

Death Magic 821

Chapter 821: Breadcrumbs

"Don't judge a book by its cover is what I'd love to say. Look at the mighty Charlie be subjected to the folly of thoughts. It doesn't matter," he sprung onto a wooden floor, "-don't mind me."

"Lady Medusa," they watched Igna take a suit ahead into the changing room, "-I'm so sorry, I didn't know it was you."

"Don't bow," a casual crunch told of her demeanor, "-master's not the type to get angry."

"Thank the gods," the posture eased, "-I should have known the suits were ordered for someone special, not a special day."

"I hope he likes it," she said, "-if you'll excuse me, there are a few things I ought to plan," she pushed onto the outdoors, there, passersby turned, scanned the store and peeped, enviously narrowed their eyes, turned to their own, and headed on their way.

'A clean looking suit,' he thought, watching the reflection, '-I look weird,' he leaned, '-there's no sign of life in my eyes, my face's pale white, worth the trip to the beach, I now look a little alive,' the back straightened, at the same time the curtains pulled.

"Master, should I have a makeup artist arrive or hairdresser?"

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"Quell the animosity," he waved at her sarcasm, "-I look good," he fitted the tied and tugged the jacket, "-what of payment?" the attitude and persona altered beyond recognition.

"You clean up well," said Charlie, his faded aggression looked behind Igna to his assistant, the lady kept a smile and nodded.

"Don't force the compliment," he shrugged, "-payment," he leered Medusa.

"Not flipping the bill, I'm but a mere messenger," said in jest.

"Whatever," he gave his card, the latter tapped and the transaction went through, "-good work on the outfit, my trust wasn't broken. I'll have one of my associates bring a hefty tip later down the week."

The assistant signaled no but a cut-throat sign, "-n-no," said the tailor with nods, "-your presence alone is worth it?"

"Trying to compliment?" the terrifying new image of Igna glared at him from a higher plain, the silence felt akin to a rope being tied around the neck, "-good," the pressure broke, "-I like a man of business. Don't worry, the tip won't be a bomb nor will it be a gun. Consider it a contract for employment, I wish to hire thy company to exclusively make uniforms for Ravens."

"A contract," he watched in awe, "-thank you," the face gleamed, "-I don't know what to say save thank you, lord Igna."

"Worry not," he smiled, "-good work is rewarded, never forget so."

Trouble waned heavily on the mind, the trip neared its end, the stubborn Medusa averted the questioning, little over a few minutes later, the duo drove into Raven's casino, the first acquired during the conquest on Count Oathfall. The held a raven, to which he exited the car in amusement, "-did the place change when we were gone?"

"Not really, more on the lines of improved. Let's go," a spring in her movement wasn't very much a good sign.

'Her body language couldn't be any warmer, is the problem that bad she's reflexively avoiding the issue altogether?' They walked inside, a deluge of overwhelming pleasure and lust blasted, '-this place definitely is a cursed garden,' host and hostesses were close with their client, drinks were poured, money made and money lost, she took directly for the in-house office.

"Medusa, tell me, what's the problem, I need to know, now."

"Don't threaten her, my lord," said a friendly familiar voice.

He side-glanced, "Asmodeus," an involuntary smile broke the frown, "-long time no see," they embraced, "-how are you?"

"I'm good," he said, "-master, there isn't any problem."

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"Pardon?"

"The only reason we get you here is via a white-lie, you must have known, surely?"

"éclair sold me out."

"No, he didn't, master," he laughed, "-we bought him, well, we bought his silence on the surprise invitation I ordered. Before we go on much longer, let's leave."

"Since I was brought, suppose I'll spend the day," midway down, Starix ambushed the trio with a wink, by the time Igna stood under the casino, his entourage had grown tenfold, some familiar and others, strangers.

"Right people, the walk is over scam. Goes double for you, and you," the prince pointed Medusa and Starix.

"I'm the strategist, I ought to spend a few moments with the master," refuted Starix.

"And I brought the master here," hissed Medusa, "-he'll spend time with me."

"Neither," interjected Asmodeus, "-the master will stay the remainder with me. If you'll excuse us," a car pulled, the door opened, and the duo left.

"Asmodeus," they sat, "-what is it you wanted?"

"To bring you to speed with what Raven's accomplished. Starting with the mafia, Raven's are one of the top familia in the whole of Odogwoan, we've made a pact with Luon, Yonak, Saku, and Vermillion, they owe us big for rescuing their scrawny asses from a battle against the mighty Cimier. Those fools

trampled onto our territory demanding protection money, the invitation was quickly resent with an extra dose of death. Needless to say, the message carried more than pleasantries, we declared war and won, claiming the city of dreams to be ours. Chief Jula is more pleased, her pockets are lined and she's able to live a happy life. Next is the casinos and branding," the trip took a viewing point onto the whole of the area. The north, the invasion of the monsters, healed and rebuilt anew – security into the mountains heightened. The viewing point was more of a lover's respite to anything of the sorts, "-awkward," commented Igna.

"No," winked Asmodeus, "-where ever the buds of flower flourish, I'll make sure it turns hardco-"

"Stop, I don't want to hear about thy fantasies. The view," he stood with arms crossed, "-what of it?"

"The De Costle strip's expanded, more high-rises and emphasis on media, tis the ideal place for people with the dream to seek out their success stories. Raven's acquired more casinos and hotels over the years, especially the last five years, we hit our stride – I don't see us stopping to expand. Starix's ruthless in hostile takeovers forces major companies into begging for their lives. We back her actions fully – the monopoly of the gambling and drug trade wasn't accomplished in a single day. Mammon and my life changed for the better..."

"Reluctance in the voice," narrowed Igna, "-there is a problem," he turned on himself and stared vaguely into Fuda mountain's direction, '-Medusa as my pickup, I should have known. His pick of subjects point to Kul,' he shuffled forward, "-where's Kul?"

"You knew," he nervously grinned, "-master, Kul was captured a few weeks ago. We haven't heard from her ever since... I didn't want to bring the issues since you had grown to be King of Hidros."

"Asmodeus..."

"Master, don't misunderstand, we've done everything. Mammon's on the lookout as we speak, plenty of our men have taken to the street in search of answers. We've asked Odgar for help, nothing so far..."

"Idiots," he facepalmed, "-king or not, you should have informed me. Finding a missing person after 72 hours is close to naught. Well, it doesn't matter, does it," he exhaled, "-she was captured during a trade of some sort, no way Starix was blindsided. Tell me everything," they sat under the shade of a lonesome tree.

'Quite the story, Kul went missing after delivering a fresh batch of products to a new client. It had been a year at most in sending fake packages to figure flaws in the plans. Manufacturing's moved here, and we're unblemished, Kul couldn't have gone missing. Either she was killed or someone betrayed her trust.'

"Master?"

"Follow me," they stood, "-we're going to find her today."

"Pardon?"

"Don't look at me weird, Kul's here, there's no way she left the country. Don't you think the network would have picked on her movements already – to disappear from the crowd, one needs but to hide in plain sight, the principle of the grey man," therein, the investigation took to her last known sight, the

red-light district. The expectation of an unruly part of the city turned into embarrassment, the streets were clean, the clients respectful, and the workers happy and healthy. The former being used very subjectively, their positions were still hard – a majority, kidnapped men and women from other continents, trafficking, or otherwise, the poor who weren't able to pay their loans. Bleeding in a sea of sharks meant being devoured, therein, vacant looks reflected off the newer, '-merchandise,' their reality hadn't settled, working to pay their debts via any method.

"Here we are," said Asmodeus coming onto an apartment building, below, the to and fro felt a little more anxious, *thud, thud,* the door opened mightily, "-who are you?"

"Jeo, it's me," he stuck his foot into the ajar-opening, "-Asmodeus. Better open else I'll have your head."

"Ok, ok," the locks clicked, "-sorry I'm late on my payment," it opened to a single-room apartment with a bed on which laid a sobbing figure, "-don't worry about him, he's the newest addition to my repertoire. I made coffee."

"Cut the bullshit, Jeo, you know damn well why I'm here.

"Asmo, if it's about the payment, then I don't have it."

"Not about the money," he yelled, "-I've come about Kul. Where the fuck is she?"

"Don't swear, idiot, the walls have thin walls.'

"Oh, sure," stood arms akimbo, "-don't make excuses, you prick. I said it before and I'll say it again, I need to know what happened to Kul."

"Get off your high horse," he sipped, "-I'm in this bullshit place because of you."

"Asmodeus," said Igna.

"Who's the new guy," inquired Jeo.

"Doesn't matter," he shuffled forward, "-who are you and what do you do here?"

"Jeo, and I work for Asmodeus. My jobs to recruiting kids like him," he pointed on the bed, "-and have them returned to their country if possible."

"Really?" Igna narrowed to Asmodeus.

"Yes," he said, "-Raven's hate human trafficking more than anything. They keep on stealing people and I have my hands full. Vetting every transaction in this city is a pain. There are lines which never must be crossed, Jeo's the mediator, scouter of some sort."

"Why's the kid crying?"

"He was beaten to shit by the last client. I was healing his wound before the prince barged. I told you, I know nothing about Kul. She sniffed the scent of trafficking and went after those bastards."

"Still don't know who they are," facepalmed Asmodeus, "-kid," he moved to the bed, "-are you ok?"

"T-thank you," the tears flowed.

“They did a number on you,” commented Igna, “-drink this,” a potion flung on the bed, “-Jeo, tell me everything that happened before she went missing.”

“I don’t know, I was scouting, an informant of mine said a new shipment arrived. Most were sold and taken away before I could do anything, when I reach the brothel, Kul was there wailing at the barkeeper. I told her about the shipment, her mood swung and she shortly stormed onto the street. Never seen her since, don’t know if she’s alive or not. That kid’s the only boy I saved; this shit’s disgusting. The more stories I hear, the less grows my humanity, I don’t even blink at their stories anymore. Asmo, the assignments cost my humanity, that’s why I needed the money, to help this kid return home.”

“Where are you from?”

“He won’t talk,” shrugged Jeo, “-they tied his tongue with a curse. The moment he spills the truth, he dies. The traffickers are keen.”

“Is that so?” he grabbed his chin, pulled to have an eye-to-eye, *Dispel,* the sound of breaking glass shook their sense of comfort.

“PIECE OF SHIT,” cried across the street, “-YOU DARE SLEEP WITH MY WIFE?” Two mentally perturbed men went head-to-head, a crowd of curious watchers gathered, in the middle was a pretty little lady with a face of an angel.

“Damn it.”

“Asmodeus?”

“She’s a member of my harem.”

“Guys,” gulped Jeo, “-the boy’s turning crazy...”

Chapter 822: Ancient Tongue

Turning crazy, layman’s term for an unknown change in the boy’s physical self. Distraction from the warring couple outside forced a slip-on checking the boy. Igna found himself leaning over the pale-faced lad, breaking the curse somehow triggered another set of events. Tiny fingers on which green-veins layered upon the flesh, slowly anticipated the growing terror, the limbs reflexively breathed by tensing and relaxing. Before long, sweat from the forehead dribbled into mixing with the tears – the droplets fell heartily onto the joke of a pillow, by which was blankets stacked on one another.

“Igna?”

“Calm down,” he said, “-let me have a look,” he took off the glasses. The bicolored pupils bleached – the enlightenment of which Eira spoke about was what he could see. Everyone has their lenses through which the world is perceived, an artist notices more to the common, and Igna, having lived more than three lifetime’s worth of experiences, culminated into his foresight. The limiter toggled, specks of life flapped, whips waved, and expulsed ambers of an unsteady flow of mana.

‘There’s a disturbance in his inner flow,’ a map of the boy’s lifeforce drew above the visibly feeble body. He circled, the vicious outer mana lines, shaped to snakes, lunged at the emptiness. ‘-Seclusion,’ he gathered the remaining power, firmed the layers, and added a few words of power to secure the bonds.

From another perspective, Igna merely gestured above the boy, if not for the latter's relaxing, it'd have come across foolish.

"Done," he exhaled and covered the unbearably clear sight, the glasses gleamed, "-the curse was a ticking time-bomb, whoever was responsible is skilled in the lost magical arts. These originate from a fallen kingdom, the resemblance points to an identical recreation. Smart, using a unique art for the cover," by the look on Asmodeus and Jeo's faces, they barely understood a word he said, "-basically, they used the unique curse to put us on a pointless path."

"I see..." there was much distraction in Asmodeus's pitiful attempts at being interested.

"What's on your minds?"

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"The fight," they exchanged glances, it wasn't every day a brawl over a lady could be watched from a premium viewpoint. Before long, Igna sighed in jest – a signal they took as permission; the door barged opened, the outlines latched onto the railings, a sadistic grin sparked.

"How dare you cheat on me with that fucker?" cried one with a broken bottle in hand, the gathered crowd was worried.

"A bottle?" laughed the other, "-I have a gun," he rose the pistol with an unsteady aim, "-hell no, she's mine."

"Dragve," commented Igna with arms crossed, "-a pistol native to Iqavea; importing weapons made by the Cobalt Unit is a taboo, Phantom's the main dealer," he smirked, "-points to a few options, don't it."

"You think a gun's going to scare me off?" puffed chest strode forth, "-take your best shot, I know I'm in the right. That bitch of a woman was my wife," he glared to the point of bleeding tears, "-no way, not ever again. She betrayed my trust, I won't stand for it," the hand rose, *snap, snap,* two claps, the man fired, the other fell, panic followed, the spectators ran in confusing directions.

