

Death Magic 651

Chapter 651: Thena

Thereon, the rulership of the Shadow Realm settled. The people, conveniently dubbed, 'Shadows' trained without interruption. One could say, the news of Zeus periodic slumber brought upon the mortal and divine realm peace and quiet. In retrospect, such would have been earlier deduced per Syhton's untimely visit.

Without much trouble, the day advance to the 7th of October. By then, Thena and Nike were used to live at the manor. *Driing,* commonly rose the day, and so woke Igna in a larger-than-life bed. Draconis, Saniata, and Vanesa curled and scattered throughout the map-like sheets.

'Two days,' he thought and made for the corridor, *click,* the opposite bedroom opened to fatigued looking gentlemen. "Thena and Nike," he said, "-good morning," a courteous hug headed for the washroom.

"Aren't you ashamed to share such a private moment in the company of young maidens?"

Amberly lit bulb warmed the sink, "-aren't you ashamed to be taking a shower in company of a man?" returned Igna, "-besides," he meaningfully glared to Thena's underpants, "-I see the morning wood has yet to subside."

"Shut up," the curtain pulled with arrogance. Nike breathed a chuckle and wandered through the morning routine. Downstairs, the familiar sound of breakfast hummed melodiously, the scent drew one after the other to the dining hall. There, éclair brazenly tied a very feminine apron, "-good morning master," he said in the company of an arduously working Aceline.

"The idol's putting in the work," jested Igna, "-I'll take these next room. Wake the children in an hour or so; the night's been very stressful." Currently at the manor were, Igna, Aceline, éclair, the children, Thena and Nike, the latter two were new and temporary... or so he thought, or would see later on. Asmodeus and Kul took the liberty and flew north to Tale(also known as Tole), a village recently turned town, of unwanted affairs. Far as Dostein politics cared, Tale, partly ruled by Cimier, was but a hunting and agricultural area. A twinkle of a bell projected a screen onto the wall, there, news of current events displayed.

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*Good morning everyone, I'm your favorite host, Misty from the Morning Fall show, and today, we have updates on the shooting at the musical festival. Aceline and Kinless, two heroes of the said night, spoke on the matters a few days ago. Due to some constraints, we weren't allowed to show the full speech. In any case, more than a few million people have seen it already. A compilation of the guitarist's heroism of which had our trusted Sultrians put to shame, and the willingness to embrace death for the people's sake is on the site for all to see. The 'boycott Ansoft' movement has cleared, Arcanum users have raised important questions per Igna's speech. The way he phrased many ideas was in a way, reawakening, I, myself, the ever-shining Misty, couldn't believe it. There are so many things we do not know about, and I, for once, want to know the full history. Despite public outrage, the Gaso Group has denied any allegations and refuses to make an official statement, save a few rudimentary comments on social media. Alpha bonded together in a time of crisis, a true sight of fraternity towards our continent. Our

voice was heard by our emperor, official messengers have said his imperial majesty shall address the public once the terrorist threat is under control. In other news, Ansoft's influence over the entertainment world has dropped substantially. The company's going through a rough time, the conglomerate has paid a humongous amount for the physical damages. Good on you, Chef Amsey, great work, We from the station and on behalf of the populous, accept the events as one tragic and unlucky. Enough gloomy news, here's one for my fellow female listeners, the lady who coordinated the investigation and supervised the rescue operation was promoted to Chief of Odgawoan, the first female public officer to reach such an influential position. Chief of Police, Lula Valentino Rozemal, from the very distinguished household of Rozemal, daughter of the General Dockzt Rozemal, who's actually on the phone, good morning, Lady Lula."

"Good morning, Misty."

"I was surprised when I heard from my manager, the chief of police wanted to be on my show."

"Well, everyone here listens to the Misty show."

"Thank you for the compliment," she laughed, "-you had an announcement?"

"Yes, to the efforts of my team, we have found and tracked the location of potential suspects involved in the incidents on the 5th. The captured prisoners will be put on trial before his imperial majesty's self. Kinless and Aceline, heroes of the 5th, Emperor Sultria VI, requests thee to be present."

"A public announcement," interjected Misty, "-should this not be done officially?"

"No," she refused, "-staple official on an act and people think it to be political. I rather do it publicly and without restraints."

Beep, breakfast ended before the show, "-Master?" said éclair, "-should I be worried?"

"No, ignore what she said," firmed Igna, "-tis publicity. As new Chief, she ought to show a great deal of affection to the people and safety. Trust me, her words are fleeting. The supposed trial is over already."

"How do you know?" narrowed Thena, "-see the future much?"

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"Common sense," he smirked, "-would one willingly bring an unknown before the monarch. What if the body had a spell or greater offense, caution over bravado."

Dishes aside; the hours progressed until 10:00. 'I don't get this world fully,' gritted Thena. Multiple canvases laid beautifully on white walls. The study was refurbished to be a painting station for the new resident. Materials, canvas, anything he wanted or needed was made available. His best pieces were taken to the ground floor in a remodeled dancing hall. The open space was sliced and divided by wooden walls painted white, lighting and décor matched one of pleasantness.

'Why must I have to paint...' the lift opened, a fatigued Thena ambled his way to the gallery and hung his piece. "Igna..." he turned the corner, "-why must I paint?"

"To pay the rent," replied he, an open entrance gave a sense of freedom. The exquisitely cleaned marbled floor sparkled, "-didn't I say to experience what the mortal realm has to offer," stood behind

were avant-garde paintings. Whereas the personages, landscape, or object be centered and follow a certain symmetry, his choices were bold and meaningless. Obviously, many of her paintings followed that same ideology – very detailed and immaculate reproduction of Zeus, self-portraits, and idyllic scenery only seen through a god's eye. "I get that," he handed a smaller piece, "-what about my other works, you've kept everything I deem grand and befitting my station in the study. Instead, what the gallery compromises are abstract lines and shifts... I admit I like them better, still, why?"

"Don't worry about the why or how," returned Igna, "-just paint and do whatever, the only condition is for I to be the sole claimant on said pieces."

"Whatever," his eyes rolled, "-can we go out now?" medium-length hair drew briskly against his relaxed shoulders, "-Nike's impatient too..."

"When they said I'm the deity of Strength..." puffed a constipated voice after the lift, "-don't take it literally..." a hefty statue clambered to their stead, "-I can't hold it," the face pulsed to red, veins bugged as came a painful squint."

"See, he's impatient," rebutted Thena.

"NO, I'M..." A simple spell carried the object inside, the art room blacked out. A spacious sports utility vehicle branded by the esteemed Keihizer waited solemnly at the entrance. A shadow of a beast flew over, two loud flaps rustled the windows.

"We're going out," said Draconis, "-pops, fighting monsters is fun," he commented.

"Saniata," sighed Igna exiting the manor, "-what are you two planning?"

"Not my fault," she refuted, "-Lilith said for us to train in the Shadow Realm." The pungent aura of the vortex elapsed, "-hey Igna," waved Lilith, "-I'll be taking these two."

"Ok..." he shrugged.

Meanwhile, a whole province away to the silent Tale, Kul hid behind rusty blinders. "This place is a sham."

"Stop complaining," returned Asmo, "-I'm not the one eating fast-food..." a small television played reruns of Autumn's Blossom, "-look at the table, there are pizza boxes everywhere."

"Shut up," returned she sharply, "-not my fault... you had to go and make a deal with Yonak. Look at us now, spying on filthy humans."

"They offered one million just to sit back and watch, the more information we have, the more we get paid."

Flashback to a few days ago, after the completion with Yonak, the boss, contacted again to spy on another family. The reasoning was, 'Ravens are independent and don't care about hierarchy, the leader wants money.' Apparently, the four families were at each other's throats in the trafficking business. "Anything to report yet?"

"Not really," she replied. Empty street and shabby buildings, such was the scene onto the great beyond of two blocks. No clue, and no idea, Kul watched day in and day out. "Any luck on the microphone?" asked she.

"No luck," he replied, "éclair's gadget hasn't responded..."

"Wait, wait," she ate the last bite, "strange figures," the prince quickly shuffled to the window, "here," they wore headsets.

"Ha-ha-ha, last night was amazing," the crowd disappeared into the building.

"I know, the yellows have no idea we stole the produce from last week's transit."

"Aye, don't speak too loudly," yelled another, "pack the stuff and have the produce readied for Odegawoan. Our clientele waits patiently."

"Boss, we got a problem," the phone rang of which, éclair's autonomous system intercepted, "to the dealers, we have found a new manufacturer. The Yonak's are ending relations."

"Ingrates," a loud crash echoed, presumably, a kick.

"What are we going to do?" articulated a frightened voice.

"Shut it, man, let me think. We stole the shipment, let's just resell it to Saku or the Vermillion."

"We can't... Cimier rules this town."

"Whatever man, load the trunk, we're going on a little trip."

The door slammed, and off went the figures, "what now?" sat Asmo, "nothing's happened..."

"Maybe they know they're being watched?" Kul suggested.

"Doubt it, those buffoons don't know anything about secrecy. I wonder what secret the Yonak wants to find out. Annoying, very annoying, I could be spending time with my harem, better yet, sending ladies to the Shadow Realm."

Beep, incoming transmission, "hello boys, I hope I wasn't too late. Yonak's have backed out of the agreed deal. A team's going to attack their shipyard later today. They never realized a double agent was in their midst. They will pay greatly for the blatant betrayal; us reds will never fall to their treachery again."

"Track the caller," ordered Asmo, "I wonder, is such an infant scheme worth 1 million?"

"Orders confirmed... Caller, Unknown, Location, Unknown... Name, Tela Sizla. Associations, Yonak and Saku, disposition; traitorous."

"We got our share," smiled Asmo.

"No," her mood swung to belligerent, "those buffoons played us for fools..." *Demon-Arts: Spirit Sense,* the walls melted in favor of the life-essence, multiple gunmen posited. One held three fingers and counted, "get ready," she whispered. Fist clenched, heavy boots stormed the door, "hands up." Easy as breathing, a sloppy horizontal swipe imploded the invaders.

“Master, Kul, and Asmodeus were ambushed on their mission to Tale. The culprits have been dealt with, a greater scheme between the families may be profitable. Should I investigate further?”

“Go for it,” the scenery gently swayed for the town-center, the destination, an art exposition showcasing a collector’s pieces.

“What now?” sighed Thena, “-riding these is far comfier to chariots.”

“We’re headed to meet an art critic,” he replied, “-here’s thy chance at stardom.”

“Really?” the shoulders rose confidently, “-I am the god of arts and craft, don’t get jealous when they revere me.”

‘I won’t. Trust me,’ he emotionlessly faced forward, ‘-the underworld families bother me. Why send the Raven’s to spy, common sense says they can sell the information for more profit. Is it Esvalo’s doing or someone else. The greater reason is why – stirring the pot doesn’t equate to ambitions coming to fruition. Never mind them, Thena will learn a lesson today; art and crafts pitted against ignorance and yes men.’

Chapter 652: Evaluate

Expectation crumbles before reality. A sluggishly built apartment in a forest of taller buildings hosted the exposition. Igna’s words prior made it to be a world-renown collection, a place where art pieces and subjects to crafts were praised and evaluated. However, the SUV pulled into a vacant parking spot on the seamlessly inclined streets. Hand in hand with Vanesa, the four exited for a hasty climb into an arch of red bricks.

Inside, after the white door, came multiple men and ladies vested in costly attire. Never judge a book by its cover, prior doubts faded in favor of confusion.

“Good to see you, Lord Igna,” waved an unfamiliar face. The butler soon escorted the four upstairs and into a pretty well-maintained room. “-Please wait a moment,” asked the attendant gently tapping another door, the latter briskly opened to a hasty lady. Her steps were followed by a broader man, who, apologized briefly and fled down the stairs.

“My apologies,” said a man in a monocle, “-I never expected my invitation to be answered.” A desk of weird proportions stood in the middle, original works of art from lesser-known artists hung about the premises. The strides lessened for a glimpse, Vanesa took one look and clocked out. The golden rims of the appraisers’ glasses fell harmoniously onto the fair complexion.

“We meet again,” said Igna pulling a seat, “-I was certainly surprised about the exposition. I hear tis from an unknown collector?”

“Yes,” he replied, “-the host is very much keen on war-depicting pieces. I’ve seen the very illustrious battle of Dorchester, painted by Vnaan Dourke, at the current show. The gruesome detail of human deaths sure is haunting, the absurd reality makes me quiver.”

“Very interesting,” he made subtle glances to the unknown man, “-I heard the art gallery was asking to buy a painting from any random source?”

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"Yes," replied the appraiser(same man from the auction) "-I'm currently looking for potential pieces on a new project. The future of Arts in a society influenced by the Arcanum."

"Long title."

"Ought to get the message through. Needless to say, when art is brought up for discussion, either one cringes, looks bemused, or outright ignores the matter. Not to say, many love to admire the work of artists. I'm lucky enough to work for Stiol. Pardon the late introductions, I go by Thomas Edson, a private appraiser for Stiol. By private, it just means I'm free to work when I want and how I want."

"Don't be so modest. I've seen the magazines. The rescuer of the art world. The Battle of Dorchester was a lost piece of which you recovered singlehandedly. I'm sure the sources were dubious and unprecedented. No matter, the exploits stack one onto another. The ability to earnestly judge work and instantly put a price tag has made the replica-filled sea of pieces swimmable. One can say, the limitation of an art critic to be an appraiser was indirectly instated by you. We are sure to believe the people aren't sham."

