

Death Magic 571

Chapter 571: Confession

Three pillars reaching for the heavens. The train tracks merged into a little station at the 'entrance' of town. Pulled on a private road built like a fortress, guards in heavy camo and armed to the teeth made camp. The checking outpost, a tank as well as machine guns were placed in strategic positions. Men in uniform, the sight sent Alicia's heart into a rave. Two knocks, the window rolled, "-sir, this is a private road."

"I'm Igna Haggard, this is the first time I've used the road."

"Haggard," he turned to check with the other, nods and radio transmission. The gates opened to a very empty passage since trees gave the impression of walls as the foliage spread in an encompassing manner.

"About earlier..."

"Say it already," returned he harshly, "-is there something I need to know, or you want to say?"

"I'm sorry..."

"About what, being under the influence?" they turned inward to the skyscrapers, "-if that's all, then, there's no cause for concern. I don't care what you do, your life, no place for me to judge. Tell me one thing," they stopped at an intersection, "-how was the trip with Julius?"

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"Fun, I enjoyed it," she smiled.

"Good, then, it's about time you head to Alpha," the door opened, "-go check in with the receptionist. I've made the arrangements; besides, Celina's already begun her life. As for me, I don't think I'll be needing a manager. Tis more trouble than I require."

"Y-yeah," her shoulders slumped, "-I'm j-just a manager. I-it hurts b-but hey," abruptly glancing back, "-I came here to help, not be a burden."

"Stop," he held her wrist, "-don't misunderstand, we're going back together. The arrangements are for a better place to stay as well as a car. Go enjoy the whole of Hidros. I'm going to be busy; things are hard as is. Be careful, call if you need anything."

The blurred vision cleared at a simple caring smile. For the many days spent apart and together, living as one in Alpha spurred on things she couldn't describe. Suga and Emi saw right through her feeble heart.

"Igna," the grip lessened, she turned, "-you're the only one for me." No warning, no time to react, her tender lips locked against his. Hot cheeks inched away, her long and feeble finger moved to rest onto the lower lip, her pupils grew like a droplet hitting a serene lake.

"Tell me," he softly moved to hold the back of her head, "-why not, why?"

"I'm scared," said she, "-the feeling of being abandoned, it's here, I c-can't d-describe it."

"I'm sorry," gently easing the hold, "-I don't think I'll ever be able to love someone ever again. It's not you, it's me. The heart in my chest is nothing more than a beating rock, I felt nothing. The kiss was sweet as well as intoxicating. Trust me, there are no men alive who wouldn't accept the advancement."

"Are you rejecting me?" her heart sank.

"It would be scummy to lead you on for carnal pleasures. You're a very kind and charming person, well, towards those you trust. The harshness in the tongue, the open-minded way of thinking, it's there, it's qualities of a great partner. I'm not one to dangle a thread of fake hope."

"Igna," the door shut, "-I'm coming with," her face suddenly grew stern.

"Why, what's the reason?"

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"I should have said this before," the fierceness returned, "-I don't give up easily. Besides, Julius told me about the prior relationship." They continued driving.

"What did he say?"

"That you were betrayed by the most trusted person. She fled to another's arms because of a faint faith. I don't mind waiting, I've waited my whole life, I've broken people's relations, played with others, stole the money of a rich geezer. I'm not that kind of a person as you'd think, Igna."

"Why tell me all this?" they approached the town square.

"Do I have to spell it out?" she grabbed his collar, "-I love you."

"I see," parked under a blossoming tree, "-you're an idiot."

"What's wrong with you?" she cried, "-I'm here confessing, and you jest?"

"To be honest," moved to the shade, "-you're definitely an idiot."

"Why, why, why?" her bashful expression elevated to ire, "-tell me why," in his face, "-why," the alcohol-filled breath left much to be desired.

"The worst taste in men," said he, "-are you seriously interested. What about the heir of Patek, he seemed like a good catch. Not to mention the way you both stared and spoke. Felt more of a couple taking a cooling off period than strangers."

"Stop being so dense," cried she, "-I want you, come on."

"You want me, huh..." staring the floating leaves, "-me or my information. Me or Phantom, me or the people close to me. Alicia," he turned to hold her wrist tightly, "-I found a little something earlier. The whole thing about the reception was a test, one you sadly failed."

"What are you on about?"

"Did you really..." he laughed, "-Oh my, how very delusional. Alicia, I've been watching you closely. I had a trusty friend keep tabs; besides, even Lady Elvira was suspicious. I was doubtful from the first

encounter, why would idols groups break, the scheme about hurting another. Not to mention, the connection with the Lumian O'dla."

Bashful and cute too on edge and caution, "-where is this coming from?"

"No idea," he smirked, "-the pieces fit right in, I've a bad habit of not trusting anyone. You didn't expect the mercenaries to be found out. Phantom's interrogating them as we speak. A reference to an employer of utter beauty, the description fit yours; I mean, I would be confident in showing my face to potential leaks if I had the backing of the offshore Cobalt-Unit. Tell me, Emilia, Rem, Enia, or Alicia. I have a few secrets of my own, finding someone's identity nowadays is simpler than ever. Why was it yours came off as suspect – the reports conflicted, papers were right, a little too right. No crisscross by the persona. Here's something to maul over, we had intercourse, it might have been dark and I was asleep; I saw you shifting through my belongings. The plan was schemed by someone higher up the echelon, they knew about me, my family, and my kindness. I played in your hands from the start. Lastly, the confession. How very melodramatic. Not leaving my side, pointing out your shortcomings to tug on my heart. Here's the thing, someone recently showed her interest, a very haphazard confession, her face, and words were stuck at times."

"I've been found out?" the whole persona swapped, "-you're right, I'm a spy. I came in on orders from the Patek's. My duty was to keep an eye on Igna Haggard. The assignment was to extract information using my charms. Not to brag, I've done it countless times. My advances, my straightforward approach, anyone would have fallen... still, y-you kept professional."

"The death of Melle Nao." The name enticed another reaction, "-I knew it," he paused.

"What now?" asked she perplexed of what was to happen. Being discovered meant death for spies.

"Her death brought about suspicion to the Patek's. Your employers must have killed her, or so what circumstance leads to believe," a fresh breeze carried the long hair, "-maybe I'm being hopeful and overly optimistic. A spy and her target, the death of a close friend, betrayal from those who carelessly sent one onto the path of self-destruction."

"It's true," the tone felt woeful, "-I'm sorry for lying. My mission was to keep an eye on you, the confession wasn't a lie either. I truly wanted to be at your side. Who am I kidding anyway; my fate is sealed. The moment a spy's cover is blown, she must take her life."

"Who said that," smiled he, "-who said the cover is blown. Don't misunderstand, I know you're a spy, so what. You didn't do anything to harm me or my allies. Besides, we're always ready to handle information leaks. Phantom isn't a company to trifle with." He moved closer and took her hand, "-Alicia, here's the thing. I don't care if you're a spy. What you felt, the regret, the drive to Rotherham, the night we spent, and the people you met, truly brought a smile, I feel it deep in your heart. The first time we met, the harsh comments were to stray me away. No matter the pressure, we grew accustomed to one another."

"How can you be so trustful," close to her face, "-I'm a spy, aren't you scared that this is my plan."

"Shut it," he pulled her head to his chest, "-a spy who's loyal wouldn't say that."

"I'm happy," gathering her strength, "-I want to stay and experience the future," she smiled, tears fell, "-dreams are dreams. The time spent was worthwhile. I got to enjoy the pleasures of life for the past months. Since Nao died, I found myself at a loss. You were there helping. I'm grateful. Turning coat now is impossible – through Magiology, there's an instant death spellbound to my ring. It triggers the moment my cover is blown. I'll die any moment...'

"This ring?" he pulled one out of the pocket.

"How?" an identical one stayed on her fingers.

"I disarmed it during intercourse. Thank god it was only a spell. Cutting off the mana supply was all that one needed. Undoing spell is my specialty."

"What about the replacement?" argued she.

"Found it at a local pawn shop. Freedom is here, reach out and grab it. I did so for my personal gain, to have a spy turncoat is the best thing an organization can hope for."

She regretfully asked, "-what now, are you going to use me as they did?"

"Depends on you. Keep sending them reports, reports we give you. I will personally promise your safety; if things go out of hand, as a Haggard, I'll make sure Phantom becomes thy Asylum."

"..."

"Fine," stumped at her indecisiveness, he got down on one knee, "-Alicia Raze, drunkard and ugly crier, incompetent spy and kind-hearted maiden. As one who vowed to never be in a relation, I break it so. We're both in dire situations. Fighting the world alone isn't so pleasant," resolved, "-will you be my partner?"

"What-" her hands subconsciously covered her mouth. Casual onlookers paused in wonder, a public confession. Two handsome figures, the lady turned red as did the man. "-I don't get it, why."

"Take his hand," cheered a random bystander.

"Yeah, take his hand!" added another.

"Simple, you accepted death and confessed to being a spy. The confession, the regret, they all led to the ultimate decision of having the secret be known. I lied about the test, there was no test at all. The moment the truth clicked I knew you would confess, not love, but being a traitor. I never rejected your advances, did I?"

"Don't tell me," on her knees, "-this drama, the conversation, it was to-"

"Yes," finger to her lips, "-don't say anything else."

"Igna," they embraced, "-you're the worst partner a girl could ever hope for," she laughed, "-I'm not a saint either."

"You said it." The crowd cheered, embarrassment filled her face to which she hid by sticking to his chest.

"Come on," they moved into the car, "-let's go home."

A vow to never get in a relation shattered instantly. Origin had a part in the drama. The manager's confession held more than words and emotions. Understanding the maiden's heart was tedious – he faced her head-to-head to see the resolve. She kept strong and acted as if being surprised to shake away his worry. Her mannerism spoke loudly; the envy of death. 'Look at her sleep, so innocent and vulnerable.'

"Igna, is this truly the way forward?" wondered éclair.

"I don't know," said he, "-it just came to me. Her actions are up for debates, she never sent reports. She wanted this to be her last mission. Putting off the report to spend time until they pulled the trigger. Besides, she reminds me of myself."

"Is the feeling mutual, isn't this just leading her on?"

"The feeling is mutual," said he, "-Origins at play. I felt it, the warmness of the human heart, I felt it when we spend time together."

Chapter 572: Fondateur

The start of a relationship would mark whether it be a long-term commitment or a short-term exchange of loneliness. For Igna and Alicia, they had already lived as if a couple, and shared most things the couple had. A relation without a name until now. Firstly, they stopped at the hotel for the lady was less than presentable. Between the putrid breath and the marred hair, a phone came from lady Courtney. éclair reported her involvement as a spy under Igna's orders. At 17:00, they left for the skyscraper. Guards diligently watched and studied. Traffic was denser than the past few days.

"Igna," said Lady Elvira overlooking her large ebony desk. Lady Courtney was in the corner with a book in hand and tea to the side.

"Lady Elvira, Lady Mother, it's a pleasure to meet you again."

"Good," said Elvira sharply, "-that must be Alicia?" she inched closer with elbows on the table.

"The supposed spy?" the cup rested noiselessly, "-Is that right?" sharpened glare stabbed prematurely.

"Lady Mother, lady Elvira, she's a turncoat spy."

A raise of the hand from Courtney told them to remain silent, and so, he stepped back respectfully. The manager remained in their line of sight; a crushing pressure exuded from behind the desk walloped into a spiral of dark energy of which bared the features of a demon. "Care to explain in detail?" asked Elvira in a more relaxed posture.

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"Sure," she gulped. 'There goes nothing,' the flustered face resolved into confidence. Her partner, the supposed target, gave her the best gift one could have ever hoped for. Neither money nor fame, tis freedom. Freedom to do what she wanted, freedom to think, and a strong shoulder to carry her head in times of need. The latter was proven more than a few times, he refused to renounce her in a time where, she, herself, had given up on life. New found pride and new-found bravado, the lady stood strongly and beautifully.

“My name is Alicia Raze. I’m a spy working for Patek’s secret group of information gathering. We’re most often referred to as the secret service. There’s no name behind which we stand. Agents of the service are often orphans or kidnapped children with superior abilities. Treatment is neutral, those who are gifted are viewed as normal, and those of lower stature are treated as pests. The agents are trained in the manner of physical and mental ability. It’s the extent of what I know since I’ve been through it. Our orders come from various sources, either phone, papers, mail. No sender, no face, no identification. We’re kept in the dark – sometimes, even the missions are secretive, to say the least. I was lucky enough to have met the Patek’s heir. His actions were mostly misogynistic. We went on dates where I strongly refused the advances, saying I’d rather die. He’d always reply with, ‘-go on, refuse me as long as you want. The time will come when you’ll throw yourself at me. The short-lived freedom is mine to control.’ In around then, I received an assignment from another party. I was to infiltrate Alpha, work with idols and find traces of the Dark-Guild. I mostly did as was told until the day where Igna Haggard entered the continent. Little did I know the encounter would alter my life. I held onto sending the reports. However, one of my friends, the only one who cared for me, killed herself. My gut voiced it strongly, she was killed by the heir of Patek. I decided then and there, I’d die. Not before experiencing the pleasures of life.”

“I see,” said Elvira thoughtfully. Courtney kept the same expression and often met the other’s gaze. Silent twitches and mien showed their level of interest. Each picked on the other’s mood telepathically, they knew what the other thought. No magic nor other means for said sharing of thoughts came per the culmination of their deep bond.

