

Death Magic 801

Chapter 801: Aceline's Lecture

"Same difference," quipped Julius, "-I do hope the movie is a success," they headed in over a scarcely made pathway. For the showing of a new movie, there wasn't any crowd to speak about, the place felt tranquil and safe, two factors very much important to the glitz and glamour the stars were accustomed to.

In a way, the years elapsed in the overworld had their effects on the Underworld, most specifically, the Shadow Realm. Contrary to what Rosespire evolved into, there laid a stark difference. On one side, the royal palace allowed for visitors – the Shadow Realm, the other, the 'real' world had the castle in lockdown, threats of the plague had made the council eerily cautious.

"DRACONIS!" the inner palace walls shuddered, "-WHERE'S THAT BRAT?" cried an infuriated Gophy, her gloomy appearance stormed from the throne hall into the connecting hallway onwards to the southern side of the castle, her steps against the marble floor carried mild tremors. Serving retainers held their breaths, and platters closed to their chest, "-what did the young master do now?" inquired they hidden in a diverging corridor on the side. She walked and breathed – her steps increased till she ambled into their field of view, what stood was a lady doused in flour from head to toe. The ever-flowing silky hair tangled in a culmination of tightly gathered locks of white. Her deep red cheeks veered one side, glared at the retainers, then turned left and headed forth.

"We're saved," said the butler, "-I wonder what the young master did."

"I poured flour over her head," said a familiar voice.

The butler and maid gulped, they who had stuck themselves to the walls in fear of lady Gophy, slowly glanced at who spoke, "-hello," said Draconis, "-long time no see."

"I've found you," a heavy presence manifested at their side – the maid's eyes rolled, the butler leaned forth to grab the weak-kneed lass, "-sorry for the trouble," winked the young master.

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"GET HERE!" cried Gophy to no avail, the boy ran off into the distance.

"Why's he excited?"

"Young lady Saniata," he voiced woefully, "-could I ask a favor in helping this recruit," an unconscious retainer laid within his cupped palms over his knees.

"Right," she stood prominently, age did her visage wonders. Her hair grew into a deep blue, as her eyes followed suit, her lashes were long as she was tall, the choice of outfit was yet to change. All could see her trollop around the castle in short skirts and tight shirts. It wouldn't have been a problem if the castle was closed to the public. When asked once by a curious visitor, her reply was, "-the kids need to understand what beauty stands for," daft as the answer was, the visitor held his tongue in fear of repercussion.

"I'll help her," she said, "-carry her to the infirmary."

Saniata threw a carefree regard outside upon climbing to the sickbay, her sight landed on a lovely flowerbed drawn on a lush yard of vivid green, the paths around said patches of colors gathered in the middle, a small hill which sloped to a prominently standing tree. A swing and tire swayed, oily dark green hair wept, "-the melancholic princess," observed the butler.

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"My sister is a bit crazy in the head," said Saniata who coincidentally had the vulgar nickname, 'Insidious princess,' tales of her personality were spoken akin to scary stories to have kids go to bed. Following the trend, Draconis held the name, '-Eccentric prince,' in the Rosesopian culture of the Shadow Realm, the three princes were deemed a thing of glory and praise. Saniata's quest to provide aid continued deeper into the castle. Vanesa found herself swinging.

'Father's coming home today,' she moved to and fro. Date, December 5th X110, "-Vanesa," cried a gentleman with a parasol in his grip, "-I'm here."

"Starix," she listlessly climbed out the loop, "-I need help picking a present."

“For the master?” he inquired to receive a nod as a response.

“Yes, present,” the intonation made not much effort. On the way down, she locked herself to Starix’s arms, “-I’ll take a nap... take me there.”

“A nap?” he exclaimed, “don’t...” no chance, her eyelids were heavy, ‘-the melancholic princess,’ he stopped and pulled her onto his back, ‘-lady Lilith and I are lucky to have her. Out of the three, she’s the strongest and laziest. Eight long years,’ the promenade ended at the castle’s massive inner-town. They came from the right and started forth to an out-of-place parking lot, a storage building was torn in favor of said area. Left to right laid an assortment of beautifully made vehicles, strong to refine, it felt more of a dealership than anything. Each had differing emblems of brands inherited from the Shadow Realm. Eight long years, the car toggled with Vanesa in the front passenger seat, the time elapsed sufficed to have a world evolve into their own. Flying blimps took the place of clouds, the buildings were tall and modern, which was a reference to the symmetrically sharp angles and designs. The roads were immaculate and of a darker color, people walked else took the tram which rode in the middle of two-lane and some time, four-lane roads. In more ways than one, the evolution was focused on a better standard of living, better technology, better entertainment, and overall, better life. Opposite to an idyllic utopia, the world grew to have its own hierarchy with the poor and the rich. If one wanted to acquire goods and services, one needed to pay and to earn money, one needed to either hunt monsters or work for offices or businesses. Seems harsh at first glance, a mere scan would give naught save bits of information to be pieced on a bias outlook. ‘Everyone is born equal,’ such as the saying many adhered by the citizen, anyone could make it big – the tools are provided, they but need to take action and work for what they wanted. On policy by the four generals in attempts to increase the population, the state would provide a monthly allowance to couples who had a babe till they reached eight. Families walked along the pavements, the shops lit and showed their wares, the blimps gave visual updates on news and such, “-wake up, Saniata, we’ve arrived.”

Curtains shut, a round of applause riled the spectators, “-awesome movie,” said energetic watches.

“Seems to me it’s a success,” winked Julius.

“Right you are,” nodded Igna. The crowd dissipated, clicks formed and the seats emptied, Igna sat and waited, ‘-there they go,’ he thought, ‘-Malley’s pregnant, Julius ought to take notice of the pain that comes with raising children.’

“Igna,” a silhouette moved into his field of vision, “-look at me,” warm fingers took his sharp jaw and pulled, “-yes, me,” the star of the show meaningfully exchanged stares, “-are you trying to avoid?”

"No," he broke her hold, "-I thought space would be better served."

"And why?"

"Come on," he turned to the big screen, "-Aceline's a world-renowned name, she's a superstar. I don't want to tie you down anymore."

"That is for me to decide," she pulled him onto her chest, "-don't hide your feelings from me. I said it before and I'll say it again, we're a couple, I'm here to share your burdens."

"That's the problem," he pulled from her embrace, "-I'm reluctant," he fell into a seat, "-we've been together for six years, our anniversary is tomorrow... you've given so much love and support, what did I do, spend my time working and digging myself a bigger hole to hide under. You know why I'm scared..."

She dropped in the next seat, "-terrified that I'll be gone?"

"Suppose so."

"The almighty Igna sure has his weaknesses," she playfully flicked his nose, "-for someone who's a mastermind, you sure are daft at times. Look at me," she warmly grabbed the back of his head and leaned in, "-everything comes and goes, what counts is memories," they locked lips for a few seconds, "-what matters is the memory I impart in thy heart," her fingers ran to point at his heart, "-I forced the relation, which is why I'll never demand anything extra."

"Says the idiot who called me an idiot," he took her hands and stood, "-I would have never accepted to be romantically involved with another if I wasn't interested. Tell me, Aceline, how long have we known each other."

"Since the start?" she chuckled.

"Right," he smiled, "-that's the reason why I accepted."

It happened on a cold Friday evening in the year X104, the cold wind blew to pierce what little cloth he wore. The years were harsh on Igna, the focus on restoring his family name and reputation took him around the continent, he yearned to figure a solution – éclair and the Raven's were well-off in the booming gambling market, the stain of the monster invasion washed by the rain of time. He might have been fine alone, sadly, the glaring shadow of misfortune over the Haggard name had him in a dire situation. There was no way out, no way in – the train had just arrived at the terminal, he exited the cabin and made for the staircase – afterward, choosing to walk as opposed to a cab. Rosespire carried on with their daily lives, he bit his lips and forced through the clouded sky, he went outside of the capital, picking the walkway that linked the three-expanded cities. Incertitude rose from within, the heart pulsed, inheriting Alfred's memories and powers was more of a curse than anything. Destruction and raw jealousy were very hard to keep under control, a demon had its teeth sunk into his neck, one wrong move and it would have control. It took a few hours to walk to Juei. A massive thunderstorm laid thick on the land, the rain led into floods, paths turned stream ending in waterfall – in a rude twist of fate, Aceline, who had been riding in the company of a movie director, took notice of Igna's damp white hair, she canceled her meeting and exited the warm vehicle for the harsh outside, "-Igna," she stood in solemn contrast against the cityscape of Juei, "-it's me," she said.

"Aceline," perhaps it was the rain, or perhaps it was torn, Igna threw a woeful look toward her, only realizing the visage after the stare. Opting to switch personalities, the frown turned into a smile, or so he thought, long fingers suddenly pressed against his lips, "-don't give me a fake smile," the droplets contoured her visage, "-we're friends, aren't we?"

"Sure we are..."

"Don't give me that crap," lightning cackled, "-Igna," she moved closer, "-are you carrying the burden as Staxius did?"

Her words lit ablaze within his eyes, "-no-"

"Don't talk," she firmed, "-let me speak for once," slender and feeble as she looked, her back was straight and shoulders firm, Aceline was strong, very strong, "-I heard from lady Courtney about what happened, the company's not going so well, employees are being fired and the blame's being pushed solely on you and Julius. Everyone's out to get you, even Arda's not looking great," he averted her gaze, "-look at me," she pulled his face, "-Igna, our promise to release a song as a band... I don't think I could do it. Looking at you now, I see the broken vestige of a man who's lost everything, tell me, are you a man to be broken as easily?"

"You wouldn't understand..."

"Make me understand then," she firmed, "-Igna, look at me, stop running away. What was the whole talk about accepting oneself?"

"How did yo--"

"I know," she smiled, "-I may be nothing to you," her hand lit to materialize a grimoire, "-after revival, I was blessed by the Arcane Goddess, Elysia. Therefore, I know, you understand, I know," the book vanished, "-I can't stand the way you look," she pulled onto his sleeve, "-Igna, wallowing in woe isn't going to work. To survive, one must fight," she looked over her shoulders, "-if you need an excuse, make me your excuse. If you need a reason, make me your reason, if you need to cry, I'll be here," lightning struck.

The rain poured heavily, "-are you confessing?" wondered a jestful tone.

"Shut up."

Chapter 802: X10

"Jokes aside, I'm glad you said what you said," returned Igna gracious to her sudden interjection. After exclaiming, '-shut up,' by force of habit, she wrapped her long fingers around the back of his neck then pulled into a hug.

"I'm worried about you more than what you stand for," she said, "-listen, I don't have much time left," the car from which she leaped skid to a stop with the passenger wailing his arm in anger, "-the director's a bit on the crazy side," she tiptoed and marked his cheeks with a gentle peck, "-Igna, promise me, one thing, you'll rethink everything from the start. Who you are, what you stand for, and who you want to protect, and those who need to be destroyed, after assessing everything, crumble and burn them. Only then will what you really need to do become apparent. Tis a promise from me to you," she smiled, "-let me stand at thy side," her shoulders dropped to grab and hold his right-hand, "... the cold rain paled her skin, even so, a spark of flush rounded on her nose.

"I understand," he said, "-actions speak more than words," he placed his empty hand upon hers which had sandwiched his right, "-thank you for the warm words." Hence marked the start of their relation. Many prospecting partners came and went, many wanted his power and others his wealth – when he stood against the odds, the prospective interests showed their true intent and ran. In more ways than one, Igna found himself truly alone, '-treat people how one wishes to be treated,' the karmic saying affected his life. After having pushed away many families and friends, he found himself standing outside the capital in a heavy thunderstorm. The bittersweet revelation was known deep down. A running nose and soaking wet clothes guided him under the shade of a weak tree. He sat; the damp dirt stained the clothes beyond recognition. The phone barely had battery, Aceline's words were truthful and cause for reflection. It would take éclair five hours to locate his master – the rain kept assaulting the manmade castle of bricks – night closed, headlights upon the expressway lit the wet road, an escort of a few black cars rumbled at walking speed.

"Over there," he pointed, "-I've found the young master," the door unlocked, a parasol opened, the rain beat against the coating, éclair's glasses fogged the longer he moved. Arms guards moved to secure a perimeter. A moat formed around he who sat with one knee to his chest, "-éclair," he said coldly – there was an air of change, one palliative, and calm.

'Master's aura is different,' he observed, crossing the moat which had gathered around the tree, "-how do you feel?" he asked.

"I feel normal," he replied, clenching and relaxing his fingers, "-the weirdest of things happened. As I sat under the tree, lightning crackled and struck, the electricity jolted throughout my body and mind – I died and reawakened. The answer was before me all this time, I was too blind to see."

"Pray explain young master," he approached with the parasol.

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"Small details, the devil is in the details," he added enigmatically, "-reach enlightenment," the handheld to the sky, crackles and burnt marks resembling ferns layered his pale skin, "-éclair," he clambered against the tree, "-I know what I have to do, and I'll need help in doing so."

