

Death Magic 851

Chapter 851: Elendor [15]

“Right,” he climbed out the bushes, threw a connivingly friendly smile at the couple. They returned the little indiscretion with a cordial smile, the male partner seemed eager to run, “-carry on, love birds,” he motioned, “-scram.”

“Xen...” followed a horrifiedly excited Mandl, “-why did we break cover?”

“Honestly friend, are you na?ve on purpose?”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Igna took notice of the noble’s flushed expression, more than excited, the man held tangible embarrassment, “-don’t worry, I’m not mocking,” he reassured and casually tapped Mandl’s shoulder, “-follow me, let’s get you some action.” A young night for many, and a tired one for Igna, sudden activation of the Shadow Realm was similar to popping a balloon.

Ladies in waiting, some in their late forties, others in the earlier twenties – depending on the noble families and those wise to send their daughters as political bargaining chips, most of the ladies sought approval and love, as confided in popular romance novels – originating from the land of the unclean, Hidros. In a way, the social stigma of said land being a place of heretics hadn’t fully grasped the Elendorian population. Most knew what freedom was, they knew what it meant to be alive and accountable for their actions. Next step into establishing the lifestyle the church wanted and craved, an authoritarian state, the generations who experienced freedom certainly needed to be culled. Naturally, on overlooking the dancefloor from the first floor, Xen grabbed a glass of strong liquor and sipped. Mandl wandered to and fro, the adorable face was reason enough for admiration. In a way, Xen, who survived quite the attack, became reclusive, instead, channeling the newfound fame into bringing out Mandl’s charm.

Thoughts of what the kingdom would become flooded the mind, ‘-culling the population, removing obstacles who know what freedom is... I wonder if the fake war is at play or was the battle true. Not that it bothers me,’ the eyes carried to the King’s entourage of high-profile figures, ‘-a knight of the crown,’ he sipped, till a soft, “-Hello,” whispered in his ear.

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“Pardon me,” he turned and smiled, “-how can this bleak fellow help?” a mother, by the first glance, rich, nice clothing, not extravagant but quality – lowkey golden jewelry, a dark-complexion, and nicely tied hair. Her arms weighed heavy with a babe, “-are you Xen?” she inquired.

“With the bloodied uniform, sure hope it’s me,” he scoffed and greatly paid attention to the babe, “-excuse my asking, are you the mother?”

“Why?” returned a slightly chipper tone.

“Bemused actually,” he leaned and whispered, “-you look more like an elder sister, as for the gun, best not use it.”

The cheerfulness sapped, “-what gun?” she whispered.

“Oh, that won’t do,” he stepped away, “-whispering the question sadly christens thee as the culprit, madam.”

She hurried into his face, “-inside voices.”

“Right,” hands raised, “-you got me,” he leaned against the railing, “-was never my intention to offend.”

Footsteps cackled in the distance, “-Xen,” gleamed a newly born Mandle, “-are you?” a scan told of a differing situation, the young noble skillfully gestured and call the guard’s attention, “-that baby is fake,” he narrowed, “-else, it would be crying... don’t you think?”

“My friend is quite right,” he reached and took a sip, “-pressing your chest so close to mine is bound to suffocate that poor toy, and sorry.”

“Why apologize?” she stepped off.

“Sorry for the toy, the latter was crushed between muscle and bones, it’s bound to hurt when the male holds the gentleness, I’d associate to a lovely lady...”

“Enough,” she dropped the bundle of joy and pulled a gun, “-stand down else I shoot.” Marching stormed the first floor, each side blocked escape routes, “-gentlemen,” spoke Xen, “-this here is my friend, Irene, a fellow adventurer from Hidros. ‘Twould be nice for our foreplay to remain, you know, foreplay.” The Royal Guard leader smugly turned to his men and nodded, the heavy steps clamored down the stairs, leaving an anticlimactic taste in the observer’s mouths.

“Xen, sure she’s a friend?”

“A feral cat is the most likely fit,” he shrugged, “-anyway, we best talk,” he grabbed her wrist, “-alone,” came a wink.

“Ok,” said Xen, “-I guess I’ll go join my newly made companions.” Upbeat music rattled in the background, doors to a terrace opened – a bench held an unconscious drunk with bottles at his feet, opposite the men laid a hunched duo talking inaudibly over the balustrade.

“Tell me, stranger, why the gun?” they shuffled to the end of the terrace, a far enough distance from the others.

“Thought my name was Irene, from Hidros...”

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“Right, my bad,” he chuckled, “-Irene from Hidros, how goes it,” he observed the view, “-the weather’s nice.”

“Weather talk?”

“Small talk,” he sipped, “-tell me, what is it you want?”

“Every bit the man I imagined,” she scanned top to bottom, “-arrogant, obnoxious, and overwhelming.”

“Confident, charming, and exciting,” he quipped, “-surprised the king’s hidden guard detail has any women in it...”

“Ahhh,” she exhaled and licked her lips, “-the sexist king, I get it,” she nodded very condescendingly, “-don’t worry, the girls and I are quite competent at protecting our queen.”

“Doing a bad job at it.”

“Sorry?”

“Listen, I’m not from around here, nor do I care to learn the common sense. It’s painfully obvious the king’s using her as leverage, throwing her from bed to bed. Not saying it’s wrong... never mind, was never much of a thinker.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Queen Ela’s wise to take care of herself.”

“Suppose she is,” he sipped, “-so long, Irene.”

“Huh?”

Stopped shy of the drink, “-it’s the part where you scurry along. I’m sure the secretive guard’s unit has more on their plate. How’s this for attention,” he pointed to the garden, “-someone’s about to be murdered.”

“Ha-ha, nice joke.’

“I’m serious,” *BANG,* echoed a distant gunshot, “-there he goes, the lovely couple of earlier has died. I find it amusing,” he turned to nothing, the lass vanished as quickly as she arrived. The glass felt empty – liquor in his mind and festivities on the horizon, Xen walked inside and joined the drunk Mandl. To each their own, the noble – quite a name in the kingdom, sat with slumped shoulders beside Xen – they watched as the other, more stable men, danced.

“A few too many drinks,” said Mandl, “-I feel amazing, my head’s spinning, and my stomach’s heavy.”

“Absolutely no puking,” shunned Xen, “-hear me well, soldier, we mustn’t waste good booze,” and before the sentence registered, Xen kindly pushed Mandl’s head to the side, there, the latter hurled onto a familiar face, “-God damn it,” said a loud sigh.

“Doubt it,” he shrugged, “-excuse me, can someone help in cleaning my poor ol’ friend’s mishap?” *grunt,* an avalanche of smelly innards spewed. Maids came in twos and threes, unfamiliar faces, “-I’ll take care of him,” shoulders around Mandl, “-Irene, as you change into another bland outfit, care to bring a change of clothes?”

“I’m a bodyguard, not an errand girl.”

“Say that again without the puke and foul smell.”

“You’re annoying,” she rolled her eyes and left.

“I think you mean attractive,” the voice carried, she spun and pulled her tongue in a grimace. The mess boldly threw the celebrations into a land field of crude remarks. Deaf to their stares, they carried on, “-I’m so sorry about this, Xen. Don’t humiliate...”

“No my friend, the night’s only getting started. Besides, none’s going to remember this tomorrow.” Between the stumbling and motion to hurl, the guestroom finally came in sight with a surprise, Lessie waited opposite the door – her attention laid amidst the freshly painted ceiling.

“Hey,” he nodded, “-care to help?”

“Sure,” the lock clicked, “-are you ok?”

“I’m fine, more worried about this fellow,” once inside, he undressed Mandl and threw him into a slowly filling bathtub. The showerhead rained much-needed clarity, “-I’m leaving the door open. Wash yourself and have this,” he forcibly pushed a potion down the noble’s mouth, “-get better,” quick to grab the towel, “-right, Lessie,” he dried his hands, “-how’s the night been?”

There laid a concerned look on her visage, “-what?” he paused, “-something on my face?”

“No, no,” she shook her head, “-I don’t get it, you’ve changed, the way of speech is different, there’s a tinge of, I don’t know, smugness?”

“Guess my way of speech did change,” he shrugged, “-who cares really. About my question, I’m still waiting,” he toggled the television and settled on the couch. Lessie rose from the bed and followed into the other room.

“I wish I could have betted on the match, Xen, are you truly normal?”

“If tis about my dialect, I’m offended. Can’t a man change when he drinks?”

“Change, sure, not like this – you’re different, freed almost.”

“You have no idea,” he smiled and threw his feet on the table, “-kindly check on Mandl.”

“Wasn’t he, your responsibility?”

“Fine,” he stood, “-at least check the door, someone’s going to knock.”

“I didn’t hear any,” *knock, knock,* ‘-how?’ the tap came as soon as he vanished into the showers, ‘-weird,’ she thought and went to greet the visitor.

“Lessie.”

“Irene... what are you?”

“Came to deliver clothes,” her taller stature made it easy to glance over Lessie’s head.

“I’m about done here, darling,” echoed in the distance, “-the guy’s dead, you may have pressed his neck too harshly.” Fear washed Lessie’s face, “-I’d have loved to have died in whence I came.”

“Let me in,” she pushed the ajar door and hurried to the bedroom, “-XEN, I’M TAKING YOU IN!” her steps hurried with fear,

“For questioning?” he returned nonchalantly with legs crossed on a beanbag, “-now ladies, I understand the allure my friend exude’s quite irresistible. I do implore for a little bit of tact...”

Staring them was the third eye, “-don’t look surprised,” commented Xen, “-you pull a gun, so does my friend, it’s self-defense.”

“Honestly,” exclaimed Lessie, “-have the decency to coverup.”

“Sorry for being in my room?” narrowed Mandl, “-Xen, who are these’s women?”

