

Death Magic 611

Chapter 611: Empire's Invasion [29]

South of town, after a deflation of the naturally formed flatlands, a singular path moved through the scattered trees, boulders, reeds, and much more. A flora worth paying to watch, air worth the scent of angel's breath, and the melodic hums of the wildlife. Beyond it, after Calpter's Climb, a frigid walk into the spiraling stairs of Glenda's mountainous guardian laid a conveniently placed scape of unused space. Here, the breeze blew harder, Calpter's High acted as a barricade from the mighty wind.

In there, an army of five-thousand strong marched. Trucks and military vehicles led at a slower pace; shining white and golden armor stood on at the front. Arms crossed and focus on the target. A rather tedious obstacle for an invasion.

'Didn't account for the terrain. These men are from my estate. Damn this girl,' he side-glanced to silvery flowing hair, '-she failed in her schemes and somewhat managed to have the King accept her ideas. Our forces are tired, using my personal army for such a worthless endeavor, what a joke. A hero mustn't go around flaunting his strength. Makes me look like Old man Cray, what will the princess think... I wish I could give her a word of gratitude.'

"Kion," said the silver-haired lass, "-don't lose focus, we've entered that man's dominion."

"And?" he briskly waved her worries, "-I will not falter in the task assigned," smugly glaring at her seat, "-unlike some people I know."

"Aww," a mocking pout jabbed his nerves, "-is the hero feeling a little angry?" said she in baby-talk.

"Whatever," he crossed his arms, "-I don't much care for the childish taunts. Tell me, Lady Eira, what scheme have thee concocted today?"

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"A very simple one really," she stared the coming meadow lined in dense forest, "-I didn't expect my defeat to happen so easily. Therefore, I had our mages ready portals for immediate teleportation. Of course, since our version of the spell is a knock-off, we needed a whole lot more mana. Tis where a little bird whispered about the cult of Vane. Their practice of worship is a heaven of lust, anger, and clueless obedience. My prior steward, Undre, was quite the clever individual. He figured the plot and was killed in some dark alley. I had him switch place with an illusion-arts mage. After said incident, the hero's team offered to join my conquest. Tis was quite easy to sneak a few people inside the town – the Guild Master and Steward especially. Key jobs occupied by us. I had 'em invite adventurers from Hidros, weak ones, hostages to be precise. Baron Igna's a graduate from the Academy, a few friends gave the ideal situation. Once all was readied and settled, we only had to step back and watch. Let the town grown and spread our virus."

"Impressive," said he in a frown, "-such level of scheming and thee still lost, how did that happen?"

"Luck I suppose, or perhaps, a greater foe. Regardless, we have the town held hostage. Some of our strongest men are already present, any spark of rebellion must have been extinguished."

"What if that man shows up to defend?"

"He won't," her beautiful lips contoured into a vile smirk, "-our guild master was generous to offer quests to the 'hostages'. I've cursed the abandoned fortress and sent out fighters. One's walking into a trap, whilst the other has brought forth the necessary items from another village. Their ultimate downfall was the supposed help by the academy."

"I appreciate the monologue."

"The hero isn't one for underhanded games," she retorted, "-no matter, I doubt a muscle-brained otherworlder will ever understand the importance of a good plan."

"Please," he chuckled, "-what a waste of a pretty face. I'd have never guessed a princess to be so shrewd and merciless."

"Pretty face you say," she winked, "-roses have thorns," they approached a slight clearing, "-there's the route over Calpter's High."

"It's a shame we can't have direct communication with the others. Five thousand men are overkill for such a feeble town."

The dirt streets and stone-brick walls splattered across with the organs of the deceased. Glenda grew in the literal sense of the title, '-ghost town.' Souls of the fallen devoured by demons, Gophy and Intherna stood with a stained attire and blemished expression. Onlookers of the guild watched through the cracked walls; mutilated bodies dyed the walkways red, though now it marred into the more obscure dark. They were saved to what extent, was the massacre necessary, the ways they died, the screams, the plea for mercy, defiance of he who had lost his wife crumbled before his sight. They deserved every single bit of the punishment... still, why did the mind cry out, '-this is brutal.'

Droplets of crimson escaped down the forehead and round Gophy's face, a gentle motion stained it further, "-Intherna," she exhaled, "-they're weak..."

"I know," yawned she sat with elbows to her cross-legs, "-too weak. Whatever happened to this being the Empire's forces. Going by the numbers, I've killed around five hundred, well, half of it is ash."

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"Same here," returned Gophy, "-how are Miira and Lilith doing?" Then and there, a massive tree sprung from town-square, shadows loomed, the foliage sprawled to cover the whole area. Countless bodies suspended by their feet hung listlessly, some alive, some dead. Their lifeforce swallowed into a single flower amid the carnage, a blossoming pink-petal floret.

The passing atmosphere felt colder, heavy steps landed atop the wooden porch of the guild building, "-Lady Gophy and Lady Intherna," a picture-perfect description of power dazzled the leering eyes, "-so many lay dead in thy wake..."

"éclair," said Intherna impatiently, "-how goes the fight with Miira and Lilith?"

"The latter speaks for itself," he referenced to the enormous tree, "-lady Lilith used her World-Tree spell."

"Ancient demonic arts," refuted Gophy, "-she used it here... is she crazy, do the word hold back not mean anything?"

“She said tis the weakest spell she can conjure,” returned the butler.

“A piece of work,” added Intherna, “-what about Miira, did she fight?”

“No,” he replied casually. Behind him knelt the frightened. Lady Haru’s ears and tails spiked in fear, a similar reaction spread amongst the Ardianians, “-Lady Miira decided to spar with Draconis. The boy wanted to fight... well, he did fight,” the eyes narrowed, the index nervously scratched his cheeks, “-and sort of destroyed a building in the process.” No other words be said, a portal summoned, the remainder were evacuated to Ota.

‘Such a lovely flower,’ knelt over the bud, ‘-grow and mature into the fruit of life.’ Two thousand men were slain effortlessly, the events of said day would forever be etched in history.

‘My turn to act,’ a man carrying a child hovered towards the invading army. ‘-My element’s rested and accustomed to the first level of Nevermore. Whoever sprung that tree better not have destroyed the town.’

“Pops... are we there yet, I’m feeling tired, can I sleep?”

“Vanessa,” they approached, “-the fight ahead will be tough. I sense the presence of gods.”

“Why worry,” she yawned once again, “-I’m here pops, gods or whatever can’t defeat me.”

“If you say so,” a flap landed them under a lonesome tree.

‘They look imposing from up close,’ scanning the combatants, ‘-the moment I get overwhelmed it’s over. The forest’s good cover.’

“Sire,” called one of the scouts, “-we have a strange figure blocking the road.”

He turned toward Eira, “-Is that him?”

“In the flesh,” said she dropping out the truck, “-meet my cousin,” few meters apart, “-Igna Haggard.”

“The Baron,” he glared and followed, a bubbling blue and white aura clawed from his back, “-looks weak from here.”

Out the mild cover of a stray tree, “-Good afternoon Eira,” he waved amicably, “-you look well since last time’s fight.”

“Dear cousin,” she snarled, “-have you come to face an army of this size alone?”

“Perhaps,” he shrugged. Vanessa snuck her head over his shoulder.

“Pops, is that her?” her eyes barely opened, “-the princess?”

“Correct,” he patted her head, “-what of the army, are they weak?”

“Y-yeah,” she fell asleep, “-n-no p-problem,” yet another yawn.

“Excuse me,” interjected the hero, “-my name’s Kion Hurworth, the one who single-handedly defeated the Blood-King’s army. The situation should be clear, we’ve already claimed Glenda.”

"Honestly Cousin," giggled Eira, "-will fighting here even bring us entertainment?" grimoires levitated, each gesture of the fingers and arms affected their movement, *snap,* the book opened, "-what about the people, the friends of the academy?"

"My, my," he smirked, "-someone's gotten a little cocky," he closed the distance, "-Librarian of Nexsolium, I'm sorry to say," the eyes bleached into the crystal-like white shimmer, "-such puny incomplete information shan't rival my knowledge." *Eyes of Truth: Revelation.*

"Altering the pupils isn't going to do much," she laughed.

"Are you sure?" the crystal hue vanished, *Box of Alche,* the throats choked, a tremendous pressure buckled the vehicles, *-knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing,* he drew a simple horizontal line, *Spatial-Arts: Dimension Split* threads of reality tore before their stead, a vortex engulfed the surrounding light and image to only hurl it back out. A tinge of white circled a radius of five kilometers. Clouds were replaced by pages, vibrant colors blanched, time and their existence felt wrong. *Realm Expansion: Mantia.*

"What have you done?" fired Eira. Kion's demeanor remained unbothered.

"I've summoned part of Mantia."

"..." her eyes widened; the fist clenched.

"What's the matter with you?" elbowed Kion, "-tis only a barrier, is it not?"

Her knees buckled, she fell on all fours, "-no wonder thou art an imbecile," she grudgingly turned to Igna's stoic expression, "-the Library of Mantia is a realm of myth even in the godly realm. The Library of Nexsolium is incomplete, my mentor, Qhildir, is said to have once stumble onto a dimension where all is known, the ultimate state of awakening. Tis what gave inspiration for the construction of Nexsolium..."

"Correct," he blinked into their personal space and patted her shoulders, "-what Qhildir saw was a reflection, Mantia is the manifestation of it who holds reality, Origin's knowledge. I don't remember if I said it before, I inherited what most would kill to attain. The pinnacle of understanding," a single glance decayed the grimoires, her pages and books were rendered useless.

"Don't be so patronizing," she snarled to knock off his arm, '-where did he?"

"Mantia is my domain, my realm, I control everything," the voice resounded, "-what will it be, Librarian, does thee wish to fight?" the figure vanished.

"Shut it," she gritted, "-summoning one's own realm has a fundamental flaw; mana usage and concentration. Stray even and the realm may kill the summoner," she giggled, "-what about Glenda, the adventuring friends. The people thee vowed to protect, we came as a decoy, two-thousand of our best men have already captured the town. They'll start killing soon, what say you, Baron Igna, Mantia won't be much help." She spoke the truth, under normal circumstances, the plan would have worked.

A jolt of lightning shook the goddesses, '-the signal,' thought Miira with hands-on her nape. "-Come on Lilith, we ought to get going."

"Yes, let's," the flower snapped, shadows gave way to sunlight, her spell served its purpose.

“You’re coming with us, hero’s companion.”

Outside the guild, the same sensation went about their bodies, “-We ought to bring that pest too,” said Gophy.

“Should be for the best,” nodded Intherna.

Tsk, tsk, tsk, “-poor little Eira and her vague schemes. Didn’t I say this before,” he reappeared on the path, “-no matter the scheme, if one can adapt, tis all for naught.” Both hands circled, countless symbols wrote in reddened ink, *Spatial-Arts: Rift.*

Suffocation, blurred vision, ‘-such an overwhelming aura,’ she coughed, ‘-gates?’ lightning struck, straight-faced silhouettes strolled onto the battlefield. Inesa, Ulia, and Alta flung onto the dirt, Kion’s expression broke for the first time, Inesa’s battered face and broken limbs fired deep, their pain resounded a burst of energy, “-BARON!”

Chapter 612: Empire’s Invasion [30]

“My lord hero,” pleaded Ulia, “-please, don’t get angry on our behalf,” she sniffled.

“I don’t care,” the aura intensified, “-there’s no way!” the hands made for his hilt, “-Igna Haggard, face me like a real man. Let’s fight one on one, no magic, nothing, raw strength and swordsmanship, you devil.”

“We have a lively one,” remarked Lilith, “-I can sense the stench of Lucifer on thee,” she covered her nose, “-how repulsive.”

“Look at all these people,” said Gophy, “-a rather tough crowd.”

Sigh, “-Igna, were you serious on fighting these men?” inquired Intherna, “-the bravado is admirable, this is on a whole different level of foolishness.”

“Don’t underestimate him,” said Miira, “-look around, feel the air, we’re trapped inside an alternate dimension.”

“Enough chat,” gestured Igna, “-Hero Kion,” *snap,* the three girls hovered by their hair, the hands were forced and tied behind their back, “-here’s the exchange. I’ll let go of these three for the lives of five thousand.”

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“STOP SCREWING WITH ME!” the aura erupted; “-my companions were hurt. These men are people from my estate, no way I’m going to allow their deaths,” he glared Eira, “-what about the hostages and the men sent in Glenda, what happened to them?”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” winked Lilith. Gophy took a strong step forward, “-invading our lord’s property was a grave mistake,” a black mist of unparalleled pressure knocked the bystanders, the hero’s energy locked in battle with hers, a hefty stalemate.

“Adding to thy sins is the slaughter of demi-humans,” added Miira, translucent dragon-shaped outlines swirled around her arms and legs, an azure symbol engraved on her forehead.

"Ill-treatment of the ones we swore to protect," exclaimed Intherna, wings of flames sprawled, magma dribbled to melt the very ground, her entire persona burnt.

"The judgment is death by the thousand," winked Lilith seductively, flowers formed atop her open palm.

"Who are you people?" the grip eased.

"Igna Haggard's family," winked Miira.

"F-family?" coughed Eira, "-surely not," she clambered atop a boulder, "-each one of thee has more power than my foolish cousin. Why serve under him, I don't get it?"

"Not a matter of strength," smirked Intherna, "-our reasons are ours alone, a traitor shouldn't infect our breathing air, tis a waste. Why not fall over and die already."

"Kion," she pulled onto his armor, "-we should retreat. There's no hope of winning. These four are goddess's, Gophy and Miira are high-tier, we don't stand a chance."

"Don't waste your breath," smiled Igna, "-Eira, there's no hope of escaping. The title of the devil, demon, and evil being is starting to fit. Perhaps I am the devil," the distance closed with the hostages hovering in toe, "-Hero of another world, blessed man of Dustina. The outcome of the fight has been decided, Inesa's body speaks for itself," inches from Kion's angered expression, "-I'm feeling generous," the hostages landed, "-here's a gift," *Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Full body Restoration.* "That should have taken care of most of her injuries."

