

## Death Magic 761

### Chapter 761: Unlikely Encounter

Fenrir found a new passion; her ears would rise at the mere sight of novelty. In a way, her distractions was a nice way to digest her spoken words. The truth hit, and in the first time in a while, the feeling of desolation and worthlessness seeped through, ‘I’m backed against a wall,’ he exhaled, throwing an emotionless stare at her antics. She’d run from store to store, crossing the road without so much care about the vehicles. Time elapsed, the walkways infused in tight alleys. Outlines kept to the shadows and smoked uniform or otherwise, demography of prominent men – many squatted, others bundled into a formidable click.

“Igna, where are we going?” her extravagant sprints halted.

“To the café,” he replied, “-also,” he leaned for a closer inspection, “-why are the purchases only attire and not something, I don’t know, concrete?”

“You said my choice of outfit is bad,” her cheeks bloated, “-I was only trying to spice up my wardrobe.”

“I meant it in jest,” they crossed into the ‘alley’ many eyes fell on her and her features, “-you’re fine the way you are,” he smiled, “-a good figure is enough to make any outfit work. Look around,” he slyly lifted his brows, “-if tis acceptable, look at the lustful glances they’ve thrown.”

“Oh,” she paused, “-not mating season though...”

“Seriously,” he grabbed part of her luggage, “-give it here,” a portal opened, the short interlude gave onto a sloped street beside which carried an open drain system mostly used for excess rain. An impressive arrangement of buildings, located to the north-east side of town, “-there,” he pointed, “-the middle one’s where we ought to head.” Aside from the café, the convenience of the marketplace and neighboring shops and stores made life so much easier. Stone stairs led into a cross-shaped interior whereby each end was a differing entrance. They arrived at the center, to which, on its side, rose a spiraling stair, arrows read, ‘-Aurone,’ a superstore franchise. He kindly turned, looked at the café, nodded at the keeper, and settled.

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“Stop gawking.”

“Igna,” her eyes shimmered, “-I want to go there,” the tail waggled, “-I want to see what they have in store...”

“Have at it then.”

“Awesome,” she stormed through, passing heavy-handed guests on their way down, and leaped into the cover of the upper floors. Meanwhile, a barista casually brought a menu then stood, the café was empty save for him, the prices were higher compared to the other shops.

“I’ll have one Redloj Express.”

“Understood, I’ll be right with you,” he left, lifted the waist-high apron, and kept the notepad away.

Without say, the body gravitated to the leather case, pulled out a silvery-white flat laptop, a convenient outlet to the side had, '200 Exa per hour used,' written on bold. 'Guess power isn't something to easily yield,' he plugged regardless and connected to éclair's database. Two messages went unnoticed, the lens had run out of power, 'I didn't notice,' a swipe down the forehead onto his nose dematerialized the crystalline protectors.

'Message from Vesper,' read the first, '-when the master makes it to Meke, please get in contact with this number,' to which adequate information was provided. Next, '-A business offer from Tristin Algeria,' the message wrote as followed, '-hello Igna, I'm sending this message in regards to the offer. I've thought long and hard, the pressure to uphold my title and prestige as an elite chef comes first, I don't want to be forgotten, Kyle's grown tremendously, I want to meet him as an equal and say my work wasn't lost in the annals of time. Therefore, I, Tristin Algeria, am ready to accept any conditions thee lays out. I will be waiting for a favorable answer.'

'The plans worked,' he pressed against the chair, '-she took the bait. A red-collar chef on payroll is always a good thing, I'll have her work the casino for a while, the restaurant's there of high standing in the general public view. The spreading malady has halted business, guests are scared to make the trip, our earnings are no way near what I imagined, especially since I have two of the greatest vices working in cahoots.'

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Another notification rang, '-the engines were received and is currently being used by Clarice from the Alchemist sect to produce cures for the monster plague,' an idea sparked, '-Hareve's Pharmaceutical firm,' a quick search on the market showed steady growths ever since the heavy drop a few years ago, '-the spike in prices must have been éclair buying shares. We the majority and the shareholders have appointed the leader of Raven as their CEO, that would be me, I think,' he paused, '-the name hasn't been revealed to the public; Starix and éclair have run both companies discreetly. No complaints, a stable income, and humane treatment of the workers sufficed for them not to ask questions. Hareve's been on the sidelines, working as an outsourcing company for greater firms, the name's not known among the public. The drop in price's affected the reputation. The curse's not a problem yet, Alpha's dealing with the matter accordingly. Supply for the cure won't be in demand – not unless a tragedy were to befall the neighboring countries,' fingers glid over the keyboard, '-infection of the world,' he smirked, '-a biological attack whereby we win, none will suspect us to be the cause. Time's nigh,' the dangerously worded note ended, '-we need money, if we can't control the arms trade, we'll find another; medicine.'

The message reached éclair as if a thunderbolt, heavy rain didn't add to the tone, '-the plans ready to move forth. Lady Vanesa's,' he vanished for the Shadow Realm – the ever-sleeping girl awoke to disturbances in the grass. The brightly colored sky broke, his outline shuffled over her hanging bed, "-Lady Vanesa," he smiled.

"éclair..."

"Here are your orders," he gave a letter, "-the master's counting on thee."

"What is this?" she wiped her face, stretched and yawned, the oversized shirt hid her arms, '-Aedric Mistress of Plague and Illness, I, Igna Haggard, ask for thy assistance in a task involving the fate of the whole world. I want for thee to infect key locations, spreading the monster curse to unsuspecting

guests, have it match the illness we investigated back in Alpha,' sleep dove out the window, "-he's asked help from the Aedric Mistress," she rose to the edge of the bed, the body grew in size, the oversized clothes filled in the sudden growth sprout, "-about time I had my fun," the listless personality vanished, "-lead the way éclair, I expect rewards to match my actions."

"Anything thee wishes," he nodded. None could have known of the calamity those few words would bring, Igna and éclair understood the risk and not the scale. The Aedric Mistress of Plague and illness wasn't an entity to be taken lightly, said fact would be apparent in due time.

'Should take care of that,' the laptop screen closed – time fast-forward without his knowledge, an influx in guests displayed in the crowd. He watched and waited, the location of their meeting was set here, to which, there remained naught to be done. Blond hair, peculiar among the demi-humans, hurried from the western entrance, locked onto Igna's table, sorted his vest, and walked, "-Pardon me, are you, Joe?"

"Joe?" Igna rose his head to a familiar face, "-Leonard?"

"IGNA?" he coughed, "-sorry, I must have mistaken you for my employer."

"Joe?" the phone toggled, "-are you him?" he turned the screen.

"You're my contact?" gulped Leonard, "-talk about a pleasant surprise," he pulled a chair and sat, "-never expected this particular outcome."

"Neither did I," he narrowed, '-does he work for the monsters?'

'Is Igna the owner of the guild?' wondered Leonard.

\*Incoming call, Vesper,\* "-I ought to take this call," he rose, "-order something to drink, I'll be here shortly."

"Will do," the man's nervousness eased. Igna hastily ran outside, "Vesper, care to explain?"

"Explain what, my contact must have arrived, I received confirmation on his tracker."

"Don't play coy, the contact is Leonard Goldberg, a noble of the Goldberg dukedom."

"You mean ex-noble. Seems as if there's a deeper relation, here's the short of the story. We from the Monster Kingdom have a guild of our own in Meke, tis named Xuen – we need to sell the items which are recovered when we kill adventurers. Tis where our company comes into play, we're tasked to recover bodies and items, it's a foolproof plan, when a request arises, we but ask our inventory for the items and check reports if the corpse was eaten. Then again, we also employ adventurers to mask our scent – Leonard there is a perfect puppet to hide our activities. He thinks you're the leader of Xuen, gaining access beyond the Azure wall is hard. Once over the border, the real escort will teleport thee to the tower."

"Should have given me a heads-up," he exhaled, "-status on the adventurers?"

"Stuck on floor 198, we sent reinforcement to halt their advance since floor 199 is a neutral zone, Scifer was very adamant on giving the players a fighting chance." The call ended, smartphone in the pocket, he ambled to the café and sat, Leonard visibly tried to cover the gleaming forehead, the breathing felt erratic, '-the best approach is friendly.'

"Welcome back," he said, the pitch shot.

"Don't be nervous," returned Igna, "-forget the owner-worker relation, we're friends from long ago," he smiled, the aura grew accommodating, "-how have you been, Leonard?"

"Great," the relief washed his cold stare, "-I was stumped, you don't realize how hard it was, memories of the time we spent sort of rushed, I thought I had closed that particular chapter."

"You seem to not be doing so good, what's happened?"

"I wouldn't stress it," he sighed, "-a lot's happened and I've accepted the fact."

"No," he interjected, "-an unblest marriage," read off the screen, "-looks like lady Goldberg hasn't learned her lesson, has she?"

"It's not her fault," he explained, "-they learned of Jen's true heritage, she's a priestess from the Wracia Empire – Hidros's enemy. The populous, nobles especially, hate them, the devastation the church brought upon Queen Shanna's domain, Arda, is one we can't ever forget. Here I am, married to a direct representative of the church..."

"Arda's viewed favorably?"

"Very much so," he fired, "-we're grateful for the help the Ardanians have given in the battle against monsters, their knowledge has heightened our fighter's survival rates."

'Seems like the idea to outsource our talented adventurers has made Arda a welcoming province, I wonder how much influence Alta's had.'

"The Devil of Glenda."

"You said something?"

"No, I was thinking aloud," he paused, "-Igna, ever since you left the academy... I know the past is awkward to bring up, especially Jen and Rena, they've been worried to the point of obsessing over every little thing you did. Lampard and I too, we're worried, the Devil of Glenda, the day said the news hit the shelves in Meke, the populous simultaneously breathed a sigh of relief, finally, someone powerful enough to oppose the Church rose amidst the carnage. To see your name attached made me proud as a friend."

"You exaggerate, I only did what I had to safeguard Arda's future. Tell me about the others, everyone's graduated, right?"

"I can't tell you," he sipped, the voice sunk, "-I lost touch with Lampard, Jen and Rena had a falling out, I can't speak on behalf of Frost and the others. Our last year at the academy was fun until the last few months, the exchanges were awkward, I didn't know how to act around them, and we eventually broke apart."

"Happens to the best of us," he replied coldly.

"IGNA!" cried Fenrir, "-I NEED MONEY."

“Idiot,” he facepalmed, Leonard glanced up then turned to Igna, with a look to say, ‘-you know her?’ everyone stared. “Pardon me,” he excused from the table and stormed the staircase, ‘-AIRHEAD.’

Chapter 762: Lord Exia

“She bought quite a lot,” commented Leonard slyly.

“Shut it,” fired Igna looking towards Fenrir, she had quite the haul.

“Follow me, I’ve brought my car,” said the nobleman – the boot opened, her hands threw the boxes of juice, milk, snacks, and other invaluable expenditure inside, as vehemently stated, ‘-I want them for research, I ought to learn about the taste of the world.’

A phone rang five minutes into the journey. Igna sat in the passenger seat, carefully scanning the surrounding, a check onto the rearview mirror showed a beast playing with her prey, in other words, Fenrir juggling three pieces of chocolate. ‘What’s with the attitude?’ he thought.

“Pardon me,” fired Leonard, “-my wife’s calling, mind if I pull over?”

“Go right ahead,” said Igna, the white sedan turned, mounted the pavement, perfectly aligned under a tree, then rested, the radio played a few tunes – one of which was Aceline’s newest single featuring Vorn.

The fingers hovered atop Jen’s name, a few awkward looks to the parked car showed an unbothered Igna, ‘-why is she calling now?’ he answered.

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“About time!” fired through, “-Where are you, Leonard?”

“At work, what’s the matter?”

“No, I was in town earlier,” her tone sounded angry, “-and I saw you with a girl, are you cheating?”

“What the hell do you mean?” he facepalmed, not that she could see.

“Did you just facepalm?”

‘How in the...’ the face slumped, words articulated noiselessly.

‘Couples have a bad time,’ observed Igna, ‘-I was worried for nothing,’ éclair had hacked into the man’s phone, tapping the call as they spoke, ‘-how will you win this fight?’ a map displayed over the charged lens, two dots at close proximities lit in green and yellow, green originator, yellow, recipient. ‘And she hired a taxi to follow us,’ a deeper look to the mirror past Fenrir’s shoulder, gave onto a shady driver and a shadier passenger.

“Answer me, Leonard, where are you right now?”

“At the office?”

“Why did you reply in such an inquisitive tone,” her voice sharpened, “-screw this,” a door slammed, rocking the car, heavy stomps led to Leonard, she placed a hand around his shoulder, the man spun to horror, \*slap,\* his phone fell, chipped a corner and cracked the screen.

A burning desire to revolt rose in the timid man's visage, he glared to an expression of woe, 'I trusted you,' read her disappointed frown.

"You headed somewhere?"

"To clean up a mess," he exhaled, "-don't cause trouble."

"Alright," Igna's reflection passed Fenrir's door window. She paid no mind, choosing to read instead.

"Don't you have something to tell me!" argued Jen openly.

"Enough is enough," thundered across the mildly populated street, didn't help that the path behind led into a local commute and playground, "-stop causing a scene."

An annoyed shiver riled into, "-who the hell are you?" exclaimed without knowing who had spoken, the stares met on her saying, 'you'.

"Who am I?" he kept a straight face.

"Igna?" her posture stumbled, Leonard's cheeks burnt bright red; he kept his head to the ground, ashamed to stare at her and voice his opinion, "-explain," she made for his collar, "-LEONARD!"

He slapped her palms, "-stop it. There's no reason to hit him. Look around, look at the commotion you've caused by being insecure. Are you daft?" he moved and grabbed her jaw, "-I don't enjoy pointless arguments. The man you slapped happens to be an employee of mine, as company policy states, I have to protect my workers," the grip tightened, "-wife or not, punishment is deserving to all."

