper’s interview. Said statement alone sufficed, a breath of energy. The people could but grit and struggle. If their monarch was yet to give, what right did they have to stand and do naught.

“May I know to where we are headed?” a few twists and turns had him in confusion. Many o’ guests stood, those of which he knew not faces let alone names.

“To the backyard, isn’t it obvious?” smiled Serene.

‘The backyard,’ he thought with Lizzie’s chubby hand around his index. The Alchemic tower, one that was burnt with Intherna’s wrath. The once scorched ground had life reborn. The grass was maintained rather skillfully. A stone-path led to the back-entrance. The latter was handled by guards and a never-opening door. The tower was rebuilt and used for observation. A normally quiet backyard of which went for hundreds of meters bore a pond. A pond with Lily pad and a small outwatch in the middle. A place to have a sit and read or a quick meal. Surrounding said pond was a crowd of people. A crowd preoccupied with the smell of food coming out of out-door ovens. Maids and butlers ran around distributing foods and drinks. Young of age, they ran with big smiles.

“May I ask what this is?”

“A welcome party, isn’t it obvious?”

“Was that the reason you wished for me to come so soon?”

“Is that rhetorical?” ended Serene with a wink, “-we all but sent the invitation. Tis them who willingly came per their own arrangements.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” voiced Rile loudly as he was on their trail. “May I have thy attention?” The murmurs came to a mute as they faced, he who had spoken. “Blood-King Staxius Haggard of Arda has returned home.” Applause echoed around, Intherna and Gophy stepped out his shadow. The former stood on his right with a formal dress while the latter was to his left. A black-dressed similar to the kind night-walkers adored. Her silvery hair, nonchalant expression, and perky lips stole many glances. “And now,” he added with the claps lowering, “-a few words from his majesty.”

“Greetings to all who took time out thy busy schedule to come for this gathering. I’m honestly surprised by the numbers. It truly pleases my heart that thee deem Arda an ally. On that, please enjoy whatever hospitality is made available.”

“Glory to the King,” echoed twice before it settled.

“Master,” spoke Gophy with an ominous tone, “-I’ll be gone for a few moments.”

“Likewise,” interjected Intherna, “-we’ve got business to attend to.” Not able to place a word in, the duo vanished into dust.

‘What was that about?’ a glance at the guests showed many influential people. Many that came in help during the war.

“Majesty,” four figures approached with a strong line-up of guards behind, “-welcome back,” nodded Haru with her ears lowered.

“Welcome back,” said the other representatives.

“I heard that Easel Run Gard was subject to a few problems,” added the ever-so curious Ryul.

“Yes, it was but mere remnants of a forgotten past. What of you,” he faced Haru, “-how are the traders doing?”

“Oh, that,” she paused, “-we’re doing rather good. The trading pact with The Alpha Empire and the Kingdom of Elendor is profitable.”

“Good to hear,” now facing Mieshre, “-what of the adventurers, are they ok?”

“I’m glad to say that our fighters are more competent. The magical-weapons based on the ranking has had the survival rate increase. No longer is it an issue of carelessly dying on the battlefield, the fighters know their limits.”

“It pleases me,” facing Ryul, “-what of the new leveling system. Have they been implemented?”

“Yes, the project is about 95% done, we all but need to install the interface at Whiteowl.” Project Leveling System, else known as PLS, was an idea birthed by the tiered system. Guild-cards used to tell a fighter’s attributes and fighting capabilities. However, the cards were replaced for a controversial method, a spell, one of an interface. It allowed for a fighter to understand the mind and body more accurately. No more guess work, it gave information on what task and experience a person needed to unlock new abilities. Efficient and non-harmful and non-inclusive to the being’s personal life, many adventurers welcomed the idea. Monsters evolved and so did the defenders.

“What of you, old chap, how goes it, Skokdrag?”

“Ay, majesty,” he said with a ruffled voice, “-it’s been alright. The business has been good thanks to lady Haru.”

“Splendid,” warmly smiling at the representatives, “-do enjoy thyself. I shall go greet the other invitees, excuse me.” On that, he sprawled on the green pasture towards a flashily dressed lady. Her facial features, appearance, and how her hair was tied was reminiscent of the Dreqain’s style.

“Pardon me,” she excused herself from a tiresome conversation as told by her expression. “Blood-King Staxius,” an enormous smile portraited itself.

“I never expected the much loved Queen Elendor to make the trip to Arda. How is it, do thou enjoy Ardanian culture?”

“Depends,” she paused and eyed the ovens, “-I do enjoy the food. As for the culture; it’s very different. I see people co-exist as if nothing, I sure hope they do not take it for granted.”

“Art though referring to the conflicts between the Wracia Empire and Elendor?”

“You might say so,” she breathed a sigh that had a lock of hair sway to the left.

“What of you,” she asked, “-what do you make of the situation?”

"I'm afraid there's nothing more I can say on the matter just yet. I've only but arrived from the peace talks. Let me say one thing, the Wracia empire is more hassle than due. Emperor Paradus is hiding his vindictive nature."

"I've experienced it first hand," she chuckled, "-well, he'll be careful from now on," the eyes leaped to a guest of importance, "-you've Emperor Sultria VI as a son-in-law. The leader of one of the biggest nations in the world. I hope you realize what this entails."

"Yeah I know," the chest filled with air, "Emperor Sultria VI is a good man. He'll make Eira happy, that's all I can hope for."

"What do you mean hope for?"

"Nothing much, the rambling of a tired mind. How's Elendor, are the dukes ok?"

"Yeah, they were adamant about coming. We want to see the famed Hero-King they said."

"Surely they are exaggerating. In any case, it's a pleasure to have you here, Queen of Elendor."

"Call me Elina, how many times do I have to repeat myself."

"Sure, majesty, have a good day," he left to talk to those who helped in the war.

#### Chapter 364: Royal Family

Among those he spoke were a few of rather suspicious nature. The never-ending cycle of give and take. Many peered in envy as the king went around speaking to all. To his surprise, as he thought the celebration was at the castle only, a festival for the inhabitants began when he arrived. A big festival with multiple artists performing day and night at the town square on the second floor. Dancing, ale, food, a moment of bliss, and harmony. Long were the troubles of Kreston and its mind-games.

Having entertained the guest as was per his responsibility, Staxius excused himself from the crowd in the pretext of fatigue. In reality, the body was yet to give. The mind was it who felt tired, tired from keeping upfronts and barriers. A never-ending battle for it was here in a conversation that people fought. Words of weight to a feather, words of weight to a boulder, tone, and facial expression mattered.

"What were you up to?" said Staxius as he headed towards the royal-chambers. Two ladies stood with an open doorway leading into the hot-springs. They waited ominously with untied hair and what seemed heads. The steam and warmth of the stream made waves into the corridor. Many changes had happened, most notably, the pathway to the springs.

"Some uninvited pest made their way inside the castle," replied Intherna of which her face changed from deadly to friendly.

"I suppose I went overboard," said Gophy with the ashes of her victims.

"Any idea on who they were?" asked he with a step forth.

"Oh..." gazed Intherna downwards, "-it was act first then ask questions later. Why does it really matter?" she shrugged.

.....

“Does it matter?” paused Staxius, “-why does it matter says the goddess,” turned to Gophy, “-what of you?”

“Hmm...” her long eyelashes blinked to where rested the springs, “...”

“I suppose there is naught we can do,” he sighed. “Go on, head to the yard, and have some food. It’s been a long journey to now, have a rest, the war is over.”

“No need to say it twice,” hovered Adete. “It’s been quite a trip, hasn’t it,” the door behind closed with the steam gathered atop the liquid.

“We managed to come out on top thanks to you and the nightwalkers,” said he who undressed without care for who stared. Intherna and Gophy were long gone leaving him alone.

‘My head feels like a rock, I’m so tired,’ the feet gently pierced the surface of the water. Breathing a smile, he sat with Adete atop his head. ‘Let me rest, I’m tired.’ The clock moved steadfast – time passed and he succumbed to the ravages of exhaustion.

Arda as a Kingdom benefited more in the end. The Argashield Federation, in the first year of its founding, focused on arms and war. This, in turn, made them stronger than most. It made careless invasions, not an option. The ever-looming shadow of Phantom and the Dark-Guild scared many o’ folks away. Those wishing for a quick buck found themselves paying more. The capital in of itself, after the fight to retake control of the province, was damaged. Duke Mundy by the time he came into power was left helpless. A trap of an indebted Kingdom on the verge of civil war. The pressured applied by the Saints, of which, the record discloses not, were triggered by an untraceable organization. Till the day of Kreston’s falling, none ever knew who pulled the strings. Or so what was thought. Shadowed by many, many personas and traps calculated in collaboration with Cake, Phantom, as is now revealed, most specifically, Unit Rec, led secretive missions around the globe. The assassination of a Saint at Town Eden was done none other than said unit. The forces compromised of Yves, Courtney, and Elliot. Yves as the escape artist, Courtney as a one-woman-army, and Elliot as a back-up. The three paired under Shadow’s leadership and many were bound to fail. In said manner, without credit given, Phantom performed elemental tasks around the province till as things stand now.

Kreston with the Pope ousted joined the Federation. The fanatical beliefs weren’t changed, Sharon the apostle did visit the masses to spread the word of Syhton. Nonetheless, her attempts were usually met with disaccord. Not that many rejected her idea, it was just that the likelihood was rare.

