

Death Magic 661

Chapter 661: New Generation

The manuscript, a broken-down hardcover, told of the atrocities. They flew to the guild, the steadiest construction amidst the carnage. Julius and Eira remained reserved for an unknown duration. Words would but hamper the duty ahead. Vanesa held a very gluttonous sneer. The bottom floor was marred by ashes, charred remains fixed into a beg of mercy. After many gentle attempts, the door showed no signs of leeway. Eira impatiently broke through the windows, there, the body of an old man hung over a desk. Two manuscripts rested atop one another. The first and sadly worse lost its ink, pages were burnt. A hardcover binding protected the second, Chronicles of an old man.

“Did you know anything about this?” inquired Igna.

“No...” she omitted shyly, “-I had a vague idea, didn’t expect their extent.”

“What do we do now?” wondered Julius, “-setting my fears aside, the number of bodies and dark aura in the air speaks of one possible outcome.”

“-a plague!” added Vanesa, “-pops, the entities will soon merge into a great curse.”

“I know.” A shuffled to the window displayed a wasteland, ‘-what can we accomplish in this situation. Forget about ulterior possibilities, focus on the present. Think...’

“-Shadow Realm,” said a whisper, “-use it!”

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“I got it,” said a sudden reply, “-Julius, Eira, head to the upper floors and check for survivors. Assess the situation, I’ll deal with the issue here.”

“As is wished,” *clap,* they teleported away. The dejected expression swapped walking to a short sprint, whiteish hair leaped into the dirtied street. A flash conjured the wings, a few flaps and he hovered above the large-scale genocide. ‘-Regret, anger, and revenge, the passing emotions are strong. The last moments were harmful, everyone held a vindictive thought. The chronicler wanted very little, he watched helplessly and recorded the events.’

Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing – Full Realm Expansion. Crimson bleached to white, the paleness of his complexion lit, the free-floating hair levitated. A circle expanded outward of his pressed palms, the borders caressed broken buildings and dead bodies; a whiteish flame gave into ash.

‘Damn it,’ he panted, ‘-the expansion’s limited, I can’t surround the whole ground floor. I need more power, bypassing the mana flow isn’t sufficient. Dive deeper, let the realm handle the outburst.’ He blinked to have the right eyelash in a whitish blaze, the pupils dowsed in vibrant red, ‘-time to break the seal.’

Deep slumber, deep rest, awaken for the chance at retribution. Gate of which stands before mine way, open for thy master has come: Nevermore – Hell’s Gate. The heart boomed, pins and needles diffused, ‘-good,’ he smirked, ‘-the element’s affecting Mantia’s expansion. Without his knowing, the weather outside tremored at a lightning strike. Nearby monsters and animals fled deeper into the forest.

Span across the ages, fear is what held peace, fear is what caused War, fear is the root of evil. I, the harbinger of the ultimate fear, have come to spread and reclaim what is mine of right: Nevermore – Terror Gate. an outburst of mana bubbled inside the growing sphere. A dark hand pressed against the clearness of the overwise tame Mantian walls.

“Do you sense that?” said Eira abruptly.

“Yeah,” he gulped, “-the aura of an apostle evolved into an angel,” before they rose the cathedral.

‘More,’ he gritted, ‘-by this point, I would be shrieking in pain. Not anymore, the Shadow Realm’s amazing.’

Unbound by the laws of Heaven to Hell; unshackle mine power: Nevermore – Annihilation Gate. death’s ancient marks resurface, the chest and back burnt in the flame of the symbols. ‘-a little bit more,’ he gritted and unleashed, *Gateway to the afterlife, gateway to life, gateway of those who live, open, for I order so: Nevermore – Eleo Gate.* The sphere fully engulfed the battlefield. He hovered unbothered by the surge in power, the same couldn’t be said about the face, the death symbol lit frivolously in a comical manner, the scythe altered in a pentagram of which circled the left eye.

‘Eleo’s gate, a passage into the rank of god. I shouldn’t be able to keep the output under control, today’s different. I feel better than ever.’ Another press solidified the expansion, ‘-VIth Act of the book of Sinuye. Scripture Xth, life is but the reflection of a higher being. Nothing need make sense, wish it and reality is thine. Arise, rebuilt, restore, all harmed shall be restored, all restored shall perish, tis the payment, tis the fate.’ A tringle layered atop multiple buildings, ‘-Book of Dahalo, from whence Earth, was birthed, naught is to defy the ancient laws. Laws set and set laws, the cycle is it or not will thee think. Real is fake, fake is pure, pure is fantasy, fantasy is fake. Ache, stake, fate.’ A close bud of Karia, the flower of life, rose from within the center. ‘Vile decrepit creatures of evolution. Thy ultimate end rest singly, mercy shan’t be granted for tis becomes weak. Here presents the light, reach and grab, scream and pull, cry and fail. Choose thine fate, those trapped shall be birth a new, souls untouched by death, arise into a new world, arise for my world stand strong, channel thine hatred and manifest, revenge waits.’

Wisp-like flickers of life emerged from the piles of bodies. Some evil, some pure, and some annoyed, a mixture of emotions gathered underneath a blueish amber. Mantia facilitated the passage between real and fake, what matters was Igna’s will. Reality efficiently became his imagination, and in it, he thought the dead were alive and in spiritual form. A connection tied the unfortunate, the amber pulled dimmer lights to a single point. ‘-First, we revive their bodies.’

Once living now dead. O’ thee who’ve lost thine life to fate, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival

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Dismembered torsos, healed, lost bodies parted were attracted to the host. Before five minutes elapsed, an army of empty shells stood along the streets. ‘Sadly, they can’t exist in this realm, the moment Mantia vanishes, they’ll crumble and return to normal. I might not be able to use them as soldiers, but it’s fine.’

Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo of the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration. A tsunami, spawned midair and without support, crashed onto the filled streets, the buildings were unaffected. Souls rejoined to their bodies, the bodies soon merged and dove into an alternate world.

'Where am I?' thought the chronicler, '-the place feels different.' A lush empty field welcomed the astounded party as him.

"Us, generals of the Shadow Realm, welcome thee to an alternate world!"

Mantia's barrier wavered, the energy dispersed erratically. More alterations would shift reality in a not so amicable way. '-The last spell,' he coughed and focused, *Box of Alche* multiple infrastructures of the town restored, *Realm Expansion: Release.* A clap shuddered the weather – a heavy thunderstorm dowsed the forest cold.

'I've done it,' he chuckled, the latent death elements ability returned to normal, the gates closed, '-transmigrating a whole town to another dimension takes power,' he fell to one knee, '-my reserves barely made it.'

Mana Control: Vortex the invisible stream of mana gathered onto his index. *Mana Control: Regeneration.*

"Pops, are you finished?"

"Vanesa?" he sat cross-legged, "-where were you?"

"I went to check on this," she yawned, "-here," the carcass of a three-headed hound dropped, "-pops, Hades is looking for someone."

"I think I know who," he stood, "-I'm impressed you were able to go and fight."

"Come on pops, I'm not lazy, just a passionate devotee of listlessness."

"Sure, sure."

Meanwhile, the duo of Julius and Eira stumbled on pretty damning evidence. A hidden laboratory of amber hue. The cathedral's safe didn't inspire much in a holy way. Instead, the creations of an insane individual waited in glass tubes. "What was Lucifer up to?" each step carried a crunch of rocks and dirt.

"I don't know," she shrugged, "-these are chimeras, and demi-god level ones. He's breeding demi-humans, I think, I mean, the spells are pretty much a log of the experiments."

"One of the tubs is broken. Maybe the reason he left?"

"-Was because he found what he wanted. I doubt it," she exhaled, "-the man I've worked under for long isn't such a shallow person. These experiments were done for the sake of curiosity. Perhaps an acolyte of his found a passion for necromancy?"

"Speculation won't bring us any closer to the truth." Thirty minutes later, the party rejoined before the closed entrance. The town had no stain of the previous genocide, Eira suspiciously hovered to Igna.

“What happened, the town’s return, and the bodies are gone?”

“Does it really matter, I mean, they were dead anyway.”

“No lies,” she squinted.

“The ascended to a higher plane, is it sufficient?”

“I guess...”

“What next?” wondered Julius.

“Break the wall,” said Igna, “-we need the capital in working order.”

“Leave it to me,” a graceful step conjured ice of which swallowed the concrete, a snap crumbled the blockage, “shall we?” she nonchalantly walked through the misty sparkles, “-time is of the essence.”

No, soon after, Empire’s outpost stood relatively silent on the western coast. A compound enshrouded by tall walls made out of magic. Patrols went to the forest and turn, the guards were conflicted. No evacuation orders were issued to the actual soldiers, once again showing priorities.

“See the antenna, tis the teleportation relay. I activate after a certain amount of mana has been stored. The distance we talking about is rather extensive. The discharge, feel it, the beam was used recently.”

“There’s only one way out of this,” they landed within the dense forest, “-Julius, Eira, we’re going on the offensive.”

“I can’t, my mana’s low ever since the transition. The body is yet to be accustomed.”

“Big sister,” frowned Igna, “-did you, maybe, use the last of the mana to break the bolder?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Neither can I,” interjected Julius, “-I’ve forgotten my sword.”

“Fine, whatever,” he broke free of the foliage and hailed the armored patrol.

“STAND DOWN!” said a man in uniform, “-this area is closed off.”

“I didn’t realize...” a shuffle of the shoulder, *-Ancient demon something arts. I don’t care, fall dead,*

Her words fell onto the man’s ears, “-why is such a feeble child out in the wild, honestly, have thee come for rations?” he ran over in sympathy, “-we can’t afford donations. The outpost is doomed either way. Head on to Glenda, I’m sure they have supplies for travelers.” A sudden headache had him lose balance, the last image was of a little girl.

“The malady took long to activate,” complained Igna.

“I don’t know,” they casually walked towards the compound. Anywho dares stare was killed instantly. Death packaged in a little girl carried by death himself. Two minutes later, the giant beam stretched to the heavens.

“Hard to imagine this structure to have broken Arda. If not for it, we would have continued our lives without worries. Whatever,” *Mana Control: Purgatory Flame Variant – Emral,* a pit of flame swallowed

whatever was there. Waves crashed onto the elevated dock, no coral reefs meant the water to be harsh. The dark color gave a profound outlook on the next step.

“We’ve cleared Arda from the church.”

“Looks like it,” they stood shoulder to shoulder.

“From allies to friends,” added Julius, “-it truly feels great to have you back, sister.”

“Likewise, brother, likewise.”

“Don’t lower your guards. We might have pushed back the church, the matters of rulership stands.”

“We know, we know,” an impromptu group embrace shook Igna.

“Awesome,” they laughed.

“I know,” returned Igna. Yonder remained bodies, the heartlessness wasn’t one to sneer at. Waves crashed, the Haggard’s next-generation enjoyed their moment of respite. An anger-filled entity watched, ‘-he has returned.’

Chapter 662: Embodiment of emotions

Dryads, very often, the protectors of the forest, some would say, the halfway link between mother nature and the animals. Generous at times and unforgiving at others – the waves crashed, and a sudden chill struck a chord. The felt presence triggered an immediate response, “-someone’s watching us,” said Eira.

“Yes, I know,” responded Igna, “-I know who it is.” Brazen without fear, a confident gaze washed his face, “-Tobira Barbara.”

“Staxius Haggard,” memories of were of a refined entity enshrouded in a greenish hue. Her face suffered great pain; the otherwise colorful skin akin to a bed of flowers withered. Mana lines, the flow of her essence, were cleared due to the now transparent skin. Her clothes, else, leaves and veins, were brown and dried, a resemblance to Vanesa on days where she had to move. “-You have come,” she hovered, “-come have you to see the forest’s destruction?”

“Lady Barbara,” said he, “-I’m Igna Haggard, nephew to my uncle.”

“I care not,” her eyes slapped Julius and Eira, “-the Haggard’s have destroyed the forest. The spirits are agitated... how will you repay. Once harm is done,” her eyes widened, ire exhaled her nose, “-we may just turn the forest into a cursed labyrinth.”

“Reconsider,” said Eira, “-harm was brought by the Church, an entity we’ve ousted out the continent. See the antenna, tis the reason for the spirit’s fear.”

“Rational explanation. Out of respect for the Haggard name, I grant the continent a new chance to evolve. Heed my word, Igna Haggard, if harm is ever done to my allies, I swear, Noctis’s Hallow’s Rotten Thicket will feel like a child’s playground.” Pillars made of leaves and plants rose and took the Dryad away.

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A bitter taste remained in his mouth; “-they truly annoyed the forest spirits.”

“No time to waste,” cautioned Eira, “-our trip has yet to commence. Let’s head to Glenda.”

While the party made for his estate, a strange light ambered amongst the transmigrated populous. Such an influx in residents was unforeseen. The generals, confused and welcoming, watched from the position of gods. The explanation need not be said, the last vibrant memory of death still permeated. One thing was for sure, the afterlife wasn’t as they thought. “Miira, that light?”

“The flame of revival,” said she, “-tis a phenomenon I’ve seen when dimensions are stacked on one another. Tis a necessary ingredient to transmigrate a realm into another. The size and color depend on the soul’s acceptance. Igna’s unknowingly took control of prominent souls.”

“So what?” wondered Gophy.

“So what?” she paused, “-it doesn’t matter at the moment. Let’s guide them to Arda.”

Mild as possible, the Shadow Realm invited new residents. The place felt more and more like another world.

Skip a few hours later, the perilous journey started at the airfield, from where they took off for Glenda. Otherwise, a 2-hour trip ended lasting 4. Vanesa threw a fit before takeoff, “-I won’t fly!” she cried and held onto the hangar’s side.

