

## Death Magic 771

Chapter 771: Tower of God, Conquered.

An article on the Arian Daily Gazette took the streets by storm. Traders to local rogues, the focus was on the title, '-Tower of God, Conquered,' it read, 'on the 13th of December, a hero returns from the conquest of the tower's highest floor. Her quest began more than a year ago, a gathering of the strongest guilds: Blade's End, Pegasus, and Montrial, to name a few, sent members of their organization to accomplish a deed said to be impossible, we asked, '-how was the battle?' and she replied with, "very tedious, I'm the sole survivor." The more she spoke, the clearer the picture appeared; among the dead was her party, often known as the Savior, they've rescued so many stray adventures the lord of the town granted them the title personally. "The battle has only commenced," was said at some point during the interview, we asked for specific and her aura changed for the worse, "-the tower has evolved into a labyrinth of 400 floors."

'Wasn't the purpose of defeating the strongest monster to stop further growth?'

"Such was the goal. We stirred the hornet's nest, the demon king, Radahl, who utterly defeated me, stated monsters are his subjects."

'Is the continent in danger?'

"No, he seemed to be preoccupied with something else. When I asked if he would attack, he replied with no. Monsters have always been a threat, with a name to their leader, us adventurers have a chance at avenging the fallen."

'Will you fight again?'

"I'm retiring. After conquering the final, tis blatantly obvious, the battlefield will evolve. Old-timers like me should leave the floor for the newer generations. Emphasis on weaponry will guide the adventuring world forward."

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'What is your plan going forward?'

"To use the reward and compensate the families of the brave fighters who accompanied us in a suicide mission."

'Advice to up-and-coming heroes?'

"Fight with the objective of getting strong, never underestimate someone, even it happens to be a Goblin."

On those final words, the sudden interview ended. The 13th will forever be etched into history as the day Achilles from the legendary Knig, conquered the tower and returned a heroine. The future of the adventuring world will depend on how the tower shows itself. Guild leaders of the deceased adventurers were grateful for her diligence, the pouch of tags was a heavy burden to bear, the lives of hundreds on her palms. We from the Arian Daily Gazette wish the best of luck to a living legend, thank you for your service, lady Achilles.' Such ended the article, cigar smoke puffed, Igna sat with feet kicked

onto a table. Location, the Eizo manor, “-what are we doing today?” inquired Fenrir dressed in an oversized white shirt, she ambled to the balcony and pulled.

“No idea,” the gazette fell onto the table.

“There are still things to do,” said a slithering voice, “-good morning, majesty.

“Who’s that!” growled Fenrir.

“Vesper, my stewardess,” he calmly explained, “-good morning, is anything the matter?”

“Not really,” she bowed respectfully, “-I visited to express my gratitude. On behalf of the residents of the tower, we’re grateful for thy intervention. A peaceful outcome was worth the trip, evolution of the tower will commence.”

“Anything I need to attend?”

“No, master,” she pleasantly smiled, “-the monster kingdom rules itself. Tis a festive month, enjoy thineself, if matters grow tedious, I shall confer to lady Miira.”

“Right, I forgot she was once a member of thy family. Very well, if my services aren’t needed, I’ll move to another task. I appreciate the help, Vesper, thank you.”

“The pleasure is mine, master,” she dissolved.

“Gross,” commented Fenrir, “-I don’t like snakes.”

“Stop being a kid,” he reproached, ‘-I’ve yet to meet Undrar...’

\*Knock, knock,\* “-enter.’

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“Sorry to disturb,” said a shyly vested Wendy, “-I was wondering if you had breakfast yet?”

“Wendy,” a nonchalant glance at the door had her cower, “-I’m sorry we sort of took over the manor.”

“It’s fine,” she whispered, “-grandfather said it’s okay.”

“Well then,” he threw on some casual clothes, “-I have time to spare. Wear clothes which are appreciated for wandering the town,” he side-glanced.

“Yeah, I’m not going out naked,” the door closed.

A stroll through town spoke of the effect the article had, they crossed the bridge, left Wendy to scurry towards the station meanwhile Igna and Fenrir circled the town-hall till its entrance, ‘-the noticeboard’s filled with congratulations.’

“Igna,” her nose veered her head, “-over there, I smell good food.”

“Understood,” hands in pocket, “-lead the way.”

Far into the continent, Apexi came under scrutiny from a gossip magazine, “-Master Julius,” the high-rise office inside Rosespire’s metropolis rumbled, “-we have an issue on our hand.”

“Lady Serene, rare for you to visit.”

“Stop being dense,” she stormed inside and walk, a fair distance laid from the door till table, any outburst was very awkward to handle, especially since the hallway laid so far away, “-here are the papers,” it littered his table, “-they say Vorn’s been caught in being favored by advertising companies – says we’re not playing fair in the entertainment market.”

“Vorn’s on tour with Aceline and Xius for the annual Aeuro’s festival. What’s the point of bringing this issue to my table?”

“Read it for yourself,” she said. He took two glances, one at her and the other, the table, ‘-what’s this about?’

“Apexi, the number one unranked agency has been accused to force idols into contracts. Promising talents are stolen with or without prior notice from the agency, many competitors demand justice and fairness. Some have tied the scandal to the Rashord Musical Academy, a prestigious university for musical prodigies who’ve had names such as; Rocher Cartney, the wizard of notes, Juiei Hone, a virtuosic violinist, and Kenkei Coleeo, a world-class conductor. Many of the top graduates unofficially sign contracts to Apexi, vowing to devote their skill to building their brand. Our investigation has revealed a very suspicious income, some are calling for audits, their spending on idol sponsorship defies the reported monthly income.”

“They’ve dug our grave,” the paper drifted off his fingers and onto the floor, “-what do they want, money?” he spun to the large windows where laid rivaling tall buildings that made the landscape sparse. Normally, Julius would be found at Apexi’s headquarters – renovations made his move to Phantom’s office at the heart of Rosespire, which in all aspects, was big, tall, and technologically superior to its neighbors. The holographic displays were impressive, night was when it made its mark.

“Julius, get a hold of yourself, the Anti-Narco, Anti-Corruption Unit, and the R.E.I.S, have readied their forces to attack our agency at the first crack. Our lawyers are busy fighting against the backlash, if public pressure increases, we’ll have to reveal the ploy.”

“If it was a lie, we’d be fine,” he gritted, “-this time, the accusations are true, we’re very much monopolizing talents; they don’t complain because the money is merit-based. The more they work, no matter the result, poor or bad, they get good money, considering the state of the economy, we might just have to take a hit here. Profits are low, the cutback off their salary must have annoyed a few,” he spun, the expression tightened, “-find out who leaked the information, regardless who it is, bring them to my office. I have to make a few phone calls.”

“Don’t jeopardize our situation,” she cautioned and left.

‘This had to happen now,’ the room dimmed, a holographic display materialized, ‘-I knew lowering their pay was going to affect us one way or the other. Never expected it to be in such a manner. A whistleblower; the university will deny involvement, the burden to prove innocence in on us. Luckily, our idols are in Alpha performing for the festival – Ansoft wishes to keep good relation, who am I to refuse.’

\*Call – Sister System,\*

“Yuio speaking, Yui for short, how can I help?”

“Yui, Julius here, have you read the libel?”

“About the earning of Apexi, what they said was true, I have the data. Furthermore, éclair’s took notice of the origin, he’s sent an attachment on the plaintiff’s possible description.”

“We’re in a pinch here,” he said, “-silence won’t help nor will hiding the information. We can’t keep throwing money at them,” he paused, ‘-maybe I could create gold and valuables to reinforce our finances. Banks are owned by the head of state, I doubt her majesty would allow us to inflate the profits without proper paperwork. We’re deep in the underworld, laundering is hard enough, can’t strain their pull any further – the possibility of the Federation’s collapse has tightened the risks. No matter how I look, I can’t see a way out. December’s supposed to be a month of celebration... I’m supposed to get married, why’s Malley not responding to my messages. Apexi’s under my responsibility, I can’t burden lady Elvira further. Since Lizzie began her studies at the university, I might have spent more money to ensure the environment’s better for her.’

\*Incoming Call – Raide\*

“Hello, what’s the update.”

“Bad, the public statement didn’t go well. Clout as a world-class idol hasn’t helped; someone is pulling the strings, the more the hour goes, the more defamatory the tabloids get, there’s even a scheduled live interview to be taken place at Rosian Media Square.”

“Even if it’s a lie, the movement’s going to gain traction, what has the board to say in the matter?”

“They’ve decided to save face and flee overseas until the situation is handled.”

“Right, those old folks were cowards to begin with, they care only about profits and we care about their pockets – if they move against us, D.G’s shadow should keep revolt in line.”

“Excuse me, Julius, isn’t there anyone who specializes in intrigue, we need to fight fire with fire, and honestly, we lawyers are head deep in paperwork. Fighting the state AN-N, AN-C and R.E.I.S is a war. If the complaint was in Rotherham’s jurisdiction, it wouldn’t have been an issue.”

“I know,” he exhaled, “-wait a moment,” an idea sparked, “-I know someone who loves to play mind games. Last I heard he had urgent business in Plaustan. He owes me a favor; I’ll be in touch.” \*Call Ended.\*

“Igna, I want more booze,” a quaint little cottage under the ownership of the Trader’s guild cozily accommodated the duo.

“You had a barrel of ale...”

“Not enough,” she burped, “-my stomach’s far larger.”

“I’m not sure a lady should be flaunting that image about.”

“I don’t care, bring me more ale,” the rambunctious attitude turned many heads.

"Lass," said a huddled group of old-timers, "-want to share a drink with us?" they offered a seat at the counter.

"If you'll keep up," she grinned, "-whatever they order," they cheered.

'She raises morale anywhere she goes, Fenrir's a phenome, truly. The town's lesser tense to before, the image of the first day's altered. A good article can bring the populous around, the Arcanum's more preoccupied with a scandal,' read the phone, '-where there's money and fame, there will be a problem.'

\*Incoming Call – Julius.\*

"Long time, cousin."

"I agree," the voice seemed harsher, "-too long. Cousin, I've still not forgiven thee."

"Forgiven me?" he laughed, "-cousin, you have it backward, I should be the one who you need to ask forgiveness from. My mother was captured while you were present, I made you and Malley patch up, what else?"

"Seriously, you going to bring the kindness up?"

"Of course, I will," he firmed the stance, "-I didn't appreciate the tone you used. If there's something you need, say it now, else I'm ending the call."

"I'm sorry," the breaths transmitted clearly, "-I'm shaken from the whole ordeal."

"Good, take deep breaths and tell me, what's the matter."

"Apexi's in big trouble, someone's unraveled our connections and affiliation to our 'under the table' deals."

"Sounds rough," he said, "-I have the information, the situation looks dire."

"We can't contest the argument since they're true, if we lie, we'll be digging our own graves."

"And, how do I fit into the situation?"

"Help us win, I don't care about the method, make it happen, the opponent is astute, very astute."

"A favor for a favor."

"Deal."

"I'm on my way." \*Call Ended,\* '-the game resumes.'

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Chapter 772: Radahl

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he rose from within the tightly arranged chair and table, the lofty atmosphere was too preoccupied with Fenrir's sex appeal despite the blatant demi-human features. Envy and lust practically drooled from the geezers' eyes and mouths, "-I need a break, don't worry," he said, the doorway closed

onto a populated street. Spun to the side, hands in the pockets, and cigar in mouth, he headed into the vague direction of the hospice which could be seen over the disorderly arranged buildings.

Where one side fell into total anarchy, the other, whelmed at the prospect of the possible damage, stood elated at the idea. An outline of a man, recognized by many, stood in the shadows of a closed shop, the shutters boldly gathered dust – to a point of inhabiting insects.

“It’s worked,” said another figure ambling through the crowd.

“Let’s take a walk,” replied the stranger figure, he took off his top hat, pushing close to his chest, “-my lady, I hope my information was helpful.”

“Very helpful; you’re a genius, my friend, we followed the money and found a lot of interesting facts. The money’s been transferred to your account,” she said, hiding her laughter behind a hand fan.

“If I may be so bold,” he strained the casual banter, “-there’s someone who needs to be watched out for. Phantom didn’t reach the peak from merely being talented, I’ve seen lady Elvira’s judgment, she’s unmatched in ways of doing business, none in the world, I dare proclaim, can ever come close to her abilities. Luck of the draw,” he said, they pulled around a corner onto Oatway street, advertisements ran rampant – traffic, on foot and on the road was densely packed.

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“No, I wouldn’t dare leave the matter frivolously in the hands of incompetent planners. Hence the reason for our meeting, I want to employ thee to see the plot through, do what is necessary, I’ll have my team and a large budget allocated in the destruction of the current monopoly. If need be, I could have my associates artificially raise stock prices, corporate raiding at its finest. What say you, interested?”

“Fighting in the business world has never been my forte,” he said, casually passing the incoming waves, “-scheming, on the other hand, isn’t farfetched. I’ll work in tandem with law enforcement, they’ve wanted dirt on Phantom for a long time, now is the best moment.”

“Very well, here are the contact information, lawyers, actresses, anything, and tis there. I have high hopes.”