One must applaud the efforts of she who had formulated the plan. It surpassed the realm of human, a single lady, managed to fool a whole continent into declaring war. The mere thought said in a pub would have the speaker thrown or viewed as an imbecile, tis was how profoundly insane the prospect was. Still, it happened. Emotions of revenge for the slaughter of who she deemed to be a part of her life. In the end, Staxius chose to spare her life. Not out of humility nor pity, it was out of respect. She was placed in house-arrest under Phantom’s watch. Not that it matters ever since that day she never said a word. The listless gaze of a mad-woman spoke volumes. Who knows, it might well have been another ploy, thus, the decision to not have her taken lightly. As for the pope, the carcass of a man was killed on the day they visited Kreston. Everyone else, saints included, were killed with none the wiser. Angel Hamael sought to the higher plane. Archangel Erna after her defeat returned to her master’s side. Hence

was the province's end. New rulership under Queen Gallienne's direct supervision was instated. The borders were opened. The inhabitants were still seclusive, yet, the rebuilding process resumed.

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"Staxius..." a gentle pair of hands tapped the cheeks; it left a singular annoying droplet. It rolled off to hang near the jaw, not wanting to fall, it remained as a sore thumb.

"Tsk," he brushed off the droplet and opened to a sight not suited for many. Xula's green hair covered her chest with the lower-half under the water.

"What brings you here?" he said with eyes firmly on her face.

"Have you forgotten?" she quietly stared away, her cheeks were flushed presumably by the heat, "-you asked to speak to me earlier." The awkwardness tightened the atmosphere, five years of not talking, five years of a relation same to saying hi to a neighbor. The Queen of Arda when she turned to be enemy of the populous went into hiding. In hiding at Staxius's mansion in the company of her babe. He didn't hold grudges nor distrust, he wanted Lizzie to have a mother by her side. The romance which was but a shameful shadow of what it was, stood vaguely as the couple stared one another.

"Hey," he said slightly tilting the head, "-how are you?"

"How are you?" she chuckled with her hands covering the laugh.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing much," she smiled, "-it's been far too long," she leaned closer to rest against his chest, "-you knew, did you, you knew."

"Yes, I did, and I'm sorry," his fingers slowly caressed her head. Her reaction was but an idyllic smile and eye shut. It felt comforting.

"What now?" she asked, "-I've been meaning to have this talk," her heart pounded, "-are you seeing someone else?"

"..."

"Say it," she sat upright with her eyes of a woeful blue, "-I would not be surprised if you had another romantic interest. Especially since all I cause is trouble. Isn't this what this conversation is about?"

The words left a sour taste, to that, the response was but a glare. "Honestly," he shook his head, "-why do you have to be so adorable now. The chat I referred to earlier was on how to celebrate our marriage. Are you that dense?"

"Our marriage?" she paused, "-what do you mean, August is far gone."

"I know," he laughed, "-that is why I wish to celebrate it once more. I missed Eira's birthday too, let's host something big to celebrate."

"Are you alright?" she paused in bewilderment, "-what of the Queen of Elendor, is she not thy lover?"

“Are you stupid?” he facepalmed, “-Elina is but a friend. I said it the first time, didn’t it, you’re the only one I love. Idiot, the smart queen reduced to naught but doubt.”

“No need to voice it so arrogantly,” her eyes turned yellow, “-so, you don’t have another lover?”

“Do I have to repeat myself?”

“What of us then,” she pressed on yearning for assurance and confirmation, “-what are we?”

“Husband and wife, king and queen, mother and father, lovers, what else?”

“Do you mean to say that you still harbor feelings for me after the five years of distance?”

“Obviously, else why would I went through the trouble of abducting a failing queen so many years ago. Xula, understand this, my priorities changed. I care not for what people think, I’m done playing house, that much is true. However, I never once said that I disliked you. By stop playing house, I mean that I wanted something more real, a bond that’d never falter. The five years was a test, a test to see if thou were worth the trouble of trusting. I wanted to see if my wife would still love me or go after another,” without warning, he grabbed her shoulders and pulled tight to a warm and passionate embrace toppled with a kiss. Time came to a stop; the only sensation was a warmness of the racing heart. “-I can say with pride that you never once dared to look at another. I’m grateful.”

“Are you serious?” face drenched, none would have made out that she cried, “-you acted distant for five years, for a fucking trust TEST?”

“Now there’s the Xula I love,” he laughed as she harmlessly punched his stomach.

“I’m glad,” she smiled, “-I’m glad I trusted you too.”

“Aren’t we just happy that this is over,” close to one another, the door suddenly opened with Eira catching a glimpse of what was forbidden.

“Seriously?” she paused with a cold expression; “-you chose to do this now?”

“Come on,” glanced Staxius, “-get in too, consider this a family bath.”

“No, I’ll pass,” she turned with her mind scarred.

“Eira,” he spoke before she left the room, “-are you going to drop the rebellious phase or not. If not, then, do as thy wish, go get married. I don’t want any excuses. I approve of the Emperor being my son-in-law, however, if the boy does but made the cry.”

“Father,” she said coldly, “-I made the decision on my own. Even if the boy makes me cry, I’ll wipe my tears and move forward. That much is what I learned from you, to never stop despite the troubles. If my marriage brings you an advantage, I’ll gladly do so for thou art the one I admire.”

“Princess Eira Haggard,” he stood abruptly, the waters crashed against one another, “-face me this instant,” the voice strict, she obeyed with a tensed face. “I have but one thing to say, thou have grown into a beautiful lady. I’m proud to have had the privilege of you as my daughter. I’m grateful for you’ve mended my heart plenty o’ time. Free thyself for the shackles of debt, I, Staxius Haggard, clear thee of



any debt thou might own. Go and live, be free, and most importantly, be happy," he held out a hand to Xula to which she stood. "Just know," she added, "-that we'll always be your family."

No words, her slight raise of the head sufficed. A smile with snuffles, "-father, mother," not caring for tact, she leaped onto the duo who soon crashed into the water. "-I'M SO HAPPY," she sobbed with her head borrowed in-between her father and mother.

"I'm relieved," smiled Staxius, "-I thought that you'd have gone to hate me." No reply, she kept on crying with the door opening anew.

"PAPA, MAMA!" yelled young Lizzie accompanied by Rosetta.

"Go on, highness, go bathe with thy father," said the head-maid with a smile.

"PAPA, MAMA, BIG SIS," she scurried over and jumped.

"Oh Lizzie," said Xula who caught the tiny splash square on. A long-awaited reunited, family members who were once distant came to be as one. Smiles and joy, the 5th of December was truly a day of bliss.

Chapter 365: Noire

"Dearest Father-in-law," came across the dining hall, "-I require assistance," said a boy with perspiration running down the forehead. It had been a few hours since the bath ended. The royal family took time off and hid inside the asylum of the castle. None to disturb nor interrupt the joyful atmosphere of a long-awaited reunion.

"What's the matter?" stood Eira with a gentle gaze upon him who rushed upstairs.

"I'm afraid this matter is of utmost importance," panted the son-in-law with a visage of utter fear.

"Take a seat," offered Staxius, "-the one nearest to Eira shall do the trick. Calm thy breath and speech, I need not the blabbering of an emotionally charged fanatic."

\*Cough,\* the gaze darted left to right, it wanted to settle onto something calm and peaceful. Something reassuring for the mind was in utter chaos. Emperor Sultria, accompanied by a combat-butler, was on edge that much was said in action alone.

"Majesty," followed his butler with a grey-suit and a traditional hat, "-I'm afraid that the situation is going out of control," said he with a lowered head.

"Rosetta," called the King, "-go fetch something to drink," he ordered with Lizzie sat on his lap, she played around with the necklaces around the neck.

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"As you ordered," came the head-maid without losing a second. An ice-cold orange glass of juice was served of which had droplets of water dripping.

"Now then," said Staxius, "-what is it that you wanted to discuss?"

Gulping the beverage, a sense of clarity soothed the mind into a restful state. "Thank you for that, father."

“What’s the matter?” asked the Queen who peered the two intricately.

“I-it’s Alpha, we’re close to being destroyed. I’m afraid a long prophecy that our scientific mind decided to forgo as to stand with reason, had an inclination of truth. In legend is that that on the day the Grim Reaper descends onto the mortal plane and takes the heritage, an army of the fallen angels and demons will rise. They will be led by the true apostle of he who led the war, the god of Kreston.”

“Are those exact words what was said?” asked Xula interested in the story.

“Yes, in no way will I ever speak of such-nonsense without a base for truth.”

“What is it that you want us to do?” turned an expressionless Staxius. ‘I don’t recall anyone knowing of my identity. There are but a few, and in said few are still more than little. The god of death has taken the throne, meaning my ascension. Is this the carnage I was warned about upon my succession?’

“I don’t know, father,” he said worryingly, “-as you know, I’m the eldest in the family. My sisters aren’t yet ready to lead a continent as big as Alpha. I was lucky enough to get teachings from my father, who’s now with the stars. I never said this, though I think it best you know. I don’t really hold much respect for keeping up appearances and being courteous to those unworthy. I rather say it how it is. Since I lead Alpha, I’ve always gotten what I want, all the respect I needed, and more of which would bore people to death. That is where you come in, King Staxius Haggard, a man I still have no idea of how thee acts. Thou say things depending on the situation and do the best for those around. I’ve heard many o’ rumors of thee being a blood-thirsted killer. I hope I never see said side agai-” he paused with a gasp, “-I’m sorry, my habit of rambling got the better.”

“Would you calm down already?” turned Eira coldly, “-why don’t you start again. Keep it short,” the lips rose to a smile with the eyes saying another story.