“Sorry, go on ahead, I’ll teleport after I’ve settled her demeanor.” The outline of the metal bird distant itself to the never-ending sky. “Tell me,” he stood alone save her, “-why the adamantness to not leave?”

“Pops, danger,” said she, “-a strong demon’s prowling around the capital. I didn’t want to say it earlier.”

“Go on, I’m listening.”

“Pops, when people die with regret, the emotions manifest in differing types. The hound was a mistake, there’s another,” her face paled, “-here, he’s here.”

‘I can’t feel it,’ a tiny shift in the air *woosh,* ‘-what was that?’ stood in the other, another drop forced quick dodges, the kinds which left cracks and dust in its wake. ‘-What are they...’ the scene before was an airstrip adjoined to a rocky pasture of reeds.

“Pops, duck!” *Ancient, morning’s breath,* a disgusting green moss-colored the airfield.

“Stinks...” he complained.

“Oh, come on,” cried another, “-seriously...” the voice resounded from altering spots. “-I swear, beings in this inferior realm are annoying.”

“Who stands there!”

“No one special,” a veil of distorted cloak peeled and fell, “-blatantly said, I’m the embodiment of Arda’s slaughter.”

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“Embodiment?” they locked eyes.

“-yes, embodiment.”

“...”

“I see you wish not to probe further,” the random figure skipped and stood shoulder to shoulder, “-what will it take for me to become real?”

“Excuse you?” he turned to no avail, the entity teleported to the other side, ‘-annoying.’

“What can I say really,” footsteps shuffled to a crunchy noise, “-one time nothing, the next, I’m awake and unable to communicate. I hear the pained voices of the angry, they want revenge and I want to grant their wish. Revenge against who, I don’t know, the flames, the torture, the stakes on which their bodies were impaled, I felt everything. I spent my days wandering the capital, no one ever came, no one ever tried to attack, no one, until I saw you, and the three-headed puppy.”

“You killed it?”

“Yes, he arrived at the same time as you. It sniffed me out, I couldn’t stand by... so I killed it.”

“Killed it, an emissary of Hades?”

“Who is Hades...”

“Tell me, what do you want?”

“I want to fight, I want to make the voices go away, I don’t know, my will isn’t strong.”

‘I need more information,’ the eyes shut, ‘-Mantia, realm of knowledge, answer my query.’

‘Phenomenon of death,’ whispered a reply, ‘-in rare instances, from when many have passed to the otherworld with great magic and greater regret, the result is often a shadow of said emotion. The current history of this realm has witnessed the event happen once, and tis the birth Shanna Islegust’s Prophecy. The slaughter of her kind gave rise to an insatiable thirst for knowledge and strength, thus, the manifestation of Prophecy. More often, the embodiments are left to wander the earth until a higher power eats at their life.’

‘I’m quite lucky,’ he paused, ‘-if the entity is on par to Prophecy, I wouldn’t even need to raise a finger in battle. I doubt the goddesses will jump into fights, they’re busy, and I can’t impose too much.’

“Tick tick goes the clock, what is the matter, traveler, does my presence bother?”

“No,” he said sharply, “-Embodiment of the fallen, I presume you’ve seen the spell I cast earlier?”

“Yes, I did, and I was impressed. The rescue of their emotions, I wanted to be freed, alas, the voices plague, and I can’t forget.”

“How about a contract,” the ring of monsters lit, “-Embodiment of emotions, Vengeance, does thee wish to ally to the ruler of Monsters.”

“No,” it refused, “-prove yourself in battle, perhaps I’ll reconsider then.”

“Too late,” said Igna, “-if we fight, you’ll lose.”

"Bluffs," it chuckled obnoxiously, "-wait, seriously?"

"Yes," said Igna, "-take a look. Does the field not look familiar."

"The sun has stopped moving, wait... the ground, it's different--"

"-I've cast Mantia, the field belongs to me. What say you, Vengeance, how about the opportunity to be freed."

"Deal," an invisible palm locked with his, "-I, the embodiment of emotions, swear to be loyal to Igna Haggard, the ruler of Monsters." A translucent blast of hue forced a squint, "-the voices," stood a vibrant spirit, "-they're gone!"

"Vengeance, dull thine light!"

"What, do I shine too brightly?"

"Yes, you do," he chuckled, "-come to my shadow." The entity didn't bother to check. Mantia was in fact, inactive.

Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo of the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration.

Clouds hid the sun, the grassy scape differed, '-this is new.'

"Hey you," said a strong man with parted black hair, "-how did you come here?"

"What's the matter, Kaleem?" returned a girlish voice.

"Stop slacking off and return to your duties!"

"Cora, we have trouble!" fired Kaleem, "-an intruder." On one side a massive transfer of inhabitants and on the other, four figures and the growing bubble of anxiety.

'Is this my master's shadow?' few glances at the palm and feet, '-how do I even look?'

"You!" fired Cora, "-come here already, the masses are headed to Arda."

"No," it chuckled, "-I hate being ordered around," it dipped into nothingness, five sharp strikes dropped Kaleem onto his knees, '-I feel better, stronger, and can see clearer. The voices have stopped. Imagine a weapon,' daggers materialized on his waist, '-Weapon's creation,' he smirked, '-my master's granted me the ultimate ability.'

"STOP THERE!" epic proportioned spells swallowed the landscape, "-move a muscle and tis death!"

'Magic...' he skipped and touched Cora's wind barrier, *Spell learned: Wind Barrier.* '-oh, amazing,' he smirked, '-my master couldn't have been any stronger. My abilities reflect his, everything I learn, he learns, and vice-versa... this is going to be fun!' *Spell: Wind Barrier.* A stronger version fought back, *Evolution to suit Host's need: Wind Walk – Acquired.*

Woosh, "-hey, are you really my master's servants?" *Weapon conjuration: War-Hammer.*

Boom, the explosion rattled the ground, ‘-they’re weak,’ electricity charged the body, ‘-I want a challenge.’ From the defeated Cora to Yuria, a cheeky lick of the lips cried of the intent.

“Stop messing around,” *crash,* “-are you Igna’s spirit guardian?” inquired an unbothered lady with blond hair.

‘She stopped my attack without using any abilities. How about this,’ the daggers fired for the vital organs.

“Stop being an idiot,” said an exasperated sigh, “-the abilities are strong, but not strong enough to defeat me. Here’s the truth, the four generals have the power to defeat your master easily, don’t ever forget it.’ *smack,* he ate the ground harshly.

‘A strong master who has stronger companions, this is amazing.’

“What happened?” approached Intherna.

“Nothing much, someone needed a lesson. Enough of that, focus on the transference.’ In the crater slept the jovial spirit named Vengeance. The moment the Shadow realm welcomed his presence, the voices vanished, and Igna, unknowingly, made acquaintance to a strong ally, one of which would be very important later on.

Speaking of him, the background changes to an exhausted Igna. The confident say of teleportation was done in pure heat of the moment. “-pops, don’t you have mana left?”

“Oh, cut me some slack,” he panted, “-we made it close enough, right?” a glance showed another 30 kilometers before Hect. The enormous walls patiently stared the populous. Trade routes were reestablished, the olden style of transport, attire, and way of life remain stronger than ever. “-We’ll just walk, don’t worry about it.” Along the journey, they met a welcoming caravan of performers, who agreed for a lift. For some time, the lingering guilt of Arda firmed in thoughts. ‘She’s regained her smile,’ thought he.

They crossed Hect whereby, he got off. ‘-There’s still danger in the air. A few months ago, and this place was a sight of the battle. Reconstruction of the bridge’s completed rather easily.’

“Come one, come all, here’s the newspaper for Hect.”

“Newspaper?” child on his back, “-might I have one?”

“Sure,” said the young boy, “-that would be 12 Exa sir.”

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Famine runs rampant. The Blood-Kings Faction are under scrutiny for their lack of complacency. The increase in population has stumped the rebellion’s economy and food supplies. Local scholars say a large-scale scarcity of food will dwindle our numbers by 20%. Many lower-ranked nobles have asked for exemption in the wake of such problems. Looks like we’re on way to utter starvation. The remnant of the adventuring guild has proposed the act of Dungeon-Styled Cooking, inspired by the Devil of Glenda’s culinary exploits overseas. Lack of knowledge has had many tasters be subjected to the plague of monsters. In other news, the leadership of Hect has been put under strain; then again, the church’s involvement has the populous scared to adventure beyond the river.

'Are we honestly doing so bad?' they arrived at multiple carriages. Many of transporters headed to different parts of the region.'

"Leaving for Glenda, one place left!"

Chapter 663: "Hello Traveler"

"Hello traveler, are you new around these parts?"

"Greetings," replied Igna, "-I'd say I'm quite accustomed to the surroundings. Have matters changed?" Rough-edged benches paired by constant shakes of the rocky paths had many of a lesser plumb bottom sneer.

"Not really," said the elderly-looking woman, "-Glenda's become quite the talk of the province. Let me tell you, in my old days as a housewife, I never expected the war to have such effects on our daily lives."

"Don't worry about my granny," interjected a younger boy, "-we're all residents of a nearby village."

"Everyone here is related?"

"How did you know?" returned a motherly figure. He took a moment to think of an answer, '-I can't be rude and say they're bear similar features.'

"Call it a hunch," said he behind the mask of nervousness.

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"Are you a single father?" presumed the mother, "-the attire's quite fit for a traveler, are you perhaps rich?"

"I'd say my father's a prominent trader. The little gloom-ball is my daughter."

"Must be harsh," sympathized the grandmother, "-to raise a kid at such a young age."

"No, it's easy," added Vanesa, "-pops very rich, we get what we want."

"Very rich," a sparkle lit the obvious greed, "-might I ask thy name?"

"Do forgive my daughter," he patted her long oily hair, "-she's a bit dazed from the travels. I'd say I'm fortunate, and not rich. Being completely honest, life outside of Arda is easier."

"True that," sighed the granny, "-back in my days, us demi-humans were prosecuted without justification. Part of my ear was chopped before their grandfather swooped in. He was a mage from the Order or something, a very wealthy man."

"-Granny..." sighed the bystanders, the grandson hid his face into his mom's back. The latter signaled to be silent. "-the good ol' days. I remember it as if it was yesterday. The Dorchestrian war raged the land, my sister and I were on a trip, it was the first time we ever went abroad. The walk lasted months, until the cheapest carriage. We were allowed passage to Dorchester only; thankfully, my brother at the time served the royal family, his skills in battle made us a somewhat prominent family, maybe not prominent, we did better than the other families. One of the granted favors was an expedition outside the border. Father thought to start a trading business, and I was sent to negotiate. War had been rampant for

decades, the province decided into aggression and non-aggression sectors. Sadly, our carriage was ambushed by masked men. Our supplies and the passengers were killed, only women and children were allowed to live. Those times were rough, I can't tell how long we endured. Our bodies grew skinny, and my sister somewhere along died of starvation and diseases of vulgar nature. My beastwoman appearance didn't turn men on like she did, in a way, this ugly face of mine made it on shock horror value. Strangely enough, instead of a lady, they saw me as a replacement for a warrior. My tiger blood and carnivorous tendencies changed my persona into a warrior. In time, our band of mercenaries became well-known around the region, the highest point was 5 thousand men. We occupied the border between Arda and Dorchester. In time, I realized the reason my sister and I were sent. Father and brother lied, we were supposed to be pleasant gifts for the men, distraction for their hard work defending the border. Our carriage contained supplies for them, and never us, we were doomed from the start. Let me tell you son, the war in those days was rough. Still, this ol' granny made it alive through countless battles. I ripped, ate, and slaughtered to survive, Then, the last battle I ever fought arrived, we were ambushed by a party of mages, the leader, someone by the name of Josiah, or whatever. I couldn't believe my defeat at the hands of a kid your age named Tempest something. Whatever, we lose, and I was set free by a stranger from that mage team, he found me attractive and I figured why not. If I was to die, I'd at least know what the world had to offer. Color me surprised when I was then sent back home. There, I started a family without a man, worked as a mercenary, and grew to a sustainable life. My brother and father were killed on orders of the queen, they leaked information to the enemy. Thankfully, we were cut from the family name."

'I get why the boy didn't wish to hear her story. The granny, despite her appearance, is very graphic in the details. Even I cringed at her tactlessness.'

"-anyway, the Empire's invasion was news to me. Here I thought we had a humble king and strong queen ruling our continent."

"No grandma, the rulership changed a few years ago," added the grandson.

"Oh yeah, the king died on an expedition to the Empire?"

"Granny," slipped.

"You called me granny?" her fiery eyes dimmed, "-come here," she wrapped his head under her armpit, "-you're a gentleman, aren't you," she laughed.

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'Her grip is strong,' he tapped her elbow, "-I yield, my lady!"

"Let her go, mother."

"Fine, whatever," the grip eased, "-boy, where are you from?"

"The world plays various tricks, I'd never imagined such a chance encounter."

"What you mean, don't be a vague boy."

"The man Tempest Haggard is actually my uncle," he leaned and to watch the road ahead, "-the mage party was probably him and his teachers. Josiah's an instructor at a prestigious academy in Oxshield."

"Oh," the mother's eyes came to a pretty astute conclusion, "-you're related to the royal family?"

"Yes," said Igna, "-Staxius Haggard, the king who died, was my uncle."

"The Devil of Glenda," said the grandson, "-are you him?" he watched in wonder.

"I suppose my name's pretty known around here," a nervous scratch of the cheek sold the relatable young noble story.

"You're experienced in battle too, son?" fired the rider, "-believe it or not, I was an adventurer too until I took an arrow to the knee. The undead archers from the Azure walls are no joke."

"Isn't life hard in Arda?" inquired he.

"Not so much as Hect would make it believable," said the mother, "-true, it's hard to come across food."

