

## Death Magic 781

### Chapter 781: Raide and Bleu

Multiple stopped and stared, the Count's voice carried long in the distance. Some peered corners to catch a glimpse, the fascination with conflict was a guilty pleasure of humanity. Raide and Bleu stood against the very infuriating noble – veins bloated on his temples whilst the forehead crinkled harshly, the pupils vehemently screamed, ‘-you’re going to pay.’

“Olphia and Olivier,” called Raide, “-please tell your employee to not cause trouble.” They looked up, confused and on edge, the debate had sucked any sliver of confidence.

“The matter was settled by her majesty’s judgment,” intervened Bleu, “-Baron Denlord, ‘twould behoove thee not to add further insult to thy already pitiful attempts at scheming.” The words held weight; the arrival of Angel completely turned the tides of the proceedings. An ace up their sleeves, a very, very humble statement.

“Justice was served,” said Igna casually turning towards the ire-filled glares, “-Theo Denlord,” he voiced, “-my actions were justified, I won’t ask for much,” he broke the line the lawyers had created between him and the baron, “-a prodigious racer, one the likes none has ever seen before,” a prompt over the lens told of the man’s history, “-your future is gone,” he leaned menacingly, “-tell me, do you have the guts to make a contract?”

“Make a contract?” sweat dribbled, the overhead light didn’t add favorably to his nervousness, “-what sort of contract?”

“You,” firmly harsh hands gripped his shoulders, “-stay away from my son.”

“Baron,” he stared the hand then glared the man, “-interjecting when I’m making a deal is rather brave, don’t you think?” the posture straightened, “-after what’s transpired,” he stepped ever close to the baron and whispered in his ears, “-won’t be a surprise if a shamed noble is found dead.” A shiver ran down the spine. For the first time, Esteballe found himself cowering before another, the spectating crowd, confused by their whispers and inquisitive tone continued to watch.

.....

“Lord Haggard,” said Theo, “-what did you mean?”

“I firmly believe people who’ve lost everything know the importance of what they thought to be granted.”

Memories of races, the high-speed and rush of adrenaline, being able to move freely – waves crashed against his current self, the memories built in small increments, the heart pounded, resentment and envy washed the desolate resting frown. He nodded in agreement.

“Sign a contract with my company, Raven.”

“A contract?”

“Obviously,” he smiled, “-per the contract, I will personally ensure the sustained injuries are healed and safeguard thy return onto the racing track. I admit I don’t know much of the world of racing; still, I believe broadening one’s horizon is the true purpose of living.”

“I refuse,” interjected the Baron, “-my son is a genius, I won’t let him be bought by some rich noble son...”

“The decision is yours,” he turned on himself and faced the lawyers, “-agree to my conditions and the life you’ve longed will return.”

“What’s in for you?”

“Satisfaction,” the imposing strides halted, “-who doesn’t enjoy a good zero to hero story.”

“Is that all?”

“Perhaps.”

“Count me in,” he wheeled towards Igna, “-I promise to sign whatever contract and do whatever is needed. I want to return to the race-tracks, I want to drive and compete.”

“Right,” he exhaled, “-I’ll have an associate of mine get in touch later tomorrow.” The talk ended and the crowd dispersed. A darkened outside marked the entrance, “-well, master, it was great fun,” said Raide.

“Thank you for the help,” he replied courteously.

“Young master Igna,” Bleu cut into his field of vision, “-I’d like to offer my services to you, and only you.”

“Pardon?” he paused, a brusque breeze carried droplets of rain, the weather worsened.

“Bleu!” Raide exclaimed, “-are you serious?” he gawked, “-you finally decided to work for someone?”

“Master,” interjected éclair, “-this is great news,” he happily grinned, “-Bleu’s been a consultant for Elon’s Dynasty – he’s never showed much interest in other people besides himself. For him to easily offer his services...”

“Don’t make a huge deal out of it,” he added with a hint of embarrassment, “-I never chose sides because people are selfish and only want to win, no matter the extent. What happened earlier was different. There’ was a flicker of kindness wrapped underneath the layers of malice and blatant provocation. I decided to join partly due to éclair and his constant tales about his master, I wanted to know for myself. After all, my drinking partner is a great friend to have,” to wish he side-stepped to éclair and gave a quick elbow to the ribcage, “-glad I came.”

“Bleu Aizo,” thundered Igna, “-is the decision final?”

**novelusb.com**

“Why ask?”

“The image thee have of me is subjective. I won’t waste time on those who only wish to stand afar and watch. Getting involved means to die if ever the need arises, I don’t care for those with weak resolves and weaker determination.”

“Right,” sighed éclair, his expression tightened, “-Bleu, I’m glad you want to serve my master...”

“But?” the arms crossed, “-there’s a catch.”

“My master’s circle is very tight, those personally involved have vowed to give their heart and soul. They’d smile and give up their lives, I’m the same. I owe my life to him, and I’d never endanger his plans or get in his way.”

‘This feeling...’ the additional statements rendered the mind confused; the trail of thoughts jumbled into a tangled mess. Whilst he reflected, Igna nonchalantly climbed the stairs into the mild shower, the imposing outline blurred in the distance, ‘-if I don’t accept, there won’t be another opportunity for me to join,’ the resolve firmed, “-I’LL JOIN!”

“Sell thy soul,” he side-glanced, “-and offer thy loyalty.”

“I will,” he dropped on one knee, “-I, Bleu Aizo of the Aizo Dynasty, offer my sword and vow to devote my soul to the Prince of Arda, Igna Haggard.”

“Welcome,” he pulled the man up and gave a peck on his lips, “-Bleu Aizo, I’m honored to have thee by my side.”

“My liege,” the expression melted, “-thank you.”

“Congratulations,” cheered Raide, “-we serve the same family.”

“Yeah,” a warm feeling burnt in his chest, ‘-this sensation, it goes beyond anything I’ve felt. Igna Haggard truly is a prince, he knows how to pick and how to approach the situation. I’m glad I made the jump.’

“Right, we’re going to celebrate Bleu’s new endeavor, let’s have ourselves a drinking party!”

“Count me in,” said éclair.

“Don’t forget about me,” distant echoes of heels ran against the stone-brick walkway, “-I want to celebrate too,” said a flushed Angel, her breathing bordered hyperventilation, “-I’ll choose the location,” hands-on her knees, “-let me... catch my... breath... first.”

Igna casually touched her forehead, \*Mana-Control: Restore Stamina,\* her body recovered in minutes, “-I feel great,” she stood straight, her chest followed her harsh movements.

“Hard to beat her explosive weapons,” slyly added Bleu.

“Idiot,” chuckled Raide.

‘A nice group of friends,’ he hung to the side, ‘-this must be éclair’s circle. I’m impressed.’

“Master, we’re going on ahead,” said éclair, “-I’ll forward the location, meet you there.”

“Yes, yes,” said Laren with a subdued voice. She’d wrapped her arms around Raide and Bleu, the drinking had yet to start and they were already frantic. Quick to jump into the supercars, the anticipation of drinks pulled them out of the area and further southwest.

Hands in his pockets, the rain fell innocently, ‘-going on ahead, he must have wanted to do something.’ A slide down the silver railing and the trial seemed a far-gone story, “-Mister,” called from the side.

“Teno, what are you doing here alone?”

“I ran away,” he said, “-mother was being weird. She wanted me to lie, I hate it, I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“It’s fine,” he took a seat next to the boy, “-how old are you?”

“Six.”

Silence settled, the cloudy sky parted, “-listen, your mother did what she had to. Adults often lie to protect their close ones. Don’t get angry and don’t make her worry so much. She’s also young, like you.”

“Mother isn’t young,” the eyes crinkled, “-she’s like 21.”

“And you’re six...” the thought didn’t cross his mind, ‘-twenty-one, she must have gotten pregnant... yeah not going to happen.’

“Teno, Teno, where are you?” steps echoed.

“Hide me,” said the boy.

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” he whispered and jumped behind the bench, her light steps hit against the stairs and stopped on the last step. “-Teno, where are you?” she tiptoed, scanning a greater area from the newfound vantage point. A taxi conveniently pulled onto the sidewalk at the same time, the slouched figure of a man exited with the recognizable orange notepad in hand. He took timid glances, almost returning to the notepad instantly.

“Stark,” she took notice and ran, “-where have you been?”

“I’m sorry, I was caught up in work,” he took a single glance, “-did you lose Teno?”

“Yes, I can’t find him...”

“Let me see,” he checked the right side, saw naught, turned left, spotted Igna who returned a very blatant, ‘-he’s here,’ expression.

“I’m a bad mother, I forced him to lie...”

“There, don’t worry,” he patted her shoulders, “-Teno’s closer than you think.” Reporters from the media, present earlier during the day, subtly made their way through a narrower entrance far to the side. It was an unspoken rule not to speak to nobility, especially not after a trial – many journalists chastised for indiscretion, the difference of social classes was engrained into the souls. The exception, if the lord/lady asked for the interview; hence, the quiet yard.

“Seems the trial went favorably.”

“Count Stark,” he replied, “-the matter was resolved before long. How has life in Hidros been, especially Rosespire, are the cases hard?”

“They’ve been a treat, the simplest of crimes often have the greater pull,” the mother hid in behind his shadow.

“Forcing a child into a very uncomfortable situation, even for an adult, is irresponsible at best,” the sentence sank her further into the Count’s shadow.

“Please refrain from making unnecessary comments.”

“Count Stark, I never meant my words maliciously. I only said what I thought as a parent. They must be the sword and shield, not the other way around. Changing side to fight against me, I admit, it did take me by surprise. Biting the hand that feeds you, I digress and chalk it to a situation that’s beyond thy control. Count Stark, fame detective, isn’t it the husband’s duty to assist his wife, I fail to see any semblance of coherence,” he exhaled, “-Teno, come out would you.”

“Teno?”

He pulled himself above the bench and laid his chin upon the ledge, “-mother, father, hello.”

“Teno, where have you been?” her tone, strict and unforgiving, “-you know how much I was scared, I had to run around looking...”

“No,” he said, “-I don’t like it, not one bit!”

“Enough,” said the Count, “-we’ll talk about this at home, come on Teno.”

“No, father, I don’t accept it.”

.....

“Don’t throw a tantrum,” she yelled.

“Right, enough,” thundered Igna, “-Teno, tell me, boy, what is it you want. Why are you angry.”

“I wanted to say hi and play,” he said, “-lying is bad. Father is already fighting evil.”

“There you have it,” he stood, “-Teno, become strong and stand for what you believe. That’s what it means to be an adult. It might not make sense now, one day, when you look back, heed those words very carefully.”

“GOODBYE, MISTER.”

He threw two fingers down the side and left, the car roared and rumbled into the distance.

“Why...”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here,” said Stark, ‘-he saved Teno and didn’t once try to hang the favor over our heads. Instead, he got angry at the way she treated the child, not how she betrayed him. Igna Haggard, what sort of man are you?’

'Another day spent,' he thought, the radio played a smooth melody, '-today was great, we recruited a world-class lawyer and gained control over Count Esteballe's property,' the car vanished into the neon city.

"Majesty, was it wise to antagonize the count?"

"He outstayed his welcome. Besides, the case was so one-sided it made me want to laugh. I don't care for weaklings, there needs to be a culling; war is upon us. The Empire and church will retaliate sooner or later," she combed her hair before an oval mirror, '-Igna, I have high hopes.'

## Chapter 782: Under Attack

A night of senseless drinking, a night of forgiving one's worries. Celebrations elapsed long into the cold dawn of December the 16th. Igna woke in the Rosespire manor, one located within the noble district.

'My neck,' he sat straight, the body took a beating from the ill-advised posture upon the couch's frame, '-those two are absolutely alcoholics, who in their right mind can drink so much and not flinch.' Time read 05:45 on the dim screen, the title screen moved per the introduction to the local news. The sight was drawn, and soon, he increased the volume.

"Master, breakfast is ready," said éclair stood in the corridor.

"You sure are healthy."

"I know how to balance the alcohol I take," he commented smugly. Attention would unknowingly carry onto the screen, the first news reported on the trial of Igna Haggard.

"The trial between Viscount Haggard and son of Baron Denlord ended in a complete victory on Igna's side. Evidence revealed lord Theo would have crashed into a crowd of bystanders if not for Igna's intervention. The injuries were explained as a mishap during the scuffle. Her majesty, queen Gallienne, ordered the Count's dismissal from her court and abandonment of the title of Count. Properties have been transferred to the Haggard Dynasty who's, from what report says, have donated part of the estate to be an orphanage," few images from yesterday played under the voice over. "-Next we have the sudden increase in plague victims," the broadcast toggled.

"I'll have a shower," he yawned and stretched, "-meet you at breakfast."

.....

"Understood," said éclair.

Promenading along the manor had an eerie feeling. The estate, very valuable nowadays, laid in his pocket. The showers fell, and a new day began.

Location, Glenda, time, 06:30, beastmen dressed in visor vest carefully guided a large truck through the damp muddy path of the southern road. "Lady Stewardess," called one, "-we're ready to unload the cargo," he said.

"Right," she stood boldly upon the castle walls, "-have the traders take it from here." The wind blew, she sharply turned and glided down the stairs, the inside of the castle town consisted of traders and adventurers. Inhabitants rose their hand and nodded when she walked past, especially at the

marketplace, the merchants were more than welcome to scream her name and laugh, of which, she kindly returned through a smile of her own. The face held much tension, and the smile, timidly awkward, wasn't noticed by the bystanders.

"Tired," she pushed aside a wall and entered a bedroom, paperwork flooded her table and laid on the floor, "-I'm tired," she complained and made for the bed, the frame rocked from her fall into the heavenly pillows, "-sleep." Clinks of metal, heavy movements, and stomps audibly walked along the corridor to forcefully stop at the door, \*tap, tap,\* "-coming in," said a headless figure.