“W-will do,” he glimpsed the butler who all but nodded. “To summarize, Alpha is in danger. I just got reports that monsters of which none has ever seen, are rising in the northernmost province.”

“That is most troubling,” said the king who stood, “-art thou in need of assistance?”

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“I’d kindly appreciate to have thee as my council till the matter is resolved,” the tone returned from on the verge of panic.

“Council you say,” he gestured the butler, “-I suppose thou have information of which could make this decision a little easier?”

“Yes, majesty,” the head lifted to reveal a sharp-nose, well-groomed facial hair and gelled back hair. “As his majesty said, we’ve got a monster invasion. It is unlike anything we’ve seen, and unlike Hidros has seen as well for you see, the monsters are actually the general public of Alpha. Our continent is filled with humans classified as super. Some boast god-like strength and others the power to levitate a mountain with a thought. As generic as it sounds, the AHA, else known as the Allied Heroes of Alpha is already on the move.”

A breed of superhuman, the evolution of mankind was one very peculiar. From Vampire Slayers to Mages, Adventurers, and Super-Humans – some finer details have been omitted from said evolution

tree. Adventurers and Super-humans are one of the same. As trading and exploration grew common, people mingled with one another, and the genes evolved to now. An evolution for survival, tis how an organism lives. The Alpha Empire, with ties closer to Vampire Slayer than mages, evolved away from the use of mana. Instead, the body evolved their DNA, giving them extraordinary abilities. Given the power, either one falls to the dark side or rises to light and understanding. The AHA, an organization the same as the Guild, monitored the Heroes and rewards with payment according to the work done. The people are far worse than monsters as they hold the same power and often fall to the darker-side and cause massive panic and slaughter. One side used the power of the world and mana, while the other used the power from within, the power of DNA.

“What of the situation then?” asked Staxius. The room was but a confusing waterfall of words and explanations. Lizzie all but moved her head from one person to another eventually leading her to being dizzy.

“The AHA is handling, or should I say, was handling the situation. It’s gone to shit. Pardon my language, however, it’s all gone down the gutter.”

“May I ask why the Emperor is here opposed to his land?” asked Staxius, “-was leaving them in peril the best solution?”

“Actually,” interjected the butler once more, “-I was the one told to keep his majesty from the information. If he had known of the situation, I doubt him coming here.”

“I’ve grasped the situation,” sighed Staxius, “-the true intention was to have me return to Alpha. In no way would I have accepted said proposal if it was sent via message. Thus, thee sent the Emperor as the messenger. I’m obliged he’s of a higher rank than I.??

“Is that true?” said Sultria deeply shocked, “-Father, I’m thoroughly apologetic for what has happened. I truly didn’t know of the intention of the council. Please forgive me,” overwhelmed, he bowed.

“Don’t,” spoke Staxius with a hand held out, he stopped the emperor from bowing, “-there’s no need for such a display.”

“Wha-” gulped the butler for the king was but a few meters away. He moved so quickly the eyes didn’t react. It left a trail of a gust of which rose coats and dresses alike.

“Why the look of distress,” smiled the king, “-you really thought I wouldn’t notice, an agent of the AHA, Arle Fielder, Second Class A Hero,” a locket hung and swayed gently.

“How-” he reached out to grasp at nothing.

“You certainly are fast,” smiled Staxius, “-though, not fast as me,” the chill went up Arle’s spine.

“Now then, would you explain what’s the true purpose of this visit?”

“The stories are true,” from manly, the figure melted and changed into another person. The height grew shorter, the face smaller, a bigger thigh, long hair and eyelashes, a lady with a skin-tight suit. “I’m Arle Fielder, a hero from the AHA.”

“What about my butler?” asked Sultria with an even more baffling visage, the situation was unknown to the emperor himself.

“He’s fine, taking a long vacation at the sister archipelagoes,” returned the lady with a smirk. “I’ll drop the act. The Emperor was indeed kept out of the loop. The situation runs farther than one might think. The reason why the AHA was put into place was to handle said situation. Along the way, people turned rogue, and thus the villains came into being. They were but mere training for the real fight which is yet to come. Only Heroes in the A-class ranking are allowed this information and sworn to secrecy. Many of our strongest are out there fighting the infection. We’ve named it Noire, the over evolution of DNA to the point of indiscriminate violence. Here’s the truth, the reason why Alphaia paid attention to the Argashield Federation was on a rumor. One in which someone detailed a person being as strong as a god. We’ve scoured all over the planet to lead to you, King Staxius, the holy invasion of Kreston, showed us proof enough. You must realize, Alphaia didn’t become strong because of trading, we’re strong because of how extensive the pool of knowledge and information is. It was luck that the Emperor took a liking to Eira, we’d have opposed the relation if not for you, Blood-king.”

“Alphaia has its hand into the underworld too,” refuted Staxius, “-all of this lead to one answer. My going to Alphaia, is that the wish of the council?”

“Correct.”

“What can I expect in return, not that I want anything in particular. Doing work for free isn’t really a way a king should conduct himself.”

“I agree,” smiled the spy who proceeded to take out a rolled piece of paper, “-here’s the contract for Alphaia to join the Argashield Federation.”

“Why would I accept such a thing?” he frowned with a crinkle, “-my daughter marrying into Sultria will suffice to forge the alliance. Besides,” he leaned, “-I’m the one who decides whether to help or not. All the efforts of finding the rumored man might come to naught if I’m not present.”

“Astute,” she whispered.

“...” the tanned face turned into one angered, Sultria’s gesture turned aggressive. “What is the meaning of this!”

“Emperor,” the thunderous order forced Arle onto her knee.

“Explain this to me at once.”

“Very well,”

“Dear Father-in-law, I shall be back shortly.”

The door creaked to a stop leaving the others speechless.

“What happened?” asked Eira with a roll of the eye.

“Shanna, could you come here a sec?” he moved over to a corner where no other could hear nor see. Eira didn’t mind as for Rosetta, her attention was turned to the princess.

“Did you read their minds?”

“Obviously,” she smiled, “-what of you?” said behind her hand, it resembled two ladies gossiping about a potential suitor.

“Their emotions seemed to be a little hyper. I wish to hear of the spy, what is she thinking?”

“From what I’ve gathered, the monster problem is a thing of utmost importance. A town has already been laid to ruin, though the news was covered and disguised as an Earthquake. The Noire are truly other citizens turned rogue.”

“It ties in,” he mumbled.

“Care to explain?”

“It ties in, remember how he said the God of Kreston’s army, what did the pope try to do?”

“The Immortal Army,” she said with a step back, “-you don’t mean!”

“Careful,” he took her arm and pulled, “-Kreston has yet to die. I’m afraid that continent will always haunt us for the God presiding over is but a fiend. A monstrous fiend who loves to toy with pawns.”

“Still, who would have thought that everything would unwind itself into such a complex labyrinth of questions and answers.”

“Yeah, the war might have ended – the darkness remains nonetheless.”

Chapter 366: Onto a new quest

“The decision has been made,” Sultria waltz in confidence. The dining hall of which held four people was reduced to but a singular man having a drink. The latter was fanned by a maid who kept a smile despite him refusing the service.

“What of it, Emperor?”

“Dearest father-in-law, I’ve decided that the Alpha Empire will join the Argashield Federation. We will do what is needed to help the allied kingdoms. My only wish is that thee accompanies me to my continent, we’re in peril and I think it best to rely on someone in a time of crisis.”

“Rely on someone,” he said with an unconvinced tone, “-do you wish to say that you’d have chosen any old fool to be in thy entourage?”

“No, god forbid,” the head shook in dismissal, “-I never said such a thing,” strong gestures of disapproval amplified the words spoken. “I only considered this option for thou art the father of my will-be wife.”

“Very bold,” he smiled, “-very well, I shall ready myself for the trip,” the gaze laid onto the butler behind, “-Arle, thou better protect the emperor,” he walked over to a vertical window giving into a dark-corridor.

“When can I expect thy arrival?” asked the young emperor intently.

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“What do you mean expect,” turned the King, “-We shall go together. After all, I’m agreeing to be part of thy council. If something were to happen, I’d be the one to blame.”

\*Knock, knock,\* the door opened with a Sage holding a staff, “-I’ve brought the papers,” said he with a listless gaze.

“Perfect timing,” without a word said, a pen was placed inside the king’s hand, “-even in the age of technological advancement, we rely on what is physical and pure,” he leaned onto a tall platformed use to keep vases up high.

“May I ask to where you’re going?” inquired Arle who stood on her toe to catch a glimpse.

“Signing the Alliance,” he smiled, “-Emperor Sultria VI of the Alpha Empire, do you vow to always side with the Argashield Federation even if this is to go worse?”

“Yes, I do,” said he without a doubt.

“Very well,” the papers were signed. Date, 6th December XX93, The Alpha empire changed from supporters to allies. The news would reach all in due time.

“Youst,” without warning, he called to which the butler answered, “-have the Emperor take a test. I’ll have preparations ready for my departure. Please have Serene come to the office.”

“Father!” cried the Emperor, “-what is the meaning of this?”

“Take a rest for the love of what is holy. If you were to see thy visage, I’d swear that the response would be less than amicable,” heavy frowned with the eyebrows tensed as to display anger and confusion, a pat on the shoulder had the king leave the room.

‘Now then,’ thought he scattering across the empty hallways deeper inside the castle. Shadows loomed every corner, the outside yet visible, was but an unattainable piece of bliss. The shadows of the windows resting on the floor stretched on high till meeting the opposing wall. Invisible pair of hands wrapping itself around the castle. At intervals, pillars besides which rested naught but an empty stand would flare with the sunlight.