"-Ignore them," gestured the granny, "-food's abundant at Glenda, the villages are striving hard to make the accommodation of victims viable. There are jobs to be had, a new dungeon was found at the location of an ex-castle. Adventuring's pretty effective. Their possibilities are endless. If not for that dungeon, I doubt the faction to handle the influx."

"A new dungeon?"

"Yeah, it's increased traffic from the neighboring lands," said the rider, "-since the place is hidden inside the walls, the sense of security is much more pleasant."

"What about the royal capital?" inquired Igna.

"No idea," shrugged they, "-the place's gone silent. Even the church has stopped their useless attempts at conversion."

"Don't let the optimism veer thy head, Viscount of Glenda," added the mother, "-true be it the town's done a lot for the survivors, truthfully, a single town can't possibly help an entire province. The other nobles are on edge ever since newer construction. The newspaper, the propaganda's lesser implicit in that issue. Nobles boycotting the food situation is the tip of the iceberg, the province isn't going to last another year. The economy's going to take far longer to heal; the lizardmen, main farmers at the swamp, have perished, income is cut."

"Do pardon my surprise, you're well versed in the matters of state."

"I was once part of the queen's entourage," her face and profile didn't spark a memory. "No matter, I'm surprised a noble would bother to travel alongside commoners."

The wall of Arda stood prominently, a line of carriages and hand-drawn carts waited. Military outposts of the Blood-King's affiliation were stern in checking the supplies.

"It'll take a few minutes, why not take a walk around the village," suggested the rider, "-I'll rejoin once my cargo has been inspected."

"Come along," hailed the bossy granny.

"Me too?" pointed Igna to himself.

"Yeah, come on," she smiled. The grandson and mother were also very inviting. Pleased by the encounter, they ambled to a tall and beefy arch. "-mom, how long did it take to build this?"

"They say it happened in an instant."

"Took around a year's time to construct," said Igna.

"How would you know?" inquired the still vibrant granny.

"The prince and I built it."

"Two men..." they paused, "-seriously?"

"Forget I mentioned it," a checkpoint for people had sterner-looking guards. A sure impressive crowd of constant chatter drowned the acquaintances' conversation, Vanesa climbed from the piggyback to his shoulders. 'Don't tell me they've begun to build a village...'

"Checkpoint," the line shuffled, the fellow passengers easily made it across, "-Can I have identification?" inquired the guardsman deep onto his record book.

"Will this do?" a noble crest rested on the counter.

"Let me see," he nonchalantly grabbed, "-let's see," it pulled onto his book, "... the pen fell, "-Master Igna?"

"Correct," he smiled, "-do I pass the checkpoint?"

"S-sir," he stood sharply, the chair fell and made a scene, "-I didn't expect you to be here, sire..."

"No need be flustered," crest to his neck, "-have a good day." The other guards bowed; an influential figure was in the presence of commoners. The sentiment soon faded into life's daily ruckus. Shadows of the present arch gave to the feeble sunny another side. The place wasn't impressive nor was it to be disregarded either. The construction of buildings was handled by dwarves.

"Here," hailed the grandson, "-the tavern is over there," a sharp left led into the merchant part of town. Shabby stalls veiled per a durable fabric was neatly fit the esthetic. Loud and confident merchants hailed the passersby. Many stopped but rare were those who bought, a recession limited the movement of money. Then again, what enabled the construction of cottage-style buildings, sure, the architecture and abundant forests and material dwindled the initial cost, what about men power. In then, curious gave to, "-how are they able to build a village?"

"Pretty self-explanatory. The passage tax is used to pay workers. Materials are transferred easily and at a low cost by the links of the upper wall. Trees are cut towards the west and sent. I heard the faction has plans to open the wall's route to ease the travel from edge to edge. Sounds good on paper, I'm sure there are a lot of considerations to be taken."

'Good answer,' thought Igna.

"We're here," proclaimed the grandson. A one-story high cottage without much in the ways of visual pleasantness. The business was for better or worse, present. Lack of food rose the prices of already

cooked meals. The trader's guild was hard at work with the importation of food from Oxshield. Then again, if money isn't circulating, the sustenance would but stay in a warehouse and rot.

"Pretty well-off to sit down and eat," said Igna.

"Never said we were poor," said granny in jest. My daughter here was scouted by officials in Glenda, she's to become a worker for your town."

"You were scouted?" he took another look, "-from what I've seen, the skill speaks volumes."

"I thought the viscount would know his entourage," a distasteful click of the tongue silenced the already tranquil table.

"I refute thy line of thought," argued Igna, "-I've entrusted the town to my stewardess, and in turn the people she's trusted and employed have scouted thee. Does the logic not lead to my actions."

"I didn't mean my words in malice. Tis but bad memories from when Lucifer came into the capital, I had a gut feeling but was asked to remain quiet. The ways of the noble world, I wish it to be on merit and excellence. Ladies in wait begged, bribed and threatened me to not raise the concern to the queen for she had found love," said she sarcastically.

Chapter 664: "-why not truly unify Hidros."

"Calm it," interjected the grandmother, "-what is done is done, be grateful you were employed."

"You're right mother." In a way, the rather loud use of words was indicative of how much the lady cared about the queen. Her eyes reflected the guilt, as did the atmosphere. Time passed, the carriage crossed, and off they were to Glenda. The trip lasted quite a while; Vanesa grew impatient. She began a mini-war of games against the grandson. The latter lost at everything; in conclusion, the younger-looking child stood confidently with a victorious look.

Shuffles of the carriage past Glenda's manor a few minutes ago, after a gentle slope, came to the peak, a view onto the bustling town. Left and right, right and left, many went to and fro. Never mind the scarier forest to the north, part of the lands was trimmed and treated for farming. Cattle grazed pastures; the villagers hailed the visitors.

"Here we are at Glenda," said the raider, "-that will be 350 Exa."

Money in a pouch flung onto the man's lap, '-Glenda,' thought Igna in the company of Vanesa, '-the town is alive.' Furthermore, the southern gate, a place of entrance for many, was crowded. Amidst the refugees were traders, the portions separated for ease of transport. It seemed the former were sent along the left side while the latter had direct access.

"We ought to separate here," said the mother, "-it was good meeting you, Viscount of Glenda."

"The pleasure was mine," he bowed respectfully, "-I very much appreciate the tales of the past."

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"Don't mention it," snickered the grandmother, "-go on, boy, the town waits."

Wings sprouted; a brief flap spawned a dust-filled gust. “Ma, you think I can become strong like him someday?”

“If you train hard enough, then maybe,” added the granny.

“Worry about getting a good education first,” returned she sternly, “-the viscount isn’t only strong, but very smart too. You need to use the brains more,” she playfully leaned and tapped his head. All and all, they were a happy family despite the circumstances. The above gave a better view of the happenings. The newest addition to Glenda thrived businesswise. A new marketplace settled onto a large area surrounded by guild-houses and shops. Textile, blacksmith, potion, weaponsmith, no matter the realm, a shop bore supplies. Refugees were taken to the old town, more specifically, open space at the edge of the town wall. Rations and makeshift settlements helped the sick and feeble. Guard numbers increased tremendously, more and more safety officers wandered the streets. ‘-looks to be thriving,’ he landed atop a watchtower.

“Excuse me,” he leaned over the edge and stared at a dazed guard, “-where might I find the stewardess?”

“Who stands there?” a few blinks and he shrieked, “-what!” the face paled, “-Viscount Igna, is that you?”

“The one and only,” the figure acrobatically hopped inside, “-where’s she at?”

“The lady is inside the castle, do check the throne room or perhaps the study?”

“Alright,” he shrugged and slid down the hatch. A short ladder gave onto spiraling stairs, beams of light glared inside, the focus was on the dusty interior.

“Pops, I want food next.”

“Can you wait a moment?” the voices echoed.

“Sure,” she pouted, “-I hate when pops has to work.”

“Don’t look distraught,” he kindly tapped her cheeks, “-we’ll have a sumptuous meal later, sound good?”

“Deal.” Two doors allow entry into the castle walls and one into the castle yard. He continued inside the echoey hallway. No matter the sound, any little scratch or otherwise tap, carried across the vicinity, in a way, the solitude and cold air were terrifying. Soon, multiple large strides later came the main part of the castle, the corridors largened to a big open space. Here was the gateway to the castle’s most important features, the paths diverted on where one wanted to arrive. In the same area, a massive table of fruit-filled pots held cutlery – the dining hall. The kitchen stood not far from said table. Guards and other attendants would take turns eating, shifts promoted efficiency and gave a sense of relief.

The clops of the leathered shoes sufficed to draw attention. Guards of angered demeanor bowed in respect to their lord. He rose a hand in sign to be at ease. “-Pops, they respect you,” whispered Vanesa.

“Privileges given to a noble,” they made for the inner-chambers. Faded remnants of a heated debate fell at his feet, a glance forward showed the direction to the throne room. Closer they walked, the harsher grew the voices, “-we can’t sit by and allow death to nonchalantly kill our people.”

“There’s no argument in the matter, guild leader. If adventurers aren’t ready to risk their lives for the sake of this town, then thee may see fit to take a trip to the capital. We’re on verge of starvation, tax isn’t sufficient for the influx of people.”

“Stewardess,” said a more docile voice, “-guild leader, arguments won’t fix our immediate trouble.”

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“Fair enough,” clicked the first.

“Whatever,” sighed the second.

Creek, “-pardon the intrusion.”

“Who-” her gaze befell Igna, “-MY LORD!”

“Alta,” he smiled, “-long time no see,” the lord glossed past the guild leader, a singular up and down set the tone.

“What is all this?” he wondered.

“A throne room, my lord,” said she, “-we needed a place to discuss the future of the town.”

“Fair enough,” he turned, “-guild leader, is the discussion over?”

“My lord,” dropped onto the knees, “-I plea, help me rescue those in my party. I implore the goodness of the viscount’s heart.”

‘Alta doesn’t seem impressed by his request.’

“What happened is terrible, you have my deepest sympathies. I’m not so rude as to disregard the one whom I bestowed the responsibility of growing Glenda. If her decision says no, then we’ll do so. Address thy plea to her.”

‘The instant the lord entered; the argument shifted into a battle of attrition. I never expected the viscount to be frightening,’ thought a novice attendant. Igna sternly gave a once over. ‘-Scary,’ he choked and stood straight.

“Stewardess Alta, please, help us.”

“Guild Leader Enshoud, didn’t the guild master say the party is weak to adventure past level 3. I’m sure the guild assistants must have been very adamant. Needless to say, the daft mule can never see the greater picture. Most of me wish for thy party’s earnest defeat. The only way to teach a stubborn man is pain; bear the responsibility.”

“Guild Leader,” voiced Igna, “-state thy rank and reason.”

“Tier-4 Bronze. Money, we need money, else, the fiends of the bank shall claw at our heart.”

‘Bank?’ a suspicious frown landed on Alta, who, in turn, reaffirmed by a nod, ‘-I’ll explain later,’ said her expression.

“-My lord, please, I’ll do anything, rescue my party members,” *smack,* a loud headbutt against the stone floor firmed the resolve, “-please,” he stared forth bloodied by the loud cut.

Vengeance, a hand forward, “-go rescue this poor men’s party,” a shot of impending doom escaped the room.

‘I’m scared,’ froze the attendant, ‘-an evil presence, who was it...’

Woosh, a circle of burr showed the petrified adventurers, the impending sense of death lingered.

“I’ve done so, master,” the heavy aura vanished. ‘A fight, I got to fight strong monsters, too bad I only killed the weaker ones. Rescuing weaklings... hehe, no worries, I’ll kill them all later.’

“Guild leader?”

“YOU’RE BACK!”

“I THOUGHT WE WERE DEAD.”

Snap, the emotional reunion continued into the middle of the crowded street. “-Alta, what’s the status on the town?”

“My lord, you should be careful in giving favors. Said show of niceness will beget the lecherous attention of the greed-”

“No need to worry. Have the guests arrived?”

“The prince and princess are at the orphanage.”

‘Understandable, Julius did start the organization for children.’

“Glenda’s doing fine on the surface,” said she. “-Our coffers increase steadily, the business of monster hunting has sky-rocketed the local economy. Pressure from the other lords has hampered growth. The propaganda of Arda being starved for business has repulsed any incoming proposition from the other provinces. Food is an issue at the moment, the farmland of Apid can’t sustain us let alone them.”

“Any ideas to remedy the situation?”

“Fertile soils are rare. Farmers have tried to cultivate plenty of land to no avail. Seems like the forest around Noctis’s Hallow has an adverse reaction on fauna and flora. I’ve sent for us to grow potatoes – no idea if it’ll work.”

“The other villages?”

“The nobles despise us, they won’t sell. Instead, the supplies are sent to Ritenoot. Our villages can only do so much.”

“The estate between us and them, surely we own the land to cultivate crops?”

“Sadly not,” she sighed, “-we own very little in the greater scheme. The defected nobles of the Empire have sworn friendliness on the condition land is granted. They’re farming – the produce is sold at an exorbitant price.”

“Can they be any more blatant? In other news, the church has been vanquished from Ardanian soil.”

“Amazing,” her face lightened, “-the news will lower the refugees.”

“-About that...” he sensed it before, the clan leaders were present. The throne room opened loudly; the blood-king’s faction stood sternly. Julius and Eira were also present.

“Lord of Glenda,” said Alaric, “-tis our second time meeting.”

“Lord Alaric,” he stood, “-the pleasure is mine. Do be careful about the demeanor.”

“Astute,” he scowled, “-being in presence of lady Eira repulses me very much.”