"It's you," returned a desolate stare, "-what's the matter?" habit forced a look upward and above the shoulders.

"Trouble," the voice spoke from the hip, its arms had cradled the helmet, "-Arda needs to decide on a leadership. Either Glenda is declared the capital or the elven faction at the ancient tree will revolt. Tension is strong, everyone's settled with their teams."

"The trip to the capital was that bad?" she inquired politely.

"Bad doesn't cover half the mess I saw. The elves are very proactive, what was reported to be an abandoned tree has recovered into a booming town. They refuse to allow other races to enter save they be nobles or traders. It's worse than imagined, slavery is on the table again, the king's ordered the demi-humans to be subjugated. The last word was the safe-haven of Holia, a bastion sea-town to the west, was invaded by the elvish army. They but stood on the hill and waited for them to make the first move, the lord, Mino Asic, was threatened into surrendering his people for the sake of their families."

"There's no law saying slavery is bad, the morality of the situation is what's in question. Without leadership, the elven people have amassed under a strong party. Glenda's surviving from the accord of our citizens."

"We ought to have the queen of Arda take her rightful place," he said, "-otherwise, I see two outcomes; war or the peaceful takeover of Glenda. They'll need food, hunting monsters will only bring so much. The agricultural reform's solved the famine situation, we can smile whilst the elvish people watch enviously."

"I'll make for Hidros right away," she said, "-have this message delivered to the Blood-King's faction. Strengthened the border patrol along the walls and ready the canons."

"Understood."

After Alta took leadership of Glenda, her focus immediately turned to agriculture, they made money from loans granted by the blood-king's faction, the verbal agreement and presence of lady Elvira softened the dire situation. A few kilometers north of Hect and Ect, after the great wall, the unused land cupped within the Avender Valley, spanning countless kilometers, was terraformed into a haven for plants. The natural stream running down the valleys was easily restructured to water the plants. The scale wasn't heavily obnoxious, gentle slopes and gentle hill, using 'valley' to describe the land gave the wrong impression. Nevertheless, the farmlands were rich – a farmer's union formed inside Glenda, they took a seat at the office and promised to make sure famine is resolved. The Head of the union was a man by the name of Urzel Yog, a demi-human who underwent surgery to remove and fit human society.

Similar to Igna, Alta scouted and made grew her entourage – the elven faction grew in numbers and military strength, Glenda grew culturally and economically.

\*Beep,\* “-cousin, why must we ride in aunt’s car?”

“Because it’s fun?” he replied.

“Yes, and it brings to much attention,” he exclaimed through pressed lips, “-what then, I heard about the case, congratulation on the victory.”

“Tis a precursor to what is to happen next,” he said, the path taken gunned towards the northwest to Rotherham.

*novelusb.com*

“Explain.”

“The press will continue to lampoon Apexi at the current rate. I’ve seen the reports, the company’s in hot water, especially since the profits were sent to pay the university.”

“Don’t start,” the eyes rolled to stare outside, “-it was fine...”

“Not by what the people are saying. My little secret’s gained popularity, more witnesses are coming out against Apexi. Tides favor the opposition.”

“I know, we know.”

“No need to sound so irritated,” he exhaled, “-about my offer, did you take it into consideration?”

“Yes and I refuse to allow Apexi to fall under such circumstances. The Haggard will not have their name dragged into the mud. I don’t mind calling a few hitmen to help in the cleaning...”

“Stop right there,” he laughed, “-killing will only increase suspicion. I say, let them attack Apexi, let them focus on Phantom,” the lips perked in an ominous sneer.

“I know that look,” said Julius, “-tell me about it,” the prince stared the rearview mirror, “-also, what’s with the fizzy-haired pretty boy in the backseat?”

“Meet Raphael, ex-archangel of Restoration.”

“Hello,” said a listless voice, “-master, I’m glad you came,” he said, “-waiting in the inn grew tiresome,” the expression bordered that of a sloth, unwilling to act or move – even now, he leaned against the window desperately trying to sleep.

“Ignore him,” said Igna, “-an airhead.”

“As in clumsy?”

“No, as in he doesn’t have anything in his head. Raphael’s a weird case.”

“Cousin, I’m sure you’ve noticed the man’s dampened powers, right?”

“Pardon?” he shot a perplexed look to Julius who’d fully turned towards the angel.



"Yeah, it's bad," he said, "-he's lost the ability to channel mana through his core..."

"And?"

"It means," \*puff,\* the car suddenly felt lighter, "-he's reverting to infancy. I guess that's fine," turned to the front, "-being branded a fallen angel means to start again from scratch. Angels are strange entities, immortal and at times, stronger than their gods. The core's retracted to allow for the rebirth and regrowth, guess you have another kid to care for."

"Another one..."

"Yes, another one," he laughed, "-cousin sure loves his children."

"Don't... just don't."

The prior conversation fell on Raphael's ears, '-it's begun, my rebirth. I feel younger and lighter, the culmination of my friends' cores is what made my mind strong. Don't worry, I'll get on my feet soon enough,' head against the window, '-I want to sleep.'

Rotherham; the skyscrapers rose over yonder. Igna pulled into the parking lot and climbed to the top of his penthouse overlooking Halo Mall.

"Nice apartment," commented Julius, "-very good location."

"Don't ask," he took off his shoes and continued inside, "-I was baffled at the construction, Rotherham's thriving; even more than words could say."

"I do hope we're here for a reason," narrowed the prince, "-the sudden call and decision to leave the capital at such a trying time for our company... feels irresponsible."

"Stop with the worrying, take a seat, I'll have some drinks readied." The prince entered to momentarily stop; a warm pressure laid against his back.

"Tired," yawned Raphael, "-I want to sleep," he moaned.

"Did you shrink?"

"What are you talking about," fired the angel, "-I didn't shrink, you grew," the words left with reckless abandon to pronunciation.

They say in the living room and allow natural lighting from the balcony to ease to the atmosphere, "-Igna, about Raphael?"

"Let him," said Igna, "-he's sleeping on the beanbag. Best to leave the unknown, untouched."

"Sure..."

"Time to discuss what's going to happen to Apexi," \*knock, knock,\* "-Master!" the door barged in, the cacophonous hit resounded, Igna and Julius watched with straight-face, "-HELP!"

"Alta?"

"Help me," she stormed inside and grabbed his shoulders, "-help me."

“Quiet down, Alta,” he peacefully gripped her wrist, “-what happened?”

“Nothing major,” returned a devious smile, “-just the whole fate of a kingdom, the potential of having the throne usurped by a stronger faction, you know, the usual.”

“Awfully sarcastic,” commented Julius.

“Take deep breaths, we’re discussing how to move forward,” the television played in the background, a live broadcast of Apexi’s idols on tour.

“Alta, take a seat,” said an uncaring voice. The outburst felt pointless, her body subconsciously made for the next couch, one closer to the balcony.

\*Incoming call: éclair,\* “Excuse me a moment,” he stood and made for the outside, “-what’s the matter?”

“Urgent news; agents of the Anti-narco unit have stormed one of Phantom’s remote narcotic-making facilities. None’s been held accountable, they have their suspicion laid on us, I fear the province may grow against the established norm.”

“What am I supposed to do, this is a matter for the D.G and Phantom to handle. Won’t flapping a few bills against their faces do the job?”

“I’m afraid not,” he said, “-the situation looks dire.”

“Keep me updated, if we lose a remote base, there must be someone who’s unraveling our yarn of intrigue,” the call ended on a bitter taste. He walked inside with a less than friendly mien, the guests chose not to ask and waited, “-let’s talk about Apexi,” said Igna, “-I’ve yet to understand the line of thinking behind why we’d be attacked. The entertainment industry isn’t so profitable, we monopolize but also give other agencies work, don’t we?”

“Yes, we do,” said Julius, “-the only perk we have is first pick on the idols, nothing more, nothing less. It isn’t like we’ve stopped other people from working.”

He sank in the chair and watched the ceiling, ‘-I wonder,’ the eyes shut. \*Beep, beep,\*

“My call,” said Julius promptly exiting the living room.

“Master, are you well?” inquired Alta, “-I’m sorry about earlier.”

“It’s fine,” he said, “-is Arda that bad?”

“Yeah, it’s bad, we risk losing everything. The great wall’s prevented invasions by land, can’t say much by sea or air. The situation here looks bad too,” her cheeks crinkled, ‘-we’re seriously in big trouble.’

“Everything we’ve worked for is under attack.”

.....

“Sorry,” said Julius ambling back in, “-Apexi was bought out...”

“WHAT?”

## Chapter 783: Attack Thickens

"It's true, we were bought out."

"By who?"

"No idea," he explained, "-I was on call with Raide, he's certain the purchaser did so behind a shell company. Our majority advantage is gone, the shareholders want a meeting to choose a new CEO and alternate the board. It's a complete takeover, there's nothing we can do."

"Take a seat then," said Igna rationally, "-what of the contract, what do they state?"

"The idols are free to leave whenever they wish, tis the condition I've personally added to prevent a repeat of Ansoft."

"Good," smiled Igna, "-we wash our hands with the bad press and let it for the new owners to handle, I think it's a great idea."

"Master..."

.....

"What is it, Alta?"

"Watch the prince's expression, he cares not about the money, tis the company, I feel there's more attachment."

"We shouldn't have gone public then."

"I understand what you're saying," fired Julius, "-still, we had to in trying times. The company's running on gas, there's no money, I shudder for the employees. I'd cut ties with most and keep the essentials, Apexi's supposed to be a haven for the entertainment industry."

"Right," he paused, "-what's the percentage you own?"

"30% is mine. 50% was bought out and the remaining 20% is owned by lady Elvira."

"We have a fighting chance," he smiled, "-lady Elvira's genius strikes again, yours combined is enough to rival the majority. Get in the call, you have a company to save."

"Right, thank you, cousin."

"Take the helicopter," suggested Igna, "-I'll be a phone call away; if you need anything."

"I'll be in touch," the echoey stomps vanished towards the elevator. He sat in the company of Alta, she watched silently, the mind processed what had just happened.

"Will he be able to recover the company?"

"Not really," explained Igna, "-want something to drink?" he moved behind the kitchen counter that gave straight onto the living room.

"Water would be great," she followed and took a seat.

“How about some whiskey,” he pulled open an overhead locker, the damp hue of hard liquor gleamed, \*click,\* “-here we are,” it laid in an ice-filled glass.

“Too early,” she took a whiff and cringed, “-hard.”

*novelusb.com*

“I know,” he nonchalantly downed the bottle.

“Explain what thee meant?”

“The buyer is most certainly the masterminds who wanted to drown Apexi and turn the entertainment industry over its head. They managed to hide their names and kept signatures off papers, tis a good way to avoid the gaze of the A.C.U and the R.E.I.S. I doubt they’ll offer to resell the shares so easily, and since we can’t track them, there’s nothing we can do. The shares are like puzzle pieces of a picture, the more one holds, the better is outlook. If a few shares happen to go missing, there’s no way to recover unless it is tracked, even then, the information tied to each piece is unique. Meanwhile, there are stakes, they’re a way to add money to said shares, inflating their value and giving a lovely return when the prices are up. Together, we call them stocks, well, that’s my understanding of how the business world is fragmented in Hidros. It’s a game of building a puzzle. Julius needs to have a clearer picture, and since the company was originally under Phantom’s watch, lady Elvira had the liberty to disturb the shares when it went on the Hidrorian market. She must have kept the odds even and instructed Julius to never sell his part of the cake.”

“She had an emergency escape.”

“Right – unless the majority of the shareholders agree, any crucial decision will have to be held by a vote. The board is compromised of Phantom workers, I doubt they’ll easily yield their place. Julius calls them old man; we know well they’re wealthy investors who Elvira drew in.”

“Way to phrase it ominously, what’s going to happen?”

“A fight for majority claims I’d guess. Phantom’s greedy by nature, they want total control. Apexi’s no exception,” the television screen flashed, \*Incoming Message: éclair,\* “-I tracked the transaction to the Bank of Hidros. They won’t disclose who bought or who sold. There’s so much I can follow, it was well hidden.”

“Right,” he leaned on the counter, “-Alta, what’s the situation in Arda.”

“As I said, we risk war if the elven kingdom isn’t stopped.”

“How much estate does he have?”

“King Gla Hartslon of the allied elven nation has claimed over the sacred tree, the ancient Highclark forest, the swamp region occupied by the lizardmen, and the whole of the western edge until the river.”

“The same areas the church with exception to the eastern region. That area is split into three districts per agreement on the king’s ascension to power. Was there ever a non-aggression pact?”

“Not that I remember.”

“Great, this should be an easy fix,” he smiled, “-tell me, what happens when a nail sticks out?”

She creased her eyes, “-hammer it in?”

“There you have it,” he cheered, “-hammer it in. I told mother I would reform the land until she’s readied to rule. Arda’s going to be reunited.”

“Are you suggesting war?”

“Will negotiations work?” he asked crudely, “-wasn’t it you who ran here expecting the situation to be solved?”

“Through bloodshed... it seems excessive.”

“Right it is, war never brings good,” he spoke unfazed by the alcohol, “-Arda’s suffered much and has yet to heal. Opening a wound is easier than causing a new slit. Have the council of rulers be ready. Send an open invitation to any tribe, villages, landless nobles, and the like to rally behind my name, the Devil of Glenda.”

“I won’t try and comprehend,” she surrendered, “-show me the way to uniting the realm.” Another helicopter took off said day, Igna found himself alone in the company of the ever-sleeping Raphael. Feet kicked onto the table and sight to the screen, the time came for the opposition to make their moves.