"There she goes," commented Asmo, "-always bringing hell where she breathes," he vaulted from the first floor, "-take care of the kid," trailed on the fall, Igna joined his dive, the duo soon stormed the show.

"I DIDN'T SHOOT," cried the man, "-he tried to assault me..."

"Yeah, not going to hold in court," whispered Asmo, he grabbed the gun and threw the man into a lock.

"Shooting another man," said Igna picking the gun, "-fine weapon," he aimed at the pinned man, fear and anger took turns at glaring. *Bang,* a bullet graze his cheeks and landed millimeters from the target, "-best shut it and follow us," he turned to the frightened crowd, "-no more running or panic," he thundered, "-the red-light district is the biased place of sin in the eyes of the general public. You and I know it's not true, everyone is equal to make their lives better, don't ever allow for this kind of ruffian to foil what you, yes, you, the residents, have built. When a man dies," he glanced at the bleeding man, "-either help or bury. You kill, you clean," he smiled, "-tis the way of the Raven – restrictions are for the weak, the strong are those with firm resolves and sense of justice."

Asmodeus rose to stand at Igna's side, the shooter laid unconscious, "-lord Asmo," said the crowd in relief, "-cheers!" they said.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I present, the leader of Raven," he gestured to Igna, "-my boss, a man of strong principles." Applauds echoed, the tension relieved, the prince gave a few words on what transpired. Before long, they returned to the apartment.

"Cramped," said Jeo, "-who's the pretty lady?"

"My partner," winked Asmo.

"Please," she coyly made for Jeo, wrapped her head to whisper in his ears, "-call me Jewel."

"J-J-Jewel."

"How's the kid?"

"Ready to talk," firmed Jeo.

"Jewel," side-glanced Igna, "-you willingly created a situation to bring the worse of those two men. This one here," he pointed with his feet, "-is a spy or foreigner, am I correct?"

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"Yes," she tied her hair in a bun, "-lady Kul asked me to investigate this person, he's a key member in the trafficking ring."

'Kul, we're unwillingly following her trail, where did you vanish to?'

"Kul?" coughed the boy, "-did you say Kul?"

"Yes?" they turned, "-know anything about her?"

"Yes," he sniffled, "-she helped me when I was abused by a client. She rushed in, killed the man, said someone would come then left... I asked if she was a hero, she said no a demoness?"

"He's waking," crouched Jewel, "-wake up," she tapped his cheeks, "-earth to Henson, wakey wakey." Focus readjusted, the gagged expression seemed relieved on seeing Jewel, peace shook into panic on seeing Igna and Asmo, he kicked and shook similar to a newly caught fish thrown on land.

"Don't scream," whispered Asmo, "-we care for people." Soon, the prisoner was strapped on a chair and pulled by the neck using a ripped curtain, "-better answer our questions," she whispered, "-else I'll get angry," they pulled the tape.

"I'm not talking," he exhaled, "-traitor," he frowned, "-I thought you loved me, I was willing to give everything to you... why... WHY!"

"Honey," her eyelashes fluttered, "-I loved you, and I still do, but," she licked her lips, "-what I want is your soul, not flesh," she forcefully leaned on his thighs to extenuate her breasts, "-I loved you," she said, "-for a spy."

Gulp, he swallowed, "-how did you know?"

"The gun," firmed Igna, "-you think us fools?"

"Does it even matter, I didn't do anything to deserve this treatment."

"Sure you did," said Asmo, "-you killed a man, Jewel's plaything. She'll decide what will happen next. For your own good, better talk, else we have other ways of surfacing the truth."

"I dare you," he smirked, "-I don't break easily."

"Who said breaking, have you heard of the term, necromancy?"

"Necromancy?" he flinched, "-no way, the practice is banned by international magical law, I call the bluff."

"International magical law? Are you daft, magic is a fading art. The techniques are only used by skill adventures who've simplified the spells into short chants and activation processes. The only establishment teaching magical theory is Claireville Academy. The age of magical warfare is over. Besides, we're in the red-light district. The number of people who go missing and are killed daily ranges from a few to dozens, a stray rotten body won't cause much, the crematorium's a warm place."

"Him," said the boy, "-it's him!"

"Huh?"

"I know, he's the magic caster responsible for the curse of no speech."

"You're alive?" he glared, "-BASTARD, what of my spell?"

"Negated," winked Asmo, "-tell us what happened to Kul."

"Captured," he said, "-a lady snuck into the trading and killed many of our men, I restrained her movements on orders from the higherups. Next thing, we were forced to leave the warehouse, it happened a few weeks ago, I don't know anything, promise."

New puzzle pieces painted an ambiguous picture, '-Kul asked Jewel to investigate the man, the timeline doesn't need to make sense, she's weird in her way of covering tracks. Safe to say she was on the hunt for the traffickers, very admirable and foolish. Why was she forced into going alone, Asmodeus' not lying either,' night drew yonder, hefty and stuffy compound stood before them, the gates were tall and the walls taller, rust ate at the handle, paint and signs of fire, "-ugly."

"Don't, now's no time for jokes," they phased into the compound, "-erase your presence."

Few bored guards looked to and fro, cranes overlooked metal-cages, "-the wind's harsh," whispered Asmo, "-the hoists must be powerful to carry those things."

"You pick now to be amazed at the mechanical wonders?"

"Yeah, sure," they shuffled along, one misstep and death waited to catch their fall, "-there, a blue container. Must be the one used to transport people," they flew, "-what should we do next?"

"Nothing, if Kul was here, she isn't anymore. There should be a trail," feet on a stack of containers, "-in here," they pulled the door open, vagrant darkness loomed in the belly of the beast, a step inside

altered the aura – crimson-colored writings glowed, “-ancient words of power,” said Igna, “-she walked into a trap.”

“Pardon?”

“Look at them,” he said, “-don’t you recognize them?”

“No,” he narrowed, “-I don’t.”

“The mother tongue of demon language, ring any bells?”

“No,” he shrugged, “-I can’t understand. Why does it matter, translate it for me.”

“Hold on...” the echoey container hurtfully amplified the sound, “-Asmodeus, could you write something in the ancient tongue for me?”

“Sure,” he took to the wall, translating in, “I love burgers.”

Igna paused and wrote, “-do you understand this?”

“Yeah, says I love hugs?”

“Damn,” he exhaled, “-history changed – an entity stole the demonic tongue, altered it into a lesser potent variant. Despicable...”

“The writings are of the true ancient tongue?”

“Yes, and whoever abducted Kul is familiar with the true tongue. We have our plates full,” *ring, ring,* “hello?”

“Master, we have trouble... Lady Kul was spotted at Fuda Mountain being hauled by strange beings.”

Wings sprouted, before a word said, Igna vanished into the night, leaving Asmodeus in the dark and before a gathering crowd of angered guards, “-INTRUDER,” sounded the alarm.

“éclair, who owns the compound?”

“One of the conglomerates, shall I pursue the search deeper?”

“Yes, and I’m sure it’s the alliance to Iqavea,” he flapped through the night – passed the northern barrier, visibility lowered in face of the thick uncontested forest. A simple road, the only beacon of direction in nature’s labyrinth, led the way forth. ‘-Why are they after her?’ he flapped, “-to those hiding in the shadows, I, King Haggard, the Demon-King,” the signet ring lit, “-order for my words to be heard, take to the forest and capture the intruders, restrain them for they have done wrong,” the waves broadcasted, stray unintelligent monsters changed in their way of thought.

“... ..” said the unfaced figures, “... .. .” The foliage shook, dire-wolves gnarled and pounced, a shock of dark-light slaughtered the incoming monsters, ‘-found them,’ he turned and flapped.

Crash, the ground cracked, “-release her,” he ordered, a tranquil lake reflected the somber night, ‘-strange entities.’

“Should we fight the man?” they spoke in their tongue.

“Maybe, I don’t mind killing, it is good.”

“Stop, should we kill or not, I don’t know. This demoness has the blood of the olden dungeon, we have to awaken our lord.”

“Dungeon, our lord?” interjected Igna, “-the ancient tongue,” he stepped, “-you’re not native to this world.”

“Look, brother, someone understands us.”

“Yes sister, he understands us, we should kill him.”

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“Kill him, yes.”

Chapter 823: Dimension travelers

For otherworldly beings; the alteration was only in their sense of spirit. Those native to the world, and goes for the Shadow Realm as well, have a unique scent to them. Most if not everyone is blinded to said smell, however, in Igna’s case, the two’s scent rode above their head like riding a horse. It straddled, perfectly calm and collected. Setting aside the spiritual scent, they looked like humans, two figures, a young man and woman, twins, dark hair, dark eyes, coffee complexions, long eyelashes, rounded nose, oval-shaped face, and beauty dots under each nose. The boy, aged in his early twenties, had his mark on the right side of the nose whilst the sister, the left side. They kept speaking in their native tongue, the lad never once cared to check on the hostage, an unconscious Kul wrapped in a semi-transient bag.

“Look at me,” said Igna in the lost tongue, “-the lass on thy shoulder is my close companion,” the darkened sky didn’t make the atmosphere any better.

“You speak our mother tongue,” said the lass, “-my name’s Rachel, and this here is my brother, Rahe. We’re not of this world,” she said, “-dimension travelers have a unique scent to them,” her almond-shaped sockets tightly examined Igna, “-you have the scent of many worlds attached.”

“I appreciate not being malicious,” he nodded, “-my name’s Igna Haggard. Now,” he looked to the lad, “-if you’d please, Rahe, I’d like to take my companion back.”

“Not possible my friend,” he stepped forward, taking care in placing the unconscious Kul on a patch of weed, “-we’ve taken her for a reason. Her scent is the same as our dungeon, no way we’re returning home empty-handed.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Igna rose his palm in a stopping gesture, “-I’d rather not fight, I’m not in the mood. I’d like to do things differently,” the open palm turned invitation, “-travelers from another world, would it be possible for I, a native of this world, to become thy host for the night?”

The lad seemed hesitant, he forced gestures to be cut by the lass, “-if you’re inviting us, I will not turn down the offer,” she looked at Kul, “-I see she means a lot to you, Mister Haggard. You dropped your guard knowing full well we were belligerent.”

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“Sister, he’s just foolish.”

“Brother, don’t. We’ve hidden in the forest for far too long, I want to experience this world’s cooking and what it has. Let me, please,” she grabbed his collar, “-please, brother, I want to relax for once, forget about our world’s trouble... do it for me?”

“Puppy dog eyes sure work,” commented Igna instantly teleporting to Kul’s side, “-don’t mind if I carry her,” he hoisted her arms around his shoulder and pulled her into piggyback, “-we can walk and talk.”

“Did you see that?” whispered the lad.

“Yeah, he’s strong,” commented the sister, “-if he got serious, we’d have a hard fight, possibly the hardest fight to date.”

“You don’t say, come on sister, we both know you earned the title of Godslayer. A mere dimension traveler won’t dare lay a hand on you.”

“And you’ve killed angels, I’m not the only one who’s strong,” the intonation heightened.

“If you’re going to talk behind my back, at least keep it relatively secretive. I’ve overheard the conversation,” he threw a smile backward, “-question, do you understand the native language?”

“No,” said the sister, “-too primitive and I don’t care for it.”

“Sure seems like a hard choice. Imagine looking down so hard it forces one to sleep in the forest. Pardon my saying, stupidity ought to be called out, and this here, my friend, is the definition of stupid.”

“Would you get off my sister’s case?” Rahe hurried to walk shoulder to shoulder with Igna, “-she’s not stupid, just eccentric, I think?” he leaned forth and winked, the sister took the comment well by flipping him the middle finger.

Sooner said night, the party gathered at the manor on Eldow’s high. Winding roads wrapped their poisonous body around the hillside forestry, the poison, the built of muscle fatigue. It was three hours later, Rahe had his face doused in sweat – summer nights cared not for the chill breeze.

“I accepted the offer,” cringed Rachel, “-please don’t make me regret it,” she whispered.

“Afraid to look bad before your younger brother?”

“How did you know?” they led the way.

“Simple matter of authority, pretty obvious actually. Don’t worry, where we’re headed is my manor,” after which, the vampiric castle rose into view. In the years spent in Hidros, the trees grew taller and sharper, ‘-damn Starix, I’m sure they made the décor Victorian just to spite me.’

“Impressive,” said the brother, “-where are we, this place looks abandoned. Are we going to fight?”

“Keep the imagination level, would you?”

“Sister...”

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“No more fighting,” interjected Igna. A press of his card against the lock blinked, the gates opened to a magnificent interior. The expensive pathway led forth accompanied by jewel-like lights dug into the soil part of the yard. In the middle of the cross-shaped division laid a hovering golden globe, floodlights blasted said sphere.

“Holy mother of wealth...”

“Don’t drop your jaw yet,” winked Igna, “-welcome to my home.’

“Home, this is bigger than the orphanage.”

‘By the look, she’s giving him, Rahe slipped up. These two have forgotten I have Kul and walked into a transient portal between the Shadow Realm and the overworld. Drawing power from the latter should be simple; we have a god and angel slayer. They speak the old tongue; I’d love for them to be part of the Aapith nation. Guess my desire to visit that place holds, Alfred... why, just why.’

“Something the matter, mister Haggard, or should I call you my liege?” jested Rahe.

“Well, seems to me we’re on the same page,” winked Igna, the gallant Rahe’s confidence walked to a stop, he nervously turned to Rachel, ‘-sister,’ ended at the pressed lips.