Opened to a room changed from large and empty to large and compact, countless tables of which held holographical displays, stood glaring at him who entered. At the center of such a mess, a desk of wood and a singular monitor. One that controlled all around the room. The right-side, which once held a couch and table was replaced by metal cabinets for storing essential files. During the war, none would have guessed but this room was the center of all information transfer. It was yet to be dismantled and transferred over to the new wing. One started by the saints, the church for conversion, now used for the military.

“You asked for me?” came a voice who entered without a knock. The pitch-black hair and pale skin would have many fear for their lives.

“Serene,” said the King, “-I’ve got a few tasks you need to accomplish.”

“I heard about you going to Alpha, is that true?” she wondered with a step forth. Her tight-skirt struggled to keep with her movements, it felt as if it were to tear with each step.

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“Yes, tis true.”

“Does it have to be now?” she wondered with a dulled stare, “-it hasn’t been a day yet a week and the think of leaving so soon?”

“I know,” he shook the head, “-trust me, I want to rest and relax yet, there are matters more important than frolicking nonsensically.”

“I guess the decision has been made, what is it that you wish, Majesty?” she now peered over his shoulder.

“I want a status report on Arda. Spare none, what has the Blood-King faction been up too?”

“Alright,” she paused to draw up a massive hovering screen. “The factions holding Arda are the Noble-faction and the council of races. The post-war situation is rather hopeful, people are returning to the norm. The mine has been providing enough food and shelter for those working. The land is fertile once more, no more is the trouble of harvest. The North, where the Winged-Wolves are concerned, has had an influx in population. Mont Blanc is bountiful with prey. We found a particular plant with the ability to amplify mana-output. It grows onto the top of the mountain. I can say with pride that the villagers are filled with bliss for the plant is highly valuable. The Lizardmen tribe is alienated as you ordered. The swamp is nothing but a wasteland. Krask’s death has their kind in disarray, I’m sure that a new leader will come soon – one who values the peace of an alliance. The army is now under the control of General Mieshre of the beastmen tribe, her efforts in fighting the invasion are strong-footed amongst our men. The noble faction suffered quite a lot, their holdings and land are ravaged. I doubt there’s any amber of revolution burning. The Blood-King Faction has been all over the world spying on everyone. The Vampires are cured of the curse of day-light. Even the lowest tiered vampire, with the worst blood, is twice as strong as a Silver-ranked adventurer.”

“Most excellent,” said he, “-what of the council, has anyone tried to speak?”

“The council is tamed, my liege, everyone respects the new rule.”

“What of the citizens, are they happy?”

“From what I’ve gathered, yes, they are happy. Despite the tax, many are working hard to pay the kingdom who sheltered them in the war.”

“They’re too kind,” he sighed, “-after that homicidal act from Kreston, I doubted the populous to take my side. I’m glad,” he smiled.

“Yes, glad is the word to use for if it had gone another way, we’d be ruined.”

“Thank you for covering in my absence.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” she patted his head, “-Blood-King, you should really think of starting a harem.”

“Oh please,” he laughed loudly, “-a harem would tear my heart in pieces. I may be immortal but the anger of ladies in love is far crueler than what you may think. No harem, I’m a loyal man sworn to love the prettiest lady in the whole world.”

“Boring,” she rolled her eyes defiantly, “-no harem, what’s the point of being all-powerful?”

“Boring is the term harem, in no way does a man need more than a one to satisfy his libido. Besides one could always partake in the pleasures alone and behind shut doors. Heck, why are we even discussing such immoralities, thee doth have the worst way of bringing impure thoughts out my mind.”

“Impure, thou referred to the bonding of flesh and the creation of a babe as impure, how dulled are you, majesty?”

“Provocations isn’t going to do much,” stood with a relaxed face, “-the rather abrupt conversation has helped in soothing my mind. Thank you once more, Serene.”

“It was my pleasure, majesty.” Even since the episode with Eira’s sudden departure and how his mental health declined. Serene vowed to always take care of him who she served. A vow that had saved him many o’ time. During the five years of being away and stuck inside never-ending schemes – Serene’s nonsensical conversation and a rather flirty attitude was a bitter-sweet rest. One that he profoundly enjoyed, Serene truly was she who cared, the best secretary he could have wanted.

Down the hall and out in the still-active yard. The king traversed across the trimmed grass onto the renewed alchemic tower. The top was of a glass dome in which held many o’ telescopes and maps of the stars. The Sage had taken a big interest in astronomy in the later years. “The next step for us is to go to the skies.” A phrase he’d often repeat to the younger folks during storytelling.

Glass inlaid with golden symbols, he walked onto a tiled floor without none around. A globe stood in the middle, one reminiscent of the Hall of Rebirth. Further, into the room, a door led to the outside where a railing went around the tower. There, overlooking the castle and yard below, “-hello.”

“Hello,” returned through the phone.

“Can you hear me, Cake, hello?”

“Yes, yes, how may I help, boss?”

“I require transportation to the Alpha Empire. Is the jet readied to fly again?”

“Yes, why do you ask so, the jet is for thy personal use only, none in their damned mind will ever think of taking off without thy consent.”

“I thought I’d ask since, well, you know.”

“Yet to adjust to how powerful we are?” she laughed, “-no matter. Do you wish for me to send over a car?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“When should I expect arrival?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Deal, will there be guests?”

“Emperor Sultria VI.”



"I see, the son-in-law, very well, we shall spare no expense. I'll have Lady Courtney join the flight. She's been wanting to have a long-talk on Phantom's progress."

"Efficient as always."

"It's my pleasure," she laughed, "-take care Boss, I'll see you later tomorrow," the phone call ended. 'She's not wrong on that front,' a cigar lit, '-Phantom's evolving at a very fast pace. Our influence in the underground rose to the status of the family and backed by Godfather Renaud no less. As a business, as an arm's dealer, we've outfought any competition with connections. Phantom's research unit is making advancements as if the world is to end soon. The culmination of five-years work, the project to have us as the supreme leaders in air.' Peacefully gazing over yonder, a small man hailed fanatically.

"What is it?" a blink later, Staxius landed with wings retracting.

"Oh..." stared the Emperor, "-are you an angel?"

"No, of course not. I'm the king of nightwalkers. What's the matter, is something wrong, has Eira rejected you?"

"Please don't joke that way," a nervous smile hid the troubled mind, "-about going to Alpha."

"Don't worry, I've made arrangements for our departure. Let's have dinner since will be leaving sooner than later."

"Are we going at night?"

"That's the plan."

"What of me?" asked the butler, "-am I to stay here?"

"No, you're coming with. The matter of monsters has me very interested."

"King Staxius," came a sultry tone from the back, "-is it not a bit rude to forget a friend?"

"Queen Elina," the posture changed to one accommodating, "-it's a pleasure to see that you haven't left. Why not join us for dinner?"

"My oh my," she covered her mouth, "-you sure know how to please a lady," her fierce eyes darted behind at the Emperor – the same as a tigress saying don't touch my prey.

"It's a given," interjected Staxius who stood before his son-in-law, "-I must know how to accommodate she who's been very generous with my company." He moved to face the entrance with a simple glance. A message to say that everything would be alright.

## Chapter 367: Purpose

Time showed eight o'clock on the pendulum styled clock. Ancient and built and carved in rose-wood with the inside boasting many o' designs, the silent yet present sound of cutlery against plates echoed. Bit by bit, as if a tap left open, drop by drop, the pressure added and added and added till the point of absolute nervousness. Heading the table was Staxius with Queen Xula to his right. Next to her sat Eira followed by young Lizzie still a little new to table manners. Her ethic was watched closely by Rosetta who stood behind the princess. To the left sat Emperor Sultria VI followed by the Queen Elina. The other

guests had left to attend further business at Town Eden turned commercial hotspot. Placing down his knife and fork, maids approached to take away the plates. The moment his majesty ended, food was immediately taken away for it was tradition. Seeing how slowly Lizzie took to eat, her father, responsible for when the meal ended, came to match her pace. An act of kindness the girl had no idea about.

“Very succulent,” said Elina gently touching her mouth with a handkerchief.

“I second Queen Elina, the dinner was most warming,” added the Emperor as to socialize.

“Glad we have something in common,” returned the Queen rather abruptly. “King Staxius, may I wonder why I was kept in the dark about the Alpha Empire joining the Federation?” the tone used was of malice, she didn’t entertain the idea.

“Do kindly keep thy voice down,” he refuted, “-shouting is all but a fool’s game. As for the alliance, as per Queen Gallienne’s condition and abiding by the power given by the council – I have the right to invite and remove any from the Federation. Let’s not forget who was the creator of our family. The Federation has but one goal, and tis to get stronger using any means. I do suppose Emperor Sultria joining after the war is rather surprising, yet, us not accepting him would be as far worse an insult.”

“Please, that isn’t what I mean,” she said nervously, “-I was merely asking since the Alpha Empire is a powerhouse on their own. Allying with us is most definitely going to have a target drawn on our backs, I wish not for this to divulge into anarchy.”

“Well-grounded reasons,” added the Emperor, “-thou art weary of the Wracia Empire for they hold equal if not, more power than Alpha.”

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“Yes, very much so,” she nodded, “-not that I mean anything malicious. As it stands, we’re closest to being hit if ever they decide to go to war.”