“No pressure,” he snarled sarcastically, ‘-a shrewd woman, shoving the crucial job on another, if I fail, the blame lands squarely on my lap. I should have stayed home, still, the thrill I’ve experienced here can’t be rivaled. Look forward to it, underworld leaders; your secrets are mine; I’ll start with Apexi to send a message. If you get involved,’ he crushed the piece of paper, ‘-get ready.’

Trickles of blood sprinkled the floor, heavy inhales charged the room in erotic sparks, “-Elvira ma’am,” said a worker, “-I have urgent reports from our sister company.”

Flushed cheeks exhaled, a child laid in her grasp, “-is that right,” she kindly wiped the girl’s neck, “-thank you for today,” she said, “-ask for my secretary, he should have the payment ready.”

“Thank you, madame,” said a strangely toned voice to which scurried into the ajar door

The worker watched with a perplexed look, “-ma’am?”

“What’s the matter,” she smirked, “-have thee never seen a nightwalker before?” her fingers gestured menacingly, “-take a seat.”

“W-Will d-do,” she obeyed, the office chair strained, “-ma’am, have I offended in some way?”

“Yes,” replied a dead cold stare, “-knock before entering. I’m willing to overlook the blunder if the matter is serious, if not,” she casually sharpened her canines and nails, “-I dare not say what is to happen.” Quick to gather the papers, they flipped one by one, her gaze sprinted from left to right, “-I understand,” the stockpile papers laid heavy, “-one of our offshore companies being targeted for an audit. The official’s been tipped off,” she relaxed in her chair, “-I wouldn’t be worried,” her fingers nonchalantly searched for a number then called, “-good evening, Elvira speaking. I need to ask a favor, there have been dogs snooping around our companies, is it possible to silence them?” silence waned in-between sentence, “-it’s already been handled, right, thank you for the support, I never expected the situation to be resolved so easily. Have a good day,” the call ended. “-Now,” her murderous gaze sharpened, “-are you a virgin?”

“Excuse me,” choked the lady, “-is such a question necessary?”

“You interrupted my snack, reason says-”

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“I understand,” she exhaled, “-I’m a virgin,” she rose to kneel at Elvira’s stead, “-about Apexi, have you handled their problem?”

“No, someone’s trying to mess with Phantom’s trades. Unless the conglomerates boldly get involved, we’re backed by the Elon Dynasty, thus, our standing is greater than anything currently in Hidros. Any more questions,” she bit, “-and I’ll make sure your employers’ hunted like dogs.”

“Sorry?” her face washed in terror.

“Little spy,” said Elvira, “-are you daft; fighting Phantom with spies is a bad idea,” heavy steps stormed the entrance, “-we have a special area for traitors, bid thy life forfeit. The poison pill stacked in thy teeth won’t help,” she snickered, “-who are your employees?”

“The truth is out. I won’t speak, no matter the torture.”

“Don’t worry,” she said calmly, “-we’re not going to torture, instead, we’ll drive thee into hysteria. The worse pain is uncontrollable laughter – there’s a point where pleasure turns misery. Look forward to it.” The doors opened, soldiers in black armored suits entered, “-here to report, ma’am,” the leader saluted.

“Take her away,” the grip of her teeth eased. They took no trouble roughly handcuffing the spy and leading her down the hallway, Elvira followed the guards’ combatants till the door, there, another figure laid against the wall.

“My hunch was right,” said she.

“Yui, the training éclair gave seems to have worked fine.”

“It was torture, let’s not get into details. For now, I’m stationed to clean our company, there have been leaks, and we have yet to learn of the culprit.”

"The sister systems been working great," she complimented, "-the different departments stand on the same page. What are the following orders?"

"No idea, éclair's told me to vet the company, apart from that, I don't know. We'll see when the time comes."

"Right, if there is anything you need, feel free to ask. I'll have a plane and transport ready for when thee fly overseas. I'd like for a check at Phantom's embassy in Elendor, the leadership there seems to be rather convenient."

"Understood – I'll open a log just in case, foreign land, foreign people, too many variables." Ploys went into effect, an unproven gut feeling of many world leaders told of one thing, the Federation's summit. Counting among the current superpowers, Wracia Empire, Alpha, the Federation, and the Union of Independent nations. Each shared an equal in stakes finances, trades and peace benefited each until the destruction of Arda under the Empire's rule – there led them to be ostracized from the four-way nonaggressive pact. The foundation of the current peace laid on the Federation as they have Phantom, a military powerhouse, ranked first in technological advancement, graciously back Hidros. The emergence of an evolved Cobalt Unit's added fuel to the fire – in more ways than one, the turning point of the century relied on the summit's outcome.

A hardened, dirtily stained white panel of paint, the hospice, laid active. Ambulances, refitted pickup trucks, sprinted from the tower and back, casualties grew in numbers.

'Here we are,' skipped past the wounded lair, '-the training academy,' written across a wooden sign, '- seems to have stood the test of time,' he examined, scorch marks, exploded tree barks, and the lingering aroma of iron, '-a miniature battlefield,' he thought, a group of returning adventurers, opposite his direction, caught his attention. They chattered, the leader, firm in the center, carried a giant sword. He halted at the gate, shot a rather crude stare towards Igna, and moved into the shabbily cared yard.

'A green tag,' he followed, '-must be strong.'

"Greeting's adventurers," said a lady behind a gated counter, "-today's request's been arranged onto the noticeboard. Please bear in mind, high-ranked adventurers can only accept quest two ranks down from theirs – give the newbies a chance."

"Shut it, woman," fired a rough mouthed beastman, "-we take what we want and how we want," he stormed her counter and slammed, "-what say we take thee instead?" the group laughed, everyone, no exception, ignored the bolstering fighter in favor of the quests. The assistant had her face filled with terror, "-ay, come 'ere, there's an interesting job," hailed the party.

"Coming," he winked, an unsightly image then left.

\*Sigh,\* hands firmed her chest, "-I thought I would have died."

"Excuse me,"

"Y-Yes?" she stared, '-well mannered, no tags, a visitor?'

"Might I know the whereabouts of a lady named Viola?"

"Our guild leader, the lady's upstairs, she's in a meeting with the tower's conqueror."



“Could I send a message?”

“Sure, I don’t promise it’ll reach her anytime soon.”

“I’ll wait,” he smiled, “-tell her, Igna Haggard’s here for a visit.”

“Understood,” bafflement froze the timid regard, ‘-strange man,’ she thought while he disappeared into the next-door tavern.

‘Things never change, where there are adventurers, there’s booze,’ he settled into the quieter part of the pub, the barman gestured to say, ‘-don’t sit there, which he brazenly dismissed. Similarly, stricken by the courtesy and respect shown, the message-headed guild leader was without delay. \*Knock, knock,\*

“Enter,” she said, Achilles’ sheer aura blew as if a typhoon.

“I apologize for the interruption,” cowered the messenger, “-I have a message from the guild assistant, she said to relay this, ‘-Igna Haggard’s here to pay a visit. The room sunk, ‘-have I messed up?’

“Have the man brought to my office!” she yelled till the echo snuck into the cacophonous hall.

“Lady Viola wishes to see you,” relayed another assistant.

“Fast,” he observed, finished the drink, and made for the office. It reopened to familiar faces, a few steps in, the entrance locked, rather, gave said impression.

“Long time no see, Undrar,” he smiled.

“IGNA,” she vaulted over the desk and ran to his side, “-never thought we’d meet here of all places.”

“Viola,” strained Achilles, “-remember what I told you,” her gaze narrowed, “-he’s the enemy, don’t trust him.”

“You still angry about the duel, the tower’s conqueror sure knows how to hold a grudge.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she argued, “-We lost so much, does this look funny?”

“The strong decide the future,” returned coldly, “-adventurers are weak, the strongest platinum ranked barely scratched the surface of the tower’s true terror. There won’t ever be a second Achilles, the strength they have shown will be a benchmark, an unreachable height the later generations won’t ever reach.”

“Igna,” called Viola, her unblemished blue eyes watched in woe, “-do you not care about the people?”

“Time moves, people change, my priorities have been set in stone. Radahl’s but a mantle, a name for fighters to set their sights on, the true Demon King of the Monsters.”

“Tis true,” her shoulders slumped, “-we can’t be considered allies anymore, can we?”

“Saying it be the opposite will insult us both. I can promise this much, I won’t launch arbitrary attacks on the land without reason. The monsters fight for a single purpose, to get strong – the adventures fight for the rewards, we mutually gain from the exchange.”

“As the head trainer and leader of the training academy, I need to say this, you grossly underestimate our fighters.”

“No, I haven’t,” he returned logically, “-I’ve observed their behaviors earlier, they don’t care about respecting others, most haven’t the slightest idea of fighting for one’s life. I came to say hi, suppose the new results made our relation adverse, I’ve overstayed my welcome. Have a great day, Viola, I’ll have Fenrir pay a visit later, till we meet.”

Chapter 773: Fenrir’s deposition

“What was that about?”

“Don’t ask me,” said Viola, “-we may have angered him. He always did say, he wasn’t a hero. To think the Staxius I knew would turn into a threat against whole the world. Long as there’s the verbal agreement of non-aggression, there’s no cause for concern I’d say,” a gentle motion eased her on the chair, “-guess the tower will grow and we’ll have to adapt. Nothing new,” the curtain closed on the Tower of Aris. Igna soon made way to where it had begun, he stood with arms over the balustrade and peered the station.

‘Never expected the reunion to go so badly,’ he rolled and stared the stalls, ‘-I’ll have to accept the outcome. The tower of God, a major player in the adventuring commune, feels the same as when monsters first appeared and the new generation emerged. World’s come a long way since Vampire slayer and mages, I can’t help reminiscing.’ It had been a few hours, Wendy and her grandfather worked in tandem catering to the midday rush. He but stood with a beer can, contemplating what is to happen next.

“I’m here,” waved the energetic Fenrir, “-I met Viola and Achilles, they’re doing awesome.”

“Glad to hear,” he twirled the can, “-want some?”

Her ears perked, “-yes please,” she snatched the beverage and gulped.

“You sure love booze...”

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“Of course, I do,” she said, “-it warms my inside.”

“Right.” \*Incoming Message – éclair.\*

‘The jets have finished maintenance. One’s on route to the airfield, please take the next train.’ With purpose in his step, they bid farewell to Wendy and her grandfather, boarded the first train to Meke, and made the long journey home. An assistant gave them much attention for they paid for first-class, in trying times, the ticket alone would be worth three months’ worth of household supplies, money he seemed to carefreely spent.

“You look pale, did something happen?”

“Stop bugging me,” he sighed, “-I’m trying to work.”

"There's no need to be fussy," she defiantly stared outside, "-so much for us being companions and all, I guess I'm only convenient when you're in the mood."

"Honestly," he shut the laptop, "-is there a reason the phrasing is so melodramatic?"

"No, I'm only saying the truth. I see this happen all the time, the people around are kept for convenience, when tis outlasted its purpose, you either send them on errands or just don't care. Am I wrong?"

"The words cut deep," he said coldly, "-and I don't mind admitting what was said is true. Still, what do you expect, I use people, is it so bad?"

"Not really," she pulled a tablet and ordered snacks, "-the priorities and closest members in thy life are; Vanesa, Draconis, and Saniata. Still, as their father, I've never seen you actively try to visit or get in contact with them, are they also a convenience, jewelry to flaunt per thy whims?"

"Why are you so persistent today?"

"I thought I'd challenge the mighty, Igna Haggard," said she very sarcastically.

"Challenge, what an interesting thought. Go ahead, please enlighten me."

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"Snarky response – the whole ramble about protecting your world and what is precious to you, they're all a load of bullocks, aren't they. Deep down, there's no inkling of care or affection, even if there was, tis acting, a facade that has fooled even the actor."

"Come again?"

"I don't want to say too much," the windows tapped, a retainer stood with a silver platter.

"That train's long departed, lady," the aroma filled the cabin.

"I'm waiting to be dropped and ignored," she said, "-by default, you're a loner."

"Judgmental much?" he opened the cabin window, "-fair, what if I was to drop you, what then, should I have an obligation to dictate how thee lives. Considering what you've said, here's my point of view, I use people, and they use me. I only exploit those I've subjected to being in my way, they could very well be good people, but there's the point, I don't care. Once a light-bulb expires, what is the natural course, throw it away, you're not going to brandish the item into a jewel, the purpose is gone and the only function it served is rendered useless."

"Same could be said about you," fork and knife in hand, "-when Igna Haggard stops being useful, the world will reject him, wouldn't that suck?"

"Staxius Haggard outlived his welcome too, look what happened, another rose to take the mantle. With or without, destiny is set to follow its tracks. A spectator should remain a spectator, pawns will remain pawns, and the masterminds will lead to either chaos or Elysium."

She took a bite, the words went in through an ear and out the other, “-pathetic. I have no more words to say, Achilles was right, Viola tried to play devil’s advocate, didn’t work out, I’m starting to see what sort of a disgusting person thou truly art.”

“Fair play,” he gave a comical applaud, “-the legendary beast’s sees her master for who he is. What then, going to change sides?”

“If push comes to shove,” she glared, “-I wouldn’t mind tearing thy brains out.”

“Is that a threat?” the aura dropped, “-Fenrir, I’ve listened to what you’ve said, I’m getting off at the next station,” he threw a ring and a bank card, “-instant teleportation to the Shadow Realm and money, do what you want, I’m done with this conversation,” he abruptly rose, “-Running away from the truth are we?” said she, he momentarily stopped, glanced over his shoulder, “-have a pleasant day,” the train halted at Stonegrove Station.