"Will do," replied éclair. The screeching of the brutish wind amplified, a ball of purple summoned shy of Igna's head, he reached into the Box of Alche and removed a pair of glasses.

“Master?”

He shot an inquisitive look backward, “Wandering why I conjured glasses?”

“Yes.”

“Peer into my pupils,” he said, “-look deeply, past the retina and further in.” The butler obliged his master’s request and squinted for a closer look, “-I see what looks like an inverted pentagram, no, it changed into a dragon, wait, again, it changed into wings, what’s happening?”

“The cycle of symbols,” said Igna, “-after inheriting my true memories,” he pulled his sleeve and showed cursed writings, “-assimilating what I took time, who am I, I keep questioning the reason of my existence – before Alfred, my reply would have been, ‘-protect what is mine and retake what was stolen with interest’ the priorities aren’t the same, my answer now is, ‘-dethrone the gods, make them suffer’ quite the conundrum, isn’t it,” he kept a neutral frown, “-I see everything constantly, the mana-lines and the very fabric of reality,” therein, the symbol altered into a circle, “-the symbol of power for the cursed king – Void,” thunder resounded across the land, éclair’s heart jumped, ‘-intense.’

“Look behind you,” said Igna.

“The tree’s destroyed.”

“Correct,” he said, “-if I stare too intently at something, my mind automatically translates the structure of said entity and highlights weak point. Goes the same for humans,” he looked on into the night sky, “-take the heavens by force,” the arms reached upward, “-or so I want to say,” the elbows dropped, “-the glasses are limiters to dampened what I’ve inherited.”

On said Friday evening, great change was brought to Igna and what he held. The personality softened, or so what was read on the outside – more than truth, he grew truly uncaring to what wasn’t interesting. What followed was the true restart of Phantom and Arda – the goal, stability.

Six years later, stood at the entrance outside the cinema hall, the goal mildly elapsed expectation.

"Igna," gentle taps refocused his attention.

"-Sorry?"

"You zoned out," said Aceline. Night was upon them yet again, an afterparty in celebration of the movie was hosted at a nearby hall.

"-Not going?" he asked, moving to a bench shy of a few bushes.

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"Not in the mood," she leaned on her hands, "-I don't care for it."

"Well, you should," he said, "-a world-class superstar needs to show the people what they want."

"I'm tired of lying to the public," she exhaled, "-Igna..."

"I know what you mean," he looked on at the gathered crowd of suspicious fans outside the fence, "-going public will but hamper thy career." Various luxury cars shuffled through the gates and made for the 'affluent' district of Rotherham. Among the stars was Aceline's co-star, Johna Et, the male lead that played the detective. He looked about in search of something or someone. Handsome as he was, the man was blessed by an unparalleled acting talent, he'd flaunt his longing look right and left, nonchalantly scanning the crowd of which screamed.

"The actor in vogue," said Aceline, "-a man of hard work and talent."

"Well, the actor is coming this way."

"Aceline," the handsome man stood kindly before the actress, "-the movie turned out awesome," he smiled, the latter radiated light and kindness. He took a look side-ways, landed on Igna, said nothing, and reached for her hands; "-the fans say we look great together."

"I suppose they do," she kept a guarded posture.

"Let's go to the afterparty," he suggested, "-I mean, there's no point in standing gloomily under the night sky."

"I'm fine where I am," she replied courteously, "-besides, the afterparty is but a reason for the stars to get drunk and force themselves onto unsuspecting fans."

"What are you talking about?" he gestured in a way to say, '-how ignorant.'

"You think me a fool?" her voice rose, "-I appreciate the invitation," she slid closer to Igna and laid her head on his shoulder, "I'd rather sit in the dark in the company of someone I care about than to mingle with strangers."

"Please," he bent and took her hand, "-the scene we shot, the romance I displayed was the truth, can't you accept my feelings?"

"Accept the fakeness?" she chuckled; "-I think not."

"So, are you two romantically involved?" he shot back with arms akimbo, "-huh, am I to assume correct?"

"Assume whatever thee wishes," she said, "-doesn't involve me or him."

"You must be kidding me," the nice-face dropped, "-what's the point in staying here with a nobody. The acting career depends on connections, I'm saying this for your own good, you ought to make friends with anyone and everyone, tis the key to a life of stardom."

"He speaks true," said Igna.

"See, even the man agrees."

She lifted her head and side-glanced murderously of which her hands tightly pinched the thighs, “-he speaks true,” she returned the sentence with blatant skepticism.

“There’s no need for sarcasm,” he sighed, “-tell me, Et, what are you after, her body or her affection?”

He hesitated for a second, “-her b-, no, affection, yes, affection.”

“Not a great actor,” returned Igna, “-take away the camera and what is left is a lucky man scouted by an agency; who also was reported to have slept his way to the top. Am I, or am I not correct?”

“How slanderous, how dare you?”

“Pardon my deduction, detective,” he played a mockery of the actor’s prior role, “-my sources are never wrong. Suppose there is hard work in trying to last more than a few minutes.”

“How did yo-” the smile fell.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” chuckled Aceline, “-this nobody here is Igna Haggard, else I say, the man who pays your wage?”

“Ha-ha!” he pointed, “-Aceline did sleep her way as well, don’t patronize me when thee have done the same.”

“What if she did, is that an issue?”

“N-no, i-its not,” he backed a few steps, “-I was only pointing at the hypocrisy.”

“Well,” he stood and placed a hand upon the actor’s shoulder, “-don’t feel threatened, I never said what thee did was wrong. In a way, I ought to tip my head to thy gallantry. You’re a good actor, don’t waste the talent on needless hunts.”

“Understood,” he nodded, “-I’ll try my best, sir.”

“Call me Igna,” he extended the hand of friendship.

“I will, Igna,” the grips tightened, “-till we meet again,” he left with a lighter demeanor.

“Consider me impressed, I thought the murderous Igna would have taken his life or intimidated the man beyond repair.”

“Why would you say such a thing?” he spun on his heel, “-as the apostle to Goddess Elysia, there’s a place I wish to take thee.”

“Our bedchambers?” she coyly suggested.

“Not now,” he tapped her forehead, “-dirty jokes will get you nowhere.”

‘Wasn’t a joke,’ she murmured in a pout.

“You said something?”

“No, no,” her head shook briefly, “-where are we going?” the expression eased.

“To my domain,” *snap,* heavy-black double doors materialized, “-the Shadow Realm,” he pushed the handle, it bellowed, “-let’s go.”

The transfer of realm, the passage into another world – only knowledge Elysia passed was the tales of gods having their own world to rule and build, a bright white light shifted from Rotherham’s cityscape to a luxurious interior of a manor, “-where are we?”

“Inside the Shadow Realm,” he said and stretched his arms, “-the place I call home,” jacket was thrown onto a hanger beside an opened door to the balcony, “-follow me,” he said.

“Welcome home, master,” a few fluffy winged entities spoke in a high-pitch.

“Thank you,” he replied, “-would thee be so kind to prepare us a meal?”

“Understood,” said a pink-colored fluff, which soon hovered past Aceline’s confused regard. Night was upon the city, two moons, one larger and green, the other, crescent-shaped and red, hid behind the cover of the clouds, in a way, it resembled two figures sleeping under a warm blanket.

“The shadow realm?” she shuffled onto the terrace, “-the place looks identical to the manor in Rosespire.”

“Look to your right.’

“THE CASTLE!” her jaw dropped, “-where are we?”

“The Shadow Realm,” he said, “-the world reflects the Overworld, tis the name given to where we come from. I won’t bore with details, consider this place a reflection.”

“No, no,” she rushed forth, “-the cityscape is far more impressive than back home, I mean, it’s the dead of night and the city’s still alive. Even here,” she pointed at the various manors, “-it seems friendlier.”

“That’s because,” he turned to watch the view, “-it is peaceful, very peaceful in fact.”

Chapter 803: Four General Council

“Peaceful you say, how, where emotions reside, there ought to be conflict. Are people not envious of others, I mean,” her fingers went round the back of her neck, “-the bugs,” she tapped, “-back to what I was saying.”

“I got it,” he firmed, “-you think the humans here operate on greed and wish to gain more than others?” a confident smile tipped the scale of his lips, “-those here have died, and know they have died. Tis a

reflection of the Overworld, and here, life continues for in their minds, it's the afterlife or something along those lines. I thought of many options for the domain's creation, what would it become, a relaxing refuge or an oppressive camp? I opted for the former – they're my people, granted I may have stolen them from their families... the details do not matter for they are here."

"Right, I understand peace..." she reluctantly shrugged. The pinkish ball of fluff, which was potato-shaped bearing tiny legs in resemblance to those of a chick, three dots same as holes in a bowling ball, acted as the eye sockets and nose. It chirped to a stop, "-master," it spoke without a mouth, "-I have brought tea.."

Behind, a walking table clopped its way to their feet – the flexible limbs sterner into a normal table.

"What?" blinked Aceline furiously, '-a walking table?'

"Have some with me?" suggested Igna, out the pot and into the cups, the hotness showed in the risen steam.

A curious and cautious air filled her movements, her gestures were fluid to a certain extent. On reaching to things beyond her apprehension, an illusionary line seemed to tug, '-let's see,' she took the cup, cast a gaze on Igna, the man sipped. She gulped and took the first step, the first sip, and her mind exploded, "-delicious!"

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"Master," two strangely short figures ran amidst the shadows to perch over the balustrade, "-the Generals calls for thee."

"Oh right," he turned on his admiration over the landscape, shot the drink back.

"Wait for me," cried Aceline, "-I can't finish it..."

Snap, he clapped fingers in her direction without looking, the porcelain cup lined by blue in a floral pattern altered into a portable cup. The object stood as she'd expect from a coffee shop in the

overworld, ‘-did he just?’ she paused and watched. A slight excitement gathered in each step, her apprehensive expression could but smile.

Gathering of the court, or so was the appearance Aceline concluded from the eavesdropping on Igna’s conversation to the two strange figures. Black as the night and slim as a hair, they were truly shadows, able to reside in the darkest of the abyss. Similarly, the conversation ended; they found themselves at the Castle gates.

“How did we ge-”

“Teleportation,” he said, “-turn around.” She followed what he said, behind the elevated slope of the castle arch-gates laid a beautiful city, far more attractive to what she first saw on the balcony. The buildings weren’t too taller nor too flashier, they were clean and eye-pleasing, thus blending itself to the ‘tranquil,’ feel she spoke of earlier. In comparison to the cityscape of Rosespire, the buildings there were flashy and demanding – in a way, the advertisements and design were the same to a toddler yearning for his parents’ attention, or a desperate younger man trying to make an impression. Desperation was blatant – therein, lent itself to the ‘in your face,’ feel.

“Igna, are we not headed into town?”

“Someone’s gotten curious. We’ll go later, the whole of December is celebration month here.”

“Whole of December?” her eyes widened, “-why... no, I mean, how?”

“Fully sponsored by us,” he gave a thumbs up, “-don’t sweat the details and follow.”

Decorations layered the inner castle town. Horses and carriages waited in a corner behind the architecturally pleasing houses, slanted roofs reminiscent of the olden era. Stable workers hunched onto their work took notice of the visitor, rose their back, then waved with smiles. Igna returned the feeling and continued further in.

‘The more I stay, the lesser I know. This is nothing like where we hail from. The general atmosphere is pleasing, I-I, it’s pure happiness, I can’t contain myself.’

"Greetings my Lord," bowed a butler with arms around his chest.

"You seem well, I do hope my children aren't causing problems," his facial muscles twitched, "-no," came an obvious lie, "-they're not... I mean."

"Cheer up," he tapped the butler's shoulder, "-thank you for enduring their games."

"No, I didn't mean the pranks were bad or anything, it's fun."

"Glad to hear it," he smiled, "-have the guests arrived?"

"Not everyone's present. Please head to the secondary hall."

"The one with the open-roofed terrace?"

"Yes, my lord." Portraits of the four goddesses laid on the walls upon which the grand staircase rested. Midway up, the stairs separated into two, they picked the left side and continued. Aceline's focus drew to the portraits at the center of the separation, "-was this done by the mysterious artist who also built thy personal collection?"

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"Good eye," he said, "-the collection isn't much to speak about, well – tis only since I have yet to reveal the name of the painter. Trust me, the day it's made public, each piece will have values stronger to manors on the prettiest beach one could buy."

"If it's something like Athena, then yeah, sure."

"How did you guess?"

“HOLD ON,” her heels dug onto the carpet, “-I WAS JOKING, ARE YOU SAYING,” she pointed with mouth open, “-THIS WAS DONE BY THE GODDESS OF ARTS AND CRAFT?”

“Did I stutter?”

Clop, clop, clop, a burning mien clawed up the stairs and grabbed his collar, “-Igna, tell me the truth.”