"Don't listen to him Kion," exclaimed Eira, "-he's putting on a show."

"What's your angle?" he gritted, "-why have thee returned the hostages. I'm a straightforward type of person, I don't much care for lies and underhanded trickery, be upfront."

"Favors must be repaid in full. Report says the hero showed my people mercy," he stepped back, "-hence this whim," a good distance away, "-Kion, tell me, were you serious about the duel?"

"I was," knelt over the healed Inesa, "-I would have fought for her freedom. There's nothing else I ought to get from fighting..."

"Good point," a murderous expression rattled his mien, "-her freedom is assured. Yet, thy freedom hasn't been subject to negotiations. Let's make the fight fair. Don't get me wrong, I'm weak and tis no shame. An all-out battle would be carried by my trusted friends," the four stood strongly, "-never mind them, this little fellow on my back is strong enough to take out half of thy men."

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"You're a coward then," fired Kion, "-asking others to do thy dirty work!"

"Such a double standard," he locked onto Eira, "-didn't they infiltrate Glenda and do the 'dirty-work'. Stop being an idiot and look me in the eye, I'll fight without magic, raw ability against raw ability, a battle between the famed hero, the strongest member of the church, against the devil, inheritor of the first progenitor's blood."

"Fine," he approached the center, "-what if I win?"

"I'll guarantee thy freedom," he nodded towards Gophy and the others, "-you have no leverage to strike a deal."

A momentary pause exhaled into, "-sure. Tis thy funeral," he smirked.

"Trash talking," he teleported to Lilith, "-mind taking care of Vanesa?"

"Sure," she smiled. A nod of acknowledgment carried down the line.

"I thought you said no magic," fired Kion.

"No magic, tis a duel."

A heavy blade unsheathed; a godly radiance flooded the pale landscape. "-Not to brag, I was granted a heroic blade, one with the power to split a demon in half."

"Looks like the hero has a befitting weapon," mocked Igna, "-let me warn you, the moment we clash, there'll be blood spilled."

"Don't waste your breath," they moved to a moderate distance, Kion's stance readied, a diagonal pose intent on counter. Igna stood empty, with no prerequisite stance. A palpable thud echoed, a singular leaf drifted in between. *Woosh,* ground cracked, the duo vanished, for heavy armor and weapon, Kion's speed surpassed human limits. Each strike thrown was immediately parried and readied for a counter, the initial combinations tested the waters. *Clang, clang, clang,* flickers darted left and right, *BOOM,* Igna flew backward and narrowly escaped falling headfirst. '-Holy shit...' the words subconsciously escaped, '-he's strong,' the ground before him carved by the resulting momentum, '-my palms are resonating.'

'Very skilled,' thought Kion. He remained steadfast at the initial point, '-without enhancement and a shabby steel-long sword, I get why Eira wanted him dead.' An itching sensation pulsed, '-he cut me?' the cheeks bled from a mild slit, '-I was solely focused on defense and he did that...' An exchange of glances led into another tête-à-tête through sword.

'Who is this man?' wondered Kion, '-the moment I try to shift my footing, he launches a diagonal strike. My reach's longer, even then, by the time I react, he's already on my weak point. Doesn't matter, I'll keep him close, he's bound to get tired. We're each other's natural enemies. A rock can be dismantled by a strong enough wave, however a strong enough rock can nullify the hastiest of waves,' he parried an upward stroke, carried the momentum and instantly darted for Igna's neck, '-I made contact and reached the bone,' an explosion flew Igna to the right and onto a boulder.

"Damn," he exclaimed, "-you nearly took off my head," he held his shoulder, '-close one,' breathing grew harder, blood poured down the left arm, the weapon broke.

"Baron Igna," he held the sword menacingly, "-so much for the gallantry of being a better swordsman. I forgot to mention, as a hero of another world, my physical attributes, and prowess far surpass those here. My blade was forged by the feathers of an angel."

"Good, very good. There's merit in taking this fight seriously."

"What do you mean?" glared the Hero, "-I was fighting with all my strength from the get-go... were you holding back?"

“Obviously,” he chuckled, “-what’s the fun if not to see my foe drown in despair?” the blood crystalized, the bleeding stopped.

“We agreed to no magic...”

“Not magic, you fool,” he coughed, “-tis blood-arts. A talent similar to martial arts, and the heroic arts thee possess. For the record, why the reluctance in going all out?”

“I was fighting with all my might... thee said no magic, therefore, I haven’t enhanced my body.”

“Oh, did I?” he briefly scratched his head, “-use it, use magic, I want to see how powerful the hero truly is.”

“There’s no reason to do so,” he spat, “-the swordsmanship is weak.”

“Weak you say,” the hands made for Orenmir, “-shall we test it?”

“Fine,” held upfront, ‘-why does he act so high and mighty. I’ve clearly won our prior exchange...’ the blade reacted, ‘-what’s this?’ the focus drew to a maniacal sheath, ‘-is my blade afraid of his, impossible, I’m a hero, I mustn’t falter.”

“Heads-up, Kion, here’s a taste of hell,” he vanished. Kion’s sense heightened, ‘-feel him,’ the eyes shut, ‘-the curse is a dead giveaway, there, on the left,’ the eye reopened, “-got you,” a direct downward strike.

“-Too weak,” he dipped, narrowly escaped the blade’s reach, and landed a clean strike, Kion reflectively pulled and shielded with his armor. ‘Close one,’ he panted and leaped to safety, ‘-that stare,’ he gulped, ‘-the way he glared, everything happened so quickly, a pair of crimson daggers, my heart dropped, I’m scared, w-what was that?’

‘I missed,’ gritted Igna, ‘-damned shoulder.’

“Enough!” cried Eira, “-Kion, you can’t defeat him without using the boon. I’m sure it’s clear now, don’t underestimate Igna, he’s arguably the strongest swordsman to ever live in our century.”

“Please,” he pouted in jest, “-being called the strongest swordsman is embarrassing,” back to straight-faced, “-Kion, tis thy last chance. Win while I have a bad shoulder, the moment I recover, it’s over.”

“Fine,” forced into a denser posture, *Imprisoned till the age of reckoning, blessed my goddess,* fingers ran along the blade, *-unsheath thineself for all to see. Shine in thy real splendor, Elciz, weeping sword of Dustina.*

Heed my word, aged armor of the ancient ones, awaken, Enlightha,

Forgo of my limits, dig further into the depths of the slumbering beasts of Elck; I, humble hero, plea for a sliver of strength, grant me the power of absolute destruction.

“G-get a-away,” yawned Vanesa, “-mother, I don’t want to be dirty.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” fired Miira, *Azure Dragon’s Helm: Barrier,* a green dome protected their spot, “-the hero’s about to unleash some ancient arts. How will Igna deal with the attack I wonder.”

Armor, weapon, physical attributes, the borderline between human and godhood surpassed in a split, a downward strike created energy the size of a skyscraper. The armor cracked, ‘-my strongest spell,’ the fingers fractured the instant it unleashed. A slash of pure godly mana buried all in its wake, the ground ruptured as a hot knife to butter.

“The sad truth of an ultimate attack is,” a bell melodically rang; time seemed to stop, the postured dropped and bounced, hands on the handle, “-no matter how strong it is,” *Lightning-Strike: Abyssal Red Variant,* the sword unsheathed,”-if one is rendered useless afterward,” a horizontal scarlet-black line cut across, “-then there’s no point,” rose petals fluttered into deep echo. Howls of the dead resonated, he slid to a stop leaving a trail of steam. Kion’s head hung with a knee to the ground, the other hoisted against the embedded blade. Amber sprinkle of petals and snow illuminated the blanched sky. Rampaging specters returned to their prison, Orenmir resheathed.

“Hero of the Church,” the injuries healed, “-I didn’t use magic, our fight ended in thy defeat, are the results satisfactory or shall I behead thee for good measure?”

“I admit defeat,” he coughed, “-I unleashed everything I had, how did you win?”

“A simple act of momentarily using my weapon’s true power. The hero has fallen by the hands of the devil.”

“Go on with it,” he gritted, “-I plea for my companions to be granted mercy.”

“No,” they begged, “-take us instead, we’re the ones who hurt the demi-humans, not our lord.”

“Quit with the senseless begging,” he grabbed Eira’s chin, “-another win for me.”

“Let me go,” she pulled her head, “-this battle isn’t over, we have five-thousand.”

“Stop right there,” the hands gestured to the others, the goddesses arrived, “-five-thousand strong, quite a big number,” *Clap,* the soldiers teleported in Kion’s self-made crevasse.

“Igna...” his heart dropped, “-please, don’t... I beg you, don’t do what you’re thinking...”

“A win is a win, in the end, the victor is he who decides the outcome,” the four separated to stand two against two atop the ledge, “-the exchange is simple,” he faced the coming massacre, “-freedom for thine lives.” Draconis leaped into his arms whilst Vanesa fell into a piggy-back ride.

“Pops, good job on winning,” smiled Draconis.

“Congratuala-la-la,” she fell asleep.

“Igna, don’t do it,” said Eira, “-tis needless deaths...”

A merciless side-glance halted her speech. “-Welcome to hell,” he gestured to Gophy. Lava fell, explosions threw limbs, thorns impaled, and the clashing of rocks squished the remainder, “-I hope thee enjoyed thy stay.”

Chapter 613: Empire’s Invasion [31]

Damnation, ire, woe, self-pity, the ugliness of the human psyche. Ulia, Alta, and Inesa wrapped around the weeping hero. Outfit torn to shred, confidence laid waste, and the warm burning of the cheeks. ‘-I

was supposed to be untouchable,' the face hallowed, '-Dustina's blessing was supposed to be my trump card, I used everything, t-this is the r-result.' Albeit closely warming the fallen man, neither of the girls could stand the sight of death. Legend spoke of hell being the purely imaginary world of evil being burnt, the tormenter being tormented, and the savages offered to the foul beasts. Concurrently, before their person, the manifestation of it who they chastised and alienated from salvation engraved into their hearts. The personification of evil, Igna Haggard, or so thought Kion.

"Igna..." sobbed Eira, "-w-why did t-this h-have to happen?"

"Eira, small Eira, tiny Eira, foolish Eira," a nonchalant glance had her heart tremble, "-I said I would meet my enemy in full, the choice has been made. Stand as my opposition, I'll be sure to drive any who dares lay another finger on my people."

"-B-Baron," coughed Inesa, "-w-why did y-you l-let us l-live?"

"To be witnesses," he smirked, "-Hero Kion, take this message to the emperor, '-the boundaries have been crossed. The Church's forces will fall soon enough. I'll be in touch soon. Should cover it," he dusted his shoulder, "-it sure was a great fight."

Conversation between him and the little ones faded, Eira was left curled against a truck's tire, '-the fate awaiting those who oppose Igna is beyond traumatizing. He fought the hero without enhancement or magic, he fought on swordsmanship alone. The conjuration of Mantia rendered my library useless.'

"Kion," sobbed Alta, "-how can a person be so cruel," heavy tears echoed against the hardened dirt.

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"Stop it," he said, or tried to say, the air stuck at the throat, '-I-I c-c-can't.'

Peering over the crevasse, "-quite the concoction," he remarked.

"We went a little overboard," added Lilith in jest.

"Our job's done here," nodded Gophy, "-we'll be off to the shadow realm."

"Alright," he bowed, "-thanks for the help."

"It's no problem," they smiled, "-see you soon, devil," winked Intherna, black flashes opened to the other world, their overwhelming presence lifted. The combination of their powers ended in a goring sludge, empty skulls of the lucky would float, the unlucky merged in Intherna's lava. A frown said, '-disgusting.'

Once living now dead. O' thee who've lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival. Bright crimson glow illuminated the stagnant scenery, countless bodies crawled from the pits of hell.

Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo of the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration. An appeasing glow caressed the disfigured, a gentle touch of a mother cuddling her child, a child caring for her pet. The charm and vigor resounded in involuntary prostration, five thousand strong revived to bow. Kion managed to stumble his way to Igna's foot.

“What’s happening?” he inquired on all fours, none stayed by his side, they were frightened to approach.

“Quit the crazed self-pity,” snarled Igna, “-embrace the desperation and pain. You were lax in our fight, didn’t expect to get injured, did you?”

“N-no,” the face dried in sweat, “-are you at a higher realm than gods?”

“Yes,” he returned in a somewhat friendly tone, “-I’m ranked higher than Creation. In laymen’s terms, I have the power to injure gods and demons alike.”

“What about you?” he coughed; “-I injured y-you.”

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“Yeah, it’s because my existence elapses across all living beings. Therefore, I can be hurt by everything. Tis self-explanatory.” The army soon ambled towards a rift, “-as for them, they’ll live peaceful lives as my servants. No need to worry, they’ll start new lives in a world like ours. Fighters are expected to die, the moment one kills, he must be readied to be killed. From an Ardanian’s point of view, allowing such wretched men bliss makes me nauseous.” He dropped to one knee and gripped Kion’s shoulder, “-as a being of another world, do you wish to return or stay here?”

“I wish I had a place to return, my previous life is worse than I could ever hope to imagine,” he fell onto his arms with forehead to the dirt, “-I don’t ever want to think about those people again.”

“Kion” he dropped onto his bottom and sighed, “-I know what I’ve done can never be taken back,” the puppet army vanished, *-Dominion Release.* The sun shone brighter, the grass and leaves cried in joy. A blanched landscape of imperfection beckoned for a splash of color. The harm done seemed to have never happened, the crevasse and spilled blood relinquished to what laid before, unchanged and tranquil. “-You’re a man of action,” he sincerely matched the man’s woeful gaze, “-you were lied too from the start.”

“L-Lied too?” he frowned.