The appetite faded, Fenrir sat with one leg onto another and angrily glared outside, growls subconsciously escaped her throat, ‘-how stupid is he? Why can’t he just accept the feelings, be frank, I’m not a stranger, I only want to know him better. I guess my words were crude,’ she looked to her side and noticed the items, ‘-such an idiot. He can’t even get properly angry, threw the ring and bank card, deep down, he’s aware of the actions and prioritized my safety before his. Either I should be impressed or appalled. Seriously, Igna, stop being a pain and accept that you don’t care about others; say you reject those who aren’t useful, accept it, and then we can move forward. I’ll have a reason to stand by your side, a reason to follow, and a reason to accept when I’m inevitably abandoned again.’

The bright blue Eznie carried along the rails, ‘-Fenrir sure was in a big ol’ mood today. Guess she was right, I use and discard people,’ a sense of relief washed his person, ‘-I feel free, I guess I enjoy being alone,’ wings sprouted, ‘-better head to Oriaon.’

He shortly reached the airfield, climbed aboard the private jet, asked for éclair to send an escort to fetch Fenrir, and took to Rosespire, there, a car waited to carry him north of the capital – the Multimedia hub, Lei.

“éclair, where’s Julius?”

“His at the secondary Phantom office inside Rosespire.”

“What of Apexi’s headquarters?”

“The office buildings are under renovation since the staff’s on tour or vacation. The studios are rented to agencies to film their soap operas and whatnot.”

“What about the live interview?”

“Looks like he’ll follow the matter through the Arcanum, and I agree, with the tension, a public appearance might cause unnecessary conflict.”

“I’ll watch the event play from the public’s eye, I personally ought to see the drama unfold.”

“If it’s drama thee wishes, tis drama thee’ll get.” From the private landing strip, the flow of traffic until the Eastern entrance of Lei flowed, at one point, they moved a few meters per minute, the streets were

jammed packed. Advert airships, commandeered by the movement against Apexi plastered damning statements. ‘-Give the idols a chance!’ it read.

‘If this is the stance,’ the door unlocked.

“Excuse me, young master, where are you headed?” asked a troubled driver.

“I’ll walk the rest of the way, head to Apexi’s headquarter, I’ll rejoin later, understood?”

No say in the matter, an employee had to obey orders, and so, he left the comfort of a very high-end car to walk among the very excited mob. The current location was due west of Rosian Media Square. Lens swapped for infiltration mode; a constant feed of current events kept guard over the greater picture. Looking directly at a person who gave their personal information, if they were in a call, the audio would play and often be transcribed; the ruthlessness of éclair’s presence in the whole capital’s network meant he could instantly blackout everything at a moment’s notice.

“Where are you, babe?”

“I’m at Cozua’s shop. I thought we were going to watch the interview.”

“My friend texted, she said it’s bad, the riot police’s on sight,” he switched targets.

“Dude, did you hear, Apexi’s going down in a few hours. Everyone’s rinsing them on social media, it’s hilarious.”

“Man, I don’t like Julius, the girls on the other hand, phew, especially Sheiwai from Vorn, I’d love her so tenderly.”

“AHAHA, DAMNED VIRGIN!” the target swapped to the surrounding. Closer to Oatway streets he got, the dense grew the buildings, brighter too. Rosian Media Square was a block after the Oatway Square to the northeast. Barricades nestled on Raneo Street, blocking back and forth from vehicles. None wanted the threat of a terrorist attack – latter occurred primarily in lesser important areas. What made Rosian Media Square unique was an open-air styled amphitheater, a massive edifice rose to slightly curve as if a line of packed buildings. At its feet, and till the next street, there was space for cars and a park, the edifice was a first, a sign of collaboration from the Elon Dynasty and Hidros. The curve structure, for lack of a better word, was a television, a massive screen on which played movies and advertisements. Opposite it laid a hotel, also courtesy of the Dynasty, to fully take advantage of the screen. Audio would have been an issue, obviously, blasting a movie in the city at any time of the day would require power and a lot of money. Luckily, the researchers arrived at a simple yet effective idea – a scan screen and the audio would be broadcasted in real-time to any and all recipients. Long as the functions were in a device; a homeless man could sit under a tree and watch the movie on an old radio. Between eavesdropping and ogling the shop windows, the giant screen sprouted in view. The pavements were stacked, ‘-law-enforcement was right to shut traffic, so many spells disaster.’

“It starts in ten-minute.”

“Over this way,” said a lady perched atop an armored van, “-do not push or run, the park has plenty of space. Those who’ve booked a hotel please move to the next line.”

He hung and slithered out of the pack, and waited under a bourgeois shop of attire, golden lighting from the interior added a sense of privilege. Common folks, the vast majority of the populous, were content to window shop. Couples walked arm in arm, the lady would very often point at the items, turn to her partner and giggle.

A touch of the earlobe dialed éclair's number, "-master?"

"Is it possible to book a hotel room to watch the event, I just learned of said possibility."

"I could check," he paused briefly, "-the rooms are reserved save the penthouse which costs an arm and a leg, the price is beyond extortionate."

"Right, recklessly spend-"

"Hold it, master," he professed, "-money isn't an issue for the Haggard's, or the Raven's for that matter. I'll book the suite right away."

"Wait, don't," he exclaimed, a few confused looks turned his direction, "-I only wanted to check. I don't mind watching the interview from the park."

"You must be joking," a notification flashed, "-the suite's been reserved, kindly make thy way to the hotel."

"éclair... fine. Get Julius on a helicopter, we might as well spend the night here."

"Fine idea, consider it done," \*Transmission ended.\*

'How much did he pay?' a browse showed 80,000 Exa, '-and I spent 76,000 on a night out, what the hell did they order... narcotics, makes sense.'

#### Chapter 774: My Little Secret

Time – 17:30, the event began with a big bang, lights dimmed, the dusk peeped over the horizon. A luxuriously fitted 'watch' area fully took advantage of the screen. The excellent sound system carried music through skin and bones; heavy chops from a landed helicopter had perturbed the surrounding around five minutes ago. Two couches embroidered with an artistic representation of the Cagula flower faced the music, the glossy finished wooden frame was similar to a painting.

"Welcome one and all," said the speakers, the screen sparked into life, a glance onto the gathered crowd showed people in the thousands had flocked, "-my name's Shane, the curator, and interviewer of tonight's episode of my little secret. To keep our guest's identity hidden, the reply will be read aloud by one of my co-workers while their face is to be secret," the camera panned onto a mundane seating arrangement. Not overly dark, two seats, a table, and a mat-gray interior, "-please tell us more about yourself," he settled before the unknown figure.

"My name's Miyo, and I once worked for Apexi," her voice edged on the border of crying.

"Tell us more, how did it start?"

"Well, I was very passionate about music, I've always wanted to be in the show business world. My friends always said I had the voice and visage of an idol – being told so repeatedly and the bullying that

came from it, I decided to try. My parents were seasoned musicians. From a young age, I unknowingly started the journey into the world of music. I made my first song at the age of six, and by fifteen, my father would take me to various competitions.”

“Very interesting,” he said, “-I’m sure balancing school and music to be difficult?”

“It was, yes. I managed to finish secondary with average grades, my goal then was to enroll in a musical academy. Choosing for the future was hard and a gamble, a very big gamble. My parents who’d been professional musicians had their ups and downs; I knew passion alone wouldn’t make it. Around that time, I stumbled onto a fashion magazine that recently began hiring prospective models. I sent my photos and received a call two weeks later. My first interview went over nicely, they offered a good steady flow of cash for each issue, I only had to pose, they handled everything. I figured it to be a nice part-time job, so I accepted. Before I knew it, my life changed for the better, the income increased.”

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“How about the university, you’d already found a lucrative job – surely more studying would hamper the newfound momentum, right?”

“Not really, the goal had always been to enroll in a prestigious musical academy; they aren’t so common. My father taught at the Rashord Musical Academy, I took the exams, paid the fee, and was on track to becoming an idol.”

“For reference, how hard is it to become an idol?”

“Difficult, very difficult. I met a lot of talented individuals who were broken by the hard industry. It’s not easy to survive, you need looks, talent, courage, charisma, and a lot of luck, making connections is fundamental. I still had my contacts and friends I made from my modeling gigs – surely enough, I began doing small advertisements for local companies all the while studying at the academy.”

“Tell us about Apexi and the Agencies, how was it?”

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“A year into the curriculum, my steady income suddenly stopped. My mother caught the monster plague and my father had to take a long leave of absence to care for her critical condition. I called my modeling company and they straight up denied their involvement with my case. Job offers stopped and my bank account drained each month, I worked hard to reach a somewhat profitable stage... then again, the world is kind. I wanted to know who had done such a thing, I wanted a new start. My contact was nulled, by that time, my following was somewhat moderate. I turned to a friend for advice, he recommended trying the independent idol agencies. My previous company had been a subsidiary of an agency, I won’t reveal the name.”

“What then?”

“Next thing I knew, I sent my resume and career-long to multiple C to B ranked agencies, they all rejected my offer. I kept up the curriculum, was eventually hired to perform at a local idol competition as a representative of my grade.”

“It must have been a great event?”

“I guess the fans were energetic. I performed, thinking nothing of it, my head was always on what to eat tomorrow or if I had money to pay rent that month. Working another part-time job in catering mildly scratched the debt I would eventually land in.”

“Debt, what about the money made through modeling?”

“Gone, I was forced by an ultimatum, and if I didn’t pay, I had to quit. My parents were hard as is, dad didn’t work and had to dig into his saving to keep watch over mother, I couldn’t strain them. That day, I went barhopping alongside a friend, he took me to a shady character, I immediately thought of the worse. Sell yourself and make money, the simple fact is true. I had to get the money somehow, and when we spoke, the character turned out to be a nice gentleman, he had seen me at the event. I was given a business card and told to be wary of low-tier agencies, the stories he told about girls and boys in my shoe falling prey to lustful bastard made my stomach turn. I kept a strong face and visited their headquarters the next day. The sign read Apexi, I was impressed, an A-ranked Agency wanted me, a girl deeply in debt. We sat, talked, and eventually struck a contract, it also stated that my employment with them to never be disclosed until I graduate. The money steadily increased, their modeling subsidiary used my talents, their promotion increased my little fanbase, later that year, I’d find myself on stage beside the likes of Vorn and Xius.”

“Looks to me the agency gave a lot of opportunities, which is the reason for the interview, tell us the truth, why go against such a profitable way of life.”

“Because the same friend who brought me to the shady character killed himself. He was found hung when the neighbor reported a foul smell. By the week, a letter signed by him arrived at my table, he’d wrote the misery and pain he had suffered. I was given preferential treatment; he was forced into taking me to Apexi. From what I understood, he was in debt, and money wasn’t easy. Compared to the world of girl idols, the counterpart is shunned, companies refuse to invest in them. After I was recruited, they sent him his last payment, and was fired, the economy was tight. Given what happened, I sought to find more about his past. I went to the office, met his closest friends, dug deep, and found the dark truth of Apexi – I met other very talented musicians at my university. They were all under silence from the contract, the money was reason enough to blindly trust the agency – fame and fortune were assured. I had a year until graduation, compromising my situation would have been foolish. Around said time, I met a freshman, she seemed joyful and very chipper, a famous up-and-coming idol, her fanbase tripled mine at such a young age. She was already featured in top magazines; we grew close and soon enough, we were family. I was experienced and wanted the best for her, then, six months later, her father died, the modeling company dropped her, I tried contacting her to no avail, her partner at that time said she would be fine. Later that week, I received a horrifying message, I ran to her place and I was too late, she had killed herself by an overdose. Once again, I lost everything, I was dejected, there was no reason to live, my mother died later that month, Apexi’s grasp over my life harshened. The closer to graduation I got, the more they were persistent on signing a new contract, I was threatened at gunpoint, still, I didn’t yield. I graduated, broke from their contract, and vowed to find the truth, I sent for a famous private eye who nicely accepted my request. Two months later, he brought evidence that deeply incriminated the agency, not only were the modeling companies theirs, they lied, used connections, built an entourage of snakes around their prey, force them into contract and exploit the idols without rest. The story always repeats in the manner, so many young talents are used and forced to either surrender freedom or their



lives. I vowed to expose the truth and together with my friend, the private eye, we've uncovered undammable proof against Apexi."

"I feel for you," said the interviewer, "-the story is truly sad, I wish my best for those who're currently under threat from Apexi. If you have any similar stories, please reach out to us, we'll take your case and with our friend, make the promise of finding justice for the fallen," the screen dimmed and it ended. Another show followed, this time, a detailed investigation on the cases the interviewee had referenced. Private information was hidden. The narrator spoke deeply and confidently, the crowd but increased, whilst the Arcanum flamed the agency's social media accounts.

"Ahh," breathed a foggy breath, "-the tea is strong and warms the inside," commented Igna.

"Cousin," said Julius to his side, "-you seem in good spirits."

"Quite the opposite from thy disposition," he sipped, "-were you not in Dreqai, Danzai?"

"I was a week ago, had to handle our offshore company of import and export."

"Pardon?"