“I doubt it will happen so soon,” returned Staxius, the sentence had the crowd face him. “The Wracia isn’t going to fight, not just yet. In the coming weeks, a project will be brought to the Order of Scholars. It’s going to revolutionize the world of Magic as a whole. Don’t forget who thou art dealing with. I’ll make sure we have a decade or two before the possibility of war crosses their mind,” ended, the message assimilated with glee. ‘I can always call for a favor to the Prince.’

“I see,” smiled Elina, “-I suppose the news is to go to the Queen of Hidros?”

“She’s been informed.”

“What of Prince Easel?” asked Elina, “-I heard the prince was to come?”

“He’s at Rosespire for the Queen called an audience,” replied Youst standing in the corner.

“Let’s call it a night.” Goodbyes exchanged; Queen Elina soon took to her chambers for the night.

“What was that about?” asked Eira.

“How long have you been dealing with such a personality?” asked an impressed Xula.

"The years eludes me, Queen Elina is very impulsive and cunning. A double-edged sword that if not guided correctly, could have us sink in an instant."

"Tis a dangerous game thou art playing, father."

"I'll take the words as a compliment," he returned courteously, "-do get a few hours of sleep – we're heading out in three hours."

"This way," said Arle as she led the way in the manly form.

"Papa, papa, where are you going now?" asked young Lizzie with an unsteady stance.

"Going to work," he replied with her in arms, "-are you going to miss me?"

"No," she pouted and faced Xula, "-I have mama and sis."

"You've forgotten me, princess," interjected the Emperor shyly before leaving the room.

"Oh, not you," she raised her eyebrows, "-since papa doesn't like you, I don't like you either," she pulled out her tongue, laughter followed after the comical exchange. The door shut behind, Xula and Eira did laugh though the eyes were idle.

"What's the matter now?"

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"Nothing much," added Xula, "-it's just that I thought we'd have more time to talk and be a couple."

"Oh, don't be that way," he patted her smooth hair, "-I'll be back sooner than you know. Be the Queen that everyone needs; didn't you give me a purpose so many years ago. I think I've accomplished the task rather masterfully. Today, it's my turn to give you a purpose, be the Queen that everyone loves, be the one who holds the continent. Long are the days where blame ailed thee, thy name hath been cleared. I sense doubt in thy word and inquietude in thy step – a clouded heart is as effective as an emotional fighter, inconsistent."

"Easier said than done," she whispered.

"Tis the point, what's the point of a life without adversities."

"Fine, I understand," her frown rose to a smile.

"What of me," interjected Eira, "-where's my motivational speech."

"In no way am I going to motivate someone with a clear vision of her future. I already said what was needed," paused, young Lizzie caught his attention once more, "-there's one thing you can do," he pointed, "-Lizzie will be someone to be feared. I want you to be an exemplary older sister, be the one she strives to become, just like you strive to become like me and how I strive to become like my father."

"Grandfather Tempest, what kind of man was he I wonder?" her mind took to the stars.

"It's best you not know."

"I have a question, father."

“What is it Eira?”

“What of my grandmother, surely she’s alive. I know for a fact that you’ve never said anything of her death – is she ok?”

“I honestly don’t know myself,” the tone fell into woe, “-the only connection I can draw is something to do with the Order. Maybe my sister has an idea, still, I wish not to bother her already tired mind.??

“What of Claudia?” asked Xula, “-I did send an invitation.”

“I doubt she would have come; my older sister isn’t the type of person to partake in such festivities. Her personality is one of minimalism.”

“I have an idea,” spoke Eira, “-if you’d allowed me that is?”

“What is it?”

“I wish to go and find my grandmother; I think it would be best for my eventual growth.”

“I doubt she’ll be of any use, but go ahead,” an hour went by after the exchange. The celebrations on the lower-floors never stopped.

Left to right moved the moon without care for the norm. The bleak night-sky filled with shiny pearls had shooting stars darting across. A stroke of a white brush against a black canvas, a singular moment to make a wish, an example of taking a risk. Life was based on events that could be referred to as those darting lights, one had but a moment to grasp the chance and move.

“What should I use?” stood the King in the center of many luxurious cars.

“I’ve brought them, majesty,” said a voice.

“I see,” holding his chin, the man was in deep thought.

“Are we leaving already?” asked a sleepy Sultria.

“No, not yet,” returned Staxius with a worried tone.

“Did something happen?” asked Arle perturbed by the voice, “-did the transport get cancel?”

“No, nothing light that,” he gestured, “-I’m lost that all.”

“Say what troubles the mind then, we might be able to help,” added Rosetta.

“Well,” he faced the cars, “-I don’t know which one to pick,”

“Seriously?” a laugh escape Sultria’s mouth, he nearly spat water.

“Here,” came Serene with a key, “-take the 8I-T0.”

“Alright,” nonchalant, “-let’s go,” a push had the engine started.

“Impressive,” commented Arle, “-just how much did this cost?”

“No idea, ask Serene,” he said through the opened window.

“I’ve forgotten,” she laughed, “-I didn’t really pay attention to the price when buying. You see, it was meant as a gift for the King since he enjoys cars very much so.”

“F-fair enough,” sat warmly inside the comfortable leather interior, Xula and the others came to say goodbye. A blink later, the 8I-T0 carved through the streets and out onto the main road via Portal. From there on the long drive began.

“King Staxius,” spoke Arle in the front whilst Sultria slept, “-do you mind if we have a conversation?”

“I don’t really mind, go on.”

“It’s about Phantom and Arda. I’ve noticed this more than one time; even with a big and fruitful continent as Alpha, we seem to come into trouble when it comes to finance. How is it possible that you’re able to spend such copious amount in an after-war economy, everything has risen in price, I would say the world is in a recession.”

“I mean, money is all but a relative estimation of what is valuable. Valuable are gold and precious stones. There are other factors that we need not concern ourselves. As you know, the new currency system is backed by gold. Gold of which we have plenty. Question about how Phantom is so wealthy; in honesty, I have no idea how much we’re worth at the moment. I can but give a rough estimate in gold-coins, which would be in the millions even billions considering the business. I can safely say that Phantom is one of the richest businesses out there. We’ve also more than a great deal of money invested as stock and as shares in big-name companies. Meldorino is an example, the brand is prominent as luxury clothes and jewelry. Very popular and sought after in the after-market. Phantom privately owns 30% of their company. I’m telling you this because it’s knowledge known to the public.”

“Not that I understand the premise, I ought to be grateful for the information.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” he smiled.

“Thank you for entertaining my request.”

‘We’re only starting. I heard the news that Cake is planning to buy more than 75% of Meldorino meaning that we’ll be the new owners. A strong foot in the arm’s business, then the medical and alchemic and now fashion and jewelry. The economy now is the perfect opportunity to plan for the future. Angel Dust and God’s Ale are all but more expensive and sought for – Courtney’s been doing a good job. Phantom, who would have thought the amount of power we would have amassed.’

Driven across multiple terrains, he pulled close to the airfield where waited the jet.

“Boss,” hailed a guard on arrival next to a hangar.

“Hey, how’s the jet, where are the pilots?” asked through the lowered window, the visage all but sent a chill down the guard’s back.

“We got the news of thy arrival from lady Cake. Everything should be ready.”

“Good, do tell the pilots to be ready.”

“Before that, boss, I must add something.”

“What is it?”

“Lady Cake told me to relay this message, ‘-return to Rotherham first,’ that’s about it.”

“Return to Rotherham, sure.”

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“Wake up,” elbowed to her side, Arle jumped, “-have Sultria wake up. I’ll go check on something.” Parked neatly in an open space, he got out to spot two figures having a meal on benches.

“It’s you two,” he said peering over, “-what are you doing here?”

“Majesty,” they were the drivers from earlier, “-we’re waiting for the transport as you said.”

“Oh, I apologize,” he handed the key, “-here, take her back after you’re done.”

“Thank you, majesty.”

#### Chapter 368: Marrowy

Dark and reflecting the moonlight, the jet taxied onto the runway. The pilots were most happy for one had scratch marks going down the neck. Their expression was of utmost bliss, a pleasure incomprehensible but to themselves.

“Are we going to Alpha now?” asked Arle.

“No, we’re heading to Rotherham first,” he explained to which the Emperor nodded about and fell asleep. The informal attitude born off their relation means that manners weren’t such a necessary attribute. Not that anyone would be disrespectful, dropping certain aspects of being well-mannered and being oneself was what the Nobles and Royalty often sought – to be themselves, nothing more, nothing less. “I’ll give the explanation later; we’ll be there faster than you’d think.” Upon the last words being said, the engine went full-throttle, a high-pitched whistle followed by the Jet getting air.

A few minutes later at Rotherham, Cake received news of the Boss’s arrival. “Alright everyone,” she said inside an office with many strongly built guards standing, “-be at the ready. The Boss is coming with a special guest, I want the runway to be secured, don’t allow anyone in and out.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they replied in tandem and left. Leaders of Platoons were the first and last life of defense in case the airfield was under attack. Fierce fighters with real-life combat experience.

“Why did you call me?” asked a rather flirtatious voice, her fingers went up and down Cake’s neck.

“Lady Courtney,” she shook her head out of the pleasant moment, “-please, thy brother is arriving soon.”

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“Yes, I know,” she turned and rested against the desk, “-what do you want me to do?”

“Didn’t you ask for an audience with him? The future of Phantom and all that, I’m sure that should jog the memories.”

"Dear me," she pitched her forehead in shame, "-my bad, I forgot of so many things. Forget I said anything," with a tiny push, she stood straight and went for the door, "-the job has been completed."

'I see,' thought Cake with the blinders opened, the melancholic sky had a sense of comfort within.