“Stupid,” she said silently.

In a matter of minutes, Kul was taken to her bedchambers, the dining hall was readied with food by Midne’s foresight. “Master.”

“Midne, there’s no need to ambush me whilst I freshen up,” a few splashes and he looked into the mirror, warm water wasted down the sink, “-what’s the matter?” he reached to his right, she handed a towel.

“Been a while since we spoke,” she smiled, “-I’m glad you’re back.”

“How were the holidays with Brvya and the others?”

“Fun, like super fun,” her fingers excitedly shook, “-the people downstairs, who are they?”

“No idea,” he stepped onto a wooden floor, “-and I don’t care. They’re my guest for tonight, have the retainers prepare beds, put the best bartender on duty, and ready the grill outside. I like that you’ve prepared dinner, I’m grateful for it.”

“No need to sugarcoat, master. The food won’t be wasted, we’ll send the remainder to the shelter.”

“Thank you,” he glided to the duo, attending maids waited in the corridor, passed comments on the visitor’s language, “-ladies,” thundered Midne, “-we have preparations to make. Master, please, the kitchen’s ready with all ingredients, I’ll open the door to the backyard.”

“You’re awesome,” he blew a kiss, “-call Asmodeus and Mammon, relay the news, we’re having a party tonight.”

“Sister, I think we’re at a king’s house.”

“Brother, stop gawking... the furniture looks expensive, they feel awesome. Finally, we get to enjoy real food... not the fish and fruit you so haphazardly forage.”

“Stop it, my mushrooms are always delicious.”

“And toxic,” she gritted.

Warm footsteps shuffled into the dining hall, “-change of plans,” he said with a bottle of beer and drafty shirt with shorts, “-we’re going to celebrate.”

“Celebrate?”

“Yeah, I want to have a barbecue. Consider it a gesture in good faith.”

“Good faith sounds like bribing to me.”

“Lad, I said it before, the comments are too cynical. These lovely maids will guide thee to the showers, fresh clothes have been fixed. Don’t take too long.”

Thus, the outside, a stone oven, a barbecue, and an adorable campfire, logs-shaped seats were arranged before the warm fire. The starry night perfectly added to the feel of elation.

Apron around the waist and alcohol in hand, Igna doused the grill in impressive flames, “-Master,” the earring vibrated, “-Midne reported of otherworldly beings at the manor, and you’re treating them to a barbecue. What’s going on?”

“Not only a barbecue, Midne’s handling the drinks. Let me assure you, tonight’s going to be a fun night. Join us for once.”

“Master...”

“There’s hesitation in the voice, is there something I should know?”

“Yeah, Aceline’s staying at the manor...” a sharp dagger froze his back.

“She’s here?” he turned to the backdoor and there she was, dressed in a lovely dress with her hair tied by sparkling gems. A mixture of emotions whelmed her movements, shakes to nods, the lips tightened and relaxed, “-doesn’t matter,” he nodded and refocused on the meat, “-have Asmodeus and Mammon make it here. Whilst you’re at it, get you and Starix’s asses over, I’m using my authority to call a meeting.”

“Master, are you drunk?”

“Not drunk, a little out of character. Just get here, I don’t want to hear the end of it.”

Tap, tap, “-how’s it going, grill master.”

“Johna, what a pleasant surprise. You’re going out or returning from a date?”

“Returning,” he said, “-a little bird told me his majesty was in Alpha, I figured you’d be at the manor.”

“Well, it sure was a quick ride here,” they stood opposite one another, “-grab the drinks and let’s chat,” the caps buckled and they tapped bottles.

"Fizzy," said Johna, "-a little chat will be hard," he whispered, "-Aceline's still in the doorway. Either she's petrified or someone cast an immobility spell."

"Right," he flipped the grilling slabs of meat, the aroma drew in attention from all over the house, "-Midne," he called, "-tell the retainers to drop their duties, tis for everyone, wouldn't be fair otherwise."

"On it, master," she cheered with a mug twice the size of her head.

"Now she's a drinker," commented Johna, "-she'll empty the cases before we get a chance."

"Yeah, it's no problem," he handed the utensils, "-her glare's grown sharper."

"By all means, enjoy."

The stunningly beautiful Aceline waited patiently, opposed to in the way, she side-stepped to rest against the wall, "-the dress' going to get dirty," said Igna.

"Noticed me at last?" her shoulders slumped and carried a handbag, "-congratulations on the marriage, majesty."

"Don't hide the passive aggressivity," he stood at her side and handed a drink, "-I'm sorry"

"You're a selfish ass," she accepted and gulped half the bottle, "-how have you been?"

"Busy," he said, "-I saw the news, you were cast as the heroine of a new movie, congratulations. Johna and you make a great couple on screen," the pupils emptily stared the night, "-if only things had been different."

"Igna," she moved into a tight embrace, "-I still love you," she tiptoed to his nose, "-and I'm sure your feelings are just as strong as mind. Look at me, dolled up for what, a date with someone who I don't love. I'd rather be in a simple hoodie without makeup and chat to the one I care about. Igna, are you sure there's no way..."

"I'm sorry," he matched her affectionate gaze, "-I ripped my heart and broke the one you loved," he stepped from her warm embrace, "-I'm sorry, I truly am. Words won't atone my betrayal, tis why I said I'd never give my affection to another, believe me, you're the last person I ever open my heart to," an empty smile cordially invited her to the impromptu party.

"I-I..." she shook her head, "-can't," her heels stormed inside and hit Rachel's shoulder, to which she yelled in the unintelligible string of words.

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"Handle that like a champ," chastised Johna.

"Don't say a word," he returned to the grill, "-things are the way they are because of me. I don't want to jeopardize her position and mine."

"I won't say anything," he handed another drink, "-what is done is done, I hope she understands."

Igna took a sip, "-she will."

Chapter 824: Rachel and Rahe

“Explain.”

The crowd watched in confusion, Rachel and her tongue made a grave impression, the maids narrowed their gossips into whispers, Johna, excited as he was confused, kept the head below eye-level onto the half-empty beer bottle.

“Explain?” returned Igna casually.

The twins stood face-to-face, the sister tittered on the edge of annoyance, the brother hid in her shadow, part of the preliminary reading of body-movements told many things, one glared its ugly face, abstention. He unwillingly and with faint movements, leaned away from Rachel who energetically leaned forward at Igna.

“Yes,” she flung her arms in the air, “-I was assaulted.”

“Is this supposed to be a joke?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

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“...” he pressed his lips, motioned as if he’d open the mouth, ‘-she’s doing it for a reason,’ went across the mind, ‘-I’m sure Aceline’s what she wants to know. Doesn’t matter,’ he reached for Johna, the man instinctively handed freshly opened bottles, “-if it’s about being the lady, it doesn’t concern you,” he handed the drinks, “-you’re here as guests, stay thy welcome and be mindful of the surroundings. Besides,” he sipped and pointed to Midne, “-you’ll find there are more people who understand the olden demonic language.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Don’t take my word for it, Rahe. Please,” he poked the forced good-mannered brother, “-or is it an insult?”

“I see what you’re doing,” he drank, “-not taking the bait,” a few shuffles across the tenderly kept grass gave onto Midne’s workstation. “....”

“Got it,” she shrugged, “-anything else?”

“You understood?”

“Do you think me a fool?” she laughed, “-take a seat and strap in, tonight’s going to be a wild one.”

‘Another person who understands us,’ he sat on the log seat, ‘-sister was right,’ aroma flew from plate to plate, a radiantly inviting aura drowned the backyard, the slow-cooking, the campfire, the tingle of alcohol and the starry-night. For all it’s worth, the place felt home. Under the same atmosphere, Rachel took Igna by the hands and pulled into the shade of a tree, “-explain.”

“Explain what?”

“Why are you being so nice, I don’t get it, are we not enemies?”

“No harm was done. I examined her body earlier,”

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“-examined her body?”

“Rachel,” he lowered his tone, “-don’t take my words out of context. Nothing of said nature happened, I meant to say, I checked her physical state; the imprisonment’s spell will break on its own. The ancient language is suited for instantaneous death, and it got me thinking, why has it changed, looks to me someone or something went in time and rewrote part of history.”

“I need to know why.”

“Fine,” he sipped, “-let’s take a seat in the crowd,” he smiled, “-I’d rather talk openly than hide in the shadows. Besides,” he motioned amidst the gathered crowd, the vague spaces fell onto Rahe’s stern expression, “-the lad has a point.”

“You win,” they stepped forth, “-let’s talk.”

The lass expected to be seated next to the warm campfire, however, the tables turned when Igna took to the grill, tied his hair with a bandana, and cooked, an inferno erupted, to which he tamed it as if a snake charmer.

“When you said to hide in plain sight, I thought there.”

“No, someone’s got to make the food,” forearm to the nose, “-and it’s not going to cook itself. Here,” he served her on a paper plate, “-take a stool, we’ll cook and eat.”

“I’m standing, thank you.”

“You’re a pain,” he casually handed the readied meat to a line of flushed retainers, Midne began her long-winded speech on how the perfect cocktail is made, Rahe found himself charmed at her will and posturing.

“I’ll take it as a compliment,” she ate, “-delicious.”

“Tell me,” he drank and flipped, “-why take Kul, she has nothin-”

“No, before I talk, I want information. Let’s put it on record. If I talk, and you talk, I want us to be allies, else, no point in bonding,” her eyelashes scurried onto her brother, “-otherwise, you wouldn’t have taken the trouble of casting a translation spell onto everyone.”

“You’re a smart one,” he cheered, “-it’s my policy to not trust strangers since I don’t even trust the people closest to me. In lieu of actions shown in caring for Kul despite her being a captive, I’m willing to talk, make no mistake, I won’t trust you, nor will I ever consider trusting.”

“We don’t have anything to say.’

“Don’t blow off the conversation just yet,” he handed another drink, “-I’m willing to compromise, we’re both hiding our true intent, and I don’t mind secrets. My concern is simple, if I open, you must open – consider it a two-way street.”

“Trusting without actually trusting,” her head shook, “-I have no idea if you’re stupid, na?ve, or overly confident.”

“And I take it I made a good impression.”

“The food’s great,” she gave a half-smile and turned.

“No, no, no,” he caught her arm, “-I’m not letting you go,” they smiled.

“You’re alright,” she said, “-I’ll talk on one condition.”

“-that I go first,” he warmly handed snacks to the passing guests, “-let’s get started.”

“You’re real name, title, and origin.”

“The hardest question,” he lit a cigar, the meat diminished in quantity, feeding the gluttonous retainers was quite the jarring task, “-my name’s Igna Haggard, I’ve been reincarnated many times, before the name Igna Haggard, I went by Staxius Haggard, and before then, Alfred,” her expression altered, “-my title is Heir to Death, inheritor to Origin and Kronos’s will and Watcher of the Shadow Realm. For reasons, I’m cursed to never ascend to Godhood, meaning, the title of god will never be granted.”

“Wow,” she gulped, the food physically digested as did her mind, he’d dropped a claim so preposterous she stopped chewing, “-I don’t know what to say.”

“Focus on finishing the bite, nothing’s more unbecoming a lady who talks with her mouth full,” her lips tightened and the jaws worked double, midway through swallowing, her eyes flashed open, her chest seemed to snap, “-no water, drink the booze.”

“I nearly died,” she coughed, “-thank you.”

“No problem, anything else?”

“Origin, Death and Time, I don’t believe it, the three strongest entities known throughout the dimensions have wavered their position of power to you. Pardon my saying, you look and smell weak...” magnifying glass of scrutiny looked head to toe, fingers to her chin and arms crossed, she took a thinker’s pose and narrowed her attention, “-you mentioned Origin opposed to Creation. Means there’s more thee knows than the common, even gods stand oblivious to Origin’s existence.”

“Well,” he pulled his sleeves, “-here’s the symbol of power. There’s also this,” he tapped his cheeks, “-the remnants of the symbol’s previous spot.”

“Wait a moment,’ she latched onto his forearm, “-these writings aren’t of this world. The demonic tongue has but one condition, aside from the predecessor, none is able to write in his words. We borrow from what was handed down the generations – these symbols and tells are original, these enhancements only King Alfred could write. By the first life,” she took a few steps back, “-are you saying?”

“Correct,” he pulled the other sleeve, “-I was rejected and sentenced to persecution before having an opportunity. I’m Alfred, the Cursed King, devourer of angels and harbinger of misfortune.”

“My liege,” she dropped into a full-body prostration, “-we’ve scoured worlds to worlds in search of thee.”

“Raise thy head,” he thundered.

She obeyed, albeit shyly, “-majesty...”

“Drop it,” he smiled, “-Alfred was my title, I stand as Igna Haggard, nothing more, nothing less. Forgive what I said and stand.”

“-But.”

“Don’t,” he dropped to one knee and placed a hand on her shoulder, “-I don’t need respect nor do I need anything else. We mutually agreed to speak our minds.”

“Sorry,” she rose, “-was overwhelmed, I never thought we would ever meet.”

‘My suspicions were right, she’s from Aapith else related.’