"I admire a man who does his research."

'Beautiful,' thought Thena, "-these pieces resonate deep inside. Are artists in the mortal realm so blessed?"

"Thena," hailed Igna, "-we're headed to the expedition."

"Pardon me," the crowded room emptied, Thomas personally escorted and gave a tour of the current highlights. "There we have it," they reached a large room, three vertically hung frames kept the big piece as one. The way the images transposed seamlessly after the blank separating added to the beauty. "The masterpiece of our show."

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Confidence sparked a smug expression, Nike and Thena were lost in admiring the pieces. "Over here," whispered Igna, "-I'd like to discuss a business proposal."

"Artifacts for auction?" interjected Thomas.

"No, I have pieces made to be evaluated..."

"My lord, please, this isn't the time for jests. The market is already filled with talented painters. Slapping an image on a canvas doesn't equal money. Besides, the painter must be recognized or otherwise be a monster in art, a genius of sorts. I know the argument of beauty is in the eye of the beholder, yet, tis can't be applied to the real world. Money controls what is valuable, and I'm afraid, Collectors are fixated on old and rust, not new and fresh. They want clout, not pieces. Similar to watches and jewelry, they'll buy it under the guise of knowledge and investment... between you and me, we know they're but rich children flaunting their wealth to attract the opposite sex."

"Very true," said Igna, "-I don't wish for money. Take an objective look at a few pieces I have, don't use the appraisal skill, judge it as an art critic. If possible, slew or burnt it, you have my permission."

"I don't get it..." he glanced to Thena, "-well, whatever you say." Later on, black rectangular bags hoisted atop the stairs to the same office, there, Igna made audience with Thena and Nike.

“What now?” shrugged the unimpressed god, “-I admit, humans have a lot of talent.”

“Just wait and watch,” he said. The paintings were laid one by one, “-have thine pieces ever be subjected to criticism?”

“Subjected to criticism?” her brows knitted, “-I’m the god of arts and craft, my wisdom knows no bound. If I say it’s good, then it’s good, no argument.”

Click, ‘-we shall find out, won’t we?’ smirked he.

Menacing footsteps echoed to the three displayed pieces, ‘-what in the world is this?’

“Lord Igna, I thought you brought paintings, not a child’s scribble. I can’t even make the arguments of it being modern or else avantgarde. There’s no meaning, no context, and no feel, the strokes are lackluster and sloppy. I don’t care if it looks somewhat interesting, the foundation is lacking,” *Appraisal,* “-my skill displays zero, tis worthless. I’m tired of these types of attempts, people see money being thrown at random pieces and think it easy to replicate or mimic. The first one, trash.” So on and so forth, the evaluation concluded with a very angry statement. More he looked, more the blood boiled. “-I’ll stop at two, the third one is... boring.” A crash toppled the work, a sense of dejection fueled his mind and body, the fist attempted to curl, a clear expression of, ‘-who does he think he is?’ carried onward.

“There we have it,” said Igna, “-the god of arts and craft was judged and said to be worthless. How does it feel to be rejected by a lowly human? Don’t mistrust his skill, that man is Thomas Edson, a man blessed with Appraisal, he can objectively identify and price items. Station, prestige, a god?” he cackled, “-how very childish. Here I thought the god of art would at least repay the cost of the paint. No matter, we’re headed back, I have urgent business to attend.”

“I want food,” complained Vanesa, “-pops...”

“And get food too.”

The man froze, no words nor emotions emanated, Nike watched on from the side, baffled and intrigued. The head swayed left and right, Thena to Igna, one held the upper hand over the other.

‘He said my works were worthless,’ a cloud fell and marred a proper outlook onto the world. Silence forced Nike to carry his friend to the vehicle, from which, they returned home.

“Was it necessary?” inquired Nike.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You know very well...”

“No, it was an earnest choice. Titles easily cloud a person’s judgment. If I were to name you the god of dance, would thee suddenly be the best at dancing?”

“Good point,” she squinted, “-yet, it feels wrong.”

“Call it a proper start.”

The attended business was a live feed of the gambling house. ‘-The damned pest has decided to attack the Raven’s again. Was the 1 million but a carrot leading Kul and Asmodeus. Who’s the conspirator...’

“Master,” displayed éclair, “-I’ve identified the perpetrator. Tis Esvalo, he wishes to storm the building and steal our produce.”

‘A pitiful operation to find the formula,’ he sighed, ‘-toggle the AFR and slay any who enters the premises.’

Sun glared onto the bystander-less streets, ‘-no way I’m letting these two make money off my head...’ vans pulled to the entrance, ‘-anyone who messes with the mob must pay, and especially people who know too much. Why did the boss have to contact them, my compatriots can’t sell their produce... Saku’s the only option, they’ll buy at a very low price, if we negotiate, bullets will fill our heads.’

“Boss, we’re ready to storm.”

“Hold on a moment,” he paused, “-are you sure the building is empty?”

“Yes, Kul and Asmo left for Dostein on orders from the boss.”

“Then who am I to interject,” cigar lit, “-have at it.” The gates of hell opened, the instant the metal flung inward, turrets sprouted out the walls and floor, *bang, bang, bang,* no less than two seconds, five people were shot in the head. “GET DOWN,” ordered he, the cigar fell, ‘-what in the world?’

“THEY HAVE TURRET-” end of the message.

‘What’s this again?’ awoke a man from a bruised lady, “-the red-district workers here are very resilient,’ the curtains parted to a buffed and naked man, ‘-ever since her death, I haven’t enjoyed the company of another woman. I’m an idiot, allowing rage to take over like that,” nonchalantly checking the lady, “-don’t act like a princess, you damned doll. Feelings aren’t necessary for thy line of work. I appreciate the courtesy... big breasts and very nicely curved thighs, a man’s fantasy,’ he lit a cigarette, “-too bad your nothing than a toy for the wealthy,” he inched for a better look. Mouth gagged, hands cuffed to the bed and slashes across the stomach and legs, “-at least have the decency to shave,” he sat and wrapped his hands around her face, “-a very nice specimen indeed,” the cigarette extinguished in her neck, the bed rocked till half an hour later, the lady curled into a precarious position, her face smothered in sweat and fluids, “-workers deserve no respect,” *spat,* “-fuck you.” The unknown figure ambled into the shadowy corridors.

‘The sound of gunfire, this place is very active,’ coat on, the taller than average customer made for the square, there, a grandly priced car waited, ‘-what’s the deal with the shootings?’

The parked vans soon fled the scene, corpses were left to rot. Workers from the neighboring brothel curiously made for the motel from which they helped in taking the bodies inside. “Thank you for the help,” said a demoness in a pretty lady’s body.

“No problem,” replied a human lady, “-us girls must stick as one and survive the harshness of the world.” The world be damned, screw the misogynistic fools who abused the hardened maidens of the night, such went across the demoness’s mind. Regardless of the race, and despite their patronizing look on humans, they felt the same per shared experiences.

Igna reached home finally and dashed for the study. Countless files and information were compiled for review, the truth behind the attack needed to be found. More he read, the clearer grew a vague picture, the four families are allied as one, instead, tis two versus two. Yonak and Vermillion pitted against Leon

and Saku, the peace was more of a deadlock as opposed to an understanding. A factor knew too only a few. ‘-Esvalo is directly involved in the invasions. Tis insanity, does he not realize the might Raven hold? Perhaps someone is guiding his actions. The families aren’t involved in Cimier’s affairs. Together, the four could pull enough men and assets to rival their organization. Wait a moment...’ a eureka moment dawned his mind, ‘-Esvalo is associated with Cimier. If I replace said bit of information as to his motive, most of the foolishness becomes clearer. The cunning elapses expectation, a very nicely carved facade. Avoiding suspicious and keeping the factions from banding as one. Cimier’s more resilient as I’ve imagined, time to prove the plausible truth.’

Chapter 653: “-SKELETONS, A WHOLE BUNCH OF ‘EM.”

Matching proof to a hypothesis wasn’t always the best start, for tis the latter must follow the former. No ground to base the formulated thoughts, only one path of visible solution presented itself; personal intervention. He would have acted alone, and emphasis on the would have, instead, the information relayed to Kul and Asmodeus.

From the day to day of Igna making music, chastising Thena’s attempts at art, and constant evaluation of the town’s status, the scenery swapped for two characters of great strength.

Wings flapped, the wind blows harshly, and the ground approaches fast. Over in the distance, mud-shape giants wake from liquid form, hallow holes in place of eyes and mouth, the hands lazily attempted to swat the flying miscreants.

“Keep him steady,” voiced Draconis, “-Beelzebub’s monsters are strong.”

“Harder than you think,” returned Saniata, “-jump off and break the beast already.” Vast empty fields of sand, the remainder of Dorchester. “-what a pain,” he scowled and leaped. Looking up at the duo, a neatly sized fiery arrow broke through the beast to which the mud solidified and crumbled. *Crash,* dust, and dirt faded behind.

“Good job,” said Lilith in the company of the shy Beelzebub.

“Come on little bro,” sighed Draconis, “-you could have made the monsters a bit stronger.”

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“Enough you two,” hailed Intherna towards the right on a little hill. Prior images of a hardened battle crumbled, reality settled into a parasol and beach chairs. Sun, sand, and sea sparkled beyond the mount; the four generals came to the sea for training. Increasing habitants made the realm closer to reality, the female residents were few but greaten gradually. Many fell in love, got married, who knew what heir a resident of the realm would make. A question the freely dressed Miira wondered through her sunglasses, the warmth of the sun sufficed for a nice tan, ‘-throughout the other dimension, Igna’s is the strongest, closer to creation and abundance of mana, the residents are potential vessels for elements, tis a thing of wonder. Strap four high-tier beings in an expanding world, the density of mana is heavier than before, the monsters and natural enemies far exceed commonness. Tis free to say, the children will be monsters of their own.’

Tiny feet scattered into the sand, “-can’t catch me!” mocked Draconis.

"Don't worry," smirked Saniata, "-I don't need to," an upward stroke conjured a water-snake from the crystal lagoon, the smug Draconis didn't pay heed, and so, near the edge of the water, the snake pounced.

"Cold," he paused, '-and sticky.'

"Too bad," shrugged Intherna, "-she wins."

"Where's Gophy?"

"No idea," replied Miira lowering her glasses, "-shouldn't you be with her?"

"Nah," shrugged Lilith, "-she said don't worry."

"What she working on anyway?"

"I heard," returned Intherna, "-Igna asked her to ready the land of Totrya for some invasion, I don't fully get it."

"Seriously..." the lashes shut, "-Intherna, Lilith, Igna's planning on merging the realm of Monsters into the shadow realm."

"I get why he would," said Lilith, "-if combined, the potential of this place would be unreachable. Gods, demons, none could dare harm us then."

"If Scifer had been closer to completing the domain, he'd still be alive. Instead, he chose to die and safeguard the monster realm." Gem-like strutters of waves against the shore gave a general idea of the following week. A resort at about a 5-minute walk was 'training' ground.

Pull from the ever-giving sun, sand, and sea, Kul and Asmodeus were on their way back. Tale proved to be a waste of time. A few days later on the 11th, the atmosphere didn't spark confidence. Asmodeus and Kul waited before a council of strongly armed men. At the head, the general of Yonak's boss, the same man they sold narcotics to. "It was them," said Esvalo, "-my men said they stole the prior shipment and resold it to the Saku's. You know damn well the market for drugs is limited, the shipments are slow, and minimum, handmade stuff is cheap and ineffective..."

"Shut up," fired the boss, "-Asmo, tell me, is this true?" Arrogant smoke from incense sticks diffused outward of a deity's statue, the crowd felt bigger, or so was the illusion fabricated by cascading ambers."

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"What's more valuable to you, the word of a two-faced opportunist or a newly formed gang. Come on," he menacingly glared, "-the man said it himself, the shipment was cheap and ineffective. What about our products, they're exquisite and very sought after. Personally, Saku, Yonak, Leon, and even the Vermillion, whoever comes with a better price, we'll sell too. I ought to say, shame on your family; we're allies in name only, not on the street. That fat-fuck attacked our manor, I made it clear, any infringement onto Raven's members or property will be met in full," a sidestep allowed a clearer view onto a murderous psycho. Faint white lines formed on her back palm, the eyelashes bleached to a pure white as for the eyes of which made into pure golden menace, "-tis as was said," she hovered, "-our property was damaged," five ominously small orbs appeared atop her long fingers, "-enjoy the pain," three faded

through the wall and,*BANG,* three immediate explosions followed, the remainder two dispersed into the building, no explosion, her hovering hair swayed and returned to normal.

"Next time," two large steps had him gawking the general, "-consult the lackeys before subjecting us to this useless drama. Transfer the one million, it should be enough to cover the sustained damages."

"Are you insane?" rebutted Grie(name of the general) "-one million for what, shit information?"

"No, one million for your safety," no movements, not even a faint, what was seen, a blink and four guards instantly fell. Fear and the threat of death was one he'd been used to. This time, what loomed within wasn't fear, but terror, '-who is this guy,' he gulped. Men who gave all for the family were killed easily, "-I'll transfer the cash." A notification displayed the transfer. "Pleasure doing business." Once they left, horrified guests ran to the meeting room, "-BOSS, OUR MEN WERE KILLED."

"What do you mean?" the perplexed emotion-fueled to disheartened fear, "-don't tell me..." they pelted to an exclusive lounge where the remains of two relatively unknown starlets and the son of Luon's godfather slept in his own blood. A mangled mess, the inner organs blathered out the mouth.