“No need for violence,” he took her wrist, “-Athena visited our realm a long time ago. Suppose a goddess gets bored at times.” Distant rumbles closed his guard, he shifted, going left and right, ‘-I sensed them.’

“WELCOME BACK, POPS!”

‘Up?’ he checked, ‘-no.

‘Left? No.’

‘Right?’ no.’

“Below?’ the forehead crinkled.

“SURPRISE!” Draconis erupted out a portal, “-I missed you!” he latched onto Igna with all limbs.

“You realize the body isn’t that of a child anymore...”

“Whatever,” grinned the horned adolescent, “-I’m like 8 now.”

“You and age,” the head shook, “-never works.”

“Hello again, father,” said three quietly standing children.

'Father?' Aceline turned on herself to a melancholic, oily-faced Vanesa. A fabulously dressed Saniata of whom had a condescending leer, and lastly, Raphael in a white-overall. 'He did say something about having children.'

Before long, the meeting place swapped to the terrace of the secondary hall. The latter rested inside after open windows and heavy curtains. A backdrop of the city gave a sense of presence rather than a backdrop of a somber forest. Tables were laid, retainers did rounds, some partook in the drinking – the guests arrived to form the social groups.

"Hey, pops, tell us about what's going on in the Overworld."

"Please Draconis, no more boring talk about politics," exhaled Saniata, "-I'm more interested in her," she pointed rudely at Aceline, "-the lady is pretty and all, just who is she."

"Seems to me, sister Saniata feels threatened by the presence of Lady Aceline," said Raphael with hands pressed in prayer.

"don't play the saint," she fired.

"No saint," he returned calmly, "-I'm but an angel, understanding of another's misguided thoughts."

"One more comment and I swear," she summoned her lute.

"No fighting," mediated Draconis.

"Huh?" they cried in ears; "-did something happen?" they inquired in tandem

"No, nothing happened. Decide the argument with rock-paper-scissor."

"Never mind," they turned heads.

'They seem to get along,' he thought till a warn pressured laid on his thighs, "-Vanesa..."

"No more laying on pops lap," refuted Saniata, "-come 'ere young lady," she was pulled by the collar and forced upright on a distant seat. In the exchange, a question remained unanswered, '-who is she?' read their faces.

"Right, let me introduce Aceline, a superstar in the overworld and my lover."

"Your lover?" she pulled his cheeks, "-hello, my name's Aceline, ignore what he said, I'm more of a guiding post in his otherwise vacant life, a beacon of hope and whatnot."

"Sounds tasty," dribbled Vanesa.

"No sister," facepalmed Saniata, "-she said beacon, not bacon."

"No bacon..."

"No..."

"Boring."

"Right," Igna interjected, "-let's start with Raphael, how has life been here?"

"Well, I became Goddess Miira's apprentice a few years ago. I was assigned to work at the central hospital, tasked to heal and do research on the monster plague which affiliated our adventures. Life is pleasantly mundane – I prefer this to what I experienced in Hades' realm."

They moved on to Saniata, "-fine, I'll go next," her eyes rolled, "-Lady Intherna's been training me in the advanced art of martial combat. The training is never over. Besides training, I work as a guild advisor at the adventuring city of Meke."

“Me next.”

“Go on.”

“Ok. Lady Gophy has taught me the ways of Chaos. The more energetic I am, the stronger I will get, or so what she told me, I don’t remember. For now, I work the stables catering to lady Gophy’s collection of mythical beasts. She brought the egg of a dragon yesterday; I can’t wait to see it evolve. Before that there was a white horse with a horn, it looked stupid, I broke it and made the thing into a pen,” he reached into his pocket and pulled, “-see, it’s prettier as a pen.”

“Hold on, please tell me you didn’t tear the thing of a unicorn’s head?”

“Yeah, that’s the name she said.”

The table breathed a collective sigh, “-airhead,” they facepalmed.

Last was Vanesa with her forehead onto an empty plate. Between not laying on Igna’s lap and talks of not having bacon, her emotions drained, “-working for Lilith, she taught me the ways of the succubae or whatever, no food is no way to live.” The conversation went for longer, the guests filled the hall with cheers and smiles. Retainers enjoying drinks were forced into labor. A burst of silence drowned the friendly banter, four imposingly dressed ladies made their way onto the stage where a band of bards played, “-Welcome,” said Miira, “-to our annual gathering of friends and family. We of the Four General council wish for friendly and understanding night,” she gave the stage to Intherna, her fiery red hair was always a matter of wonder, she strode forth and struck the crowd with an imposing stare, “-times’ wasting, go out and have fun.”

“CHEERS!” it resounded.

“Who are they?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” he smiled. A familiar aura faintly tickled his nose, the outline of a massive wolf ran through the night and leaped, swapped for the figure of a lady, then landed strongly, “-IGNA,” she leaped into his arms, “-long time no see!”

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“What are you on about,” he returned her feelings, “-we spoke last month...”

“Still long,” she pouted.

“My heir,” said Adete, “-I see you’re in good shape.”

“First progenitor,” he nodded, “-thy beauty rivals even the moon.”

“Cut the pleasantries,” she tapped his head, “-has the party started?”

“Yes, it has,” the four ladies swarmed the outside – in a way, the guests felt intimidated at their auras, and so, shuffled inside to avoid their direct line of sight. Cora, Kaleem, Yuria, and Starix showed their faces after the master’s entrance.

“Wait a moment,” blue hair and ears twinkled at Aceline’s scent, “-I remember you,” she said, “-you’re the idol master and I met so long ago.”

“Pardon me,” she stepped away, “-I don’t remember.”

“Aw, too bad.”

The annual gathering, a celebration and disguised as a way to catch up on important events for the resident of the Shadow Realm who have had experiences in the Overworld. Discussing the fate of their journeys or what was to happen next counted highly in the various priority lists. At one point, Beelzebub, Asmodeus, Mammon, three out of the seven princes of hell, made their entrance to be scolded by Lilith. It was amusing to see them on the ground knelt without a say in the matter.

Chapter 804: The eight year long Mystery

“Lovely to see you again, master.”

“Asmodeus, what a pleasant surprise.”

“Not much of a surprise, is it,” he chuckled, the hall followed the annual festivities. Performers rocked the stage with their energy and good faith – in addition, to live, the various acts were transported via the antenna and broadcast over the town. Needless to say, in where the festival had the populous on fire, the performances would either make or break it, “-Shadow Realm sure is animated,” he commented.

“I know,” returned Igna, “-anyway, tell me what’s happened in Alphaia,” a loose piece of thought caught his tongue, “-before that, where’s Midne and Kul, are they not here?”

“No,” the head shook a little, “-we asked and they said, ‘-if none’s here to supervise the company, then who will?’ Midne’s a great asset, she’s really grown into the work over the past years.”

“Happy to hear it.”

“Master,” he whispered, “-I heard from the grapevines that you had acquired memories from a prior life?”

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“Right, I only told éclair, seems he might have gotten lost during the drinking session. My inheritance of what I stood before everything is a double-edged sword. I wish not to dwell on the past, tell me of what’s happened with Raven.”

“I honestly wish for thee to return to Alphaia, it’s been at least five to six years. Everything has grown; not to mention the maladies lady Vanesa transmitted around the world. I see the seedling has hatched into a great tree. Words cannot express the impression left.

“Cut the pleasantries.”

"If it's about the war," he gathered his breath and began with a pause, "-after the first invasion of the Church, the northern province has been fighting a war of attrition on the border. The pace of the battle changes every month, it's the same, they have a big fight, one side comes out on top, and the other retreats. They take a few weeks to recover, gather their force, and lash out again. If either side is ballsy enough to sneak past the assigned barrier, advance weapons are launched – of which both scenery and people die. On the day Alphaia used teleportation against the church, the border attacks have grown lesser common. Each side is wary of the other's counter-attacks. As for the economy, Alphaia's leadership is forced to spend a copious amount of money to keep the army up and running. In said war, I know not what'll drain faster, the church or Alphaia. One thing is certain, the battle hasn't deterred business from Odegawoan, we far retreated from the battle – tourists are happy to oblige; it's a thing of wonder, Raven's taken the gambling world by storm. Due to instance with the Empire, trade from Hidros to Iqavea is hampered, we've taken to exportation fully, in a way, the money we make under Phantom's name is sufficient to care for common troubles. I mean, the latter doesn't care about money anymore," he smiled, "-you've patented the whole subject on Maicite trading and technological advancement. If they want power, they ought to pay, and we aren't easily affordable. By my count, we were offered seven-passenger airplanes in exchange for a few kilograms of the purest Maicite – tis unbelievable."

"The market is ours," he said proudly, "-Raven, Phantom, and the subsidiary companies have passed the apex of making money, it's to a point where the money makes itself. Even if we are to retire now, we'd have made 6 generations' worth of money to spend and live outrageously."

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"The casinos bring in too much, Mammon's went on a spending spree, buying hotels and resorts at the beaches and even a private island to the south, worse part, he used his own money, goes to show how greatly we're doing."

"Since we do banking with Arda, there's nothing the centralized government can achieve in tracking our activities. Suffice to say, we have grounded ourselves against any prominent backlash or trouble."

"Correct," he nodded, "-pray tell, what next, I fear Alphaia might lose the war if nothing is done."

"That is for them to decide. Phantom is still an arms dealer, though the focus has been on Maicite for the past few years, I think it'd be wise to start implementing the entity in weapon's making. The Cobalt Unit is the manufacturers as of yet, pains me to say, to gain one must lose."

"Pardon the intrusion," said Starix cutting into the conversation, "-master, may we have a few words?"

"Guess it's time for me to leave," nodded Asmodeus, "-master, it's been a pleasure, I hope we speak again soon," he scaled the carpeted stairs and made for a band of castle flowers, the prince of Lust's name held true.

"A dog," she muffled and sat, underneath the pleasant aroma of the distant flowerbed, "-I have matters to report," she said, '-no response. I ought to speak my mind I suppose.'

"We heard reports of a potential attack on Easel Run Gard. The lesser fortunate countries have allied into a very concealed manner to discuss Phantom's monopoly."

"By heard, you mean it's confirmed?" he leaned onto the table, "-the lesser countries haven't the stomach to endure nor the wallet to fight-"

"-most likely, they're being manipulated by a greater party. We came to a similar conclusion. Master," she slid across papers, "-here are the details. The countries made the mistake of contacting Cimier, who I remind, has been infiltrated by 02 and a member of the nightwalker race. By my account, 02's reached the position of Godfather, he controls the human trafficking organization part of the secretive agency."

"Right," he nodded and scanned, filtering facts from fiction, rather, wrong reporting, '-I forgot about him. He kept on working for decades – 02, thou art truly a scary spy. Easel Run Gard fears the potential of a seabound attack. We could intervene... the political climate won't allow Hidros to make a move yet. Rosespire's filled with doubts and confusion, the courts in disarray after a young noble was assassinated in broad daylight at the Rosian Media Square. Seems I have to play catch up."

"Cousin," said Julius, "-I was wondering," he pulled a chair, hailed a maid who went and brought countless bottles, "-whatever happened to the mystery of Haggard's Collapse. I never had the chance to ask, and you know, the years were rough, I didn't want to impose too greatly on you or aunt Elvira."

"Always the courteous one," he smiled, "-have you ever heard of Avion Stark?"

"The detective who publishes his stories? Yeah, I've heard and read a few, what about him."

"I say this with certainty, he's the sole human who I've recognized as an equal in wit to my own. The ability to uncover mysteries from hints and discrepancies in people's words and actions is to be admired. Unlike him, I have the knack to get what I need through manipulation and a little roughhousing. I've thought and thought – what I have so far is speculation and a story which somewhat ties the events into a single timeline."

"Tell us!"

"Right, I speak from memory, therefore, the events may be a little off. I'll try to conjure a sufficiently pleasing narration," he took a sip and dove into a profound look within the expansive memory, "-before reaching the conclusion of Avion Stark having to play a major part, I'd like to bring attention to the lady who easily went under our radar, Syndra Lordon. I'm sorry to say, that Haggard's collapse was brought upon by a matter of human desire. Kyle Darker, son and member of the Kura Trading Corporation, is one of the big four. We went over how Cimier is ruled by Patek. Since we took Lumian O'dla under our wing at that time, they felt threatened by his return. It would have been fine if not for Stiol's brazen announcement to work duly with Raven and the Haggards. I guess the director is a crazy art-lover, éclair might have given him an undisclosed tour of my private gallery. I did ask for him to build our relation, never expected such growth. The true terror starts when Kyle's jealousy for Syndra, who'd given everything in favor of following a life in music, was spotted dealing with a representative of Apexi," he curiously eyed Julius, "-I've heard how the agency always used the appeal of a handsome man to ensnare the opposite demography. Not saying it's wrong, to each their own. After said encounter, I suspect he might have reported the matter to his family, and they, in turn, contacted Patek to assassinate the scout."