A cacophonous onslaught of high-paced chatter filled a local diner, clientele was many and overbearing, similar to the midday sun. A reservedly dressed lady waited at a window table, to her side sat another taller, imposing man. They seemed acquainted; the white-frame door dinged.

“Good evening, might I be of service?” inquired a waitress.

“No thanks,” a notebook returned in his coat, “-I have companions waiting.”

“Understood,” she smiled, “-enjoy,” and moved to another customer. The distant ‘-greeting, how can I help,’ corporate smile and expression distant itself. He pulled to the window and sat, throwing two understanding looks at the guests.

“Congratulations on acquiring the company,” he broke the ice, “-must have cost a lot.”

“Not really,” replied the lady, “-the price was lowered, a nice conspiracy is wise to have a discount.”

“I’m not satisfied yet,” said the man, “-I want Apexi to fall, she needs to come home, I swear.”

“My, what a needy man you are,” she said, “-we’ve only started to dismantle the walls protecting the misguided lass. Say, I heard about the raid on a stray narcotic base, was it you’re doing?”

“No comments,” returned coldly, “-I strongly advise against flaunting the wealth. Not many people in Hidros have the clout to blow millions on whims...”

“Hey, I’m part of the elite circle, I can’t help my urges,” coyly went across, “-taking down rivals is a wise strategy.”

“A little birdy told me someone from Alpha ordered and shipped weapons from the Cobalt Unit to Arda...”

“Now, now, detective, it would be wise not to investigate matters which are above thy pay-grade. I’ll be in contact again, once Apexi is finished, we’ll move to take on Phantom.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” said the bleak man, “-our organizations have allied thanks to me, and I want my request fulfilled fast as possible.”

“Stop obsessing over a brat who ran from home,” fired the lady, “-my mother’s very scary, mess with me and I promise the outcome won’t be pretty. Anyhow,” her voice swapped for a friendlier tone, “-I expect much for the money I’ve paid,” she smiled, “-concoct me a scheme which will blow away the whole continent.”

Onward from the 16th, the struggles of many influential parties remained unknown to the public. Those able of the shadows were forced to walk in the common crowd and under the overhanging light of accountability. December the 24th arrived shortly after, a week of defensive battle had Julius crawl up to Igna’s manor in Rosespire.

“You have a guest,” said éclair over the intercom.

“Right,” the lights toggled, ‘-I’ve been inside the study for a week,’ he ambled downstairs, threw a glance into the living room where Raphael lounged surrounded with toys and snacks. A few days ago, one could have spotted him inside a cradle, the reversion to infancy continued, he only returned to regrow two days ago. \*tap, tap,\*

“I’m here,” the door opened.

“Igna, I’m tired.”

“Don’t complain,” he invited the guest inside, “-go have a shower, I need to step out for a bit.”

“What about my rants,” pouted he.

“Have éclair listen to them.”

“No,” he lunged for Igna’s hands, “-what about my marriage.”

“You reek of alcohol,” he moved away, ‘-I forgot...’

“Malley doesn’t return my calls anymore,” he fell on his knees, “-I want to get married...”

‘This mess of a guy is a CEO and a world-star idol. Who knew it only needed a woman to break his otherwise dreamlike lifestyle.’

“éclair...”

“I’m here,” he said, “-I’ll take care of the prince, please carry on.”

“Right, thank you,” he exited to a fresh whiff of the grassy aroma, ‘-about time I visit them.’

The sun had risen over the cloudy capital, circumstances had forced Igna to forcibly fight a proxy war. Over the week, a game of cat and mouse between the ACU and the D.G had full-out wars in abandoned villages. Shots were fired and blood was shed, in the end, neither side won, what remained was a battle that took the lives of 53 officers and 22 soldiers on the D.G’s side. A particular event replayed in his

mind, 'éclair asked me to ensure a convoy to be used to carry a dummy prop to wastelands of Aroen hills. I made sure to take uncommon routes and disguise the prop as a common family car, the color was bland and the registration number stolen. There was no way the ACU could have discovered my moves, we went a lot of steps before finally allowing the plan to go through. We were ambushed at the hillside by an old refill station. I used puppets, they lost many of their officers, my army is strong regardless of the opposition. The fault was on the leader – should we have used an aerial means of transport, no, what strikes me weird is what happened next. I'd have checked the cars for the fruit of my labor... they decided to wait. Someone had the foresight of a potential dummy mission; the prop was a remote-controlled bomb. The real package was smuggled via public transport. I had a random stranger abducted and forced to fly for the Empire... by drawing attention away from the airport, I had planned it to work perfectly. Nothing ever goes as planned, was it luck or someone's careful observation; so, happens that day, the Anti-narco unit chose his plane for a search. When he was apprehended, guess what, what they found was a harmless sex toy, a very embarrassing situation. My bluffs say there's either a mole or the opposition is extremely competent. They desperately want to crack down on the D.G's source of income. Tough luck, Raven's taken the responsibility of manufacturing until the situation in Hidros is resolved, too bad, they think the D.G is exporting narcotics, a unanimous decision was reached, the godfathers are going into hiding, what will the reply be, my fellow enemy[KT1], ' he drove on into town – location, the Musical Academy. 'It's been a year, we should have stopped sending Celina money, I wonder if the girl's independent.'

#### Chapter 784: Celina's life

"Celina; once's the shift is over, head home."

"Right sir," she said with a platter in hand. 'A year and a half has elapsed,' the changing room was much to be desired, privacy was but a paper-thin cabinet shielding her from the outside. She swapped clothes, took her backpack, and left through the backdoor, "-good luck at uni," said a few cheerful colleagues.

"You too," she replied, "-good luck at work," two gentle waves and gone, the current of office drones and students swept her without batting an eye. A bus soon boarded, she embarked and left, not many took her line since most headed away from Rashord Musical Academy, '-it's been a year and a bit,' the familiar outside past, "-my father was killed in cold blood. I knew he was bad... the killer took me in and offered me a chance to fulfill my dream. As he said, the monthly allowance was cut – had to move to a smaller apartment to compensate for trying times. No matter, what of you, Jong, how's your life been?"

"Are you serious," returned a ding, "-father was killed, stop lying to me."

"Yeah, I know, it's a lie," a few funny stickers followed afterward, "-who would ever be in such a dramatic situation. Half of it was right, a distant relative took me in after I ran from home."

"Wow girl, that must have been hard."

"Not really, I had support."

.....

"I envy you. Say, are you free later this afternoon, the boys and I, including a few of your mates, are headed to a party, want to join?"

“Right, I’ll think about it,” she toggled the phone screen, ‘-another who wishes to drink and get laid, is this really what youth is about?’ the bus halted, she subconsciously exited the latter before a tall yet dirty looking apartment. The security guard, an old man in his late fifties, fired an acknowledging nod at her, “-hey there grandpa,” said she cheerfully, “-how’s the guard duty.”

“Boring,” he returned coldly, “-don’t call me grandpa, I’m a great grandparent,” he smugly said, fixing his tie, “-back from work?”

“Yeah, I’m tired,” she yawned, reached for the backpack, unzipped, and pulled a rectangle wrapped in a flowery cloth, “-leftovers from work,” she said, “-the best meat we sold yesterday.”

“Working a restaurant has its perks,” he salivated, “-thanks for the meal as always.”

“No worries, grandpa, I’ll be off, take care.”

“Likewise girly.” Inside was much to be said, the walls were dirty and stained, the hallways were cleaned and came with three meals a day, for her, the deal was a godsend. ‘-Repetition later this afternoon,’ the bed buckled, ‘-I thought I had free time... oh god,’ her eyes shut, ‘-let me rest for a while.’ Later said afternoon, she’d head to the campus and practice for Maestro Nevah’s team, the current leader stood a little smaller than the famed Navah, Syndra Lordon took the mantle and conducted the orchestra. She’d often stop the ensemble and point obsessively at small mistakes, the emphasis on perfection made the woman hard to approach. The Devil’s hour, as some had come to call it, “-we’re free,” students left the room with sweat and traumatized faces.

“Finally, right,” chuckled another, “-she’s so hard on us, I don’t get why.”

“I know I’m a good player...”

“Don’t let her get to you,” said another, “-we’re all in this together. Besides, Maestro Nevah personally picked our group, we should be honored.”

“Well,” they slyly with a hint of malice, stared the yet to leave Celina, “-there are people who love kissing boots to get to the top. Look at her, she’s untalented and has nothing special... still, they made her first violinist, I don’t care how I look, tis borderline favoritism.”

“Don’t bark,” said a group of sharply dressed ladies, “-it doesn’t help your case,” they said, “-before throwing blame, why not put yourself in her shoes?”

“Oh look,” laughed the group, “-Jonia Hart and her lackeys, must be nice being rich. You’re not invited to the party,” he blatantly winked, “-come on boys, let’s go party!”

“Lead on, Yane,” said the crowd, he walked past Jonia, ‘-don’t get cocky, else we’ll have you be taken care of like your little friend,’ he sadistically gave the next girl, a once over, ‘-tasty.’

“Bastard,” she gritted solemnly, the very belligerent group left with their obnoxious laughs. “-Ane,” she took the frightened lady’s hand, “-don’t let them get to you.”

“B-But,” her knees cowered, “-he...”

“We know, don’t worry,” she gently wrapped her hand around Ane’s long hair and pulled to her chest, “-we stand with you, don’t worry.”



The last note hung, Syndra whipped, and the song ended, “-good,” she said, “-you held firm through the last passage, I’m impressed.”

“I’ve done it,” her mouth opened, “-the practice paid off.” \*clap, clap, clap,\*

novelusb.com

“Nicely done,” resounded a sharp voice.

“Jonia,” pleasantly exclaimed Syndra, “-lovely to see you here, how have you been?”

“The tour went nicely,” she said, “-sadly, the campus’s grown more toxic since I was away,” she threw a friendly smile at Celina, the group later swapped places to the cafeteria.

The minimalism of the practice room traded for the cleanliness of the cafeteria; the ladies joined around a window table giving onto a path leading to the massive tree. “-Seems to me Celina’s improved,” said Jonia.

“She truly has,” nodded Syndra, “-her long hours of practice have made it worth the wait.”

“I’m lucky is all,” she hid the embarrassment behind a spoonful of rice, “-Syndra is the amazing one, so is Jonia and Ane, you girls are the pride of our year. I barely passed the exams; I don’t fully get music theory...”

“Ha-ha.”

The attention around them three wasn’t pleasant to look at. Rivaling classes and mates watched on with envy since their table had an air of prestige and class attached to it. Daughter of a Marquess, Daughter of a Viscount, and a member of a prestigious Dynasty. \*Ding,\* “-my phone, sorry,” said Celina.

“Don’t worry,” they said.

“I have to go. Mr. Rocher Cartney is back on campus,” she stormed out the main entrance and hurried along the path.

“Look at her,” commented Jonia, “-she’s carefree, isn’t she.”

“Not really,” returned Syndra, “-she told me about the struggle of living alone. Apparently, she’s living in a less than an admirable apartment on 5th Red Avenue.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” she sighed, “-never mind. Ane, how are your fingers doing?”

“Recovering,” she said, “-I don’t particularly remember the night... for some reason, I’m terrified of Yane, my body screams run away when he’s in the room...”

‘Mr. Cartney is back,’ a twirl around the tree gave to the secondary auditorium, there, directly adjacent, laid the club building, many were seen walking with instruments and smiles, a strong presence outshone the immediate surrounding, “-how goes it, Yane!” said a few upper-classman running to his side, “-I heard there’s a great event planned later this afternoon,” they hurdled on the path leading inside the club. She gripped her music notebook and hurried past, “-Celina,” said a voice through the crowd, the banter stopped, “-why didn’t you reply to my message earlier?”

“Jong,” she retracted on her steps and avoided his gaze, “-I can’t come, I have practice...”

“Come on,” he gripped her wrist, “-just come for a few minutes, you can leave after.”

“Don’t bother with her,” said a familiar face in the crowd.

‘-Shieon?’ went across her mind.

“She’s a stuck-up little daughter of a rich father, don’t bother.”

“Shieon,” drooled the rest, “-if you say the lass isn’t worth our time, who am I to argue,” he eased on the grip and left, “-show us those dance moves.”

“In due time boys,” said she coyly.

‘I’m free,’ she turned and headed towards the entrance.

“Not so fast,” a strong grip held her elbows.

“Yune?” said the crowd, “-come on man, no need to waste time on her,” said Jong, “-Shieon already said...”

“Shut it, Jong,” he pulled and stared at her coldly, “-tell me your name?”

“It’s common courtesy to say one’s name first,” she pulled out his grip, “-damned pest,” she threw a disgusted glare and headed inside.

\*Tsk, tsk, tsk,\* “-I told you,” said Shieon, “-the lass’s known for her mouth and temper. She looks innocent... when faced with things she hates, you should see the outburst.”

“I’m interested,” he smirked, “-Jong, do whatever is needed to bring her to the party, we’re going to have some fun.”

“If Yune says we’re having fun, then we’re having fun.”

Rocher Cartney waited patiently behind a piano, “-you’ve made it,” he said and played, “-take a seat and we’ll start the class.” The outside of the campus had no input on the inside of the academy, the conspiracy of corruption resulted in an audit earlier that week. They found nothing, the claims were strong and without proof – in order to look good, the A.N.C ordered for full-scale audit of every department, therein came some very interesting paperwork, many undisclosed to the public and submitted to a case being built against Phantom.

Later said evening, Celina made her way home, and on said travel was joined by her close friends, Elm and Ewi, non-identical twin sisters. “Say, Celina, is it true you’re related to the Haggard dynasty?”

“I wouldn’t say related,” they ambled through the orangish lit street, the sun had reached the west, “-didn’t I speak about my past before, I’m from Alpha, the Haggard’s took me as a favor to my mother.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” returned Ewi, “-aren’t you like super-rich?”