'The heir is dead...' panted Esvalo, '-this can't be happening, a death leaves the heritage up for debate. I never planned for this eventuality; how badly are the families going to take this?'

Outside, a very lavish car drove past the fiery mess of exploded vehicles, "-how was it?" inquired éclair.

"Pretty good," he said.

"Then we're on for the next part of the plan," smirked éclair, "-take us to Stanley's homage, we ought to pay the family a visit."

"Can't they just phone ahead?" voiced Kul.

"No, I've shut their communication. Esvalo wishes to war, we'll give him one." Moreover, the reason wasn't as simple as starting a war, no, instead, the current quest was to infiltrate and claim one of the four families.

Thus, the booming center of town approached. No time was wasted, the location of their hideout, a penthouse at a five-star hotel, took much negotiating for an audience. In the end, the mention of the heir solicited a violent response. The hotel staff, visibly allied to the family, took to escort the three smartly dressed figures to a representative. After the lobby, a worker's only area sprawled in view. The corridors led to a bemusing tiny compartment of which gave outside.

"Are you the Raven's?"

"And who are you?"

"A lawyer," replied one, "-I need to confirm a few things, mind answering my questions?"

"Sure," the gloomy weather set the scene.

To the station, the rise in popularity from Kinless and Aceline was strong a week into the events. For the first time, an invitation to a talk show promoted and showcased their popularity. "-Are you excited for this?"

"Not much." The Parker's show, a local comical relief with a mild following, had few popular snippets on the Arcanum. In no way was the show popular, the viewership peaked at five thousand.

"Talk shows are hypocritical," her face didn't inspire confidence. Once at the set, the staff watched in awe, 'the production is very nice...' Live-audience soon filled the seats. Aceline didn't show much interest, "-hey there," said a handsomely dressed man, "-you must be Kinless and Aceline?"

"Yes, and you are?"

"Parker," said he in a very smug manner, "-the staff will take care of the makeup. We're going live in thirty minutes, tis the reboot of our show, try and relax." A bitter taste forced a pout from Aceline. Cameras and nice lighting faded to a bright room of mirrors and makeup.

"I told you," said Aceline, "-this place is a shit show. They want us to boost their popularity."

"Don't worry about it," said Igna, "-we're using them as well." The arrangement was to promote the new single, 'Ghoul's Pain.'

Producers were adamant to the point of annoyance. Pressure stacked until the start, the show went live, the host began by casually addressing the crowd and making small talk. The humor and jokes were nicely written.

"You ought to sing," he demanded, "-I don't care, this is our reboot, we need viewers."

"Hey, hey," interjected Igna, "-what's your problem?" hailed he. "-I went to the toilet and this is how you treat my bandmate?"

"Listen," glared the producer, "-do as we say..."

"You listen to me," fired Igna, "-I don't care about this show. We came here to promote our song. Aceline's sick from overworking."

"What's the deal here?" approached security, "-producer, something the matter?"

"Yes," he slipped in behind a taller man, "-they're refusing to cooperate."

"Don't worry," said Aceline, "-I'll perform if I have to." A brief introduction followed behind, "-let's welcome our guests, Kinless and Aceline!"

"Watch me," said Igna, "-Aceline, don't worry about singing."

Applause, "-welcome to Parker's show," said the host.

"Good to be here," said Igna, "-I have to say, courtesy is a word not many people know around these parts." The backdrop of the landscape view of a bridge gave a sense of relief.

"Why do you say that?" inquired the host, the crowd chuckled.

"Well, I'll leave it to the people's imagination."

"Alright," he quickly moved on, "-about the displayed heroism, how did it feel?"

“Bad, pretty bad,” retorted Igna, “-I won’t lie, the publicity is great, I wish the heroes who helped would be given the same treatment.”

“What about you, Aceline?”

“I felt like I needed to do something,” said she, “-pardon my voice, the constant shouting’s pretty rough,” she implied an ulterior motive.

“Now excuse you,” the crowd laughed.

“What,” she paused, “-did I say it was because of you?” she snickered, the audience loved it. In minutes, Parker’s show became Igna and Aceline’s. Producers hailed in the background, naught could be done. Jokes after jokes, the conversation altered as Parker interjected, they made fun of his face, outfit, and mannerism.

An earthquake rocked the town. A group of armed men lingered out of Fuda Mountain. “-here we are,” said they, “-the gate opened to the city.” Dragons flew and roared. “-Come undead army, arise from thy eternal slumber!” skeletons descended.

“We’re going to capture a great view,” said a jovial photographer.

“An earthquake,” said the assistant, “-watch out for rock-slides.”

“It’s safe,” he proclaimed, “-look at the view,” they face the sea of buildings, “-imagine, tis but a mere little town for showmanship. Alpha has more jaw-dropping sights in weight, I’m glad we saved for the vacation.”

“Yeah sure, a vacation at a cheap motel. I haven’t slept a bit since.”

Click, “-hey, isn’t that bird strange?” the silhouette of a reptile flapped in the distance.

“WAIT, LOOK AT THE DUST!” cried the assistant, “-SKELETONS, A WHOLE BUNCH OF ‘EM.”

“Productions for certain movies are top-tier.”

“I don’t think...” rotten breath landed with a roar,”-RUN!”

Chapter 654: Accidents happen

‘I might have accidentally opened a portal in the middle of two warring realms...’ Ancient symbols and letters flung left to right, ‘-oh shit,’ Gophy’s darkened hair landed abruptly, “-Miira, Intherna, Lilith, could you guys teleport to my location?”

The sunbathing cut short, the three-deity stood on a glass platform in bikinis, “-Gophy...” said Miira, “-explain?”

“Here’s the short version, I got sleepy during the mana-link. I figured I’d go for some coffee, instead of the shadow and monster realm, I accidentally screwed the spell which in turn, pulled two locations, Odogwoan and the warring underworld of Sydnia under Hades’s rule.”

“For the love of God,” facepalmed Miira, “-we can’t undo the spell, the gates already locked and firmed itself. ”

"Should we be scared?" wondered Intherna, "-I haven't heard of Sydnia like ever."

"Obviously not," fired Miira, "-why would you know of some fallen realm. It's overrun with demons and alternate beings; the exact image of what humans think hell is."

"Bad..." said Lilith, "-with multiple gods of the same affiliation, we can't gauge what impact will befall the world."

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"Pops is going to be furious," said Draconis, "-Saniata, look, Lady Gophy done goof."

"I see," the griffin landed to see the destruction in full detail, "-who cares," said she.

"Yeah, who cares," yawned Gophy, "-what happened, happened. We can't do help, leave the humans to have fun."

"Washing your hands already," Miira's face hung into her palm, "-honestly..." a chilly gust blew, "-tis as Saniata said, the problem is theirs. Let's just ignore this ever happened, ok?" a unanimous agreement and the vacation resumed.

The audience froze, tremors were felt, the whole building shook. A bit of dust escaped onto Parker's gelled back black hair.

"Quite the ride," said nervous laughter, "-ladies and gentlemen, we'll be back after a short break. We can't ignore safety protocol," the feed cut. The tremors kept at a milder pace.

"Don't move!" said the producer, "-earthquake or not, the building is insured from any natural calamity. The audience, remain seated, Parker, go fix your hair, and you two," he glared, "-stay right there and don't move." The vibration pulsed louder and harsher, anxiety in the crowd shown on mystified glances.

Creek, cried the building, "-alright," said Igna, "-everyone, please evacuate in an orderly manner."

"How dare you!" shouted the producer, "-I decide when this show is over."

"And I decide when I want to leave," the confidence in step and body forced a defeated snarl, "-come on people, would you rather be alive or die in this shitty establishment?"

"We'd rather live!" fired a drunkard man.

"You'll pay dearly for this!"

"Shut up squirt, we're out of here. I hope the show crash and burns, so long," he flashed the middle finger and left.

"Well everyone," said the charismatic Parker, "-I'm back... where's everyone?"

"Left," replied the producer.

"HOW, I THOUGHT THE BUILDING WAS INSURED!"

"No," *CRASH,* the well-built set broke, "-forget it, just get out of here." Railings swung into the seats, the lights loosened and fell, a moment of doubt and there would have been serious injuries.

Located in Mi's district, a shabby view onto Fuda Mountains caught his eye, '-this presence... its dark, divine, and potent. Has another portal opened?'

An urgent call connected, "-Master, éclair reporting; Odegawoan faces a possible annihilation."

"Coming or not?" said Aceline a few meters forward.

"Go on with the crowd," returned Igna, "-here," the car keys flew across, "-take that and go home, I have a business to attend to."

'Ok?'

Through the window, "-what's the matter?" he leaped to the roof, "-I sense auras..."

"Tis but the tip," shouted he, "-Lady Gophy accidentally linked the portal to the underworld to Odegawoan, safe to say, Hades' minions have swarmed Fuda Mountains."

"SHE DID WHAT?"

"Also, the goddesses have said the following, '-no way I'm cleaning up a mess I made. The girls and I have decided to boycott and enjoy the beach for a while. Feel free to summon anyone else aside from us, ta-ta and farewell' pretty bad news."

"Ta-ta and farewell?" he dropped onto the ledge and sat; the legs freely swayed per the winds' whims. "éclair, show me a real-time map of the area and the monsters."

"As you wish," a blue-hologram hovered above the phone, '-let's see, skeletons have made it past the mountain range. The sun should hamper their movements, the actual gates behind the neighboring range, either climb the guardian or make way through the only available path. One mess into another,' scenarios showed potential outcomes. 'Best case for the country, the invaders can't pass the creek. Worse case, total devastation of the town. Maybe... and just maybe I should sit this one out. Let the Sultrian's deal with the situation,' wings sprouted, '-I have better things to do.'

Deep exhales charred the ground, "I don't think... RUN!" a simple whistle fired the photographer. Before rose, strange buildings and beautiful forests, air-bound leaches swarmed the edge of Mi's district.

"The tremors are close," commented a patron of a casual shop.

"I know..." returned the old shopkeeper, "-been a while since we experienced an earthquake." *Bang, bang, bang,* gunfire echoed in the distance, "-someone's trying to get through the border again?"

"Don't think so," returned the younger patron, "-guard towers aren't allowed to shoot unless the threat is potentially fatal. Besides, the patrol always cares for visitors." Curious drivers slowed to peep. None knew of the deadly threat.

"Guard tower one reporting, monsters have broken past defenses, I repeat, monsters have broken past the defenses. Sound the alarm, we need the heroes, magic bullets aren't helping," voiced an intercepted transmission. 'Sounds like they're having a great time,' the manor waited patiently, Aceline was yet to arrive.

Rumbles intensified; insect-like buzz echoed in the distance. The smart fled immediately, the foolish parked and watch, 'our defenses are top class, none's going to get through.' Evidently, said line of logic didn't work; when it rains, it pours. An onslaught of mangled insects rampaged through the main road. Unlucky drivers were struck and killed, the soul and life-essence drained instantly. Conversation between the young and old ended prematurely – in addition to the visible fiends, parasites, invisible to the naked eye, diffused. "What's up with you, young one," inquired the shopkeeper, "you're pale." *Snatch,* the infected grew canines and claws, eyes the shade of blood., famine and bloodlust fueled the slaughter. *AHHH,* distant cries of the unlucky echoed, a horde of half-monster and half-humans, limped and clawed up the streets. Those witnesses ran further into the city, slow and injured were abandoned. Infected drivers mindlessly sped and crashed into oncoming traffic, balls of fire dyed the sky black.

"THIS WAY," screamed the escapees, "I'll erect a barrier, run away!" Super-human abilities of normal citizens aided in minimizing the damages. No matter the strength, the fight for survival responded to a shot in latent abilities.

Familiar faces snatched and killed, the slow-pace of 'turned' allowed for many to escape. Courageous men banded to form protective walls against the enemy. The ballsy used offensive abilities to limit the horde without harming the infected. Instead, the courtesy led to needless deaths. Those harmed by said attacks, reddened by the face and body. The physical attributes skyrocketed beyond limitation and ultimately clawed their way through the vigilantes.

Stationed members of the AHA rushed to the scene, whereby, laid dehydrated bodies. An army of skeletons marched; conflicts arose. Save the people or save the town, alas, they chose the former.

"Tech guy, this is bad," reported Snowflake atop a smokey shop, "we're two against the horde. Ask headquarters for backup, I'll help the survivors. Coordinate public safety, I want the news to blast through each channel."

"WATCH OUT!" cried the Tech-guy, a dragon seamlessly appeared and attacked. White smoke flung the hero into a crowd of infected, the shock knocked him out.

"SAVE THE HERO!" shouted another man, "FIRE!" guns brazenly made the situation worse. "GET AWAY FOOLS!" after a certain number of hits, the infected imploded.

News and radio stations went full panic. Multiple distress calls bombarded the emergency number, Chief Julia, not even a month into the promotion, faced another crisis. The limited number of forces mobilized to provide support. Prior dispatched ambulances disappeared on the radar; the fiends showed signs of intellect. Targets were assigned, the strong were eliminated. Through thick and thin, the vigilantes held a key barrier; buildings and alleys created a natural cup, the mindless were attracted to heavy masses. The coming attacks happened in linear waves. A heavily injured Snowflake was thrown out of the battleground, the limbs were mauled right off his body. Medics arrived to pronounce the man dead; many survivors made it through with mortal wounds. If not killed at the start, death followed suit regardless of the location.

"Chief, we've dispatched the forces."