“Answer me this, what are your parent’s names, where were you born, and name me an embarrassing moment of the past.”

“So m-many questions,” he sat cross-legged, “-let me think...” blank, the visage paled.

“There’s my point,” sighed Igna cradling both Draconis and Vanesa, “-the resurrection is true, and Dustina did grace thee with powers. Alas, thy native world is Alpha, not some otherworldly realm,” *-Mana-Cancellation,* a flick to the forehead shattered the memory alteration curse. ‘-He’s blacked out,’ grinned he, ‘-a few minutes should do the job.’

Alta gathered her strength and will to move a few steps. Eira led the way to Igna, the ladies stood awkwardly, “-something the matter?” returned a condescending voice.

“N-no,” fired Inesa, ‘-my heart,’ she gulped, ‘-I’m so nervous.’

“Come on,” he gave a friendly smile, “-join our little discussion.”

"S-sure," and so made a circle of friend and foe. Neither could the once elegantly dressed lady nor shorter bud of energy directly face Igna. Inesa contended in hiding behind the passed-out Kion. Somewhere in the palpable silence, Draconis began to drool. With no reservation, Igna warmly wiped the saliva and settled the boy in a better posture. Vanesa changed to sit at his side as opposed to on the lap, her pale expression carried into an adorable and innocent slumber.

"Who are they?" inquired Eira.

"Come on now cousin," he smirked, "-tis no way to talk to family. The boy here is named Draconis Haggard, and she's Vanesa Haggard, my son, and daughter, your nephew, and niece."

"Come on," she facepalmed, "-how old are they?"

"No idea," he laughed, "-we're not blood-related, and neither are we. Vanesa's the deity worshipped by Vane's cult, as for him, he's one of the ancient demons. The one bearing long dark-brown hair is Lilith, Queen of Demons and wife to Lucifer."

"W-wife t-to t-t-the king?" the comment struck her in awe.

"Correct. I don't have the time nor the will to explain why she's on my side." Kion slowly came to, the tears flowed without stop, he innocently locked upon his companions.

"I know now," he sniffled, "-my home and what happened."

"Care to share the story?" inquired Igna.

"S-sure, I was born into Alpha's lower society. Life growing up was hard, school never really suited my abilities. I always had a knack for thieving. One day, I stumbled my way into the land of dreams; I overheard a conversation between shady-looking men. The pride of Hidros's return, she was spotted in Melmark. Here I thought it would be a good opportunity to make some easy money, I mean, blackmailing a dead idol won't get me in trouble. The last thing I knew, I was up a skyscraper and held in her arms, she cried out, '-even if I die, my music will live on. And trust me, the day a certain man finds out the truth, the whole of the Patek Dynasty will tremble!' Gunshots rattled our step, she shielded me from the first barrage and fell, I reflectively grabbed her arms... sadly, they hurled me over."

"Look at that," he chuckled, "-fate is weird. A hero, one from the church, was the reincarnation of the man who witnessed the death of the one I sought after."

"Excuse me, were you acquainted?" inquired he.

"Yeah," the tone dropped, "-I knew her pretty well, Aceline was one of those people vowing to change the world using all under her means. She died trying to save another despite being targeted. The Patek's dynasty, suppose the plan ought to shift a little."

"What?"

"No matter," he exhaled, "-Kion, and the hero's companions," a whim spurred from inside, "-the truth's revealed," he looked to the shaken hero, "-forget about delivering my message. Eira will perform just as well."

"No," refuted Eira, "..."

He held out a hand, “-Kion, our fight has showed a multitude of things. Our blows recounted the tale of what type of person you are. The feelings are shared mutually. I, therefore, extend a hand., forgo of thy puppet lifestyle and join me, the Haggard’s, in our agenda. I don’t ask for forgiveness, hate me for all it’s worth, I slaughtered five-thousand of thy men. I’m not expecting much, you’ve suffered at the hand of the Church, and so have I. Join me, I’ll make sure you and your friends won’t ever need to touch a sword or enter the battlefield again.”

“-Ha-ha-ha-ha,” he broke, “-how is that fair... I’ve lost everything, my memories only speak of how wicked a man I am.”

“Returning would fully sanction execution. A hero unable to protect his men is worth naught, the wrath and guilt will eat from the inside. In the end, you’ll exist as an empty shell, devoid of dreams and full of regrets.”

“-W-WHY?” he screeched, “-WHY!”

“Because I’m like you,” he stared off into the distance, “-I lost people who I vowed to protect. My family was slain mercilessly by Kreston. The regret still lingers to this day, power means nothing if it can’t save another. Here’s Eira for example, we’re family, she’s the daughter to my uncle, a great man who once unified Hidros and created the Federation, a man of unfathomable strength. He died trying to save what he had lost, death by the hands of his daughter, the silver-haired princess.”

“What if I refuse?”

“Head on home, nothing changes the outcome.”

“What if I say yes?”

“Tis the opportunity at starting over, a life without violence.”

“What if I was to fight?”

“You’ll fight as a member of the Barony of Glenda, or, join the familia as a wicked man of slaughter. There are many paths I can offer, you choose.”

“-I-I...” he inhaled; “-I want to be someone who fights for justice. Not for the church, not as a hero, but a normal man who fights crime and saves people from enduring my fate.”

“Take a moment and discuss with your companions,” he stepped away, “-Eira,” the lass followed. Silence divulged into a full-blown argument. Arms waved, the expression scrolled, woe, ire, bliss, none knew what the other felt.

“Taking out the opposition,” remarked Eira.

“Not really,” returned Igna, “-tis a whim,” they sat atop a boulder. “-What now?”

“I’ll report the defeat of Kion’s party. It depends on his answer, if he wishes to die, he’ll die.”

“We’ve decided,” panted Kion, “-I selfishly forced them to agree. Baron Igna, please, allow me to start over.”

“Good choice,” he leaped, “-Kion, Alta, Inesa, and Ulia, from today onward, thy life ends. The hero and his party were slain on the battlefield. Princess Eira has agreed, after all, the winner decides the outcome.”

The daunting fight between the devil and hero halted prematurely. Seeing the death of so many comrades would have spawned a thirst for vengeance, or so one would have thought. ‘Hook, line, and sinker. Sincerity trumps any fledgling amber of revenge. Kion’s out of the picture.’

Chapter 614: Empire’s Invasion [32]

The debacle of Calpter’s Climb ended in victory. A portal summoned to Oda village. Kion and his companions followed, before leaving, Lilith reappeared to call on Draconis. The boy apparently needed to answer for a few things. Her intent was of scolding, the boy had offended his mother. Obtuse to their relation, Igna ambled through.

‘Kion,’ a straight-face nulled on his intent, ‘-he has enough power to defeat me later down the line, there’s greater room to grow. Eira didn’t account for the potential, quite a rudimentary mistake. She thinks my actions were whimsical or made her believe so. Manipulating the thoughts of those around me still stays strong, good to know I’ve still got it. The hero’s conveniently out of the picture, my actions were heartfelt and sincere, I meant no malice whilst offering the opportunities. I meant my words and it reflected, how liberating.’

The princess returned to the capital; the news of the tremendous defeat would take a few days to settle internal affairs. ‘He wants to be a crime fighter,’ paused at the southern path, adjoined to the fields of wheat and once stained tree, ‘-the agency should give and provide what he wishes.’ A phone call to Odgar resolved the issue, an order from the boss couldn’t be dismissed.

The populous grew, most were stationed around the village square. Large tables were brought, the hostages wiped their sorrow to prepare a feast. The underlying reason was of celebration, they knew the Baron would return victorious. Fruits and vegetables prepared; hunters returned with ample produce. éclair stood arms crossed and intently listening to demands. Separate from the mass of housewives sat Haru and the adventurers, including those who witnessed the fight. The traumatic images lingered, some fully etched into innocent minds, others left flabbergasted. God knew how many would recover, the mind could only heal so much. Repeated attempts at forgetting never garnered the requested results.

“Glenda’s destroyed,” said a bystander, “-I saw the ground rise.”

“Really?” interjected another, “-I saw a massive tree spring from nowhere, it covered the whole of the town.”

“What about the bodies,” murmured Haru, “-if left unchecked, we could have a plague on our hands.”

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“I know,” muffled Ling, “-there was so much slaughter, the hospice can’t handle such numbers.”

A purple rift sparked into the streets, “-hands up mister,” cried a little kid, “-my name’s Raulf Serlo, are you one of the bad guys?”

"Pardon me?" knelt Kion, "-you're Raulf Serlo?" he wondered with a blemished expression.

"Don't mind him," said another following behind, "-that's Ota, the self-proclaim strongest fighter in Oda village."

"Ohh," the face glowed, "-you're the gamemaster," the sword soon fell, "-come on mister, can I play more games, please, please?" he hugged Igna's leg, "-please, please!"

"Chill out kid," chuckled Igna, "-I'll let you play, behave for now."

"POPS!" a fiery portal opened to the side, "-I'M BACK," a rocket blasted to a complete stop.

"I told you," they twirled to a stop, "-stop trying to spear people," he gave a mild chop.

"Sorry not sorry," quick to slither out the hold, "-who are you!" he pointed.

"No who are you!" returned Ota.

"My name's Draconis Haggard," he smiled to revealed sharpened canines, "-a demon lord," he tiptoed to give an illusion of floating.

"WOOW," gawked the awestruck Ota, "-demon lord, so cool!"

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"Draconis, Ota, why don't you boys go play," added Igna, "-hold back," a glare resulted in an honest, '-yes pops.'

Alta and Ulia knew not what to think, such a display of affection and kindness was far from what had been shown. Kion's thoughts muddled, a confusing Inesa elbowed out. Noise welled from deep inside; a simple gesture led the others towards a glowing crowd.

"Master," bowed éclair, "-welcome back. Might I presume we've won the fight?"

"Yes," he smiled.

"I see the culprits of the attack lay in thy shadows," the eyes narrowed, "-shall I dispose of them?" a flash of killing intent stole their breaths, Ulia coughed from fear alone. Inesa held her neck, as for Alta, her face lowered in shame.

"No need," gestured Igna, "-they've surrendered."

"Why are they here then?" fired a stray adventurer. The busy crowd caught notice, chopping and preparation halted, those affected ambled to surround their position. First in the crowd was Haru, "-why are the invaders here?" she gritted.

"Traitors!" cried another, "-all of them, we ought to burn them to the stakes. Such punishment is befitting the oppressors."

Mana Control: Earth Element Variant – Mud Wall, cracks outlined a circle of which elevated Igna and the hero a few feet up. "Hear me, people of Glenda!" loud and clear, "-I, Baron Igna Haggard, have defeated and reclaimed our beloved town. The number of casualties were kept at a minimum, or so I hope. I apologize for the people killed," he bowed, "-without the people, a town is nothing more than

empty construction. Thou art the heart and soul of what we call home. The war against the Empire is hard. We've lost most of the garrisoned guards, I saw friends die for the sake of dying. The horrendous actions were unsanctioned," briskly pointing to Kion, "-will the people I vow to protect stoop to their level and stone these people for the sake of retribution. What will revenge accomplish, tis but a fading sense of accomplishment? What then, tell me, will you be able to live with the guilt of hurting the innocent?"

"What's innocent about them," cried an onlooker, "-they killed right before my eyes."

"And so have I," returned Igna, "-I'm sure my nickname of being the Devil has started to gain traction. In no way shape or form am I the embodiment of righteousness, I'm the same as you, I'm an Ardanian, and at my core, I live with a directive and vague concept of good and evil. I won't bother in directing thy opinions. Shun them, hate them, my stance is firm and unshakable. Kion showed mercy to my people, the nightwalkers, Alta and Ulia only attacked men charged of defending the town, as for Inesa, she was but a spy. Her mouth might have spouted lecherous words and degrading comments, what then, will words break our spirit or we shall rise beyond it, tell me, what's the right thing to do!"

"A leader must lead by example," said the Elder, "-Baron Igna has decided, us, the people, must honor the will of our Lord."

"What happened to the five-thousand men?" inquired a knowledgeable stranger.

He made note of the unfamiliar person, '-he might be of some use,' side-glancing éclair, the butler nodded. "They were killed," proclaimed Igna, "-my companions and I defeated their army. The empire shan't dare break a nonaggression pact ever again!"

"LONG LIVE LORD IGNA!" echoed around the village, "LONG LIVE THE LORD!"

Dispel, the platform crumbled, "-Hear me, people of Oda village, I have a proposition."

"Which is?" frowned the Elder.

"Let's take the celebration to Glenda, Oda village is a little cramped. A portal shall be manifested for the occasion, after all, we've just won against seven-thousand men."

"HELL YEAH!" ran across the cacophonous crowd, young and old, excitement filled their hearts and screamed out the pearly white smiles. The joy of having won such a difficult battle, those experienced in the war were impressed and grateful. Tuesday the 6th of May would forever be remembered as the Birth of Glenda's Devil. Reservations aside, the portal doorway was erected inside the Guild house. The expectation of a destroyed town and corpse-filled streets stumped the moment they arrived. Apart from scorched walls, few bullet holes, and the destruction of an abandoned building, all remained the same. Damage sustained was minimal. Intherna and Gophy kindly burnt any trace of death, two thousand men made for the afterlife without recognition. The evening drew close, the natives of town went about their business. Stray merchants stumbled into the middle of a sudden festival. éclair was tasked with inviting people from Apid and Upen village since they were part of Igna's barony.

A serious analysis foretold of how many people actually lived in Glenda, take away the traveling merchants and the populous remained in the thousands. Details aside, éclair's evacuation secretly

divided the flock, some were sent to the abandoned fortress and others to various outposts. All and all, the town regrouped in full.

'I'm tired,' yawned Igna. The watchtower stretched up high, the wooden door gave to a vexing flight of stairs, "-follow me," said Igna. The higher, the more grew other presence. Stomps and trembles of the stone stairs dulled the chatter, Igna immediately halted at the door and gave three imminent taps.