Council took to another part of the castle, a warmer environment, and a round table. ‘Lord Alaric’s against Eira’s arrival. Aunt seems relaxed since that exchange’

“As overseer, I, Elvira, shall stand as a mediator for the council. Please, lord and ladies, keep the discussion civil and dignified. Nothing hurts more than nobles intertwined in petty arguments.”

“I’ll take it from here,” said Eira, “-I’ll spare the details, my current interest is a stable future for Arda. I wish to close the curtains on said chapter. Igna and I are honored to relate the church’s vanquishment. We raided the outpost and destroyed the access to Arda. The camp itself can be refurbished into a port.”

“Before we continue, could the princess repeat what was proposed?”

“The Blood-King’s faction march into the capital and takes the throne. We’ve exterminated any remaining threats, therefore, it should be a simple job. Secondly, the capital is to be moved to Glenda, my reason is simple,” to which, Igna slid the record across the table, “-read and thou shalt have an idea on the capital’s status. Thirdly, a new rule is to be established, the Blood-King’s faction will not claim the throne. The reasoning is rather simple, the faction needs to remain independent. If there is ever a repeat of the invasion, we’ll be safe knowing the nightwalkers have our backs. Fourth and final, after I’m crowned empress of Arda, I will do what is needed to remedy the relations between Arda and Alphaia.”

“The princess is to become empress to a powerhouse,” paused Alaric, “-I must say, I’m still not entertained by the return. The justifications of the whys have somewhat calmed the worries.”

“I strongly recommend reading the manuscript.” Page after page, the more they read, the more disgusted grew the expression. Alaric seemed more agitated by the findings until it ended.

“Immoral,” glowered Gabrielle, “-the council of races allowed...”

“Don’t point fingers yet,” interjected Elvira, “-we must look to the future, not the past.”

“The first two points are self-explanatory and will be accomplished regardless. We ought to discuss the third, a new rule. It will be hard to establish a kingdom without a king, an heir, or a purpose.”

“Julius would benefit the title of king nicely,” proposed Julia.

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“I dutifully refuse, Lizzie and I have abdicated claims to the throne, we have no rights.”

'Right, it's true. He doesn't want to be a ruler of a nation. Cousin isn't in a position, he has responsibilities with Phantom and Apexi, not to mention his lover. What is the best solution, if the Haggards can't rule, who can?' then and there, it dawned, "-why not truly unify Hidros." Heads were turned by the statement,

"-care to explain?"

Chapter 665: Ritenoot

"Sorry?" said Igna in turn.

"What was just said," voiced Alaric.

With the look of excitement and bootleg annoyance, nightwalkers wanted to close the tale on such a tragedy hastily. No heir, nor plausible ideas going forth, he understood said matter and gathered thoughts, "-unify Hidros under a single monarch. In other words, turn Arda in for Queen Gallienne to preside over."

"I-," careful deliberation swept the rug under their feet. Few words and an outcome the dimmest could conjure was intoned in such a fashion the implication felt deeper.

"Igna, I wish to hear more," said Elvira.

"Here's speaking hypothetically. Cousin Julius will not become King nor will the little Lizzie. Big sister Eira's headed to become Empress, and I doubt the populous to accept Queen Shanna's return to power. That being said, we can make the latter work under the premise of a greater nation. Hidros is united save for Arda, Queen Gallienne has rulership over the other main province; which is why the current decision seems of greater impact. Yes, the argument can be said of too much land will be granted to Hidros, yet, I see it in a clearer light. The blood-King's faction and the will-be leadership divide the already separated lands and rule as differing parties. They will be under the direct command of Queen Gallienne, who is more or less lax to her realms. Then again, let's go over the negatives. Firstly, the loss of authority, the new rulership will be under the Queen's close guard. There's no telling which noble she will assign over the land. By my standard, after the split, Arda is likely to be divided further and constitute a greater duchery. Many titles will be made available and the plagued nobles will invade the province. In light of the situation, I can't help but wonder if holding onto Arda is a viable option. The Haggard's dynasty doesn't need to hold onto the past, and neither does the province for that matter."

Speechlessness and a thumbs-up from Eira. Julius smiled at the proposition; Vanesa could have cared any less. Duke Alaric sternly weighted on the situation.

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"Being part of a bigger circle will mark the start of a new age," added Eira.

"The Federation," added Julia, "-the alliance of kingdoms will falter. Balance is already timid as stands. The Argashield Federation stands on the union of Arda and Hidros for the foundation. Tell me, what is to happen then?"

“The Federation is to be dissolved,” said he nonchalantly, “-I said before, there’s no use in holding to the past. Queen Gallienne knows the risk involved. In the best case scenario, another federation is formed. Worse case, the neighboring lands grow belligerent on one another.”

“I have something to add.”

“Please do, Lady Gabrielle.”

“Not that it’s news to you lot, there’s a new Empire to the far north of Iqavea. Tis been on the news for quite some time, travel wasn’t possible until this decade. We knew of a foreign land – the sheer scale of said area rivals Iqavea and even defeats it. They’ve been dubbed the people of the sea. By my sources, the Wracia Empire has invited the people of the sea into their entourage.”

“It fits,” gasped Eira.

“Mind elaborating?” frowned Aurora.

“Why would the Church retreat from a bountiful land, why would they abandon the invasion, rather, why would they even bother attacking us and turning the world against them?”

“We were fooled,” mumbled Igna, “-the whole war on Arda was but a fa?ade, a world-level scheme to attain greater strength,” fingers to the earring, ‘-éclair, I need information on the new continent.’

“-as wished.”

Pages after pages, photos, diagrams, “-the scale of the emperor’s ambition are truly unprecedented,” the phone slid into the middle of the table, “-the reason we never truly adventured beyond was due to fear. The populous hates the sea, it inherits our customs, water is viewed in ways of a destroyer. The foreign land has no connection to the Arcanum, their technology is primitive at best, a virgin land ripe for the picking and expansion. Here’s the scary part,” a hologram showed part of the continent, “-it’s larger than we expect. Selendia, the land of sea-people. Resources are untouched, the people are gullible, and their tenacity is monster-class. All of them have an affinity towards water, I say much in reluctance. We don’t have enough information.”

“-I-” exhaled Aurora, “-the alliance’s been made already. In exchange for technological advancement, the continent’s sworn to be the Empire’s workforce, they sold themselves to God and will do the doctrine proud.”

“In such aspect, Alphia’s not out of the question,” cried Eira, “-the imbalance will grow. A giant ally to another, does it not send shivers?”

“Best policy is to act,” fired Igna, “-debating all day won’t bring solutions. A representative should make for Rosepire promptly. Split the faction, march into the capital and reclaim the throne. Alphia’s to be left alone, they’re in peril by a sudden invasion of otherworldly demons.”

“A representative,” the clan leaders stared and gulped, “-nightwalkers aren’t much of talkers.”

“Igna,” glared Elvira, “-a member of the Blood-King’s Clan, would you do the honors?”

He cringed; “-must I also act?”

"You proposed the idea," she scanned the table, "-the clan leaders are busy with the invasion."

"On one condition," he voiced vehemently.

"Which is?"

"More land," he tapped the table twice, "-I've heard the rumors of the current rule. Famine and an economic crisis are about to befall the people. If duty as a member of the clan states I must do thy bidding, the same logic states, I, noble of the land, must serve my people."

"More land?" they paused.

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"You do understand," side-glanced Alaric, "-the nobles, of whom aren't from the clans, have their sight set on thee."

"Which nobles?" he chuckled, "-the Count of Ritenoot?" a murderous glare shook the table, "-clan leaders, I have one thing to ask."

"Shoot."

"We're still in battle against the Empire, right?"

"In the public's eye, yes," they dulled their faces, a conniving smirk plastered onto Igna's demeanor.

"By such, the clause of any captured castle or village shall be bestowed onto the assailant, right?"

"Yes, tis active until the capture of the capital."

Question about the intent halted further sentences, "-before we end the council, what say you, clan leaders."

"I'm in favor of the decision," said Aurora.

"Same here," nodded Julia with crossed arms.

"I reluctantly accept," sighed Alaric.

"Lie par le sang, shall aid any way we can," winked Gabrielle.

"Hence, as the mediator of the council, I officially end the discussion." Curtains parted immediately; the darkened pressure dropped. Formal chatter gave into informal and pleasant ones. The veil of sternness pulled apart, the clan leaders spoke amicably, "-Igna," hailed Alaric, "-were you the one who brought the princess?"

"I suppose so," returned, "-she needs closure and Arda needs a restart."

"A hefty responsibility is on thy shoulder, go and make thy aunt proud," he ambled to the clique of clan leaders.

'Aunt?' a glance showed her staring deeply to the outside. 'Where's Julius and Eira?' another look around showed the two distantly laughing. 'the ice princess has a warm smile, Julius seems relieved too.'

“Hey pops,” yawned Vanesa, “-are we done yet?”

“Come up here,” she rose into a cradle, “-good job on being polite,” he flicked her nose, “-I’m very proud.”

“Thank you pops,” she smiled through the reddened nose, “-I’m glad,” head to his chest, “-wake me, fo-”

‘A lovely girl,’ he caressed her head and shuffled to the window. Plenty o’ curious and nervous stares turned; an electrifying grudge sparked the air. Tis blatant enough.

“Good afternoon, aunt Elvira.”

“It’s you,” a fatigued side-glance returned to the outside, “-are you well?”

“Aunt,” he shuffled closer, “-thank you for everything,” a sudden embrace shook her core, “-we’ve been at each other’s throat since the death of Leko and Alicia. I know I was wrong and harsh; my intentions were pure and so were yours. Similar to big sister Eira, I want to clear the misunderstanding,” Vanesa unknowingly ended in a group hug, “-Lady mother and you are my only remaining families, I’m sorry.”

“Stupid boy,” she held the back of his head, “-always make me worry, do you know how much I’ve been stressed over the Alpha situation. I nearly fainted when éclair relayed the news about the shooting, anti-magic bullets, I thought we’d have lost you,” her closed heart opened to welcome a loved one, “-we fight and it’s fine,” she gave a quick peck, “-tis because we care for one another.”

“Aunt Elvira,” the embrace distanced, “-you’re awesome,” a sincere smile begot a warm inhale, her heart and nose heated in bliss.

“My troublesome little nephew,” she held his chin, “-go and make me proud.”

“Will do, auntie.”

Clan leaders shuffled closer, “-Elvira, care to explain what happened?”

“The exchanged seemed more of a lovers quarrel.”

“Alaric,” gritted Julia, “-don’t spout such disgusting nonsense.”

“Not a lovers quarrel,” she laughed, “-a normal family disagreement. I guess his time spent in Alpha was worth the stress.” Haggard’s new generation hurled shoulder to shoulder and laughed, Igna smiled in the middle with Vanesa on piggyback.

Orders to standby were issued to the nightwalkers. The capture of the already empty capital would take a few days to accomplish.

‘Kreston might be out of Arda, the corrupt nobles aren’t. There’s a scheme of divide and rule in order. I have a strong inclination towards Ritenoot – the noble, wherever they hide, are part of the Church. I hope my hunch is wrong. To drag another town into the mud... whatever.’

“My lord,” a familiar face called, “-long time no see.”

“We met an hour ago.”

"No, no," the windy castle walls took effort to traverse, "-I meant to say it earlier, circumstances said otherwise." They joined and stared the interior, "-sure has a lot of people."

"Indeed. Master, how are Kion, Inesa, and Ulia."

"They're fine. Aren't you worried about princess Eira?"

"Not really, if the master brought the princess, she must have had a change of heart. Forgive my familiarity, there's great chemistry between thee three."

"Worry not about tact, we're comrades first, lord and stewardess second." He spun to the new addition; "-the buildings were completed hastily."

"We used magic and preset build-spells to firm the foundations."

"Build spell?"

"Similar to the Ardanian wall, the church as a lesser potent version, we call it Build-Arts. Anyone with mana can utilize the arts with the correct teachings."

"Any limitations?"

"None, only a person's mana reserves and have the materials in close proximity."

"Very useful." Masses excitedly crossed the bridge for the marketplace. Sweaty, fatigued, and disgruntled adventurers arrived with chipped weapons and loot -a shared comradeship encapsulated the moment. "Something on your mind?"

"Ritenoot."

"My lord?"

"Any idea on their leadership?"

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"I knew it," she mumbled.

"Excuse you?"

"I said, I knew it," she firmed her steps, "-the town is in peril from what I've heard. Our distance doesn't allow for much communication. What I know is rumors; traders from the west are anxious and deeply in need of money. They sell at high prices and buy at the cheapest they can, some use brute force to get their wants."

"What about the noble side of things?"

"No idea, the ruler is pretty anonymous. Like you, tis the steward that runs said town."

"Alta," he whispered, "-we might need to lit a fire, a reason to justify a peaceful takeover."

"I understand," she stepped back, "-you wish to take over?"

"Correct. Use the simplest tactic," the eyes narrowed, "-we have spies, right?"

“Yes.”

“Then, the next time a merchant heads to the town, have it be ambushed. Steal the loot and don’t kill. Afterward, sell it to Ritenoot. Would be wise to target famous traders and steal their items.”

“I see, the scheme’s rather convoluted...”

“Not yet, attack Ritenoot’s guards as well. We’ll control the narrative. Let the fear sprout amongst our people until an official called to investigate. There should be evidence of Krestonian activities in our dungeon; have it sprinkled on the site, what say you, art thine intrigue ability worthy?”

“Consider the matter done,” she smirked, “-I request men power first.”

“Deal,” a party of six richly dressed traders materialized.

“Lord Igna,” they bowed.

“Pay heed to Alta’s command, I won’t tolerate failure.”

“YES, SIRE!”

Chapter 666: “Cut the sad story, I’ve heard plenty.”

“As asked of us, the news has spread. Time is short till Glenda succumbs; shall we dispatch the merchants?”