"We've purchased cargo ships to carry items from one continent to another, we also have begun production on cargo planes, the first one was launched earlier this year. Tis an idea from lady Elvira, the Arcanum's grant possibility of intermingling with other cultures, there hasn't really been a trading company that focuses on transit alone. There was the establishment of Hamer's Inc, brought in quite a steady profit."

"And thee said Phantom was in danger..."

"Assets are one thing," he breathed, "-let's not change the topic," the posture shifted for one a tad severe, "-the interview..."

"A well-orchestrated narration," he said, "-it deniably was live, the responses and way of speaking were rehearsed. The way they built a sense of relatability painted the narrative of humble beginnings, a lass wanting to become a star, and the rest is per her words. Whoever concocted the ploy isn't daft."

"We know," heads dug into his palm, "-I'm at a loss. What she said is true, we have Scouters who use unnecessary pressure to recruit talented idols. The better recruit, the better the reward."

"I have a gut feeling the downfall of Apexi will follow the pattern Ansoft endured, though they're owned by the Gaso Group right at this moment."

"The fall of Ansoft?"

"Yeah, I planned their downfall – actually, I only wanted to steal Vorn from their company, turns out, the aftermath exceeded my expectations"

"I didn't know that."

"Obviously not, I asked éclair to erase any information pertaining to said event. No matter, the heart of the matter is, we've already lost. There's no fighting the mob, truth against the truth, we lost our reputation, lies against their truth, we'll dig a deeper hole. We're stuck," he rose, "-and maybe for the

better,” shuffled to the window and breathed the fresh air, “-if we’re going to fall, why not bring everyone else down with us?”

“Excuse me?”

“Leave it to me,” he snickered, “-to win a war, one must know how to lose a battle.”

“Whatever does that mean?” he slammed the table, “-Cousin, THIS ISN’T ABOUT YOU. THERE ARE PEOPLE’S LIVES AT STAKE!”

He spun and weighed onto Julius’s infuriated expression, “-I see,” he mumbled.

“Cousin, please, we need the situation to turn for the better, I can’t allow my employees to be thrown out the door.” No response, Igna casually shoved his hands into the pockets and left the room, the prince’s heavy steps ran till the corridor, “COUSIN, I APOLOGIZE!”

‘They’re all the same,’ he called the lift, ‘-pathetic,’ the doors shut, a metallic reflection displayed his visage, Fenrir’s words hurried into mind, ‘-maybe I’m the pathetic one?’

Chapter 775: “-are my actions evil, or justified?”

By the time the second elevator was called by Julius, Igna left the premises. The cloudy ceiling, especially the menacing dark wave of spotted shapes yonder, deterred many o’ bystanders. Public opinion was a sly ol’ lady, a purposeful stroll through the electrified park, whereby few sat under trees, others leaned against a fence, glancing at the screen, or some reclined in their cars at an inclined parking slot. Reason states, the closer thee are, the worse grows the picture, and in a way, the largeness of the unique screen had a lot of disadvantages. Those up close who walked against the flashing lights were prone to fall unconscious or have seizures. To combat, the building which made the ‘screen’ was a barrier in itself – allowing just about enough space for spectators not to be harmed. So is to say, the farther one is, the better grows the image. All and all, Rosian Media Square was a landmark specific to Lei, Rosespire’s Multimedia hub.

“Excited about the next game?”

“East Dragons are playing the Red Deiz.”

“I can’t wait to see their rising new player, Sleo. He’s a beast at controlling the ball – his magic imbued shots are unstoppable.”

He switched from one to another, “-babe, I want to get food, let’s move.”

“Hold on, the match will start soon, can’t we wait a few minutes more?”

“No, if we stay, we’re never going to leave.”

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“Fine, how about fast food, they have some nice fried rice...”

“No, we had them yesterday, not today. Babe, I want good food, not an excuse to stay and watch the games.”

“You win, but you know, I’d like to have my night compensated.”

“You sly dog, we live together. I’ll wear that outfit.”

“Oh yes please, I love you,” a mild twitch of the cheeks guided the regard forward with goals of crossing the finish line, else, the northern entrance.

‘They’ve forgotten the event, most of them have moved on,’ the destination narrowed through a gathered crowd. The same lady of before, the officer, stood at the same height and blasted the same loudspeaker, “-walk and not run. Traffic resume shortly.” Under stress, a rather crude emotion harbored from Origin’s meddling, Igna swapped his bicolored pupils for a deeper crimson, the shakiness of his step and clouded thought relieved, ‘-better,’ he stared forth, ‘-no emotions, rational and logic.’

By the time it came to cross the road, the released influx of cars had conquered the roads, major waves of spectators were at a moderate size. Igna waited in earnest with arms crossed. A lady stood beside him with two children. A toddler in her arms and a kid of around six years old at her feet, the boy held a paper plane. The traffic sped indifferent of the sidelines.

\*Tap,\* a mild touch pulled his attention from the top to his leg, the same child had used his legs as an obstacle for an imaginary plane crash. The boy looked up, the warm pupils casually grinned, the hands involuntarily moved to pat the boy’s bowl cut and extensively straight long hair. The lady glanced at the child, then Igna, and smiled.

A strong gust blew, carrying dust, leaves, and the paper plane. The boy pulled out the lady’s hand and leaped onto the street, time played in slow motion, a speeding supercar roared into sight, barely seeing the child and slamming the breaks, it screeched a tad too late, the bonnet had reached the boy, ‘-honestly,’ Igna dove, caught the boy, pulled his legs to avoid clipping the vehicle, ‘-the driver’s an idiot,’ the secondary lane hadn’t been accounted, a strongly shaped truck(on track to hit them) slammed the breaks. ‘-my abilities aren’t for protecting people,’ \*Mana Control: Elemental Variant – Spectral Dislocation,\* the elements lit atop his fingers, ‘-car, halt,’ said the mind, the elements reacted, a wind barrier blasted against the car, aiding to stabilize the momentum and pushing away from the crowd, water and earth mixed into a muddy substance covering the street and turned friction into naught. A wall of rock rose to guide the car off a path of a massacre. Besides him, the deafening sound of horns menacingly approached, \*Mana Control: Purgatory Flame Variant – Rendonl’s Gate,\* same to when a trampoline stretched under a person’s weight, the gate did so but horizontally, the momentum carried from the vehicle into the flexible bundle of ambers and flames.

\*AHHH,\* cacophony spawned trouble, the bystanders watched, many screamed. Through their eyes, the car met the boy and he was gone, Igna’s action barely hit the five-second mark. Steam from intense energy rose; traffic stopped, he knelt with one hand against the stopped truck and another shielding the boy, “-are you alright, sport?”

“Mister,” he looked with a terrified expression, “-I-I-I-I.”

“Don’t worry, everything’s fine,” he patted the boy’s head and stood, carrying him in his arms.

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“GET OUT RICH ASSHOLE!” cried from the side – the stronger part of the crowd ran towards the car, the street steamed from the culmination of spells, the mud and rock slowly faded into smoke.

“Hey,” a loud door clanged, “-you good?” worried the truck driver.

“I’m fine,” he said. Sirens veered the corner, the lady of before fell onto her knees, her face and hands frighteningly shook. The assumption was the boy had died; the focus was on the supercar. A looming figure arrived from the street, “-MOMMY,” the boy ran to her side, “-MOMMY!”

‘Mom? She looks about twenty-one, must have started early.’

“Teno,” she cried, “-Teno, Teno, Teno, you’re alive,” she tightly embraced the boy and wept, the child matched her mother.

“Move back people,” said a familiar high-pitched voice. Law enforcement arrived, a perimeter blocked the crossing, more and more people whelmed by the cacophonous out roar, “-you, in the nice grey suit, what happened?”

“Pardon me?” he returned her intonation firmly. Short red hair, square glasses, chubby cheeks while she stood a little shorter to average; her body filled the uniform too perfectly, it seemed to strain, yet her motions were flexible and non-restricted, velvety shaped eyelashes fluttered to an intense stare.

“Must I repeat my question?” the tone echoed and pulled the crowd’s attention. An ambulance arrived at the same time, the driver and mother were kept on sight for a close examination.

“Yes and in a more dignified manner,” he strongly returned.

“The suit, the way of speech, you’re a noble, aren’t you?”

“And, should it matter?” he fired, “-I only voiced so due to the incompetence of the law enforcement. Why would the idea of leaving the area be remotely justifiable when there are people en masse.”

“Sir, causing a scene won’t benefit our predicament,” she pulled onto a notepad, “-we need to understand what has happened.”

“Inspector Mai, I’ve looked over the security footage, the boy jumped onto the street when the lights were green.”

“I see,” she wrote a few words and shuffled to the ambulance, “-sir, I think it’d best for you to leave,” she said.

‘The way she brushes me off,’ he firmed his stead and followed, “-I’d think again if I were you,” he overtook her pace, making straight for the ambulance. Paramedics worked efficiently.

“How’s the boy,” he inquired, whilst the mother and children were inside the van, away from the public’s view.

“There was blood on his head, we thought a head wound, turns out he’s unharmed.”

“Oh, that blood,” he casually took off the suit-jacket, “-must be mine,” the right arm took the resultant momentum from the sudden stop, it cracked bone and tore skin.

“Take a seat, please,” they said pointing inside, “-we’ll heal the wound.”

“Not necessary,” he replied, “-what of the driver?”

“It’s not my fault,” dissipated into their area, “-the kid just jumped in front of my car, I don’t know how I stopped.”

“Sir, I beg of you, let us examine your wounds,” opposed to words, Igna took off the shirt, leaving half of the torso exposed, \*Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Restoration,\* a nasty wound rejuvenated, “-I said there was no reason to fret.”

The visibly troubled inspector passed Igna, rolled her eyes, and made for the driver. The family was given the green light.

“Thank you for saving my child,” she said, “-I should have been careful.”

“No need for gratitude,” he casually dressed, “-so happened I was in the vicinity. I have children myself; I know the fear of watching them be harmed.” All’s well that ends well, the very active crowd demanded answers – many statements later, the driver in the company of the officer surrounded the ambulance. The boy suddenly fell unconscious, the sirens roared, “-out the way, this is an emergency!” cried the driver.

“Not until I’ve had my share of things to say,” fired the man, “-where’s the lady, pull her out, I need to speak my mind,” ire-filled his frown.

“What’s happening out there?” cried from within.

“No idea, the police won’t let us pass,” replied the driver. The mother held the son’s arms tightly, the fear of losing a close one had drowned outside noise, “-for the love of God,” cried a medic, “-what’s the problem?” he leaned out a window.

“Politics my friend,” said a random officer, “-turns out the car owner’s the son of a noble who serves the council of her majesty the queen. \*Beep beep,\* “-out the way already.”

“No, she will have to pay for my car, I’m not at fault.”

‘These people,’ sighed Igna, ‘-I thought I’d walk home and have a nice nap,’ the imposing figure approached the scene, “-best the ambulance is left alone.”

“And who the hell are you?” fired the young noble, the officer smirked.

“A bystander,” he said, “-tell me, boy,” he pulled a pistol, “-what moves faster, my bullet or the officers?”

“Idiot,” laughed the investigator, “-threatening an officer from performing her duty is a serious offense. Are you willing to go to jail,” she laughed, the young noble breathed a chuckle.

“LET THEM GO!” blew a gale, “-LET THEM GO!” the crowd chanted; the barricade forced open by a few onlookers. The ambulance sped, leaving the scene in disarray – the rectangular glasses strode to grab Igna’s collar, “-DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE SEVERITY OF THE SITUATION?”

“What?” he nonchalantly undid her grip.

"WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?" he followed her example and grabbed his collar, "-My name's Theo Denlord, of the Denlord Dynasty, my father's a Count in her royal majesty's court. I'll make sure that the family pays, the mother isn't getting off easy. Because of her, my new car is scratched, there's a bump, that fucking kid had to jump into traffic!"

"I'll write the statement with this in mind," said the officer, "-those who aided will be persecuted by the law," addressed boldly at the crowd.

"Say something."

"No way I'm getting involved in a noble's case, hell no."

"Yeah, I get you, too bad we commoners can't do anything in the greater picture."

"We better leave," vigor and passion of the injustice quelled any sliver of revolution, two of the strongest entities present in the kingdom had strongly given their word. Nobles make the law and the police enforce said laws, hand in hand, untouchable by the common masses. Then again, Igna casually grabbed Theo's wrist and pulled, cracks gave into stomach-churning screams, "-LET ME GO!"

"Keep it up," said the officer, "-the grave's only grown deeper."

"Foolish," he laughed and firmed the grip, the wrist snapped, pained forced the noble to kneel "-do you know who I am?" he brazenly kicked the noble onto the floor, twisting his leather shoe into his cheeks. Cigar lit, he puffed and randomly kicked the man's stomach, "-those at the top can do what they want to the weak," he addressed the crowd, "-are my actions evil, or justified?" he kicked and stormed onto the noble's knee, destroying the joint, "-for one to so easily dismiss the life of a child in favor of his car, disgusting," he spat, and focused onto the elbows, slowly crushing his bone, "-justice must be dealt personally. Here's a lesson," he extinguished the cigar onto the man's open eye, "-be careful who thee messes with."

#### Chapter 776: Mother and Son

A sense of guilty pleasure invaded the atmosphere, to see a young noble be snapped piece by piece felt sadistically satisfying. They watched, and for all-inclusive purposes, made no comments. The extinguished cigar landed beside the man's bleeding face. "-Call an ambulance," he sarcastically said, "-any legal problem, address it to, the Prince of Arda, Igna Haggard."