"It's true," nodded Julius, "-I'm impressed you knew about the incident since we kept it under wraps. The man was found dead by overdose in a yacht off the coast of Plaustan."

"-the death didn't change much, which is around time Avion started making a name in the capital. He'd cracked numerous homicide cases and was recruited by the court to work for her majesty. I doubt she asked for him, would have been one of the misguided nobles in her court."

"The Denlords?"

"Correct. Through them, he made a name and grew the fanbase. Remember the incident with Theo Denlord?"

"You mean the accident?"

“Yes, the case we were into court against the foolish Baron. I say there are strong possibilities said the incident was a decoy – testing the water as they say. We unknowingly walked into the trap, winning the trial had us gloat and confidence held our heads. The true masterminds knew our strengths and went after the weaknesses, sorry to say, it was you, cousin. Apexi and its corrupt ways of dealing with the music academy, which, here’s the best part, ties in where Syndra studied. Kyle wanted to destroy Apexi since they sent another scout and the Academy, who had tied her away from him. Next, we have the ring-leaders, going after a single girl wouldn’t have much merit.”

“The entertainment market.”

“Correct, they must have capitalized on the breaking of Apexi’s reputation. Who bought and promoted their Agency?”

“Leina...”

“There,” cheered Igna taking another sip, “-lady Gaso must have thought we wouldn’t recover from the attack, she seized her opportunity and got what she wanted, a hefty share of Hidros’ growing entertainment market. Kyle sadly failed at his quest to get with his lover, last I heard, Syndra joined her instructor’s touring company and went around the world. We reach the climax of the story, Patek. What would they get from assassinating a high-profile idol, the scouter, nothing? Nothing save a chance to get what they had dreamed of. Long ago, there was a conflict between Snow and the Dark-Guild, their relations been very strained,” he clenched his fist, “-those bastards assaulted and killed Lizzie.”

“Cousin?”

“Sorry, memories,” he shot back a drink, “-after the episode of Apexi’s fall, Avion led a campaign of finding the Dark-Guilds bases of operation. A few strongholds were raided and a few high-profile dealers captured. The D.G had no option but to retreat from the rough climate – the drug exploration stopped and the godfathers went into hiding. There’s an instance in-between transition where we grow very complacent and easy to target. We were attacked and the Dark-Guild-controlled harbor was captured. Many of our men died, a vacant spot meant Snow(Cimier) had a clear passage into Hidros. They took the chance and established themselves as a rival to the local clientele.”

“Do they all tie?”

“Wait, there’s one more,” he inhaled, “-Elendor had a play, Phantom’s forces were wiped in Iqavea, without our forces to defend, Rotherham and Glenda were open for conquest. Fortunately, I had a vision and halted the attack – remember the projectiles? They were from Elendor’s hired PMC who just happened to be fighters from the Church, I know much from the name, Guardian Saint of Lucifer’s Western Sect. The king of elves was a puppet, led by Ela, who from the start, was a double agent. I had to sit and think, Staxius’s death, his location wasn’t known lest it was from the queen herself. The Wracia Empire played us a fool – everything ties and in the end, we suffered tremendous losses. In a way, it was a good attack, one we stood no chance against.”

Chapter 805: Revelation

“The purpose of Glenda attack?”

“To hamper Arda’s growth into power. They wanted our attention to be spread,” the wine-glass laid empty, Igna pushed into his chair and stared up, “-how was it?” he asked.

“Do they all tie into what happened?”

“I said it before, I don’t have conclusive evidence. From what information was made available, I gathered and created a story. éclair verified most of it, which says a lot. Guess it to be the truth,” the gaze shifted inside where the gathered crowd stepped into the dance floor. Music swapped for melodic and peaceful, couples closed gaps, had hands around their partners and gave inviting gaze, some mushed their lips, others had their tongues timidly licked the upper or lower lips.

“Won’t you be joining?” inquired Julius.

“Not really,” he smiled, “-how about you head forth.”

“Right on,” he leaped from the seat, made his way to Malley, and took onto the dancefloor. Aceline in her explosive conversation with Fenrir threw sneak-peaks at Igna, who nodded and smiled, telling her to ‘-stay calm.’

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"My questions were answered," said Asmodeus, "I ought to be heading to Alpha. Master, please be wary of the opposing factions, I fear matters may grow dire once again. Leave Alpha to us, the princes of hell will make well on the contract," a black mist swallowed his presence, leaving Igna alone at the table. The children who neared the door into adolescence were spotted joking around in the company of the Four Generals' servants; Cora, Kaleem, Yuria, Starix, and the likes.

"Hello," the entourage swapped, Gophy, Miira, Intherna, and Lilith had chairs pulled by attending retainers. Their dresses, varying in size and length, took much time to be seated, jewelry and radiating items added to the tremendous aura each wielded, "-long time no see, dearest Igna."

"Lady Miira," he returned, "-I wouldn't say it's been a long time..."

"Igna," said a rather warmish tone, "-tell me, did we or did we not say I was to help if ever matter grows dire?" Intherna had taken the closest seat, in that moment, what he saw was an illusion of a Phoenix breathing down his neck, the exhalations were hot.

"Don't strangle the man with thy heat," interjected Lilith who'd taken the next seat, it is more of a sandwich. Bystanders knew not to overstay their welcome, to which, the terrace was overtaken by the goddesses without much effort. The performers played gently albeit the gestures were furious and the gleaming sweat added naught but anxiety.

"Quiet you two," voiced Gophy, her cold stare never failed to impress, "-Igna, tell us, what secrets have you been hiding. Don't avoid the subject, we felt the Shadow Realm change, we know what happened, the Great Collapse..."

"Starix's been a great reporter," winked Lilith, who paused at biting her lips, leaned her chair on two feet, "-drinks here, if you would, darling."

"Will do," nodded a flustered waiter.

"-Igna, Igna, Igna," the chair slammed on all fours, her elbows laid on the table in a way to support her head, the classic toothache pose turned innocent interrogation.

“Putting a friendly tone won’t do much,” he said and thrust the sharp chin forward, “-firstly, I won’t apologize for what happened. Would be disrespectful, I decided not to call on the four goddesses,” he casually scanned their expression, most of which were apprehensive and observant, “-hailing beings of strong disposition to solve my problem seems childish and not worthy of wasting thy time. Before interjecting,” he raised a finger to Intherna and stopped her would be exclamation, “-I have to preface by saying, I meant no disrespect. Everyone has their ups and downs, in my case, I didn’t want to involve the Shadow Realm, I mean, look at this place, it’s amazing. There’s peace, the sky always smiles and the tranquillity is nothing short of Elysium brought onto the domain. I don’t want to stain the atmosphere, never again, this place is far more than a domain, it’s a place I want to call home, a place I would love to spend the rest of my existence. Goddesses, please, as the guardians, I wish not to trouble thee, my worries are mind to handle. I’m selfish and greedy – you already know, don’t you.”

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“Put that way,” Miira threw her long-blond hair behind her shoulder, “-not much I can do or say, there’s no reason to get angry at the resolve of a strong man.”

“Never really cared about the trouble,” shrugged Lilith, “-it seemed fun, which is my only interest,” the flustered butler carried her drinks and filled her mugs, “-thank you, darling,” she elbowed his waist and winked, the servant coughed, the cheeks reddened with which he sprinted inside.

“Stop charming the younger men,” exhaled Intherna, “-Lilith...”

“Oh please,” she turned and stared, “-I have the right to have fun. Unlike you,” she pointed with one hand and gulped a drink with another, “-I don’t use them as a training practice. Do you know how much their lovely faces are battered and bruised...”

“Quiet,” thundered Gophy, “-Igna, this is not about helping. We want to know about the message Destiny relayed, the vision she gave, tell us.”

“Perhaps ‘twould be wise for I to interrupt,” a band of strong humanoid-shaped entity swarmed the area, “-pardon for the tardiness, my liege,” bowed Vesper.

“Welcome,” greeted Miira, “-take a seat and ask the guard dogs to enjoy the night. There’s portal outback leading into town, if they wish to mingle with the locals, I say go for it.”

"Courteous as always," she sat, her long scaly fingers gestured the Elemental Guardians to disperse.

"What was it about interruption?" fired Intherna.

"If it's right with his majesty," her unblinking stare bit into him.

"Go on ahead," he said and turned to Lilith, stole one of her drinks, and watched the amusing turn of events play out.

"Is there something I don't know?" narrowed Miira.

"I say it's about right," said Vesper, "-close as thee were to master Scifer, I don't think the weight of the title demon ever waned thy conscience. The name was a means to an end. We've heard of the legend of Alfred, the Cursed King?"

"Yes, the founder of the Aapith nation," said Lilith, "-the great patriarch from whom ancient demons inherited their boons from his blood. I heard of it in myth and was never really able to say whether it be true or not."

"For the Queen of Demon's not to know his existence isn't out of the ordinary," added Vesper, "-I gathered my intel from my trusty connections in the Heavenly realm. Let's say, master Scifer had his way of dealing with troublesome angels. The story of Alfred varies with each storyteller and chronicler's passage on the entity. To some, Alfred was he who freed the demons from heaven's oppression, to others, a mindless killer who ate and ravaged angels without thought or action, a jealous man who takes and never gives. Reality is," she stared deeply into Igna's eyes, "-the king wasn't much a mystery. What say you, Igna Haggard, or should I say, King Alfred, Founder of the Aapith nation?"

The table boomed, each tore their head into his direction, a persecutive inquiry fired in volleys of questions. He dodged each by feigning tipsiness, the questions fired relentlessly, "-are you the cursed king?"

"How?"

“When did it happen?”

“Did you lie to us?”

“How long were you expecting to keep the secret?”

“SILENCE!” cried Gophy, “-Igna, tell us the truth.”

“Lord Death and I made a pact long before it was common practice to record the stories of old. I founded the nation seeking revenge on the oppression and maltreatment the gods unleashed onto my realm – I created a domain from nothing save anger and envy, particle to particle, I extracted each from my very sense of being, a babe born of a ‘demon’ and a titan, bear in mind, the title ‘demon’ is used liberally – for which can be said to be a beast as well. On the verge of defeat when Death was sent to cull my relentless murderous rampage on the heavenly realm, we sign a contract. He would make sure my name to be pulled from history – Lord Kronos and Death were comrades by said point. In exchange for being forgotten, my soul would inherit the responsibilities and powers of being a Death Reaper. I accepted and the rest is history. I never thought to reawaken in such a way – the things I treasured were at risk of being stolen again. I had enough of losing everything, the curse of starting over, I guess the anger fueled my inner being without me ever knowing. She came to me in a dream, lady Destiny, I was given a glance into the future, when I came too, I knew who I was, my first incarnation, the being hated most by the gods, King Alfred.”

“Makes sense,” said Miira, “-the life lived as Staxius and Igna were plunged in darkness. Everything you loved was forcefully taken away, I’m not surprised the inner-self reached a breakpoint. Seeing the destruction of what you had built was the last straw, the container erupted into the being we see now.”

“I apologize for keeping the matter a secret. I didn’t know how to break the news; matters in the Overworld took presence over my identity crisis.”

“HA-HA-HA-HA!”

“Lilith?”

"I KNEW IT!" her eyes watered, "-I knew I was right to follow. Honestly," her outburst eased, "-it all makes sense. I understand how a human soul is able to inherit so much power – the soul wasn't human, to begin with."

"What is she talking about?" Intherna asked Miira.

"A soul is akin to a liquid, and the vessel is; well a container. Human souls or anything of that matter has a particular viscidness allowing a somewhat flexible sense of morph. To inherit power or a body, one's soul must be able to smoothly enter the container, the lesser it's filled, the better and more stable the core. Looking at Igna, I say he's the same as water – the soul is thrown into complex containers and never once spill or rejects the vessel. The product of creators' bond created a being unknown to the nature of the universe, a being of which no law can truly bind the displacement."

"Can we stop?" he inquired.

"What?"

"Igna, don't chicken out, running away will not erase--"

"I'm not running away. I've come to peace with what I am, and what I once stood for. Alfred is dead, so is Staxius, what sits at the table is me, Igna, let's leave it at that?"

"If you're adamant on the matter," they gave a simultaneous sigh.

In-between the chatter, Lilith had her sight latched, as was Miira and Vesper, '-what are they thinking?'

Intherna rose suddenly, "-where are you going?" inquired Gophy.

"Away from this pointless discussion," she said, "-looking at you now makes me want to puke. What's with the demanding glares? Lilith and Miira... whatever," she shook her head and left.

"She has a point," Lilith took a step back, "-I apologize for being too personal. The novelty was more than I could pass," she rose, "-Intherna, wait, I want to drink," the table followed suit, he had made his decision, who were they to interrupt.