"Good," said she, "have you contacted Odgar's Agency yet?"

"They're on way to Mi's district."

Meanwhile, unknown to the tragedy towards the north-east, Luon's family agreed to a discussion. The representative, a lawyer and trusted ally of the godfather kept a stern expression. Blacked out room, nothing came in, and nothing went out, what happened, stayed. "I doubt the credibility," voiced he.

"Listen, the Yonak's have killed Luon's heir. We were there when it happened."

"Could you not have saved him?"

"Don't be foolish," returned Kul, "two against their full force. We only deal in gambling and selling narcotics. Do you really think we could have killed him?"

"Figuratively speaking, no. What do you want from us then?"

"Revenge," said Asmodeus, "-the Yonak's played us for fools. Esvalo's unjustly attacked our hideout time and time again, we paid seven million and still, he doesn't want the place to slip."

"Luon's don't offer protection," returned the lawyer, "-our deal is loansharking, violence is not our type."

"-said line of thought ended in the heir being killed. Guess what, if the family wants to stay afloat, better start caring for the soldiers..."

"Good research, the death of the master will leave a vacant seat."

"A power struggle and easy opening. Vermillion and Yonak can easily seize the spotlight."

"Mhm," a few scribbles read a number, "-I'll have to discuss it with the Godfather. Call me should anything happen," he stood.

"Lawyer," whispered Asmodeus, "-if per se, the Godfather happened to die and the vacant heir is unfilled, who will be the next inheritor?"

"What's the implication?" returned he with a shout.

"Just a casual question," the ghosted his presence, "-call if ever you need assistance. The Raven's will fully support in a potential ascension," instigation of a new plot, the ball rested in the lawyer's court.

Hero-arts a slash dispatched the coming skeleton army. "-Odgar," voiced Aki, "-is it just me or are we doing the police's dirty work?" Kion stood strong between the fiends and people, the parasites had no effects on his person.

"Not just you," returned Camilia, "-I hate this," she said, "-mindlessly killing puppets."

"No more chitchat," fired Ulia, "-Kion, lead them to me. Light magic seems to work." A golden flash halved the following wave, "-daunting," he said, "-Odgar, what's the chief doing?"

"Hold on just a little bit longer," he begged.

"Sorry again, most of my men are busy restricting access." The familiar screen-filed truck beeped constantly. The more time passed, the stronger grew the monsters, "-Odgar, it's bad."

'Nighttime approaches. Hades' minion grows stronger in the dark. How long does it take for them to send reinforcements? Snowflake's dead, Tech-guy is missing in action. The weak barrier's about to fall, Odegawoan truly isn't ready to face the wrath of fiends.'

"IGNA, IGNA!" shouted Nike, "-come here and look at the news."

"What is it?"

"Fiends from Hades' realm, they're attacking," her face paled, "-what now?"

"I'm staying out of the fight," he sipped coffee, "-let them die, Alpha needs to experience absolute terror."

"Won't it hurt us indirectly?"

"Not really, besides, the emperor should take matters in his hands, not us."

Alpha had yet to play their trump card. A jet crossed the mountain range, "-did you miss me?"

CRASH, ice froze the streets, white hair swam along with the icy cold air, "Kion, long time no see."

"-Princess?"

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Chapter 655: Empress of Alpha

"Cat got your tongue, Lucifer's ex-companion?" a smug smirk had Kion flustered, a horde of ravenous ghouls, never mind the arctic cold, leaped for the white princess's neck. *Library of Nexsolium,* she spun, pages followed her icy glare, *Purge the undead,* three symbols in a triangle lit ablaze, *Clear Undead.* A beam of white burst out the street upward, a massive flow of light mana healed and cleansed the battlefield of a neighborhood. The corpses warmly burnt to pure-white ash, *Create Barrier – Protection level IX – Undead resist.*

"Is it over?" relief swept many of faces.

"Be without fear, my people," white wings sprouted, her hands clasped in prayer, a halo of divine proportion shone, "-I, Princess Eira, next Empress of Alpha, shall protect thee with all my might." The beloved princess returned and saved countless lives. The continent didn't spare a moment's time – from radio to shows and Arcanum, the news elapsed just about everything.

"Murder?"

"Who cares."

"The sudden invasion of monsters?"

"Another one's problem."

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"What about the heroes who saved the musical festival?"

“Old news.” The clock struck 18:00, rescue operation reached completion. A complex barrier rested patiently at the creek, no matter how strong the ghouls were, the latter halted just about all. The dragons and other high-ranking entities were gone long before she appeared.

Later in the evening, whereby Igna had dinner in the company of Aceline, and the household, the emperor gave a public speech after quite a long time. At the helm on the majestic castle, a balcony of white and gold adorned with rubies and sapphires, stood the man himself, Sultria VI. Behind which, waited for the Imperial Family.

“People of Alpha,” he confidently grasped the microphone, “-the prior events in our continent, more specifically, at Odegawoan, have been very sad. Aside from the lives lost by the hands of traitors, monsters invaded the town. Alas, we would have been lost, the hero known as Snowflake died a noble death, he jumped headfirst into battle and saved lives. My position prevents my movement. As most know, I was engaged to wed the princess of Arda. Due to political affairs, the matter was placed at a later date. I’m sad to admit, I wasn’t able to forget her face and personality, and to this day... No need for dramatics,” the head shook, “-I wish to say, Princess Eira of Arda, has accepted to take my hand in marriage once again. Her show of power saved far more lives of which I could have done alone. Conflicts between kingdoms and factions always leave a bitter taste. She’s a true heroine, a lady who abandoned her family to stand by my side. With this I say, my dearest people, welcome her highness into our Empire with open hearts.” *Click,* the screen turned off on a single frame of Eira waving at the crowd.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because,” he ate the last bite, “-her presence here spells bad news.”

“How so?” interjected Aceline, “-wasn’t she your daughter?”

“Was,” said Igna, “-not anymore. The lass is definitely not an ally or relative of mine. She’s the reason I died after all.”

“Igna,” said Thena, “-someone’s here.”

“I can feel it too,” added Nike, “-a presence similar to ours.”

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“Obviously,” he stood sharply, “-I know of a single human abled to replicate my mana.” *Knock, knock,* the door opened softly from a friendly maid. The figure crossed the entrance and ambled to the dining hall, silvery-white hair swayed, “-Good evening, cousin.”

“Not so great to see you,” replied Igna.

“Quit with the belligerent attitude,” said Eira, “-oh, we have goddesses in attendance. Athena and Nike, color me impressed,” she sat opposite Igna. Vanesa took a glance and fell into her world of dreams, “-the table is pretty empty.”

“What do you want?” asked he, “-if tis a battle,” he smiled, “-forget it.”

“No, nothing so undignified,” she relaxed, dinner and wine were brought over, “-I came to visit my cousin.”

"Far as I'm concerned, I know of only two cousins. Julius and Lizzie Haggard, and yes, emphasis on the Haggard name, something thee don't bear any rights towards."

"Whatever," said she, "-the food is good."

"éclair," hailed Igna, "-could you kindly escort Aceline, Vanesa, Thena, and Nike to the study?"

"As you wish," a courteous bow emptied the room. The princess watched each figure leave. Briefly paused on Igna, she smiled and took another bite.

"Empress of Alphaia, what brings such an elated being to such humble abode?"

"You really don't like me?" she snickered, "-do you."

"I wouldn't go so far, let's keep it at suspicious."

"Always with the charismatic speech," the meal ended, "-very delicious."

"Care to explain the visit?"

"Sure, Lucifer ran into trouble, the Blood-King's faction has overtaken the trade routes. Most adventurers are running for their realm, as such, our rivaling nation has struck a moment of desperation. Duty has forced Lucifer to return to the underworld, the rebellion of Arda has ended."

"Therefore?"

"There's no reason to fight," said she, "-I'm saying each side to have a truce. And yes, I know you're doubtful, hence my marriage. We were supposed to have done so per my father's will long ago. The emperor swore to return, and indeed he has. Once I'm empress of Alphaia, there will be none to rule the falling land of Arda. People need not suffer..." Her words, her expression, her aura, they all screamed melancholy, regret and pity, self-pity. It didn't take much wit to figure her real intent.

"Eira," said Igna, "-have thee come for forgiveness?" the aura sank to a moment of heavy nausea; ground to the clouds, nature cried. Muscles and hair changed, the visage slightly altered to fully resemble Staxius Haggard, "-Eira Haggard," he thundered, "-raise thine head and stare."

"F-father?" her nose reddened; "-I always doubted Igna to be the true reincarnation... now I know..."

"What is this melancholic drama," he blinked and gave a gentle pat, "-Staxius Haggard is dead, done and gone, the man and the legend forever lost to the vestige of time. I'll say what I have always said, Eira, you've grown into a strong woman, one who doesn't need others to rely on. Someone who many rely upon, a lonesome babe found on a river returns as the empress of an empire. I'm very proud," he smiled, "-a job well done."

"Father?" she spun, "-I'm sorry..."

"Don't mention it," the face and body faded to particles, "-you were, are, and always will be, my beloved daughter."

"I know," she smiled.

“And there you have it,” said Igna, “-the name doesn’t matter, I know what you’ve accomplished from start to finish. I have to be cautious, Eira, thou art far more dangerous than any I’ve met.”

“Who says that about their cousins,” she chuckled, “-I feel great. Changing sides, becoming strong, trying to defeat you, I tried to stand on equal grounds with father... sadly, my attempt ended in his death. To be fair,” she placed a curled fist onto his chest, “-I can be equal to you, Igna Haggard.”

“Whatever you say... tell me, why the sudden change of heart?”

“A long story.”

“I have free time.” Not a moment wasted, the Astra toggled and honked, “-how about a drive?”

“You know me well,” the duo smiled in a child-like manner. The observant éclair watched as they ran out the manor, behind, Thena and Nike crouched under the balustrade of the second set of stairs.

Gentler footsteps approached from the washroom, “What are you two doing?” voiced Aceline.

“N-NOTHING!” jumped Thena, “-looking for Nike’s bracelet.”

éclair heard the commotion and smiled, ‘-the greatest pleasure in life is turning the page on tragedies. No matter the outcome, Igna, if Eira becomes friend or foe, you have a loving home to return to.’ The drive made for Konlda’s district; a location higher than the restaurant. The otherwise scenic drive reached a viewing point. “-A very nice view,” said Eira.

“I agree,” they moved a few feet forward onto a wooden bench. Foliage and a natural barrier of trees made the view grander, the lights of the city, the blimps, airplanes, and bustling streets were one to behold.

“I guess I should start my story,” she paused to inhale, “-I’ll say how it comes to mind. No hidden motives nor agenda. After the battle of Glenda, I became frustrated. There, a letter arrived from Alpha – one of motivation and good luck. I thought Lucifer planned for us to ally with Alpha for a political marriage. I thought it to be the smartest choice too. After a discussion, he refused to do anything to Alpha, the reason unknown and unclear, a sort of uneasiness washed his face. The following days and weeks were bleak and mundane, I knew not what to do. The fighting brought no sense of satisfaction, my powers elapsed demi-goddess and reached the realm of godhood. A simple push opened the door to divinity, there, the realm beyond what I’ve known and grew up in was forever altered. Godhood brought a sense of fulfillment and emptiness, the idyllic scape lasted but a mere moment. My mentor, Qhildir, bestowed onto me the power symbol of the ‘page’. So on, he said to inherit the library and vow to be strong. I still don’t understand why he said those very words. Thereon, I returned to realize only 3 hours had elapsed. The overwhelming emptiness sent me to the pits of desperation. I only then figured what it meant to have powers. I somewhat understood the pain and pressure father and you carried. My perspective changed, I wanted to be of help and not elapse another. Should have figured it out long ago, the limits are mine, and mine alone to impose. I measure myself by my standards, no need to compare to another. Such sweet words many others have countlessly repeated, are harder to accept. I know not if it’s fate, Sultria VI said he was ready to face family. Something about a promise made between him and father. He did good, I departed for Alpha not long after – we exchanged words, met his family, and stayed. Lucifer but disappeared and thus followed the church. No one was right, no one was wrong, the Haggard’s did as they must, and so did the church. Tis only after thee loses what one takes for

granted, that the importance comes to mind. I took my family for granted, I took having a mentor for granted, I took the process of getting strong for granted. In more ways than one, I took my life at the Academy, the friends I made, and relations I've lost, for granted. I was too focused on a single man... all and all, without guidance, I followed and climbed the mountain he conquered. The higher he was, the lonelier it became, I saw friends and family distant themselves all the while I lied and said I would meet him one day, stand as his equal, and go on an adventure together. Quite pathetic for the sworn enemy."

"You're an idiot," laughed Igna.

"What does that mean..." she frowned.

"You're a lost cause," he tapped her head playfully, "-have you ever thought of asking for help? No, obviously you didn't, Staxius didn't rely on anyone, tis the mentality. There's a crucial piece of information thee lacks, he didn't rely on people because he had none to rely on. Phantom, the Haggard Dynasty, the position to marry an emperor, it didn't fall from the sky, Staxius worked day and night to create a long-lasting dynasty, want to know the reason why?"

"Why?"

"Because he wanted the next generation to rely upon and help one another, he and I know what true loneliness mean, a boy born on a battlefield, shunned for being the son of an exiled mage and bestowed with a curse, let that sink in."

"What then?"

"Stupid," emphasis on the 'p', "-Aunt Shanna, Julius, Lizzie, mother Courtney, Elvira, and the whole of the Haggard family waits for your return, big sister."