"Mind if I let myself inside my room," the lock clicked.

"Igna," exhaled Lampard, "-you scared the shit out of me," he panted.

"The party's all here," the key casually flew onto the desk, "-Jen and Anna's party," he settled into an office chair. "-Rena, Frost, and Anna seem to be in rough shape," confidently leaned into a stare-down, "-can I have an explanation of what's happened?"

Silence bound Frost and Cole, Ila seemed to be in a daze. "-Anna, might filling in the details?" she coughed and hoisted against the bedrest.

"We were played for fools."

"Never mind," the hands shrugged away the explanation, "-I can't be asked to deal in intrigue for right now. Kion, take over, would you?" he eased into a napping posture, Vanesa stumbled into bed with the others. An awkward silence stretched; the hero exchanged few glances.

"Question," Jen broke the ice.

"Go ahead."

"Angelic mana's practically overflowing your aura, you're from the church..." her eyes narrowed.

"Yes, I'm Kion Hurworth, the summoned Hero. You're a trained saint, the aura speaks so."

Pleasantries went back and forth, the situation rolled onto the table. Enemies made allies on a whim. Rena and Jen were astounded, Leonard and Lampard all but chuckled. Tis the sort of person Igna was.

An hour elapsed, the mind swam up the depths of thought, '-I didn't use my element. Summoning Origin's knowledge came naturally. No backlash to my body or soul, the bond's strong, stronger I'd wager. We're truly one of the same. He's such a humble bragger, what he brings is knowledge and no combat prowess, I'd so enjoy giving him a mild slap. What happened today is something I'll never forget.'

"Oh, my other self," said a fleeting whisper, "-you're a big ol' whimsical idiot," resonating laughter floated about, "-the life shown so far has truly been fulfilling. I'm happy, words can't express how much emotion brings pleasure. The joy's trickled into thy side. Every elapsed moment, we grow into the perfect being. With the ability to swap from stone-cold and blissful, as well as sharing a middle ground, I'm no longer a bystander for my name's Igna Haggard. Go on, wake up, it's been an hour already.'

Smack, the air blew out the lung, '-what the?' the eyes reopened to an energetic Draconis.

"Pops, pops, pops," he hopped about the stone-cold floor, "-wake up, wake up, wake up. The festival's ongoing," the head swayed in a daunting demonic hum.

“Whatever,” rolling the eyes, “-Kion and Alta,” sat upright, “-what of the others?”

The former nervously scratched his head, “-Inesa and Ulia instantly clicked with Jen and Rena. They’re a wholesome group of friends, especially Jen, she was adamant in setting differences aside when Frost spoke of us as enemies.”

“All for the better I suppose,” he stood, “-what about you two?”

“I chose to stay, I’m ashamed to take part in the celebrations.”

“Guilty about the fight,” a brotherly pat gave reassurance, “-the hero’s dead. You’re a new man.” Along the mini pep-talk, the graceful Alta threw intent glances.

“Excuse you,” returned Igna, “-though I don’t hate the attention, could I please know why I’m being gawked at so methodically?”

“M-me?” her voice squeaked.

“No, the wall behind,” he returned sarcastically.

“U-u-Uhm, I...” she paused to recompose, “-I was impressed by the speech. With the emphasis and strain on words, I’m moved. There aren’t many people able to stand to such a crowd and speak wholeheartedly, and appeal to their emotions, it’s amazing.”

“I appreciate the compliment, thank you, Alta.”

Chapter 615: Empire’s Invasion [33]

An ensemble of jovial townsfolk sang. Tragedy had one of two uses, either destroy one’s opponent or grant a cause for people to rally. The latter befitted the discordant Glenda. For the hastiness of preparation; the festival sure garnered many pleasant compliments. Free food and drinks, neighboring taverns were in full swing. Anger displayed into a drunken stupor. In and so sat Igna at Mainde’s Tavern, a quaint little meeting area favorite for deals. In his company sat Vanesa and Draconis, the latter found great pleasure in playing games. The former remained more or less the same. She’d often spout mumbo-jumbo and dowsed right into her nap.

Neatly tucked in a cozy corner, drinks arrived the same as would regular guests. Baron Igna joined the celebration, the hero of Glenda carried weight in a name. The attention was very much appreciated. He kindly knocked back drink after drink, and consciously avoided the cigar.

Opposite them, on a similar yet stained leather seat, settled Kion and Alta. New bar-mates arrived, later on, blond hair and the radiance of upper nobility followed by a tranquil expression of serenity – Julius and Malley.

Igna held his chin with an elbow on the armrest. The first image was, ‘-smugness and confidence,’ not as if they could argue.

“Good to see you again,” said he softly.

“Cousin,” nodded Julius, “-quite the festival. We went around town; people are dancing to their heart’s content.”

“Free food tastes better,” retorted Igna, “-the celebration is on me. Let the people have fun, Glenda’s on the path to change, one we’ll be part of.”

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Malley’s curious gaze wandered onto Kion, her heart dropped the moment they made eye contact. “-A-are y-y-you t-the summoned hero?” she stuttered.

“No,” returned a kind blink, “-I’m naught but a man in the service of Baron Igna.”

“I doubt it,” her eyes narrowed, “-the elegant Alta, no way I’ll mistake the hero’s party for some humble nobody.”

“Quiet,” gestured Igna, “-Malley, do be mindful of thy tone,” between the whelming pressure and confusion, the pitch rose to attract attention. Guests slowed their pace to eavesdrop, a mishap beyond her control.

“I apologize,” she resettled.

“Let me explain,” voiced Igna, “-first,” hailing a waitress, “-mind we have more ale?”

“O-on it,” she gulped, her platter rattled, “-w-will that b-be all?” he nodded, and so scurried away. ‘What happened?’ was left to linger

“Someone’s popular,” winked Julius, “-I can see the lady bearing gentle makeup is flustered as well.”

Skipping the playful comments, “-Malley, Julius, these two are indeed Hero Kion and his party. There’s two more dancing about town. To the world, the hero died on the battlefield. Today onward, Kion will have another start at life, one in Alphaia in the company of Odgar Codd. He wishes to be a member of law enforcement, tis the best I can offer as of yet. The agency’s a great group of people.”

“Is that the reason we’re here?” inquired the prince.

“Yes, you are to escort them to the airfield tomorrow. Arrangements have been made; a plane should be landing no later than 02:00. My job is done for tonight, Julius, take over, I’m tired.”

“No you’re not,” a portal summoned, red-fiery hair grasped his arms, “-retreating away from the celebration,” added another, one by one, the lights flickered to accommodate Gophy and the rest.

“We deserve our celebration,” interjected Adete sat atop the shoulder.

“And you’re coming with us,” winked Intherna. Miira stood gracefully, a big assuring smile watched as the lord was dragged out by the ears. Lilith and Intherna laughed loudly as they forced him outside.

“There they go making noise again,” said a lady in a seductive gothic-style dress, “-hear me,” her black nails wrapped around Igna’s order of ale, “-Malley, Alta,” she gulped the whole drink, “-there’s no way,” *hic,* her head rocked backed. Senseless jumbles escaped her slowed speech.

“Don’t mind her,” added Miira parting her long blond hair, “-she’s a lightweight when it comes to drinking,” sat with a low-cut dress, “-Prince Julius,” another drink knocked back without even denting her expression, “-are the children here?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “-they should be in the company of Estelle.”

As was said, the lady promenaded with kids in tow. The responsibilities had dulled any spark of revolt, the sharp tongue had no place to be. In addition to carrying a child, the head-maid fumbled along, not knowing the destination. Celebrations went on late, the people enjoyed their time, Igna bonded with his companions, an idyllic end to a less than likable fight.

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The clock struck midnight, those blacked out drunk were teleported home, the portals soon led the sober safely away. éclair and Igna watched, the guests gave compliments to then leave. “What a pleasant sight,” returned Igna. A trail of trash, spoiled food, and vomit was left in their wake.

“Unpleasant sire,” refuted éclair, “-they’ve caused quite the mess.”

“Not really, look at their smiles. White and pure, it’s like the stars have descended upon us. Being a baron sure is rewarding at times.” The native of Glenda carried on to the housing district. Doorways to the villages collapsed by a clap.

“Looks like someone’s had more to drink,” commented he on Estelle’s stumbling.

“Help me out...” cried the exasperated Julius, “-I’m stuck with two lightweights,” he held Malley and the maid.

“What happened?”

“Miira,” he exhaled, “-she’s a sadist, I swear. Forcing Malley and Estelle into a drinking battle. Look at her,” he lifted the foot, “-she’s laughing even now.”

“Good job,” winked Igna, “-alright, time to head on home.”

“Fine,” he paused at a stray stool, “-Kion, Alta, Ulia, and Inesa, did I catch the names right?” They followed behind, “-yes you did,” said the hero. Alta’s demeanor was of woe, why would an enemy be so sad? If Gophy hadn’t gotten so drunk, her no holds barred tongue would have sliced the tension instantly. Sadly, upon glancing back, Igna digressed the thought. Goddess of Chaos had lost her mind and body into Intherna’s rather unstable posture. Add Lilith to the mix, and the daughter of Rah pleaded for help. Miira coyly ignored the request, choosing to care for Draconis instead. A distant, ‘-don’t hurl,’ halted shy of his ear.

Ignoring the mess, Kion turned to Alta, “-what’s the matter?” he inquired sincerely.

“I don’t know,” she stared the ground, “-I don’t want to leave, I don’t know why. Something compels me to stay,” her tender lashes stared on to Igna, “-my lord baron, is there perhaps a way I can serve you instead?”

“Another girl?” chuckled Julius, “-someone’s popular...”

“Shut it,” he returned, “-Alta, what about Kion, aren’t thee a trusted companion of his entourage. Isn’t it selfish to assume I’ll say yes?”

“No, it’s not,” she refuted, “-Kion said we were free to choose our paths since he selfishly agreed to start again. I want said opportunity; I don’t want to be shackled.”

“My lady, I understand thy troubles,” interjected éclair, “-alas, things aren’t so clear cut. There are underlying issues we ought to take into account. Glenda has restarted, the enemies and spies may still be around. Trust is primordial for the rebuilding of a council. The debacle of steward Undre,” he fixed Inesa, “-has shaken me to my core. As butler to my lord, I won’t accept such whimsical plea.”

The cold night felt colder, Alta’s dream squandered before ever lifting. She crumbled to her knees dramatically, fake or not, the watery shine of her eyes cried loudly. Kion had his head down, Ulia and Inesa were ashamed – such demands on he who had graced their survival would be blatant insolence. As a fellow whimsical type of person, he gave the matter a few seconds then exhaled. Intherna’s struggle ended in defeat, the three fell to eat the hardened dirt.

“Let me see,” added Igna, “-Kion, Ulia, and Inesa,” they looked up, “-what’s your look on her plea?”

“I have no room to argue,” said Kion.

“Same here,” added Ulia.

“Alta’s always been a girl to speak her mind,” firmed Inesa.

A subtle gesture ordered éclair to lend an ear, “-you’re going to hate this,” whispered Igna, “-if she’s truly who I think she is, we might learn more about the always enigmatic Empire.”

“As you wish,” he sighed, “-I don’t have much room to argue either.”

“Good on you,” two patriotic taps on the butler’s chest sorted the issue.

Stood overlooking the woeful Alta, “-raise thine head.”

“...” she obeyed.

“It so happens the position of steward is available. Alta, let’s conduct a short interview.”

“Really?” she quickly wiped her tears, “-please, let’s do it.”

“What’s your name and background?”

“My name’s Alta Lionheart, a Bishop of the Dustina’s church. I hail from a noble family with deep ties to the emperor, my mother’s the sister of Paradus Essin. I graduated from the Imperial Academy at the age of sixteen and was offered a position as a trainee in the Cobalt Unit. I worked there for four years, completed my education in Magiology, and moved to fulfill my duties as a companion to the summoned hero.”

“Those are some big titles,” added éclair, “-what of the proof?”

“I vouch for her,” added Kion, “-she’s the smartest member of our group with the noblest of lineage. All the more reason I can’t intrude into her affairs.”

“What of statesmanship?”

"I was taught from the ground up in the arts of leading a nation. Boys and girls sharing close-blood ties to the Imperial family are required to do so."

"Lastly, what of the aspirations, why choose to work in a less than amicable place?"

"You, my lord," said she loudly, "-I admire you as a leader. There's a certain charm about the way you move people. A speech with the power to elevate the people's morale. As a child of nobility, I've always sought after someone to look up to, a mentor, and a guide. Everyone's fallen short until today, please, take me as thy disciple."

"Alta Lionheart," he held out a hand, "-consider thyself employed."

"R-really?" she accepted the offer.

"I can't well ignore the weight of thy upbringing." The discussion ended; a few words of courage parted their ways. Kion left for a new life. Miira took the lead and safely returned the drunken goddesses. éclair, Igna, and Alta remained before a wasteland.

"Master," bowed éclair, "-I ought to return to my duties."

"We'll be in touch, have the reports be forwarded to lady Elvira and lady mother."

"As you wish," he vanished in a blackened mist.

Draconis slept face down onto the dirtied ground, "-how careless can you be?" complained he hoisting the little devil.

"I have a question," she inquired rather shyly.

"What is it?" they walked.

"How should I address you?"

"No idea, a noble working as a stewardess is peculiar. How about we keep to Igna and Alta, is that acceptable?"

"Would it not be too formal?"

"Formality?" he chuckled, "-what would creating boundaries accomplish?" Stopped at the apex of the festival, "-Alta, I hope you don't regret the decision."

"What's there to regret?"

"A lot of things. Working under me means getting involved in the dark side of what is considered moral. I kill if I can't get what I want, I'll eliminate anyone in my path. Corruption and blackmail, if they're the only way to attain my goal, I'll do it without a single thought. Therefore, bishop of Dustina, the coming days will alter thy perspective on life."