Soon came the sound of the Jet; they were lined and readied to land. Over yonder peering out the tall-office and onto the airfield, she spotted the jet touchdown. 'Good luck boss,' her hands reached for another door, '-I'll continue to do as I must to have Phantom be the strongest.' \*Meeting room,\* was written on a bronze wall next to where she entered.

Down on the runway after landing, came many of men with guns. Amidst the bunch, a flash of white-hair caught his eye.

"Shadow," said Staxius off the jet, "-good to see you after long."

"Good to see me after long?" she continued walking with the others stuck behind an invisible line. "Has my brother grown so dumb as to forget what it means to keep a lady waiting?"

"How quaint," he smiled, "-I didn't think you'd care that much about being on time. Besides isn't my being here comfort enough?"

"Thinking too highly of yourself will be thy downfall one day," she refuted.

"That's why I have a reliable sister," he smirked, "-you'll catch me, won't you?"

"Yeah, I suppose I will," a rather peculiar conversation ending with a hug.

"What's the deal?" he asked seeing the fighters and luggage being readied.

"Cake wanted me to come with, thus, I saw fit that I bring a few weapons to keep me company."

"A FEW WEAPONS!" he pointed to a tank, "-covering that with a piece of CLOTH isn't going to happen."

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"WHY NOT," she argued, "-LET ME BRING THE TANK, IT'S CUTE."

"No you don't," he refused, "-and the weapons, you think bringing live explosives a good idea?" facepalming, he faced away, ???-Sister, you'll be fine with a sword. Drop the act, we need to take off, don't we?"

"So no tanks?"

"OBVIOUSLY!"

"H-hey..." whispered Sultria beside Arle.

"What is it?"

"Is my mind playing tricks or did the king refuse the lady from bringing a tank..."

"Y-yeah, I think that's what happened. I mean, how would they even carry such a beast."

"It's baffling," commented the Emperor, "-I'd never guessed that the Federation would have such expensive weaponry and act as if they were but toys. Did you see the compound, look over yonder, those three sky-high building looks as if the guardians. I dare to think about how much money was spent here." Few meters away, the argument between twins seemed to settle into silence. The lady took up a backpack with the king leading the way.

"Did you have a pleasant dream?" asked Staxius to Sultria.

"Y-yes," the reply was less than impactful.

"Here's the son-in-law I've not heard about," said Courtney rather passionately.

"I'm Sultria VI Emperor of Alpha, it's a pleasure to make thy acquaintance."

"Courtney Haggard, twin-sister of Staxius Haggard and aunt to Eira Haggard," she leaned with a strong aura, "-it's finally nice to see the lady my niece chose."

"Excuse me, but it's actually man," interjected Arle.

"My oh my," she glanced up and took a step back, "-I can sense your female aura from here, pseudo-man. What joke does thou take this for?"

"Joke... my lady, surely you must be in mistake."

"No, I think not," her imposing voice and glare had Arle trying to look away.

"We should get on board," interjected Staxius, the situation grew out of control. The engine soon toggled and the jet flew off to conquer the skies.

"Was there a need for such a strong impression?"

"Of course," replied Courtney with the Emperor quietly gazing upon the hublot. "I need to affirm my position as an enemy, one who will stop at naught to have what she wants. That's the perception I want him to have. It will be easier for us to move around the chessboard when needed."

"You're right, what of this talk Cake referred too, what is it?"

"Oh yes," a screen manifested with classified information, "-I wanted to speak about our involvement as a Family in the Underground. Since we're allied with Renaud, we can be sure that our back is secured since he's the right-hand man of the Overlord. For the past five years, our team has been all over the globe. I can say one thing, the underground runs even deeper than we know. There are even more prominent figures out there, waiting to pounce at weakness."

"I know that what of the talk, what is it you really want to say?"

"We're becoming too powerful too quick."

"And, isn't that the basics of growth?"

"No, you don't get my point."



"I think I do," Refuted Staxius, "-we're catching the eye of many, many unwanted attentions. Phantom is getting big, and there's no stopping the growth. Instead of blaming the growth, let's focus on having a strategy ready, one to safeguard our asses if it goes bad."

"What do you mean by safeguard?"

"Don't you know," he smiled, "-read my mind."

"Property?" she said silently, "-are you sure about that?"

"Yeah, investing in property is the next best thing. Even if it goes sour, the money would have been turned into something physical and of value. I don't see the need for such worries. Besides, our less than legit transaction happen inside Hidros, the place where the Argashield Federation is monarch. I can do what I wish for my word is the law. Tis not a lie for tis how the hierarchy is. Have you forgotten, that we are mere suppliers outside the reach of our kingdom's law and regulation? The distributors are the ones who need to be careful."

"Don't tell me," she shook her head, "-don't tell me you've foreseen..."

"Yeah, I did," he quietly gazed out onto the empty sky, "-I love and respect Godfather Renaud. He's a man I deem as a father, one who's taken care of me for many, many years. Yet, if things were to go bad, I'd not bat an eye and leave him to die."

"What of loyalty?"

"I'm loyal, I give him what he wants and he gives me what I want. That's the extension of our relation," holding her shoulder, "-if Godfather Renaud is ever in trouble, Phantom will not help. Heed my words well, Phantom will not get involved."

"Does the cruelty know no bounds?"

"I never said that I wouldn't help. I rather risk myself than the company for it's the only thing that can ensure a nice future for those in my entourage. And I'm to guess that was what you wanted to hear, where my loyalty stands?"

She nodded, her brother read her words, mind, and emotions perfectly. He knew what to say and what to do. The conversation ended in peace. Courtney decided to pay Sultria a visit and speak a little of Eira and their relationship. Peering to their direction showed an awkwardly suffocating scene, '-I don't envy you.'

Over the horizon rose the sun; the sudden change of light had many wake from sleep. The plane had been flying for more than 12 hours.

"Boss," said one of the pilots returning from a toilet trip, "-we're here."

"The continent of Alpha," said the Emperor, "-I forgot how unnecessarily long it is," he laughed.

"Father," he moved over, "-could you please ask the pilots to land at these coordinates?"

"Not that it troubles me."

"Arle, what is the Emperor up to?" asked Courtney.

“Nothing much, he’s just making sure that we land at the capital at not some other province. You’ll see when we get close, besides, the King of Arda knows how it is.” He avoided her gaze and fixated on the screen. ‘The Alpha Empire split into seven-provinces which each having their law and regulation. One could say it’s the same as Hidros, though, it’s the people who decide on who is to lead them. A democracy where votes are what dictates the leaders of the provinces. As for the Emperor, that position is always assumed by the Sultria. A country where politics serves to better the living conditions. There’s a heavy focus on movies and entertainment. Books, picture books, and more, a heaven for any child wishing to travel. The trade-in precious stones as well as the increase in tourism have the continent in a good spot. Many famous companies outsource their production to Alpha’s industrial district which is expansive. More jobs, more money, and more tax.’

“Have you decided where to land?”

“Yes, we’re going to Marrowy,” said the emperor, “-it’s a small mountainous village with an airfield. The quiet and indiscretion should do us wonders. The only downside is transportation. We might be stuck for a few days.”

“Should be fine,” reassured Staxius who ignored the trouble at hand, “-let’s land first.” The runway was short and, on a hill, peering from up above, one could see not many buildings and a station, a train station to be precise with not many roads nor cars. The mountains in the background were beautiful but scary for the pilots who focused tremendously. The sudden gust made being stable hard. Gritting their teeth, the jet continued its approach with a sigh of relief being breathed after they touched down. No control tower nor anyone to give directions, “-head to the hangar,” said Sultria, “-Marrowy is the Sultria line’s holiday destination.” Taxied slowly, the door opened to a cold and silent environment. The hangar despite being small seemed large for the lack of items. The loneliness seemed inviting, an oxymoron that would have many speechless.

“Welcome to my village,” said the son-in-law rather happily.

“Yeah, guess this is it,” thought Staxius walking down the stairs. He soon walked out to the runway, “-wow,” no more no less. A gentle mist had wrapped itself around its limited vision to but a few kilometers, yet, in that distance, one could see how melancholy stood the mountain filled with dark-green leaves. The runway in on itself was situated higher than the village which could be seen down the gravel road. One constant remained nature and its beauty.

‘We’re in the Alpha Empire.’

#### Chapter 369: The Mystery of Marrowy Village [1]

Marrowy, a small village close to the center of the Alpha Empire. A place secluded and hidden by the mountainous region. Access was either by plane or by train. Car and other vehicles could drive across the landscape. Sadly, the risk that it entailed didn’t make many opportunities to venture into a place where only greenery, large valleys, and waterfalls, worth it. The industrial province was more than adequate for money-making.

Landed, led by Sultria who smiled, they peered over a rather steep slope. Trees and bushes erected as barriers on the side of the graveled path. Foliage stretched onto forever for the trees was very much

present. The addition of mist, the addition of the chilly breeze, and the addition of cries of birds and other wildlife; a relaxed atmosphere for those of strong heart.

“What of the jet?” asked Sultria with a pause.

“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about,” touching his earpiece, “-We’ll be fine from here, return to Hidros,” without wasting time, the jet lined itself and took-off leaving a trail of dried leaves.

“Should we go?” proposed Arle in her man’s body.

“Lets,” smiled the emperor, the incline was soon hard to the body. Hard for it was tiring to not let the slope carry one’s body into a full-out sprint. On the path downwards, amidst opening through nature’s natural barrier, a smoothly carved cliff reached onto the sky. Since the plane came from the opposite side, they didn’t notice the immense cliff to the left. Cracks of leaves and sticks made the aura tense. As for Sultria, he skipped a few steps, the place was as if heaven – pleasant memories that made one forget trouble. In the distance came a small opening with the right-side exposed to the elements. It flattered out as if a viewing point, one natural for men had no hand in said disparity.