"Big sister?" the lashes fluttered, pearly tears rolled and fell, her expression melted, the ice princess's dream came true, '-acceptance...'

Chapter 656: Closing Curtains

"I needed this," her stormy cries cleaned, "-being acknowledged is one thing, I heard my father say he was proud. The weight on my shoulders is gone, I can finally move on, turn the page as a newly established goddess."

"The way you phrased it... feels like a promotion."

"I guess," she chuckled, "-what about you, Igna, I've born my heart out."

"I suppose I have a few questions. What of the allegiance, what about Lucifer, what's going to happen moving forward?"

"Simple answer," said she, "-I'll be crowned Empress of Alpha soon. Lucifer left in the most turbulent time of my life. I guess I'll return to where I was, orphaned?"

"Quit the drama," returned Igna, "-go back to Hidros and make amends with Julius and the others. Spend a few days with family, tis simple."

"No, not right now," her eyes strained, "-Igna, I've decided to side with thee. I know I've done more harm than good, but I know you understand," her smile tenderly matched the innocent tilt of the head, "-don't you, little cousin."

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"I do, and a bit too much I'd say," he paused and wondered toward yonder. "-Big sister, I think we might be in for a long battle," then and there, a whisper spoke from the Shadow, "-Hades will only be strengthened from today onwards. The prior attack was but a preview; how do I put the differences in proportion... imagine the Shadow Realm but stronger and viler as in, the residents must abide by the ultimate rule of survival, the strong win, and the weak lose. Don't forget, Hades is a high-tier god on par with Zeus. On that note, Gophy out... wait, I forgot, the real attack will begin in a few weeks, the portal is still unstable, bye."

'... seriously, she dares warn me after creating said mess.'

"Igna, you well?" asked Eira.

"I think so," he stood, "-Big sister, I think we ought to take a trip back home. We have about a week before things turn for the worse. Best make amends."

"You referring to Hades' portal?" her free hair swayed; the temperature dropped.

"Yes, I am," he exhaled.

"Deal," said she, "-I'll go back and apologize. Let's figure out the rulership in Arda." The return felt easier and more relaxed, in more ways than one, Eira brought a sense of relief and refreshment to the mundane life. 'She's neutral, we won against the invasion. The way she speaks and acts, I wonder if she purposefully allied to Lucifer as a spy. She willingly voiced her concerns and departed, the battle of Arda was hard... but not complicated. Did she...' he gulped; '-did she spearhead the downfall of the church from within the church?' a scan of her sleeping openly gave no clues, '-knowing her, knowing she grew up idolizing one of the shrewdest men in the world, tis not out of the plausible motives. Playing cat and mouse with gods and demons, you're truly my heir, aren't you?' The drive continued. A step to reflect on her journey showed a lot of similarities. An infant brought up on a battlefield, she joined the academy, won the inter-magical tournament, fought her way up, and became a researcher for the university at Rotherham. Thus arrived the marriage proposal from Alpha, one of which turned to regret. She became heir to a god, killed her father, fell into despair, and rose to be the devil's advocate. She stood as the villain and guided the people around her to do her bidding, the ends justify the means. Lastly, attained godhood, the ultimate accomplishment. Eira, no matter the names she took or pain endured, stayed true to her father's words. The fruit of her labor? A strong position as an individual, and the powers to one day, stand on equal terms to her idol, not that it mattered. Later said night, the household would depart for Hidros save éclair, who would assist the demons.

Simultaneously, Asmodeus and Kul worked heartily at the red-light district. A signature lighting style bathed the street orange, busy businessmen ambled, barely able to walk, along the linear path.

Remember the ladies who aided after Esvalo's unjust attack? Turns out, the heaviness of despair befell the brothel where she worked. Out of the very luminant array of dubious buildings and activities, a singular remained dim. Make no mistake, the place had guests who drank – the exception was the ladies

of the night, none worked. Most, dressed in very befitting clothes and dignified mannerisms were currently at a nearby hospice. Kul and Asmodeus separated.

Tied between a very shabbily ordered arrangement of buildings towards the south, laid the beforementioned hospice. Unlike the grander and heavily equipped central hospital, said hospice didn't compare. Familiarity didn't stop, the nurse was one easily recognized for she worked alongside the doctor charged in checking the ladies. The narrow doorway gave in to a small and clean environment. Never mind the haunted look outside, the inside seemed to bear a sliver of credibility. The slow-paced Kul shuffled behind the crowd of worried ladies, the same nurse, crude and blatant, bore a softer expression. She guided the masses to a room upstairs, whereby laid a heavily injured patient.

"A moment please," whispered the nurse, "-you're Kul I presume?" the manlier choice of outfits was apparent in of itself.

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"Yes," she replied and moved to a corner, "-something the matter?"

"I'm sure you've heard of what happened," they spoke in a lower tone.

"Rough customer?"

"No, far worst. We know the culprit, he's the heir to the Patek Dynasty. For the longest time, there wasn't any report of his appearance here, however, his back and my sisters are worried."

'Her sister?' thought Kul, '-was she also an ex-worker?'

"-I have to warn thee, don't harm the man, even if he does injure one of your ladies. I hate myself saying this, anytime he hurts, the money spends for the recovery elapses his rough treatment. Don't be mistaken, the amount sent is nothing to him, basically, hush money."

"Therefore, we should allow him to assault our comrades? Listen, lady nurse. I, personally, could not care if the man is powerful or not. The Raven's live by a certain set of morals, most important being, hurt one of us, and tis payback." Annoyed at the acceptance, the shuffle back to the crowded room felt heavy. Burnt marks on her neck, the body wrapped in a bandage, a swollen face, and a patch over her left eye, '-bastard,' the fist clenched.

"Kul," lifeless eyes pained to the doorway, "-come in, why are you outside?"

"Angel," she approached, "-I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you," warmly gripping her palms, "-I heard from my girls you helped."

"Don't worry," said she, "-us girls have to bound and stay strong. Sticks can be broken on their lonesome, however, tie them in a bundle, and they become indestructible. Please," she painfully rose a grin, "-don't do anything stupid. I'll be back on my feet soon."

"The hell not," briskly shoving the doctor aside, "-give me a moment," a darkish vortex hurled three vibrantly red-potions, "-open up, stupid."

"It's fine," her head slowly shook.

"No," she grabbed her cheeks and forced the mouth open.

"My lady, you shouldn't..." interjected the doctor to no avail. The drinks already entered her system – the temperate warmed skin suddenly flashed, the lady sat without injuries.

"-I feel amazing..." the visage rejuvenated a few years, opposed to her late-twenties, the age now shown eighteen.

"Courtesy of my master," they hugged, "-don't be stupid again."

While the sudden impulse to get revenge crossed Kul's mind, Asmodeus and éclair was near Carter Lake. Not many know of the secret shipments of narcotics. Specific gang members granted the knowledge. éclair's escapades around the family's databases brought on their next move. Saku's envoys were present and waited for the next shipment. Half an hour later, the product arrived on a nosily slow scooter. A pizza shop's and the uniform told of the allegiance. Money and produce exchanged, the delivery man left.

"Are you sure about this?" inquired éclair.

"Yeah, we're going old school." The inattentive escorts froze in fear. Two masked men ran out of the forest and shot, gunfire all but missed and ended on the truck. The driver and passenger jumped and fought. 'Why are they not running away?' sighed éclair.

"Don't kill them," said Asmodeus, "-at least let one live."

"Are going we to take bullets to the chest?"

"Yeah, just fire and make it look real."

"Alright," the tranquil water flickered the reflection of muzzles. Four against two, the latter kept a strong assault. When rumors said of the Luon being nonaggressive, tis because of the marksmanship, the members seemed adrift; the choices made no sense.

Bang, bang, two of the four fell, Asmodeus ran right up to the package, "-Luon's doomed. The heir was killed by us, the Saku, the Yonak's were very excited," *bang,* a point-blank shot dropped him. Urgency ran adrenaline through the man, he heard the reason for the attack, the distant figured sprinted.

"MY COMRADE!" screamed éclair, he pulled out a grenade, they noticed and fled for driver's seat, "-DON'T YOU RUN," *bang* a shot right through the head, the projectile flung onto the pool of blood, *BOOOM,* shrapnels grilled the truck. *Screech,* and off the truck sped.

"Are they gone?" whispered éclair.

"I think so," the duo stood dowsed in blood, "-man, the body armor and protection against gunfire sure is a boon."

"Thank you," said éclair, "-I'm a demon, the Shadow Realm has triggered my powers to reawaken," he skipped over the lifeless folks and faced the massive pool of water. "What about these two?"

“Just throw two bodies on there, they’ll come to clean up in the morning. We’ve done our task. They’ll report the incident, the lack of an heir will trigger fear, and the godfather will be forced to announce the information. Hailing Saku as culprits will have Luon on bad terms against the three. Evidently, the attack also means the other families know of the death. We’ve stirred the pot, we but wait for the lawyer to take action.”

Plots here and plots there, Alpha’s trouble only begun. The barrier against the invaders held strong. Alas, the protection was but a one-way and against the creatures. Residents were free to stray into danger, the police were caught tight in attempts to re-channel traffic. The AHA was on their way, albeit, too late. The adventurous clout seekers of the Arcanum ran out and ran in, they unknowingly contracted a deadlier variant of the monster plague. Slow acting and untraceable, people suddenly dropped in the middle of the street, their heads would expand in purple color, and bang, contagious miasma latched onto bystanders.

The flight home lasted a few hours, the 13th rose as did the sun over yonder. Rotherham’s private runway closed the distance, a prior message had already informed the head of the family and lady Courtney. “How long has it been since you were here?” voiced Igna over the leather seats.

“Quite a long time,” she replied, “-the place’s more active, far more cars and to and fro.” The tires screeched, Thena, Nike, and Aceline talked utter nonsense, the sort of conversation good comrades would have over disgusting topics.

“Wake up Vanesa,” said Igna, “-we’re here,” he said.

“Already?” she yawned, “-pops, I sense trouble in Alpha.”

“How?”

“The parasites,” she said, “-they’re like my network... they say a new virus’s spreading across the population.”

“Igna,” inquired Thena, “-does your family really own this town?”

“Yeah, my mother’s the duchess of Rotherham. Not that it matters,” he winked, “-Nike, Thena, and Aceline, I’ve asked for a car and driver to be assigned to you. Go out and visit the town or do whatever, the trip is on me, don’t go overboard.”

“Seriously?” frowned Thena, “-I don’t believe you...”

“Aceline,” he ignored his worries, “-how about vocal lessons courtesy of Apexi?”

“Yes,” she beamed in bliss.

“Settled, you’re headed to Apexi’s headquarters at Rosespire. Take care, I’ll make sure to inform on when we leave,” they arrived at a large hangar, ‘-about time we close the curtains on Arda’s nonstop abuse.’

Chapter 657: Eira’s fate

No rest nor sleep; Eira, Igna, and Vanesa made their way to the headquarters. There, Elvira, who had been teeth deep into a succulent virgin's neck, sloppily wiped the blood and smiled. "Perfect timing," she added sarcastically.

"You and your love for virgin blood," sighed Courtney, "-they've arrived," she said as is to imply an impending doom. The last visit didn't end on a high note, rather, Igna wanted blood of which would have shed if not for certain people's interruption. On the matter of guests, Amsey's campaign for support stood at a roadblock. Phantom agreed to the potential expansion on the condition Lum be instated under the Elon's Dynasty and Phantom. Basically, two sharks wanted to devour the remains of a wounded beast. Head to the ground and ego to the floor, Amsey reluctantly took the jet for Elendor. The ones to speak of his fate were, the younger master Elon and the Queen, believe it or not. Goes to say, Alison, the secretary of Elon's Empire, didn't hold her tongue nor her words. Lum shrieked at the ludicrous conditions, still, a good businessman didn't back out without a fight. Hence, a battle of attrition between the backed Amsey and his potential allies began, let's say, they wanted to rest his resolve and wit.

Swiftly moving to Igna, a message to Julius garnered a strongly worded response. The three giants prominent overlooked the peasant-like construction of shorter buildings. Three beaming towers, the sight Eira couldn't help but feel threatened.

"Igna," they paused shy of the concrete walkway, "-are you sure about this?" she wondered.

"Big sister," he stopped and turned, "-here, read this," the phone stopped immediately of her visage. Her brows knitted in concentration.

"Are you dumb?" she yelled.

"Not so loud," he shushed, bystanders peeped curiously towards the very obvious trio, "-are you trying to draw attention or what?" as if her white hair and pure facial features didn't sweep men off their feet.

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"No, I'm sorry," an involuntary bit of the lips fed into, "-why send that?"

"I only said I was bringing my big sister home," he added nonchalantly, "-besides, I never heard anything about Eira abdicating her name as a Haggard. Come on," he watched intently, "-reply to their questions and say why you did what you did. Hey," he snuck in close, "-I'm very doubtful about the reasons. Did you purposefully become the enemy to fight the enemy?"

"N-no," her face remained stern, "-even if I did, what does it matter now. The ends don't always justify the means, I've done more harm to the land of Arda than was necessary."

"Oh, who cares," two big steps gave into a loud smack on the back, "-what matters is the present. Shouldn't the big sister give her siblings comfort and courage?"

"Shut it," she chuckled, "-give you courage, as if that would ever work."