Once again, Igna found himself alone at the table, '-they've grown into a close bond of friends. I'm glad,' he smiled, '-part of me was afraid they would have taken the news badly. The cursed king isn't a name to be taken in praise,' he reached for another drink, '-the Shadow Realm won't fall, I won't allow a repeat of the Aapith Nation. It goes beyond being called a Watcher, I'll break the heavens if ever they lay a hand on what is mine again.'

"Hey," a flick to the forehead broke the intense frown, "-stop looking so tense, you're scaring the kids."

"Aceline, did Fenrir free-"

"She did, I like her energetic personality, very fun and tiring."

Chapter 806: Last Wish [1]

"Mother, please," whimpers rattled the heaviness of a quiet room. An ajar window sparsely allowed for the wind to enter, a young lady sat closed with hands softly laying upon a lady resting under blankets. Medical workers shook their heads, the doctors left the premises with defeated looks.

Words took much time to formulate, the wrinkled face lady blinked painfully, her fingers stretched to touch the girl's cheek, "-don't be saddened," the jaws unhinged to speak a few words, "-I know my body better than anyone," she coughed, barely caught the spray of droplets with cupped hands, "-I will be fine for a few days," she said, seeking the comfort of her husband.

"I'm here," before a mention was made, the man knew to stand at her lady's side, she reached forward to call on his name, "-Piers, come closer," the voice lowered into rough whispers. He leaned his full ear, to which she rose, turned, and whispered, "-take care of our daughter, I won't be long for this world. Call Igna, I need to speak with him, please." Her arms dropped, the room panicked, "-she's asleep," said an attending nurse, "-I'd advise for the room to be vacant. She needs space." Single file was the order, the robust door clicked into a damp corridor.

“What did mother say?”

“Don’t worry, Eia, mother won’t give just yet,” he forced a smile, she took a glance then spun, “-I’ll stay here,” she firmed.

“My lady, you must have lunch,” implored a younger-looking butler

“Listen to Theo,” said the father, “-I know my wife better than anyone, she’s a fighter. We must take care of ourselves and not allow emotions to trample our judgment, have I made myself clear?”

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“Yes father,” she nodded obediently, “-let us have lunch.” The butler nodded and guided the lady out. With a few twists and stretches of never-ending corridors, a double-door of which was in an arch-shape walkway; brazenly defended against the incoming gust, the heavy flowery curtain made no effort in flapping in the wind’s tune. He pushed the curtains aside in a sweep of the right hand, pushed his chest forth into the glaringly bright midday. Outline of helicopters filled the northwestern sky of which was layered in increasingly darkened shades of grey, ‘-Phantom’s come,’ he wondered, ‘-lady Elvira and Gallienne were close friends,’ he pulled on his pockets, took a phone, the date flashed, 6th December X110, 11:45. *Dialing Raven’s head office,* the receiver answered by lifting the handle, it cackled onto a nonchalant, “-Raven’s head office, how can I help?”

“Good afternoon, my name’s Pier’s Riverty, Prince Consort of Hidros. I’m calling to have an audience with the Prince of Arda.”

“Wait a moment sir, I will direct the call to one of the boss’ secretary,” it channeled, an obnoxiously eerie children’s rhythm played, *Linzie Borden took an ax, gave her mother forty whacks, and when she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one.*

“Yui speaking, how can I be of help?”

“Will it be possible to speak to Igna Haggard?”

“And who are you?”

“Prince Consort of Hidros.”

“Right,” she paused, “-if I understand well, lady Elvira’s on her way to the castle, her majesty the queen’s health has degraded. I need to inquire the nature of the call, my master’s a busy man.”

“I have no patience to entertain wasting time,” the voice hashed akin to a blunt ax against a tree’s bark, “-pardon me.”

“No, the fault is mine. I had to confirm if you were real or not, seems to me you’re not an imposter. Here you go,” the call transferred to which was answered almost immediately.

“Hello?”

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“Igna?”

“Yes, and who might this be?”

“Piers Riverty,”

“My, pardon if my workers had thee do some loops before reaching my cell. I did give her majesty my contact information, I guess she didn’t bother to relay the information. Tell me, what can I do for you?”

“Where are you currently?”

“At the moment, I’m on the road headed for Rotherham?”

“How long until you make it here?”

“An hour at the latest?”

“Make it here in 30 minutes, Gallienne’s not in great shape. Her malady is far too serious for wastage of time.”

“If the situation is dire, I’ll hurry,” the call ended. Piers had his arms weightlessly drifted at his waist, the phone was barely held by a pinch, ‘-Gallienne, why now, what was the purpose of anything...’ the forehead flashed against the sky, it helped in stopping the tears.

“Igna?” inquired a preoccupied Aceline, “-what’s with the scary visage?”

“Sorry,” he stepped on the gas, “-you ought to come with.” éclair readied a plane and made preparation for the quick departure, it had reached a point where he knew what his master thought and needed, their bond over the years of struggles fortified into a two-way tunnel of which none could interject. At around 12:50, Igna and Aceline found themselves at a helipad within the castle walls, a broken house amidst the castle-town was broken to accommodate space for helicopters. They exited onto a stone-brick road, “-the atmosphere’s dark and gloomy,” commented Igna.

“It has to be,” said Aceline with arms interlocked with Igna’s.

“I’m sorry we can’t go to the premier today.”

“It’s fine,” she smiled, “-long as we’re spending time together, it doesn’t matter.” Her movie would be played in numerous cinemas as well as at the Rosian Media Square, renting the giant screen, and preparing the men power to stream a one and half hour movie for all to see without payment cost a bunch, the numbers reached into the six figures. Prior to the call, Igna had made arrangements by renting a penthouse overlooking the screen – sadly, a new turn of events foiled their date. Regardless of the situation, he casually called Julius and offered the planned event instead, to which, they graciously accepted.

“Aceline,” on reaching the marble-stair, “-we should be tactful,” their arms unlocked. A worryingly desperate Piers paced to and fro, attending retainers watched fearfully at the irritated pacing, “-Piers?” said Igna.

“Igna,” the eyebrows flashed, “-you’re here,” he hurried into grabbing Igna’s hands, “-follow me, we need to go, now!”

‘How bad is Gallienne?’ he scanned the entourage, ‘-not many nobles, the retainers are saddened. Don’t tell me,’ what he feared was real, the door into the royal chambers opened to a gathering of elites; Lady Elvira, Lady Courtney, the King of Easel Run Gard, and a representative of Elon’s Dynasty waited in around the large bed. The queen’s skin wrinkled into what resembled a discarded piece of crumpled paper, closest to her was Elvira, she nodded softly and stood, took notice of Igna, nodded, and stepped away. Medical workers tried their hardest, “-Aceline,” she whispered with a smile, the latter’s heart shook, “-Igna, come here.”

The walk resounded, the silence gave the illusion of having amplified the steps, “-Yes, my lady, I’m here,” he sat on a stool, she shook her head and patted a spot on her bed. He shifted, the bed mildly buckled under his weight, she held out a hand, he took her offer and aided her into a somewhat decent sitting posture, “-I’m glad you’re here,” she smiled, the expression barely formed – her skin had paled, there was an air of destitute within her very aura. Igna reached for her ears without warning, “-I can heal and return thee to thy prior youth.”

“No,” she replied. Igna’s emotionless expression boldly flashed on what she said, “-I’ve lived a long life,” she said, side-glancing her husband and daughter, “-I’m tired and want to rest.”

“Why...”

“Don’t,” she panted, “-let me speak...”

“The hell you are,” he grabbed her palms, *Mana Control: Light Element Variant – Astro Krona,* a warm golden hue washed her body, *Mana Control: Waves,* the cycle of life-energy condensed into semi-transparent form, *Mana Control: Spiral,* it gathered above his palm, *Mana Control: Regeneration,* her wrinkled face softened a little, whilst a dab of reddened color filled her cheeks.

"You always want to help, don't you," she grinned, there was power and energy behind her words, "-honestly," she caressed his cheeks.

"We can't have a conversation with thee boarding death's transit."

Cough, cough, blood sprayed her blanket, "-you've increased my time, thank you. However, tis not the reason I've brought you here," the crowd watched in utmost silence, there seemed to be more between the two, a bond resembling family, "-Staxius," she whispered, "-it's you, isn't it."

"Correct," he returned, "-figured it out?"

"I don't remember whether I was told the truth or guessed. Death comes for all, I'm tired of living, I know, it's selfish, I just want to leave, I've had enough. The responsibility of a ruler is a guillotine with the harness to the blade being held over a slow-burning candle. The passage of time weakens the harness till it completely breaks and takes the ruler's head. My wire is on the verge of snapping," she tilted her head, locked eyes with Aceline, and motioned for her to move closer.

"Aceline, seems to me I'm looking older."

"Making jokes at a time like this?" she sat on the stool and warmly sandwiched Gallienne's weak shriveled hand, the healing affected only her face, vocal cords, and inner organs, the rest of her was bordering its end, "-old friend, I was sad when you left on ahead of me."

"Don't bring up the past," her face changed drastically, "-it's not fair."

"Oh, you should know I don't play fair. I see you and Igna are romantically involved," her tired lips pressed in hesitation, "-Igna, if I were to say, save the World or its people, which would you choose?"

"Saving the world would be easy, as, for people, it depends. I'd choose not to save either," he kept a straight-face, "-saving is a job for heroes, not us."

Her eyes narrowed, "-BAHAHAHA," laughter broke into a fit of coughs, "-I'm sorry," she sniffled, "-we're not heroes," she wiped her tears, "-I remember, you and I are one of the same."

"And you were the worse pain to ever cross my path," he took her hand, "-an enemy who soon turned into one of my closest friends. I say we've lived our lives to the fullest. I'm satisfied, Gallienne," the voice dropped to a whisper, "-if they wish to rest, why not join me. Dying will start the cycle of life and rebirth, there's no heaven or hell for humans who've deliberately avoided the god's wishes and the demon's temptation."

"What do you mean?"

"Join me, and my realm, become part of my domain. There, life is idyllic, live out thy existence, enjoy life until you're satisfied, be free and live out your retirement in peace."

"Sounds very fishy," she chuckled, "-fine, I accept the offer," her demeanor swapped, "-Igna, I need a favor," she looked at Aceline, "-I'm sorry, friend, my selfishness will bring heartache upon thee. Even so, will you hear out my dying wish?"

"Anything, Gallienne."

"Igna," her gaze wandered onto her daughter, "-marry my daughter and become king of Hidros."

Aceline felt her heart stop, as for the room, her speaking voice inaudible as to their ears, her words were a mixture of whispers, pants, coughs, and the stray sniffles, "-Gallienne, you can't be serious," her grip harshened, "-you know me and Igna are..."

"Yes, I know," she firmed her resolve, "-I'm doing this for the future of Hidros. Igna, please tell me you understand," they turned for answers whilst he thought.

"If I were to take the crown, you're worried about the noble faction, in a way, marrying into the Riverty family would alleviate the burden. I refuse, I'll never give the Haggard name for anything."

"I knew it, which is why I'm ready to abdicate the throne to the Haggard Dynasty. Look at me," she grabbed his cheeks with both hands, "-I'm serious, I want Hidros to prosper as Glenda did, I want the people to be happy, I want them to experience the joy and pride of having a competent leader."

Chapter 807: Last Wish [2]

"Please, I implore you," her pupils shriveled, the healing cast a few minutes prior broke, "-Igna, your choice," she coughed, "-time is nigh, I was able to achieve my father and I's dream of unifying Hidros. We're one on paper, and I sadly don't see any collaboration between the people. Add to it the turning of a new age, I'm not suitable to rule, I've overstayed my welcome. Stop running away," her frail fingers dug into his palm, skin cracked and blood flowed, '-for use to use so much force on her dying bed,' he inhaled, rose his chin at the gathered guests, "-I understand," he cupped her trembling palms.

"Igna," Aceline's visage swapped, "-don't tell me," her lower-eye reddened – her cheeks of which was braced by makeup flushed worryingly. A decision of such a scale needed to be thought over, he calmly patted her hands and gaze into her stern resolve.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled at Aceline.

"Whatever," she rose erratically, the stool toppled harshly – breaking the unspoken moment of fear and incertitude.

"Aceline," cried Gallienne who rose an empty palm at her friend's back.

"No," he held the queen's hands, the door slammed upon the idol's fleeting shadow, "-I made my decision, it was selfish, same to you," he added in a lowered tone, "-we're cut from the same cloth. We push people away, hurt them, and take what we think is fun, I understand the feeling all too well." Reference was drawn to Gallienne's lifestyle of illicit relations despite her marriage, in her youth, the lass was a manipulative mastermind – matters culminated into her finding stability with Piers' acceptance and the birth of her daughter. She understood what Igna meant, her chin dropped to her chest, tears flowed, "-I'm sorry," was the only thing she could say, "-I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry," he took a handkerchief and wiped tears, "-for change to occur, there ought to be sacrifices. I hate to think what's going on in her mind," choosing to ignore what happened, "-I accept the proposal."

