

Death Magic 841

Chapter 841: Elendor [5]

Slow rumbles, the ground held a beat, an uncertain rhythm. The arched corridor, carved into the side of the hill, was split into tiny rows, in that moment, it felt akin to being stuffed inside a loaf of bread if the latter was perfectly arched in shape. Weirder thoughts crossed the mind, the rather moderate and risqué dressed Lessie lead the charge. Hanged skeletons garnered the sides, unregular fires for light, and the distance slow echo of water. The air felt morbid and humid, a distinct scent of iron, perhaps the sprinkle of fire.

“Tell me Xen, why are you here?”

“I told you, I wanted to see a master’s work.”

“No,” she turned and winked, the mask further darkened her visage, only her bicolored pupils watched in the dark, the long lashes were reminiscent of a feline, a fierce hunter, “-why are you at the castle?”

“Came to interview,” he replied, casually avoiding her suspicion, before arrival, a report splattered over the interface, the playful éclair had an arrangement made for the note to be sexily delivered by a generated figure of a woman. She catwalk from the side and slammed the note, after which a chat-bubble rose, “-read,” she leaned into an air kiss.

A mild exhale dismissed éclair’s jests, ‘-interesting character – Lessie, cousin to Old Cray. Nothing else is known save her intervention in dire situations. Always present in earnestly serious situations – a cautionary tale told by Scorpio follows, ‘-Lady Lessie is scarier than Old Cray. Many say she’s the real leader, whilst the king is to be a puppet. It’s well known, Old Cray’s kingdom has a talented spymaster, the identity is yet to be known. Put one and one together, and a seemingly succulent mystery is served.’

“Sure,” she narrowed, slowing her pace till shoulder to shoulder with Xen, her height wasn’t much impressive, her head reached shy of his chest, the ominous mask and exclusive tattoos, only just noticed on her arms and neck, gave a sense of familiarity.

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“You don’t believe me?”

“I never mention anything of the sorts.”

“Oh, don’t play games,” he wailed, “-there’s a hundred reason why you’d be suspicious. I would be, imagine a random person suddenly enters your home and makes contact with important personnel, therein lays the doubt itself.”

“I had my doubts,” she motioned to lock-arms, a request Igna obliged. The non-caring gesture brought a smile, though it went unnoticed by the mask, “-not now, you’re clean.”

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“Pardon?”

“The private space,” she said, “-I asked for a gesture and you obliged, for all narrative purposes, I could have had a knife.”

“There,” the other hand moved and flicked her forehead, “-infiltrating a person’s personal space isn’t so hard,” he smiled, “-be charismatic and bombard the person with smiles, take their attention from the surroundings, in a way, there’s a method to guilt the subconscious onto accepting advances. Kind gestures and keen understanding.” Annoyance or boredom, a pensive matter glazed her eyes cold.

‘Might have pushed it,’ the mind readied for a moment’s fight, “-are you alright?” they stopped, her eyes turned scope, fixing itself on him.

“Sorry,” they resumed walking, “-I thought someone was eavesdropping.”

“Spying?” he followed her line to a dark tunnel intersecting against their paths. Within said land rose the whispers of death, “-curious.”

“No, annoying,” the eyes rolled, “-let’s go, the tour, I need to show my latest creation.”

“Lead the way,” her lock tugged, and he obliged, ‘-the tunnel, we’re being followed, she knows, her glare wasn’t random.’

Amber lit coal, a furnace – a domed roof and arrangement of peculiarly inventions, “-welcome to my workshop,” she skipped to the middle and proudly pulled a needle, *snap,* the heavy door locked, “-Xen,” she pulled her mask to an unharmed smile, her lips and skin were undamaged, different from the scars around her eye, “-you know why I wear my mask?” she motioned to remove the heavy hoodie, “-cousin says I have a nasty expression when I’m aroused,” her cheeks flushed, the curtain rose, exposing seductive undergarments. The smirk, midway between sadistic and provoking, small steps carried to Igna’s face, her hands clenched his waist, her chin rose to rest on his muscled chest, the long lashes flashed.

‘-too bad,’ disturbance in the mana heightened the spatial awareness, ‘-three, two, one,’ *CRASH,* the door exploded, a piece of wood flung to take Igna’s ear, instant knockout. He fell harshly, forehead against hard floor, a contest the former never won.

Lessie leaped backward and fired needles from her open palm, the stranger rose a hand, or what seemed to be a hand on the monstrously disfigured appearance. “-You,” it muddled, “-hurt,” the powerful legs crackled the floor.

“Still alive?” she exhaled, ‘-summoning more takes my strength away,’ she panted, ‘-my body is not recovered,’ *huff, puff,* ‘-fine,’ forcing a stance, her wrist twirled – the first attack wasn’t random for it impaled the attacker’s mobility. Blade-shape manifestations surrounded the entity. It soon flung punches, the resultant force carried air-blasts, purely physical attacks abled to weaponize the air, “-be skewed,” the manifestations toggled not after the attacker lobbed its feet, thrusting itself forward. *Snap,* the hand made contact, bones shattered, “-not on my watch,” gritted Xen, hand in hand against the beast. It clenched and slowly broke the fingers as if twigs, the monstrous strength forced him onto one knee, ‘-holding back isn’t doing any favors,’ the eyes narrowed, ‘-who the hell’s the attacker?’

“Xen,” arms suddenly locked around his waist, “-I’m sorry,” she said, “-I wanted to show off my creations... that there is the dungeon guardian...” the words pointed to a horrifying truth, a flicker shone

light upon the dark-figure, revelation – limbs and faces merged into a single entity, “-it must have felt threatened...”

“Telling me this, now?” he broke, the force forced the second knee, “-crazy chicks are always trouble,” he inhaled and locked the airways, ‘-burn deeply, the curse of the Nox’s clan,’ the heart exploded in pace, ‘-show me why nightwalkers were shunned by both gods and demons, show me the latent prowess the first progenitor bestowed,’ edges reddened, the pressure around the extremities heated, “-next time, warn me,” feet locked, he pushed and fought the monstrous strength – the muscles strained, charge blood from the curse lit in scarlet. A cocoon of crimson covered his body, he pushed, broke the grip, “-bon voyage,” a lightning-fast fist blasted the guardian’s mess of a face against the ceiling – he tumbled from the resultant force, a lock pulled his body into balance.

“I got you,” she said.

“Not now,” he broke the grip, the guardian had yet to be bested, the form altered, ‘-if I try hard enough,’ the stance lowered into hand-to-hand combat, ‘-nothing is impossible,’ the eyes shut, ‘-light from my darkened past, skills acquired through the years of slaughter, manifest thineself,’ the surroundings swapped to the middle of nowhere, consciousness hovered above an endless pool of sea, he looked down and jumped, the water tension crackled and broke, the remainder being crystalline powder – multiple frames rose from the ashes, they hovered, the sense of balance disrupted, there laid no up or down, no forward or backward, same went for left or right, ‘-raise from the ashes,’ the landscape swallowed into a tiny-dot, the implosion echoed a shockwave. Complete emptiness, white and symmetrically division of the ground, perfect squares – a colorless mount rose at his feet, over it hovered Orenmir. The sheathed flung, leaving the blade and gathering mass of dust, the semi-transparent mass turned liquid, drowning the entire area in a mess of solid shadow. From it, a circle carrying a rectangle levied, the single unit diversified, breaking into multiple personages, ‘-those I’ve killed,’ the whiteness vanished into an army of thousands, hundreds of thousands, life essence from three lives gathered into a single dot, ‘-here lays my power,’ he reached and grabbed the light, ‘-absorption of skill and abilities,’ he clenched, ‘-such is the way of Alfred,’ the veins around the wrist bloated and carried the assimilated raw-power through the neck and throughout the body, ‘-give me the knowledge and awareness of martial-combat.’

He reopened into the battlefield, ‘-a similar sensation before I use Orenmir,’ he dropped into a subtle and powerful stance, ‘-right,’ the crimson cocoon altered to a tempest of red erupting out his body, ‘-if I can’t use magic, can’t use my sword or gun,’ the breathing steadied, ‘-I’ll turn myself into a weapon.’

DIE, said the guardian, the damaged face healed – multiple arms exploded from its belly, a line kept the connection, the limbs had their targets in sight. A volley of punches, some missed, others blocked, razed the chamber, a stray attack accidentally landed next to Lessie, her heart skipped, ‘-what happened?’ fear had her feet glued, a bludgeoned mess of organs laid at her feet inside a fissure, ‘-I never saw the attack,’ she coughed.

‘This guy isn’t normal,’ he dodged, compared to other fights, those dodges were untrained and effective due to the reaction speed, the awareness almost covered for bad stances, the matter changed when it came to a swordfight. There laid a reluctance in using martial arts, walking the path of the fist meant forsaking the sword – two different aspirations, sometimes conflicting and sometimes identical. ‘I’m getting adjusted,’ he skipped and twirled, rolling off slow and powerful strikes into counters of his own,

the punches rattled the extended fists. 'Alfred's scary because of the envy and jealousy, what he can't have he'll make himself,' the stance refocused, '-the ultimate combination, access to the memories of the death and the ability to decrypt the memories and assimilate their skills. Works the same to when I learned to play guitar or the piano, never thought I'd use it on souls.' The volleys increased, the impacts weakened the structural integrity, '-the fight's going nowhere,' he blocked and countered, used the arts taught in military and law-enforcements – the vastness was yet another reason why he didn't yield the sword, *smack,* a punch escaped and took his stomach, the body snapped against the ceiling, '-caught it,' he braced using the legs, '-I was waiting,' he sprang, forming a bright red envelope – the monster's fists gathered into a barrier, "-NOT TODAY," the defense shattered and tore a hole through the monster.

"Huff, puff," heavy pants trembled his palms, '-I did it,' he waited on all-fours, the guardian shattered the same as a strained elastic ball being cut, each bang snapped – and so did the collection. The red tinge subsided, '-lightheaded,' the balance shook, '-must have used the blood as raw power,' he gasped, '-regeneration,' the arms lost the strength. He softly rolled onto his back, '-might have gone overboard,' the depth of the crater wasn't a good sign, '-I need blood,' fingers grappled the ground, *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,* jagged lines permeated in cold-red around the area. Any mention of blood swallowed instantly, '-not enough,' nausea and a headache took their toll.

"Xen," the blurry sight laid upon a wounded Lessie, "-take my hands, the room's about to collapse."

'My eyes,' he flinched, '-the glasses are broken,' slow and steady, the fabric and mana-waves burned brightly, "-MY EYES," he yelped and burrowed from her hands, '-too much pain,' he gritted, "-E-E-Ec-cl," shutting them made no difference, '-the price of using my abilities,' spoke an ominous voice, '-dearest reincarnation of me, fret not, I speak in peace, my duty lays to fulfill thy wish.' *AHHHH,* he screamed.

"XEN, XEN," she slid to where he cowered, "-I'm here," she held his head.

"THE LIGHT," tears of blood shed, "-I CAN'T!"

'A boon of true sight,' the decapitated heads of Staxius, Origin, Lord Death, Kronos, Nike, and Scifer laid in a row, '-they gave their lives to merge into who we are now. Igna Haggard, you existed as a vessel – a soul forsaken for being a mistake. We're all the same, in your hearts of heart lays their wishes, and most of all, their protection. Accept the boon of true sight, accept the blindness, accept the truth – long as you reject the powers, their faith art be betrayed.'

"The boon won't make me blind," he bit his lips.

"XEN!" she urged to stop the self-harm.

Blood drained from the nose and ears, "ALFRED, WE ARE THE SAME!"

Chapter 842: Elendor [6]

Cries of woe and incertitude washed into the orangish evening. Locations changed, a landscape swapped, akin to a painting being replaced – the sunny, hot, and dry, Elendor, is replaced by Hidros, more specifically, Rotherham.

Loud lights trickled along the runway, a man and woman disembarked. "-Back to where it started," said the prince of lust, "-holding straight, Kul?"

“Don’t underestimate me,” went to and fro, a tumultuous relation known as the great bond of the dog and the cat. The parked jet’s engine cooled to a stop, the cacophonous roar replaced by the chatter – the centerpiece, éclair, he leaned upon a convertible car, waiting for the guests to arrive.

“Old friend,” said Asmodeus, “-long time no see,” they shuffled onto the cleaner part of the hangar, Kul, dressed in very casual jeans and shirt, made no effort in bringing her charm. For the prince of lust, the galvanizing personality and flashy suit brought a sense of superiority.

“Long time no see,” said éclair leading into a handshake embrace.

“Don’t forget about me,” grinned Kul, a fist bump for the greeting.

“Considering the last time, I thought you’d prefer the shadows?”

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“I’m over it,” she shrugged, reference drawn to Rachel and Rahe, “-heard there was to be a revolution.”

“Yes,” said éclair, “-let’s meet at a more suitable place.”

“Lead the way, prime minister.”

One of the three skyscrapers rose, nightlife was quite the show. Asmodeus had his forehead to the window, “-don’t stare too much, they might cry stranger danger.”

“Zip it, Kul,” he scowled, “-I’m only looking,” he turned to éclair, “-what is Rotherham, a place of study, commerce, or hotbed for the underworld?”

“All of the above,” he said bearing a smug grin, “-everyone has a place, Rotherham is a pillar of Hidros, second to Rosepire. Standard of living is high ever since the secretive millionaires moved in. We have,” the voice faded into a whisper, “-under the table agreements.”

“So much for under the table,” commented Kul, “-the advertisements, the brands; has Alpha written all over.”

“What can you do,” he jested, “-the bigger, the better, the more the merrier?”