"The devil of Glenda," gasped the officer.

"Let it be a lesson, son of a count."

Frantic breaths ran into the waiting room, "-Jeya," the face shimmered, "-are you alright?"

"Avian," she replied, "-I'm fine. Teno's doing an examination."

"What happened?" he sat not after dismissing men in police uniforms. She explained, his blood boiled.

"Don't worry," said a reassuring voice, "-a gentleman rescued our children," she pointed forward, "-he's with the doctors."

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'Who might it be?' Avian rose took short strides, turned the corner of a very sterile room, nurses moved to and fro, ignorant of his timid steps. Voices spoke clutters, '-what are they talking about?' he reached the room, rather, a partition of wooden walls with much less an entrance.

"How's the boy now?"

"Healing magic works better to conventional medicines," said the doctor, "-too bad not many people have the ability to control mana and use said spells nowadays."

"Don't be so pessimistic," returned Igna at the boy's side. His open palms had flickers of green crystal rain onto the boy's tense expression, the more it went, the better he grew, a frown turned to smile, "-there was a time where everyone could use magic."

"That era has ended long ago, the only place remotely close to teaching magic is Claireville Academy. I sent my boy there to study the same art, thought it would have been a great idea to learn how to heal without using tools or performing dangerous surgeries."

"Healing magic has its limits," he said and side-glanced the entrance, "-standing in the hall eavesdropping won't bring much to the situation."

"Pardon the intrusion," the curtains parted, "-I came to check on my son."

"What a close world this is," said Igna, "Count Avian Stark."

"Viscount of Glenda."

"There's a sight which brings pleasure to my eyes," the green light dimmed, Teno's consciousness returned, and opening sight fell onto the count, "-father," he smiled.

"Teno, I was worried," he ran to embrace the boy, "-are you well?"

"I think so," he replied, "-father, father, look, I made a new friend," he pointed to Igna, "-he saved me."

"Here you are," replied Igna, "-the paper plane you went after. A little worse for wear."

"This is the plane I built," said the count, he sought answers.

"A wind blew," replied Teno, "-the plane flew. I ran after to catch it."

"Basically, he ran into speeding traffic," said Igna, "-the situation's been handled. The driver wanted the child and mother to pay for the damages the car sustained."

"Where is he now?" flames rose behind his somewhat casual resting face.

"In the operating room," shrugged Igna, "-the officers outside can give more details. Let's just say, I didn't take lightly to his ways," the rolled shirt returned to normal with a few crinkles, he slid into the suit-jacket, gave a friendly high-five, firmly shook the father's hand and left. The sun vanished into a moonless night, outside lamps flickered into light.

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'In the operating room?' he walked, seeking answers to the puzzle. Good or bad didn't matter, he wanted to uncover the truth, an obsession with the facts led into a quiet corridor lined with desolate seats, far-end of which sat a curled figure.

"Inspector Mai?"

Head buried into her palm, "-who's asking," she muffled across.

"Count Stark," he replied, "-I need answers."

"Finally showed up," she rose her head and revealed dirtied makeup and an air of having cried, the eyes were bloodshot, the edges puffy and painfully watery, "-I only did my job," she said, "-this isn't my fault."

"Start from the beginning, what happened?"

She gave a coherent summary, the interjections of sniffles and coughs broke the flow various of times, he bore and reached the end, "-Igna nonchalantly broke lord Theo's arms and legs, even extinguished a cigar in his eye. I've never seen such brutality performed so mundanely. The doctors say the lord isn't in any life-threatening risk, the injuries may leave permanent marks, some say he runs the risk of being paralyzed."

"Why?"

"Because the Lord wanted to blame the incident on your wife and child. We sort of forcibly halted the ambulance to resolve the matter around the time the boy fell unconscious. You have to understand, I was doing my job, we needed to get a statement no matter what."

"I see," he paused, "-I get the picture, there's no cause for concern," and left. Scribbles went along the notebook, '-why did it have to be him. He put himself at risk for the sake of a stranger, rescuing my child and making enemies with a noble to steer the blame from Teno. Still, a favor won't bring anything, I still plan to execute what was discussed,' he stepped inside the warm room, child and wife waited patiently to greet their father.

Dusk fully encompassed the land, the casual detour of saving a child spawned various articles over the Arcanum. 'Unknown hero saves a child from death,' it read, security footage of the rescue was slowed and shown. On the matter of the noble's beating, the footage corrupted, no proof meant no credibility.

"Please set behind the yellow line," said a loudspeaker. The underground station is linked to Lei, Juei, One, and the terminal. He ambled amidst the crowded area, entered the tram, and made for Juei.

"Fenrir's in the Shadow Realm," read a message.

'After what she said, a meeting will be very awkward,' he arrived little more than ten minutes later. Up the tiled stairs and into the damp night, the residential buildings grew taller and jammed pack. A slew of office-workers returned, '-the norms have changed,' he quietly observed and took the vague direction to Lady Courtney's apartment. '-it's normal for people to forget the magic and focus on education; fighting isn't mandatory. Adventurers are rare as is, especially since the pay they get from risking their lives and slaving behind a computer equates the same.' Soon after, he arrived at the apartment, took the elevator to the penthouse, many of the residents had a sense of dignity.



'Home sweet home?' the locks clicked, the interior remained unchanged, the television gave subtle flashes and mild chatter. Therein sat Courtney with a pillow on her lap, her eyes blankly stared at the moving images, \*flick,\* the light toggled, "-mother?"

"Ighna," her trance broke, "-you're home?" her head tilted.

"I could go get a hotel if I'm not invited."

"Stop with the jokes," said a timid smile, "-go have a shower, I'll ready dinner, you've come home after a long time."

"I thought I'd cook," he said, "-keep watching the show, I'll fix something." A hallowed lonely feeling permeated the very large apartment. The stern red pupils returned to bicolor, the thoughts grew muddy – '-what's happened to mother?' the chopping board tapped, '-she seems desolate and sad, the face always has a reserved smile, isn't there anything she wants. She sat at the television mindlessly, was what Fenrir said true, do I only care for myself. Wait, no, I know what sort of person I am, I just didn't see how my actions affected the surrounding. I stand and make assumptions; none will bring us close to the truth. Look the apartment, we're rich, she's a queen of a whole kingdom, and yet, she's not happy,' multiple dishes laid onto the dinner table. He dropped by the living room, "-I'll go have a shower, mother, please handle the salad?"

"Will do," she replied with a lowered pitch.

Warm water washed the day's troubles away, facing her head-on felt tedious and painful. The mind said to forgo emotions and ignore her plight, given the chance, he would have done the same. Seeing the bond of a loving family, the words Fenrir spoke, and the sudden urge for self-evaluation. They sat at the table and ate in relative silence. She'd smile and nod at the good food, meanwhile, he'd watch her response and exhale.

"Mother," they reached halfway, "-tell me, is something the matter?"

Her mouth opened, the words choked at her throat and it shut, instead choosing to eat., "-mother," he exhaled, "-if you don't wish to talk, then I'll remain silent."

"It's not that," said she shyly, "-I don't feel right, my body isn't normal. Part of me knows my powers have grown, and then, another part of me says I'm weak, I have the whole weight of Arda on my shoulders. I'm scared to fly there since I was crowned, I haven't once visited, left it to Elvira and the Blood-King's faction. I'm a nervous wreck, the meeting with Hades' thrown me for a loop. I have vivid dreams at times, feels like I'm going to break. I want to sleep forever, not wake up, not think, stand around in an empty room and wait for the end to arrive."

"Is it that bad..."

"I don't know," she ate, "-what am I supposed to do, everyone's working so far, I feel useless."

"There's no shame in that," he said, "-mother, here's the deal, I'll watch over Arda until the motivation returns. Please, for my sake, take a vacation and explore the world, take a trip to Alpha and check on Elvira. Take Shanna with, she must miss her daughter."

"A trip to Alpha, I don't want to intrude on the Empres-"

"Yeah, hello, big sister," he ignored her worried and instantly phoned ahead, "-is it alright if my mother visits?"

"Why this all of a sudden?" she inquired suspiciously.

"A change of pace," he said, "-mother's been very quiet, I want her to experience the Alphian beach. A few of her friends will tag along, who knows, maybe your mother will visit."

"Mother?"

"Yes, you heard right."

"Well, sure, I don't mind."

"I'll have éclair forward the details, thank you for the favor."

"No worries, it's my pleasure. Speaking of favors, I have one to ask," the tone lowered, "-I'll send Loftha."

"Her?"

"Yes, her, what's with the change of mood. You know me, tis a two-way road, one woeful lady in exchange for another woeful girl."

"You sly..."

"No, no," she laughed, "-family helps one another."

"Right, you win," he gave, "-please take care of my mother, she's been very sad, I want her to smile."

"I will," the call ended.

"Igna?" she matched with an envious look.

"You heard that?"

"Yes, not like there was an attempt to hide the conversation."

"I didn't mean it maliciously."

"Right..." a slight grin whelmed the frown. From there on, the dinner escalated in pace, she spoke, he listened, he spoke, she laughed and added a few jokes, the loneliness of the big apartment closed on itself, her mood lightened for the better. Later said night, a private plane from Alpha headed to Hidros. Meanwhile, preparation for lady Courtney's voyage was met with a few guests. Before he knew it, a helicopter landed atop their apartment building, from it arrived Elvira, Serene, and Shanna. They met and laughed, taking away their responsibilities, the four-spoke to no ends. Retainers were strained, drinking commenced.

"What about you Shanna, how've the travels been?"

"I've learned much about the world," her cheeks flushed, the strong smell of alcohol littered the living room, "-what of Serene, she still hasn't found a man."

“No, I have,” her eyes twitched, “-I slept with the young mas-” he covered her mouth, “-please ignore her words,” he said.

“Looks like your son’s been up to...” smirked Elvira.

“I’m going to bed,” he stood, “-have a good night, ladies.”

“Awe, he’s embarrassed,” laughed Shanna, “-good night,” waved Courtney.

‘Her mood’s gotten better,’ the cold bed laid in front, ‘-sleep,’ he dropped and instantly dozed off. Somewhere in the night, the half-asleep mind rose to a shuffle in his room, “-thank you for the trip,” said a whisper, “-I’ll take the time to focus on what is important and decide who I am. Good night, Igna,” she kissed his cheeks, “-my foolish son, I’m happy we’re family. Take care,” she patted his forehead, “-sleep well.”

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“Have a lovely journey,” he said, “-I love you, mom.”

“Love you too.”

Chapter 777: Haggard’s peril

“Fenrir, Fenrir, legendary white wolf, why do you pout so before the spotless blue sky.”

“Don’t,” she exhaled promptly.

“Tell me Fenrir, is something the matter, my friend?”

“Adete,” she took one look, thought to smile or frown, eventually landed on neither and kept straight, opting to lay her head against a very lush tree.

“The reaction tells me a lot of this,” she explained whilst hovering about in her smaller self, “-here,” a splash of bat-shaped clouds spawned the figure of a student dressed in the complete package; uniform, a very outlandish backpack, and neatly tied hair, “-does this make it better?”

“A student,” she gazed unnervingly, “-is annoyance a habit or but a trait?”

“Very harsh,” she said skipping a few short steps to the tree’s shadow, “-tell me, what’s the matter, really?”

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“For starters, I don’t know anything about this place. I sense a lot of power and mana, the sheer density puts Draebala to shame, and I mean it. This may very well be the greatest universe to be created. I headed into the capital earlier, everyone’s celebrating – there’s no money system, people trade and laugh, the rich and the poor, it doesn’t matter, anyone can be anything. Frankly, I’m confused, a majority choose to work for nothing, they move without purpose.”

“Good observation,” commented with a tone of dismissal, “-they work because they want to work. A place where everything is given seemed to be heaven, sounds too good to be true, then again, it is too good to be true. Relations between the four generals and the residents are tight, the latter choose to

have a monetary system implemented, something to strive towards. They work for the sake of working, moving about, and feeling fulfilled.”

“Compared to Draebala, tis the complete opposite,” she said. “-I’m impressed, and frankly speaking, I’m most annoyed about Igna.”

“Go on, I’m listening,” she eased to Fenrir’s side, her hands laid upon the wolf’s thighs, her casual and innocent smile made it hard to keep an attitude, a slight shake of the head announced Adete’s victory.

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“I don’t get him. He says he cares, he said we’d stay together, and when it’s said and done, I feel like the man is better off alone. He uses people, says sweets things, makes them feel at ease, and once the purpose is attained, he throws them like old toys. Yes, I’m mad because I was thrown away as well. What purpose did I serve in the end, a guard dog?”

“This much I can say,” her longing stare went off into the distance, “-every since you arrived, my heir seems to have relaxed. The regret of losing everything at once without a say in the matter, I can’t imagine how much it must have hurt. I agree,” she pointed to the sky at a black shadow of a griffin flapped past, “-we in the capital know the devil children of Igna Haggard. They bring joy and pain wherever they go. Related or not, it didn’t matter, Igna accepted them for who they were, he gave them freedom and acted according to what the children needed the most. Everyone knows how much he loves those children, and we too love them. In a way, the goddesses also held in the same regard, they were inseparable and very cordial, a very healthy relationship. Time moved on, Staxius reincarnated into Igna, he’s still the same person, just under a different name, perhaps the master wanted a fresh start, and perhaps he wanted to see the world through another lens. Me too, I feel lonely at times, I often sneak glances at his outside life, and when I see how much fun he’s having and the problems he overcomes, I feel a sense of relief. Whether I’m involved in his life or not, one truth will never change, he knows the importance of family more than anyone.”