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"I'm so sorry," she sobbed heavily unable to get a hold of her aching heart and bleeding tears.

"Piers," Igna stood, "-please take it from here."

The husband and daughter bundled close to the bed, the monitoring device had the nursing staff troubled, "-she's emotionally unstable," reassured Igna.

"Hey," a sharp tug pulled him from the path to the door, "-are you ok?"

"Mother, I'll be fine, please take care of her," he exited the heavy room. Between him and the queen, there was much to be said and discussed. Igna made his way further out till an open hall where various ministers and nobles hurdled in discussion. An attending maid kept her hands busy at wiping a tiger statue, "-pardon me miss," he inquired.

"Yes?" she stopped her task and stood.

"Have you seen a lady scurry out the chambers perchance?"

"If it's the crying lady, she went outside," added a passing butler.

"Thank you," he hurried after, '-don't run from me, Aceline.'

Her heart aching cries stopped, the chambers cleared with only Piers and Eia in attendance, "-why are you so unstable?"

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"I'm sorry, Piers," she gathered her breathing, "-I tried to manipulate... he saw right through me."

“Mother, please, stop talking in riddles, did he say something?”

“Eia, hold a moment,” fired Piers sensing the princess’s knack for antagonistic one-sided speeches.

“Let me give him a piece of my mind.”

“Wait!” fired Gallienne, “-refrain from talking badly about Igna.”

“What’s so special?” she shrugged, “-I don’t get it,” her inclined brows added more to the irritating gestures.

“Piers, could you call in the others?”

Aceline’s sudden departure and Igna’s attitude cornered both Elvira and Courtney, the duo could but watch one another and exchange messages via blinks. King Easel found himself peering into the distance onto an unknown plot of land.

“Pardon my wife,” said Piers broadly, “-she wishes to exchange a few words, might thee please enter?” And again, no words were exchanged, the dire state of Hidros’s ruler had everyone on edge. The populous was yet to be informed – conspiring nobles within the gathering hall held backroom meetings, most were sure to line their pockets and reach greater standing within the monarchy.

“Are we not headed to the bedchambers?”

“No,” returned Piers. Instead, the walk headed for the throne-hall, the large doors unlocked to the queen in her heavy dress and crown cupped her onto the throne, the princess stood at her side, to which, the prince consort would soon join the queen’s entourage.

“I sincerely apologize for the outburst earlier,” her hands were tight around the royal staff, “-Courtney, I fear my actions may rock the kingdom’s peace to its core. I have made my decision,” the princess grudgingly took a few steps forward, “-I ask for you to accept our family to be bound by marriage.”

“GALLIENNE!” she exclaimed.

“Let me finish,” her word sliced Courtney’s interjection, “-as the sole ruler of Hidros, I have the right and say in who takes the crown and who has the prestige to lead us to a better future. Time is not on my side, we all know said fact, even now, the dragon-stone within the staff is the only catalyst able for me to sit and talk unrestrained from my malady.”

“Please continue.”

“Thank you,” she inhaled, her chest puffed, “-as I see it, there’s no one fit to rule Hidros, and I mean my words. Piers and even my own daughter do not have the qualification required to lead the nation into a better future. As a queen speaking to another queen, we understand the fate of a kingdom rests on the competency of its ruler. The marriage is a formality – once they’re wed, I’m willing to abdicate my claim as well as all the powers that come from the title of Monarch to Igna Haggard. The Riverty family line will sadly end, and I’m willing to make said sacrifice for the sake of a better future. Are you willing to accept my request for the greater good?”

Long silvery hair swayed, lady Courtney, dressed in trousers and a bottomed shirt, had her arms crossed and stare vehement – her image didn’t quite fit what people associated with being a queen. She seemed fiercer in men’s clothes, needless to say, her feminine charm never once left her side. The frosted colored eyelashes blinked coldly, “-I can’t say. The decision isn’t mine to make. We thought my son and Aceline were destined to be married, I mean, they are an unofficial couple. Are you willing to give up the matrilineage succession in favor of the Haggard name?”

“Yes, I am. If the Riverty name ends as a result of the bond, who am I to argue?”

“What of Eia, what has the princess to say in the matter?”

“I will do as my mother says,” her chin kept to the floor, “-if it’s for the greater good of our kingdom, I’m willing to make sacrifices.”

“I REFUSE!” a side door bellowed under an explosion, “-I will not allow you to be married for political gain.”

“HART!” she exclaimed, guards were quick to imprison the intruder, “-mother, please,” cried the princess, “-leave him alone,” she dropped to the queen’s feet, “-have the guards unhand him!” spears were pulled to the man’s neck.

“Nicola Vonhen Hart,” said the queen in a low-monotonous tone, each pronunciation thundered, “-eldest son of Hanet Hart.”

The guards knocked him on his knees and chained his hands, “-Majesty!” he rose his head to only be beaten harshly by the overlooking guard, “-don’t make this hard on me, son,” said the helmed man.

“No,” he rose again, *smack,* the neck buckled, blood flowed down his chin, “-I won’t give up, MAJESTY!”

A spear rose to deliver a fatal blow, “-wait.”

“Majesty,” he bled profusely, Eia knelt in tears, “-please, Eia and I love one another dearly.”

“What exactly am I to do then?” she crossed her legs, “-sacrifices art to be made. If you can prove to me that you are worthy to take the crown and guide the kingdom to a peaceful future, then I’ll accept without fail,” she grilled his resolve, “-what of it, cat got your tongue? A man your age shouldn’t have fallen in love with Eia, how could this have happened?”

“It’s my fault, mother,” she cried, “-I-”

“Speak when I talk to you,” she thundered, “-answer me, Nicola Vonhen Hart, is the resolve arduous enough to guarantee the prosperity of Hidros?”

“MOTHER, what about this Igna Haggard!” the cries channeled into rage, “-WHAT’S SO GOOD ABOUT HIM? I don’t get it, the Haggard name... my marriage, you ending our family line for the sake of another, where’s the proof that he’ll guide us to a better future... it could be worse – tis unfair to have Nicola swear his might on such a tumultuous promise.”

“Proof,” she said, “-the one you so harshly insulted is a talent of which the world has never seen. From Staxius Haggard, my close friend, the founder of the Federation, to Igna Haggard, the nephew of a legendary figure, I’ve personally seen the latter in action. He’s singlehandedly defeated the church, saved Arda countless times, brought up his family from the depths of despair into an untouchable position. The Haggard dynasty is ranked as one of the richest dynasties on the planet. Eira Haggard, your sister is the Empress of the Alphian Empire. Julius Haggard, the son of Staxius Haggard, made waves during his time in the spotlight, reached the status of legend in the world of show business, his youngest daughter, Lizzie Haggard, is a prodigious pianist who took the classical world by storm. In comparison, we, the Riverty family, who’ve inherited our prestige from the older generation, have nothing to show. Out of the lineup of elites, Igna stands out as the one who inherited his uncle’s intellect and talent for statesmanship and warcraft. Don’t get me started on Queen Courtney or lady Elvira, who I deem to be two of the most influential people in Hidros currently – must I add more examples, or is the summary sufficient?” the princess could but drop her argument. Meanwhile, Gallienne turned to Nicola, “-after what I’ve said, do you still think you art be able to close the gap?”

“Unfair,” cried Eia,”-UNFAIR!”

“Don’t say it’s unfair,” fired Courtney, “-you’re not the only one who’s making sacrifices. My son is willing to give the love of his life... just after he decided to open his closed heart to someone he could trust, the carpet is taken from under his feet. How do you think that makes me feel, he’s going to give much more than his love-life, his freedom, his everything... I would absolutely refuse this marriage if it had been under different circumstances.”

Wind carried flower petals yonder to a solemnly crouched silhouette, “-Aceline.”

“Don’t come any closer,” she refuted, “-Igna, don’t come any closer...”

“I’m sorry,” he knelt and tightly embraced her from the back, “-it’s selfish, whatever excuse I make won’t justify the blatant infidelity.”

“Yeah, I won’t,” she grabbed his arms, “-why must it be you, why are you the one who has to take the responsibility of another. Why, answer me, why is it you...”

“Because of my family name... the responsibility that comes with being influential or powerful can’t be used selfishly, in most cases, those who have everything often lose touch with reality and what is truly important. I don’t know what to say, my selfish decision has broken your trust and heart, I don’t expect

to be forgiven. Hate me if it makes thee feel better, slap me, I don't mind, I ought to reap what I've sowed."

"You," she turned and headbutted his jaw, "-always the smooth talker," she settled her breathing, "-I'd lie if I said I'm not angry," she curled further with knees to her chest, "-looking at the flowerbeds makes me feel at ease. What is right and what is wrong... I don't know..." butterflies fluttered; the wind gently sang in whispers – the fate of an entire nation laid in those few hours.

Chapter 808: Last Wish [3] (Turn of an Era)

"What about me," she whispered, "-what am I to do? Forget we ever met and move on. Igna, I'm not such a nice person to allow the one I like and admire, no, I won't allow it. The fate of the world, the fate of the universe for that matter, I'll never waiver from my position."

"Tell me," he said fixing his glasses up the nose, "-what then, am I to abandon my duties here and elope?"

"Yeah," she took his hand, "-at least there I'll promise to make you happy. I'll work, I'll handle everything, all I ask in return is you, I want a warm home to return to, and maybe even children waiting to call me Mama when I arrive. I've thought about it for so long, during our long months apart, our long stay working on our goals and dream, I've wished for the day I can sit back and settle in life, live beside my destined one, my partner, my friend, my lover... don't you get it?"

"Wrong," he watched onto where her focus deviated towards, a lovely field of vibrant petals dancing in the warm breeze, "-the future is something I prefer not to think about. It brings joy, and more often, makes what experience at the moment fleeting. A line needs to be drawn between reality and fantasy. Don't get me wrong," he rested his head on her shoulders, "-I gave serious thought about us, and what we stood for. I was scared of a repeat of history... it was you who changed my cold heart, breaking the barriers nonchalantly, I'm fond of the time we spent together. I'm forever grateful for it," they interlocked fingers, "-I can't make promises. If there's a way for us to be united, I'll choose it without fail."

"There is a way," she said, tears flowed silently, "-give up everything you stand for and live for me," she took his chin and leaned for a kiss, the lips locked, "-I guess we have to say goodbyes."

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

"Don't," she caressed his cheeks, "-it's not as if we're going to be separated forever. I don't much care for the politics," the breeze gave mild jabs, "-by agreeing to our relation, I made the promise to ensure thy happiness. Don't know if I-"

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"Stop it," he put a finger to her rosy-red lips, "-don't, I was happy, I still am. I'm happy we met, I'm grateful for the memories you gave," a flexible thrust had him on his feet, "-here," he offered his hands, "-I don't ask for forgiveness, I only want you to be there until the ordeal is complete. Would you please accept my last wish?"

"You're a cruel man," she wiped her tears and fixed her makeup a little, "-asking I, who've lost just about everything, to watch as you're taken away..." she observed his fist clench and relax, "-don't bother suggesting polygamy, I firmly believe a lady must be linked to only one man."

"Whatever gave that idea?" he side-glanced, "-I'm not a fool. Having my hands tied by a single woman is enough to satisfy the greediest of men..."

"There you go with that silver-tongue," the conversation fell into silence. Attention fell yonder on herds of mindless maids ran akin to confused chicken, each tore across the immaculate stone-path walkway leading out the eastern entrance of the castle.

"Over 'ere!" cried a retainer whose lips were crooked.

"Found him," added the others, "-lord Igna," a swarm of uniformed attendants sprinted, "-her majesty the queen request for thy presence in the throne hall," they panted.

The thick wooden frame unbuckled during lady Courtney's monologue on the sacrifices Igna undertook for the personal satisfaction of Queen Gallienne. Frame it as she would, selfishness is selfishness regardless if the ends justify the means. The two were on a lovely carpet in direct opposition to the throne. The princess was in tears at her mother's feet, a bleeding man hung his head shy of a guard's steel-boot, '-what happened?' wondered Aceline who was soon gestured over by Elvira.

“Over here,” said her motion.

“What happened?”

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“A lot,” she whispered, they stood away from the spotlight beside King Easel and the representative of Elon’s Dynasty, “-the man at the guard’s feet is the princess’s lover. The latter begged her mother to stop his execution, the situation’s far complicated than I’ve ever seen.”

“What of lady Courtney...’

“You noticed, good eye. She’s flustered and angry.”

“Why would she?”

“A mother has the right to be angry on her child’s behalf, and as it stands, the situation speaks disaster for Igna, he’s giving more than romance... freedom and exposure to the world’s threats. We’ve always taken the spotlight and allowed him to move in the shadows – so happens everyone believes their reason to be right. I don’t see anyone who’s in the wrong, they’re correct in their own way, a mother who wishes the good for her son, a queen who choose to sacrifice her own daughter’s happiness to ensure a better life for the faceless millions who call themselves residents of Hidros. Amid the folly are Igna, Eia, Nicola, and you. It’s painful to stand in the shadows and watch, I want to intervene, I want to help... however-”

“Tis not the place for outsiders to interject,” added the King.