"Stop," said Leonard, "-I'll explain what happened, thank you for stepping in," he threw a compassionate yet lonesome regard, "-it is how it is," hunched to pick the phone, "-personal and professional need be separated." The grip eased, the husband took charge, moved midway between his wife and Igna, "-care to leave us alone for a bit, I have important matters to attend to."

'What's he asking?' she retreated, '-am I the villain here?' the whispers grew audible,

"-What a poor man."

"-who is that chick."

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"-crazy much."

"-I feel for him."

'No, that's not what I mean,' she gulped, her fist clenched, '-say something, Leonard, tell them it's not my fault but yours...'

"The one responsible here is you," added Igna, "-scurry on home, we don't need a coward unable to trust her partner hanging around in public," her nose reddened, she dug her face into her elbow and ran, jumping into the taxi and darting for the unknown.

"I apologize for her behavior."

“No harm done. I might have been too hard, I’m sorry if matters are awkward at home.”

“Don’t sweat it,” the painful expression forced a smile, “-I’ll be fine, she’ll be fine, we’ll be fine.”

Lights turned green; traffic moved at a steady pace. ‘-if matters are awkward at home,’ went about his mind, ‘-no, not good,’ he glanced the rearview mirror, an unlikely guest sat beside Fenrir, the tension, palpable, forced multiple exhales from the legendary beast. She wasn’t one to care much for a stranger.

Earlier, after Jen disappeared into the never-ending streets, a message kindly read, ‘I need a ride to the Azure Wall, emergency summons from Mello.’ There, without arguments, Leonard turned the car, made for their apartment, climbed the stairs, explained the situation lightly, and returned in the company of his wife, fully dressed in her uniform. An hour had passed, they were around three-quarters of the journey – transport buses were common on the highway, to and fro, occasional sirens dashed by. The overall landscape sloped gently towards the Azure Wall, a landmark worth its weight in gold, rose in the distance.

“Iga.”

“Jen.”

“Good to see you in good spirits,” she smiled nervously.

“Same can’t be said about you,” the pupils twitched to Leonard with a slight sneer, her forehead crinkled.

“I said I was sorry for jumping to conclusion,” her lips tightened, “-why are you in Hidros?”

“To work?”

“To work,” she repeated, “-I see,” her face wandered to the changing outside.

“I’m happy for you,” he said suddenly, “-the uniform, you’re a wall guardian now, I’m glad to see the goal’s been accomplished.”

“Thank you, never thought you’d remember.”

“How can I not, we were friends after all.’

“Were friends,” her volume lowered, “-about-”

“Don’t worry,” he interjected, “-the past is long and gone, what’s important is the future, more precisely, your future. Leonard and thee are married, cherish the relation, struggle, fight, and love one another, a bond sworn under the blessing of the God of Marriage mustn’t be broken.”

“Didn’t you have a partner?”

“Had a partner,” he corrected, “-Alicia. She was the best lady I had ever met, strong and determine. Her beauty was unlike anything I’d seen, without her, I wouldn’t have gotten where I am today. Things happened, and she was found dead, ruled a suicide... I know she was murdered, the evidence blatantly point... I’m sorry, forgive the rant.”

“Must be rough,” she said, “-I miss the academy days. We had so many friends, we were together...”

"I wouldn't say my time was enjoyable. You and Rena had it in for me, I don't know why, well, I do have my speculation. Scared I'd break the click."

"-I guess?"

"What's happened to Rena and Lampard?"

"Last we heard they made for Lampard's hometown after graduation," added Leonard.

"I see," he stared at the incoming traffic, "-more importantly, what's happened to Anna, the top of class A."

"Her," she rolled her eyes.

"She's working at our guild," said Leonard awkwardly.

"She and Frost dated, right?"

"Yes, until he died. An unlucky expedition turned massacre, the team leader didn't account for the sudden level rise, turns out, all their potential recruits were slaughtered, nobody was ever found, Frost is gone, happened a few years ago. She's been very silent since, helps out, and is a great worker." Between the gossip and reminiscing of old days, camp Reforge rose a short distance away. The car neatly pulled into a private parking lot, '-reserved for officials,' read an imposing sign.

"Props to being a wall guardian," said Jen.

"There are a few things to handle before we meet the secondary contact," said Leonard, "-please visit the camp whilst I handle the rest."

"Sure," he watched, the wife and husband, albeit on bad terms earlier, walked in relative ease, laughing and chatting, a very wholesome display of affection.

"They truly are lovebirds," added Fenrir, "-the conversations in the car were too much for me to understand."

"Just talks of the past," he said. Speaking of past, the camp had expanded over the years, the current lot, flat around which laid dried grass and weeds, had paths leading to the eastern and western side of Reforge. He followed suit, taking the western entrance to the right, a larger street made to welcome trucks. Guard details weren't much to compliment, they marched, looking at the robust building and crowded openness of the yard. Aside from a few signs, the place was relatively well acquainted. No dormitories nor cafeteria, instead, the building altered into a marketplace for smiths of all kinds. Camp square, where once the military issued orders to adventurers, laid empty. Stalls set up shop, the military compound to the east divided into two sectors, and included a central guild Office. Returning fighters hauled heavy sacks, the loot and monster drops seemed profitable.

"Igna," the shirt pulled, "-Igna."

"What is it, Fenrir?"

"The wall, I feel a bad energy, has the same smell as the ones in Draebala."



“Draebala... if they’re involved, things are about to go bad,” then, the observations made earlier linked, ‘-ambulances, Jen being called to duty,’ he pushed through a large crowd, ‘-something must have happened,’ they swam and fought through the wave, stepping foot outside, “-Igna,” hailed from the right. Jen hurried into a pick-up truck which darted forth, Leonard hurried and panted, “-bad news.”

“Take your time and breathe.”

“The walls under attack from an unknown entity. We’ve issued a full-scale retreat; forget about meeting the second contact, the wall is the target.”

“Understood,” pillars of smoke rose beyond, the next wave of fighters cried.

“We’re doomed.”

“Run, we need to run.”

“How is such a monster even able to live.”

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“I don’t care how this looks, my wife’s waiting for me.”

Resolve firmed across Leonard’s brows, “-you heard them, we need to go, now.”

“Wait a moment,” the pupils shimmered a deep crimson hue, “-Leonard, leave the monster to me,” he smirked. Fenrir burst into her wolf form, her paws clawed, he leaped on her back and galloped.

‘Tall wall,’ said he telepathically.

‘Hang on tight,’ she sprinted, overtook Jen’s transport, then leaped. Time froze on the way over, ‘-minions and their leader. Typical, arrangement for a boss-battle,’ they landed, the ground carved and sent shockwaves at the wall’s peak.

\*Come forth, Vengeance,\*

“-At your service, master.”

“Annihilate the weaklings, I’ll handle the big one.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Meters away, an undead army of skeleton trampled over stray fighters, “-I’ll cover, make for the wall,” shouted a brazen leader. Cuts riddled the clothes, the armor was torn, and face bloodied.

“T-thank y-you,” said the party members.

‘The job of a leader is to protect his teammate,’ the longsword rose courageously, \*Slice,\* instant death, he fell, blood sprouted, the incoming horde made short work. Deathly screams permeated, the stronger adventurers were further forward, dealing damage to a much scarier foe.

“Are we dead?” they cowered, raising a hand to shield the incoming spear. Eyeless sockets locked and thrust, \*gleam,\* a gust blew past, obliterating the first wave.

'Easy prey,' he dug into the ground, carved a fair chunk to stop the momentum, '-master said to destroy them,' a swipe of the hands summoned an array of magical circles, '-die.' Meteors rained.

'Good job, Vengeance,' the real threat approached in the distance. A robed undead leader made of bones wandered into sight, beside him were eight bystanders, each bore strange outfits and strong auras.

"Here we have come to conquer this world," he proclaimed deeply, the entourage bowed.

"Lord Exia, your strength knows no bound," they said.

"Pitiful humans are to bow at my feet," the fighters were forced in prostration, "-tell me, is this the best your world has to offer?" thundered a monotonous voice.

"No," leaped into the fray and stared the leader, "-doth thee wish to dance?"

### Chapter 763: Death vs Death

"Jen, Jen, Jen, you're here, finally," various colored uniforms leaped into a chaotic scene. Transport halted at the Azure wall. Elevators scaled along the walls were overcrowded, hysteria gave raise to panic, none thought to stop, fight of flight permeated. On sad occasions, the mildly injured would reach the bottom with greater injuries.

"Lieutenant Mello," she answered his pants with sternness, "-what's the situation?"

"We were under attack," he exclaimed, "-I hate work," murmured, "-and I hate people dying more," he glanced temporarily at medical camps at the foot of the barrier, "-I've gotten reports monsters are attacking the wall, not the adventurer."

"How about the stronger fighters?" she pulled up a tablet, an assistant rushed over, "-Lieutenant, we need thee to coordinate with the other outposts."

"Understood," he frantically nodded, "-Jen, I'll leave the first aid and evac to you."

"Yes sir," she threw a salute, the lazy but competent leader ran into a group of small rectangles. She averted her gaze, firming on the greater picture, to which, a massive shadow cast onto the ground, '-a wolf,' she gazed, it leaped over.

"Elevator to the top," cried a mundane worker.

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"HELP US!" screamed from the side, "-HELP US!" the group bundled against the stern platform railing of the lift, a young adult was spotted packed at the rim, he choked, none realized the issue till they reach down, the youngster fell meanwhile she headed up a private shaft. A horde of military-grade boot trampled the man, breaking bones, cracking ribs.

"ASLIA," exclaimed a bloodcurdling scream, the crowd paid no heed, "-MOVE YOUR FILTHY FEET," it said – the ground turned muddy, hinges on the edifice broke. At last, Jen threw her focused gaze downward, there, a barrier erected around a lady and a young man, the latter had sustained wounds far beyond

what she thought. Her eyes carried to the workers up top, there, people pushed and fought, each tried their hardest to make way for their team.

'Anarchy,' she arrived, '-oh my god,' her heart sank, the situation was far more troublesome than ever before, her boots scurried to the opposing edge and gave onto the never-ending sight of monsters, '-is that an army?' she clenched her shirt.

"Jen, over here," said familiar voices.

"Lingling, Goldie," she exhaled, "-what's the status?"

"We're helping in the evacuation, tis total anarchy, the medical camps are overloaded," they bore wall-guardian uniforms, "-we need to stop the chaos..."

"Easier said than done," a look down east, along the wall, showed many uninjured fighters desperately trying to jump.

"Form a triage," she said, "-use force if we have to," a radio pulled from her shoulder pad, "-orders to all Wall-Guardians, I was given command by Lieutenant Mello to handle evacuation. We're on black alert, those uninjured are to be stationed as guards. Refuse access to the uninjured, I repeat, refuse access."

"Jen, no dice," said a team from below, "-we can't really look through them..."

"Yes, you can, make it happen, form a tier list, rookies are the priority," a flip of the knob, "-command, Jen speaking, are the speakers ready?"

"Ready to be used," said an operator.

"Put me through," white noise blasted, momentarily halting the frenzy, "-Hear me, adventurers, we've moved into code black. Anyone who leaves the battlefield uninjured will be forced to abandon their title of adventurers. Wounded and rookies are to be given priority. The situation is dire, if we don't stand against the monsters, the wall is at risk of falling. I repeat, we're on code black. Back up is on their way, hold out as long as you can."

"Watch them be washed by fear, such a pitiful and unentertaining sight," said a robed undead skeleton. The silk fabric glowed, God-tier enchantments radiated, the aura and symbols visible to the naked eye. In one hand hovered a hexagonal golden staff, the other had tiny swarming books, "-you there, pitiable fool who'd brazenly rush onto death, I must command thy vigor."

"F-fight f-for y-your lives," said a stranger with a silvery tag, "-run while y-you can," being forced into jarred rock tore into the skin, he bled, the visage grew pale, life in the eyes faded.

"Lord Exia," said a human, no strange facial features nor tails, it stood calmly, not him, everyone else was human. Symbols of various types shimmered in-between their eyebrows, "-why waste breath on such weakling," he glared, the green pupils tightened, "-prostate thineself to our master!" the words visibly transmitted, the shockwave buckled their knees.

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'Strong,' he kept an expressionless mien, matching the man's energy, '-Fenrir's unbothered.'

“You dare stand against us?”

“Can we quit with the theatrics,” fired Igna, “-the words of power are good and all,” he stepped forward, leaned, touch the suffering adventurers, \*Ancient Magic, Spatial-Arts: Disruption.\*

\*Gasp,\* “-air,” they coughed, “-we can breathe,” six in total rose from the spell, “-thank you,” they said in either word or gestures.

“You’re strong, aren’t you,” said he who was called Exia, the empty sockets burnt in a white-blaze, “-tell me, what’s thine name.”

“Isn’t it common courtesy to give one’s own name first?” said an equally imposing voice, ‘-Fenrir, priority is to save the fighters. Vengeance can only do so much against the growing army,’ without intel to what happened behind, the expansive chessboard in the mind moved – multiple outcomes read as if prophecies, one of them shone in bright yellow, ‘-division.’

“One falls, two rises,” said reports, “-we kill five, ten attacks,” a transcript went across the lens, ‘-I was right,’ time slowed mildly, ‘-we’re against an angel of death. No scrap that, we’re against death, the white flames, the abyssal wrath. An endless number of worlds must have given birth to multiple wielders of death, I don’t know if he has the death element.’

“Ha,” he exhaled, “-BAHAHAHA,” the ground rumbled, “-YOU DARE ASK MY NAME?” Five of the eight humans teleported, knives, spells, name it, and they were inches from his skin, ready to impale and rip his life and heart out, “-fool, only the strong have the honor of making demands. From where I stand, thou art but a lowly human with powers.”