“Not really,” she laughed, “-I barely make ends meet. I’m happy though,” she stopped at the peak of an arched bridge, “-I work, eat, live, and study without support from another, I guess I’m independent.”

"It's impressive," said Elm, her tanned complexion and bleach-blond hair and blue eyes were a great asset, most of the students were workers to an idol agency; looks mattered no matter how bad it sounded. Part of the screening process included a photo shoot. Her sister, on the other hand, held a more mature look, long dark-brown hair, golden earrings, the same complexion with sharper and darker features, she used a darker shade makeup to add to the seducing look, the choice of bright red lipstick often gave the wrong idea, one of which she thoroughly enjoyed – leading men was one of her hobbies.

"Say, Celina, want to go to a party?" suggested Ewi.

"If it's Yune's party then no, I don't want to get involved with them."

"Why not," inquired Elm slyly, "-he's a good guy."

"I can't tell you why, he has a bad aura to him."

"How can you say that about the most popular guy at the academy. Besides, Shieon will be there, isn't she one of your closest friends?"

"We had a falling out," she sighed, "-public relation is hard," her deep-colored pupils wandered into the distance, "-I honestly don't want to get involved with people, it'll only lower my expectations."

"Celina, come on," pressed Ewi, "-for our sakes, let's go to the party."

"I don't know...'

"This is getting old," fired Elm, "-Celina, you better follow."

"Yes, let's head to the party," said a stranger's voice, "-We should have fun."

"That's it, we should have fun," said Ewi with chest, "-wait no," her eyebrows flashed, "-who are you?" A sharply dressed, white, and crimson-haired gentleman stood kindly with a comforting expression, the bi-colored eyes and pretty facial features drew the duo's attention, '-long eyelashes,' they thought and watched.

"Brother?" mumbled Celina, "-is that you?"

"Celina," he hurried into a tight embrace, "-long time no see, how have you been?"

"Pardon us," interjected Ewi, "-who might you be?"

"Older brother to Celina. You were talking about a party?"

"You overheard us..." Elm's hurried to stare Ewi.

'The reply seems a little off,' he paused, '-this could be fun.'

.....

"Brother, please..."

"Let's do it," he said, "-is it wrong to want to spend the night with my darling little sister."

"Calm it, dude," fired Elm, "-sounded very, very suspicious."

“Oh by all means it’s not,” he coyly smirked in jest, “-seems to me the thoughts took a trip to the moon and back.”

“Fine, let’s do it,” added Celina grudgingly, “-we need to have a talk later,” she pulled on his sleeve, “-understand, brother?”

‘I’m all for it,’ he smiled.

Chapter 785: “-It’s alright if I open a can of ass whoppin’?”

A trio builds itself on a whim to a party of four. The want of flying under the radar was a little hard to achieve. Attention was brought on the ladies at his side, the sisters each stole one of his arms and crossed theirs, locking themselves onto him. He breathed nonchalant answers with an inclination towards Celina, a now changed personage. Her hair was short, the color, light grey – her timidly chosen outfit did much to add to her hair. She held in their shadows, clenched her hands against her chest, and scurried. The tight, low-hanging ponytail didn’t make much to sway her hair, it was fixed, cemented in a way, onto her radiantly gleaming skull.

“So, so, tell me,” inquired a very energetic Ewi, “-where are you from?”

“Originally from Dorchester,” he replied.

“What about Celina, is she shy at home too?” they flipped to give a jestful leer.

“I wouldn’t say shy, there’s a mean streak in behind her cold stare.”

“What cold?” tugged Elm, “-Celina’s the most innocent girl at the whole academy.”

“Stop lying,” interjected Ewi, “-we all know not to approach the honor student. She’s a favorite of the teachers and most of her class ignore her. Sorry to say, brother, the lass is a loner through and through, no friends,” the crimson lips pressed momentarily, they hovered open for a few seconds in thought and hammered, “-she has Jonia.”

.....

“Jonia Hart?”

“Yes, the rich noble girl,” replied Elm. Therein, a narrative grew within his thoughts, the subjective thoughts the ladies gave were insightful. Along the narrowing passageway of Zong Park, where the trees were prominently haunting and hallow, similar to the willow trees and its hanging foliage, the lack of attention self-made a haunted path. Leaves scatter the pathways; a brief blow of wind rang the branches and pull more onto the ground.

“Celina,” he escaped the sisters’ grasp, “-are you doing fine?” they stood next to a painted iron fence of height taller than the average joe. The honeycombed-shaped iron barriers made for a sturdy transparent wall to lean against.

“I’m fine, it’s fine,” she replied and held a half-empty water bottle, “-I didn’t expect a visit.”

“If everything’s fine, why do I feel a sense of worthlessness. Are you not proud of what your actions have led to?”

"No, that's beside the point," her chin lifted and locked forth, Igna followed the line of sight and landed onto the sisters. They were off in the distance interjecting a young couple's intimate time. The boyfriend seemed awfully flustered; the girlfriend had a less than amicable response. Where sound didn't travel and was drowned by the adjacent traffic, their body posture, especially her strong sharp movements and stomps, told of a risen typhoon.

"You envy them," he backpedaled to her face, "-being alone isn't so bad a thing. Well, a university student should know better," habit drew the fingers into the inside-pocket, he pulled a shiny container, a press undid the lock in a little 'pop'. Inside were dark-brown lines of cigars, they call them cigars but were shorter and thinner than what was traditional. They lasted longer than a cigarette and could be inhaled since the smoke didn't burn one's throat and lungs, unlike the cigar. Three remained, the furthest away had toppled against the opposite ledge, '-I need to order more,' he thought and lit the brown-line, \*puff,\* "-you don't mind me smoking, right?"

"Should have asked before lighting the damned thing."

"I didn't know my words would reach."

"Stop talking in backward riddles, what does that mean?"

"I only suggested Celina be too dense to understand my words. Get it?"

"Oh," she paused and glanced downwards, "-I don't really want to party. It's beyond me, I'd rather stay home and practice. I made a promise to play the bass on stage with you one day."

"I'm flattered," he smiled, "-I wanted to play the guitar on stage too, I want to do a lot of things. Honestly, being a guitarist touring the world like Xius and Aceline looks like a lot of fun. I did it once, very long ago, my involvement was forced. There are things people can, and things they can't. Part of the responsibility to pick and choose rests on us. I'd say, there's the privilege of humanity, to make mistakes, learn, and grow."

"But why not?" her expressions were more animated and much focused on the eyebrows, "-the one who brought me here is someone truly powerful and strong."

"And there's your answer," he puffed, "-the powerful have a duty to care for matters beyond an average joe's understanding. I wish I could do what I wanted, sadly, my name, Haggard, the dynasty, the things we're involved in, the fate of Arda, everything rests on us, and on me. Cousin Julius is working hard for Apexi, you know, the situation is all over the news. Big sister Eira's an Empress of a powerhouse of an empire. Lizzie, I haven't heard from lately, save for her songs being played on the radio."

"I didn't see this coming," the frown dropped, "-everyone has their troubles to deal with."

"Yeah," he flicked the half-burnt cigar, "-tis the symbol of one being alive."

"Brother," echoed in the distance, "-we're back," the duo laughed and smiled obnoxiously, the laughter had a weird ring to the point of sounding akin to a cave-dwelling beast, cackles interspersed with raspy breaths.

"After ruining the couple's day," he looked over the shoulder, "-seems about right. The boy's sat with hands in his palms, the girl's storms her way to the entrance."

“Well, excuse my sister,” fired Elm, “-she has a habit of hating overly affectionate couples. And I personally hate couples in general.”

“Who hurt you...” he muffled.

*novelusb.com*

“Did you say something?”

“No.”

“Why’s Celina laughing then,” Elm pointed fiercely.

“It’s nothing,” she hid her face, “-nothing really.”

“A nice sight once in a while,” added Ewi.

“Question.”

“Wait, brother,” she tiptoed and waved, “-they’re here.”

‘Who is they?’ he scanned where she stared, a group of stylishly dressed boys arrived, each had their arms occupied with a lady, the centermost fellow bore the aura of a pop-star.

“Students of the academy,” said Elm. Celina promptly threw her head at the incoming crowd, the silent laughter drowned in a jolt of irritation.

“Elm, Ewi.”

“What’s up boys,” winked Ewi rushing to their side and ignored Celina in the process.

“Celina?”

“Elm...” she stood and moved in-between Elm and the coming group, “-did you plan for me to join the party on Jong’s behalf?” her arms breathed short shots, “-we’re friends, tell me, how could you?”

“Get off the high-horse.”

“Pardon?”

“Stop acting high and mighty. Don’t you get it, people only hang out to look good in front of the teachers. None’s here for the amazing personality, well there are also idiots like Jong who think with their pants and ignore anything we say. Don’t you get it, they hate you.”

“Hate me?”

“Whatever, Celina,” she trusted forth and knocked her shoulders, “-Hey guys,” said the fading voice.

“Tsk,” her jaws clenched and shone focus on her bone structure, “-what a joke.”

“Calm down, Celina,” said Igna.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!” she fired and slapped his friendly gesture.

“...” returned an emotionless stare, ‘-so much for an independent life.’

“Hey, Ewi, what’s with the dude in the suit?” went across the group, they stopped a few meters from where the siblings waited.

“Who dresses so formally nowadays?” they laughed, especially the boys.

“I admit,” said Shieon, “-he’s sharp and handsome, there’s a dreaminess to him.”

“Oh, come on,” interjected Jong, “-we look far better than the geezer...”

“Take a greater look,” said Yune, “-he’s very handsome, I hate to say it.”

“A good-looking dude with a suit, come on, he’s the perfect package. Isn’t his type the ones you girls swoon over on those soap operas.”

“Celina’s here too,” said Jong, “-I’ll go talk to her.”

“Wait for me,” said Yune, “-we’ll be back, you guys can head to the restaurant already.”

“Right on,” cheered Shieon, “-a night of partying on Yune’s tab, hell yeah!”

“Hell yeah!”

“Say, Jong, are you at all interested in him?”

“No, I only want to, you know.”

“Stop thinking with your c-”

“Boys, no horny talk,” interjected Ewi.

“Tagging with, what of Elm?”

“Not coming. They had a... rough discussion.”

“Who cares,” fired Jong, “-we might as well take her with,” they walked subtly, Yune made a conscious effort to dodge the fallen leaves, clean white-shoes on an uncared path was a disaster waiting to happen. Jong followed and gawked whilst Ewi held her mouth and stepped. The current situation was partly on their account, ‘-we tricked her, doesn’t matter if she’s ignored, we’re scum nonetheless. Elm understands.’

“Pretty brazen of you,” bellowed deeply, “-I don’t appreciate misguided anger. If you had something to say and a person to say it to, why not focus on them, instead, you threw a malicious comment at my face,” he leaned menacingly and glared through her pupils, almost peering into her soul, “-family or not, those who disrespect me will have their sorry selves put into their place. Celina,” he held her shoulders, “-how does it feel?” the terrifying aura vanished, “-my acting.”

“Acting?” she coughed, “-I-I-I.”

“Yes, yes,” he tapped her cheeks, “-I was playing around. The anger, vanished?”

“You’re right,” she gulped, “-the irritation I felt is gone, what was that?”

“When faced with a greater fear, the body reacts to safeguard survival. Anger isn’t a necessary emotion, the earlier one learns of the importance of choosing when to be hyper and how to channel said rage, the better.”

“Hello... Celina,” he held the ‘o’ and brushed past Igna, “-we meet again, don’t we.”

“Jong,” she mindfully side-step, still, the youngling forced himself to wrap his arms around her shoulders. Igna casually entered the frame and halted the advance with a single finger, “-Celina, forget what I said about anger,” the finger clenched into a fist, \*WHAM,\* he flew into the bushes.

“So much for controlling one’s anger,” she chuckled.

“Yeah, talk about the pot calling the kettle black. Regardless,” he dusted his fist, “-I got blood on my knuckles, what a pain.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” gritted Yune, “-you don’t put hands on my boy like that,” he grandly flaunted his shoulder and headbutted Igna, “-drawing blood from one of my boys, kiss your pretty face goodbye.”

“Right,” he stepped away and undid his suit jacket, “-hold this for me,” it flung onto Celina’s face, “-how about a handicap,” he smirked, “-call-in those guys from earlier, bring guns too, I don’t mind, your party of a gang, I can see the bloodlust in those weak eyes of yours.”

“Oh, you’re going to pay,” he gritted, pulled his phone, and dialed.

.....

“Celina, CELINA!” cried Ewi, “-tell your brother to stop. There’s a reason why Yune’s top of the class, he’s a damned member of the underworld. He’s gone and hurt Jong, the dude’s the son of a local mobster.”

“It’s whatever,” she shrugged, “-brother, here,” she flung a can of coffee, “-drink it while you wait,” she stood next to a bench while he had moved further forward under the sky’s watchful gaze.

“Thank you,” he replied, “-also, it’s alright if I open a can of ass whoppin’?”

“HA-HA-HA-HA,” she curled, “-NEVER AGAIN.”

“WHAT,” he exclaimed

“Your accent and the comment don’t mix,” she laughed, “-don’t do it again, I’m dying,” the eyes watered.

“Right,” he chuckled and stared at the opponent.

“Don’t laugh too much,” the bushes shrugged, “-I’ll kill you, bastard,” said Jong with a pistol in hand.

“Dude, don’t do anything crazy...” muffled Yune.

“Shoot,” said Igna, “-shoot me then,” he marched, “-one who brandishes a weapon must have the courage to take a life,” the closer he got, the more terrified grew Yune, ‘-he’s going to shoot,’ he gulped, ‘-and I’ve called my c-companions... someone’s going to die.’