"Cynical much..." the exchange bordered the slumped shoulders, in more ways than one, Igna truly wanted Eira to return home. "Shall we?" the promenade up the stairs felt refreshing. From an outside perspective, the three towers were placed for the elite. Even visitors and unassuming guests were

scared by the entourage. The guards, the workers, and even the janitors, gave a sense of confidence. Add a flashy car, two handsome individuals in very expensive clothes, and there grows the combination for jealousy.

"I see the melancholic princess lives well and great," teased Igna, the doors opened to a big open area. Stairs, bridges from one office to the other, sharp simplistic décor, and overbearing attention to architecture and uniqueness. The inside was truly a representation of what the world had to offer technologically-wise. Hardware and software were provided by Elon's Dynasty, the leading researchers in the digital world. The company motto, model advertised their products and instructions hovered freely as a simple and concrete holographic display.

"This place sure has evolved," commented she, her glance fell onto a ground of students in uniforms.

"-I'd guess internships?" said Igna before a black and reserved lift. One of the students took notice and hailed his comrade, the latter watched gleefully.

She immediately asked, "-why are they looking at us?"

"The lift is reserved for Phantom's top dog; must I spell it out?"

"Don't take the exhausted tone with me," she scowled.

"Whatever, big sister," the entrance opened, no lifts, a neatly drawn circle, and two buttons, up and down, on the side. "-I call this the tube," the metallic guards shut.

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"Why?"

"Cause," a press teleported straight to Elvira's office, "-it looks like it, one of those plastic tubes at the arcade, you get it?"

"No..."

"Forget it," further explanation would beget a more perplexed Eira. The rectangular hands parted noiselessly onto a familiar corridor. Two guards scanned and nodded. "Prepare yourself," said Igna. Every step resounded across her heart and body, the layout stretched onto forever, the more they walked, the farther it got, or so it appeared to be.

Meanwhile, the text message blundered onto Julius's phone. Around were a rehearsing Vorn and a tired Xius, "-ay, boss-man, you good?" inquired Xius's manager, an overactive alcoholic who passed out after three shots. The group loved his company – the last world tour successfully ended, save the mess at Alpha. Regardless, Sugar and Dei were strong on the booze and stronger on the teasing. No album until next year, basically, a two-month vacation. Emi Muko was offered the chance for a solo acoustic album, one her fanbase adamantly petitioned over the Arcanum.

"Doesn't Julius look a bit out of it?" commented Nona, sweat, and locks of hair marred her exhausted visage.

"Sorry girls," interjected Sheiwai and Yuna, "-we ought to head for the photo shoot."

“Good job girls,” clapped Enna, “-we’ll take a week break.” Exchange of words led to goodbyes; the band separated. The performance in Alpha brought more deals to Apexi, for example, Sheiwai was approached to model for the famous Shapes’s magazine. Yuna was offered a deal as a radio host, her speaking voice was gentle and inviting.

“Julius,” waved Nona, “-are you ok?” she leaned to block his phone.

Two steps back, “-you startled me, how long did I zone out for?”

“Around two minutes,” she said, “-the girls have left.”

“What about you?”

“No job offers,” she sighed, “-whatever,” the intent reflected mischievous, “-who’s messaged?”

“Igna...” said, “-I can’t believe him...”

“Igna’s here?” her eyes widened, “-where is he?”

“In Rotherham. I’m sorry, I need to leave right away,” leather bag on the shoulder, “-Nona, please wait here for Scott, he’ll be back in half an hour, tell him to leave for Rotherham immediately.”

“Alright,” her cheerful wave faded into solemn woe, ‘-everyone’s left, I’m stuck waiting. Life’s unfair,’ she harshly dropped onto a comfortable couch, ‘-Vorn is filled with talented artists. My heart still shudders from the time we played,’ flashbacks to the concert contoured her face in a very childlike deluge, ‘-I want to do it again.’

Marbled stairs carried Julius’s leathery clogs to the ground floor. The receptionist barely got a, ‘-have a nice day, sir’ in. The staff was pretty bemused. ‘-I can’t believe him,’ he glared the watch, ‘-he brought Eira to Rotherham. There’s no telling what she’s going to do,” a press toggled his sports car, ‘-IGNA!’

Accusing stares marked the visitors. Elvira waited behind her empty large desk; Courtney sat to a side on an equally imposing couch. Awards and medals of excellence adorned the wall, a retractable display eased its way into the ceiling. The open landscape backdrop dimmed; the atmosphere tensed.

“Good morning, aunt Courtney, Lady Elvira, it has been quite a while.”

“Quite a while indeed,” said Elvira, “-Igna, mind explaining why she’s here?”

“Is it necessary?” he returned belligerently, “-far as I know, big sister is family.”

“You know what I mean,” her sharp makeup firmly held the conversation, “-give us an earnest explanation.”

“I-”

“Cousin,” said she, “-don’t worry.” Icy cold befell Elvira, “-I’ve come to make amends, not for my sake, but for the people’s. Curtains must be drawn on Arda’s leadership. I, personally, have no interest in said pointless war. Lucifer and the church have abandoned their followers, if nothing is done, the pillars will crumble into anarchy.”

“Do you regret your actions?”

"What is there to regret," fired she, "-my father always said to do what I felt was right. I but followed his teachings."

"Make amends for the people?" voiced Courtney, "-did my foolish son stand you up to this?"

"Don't bring him into this. Igna's done wonderfully, he single-handedly thwarted the invasion, gave a decisive blow to us, and excellently handled his title as Viscount. I'm proud to have him as my little brother," they exchanged smiles.

"Besides the point," argued Elvira, "-is this about Arda or you?"

"It's about us," voiced Igna, "-big sister's to be the Empress of Arda. She's moved on from her past and is set on the future. However, to open the door to her new life, she must close the old and clear any misunderstanding. Unchecked ambers may result in an inferno later on. I, Igna Haggard, viscount of Glenda, fully stand and approve of Eira Haggard. She's part of the Haggard dynasty, misunderstanding between family must never grow out of proportion."

"Igna," said Courtney, "-for the record, your aunt and I oppose Eira's presence."

"Lady mother, with all due respect," he bowed, "-the duchess of Rotherham has no say in the matter of the Blood-King's faction. The argument at hand is the future of Arda. Big sister is the direct heir."

"Igna, mind your tongue while speaking to the lady," fired Elvira, "-I'm very disappointed in the lack of respect."

"I sincerely apologize," he bowed, "-respect is earnt, not granted for being old or of higher status. I would as easily piss on the head of an emperor as I would to a washroom."

"YOU BRAT!" cried Elvira, her eyes reddened.

"Don't move," threatened Eira, "-I've attained godhood, the whole office is subject to the land of Nexsolium. Igna and I have come to decide the future of a nation, not some petty family argument."

"Calm it you three," said Courtney, "-let's hear it then."

"Thank you, auntie. I propose the following, the Blood-King's faction march into the capital and takes the throne. As immediate heir, I promise to handle the evacuation of any lingering Krestonian forces. The church has overstayed its welcome. Igna, will, of course, accompany me in said endeavor. Secondly, the capital is to be moved to Glenda temporarily for the ancient tree needs to recuperate before any further construction. Thirdly, a new rule is to be established, the Blood-King's faction will not claim the throne. Fourth and final, I give my word, after I'm crowned empress of Arda, I will do what is needed to remedy the relations between Arda and Alphaia."

"Her majesty, queen Gallienne might have a few words to add," Elvira's mind wondered to the prior assassination plot.

"The war is over and done with, the Federation is shakey at the moment. The participants are rather busy with recuperation, Elendor needs sufficient support to stand against Old Cray's advances. Arda's new rule will ease morale, Hidros will be united and together, stand strong against the Wracia Empire."

"You don't leave me much choice, do you," said Elvira, "-the council shall meet and discuss the about the offer. For the time being, princess, do make thy way to Arda and clean the trash," her gaze skipped to Igna, "-you," she squinted, "-someone's grown rather confident."

"Effect of the time," he remarked. "-Lady mother, I apologize for any rudeness I might have shone."

"I accept the apologies," she moved to give a motherly embrace, "-welcome back."

"Mother," he whispered, "-as head of the Haggard, please decide the fate of Eira."

"Eira's fate," she said out loud, "-enemy or not, you're my beloved niece and first child of my late brother. There's no say in the matter, the Haggard name was bestowed by the founder himself; I haven't the right to say otherwise," she patted Eira's silvery hair, "-I've missed you, runaway niece of mine."

"Thank you, aunt," they hugged.

Chapter 658: "Since when did you grow so moist?"

Who was to say how the meeting ended. Looking back, after the parle, Igna and Eira casually left. A distraught Courtney and irritated Elvira beckoned another conversation. "Any thoughts?" wondered Elvira, her mouth intent on spouting viciousness.

"They're close for enemies. Eira's part of the family, I can't undermine her title and prestige."

"She's attained divinity; killing her would be close to a miracle. Should we really buckle under what was said?"

"I know one thing for sure, Igna's town suffered the brunt of the last attack. He has the right to decide if she stays or not, and my gut says, the boy has decided. Shouldn't you be leaving for Arda, the council has matters to discuss, get on out of here." With a click of the tongue and a low hum, the unimpressed nightwalker faded into bats who took to the skies. From below the office, granted not to human sight, bats flew across.

"Rare sight," commented Eira.

"Lasted longer than I imagined." Vibration caught his attention, '-forgot it was on silent,' fifty missed calls and twenty messages displayed alongside the prince's username. He visibly cringed, to which, an observant Eira asked, "-all good?"

"No..." returned a monotonous answer, "-Julius's moving like a crazy companion."

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"I don't know what to say," the question would soon be answered. Yonder approached, or rather, pelted, the roar of a fast machine. Two seconds later, the red car screeched, the visitors were startled in fear of an accident.

"Get in," said the driver, "-RIGHT NOW!"

Scene moves to the outer edge of town, Julius's complexed face resolved to a single frown, "-Igna, are you serious?"

"Don't ignore your big sister," voiced Eira immediately behind Julius, "-where're the prince's manners."

"Sister," he paused and glared the mirror, "-not the time."

"Come on, Julius. Don't make a deal out of it. Do you really think I'd jeopardize our safety for nothing?"

"Bringing the ice-princess isn't for nothing."

"Whatever," he side-glanced the window and glossed over Julius's worries. She took the queue and spoke, "-Lucifer's gone. I've changed side again."

"Why..."

"Are you up to date with the news?" inquired Igna in a pestering manner.

"No, I was too busy, I keep up with local news, why?"

"I'm engaged to be crowned Empress of Alpha. This means, the Haggard, yes, our family, will be in major political affairs. Granted, my first name may change, still, a member of the family is to be Empress of one of the biggest nations."

"If I were you," firmed Igna, "-I'd be happy she returned. The pain of big sister on the battlefield was annoying, not only must we care for the schemes, there's the blessing of an Ancient Dragon and the godhood."

"Seriously?" the mood swayed, "-give me a moment."

"Where are we headed?"

"To the capital," said he, a portal of whitish hue materialized in the middle of nowhere, the empty roads didn't care whatsoever if the car or ten disappeared. Rosepire shone, within the walls were renovated buildings. A boom in business and tourist lifted the people's spending power, moreover, the overall rulership sufficed as told the smiles. Larger roads led into a cascade of smaller buildings; stairs of which halted at a road, next to laid a massive theater. Rustic in architecture, Julius pulled into the adjacent parking lot. A sparkle of recognition reawakened the tired guard.

"Tough day?" he hailed.

"Master Julius, I hear the lady's performance is admirable as always."

"And I see you haven't lost the drowsiness," the party passed the cabinet. Up weather-stained stairs came the receptionist, who, after a look, said nothing, the door seamlessly opened.

"Are you a walking free pass?"

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"Stop joking," he meaningfully walked at a faster pace. Therein, the melodic muffled sound of piano sprung life in their step. Heavy door left ajar widened, a singular spotlight shone on the pianist and her instrument. A scan aided by éclair showed renowned names of wealthy traders and owners. Nobles gathered to a reserved area at the top.

"A private recital?" suggested Eira.

"Yeah," they eased into cushioned seats, "-let her soundscape guide us."

Meanwhile, after the same hour, the council of noble rejoined under the same banner. Representatives were suddenly called for an audience; a dejected look justified their anger and mannerism. Thus, she spoke of Eira's return, a piece of information only Aurora and Julia swallowed. Alaric and Gabrielle were apprehensive, dutifully so. The demands were quoted exactly to avoid miscommunication. The council went on for hours, to which, the theater's minute guests scurried one after the other. A sweat-heavy Lizzie panted; Shanna's green hair gracefully watched on her daughter. "-Good performance," she said to be startled at an opened door. Blond, white, and a mix of white and red entered, the princess's expression changed to a smile, "-BROTHER!" she leaped into Julius' arms.

"Lizzie," he smiled, "-long time, good performance!"

"I thought you'd never come," said Shanna, "-I see there are guests."

"Good afternoon, auntie," said Igna.

"Hello granny," yawned Vanesa, "-pops, I can't sleep..."

"A rare occurrence," said he.

"Brother Igna, you're here too?" her hazel pupils warmly watched in curiosity.

"Good performance."

"Who's the girl?" inquired the ex-queen.

"My daughter," he replied. Eira and Shanna exhaled a baffled cough, "-excuse you?" they asked.

"What... can't a man have a child these days?" Eye to eye, the imaginary scene of a linear pathed town appeared, a virtuoso against a koala. Dust from the street, wind from the west, and amber color from the setting sun. Pistol at dusk, a gesture would equal death, the children's stare-off begot less attention.

"Eira."

"Mother."