“Why does he keep people away if he loves his family, isn’t it a blatant paradox?”

“Have you not learned from the past?” a judgingly crude flutter of the eyelashes had Fenrir unknowingly pause.

“The curse of the death reaper, the curse to restart...”

“Correct,” she smiled, “-you’ve figured it out. He keeps people away because he loves them. To us, Igna’s still Igna, a young boy we call master, comrade, and most of all, loved one. Ask the goddesses and you’ll see; they know who he is deep down. We don’t need to be in his life to be of worth, for you see, we are the very fabric of his life, the people who he can turn to when in need, the people he knows are there and will always be there.”

The more words parted her lips, the quieter grew Fenrir, ‘-this isn’t the master I’ve served, he’s a new person,’ the dissimilarities were hard to accept and much harder to digest.

“Take in the Shadow Realm,” she proclaimed suddenly on her feet, “-tis the culmination of what Staxius gave to build, his life is the very essence of our realm, a place of bliss and harsh trials, a place where all is right, and where wrongs art be right per what justice says. He gave his life, his strength, and his symbol

of powers to become the foundation. Igna gave his Death Element in the creation of the structure, walls, and roof. We are the residents of the house they built, the decorations which would otherwise be an empty arrangement of cells. We make the house a home," she grinned, "-do you understand a little?"

"I'd be a fool if I said no," she clambered against the tree, "-not after that speech. Adete, were you always so wise?"

"Not really," she skipped ahead, tipped her body forward, and winked, "-I'm just a regular middle-schooler, nothing more, nothing less," she vanished in a veil of smoke, her bag fell.

"I was worried for nothing," she paused and stared, '-I don't do well in adversity,' she bent and picked the accessory, '-the Shadow Realm is what my master's put his all into,' a step into the sun rose the temperature, '-wouldn't be so bad to watch the realm grow.' Children from families ran around a garden of flowers to her right, the castle grandly gave onto the yard. Families, couples, visitors, name it, and access was granted into the inner-castle town of Rosespire, those who wished to visit were allowed unconditionally. 'I wish the people of Draebala could experience the fullest meaning of life.' The worries weren't completely shut – glooming over emotions and the issues wouldn't bring solutions, '-show me what you've got,' she walked into town where the Valkyries waited.

14th of December rose through the foggy street of Juei. A well-tuned alarm buzzed and vibrated, '-morning already?' he shoved the blankets to the side and yawned to sit at the bed's edge, '-I didn't dream. Mother departed for Alphaia. Lady Elvira, Lady Shanna, and Lady Serene followed her into the vacation. Fenrir was right about me,' he grabbed the nearest sleeping gown, slid into fuzzy slippers, and slithered into said gown. The door handle was very cold to the touch, '-05:30 cold,' he sniffled and hunched into the vast apartment.

\*Beep,\* the intercom buzzed, '-who is it at this hour?' he made for the main door reluctantly, "-yes, what is it?" a damp aura invaded the ajar door, '-what the?' consciousness suffered a rude awakening.

"Hello, Igna," said a lady dressed in black, "-long time no see."

"Loftha... long time no see indeed."

She pressed her arms against the partly open entrance, "-let me in."

"Wait, wait," he chose to slide outside, "-explain?"

"Big sister Eira said I was to exchange places with her lady aunt. Is it so easy to forget the pain I had to endure, the suffering I had to go through to have stood at your side? Igna, I've fought and have gotten stronger," a silver-tag shimmered around her neck, "-the day where I felt what thee did, I knew it wouldn't be easy. Our relation starts anew here."

He watched her skeptically, "-the marriage would have been a great political move. I admit I did so to further my agenda."

"Drop the tough boy act, it doesn't matter, I'm here to further my agenda."

"Forcing thyself into my life again?" the arms crossed, "-if it had been under different circumstances, you would be out of the building without a second thought. No matter, if tis a fresh start thee wants, tis

what they'll get," he made for the inside, "-I don't bear any responsibility to care for your state of mind and being. Follow or not, the choice is yours."

"Fine, fine," she sighed, "-let me in."

A few hours elapsed; the guest fell asleep in one of the vacant rooms. He watched out the large window with a cup in hand, the television slowly recounts the news, "-in our final story, the well-respected Apexi has fallen under fire from many allegations of wrongdoings. A live broadcast of my little secret hit record numbers, public interest is very invested in the matter. Our report at the scene," the camera swapped for a lady in rain-coat, "-hello Karl, I stand before a crowd of restless fans, many have protested against the injustice and monopoly Apexi have held over the industry," the displayed scene was complete chaos, the pavements lining Apexi's headquarters were littered by tents and belligerent bystanders. Workers were escorted to the safety of the compound, the louder they grew, the more the fire burnt. Amidst the shouting, the camera shifted to an impromptu interview, "-we're very lucky to see an up-and-coming producer from Caiga Inc at a potentially dangerous protest."

The younger man, tall and slim had a rounded nose that carried a frigid pair of spectacles, "-the question's actually very interesting," he said cheerfully, "-status mustn't deter someone from fighting in what they believe. I've proudly worked for Caiga Inc, our talents and artists always have our support. TO think, a company I once admired to have fallen so low, I can't imagine the pain our prince of Hidros, Julius Haggard, to have felt. Retired or not, the super idol's effort has made the industry what it is today, for that, I'm very thankful. Still, it doesn't absolve the malicious behavior."

"Thank you for the input, Jool."

"Anything," he replied and made deeper into the chaos. The reporter took another look and landed on a reservedly dressed lady, "-would you believe it," she exclaimed and approached the lady, "-Miss Shiona from Starlight Productions, have you come to participate in the protest?"

"Yes," she muffled to which the reporter shoved the microphone by her scarf-covered mouth, "-I will do everything I can to help the industry. We must do away with injustice."

"Thank you for the input," she said and faced the camera, "-there is no telling what will befall the fate of the entertainment industry. If Apexi falls, will it bring luck or misfortune, time will tell? Back to you, Hendr."

"Thank you, Karl," the image reverted to the studio, "-this just in from another reporter on the field, Count Esteballe Denlord of her royal majesty's council has filed a lawsuit against the Prince of Arda, Igna Haggard. More details on the field," the image swapped yet again, "-Count Esteballe Denlord at the early hours of December the 14th has filled a lawsuit against the Prince of Arda. The basis of the lawsuit is assault, the prince allegedly attacked and maimed the count's son, Theo Denlord, a prominent star in the world of racing. The count had this to say, '-to those watching from home, my son was assaulted without reason before a crowd of hundreds. No one was able to say anything, witnesses say the prince had threatened any who'd dare speak against him. Royal are leaders, we must follow and hold them accountable for their actions, noble or not, assaulting another is wrong, and to prove my point and for justice, I will fight the Haggards with every fiber of my being. Julius Haggard and his cousin, Igna Haggard have proven their stock in the public eye, we need justice, and I, Count Esteballe from her Majesty's court, will make sure justice is served,' so he said, the statement garnered favorable response over

social media, has the era of the prominent Haggard dynasty ended?" the narrator ended the summary, the television toggled off, \*yawn,\* '-we're in trouble.'

#### Chapter 778: Dead end

'I arrived at the office for a normal day. The entrance was empty, the signs of revolt against Apexi seems to have dwindled. After I sat,' the computer screen flashed countless morbid titles and articles, '-the target's swapped to my cousin, he's attacked a noble of the court and is now facing charges. The media's relentless, the Haggard name is in jeopardy,' angry and flustered, retainers usual to greet the prince for a routine exchange of word, simmered silently in the corridor. The whole office building chaotically moaned and groaned, workers from every department ran across to fetch papers, deliver private messages, and report the situation to their higher-ups.

The screen switched for the stock market, Phantom's stock prices dropped by 10 percent, in a matter of days, the company lost close to half a billion. Julius reclined into the chair, worried about Apexi who'd taken a deeper stab, 20 percent. Elbows against the armrest, fingers pressed against one another and visage stern onto the screen, it wandered to the bottom corner where time displayed; 10:30.

Meanwhile, hidden in plain sight, a couple of strangers sat within a lovely cozy white fence. A waiter arrived with their orders.

"Good job," said one resting a golden rimmed hand fan on the round wooden table.

"Not my place to accept gratitude," answered the other, he sipped, the warmth mildly flushed his cheeks, "-the man practically walked into the trap. I couldn't have asked for the young noble to be so easily manipulated. Still, there was a high possibility of the boy dying."

"I'm sorry, took it a little too far. We promise to pay the injured party handsomely. Count Denlord's swaying the court to go against the Haggard's."

"The company prices of each target have dropped," he observed, "-there's no rescuing them. The corporation's ready to buy..."

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"You know us well," she said, "-our takeover's yet to start. I ought to inflict more pain. Hidros' on way to becoming a haven for business, Rotherham's already the Trade Hub for multiple big organizations, prime example – Elon's Dynasty."

"Rotherham's in the jurisdiction of Duchess Courtney, sister to the late King Staxius Haggard."

"I know," her pupils rolled, "-it'd behoove them to not antagonize the newer parties. Should be kept neutral."

"Whatever thee says," he replied, "-my job is done for the moment, I'll return to investigating the connections between the major players. May the goddess of fortune bless thee."

"Likewise," she replied, "-good work, we expect great things."

The slumped shouldered man paid no heed to the obstacle before him, the mind simply kept at a lowered posture, '-pests,' he gritted, '-endangering them for the sake of an advantage. I said to not

involve bystanders... I'm way in too deep, if I retreat, everything's going to be flung in my direction. Walking the path of intrigue is dangerous and potentially deadly...' he stopped at an electrical-shop, televisions of various sizes were piled into a pyramid – subtitles allowed for a soundless understanding. '-The Haggard's are under fire,' he observed, '-the count's adding fuel, where will the crash land us. If this were to happen in my homeland, I doubt the leaders could handle the pressure, it's merciless, I feel for the recipient. The war fought without bloodshed is scarier.'

Mid-day rolled over the capital, lunch break for many companies. A clear sky and bright day, not to forget the hot rays, the temperature was high by Rosespire's standards.

Since the leaders were on break, Phantom ran itself through sheer force of will, not that it mattered, the target on Apexi's back thickened.

'Noon,' exhaled Igna, '-I dozed off after the morning news,' he awoke to muscle pain from a bad sleeping posture, '-Loftha's walked into my life again,' he stretched, toggled off the screen and clapped, the curtains closed automatically.

"Apexi's in big trouble," said the uninvited guest.

"Loftha," he threw an emotionless regard, "-suppose you're intent on standing?"

"Yes," she replied, "-I'm going to stay and help."

"Why, didn't I subject thee to enough pain, are you a masochist, doth thee wish another doze of the suffering?"

"Stop it," she threw open her palms, "-not another word. I came for a simple reason, big sister Eira ordered so."

"Right," he made for the toilet, "-whatever you say."

The steam fogged the mirror, and after the shower, he stood face to face against himself, '-how should I go around dealing with the problem?'

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\*Ding,\* rang the phone, \*Incoming Transmission: éclair.\*

"Greeting's master, we're in trouble. Not only is Phantom and Apexi under attack, someone's working behind the scenes to expose the links to your company, Raven, offshore. The many transactions between us, the D.G, and Elon's Dynasty are to be exposed if nothing is done."

"What's the medium of the attack?"

"Through the Arcanum," where one would expect a shuddering voice, éclair could be heard laughing and even project the imaginary image of him smirking at the idea, "-they've made a mistake and I'm going to take matters to heart."

"Right," he wiped his face, "-there's no way to counter Denlord's attack. Give me the list of her majesty's court, I'll need to correspond to them accordingly."

"Yes sire, I'll have it ready." \*End of Transmission.\*



The list read as follows:

Duchess of the Goldberg Dynasty, Lady Katarina Goldberg.

Count of the Denlord Dynasty, Lord Esteballe Denlord.

Viscount of the Zonti Family, Lord Ameo Zonti.

Baron of the Curn family, Lord Harno Curn.

Baron of the Remington Family, Lord Luther Remington.

Five nobles were selected for their loyalty and honesty towards their crown. Their purpose was simple, to gather and decide on trivial matters – act as a shield to her majesty the queen from when matters are dire, they were the mediators and closest confidants.

Latest at 13:00, Igna slid into a suit and exited the apartment, “-are you going somewhere?” asked Loftha conveniently waiting in the underground parking.

“Listen,” he circled, looking for a vehicle to drive, “-I don’t need an assistant. Scurry along,” he settled on a newer addition to lady Courtney’s collection, the Mizo S5, a collector’s vehicle, the model was a collaboration between two powerhouses in the automobile industry, Yokta and Pildi, where their previous models subjectively said the love of each team would produce a slimmer and faster-looking beauty, what was resulted was a strong robust car with a menacing growl, the emblem, a dragon. Red with black stripes, the headlights circled with a dark-purple glow, terrifying, to say the least. He tapped his phone and the doors unlocked, the engine thundered in an ominous, ‘hello’.