“Whatever,” said a somber figure, “-the town must fall, tis all I ask.”

“Your wish is our command.”

Matters pertaining to Ritenoot now handed to Alta, focus turned to a grossing matter. It may have deluded the issue, still, the subject of the true unification remained steadfast. The trio of Haggard’s next-generation gathered underneath a grand tree on the outskirts of town. Hardened dirt path climbed over plenty o’ ups and downs till the other villages.

“I’m glad we started the orphanage,” commented Julius. Standing around would do naught. The prince boldly sat on the dried grassy plane; the shadow sure gave much-needed rest.

“What of it?” silvery hair flowed.

“The children have a place to stay, I can’t ask for more.”

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“And we shan’t ask for more,” interjected Igna, “-have you relayed the information to Aunt Shanna?”

“I haven’t, should we?”

“Obviously.” A meaningless glance into the marketplace showed Alta and her relaxed expression. ‘-She’s on the hunt for potential targets.’

“-I want food,” a startling ravenous growl gave gasps.

Time sped, Igna and his party were lost in the daily hassle of duty. Julius deeply wanted to care for the children, in a way, Eira felt compelled to help. Igna sufficed to say, wasn't interested. The goodness was much to be desired. Until the Faction was ready to capture the capital, they would be stuck in Glenda. Herein, the Viscount of Glenda left for the field of adventure.

A deathly tunnel stretched forth, he walked slowly protected by a cloak. Echoes were scary, growls were scarier. Level 5, read a half-present sign. The maimed remains of an adventurer died beside the post. 'Broken legs,' he crouched and examined, '-sapphire,' he pulled the tag, the path diverged into three. Left, right, and center, extremities bore the lecherous reddened glare of famine beasts. 'the only way ahead is forward.' *Snap,* whiteish flames burnt the body, '-may thee rest in peace.'

Prospective grew, the dimness of the entrance paled in comparison to the inside. Here was the rest area of dungeon crawling, level five, a relatively unused area. A blueish crystal ceiling reflected the light spirits. An unimaginable grandeur filled the pale nostrils of red, lush green ground and a pool of crystal-like water.

"Someone else made it here?"

'There're people.'

Four warriors camped around a gentle flame, "-Yo," gestured a fatigued man, "-where's your party?" the question repeated around the fire.

"Don't have one," he replied coldly.

"Are you alone?" asked the same man.

"Not really."

"No use asking questions," said another, "-come on, sit with us, the fire's great to recover from fatigue."

"I appreciate it, thank you." The knees clicked to a harsh land, the cloak unraveled and a bag dropped.

"You're not an adventurer, are you?" inquired a tinier profile, "-the outfit and bag don't scream menace."

"Right, I'm a wandering chef."

"Wandering chef?" laughter echoed, "-new one," they laughed till tears, "-too bad buddy, there's no pray to be cooked here."

"On the contrary," *snap,* prepared goblin meat fell onto the ground, "-I ought to ask."

"Go on?"

"Is your party from the Deer's guild?"

"How did you know?" the eyes squinted.

"My job's easier," a makeshift cooking station built, "-I've come on behalf of the guild leader. He expressly said to bring the guild members, alive or dead. Level 4 is very hard to traverse without

supplies. The burning hounds attack suddenly, not to mention to Aedric bears, and finally, the level boss, five evolved hobgoblins.”

“Food, finally,” said the tiny figure.

“What’s the ranking for our quest?”

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“Tier-4 Bronze.” Bowls after bowls were readied in haste, “-eat before it gets cold.”

“-We haven’t had food in two days,” complained the smaller figure, “-I should have hired higher-ranked adventurers,” a shiny guild-tag showed his allegiance. “-I’m cutting the pay. No quest, no money.”

“Someone’s rather confident,” snickered Igna, “-a member of the trader’s guild?”

“No,” he interjected, “-I’m part of the merchant’s guild.”

“Is it not the same?”

“No, the trader’s guild is under Haru, while the Merchant’s guild is ruled by distinguished merchants, we control part of this province’s money, without us, there would be no advancement.”

Obnoxious flaunts of a higher position, the escort party leader didn’t so much stare wrongly. A fight against strong foes, until the safe zone. Once replenished and healed, the party set to climb out the dungeon. ‘-I found my target. An influential merchant, I sure hope he doesn’t have an accident.’

“Worthless idiots!” he cried, “-stay in front and protect me, my supplies are worth more than your lives.”

‘So much for letting Alta scheme, I unknowingly got involved. Damn quest posting, should have never scouted the jobs requests.’

“Monsters ahead.”

“On guard everyone.”

“We’re surrounded, watch the back, chef.”

A heavy aura rocked the ground, pebbles shook. A god-awful stench permeated, “-ON GUARD! IT’S THE WHITE HOUNDS.”

‘Just about time.’

“AHHHHH,” gnarls and howls flung, swords swung, guns fired, blood splattered onto the walls. Five hounds circled and attacked, the party had no chance of survival, “-not on my watch,” the leader jumped to shield the merchant who had dropped in fear, *bite,* the right shoulder plate buckled, “-g-get off,” he stabbed the beast in its belly, regardless, the fiery thirst for blood didn’t cower. The bite strengthened until *Mana Control: Wind Element Variant: Wind Blade.*

“-Are you well?”

“Chef,” he fell, “-I’ll live, what of the others?”

“They died.”

“Dam-” consciousness faded.

The monsters laughed in their drooling lust, a relish of certain death. ‘They were killed so easily and effortlessly. What’s the point even?’ the wolves gathered around the merchant, the stench of ammonia broke the smell of dogs, ‘-he really peed himself?’

“PROTECT ME!” cried the merchant, “-I’LL GIVE YOU MONEY, ANYTHING YOU WANT!”

“Oh, shut up, your voice annoys me,” *slash,* a swipe instantly beheaded the man. No heed to the monsters, they crawled closer and intended to attack, *-grr.*

“Silence,” he thundered, the monsters crept closer and bore fangs. “-art thou an imbecile?” a side-glare froze the coordinated approach, “-does thee wish to harm thy monarch?” the monster’s ring lit, “-heed me, monsters, do you wish to attack your king?”

“Majesty, we apologize for the indiscretion,” they bowed, “-I shall relay thy arrival to the other monsters.”

‘Telepathy. The King of monster title has a lot of advantages. Thoughts communication to beasts. Still,’ stood before the merchant, ‘-bait is best dead.’

Once living now dead. O’ thee who’ve lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival

Later that day, Igna would claw out the dungeon beside the party-leader and merchant. The tent filled castle-yard accommodated medics and traders alike. Many adventurers waited for the chance at the battle. Rumors of a man rescuing a party of Floor-4 would soon spread.

Another day passed, “-let’s head to Ritenoot,” said the party leader. “-the quest is still active.”

“I’ll stop at Glenda, you two continue.” There, the party split at the marketplace. A figure atop the castle walls dropped to nothingness. Said afternoon, news of an ambush would spook the talk of the town. None cared to believe until the party leader returned with the emblem of Kreston. He’d later die in his sleep said night. Another morning rose suspiciously, the fear of the church terrified the Ardanian, was it a repeat of the invasion? Not to thoroughly stick to Glenda, the same issue arose in Ritenoot. The merchant’s guild was tipped on the assailant – mercenaries. Similarly, far towards the airfield, troops readied for the capture.

‘We’ve planted the seed of fear,’ thought Igna in the company of Vanesa. The town hall gave a nice view onto the streets, ‘-now we wait until the guilds are scared.’ The afternoon arrived with the news of another ambush, this time, only one escaped. The loot and guards were killed.

“Guild master HARU!” cried the office, “-please, let us take care of the ambush.”

Her feline expression remained docile, “-no need for senseless deaths,” she said.

17th of October, a few days, even weeks, had passed. The conflict between Ritenoot and Glenda escalated to the point of no return. An emergency council called by the Guild Leader Haru dulled a pleasant morning. The city guard and a few statesmen sat silently.

"I'm sure thee knows of the current situation. Our sources say Ritenoot is heaven for remnants of the church. Not only were traders and adventurers targeted, but young men and women alike were also abducted."

"What of it?" said the city guard, "-we're tasked to care for the people. Attacking their town without knowing numbers is foolish."

"The captain has a point," firmed a stateman, "-if Glenda is to survive, we best not fight back."

"Igna, you understand, right?"

"I do," he stood, "-Lady Haru, I understand thy request. Listen up, I shall personally see our retribution to have a long-lasting message. No matter the adversity, we shall prevail for we stand alongside our people!"

A touching speech led to a secluded walk onto the hardened path, "-the scheme's on schedule," said Alta.

"Aren't you supposed to be in town?"

"I can walk beside my lord until he leaves, can't I?"

"Good point," they stopped beyond the populous' range.

"Status on Ritenoot?"

"They actually are a haven for the church. Numbers aren't high, the mastermind's hidden in an estate in the middle of Mont Blanc and the town. Here's a vague location. The guards are hidden among the townsfolk." A nod led to a flap. *Ancient Magic: Teleportation.*

'I'm disappointed, we used propaganda to scare the noble; the man moved pathetically as foretold. Can't expect much from pretenders. Ritenoot is ours.' *Vengeance.*

"-yes master?"

"Go clean up the trash, I don't want a single Krestonian alive. Wipe them out."

.....

"Understood."

Farther north rested the Mont Blanc and the associate mountains. Days culminated to the desired result, somewhere along the line, without a response from the enemy, the mind shifted to utter destruction. Only the strong and tenacious are allowed to be in charge of lives, not the weak and incompetent. Nothing annoyed more than a mastermind without the mind. Tall trees covered in snow hid a manor, a frigid roof, a slippery yard, and lifeless torches.

"Master, what shall we do about Ritenoot?"

"I don't know," the fireplace cast weak shadows, "-I underestimated the propaganda. I thought we could fight..."

CRASH, '-pesky doors,' explosions rattled the manor.

“WHO STANDS THERE!”

“Death,” *slash.* Footsteps echoed up the stairs, *Mana Control: Purgatory Flame Variant – Hellfire Blaze.* Despite the cold, the flames of anger charred the floor, curtains and pillars caught fire, smoke hovered to the upper floors.

“STOP OR DIE!” screamed weakened guards.

“Shut up,” *Blood-Arts: Extria,* a flick of the finger tore off heads, broke limbs, and twisted the prey, ‘I’ve come to slaughter,’

“What’s this ruckus about?” wondered the noble.

“I don’t know, sire. Please stay here, I shall go investigate. A harrowing gust blew and caught the butler, “-no need for said trouble,” whispered a demonic sneer. The palms opened into a hell of fire.

“-MASTER,” he shielded the noble.

“Good. Protect your master until the very end, for I, the Devil of Glenda, have come.”

“Devil of Glenda?” the master pushed the retainer aside and lifted the hood, “-PLEASE, STOP!”

“What are you?” the flames subsided.

“I don’t have a name,” he said, “-I was asked by the king to stay and wait until my time comes.”

“You’re a half-human and half-demon...”

“I don’t know,” he stared with a single horn and reddened complexion, “-please, hear me.”

“This explains why the schemes went along so easily. The head of Ritenoot is a child?”

“I only did what was told to me,” dropped to the knees, “-please, hear me, Devil of Glenda.”

“Speak.”

“I want to die and reincarnate as a normal child. I don’t want to suffer, I don’t want to cry, my parents abandoned-”

“Cut the sad story, I’ve heard plenty. Here, I’ll grant you passage to a realm of rebirth,” *snap,* “-die.”

Chapter 667: Federation’s Fate

“WHY, MASTER!”

“Don’t scream in my ears,” glared Igna, “-his father should have been more careful. Anyway, you best relay any information I wish to know. Ritenoot will today be under the rule of the Viscount of Glenda. This manor has no purpose, flames of my never-ending vengeance shall put a stop to its misgivings.”

“Why slay a child?” cried the butler.

“For the same purpose as I’d kill anyone else,” he shuffled to the broken window, “-he was in my way.”

“WHY WOULD YOU KILL HIM!” begged the butler.

"I've stated my reasons," he side-glanced, "-I need not state it again," the eyes trailed in a tinge of red to another snap. The cupped body of the noble in the retainer's grasp blew to dust. "-Have at it, man, the noble shall reincarnate in a realm of which I hold dominion over. He wanted death, and I obliged. Does thee wish to follow his steps or will you ally to my cause?"

"If my master perished, I have no right to live. Please, allow me to follow him."

.....

"So be it," a diagonal slash beheaded the man in a whitened deluge of cleansing flames.

To the south, unbeknownst to the townsfolk, a gust of unseen proportions leaped across town. Bodies of well-hidden individuals would suddenly appear in the town square. Heads, limbs, torsos, a disgusting taste carried the scent of death, many of which associate with the ironesque smell.

'Master wanted people to die,' paused the spirit, '-and I've obliged.' The heavy and tremendous power of the aura sufficed to have the local guild leader shudder. It wasn't long until the pile grew, with it, came the attention of bystanders. Morals didn't matter, a guillotine stood beside tall gallows. The timetable of a regular day would have execution in the mornings and afternoon. Some rather voracious businesses capitalized on the deaths as part of the entertainment. The result being, a enlarged view onto the somewhat crowded space. Immaculately arranged stone-likes and very rustic yet peaceful lamps guarded the sigil of ruthless judgment.

An explosion rattled the empty streets, "-who stands there?" cried a man caught amidst the bond of flesh.

"Your nightmare," whispered the malignant presence, '-he's bare of age...' black hair and dog-ears were forced into a vulnerable position, the assailant had no tact – saliva drooled over a firm libido. Before a word of justification formulate, Vengeance swooped in, grabbed the back of his neck, and left. The unfortunate man hit and severed his leg onto the dangerously protruding broken window frame. A distant look to the room showed the boy's impression of admiration, '-I want to be like him,' thought the boy.