"Cut it out," said Igna to Vanesa, "-Aunt, Julius, and big sister. Please take your time and discuss the affairs, I wish not to intrude." They solemnly agreed, "-take care of Lizzie too."

What else can be said? He walked out of the building in the company of children. 'Enough politic for one day,' they skipped to a rather quaint fast-food area. Fixed tables and chairs, a singular tree hung its foliage over the eaters. "Ice-cream," said Vanesa, "-I want one."

"I'll have two," glared Lizzie.

"One each," he smiled and hurried to a smaller round table. Passersby, dressed in casual clothes, took notice quickly. A man in a suit caring for girls in elegant dresses. Neighboring tables assumed him to be the stereotypical rich guy, obnoxious and smug. No heed on the surrounding, '-aunt Elvira's at the council, the new rule will have to bring Arda under one. Julius and Lizzie have abdicated their claims on the throne. In a time of crisis, I don't think the nobles would mind either. Maintain the feudal rulership or change to a more democratic way of government. A dictatorship could work, out of the three,

maintaining feudalism is better. Arda's traumatic experience under the church's dictatorship has very well wiped the mind of the populous. Hard for me to think, they need a ruler, someone to make decisions. We ought to move past the dated days of kings and nobles, Alpha's a prime example, they're just fine under the semi-democratic and feudal rulership. The people were adamant about letting their emperor be in power, got to hand it to them. Saddens to see such a fruitful land be soiled at the hands of fake believers. The pest of Kreston will never die, a damn cockroach. The fate of an entire continent rests in the Haggard's hand. Once Eira is married, the scope of our influence will be untouched. Julius would fit the title of king, knowing him, he'll refuse. I see only a single way, Queen Shanna returns to the throne, a job easier said than done. Many will argue she's the reason why Arda fell into cacophony, and as is, we can't refute their worries. Mistakes are spotted easily, no matter the great done, the jealous shall always have their way.'

"Stop thinking so heavily."

"Big sister?" focus returned, "-how long was it?"

"Two hours," she said.

"What about Lizzie and Vanesa," the questions answered themselves, the duo lent on his legs and napped.

"Where's Julius and aunt?"

"No idea?" she shrugged and pulled a stool, "-Igna, you were right to bring me here."

"The mood sure looks relieved, the shoulder stands proudly, what happened?"

"We fought," she chuckled, "-fought until the hatred displaced for laughter. Julius and I realized the points were the same in ideals, the application differed. Mother sure was excited to see us argue, she but sat with hands on her chin and smiled. Creepy if you ask me."

"Not creepy. She's happy her family is back together. Look at Lizzie, isn't her face of a blissful individual?"

"Since when did you grow so moist?" frowned she, "-aren't you supposed to be the slayer of a seven thousand army?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," the bicolored pupils swiftly reddened, "-tis all in a day's work."

"Tell me about Mantia; what does it feel to know just about everything in the world?"

"I can't explain the sensation; the events feel repeated. Domain expansion, ability granted to symbol wielders, you used earlier at the office."

"Yeah, I had to. A Haggard must have some aggression in the negotiations."

"Strictly magic wise," *Mana-Control: Five Fingers Variant- Rainbow,* "-I hold powers to any type of magic imaginable. Don't even have to use my mana."

"Still using magic?" her tone waned, "-Igna, I thought the powers would be more impressive. Magic in our age feels outdated. Even adventurers stray from the arts while in combat."

"Let me tell you something when magic dies out and humans evolve to not be able to sense or use mana, a simple fireball spell will feel as strong as a gun. The cycle of life and death, wait and watch, the magic of this era will be hailed as ancient arts."

"We can safely say death isn't an issue. Watching the populous grow and evolve sounds fun, and boring." Shanna and Julius joined the conversation, "-welcome back," said Eira.

"I've spoken to éclair; a jet is on its way. We'll fly to Arda."

"We headed the to Southern airfield?"

"No, not the airport. We're headed to Phantom's private one."

Blood-King's council, a short fifteen-minute break intervened to the final debate. Aurora stood strongly for Eira's propositions. Gabrielle and Julia were neutral. Alaric strongly opposed the traitor.

"I can't accept her return. She brought on the hurt. If not for the wall, we'd have lost in another attack. Glenda's but a mediocre town, we can't allow Igna's land to be given greater importance."

"Alaric," said Julia, "-the arguments are valid, we might upset the nobles if we focus on a single man, a boy rather. Even now, the title of Viscount has had the others furious. None want to speak out, they'd rather choose the shadows."

"We can't entertain everyone," interjected Aurora, "-Julius and Igna saved our land, don't forget. If not for the latter's party, there wouldn't be any of us left. Phantom helped the castle's capture, I say this with confidence, traitor or not, the Haggard Dynasty stepped in to handle a mess a runaway child caused."

"They wouldn't have needed to if the girl had remained quiet," fired Alaric, "-don't get me started on the Queen, she fell prey to Lucifer's charm."

"On that point," said Gabrielle, "-we might also blame the council of races, they openly accepted his entrance. I watched how he acts and speaks, the man has charm and intellect, no way we had seen this coming."

"Don't stray off the point," voiced Elvira, "-Eira's not interested in Arda's land. She wants to restore the continent for a stable future, the lady's engaged to be Empress of Arda."

"Economically speaking, we're barely making progress," facepalmed Aurora, "-raising taxes will break the livelihood of many. The coffers might last another year if we are conservative... Repairs and afterwar recompensating, the noble lords and army need to be paid. Food supplies are also slim, more have fled for the protection of the Blood-King's faction."

"What do you propose," frowned Alaric.

"Let the royal family figure it out. Igna's said to accompany the princess, right?"

"Correct."

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"Shall we decide?" proposed Gabrielle.

"Just to be clear, we have three choices, accept, neutral, and oppose."

"I disagree," said Alaric.

"I'll wait and watch," nodded Gabrielle.

"Same here," added Julia.

"I also wish to wait and watch," said Aurora, "-my allegiance stands firmly on Eira's side."

"Thank you for your time, Eira's party will land at the capital later in the night. To confirm, the council has accepted to wait and watch."

"Correct."

Chapter 659: "Witnessed their absurdity"

In the heat of the moment, whilst upon the skies for Arda, a sudden thought reflected upon Julius and Igna's faces. A thought and mishap, a potentially argument worthy misunderstanding. Idle bleak stares were shut, the passengers of which were but Vanesa and Eira, slept peacefully. That said, the moment of truth hung in the balance, the numbers reluctantly dialed.

"Good afternoon, Aceline," said he, "-I've sort of maybe..."

"What is it?" returned she loudly, "-Rosespire is very loud," when spoken, the duo of Thena and Nike ambled about childishly. "-Wait for me," said her distant voice.

"I might have taken off for Arda, it was a spur of the moment event, everything fell into place, I didn't want to ruin the moment."

"No worries," said she, "-Thena and Nike are good company. I'll be fine, take as long as you need."

"I'll have an attendant make arrangements for your stay, deal?"

"Deal." Julius hailed from the next seat over disruptively. The shaky gestures garnered a 'what' expression. Attention on the caller and face to the prince;

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"-don't cut the phone," he mumbled.

"Why?"

"Tell her the driver's ready to escort them to Apexi's studio. Someone important is waiting for her."

"Someone important?" he covered the microphone, "-who is it, Scott?"

"Spot on," a thumbsup ended the call. '-Scott's here, I hope he makes up with Aceline. The two were inseparable until I masterminded her downfall; not only did I aggravate her narcotic consumption; I also blamed her and had her dear manager side with me. None's in the right, time will say if it's worth it.'

Council and Princess wouldn't meet just yet. Night hid their arrival. The airfield, a place of carnage and prior death, subjected to assault from magic and guns, had seen better days. One of the hangars was but a shell, a massive home on the roof, broken metal beams, and the adjacent path in disarray.

'Sad,' crossed Igna's mind. A saddened wind blew onto the dirt-filled airstrip. If it had been a day, a wave of dust crashing onto the forest's shore would be the culprit. Alas, between the meadowy moisture and the cold surrounding, a warmly heated car fitted convenience. Military, namely, the blood-kings faction closely guarded the iron fenced checkpoint. Flashlights pierced the windshield, "-excuse me" signaled a soldier.

"Might I help you?" the windows rolled.

"May we see some identification. I didn't spot the car coming in, how were you able to get inside?" affluently spoken words begot a grin from Julius. Darkness hid the blatant disrespect.

"Viscount of Glenda."

"First princess of Arda."

"Second Prince of Arda."

Three heavy titles swept the men's confidence, "-I'm sorry," they saluted, "-lord of Glenda, Prince, and Princess, we must dutifully ask proper identification. Our country is in great turmoil."

"Will this suffice?" the noble's crest hung shy of the window.

"Yes," a quick scan, "-may thee have a pleasant journey." What little amber light remained dried to a starry night and no visual cues. Lampposts were a luxury at this point. One hour into the drive, they halted at a nearby village. The latter, cupped onto a gently sloped hill, was more or less vibrant. Four strangers arrived, the faintly lit village-center, empty save adventurers, gloomed.

"The atmosphere feels tense," said Julius.

"I bet it is," replied Igna.

"War has everyone on edge," the shuffle to the tavern halted. A drunken half-elf stumbled to block the entrance. The livelier and better-lit interior breathed a gasp, noise faded to a morguesque silence.

"Where you hail, traveler?" *hic.*

"Over yonder," replied Julius, "-a place where humans have conquered the night, and said night brings pleasures onto the very same humans."

"Wrong!" he mumbled, "-humans are evil... the church is evil, the crown is worthless. There can never be peace in our midst, GODS HAVE FORSAKEN OUR LAND, OUR PRECIOUS MOTHER, SHE'S BEEN ASSAULTED AND VIOLATED. Does the church answer for the crimes, nooo, do the humans apologize, nooo, poor ol' Arda must suffer its fate."

"Haul him in!"

"Let m-me finish!" a drunken struggle against a strong-armed dwarf would have never worked, "-sorry about my companion, the first round of drinks is on me, consider it my apology."

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"Thank you."

A humble and nervous tavern leader scurried to the entrance, bear in mind, the party had yet to step inside. Cold stood the hairs straight as did the cold-stares. "I apologize."

"No matter, is it possible to stay the night?"

"Stay the night?" glanced up, the eyes locked, her face paled to subtly avoid his judging glare, "-I t-think s-so?"

"No, you can't," said an overbearing shadow, "-travelers aren't invited at this tavern. Get out and don't cause a mess," armor and a heavy sword on the back, the tag had a silvery tinge.

"Who might you be?"

"Blond boy, this is no place to get laid. Take your friends and leave." The tavern-lady looked relieved, the paleness reddened. The stare-off broke to focus on the inside, whereby, sat alcoholically flustered patrons, most of which, wore armor.

"Julius, what should we do?" wondered Igna.

"We ought to stay the night. I'm pretty tired, I don't want to rest in the car, gives me claustrophobia."

"Can't you just create a house for us?" proposed Eira.

"Such an outlandish comment," the eyes rolled, "-I guess I could, but no." (That's a genius idea, why didn't I think of it) went across the mind.

"Stop ignoring me," grip on the handle, "-I said," the muscles tensed.

"Shut up," fired Igna, "-such an obnoxiously loathing accent and mouth. I can barely hear the words from that mess you call a talk," a singular scan sparked their guard; 'danger.'

"Boy, I'm a silver-ranked adventurer, do you know what that entails?"

"Yes, and I could care less."

"Igna, quit it..." whispered Julius, "-else we may..."

"Too late," remarked Eira, "-we're surrounded."

"Boy, that was a mis-" no second left, he blinked and kicked the man's head into to hardened ground.

"I don't care much for thy wit," he glared the tavern-mother, "-tell me," he leaned to her ear, "-was he the strongest?"

"Y-yes," said a childish voice.

"What about the rule?"

"What rule," she gulped.

"You know damn well what rule I mean," cold fingers ran up her neck. Her knees danced, the face glistened in sweat and belligerent bystanders held their weapons.

“Enough.” Such a brawl ruckus didn’t befit their station. The princess stepped in and justified the misunderstanding. Title and name begot admiration and hate; they knew of the Devil of Glenda. The adventurer reawakened after a mid-tier healing spell. Confusion bit his tongue and he bit his words. So long and so forth, Julius gathered intel from the many crowded tables. Igna, Vanesa, and Eira were given the VIP treatment, also referred by ‘loner’s room.’

Simultaneously in Rosespire, the scenery differed tremendously. A heavily lit and lively street held the trio. Advertisements were wild, the shops were wilder. Busy sidewalk and busier traffic, the adventurous walk sparked Thena’s creative side. He had yet basked in the modernness of the human world.

“Nike, look, this device lets you draw anywhere and anytime.”

“I know,” he said, “Igna has one at the manor...”

“Stop being a buzzkill.” Couples checked in and out, students were also a sight to behold. Besides the wide entrance waited for Aceline, the mind, and body lost in thought.

“Look at this,” two jovial men jumped out.

“Mind it,” returned she, “-people are watching.”

“Who cares about them,” shrugged Thena, “-this tablet lets me draw how I want and when I want. The human world is truly amazing.”

“Human world?”

“Ignore her,” refuted Nike, “-my friend’s a little too excited.”

Apexi’s branded a foreign car, plan switched halfway across. Windows rolled to the pink-haired Nona, “-Aceline,” she hailed, “-over here.”

“Nona?”

“The one and only. Stop gawking and get in, we’re headed to the company hotel.”

“Company hotel?”