"I'm settled on said front," returned she strongly, "-we're taught to use any underhanded trick available to guarantee victory."

"A fellow schemer," he chuckled, "-Welcome to the team," they climbed onto the watchtower. "Here's the office, bedroom, and everything. Construction on a new administrative building is in the coming

renovations. For now, Glenda's hierarchy consists of me and you," dropped in bed, "-open the closet, there's a portal headed to my manor.' *Box of Alche: Creation.* a ring materialized, "-there, catch."

"What's this?"

"A signet ring, it bears the crest of Glenda and thy affiliation to me. Go on and rest, we got a big day tomorrow."

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"As thee wish, my lord."

Chapter 616: Empire's Invasion [Conclusion]

The Empire's defeat at Calpter's high shook the very foundation of the church's ambition. Social media boomed as many put their credibility to shame. Going against religion was a line uncrossed by many since the day of the crusades. A big advocate for the unsanctioned invasion, Alpha, was adamant in lqavea paying for the damage caused. No matter how the press reacted or the world flamed the outrage, the Emperor stood strong and so did the church. The devotees prayed wholeheartedly.

Two months elapsed – during those days, a lot of events transpired. Starting in Noctis's Hallow, the victory prompted Igna to be rewarded. The foolishness of the guardian fortresses came under heavy questioning. The death of Kion snuck inside the Emperor's office. He threw a fit, the blatant warning turned truth, the massacre was plenty to show for the indiscretion.

The Blood-King's faction was rested and ready to charge the front. Once a pact is broken, there's no room for discussion. Pulling resources and men's power, the nightwalker rose to reclaim part of the Eastern front of which encompassed the airfield and castle Eldo. Barricades were erected at key locations. Traders and adventurers were directed to Glenda as opposed to the capital.

The King expanded into the massive domain of the ex-lizardmen tribe. In addition, was the crushing capture of the western front. Arda's demography changed, the center, west, and south, were left to Lucifer. The north and part of the eastern frontier were left to the nightwalkers. Despite the victory, the share shook into 65-35, 65 in favor of Lucifer, a good number on paper and paper alone. Their share held Arda's natural resources and the only way of making a decent income. Lands towards the Southwest were always better for agriculture. Luckily, trade routes to Dorchester reopened. Monster hunting and questing expanded into Oxshield as was meant to be. A decree to tax monster earnings and quest completion stapled the Ardanians. Running an unrecognized nation required money, a lot of it.

Away from Arda, we move towards events around the world, more specifically, the Federation's attack on the Wracia Empire. Ardanians are by all means people native to Hidros. Blatant slavery gave birth to unrest. Queen Gallienne, allied with Elendor began a long tedious fight into Old Cray's territory. Alpha opted out of the fight; Phantom's monopoly of the arm's trade brought greater profits. Earning for the past months rivaled that of the Gaso Group, a first in quite some times. Elon's Dynasty laughed openly at the profits. The powerhouses shook, Elvira's foresight into the market as well as investment elevated the organization to a realm of their own. How could anyone face off against such a presence? The weapons are constantly being improved. Attempts at reverse engineering had the minor arms maker kneel. Simple concepts, and complex execution, best of luck to those trying to place guns against guns.

Now onto the acquaintances. Kion and his companions settled into their new lives, Odgar Codd was very welcoming. The combat prowess added to the already battle-hardened team of investigators. Together, he found what was sought after, a clear directive, fending for the weak and unfortunate. An attempt to do as much good as he did evil. The adventuring academy students returned with big rewards. Igna said it to be compensation for the trouble.

Saturday 31st of July rose, noisy growls broke his tender slumber. Progress on the wall reached Ritenoot. North from it laid the memorable Mont Blanc and its people, the winged wolves.

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'Another day of work,' stood facing Svien's hill, construction of the additional district as well as town-wall was complete. A bridge was built over the stream, the hill was carved into, part was used as natural protection against the outside. Without direct intervention, clearing the land and carving the rock would have to take a few years. Julius helped in the raw-material area of things.

"Good morning, Baron," the lock clicked, "-how are you doing this fine morning?" a lady entered with a platter holding tea.

"Take a look," a fatigued look nodded towards Draconis.

"Is that a snake?" she wondered.

"Correct," sipping the drink, "-he says the snake is a pet. Those unblinking daggers are quite the spectacle."

"I see," quick to change the subject, "-my lord, we've scheduled the long-awaited meeting."

"I know, the inauguration of the new district. Quite a lot of money has gone towards the infrastructure."

"On the contrary," refuted Alta, "-the project seems to have garnered the attention of many interesting parties."

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"Any reports on the informant?"

"None so far," said she, "-the capital seems to be in order."

Bright orange hue mischievously awoke the lazy, the town bustled to the usual riff-raff. Ever since Igna came into power, the town boomed. Part of the success was a direct result of Alta's employment. After he said yes to her job, on the following day, policies were changed to better the natives. The tax was lowered to break even. Merchants and fighters came in full.

Back to the room, after a few minutes, Igna donned a classy suit. Vanesa sloppily slid into a white and blue dress, Draconis wore the outfit as his father. The noble family needed to represent their fame and prestige. Appearances can only do so much for he shuddered the boy's unpredictable demeanor.

"Listen to me," voiced he, "-today's an important event for the town. I've graciously ordered the game and also allowed the guild application. Draconis, best behave else I'm taking this week's allowance, do I make myself clear?"

“No problem pops,” he smiled, “-I’ll keep quiet.”

On it was to the new district. A stone bridge arched over the imposing river. Trees and the malignant aura of Aedric energy converted into fortified land. Stone-paths symmetrically laid out the land, anyone, local or not, can purchase a property. In the middle, a massive building with a slanted roof rose quietly. Against the backdrop of grey and occasional vegetation, intimidation reflected onto the visitors. Locals patiently waited for the lord’s approval.

‘Amazing,’ he watched in awe. Julius and many familiar faces watched from the crowd. Leather shoes clopped against the stone bridge, he turned to face the crowd. Numbers increased; traveling voyagers paused to stare.

“People of Glenda,” he thundered across, “-behind me stands Glenda’s new district. It shall serve as the home to the town hall. Be proud of what we’ve accomplished. I know it’s been hard on some of us, the battle took a larger dent in the town’s coffers, to that I say, screw it,” the change jolted the listeners for it was first the lord used such vulgar language. The response was awe, “-the loss, over a period of mere months, transformed into profit, our town’s prosperous, and it’s all to the people’s effort. I’m grateful to have such lovely and understanding comrades by my side. If not for notable people such as; Guild Master Haru, Stewardess Alta, Prince Julius, and countless others, we wouldn’t stand in such favorable position today.” Festive banners rolled above the town’s gate, the influx of visitors wasn’t due to the new district, no, more than that, Glenda’s native were men who enjoyed drinking and partying. Most understood the silence, mild laughter murmured.

“I know,” chuckled Igna, “-may the festival, BEGIN!” éclair and Alta fired elaborate fireworks; the blueish sky couldn’t handle the display. The laughter spawned off how impossible it felt. Another festival, so close to one another. Weirdly, the randomness felt right. The prior celebration was spontaneous. Deep down, the intent whispered, ‘-if one wishes to have a festival, one must do it right.’ In other words, today’s celebration would be the official event for Glenda’s victory and the new district.

A council room of long tables shuffled by the coming guests. Igna sat at the head whilst many others joined. Notably, the village elders. Curtains were shut for privacy, éclair stayed in the corridor. Alta stood at the lord’s side.

“Greetings everyone,” said he, “-I’m sure we’d all like to rejoice in the celebrations.” They listened intently, “-I assume those in attendance are acquainted with one another?” they nodded. “-We shall start the first council meeting.”

Igna from Glenda, Old man Elm from Oda, young Flea from Apid, and stone-cold Mifjia from Upen. Lady Haru represented the guild as well as the merchants. Lastly, priest Legane, from the church of Syhton, a representative for the people.

Light discussions were served, many were preoccupied with leaving the table. A controversial decision rattled the council members.

“I’ve decided to leave Glenda in the caring hand of Alta.”

“MY LORD,” they smacked the table, “-you’ve been such a great leader to our town. Without the constant guidance, we might get lost...”

“Young Flea raises a good point,” commented Elm.

“At least explain the reasoning,” offered Haru.

“Competence,” said he, “-she’s proven her worth time and time again. I can no longer ignore the exploits. My duties in Arda will be complete in the coming week. My job is done. The town’s stable and can rule itself. Alta’s insight and statesmanship will be invaluable. Trust me, council members. Else, why would be the reason to have a council in the first place. I could one day decide to inflate taxes, what then, the townsfolk wouldn’t have a say.”

“I understand,” nodded the priest, “-the council shall intervene when matters are at a strangle. As my lady Syhton wishes, the church will lend our humble support.”

“Not much we can do,” thundered Mifija, “-Baron Igna has proved himself time and time again. Look at Apid, they’ve outgrown the feeble practice of selling offspring.”

“Don’t go there,” fired Flea, “-I’ll never allow anyone to suffer such a fate. I’ll be damned if history repeats itself.” The meeting continued, fears and misunderstandings cleared.

‘And we’re done,’ the heavy door shut, ‘-Alta’s the perfect candidate to take over Glenda. Feels nice to have made a place of joy in times of war.’

“My lord,” heels echoed to an intimidating stop, “-I was never informed of such a radical-”

“Alta, Alta, Alta,” the windows opened, “-surely thee understands, my quests is forever changing. I doubt the King’s going to fight. Reports say the church forcefully had their army routed to Iqavea.”

“What now?” she gulped, “-how am I supposed to lead them, they all love their lord. An enemy isn’t going to suffice.”

“Why would I ever say something I didn’t believe. Compared to ruling a nation, Glenda’s child’s play. Be more confident,” he kindly led her out the room, “-go enjoy with the populous, I need a moment of rest.”

He watched through the parted curtains. The lady shook her head to be more confident. The council members greeted her presence in joy, and so, they went on above the bridge to disappear.

“Master,” interjected éclair, “-Lady Courtney has asked of our help in the dark guild’s affairs. Julius is also needed to lead his guild and Apexi.”

“I know, I know,” he laughed, “-good things have to come to an end. Here I thought of building a wall, events carried on so unexpectedly. We’ll depart the moment the dots are connected.”

“I’d say the experience has been worthwhile,” added éclair, “-we made new allies and established a stronghold for the faction. They’ll take it from here. What’s our next job?”

“We ultimately have to drive out Lucifer and his minions. At the moment, strength is lacking. We can’t spare to fight the Empire directly. Phantom can only do so much. The tension between Cimier and the Dark guild is at an all-time high. The conglomerates have allied to the Empire’s underground organization. I can’t seem to escape the ravages of battle.”

Out to the capital, Lucifer paced up and down the throne room, “-how did the hero die?”

“I warned you before,” added Eira, “-Igna Haggard will forever be an overwhelming obstacle. I saw them die; my library was rendered useless. Tis best the church cuts their losses and focuses on Iqavea. The faction won’t fight without provocation.”

“Feels so nauseating to lose. I wanted to enslave the nightwalkers; their power is the boost my army needs to take hold of Hidros. Devil of Glenda, I swear we’ll fight in the near future. I concede the battle.”

And thus, Igna and Julius’s Ardanian trip reached its conclusion. The prince found love, Igna found strength, knowledge, and strong companion in form of kids.

Chapter 617: Great Wall of Arda

“Got more than we bargained for,” escaped a sly remark. The salty western sea breeze warmed the lungs. Pseudo medicine recommended the sea’s aroma to cure various illnesses. Without proof nor reason to break the myth, many countries have one or two hospitals around the ocean’s vicinity. The last village, Ohm’s port, harbored trade ships from the western lands. Easel Run Gard and Drejai to name a few.

“You’re right,” added Igna deeply. A viewpoint gave onto steep slopes, the last point had been joined. The dotted diagram of protection finished on the 20th of August.

“Julius,” giggled a lady at the back.

“What is it?” wondered he facing the murmur.

“Look, a traveling food merchant. He must have meals specially made for the beaches.”

“Probably not,” added Igna, the excitement shattered, “-he’s selling raw fish and the lot, not cooked items. Tis no wandering chef.”

“POPS!” a loud crash levied the ground, “-I’M BACK!”

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“Welcome back,” sighed Igna, “-how’s the griffin?”

“It’s awesome,” cried he tightly holding reins, “-He has a name, Potery.”

“Potery...” the visage dulled. Julius and Malley followed said reaction.

“Potery?” she scratched her head, “-what about it?”

“I see,” he leaped into Igna’s arms, *snap,* the legendary beast vanished, “-I saw it in town. Some strange man was selling flasks named Potery...”

“Honestly,” facepalmed Julius, “-why does my nephew have to be so-”

“I know,” murmured Igna, “-I know. Dealing with him has shaved off years off my life,” a gentle shake of the shoulder begot an annoying snarl.

“L-leave me alone,” yawned Vanesa, “-I’m sleeping here.”

The shoulders slumped, Julius comfortingly tapped Igna's back, "-hang on in there, cousin. Things will only get worse from here."

'Only get worse?' shivers darted down the back, '-I forgot about her...'

A portal summoned to the lively Glenda, '-today's the last day,' he reminisced.

"Can't believe our adventure took on so many twists and turns. A simple project to make a wall turned into fighting off the Invasion, what a joke."

"Go on and meet with the others," said Igna, "-I'll check on preparations for our departure." Malley giddied down the mossy steps. 'The new district's started construction,' off the walls himself, '-we're headed to Rotherham. I wonder what the others have been up to?'

"Unacceptable," resounded along the watchtower, "-these mustn't be packed!"

Creek, "-excuse me?"

"MY LORD," fired Alta, "-please tell éclair to stop packing these shabby clothes. You're not headed to Oxshield in such attire."

"Calm it you two." Draconis escaped his grip and bolted down the stairs, "-I'm going to see Ota," he bellowed. A roar gave rise to subtle tremors, a shadow briefly covered the inside.