“Make one wrong move and you’re dead,” said a lady boasting purple-colored hair and matching makeup.

“Poor boy, about to die for nothing,” said a cross between man and woman, in all aspects, the tone was a forced feminine voice by a man. A bald cut painted pink, judging a person’s preference was never Igna’s forte.

“I smell something strong within you,” said a smaller boy bearing black hair and a large nose.

“Can this be over already,” added a taller, handsome man in a suit and long glossy hair knotted in a ponytail.

“Don’t hog all the fun,” said a higher-pitched voice, both her index pressed against her filled cheeks, “-I kill him first,” the makeup, dirty and lazy, the hair, tied in a pigtail, swayed against the wind.

“Am I supposed to be scared?” he pushed through the weapons, “-empty threats aren’t much to make me want to give up, you know,” he smirked. A flash of lightning gleamed, \*CLASH,\* rang across the battlefield, “-attacking a person from behind is very rude behavior,” said he blocking the tall handsome man’s upward stroke singlehandedly, “-maybe next time,” he pulled, chipped the sword out the attacker’s hand and sheathed the previously hidden Orenmir, “-now then,” a murderous gaze rose, “-please return to thy master, dogs.”

“HALT!” thundered the leader, “-very well,” the attackers teleported behind their master, “-I am, Exia Longeth, God of Death and ruler of the afterlife.”

“Is that right?” ‘Formidable opponent. Can’t say I’m happy about the battle – if not for the kill zone, I’d have had my head decapitated. Time spent in Draebala’s come in nicely, my body’s light and my sword seep with rage.”

“My name’s Igna Haggard.”

“Alexia, tell me, how is the man’s swordsmanship.”

“Adequate, my lord,” he bowed, “-please forgive me for not striking down my enemy.”

“It is forgiven,” he said, “-tell me, Igna Haggard, why have you come to battle?”

“I was curious,” he smiled, “-there are many things in this world that can’t be explained. When my companion said Draebala, I knew there was more to the little charade.”

“Mind thy tongue, human,” fired a ghoul of a lady wearing a crimson-stained veil and torn wedding dress, “-one more word and I’ll rip thee to shred,” her nails sharpened into claws.

“Do I take the assault on the Azure wall to be a declaration of war?”

“Why, boy,” said the leader, “-are you in a position to halt my assault,” he laughed maniacally, “-look behind, my army of undead will always double their power. Tis my boon, any undead I raise is blessed with immortality – kill one and two takes its place. Hydra’s curse,” he grasped the staff, “-the talk has been fun. Time to bid thee farewell,” it rose to the sky, lightning cackle without warning, \*Alteration of dimension: Realm of Death,\* the clouds thickened into black, the ground solidified, cracks formed under which flowed a peaceful white flame.

‘Now’s your chance,’ he said to Fenrir.

“Die!” the jewel pointed at Igna, a giant beam exploded, disintegrating all in sight. He sidestepped, snapped under Fenrir’s feet, \*Spatial-Arts: Worm Hole.\*

“No escape for you,” said Exia, the monstrous beam curved directly, ‘-shit,’ the fingers drew a symbol, and the spell hit, the ground broke several meters into the white flames.

“-He’s dead,” commented one.

“Yes, our Lord used his weakest attack; no way someone of such a blatantly annoying sneer is to survive.”

“Fools,” said the ghastly wedding outfit woman, “-the beast lady and adventurers are gone.”

“No matter,” said Exia, “-Igna Haggard will be remembered as one who put his comrade’s life before his own. I honor such an act, we must pay respect to valiant fighters,” the group hurdled before their master, a square erected through the flames upon which rose a throne of bones, “-if our master wishes,” they knelt and bowed, “-then we shall respect the warrior.”

“Don’t count me out the fight yet,” clambered through the debris.

“Impossible,” said he who had spoken words of power, “-YOU SHOULD BE DEAD!”

“By all means, I should be,” he stood with a broken arm and burnt clothes, “-I always hate my outfits being destroyed during the battle.”

\*GONG,\* the staff plummeted on the metallic square, “-WHO ARE YOU!” roared, blowing trees and turning the ground asunder.

“No one particularly important,” the arm healed, “-tell me, Lord Exia, as he who claims to be death, have thee ever died?”

“PREPOSTEROUS,” he stomped to the edge of the cube, “-DEATH NEVER DIES, TIS UNFATHOMABLE.”

“On the contrary,” he smirked, “-death is a privilege only death can enjoy.”

“How didn’t the Azure Flame burn you!” echoed a servant.

“Why would the flame burn their master,” a trail of white-clawed up his legs and to his shoulder, “-don’t think death is but thy title.” \*Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia -Library of the all-knowing; Realm Expansion.\* A mosaic burst washed the threatening kingdom of the death motionless, the fires burnt in single frames, all seemed to be inside a painting.

“DON’T TAKE ME FOR A FOOL,” he thrust the staff downward, an implosion separated the realms into two hemispheres. Their borders charged against one another, flickering electricity and discharge of raw energy “-THE REALM OF DEATH HAS NO EQUAL,” the sky – blacked-out canvas, riddled with God-tier spells; lightning, fire, water, wind, every element sore. “-DIE!” Ragnar?k, the mystical end to space-time materialized on the horizon, a battle of unprecedented nature had the continent tremble – seas ashore of Alpha and the Wracia Empire raged with waves.

‘I’ve done it,’ he laughed and immediately covered his mouth, ‘-this guy is strong, super strong, I feel like a pebble against a mountain. I could let the spell destroy the continent; how badly will the devastation affect me?’ he watched; arms crossed in a toothache pose.

“Lord Exia, the man seems to have surrendered.”

“We show no mercy, this realm will be ours.”

“Is it wise to go to such lengths?”

“Have you not seen my realm being equaled in strength by another, TIS UNACCEPTABLE, I’M STRONG, THE STRONGEST, I WILL NOT LET ANYONE ELSE HAVE THE TITLE!”

Igna rose an open palm to the sky, “-Hear me, o’ my goddesses, guardians who humbly watch over I, Igna Haggard. I’m earnestly lost, I admit defeat, I have not the strength to rival such a foe,” the fist clenched into a mist darker than black, “-if thee have a sliver of compassion, please, I request thy assistance.”

The aura sunk, an equally devastating barrier rose underneath the coming Armageddon, “-I’ve said it time and time again,” familiar figures graciously ambled into the overworld, “-the incantations are a bit too awkward to respond,” said Gophy, her long black hair struck instant fear in the surrounding area.

“Don’t leave the heavy lifting to me,” complained Miira, \*-Urn of the Devourer,\* a god-like artifact summoned alongside the spell, “-eat.” A spiral-turned tornado rose to swallow the incoming projectiles.

“What mess have you gotten into,” materialized Intherna bearing the Phoenix cape.

“We get to play for once,” said a seductive voice, \*World Tree.\* a

Chapter 764: ‘We’re the same.’

A golden stump rose and bloomed into radiant foliage. Darkness cast upon the land seemed to nullify, the wounded scattered beyond the reach of help were cocooned into healing pods. “I’m on the sidelines today,” remarked Lilith.

‘What does she mean?’ he glanced to her stead, she had found a cozy little boulder to sit against, “-Gophy, Intherna, Miira, take them out quickly, I want to go home.”

“Yeah, yeah,” sighed Miira, “-we’ll do what we can,” the jade-rimmed urn of various designs and symbols shrunk to a puff of smoke. Yonder, Lord Exia and his servants watched. Gophy pointed at the cube and snapped. The difference in height crumbled in a bellowing boom – flight magic toggled.

“Igna Haggard,” spoke the leader, “-who are you, truly?”

“No one special,” he smugly smiled, the four goddesses loomed in his shadow, “-a man of many contacts,” he rose his signet ring, \*Upon the authority granted by the ring dominance, I, King of Monster, order all who lives the shadows, cower underground, hide behind tree lines, and up in the sky, show thineself to thy monarch. Time is nigh, I decree, what I deem to be a threat is to be viewed without mercy,\* the jewel gleamed, \*-Damnation.\* Land within the border of Mantia cracked, humanoids figures clawed – countless shadows of flying beasts circled, a dust storm rose in from east and west. Advancement of the opposing army halted.

“Lord Exia, give us the order,” said the swordsman of his group, “-I will make sure they never live to see another day.”

“Clam it Alexia,” said a soothing yet imposing voice, “-we shan’t move into their field easily,” he laughed, threw his robe backward, and exposed a secondary staff, “-here present, the staff of reckoning. I must credit thee, Igna Haggard, thou art the first whomst I’ve deemed necessary to use all my power against.”

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“I kindly take the words,” added he sarcastically, “-thing is,” he jumped back a little, “-don’t ignore my companions. They’ll handle the battle from here on.”

“Over here,” waved Lilith, “-I’ve saved a seat,” she said unphased at the potential world-ending enemy.

Red, blonde, and black, each threw meaning full glances and accepted the offer.

“Don’t care who you are,” said Intherna, her whole body enveloped into flames, “-the strong decide the outcome, right?” a push raptured the ground.

“They come and go,” exhaled Gophy, “-what I love is destruction,” orbs of black encircled the enemy, “-do me a favor, die.”

“There they go being uncouth,” reprimanded Miira with a slight nod of the head.

“Miira, you can’t speak for much,” commented Igna.

“Whatever do you mean, master?” she nonchalantly had grabbed the swordsman Alexia and repeatedly pounded his visage. Her fist and arms scaled in shades of green and purple. Hit after hit after hit after hit, the bludgeoned expression drew its last breath, “-farewell,” a mild strength punch splattered the man’s visage across the mosaic-colored ground. Two of the three who didn’t attack previously were teleported onto stakes within Mantia. She blew, the straw caught fire in a very lazy manner, the motion of the flames wasn’t fluid, instead, it alternated between two still frames taken from an illustration of a fire. The smoke rose in small increments, childish as the drawing seemed, the heat was true, their exposed feet charred, the skin crinkled – they screamed,

“LET US GO!”

“WE HAVEN’T SINNED.”

“MERCY, PLEASE!”

“Weakling,” she stood arms crossed dawning the phoenix robe, “-if thee wish for mercy, ask thy master to beg.”

The wedding-dressed lunatic and her companion, the twin-tailed lady bearing dirtied makeup, ran across the realm of death, they lured Gophy in, or so they thought.

“Shall we end the game of cat and mouse?” Gophy snarled at the leader.

“Lord Exia, the battle is over. The World tree’s infiltrated thy realm – the Queen of Demon is known for her beauty and irrefutable strength. The more the battle prolongs, the worse tis going to get.”

“Master,” said the pink-haired cross of a man and woman, “-what should we do?” he sniffled, “-our companions are hurt...”

The overall energy changed, those beaten revived; a slash chipped Miira’s nails, the bloodied face healed. Next, Intherna and her ‘barbecue’ screams turned laughter, the hotter it grew, the colder they dropped, and lastly, Gophy, who had walked into the opponent’s realm brazenly, “-FOOL!” said the pink-haired man, “-you really think we’ll be outdone by such low tier attacks. We serve the ruler of death, tis assured we are blessed to never die.”

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“Foolishness, summoning four companions won’t help protect the town against my minion,” the staff glowed, this time, the array of spells faced horizontally against the wall, “-the greater picture,” commented he, “-you lost track of the greater picture. I’ve won.”

‘And we’ve won,’ smirked Gophy, “-Exia,” she proclaimed, “-what will it be,” \*BANG,\* the pink-haired man fell, “-MY LEGS,” he cried forgetting to alter the voice for one lesser manly, “-WHAT HAVE YOU DONE.”



A shadow leaped into the realm of death, pure white fur stood on a somber-colored cloud, “-the bigger picture,” said Igna atop Fenrir, “-Lord Exia,” wings sprouted, the hair swapped into white lined with red, “-seems to me, brute strength is thy only redeeming quality.”

“How are you able to move freely inside my realm?” he side-glanced.

“Look around,” feet touched the ground, “-remember Lilith?” they looked into her direction where she waved back joyfully, “-the world tree is potentially the worse spell she could have conjured. Know why?” he leaned closer, “-it can control the very essence of mana, therefore, everything. The Realm of Death’s graciously filled my realm. The stronger the foundation, the greater the power my companions are to release.” Time resumed into a brutal reality, one by one, the servants were killed coldly in a demeaning manner, “-don’t count on immortality,” the bodyless head of Alexia landed with a few rolls. ‘Score,’ cheered Miira in the distance.

“IGNA HAGGARD!” the true power unleashed; “-YOU WILL DIE!” the dormant army roared into life.

“Wrong,” he halted the classic burst of power, “-no power boost here, Exia. You’re a transmigrated soul from another world, aren’t you? Let me guess, the granted boons blinded sided thee. Mistake, damn fool, the land is home to many beings beyond thy comprehension. The mantle of death thee proclaimed,” Igna grasped the skeleton shoulder, “-belongs to me.”

‘I’m sure my army is strong to fight,’ he didn’t yield, opting to look to the undead, ‘-the more they die, the more they swarm the attackers...’

“Realized it, haven’t you?” interjected Igna, “-your army’s being held by mine.” Mantia fully circled the Realm of Death, the resultant bubble of energy exploded, terminating Lord Exia’s realm. The water-like nontangible entity swarmed in where they stood. Fallen bodies of his comrades washed at his feet. “-When you can’t fight, prepare aces. You lost, no, forget that, you were destroyed. Since thee have the blessing from an angel of death, the killing will be pointless. I hope the lesson is learned, do not ever try to swim into calm water, for you see, the calm waters are often the hardest to keep afloat.”

“My comrades,” he dropped to his knees, “-what have-”

“Don’t blame me, blame thineself. You’re weak...”

“Y-you’re w-weak too,” he mumbled.