“Fair enough, prime minister.” Lightheartedness lasted only so long – on entering the restricted underground parking, the atmosphere changed. Armed guards were stationed, the first skyscraper, property of Phantom and their activities, including an overseas office for Raven, the latter having been established in Alpha sure made a world of confusion. The lift rose, éclair had his face into the tablet. An entourage of powerful figures, the silvery-cell parted into a large, simplistic hallway. Colors were chosen in a mixture between black and white – decorations, sharp, blunt, and geometrically pleasing.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said éclair opening curtains to a confined room, “-I appreciate the quick response.” In attendance were names linked to Igna. Asmodeus, Kul; representatives from Alpha and Raven. Alta, éclair, and Starix, representatives for Glenda and the king’s company. Prince Julius, newly appointed spymaster and CEO of Apexi.

“Mammon’s not here today,” said Asmodeus, “-business is a bit troublesome,” they settled.

“Right, shall we get it started?” inquired éclair, the air was tense, especially since the call was made urgently. An open, ‘-okay,’ said through the accepting gestures. He took the stage and stood, “-those gathered today are friends close to Igna, people, who know who he is, what he represents, and have devoted themselves to be his aid. Our climb to the top hasn’t been easy, and everyone here played a major part in helping the success. We’re split into factions, Politics, underworld, and business. Major roles have been laid on our shoulders, and yes, I know, Igna’s very eccentric. He makes a move, takes a fancy to a new idea, competes to reach the top, and leaves after achieving the goal. I know it all too well. Hence the reason why I called a meeting – Igna’s moved to a dangerous operation in Elendor. Details have been written on the files, read it at thy leisure.”

Julius rose an eyebrow, “-Prince Julius, you have something to add?”

“Yeah,” he stood, “-can we cut the bullshit?”

“Sorry?”

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“éclair,” Julius stared squarely, “-you’re an idiot,” the collective room exploded into laughter.

“Being formal around friends isn’t such a good idea,’ interjected Asmodeus.

“Say what you need,” added Alta, “-we’re close friends,” the mockery shifted into lightheartedness.

“I feel stupid for trying,” he exhaled, drinks were brought on the table by attending retainers, mindless operatives without consciousness – part of research conducted by a slightly sociopathic researcher. The meeting divulged into a small party, music transmitted over the speakers, pleasantries were exchanged till another hurdle.

“Now then,” sipped Julius, “-tell us the important news.” Empty stomachs didn’t help conversations, a truth the prince knew on closely looking at the faces. Filled, seriousness automatically crawled to the foreground.

“It’s about the master,” he said, “-tis on the report, he wants to rescue the Queen.”

“The long trip might take quite the toll,” said Starix, “-a direct assault will break the armistice. Since we’re allies to Alpha, it’ll reflect badly.”

“Which is why,” the door opened, “-master left Vengeance behind. If he’s not back for the signing, he’ll be the replacement.”

“Vengeance,” they watched in awe, “-heard about him in stories, not in person,” commented Alta, “-how powerful is he?”

“Very,” added Julius, “-an army on his own.”

“Why gather us?” narrowed Kul.

“To officially say whose part of the inner circle and who isn’t. Master’s made many connections.”

“Who made the list?” wondered Starix.

"The master himself," suggested Asmodeus, "-conveniently cutting Phantom."

"Conflict of interest," followed éclair, "-to be on the same page, we ought to be able to trust one another. What happens beyond these walls won't affect the priority, we're members to the Haggard family, the branch ruled by Igna."

"Now that we know who's a friend and who's foe, what's the plan?"

"That, my friend," winked éclair, "-is after another round of drinks."

Prince Julius stood idly, hand wrapped about a drink, "-I apologize for the sudden offer."

"éclair," they both watched down to the street, "-don't mind it. I'd been thinking of a steadier lifestyle. Companies to manage and my wife's mood swings, life is hard. I appreciate and welcome the offer, a stable life."

"Also dangerous"

"You planned for this day, the connections, the network, the funds, you knew, didn't you."

"About what?"

"About becoming king. My cousin's weird in many ways, I don't expect to ever know what goes on inside that man's head. Leaving lady Courtney and Elvira out is suspicious, what's the matter, truly?"

"A mole," he sipped, "-Raven's clean from outsider influence, I trust Asmodeus, Mammon, and Kul, those three rule Odgawoan from the shadows. Experience is needed, the crowns at risk, and the danger is from the inside."

"The queen," he said softly, éclair save but nodded. Others approached and joined the conversation.

"Eia," narrowed Alta, "-she's been acting very suspiciously," glancing at éclair, "-go on, tell them, prime minister."

An angry subjective inquisition glared at him, answers, they wanted answers, "-was the talk about trusting one another a lie?" motioned Starix. The words hung at his mouth, a few mindless glances did naught, the pressure increased till the butler caved, "-I have good reason to believe Eia's been unfaithful to the king."

"DAMNED HUSSY!"

"Stop," fired Asmodeus, "-don't do anything stupid, Kul," he grabbed her forearm.

"No," a shove broke the grip, "-that little stuck up bitch's cheating?" a murderous air rose at her feet, wings of black vaguely manifested – the same thought went across their minds – retribution, "-What then?" fired éclair, her hands stopped inches from the handle, "-and I ask this to everyone," he glanced one after the other, "-will killing her bring anything of value?"

"It's about the message."

"Stop it, Kul," said Asmodeus "-éclair's right, we can't act."

"I'm as angry as you are," he gritted, "-I saw my master rip his heart and forsake a life of comfort with a person he loved – he embraced the darkness in honor of Gallienne, he chose to reject compassion, satisfaction, for the sake of Hidros," by the time they digested the thought, the voice of sanity settled before the doors, "-and you asked why I didn't speak the truth. I knew emotions, the trust thee have to the master is strong, none wants to see him hurt," a gesture to Julius, "-if master Julius wishes for lady Eia to be punished, then, by the orders granted by my master, I will obey the will of another Haggard."

"No you're not," he returned, "-listen, Kul, Asmodeus – Alphia and Hidros are different. The game's changed, move rashly and the throne may be in jeopardy."

"Here's a thought," added Alta, "-the regime against the king's gathering momentum. Kreston's gullibility's seeping into Dorchester, the wave is open to Oxshield. Nobles loyal to the Gallienne's true heir, Eia, have started gathering. We can't make a move before Alphia enters the field."

Dring, dring, "-Pardon me," excused éclair, hurdling from the crowd. Discussion resumed at his back; "-the opposing factions have made their move. The targets, the Gaien Council. Money's changed hands. More information on the report."

"éclair?"

"Sorry," the phone cut, "-we have trouble; the nobles are making their move. We're headed to Rosepire. From today onward, those present here will work for the crown, we're to safeguard the balance until the emperor arrives. Until then," the door barged, "-we'll wait until they show their hands."

"Right on," they followed.

Tomorrow came over yonder, *Thud,* '-an unfamiliar ceiling,' crossed the mind, '-where am I?' back straight, '-hay?' the smell of turd and neighs rattled stables, '-damn, my clothes ruined, again,' memories of yesterday rode on a silver-colored horse, '-martial arts,' he clenched his fists, '-a new style for a new land,' he thrust to a stand, made way outside where the sun-shone first thing, '-not cold.'

"The lad's awake," said distant chatter, "-we heard you're representative for Scorpio?" around five stout men hurdled in a semi-circle, "-good thing we threw ya on the hay. Lady Lessie had the crap beaten out of her by the king. Should have seen her cry and beg for your life," the middle-man spat, "-listen 'ere, we've come to work," he threw a bucket, "-better start with the horseshit, breakfast?" he paused, "-horseshit," they laughed and left, the container rolled, ending at his feet.

"My God, the smell of shit might as well be a flower compared to the breaths out your mouth."

"-What you say?" he glanced over the shoulder.

"What, can't hear?" He bent, lifted the bucket and moved close to the gentleman, "-I said," the bucket dropped, covering the lad's visage, "-close your mouth and hide that ugly face," *clang,* a flick rattled the man onto one knee, *clang, clang,* multiple taps had the latter drop, the metallic container rolled, "-listen here, boys," a stump crushed the circular container into a line, "-I don't mind roughhousing," from the vessel to the lad, "-be mindful of payback," he rose his foot, "-it could hurt."

Confused looks led into them picking the unconscious man who bled from the ears, "-let's go, Onte," looks of '-this isn't over,' sprinkled in his direction.

Yawn, he stretched and turn to the stables, “-that’s starting the day right,” he lifted the broken container and restored its form, “-might as well care for the horses.” He fed, groomed, and cleaned the majestic beast’s quarters – a ripped shirt served no purpose, to which he worked with only pants and suspenders over the chest. The ancient writings, runes, and symbols were a nice addition to the muscles.

“Hurry, hurry,” whispered a maid rushing from the stable.

“What is it, Claury,” said a middle-aged lady, “-we know you hate outside duty, what’s the complaint now?”

“No, no,” said the energetic lass.

“Why are you in a hurry?”

She gripped and lifted her dress, “-just follow,” to which she scurried from the palace ground and into the worker’s area. A well-toned Igna glistened against the sun, ‘-should take care of that,’ he gently caressed the horses of which neighed in acceptance.

“Look.”

Chapter 843: Elendor [7]

“Girl, slow down,” panted the older lady.

“Someone’s excited to see the horses,” giggled the entourage of four, including the younger lass. Buckets at their hips, the wiser women strolled atop a bleak bridge. A gentle stream, rare in Elendor’s climate, washed toads and pebbles- crystal clear to the point of seeing the depth. Heading upstream, one would arrive at a large, for lack of a better word, square. A simple rectangular door beside which the water flowed from gates.

“Wait, wait, wait,” waved a flushed butler, “-hold on ladies,” he gasped, “-king Juvey will be here any minute, have the horses been prepped?”

The trio, excluding the unseen lass, scanned each other, “-no,” said the one in the middle.

“Sawdia, I thought I had asked the interviewees to relay the message?” from hunched to a somewhat straight stance, “-how long will it take?”

“Depends,” she said, “-anywhere from two to three hours, majesty’s particular.”

“Well,” he turned, “-have it be readied before eight.”

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“Lady Sawdia,” murmured the attendants, “-it’s going to take longer.”

“I know,” her pace hurried, “-let’s go,” they ran.

“-damned worthless candidates.”

“Now Maria, what is done is done, how many times must I explain, blaming others will only waste time and energy.”

“Rande,” thundered across the palace, “-where are you?” the timid butler who’d barely caught his breath, rummaged mindlessly, those assigned to indoor duties watched sympathetically. The absence of Scorpio brought a tenseness not many could replace,” -RANDE!” Against all odds, the attendants clenched their fists in encouragement. Whispers followed mildly behind the stumped helper, a pull opened the gates to hell, insults and humiliating comments about the lack of competence rained, “-nothing is ever ready,” exclaimed the king, “-pointless servants, I asked for my tea to be served five minutes ago, WHERE IS IT?”

“Pardon my saying,” gasped Rande, “-without the head-maid, everyone’s confused.” A heavy shadow rose from lovely colored seats.

“Are you saying this is my fault?” he glared, “-EVEN IF IT IS,” *smack,* a slap had the man end on a sharp cabinet’s edge, “-DON’T YOU DARE DIRTY THE TILE WITH THE FILTHY BLOOD.” Assisting maids hurdled, scared at the out lash. He glanced, bit his lips “-DAMN IT,” a kick send said couch into the maids’ direction. “-Worthless sacks of meat,” a disgusted side-glance to Rande, “-you,” he pointed, “-if the one thing I asked isn’t ready, you’ll pay with your head.” The heaviness carried into the next room, the bruised workers ran to the badly wounded butler.

“Are you ok?”

“A little lightheaded,” *cough* “-my vision’s red.”

“Obviously,” the sound of torn fabric followed into a sudden pull, “-let’s get you to the medical bay.”

“RANDE!” shattered the moment of solace.

He clambered, droplets of crimson dowsed the tiles, “-I have to go, please, clean the floor for me. I rather die than have my blood on the king’s furniture.”

“RANDEEEEE!” the helpless helper, aided by the wall, touched his way to the outside, ‘-I’m sorry, Sawdia, I couldn’t give more time.’ Whispers sparked inside many hidden corners, “-have you heard of the torturer?”

“Yeah, she’s in bad shape. I heard the king spared no mercy in tearing her flesh this time.”

“I heard from the guards that she invited an unwanted guest into the dungeon.”

“Bad idea, the king’s possessive about the playthings.”

“The rumors must be true; I haven’t seen her around.”

“If she’s even alive. So much for being blood-related.”

“Shut it, don’t speak too loudly.”

“My bad, my bad.”

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The stunned Sawdia and her comrades halted shy of the gallows, the stables laid a few steps forward, the surrounding was cleaned – in their suspense, the heaviness of Juvey stormed into their vicinity, one

assistant quipped by elbowing Sawdia, to which, the maids humbly bowed heads at the king's entrance. A badly wounded Rande limped, "-has my horse been prepped?" he stopped at the maids.

"Majesty," huffed Rande, "-I apologize on their behalf. I had the candidates relay the message..."

Juvey said nothing save a mortifying stare, the intent had the knees tremble, '-another excuse and its over,' said the expression. No whisper nor unnecessary chatter in Juvey's presence. Subtle gestures if transcribed, carried on full-blown conversations.

'What's happened?'

'No idea,' returned the maids.

'The wound?'

'Rage.'

The crowd of fellow interviewees made to and fro across the training grounds, obvious laughter drew the king's wrath – the body motioned towards the group till a shadow escaped from a shed, "-majesty," said a bare-chested Igna holding grooming utensils for the horses.

An elbow brought Sawdia's muffled grunt, '-what?' flashed her face.

'LOOK,' rose the eyebrows, '-LOOK,' it pointed towards the energetic lass from before – the latter crouched behind a pyramid of barrels.

"Xen?"

"Pleasure day, is it not, majesty?" he spoke nonchalantly, "-must have woken on the wrong side of the bed," a few steps closed their distance, "-bloated veins on the forehead aren't good for your age."

Therein, horror washed the maids, '-does he have a death wish?' Rande collapsed, the loss of blood waned heavy, none motioned to help the fallen. An unwritten rule said, '-if a weak-willed individual falls on accounts of his actions, none is to help.'

"Question," Juvey hunched onto Igna, "-were you the visitor Lessie took to the dungeon?"