“Your entourage for tonight. Personal heaters, I mean, that one is packing heat.”

“Tell me about it,” they exchanged meaningfully suggestive winks.

“Men will be men,” sighed Irene, “-next time, I’ll shoot you,” she flashed her gun at Xen, “-the jests will do more harm than good one day.”

“Don’t talk about morals,” he rose, “-clothes, have you brought any?” a package flew overhead shortly after, “-get dressed, lord Mandl.”

“Hey,” he reached and grabbed Xen’s sleeve, “-thank you. Call me And, we’re friends.”

“Xen for me,” he returned a sincere smile, “-take your time, have a nap if needed, I’ll be in the next room.” The puffy cheeked And escorted the trio out of the bed, after which it clicked, leaving Xen, Irene and Lessie before a low volume television.

“I ought to return.”

“Me too.”

“Right,” he vaulted over the couch and dropped, “-close the doors on the way. I’ll be here if anyone asks, though I doubt the crowd will care for a simple fighter,” *click,* escaped in the distance, ‘-she’s right,’ he rested on his back, ‘-I feel and speak differently. What’s happened, I’m usually nonchalant and serious... there’s a certain smugness in my tone. Was it because of Lucifer?’ the palm opened to a mini-representation of the wings, ‘-without this, there’s no way you’re able to harm another deity, let alone demi-god or demon. Curse my soul to never reach godhood, and I take away the source of pride and power. Tit for tat,’ he yawned, ‘-tit for tat.’

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Gasp, ‘-where am I?’ he rose to a half-naked lady over the adjacent couch, ‘-still in the room,’ he sat upright and looked around, ‘-when did these women come?’ feet on the warm-carpet, ‘-beautiful maidens, I certainly had no influence here...’ he stopped, ‘-I’m even thinking strangely, what’s happening?’ a yawn stole the sudden worry. *Stumble,* boomed in the next room, he walked and pulled the handle, the door unlocked into a bed filled with women. And slept in the middle with arms around a pillow, ‘-I was right about the allure...’ he blinked, ‘-did I?’

Chapter 852: Elendor [16]

“Since when are you popular with women?”

“Xen, my friend,” the flushed noble rose from a pile of ladies in undergarments, some half and others fully naked. The immediate scent was sweat, perfume, and alcohol, “-glad to see you,” he stumbled onto the carpet, “-you won’t believe me.”

“Right, put And Junior away, then perhaps we can talk.” The morning had risen over the festivities – invited guests, the more influential, stayed within the palace premises, whereas the other, lesser influential, moved to the capital for hotels.

Across the ocean, whereby the roads carve into a land of groves, grass, and green – backdropped by mountain ranges in the far-away distance – an envoy marked by the Phantom insignia, carried supplies headed for Rotherham. The otherwise empty streets rattled under engine rumbles, pebbles to the side-swept into the massive land of weeds and rocks. Music played, driver and passenger sat patiently with guns to their side.

“Put the music down,” fired a voice at the back of the truck, “-call from the boss,” he yelled, the upbeat track lessened, “-hello boss, how can I help?”

“Good morning, I called to warn – there’s a checkpoint a few kilometers out. Show them the pass and all will be grand. Have the forces be readied in case of a battle.”

“Understood, sir,” the call ended. Lines of solemn soldiers gazed, “-new orders team,” fired the leader, “-there’s a checkpoint ahead,” mere mention had many reach for the weapons, “-as we know, law-enforcement for Erat isn’t responding to orders from Central. Therefore, we, the private army of Phantom, will be stepping on the battlefield to give a message.”

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Earlier, at a time where the night loomed, a briefing of the following events had the fighters on the edge of their seat. “We have reason to believe the Revolting faction has settlements scattered around Hidros. The continent is big and dangerous as is, monster trouble has evolved into a fear of expansion, villages grow, more villages, instead of settling farther away, create communities. Join and merge until growing into towns. One of said unknown settlements, Erat, was founded as a stopping point between Rotherham and Rosespire – here,” the leader pointed on a map, “-is the point where the roads link. Since the new coming of power, many towns and villages have disappeared, many fled to other provinces – monster trouble has been passed by the plague. Scout reports suggest Erat has been shunned as a dumping ground for the ill and weak. Today’s operation is solely to clear miscommunication, the checkpoint will be taken with or without force. Be at the ready – the area is prone to backstabbing – geographically, we stand at a disadvantage.”

éclair sat in his office; multiple reports headed his way. Files on files, the details filtered, per order of the council, a decision was made to secure Oxshield from slums and unknown settlements. Erat was first on the list, the place grew a hotspot for vagrants and ruffians – the latter both not being of much trouble if activities had remained low-key. Alas, there needed to change. Lost cargo during transit was tracked from said area to a little tavern known as The Monel.

‘Report points to it being a face for a bigger operation. I’ve confirmed with Lady Elvira, Phantom is not involved. This leaves the revolution, if the checkpoint lashes, we’ll have no option but to pull the trigger and officially send a notice,’ he dropped in the seat, ‘-let the operation begin.’

Trucks neared the checkpoint – the road suddenly inclined to climb a hill, thick groves gave the illusion of a haunted forest, a place truly distant from civilization, thus the impression till the summit. The land

cleared, a magnificent view rose on the horizon, the road split towards the right. A uniformed man rose a baton, signaling the transit to stop. The driver halted, tenseness in the air didn't bode well.

"Transit from Phantom, eh?" exclaimed a member of the checkpoint detail.

The officer with a baton in hand threw desolate regard into a thicket where laid a small building. On its porch sat an older man, he rose an eye over the newspaper and nodded.

"What's the deal?" inquired the driver, "-we're a dispatch from Phantom," he narrowed, "-you know..."

"Tough luck pal," shrugged the officer, "-tis in our judicial rights to investigate cargo coming in and out of our territory."

"Since when is a no-name settlement counted as an entity to Hidros' soil?" quipped the driver, "-Sorry pal, I don't have time to waste. I'd rather die for being late than being searched."

"Stop, stop," an armed force of dozen shuffled from the left, "-get out the vehicle."

In the inaudible distance, the man holding a newspaper breathed slowly, '-they're carrying weapons,' the lips pressed tightly around a pipe. '-Phantom is smart not to put armed guards with the traffic – moving weapons is easier done under the cover of normalcy.'

The confused guard sought answers, the man save but tipped his head and turned the page. Forces grew by the second – a circle round the parked truck, "-get out of the vehicle," exclaimed from the outside, "-else we'll have your head!"

"This isn't going anywhere," sighed a voice in the crowd, "-kill the driver."

Bang, the half-risen window buckled and remained strong, "-Phantom has cash," whistled another, "-bulletproof windows, those things cost a fortune," bullets wailed at the empty seat, the driver ducked as did the passenger.

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"Let's go to war," he smirked and gave the signal, the gunfire outside halted, footsteps approached the door.

"I think the driver's dead," seeing inside was hard between shattered glass and crimson tint.

"Don't lower your guard," they rose their guns at the front, "-check the back," he ordered, majority of the guards muddled, "-it's locked."

"Key's with the driver," they shrugged, "-right, open the door," the split between changing target, a moment of the lowered guard – the backdoor slammed open, armed fighters ran out whilst a few stayed to provide cover. Bullets flew, heads dropped – communication ruined – cacophony behind gave much-needed space for the driver and passenger to retaliate. Gun drawn, Phantom's rifles thoroughly overpowered whatever they used, armor or whatnot, nothing mattered. The ordeal was over under five minutes, armed soldiers rose their weapons at the reading man, "-put the paper down."

"No need for violence, I surrender," hands in the air, "-we messed with the wrong crowd," completion traveled to the capital where a busy éclair sat in a political meeting, '-Yui, move to the second phase of

the conquest. Have Wendy's squad infiltrate the town, I need information, best to learn their tactics before laying siege.'

'As you wish, brother.'

The news didn't only travel to Rosepire, it also made a long trip to Kreston to the summit of St. Lucie, a town built around the Cathedral in service to Lucifer, "-bad news," whispered across the table, "-forces have been captured. Waging war this early will be our loss. We must reach out to the Empire for help."

"No no, we can't afford them entering Hidros. One wrong move and they could stand to take more than just Kreston."

"So, what's the problem. The only goal is to fight and win against the fake king," the arduous voice of battle whistled to a bench directly laying on a statue dedicated to Lucifer. Queen Eia watched, hands bound in prayer – a crack shattered the face, '-what?' she gulped, the eyelashes fluttered, '-the stature cracked,' confusion forced her into wiping her eyes and recheck – there, the cracked face disappeared, '-did I imagine?' A shadow moved into her peripheral, "-father?"

"Eia," he smiled, "-I found you," he rushed to her side and tightly gave an embrace, "-Eia, Eia," he held her chin, "-I missed you, my daughter."

"Why are you here, father?"

"Came to check on my daughter, why?"

"I-" she stopped, "-I was abandoned... rejected by everyone, why?"

"I don't care about what happened," he sat, "-what is done is done, I'm sure you had your reason. The continent's divided, and for what?"

"I know, it's wrong, they've wronged me."

"Eia," he grabbed her hands, "-are you pregnant?"

"Yes?"

"Who's the father?"

"..."

"Who's the father, Eia, tell me."

"..."

"Eia?"

"Father, why are you here?"

"To find the answers. All I wanted was to have a happy family, it didn't matter if you were with Igna or Nicola, my heart yearns for my family to be blissful. This," he watched, "-you, in particular, there's no hint of happiness. Misery," the head shook, "-why force such an ordeal on thee..."

“Don’t take their part,” quipped strongly, “-I didn’t ask to be shunned. Igna ignored me, said I was free to do what I wanted, so I did.”