Faced forward, '-stories don't need to end nicely,' they leaped from building to building, until the town-square. Meanwhile, towards the north flew Igna, the clothes and face cleaned from blood or signs of a battle.

'Vengeance did a good job,' he landed before the countless masses. Stranger folks peeped from higher grounds, important individuals watched from the shadows, a nod to the partly invisible spirit eased the atmosphere.

"Hear me," he thundered from the gallows, the onlookers buckled in gasps, "-I've come to conquer Ritenoot. The remnants of the church have been dealt with; the noble lord was found dead in his manor to the north. I, Viscount of Glenda, proclaim the town to be safe."

"THE DEVIL OF GLENDA!" shouted a stranger.

"Yes," returned Igna twice strongly, "-you," he pointed, "-tis right, I'm known as the Devil of Glenda, the man who killed seven thousand men. The lifeless heads under us are the bodies of the hidden agents of Kreston. I sent my companions to clean the trash. The man who stands under the blade of ruthless

judgment is a high-priest of Lucifer's sect. The decision will be in thy hands, people of Ritenoot, thee hath two options. Kill the priest and be under my rule, one of which I promise to be fair and equal, or, spare the men's life and continue independently."

"He's right," spat the captive, "-I'm a priest of the church. You will all feel the wrath of my lord soon, he brings evangelium 1by the sound of angelic horns of the heaven. Bow down before his might, destitute rejects of the world's grace, foul beasts. You've stained the havens of which we call home."

"No matter what he says," returned Igna, "-Arda will be free from Kreston, the province will reawaken stronger than before. Think well, townsfolk of Ritenoot, the decision lays in thy hands."

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"KILL THE FUCKER!" cried the crowd rudely.

"They took my wife and children away!"

"They forced us to their biddings."

"MY HUSBAND WAS KILLED UNDER THE GUISE OF HEATHENISM."

A smirk begot the fury of the mute priest, '-there's no need to speak, you've done enough.' A tiny thread of blood sowed his lips shut. "By Tharis's name of righteousness, BRING JUDGEMENT ONTO THE MAN!"

"Hell no, he's not dying easily," a stray bystander leaped onto the platform, freed the priest, and threw the latter into the bloodthirsty crowd. Stones, punches, kicks, they beat, and beat, and beat, until the face was unrecognizable, and angered parent emasculated the representation of holy.

"Worry not," said Igna, a space opened in the crowd, "-the man will not die so easily," he landed. *Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Restoration.* "-beat him to thy heart's desire. Tis the only gift I can offer, exact the hatred onto they who've oppressed our idyllic land of Arda. Non-humans aren't the scorn of the earth, we respect fauna and flora, we care for one another, and we always repay kindness in full. Humans are greedy, weak, and arrogant; ARDANIAN, JOIN ME, JOIN MY LAND AND FIGHT."

The therapeutic beating, an oxymoron in retrospect, followed to the 18th of October. Here, the area changes to an overview of the would-be battlefield. The Faction's army, led by Julia, and Aurora, marched strongly into the vicinity of the capital. They knew of what had happened; a ghastly palm gripped their chests fictitiously.

"Charge!" ordered Julia. Units of twenty stormed the ground floor. Empty buildings, streets, and no living presence returned, the capital stood solemnly similar to a ghost town. Soldiers quickly climbed the upper floors, aside from stray monsters, naught of dubious nature was found.

"The report is true..."

"The capital was truly plagued by death and mercilessness."

"What should we do now?" wondered Aurora, "-we've taken the capital, and thus, regain control on our land. I fear the repercussion of the people, what will they say when their loved ones are nowhere to be found."

"I see a singular path before us," gulped Julia, "-Alaric and the others agree with me. Let's publish the manuscript for the world to see."

"Will it not bring scrutiny to the church?"

"Forget the repercussion, we ought to publish it."

Next followed the 19th, 20th, 21st, and lastly the 22nd. In those days, Phantom published the manuscript under the name 'The truth'. A very obnoxious title of which drew traffic. The company's profit would be put towards Arda's crumbling economy. Only a few copies sold, and already, the shift on the Arcanum was consequential. Matters of said kind need time to brew. In a way, the goal was accomplished. Ardanians learned of the truth, they knew what happened in those months secluded inside said prison.

The royal family's castle rose on high. A heavy gate lifted for entry, an audience with her majesty the queen was granted. Igna, not thrilled by the prospect, sighed heavily on the drive.

'I represent the faction. I have to negotiate for the future of a whole province, quite the pressure to put on the shoulders of a young adult. I can picture my mother and aunt laughing at my troubles. They enjoy shoving the harder jobs onto my stead,' the car parked neatly. Suspiciously envious guards watched, a butler arrived, "-Viscount Igna?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Please follow me this way," he walked at a pace to match Igna, "-the capital has heard a lot about the various exploits."

"Elementary I should say," the corridors and pathways became convoluted. All while the promenade, casual small talk gauged one another's stress level.

'The theme's changed quite a bit. Feels friendlier and guided towards a child's moods.'

A singular path continued down a hall of portraits and status. "-Her majesty the queen waits." Two guards opened the doors when he arrived. A large room expanded, one could see the normal décor and feel of an office. The queen, in her late thirties, was quite the sight to behold. Her visage didn't give to age nor did her hair.

"Viscount."

"Majesty," he bowed.

"Raise thine head and take a seat," she offered, a holographic display of the land vanished, "-I've heard a glimpse of the visit from the duchess of Rotherham."

"Queen Gallienne, I'd like to set the reason of my visit straight. The topic I speak of is the rupture of the Argashield Federation."

"Pardon me?" she frowned.

"Please allow me to elaborate, not to be awfully obnoxious, I bear with me the crest of the Blood-Kings faction as well as the crest of Arda. They give me the full authority on the matters of state."

"I don't understand how a new noble would have the fate of a province granted so easily."

"In a way, I speak using the authority of a king."

"I gathered much," her stone-cold visage didn't change, "-we're at a level playing field, do explain what's to happen next, Viscount."

"I presume you've read the book titled, the truth?"

"I have, and what of it?"

"Arda, and I'm ashamed to admit, has no viable ruler. Queen Shanna isn't suited to rule, the public won't allow it as she's the reason why we were engaged in war. The second prince and third princess have abdicated their claims. The scope not only covers the royal family, but the nobles too. Everything has been left to ruin, the Blood-King's bastions of leadership barely held the province from utter anarchy. The Argashield Federation must be broken, I know the history behind said foundation, and I also know the reason why such strong nations were together. My uncle strongarmed his way to a coherent alliance. The pillar's gone, and the strong players will fall sooner or later. It reads clearly, something needs to change. The invasion showed how weak the Federation is, Elendor's suffered copious amount of damage."

"True that," she resettled, "-what about a solution?"

"The establishment of new rulership, the true unification of Hidros under the Riverty royal family. The true patriarch and thy bloodline allow for the rightful claim."

"Tis easier said. I understand my blood allows for Arda to unite under my rule. What I don't grasp is why. The true royal family of Arda is the Haggard's, what of the dynasty Staxius built?"

"It must be broken for the sake of the people. My mother, current head of the Haggard's, is already the Duke of Rotherham. If we were to grant the title of the monarch, she'd become the Queen of Arda. The power struggle of the nobles will harm..."

"Viscount," her eyes sparkled, "-what you said is possible. The solution stares us straight. King Staxius Haggard's twin sister, Duchess Courtney Haggard. Her experience in ruling the land of Rotherham will suit the task."

"Are you proposing the Duchess to become Queen of Arda?"

"Yes, her influence and strong persona will aid us greatly. You hoped for I to take the title of Queen. Instead, I wish for the legacy built by my old friend to forge on until the end of time. The Argashield Federation will revive under our rule. After all, the duchess is my best friend. Take the news to the Blood-King's faction, a new leadership will establish from here on. The province of Arda shall be granted to Duchess Courtney. Before her ascension, do kindly take care of conspiring nobles."

Heavy gates dropped, '-it worked,' he cruised down the slope, '-the idea crossed my mind when we spoke. Mother is in a great place to rule the province, she's smart, strong, and very vindictive. Queen of Arda, the Haggard's legacy forges into history.'

'Viscount Igna,' wondered the Queen, '-he's stronger than imagined. A young boy with the foresight of a wise leader. Arda's best in their hands. Her influence will forge the Federation anew. The Empire's allied

to a new land, we need to stand stronger. Show me what the Haggard name will accomplish, newer generation.'

Chapter 668: Vigilante

Hades, long known as the god of the underworld, one of three greats presiding over multiple domains, a being of legend, accidentally had a portal open in an unforgiving land. The details are known and not understood. Alphia opted for a defensive strategy against the current upheaval. News reports are scares, and reporters are lacking. Access to Odgawoan is but gone. The powerful pulled resources into a single pot and stood behind the town. Between medics and supplies, a lot of money was used.

An information blackout meant no sufficient support from the outside. The Emperor saw best to limit knowledge to the land of dreams. Alphians needed to keep their expectation high, and not face the reality of what a shame it was.

Hope wasn't far. The reinstated AHA, aided by big firms, bonded to form a temporal barrier. Monster invasions were frequent and hard. Experience of battle at Whuotan, against monsters, prevented further casualties.

"Wake Voraum, the day has settled for the night."

"Pesky Kazalon, what brings you to my rest area?"

"The birds, Voraum, the birds."

"The dead one I refer?"

.....

"Yes."

Military outposts after Fuda Mountains shut, no questions asked. The mountain faces were surreal, at night and day, the perpetual fear of attack lingered. Here, tucked away behind the first range of the mountain range, camped two otherworldly beings. Voraum, a somewhat humanoid figure, to be pleasant. A true description would be shadows surrounding a stickman figure, no heads, instead, an upside-down metal bucket, two beady lights to mark eyes. Next, Kazalon, a mangled mess of sea creatures supported by tentacles. Claws of a crab, head of a shark, and the rest being a guessing game. The appearance fluctuated; for the sake of not looking like an idiot, Voraum and demons alike, referred to the beast by his name.

"Say, tell me, Voraum, what did the master ask?" a surprising normal fire burnt.

"I don't know," echoed the voice, each work expelled mist down the bucket, "-as assistant to our lord, we mustn't get complacent."

"I know. Don't repeat what I know," he snatched the uncooked birds and ate, "-Lord Cimi doesn't like a battle."

"Yeah, I know," more mist gathered at his feet, "-the duty says to observe the mortal races. My minions have gathered much, this realm brims with mana, we're close to Creation. Mana is abundant, the rupture was quite a shock to us. For the first time in ages,"

“-We can walk free from the punishment of our grandmaster.”

“Let’s go, we need information.”

Backpedal to the prior battlezone and the reinforcements stand sternly. Road traffic detoured and completely boycott the northern part of town. The equivalent of adventurers, per Alphian standard, were Sultrians, humans with super-human abilities. No use of mana, instead, the evolution of genes. Despite their numbers, the true abilities able to save and help people are few. Only a handful make it to the title of Hero, regardless, the ones not acknowledged by the AHA, are known by the simple moniker of Vigilante.

“Welcome to the gathering of Sultrian. I’m sure the pleasure is yours,” notes and files dropped on the desk with a loud crash. Countless men and women stared the front, the atmosphere resembled the start before a presentation. Chatter and inattentiveness diffused. The speaker, a man in a black suit, bore a stern expression through the rigidly square forehead. An uncleaned stubble exuded seriousness. “-Another bunch of weaklings,” murmurs silenced the crowd in a belligerent manner. “-Listen up, Vigilante, many of you are new to the situation here. I don’t know why the brass would allow these much to come here. If my tone isn’t clear enough, I hate each and every one of you with a passion. While I’m at it, here’s my name – Brand. The manager of the Scaica’s western division. It means I’m in charge of the heroes who come and go into Odgawoan,” animosity grew, he paused and glanced the first row, eight seats of which four were empty. “-Trafall...” the arms crossed audaciously to a few taps of the index, “-TRAFALL!”

“Here, don’t shout.”

“Where’s Orisia and her team?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged, “-man, cut the bull already. My team is on break, it’s not the time to play house.”

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“Whatever. Koft, Strema, and Glacia, stand up and show the Vigilante who they have to aspire to.”

“Stand up team,” the nonchalant Trafall, an average joe, by all means, yawned at the crowd, “-I don’t need to introduce myself, do I?” The response said no, they knew as did part of Alphaia. Trafall, an average man on the surface, has the ability to evolve his body into a metal suit, he can reproduce any machinery and implement it into his body.

“-Ello people, the name’s Koft,” the standard superhero with heightened ability. Cliché to some extent, true is, people with said ability are very sought after.

“Strema,” smiled the next, a boy barely of age inherited the ability to control puppets. The scale starts from figurines to behemoths.”

“Glacia,” whispered the last, the twin sister of the fallen hero, Snowflake. Her ability, precognition.

“There you have it, Vigilantes, the heroes who you’ll never surpass. They’re the best of the best.”

“Can we leave?” interjected Trafall.

“Yeah, go on.”

“As I was saying. Don’t ever compare to them, you’ll die needlessly. Each of you will be assigned to one of the eight heroes. Did I mention how the AHA works?”

“No,” returned the crowd.

“Damn, should have started with that. Alright, here’s the deal, bunnies. The Alliance is supervised by a board of directors. Below them, the Faction Managers, split into North, South, East, and West. The latter two are in charge of the main province, Scaica. After the managers, we have the Heroes who aren’t ranked, once a certain criterion is reached, the company sends a congratulation, you’ve done it, type of letter. Don’t get your hopes up; Vigilantes die easily,” a pause settled the disrespectful waves, “-don’t want to die, get out right now. Else, stay and have the chance to earn mediocre money and live through constant danger. That’s the price to become strong, and I mean it.”