"And if I answer positively?"

"Don't play games with me, boy."

"My liege," he stood his ground, "-technically, I'm not under the royal family's employment."

"And?" he remained unshaken, "-you're on my property."

"Right, a property where women are raped and men worked to death," he side-glanced the fallen, "-look at him, he bled out. I could probably save him, but," he shrugged, "-survival of the fittest."

"XEN!" a punched snapped for the insolent mouth. Igna expertly palmed the strike, using the pressure to move into the King's personal space all the while disrupting the balance.

"Majesty," he stopped at the King's jaw, "-if playtime is over, I'd like to check storage for medicine, one of the horse's sick."

“Impressive,” grunted Juvey, “-care to enlighten this old man to your martial art?”

“No name,” he smiled, “-And please, if it had been real – the shed would have been torn by the pressure.”

“My liege,” in marched the commander in charge of training, “-the recruits are ready for their altitude training. We’re waiting for your orders.”

The pent-up rage subsided, a calmness around Xen lowered the risk of eruption, “-Xen, as representative for Scorpio, I’ll let the whole dungeon debacle go. There’s much which needs my attention – take time and learn the way of the palace. Don’t approach the queen under any circumstances.”

“See,” he interjected, “-saying not to approach the queen gives rise to question. We know how compelling curiosity can be,” an exhale later, “-if his majesty orders, I shall obey.”

“Good,” said a nod, “-Sawdia, put the other candidates through combat training, I want each of them ranked by ability and skill, no killing – anything else goes,” he paused and scanned the blunt attire, “-put some clothes on.”

“My bad,” he chuckled, to which the king responded positively. The combination of commander and king soon took to the military grounds – the lingering shadow vanished.

“By the name of the holy,” exhaled Sawdia, “-I thought I was going to die under the pressure,” they hurried to Rande, “-Xen, is it?”

“Yes,” he followed their lead and squatted at the passed-out butler, “-the wound doesn’t seem to clot. Best to call an ambulance.”

“I remember someone saying he could heal?” suggested one of the two.

“My bad, must have slipped. No matter,” he effortlessly lifted the man in a princess carry, “-care to guide us to the medical room?”

“Sure,” off the beaten path and onto the lush green yard, “-tell me, Xen, you’re not from around here.”

“Should I respond or is it rhetorical?”

“Answer.”

“I’m not from around here, I was called by a friend of mine, Scorpio. Said there was a job opening, I wanted to experience Elendor for myself. The Arcanum always has articles written about how the culture’s changed.”

“Tell me, mister, what are those tattoos about?”

“Initiation to the way of the warrior,” he smiled, “-we’ve been walking for quite a while, no sign of the hospice.”

“Here,” they passed the palace and muddled into the shadows, far behind a grove of trees, a thick and uncared patch of bushes, wild animals, and the occasional growl, “-welcome to the maid quarters,” said Sawdia. A school-like dormitory rose in the thick of the dampened air, nature took its toll, the iron gates

barely stood, even so, on stepping inside, the entryway cleared. Benches overlooking a muddied pond, few scattered maids tending to medial tasks. A coat of moss and erosion glazed the paint. Then again, 'l'apparence est parfois trompeuse'¹. The inside radiate cleanliness, "-over here," led Sawdia. A timid room armed only with beds and a medical cabinet attracted the attention of those in attendance. Differing age and races crowded the doorway – a half-naked man had just entered the dormitory. Not as if it was uncommon; rare was it for someone handsome to make the journey. Sawdia held a passive-aggressive smile, "-thank you for the visit," she slammed the doors. First aid kit in hand, Igna dove into cleaning and fixing the wound.

"Experienced at first aid?"

"Yeah," he said and expertly stitched the temples,"-lack of medical knowledge is deadly on the field. Everyone's taught medical care before entering battle, well, either that or you use magic to heal wounds," the pressure eased, "-and preferable, most chose magic."

"Let me bandage him," offered Sawdia.

"Please," he retreated and settled on the adjacent bed, "-proper introduction is in order, my name's Xen."

"Pleasure, Xen, my name's Claury," said the energetic younger lass, most of her traits were shielded by a hat – a rounded nose and dark-colored pupils tightly wrapped into an oval-shaped visage.

"Maria," added one of the two. On first look, sisters or relatives, same-colored hair – dark-brown, and same traits, albeit the chipped front yellowish tooth. A slender figure was hidden under her maid's uniform. Wasn't hard to put two and two together, their duties implied more than cleaning, so said the odor.

"Flasie," said the second, "-we're sisters," she smiled and displayed a few of the missing teeth.

"Don't hold yourself back on our account," commented Sawdia, "-someone like you has no business in our world. There's a particular feel, same as the king, even greater, the spirits are happy when you move, they sing and smile, it's the first time I've ever seen them be so agitated."

"The boon of spiritual sight," he paused, "-very rare and unique to the elven race."

"Perceptive," she turned and touched her ears, the latter grew as for her skin, it rejuvenated.

"Please don't," a tap on her shoulder halted the spell, "-not worth risking your lives."

"Xen, you're a good man," she said, "-a strong character. On behalf of my friend, Rande, I give my sincere thanks, lest you'd be interested in taking one of us?"

"No, no," he refused, "-I rather not."

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"I get it," shrugged Flasie, "-you think us, repulsive women, for having slept with others?"

"That's not it," the gaze narrowed, an air of entrancement lingered under the door, he stood and pushed, "-the fragrance of intoxication," he reached, strangled and lifted Onte, "-are you an idiot?"

“W-W-W-W,” the grip eased, he dropped, “-don’t get pissy at me,” he scowled, “-I lost a bet with the girls.”

“Well then,” sensing the suspicious aura, “-I’d like to play,” shoulders around Onte who instantly tried to escape, “-move and I kill you,” he murmured, “-let’s get out,” they stepped outside, the abandoned school moved farther till Igna suspicious halted.

A disembodied voice rose the hairs on his back, ‘-Lessie is in pain in the dungeon. Juvey won’t be at the palace till later tonight. Help her, no one else can.’

“Dude, are you ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” replied Igna, “-Onte, go on ahead, I have something to take care of.”

“Take this,” he threw a shirt, “-they told me to hand that over. Don’t take too long, we’ll be evaluated soon.”

“I appreciate it.”

Chapter 844: Elendor [8]

Dusty old, the passage of time beat itself into the walls, the floor, and those chained by arms and legs. Dressed in the shirt Onte threw, Igna felt his way across the forest leading to the outer wall. One constant remained, the farther one moves from the castle, the lesser appealing grows the surrounding, similar to an oasis amidst a wasteland. ‘Spirit control,’ he rummaged through the stray branches, leaves, and occasional crackle of twigs. The descending incline, masked behind the untouched vegetations, leveled into the vague shape of a hovel. A rough disparity, he shuffled onto the strange extension, ‘-man-made,’ he skipped and dropped, landing squarely on the only path of land. Behind rose a temple-like entrance, pillars holding slated roof – between the color and mud, nature was victorious in her conquest.

‘She’s somewhere inside,’ he moved and soon found the path to be blocked, around the boulder, stuck from outside view, blatantly guarded the passage. ‘-Auras of monsters,’ arms to the rock, ‘-the air’s not stable,’ he observed, ‘-her presence is faint and alive. Not deathly injured, suppose the king’s got mercy in the vein.’ The open palm clenched – the blockage shattered into a veil of suffocating dust. Red pupils locked on him as if metal to a magnet, nothing else said, the posture dropped into a defensive fighting stance. The unknown outlines leaped, growls and snarls followed, ‘-five,’ he flashed, the muscles tightened – claws and jaws reached for his vitals, Igna stood patiently, arms held a fair distance from his chest, *growl,* a putrid exhale waved over his right ear, he shifted and palmed the surprise attack into the wall, crashing bones and exploding its head into a splatter of brain matter. Others leaped, he countered and pushed, keeping confine into a circle, ‘-transcribe my sword-arts into my body.’ Pushing the beasts was simple, the attack patterns were a boon. ‘-These monsters haven’t learned the battle properly,’ *clap,* a shockwave rattled the surrounding, ‘-knew it,’ he leaped, ‘-strong vibrations are priorities on their minds, staying couped isn’t a good thing,’ one after the next, he punched, crushed, and slit the monsters till a sliding to a stop. Masses of dust imploded, ‘-defeated and returned to their realm.’ Focus settled on where he stood, an open doorway into nothing, ‘-she’s inside here,’ he exhaled, glanced to the side, and spotted a stairway, ‘-dungeon exploring, how fun.’

Moans and painful yelps, Lessie, tied by the hands and legs laid on a metal sheet, a vacant look stared the unhinged ceiling, once a canvas telling of a Lucifer's descend, now sullied, could but painfully cast saddened gazes on the prisoners. Ruffles at the door, '-who's there?'

"Pizza delivery guy."

"I ordered three hours ago," the cautiousness faded, "-you sure it's the pizza delivery guy, better have food in the box, not a flesh rod," the words painfully left her lips with muted tones and sometimes, irregular pauses. The locked shattered, the array of spikes screeched inward.

"On the house," he said, glancing around, '-another torture room, separate from yesterday. A pile of bones to the side,' he scanned, '-vague traces of alchemy. The manufacturing of homunculi.'

"Here to rescue a princess or stare at the pile of bones?"

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"Fair point," he said and made for Lessie. Alongside the chains, metal spikes were plunged into her arms and thighs. A slow dripping container rested above her head, the longer it dropped, the heavier grew the impact. Acid scars laid on her chest to her stomach, the occasional rats screeches, "-you look like shit."

"Unlike you," her vacant expression barely moved, "-thank you."

"For what?"

"For visiting," her lips pressed woefully, "-my cousin's going to return soon. Leave, tis my punishment for disregarding his order."

"Right," he ignored her plea and broke the chains, "-we share the blame," quick to undo the shackles, "-if it comes to a battle," he helped in her sitting upright, *AHHHHH,* the body reflectively flung to hit the hard surface and knock her unconscious. 'Seriously?' the head shook, "-idiot," he exhaled, "-better now than never," *Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Restoration.* '-the method of torture's quite tame compared to what we use home,' the right eye crinkled, a haunting reminder of Gophy's exploits in making people talk. The burnt marks broke, allowing the flesh and skin to merge and rejuvenate. '-Healed,' he paused, '-she's naked,' he looked around to no avail, '-leggings,' he locked on her bottom-wear. Fabric torn, the leggings turned shorts, as for the area around her chest, wrapped akin to a present. There laid barely enough to keep her dignity.

"Lady Sawdia."

"Maria."

"Are you certain he'll come from this passage?" her head tilted, "-the rumor of strong monsters is there for a reason, right?"

"Maria, I brought you for the simple reason of understanding. Your sister and the brat are harder to-" the sentence stopped by interruption, muffled walking echoed from the inside, "-See, I told you the man's strong," her lips pressed, '-especially since the man's the nephew of King Staxius, the man who brought bliss to Arda after the war. If only Elendor didn't lose, we could have returned home, to a healed Arda. The spirits don't lie,' arms crossed, '-and I won't meddle.'

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"Xen," she smiled, "-you rescued her, the princess."

"Princess?" he escaped from the musty shadow, stepping into the great open, away from the claustrophobic lair.

"Yes, princess," she smiled, "-the lass's parents are dukes. Too bad for her, the family once tried opposing the King, as a bargain, they surrendered her to safeguard their position in court."

"Good offer," he looked at her slumped visage, the piggy ride gave impressions of an elder brother carrying a sibling.

"Sawdia," cautioned Maria, "-SOMETHING'S COMING!" He snapped onto the target with a spinning back heel kick, the impact caused the entrance to quiver, "-GET OUT," the structure crack – the last block caved shy of taking Lessie's head.

"Holy," he panted, and dropped on both knees, "-we've made it."

"Come on," said Sawdia, "-let's take her to the maid's quarters," once there, the wounded princess came to a fast awake, the chosen room was quite a way away, most of the retainers made to the palace. And so, Igna found himself alone in the company of Lessie – a change of clothes laid on the single-bed. Attention was pressed mostly upon the view, a small square giving onto green and brown, no definition nor clear intent.

"She told you."

"Yeah," he replied, "-I didn't pry, thought private business is best left untouched."

"Well," she laid on her back, "-I feel better, was going crazy before. Tell me, how did you heal me without leaving scars?"

"A little secret," he turned and pressed his back against the wall, in return, she sat opposite with back against the frame, "-I used magic."

"Magic?"

"Yes."

"The devil's arts," she whispered.

"..."

"I'm joking," she smiled, "-Magic is a taboo subject, better stray from the matter altogether. Saved me once again," she exhaled, "-Xen, you're not a simple candidate to be a butler, are you?"

"No one's simple."

"Right," she settled, "-my being a princess isn't new nor hidden. Most have forgotten about the incident. Happened more than six years ago, back then, life was peaceful, I grew up to be a princess and fulfill my family's goal. We controlled a major part of King Juvey's territory – cousin has a thrill in conquest and invading other kingdoms. As result, there was more land to care for, more people, and less effective

means to bring order. My father isn't strong-willed, the complete opposite of Juvey. Sufferance forced his hands, civil war laid on the table, our domain became the haven for the revolutionist. On announcing the conflict, forces from all-over Juvey's land rampaged into our land, destroyed everything, killed and slaughtered – heads of revolutionists dragged along the floor, they marched to the capital, took my mother and brother hostage till an offer from cousin. My life in exchange for their land – I mean, a beloved daughter weighted the same to an entire country, father accepted. I spent the next few years in the company of Juvey, going into battle as a simple-foot soldier. You can imagine the pressure on me to survive – hungry beasts... I'll skip that part. After the many campaigns, we landed in Elendor, they struck a deal and I was confined to the palace, forced to work as a torturer. Time passed and I found solace in hurting others, putting my pain on them brought elation and rest. Got so bad I couldn't sleep without the ear-tearing scream of a dying soul. My title of princess is naught but a joke, the deflowered princess, that's how many address me. You were the first who took interest in my job instead of asking to get close to Juvey or that sort of political complication – I figured why not, and here we are, I was punished then rescued," knees to her chest, "-what about you, Xen, what brings you here?"