“I know,” he laughed, “-the reason why I give up easily,” he jumped to the Goddesses’ side, “-I appreciate the help, thank you very much.”

“No worries,” they said entering the respective portals, “-later, the pounding was fun.”

\*Realm Release,\* plants regained their color as did the sky. The attacking undead army crumbled, on that day, many of the adventurers who had witnessed the exchange would speak of beings equal to gods.

Bit by bit, the skeleton projection faded into a frail display of a young adult, “-don’t look at me,” he said hidden under the now oversized robe, “-please don’t.”

“Mind answering a few questions?” he casually lit a cigar. Fenrir’s wolf form returned to humans and proceeded to sniff the area for survivors.

“What?”

“You heard me,” he grabbed the attacker and pulled under a tree, “-the battle’s over. You lost,” he puffed, “-and companions were killed because of it,” \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,\* threads of crimson gathered into a thick juicy apple, “-they were strong, very strong, I can tell from the extracted blood,” he showcased the fruit.

“Where are their bodies?”

“Here,” \*crunch,\* “-in this apple,” he ate.

“I don’t understand, why aren’t you going to kill me?”

“Are you that daft?” he sat, “-death chose thee for a reason, and I don’t want to undermine the decision.”

“Y-yeah.”

“Good, we’re the same. I wield the Death Element.”

“No, I didn’t sense any similar auras...”

“Don’t sweat the details. Why and who sent you here?”

“I don’t know, I died and was reincarnated into an empty room. God asked me if I wanted to go to heaven or become someone powerful and strong. I chose the latter, look at me, tis how looked before I died, a frail man in a frail body. I wanted to run around the fields and make friends... Draebala, I was reincarnated into hell. Every day was a struggle, I fought, tried to get strong, and awakened my abilities, I made friends along the way and began building a realm from what my god had offered.”

“Continue.”

“I- what?”

“How did it end to now?”

“The god told me to invade this universe and capture their leaders. Our universe is on the verge of collapse, we need to harness the true mana...”

“Wrong, you were played a fool. Our universes are one of the same, there’s no such thing as a true aura. Most likely, they sent thee to wreak chaos,” he rose, “-nothing much I want from you, kid. Here,” he held out a hand, “-I’ll send you to Draebala.”

“No, I don’t care, I’ll stay here if I need to. I don’t want to return to that shitty realm...”

“Persistent. If you wish to die, be my guest. Personally, I’d love to avenge the death of my comrades if I were in thy shoes. They played us for fools, sent us to fight an unknown realm, sounds like a bad idea to me.”

Confusion spawned many emotions, ‘-take the bait,’ puffed Igna silently.

“Revenge,” \*thud\* a nauseating aura dropped from his chest, “-I want revenge, kill them, kill them all...”

'Is that how I look to people?' said a frown.

"Made up thy mind?"

"Yes," he rose to his feet, the wimpish body hid under a stern projection, "-I'll get my revenge," roared the Undead King.

"So, you shall," a portal bid the man adieu.

'Done,' he toppled, the cigar fell, '-he took the bait, the blame lies on whoever used him. Nothing equals a little manipulation here and there. If not for Lilith's tree, I don't know how we would have won. I bluffed, and bluffed, tis not even funny. If he had chosen to launch the spells, the wall and all in its path would have been decimated. Miira's Urn and the barrier couldn't have protected such a large object. Battle of the realms, first time for everything. Death can't have a realm – then we have Exia, he summoned a 'borrowed' domain, the energy I sensed was the death element alright. Are there more angels of death throughout the multiverse or not.'

\*Incoming call: Leonard.\*

"Hello?" he answered.

"Where are you?" screamed a female voice.

"Jen," replied gently, "-where's Leonard, get him on the phone."

"No, I need answers," the voice shook, "-what happened to the presence we felt, I swear I thought the world would have ended."

"The weather was bad, to begin with," shuffles changed hands,

"-Are you there?" asked Leonard.

"Obviously, have preparations been readied?"

"Yes, and I have the green light from the military. The second contact should be near the border."

"I'll take it from here," \*Call ended.\* 'Handle one problem and another spring up.'

"No survivors," said Fenrir telepathically.

"Right, follow me, we're headed to the south." 'What will the tower have in store for us?' he wondered with a slight grin.

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Chapter 765: Town of Aria

"Why the constant back check?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," returned a pouty Fenrir. A distant look to the wall as well as the constant feed of information told of a gradually subsiding tide, '-seems the panic has calmed. Not Fenrir,' he paused, taking time to scan the area. They had crossed into the land of no return so some

said, foolish adventurers hungry for fame and fortune very often returned in body bags. Then and there, Fenrir side-glanced again with a hard-to-read regard, “-STOP IT!” he said, “-tell me what’s in thy mind?”

“No,” she shrugged her shoulders and crossed her arms, “-why should I, a comrade you’ve known for long, ask about what just happened. Yeah, it’s fine, I understand the new faces, the strange power able to control monsters, I get it, totally.”

“Yeah, the expression says otherwise.”

“Your point?”

“Fine, I’ll explain,” he picked up the pace, “-I’m the inheritor of various entity’s symbols and will.” The story summarized to an understandable level, the promenade and parole ran in parallel.

A heaviness wrapped the later steps in a murky and dense aura of malaise, “-I feel nauseous,” said Fenrir, the tale ended on her pressing her lips in a straight line, her eyelashes rose on to Igna with the same straightness, “-doesn’t bother me anymore.”

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“Don’t roll your eyes at me. I wasn’t the one being overly sarcastic.”

“Oh shut it,” she returned, “-where are we anyway?”

“The Border into Totrya.” Tall mountain rose before them, the rocks and foggy forests were reminiscent of Mont Blanc. While it felt similar, the sharpness of the slopes was like a blunt sword’s edge. The dulled gray carried over, a canvas of very little color, grayscale to some extent, painted over the horizon. Most of the dullness arose from the barrier. Fenrir stopped to sniff the strange entity; a ragged edge line liberally divided each province. He hunched to examine the halted meadow where the border had begun. Behind, where rose the Azure Battlefield held scarcely plotted tree lines, the ground mostly muddy and without weeds. Long one walked, the more the area vegetation changed. A sprinkle of intrigue veered its head, left and right, an expansive tree line went onto miles. Most assumed the forest bordering Totrya and Oxshield to be full and dangerous, instead, what stood was a world-class illusion. Consider one who was able to cross into the enemy line, having fought monsters, they’d waver to the border in search of answers, for the latter, fog, a mountain, or a labyrinth of trees would conjure to meet their challenges.

“Welcome to Totrya,” said a shuffle, Fenrir immediately leaped in front of Igna, her tail stood and ears stern. Outline of figures approached from the right over a small hill, the shadow of the trees, real or not, who’d care to know, cast shadows onto the dirt trail.

“Thank you,” a gentle tap upon her shoulder led into a lowered guard, her belligerent persona dwindled, “-did Vesper inform of our arrival?” the ominous entities arrived and turned to be but a singular personage.

“My lord,” it bowed, “-tis an honor to make thy acquaintance. I am Slithaphall, a proud member of the Naagi tribe.”

“Naagi?”

“Yes, we are what the common world refers to as demi-humans. Instead of mammals, we Naagis are reptilians, snakes to be precise. Stewardess Vesper is also a member of our people.”

“I figured much,” he scanned. She bore a humanoid form. Her visage had black colored scales shyly hiding under her eyes. Her nose, smaller and sharper, to what had been commonly observed laid peacefully. Her tongue would occasionally slip, the eyes never blinked, beady dark pupils watched every movement.

“Perplex to why I have a human’s form?” she inquired, he nodded, “-for convenience,” she said, “-we prefer to stay out of the way, and a human’s body is easier to mimic and learn. I’ve wasted enough time,” she continued along her road, crossed the duo, and headed straight forward, “-please follow me.”

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“What about Totrya?” Fenrir questioned reluctantly.

“There isn’t much to see, the borders between the world have been ruptured. Nature’s slowly taking its territory, the many illusions we used to ward curious adventurers have been replaced for a lighter confusing spell. In a few months, the realm will stand free of the monster’s control – a lush forest will rise to conceal our arrival. Training is primordial, here or there(a reference to the Shadow Realm) we exist to fight our monarch’s enemies.”

In a way, the walk along the border was pleasant. Monsters dared no inch – the gusty strayed were sent running with tails behind their legs. ‘A Naagi’s stare is said to have the power of hypnosis,’ read a random piece of trivia courtesy of Mantia.

Alongside fighting, Igna had worked on gathering information from the library. The general layout of the castle was more or less known. If he had to look for some piece of information, the brain would go through various pages till what he needed. The manual process took time and attention, both precious commodities in times of need. Now, instead of focusing on a particular situation or entity, the mere thought of a word would ready an avalanche of knowledge. Fighting the storm daily eventually gave rise to a particular skill, no name was given. Briefly, if a random situation sprung, the deluge of information would cascade, the subconscious mind leaped, grabbed relevant information, and read it mentally, hence, the trivia.

“I apologize for the inconvenient detour,” she said upon the sky turning pink. A portal rose, “-please head-on in – tis a direct passage to the town of Aria.”

“Will you follow?”

“No, I have other duties to oversee. Worry not and take in the town.”

Surely enough, setting foot inches from the oval-shaped hole pulled, “-okay?” he replied to none, the guide disappeared.

“Igna...” said a preoccupied Fenrir, “-I need some help here...” it swallowed her tail.

“Go on,” he spun and closed line them inside – instant teleportation, she landed on her bottom while his nose barely grazed the ground.

"IS THAT-" exclaimed she, cold stare fell on the duo, stopping her outburst, the stone-tiled streets held many o' bystanders. It but took a few seconds to pass, '-what's wrong with them?'

"Here," the palms clasped.

"Thanks for the help-" she dusted her clothes, "-wait a minute, who in their right minds..."

"Keep the complaining for later," the chest rose, '-Town of Aria," he looked around, the buildings were two to three stories', alleys and narrowed passageways separated differing properties. Alarms rang to the side on a slightly elevated platform, a terminal upon which bore holographic displays advertising weapons and products from Phantom. "Affordable and deadly, why risk a clashing sword when you can blast away your enemy," a handsome woman bore safety glasses and a contagious smile, "-monster problem?" she spun and pulled, the gun blasted explosive pallets into the living flesh of a goblin, "-buy one, Raida Mrk 4, starting price, 5,000 Exa."

'A bit much,' he smiled, "-Raida Mrk 4. Way to make a life-ending instrument feel childish."

"Hungry," said Fenrir.

"Right," a map materialized onto the phone, "-we might find something to eat at the market."

"Anything's fine," she said, "-a tavern would have been nice."

"We're in the first district," he said, "-taverns and lodging over there," he pointed vaguely to the southeast, "-ought to cross a river first." Soon enough, the buildings elapsed, various Guild Emblems projected on the colorful buildings, copper, silver, and gold color, a representation of, low, mid, and high tier guilds. The centerpiece, the tower of God or Tower of Aris rose silently and menacingly in the distance. The scale, larger and without competition to the walls he'd seen in Draebala, the peek wasn't visible to the naked eye, the clouds barely scratched its surface. A crescent moon peeped around the shaft, illuminating part of town. The names worked interchangeably, tower of Aria, Aris, or Town of Aria, Aris, they meant the same.

Fenrir's quest for sustenance brought them to the market which also held the terminal of Plaustan. Here, various other trams led out to the renowned beaches, tranquil towns, and villages. One word described the province, Affluent. The large highway connecting the outposts, sliced straight into town, cutting the station from the market and curved to the south. Flyovers layered the obnoxiously loud road, rider gangs often paraded from one outpost to the next searching for the next best place to get drunk. A cozy little shop on wheels waited opposite one of the flyovers – a little community of fast-food sellers neatly arranged. Benches faced the cook who hid from the visitors by hanging shoulder-high curtains. An old man held the stand, "-what you want, kiddos," said he expertly juggling ingredients from pan to pan.

"Anything, old man," said Fenrir, the aroma joyously twinkled her ears, "-what do you recommend?"

"It's going to cost a fair penny," he leaned over the edge, smiling with a few missing teeth.

"My friend here is rich," she returned his energy in full, "-old man, you like booze?"

"Bet you five exa I love 'em," a nonchalant gesture pulled a bottle of wine from the underbelly, he dowsed the pan and drank the rest, "-you're a fine kid," he said, "-I'll give it my best,"

“Old man, order us some drinks too,” said she aloud, “-keep a few yourself, a gift to a fellow booze lover.”

“Girly,” he laughed, chipper at the prospect, “-I’ll get right on it,” he leaned to the other side, “-WENDY, BRING US WINE AND BEER, THE BEST STUFF YOU GOT!”

“NO MORE DRINKS FOR YOU, GEEZER,” fired an equally chipper tone.

“IT’S FOR A CLIENT.”

“NO, YOU’LL SPEND THE EARNINGS ON DRINKS AGAIN!”

“I’M SERIOUS!” he exclaimed.

“OLD MAN TENMO,” rose from the other end, “-BACK AT IT AGAIN WITH THE DRINKING, HUH,” laughter permeated the gathering.

“Isn’t this a lovely place,” said she.

“I agree,” he smiled, “-I love the atmosphere, it’s very welcoming,” the chef kept exchanging banter to the neighbors, a lass soon brought the drinks. Regulars slipped in, took a ‘to go’ meal, and made way to a viewpoint overlooking the highway. The road was built on a dried river bed. Humble lighting rose the appetite – neon signs reflected against decorative ponds in the distance.

Dinner finished. Before he realized it, more drinks carried over, a small crowd gathered – the many stalls held a communal gathering area in the center, basically a walkway in between, turned makeshift gathering area. Humans, demi-humans, and various kinds climbed stairs; activity heightened. Igna and Fenrir shifted from the stall and into the stone-pathed area, tables and chairs were brought, smiles and laughter went to and fro.