“-And my daughter decided to give her virtue to another, committed adultery, and bears the child of another. I can’t be angry,” he bent with an elbow to his thighs, “-your mother was the same, I don’t even know if you’re my child or not. She slept with her butlers, nobles, everyone... I couldn’t do anything, my trust betrayed time and time again – she did what she wanted until her father died. It was then she changed – Staxius came into our lives, the two knew each other as children or so I was told. I’m grateful to him and his family, for the shared bonds and loyalty gave us perspective. Your mother’s will to fulfill her father’s wishes led to a massive war against the church and Kreston. Throughout the ordeal – Staxius helped in battle, they fought until the church was ousted, tis then, the continent finally united.”

“I know...”

“We’re back to square one. The revolution is baseless, do you really want the throne?”

Her eyes wandered, “-I.”

“Father,” came a distant voice, “-I ran as fast I could when they said you arrived.”

“Nicola.”

“Go inside, Eia, the weather’s grown cold, I need a few words with your father.”

Worry filled her thought – sadly, inability to stand against her lover eventually carried her inside, leaving the two one on one. “-Why are you here, Piers?”

“A blunt jump.”

“Cut the shit, I know you’re here to sway Eia’s mind. Not going to happen,” he thrust forward and stared in Pier’s face, “-we granted passage because you’re her father. Don’t overstay the welcome...”

“Do what you want,” he returned, “-I don’t much care for the politics. All that matters is her happiness. I’ll leave, for now, carry my warm wishes to my daughter,” he turned his back.

“Not so fast,” echoed in the distance, a click sent chills down Piers’ spine, “-I can’t let you walk away, father-in-law. Too much is at risk, orders from the top,” gun rose, “-watch over her in the afterlife, dear father,” *bang,* the shot rattled inside, where an oblivious Eia sat.

GASP, dropped on all-fours, ‘I’m alive?’ he panted.

“Lord Piers,” grinned Alta, “-should have known how the battle would end.”

“What did you do?”

“Activated a remote teleportation spell,” she smiled, “-consider it a prototype from the University.”

“Where are we?”

“In Arda,” she stood overlooking the bustling town of Glenda, “-I have a meeting to attend with Blood-King’s faction. Care to join?”

“Are you sure?”

“Right I am,” she made for the stairs along the castle walls, “-firsthand experience, tell us what Kreston is like.”

A relieved exhale escaped, ‘-why bother fighting the tide,’ the expression firmed, ‘-you were right, Gallienne, the Haggard’s are truly worthy to rule Hidros. They answer to no one but themselves, ranging from commoners to nobles, the perspective is realist and idealist at the same time. They know what they’re doing, same can’t be said about the revolt.’

“Stand there in soliloquy or we head to the meeting?”

“Sorry, sorry,” he dashed, “-I was deep in thought.”

The battle of Erat was the first in a truly bloody war of kin against kin. The dirtiest Hidros would ever see. Queen Eia and her unborn child were stuck in the middle, between love and duty, the war was yet to fully erupt.

Chapter 853: Elendor [17]

Midday so told the watch. Xen and a newly made friend, an interesting character, Lord Mandl, found themselves seated outside a very lush café. A steaming hot cup of coffee before a similar hot outside, “-was this your idea of class?” narrowed the noble to another guest, Nadhi, a member of the young lord’s very lucrative last night.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged and scoffed snacks, Xen kept a relaxed expression, the attention of the passing crowd – physically and mentally different people from Hidros. The outfits were on the lesser side, darker complexion, skinnier and taller figures.

“Staring in the distance?” commented the lord.

“I find the area quite amusing,” professed Xen, “-everyone’s walking without care for the heat. Look at me, look at us,” a shadow hid the eyes, “-we’re under the shade... I understand how a turkey must feel in the oven.”

“What?” frowned the lass, tan marks of swimsuits leaped from her rather ‘radiating,’ top, despite the weird request, the smile was bright as were her pupils. Shorter side hair kept in a ponytail, “-don’t blame it on me, blame television,” her pout led to a nearby drink. “-Besides, I haven’t indulged myself in a long time. Training’s hard, the foods almost nothing but grass... well, anyway, out of the countless women yesterday,” a ‘-be careful,’ aura fill her way of speech, “-why pick me?”

And opened his mouth, “-no,” fired Xen holding an index to the noble, “-And, allow me to answer,” the body tilted towards the lady invitingly, “-you see, fair maiden – I chose for us to have a companion,” he smiled, “-and don’t misinterpret, I didn’t pick, a gentleman must never objectify women, it simply came down to your smile and cheeriness. The way you walked out that room with energy and vigor, I felt rejuvenated, and I mean it in a good way.”

Her slightly rounded nose lifted to Xen to which she pushed her body forward, “-I like you,” she winked, “-good answer,” casually flipping her pony-tail to And, “-what about you, And, tell me your answer,” she licked her lips seductively.

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"You're the prettiest," escaped – the flushed cheeks reddened, "-I'm sorry," he covered his mouth charmingly.

"Ha-ha," her cheeks crinkled around her eyes, signs of sincerely genuine laughter, "-you two make a great duo. How long have do you know one another, must be great friends."

They exchanged glances, "-actually, we met yesterday."

"And is correct. He had more charm than the other, certainly more to the other obnoxious invitee. The celebrations start later this evening. And, Nadhi, why not spend time together."

"Xen?" said And in a questioning tone, the cheery Nadhi brusksly moved her head from man to man.

"Tonight's party is about showing off one's date," sighed Xen, "-sorry, Nadhi, I wanted my friend here to have the best date of the night. After what I said... comes across as rather rude, doesn't it."

"I get it now," she exclaimed, "-Hidros's way different from Elendor, I get that. We don't usually care about how the other person feels, I mean, the queen was our pride and joy, she always kept a strong smile and a dignified attitude, I look up to her. I guess it's different in Hidros, the leaders are different – is the king like a recluse or the leader from the shadow type?"

"Actually," motioned Mandl, "-King Igna might be the greatest mind in our generation. I can't hold a candle to him," the fingers quickly tapped and pulled a page dedicated to King Igna's journey, "-the stories about him are amazing, recently, this," a familiar title caught Xen's eyes, "-The Epics of the Haggard Dynasty. An amazing read, I'm not even kidding. The way Serene wrote the details is like there's more to what's on paper – there's depth, it's like anything's possible."

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"Doesn't that mean the secretive family is exposing their secrets?"

"No, she uses different names and fake locations, the context is true and the personages are real. Far from what I've read, there isn't any chronological order, she writes what she wants and details the epic as her fingers desire."

"Tell me more," Nadhi's curiosity piqued, "-they sound fun."

Xen save but smiled and stood, "-seems to me, the date's going better than I expected. No way I'll get in the middle of such a lovely relationship. I'll see you around, And, show the lovely a great time."

"Wait," he called, "-what about you, got any money?"

"Always the caring soul," returned a kind refusal, "-I would never take money or favors from a friend. Besides, we've only known each other for a day. Keep the valuable closer, friend, never know who might be painting a target," thus, he excused himself and soon landed inside a hallway lined by various shops. A walk around the city was quite an experience. People were always in motion – they walked, some ran, the warmth in the air was quite a hassle, not many thought it as trouble. The lonesome walk went from the good part to the outlier district, merchants sold knock-off items, they screamed prices, and drew the visitors. A disheveled road, dirty, and filled with trash, roughly took old trucks into a jumpy ride – hit a pit too hard and the driver might have flung out the windshield.

'They don't care about keeping their streets clean. Bags flying, honestly,' he walked, hand in the pockets, '-feel bad for those living here,' a certain alley caught his attention – the many locals made conscious efforts in avoiding a certain radius at the alley's mouth. With nothing better to do, he followed instinct and slipped into said area, '-what dark secrets do you hold, alley,' the winding path dug deeper into a gated area – the whole installation pointed to an abandoned factory. Gates were torn, footprints visible and recent, '-fun,' he ducked and moved inside, '-what am I even doing?' he shuffled with hands in his pocket. A watchtower rose in the distance, unhinged window, shattered glass, and an ominously blowing wind. A few steps in, at the start of the compound, symbols pertaining to a gang, '-Yeo,' jumped in mind. Distant moans and murmured rose in the distance, '-wait, I know that voice,' the focus heightened, muffled cries caught his ears. No questions asked, he snuck deeper and deeper into the compound, open warehouses echoed, chairs and tables screeched.

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH," *smack,* "-DAMNED MAID."

"Damn, she took that slap like a man."

"-I'm not laughing. We got her as trade by that fucker who owed us money. Can't do anything with a living chick, besides the usual trade, she's useless. There's no point in taking care of a defiled product - buyers won't pay money for a sack of bone. Look at her face, she's not even pretty."

"Come on, she opens her legs and clients will swarm."

"Keep dreaming, we are Ye-motherfucking-O, standards to keep, the boss won't be satisfied."

"I don't care, he just bought time. Hand her to the boss, we'll kill him later."

"I mean, we could have a little fun before sending off?"

"So much for the talk about standards," a loud moan echoed from the next warehouse, music played, a drug-and-sex party, host of sin and unspeakable acts, so was the description by the local paper.

'The scream, I'm sure I heard the voice,' *clap, clap, clap,* '-sticking to the shadow won't help,' two warehouses stood before him, one empty and the other darker and host to atmospheric lights, the scream didn't cross his ears again, '-maybe I imagined it?' hands in pocket, he walked, the gang presence grew very obvious. Movements in the distance, *brr* '-shit,' he jumped, '-damned phone,' *incoming message – Mandl,* on it was the attachment of a picture, '-they went bowling, looks like she's having fun.'

"Come on, we got places for two more."