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Honestly, nothing is interesting about my story. I'm an adventurer from Hidros, a friend offered me a job, I needed a change of pace... I accepted."

"No, no. Adventurers make way more than maids, hell, some of us don't get paid. Why forsake a life of excitement and thrill to this?"

"A simple answer, a whim."

"I get it," she buried into a pillow, "-there are things no one should know."

"Oh you're not guilting me into saying anything," he laughed, "-Lessie, we're acquaintances, don't think more of it," he moved to her side and patted the shoulders coldly, "-those closest to me often end up dying. Would be better to stay away-"

Smash, "-XEN!" a loud entity rose at the doorframe. Lessie's demeanor instantly dropped into horror, she pulled herself off the bed and hid behind Xen, "-I said-"

"Said to say away from the queen, my liege. Nothing was ever said about Lessie," he replied, nonchalant to the king's fury.

"Bastard," snarled Juvey reaching forth, to which Igna slapped the wrist, "-INSOLENCE!"

"My liege," he stood ground, "-I've said it before, I'm not in employment of the royal family. Regardless of the ground, we stand on, I'm a man of Hidros and a man of principle. Lessie helped me escape the dungeon, and I owe it to my pride to extend a helping hand, especially to someone who unconditionally accepted my request of comradery. Go ahead," he lowered his guard, "-if his majesty, known master warrior, falls to his ego and pride, all the while forgetting the warrior's code, then," he tore his shirt and slammed it at the king's feet, "-I'll fight till I die, send how many men you want, I'll stand firm and show why Hidros's adventurers are worth their weight in gold."

“Enough,” murmured Juvey, “-it is enough,” he backed out, “-I’m not stubborn, nor am I a murderer. Lessie was punished for breaking my trust,” he glared, “-whilst you,” he gritted, “-you carefully moved around the orders I set. Tis a good trait for warfare. Xen, as a warrior, I ask for thy assistance in battle.”

“Battle?”

“Yes, a revolt’s broken to the Southwest. The battleground will prove a testing ground for the gathered talents. My forces are on campaign with the emperor’s forces – thus, we’re left vulnerable. The capital is priority – hence I ask for thee to take to the battle.”

“Majesty, pardon my saying, what if I used the information and scaled an attack against thy faction.”

“You won’t,” he grinned, “-reason being, I’ll haunt thee till the day death comes. I will take Hidros if need be to quench my thirst for revenge, only then will I stand.”

“Understood,” he said, “-when’s the transit?”

“In two days,” he made for the opening, “-Lessie, consider Xen’s friendship as a blessing. If another had pulled such a stunt, tis the gallows,” the impactful steps faded to a tranquil room.

“How did you?”

“A person must stand for what he believes. King or not, those fighting for a cause, those protecting something are tenacious, King Juvey knows the feeling of dread attached to a cornered rat. Never push anyone beyond their limits.”

Chapter 845: Elendor [9]

“Quite the lovely relation,” remarked Lessie. Igna blinked, grabbed her arms, and pressed, she exclaimed.

“Injured ladies must not add frivolous comments.” Thus, the motions of healing an injured followed, it started by assessment of the wounds left unhealed. Overusing mana was quite the risk. Rumors of Xen’s actions circulated around the palace, those directly involved, candidates, rose their heads to the outsider. Luck would have it, a meeting of the gathering was called by a military officer. The recommended ten arrived onto the burning hot tarmac – sweat poured, and in said heat, guards ran laps around the premises. Dedication to their craft was quite the sight to behold.

“Attention,” thundered the officer, “-today will be combat evaluation. Certain criterias have to be met, consider this, a large majority will return home today. The position of retainer to the crown isn’t earned by doing chores or housework. If those qualities were needed, I’d have hired human-looking workers, unlike the circus at play here,” the row stood formidable, the officer walked from end to end, gauging grit and determination.

Igna’s effort wouldn’t affect the greater picture save making connections, real trouble brewed on the empty streets headed outward of Rosespire.

éclair watched from the window of a skyscraper, gazing onto the passing vehicles, “-prime-minister,” said a well-dressed figure, “-you called?” he approached the view, passed glances inside where laid office-cabinets and cubicles.

“Made it in time,” he said, “-how goes the negotiations?”

“Depends,” they stood side-to-side, “-between us, it’s bad. The Goldberg dynasty’s paying to reframe their reputation.”

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“They’re the enemies?”

“Yes, the influence skyrocketed after the marriage. Reason says to expect a greater scheme.”

“I know as much,” he exhaled, “-anything on how they’re earning their money?”

“Nothing conclusive, my position stops me from prying further. A conflict of interest on my side will most likely break the only liaison the crown has to the noble faction,” curiosity had him glance at the office, yearning for answers about the area, “-pray tell-”

“Don’t mind the workers,” interjected éclair, “-they’re diligent studies to the market trends. Our eyes and ears. No matter,” a motion of a handshake marked the end of the conversation, “-Lord Dyale,” a piece of paper slipped into the breast pocket, “-a few tips in changes. The well-being of contacts takes precedence.”

The face lit in a thousand flames, “-thank you very much, prime minister,” a sharp energy energized the walk toward the elevator. éclair kept composed amidst countless notifications and messages, *-calling Yui.*

“Hello brother,” returned a curt and innocent voice.

“About the Goldbergs?”

“I traced the money, the point of origin’s lost somewhere around the cooking academy.”

“The gray area controlled by Snow or whatever figurehead they’d like to use.”

“On the subject of Leko’s academy, we have dire news about lady Lizzie and her comrade, Lady Syndra. Seems they’ve been harassed. What should I do?”

“Leave it into her guard’s hand, send them the message, monitor Syndra. Her fiancé is quite the character.”

“Understood,” the call ended.

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His reflection layered on the glass, ‘-master’s in Iqavea, and conveniently – our test shipment of narcotics is attacked in the woods. Narrowing the list is going to be hard, the route and information came from Phantom; meaning, the rat problem still exists. A message to lady Elvira won’t accomplish much,’ therein, another phone call phased through his interface, *-incoming call – Alta.*

“Status on the meeting?”

“Bad.”

“Explain?”

“The council’s putting the royalist faction’s integrity in question. They’ve horned on the feud between the crown and the nobles. Using that logic, they’re pushing to have the royalist faction give and allow freedom in conduction of the sittings.”

“A good plan, saying nobles and us don’t align, free reign. What was the result?”

“The discussion is postponed for the meeting.”

“The people trust in the council, if it fails, master’s reputation will crumble,” an array of numbers suddenly materialized, he side-glanced inside to sleep-deprived workers giving thumbs up, “-give me a moment,” the call paused, to which éclair entered the working area confined within transparent walls. The data hovered above his palm, as for the employees, most had their heads on desks.

“Good work, it saddens me people will never know of the amount of manpower required to keep our interests sane. The month’s been insane, take a one-week vacation, the remainder will be outsourced. Preparations will be made at the Tajeh Resort,” a tip of the head later, he watched from the outside, files flung in the air, celebrations were at an all-time high. “-Sorry for the wait,” the call resumed.

“Nothing to apologize for, any leads?”

“Yes,” he smiled smugly, “-I sent the workers on vacation, the pile of numbers indicates deals between the merchant guild and the nobles. Latter must have given information to the former, united, they want to break the influence the crown has on the royalist faction. Let them try – we know their hand. About time to decimate their newfound confidence, Eia will fall, gather the evidence and file a complaint of conspiracy against the crown to the Goldberg’s, name Nicola as the main suspect. Bring the best we have. Let’s shut them up for good.”

Nature of the rebuttal flashed across Igna’s pants. Seven out of ten fell at the end of the day – a pinkish evening drew over the horizon, trees thickly shadowed the sky, ‘-éclair’s going on the move,’ laid on the grass and face to the thicket’s foliage, ‘-dragging Eia’s reputation, we’ll fall and bring her down with us. Good plan,’ he gasped.

“Alive?” a mask-wearing silhouette leaned at him; “-the training’s supposed to be easy...”

“It is,” he sat, “-except,” pointing at the fallen participants, “-if not for that damned officer’s grueling kink at breaking people, the evaluation would be over long ago.”

“There, there,” she patted his back, “-don’t cry,” a cold bottle dropped into his hands. A twist brought the liquid onto his visage. The wind changed, the atmosphere altered, ‘-I know this feeling,’ he stood, ‘-an ambush?’ Bushes shuffled, armed fighters pounced, a forceful kick pushed Lessie out of harm’s way, the motion had the body off-balance, to which a fighter strike by chipping Igna’s nose, the following attacks made contact with bone, ‘-three in total,’ forearm as a shield, an opening allowed for a retreat to Lessie’s side, “-stay behind me,” he said, physically blocking her from the attackers. ‘-Seven,’ he narrowed their eyes, ‘-a test,’ he wondered, a twig crackled in at their six, ‘-maybe not,’ the blood crystalized and stopped the bleeding, ‘-they’re coming to kill.’ A circle of warriors moved simultaneously to Igna, a step to the right and the whole circle followed, the spacing and breathing mimicked his.

Shuffles sprinted at Lessie, the dagger swiped for her neck, Igna pulled her arms downward, her whole body dropped, and caught the attacker’s wrist. The stop signaled the others to strike, *Mana-Control:

Field of Awareness, * time slowed, ‘-practitioners or not, everything has mana,’ the eye closed to be reopened, ‘-no mana...’ the targeted blades grew ever close, ‘-they’re after her,’ he side-stepped into harms ‘way, three knives dug into the belly, the remainders ran for Lessie. “Try again, later,” he smiled, pulled the knives, and knocked the three closest unconscious – blades laid inches from Lessie, the daggers flung and tore the attacker’s hand. Defending someone was a tall order, Tharis clocked – gunfire resounded across the battlefield.

“STOP, STOP, STOP!” a familiar face ran into the open, “-did you kill anyone?” panted the officer.

“No,” hands to his stomach, “-it was obviously a test...” a cold stare washed those who blatantly flaunted killing intent, “-Onte and his possie, next time, face me in a real match.” The fired bullets reached their marks, the string holding the masks, “-Lessie,” he gave a helping hand, “-let’s go,” they passed the officer, “-I wonder how the king will react after the mess is recounted.” Night settled, dinner was served, a reserved table for the participants held four men and four ladies. The latter half opted to quietly enjoy their meals – as for the remainder, “-who does he think he is?” snarled Onte, the gaze firm at the corner table were laid Xen, Lessie, and Claury.

“Was it necessary to use lethal force?” questioned an observant maid.

“Angela,” the table turned to her, “-got something to say?”

“I do,” she sipped, “-but I doubt my words to have any effect on morons. How pathetic can envy get. Xen’s obviously strong and charismatic, he’s the only candidate I’ve heard rumors about. Some say he avenged Scorpio’s defeat.”

“I agree,” added another, “-you fellows keep dragging us into a pointless mess.”

“Don’t you girl’s see the favoritism?” glared Onte, “-he’s faulting the pretty face around. Look at him...”

“Does it matter?” shrugged another, “-what happens between you and him is private business. Sargent Faber was dragged into the supposed test, an impossible task Xen proved possible, he held attacks from the strongest rogues trained at the military academy. Good job,” the ladies rose in tandem.

“It ends tonight,” muffled Onte. Igna rose to return the tray and visit the men’s room. Waiting was Onte, back against the wall and arms crossed, “Xen,” he motioned. Igna paid no heed, walked to the sink, and stared the mirror unbothered by the envious bystander, “Xen,” another gesture returned naught.

“Find pleasure in taking the washroom aroma or is it the sight of naked men that sails your boat?”

“Ha,” he walked at the same time Igna headed for the entry, “-meet me at the training grounds later tonight. We’re going to settle the feud.”

‘On cue,’ the proud rogue vanished into the cafeteria, ‘-made allies, used the vampire allure to draw attention, saved Lessie, a close connection to King Juvey twice. The narrative’s structured for me to come out on top.’ Little did Igna know said night held more than a duel.

Time for the meeting approached – Tharis on the side and mind ready for battle. The outline gave onto a moonless sky, cold drafts rose hairs. ‘-More than one?’ the gathering spot stood in the distance; a heavy outline contrasted against the darker aura. ‘Scorpio?’ a wheelchair soon caught the attention.

“Welcome, Xen,” said the King backing Onte.

“Majesty,” he nodded and scanned the entourage.

“Shit yourself yet?” chuckled Onte.

“Silence,” thundered Juvey, “-Xen, do you have any idea why we’re out here?” a look at Scorpio paired with the condescending tone screamed treason.

“Yes,” he replied nonchalantly, “-came to have a pleasant exchange of fists against Onte. Why, should I be wary of the man’s talent?”

“Enough!” the ground shook, “-Scorpio said everything, you’re not a normal adventurer, nor are you someone suited to be a butler.”

‘He knows?’

“Majesty, please,” motioned Onte, “-looks like Xen wants to fight.”

“If I have to fight,” he reached for Tharis, *snap,* lasers locked.

“-I’d wait.”

“I’m trapped?” he exhaled.

“No, you’re not,” Juvey’s tone swapped, “-Onte, you were wrong. He’s not a double agent.”

“Sorry?”

“Xen, don’t look confused, Onte here is a spy working for me. A carefully chosen agent to infiltrate the ranks. Scorpio vouched heavily on accounts of thy skill. The earlier attack was my idea. Most forsake Lessie after learning her story. I had her tortured to test the strength of character. After what’s happened, you chose to take three daggers in order to protect a worthless pest, I’m pleased, very pleased.”

“What of the battle in two days?”