“Old man Tenmo,” said an adventurer, “-has the party started?” another group peaked into the gathering.

“Just in time, kiddo,” he smiled, one could see the expression from the side, a wide rectangle in the humble eatery, “-these two lovely kids have decided to sponsor our night,” he cheered, nodding to the side, “-apparently the boy is loaded.”

“Are you sure about that?” slyly smirked the broad man, “-could cost you a lot.”

“Once a decision is made,” he stabbed a can, the liquid gushed, he guzzled the drink, “-there’s no turning back!” the canister slammed against the table. The crowd of strangers fell silent, a would-be barbecue stopped, they watched and stared... “-HELL YEAH!” it roared. “Drink, drink, drink,” they chanted, a bonfire lit, the night livened, more adventurers arrived, the smell of alcohol and delicious food hid the scent of blood. The crowd spilled onto the walkway, unknowing passersby clicked their tongue, rolled their eyes, and were on their merry way.

“Not going to drink?” said a lady dawning a bandana, orange hair, freckled nose and cheeks, “-had enough?” she chuckled and held a glass of her own.

“My friend’s having fun for the both of us,” he said facing away from the mildly populated highway, “-Aria’s more jovial than I imagined.”

“Thank you,” she smiled, “-I wish everyone was like this, happy and full of life. Our little commute grows smaller each day, our customers die, and most of the townsfolk scowl at us. Hard to imagine the whole town was like this at one point, blissful and living in the moment. Look at them now, empty vessels trying to survive.”

#### Chapter 766: Heaven in Hell

The truth of the matter, sheltered kindly in their thoughts, was, the norm was to worry about oneself against the lives of strangers. The selfish way of thought, not that it mattered whether it was good or bad, had to be accepted to promote growth. Stronger alone, and strongest in a team, the formed clicks were tight and very much unaccepting of the newcomers. Hence presented the society of Aria, a commune of very interesting personage, a slight faction kept the same old joyous approach of eating and drinking, living proof, old man Tenmo and his contagious personality.

Cup in hand and eyes towards the wave of headlights, he continued listening to Wendy’s thoughts. She provided much information – at a fixed point during the night, whereby the train station dimmed and the highway grew desolate, the party spilled onto the concrete walkways. Tables and benches scattered among the street, strangers enjoying a nightly visit were stopped and coerced into joining the celebrations.

All wasn’t so joyous and eccentric. Groans and the slow dripping of a liquid resounded throughout a giant rocky cage. Swords, broken weapons, guns, and ammunition littered the area, spilled potions, unconscious bodies, and a booming echo of a monster. An exoskeleton armored its back, the appearance was of a four-legged mammal upsized into a combination of insects and weapons. Its mouth, or what remained, had claws, the eyes, unseen and weak spots, unknown. It fell sideways, covering a few hundred meters. A singular entity stood upon the dead beast, she’d dug a sword into its armor and poured all her energy inside, the pressure built against the strong layer (the armor) till an explosion out of its face, or what seemed to be a visage. Internal organs guzzled out its mouth, hitting the wall and laying upon the rocky ground.

\*Huff, puff,\* she slid down its belly, barely catching her step upon contact with the ground, ‘-we’ve defeated it,’ she gasped, the hands and legs vibrated in pain and elation. A fresh wound slowly dripped blood, she clambered, making way around to the body in hopes of checking on her companions. A few minutes elapsed, she limped and held against the boss to veer the corner, “-are you here?” the claws outside its mouth laid strongly on the ground, blood poured in mild increments. The waterfall of crimson life essence spawned a pond. Her spoken words fell on an empty scape of rock and boulders.

“Anyone here?” she walked, aided by the sword’s scabbard-made walking stick, “-Enria, Zoria, Harvie?” every pronunciation ended on naught. A slowly brightening light watched from the ceiling – the rays caught dissimulation of the boss, the mangled body parts turned to dust, a whiff scattered ash. The twinkle of the reflected last moments forcibly exhaled, ‘-pretty,’ from her chest. Dimness and the sensation of fear and doom lifted, the disappearances of the boss meant; Floor 198 was cleared. Giant double doors at the far end clicked – vegetation and strong light escaped to where she knelt. “We’ve done it, the quest to conquer the Tower of God has been accomplished.” A mountain of golden coins, ancient weapons, treasure chests, and much more, piled where it last breathed. ‘To stand at the top, one must climb upon the dead bodies of one’s enemies and comrades,’ to her side, left and right, laid the bodies of her companions.



“Zoria,” she paused with a resigned smile, “-thank you for the support, it means a lot. I can’t express how much grateful I am, you were always there to catch our mistakes and spot traps long before we were harmed,” her long bloodied fingers, gently caressed pale cheeks.

“Enria, my fellow swordswoman, we had fun, didn’t we.”

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“Lastly, Harvie, you were a trouble maker from the beginning,” she exhaled, no tears nor woe came, the expression remained nonchalant and peerless, “-I’m happy we met, and I appreciate you spending thy last moments fighting the last boss with me.” A bottle opened, a few scrolls laid at her feet, ‘-the last of our supplies,’ she downed the healing potion, used the scroll on her wounded leg, ‘-I’d have died without my invincibility. A direct hit from those claws was foolish, very foolish.’ In the truest sense of the word, Achilles stood as the strongest upon a mountain of corpses. An expedition that had lasted a year, whereupon five guilds gathered into a single unit of around two hundred members, remained with but a single adventurer. She stood, grabbed the tags of the fallen, opened a red pouch containing the other tags, and let go. A twinkle whispered, she tightened the sash, took her time setting the bodies in a respectable line, and lit it ablaze. Smoke rose, she passed the mountain of gold, uncaring of the treasures, and made for the next level.

‘Floor 199,’ in what could be described as a heavenly forest, her heart warmed to a genuine smile. A straight narrow path went through the green, tall trees of brightly colored leaves – the melody of flowing water tickled her ears, a slight inclination prevented a direct view, she climbed up the mound until a whiff of freshness – crystal clear water under which laid soft-looking pebbles, meadows of flowers, birds in the distance and reindeers lined against the edge. It truly was heaven, ‘-is the hell over?’ her presence sent the wildlife running, ‘-or is there another floor?’

“Igna... Igna... Igna...” it progressively grew louder, “-Igna...”

“What’s the matter?” the eyes opened to a painful headache, ‘-I feel awful,’ he massaged his brows hoping to ease the pain, ‘-where are we anyway?’

“Wake up already,” said blue hair with a nasty smell.

“Fenrir?” he sat, turns out, the location hadn’t changed. Many drinkers of last night were passed, some slept on comfy sleeping bags, others on the cold stone floor. The stalls were shut, and the owners, nowhere to be seen. Morning rose, a cold breeze washed the area, “-Igna,” muffled a slightly seductive voice.

‘-Please no,’ he looked down, the pants were present, glanced to where the sound originated, ‘-she’s dressed, thank god,’ a sigh of relief escaped.

“What are you so happy about?” pouted Fenrir, “-my friend, you had a very energetic night. Wendy’s cabin,” she pointed, “-the number of times we heard her scream and moan... it was, let’s say, educative,” she chuckled, “-never knew you to be such a dog.”

“Rich coming from Fenrir,” the eyes narrowed, “-well, we don’t speak about drunk me, nobody speaks of drunk Igna.”

\*Burk, burrk,\* hailed from a side-alley, “-you good?” fired Fenrir.

"Yeah, just fine," said a grumpy tone, "-hungover that's all," it hurled once more.

"What the hell happened?"

"A fun night," she explained, "-I had a blast, we drank, drank, and drank – we had people come from the second districts with booze and the white powder. When I say it was wild, trust me, it was fucking wild," her eyes widened, "-I want to do it again."

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"How are you not hungover," he burped, the burning odor of alcohol rose from within.

"I can hold my liquor," she winked. Meanwhile, the gentle mumbles reached over and grabbed his waist, "-I gna," said a red-eyed Wendy, "-don't leave, I want to know more..."

'She reeks of alcohol...'

"Go back to sleep," he tapped her forehead.

"Going to abandon her?"

"Not really," he undid her grip, "-Wendy was very helpful in giving intel."

"Well, whatever you say," she backed off, "-I'll head off to the tavern," she threw a business card, "-an acquaintance of ours offered to rent us a room for our stay, says it's a thank you for last night's party."

'Last night's party?' the memories slowly gathered; '-I offered to pay...'

"Good morning, kiddo," said a man in casual clothes, "-you guys know how to party, don' ya," he smiled with a few teeth missing. "-I'll open up shop, check on the others would you, I'll ready the check and fire up breakfast, don't worry, it's on the house."

The side panel opened, and Tenmo began about his day. Fenrir suddenly left, leaving him confused, '-check on the others?' he fought through the headache and stood. The side-alley shy at the back of the old man's stall had a bunch of sleeping drunkards, "-Hey, you good?" he voiced loudly.

"Yeah, I need some water," said he who had vomited, "-god, I'm still not sober," his arms stretched around a bin, constantly filling the container with his guts, "-what sort of stuff did they buy last night."

'-I saw a vending machine around last night,' to the left built a cozy garden for late evening strolls, arch-top gates unlocked, '-I knew it was there,' he hopped over the separating bricked pavement, bought a few drinks, and returned, the guards of the garden nodded and said, "-thanks for last night, we had fun."

"Sorry?" he halted shy of the entrance on the way out.

"The drinks and party," they commented, "-you invited us to partake in the feast. Tis the first time in forever I've seen young Wendy smile and laugh so openly. Must be tough for a girl to be born into an adventuring family. Old man Tenmo's her grandfather," they smiled, "-those two always get in fights and make the overall atmosphere pleasant. Too bad the town doesn't return their energy."

"I'll keep that in mind," the hurling resumed, "-I better go check on them," he laughed.

“Take care, Igna,” they waved, he crossed the pavement, the station roared to life, time showed 05:34, ‘-an unexpected encounter. You have to love visiting new places,’ he entered the landfill of drunkards and handed cold drinks to those who woke.

“Thanks, Igna,” they replied with grateful smiles, the few able to stand nodded and clawed to the second district – their homes. A gathering of a few dozen, at its peak, a hundred or so, dissipated with the rising sun. Many exchanged contact information, wanting to relive tonight, the clock advanced to 06:20. The area cleared; demi-humans arrived to clean the roads, they bore orange vests, ‘-Eizo Cleaning Company,’ branded across the back.

“Old man Tenmo,” said an older worker, “-today seems more charged than usual.”

“Han,” he exclaimed, “-I’m glad to see you. Last night was the best event we’d ever hosted.”

“Is that right?” the curious gaze wandered to Igna, who matched the man’s stare.

‘Curious,’ he thought and sat beside Wendy who slept deeply, ‘-not dignified for a lady...’ he smiled, ‘-drunks are funny people, the bench looks like her bed, she’s so comfortable.’

“Too bad you couldn’t join. Once again, we appreciate you guys cleaning up after us.”

“No problem,” burst a thumbs up, “-pleasure is ours,” he said, “-long as we get to eat your food, old man.”

“Stop... Igna, please, I can’t take it anymore,” said a few whimpers, “-stop I c-can’t.”

“WENDY!” he reached over and covered her mouth.

“W-what,” her sleep broke, “-why you covering my mouth,” she muffled, the tipsiness faded.

“I had to,” the grip eased, “-you began to sleep talk.”

“Can’t be that bad,” she rose, “-last night was fun.”

“Are you not hungover?”

“No, why would I be,” she laughed, “-we drink all the time,” she straddled over to Tenmo’s stall, “-grandpa, I’m going home.”

“Whatever, take Igna with you,” he said, “-he’s a good kid.”

“What about stranger danger.”

“Oh please,” he breathed a loud laugh, “-you two made an orchestra yesterday, everybody knows of the intimate bond. Go on, kiddos else you make this old man feel sad.”

“Right,” she turned, her freckled cheeks flushed, “-I’ll get my stuff ready.”

“Okay?” he observed, the day resumed without hassle, last night slowly faded into the everyday motions.

“Igna!” hailed Tenmo, “-the bill’s here if you ready to pay.”

“Right, payment,” he ducked into the stall’s seating area, “-how much?”

“Here are the invoices.”

“76,000 EXA?”

“I know, the price’s too much, I should have stopped the party.”

“No, no,” he reassured his worry, “-tis cheaper than I expected,” a tap of his phone cleared the bill, “-right, that should handle it.”

“IGNA,” waved from the side, “-I’m ready to go, follow me.”

“By the way,” whispered Tenmo, “-look after her, I know it’s a tall order to ask of a stranger, but still, I trust you. A drunk man is very honest, and what we saw yesterday were humbleness and charisma, you’re a great kid.”

“Don’t know what to say... I appreciate the thought, old man.”

“Right,” he smirked, “-visit us anytime, tell the blue-haired girl she’s always welcome to share a drink.”

“Will do.”

Chapter 767: Eizo

“Pardon the mess.”

“No need to worry.” Expectations of a humble apartment in a not-so-nice part of town had prepared the mind to witness the worse of what an adventuring town could offer. There, after crossing the bridge overlooking the highway, she treaded along the pavement, caution to movement around her, the way her hand and body reacted spoke of a trained fighter. Not wanting to interfere in private life, he simply followed, admiring the diversity of architecture. Soon, they’d cross a residential block of tall apartments of many vacant rooms. Lazily painted advertisements read, ‘-500-5000 Exa.’

“Ignore those,” she said curling her index, “-they’re scams, I think,” she brazenly added before the guard of one of said buildings, the man looked and paid no heed.

“Are you daft?” he hurried to her side, “-we’re in a sketchy part of town, right?”