He ignored the message and followed the instinct, '-I was drawn here. Coincidence isn't much in my favor,' he turtled to a brick-wall, the warehouse laid a few meters away, music played in the background, '-who's the unlucky captive,' an argument broke, two figures loudly left one warehouse for the next, the mumbles was inaudible to recognize. Life in the step, he ran for the inside expecting a row of gunmen, instead, there laid an unconscious lass on the dirtied floor, she bled from cuts on her face – time slowed mildly, a study showed two aggressors, one had a gun to the prisoner's head, the finger itched to pull, *kick,* a pebble flung at the gunman's head – a nauseating crack followed in a drop, *smack,* another bone-shattering muffle gave into another drop.

“Claury,” quick to untie her restraints, “-Hey, wake up,” he tapped to no avail, the palms glowed in a green hue, the wounds rejuvenated, “-yeah, look at me,” consciousness slowly returned, “-Claury, can you hear me?” no answer came.

‘Getting trapped here won’t be good,’ hand on the closest pistol and Claury on his back, ‘-will saving her do anything?’ crossed the mind, ‘-I’m not Igna, I’m Xen,’ he shuffled to the front and snuck glances to the other warehouse, ‘-no time to consider my actions,’ he ran for the exit.

“HEY, HEY!”

‘Just my luck,’ the pace heightened, bullets landed close, ‘-trigger happy idiots,’ the gate laid in the distance, *bang,* a bullet hit his leg, the sudden change threw Claury off his back and onto a wall, her impact didn’t sound healthy nor did his, for he slid to a stop on his back, ‘-damn, my shoulder’s dislocated,’ he cringed in pain. Gang members swarmed the exit, ‘-we need to run, can’t feel my powers since yesterday. Fighting Lucifer,’ he gasped, ‘-took everything, Claury laid unconscious in a puddle of blood, ‘-so much for coincidences, they never go well for me,’ gun in hand, the first gang member veered across the corner, *BANG,* instant death, mentally challenged drug users jumped one by one without care for death.

Bang, “-that’s seven,” he panted and sat beside the wounded Claury, ‘-heal, come on, heal,’ spell in one hand and gun in the other, splitting tasks required focus and precision, both with he had no time nor patience to gather. ‘-Focus on healing, don’t matter if I’m hit,’ a slow realization crossed, ‘-my leg isn’t regenerating...’ *Blood-Arts: Bloody-Mary,* the departed disintegrated into crimson apples, ‘-no time to hold back,’ snack in mouth, a bite lit ablaze, an inferno of death and massacre, pain and emotion slowly eluded the consciousness, the world painted a bloody red scenery, ‘-di-’

Beep, beep, “-XEN, GET IN!” screamed from the side, “-STOP STALLING,” cried Mandl. With injured leg and bloodied clothes, he grabbed onto Claury, leaped through the broken fencing – the wheels screeched to a sudden backward jump. Insanity washed the noble’s face; he tore through the street towards the hospital.

“How did you find us?”

“Don’t worry, I received the location and figured something was wrong.”

“What’s with the car?”

“We hired it for a test drive – seems everything worked for the best.”

“Yeah, sure.”

The unconscious Claury was taken to emergency, Xen’s wound healed on the way to the hospice, the erratic half an hour slowed, and for the next hour, Xen remained at the hospice, waiting for her condition to improve.

“Inspector Coftler,” he puffed, “-I was waiting when you’ll show.”

“We check the compound, complaints about a gang-shooting. Dozens of young men dragged in body bags, it’s nauseating. Why were you there?”

"I went to help a friend. She's inside on the operating table, fighting for her life. Claury's the king's maid, why would she be here of all places, I saw her yesterday at the festivities."

"Calm down, Xen," he reached inside the coat and pulled a bag, "-remember this?"

"Yeah, that's the pistol I used to kill my attackers. They shot at us."

"Right, and there's no one to interrogate..." the tone sharpened, "-everyone's dead," he slammed the wall, "-ARE YOU INSANE?"

He glared right back; "-my friend took the brunt of the mess."

"This goes beyond her... it's a matter of national security. I know you wanted to help. Next time, drop me a call."

Chapter 854: Elendor [18]

'And just like that, the situation is swept under the rug. The inspector was right, the matter pertains to national security. The disappearance of Claury must have affected,' he paused in the middle of gulping a pint – celebrations fluttered in the suffocating air. Lights dimmed, music in the distance, and most importantly, booze. After the inspector arrived at the hospice, Xen felt powerless, the life and hope of Claury laid in the hand of another, on his own, he was strong, influence wise, not much better. Mandl showed his prowess in stopping officers from digging too deeply. Before the hour ended, Igna was on way to the palace, assured by the doctors that Claury will be kept overnight for thorough analysis. 'Feel worthless,' he drank at the bar, drinks came and went, the nobles and their partners excitedly cheered and laughed.

'I can't stand still,' he gulped, '-the truth,' he narrowed, '-I need to know the truth. The lens' was broken, my glasses luckily didn't shatter, and I've lost my phone. All and all, a very bad situation, no contact with home doesn't bode well. Hopefully, éclair will notice my absence and send the supplies via Dyu,' the previous day's event played in the head, '-fight against lucifer, the long-awaited battle,' he sipped, '-nothing came of it. I defeated the angel, devoured his realm as if nothing, I wasn't myself, there was a surge in power, my hatred from him never felt so satisfied before. Alfred is a double-edged sword, overthinking won't help,' staring into the crowd, the night's detail obnoxiously showed, a soiree, one where couples pitted themselves against others. These typical battlefields rose at schools and on 'celebratory nights'. Close proximity dance, alcohol, and narcotics served under the table, a true party for the exquisite. The thought repulsed Xen, a combination of the day's event forced the drink down the hatch, hands-on the uniform, he made for the door without drawing attention. '-I need to find the truth.'

After a search, Sawdia was spotted outside through one of the many windows. Impatient to take the door, he vaulted from the second-floor, landed with a roll, then stormed to her lonely stare. Her disheveled hair, broken top-buttons and scratch marks on hands pointed to misplay, "-Sawdia, are you ok?" he hurried to her side, "-your hands and face," he grabbed her swollen cheeks – she didn't resist, save the distant stare, "-Hey, look at me," he forced her to chin upward, "-Sawdia."

"What?" said a muffled, dejected voice, "-what's the rush..." she broke off his grip and stared downward.

"Someone's looking worse for wear," he knelt and stared at the pitiful display, "-I need to know, what happened to Claury?"

"Claury," she inhaled, "-did they find her?"

"What do you mean?"

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"I looked for her since yesterday, no signs. We sent her to serve her first master, I told her not to pursue our jobs. These parties aren't just celebrations, they're often used to scout retainers for sexual pleasures, high-class prostitution. From her to the queen, no lass inside is safe from the wretched hand of a powerful noble. Look at me," she sniffled, "-I lost everything..."

"Hey, look at me," he sliced through the emotional speech, "-Claury is alive and well. The details aren't up for discussion, just know, she's at the hospice in the company of a lady who says she worked here, didn't quite catch the name."

"Oh, I get it," her sadden air lightened, "-you found the head maid. Send a message from her, ask her to take Claury away, she doesn't deserve the wretched life we have here. You understand, don't you, Xen – serving the mighty and powerful is the worst job imaginable," the voice trailed into muffled cries.

"Get a hold of yourself, Sawdia, crying doesn't befit a strong lady as yourself," he grabbed her shoulders, "-everything happens for a reason. Better or worse, humble pawns as we are – our influence is on our action alone, not how it reacts nor how it affects people; we act and wait. Claury, I need to know what happened to her."

"Why?"

"Did you forget, I'm a knight? My duty is to the service of the people – and my duty lies in helping those who've helped me. I don't care much for consequences, so tell me," he moved, grabbed the back of her head, and pushed his forehead against hers, "-your strong, stronger than me and the others. Woe and miseries aren't thine to bear," he gritted, "-raise, Sawdia, be the maid I respect and admire. Smile, even tis a fake."

"-O-Okay," the grip eased, he backed away and waited.

"All I remember is Claury had a meeting with a strange noble. The man had an air of suspicion around him, couldn't get a handle on why. He seemed very impatient as if he could explode at any moment. Check with Maria and Flasia, they escorted Claury, waiting to be there for her after the job was done."

"Understood," he cupped her hand, "-Sawdia, none of this is your fault. Self-pity and blame won't accomplish much save hurting yourself. I saw it without stock, I know it's easy to get lost in a vortex of doubt and regrets, what if I did this, or what if I did that. I know the feeling all too well, which is why, as a friend, I ask of you this, stand up, wipe the tears, bear a smile, and move forward. Claury is safe, the world is a pain, still, we must survive. If not for you, do it for the maids who look up to you."

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"Thank you," she exhaled, "-I feel relieved. Someone's led a team before."

“More like a kingdom,” he winked and shuffled away, the statement caught her by surprise, ‘-led a kingdom,’ she watched Xen’s back grow distant, ‘-liar... or maybe not.’

‘Not Sawdia,’ he ambled along the palace corridors, looking for any signs of the duo, left and right, no signs till a certain area where the atmosphere felt dilated, the maids not only served but made inviting and seductive digs at the few nobles who passed said part of the palace. He took a chance and followed, one of the passing maids ran up and bumped his shoulder, “-Hey,” she whispered and pulled him to the side, “-why are you here?”

“Have we met before?”

“It’s me,” her eyes narrowed, “-look closely, it’s me, Maria...”

“HOLY,” escaped, “-pardon, why, how. Maria, makeup is scary, you look like another person,” lovely combed hair, slight but effective touches on her cheeks, around her very large pupils, nicely shaped lips and the revealing maid-outfit, opposed to before, the length was freely cut till shy above her knees. The white stocking and heels didn’t help the cause either.

“Stop staring,” she stepped away in embarrassment.

“Maria,” hovered a few mocking gestures, “-take the dashing man to one of the rooms,” they suggested. Older, less attractive, chubby men, complete with a lack of personal awareness, issued death threats, rather, tried to squint their intent across, against the fleshy-filled visage. Harassment is all but stacked.