“Igna.”

“Yes, mother.”

“Is it true you’re dating her?” asked she strongly.

“Yes, it’s true,” he ambled to her side.

“Even though she’s a spy?” inquired Elvira, “-surely thou art not so daft. What if tis all a greater scheme to gain our trust, what if she has other plans. Can you vouch for our safety?”

Alicia’s demeanor sunk into hesitation. ‘-They’re right,’ her mind moved to a dark howling forest. Black was the sky and blacker was the path. The leaves swayed in a manner to say, ‘-unworthy, death is all thy deserves. Not acceptance.’ A gust soon blasted her face frigid – voices of the dead, voices of the people she killed were carried over. Accusation on accusation, they complained, screamed, and defiled the remaining confidence. Shadow befell her eye socket, the hefty burden weighted against her shoulder. Her head hung low in damnation.

“Most definitely,” exclaimed he, ‘-why am I so adamant?’ Crimson discolored into white, ‘-why do I feel so angry and confident?’ He grabbed her hand, “-I first brought her here to be used as a spy for our cause,” side-glancing her lowered head, “-I know I was wrong. It would be cruel of me to ask so much to someone who’s already lost what she had. Regardless, I can say one thing, she’s my partner, and I’m not letting go. She understands how I feel, the world changes, and I need allies.”

“Are you sure?” asked Courtney.

“Mother,” strong and loud, “-Like it or not, she’s my partner, we’ve vowed to one another.”

The night cracked; pieces crumbled to dust. A tight grip pulled on her focus, the way he spoke and stood up for them gave hope, the head slowly lifted. He spoke to them as if it was expected. Behind the desk stood the demon, opposite them, another rose, the devil, each butted head.

“Good,” smiled Courtney, the dangerous aura resolved, “-I like it,” she turned to Elvira, “-my son’s grown so much.”

“Yes,” smiled Elvira, “-our precious Igna’s a man now.”

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“Mother,” the grip eased, “-I’ve missed you.” She vaulted over the desk to a tight strangle. The reunion continued late into the evening, 18:00 flashed on the digital clock.

“About the assignment to restrain Eira.”

“Yes, it won’t be necessary. The ambassador is Lucifer himself,” said Igna. Alicia stayed in the waiting lounge.

“I know,” said Courtney, “-Igna, can you beat the Librarian of Nexsolium?”

“At the moment, no, I don’t think so. I’ve regained part of my strength.”

“I knew it,” said Elvira, “-you’re our master’s reincarnation, aren’t you, Igna.”

“I suppose so. A new life means a new start. Nothing must change, I’m still the son of Courtney Haggard and precious nephew to Lady Elvira.”

“I know,” said she rustling his hair, “-about the task, it comes from Queen Gallienne. I’ve sent the information, depends on her next move.”

“What’s Phantom’s stance?” asked Igna.

“Think about it,” voiced Courtney, “-this is a great opportunity to leave the politics and live a normal life with the newfound partner.”

“I’d be lying to myself. I’m not saving the world; my goal is to get strong. To do so, I must face off against strong individuals – there are far too many unanswered questions.”

“How about regaining the symbols of power for a start?”

“Difficult. I don’t have the slightest clue where they are.”

“Look here,” said Courtney pulling up her sleeve, “-I have the symbol of the Death Reaper. Too bad I can’t use it, feels more like a tattoo than anything.”

“Seriously?” the brow raised; “-the scythe is in thy possession. What then?”

“Take it,” said she, “-heir to Lord Death.”

“The symbol of death,” he gulped, ‘-if I take it, I’ll be able to access Nevermore. The DEATH gates... should be a fighting chance.’

“Go on then,” said she, “-touch it.”

Relaxed and focused, a single touch on her arm sent a shockwave of nausea. The symbol jumped to crawl up Igna's arms and burnt under the left eye. 'I feel dizzy,' *bang.*

"-IGNA... IGNA... wake up, are you ok?"

"-Someone, get a medic!"

'So loud,' the eyes reopened to Rosespire, '-wasn't I at Rotherham?' few blinks, and the picture grew clearer, the banner down the castle wasn't of the royal family. The people walking about did so in utter joy, it felt more of a replica of the actual capital. A flash of lightning shook the ground, '-what's happening?' shadows went up and down the arms and legs. 'Did I cause the lightning?'

A horn resounded across the empty plateau outside the castle walls. Three powerful entities flew in to stand at the entrance. Black, fiery red, and bleach blond, the aura emanating were way beyond what he could sense. '-They're as strong as gods. Who are they?' blurred cleared into the inside of a palace. Tall ceiling, carved pillars of marble, intricate and beautiful murals. He turned to sit, the couch screamed of nobility, the tiled floor was even more so refined.

"Look who decided to wake up," said a soft voice. '-this feeling, it's like someone's standing on my head.' The drunken stupor broke, "-ADETE," he shouted.

"WOW," returned the room, he reached to hold her tiny arms, "-it's you," he smiled, the first progenitor stood atop the open palm.

"Don't start crying on me," said she hugging his forehead.

"Says the one who's crying," he refuted.

"Shut up, you're crying,' said she childishly.

"I've missed you," said he, she flew to stand atop the shoulder.

"Me too," said she joyfully bobbing her head. "-I'm not the only one." Giant doors opened inwards, high-heels echoed on the floor.

'Unbelievable,' he stood, '-three majestic entities.'

Intherna's crimson-colored hair felt fiercer than ever as was her beautiful face. Gophy's melancholic and slightly destructive person watched in disregard. Miira's traditional and refined way of posture and mannerism held even stronger. The trifactor of the epitome of power. He once had the honor of having their respect. Now, the expression said to address in respect, they watched indifferently at the shell of a man once called master.

"Goddess of Chaos, Gophy, daughter to the sun god Rah, Intherna, and Goddess of Kiant, eternal protector of time, Miira. I'm Igna Haggard, the reincarnation of Staxius Haggard," he got on one knee and bowed respectfully. The heels strongly moved to stand around his lowered gaze. The burden had the throat subconsciously choke.

"Welcome back," warm hands wrapped tightly in an embrace.

"Sorry?" he leaned to see the three deities in tears.

“Are you stupid?” voiced Intherna, “-why so formal. We vowed to be by thy side. Miira and I searched day and night for the past six years. We looked to no avail, your soul and body were lost.”

“Calm down,” said Gophy, “-Staxius, I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” added Miira, “-if only we helped, Zeus and Lucifer wouldn’t have killed you.”

“Wait, aren’t you angry at me?”

“Why would we be?” said they simultaneously, “-the one who turned the last of his power and life force into the foundation of our home deserves praise, not hate.”

“The shadow realm is intact?”

“Far better. Tis a dimension of its own now. Kronos’s sickles granted far more power than ever. Everyone here’s grown to surpass the mantle of High-tier goddess,” said Intherna.

“In another word,” interjected Gophy, “-you’ve created another world. A place where beings are constantly granted power beyond normal expectation, from souls to gods, all are granted equal amounts of power.”

“I sense something else,” voiced Miira, “-you’ve done it, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” he nodded, “-I met with Origin, I completed Scifer’s request. The Foundateur 1 is part of my being.”

“I’m glad. Alright, stand up,” she held out a hand.

“Where are we headed?”

“To talk over a nice warm meal,” winked Intherna.

“What about you?” asked he to Adete. *Bite,* he squealed, “-never mind.”

‘The Shadow Realm is a world of its own. Hard to imagine how much power it must have taken. The mana is very potent, a bit too much – I feel light-headed. I’m glad to see the goddesses. Their eccentric personalities are breath of fresh air... If I’m in the Shadow Realm, doesn’t that mean I’ve traveled into another world?’

“Correct,” said Miira, “-though, only the consciousness made the trip today.”

Chapter 573: Another world, for us

A large curved balcony gave onto the cliff at the northeast side of the castle. On it laid multiple tables and chairs, the view onto the forest below was very pleasant. A few years back in memory, and tis the place where Raulf Serlo and Staxius Haggard fought. The divine blade against a novice vampire-kin.

Then again, the battle did help in ending an age-old quest of starting a guild in Arda. All seemed very far away. The line of ‘story repeats itself,’ concluded agreeably to many events over the year. At a glance, the events between Arda and Hidros were the same before the Federation. What to do, and what to say really. Igna watched as colorful pastries laid on the table. Single bites and the ladies were elated, the

body quivered under the sweetness. The presiding chef watched smugly; his art brought beautiful maidens on their knees.

“Shall we start the conversation?” inquired he unwilling to eat.

Adete crept up under his shirt, her hands tickled under the examination of the newly formed ancient writings. Gophy and Intherna’s personalities were always hard to judge. In a way, the freshness of their actions lit the somber path a little. Miira’s demeanor throughout the encounter stood proudly. A face reminiscent of a mother having her son win a school tournament.

“I’ll go first,” said Miira clearing her throat. “-the encounter with Origin, how was it?”

“No idea. It sort of happened. I thought I’d lost it all until my psyche reawakened in another dimension, the feeling is indescribable.”

“I see,” she thoughtfully recorded the answers, “-Sorry to spring this right away, why did you contact him?”

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“My ladies,” the crimson-colored iris discolored into white; the body visibly lit, “-any answers directed to Origin, shall be answered by Origin.”

“Igna, are you sure?” wondered the second-self.

“I’m sorry for breaking the nap, I don’t have all the answers. They’re high-goddesses and powerful ones at that. Given my state, I’m weak, there’s no way to gain respect in such a state.”

“I get it,” smiled he, the consciousness swapped. “Very different,” the fingers clenched and eased in a slow repetitive manner. “-Who summoned me?”

“Excuse my ignorance,” squinted Intherna, “-who might you be?” Hands and body were at the ready to strike.

“Origin, the foundation of all that is present. My identity is unknown to even me, therefore, let’s not bother with small talks. Lady Miira, you had a question?”

“I can’t believe it,” the fork rested, “-Igna merged with Origin. Why, why would the most powerful being merge with a lowly human?”

“Don’t misunderstand,” voiced he loudly, “-Igna, my trusted companion, isn’t a mere human. I dare say he’s Origin. We’re one, thus, the foundation is also heir to the element of death, the sickle of the time, and wings of Nike.”

“Thing is,” added Gophy, “-all the symbols have been lost. What do you expect?”

A condescending resolve said, “-not really.” The table went about seeking answers in other’s faces. The chef who’d been here prior disappeared. Not long did the idyllic scene over yonder feel appeasing.

“Sure, let’s say the symbol of power isn’t his to possess, what next?”

"My," he paused to sip, "-very unfortunate. I'll get straight to the point. Igna Haggard willingly gave up his all to me. We formed a pact, the sincerity in his speech, the pain of the past, and the probable future, they were all part of him. Human or not, he was the only person who sought me without any ulterior motive. Rather than take, he offered to give. I'm the pillar of reality and all that is present. In a swift soft voice, he understood the pain I never really considered. My loneliness, my boredom, and my fading vigor to watch as many things crumble. I'd be a fool to say he's an innocent soul, the amount of blood left in his wake is enough to fill a lake. Still, we accepted one another unconditionally. My consciousness and knowledge merged with his soul, the price he paid was emotions and the rebirth persona of Igna Haggard. The latter has been replaced by me." Holding the white-cup, a scan of the atmosphere felt taut. "-The emotions are now mine, he handed over his humanity once again for a greater chance at success. The repetition of a person's action, starting from zero is easier said than done."

Information stuffed down their throats, no longer did the pleasant sweetness lingered. "We get it," said Gophy fully facing him, "-what's your purpose with him?"

"Entertainment," he smirked, "-I don't care about what happens to this world or any other for that matter. We're one of the same."

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"Care to elaborate?"

"No, I rather not," a kind refusal stumped Intherna's advances.

"Let's change the subject," proposed Miira, "-I need to know. Why did the Sim's world have to be destroyed?"

"Sim's world?" asked he.

"Yes, the world in which Scifer was forcefully spirited too."

"Oh, that," he sighed, "-the question is better suited to the current Supreme God Zeus. Your expression doesn't inspire confidence. I'll keep it short, they needed power and a dying dimension held no rights to survive."

"-What about the people?"

"My lady," the head shook, "-why are you so blind to the truth. Gods and Demons serve only themselves, we're not better off ourselves. Since they are being of higher stature, the concept of right and wrong doesn't exist. The so-called judgment of Tharis is naught but laws to guide the mortals."

"Suppose so," a fatigued exhale escaped. "-Might I bother with another question?"

"Sure, I have nothing else to do."

"What are your intentions, the real reason for the assimilation?"

"To be at Igna's side. My intentions art but the passing fancy of a dreamer. I longed to walk the mortal realm, to experience life. My role is to be an observer, tis been such from genesis to end. The cycle of creation and destruction loops as I watch from on above."

White-colored into bright crimson, “-I feel bad for Origin,” said he, “-answering for so long has drained him.”

“I-” opposed to answers, even more questions sprouted.

“Let’s leave it behind,” said he, “-Goddess Gophy, Intherna, Miira, first Progenitor. What’s next. My intentions are the same as Origin said, there’s nothing much to do at the moment. A few situations need cleaning,” paused, a sliver of memories returned, “-Adete, it was you who spoke the first time I awakened beyond the wall. The whispers I heard; make sense. Back in Alpha, after the chase and murder of a certain family, I wished the vehicle to burst in flames – here I thought it was a coincidence.”