“What?” returned a perplexed look, “-if you haven’t noticed, the whole town is sketchy. Our house is in a better place anyway, too bad we have to walk through these parts.” Before the next hour, they arrived whereby she said, “-pardon the mess,” whether it be jest or not, Igna watched straight-faced. What laid wasn’t a normal house nor an apartment; a manor of lavish proportions had, “-Eizo Family,” written in golden font. Certainly, many questions rose, who is the Eizo family, how did they make their money, and how powerful are they. A touch of the earring replied in a faint vibration, the lens swapped into infiltration mode – unseen information else spared for éclair’s backend processing displayed. Aside from names, the value they held, rumors linking to their past, and a summary of what they’d been known for or had accomplished in the past weeks sorted itself. The blocky silver barricades opened, to which, she asserted her hand upon Igna and pulled, “-I don’t see why you’d ask for pardon,” they landed inside, the gates slammed.

“Don’t talk, just follow.”

The truth of previously transpired events linked in a timeline. Was it wrong to trust people, was it wrong to enjoy relations of innocent nature? A nasty gut feeling of deception whelmed, what he felt was a tangible uneasiness, red-alarms riddled. Thoughts ran amok, yet, the truth was Wendy had grabbed and pulled since the start, she didn't let go, and a part felt the reluctance to let go, there was a newfound affection, a natural allure to her words. The trail's thought tightened into tunnel vision, the damning scenery – part clean and part unclean held a sense of disassociation. A block of a building laid at the center, a very typical built for those wanting to flaunt their wealth.

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'I don't feel like myself,' an astral projection of himself parted from the physical self, '-the manor looks nice, tis too good to be true. What did she mean by a mess,' no sense of body allowed for movement, '-think, Igna, think. Taking spirit form isn't normal – the only time I know of this happening is when activating the curse of Nox, the all-seeing eyes,' he watched as they entered the building, there, the spirit forcibly pulled, the head rocked into a lack on self. Field of view grew blurry, the five-sense numbed, "-will you satisfy me again?" said a female voice.

"Yes, I will," he replied without uttering a word, '-my mouth's moving on its own.' A barrier rose between personality and body.

"You're a good slave," it added crudely – a glimpse of the untouchable room was black, a warmly lit fire, and the touch of another.

"Yes, I am," he replied, '-no I'm not,' he fought, '-I'm trapped within myself, what sort of trick is this?'

"Tell me your most guarded secret."

"I'm afraid of letting go of my children."

"No, something more consequential."

"I love my companions."

"What about your bank account, how do you make money?"

"I don't know, I order people around and they obey."

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"Why did you come to Aria?"

"To meet a friend."

"And who's this friend?"

"I don't know..."

"Connect into Phantom's servers, I want administrator access," a gentle caress went down his neck and to the stomach, slowly slipping into his pants, "-you'll obey to your mistress, won't you?"

"I will," keys tapped, the screen dimly lit the darkened room, "-access denied."

“Access denied?” she slammed the table, “-Yeah, hello, there’s no way to gain entry. What should I do next, I’m expecting my payment.”

“No information, no money,” it replied somberly.

“Don’t screw with me,” she exclaimed, “-you know the amount of shit I had to pull to get in this shitty manor. The young lady wasn’t exactly a nice host to inhabit.”

“I don’t care, damned monster, no information, no payment.”

“Fine, fine, how about you make him a political hostage, a high valued customer like him will make a fine piece in international deliberations,” she straddled and stared into his empty bicolored pupils, “-act now and I’ll throw in his phone.”

“We’ll wire the payment, check the usual account.” \*Beep,\* notified the laptop screen, [540,000 Exa delivered], “-expect the rest upon a safe exchange of the goods. Our team is ready at the airport, making sure to move him quietly, don’t want to alert his faction.”

“Don’t take me for an amateur,” the call ended, “-look at you,” she bit her lips and pulled his cheeks, “-empty and without a will, helpless and under my absolute command. Go on, move your hand and undress me.”

“Will do,” he reached behind and undid her bra.

“Little dog,” she spat on his face, “-get down and kiss my feet.’

“Yes, master,” he dropped to the floor, slithered to her feet, and pressed his lips, she pulled her feet and slammed his head against the cold floor.

“BAHAHAHA, HOW SUBMISSIVE CAN A PERSON GET!” she laughed and moved to a table, “-come here,” he followed, “-you’re going to serve me until I’m satisfied,” she spread her legs, pulled his face between her thighs, “-men are all dogs,” her legs tightened, “-you exist to serve me and only me, do you hear, prince of Arda?” her eyes watered, the cheeks flushed, she stared the ceiling, drool ran down her chin. \*Gasp,\* hands snapped to her neck, a brief moment of elation faded in favor of fear, ‘-I c-can’t b-b-breathe.’

“This won’t do,” consciousness returned, “-a spell of subjugation, narcotics, and brain-washing mana waves. Who in the right mind has the audacity to target me?” he pulled away, rose with her neck within his grasp, and pressed her against the table, “-who are you, really?” Her eyes rolled, “-someone’s kinky,” the grip eased, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* chains of crystal tightened her limbs around the table, “-Not the Wendy I remember from last night, who are you?”

“I’m Wendy,” she panted, sweat dowsed the table, “-what are you going to do to me?” said a very suspicious sneer.

“Nothing,” he laughed, “-anticipation is the worse feeling a person can endure,” he caressed her legs, “-you’ll crave it until the inner peace falls.”

“I DON’T CARE, THE MORE PAIN THE BETTER!”

"You're gone," he sighed, "-we're inside a weak domain," a scan about pointed so, "-Wendy Eizo isn't a freaky individual, she seems earnest with a slight temper. Whoever you are has a very nasty personality and a way of charming people, who do you work for. The realm is definitely not godly, angel, nor demonic, it's artificial."

"Perceptive of you," she cackled, "-still, no matter of torture and questioning will answer your question. I've won, be as it may, my realm is but an addition to further trap my prey. You've lost, Wendy's under my control, and if my demands aren't met, the more pain this body feels, the louder will grow her emotional scars, I'll break her ego and slit her throat before you can react."

"I guess you have," he walked about, looking for the edge, "-quite the quandary. I gathered much, you're not a spy, I'd wager hired help. Don't presume I was knocked out, everything spoken was recorded," the promenaded ended by leaning upon her visage, "-if you won't give me what I want, I won't give you what you want." \*Partial Realm Expansion: Puppet Summoning,\* "-I've called in a member of the Dogeio Race, one renowned for its stamina and large member," he snapped, the puppet got in between her legs, "-he'll give you what you want," she moaned, "-I just need to know who employed you."

"I've won the trade," she clenched, "-I've gotten what I desired."

"Too good to be true," he flashed his brows, "-the truth about the Dogeio Race, when they mate with another race, their bestial side takes over – it is said, none save a member of the Dogeio people can withstand their lovemaking. About the threat, the body thee host isn't of Wendy, tis but a reflection, the lass's most likely already dead." A sense of dread washed the entity's self, "-no, no, no, no."

"The die has been cast," he ambled to the realm's barrier, "-how long can thee last against a beast," fingers against the murky wall, "-don't mind if I take a shower and get dressed," \*crack,\* the realm shattered, \*Partial Realm Expansion: Period Sustain,\* another bubble wrapped around the lady, "-enjoy," he winked, exploration resumed. A warm shower, new pair of clothes, and browse through the Arcanum, '-when did it go wrong. I met the true Wendy yesterday, I'm sure of it, the way she acted and how Tenmo went along to her whims is tell-tell she didn't change until the morning. The narcotics and drinks explain why I had a headache, it must have happened midway into the night, perhaps the night me and her shared, I don't remember much. She must have spiked my drink, the Eizo group, cleaners of this morning,' a seemingly innocent sentence came to, '-look after her, I know it's a tall order to ask of a stranger, but still, I trust you.'

"Trust is a big word to throw around – the glare I received from the cleaner wasn't completely innocent. Eizo has a darker past I would imagine; drugs aren't easily obtained without contact to the D.G or an overseas supplier."

"Master," said éclair loudly, "-good morning, I've tracked the location of the caller. It's somewhere in the Empire. I was able to dive into the laptop when she tried to get access to our servers. Other parties simultaneously wanted to assess as you type the code, the nodes were interconnected. She's but a puppet in another's chess game."

"Anything else?"

"Not really, the data's been wiped, I managed to reconstruct the signature on a letter; E.E."

“E.E, not much to go off of. Have you looked into the Eizo’s history?”

“Yes, they’re tied in heavily with corrupt nobles, often used as intermediate in the trafficking of workers.”

“I see, they specialize in demi-humans I’d assume?”

“Yes, and how did you know?”

“Observations, the cleaners were all demi-humans. The atmosphere was very inviting, I didn’t think much, however, when a small fraction of people enjoy life whilst the majority cry in pain, there’s a slight chance the disparity is a sign for help. What faction do they serve?”

“Here’s the frightening part, they tie with Godfather Sable’s faction. They’ve been very proactive in expanding their influence over Plaustan.”

“Being tied to the godfather doesn’t amount to much. We need evidence, and speculation alone won’t bring the truth. What we know is this, someone wanted to access Phantom’s servers, and when failed – she offered to use me as a political hostage, blatantly outed her employers. In addition, there’s this, ‘I don’t care, damned monster, no information, no payment’, an innocent sentence at first. Focus on the Damned monster part, the church’s renowned for rejecting anything and everything going against their dogma.”

“Doesn’t help us much,” he said, “-should I relay the information?”

“No, let it be. Whoever wants to go after me needs to think they’ve won. éclair, the time’s come to show me thy prowess. Grant them access to our servers, mimic it and give them access to you, and your database, it’s fine if they steal data – use one of the dummy hosts, have the sister system assist in the cyberbattle.”

“It will be done. A battle worth my time, tis the perfect opportunity to show how ruthless thy butler can be.”

\*Partial Realm Expansion – Release,\* “-I’ve come with a new proposition.”

Chapter 768: ‘-I forged a contract with the devil...’

“No way,” intense groans imbued by heavy pants escaped, “-I w-w-w-won’t.”

“Holding up pretty nicely,” he said, “-I won’t ask again; I merely increased time earlier for the beast to settle. He’s ready to engage, you won’t survive him no matter the refusal,” her face showed a combative spirit, the attack amplified, she kept a strong grit, limbo against pleasure and pain.

‘Well,’ he turned away, ‘-if she won’t reply to my demands,’ made for the adjacent hallway, “-I’ll give you two hours in this realm’s time,” a snap summoned another bubble, “-which will amount to two days,” in addition, few other members joined, they circled to block the direct lock of their eyes, pain shimmered, they grabbed her face and the domain blocked peeps from outside in. He sat before an empty living room, toggled the local news, and waited.

The realm changes to Draebala, ‘-I lost. My comrades died, I thought I was strong,’ vivid images of their death played in repeat, ‘-was I not worthy of this power?’ the fist opened and closed. Patched grassy



lands gave onto the sea, who in turn, linked to the continent of Zuyan D'olsak, The broken vessel ambled slowly for a town up north, he paid no heed to the roaming monsters.

"You seem lost, my child," said a voice inside a dark abandoned log cabin.

"..." he looked and walked, led by a burning desire to avenge the fallen.

"So much pain," it said, "-I understand how you feel, I was also subject to the manipulative ways of God, they don't care about us, they never wanted us to prosper. Join us," a transparent hand held out, "-I won't promise happiness or a fair nation, what I guarantee is revenge," the cabin opened to thick darkness, many outlines huddled against the walls, sat with knees to their chests, "-we wait for someone to become our master, someone strong to lead our people into battle. The gods will pay, their beliefs will be slain, and most of all, the leadership shall crumble." Unable to think, the man who'd lost so much took the hand of a strange entity, the cabin and man vanished overnight, tis said, imprints of the four-walled structure can be seen to this day.

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\*Woosh,\* the window opened, '-a strange chill. The channel swapped for a paper on current international affairs, '-let's see,' he hunched with elbows upon the thighs and read. "Recently, in a press conference by the minister of foreign affairs, Kieo Hadbo of the Holy Wracia Empire, after much pressure from neighboring independent kingdoms about the new continent's discovery, said, '-we're making sure the people are given utmost priority. They have signed and agreed to become a direct vassal of the Empire; on a goodwill trip abroad, our Emperor had but praises to sing. The natives are very accepting of his ideas and way of life – tis an equal exchange. We've promised to improve their land for their devotion'. When asked about proving a perspective from the native people, they refused, saying it would scare them. Ever since the Pope and the Emperor have joined hands, there's no telling what the future can hold. The War between Elendor and Old Cray has rung for many years, there's no sign of stopping. The leadership of Elendor is slowly falling, noble lords are angry at the constant battle; finances are bad, the people starve without a say in the matter. Life around the borders is survival of the fittest. The addition of PMC's has only worsened the balance. Directly linked to Elendor, the Federation, is also on the verge of collapse. Our sources report the leaders aren't on the same page. Officials want the war to end, meanwhile, Elendor wants to continue the battle; in a war of attrition, neither nation has the upper hand. The moment the Federation falls apart, the Empire will strike – we saw their ruthlessness in Arda, the extermination of a whole province; rather than hide the stain, they brazenly and openly flaunt the event as a warning to those who dare fight their Dogma. Alpha's neutral on the matter so has stated General Dockzt Rozemal, "-we do not see a reason to take part in the war and needlessly endanger our people. If ambers blow towards us, there will be no mercy, we take pride in the strength and unity of our nation. When push comes to shove, we, Sultrians, will not waver and use our latent abilities." Those very triggering words had many smaller nations cower, history is a strong basis to not get Sultrians involved. In trying times, we, the people, must learn to adapt and learn to see how the war will affect our daily lives."