“The hunting hour begins,” stated Koft. “What you think, Glacia, the bunnies going to survive the night?”

“I don’t care,” she murmured and simply left.

“Trafall, what about you-” he spun and bit his tongue, “-Yeah, no, not going to happen.” The man was off on the prowl for nightly companions.

“Strema?”

“I’m not legal, goodbye,” the feeblish figure vaulted off the flyover and onto a quadruped something, ‘-Is that a table, yeah, I’ve seen it all tonight, that’s definitely a table,’ the boy surfed into the neon-display of the nightlife.

‘Bunnies,’ elbows to the railing, ‘-I sure hope they don’t die, the moon is out, one of those two might play. Trafall’s babysitting. About the time I head to sleep,’ muscles tensed, *woosh,* nothing.

As stated prior by the blood-king’s faction, anyone who held lands after the war will hold onto said property no matter their station. Well, after the return to Glenda, let’s say, the clan leaders weren’t pleased. Ritenoot, undoubtedly another pillar in the chain of trades, was held by the viscount. The town hall held representatives from Ritenoot. Igna sat nonchalantly in the lounge with a cup of coffee. Flash images of Lord Death phased in and out, “-Nephew.”

“Aunt?” he sipped, “-pleasure to welcome thee again.”

“You’re a handful,” she exhaled. The date showed the 25th.

“You flatter me,” he chuckled, “-has lady mother arrived?”

“She’s on her way here,” she narrowed suspiciously.

“Igna,” the door barged open, “-I was told you attacked Ritenoot?”

“Lord Alaric. Please be seated, I shall clarify the misconceptions in due time. We wait on the Duchess of Rotherham,” leaned to Alta, “-please see to it the arrangements are completed.”

“Yes, my lord.”

A luxurious jeep soon arrived; the astounding townfolks wasted no time in spreading rumors. Gossip of important personages in Glenda rose many o' brows. Julius was excited to open the door for Duchess Courtney. Meanwhile, on the other side, Eira excited to open the door for Shanna Islegust, and Princess Lizzie. Important personage, a very undermined statement.

"-I-Igna?" stuttered Aurora.

"Clan leader of Nox, please pay no heed to the windows. The guests shall soon arrive. Let's take the meeting up a level," cup to the table, the snacks returned to the lavishly dressed trays. Town-hall assistants led the way to the council room.

"Why are we here?"

"No idea, we were summoned."

"Ritenoot?"

"No clue, some say the viscount has returned from Oxshield, the mood seems apathetic. Perhaps negotiations went wrong?" only suggestions went round in circles, no definite cause of the matter could be deduced.

"Preparations have been made," said Alta.

"Good, time has come to close curtains on Arda's sufferance."

Clan members, council members, representatives of the guilds were seated first. Second the guests; Duchess of Rotherham, the first princess, second prince, third princess, and the previous monarch, queen Shanna. Major players gathered before a relatively 'weak' viscount.

"Good afternoon. Words have no say in how grateful I feel to gather such an entourage of important figures. I'll cut to the chase and begin," curtains dropped, the automatic light-activated, emphasis was on him. "-I've conquered the castle town Ritenoot. As stated before, any conquest kept until the end of the war, shall be rewarded to the victor. Politics on the matter should be clear as water. I only want to reinforce my claim. Who am I to decide?" a well-timed pause allowed for questions to simmer. "The reason we've gathered is for a formal announcement. Per the rights granted by the crest of Arda and position of representative of the Blood-King's faction, I, on behalf of her majesty, Queen Gallienne, formally decree, Duchess of Rotherham, Courtney Haggard, to be granted the title of Queen of Arda and its associated land."

'-What?' her face paled, Elvira allowed a 'holy shit,' to escape. The focus turned to the speechless duchess.

"I know the news is sudden, and the choice would have been best suited to either Prince Julius or Princess Lizzie. My task was to secure a viable future for Arda and tis the best outcome. Fear not," the screen flashed gagged faces of various nobles inside a torture room, "-with help from Princess Eira, my stewardess Alta, and a few other companions, were able to ascertain conspiring nobles and strip their ranks. The crests, a symbol of their power, rests in this coffer. We created a clean slate for the province's reform. Princess Eira, if you'd please."

“We all know the story of how I turned sides. I betrayed many and have returned to make amends. If not for Igna, Arda would have been left to fester the essence of evil. Shames me to say, Arda was only strong in the Blood King’s reign. We can’t turn back time, which is why I hope for the Duchess to accept my selfish request. Tis a springboard for the union of the Argashield Federation. The conditions have been met. What remains is for I, future Empress of Alphaia, to remedy the alliance between both rulership.”

Finer details continued hours on end. Questions were answered strongly and logically. Many of which were at the Duchess’s ability to be the monarch.

Dawn blew over the horizon, the council room emptied save a few members.

“Viscount Igna Haggard, might I have a word?” thundered across.

“Mother, I apologize for suddenly springing such news. I implored Queen Gallienne to relay her side of the story. Her jestful nature proclaimed for I to surprise.”

“She’s like that. Igna, you’ve truly amazed us today. I didn’t expect the princess to be part of Arda after such a mess. Look at them, the royal family is joyful.”

‘So much for not getting involved,’ he escaped to the secluded roof, ‘-they congratulated us for a job well done. I’m glad it’s over; my head hurts. The clan leaders said for Ritenoot to be granted to another noble, instead, they’d grant me land equal to said town around Glenda. Alta’s filling the paperwork. I’m tired.’

“Master, éclair speaking, Hades’ minions are the invaders of Alphaia.”

Chapter 669: I lied

‘One mess into the next. What’s wrong with trying to procrastinate. Annoying,’ paused on the sloped tiled roof, ‘-forgot about the invasion of Alphaia. Arda’s sorted for the unseen future. Mother will do a great job; the Federation will regain its strong core. The Wracia Empire’s trouble, they’ve allied to a new continent. In a way, I can expect Alphaia to join the Federation. Self-sustaining in a time of crisis won’t be great. Hades’ arrival couldn’t have come at a better time. Great upheaval lingers.’

“Igna, Igna,”

“Where are you?”

“Igna?”

“Big brother?”

“Little pest?”

“Little pest?” the forehead crinkled, “-Aunt Elvira...”

.....

“Any idea?” wondered Julius.

“Call him,” said Eira.

“No need,” he leaped off the roof, “-what’s the matter, can’t I have a rest?”

“No rest for you,” Courtney shook her fingers, “-boy, we have much to discuss.” The somewhat silent backyard dismantled before his eyes. The close entourage of important figures sneakily guided him up the stairs, night fully settled as did the backdoor.

Not long after, a helicopter arrived for the Duchess, lady Elvira, and Shanna. Important matters were told over the phone. Hereon, the town-halls prior capacity eased to only a few. To help against the famine, Igna, on days of idleness, gave lessons on Dungeon Style Cooking. Eating monsters was a strange idea, still, many had tried in desperation. The last lesson ended on a simple spell, Monster Affliction, an incantation abled to prevent a monster corpse from disappearing. Alta handled most matters with flare and commendable stride. Her entourage grew by the addition of the traveler he met on the road.

‘Oh crap, I forgot about Aceline and the other.’ The next day rose in the company of a loud engine, the unconscious Eira, Julius, and Lizzie awoke to a change of scenery. “What’s this?”

“We’re in Rotherham,” said Igna, “-I asked for éclair to hitch us a ride. You three were sound asleep, a little teleportation seamlessly helped us home.” The private runway held a few more planes readied to takeoff. The morning began at the sound of transported cargo. “Not to be a pain, big sister, you ought to leave for Alphaia right away. I heard things aren’t looking great. Best be at his side and firm the vows of marriage. I doubt the latter to be public,” he grasped her hand, “-congratulations and good luck on the new life, Empress.”

“Drop the title,” her cheeks flushed, “-we’re still family, don’t forget it,” one arm wrapped around Igna whilst the other invited Julius and Lizzie, “-come ‘ere.”

“Good luck, big sister,” said Julius, “-I hope you have a great life.”

“Same here,” smiled the slightly taller Lizzie, “-have fun.”

“I will,” she stepped away, “-Igna, truly, thank you for everything, I can finally face the future without regret.”

“Keep the gratitude, I’ll require a few favors soon, trust me.”

The silvery hair swayed, “-I’ll be waiting,” her arm rose to Staxius’s signature gesture. One moment present, the next, disappeared before a passing cargo relay cart.

“Cousin, I’m glad you were here.”

“Don’t mention it, Igna. I’ll head to the agency. You ghosted Aceline, she won’t be happy.”

“Tell me about it,” and there he left hand in hand with Lizzie.

‘I can finally breathe a sigh of relief,’ the sleeping Vanesa showed no inkling of motion. ‘-Time to head out.’ Once again, he stood solemnly in the company of his shadow. The trip proved useful in countless ways. Settled on an early promenade, the would-be hot sun but smiled coyly behind clouds.

Paint to the right, paint to the left, a dirtied unbuttoned white shirt floated about a focused artist buff body. Sculptures, statues, and paintings layered one above the other. An ajar window gave onto a foggy

back alley. Footsteps ambered onto the polished floored corridor. A knock immediately reached for the handle, *click,* “-I’ve brought breakfast.”

“Set it on the table.”

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“Come on, you haven’t eaten anything since last night. I don’t care if the body is godly, taste the food, it’s awesome.”

“Nike,” a harsh side-glance, “-I need to prove my worth to that brat. I can’t standby and allow for the work to be deemed trash. My pride as the goddess of arts and craft stands on the line.”

“Whatever dude. I tried to be a good friend... the straightforward approach is the reason why you’re still a virgin.”

“EXCUSE YOU?” he coughed, “-the hell you mean?”

“Chill, it’s obvious.”

“Nike,” a tone of shock baffled the room, “-have I heard such vulgar words from the mouth of a goddess?”

“Look down, we’re not goddesses anymore. We’re men, and I personally enjoy the chance of pace. No more being tactful, I can say whatever the hell I want. Besides,” he skipped closer, “-thousands of years and not even once have you enjoyed the what the carnal pleasures have to offer.”

“Stop, I don’t care for such trivial matters. True the gender has changed – however, I won’t be prey to the vices of the mortal realm.”

“Boring.”

‘What’s his problem,’ frowned Thena, ‘-I choose to be chaste. Besides, I won’t so much care for the other gender. Focus on the paintings, I swore to have the boy sing my praise.’

Another pair of footsteps echoed along the corridor, one of which was drowned by the cacophony of morning shows. Feet on the table and snacks in hand, Thena’s repulsed glance at Nike’s laughter bore no response. The footsteps closed the gap till the door.

Knock, knock,

“Someone’s at the door,” cried Thena.

“Answer it then,” replied Nike.

“DUDE I’M PAINTING.”

“You’re close to the door. Move your arse and open it.”

“Such insolence...” a click of the tongue later, “-who is it?” the door pushed ajar.

“Your landlord,” fired Igna, “-let me in,” he stormed in with Vanesa on the back. ‘-A lot of paintings and good ones at that. He’s worked hard, they might be worth a few million on auction.’

"Heh," he stood proudly, "-see my art?"

"Yeah, cool," he nodded and made for Nike.

"IGNA!" said distant pleasant screams, "-WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?"

'Are they trying to piss me off?' the eyes narrowed, '-don't forget, I', the goddess of wa-'

"-don't move," whispered a spirit, "-I'd earnestly advise for the killing intent to be kept at a minimum."

"-Who are you?"

"Vengeance, Igna's guardian spirit."

"Don't trouble the artist," echoed out the room, "-let him paint. We have better things to do." An elaborate facade to annoy the goddess worked. Soon, he'd drop the paintbrush and stormed the dim room.

'I SWEAR!' ire in the eyes and stomps in the step. '-what?' the world turned upside down, therein, he spotted Igna glued to the sidewall, '-did he trip me?' *bang,* straight-faced on the couch, '-what's happening?' the arms wailed and clambered out the dishonorable posture. 'Nike?' two blinks and cake plastered across his face.

"Congratulations!" shouted Igna, "-you were successfully reawakened from the trance of hard work."

"I have a lot of questions," a dead tone resembled the pace at which the cake slid, "-I'll ask just one. Why?"

"To celebrate your hard work," fired Nike. "-I sent daily reports on your progress. Man, you were so annoying during the dry days of inspiration. Always bickering, complaining, it drove me crazy."

"Really?" he wiped the cream, "-was I that annoying?"

"Yes, totally."

"There you have it," added Igna, "-Nike wanted to revive Thena of old, the confident artist, and not endure the insecure mess thee have become."

"I'm insecure?"

"You reek of it," added Igna. "-A few weeks in the mortal realm has transformed a goddess into a workaholic. See, we deal with more than the gods can ever imagine. Rather obnoxious on my part," he shrugged, "-tis how I feel. Which is better, the always happy ideal heaven or a place of unknown outcomes?"

"The latter," he resettled, "-I was lost in the motions of constantly trying to show how good I was. I guess I lost my way on the path there."

"Don't worry," he patted Thena's shoulder, "-I took a glimpse and knew what you made are masterpieces. I hope the experience will serve nicely, later on, call it, the struggle of an artist. What was felt is a portion of mortals endure without godly talent and creative feel on the daily. Hard work isn't guaranteed – many sadly departed artists often leave behind their lifeworks and are never

acknowledged. The books, paintings, sculpture, no matter the medium, will be subject to the trial of times and never be seen again.”

The aura swapped, “-I see,” he breathed softly, “-I’ll take the lessons to heart,” a ball of light sparkled above his head, “-well, the journey’s been great, I had fun, I think,” the appearance returned to the almighty goddess, “-duty in the godly realms calls. We’ll meet again, Igna Haggard, we’ll meet again.”