“Settled, nothing to worry about. My agents took the leader’s head and are in process of cleansing the land. I must be objective; I’ve asked the best-trained soldiers to come for thy head. Win or die, Lessie’s identity must remain secret, the way of the palace is a matter none must ever learn or understand. Win, show me how strong you are. No restriction, thee asked and I’ve delivered – a battle to the death,” sharp chops blasted the area, the gathered crowd soon climbed and left – Igna stood in the open with lasers aimed at him.

“Killing him, majesty?”

“Scorpio, you said it yourself. If he’s worth my trust – I’d like to see how he fairs against those I deem worthy.”

Chapter 846: Elendor [10]

“Live by the sword, die by the sword,” the pupils washed into a crimson glow. Igna, armed and ready, followed the lasers till pinpointing the targets, all of which were displayed on his map. A faint exhale later, the target vanished from their sights. Perplexed snipers readjusted their scopes, frantic calls

echoed around their communication channel. “-Communication line found,” displayed on the interface, “-nullification in process,” a loading bar bubbled as he dove into the nearest grove. On approaching the meeting earlier, he picked a path closer to cover in the eventuality of a battle, the precaution came in handy. Following groves, he ducked into the stables, vaulted over obstructions, and climbed the gallows. The mindless confusion had lasers scanning the empty field, ‘-duos split five ways,’ he paused whilst laying on the stomach, ‘-how about a little illusion,’ *snap,* no chants, one of the many elements lit above his open palm, the intent sufficed, the dark-element summoned an illusionary spell, a decoy of similar features manifested and gave the appearance of running for cover. A slower pace and loud noise drew the targets. Pointers went dark, orders went across the channel, “-surround and eliminate.”

‘They’re good,’ he observed the map, ‘-too bad the devices have tags.’ The dots followed in and out of sight, precise and swift, guns drew onto the figure. The lure had made its way into the stable – meanwhile, the hunters circled the area – escape covered, they waited, as did Igna. ‘-About time I make my move,’ he stood and aimed, Tharis’ form altered into a silenced rifle, ‘-transformation magic build into the building material, smart idea, isn’t it,’ camouflaged watchers kept composure, ‘-too bad,’ he aimed, “-go!” loud interference rattled the channel – a deafening explosion led into white-noise. Therein, two bullets fired, eight remained. As expected, the communication rupture forced the eight to break into the stables – sadly, “-farewell,” a small toy-like object flung inside. Painful screaming of the earpieces lowered guards, *barrier* all opening closed, the toy exploded, fire and smoke erupted. Shrapnel broke bones, the fire deprived air, and soon, the inferno melted the suits into their skin. At 01:20, a good five minutes later, the barriers undid, allowing the flames to rage freely.

‘A nice bonfire,’ shrugged Igna sat with legs crossed a few meters from the burning mess. The snipers’ bodies, after being dragged for five minutes, laid on each side. A beer can in hand, he watched – smoke invaded the starry sky, an alarm rang within in the palace. Retainers rushed onto the scene, “-A FIRE!” cried a horrified woman. The fire department and king were called simultaneously.

Dring, dring, the helicopter landed atop the hospice, “-hello?” answered Juvey.

“Greetings, my liege. Before asking how I got the number, consider it my way of saying I made good friends. The test is over, I’ve slaughtered the supposed elite of whomst were sent. The poor ol’ stable’s burning before me, it’s quite the spectacular sight. The horses are safe, worry not – animal life is placed higher in the hierarchy.”

“Xen,” the large strides halted at the elevator, an unconscious Scorpio was taken inside, “-what of the marksmen?”

“The ladies? Killed in action,” he replied, “-majesty, the world is vast, there are numbers of entity stronger out there; demons, angels, hell, even gods. It’ll reach a time where weapons, finely crafted to kill our kin, will no longer have the effect necessary to vanquish monsters.”

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“I had my doubts, Xen, who are you, a friend or foe?”

“Majesty, I’m neither. I arrived for a job, and I will do my job, tis the long and short of it. Elendor’s a place of wonder – thy powers are limited since the kingdom isn’t truly Old Cray’s domain.”

“What do you want?”

“Nothing,” sirens blasted through the call, “-the fire departments arrived. King Juvey, at risk of sounding pretentious, I’d like to have the test stopped. Fire me at the end of the trial, it doesn’t matter. I hate pointless deaths, albeit an oxymoron since I enjoy killing the strong and tormenting the weak. Consider me a cursed weapon – I obey to none and only serve those I deem worthy. You’ve tested me, it’s time I return the favor.”

“Xen, don’t overstep your station.”

“Else?”

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“Else...”

“Majesty, threats don’t mean anything to someone who has nothing to lose,” he laughed, “-liability or not, tis thy responsibility as leader to ensure I’m put to good use. However, if I suspect any misplay at hand,” a sudden suffocating mumble choked through, “-take this fellow agent, for example, he’s been watching me since I arrived – pretty blatant...”

“You’ve made your point, Xen,” the valorous tone eased, “-I’m no fool. I understood thy abilities upon the defeat of the chimera. You should understand, the civil war isn’t over, I only said it ended to appease the candidates. As the last test, you’ll be sent to the battlefield alone, the only condition to pass is to survive. Burning down my stable, killing my people, and having the audacity to make demands over the phone, either you’re gutsy or plainly an idiot. Put those words into action, survive and the job is yours.”

“My pleasure,” the call ended, ‘-and he’s in my pockets,’ he eased to watch the starry night, ‘-no matter what intrigue is thrown, the king won’t get rid of me arbitrarily,’ faint taps against the arms, “-my bad,” the grip around the neck eased into a mass landing, “-had to show his majesty I know,” the burning rubble laid to the side, ‘-a spy assigned to guard my moves. How stupid,’ he shrugged and returned to the initial place – a spilled beer bar crinkled the demeanor, the reddened stare bleached into the usual bicolored listless expression.

“Xen?”

“Lessie, how goes it?”

“What?”

“Watching the show,” he said, “-fighting fire with water. Look at the fighters battling against an infernal beast.”

Her feeble steps slowed, “-are those?”

“Corpses, formal soldiers in the king’s elite force,” he pointed at the tags, “-see?”

“I recognized them,” she leaned, “-they were once part of the Eia’s elite guard...”

“Too bad, the weak die, and the strong lives.”

Soon enough, another battle echoed across the ocean, the integrity of the King’s faction laid in the balance. The Gaien council began deliberations, media coverage was at an all-time high. Opposed to the

firm and comforting inside of the castle; photos of the Royal Court plastered the day's newspaper. Reports fought one another, the channels squabbled for interviews or any piece of information. The cacophonous outside faded on entering the court. Representing the state were Bleu Aizo and Raide Rose, back by influential figures sat behind them. The end of the spectrum was Lord Carf, a graduate of the Aizo Academy, who stood as a defense for Queen Eia Riverty-Haggard of Hidros, Nicola Vonhen Hart of the Marquise of Hart, and representative of the Gaien Council.

"Quite the unsightly display," commented Raide, "-the queen and eldest son aren't in attendance."

"Don't bother," added Bleu, "-they're obviously wary of us. I mean, who in the right mind would conspire against the crown, it's treason plain and simple. I wonder," he targeted Lord Carf, "-what would happen if Eia's blatant shamelessness is brought to the stand?"

"Bleu, I'd advise against blasphemy..."

"Pardon me," he covered his mouth, "-speaking the truth isn't much interesting." Casual chatter halted, King Igna marched forth to the judge's seat as did a representative of Tharis's sect and another from Syhton's church. Before the trial, Raide and Bleu motioned for the debate to be halted. Without Nicola and Eia, the would-be discussion followed into charges against them being read aloud. It encompassed those who assisted the scheme. Time shuffled onto noon, there, the traumatized Carf sweated bullets. His entourage could but cower before the nonchalant attack from the state. With said momentum, the Gaien council meeting began in the next hall over. The sides split, and Alta took the forefront, "-the council was created to help the people," she glared at the opposition, "-and seems to us, those loyal to the new regime, there is to be conflict from the noble faction. Queen Eia will be proven guilty and her claim over the crowd will be washed clean. Goldberg's and backers," she turned to point at the nobles on their side, "-if push comes to shove – Hidros will turn into a military powerhouse – a culling of the noble families will follow – people put to the sword. A dictatorship whereby only those in power wins and the citizens suffer."

"Stop bluffing," fired Narlo, an elected member representing the people, "-the crown doesn't have a stable foot to stand on. Remove the nobles and the entire rule falls, no money means no stable economy."

"Have you forgotten of the Alrosia alliance? There lays a clause in which Empress Eira, legitimate claimant to the kingdom of Hidros, can exercise her influence and take the throne. She's related to the queen, and must I remind, is the firstborn of the previous monarchy."

"You'd forsake our culture and tradition to them?"

"Understand, the royal family is the Haggard dynasty, and we, its members, are vindictive by nature. Losing isn't an option – if defeat lays in the future, we shall drag everything we've built to the grave."

"This is plain blackmail," exclaimed another representative, Xoz.

"Politics," added Serene, "-the Blood-King's faction fully backs King Igna, the authority extends to the Kingdom of Easel Run Gard and Arda. What're a few nobles in the greater picture."

"If it's about money?" chuckled Julius, "-our coffers booster more than entire nations."

“We’ll report the threats to the press – when the citizens learn of the truth, we’ll stand on equal ground.”

“Ah,” mocked Starix, “-pitiful elected politician, let me clear a misconception. The Gaien Council is for the betterment of the people, not a power trip to boost your egos. We pull the plug and the blame lays on the representatives. Revolt? How about we starve the population. War? How about we deploy Phantom’s forces. Turning to another nation? How about we decree the revolution as treason.”

“Hear us well,” thundered éclair, “-if tis a fight, there will be war. And trust, we won’t stop until the very lineage of the families is choked. There’s a reason the Haggard dynasty is feared – tis wise not to awaken the Devil of Glenda.”

“We’ll fight,” said a liaison for the Goldberg Dynasty, “-we’ll use adventurers, sully the respected title of monster slayers. Queen Eia’s the true ruler of Hidros, the Riverty dynasty will never fall. The noble faction hereby joins the people – united, we shall claim what is rightfully ours.”

The door barged open, loud steps boomed, “-In the name of Igna Haggard, King of Hidros, I hereby decree the noble faction a threat to the crown, on counts of conspiracy against the throne, collusion with the empire, and wrongful subjugation and taxation of the people of Dorchester, from today forth, those siding with Queen Eia shall be treated as traitors, the penalty, death.” Knights hurried to capture the nobles; “-everything will be decided by the will of Tharis.”

Such was the start of a civil war; it was shown that the Queen conspired to assassinate the king. Her name was dragged into the mud on national television, evidence after evidence, a trial made public under oath of Tharis’s scale until a trusted lady-in-waiting in service to lady Eia, “-is it true, Queen Eia betrayed King Igna’s trust by sleeping with Nicola and performing in rituals to the Dark-God of Hatred, Esyter,” suspense in silence had watchers on the edge of their seats, “-no,” the scale tipped to say, ‘-Lie.’

“Here, how about this. Did King Igna ever act maliciously towards the queen, was there ever a suggestion to infidelity?’

“No,” her gaze lowered in shame, “-King Igna remained faithful, even after knowing of her pregnancy,” the scale tipped to say, “-True,” Eia’s reputation dropped by the second, loyalists to the Riverty Dynasty rallied in Kreston. The United Kingdom of Hidros, after the trial aired and decree made, split into two factions. Oxshield, Plaustan, Arda, and Totrya rallied behind the Haggard’s whilst Dorchester and Kreston rallied behind the Queen Eia, backed by the Goldberg duchy. A leak conveniently had the opposition escape before the trial, at the head of the scheme smirked Starix, “-cheers to victory.”

“Cheers,” glasses chimed.

Chapter 847: Elendor [11]

“In current news, the united provinces of Hidros have been split into two factions. The rebels have named themselves the Queen’s Requiem, as for the other, they choose to simply address as the Crown. The threat of civil war looms over our heads, Hidros’s unity, fought to be kept and attained by lady Gallienne, has been jeopardized upon Igna’s ascension to the throne,” the camera shifted to the Prime minister, éclair, “-we must know, prime minister, the people need to know.”

“Understand this,” he took the microphone confidently, “-our actions were a result of what was learned in our internal investigation. King Igna prioritizes family and loyalty above anything else, ask any of our closest retainers, they’re family members, not just workers. Niceness has its limits,” he pointed at the crowd on the other side, “-what would you do? Imagine being asked to forsake thy love and pledge to another. You accept the fate and wash thyself empty to start again, the lingering pain of abandonment and betrayal, regardless, the bigger picture is what matters. Now, add disloyalty of the other partner, the one you didn’t love but choose to accept and believe. The latter couldn’t accept the outcome, betrayed the marriage, and gave her virtue to another whilst being tied by the bond of matrimony. How would that make you feel?” the eyes narrowed, “-let me tell you, I’d be furious. I would want her to suffer for the betrayal,” the mouth hovered in a small split, waiting for the next trail of thoughts to pass, “-got the answer? Hear what king Igna wanted, to unite the kingdom and allow the people to make a meaningful judgment in expanding the horizon. Industrial evolutions, a solid partnership to the famed Alphan Empire. Alas, the disagreement has put everything on hold – we’re disunited and vulnerable. The only solace we have is the armistices reached between Alpha and Iqavea. United Nation of Alrosia meant the truce extended to us...” a woeful silence washed the atmosphere, “-Civil war? After what he did to ensure the kingdom’s growth and betterment of the people, to have the very same people turn around and spit in his face, well, what can I say. The Gaien council, elected leaders by the citizens, nothing matters. Our trust was shattered, hope we had for the future crumbled.”

“Wait, wait,” interjected the host, “-the fault lays on us?”

“No, it lays on those who’ve allied to Lady Eia’s attack on the throne. They fled the province before answering questions – and in layman’s term, an admission of guilt.”

“Are you saying there’s nothing to do?”

“Yes, nothing at the moment. The rogue faction against the crown have shown their colors and fled to Dorchester and Kreston. As of today, border patrols will block access and monitor closely. We fear the rogue faction may try and ask for overseas help; the church, for example, they may be interested in capturing Kreston again – return to when they were ousted.”