“Don’t worry about it,” the vibrant trio vanished into the busy capital. The driver showed no interest at first, not until the focus met the passengers’. “I know you...”

“ACELINE!”

“SCOTT?”

“Aceline... it’s you, I never thought we’d meet.”

“I was dead for the most part. Scott, oh, I forgot, you’re a manager for Apexi right?”

“Hey, listen, I’m sorry for the way our relationship ended.”

“I was a pain too, don’t sweat it.”

Company hotel was an understatement. Once inside the commercial district, Apexi’s tower, which reached the heavens, hosted everything the commercial district might offer. A shopping mall, multiple

gymnasiums, full-sized pools, and even tennis grounds on the side of the immense infrastructure. Compartmentalization saves plenty o' headaches. The bottom area was for the shopping mall, the mid harbored the other facilities as for the top, a hotel for visitors. Another side, one complete with a helipad and garage, was grounds for Apexi's workers, staff, and leaders. Stack it to their fortune, workers were free to buy, eat, and do whatever they wanted for naught but efficient work and higher morale as payment.

'Continues to amaze.' The long way involved a promenade through the mall. Surprisingly, the place was very active. Families and friends alike kept smiles. Occasionally, some would have pouts and looks of dejection. Obviously, those were children who didn't get a toy or ice cream. On the topic of children, Thena jumped at the notice of an art gallery. They could but follow his whims, the conversations lasted hours on end until the rooms.

Morning rose, the renamed capital of Arda, Awei, silhouetted by the rising sun, held woe. The roads up to said tree were scarred and left to ruin. The foliage, once green, was but a reflection of the past. Dust and other wastes layered the leaves. A few rodents of the church lingered to and fro, the main entrance had been cemented in.

"Why's that there?"

"To stop the residents from fleeing. See the path up there," she pointed, "-tis the only point of access. They controlled what went in and what went out."

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"How did people escape?"

"Look on higher, there's another concreted hole. A runaway mage, driven by madness, killed himself to open an escape route. I remember the day vividly, reports of screams had reached the cathedral. I curiously went to look, what return was a pit of dead bodies. Few survived and escape, the injured were shot, and the mad erratically left the moral realm."

"Why are we just wandering around the tree, there could be soldiers..."

"Don't worry," said she, "-I've said it before, the church's out of Arda. The capital is without a leader."

"Why are you staring at the main entrance, Igna?"

"Don't you dare," warned Julius, "-I swear to god, don't you dare blow open the hole. Let it be, we'll follow Eira."

"Fine, fine." 'Imagine if Draconis or Saniata were here... they'd have burst in without warning.'

"Pops, danger. I smell myself..."

"What she say?" frowned Eira.

"Let me translate, she means there's an Aedric curse or some kind of plague."

"Cousin..." they slowly made to the entrance; "-I have a bad feeling. Why's the capital so quiet, should it not have people's shouts and presence?"

“Potent,” she smirked, “-the stench of sickness and disease... hehe,” her lips contoured sadistically, “-I feel it, pops, they’re mad, very mad.”

“Eira... are you hiding something?”

“Yeah,” they arrived, “-the reason why I know the church left...” the sealed barrier cracked, “-is because one of my attendants witnessed their absurdity.

“By the heavens...”

What couldn’t be described in words and details lingered at the bottom. Buildings were smashed into a rectangle, the ground floor, once a town, was a broken remain of tried and tested torture methods. The ultimate cleansing, to the side, a stair had the charred remains of escapees. Pests and diseases bubbled in the pool of black miasma, the entire residence ship of the capital was killed mercilessly and thrown to decay. “-what the hell...” for the first time in ages, disgust, and irritation nearly forced a gag. Julius’s fled for fresh air, Eira fell to her knees, “-I never expected this...”

Chapter 660: Recount

The day of absolute cleansing, a date of righteous prayer and slaughter of evil’s manifestation. A day, whereby, none knew when, how, and why, occurred. One by one, the questions are answered by assumption and a little bit of imagination.

It began normally, the power change brought new rules and laws. One of which was segregation. The ground floor, once a place of refuge for adventurers and visitors, turned to a cell for the beast humans. Life here as the latter was harsh, manual labor battles to the death, and weird torture kinks for the rich and powerful. By this point, the religious belief of Kreston’s church alienated those of inhumane appearance. Anywho served the church, at any capacity, may they be the priest or an altar boy, judgment was based on looks. The moral compass inherits from very religious people was in most cases an escape, a way to find solace in their actions. Hence, the depraved nature of the beastmen’s treatment didn’t once cross their minds. Where the line of cruelty barely flickers and the pressure of beliefs strangles, tis fair to say, a singular path opened – follow and obey. From the outside in, the true torment couldn’t be showcased. No reference nor context, hell, not even names to faces, the trip inside the hell of the ground floor would only disrespect the sufferance.

Day to day, I, humble unnamed chronicler of the church, was tasked to write and record the happenings. Our sovereign said to not care about the days, only write what I saw and factually record the way people reacted. Thus, in my office, I sit and write with a book and quill. As a converted demi-human, sympathy was granted by the suppressed individuals.

We begin when the church finally took power. The borders and main entrance were still open. The adventurers, more specifically, those under the guild’s command, were wary but safe. Nothing changed, for the most part, life on the ground, first, and the second floor continued normally. Monsters were killed, loot was traded and exchanged. Sadly, the first sign of things to come would soon bear its head. A prominent young noble lord of a trader’s family(demi-human) was found mutilated and engrave with a paragraph from our teachings. Expendable a man I was, the corpse would never find true salvation. Tragedy befell their family, the father had an affair, the mother went mad, and the children died of maladies. In the span of three days from the heir’s death, a noble family and its blood were wiped from

the planet. I dare not say how many other have suffered the same fate. In the later days and weeks, my mind, cynical and judging in nature, would watch and notice slight changes. Most apparent, guards, men of the cloth, waited prominently over the bystanders. Moral and questions were raised. Nothing came of the people's fear. Soon, the last and final straw was pulled. A member of the royal entourage, a lady in wait preciously in service to the queen, was publicly humiliated, tried, and hung for dishonesty and witchcraft. Magic isn't a subject of fear, nor is it unusual, clean magic else, the use and conjuration of spells by one's own might and mana is without argument, accepted. Dark magic, the use of mediums, spirits, and ancient arts to harm, or in any way, do harm to the church or its followers, would beget scrutiny and death.

A priest by the name of Albert was inquisitor and chief investigator for the dark crafts. Tasked by the king himself, he would go into town, investigate reports and publicly question and test the accused. Guilty until proven wrong. Humiliation lashes to the back, ears, and tails chopped for the sake of cleanliness, the victims would more or less give to the accusation, the want of death overshadowed the truth. In all cases, of which I've kept a record in another book, was deemed wrong and thus burnt or otherwise killed. The witch trials without a doubt, the worst documentary I have ever written. The victims, young in age and prominently of the female demography – were abused to the brink of insanity.

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Enough on the trials, the worst had yet to come. Time progresses further. Liberties once taken for granted were swapped for forced labor and quests. The guild lost its power and was ruled by nobles of the church. Less and fewer tasks outside the capital were posted, until, the freedom vanished altogether –

[My duties as chronicler are to be factual and not add my feelings into the reports. I have earnestly tried, believe that I've agonized and anguished onto this very point. A friend of mine has had an idea of a spell for quite some time. Access to advanced technology is limited to only the people of power. Two versions of the chronicles have been published, one factual and intended to please the monarch, and one where I accurately paint the picture of truth, my feelings and doubts are firmed by proof. Worry not readers, nameless and unknown as I am, my volition is pure. Said paragraph should have been at the start, no matter]

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– furthermore, the disappearances of high-ranking adventurers were also highly unusual. Some patrons of an eatery I frequent were adventurers. A man clad in black, nicknamed Noire, would prowl the night and attack the unguarded fighters. The pride and strength of the demi-humans were ground to absolute order.

Ground floor, once a place of the venture, became a sign of horror. Tried witches paraded across the streets, impaled and half-alive. Adventurers dropped left and right, nobles vanished, power and influence couldn't stand against the oppression. Day and night, the constant screams and plea for mercy nullified the hearts of many. Young and old watched silently, did as was ordered, lifeless eyes and hardened hearts, the majority became puppets.

In the coming weeks, the eatery which I frequented closed its doors. The chef and owner suddenly vanished. One an elf, and the other a demi-human bearing rabbit's feature.

Where oppression presses, revolt is birthed, a particular race didn't stand for said actions. Bear in mind, the council of races was naught but power in the title, the rulership was handed to King Lucifer. Arda's royal family disappeared, some speculate killed for an easier ascension to power. Back to the revolt, the swamp, motherland of the Lizardmen tribe, were angry. They were never tried and also kept at a distance. An incident outside the capital sparked the defining moment of the castle's rule. An escort mission turned witch-hunt. A young noble priest from the church, ordered to pay a visit at a nearby village for the conversion of the fiends, was met by an ambush. The young man died, and the fierce lizardman returned with a body in toe. Here, the father of the boy, a trader, outraged by the incompetence, killed the adventurers before the masses. The next day, Kreston's army, helmed by the chief inquisitor, marched out of the capital. In there, I received damning evidence of the supposed ambush. Another friend of mind reportedly saw the faces of the attackers; humans.

Next, the army returned, and a grand ceremony was hosted on the ground floor. "-Lizardmen tribe has been exterminated," or so I vaguely remember their words. Yes, the news was true, the unthinkable had become reality. A meaningless genocide. How about this, the lizardman tribe was said to be the closest aid to his majesty. In a single instant, their race was wiped out. The same question went around the people's mind, 'if they could wipe out their allies, what about their enemies, what about us.' Next, the main entrance was shut and the first floor was restricted. Most of the residents, around 50,000, were forced to the ground level. Prestige, money, gender, race, it didn't matter, no houses, cramped streets, who cared, the church bore their fangs. Communication to the outside world was cut. No work, barely any food, and the constant scenery being a prison; anarchy ran amok. Thievery, murders, kidnapping; illegal turned legal, no laws nor right or wrong, the streets became fighting grounds. The strong turned mad with power. The only safe haven was the adventuring guild, the place where I stay and is protected by the church. I often see nobles overlook the carnage and suffering and have supper.

Famine halted the needless violence, a shell of their prior selves walked. Where once we had the sun's light as a guide, the all-mighty deity would never shine again. The frightful and cold night had the populous in their clutches. The pain would only increase. More and more demi's were pushed down into the cell, the abyss of no return. The only entertainment was the union of flesh. No matter where one looked, the traumatic sight would forever burn in one's heart. A witnessed lovemaking beside a man bludgeoned to death, tis how the mentality of the Ardanian swapped. Nearby villages were forced, the numbers grew. People slept on the street; children staved without knowing the outside world. Newborns, well, in a time of famine and pain, no other word need be added, conclusions can be reached without my intervention.

Duties forced me out of Arda. A year passed when I returned. The ground floor's scenery was of skinny figures cannibalizing dead bodies. Consciousness retracted to primal instincts. Ardanians were no longer able to speak, the fight for survival reawakened their taste for blood and hunting drive. The animalistic kingdom lived on survival of the fittest, herbivores were devoured, carnivores ate and mated, omnivores took neutral stances, territories divided. I couldn't believe my eyes, the proud Ardanians were forced to be beasts. The worst part, nobles would take guns and hunt the herbivores. I saw a child run and be shot in the leg. The parents watched in horror, the shooter, a young boy, held the child's ears and slit its neck. Praises from his parents elevated his sense of pride.

Lady fate had yet abandoned hope. The Blood King's faction truly opposed the church. The torment and pain took corporal form in a stranger's will. The Devil of Glenda stepped foot onto Ardanian soil, and

throughout last year, made strides in refuting the church. The army lost a large number of soldiers, next, came the decisive battle of Glenda, whereby, a single man annihilated seven thousand men. The BK faction also took control of the airfield and significant castles.

The outside events served to inflame the inside, the cell turned into a place of outrage. Defeated Krestonians stormed the ground floor in search of victims. They'd hurl their prey to the first floor and there, would be killed and flung off the tree. At the time of my writing this, the last bastion of humanity was lost. A major event rattled the leadership, pillars of confidence and strength crumbled. When it gave, the receivers, the Ardanian's wouldn't be spared. To fulfill their thirst for power, the last ever order was, 'eliminate everyone.'

The always dark cell burnt, bodies were killed and maimed. Carnivores or not, the instilled fear of the fair-skin humans forced an unjust surrender. Lines and rows of Ardanians were killed in arduous flames, suffocation, torture, and abused physically. The children were spared to watch their parents die, and vice-versa, in the end, the last thought, "-curse the wicked humans."

A run-away mage was able to create an escape path, albeit, the result, a precipice to their deaths. Here say, I end my recollection of the Church's rule in Arda. Whoever finds this manuscript, please, have it published, and may the world know the true face of the Empire. I've grown old, I sense the reapers scythe around my neck. I'm part of the lucky few who the church accepted. I gave more than I received. I doubt you to survive the purifying flames, a pitiable existence. By no means are my words on paper meant to sully the church or blame ideals. If fingers were to be pointed, the cycle of revenge would forever churn until humanity ends. As a man of old, I leave fate to the younger generation.

If even the manuscript is read, I wish to impart these words to a singular man, "Devil of Glenda, strive towards a place where co-existence is reality, not a fleeting dream. The path is thine to choose, no matter the disposition, I wish Arda to revive from its ashes, rise and fly, Phoenix, and may they see what thee becomes!"