'Who decided to air such a show. It's full of misinformation, the facts aren't completely accurate, I hate the media," he sighed, "-making a show of everything. Still, it worries me to think Elendor wants to continue the battle in our economy. Tis taken everything for Queen Gallienne to help Arda get on its feet. Money," he facepalmed. "-if only we had more money... money to lead a nation, money to fight a

war,” he exhaled, two hours elapsed, ‘-let the Federation fall,’ he gritted, ‘-I’d cut ties before Elendor grows to adamant. The fate of Hidros will be dependent on the next summit. Alpha can be swayed in our favor, I wonder if her majesty, Gallienne, knows of Alpha’s dirty secret?’

\*Incoming Call: Vesper.\*

“Hello?”

“Greetings, majesty,” she said in a calmer voice.

“You seem easier to listen to, has something happened?”

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“Yes, I’m glad to report the adventuring party set to conquer the tower was defeated, there’s a single adventurer left and she’s resting on floor 199. We need but materialize the doors for her to continue.”

“Looks like I didn’t have to come...”

“No, by all means, the presence is required. Our ruler should speak of our evolution. I’ve asked for the third transit to make way to your location, I’ll have the fighter move to floor 200. This is it, master, show the world what us, the people of the Shadow Realm, can do.”

“The people of the Shadow Realm?” the eyes narrowed.

“Yes, we’re allied,” she laughed, “-be sure to make an impact,” the call ended. The entire manor rumbled; a strong aura approached from the Tower spotted in the far distance. Gusts blasted the main door open; stomps filled each nook and cranny with the malicious intent of destruction. The shadow of a horned tall silhouette laid on the entrance hall.

“Can I come in?” said the strongly mature female voice.

“You’re already inside,” he returned,

“And?” her strong steps echoed around the couch and hopped in his field of vision, “-...” a brazenly opposing glare drowned his regard, dark curly brown hair parted around the strong expression, the horns were fierce and sharp, her dark complexion had marks of red and white run along the arm, face, and legs, her lashes flickered, displaying her mercilessness, “-are you the one I’ve come to fetch?”

“Kylsha the Seductress.”

“Vesper must have told you?”

“No,” he smirked, “-we met long ago, maybe a few decades back when the King was in power. Remember his birthday, and the event you and your companion interrupted.”

“Is that so?” she gave a half-smile, crossing her arms, “-must I be happy?”

“You’re that type of entity,” he sighed, casting away any interest, “-before we go, I need to take care of a private matter,” shuffled to the stairs, “-join me?” She rolled her eyes and accepted, ‘-another headache.’

'Who is this person,' she followed, 'what did he mean by that type of entity, did my strongness not get across properly. I don't know why, but I feel like he's already seen through my facade and is less interested... it makes me... angry,' the nails sharpened.

"Keep those things away."

The partial expansion released, a bloodied and sweaty Wendy had her face mashed onto the table, her hair awry on her visage, snot and tears gleamed under a singular light bubble. "Stop it," he ordered, she laid on all fours, scratch marks plastered her back, "-how was the experience," he nonchalantly leaned against the edge, "-do you feel good or humiliated. How was it knowing your fate laid in the hands on another person," he turned and spat, saliva landed shy of her fatigued expression, "-an eye for an eye, a spit for a spit," he caressed head, roaming his fingers through her nasty hair, "-Wendy, Wendy, o' dear Wendy. Why not accept my proposition," he leaned, carried her messy hair around her ears and smiled, "-agree to my demands and I promise a more lucrative life. I don't mind answering to thy demand – consider this an act of charity; I won't ask who employed you nor personal questions," the fingers moved from her hair to the cheeks, he wiped her newly formed tears, "-I'm your savior and your destroyer, you're life belongs to me," the bicolored pupils dowsed crimson red, he glared with the same expression of a heartless killer, "-I can be a very gentle person," a sharp turn flipped her on her back to stare the ceiling, her body was in an ungodly state, bite marks dowsed her chest reddish-brown, her nose and mouth motioned painfully, she instinctively closed her legs, the tears fell, "-now, now, you trying to defy me again?" \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* lassos pulled her feet, he motioned to a Dogeio, the latter drooled and moved in-between her legs, he gripped her waist and tore into her flesh, \*AHHHHHH.\*

"Why are you screaming?" he patted her forehead with a saddened expression, "-he hasn't done anything yet."

"S-stop," she sniffled, "-I-I-I," he forcefully grabbed her jaw, "-listen to me, I don't have much patience. Offer yourself to me or be subjected to an eternal prison of far worse treatment, I'll tell you, besides depraved individuals, some lustful torturers find bliss in chipping at a person's life, and they, luckily, work for me." No response, her pupils fell emptily on him, the vision blurred by increasing tears, "-guess there's no helping," he rose a hand, the beast pulled side her legs, "-I gave thee an opportunity out."

'Why me, what did I do to deserve this. A puppet shouldn't have emotion, she shouldn't be able to think, only act. Why me, why am I different, I wish I was like my other sisters, they were truly emotionless, watching as the world closed on us, they never smiled, never tried to talk, we were trained to be empty, but I... I, why am I different, WHY DO I FEEL PAIN!'

"Because, you're human," replied Igna, the barrier vanished. The darkroom swapped for an idyllic landscape, 'where are we?' she inhaled, the wounds were healed, '-I'm wearing clothes.'

They sat atop a hill, "-look yonder, isn't the forest a relaxing place?"

"Why are you here?"

"To offer a chance at retribution."

"Why should I trust an enemy?"

“Simple, because I’m Igna Haggard,” he smiled, “-a whimsical man who enjoys inflicting pain and subjugate strong individuals. Yes, I agree my methods are crude and heartless, and in a way, I can’t really say I dislike hearing someone scream. Whether I’m good or evil, thee choose. So,” he turned and offered a hand, “-doth thee wish to make a deal with the devil?”

“Will you help me take revenge on our enemy...”

“Offer me your soul and I promise to take in thy pain and regret. Release the burden, allow me to take it as part of our contract.”

“Can I trust you?”

“No,” he smiled, “-never trust anyone, not even me. I don’t have much to gain yet, I admire the tenacity.”

It took a moment, she hung her head between her knees, a casual breeze rattled the grass, ‘-why me, what have I done?’ the hold broke, “-I accept.” The landscape shattered, her mind reemerged into the dimly lit room, ‘-was I dreaming?’ the eyes reopened.

“Good afternoon,” said Igna, “-seems like you made a great choice,” he winked, a greenish light healed her wounds.

‘-I forged a contract with the devil...’

Chapter 769: Wendy

“I’m healed?”

“Of course, you are.”

“Why would-?”

“For my benefit,” the room flashed awake; faces were precisely shown, “-a contract must be followed under any circumstance.”

“Fine,” she sat upright, pulled her messy hair into a low-pony, left a few strands hanging near her cheeks, “-what should I do?”

‘What sort of torture did she go through?’ wondered the newly arrived guest, her menacing stare and heavy frown were among the fiercest to date, ‘-Igna Haggard, the reincarnation of Staxius Haggard, our old master’s nemesis and savior. What type of person is he?’

The exposed Wendy sat with much thought, a small towel kept her waist unexposed, the same couldn’t be said of her chest and body. Aside from a small chill running up her spine, the wounded body and the excruciating pain felt minutes ago vanished, the memories were present yet non-threatening, and by such, reference to mental scars, the culprit, Igna, watched nonchalantly, ‘-a contract...’ he ambled to the nearby desk, scouring for the laptop, ‘-why do I always have to act so high-and-mighty. I’m not really forging contracts, a mere figure of speech,’ a timid sigh escaped.

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“Something the matter?” returned the cold mouth Kylsha, she hung just of his back, overlooking his shoulders to what he did, “-gloomy.”

“Don’t sneak up on people,” he inhaled, “-is the demoness not curious to my actions?”

“Not really,” she stepped into the light from the open hallway, “-I’ve seen worse inside the dungeon. I shudder to think about her state of mind. She looks unfazed, a bad sign, she must have rewrote the memories.”

“More obedient she is, the better the pawn is for me,” replied monotonously, no hint of empathy or compassion filled his mien.

‘A wonderous man,’ she observed, ‘-better secure a perimeter, never know who or what will attack,’ her body rose into a mild hover, the hair and clothes followed suit.

“Wendy, tell me, who are you really?”

“What about me not needing to say anything?”

“Right,” the head shook, “-there’s the laptop, tis logged onto Phantom’s servers.”

“Why are you helping?”

“To satisfy a whim,” he said, “-besides, you don’t have any pull in the situation, a pawn is best kept a pawn.”

“I’ve sent the information to my client,” her lashes flickered, “-since we made a contract, I want revenge,” the visage burnt, “-my name’s Wendy Eizo, of the Eizo family. The girl you met yesterday was I, tis but a game of personalities. Since I was little, I don’t remember the warmth of my mother or the comfort of my father’s grip, we were raised somewhere overseas in a white room with tables and a chalkboard. Life wasn’t hard, we had food and were somewhat in decent condition, so I said to myself. In actuality, we, children, had no concept of the outside world, what did it feel like to eat till you’re stuffed, what is it like to play with other kids your age, what is a friend, what is freedom, the concept is so farfetched we’d never cared enough to think. As I grew older, the girls around my age, familiar faces I met, bathed, ate, and slept with disappeared. Our dormitories emptied and I saw nothing wrong – my day of age arrived, sixteen, my first assignment, become the daughter of the Eizo family. Assassins killed the parents, the grandparent, a mere pawn in a greater scheme could but watch – we defied the family and forcibly conquered their business and fortune. My life isn’t much interest, there are other countless empty shells like me scattered around the globe, some take the seat of high-political member, others, the worse scum of the planet. My orders were always via phone, with no intonation nor feeling, I was tasked to live my life and one day take the dynasty for what it was worth. Then you showed up – at first, we had a lot of fun, and by fun, the night we shared, the drink we had, and the genuine joy I felt were sincere, those were a part of me that wanted to be free and meet people. All changed when I received new orders the following day; Infiltrate Phantom using you.”

“Basically, you were raised to be a spy?”

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"Yeah," she nodded, "-a spy without much pull or say in her organization, a pawn," her face felt gloomy, any sliver of self-worth scattered and faded.

"I did say pawns have no authority, tis to say," he placed a hand atop her shoulder, "-under the right circumstance, a pawn can become queen."

"Seriously?"

"Yes," he stood, "-we're bound by a contract, and I did say I'd help thee get revenge. Your organization needs to be stopped, the children are a no-go in war, they need to understand the battlefield is to be limited, senseless killing isn't the answer." '-Hypocritical from me,' he side-glanced, '-I'm spouting a lot of idealistic jumble,' her face shifted favorably, '-tis the best course to get her on my side.'

"Igna," frame tapped, "-we need to go."

"Kylsha," looked to the corridor, "-I'll be there in a moment, wait for me outside."

"Two minutes," she rolled her eyes and left.

'-Aggravating.'

"What now?"

"What do you mean, what now?" he laughed, "-Wendy, you're still alive and have completed thy mission, there's nothing else. Follow their lead and do what they say; however, don't be so uptight, I'm backing you as of this moment, thee have my word, if push comes to shove, I won't hesitate to take on an army."

She watched with a curtain around her shoulders, '-he fell for it,' she smirked while he hurried outside to Kylsha's side, a muddy reflection of herself rose with phone in hand, "-yes, hello, Igna thinks I've come over to his side. What are the next orders?"

"Good job, to celebrate, a child will be granted with an easy death tonight. Don't disobey, we know how shrewd he can be. Anything he's said needs to be forgotten, else, we'll kill them."

"Don't," she exclaimed, "-I won't disobey," the reflection fell to her knees, the call ended, '-why me, what did I do to deserve this... playing two sides is far worse than I've imagined...'

\*Clap, clap, clap,\* shoes against the asphalt, the outer gates soon passed them and the manor grew a distant memory upon reaching the labyrinth of alleys, "-she's going to betray us."

"I know," he said with hands in his pockets, "-not much I can do in the matter," the focus wandered from window to window, "-didn't realize Aria had a lot of junk." He walked, she stopped, "-what now?" he stopped, few passersby dodged, glanced the duo and shuffled along, a gray hue washed the area.

"What's running inside that brain?"

"Why is the lady Kylsha interested in my schemes?" he smirked, "-where's the standoffish attitude..."

"Quit playing games," a shadow hid her intent, partly due to her staring the ground and gritting, "-TELL ME NOW!" the head rose akin to a fired bullet, the echo channeled a few blocks down.

“Honestly,” he looked forward, “-there wasn’t a need to scream.” Awkwardness filled much of the next promenade – they moved to the bridge into the first district. Headlights passed, engines roared, the train was seen over yonder on a plane of its own.

‘I might have gone too far with the strong act,’ the posture somewhat closed until the crossover, it arched with refined street lamps arranged at intervals. “Say, I’m sorry about earlier,” she said at the peak of the curve.

“Oh, that?” he turned onto the balustrade, “-don’t let it bother.”

‘What’s with him,’ she smiled, desperately hiding an inner sense of anger, ‘-I thought he was mad, the change of personality really pis-’

“Either a spy or not, we don’t have much to lose,” he lit a cigar and puffed, the dullness of his outfit matched the somberness of the weather, smoke rose similar to a chimney in cold winter, “-say, if she turns to outside, the lass won’t know much of her organization. Now, if the contrary happens, a spy is still a spy, she’ll have more orders – said orders are puzzle pieces. So, it’s best to use a spy without using a spy, the concept’s a little moronic. I used my words to paint the narrative that I was going to take revenge on her leaders – said a lot of idealistic ideas in the process. What will her thought process be?”

“I’d have not cared,” she replied, “-nothing’s worse than a man who talks a big game.”

“There,” he puffed, “-my thoughts exactly. Now, if she thinks I’m said type of person knowing well I can do, her instincts will speak of two possibilities, ally or betray; two options which align with what I want.”

“Huh?”