“Guess it’s my turn,” she inhaled, “-my name’s Rachel, and I serve the true ruler of the Aapith Nation, the founder, Alfred. For millenniums, there’s been inner strife between two factions, one worshipping the tales of King Alfred, and the other, the revolutionist who base their beliefs on Lucifer’s teachings. The former faction’s lost power – tis to a point where the tale of Alfred’s been altered so the real values and teachings were lost. The Aapith is a nation similar to how this world is, demons are described as the embodiment of evil, so says the gods. My brother and I were ordered to jump worlds in search of anyone who knew the teachings of King Alfred, they need someone to take the fight to Lucifer. He’s blatantly insulted our true founder and is on a campaign to rid the nation of believers in King Alfred. When I said dungeon, I mean my world, since it’s grown into a testing ground for the followers of Lucifer. Day in and day out, they leap into our domain and slaughter, pillage, and ravish in the destruction. I wish I could stand to their might... the words of power dwindle and I fear the worse. Before you ask how I know whether my story is right or wrong, you have to understand this, before King Alfred sacrificed himself to Lord Death, a secretive contract was made to ensure his teachings would never disappear. The statuette of Milosa, the voice of truth, chronicler of the founder, took a stand at the palace – on every full moon, she recounts the stories. Knowing Lucifer, you understand such an item would stand against his fight to power. Therein began the first war of demons against demons, his side won, we were forced into subjugation and Milosa was sentenced to the never-ending abysmally purge, a furnace of humanity’s dirtiest thoughts and wishes, a cursed well of raw malice. It’s been said, on full-moons, whispers can be heard from the depths of the abyss, Milosa speaks true. My brother and I were unfortunate to be born in a noble family of a high demon. During the war, we were taken hostage and forced near the cursed well, the raw emotions lashed to burn my arms, my brother went mad, he tore his eyes and pierced his eardrums, I tried to hold him without luck... I wanted to tear my sight from the horror, in the end, the soft whispers of Milosa gave us light, my brother was healed and I was granted the following words of power – Ene, Lewip, Straq, translating into Resilience, Immortality, and strength. I fought my way out, the resistance help us and the inhabitants escaped into a pocket dimension. The rest is the tale of how we grew into angel and god slayers, we’re the strongest fighters the resistance have. They knew full well if we went away, the attacks would grow stronger, still, they told us to flee and live a fulfilling life for them, most of all, they say to believe in the founder, believe the herald of lamentation would return to his rightful place, the throne of the Aapith Nation. We spent centuries living in many worlds until a disturbance in this world, Hades invaded and we followed. We watched battles after battles and landed on Kul, a Demonlord of unknown Origin. Her abilities are beyond what we imagined without ever being tied to the blood of the demons. She’s as strong as high-ranking demons with the same scent to what I remembered from Milosa,” she exhaled, “-our story in a nutshell.”

"A nutshell?" he wiped his forehead, "-Rachel, I'm glad you told me what happened. Sadly, I can't help."

"Can't help?"

"The reason they asked for you both to run was to safeguard the legacy of Alfred, the domains already destroyed by now, Lucifer is powerful, even more now that he's done the unforgivable, the agreement to merge selves with a god. The majority of the world worships him, the power of belief trumps most, and the devotees are an army of faithful. Sorry to say, I can't help."

Chapter 825: Trust in me, thy emperor

"Can't help? I didn't ask for help, I told our story since we shared. Besides, you think I don't know what's happened, we ran with tails between our legs, the dream of finding someone to replace Alfred and solidify our beliefs, it's just," the words locked at her teeth, her lips closed in submission, "-it's just," she kept around the same words.

"Just?"

"-Just that I want our beliefs to be reinforced. I don't want to look back and think I should have been better off handing ourselves to Lucifer's army. I sincerely apologize for the trouble, I never meant to bring Kul into our private affairs."

"Or it was planned," an empty bottle swapped for another, "-Rachel, I understand why and how the method of getting the ringleader into sight was well executed. First, Kul was unharmed, the words of power diminished to a playground level. Second, the willingness to hear me out, and lastly, the way you took to my story and opened yours. I've spent my life manipulating others, in a way, I've gained the ability to get a person to do whatever I wish. What's happening right now is manipulation 101, get the other side to think they came with the idea – socially get acquainted, build trust, and share secrets."

"Figure me out?"

"You're not a puzzle, don't lower thyself, it's unbecoming. I'd much prefer the alternative."

"And it would say you're smarter than I am."

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"Correct."

Bang, the backdoor rattled, two suited gentlemen burst onto the scene with bags and laughs. Following them were ladies and men, all dressed for a lovely night, the duo, from the standalone aura, covered the sky-ceiling in a tinge of the innate allure to vices.

"Greetings, master," said Asmodeus.

"Been a while, master," returned Mammon.

Rachel mumbled a few words, Igna took great attention to her pronunciation and intonation, "-pardon me," interjected Asmodeus, "-do you speak the ancient demonic tongue?"

"Oh?" her focus flashed, "-I'm impressed."

"She does speak the ancient tongue," elbowed Mammon, "-master, where did thee find such a rare piece."

"Rare piece?" he frowned.

"Let me explain, those able to read the ancient tongue are worth more than legacy items left by the predecessors. The catalog of the olden demons is lush and cryptive, deciphering the texts is an easy opening to the ancient world."

"Why she's called a rare piece," said Mammon, "-the current generation started alongside Lucifer, are ignorant to the old way. Knowledge is one of the greater valued monikers in the wild, thus why the princes are obligated to learn to read and write said language."

"The more I'm told about the demonic realm, the less I'm interested. I've wondered about demons and thought them to be strong and fun, the past hours changed my curiosity."

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"Well," they tapped their bottles, "-we've come to the party,"

"Yeah, I understand," he returned to the stove, "-did Midne."

"-We brought meat," leaped Medusa from nowhere, "-treat us to the Alchemist's skills."

"Strap on," he roused the inferno into a volcano, "-I'll have you eating your fingers."

At the early hours of 22:45, half of the entourage were on the grass under the influence of cigarettes lined with Angel's dust. Midne took and began adding God's ale to the mixtures, it reached a point where the drinkers did shots and shots of the ale. Igna's accompanying party consisted of Asmodeus, Mammon, Medusa, Rahe, Rachel, Midne, and Johna. The banter floated between tame and risky. The narcotics kept on piling, and they kept the pace till midnight, the strongest of fighters dropped.

"I win," yawned Mammon, "-she's standing after the last shot, I win, master."

"Yes you did," said Igna, "-my chosen champion dropped, what a shame," they filled a large cup, he grabbed, opened his mouth and threw it inside, "-nothing," he wiped his mouth, '-tonight's been a great night.'

"Master can hold his liquor," said the drifting Asmodeus.

Beep, beep, "-sorry," the blond head of Johna swarmed himself through the unconscious crowd and into the manor, one thought remained in his mind, '-fun,' the scattered stone path merged into the sterile inside, "-Aceline."

"Hey," she stood against the hallway, "-I returned."

"Listen, I'm a little drunk, now isn't time for me to give advice."

"No, I don't want advice, I want him and he wants me, I can't help."

"Yes, you can, forget about what's happened tonight and return home. I'm against adultery, I won't allow either to regret the choices made on a whim."

“Stop!” she yelled; “-I don’t want advice from a drunken mess.”

“YOU TOO,” he grabbed her arm, “-don’t, I’m serious, you better not.”

“Johna, for the last time, I want you to stop,” she pulled, “-none’s willing to take responsibility, and I don’t want to stay my life with nothing. I wanted something genuine and it reached a point where he and I could obtain... then came the queen’s death, the kingdom, I-I...”

“Aceline...”

“Fine,” she spun, “-if I won’t get my way, I guess someone else is better suited for the job,” and stormed out the door. The stumped actor had his head against the wall, ‘-Igna, the favor is too much for me to handle, I don’t think I can...’

The next day arrived in haste, Igna slept the night outside in a jigsaw array of retainers and companions. Whispers in the tree broke the dream, ‘-the drinks must have kicked in,’ sat upright, ‘-oh boy,’ he looked about and saw many unclothed and in very incriminating positions, ‘-did Asmodeus make the party into an orgy, horny demons. Speaking of which,’ he stood and peered to naught, ‘-where are they?’ Midne was spotted hugging the log, Rahe and Rachel were gone. A hard ground did quite the damage. On stepping inside, the warm fragrance of mint, ginger, and tea cleansed the inside, he made for the kitchen and spotted the same party of last night, “-Good morning,” they said. Asmodeus handled the stove whilst the remainder gathered at the table, “-you had a great sleep, didn’t you?”

“Don’t start,” he joined and exchanged a pleasant conversation. The hours led into the fallen soldiers reviving to fight another day, and before much time passed, Igna found himself sending Medusa, Asmodeus, and Mammon to their duties, “-Rahe and Rachel,” he paused at the balcony, “-what next?”

“We don’t know,” sighed Rahe, “-the quest is over, we met King Alfred and told our story.”

“Leaving me with the responsibility,” he looked at the sky, “-here’s my tidbit. Forget everything about the Aapith nation and their troubles. It’s a new start,” he vehemently looked the two in their souls, “-when the time comes for us to go to war, I’ll call and we’ll fight Lucifer. Currently, I don’t see the good in antagonizing his faction.”

“What then?”

“Why not live here and assist the Princes of Hell. You’ve met them, consider it an informal interview, they’re willing to put thee to work.”

“R-right, the princes of hell, brothers to lucifer...”

“You misunderstand, they’re part of my inner circle.”

“Starting a new life,” she looked to Rahe, “-can we be anything?”

“Depends on the offer.”

He dropped with, “-I want to be a doctor.”

“And I want to be nurse,” fired Rachel.

“Noble professions,” he moved and placed his hands on each of their shoulders, “-consider the deal made. I’ll have arrangements made for the education and gentle transition into this world, welcome.”

A flash of red, a dark room, consciousness faded. Many whispers, a lonesome drift into emptiness, in the distance, the drowning sensation drops into a knee breaking pull, skin cries, an array of images goes top to bottom, the revolution rendered the mind useless, “-HELP,” the bed rocked, “-huff, puff,” an attenuated ray of light lays on the wooden floor, the ceiling reached high, the bedframe recognizable, ‘-my room?’ shuffled to the edge, she stood, the blanket easily slid, ‘-I’m home?’ she stared the outside in undergarments, ‘-my head,’ a needle dove into her pupils, ‘-it hurts,’ she dropped into a hunch, “-what the...” the balance faltered, “-shit,” the sharp bedpost approached till a sudden pull.

“Kul, you woke up,” said Igna, “-welcome to the world of the living.”

“Thank you for the help,” she said tugged into the comfy gateway to the land of dreams, “-why are you here?”

“I came to fight off the imperial army. What of you, tell me, what’s happened?”

“The trafficking ring’s grown too much. I can’t sit by and watch young folks be subjected to this dirty world. I’ve used most of my cash to acquire a private school. We find the few unlucky ones and send them there in case they have no homes or families. I guess I want to extend a helping hand to the weak.”

“Admirable, I’m proud.”

“Well, I don’t need nice words, I need results. I learned of the head a few weeks back, I went after their shipment and was knocked unconscious, I don’t remember anything after. I guess I walked into a trap and paid the price.”

“Don’t use woeful intonations with me,” he said, “-the efforts have saved many. You should have come to me; I’d have helped in financing the academy.”

“I appreciate the gesture,” said a hint of suspicion, “-it’s lowkey, I’d hate for you to use my actions as a ticket into some greater scheme. Pardon me for doubting thy integrity, I want those children to have a second chance, and I’ll cross anyone in my path to achieve my goals.”

“I guess you’re right. Promise to be more careful next time, I won’t be around again.”

After the little talk, Igna found himself on the road. Meeting comrades and learning a bit about what they’d accomplish breathed life anew, the will to fight heightened. A landmark of a day rose on the 20th of January, multiple strings were pulled behind the scenes – Igna and Markus sat face-to-face before a crowd of thousands, the channels transmitted the broadcast worldwide, “-good morning, people of Alpha,” he took the stand, “-the past few years have been rough on us and it has been on you. We’ve worked our hardest to keep the fighting away from the people. I know of the outrage from the residents to the north, native of Whuotan, I apologize for the province’s destruction. We’ve fought, shed blood, lost comrades, and moaned the death of war heroes. The exemplary display of courage by the heroes has motivated every single one of us. Its important Alpha makes its will known to the world,” he sidestepped, “-which is why, I’ve called onto the King of Hidros, Igna Haggard,” no applause nor smile, the crowd watched pensively. “-Thank you,” he nodded at Markus, “-people of Alpha, I’ve come to

formally announce the Imperial army' death at our hands. General Valentino and Emperor Sultria were pillars in the last battle, I'm proud to say, the northern province has been freed. We won; the lives lost could have been avoided. I know the pain of losing someone close, we think of them, we wish they'd never taken those steps, accepting the loss require strength and selfishness. It's a lesson to us all, take Arda for example, we've suffered great losses and persecution, our people enslaved and killed for the pleasures of killing, even so, my companions and I, regardless of future outcomes, pledged ourselves in rebuilding the kingdom, there's a long road ahead, yet, I don't regret my choice in fighting the losing battle. The tenacity eventually led to sustainability. I'm proud to say, we're doing better than before. Why am I saying these things? simple, to prove actions have more merit than words. I don't enjoy the way politics is played, the leaders stuff pretty words down our throats and expect us to digest their bullshit, I say, enough is enough. The greater enemy stands in form of the Wracia Empire. My kingdom is under attack, I promised the late queen to pour my soul in defending what she cultivated till I breathe my last breath. Time is nigh to swallow pride and stand in a united front. Give me, no, give us the chance to show strength in unity,"

"-as my brother-in-law said, the decision to be united lays in thy hand, people of Alpha. We will make right on the lost lives, the United Nation of Alrosia will rise against the world and show our might. Vote, my people, vote. We can't afford a repeat of Whuotan, nor will I allow for it. Trust in me, thy emperor."