“Seems to us a war is gearing to start?”

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“Correct,” nodded éclair, “-enough is enough. We will take action and strike those who dare hurt our king’s trust. This is a warning to villages nearest the borders, evacuate inland. Contact the guilds for job requests – the crown will fund the necessary arrangements. Lest the nobles agree to our terms, Hidros will be divided – war will ensue until surrender or complete defeat. Heed these words carefully, Queen Eia, Nicola Vonhen Hart and worshippers of the dark-god; bear thy fangs, we’ll repay the kindness tenfold,” the show went offline – discussion levied over the arcanum. Details were scarce until the greater picture was posted; all the facts were made available.

The revolutionist also made attempts at broadcasting their side of the story. However, unknown to the public – the attempts failed every single time. Never underestimate the power of narrative control, then again, the broadcast sometimes reached the channels in a blurry and biased fashion.

The camera's toggled, éclair rose for the outside – a car waited, destination, the castle. The weather worsened, droplets hammered against the windshield, tiny pallets – the cacophony made hearing one's own thought troublesome.

An hour or so later, he arrived and swiftly made for a meeting room. Closest allies to the crown sat and ate – the broadcast projected against the wall. "Welcome," said Starix.

"Prime minister," nodded Asmodeus, "-job well done," they clapped.

He grabbed a wine-glass, rose a hand in motion to say, '-stop,' and followed to the entourage, "-a minor victory," he sipped.

"Minor is an understatement," fired Alta, "-we've taken control of the story. Releasing the facts was a great idea," her glass rose towards Julius, who in turn nodded, "-words, proof, all there to make their own judgment."

"The scheme's marvelous," added Kul, "-break the unity, gather the enemies into one place, classic divide and conquer. This time, we divided ourselves – way to surprise."

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"I feel for our enemies. Imagine Eia's face, she had nothing to do – her pregnancy's real, a doctor confirmed, and it's plastered over the Arcanum. Step one is complete, what else?"

"We wait and watch," sipped éclair, "-their turn to make a move. The more time passes, the more of our agents will spread the word of how conniving the queen is – we'll rip apart their integrity," *slam,* the door buckled, "-ÉCLAIR!"

"I was wondering when you'll show."

"Bastard, that's my daughter!"

"Piers Riverty," called Julius, "-your daughter showed her true colors."

"Obviously," the frustrated man stormed to éclair's face, "-she was forced to marry and forsake her rightful claim."

"Poor little ol' Eia," jested Asmodeus, "-look, Piers. She's the reason the revolt exists."

"We know of the plot being constructed," added Alta, "-his majesty said to leave her alone, do you know why?"

"Treason's penalty is death," he gulped.

"And those conspiring with her will suffer the same fate. No matter how advanced machinery and technology gets, the leadership will never change, the king has authority to do what he pleases. We tried implementing a voice for the people, look where it landed us, in a shit bed of conspiracy. The Gaien council will exist, the king's adamant."

"Piers," shuffled éclair, "-for the greater good or whatnot, I don't care, none cares to save for themselves. Do what you must – go meet her, stay by her side if the war escalates – I want you to pull

the plug and stop those pulling the string. Lives will be lost, there will be a battle, and in said battle – make sure she escapes.”

“You care about her?”

“No, we care about the promise made between Queen Gallienne and King Igna.”

“Right,” he nodded, “-I’ll go.” The locks clicked,

“-sure it’s wise to let him go?”

“A father has a duty to protect his kin, who are we to deprive his right,” said Julius, “-I’ll continue coordinating agents on the field.”

“Yes,” the collective gathering gulped the drinks and scattered across the big wide hallway. éclair was left to shuffle forth till a balustrade giving onto a patch of emptiness, ‘-we have the situation in control, master – how’s your journey coming along?’

A few weeks later, a lonesome figure stood before the secluded town of Ezbon, many buildings lost inside the greater sea of nothingness, dry grass, dead trees, and scorching heat. Distant rumbles, the sound of marching troops – gunfire far in the distance, ‘-here’s my last target,’ paused Igna, ‘-the stronghold of the revolution.’ Cars were rare, ‘-I’ve killed so many people on my way here,’ images flashed to when a helicopter dropped him at an under-siege stronghold to the east. There, a few days were spent defending and attacking the invaders – strength in numbers made the battle a fight of grit. Soldiers falling left and right – blood slashing across the field, ‘-the amount of blood I’ve absorbed,’ he smirked, ‘-I feel awesome.’ Rumors of a bespectacled fighter diffused from the front lines to the headquarters, ‘-pale skin, dark hair, and bi-colored eyes, any sighting is to be reported immediately, the man’s a threat, unlike anything we’ve seen. He singlehandedly defeated a tank – they said he leaped on the machine and fired – the bullet pierced armor and killed riders.’ Tales of war were common – many dismissed it to the folly; battle sickness.

Dried dirt scattered over the roads, Igna walked – marksman guarding the entrance of town shimmered their scope, the interface made an internal note of the location. Ezbon wasn’t picked as a stronghold by random, the area was secluded and difficult to attack, considering the access path. Either climb mountains to the north or stumble across the forest to the south. Terrain unevenness, another added layer of difficulty. Easy to defend for a simple reason – a singular path of attack. Mounted turrets pointed down the road, tanks circled kilometers away – aerial support at a moment’s notice.

‘Can a single man take their stronghold?’ he squinted; jarringly massive doors guarded the inside, ‘-taking the area might be fun,’ communication channel shifted, “-Hello, hello, Xen speaking,” fired a cheery voice, “-I’m doing fine, thanks for asking. The heat’s a pain – they’ve taken notice to my position,” it suddenly beckoned seriousness, “-the forces have exhausted their numbers. About time we deliver a final strike. On my orders,” a force a few hundred laid in wait to the south, under the cover of rough terrain, sharp cliff ends and forests. The operation began a few days prior, a scouting party made a journey inside the deadly forest – afterward, climbers scaled the insanely sharp crag. The climb alone took twenty minutes. A replica was made to train the fighters, only the best and fastest were recruited.

'King Juvey's forces' adaptability is to be feared,' he marched, '-makes sense why many kingdoms fear them,' glaring down the path, '-augmentation of physical abilities,' he swallowed darkened crimson orbs, '-let's go,' the outline vanished under their noses.

"GONE!" exclaimed the sniper, too little too late for Igna leaped, bypassed the defense, and dove inside the building. The shattered glass had the soldier glance, *bang,* one target dropped, Igna turned and aimed for the adjacent building – confusion screamed across their channel, nothing beats amplified white-noise, *bang,* another shot, another dead. In the same manner, he moved swiftly under the confusion; stabbed, shot, and strangled guards. "-Send the decoys."

An army bearing the King's flag exploded from the Eastern road, they leaped over the sloping hills and tore the asphalt. '-Good,' he watched from the comfort of high-grounds, the alarms of attack rang, the attackers leaped at the chance of battle. Rifle in hand, the flock ran at the incoming deluge – explosion from shells slaughtered dozen. A rope ladder was dropped from the southern wall, courtesy of Xen, "-area's clear – let's move people."

"The plan worked," nodded Onte, "-time to clean up the mess," the team split and killed. Aerial support vanished by anti-air weaponry, the scale of Elendor's might all but scratched the surface. Gunfire rattled, '-who's the resistance?' a scan revealed a precociously arranged structure. Roof to roof, '-there are people?' he dropped inside, pistol unholstered, a vaguely suspended lightbulb barely lit the underground room.

"Who are you?"

"Someone of no importance."

"No importance?"

The interface scanned the figure and labeled him an ally, "-a member of Phantom?"

"Who did you k-"

"Don't ask questions, why are you here?"

"Kidnapped and forced to work for King Juvey."

"King Juvey, I thought the stronghold was under the control of the resistance."

"What resistance," he shook his head, "-King Juvey stages sieges and conquest to keep his troops in shape. Those on the frontline are common folks, residents of Elendor, or slaves delivered by the church. How did you know I was?"

"Doesn't matter," he exhaled, '-there's my reason why he didn't care. I took part in the genocide, whatever,' *bang,* the man dropped, '-Phantom or not, if I refuse – my cover will be blown.' Footsteps stacked and ran inside, "-Xen, we heard shots, are you ok?"

"Yeah," he stood with a wounded arm, "-this one cause me trouble, I barely escaped."

Onte seemed a little disappointed, "-what's done is done, let's head back, the battle is over."

Chapter 848: Elendor [12]

Speck by speck, the time glass of Kronos moved, inhibited by the flow of time, untouched by the sullied outside, the true flow of time moves within the falling snow. Kronos's scythe; the symbol of power to the inheritor of time, the ultimate ability in combat dug itself a domain of invincibility. The foundation of the Shadow Realm, guardian to said place, latter being an immense marble temple of a mildly sloped roof, slanted till a precipice, a sharp vertical incline following the symmetry of the support beams. The front of the enormous construct laid four sculptures of humanoid figures, women, and men each holding their hands at the roof – literally supporting the weight of the temple.

The guardian, Miira, watched thoughtfully, her piercing regard sliced the details, 'the glass is unstable,' despite the scale – people weren't restricted to visit and pay their respect. A temple was a temple no matter what resided inside its walls. Pilgrims from Rosespire within the Shadow Realm, made the long trek to Dorchester, at the foot of Winterpar valley, to a little village known as Frostrest. Contrary to what the overworld would have believed, the village, the place where Staxius made contact with the Silver Guardians, wasn't suitable for life. With the harsh cold weather from the adjacent mountain, perpetual snow, and high altitude, there was no 'living' without risks. One could say the reason to be the temple to Kronos – for it suddenly materialized, and since then, the weather never changed.

Her blond hair swayed on stepping inside, clear and immaculately well decorated, an ensemble of tapestries and various objects were put on display, 'the wall of offering transmigrated from Kronos's realm and moved into Igna's realm. Things are looking good, powers from the forgotten domains are reinforcing the foundation of this world. A sudden jolt might throw Igna off his game,' arms crossed in reflection, 'Scifer definitely loved changing décor into galleries,' her calm gaze looked upwards, 'be careful, Igna.'

Words of worry, words of care went unheard. A dark cell carried whimpers, hands and legs tied, Igna's bruised visage blinked at the many torture devices, 'betrayal,' he coughed, 'Scorpio ratted me out,' the visage cringed in pain.

"I knew, I smelt the fishiness the day you stepped into the palace premises," a fist grabbed and pulled Igna's hair, "-Xen, who are you?" a fork stabbed the fingers.

"Xen," he replied, "-I'm Xen," *Smack,* blood poured from a punch to the face, "-Onte..."

"Shut up," he spat, "-I need a few minutes," turned for the door, "-make sure he doesn't escape," a bloodied piece of cloth landed, "-don't make it hard on me," smirked Onte, "-try anything, and tis Lessie's head."

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Slam, the metal stabs locked, 'some quiet time,' he exhaled and shrugged the gruesome wounds, 'they don't know anything about my true identity. Someone sold me out, either the lawyer or Scorpio. I don't understand how it could happen – I did everything right, I even killed the Phantom... wait,' he blinked, 'I didn't have a reason to kill him. Onte sounded disappointed. We exited the building and I was suddenly knocked unconscious, never saw the attack coming. So much for being always on guard. Damn fucker broke the glasses, my earrings, no way to call éclair. What's their plan, I need to know before making a move, the pain,' he squinted, reality's truth unraveled.

Meanwhile, the celebratory reception within the palace walls grew strenuous. King Juvey, on hearing the bravery displayed by Xen – had medal of honors readied. “-Majesty,” bowed Scorpio, “-the guests have arrived. No signs of Xen anywhere, I’ve asked lady Lessie and the maids, no answer.”

“Is that so?” he fixed his kingly military outfit, “-what about Onte, where is he?”

“Here, majesty,” said the agent, “-I must confess, majesty, I locked Xen away under suspicion of being a traitor. No person can be so powerful and only want a job as a butler – my suspicion turned truth when he killed the captured officer.”

“He’s locked away?” narrowed the King, “-the celebrations of today’s victory were meant to be formal employment. Onte, by what authority-”

“Majesty, I obey the crown, and I have sworn my life to safeguarding the inner peace. I will not accept Xen – no matter how strong he is and useful he proves to be, I simply will not.”

‘Bad,’ gulped Scorpio, ‘-Onte’s stubborn, if he says Xen’s a traitor, he’ll make evidence appear without care for consistency.’

“Majesty,” he interjected, “-forgive my overstepping, Xen’s a trusted friend of mine. I asked him here to prove Hidros had strong fighters, I wanted him to have a taste of another kingdom’s culture and way of life. He sacrificed himself to avenge my assailant, how is he repaid? Torture and humiliation... are those the way the warrior King Juvey rewards bravery on the battlefield?”

“Don’t listen to him, my liege. For all we know, Scorpio could be an undercover agent!”

“I’m offended,” they clashed, “-I’ve worked my whole life in service of the king, answering to demands and looking for how I can best serve my king when he needs the aid.”

“Deflection,” cried Onte, “-it fits well, too well, it’s planned perfectly.”

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“Silence!” thundered, “-Onte, we will talk at greater lengths after the party. Have Xen readied for the ceremony.”

“But!”

“Obey,” he reached for a sword, “-ELSE, ITS THY TONGUE.”

A disappointed shake of the head led into the ajar door slamming shut. Juvey kept his focus on the mirror, ‘-trusted allies,’ he exhaled, ‘-I can’t trust anyone. Onte’s loyal and very close-minded – the gut feeling’s always right. Scorpio’s diligent and always on hand to help. I’m growing old,’ the white-beard and hair didn’t help the comment, ‘-my senses have grown dull. Part of me is getting soft,’ the mirror reflected another figure, a beautifully dressed Queen with semi-conscious pupils, ‘-Ela,’ he spun and grabbed her arms tightly, “-clothes make the man, none’ll suspect you’re a whore,” he laughed, ‘-then again, maybe I’m not so softhearted. Lessie’s been the only member of my family; I’ve tortured and abused, she refused to leave. How long till she fully hates me. After meeting Xen, I saw it, she smiled and laughed. Whatever gut feeling Onte had, only a sincere and kind person could have her feel accepted. She’s the real test – anyone able to win her trust and have her in high spirit will become the personal guard to Ela. I’ve decided,’ they locked arms, ‘-Xen’s a perfect choice.’