“She’s gone,” said Nike, “-I’ll take my leave as well. Take care, Igna,” and off he teleported to the Shadow Realm. The lonesome room spoke via the news channel, ‘-didn’t expect them to leave so fast,’ a stroll around the room showed plenty o’ paintings, ‘-he really tried to stand out. The gamble paid off, I knew the goddess of art wouldn’t stand criticism. Since she’s neither friend nor foe, had to make her produce as many canvases as she could. I lied,’ he laughed, “-everything she makes is grandiose with her character shining through. The paintings we showed at the auction house were real and fake at the same time. The evaluator was subject to an illusion spell, what he saw was the work of a child, whilst what she saw was her work. My devious nature’s gotten stronger.’ Finger to the earring, “-Hello éclair, could you order around thirty briefcases for canvases of varying sizes?”

“Yes master, I’ll have it delivered.”

Shortly after, workers came in full. A truck parked shy of the hotel – the cases were readied to be taken overseas. A call from Julius postponed the departure. The radio talked about Vorn and their recent success, Xius’s songs played scarcely.

Current location, Apexi’s tower in Rosespire. The gates opened without so much a word. Many vehicles crowded around one of the many studios. The text addressed showed Studio 04. ‘What’s the deal with them?’ the sign read 04. Farther inside, medics were on the sight, yellow tape prevented access.

“éclair, what happened?”

“Someone called an ambulance a few minutes ago. Apparently, they found an unconscious body, no name nor idea on the identity. Many fear a worker died or worse, murdered.”

“Any news on Julius and Aceline?”

“Questioned by the police.”

‘Bad press,’ the lenses toggled to infiltration mode. Names of bystanders arranged in order of importance, race, place of birth, and privileges, ‘-I smell foul play.’

“Vengeance.” The spirit materialized without anyone’s knowledge, “-go investigate the inside. Take out any suspicious-looking men. No killing this time, do I make myself clear?”

“Alright boss,” and off he shuffled through the crowd. Overlooking the perimeter wouldn’t bring many solutions. Instead, he stepped back and made for Julius’s location.

“Do you think it’s a homicide?” chatted investigators.

“No clue at the moment,” replied the older-looking man. A brief exchange of glances separated their paths. “-We have yet to identify the body.”

Through where they left, “Julius, Aceline, are you ok?” the door closed behind.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” replied Julius, “-I’m more worried about the stain it’ll have on our agency.”

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“Aceline, are you ok?”

“I guess,” she sniffled, “-investigators sure have a rough way of speaking,” her face showed signs of a common cold. Aside from them, Scott waited beside a water dispenser.

What followed next would redefine the world’s fate. Vengeance calmly arrived at the site of the body, here, a strange aura rose from the unconscious being. Medics were scared to approach the greenscreen area, an invisible barrier rose. ‘-Interesting,’ thought the spirit, ‘-I wonder who it is?’

‘The spell backfired. Such a headache, I shouldn’t have listened to Voraum and Kazalon. Use a wormhole they said. What a pain...’

Chapter 670: True Demonlord [1]

Sparks of electricity, ambers of flames, droplets of water, the heaviness of the dark-aura, and the calmness of the light. The barrier shuddered, the photo studio, otherwise a green block of nothing, dissipated into utter chaos. Footprints marred the greenscreen brown. Evil cackles, or so heard the investigators, sent danger signals across their psyche.

On one side stood the semi-transparent Vengeance, and on the other, stood an unknown demonic figure. The description matched the tales of what ancient writings told. A figure of half man and half goat – opposed to a goat head, the face was of a disfigured warrior. Shadows under the eyes, sharp teeth, and protruding horns made for a stellar display, obviously, not so much for the bystanders.

He bore no animosity nor emotions; a circle of elemental magical orbs circled each shoulder in increments of six. In addition, the instant Vengeance stepped closer, a strange barrier completely halted his advancements and attacks. The ceiling burnt as did the ground, a set of unheard words escaped. A tiny spark of light, heavy from what appeared, hovered to the floor, the tiny charges touched and *BAM.* The concrete floor tore underneath, the walls disintegrated, the clear night sky flashed for a moment, and by the same moment, a deafening explosion sent debris and people across the grandness of Oxshield.

‘I can’t fight him,’ cringed the feisty guardian, ‘-he has the authority of a demi-god. I can’t do harm even if I tried,’ the last resounded sound was of a tree’s crack. Shivers ran up Igna’s sleeve, the scene played slowly beyond what he could see or hear.

“Master, a strong foe has arrived. If nothing is done, people will die needlessly.”

No time wasted, the instant, ‘-a strong foe,’ crossed his mind, the body reacted in a burst of dense mana. ‘-Debris, people,’ the crimson pupils bleached for the crystal whitened glare, ‘-I need to save them.’ *Blood-Arts: Enlian.*

‘To fight a demon, one must be a demon,’ he leaped for the skies, the full moon silhouetted his body. Anywho watched would have seen the embodiment of what they knew as ‘-terror’.

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Spatial-Arts: Wormhole, thought of ‘-we’re going to die, God help me, I don’t want to die, I still have so much to live for’, were stumped by a sharp purple glee. The next thing, the victims sat in a hurdle before Julius, who albeit, kept a stoic demeanor.

A broken vestige of the studio would have been expected to plummet, instead, they feathered to the mercy of the breeze.

“Good display.”

“Who stands there,” the manifestation of his mana swallowed to naught, “-are you the one responsible?”

“Yes, I guess,” said the buffed-beast, “-my name’s Cimi,” reddened holes of which were eyes, scanned the vicinity in efforts to make sense of said situation, “-I caused quite the mess,” the magical abilities went above expectation. The heart pulsed, a demon of such ranking would be in-between mid and high tier. “You look strong,” he said to initiate small talk.

“I guess?” replied he perplexed at the behavior, “-I don’t sense malicious intent. What are you?”

“Who me?” another scan around, “-I guess I can show you,” he dove to the ground. A patch of lonesome grass stood hidden behind a decorative behemoth of a boulder. “-I said it before,” a twirl swapped the entire persona. Newly before stood a boy in a doctors’ coat with round glasses. A cute-type of tiger beanie hid the horns, “-the name’s Cimi, I’m part of the Demonlord’s army.”

“Demonlord?” the face scattered to the signet ring, “-someone else bears my title?”

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“You’re a Demonlord too?” he blinked inches away from Igna, “-I don’t believe it.”

“I don’t need you to believe either.”

“Well, whatever,” with a child’s nonchalant vigor, “-I’m sorry about the building I broke. Wasn’t my intention, this realm has a lot of potential in the ways of ancient magic. I can summon a whole lot of spells to aid in the conquest. I guess the wormhole spell worked, I should have thought of a location first.”

“Sorry, what demon lord’s army are you from?”

“Don’t you get it?” he side-glance mercilessly, “-I serve the son of three great gods, the overseer of the underworld, the true ruler of demons, the guardian of death, Hades. Well, I serve the son anyway, he’s strong, very strong, the name’s Zagreus. Maybe he’ll come around to play someday, who knows.”

“Are you a fighter?”

“No, far from it, I’m the weakest demon out of the bunch. My job is to help the others, my minions are also the slowest and weakest. Still, doesn’t matter anyway, we’re strong enough for this pathetic realm,” the arms stretched to the studio, “-I accidentally released my true form earlier, I don’t know why. Someone had vicious killing intent, it was reflex, I think. Since this place isn’t in the area of conquest, I’ll just resolve the problem I made.” No incantation, no visible strain on the body or mind, the fragments returned and sealed at the prior locations. “-There, it’s solved. What’s your name?”

“Igna Haggard.”

“Alright, cool. Nice to meet you, strange being, Igna Haggard, we are similar, I know you’re strong, very strong,” a cheeky lick of the lips, “-I hope we meet again very soon. For now, we invade and build a castle for the servants of evil!” the tone heightened menacingly, “-Ok no,” an abrupt stop, “-not evil, maybe... to hard, I don’t want to think, goodbye.” *Poof*

‘What was that. I can’t reach Vengeance; did he lose the battle without fighting. Cimi, the servant of a Demonlord, quite the humble title. He had the powers of a demi-god, one who neared the ascension to divinity, or in the case of demons, Demonlord. The building was fixed in such a stoic manner, easy as breathing. My heart still trembles from the burst of mana. Alpha’s going to be a warzone.’ Steps of a worrying nature skipped along the asphalted road, it halted audibly and presumably looked about. The vampiric transformation returned to normal, wings retracted, the canines grew less blatant and the nails, covered in black nail polish, were trimmed and proper. A few shoves gave way beyond a slightly tall curb. Lights from the adjacent store blinded it who made such a ruckus. The outline, slender and curvy, long straight hair, a staple of what the industry called beautifully, watched aimlessly with hands clasped in prayer on the chest.

“Aceline?” he ducked below a branch and clambered onto the street, “-is that you?”

“Igna,” she moved to hide the light, the face brightened, “-where have you been?” she skipped forward.

“I had to care for a rather interesting intruder. What about you, judging by the pants, did you sprint here in heels?”

“Y-yeah,” her eyes wandered nervously, “-don’t stare intently...” her cheeks reddened, “-fine, it’s been weird for me, ok? I had to work with so many artists, Scott came back, we somewhat set our differences aside and he apologized. I’m lost and don’t know what to do,” she timidly placed her head onto his chest, “-a new place, a new environment. I thought I was strong, turns out, I’m weak. The past still haunts me, I can’t rest, lest the memories ease.”

“Aceline,” he gave a firm and comforting hug, “-you’re working hard, I can say, I’m very proud. I selfishly brought thee back from death. I should have been more careful... I-” he paused for she warmly lifted her lashes to his words, “-I felt lonely, I guess. Yeah, yeah, laugh while you can, I just wanted to have someone who knew me from way back then. Someone I could talk to, or something, I don’t know,” the bi-colored eyes nervously tried to stand firm, Origin’s emotions seeped onto the cold heart; a warm dash of water onto an ice-cold rock. “-I have to ask, Aceline, you’re young, very young. I’d say mid-twenties, meanwhile, I met your best friend, Queen Gallienne, she’s been subject to the passage of time, or is in the process.”

“You met Gallienne?” her eyes sparkled, “-oh,” she stepped back and breathed, “-I guess you would have. Not me, I- I’ve betrayed her trust more than once.”

“Yes, hello,” hands-on the earring, “-éclair, could you transfer the call to my mother?”

“-what are you doing?” she inquired in a mumble.

“Greeting’s lady mother, I’m sorry for the sudden call,” the voice grew distant, the world around her shut, the nose burnt, her throat tightened, a moment of joy and terror lifted her chest, ‘-w-w-why, w-why...’

“-Yes, could you please get me in contact with Queen Gallienne?”

‘-Why is he doing this...’

“My humble greetings, majesty, if I may be so bold, could you spare me and a companion of mine a sliver of your time?” he handed over the phone, Aceline watched on verge of tears, “-go on,” urged Igna, “-take the phone.”

“Who is it at this hour?” exhaled she over the phone, “-don’t run around the palace,” she fired distantly. The phone shakily touched her cheeks, “-hello?” Silence permeated on both sides, a blast from the past relit their memories. Bliss, woe, struggles, and ultimately, death.

“Aceline, is that you...?”

“Y-yeah...”

“Hand the phone to Igna right away,” she missed her target blurry from the overwhelming tears. A short onslaught of insult from the royal, the latter gave to her emotions and asked for Aceline to head for the castle. Quick to oblige, a stationed helicopter of allegiance to Apexi, headed for the palace without Igna. He stood on the side in the company of Julius and Scott. She had to face her past and make amends, in a way, he had done so for Eira too.

The brisk tempest of upper floors solicited shivers, “-let’s head back,” proposed Julius. Orangish hue of the lift reflected against Scott’s flashy forehead, “-Igna, I ought to know, who are you?”

“No one special, just a guy who has a lot of contacts,” he chuckled, “-I heard Xius’s gotten to their level of reputation from your work.”

“Not really,” the lift descended slowly, “-I just helped Emi Muko and the band get together. Can you believe them, I’ve asked so many times to find a full-time drummer, they never do the effort and end up firing any prospective talent. Xius’s a great band, take away their passion for alcohol, they’re good people with good hearts.”

“I know,” a feeble laugh escaped, “-we did have a lot of fun.” Julius knew what he referred to, a hole of which would take longer to fill. Down to the ground floor, the empty crowd grew, familiar faces waited around the receptionist. The worker exchanged chatter and banter; morale was high regardless of the incident. Part of Vorn, present for jam sessions took breaks to meet their friends. A live broadcast of a popular late-night show flaunted the charismatic trio of; Nola, Enna, and Sheiwai. Applause from the audience was loud and substantial. Beyond the reception at the entrance were investigators.

“I’ll take care of negotiations,” said Igna, “-could you check on Vanesa for me?”

“Alright,” they winked. The channel swapped for a rerun of a particular cooking show, the young star of the culinary world, Kyle Darker, and his explosive personality in the kitchen.

“Officers.” The old man shoved a pen under his beret and itched in a ‘-whatever’ type of mood.

“You are?”

“Igna Haggard, I presume you’ve come for an eyewitness account?”

“Yeah, could you answer a few questions?”

“Sure, let’s move to a more private area.” He led the way to a corridor, “-we should be far enough,” the reception’s bright atmosphere nulled to one of threat. “-I’ll say with this, the incident was caused by a Demonlord, a monster of whom no current adventurer can hope to ever combat. I speak on the authority of the Viscount of Glenda; if a mess is to be made of this situation, we may incur their wrath. I’d strongly advise wiping the incident from thy memories.”

“-sure,” they gulped.