“There,” pointed Sultria, “-that bricked roof, that’s the cottage we’re going to stay the night,” the mist made seeing further impossible.

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“We’ll take your word for it,” added Courtney with a yawn.

The more step walked, the gentler grew the slope and after what seemed an hour, the land leveled. No longer did the foliage, the natural roof made by the forest, stop the dim sunrays. \*To Marrowy,\* displayed on a post pointing to the right. A crossroad with paths to the airfield and further down to the valley.

The gravel path soon changed to stone, not bricks, but stones that seemed to fit in a rather puzzled manner. It seemed to have been placed using one’s eye and judgment. Inconsistencies were more than few, nevertheless, a certain charm made one to only step on the stones. Over yonder after a gentle climb came the village. Surprising was to see people walking about in warm-clothes. Men wore top-hats with coats whilst the ladies did the same with heavier dresses.

“Welcome to Marrowy,” said the Emperor.

“Breathtaking,” said Courtney, “-I would most definitely enjoy having my retirement here.” To the right, after a few stone-steps came to a station, a train station with the tracks running down from whence they came. Caged by a curved roof with openings at intervals, it didn’t seem that much lively.

“Let’s go,” said Sultria ignoring the station.

“Should we not?”

“No my lady,” he turned with a stern face, “-the train comes here in the morning which is long due. We’ll be staying here tonight.” A satisfactory explanation had the group move forth.

‘There’s something awfully wrong here,’ thought Staxius to which Courtney nodded. ‘I guess she’s reading my mind.’ She smugly winked to say yes. ‘Look at the people,’ they continued, ‘-there’s a certain

feeling of idleness. Maybe I'm wrong since we've never come upon such a tranquil place. It's disconcerting that's for sure.'

'Yeah,' came a loud voice, '-I do think there's something weird.' The gazes being cast were unreadable; anger, happiness, doubt, frustration, listlessness? A barrage of unevenness.

\*Marrowy Cottage,\* came after a few twists and turns, the sloped roof and logged beams were reminiscent of the olden era. The walls were of a creamy color, one inviting and comforting.

"Hello," said a tired-looking middle-aged man with gelled hair hunched over the counter. He bore a beard and mustache, a prominent feature amidst the few people they came across.

"Hello to you," replied Sultria who smiled, the man had yet to lift his head. A game of crossword on a brownish looking book had him busy.

"What would you like?" he asked yet to stare up.

"Two rooms for two."

"Two rooms for two," gently scribbling a few letters, he stood straight with a victorious smile, "-two rooms for two," said he to a sudden silence. "Emperor Sultria," the already empty room shifted. Guests who were sitting in the lounge were startled by the man's voice. "It has been so long," he said with a smile.

"Yes," replied Sultria, "-I see that the game of crossword is still what thee enjoys." A reference to a television fixed on the wall opposite the counter.

"It was a gift from the late-emperor, I better complete it else I'd never see to live another day."

"Again with the woeful jokes."

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"It's the village," he dinged a bell, "-Marrowy changes a man the more he stays."

Parting a heavy curtain came a young boy with a hat and freckled cheeks. "What is it, father?"

"Could you kindly show our guests to their rooms?"

"Will do," unbothered to see who had come, "-follow me."

On the stairs, "-be careful," said the boy for the steps creaked.

"This place sure is weird," said Courtney after being shown their room. A big bed with a television, a closet, a window that gave onto the station, the curved roof for it was all one could see. The scenery was but an alley followed by other buildings. Peaking out to the right; a small restaurant or café, stood with people enjoying drinks. An outdoors covered by tall-umbrellas fenced from stray animals.

"I'm starting to see why so," refuted Staxius.

"Care to explain?"

"Look at the wall," he said, "-the paint is new. It's as if they're trying to hide something."

"Don't be such an idiot," sighed Courtney, "-it's probably because of moisture. The dampness in the air is obvious."

"No, that's not what I'm referring too. Didn't you notice the newspapers flying about? I caught a glimpse, the dates were XX87."

"Good joke," she laughed, "-in no way would such a dated paper be around."

"And yet, it's around. I'm not being a detective; it's just that something is weird. The way they are clothed, I understand that they are alienated, not to this amount. It's like we've walked into a time-capsule, a place where nothing ages. The small television, the boy who didn't care to stare, and Sultria's nonchalant attitude."

"Don't you dare tell me we're in a typical horror novel situation? Let me guess, someone's going to waltz into the room and scream '-person x is gone.'

\*BANG,\* "EMPEROR SULTRIA IS GONE," screamed a frightened Arle.

"Good job," facepalmed Staxius, "-YOU HAD TO GO AND TRY TO BE A SMARTASS."

"Wait..." she paused, "-why do you all look so uninterested?"

"It's nothing," replied Courtney, "-what happened, what of Sultria?"

"I don't know," she said trembling, "-I went to order food but when I returned, he was gone."

"And, why should we be so scared as to a young man going off to adventure?" asked Staxius.

"You don't understand," she panted, "-it's because..." taking a deep breath, "-it's because his father died here, or should I say, disappeared mysteriously. I was opposed to the idea of coming to Marrowy, the village is full of things I hate."

"Why did he want to come here so intently?"

"I don't know, maybe he feels responsible."

"And how is that the case?"

"This story is only known to a few. The late Emperor, Sultria V, came on a trip with his family. Your son-in-law was in his teenage years going through the rebellious phase. Now, tis, where the story gets weird. There were rumors of something being after the late emperor's life. The supposed vacation was him going into hiding from the conspirators. On the same night, they checked into this cottage, when the boy ran off to see the mountain; upon his return, the Emperor was nowhere to be found. The last accounts were of him running off after the figure of a boy. Though it is said that Sultria VI left after his father."

"Damn it," sighed Staxius, "-let me give my thoughts. First of all, did the Emperor die in the year XX87?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"I see where this is going," grabbing onto the trench coat, "-I have a gut feeling that the Emperor's disappearance wasn't out of the norm. I'm sure this village is guilty of his murder."

“What makes you say so?”

“We shall find out, shan’t we?” \*Death Element: Concealment,\* a snap later, the man disappeared.

“Listen, if what you said about the death is true, there’s someone who wants to assassinate the Emperor. Him coming here was birthed by subjective messaging, we’re dealing with a master killer.”

“Ok,” said Arle, “-what do I do?”

“Run to the counter and explain the situation as best as you can. I’m certain the man has something to do with it.”

“What of you?” she asked.

“I’ll be out looking for him, what else do you expect?”

\*Clop, clop, clop,\* dashed Arle down the steps.

“What are you thinking?” asked Courtney.

“We’re going to lay a trap for the assassin.”

“What of the Emperor, is he not in danger?”

“No, don’t forget who I am,” \*All-Seeing Eye,\* a scan of the area and the prince’s aura was located.

“He’s at the river on the bridge, here,” \*Summon forth, Box of Alche,\* “-take this and make sure he gets it. You’re going to play a big part in this hunt, Daemonum Gladio, I’m counting on you.”

“Trust me as you’d trust you,” she teleported away.

‘The plan is laid out,’ \*Ancient Magic: Teleportation,\* he hovered above the cottage.

“The Emperor has gone missing!” cried Arle to the cottage-owner to which she dashed outside.

“Arle, Arle,” said Staxius, “-I found him, he’s at the river on the bridge.”

“What are you waiting for then?” she screamed, the lights of the cottage had a few stares on them.

“LET’S GO,” she screamed and sprinted.

‘I see,’ he followed closely.

Hidden in from the world and stood on the bridge, Sultria rested against the bridge’s railing. The stars helped in lighting the area. The calming sound of the river made the mind at ease.

“Hey,” he said speaking to a strange figure, “-I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Hey, how are you?” they spoke as if old friends, or rather, as family.

“I’m good, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you,” jested Sultria, “-is everything been ok? I was worried about you and her.”

“Yes, it has been, except,” \*BANG,\* “-I never thought you’d come here again. Even after what I told you to do.”

“W-why,” blood soiled the suit, “-I only wanted to talk.”

"A talk, no, never, your father was fool and thou art a bigger one."

"U-UNCLE," he coughed blood, "-why would you do so?"

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"It's simple, I want to inherit Alpha for myself." he laughed, "I was content living my life out here in Marrowy, that is only if you didn't show up. I promised to hold back, yet, my thirst for vengeance is unquenchable. Go on Arle," came the spy, "-finish him off."

"Really," she said whilst panting, "-could you not have shot him in the face?"

"W-wait," said Staxius baffled, "-WHAT HAPPENED?" he rushed over to the Emperor, "-are you ok?" he said pressing the wound.

"King of Arda," spoke the shooter, "-how lovely to make your acquaintance," he raised the gun once more, "-however, I don't need witnesses, wrong place at the wrong time, farewell," \*BANG!\*

Chapter 370: The Mystery of Marrowy Village [2]

\*Ting,\* a high-pitched sound screamed along the river. "I figure as much," stood Staxius with a nonchalant face, "-guns are so easy to counter," he dusted his shoulder.

Two menacing figures stood, they peered coldly at he who shot. Arle and the supposed uncle were lost for words.

"Master," turned Gophy with an angered visage, "-please be more careful."

"Seriously," mumbled Intherna, "-I woke up to watch this?" rolling her eyes, the flames around her head settled and they returned from whence they came.