“Don’t get any closer dude,” the pistol clenched, “-I’m going to shoot, this isn’t a joke.”



“Shoot,” he provoked, \*BANG,\* the cartridge fell with a twinkle, “BROTHER!”

Chapter 786: Generosity

‘I shot, I pull the trigger,’ the moment froze, ‘-the bullet’s trajectory, I can visualize it, I didn’t mean to shoot, it’s going straight for his head, I’m scared,’ \*thud.\*

\*Clap,\* “-barely,\* said Igna with closed palms at his face, “-good shot, I’ll say much,” he winked and stormed to Jong, “-thing is, bullets are projectiles, a ball, a rock, even a human, if they’re thrown, they can be stopped, and bullets are no different,” he held the tip, “-here, I say refund it.”

Horns and engine growls stormed the park, a motor circle gang pulled, the count increased by the second, the shock and fear of having shot at someone brought Jong to his knees. Actions and words were very different, even if one carries a gun or any weapon, the adrenaline is sure to fade, and when it fades, the seriousness of the actions veers a little smirk.

The insignia bore a smiley face – a circle, not perfect, a cross and line for the eyes, and the tongue, a curve under which held a U, basically pulling out its tongue. The outfits matched, leather jackets, dark boots, and silvery sharp jewelry. An air of menace was about them; the leader dawned a vest with ‘-Emperor,’ written in a symbolic language, he leaped to Yune’s side and smiled, “-who’s the one?” a collective glance forth showed Igna, white buttoned shirt of which the top three were undone. He threw nonchalant regards at the bikers.

“Brother...”

“Celina... who is he?”

“My brother,” she replied with a syncopative tone, “...”

.....

“MONSTER!” cried Jong desperately retreating, the thighs met against a ribcage-height wall of bushes, “-GET AWAY FROM ME!”

“Am I so threatening?” he approached uncaring to the gathered group, “-you have the gun and I’m the unarmed fellow. Who has the power in this situation?” he dipped and lunged forward into an upper-cut. A crack echoed, knuckles made contact and the boy dropped.

“Jong,” Yune hurried to his side, “-what have you done?”

“I knocked him out,” he replied uncaringly to the bellowing trouble ahead, he turned on his heel and promenaded to Celina, he pinched his shirt away from the chest, “-hot,” he said

“Brother?”

“Don’t look confused, I stopped the bullet and gave your friend a little welcoming present.”

“I’m not referring to that,” her eyes signaled behind, a shadow grew on his back, a metal bat swung, he sidestepped, turned, grabbed the bat when it finished its course, pulled and struck with his left fist, the attacker blasted instantly against an old vending machine shyly kept behind the bench. The bikers glared, “-Celina,” he shook his hands, “-call an ambulance.”

"He's not getting away," said the leader, "-GET HIM, BOYS!"

'No way he'll win against this many people,' figured Yune who held Jong on his legs. The vision randomly locked onto the black-pistol upon him looking at the ongoing fight.

'What happened?' the sound of heavy pants, insults, and screams forced a heightened sense of self, 'I was knocked out,' the head tilted towards the concentration of the cacophony. A crimson-white haired man dodged and fought, the long limbs and refined body were a thing of beauty, the sheer skill gap was insultingly obvious. He didn't break a sweat and fought, they came in waves, forced used their numbers and yet, he kept a close guard and hopped.

"Awake?"

"Yune?"

"Yeah," he replied solemnly, "-it's bad, we went against a monster."

"The humiliation," the glance fell onto the gun, "-I can't go home after this. Father said I would have to kill one day or the other,' he reached and grabbed, "-sorry Yune, this is where the world of gangs and mafia families differ. I have a duty to honor my family's name, I can't afford humiliation.'

"Don't do anything stupid, think again man, wasting your life isn't worth it."

"You're a good friend, Yune, we conquered the University, couldn't have asked for a better partner, what he showed me today was a difference in determination and experience. I have to take the first step," clenched the pistol and dashed onto the battlefield.

### **novelusb.com**

'Little fellow's awake,' figured Igna, '-he's carrying a gun, the feet are pointed to Celina,' he dropped his head and avoided two horizontal swings of bats, '-using hand-to-hand combat is exhaustingly fun. Holding back against them is far harder than I imagined, it would have been faster to kill,' a strange aura craved across the hardened ground, \*Mud-Spikes,\* sharp arrows tore from below the floor, one managed to chip his finger on the retreat, "-magic-user?" he dodged, the summoned trap vanished.

"Not really," said the man marked 'Emperor,' "-an adventuring skill I learned from my days at the academy," he smiled, "-you've handled my boys very efficiently, they're knocked out and not too badly injured, thank you for the courteousness."

"Right," sweat gleamed upon his forehead, '-what's little fellow doing?'

"STOP!" he cried from a distance, the remainder halted midway their strikes.

"BROTHER!" exclaimed Celina, her nose turned a bloodied red, fear ran through her arms and legs.

"JONG, STOP," cried Ewi, "-are you serious?" a mild tinge of pity carried within her voice.

"I don't care," he pressed the pistol against her temple and wrapped himself against her in a very avant-garde hold, the arms blatantly went across her chest whilst he'd dug his knees in-between her legs, "-one wrong move and I blow her brains out."

"The classic hostage situation. Emperor, are you affiliated with this boy?"

“No, we came here to help the dude over there, I can’t help but come to my little brother’s rescue.”

“Right, as an adventurer, might I request for our scuffle to halt?”

“You may not,” he laughed, “-did you think I’d allow such a chance to pass me by. We have no trouble using underhanded tricks to beat our opponent into submission,” the fallen fighters rose to their feet whilst Igna locked onto Celina. Jong’s advances grew hard to watch, ‘-the Silver Guardians,’ said a déjà Vu, ‘-I remember the first time we met,’ he chuckled, ‘-it was a similar situation, being fondled by a noble. Times have changed but the personages remain the same, history repeats itself, what a joke,’ \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* “-HAVE AT HIM BOYS!”

A flash of red twirled, “-Humans are foolish creatures,” echoed his deep voice, the gathered crowd froze, “-how many times will it take to learn, when a stronger foe has the patience and generosity to allow for thy sorry self to retreat, don’t shit on the given courtesy,” he strolled away from the bikers and stood sideways with one hand in the pocket and the other pointed at Celina, “-take the shot.”

“STOP MOCKING ME.”

“Take the shot, I dare you.”

“DON’T PLAY WITH ME,” he cried, Celina, closed off her surrounding, her eyelids strained shut.

‘Boy,’ he took notice of the snail-paced pull of a trigger, ‘-may this fear forever be etched in thy soul,’ \*snap,\* a crystal-red dart tore into the grip, blasting open the palm and destroying the gun in the process, “-AHHHHHH,” he dropped, similar to those behind, mild droplets fluttered onto her cheeks.

“Rain during a clear blue sky?” they didn’t realize what happened, Yune touched his cheeks to smear of red across his fingers, “-blood?” they who had stopped moving fell, their blood exploded upward in a manner similar to a fountain, Igna prominently waited, the white shirt gradually held the crimson color, the bodies fell.

‘The grip’s eased,’ she reopened her eyes to a man in complete agony, her stare landed on a demon, the blood, the corpse, and most terrifying, a nonchalant expression in face of death, “-those ready to take a life must be also be readied to give theirs.”

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!” the leader hurried into the fallen pile of bodies, “-MY TEAM, YOU’VE MASSACRED THEM.”

“What did I say,” he inquired deeply, “-I made the offer to stop our fight. What was the response, tell me?”

“There’s no getting away from the law!” he cried.

“Oh please,” \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,\* the bodies churned into a single medium-sized dark-red orb, “-will a gang ask law enforcement for help?” he laughed maniacally, the entire park bellowed, “-hilarious, so much for anarchy,” the laughter halted as if snapping the neck to a dying beast, \*crunch,\* he teleported behind the leader and squatted, placing a hand upon his shoulder, “-who would do such a thing, I applaud at how they treat human life so casually. Don’t worry,” the sharpened nails dug into his neck, “-I wonder for what purpose he’d allow thee to live?” the man dropped, tipping his head onto the ground, ‘-I’m terrified.’

“Yune, Jong,” he dusted his shirt and closed the bench where Celina desperately tried to wrap her head around the slaughter, Ewi fell into a haunting mien of despair, no words could describe their emotions, Yune laughed menacingly, sad in a way, Jong curled in desperation of the injury, “-what about the party?” he sat and opened the coffee can, “-should we really make them wait?”

“How can you say that...”

“Say what?”

“YOU KILLED FIFTY MEN IN COLD BLOOD,” cried Ewi, “-HOW CAN SOMEONE BE SO BRAZEN?”

“Is there remorse when thee squash an ant or squat a mosquito? No, there isn’t. Tis the same for humans, they’re worthless beings who but sing their own praises and are quick to look away when the situation doesn’t concern them. Tell me, if I had killed demi-humans instead, there wouldn’t be a place for trouble, the only reason thou art worried is a sense of familiarity, admirable and pointless at the same time.”

“Brother...”

“Celina.”

“Are you stupid?”

“Pardon?”

“DID YOU HAVE TO KILL THEM?”

“Not really.”

“THEN WHY?”

“Because they rejected my offer.”

“What offer?”

“When Jong here,” he turned over and placed his heels onto his face, “-decided to manhandle you under the guise of a hostage situation, I asked them to drop the battle, they refused. Right,” he exhaled, “-why do I bother explaining,” he casually grabbed the suit jacket and stood, “-suppose I ought to leave. Have fun, Celina.” Sirens reached the scene, ambulances and law-enforcement hurried, Jong, Yune, and the leader were taken to the hospital, Ewi and Celina were left alone before a scruffy looking detective, “-can you tell me what happened?” Ewi was first, the traumatized expression knew not to say, truth or lie, \*dring, dring,\* “-Pardon me, I have to take the call,” the beige overcoat skipped to a somewhat isolated spot under a bleak tree, “-right, I understand.”

‘A phone call...’

“Sorry to bother you, ladies,” said the man, “-the incident has been concluded. Head on home, it’s not wise to stay these parts for long, especially when reports like these come to us,” he tipped a cordially good-day and left.

“Celina, what the hell is your family?”

Silence settled, leaves fell and the gentle breeze lifted dust and swayed the foliage, “-they’re scary,” she said, “-if he was in a mood to cause true damage, we’d have been in greater trouble.”

“What is he?”

“A nightwalker, the Devil of Glenda...”

“The man who took on an army on his own...” she gulped; “-we were stupid to go against him.”

“I know,” she sighed, “-and I’m sure the phone call the detective got was from a member of his team.”

“No use dwelling on the matter,” she rose and held a hand to Celina, “-I’m sorry for what my sister said, I hope we can return to being friends again.”

“Yeah,” she smiled, they walked through the strange atmosphere. The images flashed constantly, Ewi reached her limit and said to party.

“I have to get a drink,” she said, the scenery swapped for a line of restaurants and bars overlooking a pond, “-sorry about this.”

“I need a drink too,” returned Celina, “-after what we saw...”

A brown door guarded the entrance to a stone-brick restaurant, it bore the best view onto the pond, including outside sitting, “-Maie’s Eatery,” wrote on the glass, they pushed into familiar faces, “-welcome,” cheered the students.

“Elm, finally,” said Ewi, “-I’ve missed you.”

“We were apart for an hour, I see she’s here too. Hey, whatever,” she glanced sideways, “-brother is here,” she said.

“Hello girls,” he winked, “-sure took your time.”

Chapter 787: The Great Collapse [1]

‘Surprise’ read his face, Ewi watched, cold-faced and weak-kneed, Celina threw casual stares to and fro, checking her surroundings. There were many customers, and most were tied to the music academy. Friendly faces and friendly drinks, Igna kept a few distances between him and the students, a distance which grew the more drinks they had. Before him, a barrier of many drunkard older men swayed, Celina, cast her worries aside, and made way to his side, they exchanged a few words, he recounted a few stories of the past and she spoke of the trouble to be independent.

Alas, the same couldn’t be said overseas, the rough sea bordering Whuotan exclaimed, the north most province of Alpha, monster realm as it happened to be known, was lesser populated by humans. The few military outposts found at precise locations, namely; top of hills and in open planes, had traffic in and out using air travel. Among them stood a small outpost facing the northwest, in the general direction one would take if the destination is the Empire.

Outpost Gree, cloaked behind tall walls and tightly guarded entries, “-another boring day,” said a guardsman patrolling the perimeter.

"I know," yawned another, "-we've been stationed to the recruiting post," he said, "-the academy warned us about Gree, the fattening pigsty."

"Don't take the duty lightly," added another from the back, "-we may walk along sand paths and look upon an idyllic beach..."

"Stop right there," they chuckled, "-no more talk," they wished the days would remain peaceful. Sadly, particularly today, a collapse of power would forever shake the world. Elendor, unbeknownst to anyone, split into two major factions – one led under Queen Ela III and the second, Duke Armstrong of the Duchy of Dreqai.

Vague outlines protruded over the horizon, black shadows and a fleet of planes headed in their direction.

.....

"Upon the honor and sacred will of our God, us, the Church of Lucifer, shall lead a holy crusade upon the cursed land of Alpha. Trusted comrades of the church, and our newly joined guest, Queen Ela, welcome aboard the holy treaty of Demeter, we, servants of his holiness, the pope, shall endeavor to purify the land from the accursed monsters," the news made headlines, the whole continent had their breaths choked, the imperial family, unable to act, watched from their remote palace. Footage of total massacre carried weight to the military of Alpha, large motherships, floating cities, carried planes of which struck hard onto the Northmost outpost.