“I’m coming with you,” she entered the passenger side and sat.

“You’re getting on my nerves,” he grabbed the steering wheel, “-here’s a simple mission, I’ll drop you at the capital,” he threw a secondary bank card, “-kindly observe the current trend and what the populous is saying. Look at it with bias, I don’t care, report daily.”

“A convenient way to get rid of me,” her eyes narrowed.

“No, there’s someone else you ought to meet,” he showed a photo, “-I sort of killed her father and drove her mother to insanity. I’ve yet to visit – there are more pressing issues at hand.”

“I understand,” she nodded affirmingly, “-I apologize for acting the way I did. Big sister said to be obnoxious until you gave.”

“She sure knows how to press my buttons.” Therein, they drove into Hidros’s heart. éclair contacted the nobles for meetings, two of five answered. 14:30, he drove into a parking lot and made for Loron’s Restaurant. Passing the olden style buildings brought a sense of gratification.

‘Here we are,’ the restaurant rested peacefully. A familiar face escaped from the neighboring alley, the silhouette had her gaze firmed upon the building, no care to the surroundings, “-lady Beatrice Jola.”

“Pardon?” her hair brushed against her back, “-who’s asking?”

“Igna Haggard,” he replied, “-long time no see.”

Her neatly trimmed eyebrows crinkled, the forehead spawned wrinkles. A spark eased the tension, the jarred edges soothed to gleam under the sunlight, “-Igna, it is you.”

“Correct.”

“Pardon, I really ought to get ready, we’re expecting a representative of the Goldberg Dynasty.”

“That would be for me,” he said, “-we have an appointment.”

“I forgot you’re a big shot nowadays,” said she in jest, the doors opened to an empty inside. The whole restaurant was booked, the staff members waited patiently, “-Igna, why not visit the others,” suggested lady Jola, “-I’m sure Joe would be happy.”

“Are you sure?” he turned from his seat trying to glimpse towards the cooking section, “-I certainly don’t mind.”

“If tis about Kyle Darker, worry not, the chefs on tour overseas to shoot a new cooking show,” she giggled, “-right, go, I’m sure you’ve missed them.”

Pushing the door into the kitchen had a nostalgic feeling, the air, and pressure of cooking, the chefs spoke through motions, “-Jola, is the table set?” fired the always strained voice of Igona, “-for the love of god, reply,” he spun, “-who the hell are you?”

“What’s the matter,” hailed from the other side, “-Igona, I’m waiting for the ingredients.”

“Wait a moment, Joe, we have a guest,” said a lady.

“Yes, a guest,” added another.”

Annoyance twitched his cheeks, he stormed the middle and shouted, “-OFF LIMITS!”

“Hello everyone,” said Igna, “-long time no see.”

“WHO the hell are you?” fired Joe.

“Igna Haggard, don’t you remember?” he casually tilted his head, “-I see the bandana has yet to be changed in the many years we met.

“Igna!” the eyes widened, “-Igna...” the sudden change in energy, “-long time no see, yes,” the very energetic gazes collectively dulled to the floor, “-why?”

A chuckle escaped, they jointly matched the guest’s outburst and exchanged meaningful glances, “-why are you laughing?” inquired Igona.

“The reaction,” he said, “-Cle’s result lingers, the betrayal must have been a hard choice to make.”

“We did...”

“Don’t worry,” he said, “-I’m here as a guest,” before another word said, Jola stormed through the door, “-bad news,” she exclaimed, “-Lady Katarina Goldberg’s here instead of their representative.”

“My cue to leave,” he nodded, “-I’m expecting a meal worthy of the Loron name.”

An acquaintance of the olden days waited gracefully at the window table, age took its fair share of digs at the lady's visage, and opposed to using makeup to hide the signs of age, she opted to embrace the features. Said decision made her better looks-wise.

"Pardon if I was late," said she.

"Pleasure to make thy acquaintance, lady Goldberg," he nodded and sat.

"You're the Devil of Glenda I've heard much about," her subtle look had more hidden deep within, "-I can figure a guess as to why you'd wish for us to meet, then again, I don't mind the controversy," she smiled cordially, "-let us speak in more details." Over the next two hours, they ate and spoke, Igna carefully chose his words, she refuted any attempts at misdirection and stayed on point, by the time dessert arrived, it showed 16:45.

"Lord Igna, I understand your plight and I'm sorry to say, we from the Goldberg Dynasty have no say in another noble's affairs. I enjoyed the meal and the conversations, perhaps there's more to discuss for the future, I kindly refuse to be associated with any parties. A dukedom must stay neutral, I promise to keep the balance, justice is a game of cat and mouse, may goddess Syhton bless thee."

"Thank you very much, duchess Goldberg, until we meet again," the meeting would solidify a certain trend. Swaying her majesty's court's option wouldn't work, the secondary party was the Remington family, an old friend in the past life. They also didn't show interest in the matters.

Darkness veiled the eventful day; the body nonchalantly returned to Loron's that night for dinner, he left at the early hours of 19:32, the gently lit building shimmered against his back, a cigar lit, smoke puffed, '-a dead-end,' he walked, '-looks like the parties aren't interested in siding with a losing team. Understandable,' he sat onto a lonesome bench and faced the starry night, '-a losing battle, I can't see solution...'

#### Chapter 779: Elendorian Conflict

'Stability,' sparked within the ever-plotting mind, '-taking the matter to Gallienne would only take a few minutes, and I'm sure I can use the pressure from Phantom's undeniable influence over Hidros's status in today's world. Doing so would amount to breaking an alliance, one must clean one's own mess,' he waited and watched the cloud pass along the night. Midway, the body instinctively wished to visit the 'scum's district,' where laid the D.G's hidden bar. On second thought, the people in said place had already served their purpose, and in thinking so, Igna returned home to a dull apartment. He soundly returned to sleep, the real cause for trouble was the border between King Juvey and Queen of Elendor.

In the late hours of December the 14th, the Cobalt Unit's army broke through the defensive border of Elendor. Consider this, the border used to have been a split of 50-50, and for the majority of the time, the battle was allowed to be a 75-25 split in Phantom's favor. No decisive battle was ever fought, Phantom had orders to defend, not invade, the people of Melinda, King Juvey's province's name, had suffered much, their world revolved around battle and starvation. While Phantom maintained the advantage, it was easy to keep the battle confined and limit casualties, in a way, they fought to better both continents regardless of outside orders. Who'd even care to battle the strongest group at the time, they were beyond the rest of the world's reach; winning meant nothing. This is where the morality of such a troop came under fire and scrutiny, the brazen mindset of walking into battle expecting to win

without a finger lifted eventually drove the soldiers to insanity. They inflicted much pain, war crimes were hidden to ensure each side's integrity. Money flowed; Phantom controlled both party's weaponry – the enemy needed to buy from them to keep a level playing field. The blood money tremendously filled Phantom's coffers, and with it, they expanded their influence into many sectors, prominently; import and export.

Add another factor, the evolution of weaponry through battles. The Cobalt Unit wasn't silent in the last few years, no, rather, they had a contract with the King of Melinda to test their weapons and sell any information, weaponry, or whatnot Phantom bore their insignia on, they reverse-engineered and crafted arms equal in strength to the original. Their army was trained in arduous conditions to fight against odds. The rise of the Cobalt Unit's PMC was displayed for the world to see on said night. The split which had been 75-25 two years back, crumbled into 50-50 in the past year and said night, fell to 25-75. Phantom was annihilated, no second way around the matter, it was a complete defeat.

Location – a castle town named Endrona cupped at the edge of the river Stas, a convenient natural barrier for each province. Elendor's main district laid to the west, whilst the breeched border laid to the east. The abundance of forest hampered mobility.

A single option remained, snaps and thunder-like burst cried yonder at the forest. The town's folk of Endrona, mainly farmers and villagers from the neighboring settlements were often required to bring their food and supplies to the fighters. Phantom's hold over the town meant more trade for the poor village, the profits outweighed the risks, and in a way, their name alone spoke of strength beyond imagination, the illusion shattered, an alarm rang, a gathering of visitors rose from their slumber and urged into the frantic hardened-dirt path. Many were in their sleeping wear, especially the children and women, “-evacuate,” cried men in black-uniforms, “-hurry along,” they said. The loud rattling of helicopters tore over the town sank their hearts – explosions and the snaps thundered. Fighters perched at the wall's fired, the noise deafened many.

“EVACUATE,” the unit split, a quarter remained whilst the rest took the residents out the eastern exit. \*snap, snap,\* “-GO ON AHEAD!” cried a lady in uniform, she pulled her rifle and fired towards the vague shots, the bystanders were led in line to multiple armored trucks.

“Enemy sighted,” said the radio, the night flashed, the menacing sound of jets passed, horror sank on their faces, the nameless faces of people who tried their best living. A massive shell hit one of the advanced vehicles, instant devastation, the follow-up driver wiped hard, nearly tipped the truck in evasion, “-A TANK!” screamed through the intercoms, “-THEY'VE CIRCLED AROUND THE TOWN!”

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“Units five and six, abandon the castle and commence the retreat,” more shells rained, some missed into immense fireballs; bullets whistled and snapped, “-MOTHER!” cried a child, a lady dropped, “-MOVE!” cried the leader.

An attack helicopter passed overhead and destroyed the tank, it fired without prejudice, “-unit 05 and 06 reporting, retreat isn't an option, the enemies' already inside the castle town. We've shut the gate,” a makeshift barricade laid to stop their attacks, they hurried inside without care – more troops rooted around the castle, target, the escapees. “-Unit 06's made their way outside the walls and are fighting a

losing battle. May the goddess of war shine upon us, Captain, we request an airstrike, have the squadron hit these coordinates.”

“Understood,” the fist clenched. The frequency of the shells and snap eased as they drove deeper into a jungle. Distant rumbles marked the end of an era, an airstrike razed the town indiscriminately, the helicopters utterly destroyed the tanks, the jets made rounds. The price for their retreat was half of Phantom’s forces and two helicopters shot down in a rescue operation, the casualties reached into the hundreds.

Morning shone across the alleys of castle town Ehe, a secondary base for Phantom directly to the east of the previous town. Buildings cast shadowed onto the moist path, battered and wounded fighters limped inside, there were more body bags than people, a quarter remained of Phantom’s forces, the field commander, Captain Ernie Odle, waited against a deserted tavern. Familiar lifeless faces were dragged inside, medics painfully helped the injured, “-Captain Ernie, we have a message from Lieutenant General Osth of the Elendorian army,” reported a bloody-faced fighter.

“Understood,” he said.

“Captain Ernie Odle,” said a mustached man sat in the company of other highly decorated individuals, “-your actions last night were atrocious,” he gritted, “-we lost an influential pillar of Elendor’s defense. Razing the town with airstrike – if you were a soldier of my army, you’d have been killed already. Phantom will release their control of the area to us, the Elendorian army,” he boasted, “-I’ll show those monkeys how a war is fought. Phantom’s remaining forces will stay put till further orders. The evacuees are to be returned to their homes, we can’t afford to sully the town’s reputation; henceforth, Captain Ernie Odle is to relinquish his claim over Ehe.”

“Understood, sir,” he said, “-what of my wounded men?”

“No idea, and frankly, we don’t care,” the collective room closed their guards and smirked, “-Phantom’s isn’t strong anymore, leave the battle to us, the competent, damned pretenders. You’re dismissed,” the great doors echoed shut in great humiliation. ‘My men died for them...’ the pace quickened, ‘-ungrateful bastards, we held the fortress for so many years and this is how they repay, war is unforgiving,’ the scenery swapped for a desolate base-of-operation, “-listen, men, we’re pulling from the Elendorian conflict.”

“We’re going home?”

“Yes, we are,” he said, “-I’ve received orders from headquarters, éclairs granted me full-authority in how we move forward. Reinforcement won’t be here anytime soon; our air force has already departed for Hidros.” The early hours of December the 15th, same to when the sun shone upon a populated town filled with life, it shone upon a desolate land of the horrific display. Total carnage, scorched earth, burnt corpses, a body-filled road marking the late-night escape. Innocent people led on the floor, left for animals to prowl and feast upon, the remains of tanks and evac-helicopters, the pillars of smoke and ambers quietly muffled, ‘-defeat’.

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“I can’t believe we’re going home,” said a worried fighter.

"Me neither," they stood far from the town, on a deserted field, waiting for their evacuation.

"Captain Ernie," said a younger boy, "-pardon the intrusion," he'd snuck into a makeshift camp where an imposing figure hunched over a map, "-I feel like this isn't the greatest of ideas."

"Why not?" the posture straightened, "-are you worried about something?"

"Yes," he replied, "-I'm worried this might be a trap."

"I don't think so," returned the officer, "-we were given orders from the top..."

"And, was it verified?"

\*Snap, snap, snap,\* the atmosphere shifted, "-CAPTAIN, WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!"

"What the fuc-" they dropped to a crouch, bullets nonchalantly pierced the tent, "-grab onto a gun," he said, the messenger dropped from a wound to the head, "-we'll exit out back."

"No," said the boy, "-they've covered our exit," he panted, terrified at the onslaught.

"Any bright ideas?"

"We dig a hole," he gulped, "-a hole," the fingers pointed down, "-I can use Earth Magic," a square soon freed, "-we have to hide."