Chapter 826: Guardian Saint of the Southern Sect.

"Good day, lord Parker."

"Good day, the interview was organized pretty fast."

"We take pride in working fast," the camera panned to a set, two formally dressed men sat face-to-face and slightly tilted at the camera. The topic of conversation wrote in bold on the background screen, 'the United Nation of Alrosia,' north, south, east, and west – look and there were people in mass talking on the sudden announcement. The debates were long and hard, and the vote, done through a physical medium, would be counted and announced on the 22nd of January.

"We've watched the clip indulgently; I'm surprised to see the emperor be sincere and earnest to his cause."

"Sincere is a double-edged sword," explained Parker, "-looking at the pros and cons, I see more advantages in my biased opinion. Love or hate, the Sultrians are the pride and joy of Alpha. They've cultivated the place from the ground to where we stand, I couldn't be more grateful."

"Let's touch on the arguments against the alliance," suggested the interviewer.

"What is there to say, the war's been tugging hard on our resources. Young men and women have died, there was a report of the princess going missing. We've remained a peaceful nation for far too long, upon a war, regardless of the technology and military might, we were outfoxed and outgunned. The only real disadvantage is free trades from Hidros and Alpha, which I remind, have already been done in good faith by our Empress. Hidros is a war-torn nation by heart, they battle day and night, the newly crowned King nicknamed the Devil of Glenda, has once taken on an army of seven thousand and won."

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“What about the people of Hidros themselves, are they not?”

“Don’t,” he interjected, “-those afraid to welcome new experiences are fools, we should embrace their way of life. Unlike us, the other races aren’t afraid to show their features – we, on the other hand, must hide our abilities and undergo surgery to fit into society. It’s not been a problem before and I don’t think it will, sadly, I can’t help question the word freedom.”

“On the subject of Hidros, what of the King? The coronation’s been closely scrutinized.”

“Does it matter? Queen Gallienne gave her word and will to the king, the princess married into his family – therefore, the throne is his no matter the blood ties.”

“Some argue the throne should have gone to Empress Eira, the firstborn of queen Gallienne.”

“-they are fools. The mantle of ruler of Hidros is a task not fit for the weak or common. Igna Haggard is special. There’s an article about his rise to fame in a strange land, his climb to an empire worth billions. All began from a cooking video, and now, he stands as the director to Raven.”

“No matter the ascension, the decision will come to the vote. The united nation of Alrosia may just be the turning point in Alpha’s legacy. Who knows what the opposing faction plans.”

Speakers cleanly spoke the television’s words; a loud crash rattled the outside corridor. Feet ran to the noise, *click,* “-Master,” said éclair behind whom maids hurried with towels, “-I’ve returned.”

“About time,” he said, “-close the door.”

“The study hasn’t changed,” commented the butler, “-the news,” unbuttoned his shirt and sat, “-I’m home at last.”

“Have something to drink,” said Igna, “-nothing else better to do.”

“Maybe,” he pulled his smartphone and tapped, “-this will interest you more.”

“The unnamed project,” he smiled, “-bringing this means we’re ready to launch?”

“We will be, pocket dimension’s been damaged from the various testing. I only returned after fixing the blunder. After its life, we will have a monopoly over the greatest asset the worlds not heard of.”

“What’s the status in Easel Run Gard?”

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“The church’s backed away, the Empire’s yet to answer. I say things are going pretty nicely.”

“Don’t jinx it,” he coughed, “-don’t do it...” a jolt flashed the thoughts, “-éclair, we have trouble,” he stood, “-what if Easel Run Gard isn’t the real target. What if instead of attacking Sultria’s northern province, they took to the south, or worse, they’re in the city center. It’s unheard for the church to not retaliate.”

“You’re being paranoid.”

Breaking News, an unknown monster has gone rogue in the city center, the heroes are rushing as we speak, trucks were flung, people killed, and mass hysteria, *class-A warning, the AHA has issued a class-A level threat. Evacuate to the shelters, evacuate, I repeat, evacuate.*

"I let my guard down," he stood, "-the wielder of a scythe. I assumed she ran, obviously not," he side-glanced the screen, "-look, it's her, the hood doesn't hide much."

The Class-A level threat stormed onto the street; elite heroes flew to the area of devastation. Smoke pillars marked her past location, the monster promenaded in the middle of the streets, a turn of her weapon cleanly sliced cars and buildings. Nothing seemed to affect the range or level of attack.

"Stop right there," cried a muscular outline dressed in a super suit, "-enough damage," the badge read, First Class B-rank.

"A hero," said the unusually childish voice, "-are you this continent's adventurers?"

"No," the guard heightened, "-I'm not an adventurer. Just someone who's fighting for the weak," a push cracked the pavement, the cloaked outline twirled, the hood drop with a sneer, "-may God bless thy soul," the weapon, a little on the tall-side with chains on the blade and handle, dipped to be stopped singlehandedly.

"The weapon's not a great match," said the hero.

"Oh," before another word said, he punched and sent her flying, "-NICE, NICE," she grinned, "-you're strong."

'She blocked my attack at the last second by pulling on the handle. She's unharmed,' no thought for concern, the hero dove into the fray, each attack built into the heavier strike, her movements greatened, the strides became leaps. The sidesteps and counters were so graceful it gave the appearance of her having wings, nimble moves didn't hide the force behind her strikes. The long-winded attacks gave space to dodge and close the distance, to which, she'd leap and keep a relative range, '-I'm getting nowhere,' he gritted, '-my stamina's running low,' the visage drained in color, the paleness began to show on his forearm, "-what have you done?"

"Death by a thousand strike," she laughed, "-anyone who touches my weapon is instantly struck by my god's might. No one save his grandness and I, are allowed to come close, let alone allowed weaklings to damage his property."

"It doesn't matter," he coughed, "-long as I stand, I'll fight."

"I'm sorry," the air around her feet swayed into a murderous wind. She pulled onto the chain hanging down the blade, it dropped to show a needle, "-sadly," she took the latter and tapped the weapon, a flash of light pierced his legs.

'What hap-' he looked, "-MY LEGS."

"WHAT!" she exclaimed happily, "-CAN'T TAKE MY LORD'S BLESSING?" the legs were cleanly amputated, blood drained without stop – arriving heroes leaped into battle, she tapped the silver-handle, flashes took the fighter's arms and legs, vital spots, name it, and they dropped. The onslaught began, and ire of murderous folly veered the attention at one of the shelters, law enforcement rushed onto the scene.

High-caliber weapons were pulled from the armored vehicles and fired; tiny explosions destroyed the area around save her spot. An invisible barrier deflected projectiles, heroes coordinated with law enforcement, the guns stopped firing and the ground fighters ran into her deadly embrace. She nonchalantly tapped and slaughtered the heroes, “-FIRE!” screamed across the intercoms,” -SHE’S GOT BENITH.”

An unfortunate soul got held by the neck and used as a meat shield, “-resilient,” she commented, the organs spilled.

“There is life behind those empty eyes of yours,” he smirked, crimson-colored pupils flamed in a deluge of fuzzy dark mist.

“A NIGHTWALKER,” she leaped backward, “-SPAWN OF THE DEVIL.”

“Sorry to say,” the previously maimed figure burst through the fog, sharpened his claws, and fought.

“There’s a First-Class A hero for you,” commented the lower-ranked fighters, a perimeter drew around the block, helicopters circled and gave live information, a feed displayed the duo going head-to-head, she inflicted mortal wounds and he simply shrugged the attack by regenerating the limbs. “I’m not so sure about the fight.”

“What’s the matter, boss?” whispered within a mobile command center, or from what was seen outside looking in, an ice-cream truck.

“Look at her attacks, she’s fighting on the defensive. Each landed attack tears off his limbs or shatters the bones, we’re talking about a Count-Ranked nightwalker. Their race specializes in killing, Benith made the climb from zero to hero in a few months. He’s on his way to the top...”

“Those are good things, right?” countless screens displayed the battle and coverage.

“No, he’s being pushed back. Worst of all, the other a-rank heroes are on a mission around the continent. We’ve drawn the short-straw, long as tis a battle of attrition, I’m betting my money on Benith. Notify law enforcement, we may need to call the military.”

‘The more I fight,’ he dodged, ‘-the more my blood gets pumping. I’d love a battle like this,’ the arms flung out its socket, he leaped, caught the member, forced it into place, and continued, ‘-each strike she gives I feel weaker and vulnerable. Is this fear?’ the ambitious strikes hampered, the movements lessened to favor defense, ‘-I feel death closing on my body. What is she?’

“FOCUSING ON DEFENSE?” she stopped and sprang, used the momentum to carry her weight through the weapon and take half of his torso, he pulled at the last minute and stood with a gaping hole, the wound didn’t heal nor did it show signs of stopping, “-fear is what feeds my baby,” she grinned, “-now that you’ve displayed weakness, I’m going to take your life, miserable undying fiend, you’re not fit for this world.”

A loud screech bellowed in the distance, her delivering him to the lord of death stopped, the vampire crouched on one knee, unable to stand or fight, the eyes refused to stare at the opponent.

“-Where’s the army?”

“BOSS, don’t take it out on us.”

“Are you stupid?” he slammed the control terminal, “-BENITH IS ABOUT TO DIE, WE NEED TO SAVE HIM.”

“Report from the military, they’re unable to help. Enemies’ ships have been sighted to the west; the naval forces are gathering as we speak to go on offense.”

“Thirty second out,” said éclair over the intercoms.

“Why the prickly tone, something the matter?” they flew.

“No comments on my new drone?”

“It looks terrifying awesome,” the cityscape passed till the location.

“Good luck, master,” a press toggled a magical circle, the passenger instantly teleported outside the jet with its velocity, ‘-perfect,’ he dove towards the battlezone, wings sprouted at the last moment, *crack,* the road buckled.

“Holy Mother,” said the uninvited guest, “-one second late and I’d be dead,” he clambered out the massive hole, “-Benith, are you well?” regenerations activated slowly.

“Igna?” he blinked, “-I should have known,” a peaceful smile broke the frown, “-take care of my mess, I’ll return the favor later.”

“Take your time.”

To his side bellowed a tornado of anger, “-are you?”

“I am,” he replied, “-pleasure to make thy acquaintance, Guardian Saint Jusa of the Southern Sect, the gothic executioner.”

“Gothic...”

“My bad, I added the gothic part,” said he in jest, “-they said you were a gothic brat who wears short Victorian-black dresses and spiderweb leggings. Sounds to me you’re more suited to satisfy the kinks of the depraved.”

Woosh, the weapon teleported at his face, he dipped, palmed her side, and sent the lass a few meters away, “-you,” she glared, “-who are you?”

“Didn’t Oat say?” he scratched his head and crossed the arms, “-the name’s Igna Haggard, I was the one who defeated their invasion into Arda. I heard stories, mostly about the underhanded flashes.”

“I see what you’re doing,” she settled and gripped her trusted ally, “-trying to rile me to give in to the threats. Not going to work.”

“No, I only said you’re a close-door exhibitionist. Let’s stop the games. Why’s a guardian saint here?”

“I had a divine revelation, my lord said to cause chaos at the heart of Alpha.”

“Well then,” he tapped the belt, Orenmir materialized, “-shall we dance?”

“You love to battle, don’t you,” she licked her lips, “-I’ll show you,” she vanished and appeared above with the edge millimeter from his head, *Mana Control: Wind Element Variant – Cocoon.*

Chapter 827: Battle within the city

A bed of air glided the impromptu strike towards the ground, Igna took action by spinning, taking account of the situation, and leaping to a favorable range. The gamble paid when retreating, there runs the risk of being backstabbed, what he did was greater the distance. A foolish move since the guardian saint showed signs of superhuman speed. Currently, he wasn’t the only person able to move with the illusion of teleportation. In the milliseconds the scene followed, the guardian saint’s murderously vibrant pupils glared in what seemed to be a motion lasting hour. The scythe touched the ground, she altered its’ shape to gain speed from contact – and before Igna adjusted, she was on her way to deliver another strike; this time, the weapon’s joint headed for his neck. Ducking or sidestepping was no option, by the time Orenmir could be drawn – his head would be taken. The opening was too delicious to pass.

The supposed expression of horror dropped to a smug smile, by the tiniest window, she planted the weapon inches from Igna’s foot and sprung. He turned and leaped, Orenmir drew to make first contact with her handle, the force behind the swing had her flung a few meters, the eyebrows crinkled. Needle to the handle, flashes of light rained onto Igna – wings sprouted by force to dodge the volley. Below, the unfortunate target munched into dust. Her journey cut short on reaching suspended rail, her knees buckled against the side then pounced. A wireframe of crimson manifested inches shy from her face, an explosion rattled the seemingly empty sky. Smoke lingered and droplets scattered. Both kept their cards hidden, soon, the saint fell onto the cracked street, leaving a cloud of black in the air. Her shoulder was slit open, the sleeve didn’t survive the attack, red stood against her skin. She bit onto the nail and pulled, solid yellow-colored shards appeared above his head, a wink toggled the torrent.