“Seriously,” said Intherna in a light-hearted voice, “-we made a promise, remember?”

“I know,” he nodded, “-what next, what are you going to do?”

“Revenge,” said Gophy, “-I want revenge,” her eyes burnt in vengeance, “-Zeus will pay.”

“I agree,” the hatred shared across the table, “-we’re stronger, none shall defeat us ever again, not even that pest of a queen Cleopatra.”

“Goddess,” he stood and moved to the balustrade, “-I’m not Staxius any longer. I’ve inherited the will to become the leader of the monsters. I say this in assurance; the path ahead leans towards the evil side of society.” Dropped on his knees, “-I know this is selfish of me. I’m not the same as I was before, I’m weak, I’ve only just inherited the Symbol of Death. Please, can I ask for your assistance once more, help me become strong, help me take what was stolen. They’ll pay, the gods and the demons, they’ll equally pay for the memories, people, and time I’ve lost.”

“Iгна Haggard,” they stood in a circle, “-raise thine head,” said Intherna.

“Don’t forget, we’ve gathered here thanks to you,” added Gophy.

“We were granted bodies, a place to recuperate, and a place to live serenely. No pressure from gods or humans, a realm for us to rule and watch over,” added Miira.

“You’re the only one fit to inherit my will,” smiled Adete.

“We’ll always be your ally, Master.” They knelt to touch his back, “-go, the other world awaits. If ever thee requires assistance, think of us, and we shall come. Even if thee don’t call, we shall come for the portal between the Shadow Realm and the other dimension is you.”

“Surprise home visits are the best kinds.” *snap.*

Cool and peaceful. Mild beeps tickled towards the left, the eyes reopened to a white ceiling. White curtains covered the bed, warm hands locked with his. Chocolate-colored hair flowed from her head onto the bed and then onto the floor as if a waterfall. ‘what happened?’ memory was a little fuzzy. ‘-The Shadow Realm,’ thought he scanning the room, ‘-they’re alive. I’m glad,’ he smiled, ‘-what’s this?’ pushed to sit, ‘-am I feeling joy?’ checking the phone showed bicolored irises. ‘I see now,’ he waited, ‘-I can feel thanks to Origin.’

“Mhm,” the lady rose, “-you’re awake?” her locks covered the visage, the white outfit didn’t help either.

"Are you the angel of death?"

"What angel of death?" her hair parted gracefully, "-it's me, Alicia."

"You still look like shit," said he, "-the dark circles and sweaty forehead don't bode well for someone people think is beautiful."

"I'm hungover you know," she pouted.

Tap, he gave a playful flick to her forehead and sat at the edge of the bed, "-how long has it been?"

"Three hours I think," said she resting on his lap, "-Igna, Igna," the messy mane covered the flustered expression.

"Yes?" the long fingers went along her hair reassuringly, "-something the matter?"

"I was terrified when they said you passed out."

"Someone's being a little adorable today, isn't she."

"Stop teasing me," said she sitting upright, "-you're the one who said we were a couple. Thanks for that, thanks for saving me, I really appreciate it."

"Alicia, honestly, the confession, was it a plot, or did you mean it?"

"I meant it," voiced she strongly, "-why would a spy confess her love, why would I do so to blow my cover. I choose to spend my final moments at the side of someone I admire, respect, and love. Albeit I want to kick his ass too sometimes. What about you, did you mean it?"

"I couldn't say, one thing is for sure, I like your guts. Love is a big word to throw around. In a way, the show of resolve and strong persona displayed has my respect. I'll say one thing, you're more than a friend to me."

An exasperated sigh led to, "-why make it so hard," she took his hand and placed it on her chest, "-feel it, my heart, it's pounding. The moment you said no, I nearly passed out."

Putting my mind into words was most definitely a tall order. She accepted it as him saying the feeling was mutual. They returned to the hotel, the day had been long and tedious. Meanwhile, Elvira stayed the night to discuss the events with Queen Gallienne.

"I understand," said she, childish screams and giggles levied in the background, "-Eira's not the ambassador. Lucifer's making his move. The pressure of Phantom against the Wracia Empire has stopped the potential of battle. Queen Elendor is risking part of her territory for our sake. Elvira, please ask the Blood-King's faction to keep an eye on Arda's movement. The spies at Reforge are plain to see, they made their move. It's time for ours. A spy of mine has information that might interest Phantom, more specifically, lady Courtney. We made contact with a couple; they ran from Hidros many years ago. They've agreed to help our cause. The information's been transferred already. Send someone to the main continent. I realize it's a tall order since they're more technologically advanced than the royal capital."

"Actually," she chuckled, "-majesty, I have great news."

“Do tell.”

“Staxius was reincarnated as Igna Haggard, he’s regained the lost memories.”

“...” a loud crash commanded silence. ‘He’s back!’

Chapter 574: Juice

Dawn of the 10th of March. Last night had been the coldest year-round. The once distance rainfall stood at Rotherham’s doorstep. The simple quiet night didn’t last long. Between Alicia’s growing libido and the crashing rain, Igna’s want of whiskey turned to one full of youth and passion. Sleep broke at the early 06:30, ‘-yesterday feels like a dream,’ he thought. A distant peep at the slightly reflective vase showed the symbol of death, ‘-it’s true then.’ Pins and needles pained the arms, oily hair bundled as if a nest had used him as a pillow. ‘Weirdly enough,’ the mind lost in thought, ‘-why did I agree to start such a relationship. Am I so craved for human affection,’ a hardened smack broke the ill-mannered thoughts, ‘-that’s not it.’ Her hands leisurely stayed atop his head, ‘-she’s random, very random. The manager with beauty rivaling the models of Alpha. A spy or whatever. Her past might have a few things of interest. I best not ask her so.’ On his feet and at the bath, ‘-there’s a rough day ahead.’ A simple prediction that would be pivotal later on.

The fatigued seagull-hair specter crawled out the bed into the living room. ‘-What’s her deal?’ thought he sneaking few glances. The heavy dark circle snapped to his hand and stuffed mouth. “Food,” she mumbled. Arms stretched seekingly for the meal, head slightly tilted of which the darkened locks ran down the shoulders forth.

“Stay away,” said he with fingers joined in a cross, “-don’t come any closer,” the right leg lifted to stop the advances.

“Give me food,” she said.

“No, get away,” he gulped the remaining breakfast to smirk. “-Sea-weed zombie, you need be cleansed by the holy water of a steaming shower.”

“I get it,” she pulled back her hair around the ears, “-no need to say I’m dirty, I know.”

“Good,” he pinched his nose, “-go take a shower already. Smells like a wet dog, if latter had rolled around in a dump of dung, took a stroll to a fish-drying stack, leaped into the infamous sewer of bubbling excrement, and then proceeded to soil itself.”

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“Really?” said she in a straight-face, “-do I smell that bad?”

“Yeah you do,” returned he without much care.

“You saying you don’t I-like m-me?” her tone sunk, “-I-Igna w-was our n-night that hopeless?”

“Stop playing around,” refuted he whilst checking the news, “-I’ve ordered breakfast, take a shower and forgo the grim.”

"Yeah, whatever," she skipped around the foot barrier to latched onto his person, "-if I smell, so shall you, dearest partner," just like that, an attacker snuck into the castle walls to steal the treasure of which was a kiss. "Later."

'What a mess.' Lenses materialized, "-good morning éclair," the interface booted, a white-line scanned the room and left wireframes in its wake.

"Good morning," returned the spirit, "-Igna, there's a lot of things on the agenda today."

"I'm all ears."

"Alright. The restraining of Princess Eira has been canceled. Queen Gallienne's opted for another course of action. The incident concerning Reforge and the sudden invasion have been handled after much debate. A subsidiary of a parent company has undertaken the rebuilding of the outpost. To fill the lack of personnel, the military has deployed a few soldiers to serve the front line. Codd's agency has horned on a massive lead in Nao's case. As for us, the drug's been fully synthesized by Clarise."

'-Things are moving along.'

"About today's schedule. We're to meet the Alchemist, then head for the adventuring academy per lady Haru's request, and lastly, meet an interested party for dinner at Loron's."

"About Loron," he paused, "-will bringing a few guests of mine be strenuous?"

"No, the party's bringing their own entourage."

"Alright, I'll ask Celina if she wishes to join us for dinner. Have a car be readied to take her home and back, I want the best."

"Understood," the display dimmed to allow a moment of rest.

'My prediction's coming true. Please don't tell me...' another realization hit, '-if party-crashers show up...'

Bang, bang, bang,

"Silence you oaf," the lock clicked, "-don't bring the door down," it opened to an unsightly scene.

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"Good morning, Cousin..." said Julius slumped by the weight of Dei and Emi. Suga, meanwhile, dragged his feet along the red carpet of the hallway – consciousness spiraled in the rollercoaster world of his making. "-Sorry for the trouble," the ajar entrance flung, Dei stumbled to faceplant into the couch. Emi kept her posture, strong and beautiful, and passed his shadow. He watched pleasantly, confident about her ironclad stomach. Few steps in, the arrow of a posture buckled to fall over the other couch.

"More drinks," said Suga in only underpants, "-more drinks!" he knelt at the door in motion to hurl.

'These party animals,' dash to the kitchen and back, a plastic bag mercilessly wrapped around his ears. The weightlessness soon gained to hang. A beard made of vomit, quite the amusing display. Skipped an hour later, the drunks leaned on one another.

“Cousin Julius, what was it about keeping an eye on them?”

“Egh,” he gulped, “-they snuck and went bar-hopping.”

“Should have expected as much,” he sighed. Alicia carefully moved to tend to the stars. Embarrassment made it hard to look, ‘-was I the same as them?’ she wondered.

“Cousin,” called Julius, “-is the rumor true?”

“What rumor?”

“About you and Alicia...”

“Yeah, we’re a couple.”

“She’s pretty,” said he, “-pretty random.”

“Say that again,” they chuckled, “-listen, cousin, I have to leave to the adventuring academy. Use the room as long as is needed.”

“Sure, what about Alicia?”

“Why not ask her?”

Clap, clap, clap, “-anything the matter?”

“Don’t look so bashful,” remarked Igna, “-it gives another emote.”

“Shut it,” returned she, “-you sadist.”

“Ha-ha,” laughter escaped, “-pardon me, ha-ha,” the princely charm shook in mirth. It took a few to settle, “-Alicia, cousin Igna’s headed for the academy, what will you do?”

“I’m staying,” said she, “-we ought to care for them.”

10:00 shown on the watch, from a jet to a train, the journey happened effortlessly. The academy waited atop the vexing staircase. Students gathered around the dormitories. A festive air lingered; excitement and anticipation screamed on the many faces. ‘More active than before,’ he climbed.

The prior visit to lady Clarise proved eventful. She and her own manic laboratory relocated to the university, rose from a drunkard stupor. ‘why am I running into alcoholics,’ he wondered.

“Igna,” flailed she, “-over here.”

“Are you drunk?” asked he.

“Just a little,” *hic,* “-the drug is potent. I managed to remove the poison. Just the smell can knock out a veteran. I can say for sure, this is the handy work of the off-shore research lab,” the dazed state faded, “-the effects dissipate fairly quickly. Here,” she showed variations, “-the one that killed Leko is here, and the one published in the papers is here. It can’t be an imposter; the substance is made from the ground up using expensive equipment. The technology is available to only us and the Cobalt-unit. The assassination was a botched job. Else, the drug wouldn’t have been found. Something must have happened during their exchange.”

"A bruise," voiced he.

"You knew?" asked she.

"Yes, I had éclair made an exact copy of the body. My doubts were at foul-play, must have evaded my thoughts, emotions are a powerful tool to fight and to forget."

"Speculation leads me to this. The killing of Leko wasn't intentional. There's nothing to gain in doing so."

"Wrong," voiced he, "-there's someone who stands to gain. The facts are well-hidden, which doesn't surprise why people would be puzzled. The best-hidden secrets are out in the open. We didn't once think of questioning the person's intent. A narrative of them being the victim had a view with compassion and sympathy. Leko's wife stands to gain."

"Didn't she say the school would be a greater burden?"

"A lie, obviously."

The safety glasses laid in between her fingers, "-the school's home to prominent families and dynasties."

"Right, I don't need to say anymore. Good job on clearing my suspicion. The botched job means an amateur did the killing, and another covered their tracks. Two parties are involved," that in mind, the lively campus hoisted against the blueish sky. Posters advertised a coming festival. Many were busy gathering raw materials for signs and decorations. 'Lady Haru's leaving the academy today.' He walked, '-Clarise gave me antidotes against the poison. The assassin should be at the academy. Can't be careless. I have a bad feeling about this.'

Short-lived memories flooded. Today would be the last time he stepped foot within its vicinity. The journey of being a trader halted completely and so did the dive into cooking. Goes to show, not all effort is rewarded, not all hard work is acknowledged. The more one strives for a certain path; the sharper grows the thorns. Ghosting past the crowd, the office building waited. An ominous gale blew onto the cobblestone path. The windows, doorways, and additional decorations merged to form a fearsome expression. 'Annoying pareidolia.'

"Igna," hailed Haru, "-over here," she sat off the premises.

"Didn't realize there was a garden here too," he joined her company.