A silent evening fills with the sound of chaos and destruction. Mushroom clouds levied land and toppled cities, the very few survivors were massacred, "-Gree to headquarters. Time reads 17:43, we're being invaded by the holy faction, they've yet to send messages, we request-" nothing save static. Communication was lost and Whuotan went dark.

"Emperor Sultria," hurried officials through the jarring roads on the face of Mount Lige, an observatory made underground military base. The military faction of Alpha suffered a rude awakening. A roundtable of the Empire's top personal sat with hallowed glances and slouched shoulders, "-the reports are here," said a military man, "-please read so in due time, for now, focus on the screen," he pointed aided by a baton, "-the northern province has been lost. Connection to the area governed under Gree is dark. We asked our ambassadors to contact the Wracian's leadership to no avail. They were evicted from their buildings and are on a flight home. Those at the Wracian embassy have also fled the country."

'The power balance,' reflected the emperor, '-the Federation is shaky, what's happened?' his personal screen flashed to a few messages. A summary of recent events was told and correspondence with the scouting regiment gave immediate feedback. A force of three thousand was dispatched from Dostein and Subrea.

***novelusb.com***

"My liege," said a commanding voice, "-may we have thy opinion on the matter?"

"What is there to discuss?" he said in a slightly annoyed tone, "-war," he said, "-war is upon us. The church, righteous as they seem, took the liberty to attack without warning. Such are the ways of greedy

and self-righteous groups. General Rozemal, I grant the authority to call in the special Sultrian unit. Show the world how scary our army is," he smirked.

"Right on," he rose from the seat, "-gentlemen, we're in a state of crisis. Our first most concern is the safety of the people. Give the evacuation order, the military will be controlling the northern borders."

"I will gather the noble factions and ask for their troops," said a slightly hunched, small man. An impression of mere minutes hid the truth, a glance at the watch and a daring heaviness in the eyelids, '-midnight,' said the emperor sat in the comfort of an office, no windows, sterile and on edge. The corridors sang the song of a thousand steps. He faced the screen and thought harshly. A single statement came from the Empire, "-upon the honor and sacred will of our god, us, the Church of Lucifer, shall lead a holy crusade upon the cursed land of Alphaia. Trusted comrades of the church, and our newly joined guest, Queen Ela, welcome aboard the holy treaty of Demeter, we, servants of his holiness, the pope, shall endeavor to purify the land from the accursed monsters."

"What do they want?" he lounged in his chair, the news dissipated among the people, panic of the unknown locked roads and blocked public transport. Flights overseas were at an all-time high, with Alphaia's economy, everyone had the means to take a ticket and run, the airports were jammed.

Time 23:50, an advance scouting party reached a hideous battlefield. The greenish glaze cast upon their night vision goggles barely gave details of true devastation. Ships boarded the beach; the Church had touched ground and made their headquarters. Muffled shots whistled through the trees, "-sniper," cried the intercoms.

"Five dead, location unknown."

"Stay in cover people."

A massive flash of light blinded their vision, "-good day gentleman," said a lady wrapped in a black dress, "-sadly, the church doesn't like people spying on them," she said with a sadistic smile, "-do allow me to guide thee to the afterlife," she flicked her weapon upward, a scythe twice her size, and rampaged through, people, trees, it didn't matter, they were sliced effortlessly. "-I love it," she said standing before the bodies, "-the sensation of souls passing through," her legs closed, her long fingers wrapped the weapon suggestively, "-I love it."

The next day arrived, the emperor stood before the world and spoke, "-we were assaulted and had our land invaded by the Church of Lucifer. Alphaia isn't a place to discriminate and judge one's belief, we pride ourselves in being inclusive. Events of yesterday have forced our hands to take up arms. We're going to war against the Wracia Empire, to my people, I ask forgiveness, I should have had the foresight to stop any flickers," the painfully regrettable expression firmed up on the cameras, staring deeply into the onlooker's soul, "-there's no winning in war, only death, and destruction. To protect my trusted people, we will take to the battlefield and push back the attackers, such as a promise, we will regain our continent!"

"Have you seen the news?" muffled throughout the cafeteria. Celina sat in the company of Elm and Ewi, the whole aura tensed.

'Brother,' her tea steamed, '-will we be ok?'

\*Yawn,\* the eyelids opened underneath the shadow of a great tree, ‘-did I spend the night outside?’ he sat upright, the dew-filled grass forced sneeze and a runny nose. Rezolia’s park, many visitors threw suspicious looks in his direction on their morning walks and jogs. The outline of the tall-city scape waved through the spotted foliage, ‘-my phone,’ he thought and searched through the many pockets. ‘-there it is,’ it toggled, ‘-what?’ the sleepiness vanished, ‘-so many miss calls... from Julius, a private number, and Big sister, what the hell happened?’ the head shook a few to scare the sleepiness away, ‘-the lens and earrings are out of power. Well, the noble district is half-an-hour away, I’ll just take the bus.’ And he did so, unknowing to the terror weighing heavy on their asylum. Public opinion on the Apexi situation dipped heavily in favor of the opposing faction. The newest addition to, ‘-my little secret,’ hosted Baron Esteballe Denlord, the man who couldn’t keep from the spotlight. The narrative of his story was built on the basis of injustice and corruption – he took massively from the trial of his son and Igna Haggard, used so to paint a greater picture concerning the Haggard dynasty. An interview couldn’t have caused much damage, and in a way, it wouldn’t have, not until a truly disturbing image flew around the Arcanum. A line of idols, loved by the continent and people, were forced into giving their bodies to the higherups at Apexi. Many faces were recognized as the members of the board, the public wanted retribution and the humiliated idols were shortly dismissed from Apexi, choosing to side with Leina of Alphaia. The branch agency made waves; the people revered them to godlike status.

“We have lost,” pitied Julius inside a decrypted empty office, “-many staff members have left their posts after the new information.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” inquired Serene.

He buried his face in his palms, “-there isn’t. The A.N.C and R.E.I.S have gained the upper hand; the royal court has issued the warrant to conduct a full audit of our spending. If they dig far enough, we’re doomed.”

Misfortune hadn’t stopped there either, “-Underground human trafficking ring uncovered,” read a news headline, “-the Anti-Narco unit have uncovered and dismantled an operation of trafficking which has plagued our country for long. The Dark Guild is attached to the arrested individuals; countless women and demi-humans were freed and many lives were lost. The current rulership has taken grandly to clean the trash from our continent,” the play forced many high-ranking entities to run for cover. Without further knowledge, Cimier, more precisely, the branch organization operating within the empire, Snow, launched an attack at the northern, D.G-controlled port.

Shots echoed from the southern-hill side, “-we’re under attack,” said the driver. The last convoy hailing from inside the continent was ambushed at Eriko mountain pass, the forward vehicles were shot and toppled down the slope. The short gunfight obliterated the D.G’s forces. “Right on people, let’s move out,” the driver resumed.

A few hours later, “-open the gates,” cried a watcher. The trucks drove and pulled into a remote warehouse.

“Another boring day of lifting loads,” complained a worker.

“I know,” returned another, the place was large and empty save the convoy, “-look at it this way, today’s the last batch we’ll ever lift,” they laughed.



“What’s the bullet holes,” inquired a suited man carefully noting information, “-have I seen you before?” he closed on the driver.

“This?” he replied, “-well, can’t be helped,” \*bang,\* the backdoor barged opened.

“The classics are worth the try,” cheered the attackers, bodies fell left and right, “-the trojan horse.”

“WE’RE UNDER ATTACK,” rang the alarm, the port shuddered, “-everyone, to the warehouse,” shouted the supervisors. They turned attention away from the sea, a fatal move, silently black speed boats boarded in a back-stab, in the end, the port was conquered effortlessly.

A collective attack, Alphia, Apexi, and now, the Dark Guild. The greatest fall had yet to smile, by the time Igna reached the noble-house at the Noble District, Arda suffered a massive blow. PMC of alliance to Elendor snuck from the north, using momentum from the conquest of the port, carefully avoided Noctis’s Hallow, marked the exact location of Glenda, and sent said information to headquarters.

The day was nice, gentle, and easy on the commoner’s life, “-mother, look,” pointed a child walking away from the town, “-a plane,” he said with a chipper tone.

“A plane?” the mother turned, and \*BOOM,\* the town levied in smokes, the ears rang, “mother,” cried the boy, “-mother...”

“HELP US!” screamed the survivors. In wake of the attack, a barrier rose above the critically broken townscape; rubbles fell upon bystanders, some burnt, others disfigured, and many, instant death.

“Operation Collapse is a success.”

Chapter 788: The Great Collapse [2]

“Practically speaking, and from what many past experiences have concurred, the way to win a war is to have the other surrender or take out the opposition’s base. And for centuries, the method hasn’t changed, well, until now. Theoretically speaking, to win a battle, one needs but to surround the opposition. Won’t matter no matter the number or opponent, a caged bird can only do so much.”

“Detective, what’s with the boring talk,” said a lady behind her hand fan, “-I heard the news, what have you done?”

“Here a question.”

“I’m not much interested to answer, fine, go on.”

“How does one defeat an invincible foe?”

“No clue.”

“Didn’t bother thinking,” he exhaled.

.....

“What’s the solution?”

“You don’t,” he laughed, “-the answer is simple, destroy what’s around the invincible foe, take out those they care about, trample over what they’ve built, and lead them to self-destruction. In our case,” he sipped upon a porcelain cup, “-coordinated attacks.”

“It was a lovely idea to separate the operation and call on everyone who held a grudge against Phantom and what they stood for, Arda, Haggard – the long month planning’s culminated into our complete victory.”

“They can’t recover, there’s no way. No matter the method of the scheme they counterattack with, fighting us means facing a new alliance of nations, Alphaia will fall the same as Hidros. Queen Ela sure was easily swayed into leaving the federation, I must bid my thanks to the emperor.”

“He’s a charismatic fellow,” added she, “-the four greats are officially allied to the Empire – part of Alphaia’s collapse depends on them. I can’t wait to see the drama unfold. Good job, detective, I knew you had the intellect to rival the whole world.”

“Far too much credit,” he exhaled, “-I should get going, my duty has been accomplished. The rest is in thy hands.”

“Right, awesome work,” returned distantly.

‘Discarded after I’ve served my use,’ the restaurant strayed from vision, ‘-I wonder why no one had ever tried to coordinate... I know the answer, they’re scared of the retribution. Well, I’ve made sure to clear the path for a relatively easy conquest. A game of chess that spans the size of the planet, I loved every moment. Tis how it goes, all is fair in war, and I suppose, the Haggard dynasty was dealt the last blow, it’s over, adieu.’

‘The manor feels ominous,’ upon the midday sun, Igna arrived at a very desolate scape. There was a hint of anguish oozing from the castle over yonder, ‘-something doesn’t feel right,’ he entered with a push, the gates unbuckled, the short climb led to a few parked cars, ‘-sports mobiles?’ he continued the walk and arrived at the porch, glancing inside didn’t give much information.’

“Where’s Igna?” yelled across, “-how can the man be so irresponsible at a time like this?”

“Pardon, my master hasn’t returned home since yesterday.”

‘An argument?’ he made for the living room, the television played heavy news, many figures laid in weight, tension was at an all-time high. éclair helplessly nodded before the onslaught.

“Is something the matter?”

“Master Igna,” éclair’s eyebrows flashed, “-welcome home,” he smiled.

“The man’s finally here,” said an unknown face, “-allow me to introduce myself, the name’s Els, I’m an executive for Phantom’s forces. I wish to speak to lady Elvira.”

“Pardon the intrusion,” added another random face, “-my name’s Ian, I work directly under Queen Gallienne, her majesty has ordered for I to contact lady Courtney.”

“About time,” side-glanced Loftha.

“The situation is dire,” said Els vested in a gently colored striped suit, clean-shaven jaw, a little stuffy around the eyes and stiff at the lips and mouth, “-I require a private audience.”

“Hold on a moment,”

“There’s no time to waste,” fired the second figure, a small man with a child face and innocent smile, a disarming mien, “-we need to speak to the leaders.”

Overwhelmed at the constant inquiry, a questioning gaze shot at éclair’s general direction, “-an urgent phone call,” he said, the demeanor sank, “-master, it would be wise to review the situation,” he handed a tablet and left to the silence of the upstairs.

‘An executive of Phantom and an envoy from the queen,’ he scanned the guests and focused onto the tablet, “-can’t be possible,” the expression froze, ‘-what happened when I was away?’

### **novelusb.com**

“We need lady Elvira to return.”

“Same to lady Courtney. Her majesty the queen has ordered for the Federation to join for an urgent meeting. Representatives of the other factions have departed and will arrive at the latest tomorrow.”

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” he turned on himself and made for the door, a breeze slapped across his sweat-riddle forehead, the mild cold sent pins and needles, ‘-I can’t believe it...’ just as he thought nothing could get worse, a helicopter burst into the field of vision, the small dot grew in size. They landed, the first outran senselessly to Igna who had taken a seat onto the grassy slope leading into the massive yard, “-IGNA, IGNA, IGNA!”

“Kion?” he stood, “-why are you here?”

“I hurried to Hidros after I heard the news,” he panted, “-Alta, how’s Alta doing?”

“I don’t know, she should be at Glenda...”

“NO,” he clenched, “-it’s our link...”

The thought crossed and forced him to stand, “-is she’s dead?”

“We don’t know,” the face clenched, “-what’s happening...”

“What of the others?”

“In Alpha to aid the troubling situation. Odgar was recommended as an advisor by his wife, the daughter of the acting general. The rest of my party are at their side supporting the whole situation.”

‘Glenda is under attack?’

“Master,” footsteps stormed, “-Glenda is at risk of total destruction.”

“How?”

“A PMC has invaded Arda from the northern sea...”

“Noctis’s hallow is there, ask help from the nightwalkers.”