“FINE,” she grabbed his hand and led the walk, up a narrow staircase – an insult to the larger customers – and inside an array of doors. Her long fingers wrapped around the first door and entered. Xen followed; the inside was an epitome of what love hotels tried to sell. Dark colors and slow music. Maria snapped at the lights control, toggled it too loud, and dug her heels into the knobs controlling the music, “-sorry about this,” her flushed face and heaving breaths changed by her swaying her hair and slowly lowering into her seat, of which was the foot of the bed.

“Maria,” he stepped inside, “-I suppose turning on the lights and shutting the music means we won’t be having any fun?”

Confusion riddled her face, “-wait, you wanted to?”

“I’m only joking,” he laughed, “-pulling your legs,” he winked.

“Ok, enough. If you want sex, say it outright, don’t have much time to spend on another worker...”

“Hey, no,” he motioned towards a cupboard inside which were bottles of wine. The latter opened and drinks poured, “-here,” he handed a glass then followed to sit beside the obviously tired Maria, “-no intercourse, only a parole between friends,” they cheered and sipped, “-I spoke to Sawdia earlier, she seems worse than before. What happened?”

“Our job’s hard, Sawdia’s the favorite of despicable men with harmful fetishes. She takes the requests to save us, all we ladies are grateful, she does so much for us, and we ought to appreciate the help. This worthless side of the work is disheartening. Did you know, all the maids here were once servants to lady Ela, being hired by her was the best day of my life. The opportunity to work with our dignified queen, I couldn’t ask for more... then, he came, and everything changed.”

“Tell me about you, why the sadness?”

“Don’t know really, I’m just, I don’t care anymore. Nothing matters,” she watched through the lenses of one who’s forsaken life itself. A common sight amongst war-veterans, “-why did you stroll here, was it to laugh or pity.”

“No need to get defensive. I came to ask a few questions about Claury. Tell me, what happened to her...”

“Oh...” walls rose around her expression, “-I-”

“Tell me,” he grabbed her hands, “-don’t worry, she’s fine, I need to know who she catered to.”

“Claury is fine?”

“Yes?”

“She’s always fine, isn’t she?”

“No, she was abducted – they found her wounded body, not to worry, she’s at the hospice, healing as we speak.”

“She was abducted,” her hands moved to hold her face, “-I don’t believe it, a friend of ours was lost and we sat there, doing nothing to help. Xen, look at me,” she grabbed his collar, “-promise me as a knight, you’ll deliver retribution to those who did her harm.”

“I need a name or a description.”

“Flausie,” said Maria, “-the man’s with Flausie, I saw them take the room at the end of the hall earlier.”

‘She could be in danger,’ he hurried into the hallway, ran to the room, and knocked, “-Flausie, you in there?”

No answer, “-Flausie?” he tapped again, nothing, ‘-screw it,’ he broke down the door and jumped inside, a masked man stood over a bloodied bedsheet with a knife in hand.

“Get out,” said the man, “-else I’ll have your head,” he rushed at Xen, a worried Maria ran down the hall, *crash,* a body flew across and into the wall, the sudden boom had many invitees exit their rooms. Whispers washed the horrified sight, “-you,” Xen glared. Maria looked inside and screamed, “-FLAUSIE,” she ran to her friend – the room was covered in blood, “-FLAUSIE!” she cried over and over again, the other maids tore from their clients and hurdled at the room, “-FLAUSIE!” Maria’s excruciating cries brought the nobles to their feet. Many wanted pleasure, and others, something to spice up the encounter. Nothing extreme as death.

“-Bastard,” hands around the neck, he pulled the man off the wall and threw him on the floor, the mask broke, “-that’s the Duke’s son,” said a scared noble.

“What’s his name?” scowled Xen, “-give me a name, right now,” he casually lifted the knife, “-must I repeat myself?”

“Prince Raine Shion of the Dukedom of Cophy.”

Panic muddled into the room, “-Maria,” cried a maid, “-stop Xen, he’s going to kill the son of a duke.”

It came down to the last minute, Xen had a knife above the unconscious Raine’s head, Maria had to run, and embrace him from the back, she held strong, “-don’t do it. Don’t kill him... if you do, you’ll die,” no stop at first,”-XEN, STOP!” she screamed, deafened his ears, the knife dropped as did they, falling onto their backside. Her forehead dug into his back, “-Flausie is dead,” she sniffled, “-my friend is dead.”

“Not on my watch,” he broke her restraints and grabbed the noble’s collar and pushed him against a wall, “-wake up, prince,” he tapped, the blonde-hair man opened his eyes softly.

“GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME, COMMONER.”

“Perfect,” *smack,* teeth, and blood spewed, “-you wish you were dead,” fist curled, Xen unleashed on the prince.

Chapter 855: Elendor [19]

Back against a cracked wall, Raine bled, consciousness barely present, he gasped for air, pled for mercy – an army of guards invaded the hallway, guns were drawn at Xen’s head. Bystanders watched in utter horror, Maria had her face to the ground crying at the pain of losing someone close. The Duke of Cophe, a square-faced man on which laid a slightly curved nose, tiny eye sockets overshadowed by a square temple, “-arrest him!” he ordered, the guards ran to surround Xen, who gasped and threw glances left and right.

“Let the boy go,” mediated the captain of the guard, “-Xen, it’s not worth the trouble.”

“Oh it will be worth every penny,” cried the duke, “-a commoner dares lay his filthy hands on a prince. You’ll be lucky to receive death by hanging, I’ll make sure you suffer.”

“Look at me,” he glared, “-Duke of Cophe, I hold in my hands your son’s life. A simple push and I’ll snap his neck, shoot my head or any vital spot, I swear, I’ll kill him before I die, an absolute fact,” from the wall, he held the prince by the neck and placed him before Xen and the duke, “-what will it be, Duke, do I snuff his life at this instant or will you back down.”

A disturbed Maria wept and clambered into the hallway, “-Xen,” she sniffled, “-for me,” her eyes wrote vengeance, “-I beg,” she gritted, “-KILL HIM!”

“XEN, DON’T!” screamed the guard leader.

“Captain of the royal guard,” he smiled, “-it’s been a pleasure knowing you and this country,” he squeezed, the windpipe crushed in a stomach-churning cry, eyes escaped the boy’s pale blue sockets – what remains left fell onto the floor, the crowd gave a collective gasp, “-WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR!” cried the duke,” -SHOOT HIM!” Triggers pulled; a sudden pulse flung the bystanders a few steps back – bullets hovered.

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“Pitiful humans,” wings sprawled and stretched, “-you dare threatened me?” he flew, grabbed the noble’s neck and slammed him across the hall, “-look at me,” he glared, “-doth thee wish death?” the feathers shook as did the palace. Before the duke rose Death, he wailed and cried, nothing, all watched with a dumbfounded stare, “-I guess not,” he smirked, a feature snapped at the duke’s head, instantly

killing the man – the stain created a line against the wall. Xen turned with sharpened canines and an aura of an otherworldly being. No words exchanged, the crowd begged for mercy, the mouths opened to naught. A single glance at Maria had her walk to his side, “-Xen,” tears flowed perpetually, “-take Flasia... she deserves a respectful burial. Leave this to me,” she leaned and grabbed a knife, “-don’t worry,” she smiled woefully, “-I’ll handle it, just go.”

“Not possible,” the wings rested, “-we’re escaping together.” A fighter resisted the mild paralysis and called backup.

“Xen,” gasped the Captain of the Guard, “-there’s no time to wait,” he breathed, “-the special unit will be here any minute. Take Maria and go,” he leaned against the door with hands on his shoulder, “-if this reaches the church, there won’t be any escaping.”

“Let the church come at me,” Flasia peacefully rested in Igna’s arm, “-I’ve defeated their god, what’s the harm in completing the job.”

The palace went in full panic, an observant Dyu, invitee for said night’s gathering, received dire messages, ‘-Igna killed a duke and his son,’ he cringed, ‘-he’s not suitable for undercover work. This sucks,’ he leaned from the first floor, locked onto the queen, a special team of armored ladies swarmed in a circle, they drew weapons and kept their monarch safe. In that instant, the message traveled overseas to éclair.

Ding, ding, sat in a casual meeting between friends at the castle, “-take the call,” suggested Johna.

“Right, excuse me,” he rose and headed to a discreet place, ‘-Igna killed a duke, we’re moving up the operation. Have the pilot be ready to takeoff,’ wrote across, “-WHAT?” he blinked, “-for the love of-” a press sent relevant information to key people.

‘-So much for using Hamer’s Inc as cover to sneak away from the queen. Guess we’re doing it the old fashion way,’ displays rose above the office desk.

Tension ran high, nobles screamed and ran for cover, King Juvey and Queen Ela were taken to a secluded room, “-stay put, majesty.”

“What’s happening?” he demanded answers, “-I need to know!”

“Duke Cophe and his son have been killed,” reported another, “-seems Xen was responsible for the deaths.”

“XEN?” he fell onto a lonesome chair, ‘-why did he...’

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Bullet flew left and right, Igna barely dodged the incoming projectiles – none but himself – a volley of spells returned at the attackers, a preference to the ice-element rose paths and killed painlessly.

Huff, puff, the dance-floor stood before them, *snap,* *XEN!” screamed Irene, “-DID YOU LIE?” bullets rained, a simple raise of the palm stopped the bullets.

“Irene,” he blinked and raised his head, “-what is done, is done. Seems we stand on opposite sides,” a twirl flung the bullets her way, “-don’t make me kill you.”

"The wings," she ducked, "-are they angelic?"