"Not many students come around here. The office is like a nightmare for them, being called equals to expulsion. There's even the belief that good fortune befalls those who never have to enter the office's surroundings. The administration is ostentatious, a big cry for affection. I'm glad," the lips relaxed, "-to be freed from this racist and sexist organization. Demi-humans aren't viewed in good light. The queen's attempt helped, falling nobles, crumbling dynasties, many see Arda as the culprits. It's very common among the upper-class. Getting harassed, treated as a plaything for the sake of profanity. Leko helped, the trader's guild never had much to show. He took on the responsibility to carry us. I'm sorry to spring this on you."

"No problem," said he, "-lady Haru, you're leaving, right?"

“Yes, my students in Arda waits. I’m the Guild Master when said and done. Our haven is at risk, the new leadership vows to seclude the kingdom from the world. If that happens, we’ll be feared the same as was so many years ago. Nothing’s changed, they’re all the same.”

“Lady Haru,” gestured an innocent-looking lady, “-how goes it?” she held bottles of juice.

“Carly, how have you been dear,” stood to give a tight embrace, “-Igna, she’s the only one who helped Chef Leko in the kitchen. Her skills with a knife are second to none, I’ve never seen anyone work so fast before. He held her in quite a high standard.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” said he.

“Likewise, Igna,” a faint nod caught his eye of which she flowed into conversation.

“I do hope lady Leko’s fine,” said he softly.

“Lady Leko?” paused she, “-do you perhaps know her?”

“Yes,” cigar lit, “-her role as the new director couldn’t have been any more perfect. She’s a hard worker. I heard she came to visit the chef before he sadly passed. I can’t help but imagine how she must have felt,” smoke puffed to the skies. Haru listened attentively, in those words laid hints towards a greater picture.

“The burden is certainly hefty to carry,” said she.

“What about you?” asked he, “-how was Chef Leko, I wanted to speak to him about the potential of accepting the offer.”

“What offer?” asked she strongly.

“To be his successor. Didn’t he say?” turned he sternly, “-weren’t you an assistant?”

“I’m afraid not,” she sighed, “standing to your standard is tough, unbelievably so”

‘clair, run a background check. She doesn’t seem right. The presence, the unfaithful smile, what’s she plotting?’

Haru sweated as she’d often held her shirt to blow.

“Here,” she handed over the juice, “-it’s so hot.”

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“Thanks,” she graciously gulped half of the bottle until Igna interrupted.

“Let me have some,” he interjected. The conniving girl watched in pleasure. He sipped to see the Guild Master fall and coughed, her mouth foamed, “-lady H-Haru,” he fell in turn, ‘-careless.’

“The job is done. Target’s been eliminated.”

Chapter 575: Satisfaction

'My head hurts, where am I?' an unclosed faucet leaked into a stainless sink. The location, Leko's kitchen inside the gymnasium. The virile way of placement and sense of order was his. A single glance told the truth.

"Hey, is it true?" spoke whispers.

"True what?"

"You killed Haru and her brat?"

"Yeah, the fool gulped my offering without question. I dare say, he was a wimp. The supposed man who fought at the Azure wall, don't make me laugh."

"Mistress, the boy is tied to nobility. This is bound to cause trouble."

"Shut it," the whisper sliced to a stop. Figures entered through the blurred doorway; the heavy curtain parted after much effort. One feminine and the other manly, they approached. "Look at them," said she stopped at Haru's head, "-fatigued and sleeping. The drug sure works wonders. Now, tie the noose."

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"Yet again," cried the man, "-I have to clean up. Disposing them over the cliff would have been easier."

"No, not now," voiced she, "-there's too much at risk."

'Two figures, one killed and one hides. Good thing I injected the antidote, lady Haru should wake at any moment. It's true, they're the ones,' extremities of the fingers were numb, a throbbing headache pulsed.

Mild hums fell from the man's demeanor. The noose tied around an extension seamlessly. He did so in much innocence and joyfulness. The other silhouette moved to lean on an opposing counter. A flask of purplish liquid moved about her fingers.

"Can I have some help here," asked he, "-the lady is heavier than she seems."

"Worthless."

They hoisted the body, a few seconds later; between the pants, her feet hovered. '-Alright then,' a slice of the thumb, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* two flashes followed into a loud crash.

"Did the noose break?" she faced away.

"I don't know," voiced he repeating her actions. Instinct crept from within, "-what's this?" a tight piece of rugged cloth slowly pulled, breathing became hard.

"How very quaint," in a blink, an unseen force knocked them to their knees as did the rope warping about their necks.

"What's happening?" exclaimed the girl, "-Donav, do something you worthless piece of sh-."

"Shut it," the light toggled, "-I've caught prey," said a menacing visage inch from their faces, "-how does it feel?" the flask swung in a pendulumlike manner, "-to be at the receiving end."

"Who are you?" she lunged.

"Slow down there," a pull tightened the grip, "-dogs should be obedient. Look at your friend," *smack,* a kick broke tooth and splattered blood, "-what happens when the cleaner needs to be cleaned?" *Cough,* whimpers and guttural screams all but stopped before the lips, the kick dislocated his jaw. He stayed there with head to the floor, crying in agony or cursing fate, none knew. Her expression sank, "-D-Donav... a-are y-you?"

"Hey," clasping her chin, "-look here," he pulled without tact. The sharpened nails dug to pull blood, "-let's make a deal. Give me information and I'll be sure to heal your friend and let you escape."

Faced by karma, her mind thought of two things, survival and survival. '-why did my first job have to end like this. I was supposed to become rich and move away from this damned land. I want to return home... s-somebody h-help.'

"Igna," said éclair, "-I've dug into their backgrounds. The girl's named Carly Hena. She moved here from Iqavea a decade ago. Her father's a military officer. I've searched to no avail, by the expression, the kick sure made her into an angel. The boy is another story, he's trained to be a royal guard and sent to further increase knowledge about the world of monsters, a fellow countryman."

"Carly," easing the grip, "-care to answer a few questions?"

"N-no," her eyes shut, "-I c-can't. M-my mouth is t-tied."

"And so is your neck," he tugged, the body pulled to crash against one of the cooking stations, "-don't forget, I'm the one who has the reins." One of the edges chipped her head. *Cough, cough,* "-I w-won't s-speak, kill me I d-don't care," the noose tightened to a strangle.

"Oh," paused to stare, "-being hung momentarily doesn't scare you. What is it, adrenaline, a sense of duty?" the tension eased, "-no matter," she stood on her feet, "-it's not like I need your information anyway. Tis been a long time since I've played with humans," another pull had the boy standing at her side. The disfigured visage watched restlessly; strength dwindled.

Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Restoration. "-There," said he, "-how does it feel to have a mouth again?" multiple tools laid in order, a knife, fork, and even a spoon.

"HOW DARE YOU!" cried he, "-you fuck-"

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"Don't talk too much," a simple stroke of the index had the lips tied, "-I've decided. I don't care about the information; I want to see you suffer," tool in hand, "-let's start with the lady." Earlier, a spell was cast to nullify the need for restraints. The more one resists, the more the strength is taken away. To escape, one must bear the hatred and pain, even so, when fully activated, the victim usually falls into a comatose state.

He struggled, tried to fight for freedom, the closer Igna got, the harder he moved, shouting, screaming into closed lips. "I see," stared he nonchalantly, "-you have a thing for her, don't you?" she watched with a petrified expression, "-Carly, don't worry. I won't do anything ungentlemanly. After all, I have standards of which you've failed horrendously. Now then, one who takes a life must also be readied to

die. Isn't that a saying in Iqavea?" fork in hand, "-let's start with your hand," her body loosened to the floor. "-Look up," said he, "-the ceiling is very reflective?" The dulled edges slowly pushed against her palm, she trembled. The boy kept on fighting, the slightest sign of pain had him burn in vengeance.

"Why..." mumbled she, "-why a-are you doing this?"

"My mentor was killed without achieving his dream. It's for vengeance, the world best be burnt in rage."
crack,

"AHHH," guttural screams shook the core of the room, "-IT HURTS," tears flowed, her pants soiled, "-MY HANDS!"

"Come on," said he, "-I've only done one nail. There's much more to come." Nauseating cracks and screams echoed, her cries all but increased. From hand he moved to her mouth, pulling out teeth, piercing the jaw, burning her feet, the absurdities continued incessantly until finally, the boy's stamina drained.

"Stop," he thought, "-I'm done, I'll say anything."

"Good," the lips untied, "-willing to talk now?"

"Yes."

With the magical barrier, the torture and questioning went on for 2 hours. A loved one in pain was worst than being hurt. The hopelessness and sheer trauma. Carly was but a means to an end, the target had been Donav from the start. In summary, "-I was employed by Chef Leko's wife to help cover her body. Carly's got nothing to do with his murder. From what I know, she was employed after by another party to assassinate Lady Haru."

Helicopters hovered to land on the gymnasium. Many were confused as to why. Thus, the duo was taken to Rotherham. A report of the information headed to Elvira.

At around 13:00, inside the nurse's office, lady Haru's sleep broke. "Welcome back," voiced he coldly.

"Welcome back?" she sat, "-what happened?"

"We were poisoned," said he, "-by Carly. Someone wants to have you killed. The motive is unknown, one mystery gets solved and another is born. Lady Haru, things aren't the same as they were. You best leave for Arda as soon as possible."

"What mystery got solved?"

"Leko's death. I know the culprit."

"What then?" asked she, "-are you going to take revenge?"

"No," the head shook, "-I've asked lady mother, and she said to leave it be for now. Try as I might, brute force isn't always the answer. Therefore, I'm going to leave the justice to Lady Elvira."

"Will you be ok?" asked she in good faith.

"Don't worry," said he, the eyes burnt in red, "-I don't feel much nowadays."

"I apologize for the trouble I've caused," her head lowered.

"Lady Haru, I'm grateful for the help. There's nothing to apologize for. I'm finally freed from the adventuring academy. Supposed I ought to get going. Let's have dinner sometimes."

On a trip to the office, the advisor grudgingly granted the graduation badge. No ceremony, nor satisfaction, the haunted building presided heavily. 'I wonder what Gayae is doing,' a trip to the workshop displayed an even dirtier scene. He and his partner ran about the oily yard.

"Igna," skid to a stop, "-save me," the imposing body cowered.

"Huh?" a wrench beelined for their heads, "-holy," he caught the projectile, "-careful." Just then, a group of first years passed by.

"Come on!" cried Gayae, "-stop throwing stuff around, it's dangerous."

"No fuck you!" exclaimed she bolting inside.

"You sure get along," commented Igna.

"Stop it," he sighed, "-what's up."

"Came by to say farewell. I graduated earlier."

"Graduated?" he frowned.

"Yeah, I'm part of the trader's guild. A culmination of events led to this situation; my teachers headed to Arda. A tier-3 silver ranked oversaw the exams," he pulled out a tag, "-see, I was promoted to Tier-6 Emerald."

"Wow, tier-6. I'm only tier-8, you must be strong."

"Not really. Here, let's exchange contact information. Who knows, I might need a talented mechanic one of these days."

"I'll be happy to help," they hugged and parted ways. Noise and chaos permeated through the academy grounds. Part of it was the charm of preparation before a festival. Practice, hanging out with friends, working together, and the opportunity to show their talents to potential buyers. 'I wonder what old man Kord's doing.'

Across the forest path and into the shopping street, the noise grew fuller and present. '-Ok...' flyers were all over the shops, preparations here were also in full tilt. Brazen students climbed buildings to tie decorations. Kord's shop stayed more or less the same, customers sure weren't lacking.

"Ling, isn't that?"

"What is it, Goldie?"

"Look," she pointed, "-that's him!"

"Kein, catch him."

The apartment brought more than a few memories. The closed opposite shop gave ample cover from the mild showers. A refreshing change from the earlier heat. 'I wonder if they're fine.' Bags were used as shelter from the rain. The deliciousness of the food didn't discourage, rather, the intensity augmented.

"I got you," mumbled a short black outline.

"Who are you?"

"Calm down," said a familiar voice, "-no need to pull out a gun."

"Sorry," said she, "-I had to pull up my hoodie," and so, the outline turned to be Kein.

"Lingling, Kein, and Goldie, what a coincidence."

"You don't seem happy," argued Goldie.

"Should I be?" he ungripped Tharis.

"Cold," cried Ling, "-stop trying to be so off-putting."

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"What happened to Lucia?" the reunion fell in woe, the lowered gaze spoke volume 'bad question.'

"..."

"Don't worry," said he, "-don't speak if you don't want to."

"No, no, it's fine."

"The face could say otherwise," he remarked.

"It's fine," refuted Ling, "-Lucia left the academy. The experience was too much to handle."

"I-I see."

"Forget that," said Goldie, "-come, let's go eat." They made for Kord's eatery.

"Mister, it's me, Lingling," an energetic gesture invited sneers from the buyers.

'What is she thinking, cutting line is the worse offense...'

"Ling, use the backdoor, girl," refuted the old man. Up and around, "-so, what brings you this afternoon," the fish were readied effortlessly.

"We brought someone special," winked Kein and Goldie, "-ta-dah."

"Embarrassing," he whispered, "-hello, old man Kord, long time no see."

"I'll be damned," he laughed, "-good to see you alive and well. Go on upstairs, the lass has been more on edge lately."

"Are you sure?"

“Yeah, go on,” he smiled, “-girls, get ready, we have a lot of customers today.”

“Yes boss!” they saluted.

‘Working-part time. Who would have thought.’ Up the fire escape, *knock, knock,* laughter dulled into babbling, “-coming,” said one through it all. *click,* “-hey, how can I help,” the face froze, “-I-I-IGNA?”