"Can't believe the boy's tamed a griffin," added the bemused Alta.

"Well, the griffin was tamed to be a familiar. I forgot about many things, one of them being that as well as its master."

"It's master?" squinted éclair.

"Oh yes," the monster signet ring glowed, an empty circle covered the dirtied floor. Above it rose what could only be described as a humanoid figure. Long legs of blue complexions, light blue hair, long inviting lashes, and sharp facial features. A crown of coral gently merged onto her head, the ears were long, same as an elf, but different. Her neck bore a black line, tattoo for the clueless, and grills for those in the know. The appearance was one of animosity. For once, the instant she appeared, her arms crossed, the lips slid into an annoyed frown, "-I present thee, Saniata, the spirit of water."

"Shut it," she fired in a soft-spoken tone. The would-be hurtful words floated to the recipient, "-I won't forgive so easily," she moved to the office chair, "-forgetting about me and my griffin. How can a master do so to his companions," she ignored his gaze, "-I won't forget."

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"Another girl," commented Alta.

"Another one," joined éclair, "-I think my master's a bit of a--"

"Don't say it," he thundered, "-regardless, meet Saniata, she's the master of the griffin. Draconis made a pact with her."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," said she softly, "-I hope we get along," she nodded, "-unlike a certain forgetful mongrel."

"Saniata," said he coldly, "-do refrain from speaking so harshly. Misplace words might end in an untimely accident."

"No, I think she'll be fine," grinned éclair, "-as long as the goddesses aren't around to hear the insults, I doubt anyone would complain."

"You decided to show me attitude now?" he exhaled to shake of the head, "-whatever."

"Pardon my intrusion," coughed Alta, "-I'm pleased to see another companion has joined my lord's rank. Preparations for the departure are complete. A jet awaits at the secondary manor."

"I see," he nodded, "-I've asked for my forces stationed at the first manor to return."

"Understood. We sent for a new garrison earlier this week. Defense-wise, Glenda's reached a new mark. Mounted turrets and tanks at the ready to defend."

"Won't be necessary," he smiled, "-today's the day our project comes to fruition."

"Master," glared Saniata, "-I've decided on thy punishment."

A defiant side-glance said, "-how very generous of you."

"Let's see how the attitude holds me," she smirked, an upward spiral of water shattered the chair and roof, her tall stature shrunk. '-Oh no,' realization hit,' -please don't tell me.'

The body reversed in time, "-hey there pops," she giggled, "-I am, sorry not sorry years old. Saniata Haggard, the illegitimate child of my poor father, Igna, who sadly had intercourse with a water spirit," she wept into her elbow, "-why did you leave mother..." a soft-tone of woe broke éclair, '-she's so adorable...'

"Pardon me, master, are her words truthful?"

"NO," he thundered, "-Saniata's blatantly lying..." Then again, '-she fooled éclair without making an effort.'

"Well then," he laughed, "-Saniata, I'll gladly play your game."

"Tis no game," she leaped to hug his leg, "-I'm serious about being called thy daughter."

"Why, what's the merit," he gritted.

"To play with Draconis and Vanesa," she smirked, "-they seem like fun."

BANG, the small hole exploded, "-INCOMING," cried a curled-up boy. The roof broke into an open ceiling.

The dust settled, "-mind explaining the meaning of this?" Igna wondered whilst he gripped the boy's nape.

"A DIVE BOMB," he thundered recklessly, "-I heard my name."

"Where's the griffin?" the finger rose, "I can barely see the beasts. Just how high did he fall?"

"Blue lady," he escaped the tight hold, "-who are you?"

"Igna's child," she laughed, "-nice to meet you."

"A new friend," the eyes widened, "-AWESOME!" a whistle responded in a heavy gust. "-I'll be off with Draconis, see you later, pops!" winked the mischievous Saniata.

"What's the noise about..." coughed Vanesa, "-pops, keep it quiet, I'm trying to sleep."

Fatigue buckled the baron's knees, 'what have I done to earn such a punishment.' In face of an army and god-like entities, the strength never once escaped, despair never crossed the mind. However, faced by the children, even the strongest of men could but cower. 'Draconis was one thing,' he facepalmed, 'now there's her too,' visibly irritated, 'at least Vanesa's somewhat normal.' The normal weight of her body lifted, he turned to a green mist of transparent arms, she hovered as if possessed, "-POPS, I NEED FOOD!"

"HELP ME!" bellowed the broken tower.

Minutes turned to hours; Julius's preparation was readied. The jeep made down a gravel path, Malley and the children sat in the back. "-who's the new addition?" inquired Julius.

"My bastard," he headbutted the steering wheel, "-or so she says. The lass is but a water spirit."

"The devil of Glenda brought to his knees by children, feels poetic."

"Don't mock me," he grabbed his collar, "-try babysitting for once a day, I swear, you'll choose an army over their whims."

"No thanks," he countered the grip, "-we're at the spot."

A ravine dipped a few meters ahead, "-ready?"

"Yeah," smiled Julius, the hands pressed, golden circles spun about his limbs.

Mana Control: By-pass, palm against Julius's back, "-do your thing!"

Tremors rocked the entire province, from Noctis's Hallow to Castle Eldo. Fauna and flora reacted, a giant shot of energy spread around the fourteen points, the culmination of a few month's work. A deterrent to any who wishes to fight against the Blood-King's faction. Previously invisible lines shuffled into sight, *Creation: Conjunction,* he swiped, the wall summoned to follow the gesture, the lips parched, the skin paled, Julius fell from exhaustion.

"Good job," said Igna, "-I got you," the prince solemnly napped, "-with this, our quest's complete." What was a ravine filled into a monstrous edifice of strength and defense, the shadow it cast went on meters on end. Archways were built along the common trade routes. Not only did the prince construct the wall, but also added military outposts for increased defense. The size was a little taller than the Azure Walls. Like them, soldiers could patrol along the very wide summit. One end of the continent to the other, a journey of a few months on horseback, excluding weather conditions and monster attacks.

"They've done it," mumbled Serene.

“What’s the matter?” inquired Alaric strolling along town-square

“Why’s everyone out here?” wondered Lord Balthazar.

“The tremor,” yawned Lady Gabrielle, “-the mana’s potent.”

“I fear we’re under attack,” gulped Aurora, “-should have expected as much, there’s no way the Empire would stay quiet after their shameful defeat.”

“Got to hand it to Baron Igna,” complimented Alaric, “-he turned the tide of war on his own.”

“He’s blessed by the god of war,” added Julia, “-the devil of Glenda.”

“Actually,” breathed Serene, “-it’s the prince and Igna, the Haggard’s have completed their quest, a great wall reaching from one end of Arda to the other. It encompasses the villages.”

“Surely you jest,” added Julia nervously.

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“No, I’m serious,” a portal summoned, “-they’ll head for Rotherham.”

As was said, the jeep reappeared at the secondary manor. There in rested the children of Svein’s hill. Julius was quite the softie, the property transformed into an orphanage. The Head-maid reluctantly became the dorm-mother. In addition, an asphalted road of a few minutes led to Glenda, where, in the new district, a school neared completion. More scholars escaped the clutches of the Empire, the town being a haven changed many lives for the better. People in Oxshield were hired to provide care. Pulling a few strings garnered affiliation to Sky-Heart Academy, a relatively prestigious establishment. Thus, the first fully endorsed complex for magic, trading, and any in-between, was formed.

A black jet laid in wait; Malley dragged the prince mercilessly across the yard. Children inside rushed for a farewell party. ‘The Haggard’s truly care for their people. How nice to see those smiling faces. Makes all the bloodshed and deception worth it. The youth are the ones to truly reunite our continent. Quite a stroke of genius, cousin, involving Sky-Heart Academy will allow for exchange programs. I can’t wait to see what comes of it.’

Bloodied doors opened to the sunny outside, “-my eyes,” complained Alaric.

“So warm,” melted Gabrielle, “-it’s been so long!”

“I presume you’re Igna Haggard?” inquired Julia, “-are the rumors of the wall true?”

“Yes,” he stopped as the others carried inside the jet, “-Lady Julia Fawn of the Sabbath clan, what brings the clan leaders to this humble abode?”

“You,” retorted Serene, “-lady Elvira’s been quite adamant on your prowess. Seems her trust wasn’t misplaced.”

“I did what I sought out to accomplish. Will the pessimism take a re-”

“Yeah, yeah,” she shrugged off the provocation.

“Baron,” called Aurora, “-mind you show us thy wings?”

“My wings?” he paused; “-I doubt it to be of any use.”

“Do it,” mumbled Lord Balthazar.

Blood-Arts: Enlian, the hair bleached into pure white save a few crimson strands, the canines sharpened, the nails followed into inky black, long wings of a fallen angel stretched, “-will this be enough?” a few flaps had the council in jeopardy.

“The Blood-King’s wings,” they knelt, “-there can be no other who has the first progenitor’s blood, my lord, have thee returned?”

Chapter 618: “-are you sure, wicked vixen?”

“No,” he replied firmly, “-I’m aware of my uncle’s exploits. Us bearing the same blood is a coincidence, nothing more, nothing less. If you’d please excuse me,” crossing the crowd, “-I have a flight to catch.” The jet thrust into life; a high pitch screeched for many to cover their ears. Without much effort, the metal bird took to the skies.

The cacophony dissolved into, “-he’s blatantly lying, yes?” asked Julia, “-no way another nightwalker can inherit such a title.”

“He bears the symbol and the blood. No doubt in my mind, Lady Courtney’s nephew is the reincarnation of our King,” added Alaric.

“Let’s forget the meet ever happened,” proposed Aurora locking fingertips, “-tis better to see what comes next. A robust foundation has been handed on a silver platter. Let’s make the province the best place we can make for the people. Nightwalkers have to get stronger,” side-glancing Julia, “-the Sabbath and Onyx clan must stand to the challenge.”

“Might I interject,” voiced Lord Balthazar, “-vampires are strong as is. We lost per the intervention of a being so strong we couldn’t account for. I may be old and senile,” glanced to the empty sky, “-my gut screams of our safety. The immediate threat, Kion Hurworth’s changed sides, “-the faction can safely grow into a brighter plain.”

Left on a good note, Igna made for Rotherham in the company of three children. Julius brought a fiancé, and Serene followed as secretary to the prince.

“We can see it from here,” she threw comments over a noisy inside. Draconis and Saniata ran without prejudice, toppling snack-filled tray and locking into a battle of flails

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“Y-yeah,” escaped Igna’s tired self, “-sure is awesome...”

“You don’t sound so enthusiastic,” returned she in a tightly fitted outfit, “-I’m rather annoyed.”

“No matter the outfit or advances, I won’t shake,” he winked, “-besides,” he leaned to check onto the energetic duo, “-my heart’s set on what to protect. I complain for the simple reason of complaining. Their overly fanciful and bratty attitude brings smiles, well, part of it.”

"I see," she leaned seductively on the armrest, "-what about me then," her imposing chest laid bare to see.

"This is a no flirting zone," added Vanesa, her dark green locks hovered as if snakes, "-advance on my pops and I'll bite you," it truly was the back-biting reptiles.

"Oh, what a lovely girl," she nonchalantly stuffed Vanesa onto her cleavage, "-so repulsively adorable. Come here." He feigned ignorance to the mess inside. éclair sat as if an obsessive stalker. Julius and Malley were locked in a private chamber, who knew what the couple did behind lock doors, rather than knew, who cared.

Rotherham 20th of August at 15:35, a black shadow approached from Arda's vague direction. Tires howled against the black asphalt layered with dust, smoke puffed. It taxied to a solemn stop in one of more refined-looking hangars. Airfield Xene, else referred to as the Haggard's private runway. Cupped on the outer edge of their base, just after the military runways. A three-meter-high wall on which rested watchtowers at the edges and the entrance – an archway and heavy-looking doors. Access here was limited, to say the least. Prototype cars, tanks, weapons, and a private launching station for missiles. Faceless guards hugged the shadows; their duty – get involved when necessary.

"Feels good to be home," lights toggled onto the reflective ground, a man waited in the company of a little girl. They paid no heed to the guests. Igna curtly nodded in acknowledgment, and so did the man, the creator of many unmanned planes.

"Wow!" shouted Draconis, the deafening bemusement echoed.

"The hard ground," remarked Julius, "-I feel so much better."

"Where are we?" inquired Malley, "-this place is amazing."

"Welcome to the Dukedom of Rotherham, ruled by Duchess Courtney Haggard," added éclair, "-my lord's lady mother."

"Wow," her eyes shone, "-you're the son of a duchess?"

"Don't be so foolish," he retorted, "-my title means nothing. Julius's the son of a queen."

"Duke, Queen," her mouth widened, "-you two are like royalty..."

Brief to check one another, the cousins chuckled, "-we are royalty," facepalmed Julius hysterically.

"I suppose we are," added Igna wiping his mouth.

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"Let's get serious," added Serene, "-two cars are waiting outside. One for Julius and the other for Igna," glanced to éclair, "-as attendants to our masters, we shall serve to the best of our abilities."

"Yes," he nodded, "-let's do our best." A heavy expensive steed drove to a stop. Malley fixed her hair and followed behind her lover. The doors closed per Serene's courtesy, '-so long,' said her gestures, and off they were to an uncertain location.

'Feels good to be back,' Vanesa slept in the reserved piggyback, Draconis moved to sit atop the shoulder, whilst Saniata took to a more common position in his arms.

"Are we home?" inquired the boy.

"Yes, we are," said he, "-I hope you three will abide by the promise we made on the plane."

"I said yes, didn't I?" retorted Saniata, "-misbehaving and tis off to the shadow realm, we know, we know. It's boring there," she yawned. Father and children traded smiles and laughter, a new place to explore meant more fun. A place of technology had hooked the boy, the want of games forced an unprecedented obedient attitude.