"No, they're the wings of a fallen," he turned and made for the exit, "-Flasie is due a proper burial," the main entrance buckled into an array of flashlights and officers, "-XEN, ON CRIMES AGAINST THE CROWN, YOU'RE UNDER ARREST!" helicopters circled, officers and soldiers joined forces, "-surrender, else thee dies," Maria stayed in his shadow, he rose a hand, *puff,* a smoke screen hid part of the area, "-IGNA, COME," whispered Dyu – *OPEN FIRE!* echoed outside, bullets rained indiscriminately, the trio hurdled behind a fallen speaker.

"Dyu, why are you here?"

"Long story," he looked at Flasie and Maria, "-she was murdered and you took revenge, am I correct?"

"Yeah."

"Ok, well, it was a bad idea," he erratically looked about – an advance force of five approached, *snap,* feathers detached from his wings and locked onto the targets, muffled grunts ended in heavy drops, "-wow," he blinked, "-an army on your own," part of Dyu cheered. "-How long can you last?"

"I wager another few hours?"

"Perfect," he handed an earpiece, "-take this, it connects to éclair and Yui. My car's outside, I'll make sure Maria and Flasie reach the transit safely."

"Hello, hello?" the earpiece buzzed, "-master, are you there?" inquired a soft-voiced éclair.

"Hey, didn't expect-"

"MASTER!" he screamed, "-PLEASE TELL ME YOU DIDN'T."

"We'll talk about it later, besides, influential members of the Elendorian Court and King Juvey's entourage are here."

"Right," a list suddenly lit across Dyu's phone, "-here are the people who need to die. Might kill them long as the chaos persists. The rescue of Queen Ela will be thy responsibility, and please, don't kill anyone save those on my list. The King is to remain free."

"I get it," he looked at Dyu, "-there's a girl at the hospice, her name's Claury..."

"Yeah, I've already asked my team to handle her evacuation. A helicopter should be on its way to the airfield. Time is of the essence," the footsteps amplified, more and more soldiers arrived. Plan in the head, they split and left Dyu to deal with the evacuation of two maids, "-here," he wrapped a piece of cloth around Maria's head, "-let me do all the talking." A massive explosion destroyed the wall and pillars, the trio snuck to the side and made towards the gallows, a garrison guarded the bridge.

"Medic," he panted, "-I NEED A MEDIC!" he cried, "-they were attacked by Xen."

"Dyu, is that you?" narrowed a fighter.

"Carl, I need help," he dropped to one knee, "-we need medics."

“Can’t help, brother,” the head shook, “-I saw your car, the only option is to take them to a hospital. Go,” the line cleared – the tenseness had the heart racing, “-HEY!”

The heart sank, “-Dyu, any idea where Xen’s headed?”

“No, we were attacked trying to escape.”

“Right, carry on then,” the guard detail returned to watching the side exit. A sports car laid in wait, Flasié’s body was placed in the backseat, the engine toggled, after which they drove out the guarded perimeter and sped to the city.

“Notify master,” he spoke via the general channel, “-we can’t stay around the palace.”

“Understood,” said éclair, “-the helicopter’s still on way to the hospital. Head there, we’ll evacuate the maids in tow.”

Meanwhile, at the castle, sirens and constant explosions rattled the air. *Stab,* knife to a lady’s heart, ‘-last one on the hit list,’ the hands carried crimson apples, ‘-guess I take the queen and escape,’ he wandered into a relatively untouched part of the palace, an empty room of fallen chairs and portraits, “Xen?”

“Lessie?” he narrowed, “-is that you?”

“Yeah,” she sat with a broken leg, “-long story,” she smiled, “-wait,” the wings caught her off-guard, “-are those?”

“Yes, wings,” he knelt, opened a rift in reality, took a high-tier healing potion, and splashed it onto her wound, it healed easily.

“Who are you?”

“Someone not of this realm,” he held a hand, “-Lessie, as someone who helped in a foreign land, will you escape or remain shackled?”

“I don’t even want to know what or how this happened,” she took his hand, “-we’re friends, let’s escape,” past the room laid another set of corridors, he moved until a blank canvas, a white hallow passage into thick metal doors. Guards lined the way, ‘-could you wait here?’

“Sure?” she peeped around the corner, Xen rushed out and ran for the door – crystal daggers split from a semi-transparent bloodied halo – slash upon slash, strokes of red painted the white, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* round their necks, he pulled, heads rolled.

‘Demon,’ she hurled, ‘-how can someone,’ tears blurred her vision – no matter the weapon or person, a simple gesture delivered a soul to the Hall of rebirth. *Kick,* the metallic protection blasted open – Juvey and Ela sat a fair distance from one another.

“Xen,” gulped Juvey, “-TRAITOR!” he lashed out before a curved wall lined by windows covered by curtains.

“No,” he rose an index, “-I would have kept my mouth shut. The way the maids were treated, the only people who helped me through YOUR genocide... one got brutally murdered and the other, abducted on YOUR orders.”

“Xen,” he crossed his legs, “-look,” he pointed to the right at a maid, “-remember Sawdia?” he laughed, “-she was a spy all along. The maids you tried to protect, guess what,” he leaned forward, “-they’re nothing but puppets answering to my whim,” *clap,* Sawdia’s heart glowed bright yellow and exploded, “-quite the show, don’t you think, Xen?”

“Juvey...”

“What’s there left?” a team of special forces burst through the windows and aimed guns, “-see the mark of Lucifer on their forehead? No magic nor special ability is going to affect their weapons. Anti-Magic, weapons grounded in reality.”

A message simultaneously passed his earpiece, “-master Igna, I apologize,” whimpered Dyu, “-I barely escaped... Maria and Flasia... they self-destructed,” he bit his lips in pain, “-got hurt badly. Was a good journey,” he laid face up to foliage, “-my undercover mission comes to an end, éclair, I told you... just know, I told you.”

Face to Juvey, an array of soldiers had their weapons at him, ‘-I need time,’ he narrowed, ‘-if only it could stop for a few seconds.’

“Right, soldiers,” they propped their rifles, “-death to traitors, FIRE!” bullets rained, Lessie ran for the room to no avail, “-XEN,” she exclaimed.

The symbol of Kronos, the sandglass within the Shadow Realm rumbled, a greenish beamed fired into the skies, he took off the glasses, “-by the name of Igna Haggard,” projections of Origin, Time, and Death, harmonized with his voice, “-and on the honor of Alfred,” he clenched his fist, “-STOP, PASSAGE OF TIME,” a gray bubble swallowed the palace, everything froze, the flow of mana and life force pulsed in lines, the true sight showed points of weakness in the slowed movement of those present, ‘-what happened?’

Chapter 856: Elendor [20] [Finale]

Cough, ‘-my life’s about to end,’ Dyu thought solemnly, dying alone, the pain of a splinter inside his abdomen. Adrenaline lessened the pain but for how long, the exploded wreckage of his car laid in a bowl of flames, ‘and all I did for the organization, nothing mattered. I wanted to save the queen, I wanted to save myself and start a new life... in trying to help Igna’s maids, they self-destructed and killed themselves. Should I be grateful?’ he watched the grimly dark grove’s foliage, an appalling ceiling of black and tiny opens of white. ‘They have the power and authority to do whatever they wished. éclair’s plan was perfect – I might have asked for the strongest, not a hothead, is master all that great? What if éclair sent himself, I picture it. After the celebration, he’d stand behind the queen, protecting and acting on her best behalf. We’d make many business trips and slowly prefaced the importance of unbiased shipping cooperation. Under the premise of selling guns – using the mantle of an independent agency, we’d make trips across the ocean, deliver the weapons and show the seriousness. In return for more favorable items, the leader of the agency would ask a request of the king, a night in the company of the queen. On that, we’d use mid-range teleportation spells and disappear into the night and leave

dead bodies then explode the room. A serving of narcotics through the central aeration system and the doors be wide open for us to leave. A plan I dearly admire and respect,' the fists clenched, '-what we had in return was a maniac who lost control on seeing a friend die... wait,' he gulped and kept a timid smile, '-I guess, the master I look up to is true to his word no matter the situation. He puts friends and family before anything and anyone else,' light faded in the far-away distance, '-I'll try my luck in the afterlife. Life as Dyu was awesome.'

At the castle, the greyscale mist halted time, Igna walked freely, waves of mana flowed to and fro, they moved akin to fish in the sea. '-The power of Kronos,' he stared his open palm, '-the sandglass of Aclk,' the palm closed, '-something must have happened in the Shadow Realm.' He reached and grabbed the Queen and Lessie then vaulted out the same windows and landed on the remains of a flowerbed. '-He did hold back,' he looked at the skies, countless helicopters circled, '-something's happened to Dyu.'

Inside, two identical creations were placed in the line of fire. Lessie had a stray bullet-headed at her visage, and for Xen, the tale of the martial-art ought to end. A landmine spell, soon as time flowed, would explode and charr Ela's body.

Those he tried to protect died, and in the rush to the parking area up front, Igna arrived at the familiar supercar Mandl rented, the passenger door was open with a hand hanging down to the ground, a peep inside showed the noble rushing to push her out, a bullet crossed the driver's window and headed for her head. '-I don't have much time left,' he opened the backdoor, threw Lessie and Ela inside, clambered into the driver's seat, picked the bullet from midair and threw it at the gunman.' The three ladies were pushed in the back and still held a place for more, '-good thing they care for their bodies,' he grinned, had the gear in reverse, and drove, the car leaped into the fray, hit the tarmac of the outside road and blasted forth. No care for speed, the car reached top-speed no shorter than a few seconds later, the speedometer lit bright-blue, '-good car,' smiled and drove. The sandglass trickled; the remaining grain fell till a bell chimed. The flow resorted, bullets hit Xen, Lessie's skull exploded with contact against the experimental ammunition, *BOOM,* a loud explosion rattled half of the room, Ela's charred body dropped headfirst, Juvey barely escape the massacre, he gasped and held his arms, '-Xen, why did you have to,' he shook his head, '-if only you'd come to me about the noble's death, I'd have resolved the matter and explained the ladies aren't real. You died for nothing, so much potential wasted for a noble cause. You honored the knight's code of conduct, I weep, a friend who risked much to safeguard what was important,' on paying respect to the fallen Xen, the vision fell onto Lessie, '-no,' the heart sank, '-not you too,' he ran to her side and saw naught but a saddened expression, '-DAMN IT!' he smashed the walls.