Distant moans turned painful screams – the echoey pathway trickled with droplets. Metal gates screeched, a silhouette waited at the doorway, “-come for more?” coughed Xen, “-bring it, Onte. I’ll grit through anything, trust when I say, if I’m ever set free, you’ll be first on my list,” agony from the cursed vision tricked the brain, by seeing everything, blindness eventually settled in a painfully bright flash.

“Easy on the death threats,” the figure mumbled forward, blurry vision and blocked hearing made recognition tough, “-he went hard,” the outline knelt and made eye contact, he saw naught save the facial features.

“Aceline?” he blinked; “-you came for me?” narrowed to barely see distinguishments.

“No,” gentle taps washed the starlet’s image, “-it’s Lessie.”

“Lessie?” the focus sharpened, “-I hallucinated?” a chuckle escaped, “-man, pain is a whole other experience,” the head rolled upward, “-what did the king say?”

“Onte acted on his own,” the ties unlocked, “-escape would have been easy...”

“Yeah,” he smiled, “-I thought about it and figured it to be too boring. Being tortured can sometimes give perspective on life,” he pushed – the open wounds gushed.

“Easy,” she dropped and gave support “-don’t overexert.”

“Lessie, I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“I’m not the person you think I am.”

“Did the torture grant the philosopher affinity or something?” they clambered into the hallway, “-Onte must have hit the head too hard.”

“Of course he has,” he gasped, “-won’t Old Cray...”

“Don’t speak,” she led the walk till a flicker, lanterns waited outside the dungeon – familiar faces including Sawdia and her assistants collectively breathed sighs of relief, “-ugly,” fired Claury.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” he quipped, a conversation followed till the maid quarters. Orders expressly arrived from Juvey – expensive healing potions, scrolls of minor cleaning, and a physician laid at disposal. Lessie vanished halfway amidst the healing process – the hammer strikes of pain disrupted focus. Before he knew it, Xen waited before a mirror with replacement glasses and a white and gold military uniform. No medals no rank, a cap, and the name tag, Xen. “-Sawdia, what’s with the uniform, look different from the others?”

“White and gold...” the mien collapsed in thought, “-it’s like being chosen by the King, a special honor granted to men of chivalrous quality.”

“Way to make one feel special,” he smirked and shuffled into the empty common area, “-the reception starts in a few minutes, I’d head inside if I were you.”

“You’re not coming?”

“No,” smiled Sawdia, “-we maids must ensure the guests are welcomed.”

Without much to say, he thanked their kindness and followed the path to the palace. “-Xen,” whispered a soft voice to the side, shy of the main door, “-wait,” Lessie stood awkwardly in heels and a tightly fitted dress, her hair combed similarly to the stars on television, her mask matched the light-brown color scheme.

“Lessie,” he stopped and stared.

“Don’t,” she shyly lowered her stare, “-I don’t look good in formal attire.”

“Nonsense,” he offered his arm, “-Lady Lessie, would thee kindly accompany me to the reception?”

Her response wasn’t much interesting, “-sorry to say, that was a little bit creepy.”

“So much for being courteous,” he dropped the arm, “-Lessie, let’s go to the party.”

“Now,” she gleamed, “-that’s the Xen I know,” she forcefully locked arms and made for the palace. Enviously passive maids watched, “-lucky them,” exhaled Maria.

“Our prince charming will never come,” sighed Flasia, “-Maria, come, we must attend to the guest’s needs.”

Sawdia’s heart raced, ‘-Claury’s going to serve tonight... the nobles might take a fancy to her stature... damn animals, I-’ she bit her nervousness, “-Claury, why don’t you stay here for the night?”

“No, I want to help, looking at you guys be hurt without my doing anything makes me sad. I can’t anymore, I want to help.”

The booming lights from the palace lit the night – luxurious cars circled the fountain, halted at the red carpet where a valet took the vehicle and left. “Damn,” blinked Lessie, “-these people have a lot of money. Look at that,” she pointed with a flash of the eyebrows, “-saw that car in a magazine. Costs around seven million, where do they get all that cash?” the more time elapsed, the closer grew the entrance, Lessie pulled his arm, “-the back, we take the back door.”

‘Right,’ he scanned and saw judgmental sneers flashed at them, “-Over here,” waved Scorpio

“Someone’s looking in good shape,” added Xen.

“Look who’s talking,” they exchanged fist bumps, “-my, Lady Lessie, you look splendid tonight.”

“She looks good every other night,” commented Xen.

“Stop it,’ returned a sharp elbow., “-no teasing.”

“Come on, follow me,” motioned Scorpio, “-the hierarchy is a thing of life or death. If you’d have stepped onto that carpet – I shudder to imagine what the nobles would have done and said. The white and gold uniform has been a while, not since the last hero, I think. Xen, the reason the outfit is white is that tis a canvas for blood – wearing said uniform means being ready to accept challenges from any opponent. King Juvey loves seeing spars, anyone able to defeat the one in white will be given gold.”

“I have a bounty on my head and everyone is free to challenge and rip the clothes...”

“Yeah, close-range weapons are allowed, no guns. Forgot to mention, the victor has the right to ask anything from the loser – regardless of rank; Lessie’s quite the looker, she might be in trouble. I say, walk in there alone, if not, she’ll be humiliated.”

“No,” he smiled, “-Lessie’s my date tonight. After what Onte did, I’m ready to explode, on my name, those who dare challenge me will suffer a fate worse than death.”

Chapter 849: Elendor [13]

The white and gold uniform is a symbol of strength and loss. The significance of said uniform goes back to a time of war and never-ending suffering. A time when people died more than babes were born, a time of constant agony and fear. The colors white – surrender, and gold, strength – a warring noble with a hundred men faced an army of thousand. The opposition had claimed and destroyed all, what little remained was undergarments of which were white. In force to display their unity despite the odds, the soldiers stood behind their master in nothing save white. The action signaled the birth of the white surrender, life in exchange for all possession. The more time elapsed, the more meaning grew attached to the uniform till a divergence. The first bloodied white flag, not only did the attackers not respect the surrender, they stole and killed.

The actual uniform wouldn’t arrive until a few centuries ago, in a time were duels between leaders were more respected to a show of numbers. A lonesome village youth, a knight in training, dawned a white outfit on seeing rogues. He bravely fought, slicing heads and arms till white turned brownish red. The king at the time passed and took notice of the young man, the latter was invited to the castle and treated to a feast. There, he was granted the honor of knighthood whilst wearing the first iteration of the uniform. Jealous peers took no hassle in slaying the knighted man before a party of nobles, there, the king decreed, “-wearer of white are those who I, king, have recognized as strong and worthy. The color is for humility, my newly appointed knight was slaughtered before having a chance to prove himself. Therefore, the attackers will be sentenced to death, however, the uniform and the death attached to it will follow as a rite of passage for the strong, the powerful, and the hated.” After those events, many men dawned on the outfit, a good percentage of the wearers accepted duels and kept their honor. Time continued; the meaning evolved into the present.

“Wearer of the Saintly Uniform, Xen,” cried an announcer, the collective atmosphere snapped to the side entrance where he stood arms in arms with Lessie. King Juvey was spotted on an elevated terrace of which gave on the lowered dancefloor. Stairways coated in red carpet carried one stage to the next. As expected, the King stood firmly, the glare strongly onto the dance hall.

No introduction was made about Lessie, “-follow me,” gestured Scorpio, by how the body faced forth, he motioned towards the King’s platform.

“Rude,” commented Xen.

“No, not really,” she breathed, carefully catching the deviant stare at her, “-women don’t have much authority in Old Cray’s kingdom. Hidros and Alphaia are different, I heard women lead major companies, especially Lady Elvira, even here, stories about her fights and takeovers are awesome. You should really read the epic written about the Haggard Dynasty. No idea how much is true, but still, it’s amazing to see how a single person could rise above everything and stand at the top.”

“The Epics of the Haggard Dynasty,” he narrowed, “-mention about the writer?”

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“Serene?”

“Right,” he exhaled, “-sure, let us read it sometime.” The peculiarly sharp turns, after passing under chandeliers, climbed to the first layer where stood the king, behind whom extended large, florally engraved doors giving into a glimpse of hedges.

“Majesty,” bowed Scorpio, the duo followed and respectfully gave their regards.

“Scorpio, kindly take my cousin on a visit outside,” said Juvey in an ominously cheerful mood. Who wouldn’t be, for he carried the prettiest flower in the room on his dominant right-arm, Queen Ela. There laid an air of mystic around her visage and her expression, ‘-she’s high, and so is he,’ a quick look at the fingers revealed specks of white, ‘-angel’s dust. The king’s on a trip with the fairies.’ Lessie reluctantly shuffled away, her worried stare shot at Xen. Scorpio inconspicuously threw a thumbs up to his side, ‘-better trust than worry.’

“Xen,” thundered the King, “-how do you enjoy the party?”

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“Enjoyment after I was tortured on baseless accounts. Tell me, King Juvey was the war truly real – the man said you used innocent people to stage a siege and had your forces invade and commit genocide. Was it true?”

“No tact,” he dropped his arm, whispered into Ela’s ears, she nodded and strode to a gathering of ladies-in-waiting, “-follow me.” Before much longer, they took to the second layer, guards at the foot of the stairs were menacingly attentive. The upper floor was reserved to only important guests, a literal way of saying, ‘-we’re higher than the common,’ after passing over the lovely tiled floor, a double-door slid into the open and over a nice view of the main entrance.

“Xen, any ideas why you’re wearing the uniform?”

“Sawdia hinted at the history, why, does it matter? Don’t change the subject, we’re here to discuss what Onte did.”

“I know, I know,” he moved and grabbed the handle, “-Xen, I’m a merciless ruler, a tyrant. If nothing goes my way, I use force and take what I want. I’ve grown up in a place where only strength gives respect – you, on the other hand,” he spun and sat on iron bars, “-I don’t know, can’t figure it out. The way you speak and sometimes challenge me, if anyone else used that tone, they’d be hanged. Something about you, I don’t know, I don’t feel least annoyed, instead, the change is a nice breath of fresh air. Burning down the stables, killing my men, and still, we talk as if nothing happened,” he paused – headlights moved along the road, the fountain lit vibrantly. “-Onte did what he had to. He’s been loyal and very close-minded about who we hire. The man hates newcomers, can’t blame the man. You healed well, therefore, no need for apologies. The uniform is a chance to prove yourself before the cutthroat society I created. After being knighted, you’ll become a noble, low ranking, but noble nevertheless.”

“Why?”

“To safeguard the queen. I need an escort at her side, someone to watch and answer my demand. She’s half-awake, her personality’s gone – the body craves only narcotics. Consider her a mindless doll for my associates. The proud and gallant Queen of Elendor, tis a shame the emperor has his hands wrapped around her neck.”

“Majesty,”

“Yes?”

“The requests – am I allowed to challenge people?”

“No,” he returned, “-the uniform stands there to be a shield, not a spear. You’re powerful, perhaps stronger than I am in hand-to-hand combat. The years have passed me, anyway,” he moved to the entrance, “-comrade, best of luck.”

Thus, Xen stayed behind and gathered his thoughts – ‘Juvey trusts me?’ he narrowed, ‘-the fellow’s a good man in his own way. He’s a comrade to Xen, not Igna – the game has begun, who knows how it’ll end.’ Bell rang, marking the start of the knighting ceremony. ‘He deflected answering questions about the war.’

Soldiers lined the dance floor, a red carpet split through the middle and ended at the throne where sat the King. Nobles joyously stood on the first and second floors, casting subjective thoughts amidst themselves – exchange of whispers and biased remarks.

Scorpio stood firm at the King’s side. He rose, “-attention,” exclaimed the general, the troops shook the room with the gesture, “-welcome to the end of war celebration, the battle against the revolutionists ends with us as victors. Many loyal men were lost in the battle, good men with families and loved ones, sacrificed themselves for the peace of the kingdom. To them, we salute,” hands to their temples “-in death, may their spirits carry their bravery and loyalty.”

“At ease,” shouted the general.

“The battle of Ezbon, the end of the war, was won by the wit and strength of a single man; one who turned misfortune into his favor. A follower of the path of the warrior, Xen,” to which, he broke from the first line and shuffled to where the king stood, “-if not for him, the battle would have dragged, and more good soldiers would have died for naught,” they stared one another, no strenuous aura nor tenseness around the king, a novelty in the eyes of many careful observers, “-for the efforts shown, Xen, I, King Juvey, grant thee a medal of bravery and bestow the title of Knight.” The room gasped, none knew of the decision, and a lot of envious factions snarled. The ritual involved drawing blood and smearing it onto the uniform. Depending on the wound the King takes, it equally reflects the trust he has in the knight. The shock surprised everyone, King Juvey slit his palm and placed it on Xen’s heart, drawing upward to the shoulders, “-Xen, from today forth, thou art a knight of the crown.”

“The mark of Relz,” commented Lessie, “-a death sentence,” she gasped, “-the symbol means the King trusted Xen to carry the burden.”

“The greatest honor a soldier or noble for that matter. He’s a foreigner, I doubt the loyalist will see this as a cause for celebrations. The King’s truly merciless, and weirdly enough, he looks pleased.”

“Trust,” said Lessie, “-Juvey trusts him. I can’t believe I’m saying this, the king trusts Xen... a complete stranger.”

“I know, he doesn’t trust anyone else, but him,” narrowed a man with white silvery-blond hair, there laid an air of superiority and bliss attached to him, a feeling of elevation and salvation. It hurt to stare at the man squarely. The dance floor freed to host Xen; the rite of acceptance was about to start.