"Master," approached éclair, "-Void's ready to depart."

"Void?" he narrowed across.

"I've used my talents to bring the countless vehicles into a single spot," he smiled.

"I see," they stepped onto the somber outside, "-let's go everyone," hopped inside, the windows rolled, "-aren't you coming?"

"No," refuted éclair, "-I have a few businesses to attend to. There are quite a few matters that need my private intervention. Contact me as usual, the link is reestablished. Bon voyage."

Two seats didn't feel so cramped as he'd imagine. The drive home, the apartment, was slow and scenic. The passengers watched in awe, such a pretty town. Plenty of visitors, most of the crowd were students of the academy.

"We're here," three tall-beckoning structures glared onto the ants of visitors, Void made a few turns until the residential district, gates to the parking opened at his presence. Clean and empty streets save a few formally dressed men. The slope led into a spacious underground lot. Void moved at a snail's pace; multiple vehicles fogged the scape.

"Look there," pointed Draconis, "-there's a bike and two sports cars," above them read, 'Private parking.'

"Good spot there," they went in and settled. The scent of dust and engine fumes filled the air, '-isn't this bike from mother's apartment in Rosespire?' the doors locked, "-we're home," cheered Vanesa.

"And what gives that idea?"

"Pops," tugged Draconis, "-she fell asleep."

"The cheer must have taken a lot of energy," sympathized Saniata, "-I feel for my elder sister."

"Shut it," he pinched her lips, "-no more sarcastic remarks," her face resembled a duck, the devilish boy broke into mild giggles. The precarious situation didn't once resolve her attitude, rather, her eyes rolled defiantly, her arms rested on her waist with a slight lean, '-anything else?' said the body language.

"No food for you."

"FOOD!" exclaimed Vanesa.

'The mere mention of sustenance alters the personality,' waiting a few seconds, 'and she's back to napping. She's the best out the three.' Hand in hand, the four-headed up the stairs and called for a lift, therein, they headed 'home'. Time changes people and rare changes inanimate objects, leave one for years and it shall only gather dust. Setting foot on their floor sent shivers down the back, a sudden jolt of uncertainty muddled their walk. Draconis felt the anxiety to innocently glance upward, "-something the matter?"

"No," shrugging the uneasiness, "-let's go." *Click,* the door opened, heels and a sneaker of which a child would wear neatly stayed adjacent to a coat hanger.

He shuffled inside, Draconis and Saniata fed off the timid demeanor, the guard rose. A quiet interior meant trouble, he climbed a step to face an expensive dimly lit portrait. Here, at the art piece, laid a crossroad. One to the living room and open kitchen, the other headed to the bedrooms and miscellaneous open spaces. The paths joined on ahead after a few corridors. To the right laid the kitchen, the wooden floor changed to lush and warm carpet, the cooking station felt as pristine as ever.

The unexplored journey continued, two guest bedrooms laid farther from the kitchen, not that it mattered at this moment. The real beauty came in the form of an amazing view of the skyscrapers and the town.

He slipped onto a barstool; the children stuck closely. "-I feel a presence," said Vanesa. Tiny steps scurried behind loud crashes, "-SURPRISE!" fired two feminine voices. The stool rotated to an awkward, "-hi."

"IGNA!" exclaimed Alicia, "-welcome home," she rushed into a tight embrace. He returned the sentiment with a tighter lock. Shanna and Lizzie kept a fair distance, '-why are they here?'

"It's been too long," her face flushed, "-I missed you so much!"

"I missed you too," said he warmly, "-might I ask why my aunt's here?"

"She's our neighbor."

"I see," he nodded, "-good to see you're in an adequate shape. I hope Alicia didn't cause much trouble."

"Stop it," she pressed his lips, "-listen," she whispered, "-I've missed you more than you can imagine."

"HALT!" said a soft voice, "-this is a no-flirt zone," cried Vanesa peering over the shoulder. 'A ghost,' fear forced Alicia to stumble onto the nearest couch.

"Who's that?" her mouth widened.

"We're," proclaimed Draconis, "Igna Haggard's," added Saniata, "-illegitimate son and daughters!" exclaimed Vanesa landing into a three-way posture. The dulled reaction had the trio look back upon their father, "-they didn't cheer," cried Draconis.

"I'm tired," complained Vanesa stumbling to her knees.

"Got you," he caught her feeble self and hoisted onto his arms. The devil and the spirit hurdled for a makeshift strategy meeting; they loudly refuted the guest's unjust answers. More than anything, Alicia's beauty features split into a frown and sharpened glares.

“Hold on a moment,” added Igna, “-Aunt, Lizzie, mind giving Alicia and I a moment alone?”

“Sure thing,” they happily made for the door. The large windows closed per a press; the room befell into a judgment hall.

“What’s this about children?” her voice sharpened; “-did you cheat on me?”

“I know this looks bad,” he held the three in close proximities, “-take a closer look,” said he, “-do they look anything like me?”

“I g-g-guess not, still, children are proven to speak the truth,” her knees shook, “-tell me, did you find someone else on thy journey?” the misunderstanding grew, a narrative formed the basis of her foul mood.

“No,” he calmly refuted her questions, “-why would I when I already have you?”

“Bullshit!” she cracked; “-I don’t believe any of it.”

“Listen,” he breathed, “-Julius can vouch for me.”

“How can I trust his words over yours?” she vividly opposed his explanation, “-you two are always attracting unfounded attention from the opposing sex. How am I supposed to believe anyone, I have no idea what happened, for what it’s worth, he could be in on the lie too.”

“You know what,” he stood, “-there’s no need to explain my actions.”

“W-what, why?” she held out a hand, “-are you guilty?” she exclaimed.

The curtains parted; the outside view revealed much. éclair’s prior business involved her directly, messages and proof flooded the lens. “I can’t believe I was foolish enough to trust you, Igna, SERIOUSLY, WHY DO THIS?”

“The audacity,” he smirked, “-those words coming from the lady who blatantly chooses another man.”

“What are you insinuating?” her face crashed, “-you’re the one with three children in tow!”

“Children,” fired Saniata, “-are you sure, wicked vixen?” the pressure increased.

“How dare you,” thundered Draconis, “-my pops is the best man to ever live,” steam puffed out the nostrils, “-and you dare cheat on him?”

“No one dares betray my pops,” added Vanesa, “-you must die,” her petite palm stretched to spawn a visible mist of green.

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Chapter 619: Cheater

“Why is it about me...” she muffled through her palms, “-you’re the one who brought children home, I did nothing scandalous, I promise.”

“Nothing wrong?” the smirk dropped to a frown, “-explain me this,” multiple images and videos boomed her phone, the sudden jitter had her shudder. Wide-eyed onto the notification, her fingers tightly

formed symbols, the screen unlocked. The phone's hue scrolled along with her glistening pupils, the lips jarred in subtle ups and downs.

"What's the matter?" retorted Igna, "-am I to assume those videos are fake?"

"Obviously not..." she exhaled, "-the truth is out," her shoulders slumped into disarray, "-I can't believe I've been found out," she dropped onto the engulfing couch. The tension increased, what they referred to was countless late-night dates Alicia had, from the heir to the Patek, someone she adamantly said to have no connection, to Laven Enda, the dubious director. "The evidence is too much to be explained by words," she sniffled.

"Ha-ha," escaped mild chuckles. Vanesa's tiny hands retracted to her normal naps. The other two had no clue what was happening, they but sat crossed legged and played rock-paper-scissors.

"What's so funny," her upper-back dropped onto the headrest, "-what I've done can't be undone. And so is you," with a marred inhale, "-we ought to separate," the hands clambered to a feeble stand.

"Sit back down," fired Igna

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"What now," she grudgingly agreed, "-will you chastise my actions?" her tongue clicked.

"Am I so petty a person?" a disappointed shake of the head followed, "-frankly, I know the full story. You're trying to get information on up-and-coming idols, all in effort to help Apexi. Going on dates and using thy charm is but an excuse, a spy through and through."

Her face lit, "-if you knew, then why?" her hands pressed as in prayer, "-why be so judgmental?"

"No, no, no," the index bobbed in a rather smug manner, "-let me remind, Lady Alicia Raze was she who vividly said I cheated. You didn't have the stomach to face the truth, what's this, an inferior complex from the sharpened tongue manager?"

"Stop," she bit her lip in annoyance, "-My actions were pure and meant for our company's success, what about you, bringing three children..."

"Good," he sat opposing her faded sense of rebuttal, "-how did it taste?"

"What?" she narrowed across.

"The taste of not having a chance to explain oneself. Deep down, even if the actions were ultimately for the greater good, the journey towards said goal is what people seek after, they care not for results."

"..." her complexion eased, "-are the children not yours?"

"They are," he retorted adamantly, "-not my biological kids, however." Her expression gave the green light to explain, "-Draconis was born to someone I'd say is more frivolous than him. Vanesa followed suit and was in the same sort of situation. Lastly, we have my dearest Saniata, a spirit who's deeply offended as I've ignored her for so many years," he kicked up his legs, "-Alicia," deep and thunderous, "-it's better we separate as a couple," he drew on a cigar.

"What?" her expression said no other, "-what brought this on?"

"I've changed," he added solemnly, the crimson pupils burnt into her soul, "-I've traded my heart and emotions for greater power. I thought we would make a great couple... well, it doesn't seem as if I'll be able to make you happy." The trio ran to give a tight embrace.

"Pops said he'll care for us until we die," snorted Draconis.

"For that," yawned Vanesa, "-we're grateful."

"I'd advice so," said Saniata, "-pops isn't in shape to care for someone else. A burden of a lover will be arduous."

"What they said," he completed their little speech, "-my fate lays in chaos and destruction," another message lit her phone, "-I've killed 7 thousand people and forced many into heart tearing torture. I didn't once blink to the people I killed," he resettled into a formal posture, "-how I see it, getting caught up in my life will bring woe and despair. We should separate for your own good."

"My good?" she shrugged, "-what gave the right to decide what's good for me?"

"I did," he smiled, "-Alicia Raze, it's been a pleasure," he gestured to Vanesa, her palm rose, "-she'll change thy memories. Opposed to being lovers, we'll be friends, close friends. The bonds we shared shall be erased."

"NO," she leaped backward, "-I'm not giving up on my memories or you," her high-bun stood above the couch, "-do what you want. I don't care about being good or evil, get involved in the underground for all I care, as long as you return to me, I'll be happy."

A soft breeze blew across her cheeks, "-are you certain?" he whispered to the right ear.

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"YES!" she snapped to the right, '-where's he?'

"What if you have to kill someone?" whispered the left ear.

"I'll do it," she snapped to the other side, '-where's this voice coming from?'

"What if my companions are mainly ladies?"

"Then?" she gently faced the front, their noses met, her heart sank, "-I-I-I,"

"What then?" he peered into her whole self; the immobile pupils bore the truest of intent.

"As long as you have feelings for me, then I don't care!"

"Good," he leaned closer, "-then I accept," they pushed against the sofa and dropped into a tender embrace.

"Stop," she managed to escape a few words, "-stop," the reunion grew intense, "-what of the children?"

"A demon, the mistress of sickness, and a strong spirit," the approach amplified, "-all above eighteen."

Minutes turned to hours, the guest rooms locked, at 17:00, the door finally clicked. Draconis and Saniata were hard at work watching the television. Barefoot tapped the wooden floor, “-you guys ok?” yawned a fatigued Igna, “-I’m going to make dinner,” he stood shirtless with messy hair.

“Dinner!” cheered Vanesa, “-food, food, food, food.”

“Draconis, Saniata...” he fired across.

“Just cook,” returned Draconis, “-I don’t care,” he stuck to a pillow.

“Don’t interrupt us,” cried Saniata, “-it’s getting to the good part.”

“Suit yourself,” the stove fired, ingredients chopped. Vanesa managed to stumble her way to a stool adjacent to a marble ledge.

“Pops, did you have fun?” she asked in a supposed smirk, her lips broke into a smile and frown.

“Fun?” back to her face, “-I guess so,” vegetables flew. “-The misunderstanding’s settled.” Another pair of feet scurried into the kitchen, her hair awry down the shoulder, a baggy white-shirt belonging to Igna cover down to her waist, where she wore shorts and discolored socks.

“Igna,” she slumped onto his back, “-promise me that you’ll never leave.”

“Stop with the sentimental drama. Promises are the bane of human relations. You said you wouldn’t leave, therefore, tis no matter.”

“Back off,” fired Vanesa, “-pop’s back is my private bedchambers.”

“I’m sorry,” she escaped to hug Vanesa instead, “-you’re so adorable, the melancholic dead-eyed look, I love it.”

“You’re warm,” said she, “-and comfy pillows,” the lids shut to a nap.

Knock, knock, Alicia made for the entrance, she nonchalantly opened the door to a pink-haired lady.

“Who are you?” she frowned.

“Isn’t it common courtesy to give one’s name before asking?” returned the unsolicited guest.

“Now, now,” interjected a gentleman, “-tis no way ladies should interact.”

“Julius,” her expression swapped for one friendlier, “-come on in.”

“Well thank you,” tightly gripping Malley’s hand, the latter gave a smug once over and followed on inside.

“Don’t mind us,” said to lavishly dressed ladies, their entrance had her shudder. An aura of dread followed on inside. Next to them, arrived lighter-green hair in the company of the prodigious Lizzie. The living room sure filled with interesting people, mainly, Malley, ‘something about her ticks me off,’ gawked Alicia.

In attendance sat; lady Courtney, lady Elvira, Julius, Malley, lady Shanna and lastly, Lizzie. Quite the ensemble of people, Igna paid no heed, the mind solely remained on the preparation of food.

"I'd have never thought we'd all have the same idea," added Julius beside Igna, the open area made for easier conversation. Malley and Alicia took on seats at the counter.

"I'll go first," interjected Courtney,"-Julius Arnet Haggard," strong and threatening, "-come here right this instant."

"Good luck," whispered Igna over the frying pan.