Chapter 576: Surprise...

“Hello Ila, surprise visit.”

“I don’t believe it,” the figure retreated, “-Anna, it’s him,” she yelled.

“He who?”

A few seconds later, he sat at the edge of the sofa. The living room had changed quite a bit since the last visit. Not that it mattered any, paying attention to a place he’d never see again felt more of a waste. Fondly enough, the usually hot-headed Ila brought over drinks and prepared hefty snacks for the guest. Between eating biscuits and sipping coffee, Ila escaped out the fire escape. The metallic step sure trembled at her explosive march. Shy as a cat, Anna made her way to sit opposite him. The face told of a myriad of questions. “Anna,” said he, “-I’ve graduated from the academy. I’m officially Tier-6 Emerald.”

“I see,” she drank peacefully.

“Listen, I came to say farewell. I won’t be back for a long time; we might never see each other again. I get we had an agreement to be side-by-side since we shared so much. It brings me shame to say this, your green hair and resemblance to Xula makes it worse. I know, there isn’t much you could have done, the problem is mine, which is why I say so.”

“Cut right to the chase,” said she, “-I heard about what happened at the Azure Wall. Everyone was scared beyond words. Don’t worry about me,” the melancholic smile hinted at something else, “-we fought so hard to no avail. I was weak and forced to retreat. Meanwhile, because of the graduation exam, you were stuck on the field, defending and fighting a monster not many could dare stare in the eye. I realized it then, we’re too far apart. The connection of master and servant will always be there, I can’t change that aspect. I would normally offer my help... yet, it feels wrong. I-I’m confused and lost. The time spent apart felt more peaceful... I mean no disrespect from it.”

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“I get it,” he stood, “-no need to worry, I understand. You look far prettier than before. It’s a telling sign of a maiden in love, the expression says it all. Let’s leave it at that,” he held out a hand, “-if things ever get tough, do give me a call. We’re friends, and friends help one another. I doubt it will come to that. Frost, Leonard, Lampard, and the others are very reliable. They’re a good bunch to have around. May the path thee forges lead to greater happiness.” Hands shook, “-why not pay the others a little visit?”

“No, I saw them busy at work for the festival. Things are looking up; I can only imagine the path ahead. Be careful.”

“What about you,” she asked with sincerity, “-what’s next?”

"I've fooled around enough. Time's come to take my role and name seriously. Many rumors say of a coming war; I know full well how resolving conflict in a pool of blood doesn't bode well for anyone. The populous is crazed as is."

Looking deep into those emotionless crimson daggers, "-majesty," she knelt, "-may thee find what thee seeks."

"Likewise," cold and resolute, "-good luck on the journey ahead." The door opened just as he reached for the handle.

"Anna!" cried Frost.

"Good afternoon," returned Igna, "-so you're the one she chose."

"What are you doing here?" he frowned, "-wait, what happened at the wall after we left?"

"My friend," hand on his shoulder, "-tis none to be concerned about. The lady inside needs care and affection, do what is must to keep her close. Cherish every moment, and don't betray her trust. Moments like these are fleeting, enjoy them while you can." Cryptic as could be, the figure vanished into the pouring rain.

"Anna, is everything ok?" he moved to hold her hand, "-you heard all that right?" still staring the door, "-what did he mean?"

"I know," her head shook, "-Igna Haggard's gone through more than we can ever imagine. He was referring to a time where he shared the same bond we do now."

"You knew him from before?"

"Don't worry," she patted his back, "-the past is the past, nothing lasts forever." He reflected on the depth of her words as she never said anything without meaning. 'Besides,' thought she, '-there's no way I can keep up with his ambition. The Death Element is awakened, he's regained the symbol of power. Igna's all but gone at this point, I sensed it – King Staxius is back. The Seer's prophecy about an age of disruption, an age of calamity fought in higher realms, a conflict of which had the fate of the fabric of reality in jeopardy. At the center, the choice lays in the hands of the Supreme God. Will it bring suffering or salvation; good luck.'

The train rode without much trouble, Igna peered into the passing vegetation. The life of a student and novice adventure was left to the far reaches of memory. A potentially future-changing encounter laid in wait. From Meke, a jet waited to head towards Rotherham where he joined with Alicia. The evening drew close, the duo made it to the capital through a portal ending at the mansion. As instructed by éclair, Celina waited cheerfully at Lizzie's side who indulged in the ways of music.

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"Good evening, master," said Rosetta respectfully.

"Good evening," voiced he, "-was everything explained?"

"Yes," she nodded, "-Lady Celina's dressed for the occasion."

“Good, we’ll depart right away. Have the car be readied.”

“Certainly,” said she. An exquisite black behemoth of a steed parked underneath the clear sky. The setting sun painted the blueish grey into slashes of amber. Too bad the view didn’t extend to a cityscape.

“éclair,” out on the balcony, “-what’s the evening’s meeting about, who’s coming?”

“A surprise,” said he, “-lady Elvira said to keep it quiet.” Emphasis on being proper, the hardened show in fortune and prestige displayed by the clothes, the car, and the escort. Even to his taste, the expensive nature brought on doubts. 18:00 struck, the butlers escorted the very well-dressed ladies to the car. Thinking nothing much about the dinner, the car drove onto a closed road. Security was tighter than usual, Loron’s soon reflected off the car. A man dressed in black suits waited at the entrance, red carpet welcomed them courteously. ‘Now this is a bit over the top for a simple dinner,’ he stood behind Alicia and Celina who had locked arms. It opened to an empty restaurant as was the supposed town square.

“Greetings, my lord and lady,” nodded the manager, Beatrice, “-it’s a pleasure to welcome such esteemed guests to our establishment.” They were guided to a pleasant table, a live orchestra played in the background.

“Lady Yuki,” dashed inside the kitchen, “-our guests have arrived.”

“Who is it?” asked she in the company of Kyle who smugly smiled.

“Some no-name nobles I guess.”

“Mind your tongue,” voiced Yuki, “-we have very special guests today. The Queen’s gracing our establishment to converse with relatives or so I heard.”

“Lady Yuki, are you sure it’s relatives?” inquired Beatrice. Just as she said so, her majesty arrived in the company of the prince consort and the young prince.

‘Why are they here?’ he stood in utter shock. The royal family visited him without warning. To not be a fool, éclair gave the remainder of the information. Phantom disclosed Igna to be the reincarnation of Staxius, the news alone had the Queen in utmost joy.

“Majesty,” they bowed. Celina and Alicia couldn’t grasp the importance of such a meeting and chose to be silent.

“Igna Haggard?” she spoke behind a hand fan.

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Drop the formality,” said she, “-please, raise your head,” her voice remained steadfast.

“As you wish,” they stared, “-the dress truly befits you, majesty.”

“Oh please,” she sat, “-I see we’ve been graced by two lovely angels as well.” Try as they might, the words stuck, thinking of something to say pressured the mind into batter.

“I’ll get to the point,” said she, “-are you him?”

“Yes,” said he nonchalantly, “-I must say, the fake eye has done much favor.”

“Finally,” the tense aura released, “-I was doubtful at first,” she stood, “-might we have a word before dinner?” Turned to the prince consort, the man understood and engaged the table in conversation.

Out of sight, her guard dropped, “-Staxius, is that truly you?”

“Queen Gallienne, didn’t Elvira surmised what happened. I’m sure you know the whole story.”

“I know, I know,” said she, “-killed by other realm beings.”

“What about you,” he inquired, “-why would the queen meet the nephew of Staxius Haggard.”

“Is that what’s happened?” she chuckled, “-never ceases to amaze, do you.”

“Majesty,” he gave a once over, “-the feisty conniving queen I knew has gained some weight and grown old.”

“Shut it,” refuted she, “-you’ve all but gone back to being a young adult.”

“Why so trusting. I could be impersonating-”

“Let me stop you,” she held out a hand, “-it throbbed. The injuries I sustained during our fight, the elements reacted, so I knew.”

“What then, why the dinner?”

“To confirm my doubts. Let’s head back, we’ll discuss a certain task that might intrigue you.” Skipping over the formalities, the guests sat and appetizers were brought. Yuki stepped in to explain the dish. Her hands trembled; the boy she rejected to support another stood in the company of the monarch. By impression, even the Prince Consort got along fine with him. Kyle watched through the ajar door biting his nails in frustration. A rival knocked to the depths of irrelevancy returned to be at the Queen’s side. Thus, the ice broke, they grew to know one another. It was the same as any other family dinner – remove the pretentious vestment and meals costing the same as a single wage; pretty normal.

After dessert, Celina got in the good graces of the young prince. They played games as Alicia found an interesting topic of conversation with the prince. Gallienne and Igna faded to the same darkened area.

“The prince looks so much like you,” said he.

“Yeah,” she childishly turned to check, “-he’s adorable. I never would have guessed having an heir to be so fulfilling.”

“This from the lady who once shipped-”

“Stop,” a glare halted the jest.

“Someone’s touchy,” said he, “-anyway, what’s the talk about?”

“Do you remember the couple that fled to Iqavea? Auic and Avon.” A wave crashed against what was known. So much had happened over the years, ‘-there’s a name I never thought I’d hear.’

"I'll take the silence as a yes. Long story short, a spy of mine made contact with a small resistant group in the main continent. The rulership is dictatorial and fully involved with the Church of Kreston. The fiends who once divided Hidros."

"What about Auic and Avon, what of them?"

"Coincidence or fate, I don't know. The church fully hates demi-humans and impure humans. Auic was arrested a week or so ago, Avon tried long and hard to make contact, that's where the spy and the resistance met. He adamantly asked to speak to Staxius Haggard, said the man would come to his aid. Hence why we're here. I thought it was a joke at first. After speaking to Elvira and Courtney, the situation grew apparent. You being here couldn't have been any more perfect."

"Tell me," a certain prospect came in mind, one that didn't bode well if turned true, "-were you the one who asked for Eira to be silenced?"

"Yes, why?"

"We've been played," said he, "-the situation is bad."

"What do you mean?" her face froze.

"The church, Lucifer, don't you get it?" he exclaimed, "-their god is in ARDA!"

"Oh shi-"

"The whole ambassador to Alphaia is a fake. They never intended to ally with them, the objective was to bring down Arda from the inside. He's working with the Empire."

Miles away from the peace of the capital, a giant summoning circle illuminated the night in dark purple. Countless ancient writings and symbols levied inside the Forest of Reona. A teleporting pod erected as a monolith, from it, tanks, trucks, jeeps, and soldiers invaded from Iqavea.

Chapter 577: Invasion

'Oh shit,' quoted from Queen Gallienne's realization of the events. A normal dinner turned asunder. Ignore were those living off in peace outside Arda. Forest of Reona, named after a witch who perished trying to save a village fell in mere hours. A solid stronghold built within minutes, the mages of Iqavea were proficient. Nobody knew the horrors until the third day after the invasion, the 13th of March, a village of demi-humans, South-west of Mont Blanc – a three-week voyage, in respect to the other settlements. The village of Reona wasn't much to be desired. Not until one considered the abandoned fort used as a shrine to the forest's guardian.

The day was joyful, crops and harvest were satisfaction this year around. The drought which had previously plagued the land was nowhere to be found. The kids played, the adults worked the farms and brewery, as for the village chief, he prayed in the company of the shrine maiden. A youthful representative and adventurer.

"Big sis Melti," said a boy conquering the battlements.

"What is it?" asked she in a warm tone, "-get down, you'll get tired," the dirtied yard cleaned bit by bit.

“Why is it the people hate us?” he wondered about with arms stretched, the bountiful flushed forest looked like an insurmountable wall.

“People don’t hate us,” she said in a tame tone, “-we’re different. We, demi-humans, are proud children of the great one. We might be weak, but, we get stronger faster than anyone else. Don’t worry, Henny, the day will come soon, I’ll take you to the adventuring guild. I promised, didn’t I?”

“Thanks, big sis,” elbows against the rocky fortification. Chores complete, the gracious lady climbed on up to keep the boy company. “-Big sis, why is it you fight?”

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“To avenge the fallen,” her long lashes peered onto a distant land, he could stare up at her confidence, “-I was shown the way of battle. The world is a cruel place, either live or die. Monsters aren’t the only threat to us. I’m a shrine maiden, my duty lies in helping others... yet, I can’t help looking on what lies ahead.” Just then, bells twinkled, she faced away in shock. “GET DOWN!” in a flash, a whistling sound shot past. “B-b-big sis,” blood splattered. The glimmering strong visage side-glanced with a timid grin. The body tripped over the edge to crash onto the stables below.

“BIG SIS MELTI!”

The first shot fired in what would be a gruesome conflict. Men dressed in uniform captured the village without resistance. All of them watched in disgust, the sight of demi-humans made it blasphemous to the belief. The Order of White Knights, a generic name for a generic Division of 3 brigades consisting of 5 thousand soldiers under the command of Major General Lockeen Vansolda, an arch-bishop for the holy church. The crest of Kreston’s god displayed on their shoulders. For the attack on Reona a Company of 200 was split into 4 squads of 50. Sudden as it was, and despite the relatively peaceful surrender, some villagers didn’t agree, and in their midst, unknown to the invaders, were adventurers tasked to safeguard from monsters. A massacre soon followed; villagers were shot indiscriminately. Women and children were taken hostage, the men who resisted died, and those who complied were taken to a makeshift camp. Spells were summoned; the garrison soon fell under siege by an adventuring party.