‘A strong aura,’ he blinked, ‘-there’s someone with powers beyond that of a normal human,’ a few scans landed on a silvery-haired man, the latter smirked and vaulted – white wings carried his fall, “-you,” he pointed, “-you’re a strong one, aren’t you?”

Juvey, stricken by pure horror, dropped on one knee whilst the rest of the entourage bowed with forehead to the floor. No whisper, not a single out-of-place breath. The unknown figure echoed till a one-on-one stare off, “-Xen,” he narrowed, “-or should I say,” came a whisper, “-Igna, the devil of Glenda. Rather, the title of Watcher of the Shadow Realm suits best?”

Unshaken by the confrontation, “-pleasure is mine, Lucifer.”

“My,” he fluttered away, “-tell me, are you wise to fight a god?”

“Fight a god?” he smirked, “-I’m wise enough to pick my battles. Like you, Lucifer, I care less for a meaningless display of power. You’re the bane of my existence, the mastermind behind the attacks on me and my family, the constant barrage of intrigue, it’s all you...”

“No, no,” he laughed, “-not true, I asked my companions to make your life hell. For example,” a finger rose to strangle and raise Ela, “-I know you want to rescue her. Don’t worry, they can’t hear us.”

“Lucifer,” Igna’s arm crossed, “-today isn’t the day we battle.”

“Why not, are you weak?” *snap,* “-Realm expansion: Ethereal Sea of Truth,” a curtain of white crashed, raw mana pulled at his feet, circling up his body.

“No, you’ll lose,” *Watchers, spectators, names ring high and low, us, unknown to the world’s reality, unknown to the world’s knowledge, have lived in utter solemnness for millennia to come and go. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, beckons my might to be fully materialized without prejudice, reality is but my playground, neither god nor demon shall overcome my authority, face me in stride, face me in fear, reality’s what I wish it to be for knowledge is the true strength: Realm Expansion Shadow Realm Variant – Rantiam.*

“A puny realm of a nightwalker... do you think?”

“No, I don’t think,” both realms clashed, “-I know,” sheer power from the core exploded and to swallow Lucifer’s realm, “-you should know, thief, my true title is Alfred, the Cursed King, devourer of angels and harbinger of misfortune. Heed my word, as a fallen angel, I can rip you to shreds and assimilate thy powers. You’re weak, I’ve reached the summit, neither God nor demon will ever lay a hand on me, for I am the cursed soul of a rejected entity,” *snap,* his wing’s snapped as if twigs, “-return to thy realm, Lucifer. Now isn’t the time for battle.”

“Damn you, ALFRED!”

Chapter 850: Elendor [14]

Grayscale cast upon the slowed idle entourage faded behind Lucifer and the magnificently chipped wings. Half of the latter, features which made him angelic and powerful, hovered to the cold and gleaming ground. Strongly expanded realms fought to a deadlock, or so wanted Igna, subtle increase in the power flashed, akin to premonition, to Lucifer.

“I didn’t want to fight yet,” said Igna, “-the almighty got of Iqavea had to show his hand, how pathetic. You’re naught but a thief, the stolen power is mine and mine alone. Look at what happened to my realm, my precious old world I created – a weak pool of ego and pride. I’m embarrassed for you,” the head shook, “-listen well, Lucifer,” hands pressed, the middle ground broke, the Shadow Realm took on the appearance of a massive body of black – giant arms pressed above the head in a pyramid – faded crimson sparkle lit amidst the featureless head, “-I’m the better version of you,” the figure dove, similar to a diver making for water. Contact made, the body dissolved into a mass of water, raw power drowned Lucifer. The arms helplessly wailed for the surface. Igna pointed, a vortex appeared as a dot, he flung, the tiny speck opened and twirled – a white line stood against the sea of black, Lucifer’s power drained from the broken wings, the latter, of which laid after the cell of water, suddenly pull towards Igna’s empty hand. There, it hovered. Lucifer cast horrified glares onto the epitome of power, the rejected one, “-particle by particle,” he smiled, “-you’ll fade,” the wings shattered into snow, slowly drifting onto Igna’s palm, “-lest,” he rose his stare towards the suffocating fallen angel, “-thee agrees to take the battle into Draebala.”

Lucifer fought and conjured to no avail, the secluded sea of the dark was the core of hell’s eternally burning fire, Void’s center. “-More the struggle carries, the more unlikely will be the undoing of the damage,” no smirk nor expression, Igna took each step slowly, “-imagine, colluding with the supreme god to kill Staxius Haggard, and still, the symbols of power remained unknown and out of thy reach. Demons and Gods are my enemies,” he slammed the cell, “-those mongrels staring from the heaven, watching the world evolve without action, nothing’s changed, nothing will change. Lucifer, poor ol’ Lucifer, if only you were more approachable and less of liability. Asmodeus, Mammon, Beelzebub, and Lilith, the princes of hell will all answer to me someday. Believe, I will return for my world, and you be damned for stealing what I build,” the mass shattered – the arrogance and beautiful Lucifer fell, the clothes outgrew the body. “-Like me,” he knelt and grabbed the child’s jaw, “-the damage done to thy soul will never be reversible. I ensure to leave some reserves, return to whence thee came, leave this world alone, focus on Draebala, for it will be the resting place of either one of us.”

“Alfred,” he narrowed, “-no more cliches. The next time we meet, it’ll be for the final battle. I promise on my title name to leave this world, however, my companions will be free to act how they wish. I don’t need to intervene, one day, you’ll ruin yourself,” a bubble swallowed Lucifer into nothingness.

‘A battle against Lucifer,’ he stood, frozen time melted, ‘-I won today, and I will win the future. No one will step in my way again,’ the fist opened and closed, ‘-Draebala.’

Meanwhile, the portal reopened to an unknown area, an unknown realm. Lucifer gasped, the body weak and the mind dizzy, “-my lord,” muffled in the distance, “-are you well?”

“My apologies, curiosity got the better of me. Zeus’ still asleep?”

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“Yes, he rests, no idea on when he’ll wake.”

“Carry this message to him when he wakes; Cursed King Alfred is alive, an entity powerful enough to destroy the heavens on a whim.”

“This is good news?”

“Suppose so, we’ll take the heavens for ourselves?”

“No, not now. My strength’s drain. I need to rest.”

The frozen bodies moved, King and entourage stunned rose to naught. None knew what happened or why they’d prostrated themselves to Igna.

“I, eldest son of Viscount Mandl, issue a challenge to the sainted warrior,” before long, none cared for what happened, the memories vanished to only be in the moment. A uniformed fighter had risen a sword to Xen, therein, the first battle of said night.

“My pleasure,” he smiled, hands in a loose fist, the instant the challenger stepped forward with his sword, Xen ducked, grabbed the man’s collar, and threw him over the shoulder, a heavy mass echoed as did the clinking of a fallen blade, he rose a menacing glare to the others, “-I swear on my name, Xen, challengers, come forth, I care not about rank nor strength. Come in numbers or come with long-range weapons – with only these fists, I issue a test for the King’s strongest protectors. Prove to me that protecting the king is worth my time.”

“INSOLENCE!” exclaimed the General – knights in armor rose their spears menacingly. Xen and Juvey exchanged eye contact, the king rose a hand, “-you hear the young knight,” he laughed, “-show him what my fighters are capable of. The one able to defeat Xen will be handsomely rewarded, I swear this on my name.” Men after men, it didn’t matter if they held weapons or not, Xen fought, blocked, prolonged battle as he pleased.

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Whistle, “-impressive,” commented Scorpio.

“He provoked everyone,” shuddered Lessie, “-if he loses, I’m done for,” she gulped. Older men scattered about the premises had lecherous grins pointed at her, ‘-what are you trying to prove? Xen...’

Minutes elapsed into hours, Xen’s white uniform turned an abstract work of shades of brownish red, shoulders down and face to the ceiling, heavy pants settled the heart, ‘-there they are,’ he gulped, ‘-the last boss.’

A giant phenom of a creature, chained and gagged; tore onto the palace dancefloor, “-here is my challenger,” thundered the King, “-the berserker, Knivo,” it took a dozen of soldiers to hold, yet, if Knivo so much as moved his hands to scratch – the guards helplessly pulled alongside the sheer strength.

“King Juvey,” he spun and knelt, “-must I fight this simple man?”

“Knivo, don’t underestimate my knight,” he smiled, “-to the lords and ladies present, my maids will shortly arrive to take bets. Who will win, Knivo, the strongest brawler in my army, a man who caught the shell of the tank, or Xen, the martial artist?” Odds favored Knivo, and in time where the maids shuffled to Queen Ela, she rose her hand and dropped her rings and jewelry in Xen’s favor.

'Queen Ela made her prediction,' gulped the room. Wounded fighters of before, young nobles, also made their bets in favor of Xen. There no longer needed to prove his might, for he had defeated opponents with but fists – guns, rifles, knives, nothing mattered. Scorpio and Lessie watched, the latter pulled her mask, "-I wish I could bet."

"Too bad," shrugged Scorpio, '-Igna Haggard is the strongest in Hidros, and tis not an understatement. The man carries the strength of an army, I doubt Knivo will win. He could kill everyone and take Elendor if he pleased, yet, the master decides to play along and hold back. I fear those on the receiving end. I feel sorry for King Juvey – betrayal will knock sooner or later.'

"Votes have been cast," said the announcer, "-time is nigh fighters." Each shuffled to opposite ends of the floor, "-ready?" they took their stance, "-BEGIN!"

Knivo sprinted and threw the first punch – the entire crowd expected Xen to dodge and counterattack, however, he threw a punch of his own – they made contact and sent ripples, "-the reason I dodge is that," he moved his fist a few centimeters away,"-if I fight with all my strength," *smack,* he punched again, the force rattled across the cannon sized arms, blood vessels ripped, bones shattered, without hesitation, he jumped and fired another push with the left hand, Knivo dropped instantly,"-it'll be over too quickly." Xen's pent-up rage subsided, '-Alfred's hatred is out my system,' he landed and exhaled, '-a symbol of peerless physical strength,' pierced through the sleeves, '-Alfred's strong, too strong,' he chuckled and moved forward.

"..." a pin drop silence – nobles who'd made fun and snarled at Xen's position and title were clapped shut. King Juvey blinked, Knivo hadn't been defeated in over five years.

"HE DID IT," hands pressed, '-you did it, Xen, you did it,' an admiration-filled glee washed Lessie's face, "-Scorpio, look, he did it," she smiled, giddied with joy.

"Results don't lie!" thundered Juvey, "-my newly appointed Knight is the best of all," he smiled, "-let's raise a toast to the undefeated martial-artist!" the mood greatened. The few who betted in favor of Xen walked away with riches. Helpers flooded the dancefloor, lifting a beast as heavy as Knivo required at least a truck. The battered fighters joined hands, as did Xen, together, they took the behemoth to the infirmary. Maids cleaned the floor and celebration resumed.

"By Lucifer's might," exhaled And Mandl, "-you're a strong one."

"Not really," he exhaled, "-martial arts is an always evolving subject. Can't be complacent."

"Why did you jump and punch for the last move, he could have countered."

"Fighting bigger opponents is easier than you think. Adventurers face down monsters twice, if not thrice their size daily. After battles, you get used to it and don't care about size. I went head-to-head and intercepted the punch before he drew the full strength – the suddenness knocked him off-balance, takes a big man a few seconds to return to a strong base, the interval was what I needed to finish the job."

"Really?"

"Yes, why?"

"From where I stood, it looked more like you overpowered him..."

“To each their own,” he said, “-the other fighters look at me with envy and jealousy. What’s different about you, Lord Mandl?”

“The others are fools to ignore what just happened. The ego’s bruised – most of them will be spending the night trying to score a lady’s favor in bed. Celebrations like these are political plays – the end, three days from now, will host backdoor meetings and a lot of schemes, all pertaining to the Kingdom’s future,” they nonchalantly ambled to a hallway which stood over a relatively atmospheric garden built-in way to resembled a park. Amber-colored lanterns and couples; the corridor split to the side onto a roof made to be a terrace.

“Nights always lovely,” he smiled. Inside light caught the expensively dressed noble warmly, slightly burnish jewelry added flair to the overall attire. Clean-shaven, a rounded nose, puffy cheeks, and blueish eyes – the refined way of speech and movements were as expected for a highborn. He looked below with a childish curiosity, “-look,” said a whisper, “-look,” he leaned close, sweat gleamed, “-they’re about the kiss,’ he gulped.

“About to kiss?” Xen turned and watched, breaking stare from the couple and the young noble, “-don’t tell me you’re a virgin?”

“S-sorry?” he gasped, “-n-nothing of t-the sorts.”

“Right,” he turned to the couple, “-won’t see much action from here,” winked Xen, “-come,” a lean over the balustrade showed a path of grass cupped in a lonesome corner, “-let’s go,” he whispered.

“Xen... I’m not sure we should...”

“Get on with it,” chuckled Xen, “-I’ve always wanted to do this with a friend, come on,” fist loosely around a pipe, he slid and dropped to a lowered posture.

“Fine,” shrugged Mandl, the delicate expression of morality cracked into blissful ignorance of a child, a sense of happiness as pure as it came. Past hedges, benches, the duo moved into the darker part of the garden, moans and giggles escaped.

“Someone’s getting some action,” whispered Xen.

“-Y-Yeah,” gulped Mandl – a convoluted detour landed them squarely at the farthest side inside a bush.

“My heart’s racing,’ commented Mandl.

“Awesome, isn’t it?” they whispered and watched, “-there, look to the right – a lady waits patiently for her prince to arrive.”

“Annia,” said a distant echo, “-my love, I’ve come.”

“Randy,” they rushed into each other’s arm, “-I wish we could meet openly, my father...’

“Forget about him, I’m here, let’s spend the night talking about how pretty you are under the starry light.”

“Boring,” commented Mandl.

“Yeah, looks more like a play than some getaway... if only it had been in Hidros.”