A magical barrier summoned to block most of the wailing, he threw few glances at the saint, who nonchalantly stitched herself with a crudely shaped needle and fabric from the torn clothes. The aura around the weapon shifted dearly – Orenmir shook within its sheath, they seemed to communicate, there was an unseen yet felt echo coming from each. The shockwaves met in the middle, the same spot where Igna landed, the rubble shook vehemently from the implosion of intent. Relatively unharmed, he dropped into the lightning strike pose, undid the first few limiters he placed upon gaining knowledge to being Alfred, the markings on the body, where once had been curses, and the obsession on collection in the prior life was a projection of the forgotten self wanting to make itself heard. He chanted a few unintelligible words, the symbols burnt to ash revealing his pale skin. The density increased at her side, they locked eyes and ran at each other, she jumped with intent to take his head once again, he kept to the ground with hand on the handle – the sad reality blasted in her smug expression, the gut it took to jump, leaving herself exposed, was a risk she took by assessing his abilities, a card he kept closely hidden. The beat in the movement changed, the moment her feet lifted, he dashed – the shadow of death’s skull lingered, the blade left its chambers, ‘-danger.’

“COME FORTH, VENGEANCE!” a body double leaped from Igna, he made contact by slicing her dominant arm, if not for Vengeance, the light of Kenria, an outline of the cross used by Lucifer’s first disciple, which dropped moment from the final strike, would have destroyed Igna. Instead, he gave on killing the saint whilst Vengeance harshly took the brunt of the attack.

The bloodstained blade returned in its guard, Vengeance returned into his shadow, a cross-like entity dug itself into the harsh ground. Jusa dropped to her knees before the object, tears whelmed her visage – a group of figures dressed in gold and white dropped to shield the saint. A light-haired man in the shade of gray, emotionlessly drifted to a graceful landing, he stood with two swords and an empty expression, “-Jusa, are you hurt?”

“Lord Paladin, I welcome thee to Alphaia.”

“Not great a welcome,” he said scanning the cityscape, “-and who might you be?”

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“The name’s how about you learn some manners?”

“Pardon,” he bowed eloquently, “-my name’s Othezel D’el Kenria.”

“Igna Haggard. The cross’s yet to manifest fully,” he commented, “-pray tell,” he locked onto the other figures who scattered strategically, “-why are you here?”

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“To pay a visit to our future home,” he smiled, “-what about you, King of Hidros, nephew to Staxius Haggard, enemy of our god.”

“Such misplaced animosity,” he said, “-Paladin,” he readied his stance to battle, “-have thee come to fight?” *Souls bound to my soul, companions, servants, those who I’ve deemed worthy to stand at my side, heed me, heed mine voice, heed mine call. I, Igna Haggard, Heir to Death, call upon thy strength, arise Box of Soul – Release.* ghouls, demons, unseen creatures, souls he killed and absorbed – rose from a pit of miasma. His body phased and split, Vengeance materialized in his complete version, “-if thee choose the way of war, I’ll have no option than to fight. I’m bound to protect the land,” *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,* the fallen heroes’ bodies drained into a line of crystal red, the bloodied halo, mark of nightwalker of rank Duke and higher, thickened in substance.

“Let me enlighten thee, foolish king,” he grabbed both swords, “-it doesn’t matter if I’ve come to battle, you’re weak. Long as the cross of Kenria blesses the land – the domain of Lucifer extends to grant his servant immortality.” The scattered entities dawned their masks of bloodlust, Jusa’s fallen arm reattached and healed, ‘-tough battle ahead,’ he grabbed onto Orenmir and gave on the lightning strike since it was another’s technique. Rather, he stood with the blade before him, the tip shy below eye-level, the summoned army scattered, Vengeance ran and took Jusa in battle. Strike after strike, a battle blew in the city. Flashes, the pace lowered, the paladin’s strikes were fierce and precise, on the glabella laid the symbol of Lucifer, a word of power that increased the paladin’s combat prowess. Igna took damage, the strikes from the heroic swords left burn marks.

Blood halo took on a sentient form by traveling around Igna’s body. Aside from the paladin, a sniper camped at an unknown area fired bullets of which the halo instantly blocked, each stop chipped at the shield, there was only so much it could take.

To the side, Vengeance’s hatred manifested, by speaking – physical properties on the field would alter, “-break thy legs,” and she’d fall with the order, “-kill yourself,” the more he yelled, the weaker grew Jusa

– yet, the light of Kenria amplified, the unnamed and unfaced entities ran circles around the undead army.

Woosh, ‘-I’m on the defensive again?’ he puffed, the onslaught from the Paladin doubled in intensity, ‘-he’s feeding on the anguish, the more it drags, the stronger becomes the cross. Hold on,’ time stopped, ‘-he’s trying to channel fear into power. The shelter’s close, I’m sure the sniper’s there right now,’ a downward strike rudely awakened the trail of thought, ‘-they have nothing to lose. Ships were spotted westward, I need to win, can’t afford to lose,’ *slash,* both swords impaled his heart and stomach, “-you’re gone,” he said, “-the king of Hidros not so strong. The princess cried about how you’d take revenge and end my life, seems to me she was wrong – the same way as I mushed her head onto the cold ground, I kicked relentlessly to no avail, she kept talking... should have seen the look on her face. I could never,” he licked his lips, “-never imagine such a boring battle.”

Incoming transmission, read across the bloodied lens, “-master, éclair reporting. You’ve bought enough time, we have permission to nuke the motherships. Payment has been wired, we need thy confirmation.”

Cough,

“-Still alive?” he harshly grabbed Igna’s bloodied hair, “-why don’t you yield?”

“Are you daft,” he smiled, “-PERMISSION GRANTED!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Foolish child,” he grabbed and shattered the blades, the open wound remained, “-is this how you pay respect to me?” he took off the glasses, the energy exploded in waves, forcing the paladin to retreat, Igna marched without care to the injuries, “-Vengeance, end her life,” last images were countless spikes impaling Jusa, he took one look at cross, hefty invisible chains tied it to the heavens, “-by my name,” he held his palm to the sky, “-I order the veil of untruth to open,” the blueish ceiling parted to show two white-robed angels pulling onto the cross, “-there you are,” he smirked, “-accursed beings,” the palm tightened, “-be dragged onto the mortal plain,” he pulled, “-lament thy fate,” they dropped from the heavenly station, two lovely maidens with pure skin and spotless visages, “-May this be forever seared in the annals of history,” he marched, the paladin fell under the immense pressure of angelic beings dragged into their world, “-time may have changed, yet, I haven’t forgotten,” the innocent maidens knelt with hands interlocked, pure fear and terror drained the idyllic looks, he passed them and touched the cross, “-die,” it shattered into a rain of golden dust.

“Who are you?” inquired one, the ground shook.

“My name and identity are not important,” he turned and glared, “-angels under oath to Lucifer, thy days are numbered,” he grabbed each and held them by their throat, “-once a line is crossed,” he pressed, “-nothing can be done,” a black pigment filled the pure complexion, “-may this be a lesson,” he tore into their neck and drank. Loud shockwaves crashed against the western shore, the bombardment squad, stationed at an abandoned island, bombarded the incoming fleet with countless nukes of potency similar and greater to what was used at Whuotan.

Shells of innocent beings laid at his feet, the wound remained open – the immovable aura broke, an order to retreat crossed every servant of the church. The horrid sight scarred those who battled said

night, ‘-I devoured them, it’s true,’ he dropped onto his knees, ‘-I have the power to pull angels from their heavenly plane,’ raincloud covered the area, ‘-they did a number on me,’ he coughed, with the remainder of the strength, he erased the scars of battle the city sustained. Vengeance disappeared, and so did the summoned army, what remained was Igna laying face up to a heavy shower, ‘-it’s over,’ he exhaled, ‘-we won.’

“BOSS, we regained the signal,” bellowed within the ice-cream van, “-the battle is over.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” the coordinator pointed at a report, “-Benith said the battle is over, the King of Hidros intervened and won.” The good news reached their destination in haste, before long, the destruction of the Wracia Empire’s impregnable sea-fortress sent news across the world.

Igna was taken to a hospice at the heart of Melmark, the news glorified his action, many eyewitness accounts recounted the bravery he showed – the day of the vote arrived, results were highly regarded by the people, more than 75% voted in favor of the alliance.

23rd of January arrived, ‘-a white ceiling,’ consciousness returned, ‘-Alfred took over my consciousness and devoured the angels, I relished every moment of it,’ the eyes opened to an onslaught of information which forced it closed, ‘-the sensitivity’s increased. I can see more of the mana waves and their effect on reality, more importantly, I can sense the presence of angelic beings. Assimilating their life essence must have awakened the powers I gained during Alfred’s lifetime.’

“Don’t go back to sleep,” fired a sharp voice, “-wake up, Igna.”

“Big sister?”

“Yes, it’s me,” her smooth long fingers grabbed onto his hand, “-here,” a cold frame dropped inside the palm, “-wear them.”

“Glasses?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you,” he sat upright and dawned the barriers, “-finally,” he blinked, “-I see without a headache. Why are you here?”

“Visit, you know,” she stared at her belly, “-it’s a checkup.”

“I’m glad,” he moved to the edge of the bed, “-I appreciate the visit.”

Chapter 828: A tale of camaraderie

“Congratulations are in order.”

“I never knew big sister to be so open with compliments,” he peered out the hall.

“Don’t bend, I can see those butt,” she chuckled, “-look all you want, not going to change the truth, we’re stuck in an elite hospital. You should have seen the look on Markus’s face when you arrived at the ER, you were dead, no pulse, cold to the touch, and with a massive wound in the chest. If not for Benith.”

“-let me guess,” he pulled from the sterile-white corridor, “-he begged the doctors to give me a bed for recovery, said I’d heal myself over time?”

“Not really. Four young adults barged into your room, security had nothing on the skimpily dressed one, her words were sharp, too sharp. They said they were your children, Raphael began treatment, we saw the ominous expression motioned into a smirk. Tell me,” she rested her elbow on her horizontally strapped arm, “-why were they so adamant in saying you’re their father?”

“They came,” he smiled, “-those trouble makers are my children. I had them take care of an errand,” the words trailed for a few seconds, “-ok, I get it,” he turned to the counter, “-they must have been following the invader’s trail,” the drawer pulled ever so gently. Inside laid the phone and a case for the glasses, he reached and pulled on the former, toggled the screen to a massive font of, the 23rd, “-I’ve been in here for that long?”

“Surprised?” she stood, “-they did a number,” a welcoming pat on his shoulder had her move to the doorway, “-I’ll tell everyone the King’s awake, the hero king,” she coyly winked and slid the door shut. A draft fluttered in the tangled mess of white-curtains, the phone laid inactive, he pressed his bottom against the bed’s edge and exhaled. ‘-I missed out on the announcement,’ *brr, brr*

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“Hello?”

“Master, you’re awake.”

“éclair,” he pulled from the cacophonous mess, “-where are you, and what’s with the loud mess?”

“Celebrations,” cried the background, “-in honor of the founding of a United front against the Wracia Empire. I’ve summarized the events, there’s quite a load to digest. Take the time and read, most of us have flown to Hidros, the children are back home. The emperor will most likely wish to make a public announcement. Congratulations,” they laughed and pressed mugs to each other, “-see you soon,” the call ended.

‘Interesting,’ he stared at the blackout screen – the reflection showed a genuine smile being looked upon an utter look of despair, the pupil’s bicolored nature screamed the blatantness of chaos between the personas. The screen toggled to avoid the issue, ‘-greetings master,’ read the first-line, ‘-here’s an account of what happened since the impromptu rest. Videos of the nukes being deployed were sent to the Wracia Empire, we had witnesses come forward with the Church’s inhumane way of battle, their integrity is being scrutinized. Much pressure is being put by the independent nations, we divulged information of Elendor’s betrayal and how the queen faked being a friend for years to only backstab her comrade at the last instant. The supplies and money granted for her to fight the war, not to mention, the death of King Staxius and her poaching our resources, let’s say, the information wasn’t pleasing to the opposition. Back to the nukes, it devastated the mothership; strong waves were reported from nearby sea-side settlements. In a single hour, Phantom took the elite fortress – we’re back on the playing field, the power of Maicite’s grown an issue of national security. The policy to protect national interests has sent many spies across the world in search of Maicite mines. The western dragons of Easel Run Gard luckily came across a rich mine, we took action in purchasing the rights for quite the price. Alta was quite the negotiator in our goodwill voyage to the kingdom, she lashed at the King’s competency

and forced him to admit weakness. We leveraged the battle the devils fought and displayed the state of Whuotan and Arda after the church took a liking. It's a battle for supremacy, and we took a giant leap, the king had no trouble signing agreements saying we had rights over any new mines, there are two conditions, one, the plague spawned a few years back, nicknamed, la mort mauve¹, has defiled researcher's medicines by evolving into lesser and more potent entities depending on the continent. They want easy access to drugs at a lowered rate and the promise to have a seat at the table of the United Nation of Alrosia council. He was pretty adamant on the latter, the king's been good to us, and even when they had nothing to give, they dug and sent forces to aid in Hidros' inner strife. The vote successfully ended, turns out the battle against the paladin really showed actions have more weight than words. The people watched a king of a nation risk his life to save Benith, a beloved hero – he especially gave an ambiguous tale on how you risked everything to save the bystander's life. He did more PR than we'd assemble. And here I reach the end, my wrists are hurting from all the typing. Right, I shouldn't add personal, whatever, master, you better recover quickly, I'd hate to see thee waste away inside Alpha, Hidros' needs a firm stance on the world; the spark of revolution may compromise thy claim to the title. Queen Eia might not be so good. One last thing, the Wracia Empire and the church have firmed their intention in signing an armistice, the war is finally over. Each side will occupy land claimed during the battle, prisoners are to be released by their capturers' discretion. Congratulations, you did it, master, you did it.'