"Majesty, the targets have been neutralized, what should we do?"

"Have the forces clean up bodies," a puffy exhale refocused priority, "-use the remains of the stable to create a bonfire. We're burning the bodies. No news of this is to get out, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, majesty."

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"Order a communication blackout – no access to the palace until further notice."

Wheels screeched shy of Dyu fully shutting the eyes, “-better not die on me,” a distant door slam followed into footsteps crushing twigs and the vegetation.

‘Ouch,’ he watched, ‘-a metal rod, should be easy to heal,’ *Partial-Realm Expansion – Mantia,* an orb wrapped the lawyer’s body, *Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes prospective, watcher watches, creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht,* the open wound closed, *Realm Expansion: Release,* a tap reignited Dyu’s consciousness.

GASP, sat upright, “-I’m alive?” he blinked and subconsciously touched where the wound laid, ‘-I am alive.’

“No time for reunion,” said Igna with crimson and white hair parted down the middle. The vampiric features were prominent and charming, a scarlet halo circled around his head. Dyu followed and opened the front door, he threw Mandle at the back of which was an easy squeeze considering the passengers were unconscious, the engine roared into action. The rearview mirror kindly showed the passenger, “-seems we have two unknown guests?”

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“Twould be Mandl and Nadhi. I sort of rescued them without their knowledge”

“Lessie and Ela,” attention turned to the road where scenery flung pass without care, “-what’s the probability of escape?”

“I don’t know,” he firmed the steering wheel, “-the maids turned out to be homunculi, Juvey had the know-how to add emotions and free will to their mind. Impressive in retrospect.”

“-and scary. What will happen now, they know you’re Igna?”

“No, I made sure we’re dead,” he smiled, “-far as the crown is concerned, Lessie, Ela, and I have perished. Identical clones are very much a perk when utilizing ancient arts. I appreciate you answering my selfish requests. Enough chitchat, contact éclair – ask about the escape plan.” The drive followed into the street-racers land; other cars rumbled across the streets – most waited patiently for a sign of some sort.

“Don’t mind them,” said Dyu, “-I had my old friend stationed by in case of the police coming after us. They’d block the roads and allow easy access along the mountain pass.”

Sharp turns rocked the unconscious bodies, first to wake was Lessie, “-XEN!” she shouted and caught Dyu by surprise, “-calm it, lady,” he held his heart, “-I nearly died, again.”

“Where am I, where’s Xen, what happened?”

“Xen’s dead,” returned Igna, “-everything will be explained later. What happens next is yours to decide,” her mind fell onto the passing landscape, “-fine,” she settled, “-appears I’m not the only one being kidnapped.” Little close to a few hours later, at a time where night grew ominous and unyieldingly savage – the escapees pulled into the airfield and turned towards a rusty-looking hangar. A dormant black private jet laid in wait, the car stopped, the doors unlocked to the open air, “-we made it,” cheered Dyu.

“Majesty,” echoed in the distance, “-we’re ready to fly out,” they said with air hostesses guarding the foot of the staircase. Ladies in heels, bearing gorgeous smiles and deadlier weapons. Igna held Nadhi and Ela at the hip and slowly clambered along the stairs. Lessie and Dyu were content to carry Mandl by the shoulders. Inside laid a decadent interior of expensive wood, couches, and unnecessary luxuries. Seatbelts clicked, the jet roared and soon took off and made for the north – a planned route of which avoided the anti-air defenses known to be an Iqevian marvel.

Head against the seat, Igna sat alone before a table, the others were seated at the back where laid a television, ‘-over,’ he lit a cigar, poured a glass of whiskey and relaxed, the jet crossed into the ocean, the escape was a success, *huff, puff,* ‘-so much for the intricate plan, éclair. He’s going to be mad,’ a slight chuckle escaped, ‘-oh well, what’s done is done.’

Slowly but surely, the others regained consciousness, “-where am I?” blinked Mandl, “-NADHI!” he grabbed her in a warm embrace, “-I thought we were going to die.”

“Me too,” she returned his hug, “-Mandl, we’re in a plane, right?”

“I think so, a very expensive one,” he looked at the interior and the features, “-very expensive one, my family can’t even afford one of these.”

“-Huh?” she blinked, “-I thought you were rich?”

“We are, not this lavishly.”

Dyu and Ela were seated farther away, the queen’s forced addiction and sanity were quite liable to harsh changes. In events of a fit, Dyu knew how to calm her erratic personality – she spoke no words save grunts and scowls, a queen turned animal.

“Excuse us, lady Lessie, you seem rather unfazed.”

“If you want answers, go speak with the man responsible,” she nodded to a smoke cloud in the distance.

“No need,” he walked and stood before the television, “-I apologize in advance for the confusion. This happened for a reason,” he sipped and smiled, “-let’s start with an introduction, my name’s Igna Haggard, King of Hidros, also known as the Devil of Glenda. Before questions, here’s the truth – Xen and I are the same. I infiltrated Elendor on a whim, an agent of ours asked a favor, the rescue to Queen Ela. On investigation, I realized the betrayal of Elendor was planned and orchestrated by the Empire. Therefore, to honor my uncle’s friendship with the queen, we staged an abduction. The matter grew worse at the party, a noble murdered one of the maids who helped me quite a bunch, her friend’s last request was to get vengeance. Rest is history, people died and those in attendance are now on a trip to Hidros. Whether tis salvation or imprisonment, the choice is yours. Mandl and Nadhi, I’ve repaid my debt – an assassin was out to kill. Lessie, before getting shot by the ambush, I saw your tenacity in wanting to save me, for that, I’m appreciative,” glass empty. The hair and eye colors changed to white ending in red, the same as recognized by the populous. “-My assistant has taken the liberty of confiscating smartphones and such. Until the background has been fully vetted, you’ll be staying at a resort in Plaustan, one owned and run by Phantom.”

“Xen... sorry, Majesty,” called Lessie, “-are we still friends or not?”

“Nothing’s changed, I’m the same guy.”

“King Haggard,” blinked Mandl, “-never expected this... I’m a fan, a huge fan of the Haggard dynasty. It would be an honor to be considered a friend.”

“Hey, stop the formal talk,” he sat beside and relaxed, “-Nadhi, we’ve reached out to your manager. She’ll beat at Rosespire, don’t fret.”

“Thanks,” drinks arrived courtesy of the hostess, “-we have a long journey ahead,” she said, “-please, if you wish to sleep, there are rooms at the back. If there is any trouble, don’t be shy,” she winked at Mandl and Nadhi, “-the rooms have protection. Please,” she gestured to the back, “-why not test the bedding arrangements.”

Nadhi was quick to touch Mandl’s thighs, “-if thee insists,” they hurried and bore the same excitement as children.

“Didn’t expect you to be king,” commented Lessie.

“Didn’t expect the head torturer to risk her life for a stranger.”

“Stop it,” she drank, “-we’re past that, I’m a friend,” a smile lit her burnt skin.”

“To a new friendship,” he rose a toast.”

“To a fresh start,” said a relieved grin.

Chapter 857: Wings

“We gather to officially recognize the United Nations of Alrosia as a true bonding of many nations. From the bottoms of our hearts, we invite the population to unite in the celebration of the alliance. The invitation extends to the nobles who aren’t politically aligned with our thoughts. Times of peace are much wiser spent in the company of loved ones.”

10th of March, the treaty between Hidros and Alpha is signed at a conference hosted in Hidros, the Alphan delegation; Emperor and Empress. The long-awaited return of the Ice-princess was celebrated by the whole of Oxshield, Eira grew into a loveable and charismatic character. After the signing and inclusion of Easel Run Gard and Arda – the capital cheered collectively. The Gaien council was stumped in a sudden change of hierarchy, not that it mattered. For the masses, a very lavish celebration filled the street. Concerts in Lei, the media center boomed by tourists.

Outside looking in, Hidros’s culture and history were very extensive. Mages to monsters, the place was a different world within the same world. Happiness wrote across the populous faces, the kingdom showed signs of prosperity.

The current date, 12th of March, Igna sat at the desk inside the castle. Opposed to a big room, one of the bedrooms was remodeled to suit his needs. A mass of paperwork spilled from the table and onto the couch in the middle, he sat with a cigar in his mouth. Partial sunlight snuffed through the blinders, the view wasn’t much to desire for it gave onto a mess of reeds and uneven mud. ‘-Been weeks,’ he puffed, ‘-an aftermath of the great escape,’ a report titled ‘Death of Lessie,’ hung off the table, the folder was part of a bigger file, and sadly included Nadhi, ‘-world star athlete dies from a heart attack,’ read the first line. ‘-So much to the start of a new friendship,’ he held a glass, ‘-her death affected me, I don’t know why,’ he puffed, ‘-she was found dead at the resort, I had only seen her a few hours ago, and

there, news of her death... if only it had been a murder,' he leaned in the chair, '-she killed herself. I thought we were friends, I thought she'd have spoken her mind. Painfully obvious that I'm not almighty nor am I such a good friend. Looking out for someone else,' he shook the glass, '-doesn't matter.'

éclair, meanwhile, returned from a tedious meeting with the representatives of the guilds. "-Prime minister," said Alta in ambush, "-negotiations with the Blood-King's faction took an effort. Here are what they need," she handed a file.

"Why me?" they climbed stairs into the erratic castle, "-master's here, no? have him check the details."