“I must agree,” added the lady in formal clothes.

“You are?”

"Alison, secretary to Lord Elon," said she hugging a tablet.

'What will you do?' wondered the collective crowd, eyes were on Igna and Gallienne. He ambled through the line of guards, stopped at Nicola's bloodied visage, "-we meet again."

"Who a-are you?" he rose his head, a crimson hue stained his vision, "-have we met before?"

"Yes we have," *Mana Control: Light Element Variant – Astro Krona,* "-at the musical academy, your sister and mine grew acquainted."

"Yes," the wounds healed in under a golden hue, "-I remember," the guard's weapon eased, allowing for the intruder to kneel and stare Igna, "-thank you for healing me."

"Igna!" thundered the queen.

"Majesty," he returned, "-I would like for some answers, however, by the looks of things, the matter is self-explanatory. I suppose the eldest son of Hanet Hart, Nicola Vonhen Hart, is romantically involved with the princess?" each watched in wonder at the astute detection, "-her highness is to sacrifice her love life and be tied to me for a better future of the kingdom?"

"Yes, she's ready to accept."

"Pardon me saying, you sure are very ruthless," he shuffled forward, "-there's but a simple solution to our quandary, a fake marriage. Yet," he scanned the entourage, "-fakeness in starting the foundation of new rulership will be discovered sooner or later. We could be married officially and behind doors keep our relations private – then again, we run the risk of the palace flowers having thorns. Honesty is the best policy, and I agree. I selfishly asked for the one I love to sacrifice her heart for the betterment of the continent. My words won't suffice," *Blood-Arts: Enlian,* "-in order to prove my sincere feelings, I will kill the person she knew and loved," the nails sharpened into claws, he cast a genuinely happy smile at Aceline, "-I love you," the fist dug far into his chest, broke ribs and tightened at his beating heart, *cough,* he hurled blood, they watched in horror.

"IGNA!"

"It's not fair," he fell on one knee, "-for her to sacrifice her heart for my selfishness," it beat within his extended palm, "-to prove my resolve, I will kill myself," the fist clenched, he dropped, a massive puddle of blood flowed, *thud.*

"WHY!" she screamed, "-LET ME GO!"

"ACELINE!" exclaimed Elvira tightening her grip around the lady's waist, "-don't!" she said, "-tis the resolve he made..."

"Igna..." muffled Courtney, "-my son's decision," she knelt and placed his head on her lap, "-to honor his promise and relation with Aceline, he decided to tear his heart and die, killing the being he was," the splattered blood crystallized into the symbol of death above the hole in his chest, *thud,* the eyes opened, the hole closed and he stood with a massive tear in his shirt. A handkerchief nonchalantly went around the glasses to clean the droplets of blood – strong guards of which were part of the royal guards hurled within their helms. The gruesome sight wasn't weakhearted, his actions proved to him, Aceline, Courtney, and Gallienne, the resolve.

"Count Igna Haggard of Glenda," thundered the queen, "-will you accept the title of King and lead our nation to a better future?" he now knelt at the foot of the podium on which laid the throne. Her majesty clambered to a stand, barely able to shuffle her feet, "-to the ministers and nobles in attending," she clapped, a broadcast bellowed across the castle, "-from today onward, Igna Haggard, of the Haggard Dynasty, will inherit the throne of Hidros, for I, Queen Gallienne Riverty, abdicate my position and full-authority to Igna. To further solidify the abdication, my heir, Eia Riverty, will marry into the Haggard Dynasty of which will officially make the Haggard Dynasty the ruling royal family of Hidros. The decision is final and is presided by an apostle of goddess Syhton, as well as the Bishop of the Church of Tharis. In words and action, the coronation of Igna Haggard is just and fair," she took off her crown and placed it over Igna's head, the item trembled in a whitish blaze, the pure fume meant no malice as for the jewel, it changed to a manlier version, "-for generations in the Riverty line, the Dragonstone staff has been handed to the next ruler, it is said the gemstone only reacts to one who is suitable to rule," she handed the item.

'This is it,' he thought, '-my life is about to change again,' he grabbed it, a large shockwave blew the bystanders, the gem not only reacted but also hummed in an angelic song – the broadcast at even the capital's square had the onlookers kneel in respect at the divine intervention.

"Thank you," she said, her visage waned, "-I'm happy, Igna, thank you for everything," life in her regard dulled by each passing second, the transmission stopped, *Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo of the past and look towards

the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration.*

‘-My journey ends,’ perspective altered into a floating shapeless cloud of consciousness, she watched as her head rested on Igna’s lap – Piers and Eia ran to her side, each tried their best to no avail, ‘-I’ve lived a great life, met great people – the turn of an era is not a place I want to be.’

“How does it feel?” said a familiar voice.

“Staxius?” she looked around aimlessly.

“Look down,” he said telepathically, to him, death was nothing save a swap in the state. He kindly smiled at her suspended cloud; ‘-I can see you.’

“I’m dead, how can you?”

“Don’t sweat the details. My friend, Gallienne, since you accepted my offer, I have control over thy soul. Voice regrets now, I can still revive thy body and grant thee the blood of a nightwalker.”

“No, I’m tired.”

“I expected as much. As the Watcher of the Shadow Realm, I offer thee this, doth thee wish to be reborn as a child, who I preface will either have or not have thy memories depending on thy choice, or prefer to be transported without change to the realm?”

“I’d like to be reborn, make me a boy and I want my memories to be retained.”

“In a wealthy family or not?”

“Does it matter?” she chuckled, “-send my soul to a vessel which eventually grows to be a close member of thy court. We’re friends, I’d like to keep that way.”

“Your wish has been heard,” *Snap,* “-I hope for thy life to be blessed with happiness, dearest friend. Take heed and be safe, until we meet again.”

“Thank you,” she smiled, “-THANK YOU!”

Chapter 809: New Beginnings

On the 6th of December, when the crown swapped owner, a young babe was born to a wealthy family inside the Shadow Realm. His memories of birth were of the life she had lived, the consciousness traveled, and in the few minutes the mind was able to process a large amount of information, he knew, life would be peaceful. Upon the transfer, the mind reverted to infancy, and the process of growth and restart began for the Queen.

Night laid on the capital, a heavy feeling of confusion had grasped the street and households by force. Their ruler, the stability most had known to understand and live with, was pulled from below their feet. Unable to stand on firm ground, there was much sliding and clambering, perplexion rattled the Arcanum – no announcement was made save the speech her majesty gave. The castle was on orders from Raulf, who had been away till a few hours ago.

“Gallienne,” Igna stood on a terrace overlooking the eastern side of the castle, which also where Aceline previously ran towards. The flowerbeds and grooves gave an air of solitude, without the sun to add to their color, the dullness was reminiscent of him. A shiver went from the open hole in his torn shirt, ‘-I can sense her presence,’ he inhaled, ‘-may you have a great life.’ Footsteps shuffled till the archway, “-stop hiding in the shadows,” he said with much truth, lights had yet to be turned inside the corridors – thus the allusion to a vacuous cave into nothingness.

“You sensed me?” the footsteps closed onto the balustrade where Igna drew support from, “-I can’t believe she’s dead,” said an unhealthy voice.

“I can’t believe it either,” replied Igna, “-your wife was an amazing person. We all grieve her death,” he turned and gave a half-smile, “-I can promise one thing, she’s in a much better place, not heaven or hell, a place where she can fully rest and relax, a place where she can live her life as anything she wishes, I personally guaranty her happiness.”

"Where does this come from?" the want for answers begot but a silent fading smile, "-I'll take the words for it," he turned and used the balustrade as a seat, "-mind if I smoke?" he unpocketed a blue-box muddled by stripes of yellow and red.

"Go ahead," to which Igna reached subconsciously, "-oh right," the hand grabbed at a whiff of air, '-my jacket's torn.'

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He took notice and offered a cigarette, "-here," both puffed – the passing wind made short work of the cloud, "-I truly hope the kingdom moves in a better direction. She was always afraid of Arda and what move they would make, in a way, her mindset of Hidros not being a united entity never changed. Tis the flaw which comes with age, can't teach an old dog new tricks."

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"No, I think it's amazing how she kept calm under the growing political climate. The fate of countless millions rest in my hands," he inhaled and exhaled, "-honestly, it won't matter, not until the nobles are on board. Piers, I have a favor to ask."

"Sure, what is it?"

"Starting for now, I want you to work as a spy."

"A spy?"

"Yes, I want information about potential revolution amongst the nobles and people," he stopped and shook his head, "-no, never mind, I was lying. Truth is, I want you to take a break from the castle life. Take a trip, expand thy horizon, do things you couldn't – it's my way of repaying the faith you've had in the queen. Visit family, I met your brother not long ago inside Alphaia, lady Sophie's doing great with her auctioning company."

"I see," he puffed, "-I appreciate the feeling, still, I'm not leaving the unstable climate in your hand. It would be running away; I can handle the noble families. My lovely wife entrusted the kingdom to you, I will follow her example and entrust my fate to you. Show me the world she wanted to create, Igna Haggard, show me what the legendary dynasty is able to do!"

Said night, none at the castle ever thought of sleeping. The throne hall was altered, priests from the Syhton religion were present to wish the queen a pleasant afterlife. Chants and hums echoed the hall akin to a cathedral – she was given the last shower and dressed in her ruling attire. The news ignited across the capital, the queen died – Igna made sure the attention to be solely on her majesty's last moments and the life she had lived till the day she died. Contrary to King Blaine Riverty, she would be buried without a public appearance, as in her coffin wouldn't head into town.

The next day rose, Igna remain steadfast close to the coffin – where many were defeated by the heaviness of no sleep, he vehemently stood guard and watched. Death for him and his family wasn't a great deal, the boon of immortality was trivial to them – yet when the death occurred in other families – especially one of such prestige and power, he could but observe the toll a death had. Queen Sely departed from the mortal realm a few years back, her situation was peaceful, they said she took her last breath surrounded by family. To open a new door, one had to close those of which were open and even left ajar. To said extent, choosing to remain in the shadows proved efficient, none bothered to care about the kingdom, for many loved their queen.

Curtains were drawn at 10:00, the final prayers and chants were spoken. The final moments before burial were broadcasted live, the apostle of Syhton, Sharon, took to the microphone in her ritual robe, "-the death of a friend, the death of a family member, the death of a person who we wished draw breath is the proof of their life. We think at what they've done and smile at the moment spent as one. Queen Gallienne, as a ruler and as a person, was very resolute – this paved the way for a better life," she paused, "-Queen Gallienne will be remembered, forever and ever." Influential figures took a turn and spoke, they gave their feelings and expressed last words of which were hidden deep within their hearts. Piers and Eia opted against speaking in public, to them, they had already spoken their last words to her.

At noon-sharp, the coffin rose to be taken at the Cathedral of Stars, the place whereby many pilgrims make the long trip to have an audience and pray in the company of the apostle. Many grieving bystanders swarmed the street headed towards the grave – barriers were placed, the roads were shut, many shouted good wishes through the iron gates. Flowers were flung, petals were thrown off roof-tops, the feeling was bitter-sweet. At 13:43, her coffin was placed inside the family crypt, her place, cupped in the middle of King Blaine and Queen Sely. Dust and spiders were common sights; Sharon read texts from her holy scriptures; Igna, Piers, Eia, and Courtney were the only four allowed within the crypt as said resting place was most often dangerous.

"May you rest in peace," they said, the ceremony concluded. Eia fell onto her knees at her mother's side, Piers could but console her through warm pats on the back.

"Is it certain the curse of undead won't affect her?"

"No," returned Sharon softly, "-the prayers and spells cast won't allow for the evil taint to awake her eternal slumber. The doors have been shut, Hidros will soon feel the fear of not having a foreseeable future. Igna Haggard, from the bottom of my heart, I wish for thy success. Take heed, a good ruler is one who is sharp and unyielding," on those words, she took up the degraded stairs – pebbles fell from the hand lain stone bricks.

"Let's go, Eia," said Piers, her slumped shoulders rose listlessly, there held no spark of life within her pupils.

"A sorry state for a princess," commented Courtney, "-she's gone."

"Yeah, I agree," returned Igna, "-mother, the future will be a hard fight."

"I understand, you'll have my full support," she said very confidently, "-what will it be, king of Hidros?"

"Not now," he said, "-there is much to be done before. First order is the public," a finger to the earring, "-éclair, are preparations readied?"