"Good news," he stretched his arms to the heavens, "-after all this time, the gamble paid off. They led the troops to us; by faking my lowered guard against the guardian saint, she snuck into the city and wreak chaos. Killing a few heroes granted the moral cause to take an eye for an eye. The entourage consists of elite's, I'm glad," the fingers interlocked, '-still shaking from what I did. Have I grown soft or am I scared, I don't know,' flash images of him devouring the angels played, '-was a long time coming, I thought I accepted that part of me, seeing it and doing it is very different. Regardless,' he stares his arms, '-the more powerful I get, the lesser I'll care. I'm not truly emotionless, Origin's promise of influence has merged us into a single entity, he's there and not, a very weird sensation. Another being's in my shadow, Alfred, a tall mass of hatred and jealousy. Nothing out the ordinary,' he exhaled.

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The locks unhinged, "-you're awake," said a familiar face.

"Mina?" he exclaimed.

"In the flesh," the door closed behind, "-how are you feeling, Igna?"

"Good and perplexed," he watched, her hair was longer than before, "-why are you here?"

"I saved my money and flew to Alpha in search of a job. Got lucky and married a wealthy man, he's the owner of the hospice – turns out, some people yearn for inner beauty, I swear, I was shaken."

"The shoulders are straight, there's a spring in the step, you're jovial, I'm glad," he smiled, "-good to see an acquaintance in good shape."

"Same can't be said about you. The paperwork's been filled," a package dropped, "-there's a new change of clothes, hero-king, be ready in fifteen minutes, someone special is on the way."

"Let me guess, the emperor."

“Correct,” she stopped with a pointed-gun gesture, a reference to a popular comedy show, her version wasn’t much accurate, the feet were unbalanced and the awkward stance felt more to her needing the washroom, “-sui.”

“You got it,” she laughed wholeheartedly, “-anyway, I’ll be on my way. Take care, Igna, and thank you.”

“For what?”

“If not for our encounter, I’d still be working in Reforge, doing nothing but contemplate my life. I’m fulfilled.”

“Sorry to ruin the parade, it was all you,” he made for the unopened suit-bag, “-I’m glad the influence was worth a thank you.”

“Right,” her lips pressed, the room inflated in tension, “-I’ll get going, take care, Igna, don’t visit, I rather not see the traumatic wounds again.”

“I’ll try not to...” the door closed on her way. Before long, he stood in a very expensive three-piece suit, the leather shoes were brown, the low-key striped texture and dark navy-blue color were one synonymous to Alphian elites. Again, the door pulled open, two guards leaped inside followed by a similarly dressed men, the difference, a slightly lighter blue, “-Igna,” he said and leaped into his arms, “-you’re well,” they embraced tightly, “-how are you,” Markus pulled from the embrace and laid a small peck on Igna’s cheek.

“Markus, I don’t want to ruin the parade, this might be considered cheating on my big sister.”

“Oh come on,” the sound of cheating forced him to step, the sound of footsteps carried into the room, “-what is this about cheating?” frowned Eira.

“N-nothing,” he said.

“I’m kidding,” she broke her icy-cold glare, “-I’m headed out,” she said, “-take care, Igna,” the guards promptly followed her to the elevator.

“I could have died,” he whispered.

“I doubt it. Let’s have it, Markus, why the sudden affection? Did I miss a memo?”

The casually friendly mien took a hit, the confidence seemed to empty similar to a punctured bottle, “-no?”

“I’m joking,” he said, “-don’t worry so much. Tell me, why the celebration?”

“The Alrosia nation,” he gleamed, “-the new leadership forced us to restructure the leadership, par efforts by the Raven’s, I was able to kick the conglomerates’ into their place by firing some of the top-dogs. The seats have been filled by members of Raven, Asmodeus, and Mammon to be precise. Evidence of collusion between them and the empire truly added to the imperial family’s might. They won’t be making waves; I ordered the bank to freeze their assets until the turmoil settles. Can you believe a 75% in favor vote, I can’t, the majority usually tops between 55 and 59%, more people are in favor... I wonder why?”

“The entertainment industry. Both countries are fascinated by one another, especially the youths, we make dramas, movies, and other mediums of entertainment, Alpha’s our biggest and largest customers. Alphan entertain, they’re the best Rosepire’s seen. Sprinkle the popularity of the Arcanum and tis a medium of cross-continent exchange.”

“Yeah, one of the more popular shows currently is, King of Stene, a show based on Hidros’ culture of monarchy, knights, swords, and magic, it’s a good combination. One of the characters loosely based on you,” he smiled, “-the writing team contacted Eira not long ago, she gave her green light and here we are.”

“Must have been the push we needed,” they exited the premises. Oppressed to the ground floor, Markus took to the roof, there, admits the troubling wind, a helicopter waited, “-we’re headed to the city square. They need to know of the heroic king’s triumph.”

The scale of his popularity became blatant on passing over the city square, a mass of black lined before a stage, music played, instruments rang, floodlights leaped from one end to the next.

‘Vorn, Aceline, and Xius,’ they passed to land a fair distance from the stage.

“Igna,” they dropped onto the cold ground, “-play for the people,” he said, “-I searched the Arcanum and stumbled on your Lokka page, the last upload dates a few years back,” a black car drove to their spot, the boot unlocked automatically, “-a guitar,” he said, “-take it and go perform. Musicians banded together in remembrance to the fallen heroes and soldiers, the end of the war,” he said and grabbed a violin, “-I’m confident – we start now, a new leadership, and most importantly, a tale of camaraderie.”

“I’m in,” he cheered, “-Markus, you’ve changed for the better, Alpha’s in good hands.”

A golfing cart slid to a stop, “-GET IN, BROTHER!” screamed Loftha.

Chapter 829: Change of Pace

“You’re alive?”

“No time for questions, get in,” the gestures motioned hurriedly. Markus could but tap Igna’s shoulder and rush onboard the two-seater vehicle. In the rush, Igna found himself latched onto the roof and traveled at twice an average joe’s running speed.

On the skyscraper-filled surrounding of the city-scape, a massively open stage flashed lights in consecutive rhythm, the epicenter of the latter being the drummer, Sheiwai and her spins of the drumming stick, around inside her palm? No, she twirled it around her actual wrist and timed it perfectly on a drop – the guitarist jumped and played, Aceline, Sugar, and Yuna sang in tune on differing intonation. The beat slumped to a dormant harmonious melody, the gathered crowd – a mass of black, banged their heads and tandem – television stations displayed the events in live. The end was in an hour, the slumped beat was a tell-tell sign of the performers’ fatigue, why would they not be, singing and playing for more than 12 hours.

A simultaneous interruption leaped across their earpieces, “-go silent,” it said, the spotlights dropped – Sheiwai slapped to a stop, the pianos and guitars followed suit. The dullness spawned anxiety in both performer and listener, “-why are we stopping?” fired Sugar to Dei who shrugged and stretched her shoulders. There laid barely enough light to see outlines, the shadow of the massive theater trumped

the jarringly cloudy sky. Confusion forced many to look to the backstage crew, they also stood empty without answers. A few seconds after the lights shutting, two silhouettes ambled onto the stage, the singers veered heads and squinted – no idea, they walked, the performers waited with instruments in hand.

“Markus,” spoke Igna, “-we’re going on stage,” he smiled, “-ready to give them the best end of the show?”

“Obviously,” he pulled the violin to his shoulder, “-let’s lead together,” the hand swayed, a beautifully melancholic note tore through the silence – the lights flashed onto the suited Emperor carefully caring his emotions to the crowd. They watched in awe, from bystanders to superstars on said stage, the jaws dropped, unlike anything they’d ever seen. He played a beautiful opening – to end on the start of a terrifyingly ominous muted chug, the buildup had silent musicians tap their feet – no words need be exchanged, Sheiwai caught the intent and slammed into the rhythm the moment the lights flashed on Igna, the crowd cheered, Dei and the others joined in – King and Emperor played back-to-back, their energy reignited the ambers of fire.

“HOLY SHIT!” exclaimed Sugar over the microphone, “-ladies and gentlemen,” interjected Yuna, “-our very special guests,” winked Aceline, “-Igna Haggard and Markus Sultria!” the melody leaped into the drummer slamming her stick explosively, the buildup halted at the peak of the chaos, a short silence held the crowd in suspense – Igna and Markus became the lead, all looked to them for answers. “-Markus,” he grinned, “-how skilled are you at the violin?”

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“Very skilled,” he winked, “-don’t worry, I’ve trained every day – throw what you have, I’ll follow.”

“Viper’s lair,” he said.

“Oh boy,” he exhaled, “-go for it,” the focus heightened. The symphonically recognized opening held the musician’s faces in contempt, there were only a few who could perform said song, including Sugar on his worst days. Kinless’s variant cried in the muted notes, “-HELL YEAH!” screamed the drummer, spotlights dawned on the duo, and Igna took off. The guitar became more or less of a piano, he played notes inhumanly fast with complex structured chords and taps, the crowd watched in awe, the difficulty in the movement barely came across – a true master makes skillful motions looks simple, and there laid the greatest illusion. His variant trumped anything the music scene had witnessed in years – a shadow laid behind his notes, Markus’ speed and vibratos, he hung akin to a painting supporting Igna’s art, the duo made a pair of insanely talented individuals, at that point, only the drums, guitar, violins, and Dei’s bass held the pace – the intro eased, he threw a smirk at the musicians, the difficulty nonchalantly eased to allow the others to jump in, and they did so on cue. Sugar and Aceline leaped in and cried their hearts – a missing person soon leaped from the other side, Emi Muko, the lead singer on Xius, her rough booming vocals growled, the crowd lost itself.

The time arrived for the solo, Igna gave the floor to Markus – the music followed to back the violin, a flick on the toggle changed the guitar’s tonality, to which Igna supported the emperor similar to how the latter supported him in the opening. The slow-paced and long heart tearing stretches held the emotions in a tight grip – he engraved the melody into their ears, turned to Sugar and winked, the lead pulled to the front – in a similar pattern, all the musicians were given the spotlight to show their skill and rile the

energy for themselves, a drum solo slammed into countless stares thrown at Igna, he'd supported everyone, "-show them what you're made of Kinless," said Suga. He moved to the front, the instruments lowered, the tranquility held the crowd by the neck, dark tones, dark motif, and dark imagery – he flicked to the lead pick-ups and ran down the fretboard, the hands seemed to become a spider, the speed, muted notes, and attention to the progression, everything culminated, and he nodded at the others, the intent was clear, the solo was nothing more than a buildup to a great merging of talents. Opposing to ending the song on an electrifying show of skill, he voluntarily focused on rhythm and kept the flow till the drop, everyone laughed and played as did the crowd, from live to people at home, everyone jumped to see the headline, "-Emperor and King play for their people," read the many titles.

Sheiwai slammed the crash and silence, sweat trickled, singers' beautiful outfits stuck to their body, the crowd breathed a collective sigh of relief. "-We did it," panted Markus, "-this experience," he gulped, "-I'd have never thought..."

"I know," he said, "-the life of a musician is a double-edged sword. We're lucky to play at the highest honors there is to play, the way to this stage is one suited for only the motivated and talent."

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"Igna," exclaimed Emi leaping into an embrace, he slipped on Markus's sweat and ended on his bottom, the hasty crowd, mostly – Nola, Aceline, and Emi, all slipped to end on suspended conjured air-cushions.

"Honestly," he smiled, "-take it easy." Markus took the queue and also dropped on his bottom beside Igna, the spotlight leaped from them to the announcer, he spoke on the event and how much it meant.

"Hell no," said Nola, "-I never dreamed this day would come. Us playing side to side again," she panted, the elation flushed her cheeks fleshy pink.

"Majesty," nodded the pianist, leader of Vorn, Enna, "-his imperial majesty."

"Drop the formalities," he insisted, "-Markus, or Mark for short."

"The best end of shows I've experienced," cheered Sugar.

"Aceline, Emi, are you both alright?"

"Yeah, I think," Aceline kept her head inside the cushion, "-comfy," she said.

Snap, the soft pillow vanished to which he caught her fall, "-I'm sorry about what happened."

"Don't worry," she knelt, "-I'm happy."

"What about it," narrowed Nola.

"I'm glad to see you too," they did a complexly weird handshake.

"Right on," she cheered and stood, "-let's bow to the crowd." They split into their clicks, leaving Igna and Markus facing the unknowing watchers, "-such an awesome feeling. I understand a bit why you choose to be involved in many activities, the joy of completion feels like a drug – I suggested it on a whim, turned out great."

"If we pulled this without our title, look at security."

“Those are some big guns,” he gulped, “-it’s good we’re at our station,” he chuckled unable to keep a straight face, both ended in a loud string of laughter. The backstage crew climbed the stage to clean the sweat off the ladies and fix their makeup. Through the wait, during which Mark sat back-to-back with Igna, ‘-I missed performing,’ he thought, ‘-Aceline’s forgiven what I did. The joy, nothing compares to the excitement. Markus changed and gave a lovely break from what lays ahead.’

“Pardon me,” said a backstage member, “-would his imperial majesty and king Igna please take the stage to say a few words?”