"What was that?" asked Arle who changed into her real form.

"Nothing that you need to know," he stood and stared.

"Even if you kill me, nothing will happen as the next in line for the throne is my son. It will all but be in my favor," said the man, "-king of Arda, I've killed thy son-in-law, what are you going to do now?" laughter ensued.

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"Is that so?" glanced downwards, the body of the Emperor melted to flow into the river. "I'm surprised you thought the same scheme would work twice," he rested against the barrier whilst two figures approached from the opposite side.

"Emperor!" screamed Arle, "-you're ALIVE," mixed with joy and anger, she bolted forth with killing intent. \*Death Element: Hand of God,\* casually lighting a cigar, the lady got thrown and landed against a fishing cabin. \*Puff,\* "-explain thy purpose else I'll have the entire family put to the sword for treason."

"How is this possible," fallen onto his knee, "-I thought I killed you personally."

"Quit it with the theatrics," refuted the King, "-you dared to try and harm the girl my daughter fell in love with," without care, he turned off the cigar against the man's cheek. \*AHHHH,\* he held onto the burnt spot and jumped backward, "-LEAVE ME ALONE, I did nothing WRONG."

"Father," came the Emperor, "-what happened, is Arle a spy?"

"Yes, a double spy I'd say. Heroes, what a joke," glaring she who limped over, "-loyalty and justice, I guess greed and jealousy will always have the upper hand."

"Can we end this farce already?" added a tired Courtney, "-if nothing is going to happen, let me just kill 'em already," she stomped across with hand on her sword.

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"M-master," the two sat close, "-sorry, father."

"..." no response from the man.

"I'm so sorry I didn't have the heart to take the life of my cousin."

"..."

"Father, please..."

"Get away, scoundrel," he shoved her away, "-how can I be proud of a girl. You were never meant to be born, worthless little shit," \*spat,\* saliva hit her face. Despite the disrespect, she kept a smile, one of being thankful.

"ARLE!" voiced Sultria, "-Explain to me what's the meaning of this."

"Don't bother," trailed the uncle, "-since I've been found out, I guess there's no need to hide the mystery of Marrowy," inhaling deep, the man stared strongly. "Before I start, I need to know how you survived. How did the King of Arda know my motives?"

"Simple," said Staxius, "-man who owns the cottage. In no way are you going to fool me with that disguise. I only just figured the truth with the help of Arle. It's you that passed her the DNA of disguise." Indeed, it was true for the man who changed the face to one of the men before.

"I don't understand how."

"It began the instant we walked into the village, nothing seemed right. A strange malevolent hand stretches on far over – I can't put into words of what I sense. Then came the television, it's old, even for a village, and the crossword book, the pages, they were aged well beyond a few years. By chance, I spotted a newspaper dating to XX87. The question was there, why the olden style, why so adamant on focusing on the past. The little conversation between you and the emperor when we checked-in had an underlying tone of mystery. The mention of the late-emperor struck my interest since I was told Marrowy was a vacation-spot for the imperial family. Why would a vacation spot be so out of touch with the world? If such prestigious guests came here often, I would assume the village being richer for many are craven of the idea of nobles. The observation led me to a singular conclusion, there hid more than the eye could see," paused to gather a few breaths, those before him were deeply attentive. "As for how I manipulated Arle. She barged into our room rather abruptly and screamed at the Emperor's



disappearance. Why would she do that for a butler is sworn to always stick by their master? Any normal servant would have not wasted time and rushed to search. The message could have been delivered by the little boy that came with us earlier. This slipped my mind, the boy, yes, the boy also gave a hint. Kids their age are very curious and hyperactive. What I saw wasn't a boy, but the mannerism of a teenager. One who knew how to walk and act. Him not raising his head to see who had come went against their curious nature. Enough of that, let's get back to Arle. She obviously wanted to get our attention. Tis why I offered for her to report downstairs but mind you, I didn't specify any one particular but placed emphasis on man. This, in turn, made her suspicious of what I knew. The man meant that I knew someone was responsible. Her reaction was to go warn the ring-leader. Skipping forward to where we met outside, I said that I knew where the Emperor hid. Tis was then I confirmed my suspicion, you tried to hide it but I saw a faint gesture of acknowledgment between thee both," paused once more, the river seemed to slow in pace, an illusion as attention was on the King. "Lastly," he smiled, "-lastly, I silently manipulated Arla into thinking she held the advantage. You already knew where the Emperor was," he pointed to the Uncle, "-but only acted oblivious to fool us. You knew he'd come to where the late-emperor died since you killed him. I all but made sure that the scenario in thy head play out. The one you shot was nothing but a puppet, one that could fool even a scholar. You shot on impulse and here we are."

"Shot on impulse," laughed the Uncle, "-I suppose I did," he glared Arle.

"Uncle please," walked Sultria with open arms, "-why, why do this, why did you kill my father?"

"The mysterious murder of the late Emperor did have something to do with me. Though," he raised head to Staxius, "-the scheme was plotted masterfully, though, the reason why I acted is very much wrong. The Emperor died because of me, not because I killed him. We came here so many years ago, the village of Marrowy, else known as the resting place for the Golem army led by God of Earth, Tonus, its tradition to have a sacrifice to the deity for the protection of our continent. The pact runs very deep in our family. On that day, it was decided that I be sacrificed for the good of all. Not that I was given the chance, I had to accept since being part of the lower-family. On that particular night, after he seemingly ran after a figure, it was but a lie, a lie for me to escape and be sacrificed. Dear Nephew, you were a fool to follow after thy father. The ritual was readied, I gave up hope and waited for my life to end when, young Sultria leaped on the bridge to give me a hug. Without warning, as the final judgment was to end our lives, your father, my half-brother, shoved us off the bridge thus being the sacrifice. I hated it, I hated it that he could not have stayed with his family, my step-brother, Tomo, had more talent than anyone. The Empire that could have been made was sullied by the action of a teenage boy. I'm sure you don't remember since it was night. I made sure you thought of it as a dream. That's why, that??s why," he stared the ground, "-that's why I wanted you to die. Die so I could take my brother's place and rule, take my brother's place and destroy Marrowy, the village that binds my soul and heart."

"The mystery of Marrowy," sighed Staxius, "-cottage-owner, what's thy name?"

"Solomon."

"Well, Solomon, never have I heard such a dumb story of revenge. My ears are screaming in pain of what I heard. The Emperor sacrificed himself to save you and his heritage. Thee, on the other hand, stuck inside a bubble of self-loathing, don't realize how much the Empire has grown. Can't you see how greatly Sultria led the country? You reject your own blood for the sake of a misunderstanding."

“Don’t talk as if you know me,” he snarled, “-whatever the case, Tonus’s curse will activate soon. Either he takes mine, my nephew, or my daughter’s life, I care not. Let the curse be active, I’d like to see everything be destroyed.”

“A curse you say,” he gestured for Courtney to get off the bridge, “-let me guess,” he pointed up to the waterfall a few meters away, “-that’s where judgment comes from.”

“Yes, the statue of Tonus is up there watching and waiting for the next meal.”

“You’re mistaken, that is nothing more than an illusion cast by the reflection of water. The curse and the thing about being sacrificed is nothing more than a contract to a demon. The imperial family is indebted to a demon, and the demon requires souls to keep from causing misfortune.”

“Stop blabbering,” lashed Solomon, “-I wish not to hear that my brother died for naught.”

“Tis the truth,” hands pressed, \*O’ elements of mana, o’ elements of life, heed mine call for I command thy. Mana Manipulation – Unity.\* The splashes of water against the wooden steps moved in slow-motion, he stood at the center of white-mist-like lines twirling around his finger. “Thee who hides and preys on the weak, show thyself,” pointing atop, the lines shot forth and dispersed upon impact.

“What’s this,” asked Sultria, the ground trembled, a loud thump came from the waterfall.

\*CRACK,\* a figure leaped from inside the waterfall.

\*Flow with one, flow with all, thou shan’t lay a hand on I. Mana Manipulation – Drift,\* the white-line formed an evanescent curse which had the figure flung outwards.

It hovered with the muzzle of a dog in rock, the body of a dragon, and the wings of a crow, dark-horns protruded above which conjured a boulder. \*Grr,\* it flicked the projectile.

“Time for us to play,” without a word said, a flash of fire and shadowy mist conjured forth. Cut in half, she with the shadowy aura, the remainder was burnt to a molten state by the other. Two goddesses stood facing the demon. Intimidated, it growled heavily to the point of covering ears did naught. One by one, more demons dashed from the waterfall, \*Blood-Arts,\* slicing open his forearm, \*-Crimson Thread,\* a fishnet line structure manifested instantly with demons cut in half.

\*Death Element – Daemonum Variant: Ire,\* leaped Courtney onto the barrage of demons.

\*Death Element – Daemonum Variant: Silence,\* those touched by her sword, the instant she sheathed, combusted in a white-flame.

“Master,” spoke Intherna hovering with the wings of Rah, “-it’s a high-tier demon,” she said with flames pulsing down her forehead.

“I agree with Intherna,” said Gophy smugly, her visage all but held a smirk.

“I see,” his wings sprouted forth as the crimson threads broke and returned to his halo. The waterfall rose a being of unmatched size, it was as tall, if not taller than the drop of fifteen meters. The insignia of the god of Kreston stood on its forehead. Sword in one hand and wand in another, the wolf-like muzzle roared loud. Intherna to the right and Gophy to the left, the goddesses stood at the ready to fight.

“Slaughter them.”