“Second Lieutenant Mei, we’re under attack!” reported an officer.

“Is that so,” she wiped her cheeks in blood, “-send someone to clean up this mess,” out the house, the remainder was a disfigured demi-human with ears chopped, and face cut to fit what was ‘normal’.

“Good job kid,” said one of the adventurers, “-head on back, we’ve already informed the guild. I promise will get the village back.” Sadly, what was said never came to pass, the boy who saw a caring individual shot in cold blood, heard and witnessed the cruelty of the holy ones, escaped into the forest. Pillars of smoke rose; anarchy befell the village. Those who surrendered were given quick deaths.

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Borders were shut, any audience to Arda ended in dismissal. They refused to accept help – the Federation’s hands were tied. Queen Gallienne sat in despair, what Igna predicted came to pass. Thus, a week went by, the invasion of Arda continued – people were slaughtered without even being acknowledged.

“Majesty,” cried the roundtable, “-what is to happen to us,” they wept.

“Arda’s being invaded, there’s unrest among the people as well as the nobles. Some have defected to Noctis’s Hallow!”

“We’ll surrender,” said Lucifer after much consideration, “-we’re not ready to lead a war. Levying troops will only bring about more death. It’s better we negotiate for a solemn agreement.”

Thus, as predicted, the proud kingdom of Arda revoked its freedom to be placed under the protection of the Wracia Empire. “Lady Mother!” whispered Eira, “-what are we supposed to do?”

“My daughter,” she sat desperately under the moon, “-it all happened because of me. We’re a lost cause, I sought refuge in a man of charm forsaking the future of the people. If only he were here,” she prayed.

“Mother,” stood at her side, “-the kingdoms fallen. Demi-humans are being shipped off as slaves for the pleasures of the nobles of the Wracia empire. Arda’s no longer fierce. The Capital’s the only safe haven. King Lucifer made it clear in the agreement for surrender.”

In a matter of months, the whole of the world’s leadership changed. The conquest of Arda became public on Thursday the 1st of April. The potential of war forced many other factions to be at ease. King Lucifer became ruler of Arda under the direct order of the Emperor as well as blessed by the Saint of Rondo. The economy wasn’t much to talk about, the kingdom was ransacked and left nothing but change. Unnecessary villages were burnt, races and tribes neared extinction. Hate harbored the people, famine and plague ravaged the land; the capital became a holy-capital devoid of demi-humans. Anyone remotely different was ousted. Scholars usurped knowledge from the many magical universities. The royal castle burnt to be replaced by a cathedral for the church. Any nonbeliever was tried and burnt. Goddess Syhton, state religion for Hidros, was seen as demons of the foolish.

Animosity grew on the borders, few skirmishes happened here and there. They were probably toys sent for the viewing pleasures of the soldiers. The Federation was forced to take up arms and guard. Hidden under the blemish of battle, the Queen and Princess of Arda were gone. King Lucifer made no attempts at recovery for he vowed to purify the land.

6th of April, a nonaggression pact sealed by the emperor reached Queen Gallienne’s side. “HOW DARE THEY!” she screamed to break multiple vases, “-ARROGANT FUCKS, they take land from us without so much as a battle and send a pact after claiming their fill.” Anger wouldn’t do much, and so, the Wracia Empire and Hidros signed said treaty of which was a year.

Two days later, ‘-damn idiots,’ thought Igna in the shower.

“Igna, are you done yet?” cried Alicia.

“In a minute,” said he stepping onto the cold floor, ‘-Alicia’s acting more like my wife than a manager. Arda’s gone, the demi-humans are back to slavery and oppression. Phantom was forced to stay on the sidelines. The Federation decided to play into the Empire’s hand and hold fast. The nonaggression pact is for both sides to gather forces. They began the war, captured the kingdom, forced Hidros’s hands, and left without any loss. Luckily, the Guild Leaders escaped to Noctis’s Hallow. Try as they might, fighting off immortal beings immune to the blessing of the vile god is a pointless affair. The once alienated race of nightwalkers, shunned by the king and his roundtable, was now licking the very ground the vampires walked. How shameless.’ Out the shower and into the living room, the three pillars of Rotherham stood

over yonder. They relocated to Hidros as duty called for Igna. Alicia found herself helping Apexi and Julius.

"I've made breakfast and lunch," said she wrapping the meals, "-be sure to eat," dressed formally, she slipped into her heels, "-I'll see you later tonight."

"Alright," they kissed, "-have a good day," said he.

"You too, darling." The lock clicked and she left. The apartment sure was spacious and screaming of rich. The clean decorations, slick furniture, and view over the growing town were much to be desired. Sat on a stool facing the view, '-Lucifer played a long game, plotting and waiting for many years until the final piece fit. Xula and Eira were meant to an end. What of the alliance between him and Zeus. Regardless,' a sip later, '-Queen Gallienne didn't stand down either. She took her demands to the Emperor and ordered compensation for the belligerent conduct. The intervention of the Pope sure made it a hard-fought battle. What to do and what to say really, we were given money and they were graced with a peace treaty. Lucifer...' he gritted; '-my legacy is slowly being tarnished. As it stands now, the Empire's back to being the powerhouse of a nation, followed by Alpha and lastly, the Federation. Technologically speaking, we have the upper hand. Waging war on us is a bad idea. Still, the conflict sure brought a lot of profits to Phantom. We supplied them with guns, any other arms maker fails to compare, even the Cobalt-Unit's given up. I guess that's the reason for the discourse between Arda and the Federation. Putting a wedge to separate and undermine the Federation's military support in times of war. A well-executed plan. If only the Federation was united, the war would have been a whole other story. Auic escaped to Avon's side, help from the Assassination sect. The Empire's too virtuous to have an underground organization, them and their clouded judgment. I can see it clearly now; the peace treaty wasn't the intent at first. Pressure came from Elon's Dynasty; their wealth is beyond what the Empire can muster. Since Elendor controls one-third of the land and is backed by the Dynasty, there's no fighting against them. Old Cray's battles are worthless, to say the least. Politics,' gulping the last morsel, '-standing in the side-line isn't too bad. I would have jumped into battle and ordered the people to take up arms.'

Knock, knock.

'Who could it be?' dressed in a sleeping gown, "-coming."

Click, "-good morning cousin," said Julius in a rather complex mood.

"Good morning," returned he on guard, "-is something the matter?"

"Well," after a brief moment of silence, "-I'm sorry to do this, cousin." Two figures spawned out the shadows, white and green hair dressed and covered in a hood. Heads lifted, the piercing gaze of Eira and Xula watched.

"Cousin," he glared, "-what's the meaning of this?"

"Igna!" said the Queen holding his hands, "-Julius told me everything, your him, aren't you," she pulled closer, "-Staxius..."

"Enough," breaking her grip, "-how dare you," said he, "-how dare you presume I'm the husband you traitorously abandoned and killed."

"Igna," glared Eira, "-that would be enough disrespect to my mother."

"Princess Eira," he frowned, "-still stuck up as I remember."

"Cousin, please," said Julius stepping in the middle, "-they've come for a good reason."

"I guess. Come on in, guests of my cousin." The well-lit interior gave a semblance of comfort.

"Cousin Julius," loud and clear, "-follow me." Up the stairs and into another makeshift study, a better version than the one in Alpha. The door closed; a spell toggled to conjure a soundproof barrier.

"Cousin Igna, did you mechanize the activation of spells?"

"It's commonplace, don't worry about it," sat at the desk, "-now, tell me why those two are here."

"I'm sorry," said he, "-I couldn't give up on my mother and big sister. They ran away, the king made no attempts at their search or rescue. As far as the continent is concerned, the royal family of Arda's being held captive."

"You have five minutes to formulate a good argument. I don't need to repeat myself, do I now?" a manifestation of evil stood behind as a giant howling visage.

Chapter 578: "Queen without a kingdom"

"Five minutes, cousin, that's a bit harsh."

"Nonsense," said he, "-don't try to defuse the situation."

"Fine. Here then, Mother and Big sister Eira arrived at my door a few days ago. They were in rags and hadn't eaten in a few days. From what my sister told me, they ran from the kingdom and barely managed to teleport outside the border. From there, with no money and nothing valuable, they've walked and asked, worked part-time, helped in slaying a few monsters till here."

"Tough bout," cried he, "-anything else, the arguments more sentimental. Straighten up, cousin."

"Right," he breathed, "-emotionless as usual," a glance showed deep bloodlust-colored irises. "The merit is you have royal blood and the rightful inheritor of the throne. Princess Eira's the next queen."

"Great," said he sarcastically, "-how about I take an army and launch an attack against Arda. A revolution for the Ardians, how does that sound?"

"Good actually," returned the prince staring into the vacant distance. The fingers moved about the nonexistent beard, "-might just work."

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"Stop it," refused Igna, "-no way that'll happen. The Empire's powerful as is, now, add the church, we're grasping at straws. This wouldn't have happened in the first place if," a swipe broke the barrier and opened the door, "-not for an incompetent queen and princess!"

"Oh," they stood stumped by what to do next, "-hmm..."

“Queen Shanna and Princess Eira,” glared Igna, “-come on in.” The howling figure stretched long-skinny fingers about the room, it curled invitingly to dance with the devil. One measly step inside and the body cried a severe head ache and nausea culled any left-over discontent. Another gesture and the door shut automatically. No magic was involved. éclair’s influence stretched out around the whole apartment, windows, doors, to even the toilet, total control. A few meters onto the scorching heat of a never-ending desert. Sand for miles on end, currently, the sand was replaced into a miasmatic substance of black and red. Even though Julius sat a stride away, their body and faces were blurred, the dense aura and presence made such a simple venture into a trek into his territory.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ wondered Eira, ‘-the presence is too strong. Using magic to counter it is useless, there’s nothing to fight raw strength against. My body’s shaking, my mind says to run, my heart’s beating fast. The element’s reacting, I feel the mana coursing through my veins, this feeling of fight or flight, I hear even the Dragon’s voice.’

“Sit already,” said Igna, the density eased too normal.

“Julius,” coughed Shanna, “-were you fighting against such a foe?”

“Mother,” said he in sympathy, “-it was more of a test than fight. Cousin Igna here is a very hard shell to crack.”

“I’m still here,” returned he murderously. Sat comfortably, the conversation resumed.

“I understand what you said, cousin,” pleaded Julius, “-if not for the queen’s demeanor and the princess stubbornness, this could have been avoided.”

“Insolence!” refuted Eira, “-how can this be our fault?”

“Silence!” snarled Igna, “-this conversation is between cousin Julius and I. Exiled Queen and Princess, we stand in Rotherham, of which I remind is the dukedom of my lady mother. Please maintain decorum and not lash as if a jealous kid?”

“Cousin,” sighed Julius, “-a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“No, I think it’s adequate. I mean, guests’ who’d prefer to eavesdrop on private discussion don’t have the right to an opinion. If basic ethics cannot be maintained, what’s the difference between an animal and them?”

“Still, isn’t it the host’s responsibility to care for the guests?” argued Julius.

“Cousin, dear cousin,” monotonous and heavy, “-they’re not guests. How about changing the subject, a frivolous argument isn’t going to resolve the matter at hand.”

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“As I was saying-”

“No need,” he interjected, “-continue with the reason.”

“Queen Shanna and Princess Eira are here to petition help in reconquering Arda.”

“-And?” he paused, “-should this not be taken to Lady Elvira or my lady mother?”

"Thing is," he gulped, "-they're at odds end. Any audience will end in failure."

"You sought refuge in me," facepalming, "-cousin, the power to alter the course of the world is at thy disposal, why not use 'em?"

"Might I speak?" interjected the Queen.

"Queen Shanna," he watched silently, "-go ahead."

"The blames on us," said she in woe, "-we're the ones who are responsible for the attack and invasion. I didn't realize my fiance to be such a shame of a man. I was content in having him by my side if it meant running away from the responsibilities."

"I see," said Igna softly.

Her face lightened in bliss, the words reached his heart, "-you understand?"

"NO!" a direct refusal, "-how ignorant and childish can a queen get. It doesn't matter if you're lonely or sad, an entire kingdom rests on thy shoulders. Royalty doesn't have the right to complain and run, they're to stand strong and lead by example."

"That's easy for you to say," returned Eira, "-you haven't experienced pain as we have."

"Pain huh," he stood, "-listen here, princess, don't play the damned victim. People are dying because your QUEEN was lonely. What is there to show for the trouble, a kid. A queen without her kingdom is nothing more than a woman. Considering the queen threw away her only aid, she's more of a burden than anything else. I'd honestly recommend to give and return to thy husband's feet. Beg and lick the floor, become a mistress to the new kingdom, isn't it the duty of a wife to follow her loved one?"

"But--"

"I'm not done, princess," he ripped open the shirt, "-remember now, Librarian of Nexsolium? The sword running through my stomach."

"W-what a-are you s-saying?" her face froze.

"Librarian of Nexsolium, return to your master and pray," he grabbed her chin, "-I'm the reincarnation of Staxius Haggard, I've come to take back what was stolen from me, do you understand?"

"R-reincarnation?" the room slumped in silence.