"Yes, my lord," he answered. Many news stations were given the footage of Gallienne's last wish, she said plenty o' difficult things, first being the succession. The gut shouted of the troubling noble faction, instead of appealing to them, Igna thought for a harder path, one where he cares for the people instead of the world, the answer to her uncharacteristic question. Shortly after, at 15:32, under the shadow of King Blaine's commemorative statue in Rosespire's town square before it grew into a city, men in dark suits nonchalantly created a bubble. The grandness of the space proved a boon. Various vehicles from multiple news stations drew their cameras and waited at the scene, rumors of a public appearance roared across the Arcanum. From said baseless rumor, a crowd of a few hundreds gathered – at 15:45 – a relatively known figure thrust at the feet of the statue.

“Good afternoon, people of Hidros,” said he boldly – spells carried his voice across the capital, “-my name’s Igna Haggard, before addressing matters, I’d like to take a moment of silence for our beloved queen,” the silence was unparalleled, he opened his eyes to a bigger crowd, “-I stand before thee as a humble citizen of our kingdom. The untimely passing of our ruler has left her grand seat open. As is known, our society isn’t much equal, and still isn’t. I don’t argue against inequality. The saying of people being born equal is wrong and flawed – decrepit and woeful the situation may be, there’s the opportunity to rise through the ranks. This, my friends, is what sets us, Hidros, apart from the rest of the world. Arda’s gone through a lot, I’ve tried my best in helping the citizens, to show for it is a booming kingdom. I won’t stand and make promises, the Empire has caused much trouble in the world, our friends, the empire of Alphaia, fights a war against the oppressing faction of the Wracia Empire. No one is out of their reach, the Argashield Federation ended prematurely for the reason of a betrayal, the kingdom of Elendor played us fools and masterminded our falling out. The safety and stability of our citizens are the utmost priority. The empty throne will be filled by me, I made a promise to Queen Gallienne of truly bringing Hidros to prosperity. Nothing is black and white; the ambers of war will fly our way. You and I have to make a promise here and now, as the Devil of Glenda, I swear to protect the continent from invaders – if anyone dares to lay a finger on us, I will take the battle to them. The Riverty bloodline will end after my marriage to Princess Eia. I don’t expect to be accepted, and frankly, it doesn’t matter. A ruler needs to be sharp and right to the point. I was given a goal, and I will make sure said goal is reached. You, the people, have previously had no say in how the government operates, this changes today, anyone with citizenship of Hidros, inclusive of Arda, Oxshield, Plaustan, or any provinces, will have a word in what is to be done going forward. A channel for public discussion is hereon created and dubbed the Gaien Council – I invite everyone to voice their ideas, if you have talents beneficial for the country’s growth, I invite thee. Hidros is a great continent, we’re multiracial, and I’d like to keep it so. For the betterment of the future, I, Igna Haggard, vow to make the kingdom a better place!” By the end of the speech, a mass of thousands gathered – knowingly or not, the name and title, Devil of Glenda, Igna Haggard, was and is one venerated as the hero who saved Hidros.

“Cheers for the new king!” cried a lonesome bystander.

“...CHEERS FOR THE NEW KING!” the reluctant crowd followed.

Chapter 810: Kugan’s Saturday night live

“Good evening to our viewers,” said a very charismatic host, “-and welcome to the first installment of Kugan’s Saturday night live. For today’s guest, I’m honored beyond recognition to welcome, King Igna Haggard,” the set, backdropped with an outline of Rosespire’s mountain range of office buildings. The live crowd cheered and applauded the same as they would to a superstar. His Majesty walked in without much strain over the appearance or persona, to the people, he was one of them.

“Nice to meet you,” they exchanged handshakes in the middle of the set, after which, climbed three brown-colored stairs and sat on comfortable-looking couches.

“I’m surprised,” said the host, a demi-human of very nice facial features, the disposition of the traits was of the illustrious black panther – there was strength and power behind his words, countering the canines and ears were his visage and polite intonation, “-our team took a chance at contacting the royal palace... imagine my surprise when a kind gentleman answered the phone and immediately accepted the offer.”

“It would be my secretary, éclair,” replied Igna, “-besides, coming here is an opportunity to mingle and have a little entertainment.”

“I’m relieved,” he sighed, “-pardon me,” he shot back in his seat with a few cackles, “-I expected his majesty to be stern and very harsh on strictness and manners.”

“What image do you have of me?” Igna said rhetorically with a hint of jest, “-we’re not so heavy-handed.”

“Right,” the host faced the bemused crowd, “-we have a lot of questions to get through.”

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“Go right ahead,” said Igna.

“First, everyone’s been dying to know about the marriage.”

“The princess and I are officially married,” he smiled, “-Eia Riverty-Haggard, she chose a compound name to honor her family. As pretty as she is on camera,” the voice softened into a whisper, “-she’s very fickle,” the crowd took much of his jests with open-minds, they laughed albeit for show.

“I’ve been a fan of you since the days of the Alchemist,” a push of a button suddenly covered the set, “-I’d like to see his majesty in action!”

"A kitchen," remarked Igna, "-the technology sure is impressive," it didn't take much to alter the flooring into a full-fledge cooking station, "-the ingredients are top-notch," he threw on an apron and tied his hair with a fiery-designed bandana, "-how about I whip up an Igna special," he winked. There, the act of donning an apron swayed the masses completely. To see the new king in cooking attire and making his way around the kitchen brought a sense of relatability. With or without consent, the subconscious message of him being one closer to the people as to one destined to a life of seclusion in the palace was satisfactory. A brief fifteen minutes was all the time needed for the studio to be ravaged by famished onlookers, the aroma riled the appetite like no tomorrow. Poor Kugan hops in his steps and excitement on the face led his pallet to a serving of cooked meat. The fork reached in timidly, once he impaled his prey, the latter dove heartily into his mouth, what returned was confused, "-houf, houf, hot."

"I see Kugan speaks the language of the dragons."

"HA-HA-HA," the crowd laughed.

"Please," Igna hailed to the backstage crew, "-I've made enough for most of the people here," a curl of the palm brought them onto the set, "-please distribute this among our guests."

"We won't have enough," said a man in working attire with a tablet in his grip.

"Worry not," returned Igna, a glance to the man's badge had, '-producer,' written upon, "-I've already asked for more." Before long, the cacophonous audience breathed and spoke the same language of 'houf, houf.' A team of terrifyingly dressed guards barged through the main door and made their way onto said set.

"Place it here," directed Igna, the inventory of snacks grew spares, and without fail, he donned the apron again and erupted the stoves in volcanic spews of pure flames. The minutes turned hour, as for the show, the schedule didn't really matter as Kugan had close to two hours on the air.

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"Amazing," the camera panned onto the host and guest, "-I never expected such deliciousness, I only heard from the accounts of others. Man, we're lucky, aren't we," the set returned to normal.

"Yeah!" said the crowd.

"We should get to reason why we called on his majesty for an appearance," a shady aura filled the host's eyes.

'There we go,' thought Igna, 'he'll either bring something from my past or talk on the collapse.'

"A new segment," he smiled, "-please look at the screen," a holographic rectangle materialized, "-ask his majesty anything!"

'I see,' he exhaled, '-a question and answer bit. I guess he's used up much of screen time. For a pilot episode, the real-time response is very favorable.'

"First we have Elie from Oxshield asking; what are his majesties hobbies?"

"Hobbies," he paused in reflection, "-researching?"

"Will you elaborate?" inquired the very interested host.

"The University of Rotherham," he smiled, "-I love looking into the intimate nature of how mana interacts with us and the universe. It's known all of us that power is a necessity in our evolving world," he held an open palm to the crowd; spirit-like creatures materialized with a liquidesque texture. They flew with much of the likeness drawn from Adete's bat-form, "-the hobby's led us to discover a means of power, unlike the world, has yet to see. There's more information available on the university's site," the chin sharply made for Kugan

"-Pardon me," he exclaimed, "- I was lost in thought. For the next question we have Mark from Kreston, will the war affect us?"

"A great question, the answer is complex. I suppose not, there are measures in place to safeguard our day-to-day life. One of the greater policies is to bring Hidros's economy past the threshold of mediocrity and onto the path of stability."

“Yes, I agree,” interjected Kugan, “-there has been talks of having differing currencies for different countries. The universal Exa currency is making the rich, richer, and the poor, poorer. The less fortunate kingdoms wish to keep Exa, as for their counterpart, breaking from said means of exchange and looking into their own means will definitely add to the prestige.”

“Currency is a topic which will require more than a few snarky replies to cover. Depending on how the council comes to an agreement, we ought to look for both possibilities.”

“Last question,” he said, “-Acie from Dorchester asks, will his majesty keep Hidros unified or will there be diversifications?”

“Hidros doesn’t need to be unified,” he said, “-I say this in a good way. The leaderships are unified and tied by us – while the idea of harmony is appealing, I earnestly think there is more stock in allowing each belief and race to grow at their pace. Elves have a life expectancy of thousands of years, dwarves live for centuries, humans, at most, a few decades. Each will grow on their own, and as for me, my true race is Nightwalker, I was once a human – and now bear the blood of vampires. Us, as a people, have been watching over the world since the dawn of time, I say this with the warmest of intention; for Hidros to become how King Blaine Riverty envisioned, the understanding has to start from the people. To back my words, the current council is compromised of various races, adopting a similar means of passing judgment akin to Arda,” the crowd were mesmerized by the answers – the simple rule of manipulation applying to a person works on the greater picture. A man whomst kind on the eyes, polite in his speech, charismatic in his ways of interaction, will always shine brightest. It doesn’t matter, the truth is so, charisma will always win over competence, sweet words are much easier digested as opposed to the hard truth.

Shortly, at 19:30, the curtains drew on Kugan’s Saturday Night live, “-amazing,” said the host closing the distance to Igna.

“Was it?”

“Yes, look at the crowd, they’re elated and excited.”

“Good job on the questions,” said Igna, in it, a sense of danger riled the panther’s instinct, ‘-he knows,’ he gulped, ‘-his majesty knows the questions were staged by the higher-ups...’

“Please give my warmest of feelings to lord Amsey,” same as he arrived, the king made for the backstage. Building a reputation wasn’t much priority, “-could you please sign my shirt?”

“Sure,” he replied, “-why would you ask for my signature?”

“I admire you,” said the attendant, “-a king who’s not afraid to talk with his people is something I’ve never seen before,” the kind-hearted lass’s round glasses reflected the gleaming overhead lamps.

“Thank you,” returned Igna, “-I may never reach the level of admiration Queen Gallienne held, even so, I’ll make sure I come close?” he winked and left, leaving the bystanders stunned at how friendly and dignified he was.

“Master,” gestured éclair, “-transport is ready. The nobles have been gathered at the castle.”

“Right, what of King Easel?”

“The man’s still in the castle.”

“Should be fine,” they entered a monstrously expensive car of which reflected the passing lights and traffic.

“Master...”

“If you have something to say, do it.”

“The story of the kind king, he who had everything did all he could for his people. In times of pain, he gave his people happiness, in times of drought, he gave his people food. In the end, when the king’s coffers were empty, the very same people turned on his majesty and blamed their situation despite him having cared for them.”

“I know,” replied Igna staring into the passing scape, “-the kind king was a fool. The moral was that people are ungrateful creatures by nature, I understand it very well. My dearest friend, thank you for

being worried. Much of the reason I'm pushing forth the persona of a kind and friendly king is to lower the guards of our enemies. The perception of friendliness is often misjudged as weakness – I achieve two goals with one shot, the people grow to accept my claim, and those willing to do harm are exposed."

"Is it the reason why you allowed Eia to have a compound name?"

"Correct, long as the Riverty name exists, she has claimed over the throne, doesn't matter if her majesty abdicated her claim, the belligerent parties will want to gather a revolt behind her, I'm sure they'll make contact soon."

"What type of king are you trying to become, master?"

"Me?" the legs crossed, "-the kind who'll stop at nothing to get what he wants."

The date read 28th of December, the marriage took place on the 10th in a private ceremony. The look on Aceline and the princess's lover, Nicola, was one deeply engraved in his heart, 'she's a liability, getting rid of her might be the better option in the long run. Ending her will end their bloodline,' so was his line-of-thinking whilst they exchanged vows. Since then, the days were filled, between transferring all the paperwork onto éclair's core in the Shadow Realm and public appearances, much was left to be done.

"Master."

"éclair?"

"I have good news," he said, "-the unnamed project's nearing the end. The new proposed catalyst has worked perfectly."

"Good," he smiled, "-to open ourselves to the world, we ought to start with a bang."

Soon rose the arch-way entering the castle. Guards were stationed as usual, "-majesty," a maid was quick to open his door, "-the guests wait in the council room."

“Understood,” he glanced éclair, “-let’s go, my friend.”

An air of suffocation gripped the steps the instant the barriers unlocked, ‘-there they are,’ the king entered with chest, ‘-the people who rule the kingdom from the shadows, the true leaders. Nobles, warlords, and the hidden society of elites, Ariel. Welcome to my table, unlike Gallienne who was led on by these old-timers,’ he reached for the chair and sat, ‘-you’ll find, I’m heartless,’ the aura glazed with a single glare.