Armored trucks rushed into the scene, the awaiting troops were shot without a chance to return the favor, the medical tent was hit by a shell, two figures stood a kilometer away, "-per the agreement, we serve Phantom's forces on a platter."

"Pleasure doing business," said a suited man, "-and per our side of the deal, the army agrees to have the battlefield split into 50-50, the non-aggression pact will last six months."

"Right," said the man happily, "-Phantom's outstayed their welcome," he left, the attack spawned from the uniform of King Juvey's army. A tank bearing their insignia fired shell after shell, death, and destruction followed.

"We've been had."

"Captain?"

"We were played for fools," he gritted, "-I was a fool, how did I not see this coming!"

"Can you explain?"

"It's obviously now," the forehead crinkled, "-forced into the open, given the order to evacuate – Elendor must have had a deal with Melinda, those bastards wanted us out of the fight."

"Phantom is strong... right?"

"No, we're not," he headbutted the dirt, "-the Cobalt Unit's chipped at my men since the start of the year, we've lost so many people, I can't even remember their faces, it's in the thousand, I-I-I..."

"We'll make it home," firmed the boy, "-they need to know what's transpired."

“We don’t have proof.”

“Yes, we have,” asserted the boy, “-they’ll believe us, I know they will, Phantom isn’t a company to leave their workers behind, I’m sure, 120% sure!”

Igna rose to a sweaty visage, ‘-a dream?’ he gasped barely able to keep his breathing, ‘-or a flashback,’ the gaze, blurry against the sweat, landed on trembling palms, ‘-Elendor working with Juvey, I must have dreamt it,’ he shuffled to the washroom, there, the mirror showed a face of complete horror, any hue of color turned damp and pale, ‘-I know not to ignore my dreams,’ the lens toggled, \*-Contact – éclair.\*

“Good morning master.”

“There’s nothing good,” he gritted, the pupils were crystal white, “-have we lost the battle in Elendor?”

“How did you know?” he paused, “-master?”

“Our forces, were they scheduled to retreat?”

“I suppose so, I did give them the order, they said they’d retreat.”

“Have they contacted anyone since?”

“No, I don’t think... master, is everything alright?”

“Can you hack into Elendor’s military servers, focus on Lieutenant General Otha of the Elendorian army. Also, have a few scouts investigate unusual faces, I want a full report on Castle Town Endrona.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” interjected the butler, “-too fast, take steady breaths and focus. Master, what’s happened?”

“I had a dream... no, it was more like part of myself was transferred to another person, I saw him and what happened around him, it felt too real to be true, we need to confirm. If what happened turns to be true, Phantom’s been betrayed,” the tone couldn’t have gotten sterner.

“I understand,” he said quietly, “-I’ll have undercover agents investigate the town.”

“Right, thank you, éclair.”

“No, there’s more to do,” he said, “-the lawsuit, have thee forgotten?”

“I remember,” he stared in the mirror, “-I remember.”

## Chapter 780: Royal Court

The more the days carried, frequent grew tiresome troubles. Suit on, shoes tied, Igna left the apartment in a nonchalant mood. Today’s agenda mainly consisted of the court hearing. The car toggled, and he drove into the capital – past the massive northern gates and inside the array of buildings. Prime location for their debate rested little shy of the noble district, from his Rosespire manor, where a monument of remembrance was built for Lizzie, the car made a few twists and turns southwest and into a clearer, sparsely built plot of land. There was much distance between each construction, and in to fill those empty spaces grew grass, trees, and bushes. The streets were clean, freshly built in some weird way – in and out were very uncommon; a few cars were sided on the roadside. Renowned brands of luxury

mobiles gallantly laid in wait. The very strong Mizo S5 wrapped a corner and arrived. The door unlocked towards a mountain of darkened tiled stairs, the railings were silvery, the steps were stern and symmetrical – a monstrous darkened gray building overlooked said stairs. In a way, it almost seemed to glare, horizontal writing on the right side had, ‘-Royal Court,’ written in bold white.

Large space interspersed with fresh air, shadows from the adjacent buildings, and tranquility unlike the capital.

He threw a gaze at the car, scanned, and firmed forward, making way to a lonesome bench next to the overwhelming stairs. The spot was prime for a refreshing breeze, add the shadow from the building over, and one had a perfect place to nap. A cigar lit out of habit, the time displayed 11:43, ‘-I forgot to look over the complaint,’ he puffed, ‘-royal courts are biased to nobles,’ he stopped and side-glanced, ‘-justice in a monarchy is hit or miss. The ruler decides whether the people art be rewarded for good behavior or not. This place is a trap, there won’t be any justice served – since I assaulted the boy, blame’s on me,’ the shoulder eased, ‘-does it even matter?’ he puffed again, the ring-shaped smoke widened until nothingness. There was clear discrimination in the judicial system, and Igna knew much about it – the reason why his actions went unanswered was because of not bringing attention to a particular situation. What is a random occurrence in the greater state of things, deaths are common and most often unsolved, there was nothing to be scared about. Still, in the rare cases where a case could be filed against him, the company made sure silence, especially from the DG was reinforced. Courts were for the rich and powerful, the commoners had no say in the matter, their way of dealing with the offense was to either take it to law enforcement or remain silent. And when it came to the rich and powerful, status and money spoke volumes, a person’s pedigree held a lot of weight over how the proceedings would follow. So is to say, unlike Alpha, Hidros was a playground for the powerful, and Queen Gallienne stood as the ringmaster.

“Master,” the wind blew and caught the reflection off-guard, “-I’m here,” said éclair dressed formally.

“éclair,” he smiled, “-been a while,” he said, “-please, take a seat,” the body instinctively offered a smoke, one the butler accepted and puffed.

“How’s the maid doing?”

“Yui or Midne?”

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“Both of them.”

“Yui’s working under Prince Julius for the time being, there was a leak and Lady Courtney caught the spy, Yui had a great influence over the matter. I say proudly, the lady’s taking to her job nicely. We recently established a link between her and the sister system, similar to how you and I are connected.”

“How useful will she be in the future?”

“A phenom,” he said, “-perhaps scarier than me.”

“You’re plenty scary,” said Igna with a little chuckle, “-I know the abilities first hand, without it, I’d had never been in my position. What about Midne?”



“She’s hard at work serving the Princes of Hell. Lady Kul took a liking to her and they’re living together from the last report.”

“Sounds nice,” he said, “-everyone’s living their lives per their own will. I’m satisfied,” the way in which the words escaped his lips was ominous, a precursor to greater trials ahead. A fast-sounding hum tore across the asphalt and halted short of the court, it efficiently pulled aside, the bright red doors opened upwards, the driver exited in the company of another, two nicely dressed individuals. One donned a very conservative suit, the colors and style were not overly interesting to the common eye. To those in the know, the fabric and quality spoke of taste and financial ease.

“Greetings young Master Igna,” said the clean-shaven man, the facial features were average, the short hair minimally gelled to the side and frameless glasses upon the nose-bridge, “-I believe today’s the first time we meet, my name’s Raide Rosie, the lawyer for lord Julius,” the regard also landed politely on éclair who rose to exchange handshakes.

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“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” replied Igna following éclair’s actions.

Next, the driver, a very handsome man with slightly shuffled hair, and partly feminine facial features, the wardrobe choice was formal, beige with warm colors. The mouth always smiled grandly, almost in a way to show off the perfect white and cared for teeth, “-we meet again, young master,” said the younger-looking man, “-my name’s Bleu Aizo of the Aizo noble family.”

“Yes, we meet again,” he friendly went for an embrace, “-I was impressed by the talents at the trial of Count Oathtall.”

“It was no issue,” he smiled, “-said case was an easy fix.”

“Care for a smoke?” inquired Igna, the newcomers graciously accepted the offer and puffed, the menacing court house’s presence diminished, the lawyers threw an equally imposing air against the building. At around noon, the plaintiff arrived in a normal car, the lawyers exited first, a duo of a man and woman, followed by Count Esteballe Denlord, behind him, Theo Denlord forced to travel in a wheelchair. Inspector Mia tended the man’s wound, menacing glares flew towards Igna’s group. Shortly after, the mother and her child arrived in a taxi. Their eyes met, to which she averted her gaze, the boy noticed Igna and ran to be halted by his mother, she turned his body and shook her head, the energetic youngling slouched and tipped his chin. She blatantly avoided his gaze and moved to the Count’s side who stood firmly with arms crossed.

“We have a lot on our plate,” said Bleu.

“I noticed,” said Raide, “-they’ve joined sides with the Count. We’re going inside with odds stacked against us,” he casually stared the court-house, “-the Royal Court, the jury will consist of her majesty’s council. She’ll watch and deliver the final verdict.”

“Any chance at winning?” inquired éclair.

“No clue,” the lawyers exchanged smiles, “-we have an ace up our sleeve, she should be here any minute.”

Meanwhile, the opposing factions glared, “-look at them,” said the Count, “-acting innocent,” he glared the mother, “-I’m sure your husband has related the information, you’ll blame the whole situation onto Igna Haggard, do I make myself clear.”

“Yes,” said a timid voice, “-I’ll do as you say.”

“Olphia, Oliver, why the long faces?”

“We apologize, my lord,” said Oliver, “-the lawyers standing at Igna’s side are the worse obstacle which we could have encountered.”

“Please explain?” his expression tightened. Theo watched silently, unable to move his hands or legs.

“The plain-looking man’s Raide Rosie, a man of average looks and presence, once inside, the personality changes tremendously. He’s fought cases internationally and is said to have been the best graduating student at the prestigious Aizo Academy.”

“And, what of the second man?”

“The son of the Aizo Group’s president, an unrivaled genius said to have a photographic memory and the ability to sway facts without even blinking. They graduated at the same time and have been working for conglomerates serving as consultants. We’re against them,” shuddered Olphia, “-there’s more at risk from what we realize.”

A distant screeching veered their attention, a lady exited, she bore an extremely large coat. “-NO!” fired Theo, “-this can’t be her.”

“What is the matter, son?”

“Father... it’s her, the one who I nearly killed a few weeks ago.”

“What?”

“I told Mia about it and she quietly handled the situation, I thought we paid her handsomely.”

“Why is it a problem?” he asked.

“Because the accident occurred in front of camera...” The atmosphere deepened in density; she casually approached the gentlemen.

“Hello, the name’s Laren, stage name, Angel.”

“Hey Angel,” winked Bleu, “-long time no see, has the injury healed?”

“Yeah, the son of a bitch still hasn’t been caught.”

“Oh, we have caught him,” he brazenly pointed at Theo, “-there’s the culprit.”

“Really?” she smirked, “-I don’t know what this is about,” her stare went from person to person, “-and I don’t care. You must be the leader of this group,” she locked onto Igna.

“Good eyes,” he returned, “-Angel, if I remember correctly, you’re a performer underemployment of the DG, aren’t you?”

“Ah,” she covered her mouth, “-an intelligent man, perfect.”

Each party gathered; the clock hit 12:45, they headed into the lobby where a guide escorted them to a massive hall. Three seats far end the centermost reserved for the queen, the right seat, a representative of the Tharis sect, and the left side, the apostle of Syhton. A gathering of elevated seats within a wooden square( placed against the left wall) was reserved for the jury. As predicted, her majesty’s council entered the room, followed by the queen herself. Igna took his seat as did the count, the massive oak doors slammed shut, no words entered nor left, Olphia delivered a very strong opening statement, and the trial began.

20:30, amber lit lamppost attracted bugs, the hearing ended on a favorable verdict on Igna’s side. Bleu and Raide utterly decimated Olphia and Olivier, for the first half of the argument, they blamed Igna for having a history of violence, deeming him too dangerous to walk around in public. After allowing the duo to gain momentum, Raide interjected. A little fact was conveniently left out, the footage of him rescuing the mother and son. Before the duo could say anything, the images laid upon the projected screen for all to see, from there on, the deliberation grew one-sided. It was complete devastation, no matter the refute, Bleu was ready to strike and switch the narrative. In the end, the fault fell onto Theo Denlord’s shoulders, it went so far as to accuse the jury itself in cahooting with the count to sway the ruling. Under the guise of fairness, before the trial began, Igna requested for the hearing to be made for the public to see. Queen Gallienne saw nothing wrong, the jury also accepted the request, tis then their fate was sealed. Videos were shot, the media was brought into the courtroom – the overwhelming disadvantage going into the trial nullified.

“I, Queen of Hidros, sentence Theo Denlord to prison, Count Esteballe, on the reason of corrupting the sacred place of justice, is to drop from Count to Baron and relinquish his properties and authority as a member of my council. May this serve as an example to any who dares go against the law. As a ruling monarch, my duty is to assure a place of rest and comfort for my people – an environment for them to thrive. The relinquished properties will be transferred to the Viscount of Glenda, a hero who’s done much for our land. I won’t tolerate fake news.”

They exited the royal court with smiles; Theo Denlord was spared prison time on the basis that he would transfer everything to his name, including businesses and assets, to Igna Haggard. The takeover will be under Rotherham’s jurisdiction, thus meant, they had free reign.

“YOU!” gritted Baron Esteballe, “-HOW DARE YOU!” echoed across a comfy corridor.

“Please,” interjected Raide, “-there’s no need for additional damage.”

“Let him,” smirked Igna, “-the justice system favors the truth.”