"Yes," he glared, "-I said this before, be my ally or be my enemy, the choice is yours. The latter was chosen, therefore, tis decided," the gripped eased, "-my legacy and the kingdom I strived to make for the inhumane is in jeopardy. Princess Eira, wouldn't you like to explain how I was killed, tell her, please do. All of this rests on thy weak shoulders," stepping away, "-not that it matters now. The people I once vowed to protect are being used as livestock. If this were the old me, I'd take to the front lines. Now," the curtain parted, "-there's no connection to be made."

"S-Staxius," her hand stretched out, "-y-you c-came back."

"Yes," returned he, "-not for you, Shanna Islegust. I've returned for vengeance. Those who steal from me must pay dearly."

“Still, you came back for me, didn’t you?” her eyes watered, “-I’ve missed-”

“Majesty,” he bowed, “-the Staxius of old is long gone. He was slain at the hands of his daughter, what stands here is naught but a shell. Congratulations, Princess Eira, the quest of slaying a god was successful. I’ve figured much from our exchange. Be my guest at stay in Rotherham as long as necessary. Prince Julius will help. Try to live a normal life. Once royalty falls, there’s nothing left to be reclaimed. Arda’s done for, the countless lives are in thy hands. Bear the burden till time passes by.”

The long-winded one-sided onslaught of words ended in silence. The guests walked to the guest room; Julius followed. “Who does he think he is?” exclaimed Eira, “-what a pretentious boy. All of this isn’t without reason. Lady mother suffered from whence he left, always running away to do quests and explore the world. He never really cared about us, left in his shadow, to grasp at air. How dare he say all of this is mother’s fault, it’s not, he should take responsibility.”

“I get what you’re saying,” said Julius, “-there’s no right and wrong here. Father did what he had to make the country strive. Between managing a kingdom and fighting for survival; hard to imagine how someone could strive to walk. I heard during Kreston’s holy invasion – the Duke of Dorchester, Julius Garnet, and his sister, were slaughtered in cold blood. Not only that, he lost all the companions he’d made over the years. Imagine losing all you cared about in a single day. I’m not saying to exempt him from blame, he has his fair share of faults. In the end, he knew what mattered the most. The kingdom and their people, the federation striving to make a world where such a tragedy couldn’t be repeated.”

Shanna escaped facing the empty wall. ‘He’s back. Staxius’s back... What’s wrong with me, everything’s so dazed and distant. I feel alive again, was it just a massive dream, or did I really watch as the kingdom failed.’

“Mother, are you ok?” asked Eira shaking her shoulder.

“I’m good,” voiced she, “-I feel better than before,” strong on her feet, she regained her wits. “I’m sorry. Time came to a stop long before I realized it. I sort of reclused into self-pity, running away to leap into the arms of another man. I should have known he’d be back.”

“Mother,” smiled Julius and Eira, “-glad to see the old expression.”

“Sorry Julius and Eira, I was a fool,” stood to give a grand embrace, whispers came from out the room.

“What now?” asked Julius.

“We wait and watch,” smiled the Queen, “-I’d like to experience normal life for once. What’s done is done, I can’t take responsibility even if I wanted to. The fate of Arda lies in the Federation’s hand. Eira, decide for yourself.”

“Mother!” she cried, “-after all we’ve been through, you’re just going to stand there and do nothing. All of this was Father’s fault, why doesn’t anyone agree with me. He caused us pain, stole Julius and Lizzie away, trampled over my feelings, I wanted to be at his side, but he never cared. I won’t accept it, I WON’T!” she barged out the room. Below, Igna stood in the company of an office lady. Shanna and Julius follow suit.

“I’m back,” said Alicia, “-come here.”

“Easy,” said Igna holding her tightly, “-don’t throw the shoes onto the couch, it’s bad manners.”

“Whatever,” she nuzzled his chest, “-I don’t care.”

Clop, clop, clop, “-hello Alicia, how goes it?”

“Boss,” she gulped.

“No need,” he laughed, “-meet my lady mother and big sister.”

For the next hour, Julius and Igna held on conversing. Shanna’s mind lingered between jealousy and confusion. Eira remained more or less quiet – a conflict of interest. What she had done till now, sacrifices made, holding back on her wants; did it mean nothing, was all the effort pointless. Making amends in slaying his father, biting the hand that fed her out of kindness, killing a great man for the sake of killing. The slow agonizing guilt forced the mind to seek out an answer or a reason to justify the killing. What returned was a revelation, the strong leader and King Staxius had more secrets, each viler than the other.

‘I don’t have the right to judge,’ thought Shanna, ‘-I was the one in the wrong. What he said before was true. I made my peace and so did he, tis Igna Haggard that stands before me, not Staxius Haggard.’

“Igna,” gulped Alicia, “-who are they?”

“It’s as Julius said.”

“My name’s Shanna Islegust, and this here is my daughter, Eira Islegust. I’m Igna’s aunt, nice to meet you.”

“T-the pleasure i-is all mine, ma’am,” she gawked, “-sorry for staring, it’s just, your very pretty, my lady.”

“You flatter me,” she laughed. The doubt suddenly faded, the tragic queen of Arda laughed, her face glimmered in bliss. A lady who had been so lonely and sad for countless years laughed. In a way, Igna’s assault and rude tone gave closure. He said what needed to be said, no words minced and no underlying malicious intent.

“Cousin Igna,” whispered Julius, “-you’re a softhearted man deep down.”

“Shut up,” refuted he, “-else I’ll have you clean the toilet.”

“Please do,” they laughed, “-I’m glad I came. They’ll be able to turn over a new page.”

“Does the shrewdness know no bounds?” remarked Igna.

“No, I’m a son to a very mysterious man. Runs in the family blood,” laughter led to hysteria. The Queen found her way – though, the same couldn’t be said for the princess. Her expression seemed to be at a standstill, words could only do so much.

Chapter 579: “Just say yes.”

Shanna and Eira’s arrival was quite a spectacle. Igna’s mind was forced into facing the past, facing those he’d left behind so very often. It proved one thing, seeing their faces didn’t birth any strange behavior. They were the same as anyone else, in his heart and mind, granted their past was one of the amorous

endeavors, was now a passing envy. Her confused self watched and studied. Julius's ill-intent, even though he said to never forgive and forget, was tackled by the latent love for his family. A mother who did wrong, a sister who was a little strong-headed, when all is said and done, was still family. Their kinks made it the more interesting. The surface was cleared of any superficial misunderstanding. They all understood what to do and what to feel. Tearing at the past was a fool's errand, and so, with Igna's blessing and half-asked forgiveness, Julius took to the skyscrapers where Elvira and Courtney waited.

In the far reaches of Alpha, Codd's agency investigation stumped on a hardened wall. Codd's had been following the trail of a potential slavery operation. Sadly, as he got closer, a phone call disrupted the investigation.

"Boss," the phone rang, "-it's me, Camilia, got a few things that might be of interest." Then on, the inquiry led to a mundane gathering at the mansion. Door sealed; a previously cleanroom turned dump for files and pictures, a whiteboard on which scribbles were bare to see. On the timidly lit table sat the other members. The topic of discussion, mysterious deaths of the starlets.

"I'll go first," said Tensy in a friendly accent, "-I've scoured the underground works for a few weeks now. Made contact with an ex-companion, the assassinations were carried out by the mafia. The two bodies found at Carter lake were the handy work of a man named Muol, a hitman. He's the picture-perfect resemblance of the mythical Carter Forest's stick-man."

"That ol' tale?" interjected Aki, "-isn't it one to scare away the kids from straying too far?"

"No, it's actually true. The stick-man is a common sighting. I have my doubts about it being a work of fiction. There could be someone out there in the forest dumping bodies. None be the wiser," clear and concise, Odgar's evaluation settled the table.

"I'll continue," said Tensy, "-they're still unknown to the public. It's been judged as a double suicide. Someone's covering the mess. That's enough for me."

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"Let me follow suit," voiced Aki confidently, "-I made contact with a few reporters. They've been on the trail of murder for long before we arrived. Found out, the casting couch incident is very commonplace. The case of the starlets revolves around the snobs of the entertainment industry. Ladies are treated like shit whilst men are held up as being noble and graceful. The extent of the sexist bastards doesn't stop at the director. Producers, models, and even movie stars are often needed to be pleased before a chance at success. Makes my stomach turn. Anyway, there's something else. A director was killed a few years ago, the story's pretty much done and gone. The body was never found. The man's truck was found on a highway not too long after the disappearance. The leads pointed to one thing; the man foolishly tried to ensnare a mistress of Gyo Tune into playing 'doctor'. The rest speaks for itself."

"I see," said they in thought.

"My turn," coughed Camilia, "-sorry, caught a cold. Boss, after I'm done, I need a favor."

"Sure, go on."

"I've been following Laven Enda. I had quite the adventure. The man's a lusty dog for a supposed famed director. He gawks on women every day and brings others to his room at night and often skips out to

head into a mysterious cave in the reaches the mountains. Security is tight; I did overhear the mention of ‘-Menha’s fire grotto’ or Fire-grotto for short. It’s the typical secluded organization. Idiotic as he seems, the man’s very smart. He rarely slips up, and rarely speaks of anything unrelated. He’s part of a cult.”

“Is that all?” wondered Odgar.

“Yeah.”

“What about the favor?” he asked rather affectionately.

“Call Igna,” said she, “-he needs to know. Laven’s set his eye on a Nona Isabelle of Vorn. She’s cast to be in an upcoming film directed by him. She’s very outspoken on the whole casting couch situation. Some people might not enjoy her frankness. Laven’s one of them.”

“Can I asked why we need to contact him?” wondered Aki.

“Because it’s the life of a friend that’s at risk. We’re up and about thanks to his generosity. Logic be damned, he needs to know what’s happening, else, it might be too late.”

“So be it,” said Odgar, “-we’re at a standstill. The investigation is muddied as is, the harder we fight, the harder it will be later on. That’s it for today’s meeting. Continue with the same tasks.”

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“Alright boss.”

Later the same day, at around 14:00, Odgar phoned to inform of the current situation. Having done nothing of much importance in the last month, Igna sparked in envy. The council of nobles was to be handled by Courtney and Elvira.

“Quite late to have lunch,” said Serene dressed casually.

“Lunch at a café,” said Igna, “-sorry about before. I put off our dinner, things were very hectic.”

“Don’t worry,” said she sipping a cold drink, “-I’m busy as well. Now’s a good time to discuss the standing of the Blood-King faction. Igna,” she inched closer to the table, “-things aren’t so clear-cut. The Empire’s invasion has us trembling. Many nobles, lady Haru, and the other representatives have fled to Noctic’s Hallow. We’ve erected a barrier, the forest’s murderous as always. There are border skirmishes. By my counts, we have the 75% of the nobility and the faith of the populous in our hands. It’s quite selfish since most of them alienated us. Regardless, as nightwalkers, there are a few things we need to abide by. We could easily lead a revolution if we had the Queen or the Princess’s aid.”

“We do,” said Igna, “-they’re currently in hiding. No need to fret. There will be a need to reclaim Arda sooner or later. I get that time isn’t a luxury for the people. My hands are tied, the most I can offer is an aid in a battle. With the treaty in place, the Empire’s got free reign to do as they please. The Federation cannot interfere. If civil war breaks out, there might be a chance for an audience. The land of the Blood-King faction has always been its separate kingdom. From Noctic’s hallow upward, the nightwalkers rule over 35% of the land, including the border between Dorchester and Arda. Understand now?” he smiled, “-the solutions to potential invasion and battle were already made clear. There’s no way the Blood-king would be so careless, especially after the revolt of the Kreston’s Holy Invasion.”

“Sly genius,” she smirked, “-but, Igna, there’s just one thing.”

“The border, they can invade and we’ll be left in the dust. They have quantity and we have quality. How about this,” few gestures later, “-let’s show the Empire the strength of the House of Haggard.”

“How?” asked she with much interest.

“Like this,” a holographic display showed the boldest strategy since forever. The sheer scale of the operation, the manpower required, it all felt so unattainable. Yet, as she pondered over the impossible idea, a spark of confidence burnt in Igna’s eyes.

“Can you pull it off?” she wondered, “-I’m sure it’s plain to see. If this plan happens, we’ll be safe for the next century, a monumental task. By the sheer scale, it’ll take a decade to complete. We can’t spare much time.”

“Give me a week,” said he.

“A WEEK?” the table slammed to crack, heads turned in confusion, “-ARE YOU CRAZY?”

“Listen,” said he in confidence, “-I formulated this crazy idea, and I’ll make it work. It’s a show of strength and power. If they have their faith in God, I’ll just have to call onto another to do my bidding.” The lunch finished, Serene stepped away with a headache.

‘About Nola,’ stood facing the mall’s yard, ‘-a phone call should do.’

Dring,

“-Hello?” she answered.

“Hello, Nola, it’s me, Igna.”

“Hello, quite rare for you to call. Anything the matter?”

“About the movie,” said he, “-there’s something I’d like to discuss.”

“I know,” she sighed, “-about the casting couch, right?”

“Yes, the director isn’t much of a gentleman. At this rate, the whole of Vorn could be at risk. Can you afford it?”

“We have to,” said she, “-Ansoft has us chained by the contract. We’re slaves to them. They don’t care about us, there’s nothing we can do. It’s hopeless.”

“Tell me one thing. How much is the compensation to break off the agreement.”

“It’s expensive,” said she, “-500,000 per member.”

“Damn,” he paused, “-Nola, pass the phone to Enna.”

“Sure,” said she. The changing room gazed in silence.

“Hello, Enna here.”