“First rule of manipulation, let the other conclude to what thee wants. If the task seems manageable and mundane, all the better. There’s a 70% chance she’ll betray us, no matter, we’ve already tapped her phone, the database we gave access has a lot of information on the four conglomerates.”

“Won’t it jeopardize...”

“No, on the contrary, tis a bait, if the information is used, we know the organization isn’t affiliated to them, and if the opposite happens, we know it’s them,” he puffed, “-it’s all a big game of chess.”

“What about her, she’s a pawn...”

“I meant what I said, a pawn can be promoted to queen when granted the opportunity, if she goes behind enemy lines, there are ways we can act to support her actions.”

“Not fun,” she sighed, “-it’s set up so you don’t lose, how lucky.”

“Foolish Kylsha, tis not luck, I had everything in my grasp from the beginning,” the cigar reached midway, “-go on, let’s go into the tower, we must greet a hero.”

‘Looks like Vesper was right,’ she followed his steps, ‘-our king is someone scary – no matter the blessing he wields, a numb death-element or whatnot, the true strength comes from his mind; I didn’t realize what he was up to, makes me wonder, how many steps ahead is he thinking?’

Somewhere hidden, a link to Phantom's servers was established before a multitude of monitors. Lab-coat-wearing outlines watched, information flowed endlessly, "-we've broken through the first level," said one, "-here are the available data."

éclair sat across the continent before a somewhat smaller screen, '-idiots,' he laughed, '-gaining access doesn't mean much – trying to steal is the problem,' the fingers flew from key to key, '-do your worse, picking a fight with my master is the last thing you'll ever do.'

Water fell smoothly upon the lake, droplets partially made a rainbow, '-how long have I been here?' a campfire burnt, bones and remains of animals laid in a sack, '-the wildlife is delicious. The gate doesn't seem to want to open; did I lose my comrades for nothing?'

Rather than armor and a massively overbearing cape, Igna teleported to the final floor courtesy of Kylsha, he wore a gray suit with a marine-blue tie. An oversized throne room stretched for a few meters, the stone pillars bore an engraving of skulls, statues of previous demons lined the red carpet – the end held a powerful entity. Strong in body and stronger in the aura, "-Demonlord Kanad."

"Who are you?" echoed, the golden chair lined by crimson cushion added to the amplification, "-Kylsha, shame on you for losing the battle of floor 100."

"Whatever," she shrugged, "-lady Vesper said to leave the rest into this man's hand."

"Excuse you?" he rose, "-why would I leave my post to some stranger?"

"Because, I'm your monarch," the monster ring shimmered, "-Kanad, I say this in thy best interest, do not stand in my way."

"Monarch?" he laughed, the floor practically rumbled, "-YOU THINK THIS A JOKE BOY?" he leaped, a battle-ax materialized into a lethal downswing. \*Cling,\* metal against metal, Orenmir unsheathed, \*CLASH.\*

"Kanad, this won't be pretty," said Kylsha, "-fighting the king is a bad idea," she scurried to the throne and ate an apple, "-if lady Vesper finds out..."

"I'm not scared of her. Besides, if he can't win, what's the point of being a king?"

Chapter 770: Floor 20

'Meet the swing just before it reaches me,' the sword unsheathed, '-there's a chance he'll talk to Kylsha, seems the type to judge strength on outward appearances,' he dove through the levied fog of the impact, '-accuracy is good enough.'

"What?" \*clash,\* a brief moment of fear forced the body into a natural block, '-did he trigger my instinct?' casual banter to the demoness stopped short – after the first strike, Kanad turned toward the demoness with his ax at his side, more or less a warning shot. '-He parried my strike and vanished,' he scoured left and right, '-where is he?' the strong-armed Demonlord watched furiously, was he up or down.

"Drop your weapon."

"Excuse me?" the voice spoke from the throne.



“Surprised?” Igna laughed, “-here’s the deal,” shuffled to the golden chair, his fingers outlined the armrest, “-a king doesn’t need to fight,” \*snap,\* a ghoulish shadow dove into the fray, five strokes and four-hit, blood-splattered, “-the golden rule of kingship is entourage,” he stood with back against the armrest and held his palm open, a miniature version of the Shadow Realm materialized, “-so happens, my entourage is an entire universe, understand?”

“Whatever,” he exhaled loudly through the nose, ‘-got me good, he targeted my vitals and made sure to leave enough room for my survival, what a terrifying presence...’

“Meet Vengeance,” he said, “-the culmination of the woe, anger, and despair felt by the people of Arda, a personification of Vengeance who so happened to be my trusted aid.”

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He held his wound, “-impressive,” the grip eased, “-I was wrong to attack.”

“It is forgiven,” he said, “-tell me briefly what has happened in the years of the Tower’s existence?”

“I’ll explain instead,” said Kylsha, “-Kanad’s more of a meathead.”

“Can’t argue facts,” he mumbled, “-I’ll head out for a bit, have to gather the army for the last battle.”

“Understood,” replied Kylsha favorably, “-majesty, should we change to a more, let’s say, breathable atmosphere?”

“You’re the guide, lead the way.”

Menacing and all-encompassing switched to the landscape of floor 199, “-here we are,” she smiled grandly, a quaint table under the shelter of a log cabin’s veranda. “-Cutting to the chase.”

“Hold a moment,” the face froze, “-I forgot to bring Fenrir.”

“The legendary beast?” she seemed unshaken, “-why the worry?”

“No, I said I’d keep her by my side,” an uncertain discomfort led to fast taps.

“I’ll send someone to fetch,” she replied, “-will that suffice?”

“Yes it will,” he openly breathed a sigh of relief.

“Majesty, the emotions are readable, the body language is simple and predictable, very different from a few hours ago.”

“Has to do with my bicolored pupils,” he pointed, “-when its blood crimson, I lost any sliver of emotion I held – I become my true self. However, the crystal white pupil act sort of a limiter, I feel and express various emotions – good or bad, I don’t know, and don’t care. Does it answer the question?”

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“Sure it does,” she coughed, re-straighten her back and washing the forest by her cold stare, “-the tower of God is a realm in of itself. We conquered an infant realm not so long ago; it was altered to match the framework of a dungeon. Scifer wanted it to be a challenge for the toughest of fighters and a proving ground for our army. In a way, the levels are kingdoms on their own, this floor is living proof. Tis been

more than a decade, can't remember exactly, since we set foot in Plaustan – the town's grown around to take full advantage of the tower's resources. They feed on us and we train on them, a mutually beneficial relationship. So many people have died here, I can't speak of the stories courageous fighters recounted before we ended their lives, brings a tear to my eye."

"What's the true purpose?"

"There's thine answer," she smiled, "-there isn't one. The Tower of God is similar to a dream, an idea which says, the top will be reached by the strongest; and obviously, after an arduous battle, the reward will be worth its weight in gold, literally."

"No purpose, it exists just because it exists. Training forces is reason enough."

"Yes," a faint echo called her attention, she stood, made way down three stairs, stared at the tree line as if they weren't present, "-Majesty, the sad truth is, the tower of god is an anticlimactic addition to the world. We but have a few purposes..."

"Wrong," he stood at her side, "-the tower has shaped the destiny and path newer generations are to walk, proving one's might in the lower floors is common practice, the elite reach the top, and today, we're going to restart the tower for the better."

"Seems like the final gate's been opened. We should return to the throne room."

Kilometers away, a brave soul fought a rocky slope through a jagged hallway of overarching foliage, '-keep my guard,' she kept a hold of her spear, '-the last floor,' she thought and walked, '-here's where I'll fight my last battle. I've lost too much to brave this place again, Deadeyes, everyone, I'm sorry, your memories will live in my heart.'

12th December of the Year X102, a hero walks into the final lair of Plaustan's monetary factory. She threads from a peaceful forest into a damp castle, the pillars were twice the size of trees in what laid before her, in more ways than one, the construction was excessive.

\*Clap, clap, clap,\* stairs echoed, the outline of the last fighter rose from the depth, short hair flowed from an escaping whisper, faint whistles hummed, '-I've made it,' she gripped her spear and threw a glare towards the throne, '-Demonlord,' she gritted. An average-looking man sat at the throne, he bore long flowing brown hair tied in a low ponytail, the suit added a spark of humanity and reason – he kept the toothache pose aided by the armrest, the lips figured a little sneer. True terror in both aura and power stood at either side, Kanad burnt in a visible red-flame whilst Kylsha kept her uncaring gaze centered at the guest.

"Welcome to Floor 200," he thundered.

"Monsters can talk?" she approached and fiercely matched his response. A shadow scurried from one end to another, "-have thee decided on ending my life with backstabbing, sorry to stay, I'm blessed to be invincible."

"Actually," he smiled and held out a hand, "-Fenrir, stop scouring the Shadows."

\*Thuds,\* a flash of blue close lined her onto the floor, '-what the?' desperate to grab her weapon, "-ACHILLES, IT'S ME!"

'Huh?' the narrowed vision greatened, "-Fenrir?" her flashes flickered. Kanad and Kylsha were as confused, throwing murderous inquisitive frowns.

"Lower your guards," he whispered, "-the adventurer was once an old companion of mine. I not know of her disposition as of yet," the head hung back to stare Kylsha, "-a peaceful reform is better than fighting around destroying the room."

"No, I want to fight," firmed Kanad, "-there's no fun in winning by default."

"I bet to differ," he shrugged, "-when the dungeon is evolved, the expansiveness of the floors and difficulties greatens, you won't ever see an adventurer climb to the peak lest they be a demi-god. Here's a deal; after the evolution, move to the Shadow Realm; Vesper must have demon lord's ready to take the mantle of guardian till a truly strong party arrives. I'll say, by my side, there art to be more opportunities for fights," he smiled, "-what say you, Kanad and Kylsha, doth thee wish to fight beside thy monarch?"

"I'm willing to change my ways," nodded the demoness, "-however, the four goddesses, the entourage's strong already."

"No, I can't possibly rely on them all the time, they have the fate of a universe on their shoulders. Using their strength in trivial tasks is insulting to them and I. Demonlords on the other hand, are another story."

"It will depend on how she answers," the heavy brows flashed, the duo had settled into watching the leader.

"Igna Haggard," said Achilles, "-may we talk?"

"Why the formal tone," he climbed from the throne to a tête-à-tête, "-have Fenrir spoken about my origins?"

"The reincarnation of my master, Staxius Haggard," she stared up and down, "-true, the visage and figure are reminiscent of his days before the boon of a divine body. I can't sense the Death Element," suspicion built.

"Actions speak louder than words, and frankly, I see no reason in why thy opinion is to alter the outcome. Fenrir here should be proof enough," to which she moved to his side and hung on his shoulders, the head slightly tilted, ears and tail speaking through happy motions, "-our contract was forged from soul to soul. If I remember, I rescued thee from the eternal prison of Hades' three-headed dog."

"I don't get it. Why have thee replaced thy adversary. I learned from Undrar your enemy was the God slayer, Scifer Rethem, I decided to climb to a tower in hopes of facing him one day."

"He's dead, defeated at the hand of Zeus, same as I was. The reincarnation was a product of a gamble, I scattered myself through time, leaving my heritage and strength in being a foundation of a new world, the effort's paid."

"You're weak," she observed, "-nothing like Staxius."

“Stop comparing us, he’s dead, the legend of his story continues through the people he affected. I don’t expect anything, rather, I don’t care,” he returned to the throne, “-events have been readied to evolve the tower into a realm of endless possibilities. A lowly demi-god whose weakness lays in her name won’t suffice. Heed this warning, take the reward, and spread the name of the Demon King, Radahl.”

“Radahl?”

“Yes, the ruler of the tower and king of monsters, Radahl.”

“There he goes making names again,” whispered Fenrir.

“I guess so,” shrugged Achilles, “-fine,” she said, “-Radahl’s the ruler of the tower,” she pulled her spear, “-fight me one on one, knowing my weakness is but an illusion. If I win, you ought to answer to any of my wishes, no matter the scale of the request.”

“If the request is in the scope of my abilities,” the suit-jacket unbuttoned, “-spear versus sword, no magic I’d assume?”

“Correct, I want a contest of raw strength, no enhancement.”

\*Blood-Arts: Enlian,\* the hair bleached, “-my true form counts as an enhancement?”

“Not really,” her face gleamed, “-go on, let’s fight.”

The battle began into an instant disadvantage, the reach of a spear outweighed the reach of a sword, especially since his style relied on counterattacks; the form shifted to defensive.

“Any idea who’s going to win?”

“Achilles a hero of another world,” commented Fenrir, “-and my master is my master, hard to say.”

The spear moved unnaturally, almost giving the illusion of curving. He ducked, side-stepped, and parried, there was no way around her attacks – any opening instantly shut by her placement alone, ‘-rushing won’t help,’ sweat poured, ‘-she’s strong, very strong.’ Two steps, two strikes, one at the head and the other, the groin, ‘-barely escaped,’ he stood off-balance, ‘-oh god,’ she stomped, the spear dove forward into his left arm, it made contact, he used her momentum and spun(using the extended spear as foundation) wrapped his sword to her neck, she ducked, he jumped, she pulled her weapon and thrust upward, ‘-got you,’ it hit.

“Give up,” he said with a blade at her neck.

“You drew me into the opening,” she sighed and dropped the weapon, “-what did I hit?”

“My secondary weapon,” he panted, “-a good fight.” Little more than ten minutes elapsed, five of which were them studying each other.

“I hate to say it, the swordsmanship is top-class, a defensive battle isn’t what thee specialize in, do you?”

“Correct,” the weapon sheathed, “-a spear is a direct counter to a sword, there’s no argument. If I hadn’t gambled, you’d have won easily.”

“Good fight regardless.’

‘She seemed to accept what transpired, almost relieved to have lost. A win’s a win, no use complaining.’