“With pleasure,” said Markus, “-tis the reason we hijacked the show after all,” he sprung to a stand, held his hand at Igna with a gleamingly honest grin. The contagious joy had Igna before the crowd side-by-side with the musicians, “-in remembrance to the fallen fighters and heroes who protected our nation from harm, I, Emperor Markus Sultria, hereby degree compensation for the families unable to stand on their own. I hate to make this political, yet, I must say so to show our resolve in recompensing the fallen. This show wasn’t merely a festival – the graceful memory, the joy looking back on the event will be a reminder to honor those who gave their lives to make it possible,” he handed the microphone to Igna, “-people of Alrosia,” he exclaimed, “-today onward, our nations are united. Emperor Markus and I are pleased to say, the performance is one we’ll never forget. The gathering of the many talented stars,” he motioned at the standing performers, “-different backgrounds and upbringing were proven unnecessary for unison to settle. The music they played was the best I heard – move past prejudice and embrace what blood and tears were poured to build. Enough said,” he backtracked, “-the musicians are the true heroes of tonight, let’s give them their dues,” applauds and cheers rattled the front to back. Ending sentiments eventually led to the curtains being pulled.

‘Over,’ thought Igna looking at the guitar he played, a full-body sunburst beast lined by golden frets on which the design of skulls prominently glared. The movement of teams nonchalantly erased his presence, ‘-last time I perform,’ he clipped the case and rose his head, “-hello,” said an innocent face.

“-Aceline, what are you doing here?”

“Watching you?”

“Stalking, there’s a clear difference.”

“Don’t run,” she grabbed his hand, “-believe me, I won’t do anything to jeopardize the marriage, just listen to me.”

“I’m all ears,” they stood a fair distance apart considering the energetic to and fro.

“Johna and I had a long talk after the party, he laid out my flaws and I agree. After the footage of the fight floated around the Arcanum, I knew – our worlds are different. My job comes from singing my heart and acting, the time we spent healing one another, I don’t regret it, I’m sorry you had to open your heart for my sake. We should end everything on a high note. Saying let’s stay friend will only grow our distance, if it happens, so be it. We’ve known each other from the very start, tis the relation I want to salvage.”

“I never said we should stay apart,” he smiled, “-I’m glad to have you as a close confidante. Nothing will ever change how I felt, you helped me get through a lot of stuff, and I wouldn’t give it for anything,” he

held a hand, “-to us keeping in contact.” She grabbed his hand and pulled into his arm, they hugged tightly, “-I won’t promise anything.”

“Neither will I,” they stepped away, “-good show, I had fun.”

“Me too,” she spun and scurried into the crowd.

Watching her hide the tears hit home, opposed to taking the instrument, he spun and made his way out, interviews kept the performers occupied, “-éclair, is the helicopter ready to leave?”

“Master, are you certain not to exchange a few words to princess Loftha?”

“No, I’m sure it’ll be fine,” the woeful outside glared upon ducking under the curtains, wooden stairs lain upon a metal frame ended in soil, he hurried towards the metallic bird.

“I’gna,” said a figure, “-I knew you’d leave without saying anything.”

‘Markus?’

Chapter 830: Prestige

“No, try again,” it ambled into a better light, “-my impression of brother’s awesome.”

“Loftha, why are you here?”

“I knew you’d leave,” she said, “-I wanted to give my thanks personally. I saw what happened inside, the life you live is one I’d never want. Who am I to have a say in what you do.”

“Guess there none,” he shrugged her sudden drop in intonation, a hint of resentment and sarcasm built her gestures, “-I should get going.”

“Wait, wait.”

“What is it?”

“Thank you for saving me,” she bowed, “-sorry, I’m jealous of those in your life. I wasted my chance, and look where it sent me. No matter what happens, I’ll always be a friend. The performance was awesome.”

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“Lowering your head isn’t befitting a princess. Address me as equal,” she broke her stance, lifted her oval-chin to eye-level, a kind regard returned, “-there’s much to be done. I made sure to kick the paladin’s bottom, consider it my way of sticking it to those who harmed. Time flows and the journey never stops, take care of the emperor, you’ll be assigned a new task.”

Yonder, across the bountiful yet vindictive sea, over the nuked area, vessels swarmed the edge in an effort to salvage the wreck. There was much to learn in what was destroyed. The trek takes a dive towards Rosespire, precisely, the castle’s inner sanctum. Within the hallowed walls carved in the representations of the ancient gods, a hooded silhouette washed in a thin-white veil, stood on a pedestal with hands chained to a pillar. The scent of death – iron, diffused from edge to edge, the outer

walls followed the circular shape held by the pedestal – the gagged entity’s blond hair roamed freely on her shoulders, green-colored pupils glared forth to a familiar visage.

“My love,” said the figure, “-I’ve come for you,” he said, “-look around us,” he held a sharpened dagger to the thin layer, a touch cleanly sliced said protection, “-they took us apart. I’ve tried to hold, I can’t... the castle’s not a safe place as is imagined. The maids,” he leered to a line of naked women, “-servants to the dark-God of Hatred, Esyter, it’s the fucking same. When people want something, they pray to Syhton and her mighty power, yet, when they want to curse another, they use the name Esyter, I can’t... I can’t do it anymore, my precious god won’t be sullied,” he slit the bottom half of her outfit, to which her exposed self was to kneel over a sharpened, precariously shaped rod, “-my offering will be to grant him the blood of a virgin maiden,” he side-glanced the right, “-the guards will partake in the ritual. I wish you a great night,” he laughed, “-to the winners goes to spoils.” Her viciously amusing regard, the reluctant for acceptance, Nicola took feeble steps to the queen’s rather unbecoming posture – a press on her neck dropped the gag to her chest, she watched invitingly, the body shook in anticipation, “-I know you want me,” he said, “-and to make right on our promise,” he dropped on all-fours and crawled to her thighs, “-I’ll make sure the nights memorable. You, Eia, will become my slave, before the queen, thou art mine, we’re lovers. To my god, Esyter,” she moaned, her legs tightened – the inner sanctum shook before the familiar faces of the castle.

The jet landed on the 24th of January, a beautiful day taking Rosespire’s desolate all-year-round stature. A dark-glossy briefcase, the suit the emperor gifted and a badge of Alphian leadership, the fuselage unlocked, the door swayed into a vague distant cry. ‘-I slept the voyage away,’ he yawned, took a step towards the outside, ‘-holy,’ cheers rattled as much as did the blazing wind. His name and goodwill cheers waited beyond the fence.

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Notification, “-master,” said éclair, “-from the heroic display of strength at the heart of Melmark, the performance, and lastly, the firming of the United Nation of Alrosia, the people’s incertitude has been surpassed by thy actions,” he linked articles after articles, the central news even held a large segment on the performance; guest host being Julius.

Freelance writers commented on the turn of events on a popular site dubbed Corpio’s Gazette, “-in decades after the inception of the dominant world powers. The troubled kingdom of Hidros, viewed through the lens of scrutiny by the other nations – a place of battle and discordance, a place where narcotics, murder, and corruption run wild; nicknamed the Scarlet Providence, has changed tremendously. First was the crowning of the late-queen Gallienne, her efforts made enemies of the church, pushing their conquest into a long feud. The culture of survival of the fittest created a very unique atmosphere. Simultaneously, the golden-land of Alpha, a place of economic boom and trade haven, renowned for their hospitability and neutral stance on the worldwide political climate, birthed their wealth and industrial dependency. Children to mothers and grandmothers, add pets for the sake of adding, and one will find, most items are manufactured in Alpha. The two seemingly different leadership bonded, and on the 22nd of January, an announcement shook the world, the birth of a rivaling superpower to the Wracia Empire, the United Nations of Alrosia. Currently, the latter consists of Hidros, Arda, Alpha, and Easel Run Gard. The leader, King Igna Haggard, did the unthinkable – the unity was further forged by a memorable performance of the duo having a great time. Most of us current in the political climate know of the Wracia Empire’s influence; a long road, never-ending in ways, stretches

before them. Who is to say what'll happen, the world is in their hands, and I bet my life on supporting the UN-A," flashed across the interface, he scurried down the stairs, waved at the bystanders, and leaped into a bulky limousine.

"Greetings, hero-king," said a familiar voice with a wine-glass held in-between long-fingers, "-quite the accomplishment."

"Alta," he nodded, "-thank you for organizing transport. What's the status on Glenda?"

"Apparition of monsters has forced the adventurers to rethink their battle strategy. Lady Haru became the new central-guild master, after many years of staying beside the trading sect, the guild-leaders accepted her competence, us refusing to aid in her affairs boosted the vote."

"And the project of building a school?"

"The budget was graciously loaned by the Bank of Arda," she leaned closer, "-by which I mean, you granted us the money."

"The bank of Arda's an entity used to shield us from paying dues to unnecessary expenses. Besides, the more days pass, the more money is made."

"The trade-centers," she chuckled, "-we've monopolized the Maicite market completely, every big corporation has begged to get in on the cake, lady Elvira's never been so ruthless, you should see her during negotiations, she doesn't care."

"Tis the beauty of the Haggard style negotiations, we don't take no for an answer, unless we're the one refusing," he watched the passing scenery, "-enough chitchat, tell me, what's the real problem?"

"You know me well," she sipped, "-a nasty rumor's been circling around the castle. They point to the inner-sanctum – they say the queen's been seen sneaking into the area under the cover of night, some have said Nicola was seen heading after. The Goldberg's have made their move discreetly, many of the noble backers have been swayed into siding against the ascension. The goodwill visit from Alpha scheduled next month might be the target. You never know," her lips pressed, "-traitors, all of them."

"Being rash is a foolish way," he said, "-and I'm prone to ignore the saying completely. If Nicola's involved, I'm sure the father is. You don't think he'd love a girl a decade his age for the sake of love, no, it's for leverage. The Goldberg was crushed once, we choose mercy."

"Master?"

"-If they cross the line, we'll end the entire heritage in a second."

The slightly threatening whisper had her gulp the remaining drink. The driver took the long drive to Lai, he boldly cut inside, passed Rosian Media Square on which displayed his performance in Alpha, passed many grid-arrayed buildings till a small cozy building overlooking a lush field of yellow, pink, and red. Alta took the liberty of escorting her master, the amusingly adorable frame twinkled into a soft and comfy interior, the soothing aroma of nature filled the area, she took large strides, the owner, a middle-aged man of slightly grey hair, gave a recognizable smile.

“Here,” she hailed – they ducked into a corner room lined with dolls and stuffy critters. There laid even the representation of goblins and deadly monsters, a hint of suspicion went across the palms till a well-placed, “-hello.”

“Amsey?” he pulled a seat, oval and perfectly balanced in the fairy-tale-like motif, “-a pleasant surprise.”

“Igna, it’s been a while,” he said, “-don’t mind our place of meeting,” curtains soon undid to brush against themselves, the inside became its own refuge, “-my niece loves this place, and I agree, the milk and cookie bring me to a place of peace.”

“I’m not one to judge.”

“Listen, Igna,” he pulled forth, “-Lumian O’da’s fully a part of an alliance between Phantom and Elon’s Dynasty. I’ve worked decades to rebuild the company from the verge of bankruptcy, we’ve finally begun to make a profit. The problem is the Gaso Group, they’ve taken over the music academies, offered greater and better deals as opposed to Ansoft and Apexi, there’s nothing we can do. Handling Apexi’s taken most of my energy, I wanted to strike, sadly, I’ve failed. There’s no cleaning a white shirt after it’s been dragged through the mud. The more you wash the more the stains grow.”

“What’s the suggestion,” he narrowed, “-I owe you quite a few favors, let’s set the limit to two. The entertainment industry must be shared at our current state, the more we fight, the more the risk of backlash from the other agencies. It’ll take an ugly rumor to take the reputation into a pit of sludge.”

“I know,” he said, “-I know that. Hence my proposal to forge onto another industry, food,” he smiled, “-I have my contacts and ways to rekindle old relations. I ask for Lumian O’da to acquire Leko’s Cooking Academy.”

Igna veered his attention, “-wait,” interjected Amsey, “-I know about the death of Leko, your master. I did my research, took a page out of your book. Listen to me, tis a win-win situation, don’t you wish to see old knots be tied. Revenge on the murder and make a large profit. Entertainment is a great industry, the better the idea, the more the spectators will watch, none’s touched on a cooking show yet.”

‘Full attack and counter, he’s learned and grown into a better leader. I’ll play hard to get and see what he wants,’ the expression remained stoic, “-Igna, playing hard to get won’t do much,” he slammed a file on the table, “-everything’s written there. I want rights to Leko’s academy and a loan from the bank of Arda,” the intent blatantly smirked, “-all you need is to sign off on the plan.”

“Good,” he gave once over and turned to Alta, “-have my lawyers looked the contract in and out?”

Her firm stance broke into a mild nod, “-if they don’t see a problem, I say the negotiation’s complete. How much are you looking?”

“Somewhere in the range of the eight figures?”

“That much?” he exhaled, “-make it five-million, not fifty. Phantom will acquire the land and property of the academy – we know a good agent. The money will be split in half, the first half will be handed when thee visit the Hidros branch – the next will be given after a production company signs the agreement,” he stood, tied the suit-jacket, “-if they don’t accept the terms, come to me again, we’ll buy a whole production company if the first episode goes well, those terms agreeable?”

“Yes they are,” the hands locked, ‘-if they don’t agree, we’ll buy them out, awesome.’