“Hey, about Ansoft. Tell me, do you have an attachment to the organization or?”

“What will it do?” asked she reluctantly, “-what can a mere guitarist do?”

“Put in on the speaker,” he ordered.

“There, it’s done,” said she, they stood around a large table, the phone flickered.

“I’m going off speculation. Ansoft isn’t a great place for idols. Girls are treated like livestock, worked till past their prime, and then sent off to rot. If one isn’t popular, one cannot survive. They’d rather sell those to the lustful movie industry and make a living as such. Am I wrong?”

“...”

“Good, some of you have experienced it before. The silence says it all. Here’s the deal,” he paused. éclair brought up a few figures and details about their contracts, “-I’m willing to invest in Vorn.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nola.

“It’s as I said. I’m to take responsibility for Vorn. Ansoft is the better agency, that much is clear. I can offer this, contract with Apexi. You’ll make music you like, work on your terms, and do as you wish. The only condition is to make the people happy. Hidros isn’t the entertainment behemoth as Alpha is. We might be small, but we have an appreciation for our idols, we care about them and we worry too. The Pride of Hidros, Aceline, is a prime example. She became a global phenome whilst working in Hidros, was the first person to perform in Iqeavea. Speaking of stars, we have Xius, a band that’s slowly gaining fame. The last world tour ended in success.”

“Why are you doing this?” asked Enna, “-words are sweet and all, what if the situation is worst than in Ansoft, what then, we’ll be screwed either way.”

“Let me ask this, why did you become idols. Was it for the money or was it to share the joys of music, was it for fame, or was it to make something of your lives?” No response, they watched one another, thinking and shaking their heads. “-I apologize if I assumed wrong. Here I thought Vorn to be a well-ordered group of friends who wished for their friend’s happiness. As it stands now, Nola’s about to become food. I say this with every intent, she’ll be ruined. The frankness has invited unwelcomed attention. In a way, I’m saying to run away. Run and come to Hidros, come to Apexi. We’re small but we’re friendly.”

“I wish we could,” said Sheiwai, “-tis complicated.”

“Here I figured you to know the importance of being strong, Sheiwai. What happened to the bravado of facing the world. I’m offering a chance to do the same. I’ll be straight to the point. I’m only offering this because of Nola, she’s in danger and I want to help. She’s a friend, not that we’re that close. It’s both private and professional. Henceforth, I’ve made my mind clear, the decision is yours. Remain in Ansoft till the day the current of expectations sweeps thee or join us and make a better place for future idols. The industry is still making baby steps, to make a change, one must change himself.”

“We understand,” said they.

“Still,” interjected Enna, “-what can a lonesome guitarist do?”

Then and there, “Just say yes,” those few words sent shivers, “-and I’ll show what a guitarist can do.”

Chapter 580: The 'side-quest'

Faced with the responsibility of leading the group, Enna kept to herself and thought. Right there on the table laid a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The others were pretty much without need or want, their focus remained on making music and getting by. The fame and gratitude did somewhat outweigh the harassment of being a lady in such a filthy industry. Between them all, Nola's expression shone the brightest. Being viewed as the cheerful and explosive-natured girl she was, the others didn't think much about her mental and physical status. It was apparent, all the sufferance had been draining her vigor. The once visage clandestine to hardships of the world lingered in limbo between life and death. By that, the reality was, she contemplated suicide a few days prior. The manager Thomas luckily managed to council her back to her senses. Regardless, Enna knew the fate of the girls was in her hands. Before making her decision as the proposition didn't hold much ground Igna said a few words, '-Just say yes, and I'll show you what a guitarist can do.'

She held her breath, the proud stance slumped, '-why is it so hard?' such a hefty load, Nola's clenched fist, mild breathing, and resolute expression soon faded into a fake grin, one of self-pity and self-degradation. "Fine!"

"That's what I wanted to hear," he laughed, "-Vorn, leave the negotiations to me." *Beep, beep, beep,* the call ended.

"Enna, are you sure?" intervened her best friend, Nerilina, the violinist.

"Is this what you want?" asked the others, "-Enna," they held her hand, "-thank you."

"Why thanks?" a little stumped, "-I didn't do anything."

"You did," whispered Nola, "-you took the opportunity, for that, I'm grateful."

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"He saw right through us," mumbled Morgaria, the bassist.

"What?" Enna's face crinkled, "-I don't understand."

"We knew about Nola's situation," said Sheiwai, "-the whole incident with the director and producers. We knew about the suicide attempt, Part of me was scared to touch on the subject. I don't know..." her fist curled; "-I'm frustrated for being so indecisive."

"Take a moment everyone," voiced Yuna, "-we might have accepted, the contract remains. The truth is, those papers are more than shackles, they're a guillotine waiting to drop. If we plot against the agency, we'll be alienated from the industry; who knows what else could happen. I'm opposed to the gamble," a step forward to Nola's side, "-I don't care what happens from here on. This has gone on for long enough. Vorn needs to stand strong. We can't expect help from the public – the boy who spoke of such pretty words must prove his worth."

"I'm sure he will," smiled Nola.

Back to Rotherham, Igna drove to the apartment. The prior phone calls were made, first, Elvira, second Julius, and third, the people of Apexi. Scoring a victory against Ansoft was a tall order. The

conglomerates stood in the way, the best strategy was to be fast and stern. To that end, Lady Elvira graciously held her bargain as the leader of Phantom. Elon's Dynasty allied to fully oppose their faction.

'Let the game start,' thought he sat in the study. éclair handled the grunt work as well as the law-side of things. In a way, the army of attorney at Phantom's disposal could scare off the strongest of foes. Within the next hour, an offer to purchase Vorn barged onto the director of Ansoft's door. Signed by Apexi, the offer was 8 million Exa as opposed to the compensation of 3 Million to break off their contract. It also read the money would be provided by the parent company, Phantom and Elon's Dynasty.

"Cousin!" the asylum crumbled per Julius's wrath, "-what are you doing!" voiced he strongly.

"Good evening, Cousin," smiled he, "-take a seat and enjoy. éclair's doing fabulous work to pressure the director. As we speak, the offer should have made it to their office. No negotiations this time, no direct contact. We're pushing forth the law of freedom Alphaia so nicely abides by. Good on them to care for their citizen. A slave-like contract brought to justice, how bad could it be?"

"How are you so confident?" he sat.

"Because," with a smug grin, "-I've got allies. Besides, tis a ruse in itself. éclair's currently buying shares underneath Ansoft's feet. If it goes according to plan, they'll think Vorn's contract to be a decoy. I made it so that it appears we want to buy their whole company. Here's the greatest piece, the agency's actually independent. They're allied to the conglomerates in name only, their foul-treatment of the idols and tyrant-like leadership forced the Lumian O'dla to not officially associated with them. It's the same as war," sat back, "-I should get a call in a few moments."

"Cousin, what have you done?" wondered Julius, the free-hanging television showed current charts of stocks and shares. Lumian O'dla took a plunge, a nasty rumor permeated across Thwan.

'So many charts and figures,' wondered Julius, '-Igna's hard at work. I honestly came here because Lady Elvira required me to. Acquiring Vorn's a great opportunity to have Apexi grow. How far did he think this through?'

Dring! the sudden vibration shook the prince, '-a call?'

'Look,' said Igna noiselessly, '-it's here.'

Beep, "-hello, Igna, are you there?" inquired an erratic voice.

"Hello Lord Amsey, long time no see," said Igna without much tact.

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"IGNA!" he screamed, "-what are you up to. What have you done? I'm getting attacked on social media. The company keeps on calling, they say somebody wants to buy out Ansoft."

"Listen," said he, "-you welcomed me into Alphaia, I don't want to be ungrateful. Tis, not my intent. I was tasked to promote Apexi. Ansoft has truly outstayed their welcome. You know, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" a blatant attempt at changing the topic.

“Don’t play dumb,” a gesture and files transferred over, “-there’s a list of evidence against Ansoft and their malice against the idols. I started a rumor on social media, already, fake as it is, the people are mad. Imagine what would happen if this gets revealed to the public.”

“Are you blackmailing me?” argued he, “-I’ll take you to court!”

“Who are you kidding,” he laughed, “-I’m a noble. Alphan jurisdiction doesn’t apply to Hidros. I can’t be touched no matter the means. Not a threat, it’s the truth. Alas, the same can’t be said about you. My lawyers are already on the move to sue Ansoft for their wrongdoings. Naturally, Lumian O’dla will be dragged into the battle even if there are no ties. The evidence of murder and kidnapping is all that is needed.”

“How dare you accuse me of such folly?”

“Lord Amsey,” he smiled, “-didn’t I grant you youth. My enemy isn’t Lumian O’dla, it’s Ansoft, and their real associate, the Patek’s. They love the shadows too much.”

“Ighna,” the tone shook, “-what do you want?”

“As a sign of respect, I’ll sign over the shares to Lumian O’dla for half the price paid. In return, I want Vorn’s contract to be terminated. The offer of 8 million will be nulled.”

“Deal!” he agreed immediately. “-I’ll have the contracts canceled. Forward the details for the shares. Ighna, I’ll say this, you’re a demon,” the call ended.

“And done,” said he, “-éclair, counter the rumors, have the jet leave immediately and ask for the agents stationed in Odgawoan to escort the idols to the airport.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing much considering. I left a bigger bait, went overboard, spent a few million to acquire around 20% of Ansoft. Amsey’s the actual owner of Ansoft, not that he’ll say it outright. It’s under his wife’s name.”

“What about going against the Patek’s?”

“A lie,” he snickered, “-the one who controls the narrative controls the story. In this case, I controlled from the start to finish. The offer to purchase Vorn, the mention of Phantom and Elon’s Dynasty. One on one, we’ll win, the five big’s of Alpha are strong only if allied. I simply led Amsey into a dark hill and launched a surprise attack.”

Amount spend 2,000,000 Exa. flashed across the screen. “Even cheaper than having them break the contract individually.”

“Cousin,” stood to hold his shoulders, “-how long did it take to plan such an elaborate strategy?”

“A few hours?” he smiled, “-Cousin, lady Elvira and lady mother may be the current leaders. Don’t forget, the one who made it possible stands here as thy cousin,” giving a playful nudge, “-I have another thing I need to discuss.”

At 18:00 the same day, an escort of armed men moved Vorn to the airport. The bus drove solemnly into the setting sun. 'What happened?' went across the idol's mind.

"Enna," said Nola, "-why was our contract terminated?"

"I don't know," she gulped.

"Girls," interjected Yuna, "-heard the news?"

"What news?" they faced the backseat.

"Look," she showed her phone, "-a scandalous rumor shook the very core of Ansoft and Lumian O'dla earlier today. It went viral almost instantly. The post said something about the unequal treatment of idols."

"Do you think?" they paused and stared; the airport rose over yonder. Down a private road to a private runway, the bus came to a soft halt. The guards swarmed to vigilantly coordinate around the perimeter. Flashes of light lit the darkened forest path.

"Ladies, please follow me," said a well-dressed man.

"A jet?" wondered Enna.

"Where are we headed?" inquired Sheiwai.

"To Rotherham," said the well-mannered man, "-the young master's ordered so."

"Young master?" one by one, they sat and soon took to the skies.

Back in Hidros, after dealing with the aftermath, Amsey graciously accepted the shares. Lady Elvira was more or less pleased at the outcome. Even the secretary to Elon's Dynasty had a few words of praise to the young master. At the end of the day, a famed idol group terminated their contracts and escaped to Hidros. Julius sat at the dining table; food was cooked by a hired chef.

"Where's Alicia?" wondered Igna.

"Doing some work for Apexi. The arrival of Vorn, have you forgotten the load on us?" he gave an empty sneer.

"No need to pull such a grimace," the appetizers arrived.

"Fine," a bite soon cleared any uncertainties, "-what's the reason I'm here?"

"It's actually why I called. The whole Vorn matter was a side-quest. Listen, there's trouble brewing in Arda. I'm sure the details are well known. I went over the same topic with Serene earlier. I have a plan, and it's going to require a lot of work."

"What kind of plan?"

"A stepping stone for the potential of revolution against the Empire. As we are now, the federation can't intervene. The Blood-King's faction's the only refuge for the exiled nobles. There will be blood spilled," a holographic map materialized. "-Whether it's successful or not depends on you, cousin."

“Go on, I’m listening.”

“I was inspired by the Azure wall. If we can’t fight, we’ll defend – for a quality force of nightwalkers, spreading out will only tire and lower morale. Hence why,” he drew a line across Arda, “-we’ll build a wall from one end to the other. Separate the kingdom with a border that we control.”

“Are you STUPID?”

“No,” clear and confident, “-I speak the truth. We’ll do it in a week.”

“Impossible,” cried he, “-not a week.”

“Fine, a month then.”

“Do you hear yourself, come on cousin,” exasperated, “-there’s a limit for crazy.”

“Julius Haggard, else, Heir to Creation. Isn’t it simple to create? The plan hinges on your participation. Erecting a wall is simple for the next god of creation.”

“I see,” suddenly attentive, “-even if I start now, my mana is limited, we won’t make much progress.”

“Which is why I’ll be supporting. Instead of using the mana inside the body, we’ll use the mana made available to the world.”

“Bypassing the link?” the face lit.

“Yes. Leave that side of the equation to me.”

“One builds and one maintains,” stopped to think, “-I have my doubts...”

“-But?” exclaimed Igna.

“It’s plausible,” he resumed.