'I'm in deep,' he moved to the where Draconis and Saniata blatantly ignored the others, "lady aunt," he bowed respectfully, "-might have I perhaps offended you?"

"Most definitely," her arms crossed.

"You," fired Elvira, "-girl with the pink hair, stop gawking and come." Prior animosity towards a fellow lady turned to fear, such auras from two imposing figures. She followed orders and dropped to her knees.

"What's this?" she whispered to the prince.

"She's Duchess Courtney Haggard, Igna's lady mother, my aunt, and the head of our dynasty."

"Quit the murmurs," said she with emphasis,"-now," shifted to Shanna, "-will her majesty approach?"

"Dear me," she gracefully arrived, "-what could the matter possibly be, dearest Courtney?"

"Your son," said she rapidly, "-he's brought back a fiancé."

"A fiancé?" the room shuddered, "-Julius, tell me son, is it true?"

"Brother has gotten a wife?" voiced Lizzie, "-please tell me it's fake."

"I know, lady mother, I know," the head hung low, "-my duties were to marry into a noble family and increase our family's reputation."

"No, tis not the matter," said Elvira strongly, "-the object of criticism is thy claim on the Ardanian throne. The change of rulership has all refuted the prior decision. If ever the Ardanians are to be independent, someone from lady Shanna's bloodline will take the throne. First, it was Eira, then you, lastly Lizzie. If not for them, we have close blood ties to the king, the fourth in line is Igna Haggard, though he won't force said claim."

"What's happening over there?" inquired Alicia cuddling Vanesa.

"A talk about the Ardanian throne's future. Julius's the next candidate to be the real ruler of Arda. Mother isn't pleased by the choice of lover. A priest from the Empire, one stained by a dirty past isn't in the least fit to be queen. The people won't accept such a marriage easily, yesterday's enemy tomorrow's friend? Yeah, no, not going to happen."

"Tell me, son," she patted his head, "-do you love her?"

"Yes, mother, I do," he glanced to a comforting expression.

"Then you have my blessings," she smiled, "-Courtney, Elvira."

"If her majesty has no qualms, then why would I be against the marriage," said Courtney, "-may thee have a bountiful future together."

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The audience cleared a little, white locks faced the kitchen, "-Igna," her eyes sharpened, "-anything you'd like to add?"

The new couple escaped to the back where they made small talk to the queen and youngest princess. '-How fearsome are their family?' choked Malley, '-I never thought they could be so powerful, Queen Shanna's here and is my mother-in-law out of all things. I pray she doesn't hate my past and looks to the future. A priestess of the Dustina's church shouldn't be granted such a light sentence.'

"Me?" the fire dimmed to a stop, "-I do apologize for my appearance," he confidently ambled to the living room, "-I've performed my duties as a son of the Haggard's," he dropped to one knee, "-albeit, the journey's far from over."

"I understand you've brought children along?" she glared.

"Yes," he returned her aura, "-Draconis, Vanesa, and Saniata. éclair must have reported their origin and how they came to pass?"

"You're surely confident," her aura intensified.

"I ought to be," returned he, "-I must make my mother proud," the presence matched hers.

"Good," she broke into an embrace, "-welcome back, I've missed you."

The reunion continued over to a full dinner table. The guests enjoyed the chat and discussed politics and various other matters. One constant was the simmering conflict between the puppet masters. Spoken in code, Igna and Julius understood the matter, a meet would tell of the greater picture. Currently, they contended with a nice dinner in the company of family, a rare treat in retrospect.

Chapter 620: Alice's Nightmare

Odgar's agency turned up many leads pertaining to the suspicious deaths of starlets. Recently, around the start of August, an up-and-coming idol of the Ansoft agency was found dead atop a broken car. She had presumably jumped from the 10th floor of a less than notable hotel in Odgawoan's lesser popular district. Dubbed the most dangerous area of the town, nestled between the outskirts of Carter Lake, a naturistic retreat from the abundant glory of the trademarked nightlife. When exposed to the wild and the vile nature of greed, humans had the habit of finding the worst in a good situation. A green resort turned dark red during a power struggle. The police tried but could never infiltrate said area, its name, Alice's Nightmare, nickname one should say. On paper, the place was referred to as Keln. Truth be told, the name spawned from a very well-received journal written by Alice Handeria. She grew up in a poor family of struggling actors and dancers, tis was the common story of any struggling artist.

At the dawn of Odgawoan's rising popularity as a metropolis of entertainment, the drug trade and arm's deal garnered much attention. Gangs formed, well-established familia's expanded their reach. Where money flows, so does the blood of the unruly.

The resulting conflict wasn't much to complain about. People were sawed in the middle of the street, heads literally rolled to the gutters. Mask men riding in black vans.

Poverty doesn't allow one to have much choice. Each night, her neighborhood would scream and cry, the thunderous deluge of gunfire and deathly howls. As the eight-year-old she was, with parents bearing greater ambitions than caring for their daughter, she'd stay home late. Down the shabby first-floor bedroom, she'd often witness the blatant murder of bystanders. None ever bothered to reach out or call law enforcement. The traumatic experience forced a coping mechanism, hers came in form of writing.

Years went by, the murders kept on increasing, her parents fell to the folly of narcotics. Long were the days of innocence, her parents, most notably, her father, forced his wife and daughter in dubious activities for a chance at a shot of God's ale. She entered high school, the kids saw her as an easy target for bullying. Drug-head parents weren't something one could hide, the teasing grew harder and harder, some even broke into her house offering drugs in exchange to have their ways with her, the father accepted. No matter the circumstances, she held strong and began to take to social media. Tis the time the Arcanum was at its infancy. The gangs noted her distress but paid no heed. She graduated despite the treatment, a newly established familia offered to pay for her education, she accepted and joined the Lerado's familia, a different faction from the main familia at Tole. Money rolled in, the father grew frustrated, her mother one day disappeared to only reappear the next day in a black body bag. Her stomach had been carved with the initials of boys from her past. They joined a rival familia. The mother's death came from loansharking, she had placed her life as collateral.

The loss left the father so devastated he placed a shotgun to his mouth and pulled. Even then, her will to survive never dwindled. Instead, the journal she had kept for so many years came in handy. It harbored names and addresses of specific individuals of those who killed her parents. A copy was sent to the Lerado and another to a publisher. What happens in Keln, stays in Keln. She broke the unwritten law. Blood clogged the dirtied street once again. The Lerado fought to the last men and lost. The will to survive stood strong, rumors say she tried to claw away from her execution. They took her legs, yet, she fought till the curb where the bullies pulled the trigger. Alice's Nightmare, the tale of a truly unfortunate girl plagued by drugs and the associated life.

Years later, her name's concrete with Keln's history. The posthumous publication sky-rocketed her popularity. A deep dive into the life of an innocent girl who only wished to be a doctor. Watching her parent's dreams fail, their hard work betrayed and the effect of narcotics. A movie was planned to occur two years ago. The scouts and team members trying to have the lay of the land were returned to the film company in moist cartoon boxes.

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Slowly but surely, Odgar's investigation followed a faint trail to one of the founding familias. Alas, before concrete answers were discovered, a terrorist attack shook Melmark's core. A still under construction building was blown to bits. First, of many other attacks, their duty swiftly turned to the search for the bomber or the organization. Law enforcement deployed the military and heroes to prevent needless deaths. The continent mourned the fallen, outrage from the public took to Lime's Square, banners and posters heavily chastised the monsters who'd do such an awful deed. Many thought it to be the same who decimated the forest of Quendoel in Legrury, the southern-most district of Alphaia, regardless of the official statement.

A few weeks later, Odgar's nose fell off the scent, the faint lead disappeared. Around said time, the Anti-Narco Unit expanded activities into the south, a place relatively lax in security. Lerado's smuggling operations were squandered, Cimier forced the issue by a surprise raid at the harbor. Property previously owned by the Dark-guild was laid to dust, men were slaughtered and dropped to sea. The Lerado's amber flickered into fumes, the familia lost power, prestige, and members.

Fast-forward to when Igna returned, éclair's private business included checking on the foreign affairs. The lovely reunion escaped into a private meeting in one of the skyscrapers. Dimmed lighting and dark atmosphere made for a memorable discussion.

Elliot, Yves, Tia, Julius, and Igna, the five would normally be present, however, matters have escalated in Tole. Elliot, Yves and Tia were out on missions, leaving Julius and Igna as well as Elvira to have a tête-à-tête.

Godfather Shadow presided ominously at the table; a hologram showed the current situation in Alpha. The Dark-guild's influence was none. "Welcome everyone," said the godfather sharply, "-the dinner was very scrumptious."

"Congratulations on the victory against the Empire," added Elvira, "-tis a grand feat you've achieved. The devil of Glenda, quite the fitting name."

"There must be a reason we're here," interjected Igna.

"Very well," firmed lady Courtney, "-the Lerado have breathed their last breath. Mallie Lerado's in hiding, there's an immense bounty on her head. She was able to escape, Elliot and the others are on a mission to escort her to Hidros."

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"As sole manufacturers of God's Ale and Angel's Dust, the situation has us compromised," intervened Elvira, "-godfather Renaud's at his wit's end. Sadly, the business must continue, therefore, the Overlord's selling directly to Alpha, we're losing out on profits. The organization needs to get in power and to do so, we need control over the drug market."

"The Overlord's entrusted the operation to me," added Godfather Shadow, "-we can't hang back indefinitely. Cimier's a threat, yes, still, it doesn't mean we ought to give up."

"I understand," said Igna, "-is the mission to reestablish power in Alpha or wipe out the opposing factions?"

"The latter is a tall order, they're backed by the conglomerates," said Courtney, "-their reach is known to you, personally, I'd hope." He nodded in agreement.

"Might I ask a question?" voiced Julius. She nodded, "-Is there possibly a way to abstain from the operation?"

"Excuse me?" she frowned.

"Lady Courtney," added Elvira, "-I sincerely apologize for the impromptu report. Between Apexi and Xenon, the prince's schedule's pretty taxed."

"I understand," she graciously shifted her posture, "-with the matter as is and what's at stake, I can't force thy hands."

"I'll do it," interjected Igna, "-Godfather Shadow, please allow me the opportunity to grow the dark guild's influence."

"Why the sudden interest?" her brows crinkled, "-I gave the nickname Pluton for the sole reason of not getting involved."

"I was a fool before," the head shook, "-I understand what I must accomplish. Please, allow me to take to Alpha and do what's needed."

"As is wished," she exhaled, "-what's the reason," she glared.

"To avenge Aceline," he glared back, "-I know who killed her. The world works in strange ways. Besides, I can't stand back and watch as our hard work is spat all over. I've had enough of Cimier and their scheming ways. Goes double for the conglomerates, I'd love to see them crumble into dust."

The room fell into disarray, the determination pulsed. A few glances led to, "-I have a condition," he said.

"Name it."

"That I'm allowed to use any means necessary, and I mean, anything. Kidnapping, killing, the destruction of a whole town if need be," they feared the statement.

"Listen," said Elvira, "-I don't want to say no, honest. Sadly, Phantom can't get involved in Alphan politics, we might cause more trouble than its worth."

"Which is why I never forced anyone to accept," interjected Courtney, "-you'll be alone and without support. The duty entails starting from nothing, the birth of a new familia."

"-Once a strong enough hold is established, the Dark-Guild will ally to the new faction and inflate the popularity, have I assumed right?"

"Yes."

"Another question," the fingertips locked, "-money, will I have to fund my own projects and activities or?"

"A new faction means a fresh start, and I mean start from nothing and climb to the top," said she adamantly. "-Money can be traced."

"Fine," he violently stood, "-I get it," the bank card escaped the wallet to fly across the table, "-the almighty Phantom and Dark-Guild won't be supporting my adventures. It's no matter," he smirked, "-I'm free to keep what I own already, is that correct?"

"Yes," smiled Courtney, "-listen, it's not like I want you to be all alone and without support. Our hands are tied as of this moment. We ought to wait and watch," she threw the card right back, "-use the money as is wished," she chuckled, "-éclair's smart enough to make it untraceable."

“Just what I wanted to hear,” he stretched, “-I’ll be taking my children with. Lady Elvira, forgo of matters to Alphaia.”

“Go ahead and make a name for yourself,” smiled Courtney, “-I trust you completely.”

“I’ll leave shortly. Have a jet be readied for Odgawoan.” And so, Pluton, the unaffiliated lone wolf had a daunting task to accomplish. Build a faction on par with the current familias ruling the underworld of Alphaia. The night followed into a private dinner in the company of Alicia. There, he explained the situation, her reaction remained stern and disappointed.

“I did warn of this possibility,” the meal ended.

“I know,” she sipped wine, “-didn’t expect the time to come so quickly. Say, how long is it going to take?”

“No idea,” a melancholic gaze onto the cityscape diffused her frustration. Her eyes firmed and darted to be halted, “-no, you’re not coming with me.”

“How...”

A smug half-smile said, “-you’re predictable. Attend to Ansoft, aren’t you the manager of Vorn. They need help and whatever support we can muster. The place I’m headed isn’t fit for even the dogs. I rather keep the people I wish to protect to a minimum, respect my wishes for once.”

Left on a bitter note, éclair arrived to head for the private airfield where Julius waited patiently. Stopped before the black jet, “-looking good there, cousin,” commented Igna.

“Drop the jest,” marched a strong refusal, “-what’s this about starting over. Won’t it be simpler to-”

“No cousin,” he grasped the prince’s shoulders, “-tis a task I must fulfill no matter the cost. I leave the rest in thy hands. Take care of Ansoft and the new friends. Also, keep an eye on Alicia, she’s infuriated.”

“Didn’t you come with her?” he glanced to see a murderous beast in her cage of which was the car. “Oh, I understand,” he chuckled.

“So long, cousin,” they kissed and parted ways.

The jet growled to life, ‘-the underworld, my fated adversaries, here I come.’