“Can’t do, the clan leaders are on good faith travels abroad.”

“Again, bad timing,” a flash clicked, the picture suddenly broadened, ‘-not bad timing, it’s an orchestrated attack. I severely underestimated the mastermind. Fact is, I don’t know who’s responsible. We were defeated... it was about time for the king of the hill to be dethroned,” he fell silent as did the surroundings, Kion had but a single thought, ‘-how is Alta?’ the guests soon made their way outside of the manor, they lined at the peak of the slope and overlooked Igna; a man held in high esteem by influential people. Everyone looked to him for answers and he, himself, looked inside for the plausible solution, the bicolored pupils washed in a bloody crimson, ‘-the time’s come to fully awaken,’ the lowered gaze rose to the manor’s roof and flew to the sky.

“What will you do, Igna?” asked an internal voice.

“What is there to do?”

“Take back what was taken.”

“And, can we accomplish it?”

“No, what is lost can’t be regained, we can only satisfy the greed by taking more of what was stolen from us.”

“A nasty thought, however, I digress. I’ve tried my best to live a peaceful life, avoiding the truth and completing whimsical endeavors for my own satisfaction... if the world wants to wage war against what I built from the ground up, then I swear on my life as Staxius Haggard, they will pay with the blood,” a dark aura washed his presence, the crimson red hair bleached into a silvery-white, ‘-what say you, me, shall we give the world a taste of the curse which is us?’

‘Stop being so dramatic,’ it laughed internally, ‘-what’s with swearing upon a dead man’s name. Show them what the reincarnation of the Death’s Heir can do.’

“Master, is something the matter?”

“No,” he exhaled, emotions harshened, the expression followed into an expressionless frown, “-éclair,” he took a step with hands in pockets, “-no matter the odds against us, I will make sure we win,” he climbed the slope, past the duo, “-Executive of Phantom, have it known lady Elvira will return when she deems it. Messenger, take this to her majesty, I, Igna Haggard, will represent Arda and Queen Courtney, in the next council of the Federation.”

“Understood,” they said, “-I’ll relay the information,” they left in their transport. Loftha kept a solemn expression under the porch, “-Igna...”

“Loftha,” he stopped and stared, “-you’re worried about Alpha. Take the helicopter and fly home, it would be better to stay at their side.”

‘His face,’ her body reflectively grabbed his arms, “-what about you...”

“What about it?” he placed his hands upon hers, “-I will take back what is rightfully mine. I strongly advise for thee to head home, don’t dilly-dally.” At that moment, the words from Igna hammered into her ear, there was a tremendous power behind the monotonous voice, ‘-if I leave him...’

“Take a message to my big sister. Tell her the Devil of Glenda is at her disposal,” the pupils had nothing, they were blank and empty, “-I will be made for Alpha after I’ve handled the situation in Hidros.” Before realizing what was happening, Loftha was put on a plane for Alpha.

‘I’ve failed...’ the gates opened; ‘-how can I ever show my face to lady Elvira again...’

“Prince Julius,” said éclair.

“éclair, my friend,” he pushed the ajar door and ran for the butler’s arms, “-it’s done and gone, Apexi’s lost everything. The media’s ruthless, everyone’s turned sides, I can’t do anything. The next meeting will decide where the company moves forward... I’m going to be dismissed as the CEO.”

“I’ve asked the idols to cancel their contracts,” said éclair, “-the paperwork’s been handled, before Apexi is taken over, I’ve made sure the properties and assets to be transferred to us.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” he smiled, “-actually, it was master who proposed the idea. He knew to have an exit if matters worsened.”

“Where is he?”

“In the study, I prefer not to disturb him.”

\*Clap, clap, clap,\* “-talking in the entrance hall isn’t a great look,” said Igna.

“Cousin,” target swapped for Igna, “-I’m glad to see you again.’

“Likewise, my dear cousin,” they exchanged a firm short embrace, “-now, I have business to attend to,” another figure followed behind, “-wait up for me!” said Raphael now in his complete form.

“Pray tell, who is the new companion?”

“A fallen angel, Raphael,” a portal summoned, “-make sure not to cause the others trouble,” he said.

“Right,” and off he leaped to the Shadow Realm.

“Cousin, have you changed?”

“Perhaps,” they exchanged glances, “-lady Elvira’s present. Julius, I want you to handle matters pertaining to Phantom. Check the status of the Godfathers, I doubt them going into hiding will do good.”

“Understood, what about you?”

“Me?” he arrived at the door, “-they’ve dared mess with the Devil of Glenda’s domain, I’ll show the true meaning of the nickname.”

.....

“Hold on, Igna!” scurried from the kitchen, “-I’m coming with,” cried the hero, the main door shut.

“éclair?”

“Prince Julius,” said an enigmatic tone, “-we’ve already lost everything.”

“Pardon?”

“Here, take a look,” a tablet handed over, ‘-what does he mean, lost everything?’

“Shocking, isn’t it,” said éclair, “-Elendor has sided with the Empire and our forces were betrayed. I had spies look into a lead, Phantom was played a fool from the start. Elendor and king Juvey have signed a pact. Our force’s exhausted – I gave the order to retreat and naught. I fear the worse.”

“You don’t mean an attack on Rotherham?”

“Precisely, our military is exhausted; an attack now will spell disaster. Master understands the situation. Heir to Creation, Julius Haggard, as the servant to the Watcher of the Shadow Realm, I ask you of this, will you use thy powers and protect Rotherham.”

“Yes,” no reservations nor worries, “-I will use my powers.”

“Perfect.”

The day carried onto the next, the messengers arrived at their respective destination, “-those are his exact words, majesty,” said the boyish faced gentleman.

“Understood, you may leave,” the entrance locked, ‘-Igna will represent Arda in the next Federation council,’ she waited inside a large and tall hexagonal tower of many windows which served as a link to the castle’s inner sanctum and courtyard.

“Majesty, the king of Easel Run Gard has arrived,” reported a retainer towards the eastward corridor.

“Give the boy a room to rest, we wait on Igna Haggard. Have my generals assembled in the courtyard, I wish to speak to them.”

“Will do, majesty.”

Chapter 789: The Great Collapse [3]

Broken, desolate, and a tinge warmth from the dead fire. A faint veil of smoke rose above Glenda’s southwestern area, a place frequent to officials and guards, here boasted the alchemic tower Igna used to rest at times. The long and rigid overlook fell on its side, crashing outside the castle walls and taking part of the walls with it. Unlucky were those who’d made stands in the general area. Medical help in form of adventures and medical potions were distributed, makeshift first aid area erected at town-square, the market stalls turned into medical tents.

“Help my son, please,” cried a wounded mother, half of her visage and arm were viciously slit by the falling rubble. Glenda town guards, in lieu of helping the victims, had their hands full trying to halt unknown attacks from the northwest.

“I’ll help,” said a worried mage, “-don’t worry,” he hailed to a crowd of distraught adventurers, “-new quest from the guild; track survivors and heal the wounded.” A bain of green sparkles healed wounds left right and center, the mage, young in appearance and wise in age, ran to and fro. The courage to watch another be hurt was taught, rather, it was experienced. The inexperience from many held an air of hesitation about the adventurers, they knew not how to help or aid. The efforts from the young mage riled their weak hearts. The peerless smile carried from the town street and into the marketplace;

having healed so many grievously wounded, a patch of sweat gleamed on and under his nose. Breaths were heavy and uncoordinated, he crossed to the greater picture, ‘-impossible,’ he gasped, the air choked, ‘-so many dead...’ a line of mangled, maimed, and cut-off limbs, laid some beside their masters and some, without masters. The horrid sight basked in pure dark-red and hallowed stares. Relatives knelt lifelessly before their fallen family, the jovial atmosphere once exclusive to Glenda, bordered the precipice of agony.

\*Incoming Call – éclair,\*

“Sorry to bother, master.”

“What is it,” he replied monotonously.

“The Federation members have arrived at the castle. Lady Gallienne wishes to start the council and requests thy presence.”

.....

“Have her wait for a little, I must attend to my people. She’ll understand the plight once’s I’ve arrived. Make sure they broadcast what I see to them. Paint them a narrative of upmost helplessness.”

“Say no more, sire, I understand,” he took a breathing break, “-I must impose on another matter.”

“Julius’s Apexi debacle?”

“Yes, it seems the trouble has extended onto Phantom, we’re facing a lot of attacks from rival companies. If Phantom had been a public company, we’d be facing a lot of woes.”

“Business’s bad, I take it?”

“Yes, pretty bad. The Cobalt Unit’s responsible for the Glenda attack, they’ve flaunted the images over the Arcanum – the title reads, Intercontinental missiles operational and for sale.”

“Right...” he exhaled, “-what of my aunt, what’s she got to say on the matter?”

“We’ve lost connection to them,” he said in a deep apologetic voice, “-I was in process of asking Kul to mobilize a search party.”

“No need. They’re most likely in hiding from the sudden arrival of the Empire’s forces. Let them be, I’m sure Alpha can handle their woe – my big sister is there, and I’ll be damned if any of those small fries can ever lay a hand on her or the people she calls family. Trust me, the moment they cross the line, she’ll display the reason why she’s named the Ice-Empress.”

**novelusb.com**

“Then I shall continue to fight against the Arcanum attacks.”

“Understood,” \*Call ended,\* the interface eased on the volley of information. Igna had his head against the jet’s window, scenery changed tremendously upon entering Arda from Dorchester.

“We’re reaching jumping location,” said an attendant, “-young master Igna, tis as predicted,” he gulped fearful of his life, “-a fleet of vessels are to the north.”

“No need to worry,” he said and dawned a parachute, “-long as we don’t get in their line of sight, we should be fine,” they crossed valleys, passed Noctis’s hallow, and were on route to Glenda, \*beep, beep, beep\* [Warning: Projectile Detected. Crew members are advised to relinquish control to the AFR. Repeat, Projectile Detected]

“Young master, please jump,” said the flight crew.

“Understood,” he grabbed onto Kion’s arms and leaped, a trail of white followed the jet, \*Spatial-Arts: Worm Hole,\* a hole opened, swallowed the missiles, and exploded far into the distance, the very air shook at the shock.

“Hard ground,” panted Kion weak on his knees, “-tell me, Igna, don’t you feel fear?”

“Fear only holds me back,” he tracked the jet which soon turned southward, “-hope they arrive at base safely.” Their landing area was a patch of land shy of the meadows nearing the trade routes. Refugees fled on foot and via carriages bolted due East.

“Kion,” returned a straight-faced frown, “-are you willing to fight if the time arises?”

“I will.”

Nod, ‘-he understands the situation,’ Igna took charge and crossed the meadows, skipping over large boulders and dips in the ground, ‘-Glenda is badly damaged, so says the reports. From what éclair showed, it was a missile. They’ve developed the technology to rival our Phantom’s air supremacy, I can’t afford to waste time. Why are the people retreating,’ they hurried against the incoming horde.

“Pardon me,”

“What is it, mister?” said a very hastily dressed trader, “-I’m in a hurry.”

“Why are the people fleeing from Glenda?”

“They were orders from the town hall. Glenda ordered a full-scale evacuation; the neighboring villages are preparing for the worse.”

“Why?”

“Honey,” said a lass in the crowd, “-are you coming?”

“Sorry, I must leave,” the fellow tipped his head and left.

‘Why would he?’ question piled on end, the closer Glenda grew, the stronger was an aura of desperation. Kion felt it, his tight grip onto the sheathed sword was a clear giveaway.

Soon, the trade route curved upon an elevated slope and headed for separation of Glenda and the newer extension beyond the arch-bridge. Whereby memories showed a cheerful gathering of traders and inhabitants, reality had a macabre twist on the situation, the well-catered path was destroyed by the rush of people and animals. Smoke rose above the castle walls. Barrels were scattered, some broken, other thrown – remnants of a struggle read per the sight of clothes and garbage. Empty potion flasks and supplies, ‘-a scene of hundreds fleeing the area of impact – the panic, the terror, it reads



across the tiles,' he dropped on one knee and examined, '-my town suffered at the hands of the unsightly bastards... I'll have my revenge, don't you worry.'

"Kion, go check for survivors," he pointed at the extension.

"Understood," he hopped onto the bridge just as \*Ring, Ring, Ring,\* the sound of an enemy invasion rattled the town. The remainder of the battered town's guard official stormed the gates, their armor rang against each piece, "-shut the gates, leave a quarter of our men inside, we'll take the rest and meet the invaders," said a headless horseman, Kion spared no instant to hurry for the extension, the will to save and protect overthrew reservations.

"Dulah?"

"Now isn't the time to interject citizen, please flee to the villages, we of Glenda shall mount an offensive."

"Dulah..." he climbed the sloped hill toward the gateway, "-must I retreat also?"

"Count Glenda," he instantly dropped on his knees, "-forgive my words, I was blinded by the thrill of facing an army."

"Right," he scanned the troops, '-morale's bad, many are tired and some wounded, I feel for them.'

"Pardon me, we must take to the forest and wait for the enemy," he said, "-I ask for us to be excused."

"By all means," he side-stepped, the guards marched in unison to Dulah, '-headed into battle without a sliver of chance...'

"Master, before I leave," the march halted, "-tis lady Alta, the stewardess was gravely injured. Time is of the essence, health care in Arda isn't advanced enough to aid..."

'Alta?' he turned for the inside and entered, '-I should be in a hurry but I don't seem to care,' the breathing eased, '-magic and potions should undermine the effects of lesser advancement in medical practices,' there, the reason waved under a deserted tavern, '-we're out of supplies, hence the troop's physical state.'

\*Come forth, Vengeance,\* "-how may I serve, master?" knelt a devastatingly strong aura.

"Assist Dulah in the march against the enemy. I want periodical reports on the enemy and their allegiance."

"Will do, sire," he faded through reality and left the lonely tavern. Topples chairs and broken tables, '-the town square,' in one and out the other, the building serves a shortcut through the labyrinth-style layout of roads. 'The survivors are still here,' he arrived, the stalls were heavy and the roads jammed. Where once merchants would fight for clientele and shout their wares aloud, the daunting remains of lifeless family members were presided by the shouts of the grieving. Screams of prices swapped by the scream of the deathly injured, the more he walked, the closer grew the area of attack, the major part of the wall was destroyed, the ground opened and the walls fell in on themselves. Layers upon layers of bricks above which held a thin line of smoke and a circle of crying townsfolk, Glenda was in dire straits.

"Someone, help us, please."

"I don't want to die."

"Adventurer, help my daughter," a broken man had wrapped himself around the foot of a helpless mage, the latter looked physically exhausted, "-I will do anything you wish, I'll put myself through slavery, I don't care, save my daughter, she's only three and yet to experience life, please, help me," the sunken expression cried tears of red. He wasn't the only desperate one, many others pleaded with life and body at stakes, the adventurers, genuinely concerned for the people, were out of mana and drained to the point of passing out.

"I understand, sire, there's no way I can help," returned the young mage, "-I've used the last of my supplies and have no mana to spare."

"I'LL DO ANYTHING!" cried the man.

\*Clop, clop, clop,\* an outline of a strong man grazed the beaten path to the town square, climbed the small edifice marking the marketplace then threw longing regards at the abled of body survivors. Shy northeast of him laid the broken mess of a wall and debris-filled crater, "-People of Glenda," he thundered, "-I, the Devil of Glenda, have arrived at a sorry sight. I'm troubled to see my people readily beg for the life of another. The catastrophe was unseen, the vile acts of the Empire shan't go unharmed. I won't ask for much save the will to accept our situation, Arda is on the verge of a full-out war. My trusted aid, Stewardess Alta's gone missing, I heard she was grievously wounded and yet, I haven't seen her nor her team. Instead, I see courageous adventurers risking their lives in favor of another, to that, I say, thank you," he bowed respectfully, "-the blunder is mine to bear, the sufferance caused won't be forgotten, I vow to take responsibility," he spun on himself, "-here is my resolve." \*Watchers, spectators, names ring high and low, us, unknown to the world's reality, unknown to the world's knowledge, have lived in utter solemnness for millennia to come and go. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, beckons my might to be fully materialized without prejudice, reality is but my playground, neither god nor demon shall overcome my authority, face me in stride, face me in fear, reality's what I wish it to be for knowledge is the true strength: Realm Expansion Shadow Realm Variant – Rantiam,\* Howls of true power and terror gathered around his body and shot in a hemisphere around the town, \*-Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing. Reality or fantasy, rules of the mortal realm, laws governing the all-encompassing universe, cower before he who holds the key to the truth, he who's able to unwind the very fabric of reality, what I summon is my to rule, and what is rule by I shall obey, god, demons, spirits, angels, thou art helpless. Aronot; World Breaker.\*

Chapter 790: The Great Collapse [4]

A tremulous sense of perception, contrived by the expansion of a domain unreal and of phantasmal origin, layered the hallowed expression of the heartbroken. Time rose to a halt; none knew what happened save those able to observe and not see. A conductor before an orchestra of mana-waves, Igna always postured the same, efficient movements; he spoke words of power, "-return to thy rightful place," targeted at the rubble, "-broken wall," it restored to its prior sternness. The sheets of stone bricks were replaced as if bodiless masons took to rebuilding the wall. In a way, it would have been easier to revert time – which meant also recompressing the explosion, once's at its prime, the weapon would detonate again, the wisest choice, after much consideration, was to restore the building material and do with it rapidly. The misfortune-stricken victims, regardless of the gravity of the wounds, were

hovered over by a simple throw of the index finger to the foot of the edifice where he stood. ‘-The dead are dead,’ he observed and crouched, ‘-the town’s spotless,’ destruction vanquished in mere seconds, ‘-about the wounded,’ he gently tapped an injured face, focusing attention on the earlobe, ‘-no signs of the monster curse. Too paranoid about it being a bio-weapon, there’s no telling where the Empire draws the line,’ a sharp push had him standing a few meters in the middle of the wounded ridden market-street, “-wounds and maladies, begone for I order so,” he clapped and created a shockwave of semi-transparent energy; it flowed akin to waves, crashed upon the survivors, their wounds healed. ‘-Alta,’ the eyes landed a little further, her body was haphazardly thrown onto a pile of barrels, ‘-the explosion must have sent her flying,’ he walked, passed the healed survivors of which a minimal observed the events, and arrived at her battered self, ‘-Alta,’ he leaned and took the inanimate lady in his arms, ‘-stop playing dead,’ he watched her face, burning her features within his heart, ‘-this is what they’ve done to a member of my family. You’re not dying on me,’ \*Teleportation,\* the body phased through reality, jumping meters on foot, to the local chapel. Rules of reality didn’t matter, he commanded everything; as it so happened, a few refugees, immobile from the activation, were gestured in motions of taking cover behind the benches.

He walked; the solemn sound of his shoes resounded akin to a tiny blade sharpening a dulled wooden stick. ‘Slice, slice,’ rather, ‘clap, clap,’ he placed her body on the altar, a gruesome sight – left side of her person was charred and of pinkish-fleshy color, there was no recovering from said injury, her waist barely held her legs, they were the same as an exposed wire, dangling and without support. Light from the beautifully arranged stain-glass shone numerous hues upon her body.

A step backward allowed for a greater view on her condition, he breathed, inhaled, and exhaled, ‘-she’s not dead, not fully, Alta’s clinically dead – a reversible state of self.’

\*I summon thee, blessed chest of Creation, Box of Alche,\* the golden-rimmed godly ranked item hovered consciously. The keylocks spawned scarily recognizable pareidolia, in form of a dead man’s skull. The cover yanked open and hurled various items, many of which were scrolls, \*snap,\* the box imploded save the items, ‘-an ancient ranked healing scroll,’ he gripped the scribble of paper, ‘-I forgot about these, there was a time when I thought I could make a fortune off these,’ he held it to the light and ease the grip, it fluttered consciously above her body, ‘-expanding Rantiam’s sucked the mana dry, and the absence of my death element’s mana, there’s no way I can heal her using magic. Perhaps I should have used the scroll on the fatally wounded, those with a chance to live opposed to Alta, I’m taking a gamble here,’ the shoulder slouched from a sudden outbreak, ‘-wise up, Igna – save her, save the ones who matter,’ \*snap,\* the scroll flashed open and cast shadows outside the chapel.

“Sustained wounds art be forgotten,” he ordered, the domain handled the smaller details. The slit open arms and barely standing legs regenerated, the scroll’s properties took effect after the injuries were sealed.

‘Should suffice,’ he hopped to the alter and tapped her forehead. A gray-colored mass enveloped her body, color returned to her flesh, her eyes shot open, and blinked curiously.

“M-master?” the lashes fluttered; her facial muscles went through a variety of motions as if her mind was rediscovering her body. She clambered herself upright and turned to have her foot resting on the cold stone ground, “-where am I?”

.....

"The chapel," he said, "-glad to see you, Alta," he held a helping hand.

"No, this isn't right," she ignored the gesture and jumped, "-what of the town," she pushed for the entrance.

"Hold it."

"Master?" she turned, "-are you stopping me?"

"Obviously," he took a turn and sat on the altar, "-the town's under my control, I've expanded my domain. The safety of the survivors has been handled, there's no cause for concern."

### **novelusb.com**

Her legs shook mildly, "-what of the town-wall, we were attacked..."

"I know," he smiled, "-I should have planned for aerial countermeasures. No, worse than that, I should have been in Glenda sooner."

She took his words by heart, any hurry to check on the outside subsided by an ominously alluring look within her master's crimson pupils, '-the smile felt empty and frightening. Does he know who's responsible?'

"Take a seat," he said, "-shall we catch up on state affairs?"

"Right now?" she observed her rather tempting outfit, "-pardon the shameful appearance, it seems my clothes didn't heal, no shoes for that matter."

"More the reason to stop and breathe," \*clap,\* a new outfit wove into reality, it built itself and hovered into her arm, "-clothes and shoes, thank you, my lord."

"Glenda was attacked by the Cobalt Unit, I have strong reason to believe they are tied to Elendor or the Empire, who are one of the same. Something's very convenient, before Glenda's attack, a harbor under control of Phantom was attacked and ransacked – we received the news from a dead man's last transmission. I don't know the specifics of how they could have invaded, no matter, what's of interest is the nature of the attack and who attacked, the medium was a missile – a precise location needs coordinates, basically, they must have snuck past Noctis' Hallow. Excellent timing, the clan leaders weren't present. The events are highly premediated, which gives rise to a simple line of thinking, the various attacks were done simultaneously as part of a bigger objective. With said line of thinking, we can discard luck and randomness, which, makes it so much simpler to decrypt and identify."

Alta watched and listened, '-master's fingers,' she observed, '-he's made the body movements readable...'

"Master, are you nervous?" she inquired.

"You mean my fingers?"

"Yes..." '-feels like I shouldn't have asked.'

"Tis nothing, I like to have it tap on hard surfaces, straying the opposition's judgment is a great way to win in negotiations. We're getting off track," he stopped and shot a cold stare at the mural above, "-we lost the fight before having a rebuttal."

"No," her head shook vehemently, "-I don't believe my master's lost. No, my pride won't allow it."

"Alta, look at the circumstances, we had no information, much less a clue to what was going on. The attack on Apexi, Phantom, Glenda, Dorchester, and the Federation, they're all linked by a single thread, the Haggard's. The battle's over, no use arguing over the matter, I humbly accept the defeat. Whoever it was, has already accomplished its goal, there I say, even if we refute... it'll be the same as collecting water with a strainer, pointless. I admire their fa?on de faire<sup>1</sup>, a decisive blow, no opening nor exploits. Bears similarities to a sucker punch."

"Ok, ok, a moment, master," she broke his monologue, "-I don't want to hear any more about the fa?on de faire or whatever, wasn't there a point to the whole precise location?"

"It went over my head. I noticed a fleet of ships North of Arda earlier, they're the same people who've attacked the harbor and made their way here. Mobilizing such a fleet requires money and direct order. Enough about the attack, it's resolved. What's the status on the state?"

"The King of Elves is highly antagonistic; he sent his troops to the border under the pretense of an exercise. The man cares not to hide the blatant maliciousness," her thoughts kept going to the defeat of her master, "-please tell me," she yarned for a solution, "-tell me master... you'll win, right?"

"I'm glad," he hopped to and placed a hand on her shoulder, "-the reluctance to accept thy master's defeat is a sign of thy loyalty. For that, I'm greatly appreciative."

"I'm the one who's grateful."

"The sentiment is appreciated... I fear if the reluctance blinds thy judgment, 'twould be a shame, I rather you accept my defeat and learn from what methods were employed instead of rejecting the ordeal. A wise man learns from defeat more than he learns from winning."

'Amazing,' she smiled, '-I serve a truly intelligent master. I was a fool.'

"I see the body's recovered enough. Let us move to the marketplace," he grabbed her hand and teleported.

"Where's the explosion?" she inquired; "-I vaguely saw it after being blasted away."

"Fixed," he said, \*Conjured from the powers of which rules the law of nature, summoned to aid, mine quest art be left alone. Reality is as I dictate, matters affected by my words ought be reflected in the outside world. Realm Retraction Shadow Realm Variant – Aronot.\*

The energy was diluted with Igna at the center. The hemisphere retracted, the reality of the expanded domain remained, the desperate cobblestone streets swept under a collective sigh of exasperation.

"MY DAUGHTER, YOU'RE SAFE."

"FATHER."

"MOTHER," the cheers were mesmerizing and satisfying. Igna nonchalantly leaned against the edifice (a square pillar atop which held the representation of the planet, a globe) dropped on his bottom and had one foot on the next, after which he lit a cigar beneath a humbling shadow. The townsfolk flocked to him and groveled, forehead firm against the dirt street, they bowed in prayer to their savior.

\*Puff,\* he remained silent.

"Hear me, people of Glenda," spoke Alta, "-thy ruler has returned to undo the wrong which has been laid upon us. We know there's no law in war, the king of elves has violated the rights of our people, mankind which is defined as the collection of all races regardless of pedigree and age. They've taken our people into slavery... I wish I could help, the damning political climate is highly unfavorable for us. Residents of Glenda, thee knows about my policy to always be upfront and honest, therefore, I say this, our Count was bested. The war was fought on an intercontinental level, the situation is as follows. There is a high probability we'll be facing the elven army soon. Reforms to solve the influx of refugees and food problem have strayed us from the path of warfare, I had hoped Arda to ally in unison for the betterment of our already war-torn province. Alas, unruly factions wish to ruin what little remains, and I, Stewardess Alta, retainer of the House of Haggard, refuse to allow any leeway!" a magical orb transmitted the market-square across the villages and fleeting citizens. Igna just about reached halfway on the cigar, he inhaled one last time and pushed himself before Alta, the remainder squandered under his feet. "-Glenda's maintained a policy of non-aggression, we went on goodwill and trust, choosing to grant our people freedom from the darkness. What are we repaid with, deception and an unsolicited attack? Enough is enough," dark diabolic energy clawed down his back, "-the reason we don't have an army is simple. You have me, the Devil of Glenda. I'll be damned to let my people's flame for vengeance to be left unheard. Hear me well, my people, I, Count of Glenda, hereby declare war on the entirety of Arda, those unwilling to be under my rule will be crushed. Make no mistake, I'm coming to kill," he glared and broke the recorder with a simple smirk.