"That's the thing," she slowed her step, "-he's not been himself ever since the return from Elendor. He's changed. The suicide seems to have nudged him over the edge. He won't answer calls nor will he open the door."

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"Has he made any requests?"

"None. He didn't even have the courtesy to show at a good faith party between Alpha and Hidros. Vengeance had to play copycat. Lady Eira's quite furious..."

"She's right to be angry," he exhaled, "-listen, I have things to attend," an agent of Phantom waved in the distance with a briefcase to his side.

"The team's worked hard on these items," he handed the case, "-may it help our king," the joyous deliveryman nodded and left. Countless heads of hair moved to and fro, taking a step back showed greatly how the castle had evolved.

Alta observed, "-éclair?" she called the sudden moment of silence.

"Right," he handed her the case, "-take this to master. I don't blame him for taking time to himself. I'll handle things best I can," said a nervous smile, "-my job is to take care of what my master doesn't want to handle. Isn't it the reason why we assembled Asmodeus and the others?"

'No,' she watched the prime minister be absorbed by the shadows of other ministers, '-it's not. We took the assignment to help, not to do the work. Master Igna,' she gripped the handle and made for the office. Closer she got, the lesser grew walking and noise – past the gorgeous outside, she continued to the lesser 'nice' part of the castle – an area where a beast was slain a few years back. The goo it hurled damaged the very soil. Fear of the monster curse subconsciously had the maids and wanders not approach the area.

Tap, tap, "-Majesty, open the door, I know you're in there," Alta waited before an unsightly door hidden in the bowels of an uncleaned hallway, "-Master," she knocked again, no answer came.

"Ready or not," *crash,* she broke the door in, "-here I come," she stood with one foot in the air, "-master?" she looked left and right, finally ending behind the desk where smoke rose, "-there you are," diligently avoiding the paper and mess, "-here's a case," the hefty weight dropped onto the table.

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“Alta?” the nap cut short, “-why are you?” he twirled and checked the entrance, “-there was no use in breaking in, was there?”

“A necessity actually,” she watched with a repulsed expression.

“What’s with the dejected look,” the chair straightened, “-suppose I do look miserable.”

“No, that’s not it,” she turned around the desk and pulled the blinders, “-the room reeks of smoke, sweat, and booze. Frankly, it’s unbecoming of the man who’s supposed to be at the head of the nation.”

“Right, I’m king, aren’t I,” he lit another cigar, “-did éclair send you?”

“No, I’m here on my own accord. Master, I’m worried.”

“I know you are,” he puffed, “-and I apologize. There are things I can’t explain, and things you wouldn’t understand. éclair’s got a handle on the situation, I mean, there is a whole underground society of my closest contacts working for the betterment of the kingdom.”

“Are you serious?” she glared, “-is that enough, is wallowing in whatever self-pity party the answer you’d conclude...”

“Staying in Elendor brought perspective on how good Hidros’s got it. We’re free to think, free to act on our wishes and desires. Not Elendor, not Iqavea. You’re not a common miscreate, the blood of the nightwalker flows through thy veins, and with said privilege comes the knowledge of gods. I’m sure you know – gods and angels have walked the planet, created what they wished, and took what they desired.”

“Iгна,” silvery hair froze the entrance solid, “-my foolish little brother. I’m mad,” Empress Eira arrived with thigh-high boots and a comfy-looking coat, her hair tied and accompanied with jewelry of resemblance to icicles, “-quite the mess,” she froze the air she exhaled, “-perhaps I could be enlightened?”

“Sister,” he stood, “-here, take a seat.”

“No, no,” she glared, “-not until I know what’s been bothering you.”

“I’m afraid to speak,” he blinked, “-believe me, sister, my situation isn’t dire. The paperwork are policies that needed checking, I’ve been working, not slacking,” he side-glanced Alta then scoffed, a raise of the hand cleared the couch from the mess, another gesture sorted and organized the papers in an orderly fashion, metal cabinets opened and closed automatically. “-Cleaning the mess is much simpler than causing a mess,” he moved to lean against the desk, “-take a seat, big sister. You too, Alta.”

“Right,” she settled, “-tell me, little brother, what’s been bothering you?”

“I should start with this – back in Elendor, I encountered my long-lost enemy, the bane of my whole life, or lives I should say, during a ceremony, Lucifer crashed the party.”

“Lucifer?” interjected Eira, “-as in the prince of hell?”

“One of the princes of hell.”

“Lucifer’s the church revered deity,” narrowed Alta, “-he can’t be a demon, surely.”

“Let’s not get into the details,” shrugged Igna, “-long story short, we fought and during said fight, I went beyond my limit, I felt something inside me crack. When I came too, I knew I wasn’t the same person, something changed, and I don’t know what. Since then, there are instances where I say some things and it takes effect in reality. I jokingly mentioned a virgin, a young noble without much experience towards the opposite sex, to be a charmer, bit of a sarcastic remark, I know, keep those judgmental eyes from me, Alta. The next day, I awoke to a room filled with women – I’m talking ladies-in-waiting and models, I couldn’t believe it. Since then, women look at him without needing to talk, he constantly pesters me about getting laid every day.”

“So, the powerful king of Hidros is jealous of not getting laid?” wondered Alta.

Igna silently blinked at Alta, she rose a hand in surrender, “-the next circumstance happened when I thought of lady luck not being in my favor. I nearly died and was rescued last second. Since then, I’ve tried to keep my thoughts and words silent. Lastly,” he leaned backward, grabbed a file titled, ‘-the death of Lessie,’ and flung it on the table, “-after we landed, I had an image of her hanging herself. I’m not sure if it was precognition or my thoughts affecting reality. As goddess yourself, sister, tis commonsense to hide from the world not knowing what happened. I couldn’t risk endangering everything on accounts of being brazen. I spent the weeks in meditation, trying to find answers, looking deep into Mantia for anything relatable... nothing. The knowledge inherited from Origin’s served no purpose either, I’ve tried flipping the perspective on myself – nothing, it’s a dead end.”

“Least I know you weren’t drowning in booze,” said a relieved Eira

“There’s that too, how else am I going to meditate without a little help. The constant stream of voices is quite vexing.”

“It’s in your head,” narrowed Alta, “-master, please, éclair needs help before burning himself out. The alliance is a lot of work, I doubt he’ll survive.”

‘Sit down,’ her body dropped onto the couch, *Projection Nexsolium, Library of the Gods,* chains summoned from a gate, “-shatter and restore.”

Gasp, “-what happened?” shuddered Alta, divine lights from Eira overflowed the room’s natural flow, gates to Nexsolium slammed shut, the chains binding Alta vanished.

“Brother,” glared Eira, “-that wasn’t nice, was it?”

“I did say, my words and my thoughts have the power to affect the very fabric of reality. Not to brag, those abilities were at my disposition long, I needed to only expand my realm... no, it doesn’t matter.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” she rose from her couch, “-Igna, by battle, you don’t mean cutting off Lucifer’s wings and assimilating his powers, do you?”

“What else could I do... the entity is strong, I had to buy time before our inevitable clash, though it is a few centuries from now.”

Eira facepalmed, “-idiot. Cutting off the wing of Lucifer wasn’t the wisest of choice. Those wings symbolize light, and where there is light, there’s creation... understand, those wings are too much for anyone to handle, anyone save...”

“Is that it?” he blinked, “-if the wings are the trouble,” bright golden features sprawled, “-what the-” he reached for the tips, “-they’re not black anymore, not the wings of a fallen angel...”

“Right, the wings of a god, believers of the church put their faith in those symbols – Igna, fool,” she couldn’t help laughing, “-by taking his powers, the spot of god’s fallen in thy lap. By praying to Lucifer, they hail his name, but the faith in the cross is linked to those golden jewels on thy back. Congratulations?”

“Hence the change... I’m truly an idiot. If it’s a matter of belief, should be simple to control.”

Eira suddenly fell on her knees and held her stomach, “-Igna,” she sniffled, “-it’s here.”

The heart sank, “-ALTA, GO GET THE EMPEROR!”

“Why?”

“The baby,” whispered Eira, “-I think she’s coming.”

“Crap,” the confused Elvira summoned her wings and flew inside.

“Had to have it here, didn’t you,” chuckled Igna, “-let’s go, sister,” he grabbed the case and hurried to the entrance where Markus waited.

Chapter 858: Gallienne II Arie Sultria

A new life was born, Empress Eira gave birth to the first princess of Alrosia, a child named Gallienne II Arie Sultria. The hospice, cupped at the center of Rosespire, looking over the hectic traffic of the streets below, sat a quiet little room with a great view. Nurses and doctors were at their disposal for tending to the Empress’s aid. The voyage took little more than minutes for they had used a helicopter – the building itself was massive and not linear. Blocks broke in and out of the main firm structure. The clean and pure color scheme was pleasing to the onlookers. Ambulance sirens often resounded across the streets, injured fighters, victims of gang and domestic violence. The crime rate wasn’t high nor low, it sufficed, kept the quota of normalcy for those abled of Hidros.

Igna and Markus stood outside Eira’s room, “-congratulations,” said Igna.

“I can’t believe I’m a father,” the hands visibly shook, “-this is amazing,” he had his forehead against the glass.

“You may go in,” said a nurse leaving the room, a doctor followed shortly and said, “-the babe is healthy, congratulations.”

Markus walked in, to be completely overwhelmed by a torrent of emotions. He gasped at the bundle of joy, “-she’s,” he blinked, “-she’s normal.”

“And?”

“It means,” he inhaled freely and cheered, “-she won’t have to deal with learning the Sultrian way.”

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Eira watched softly, the news was music to her ears, “-she doesn’t have an affinity for magic either.”

'No magic nor abilities,' the arms crossed in thought, 'are the newer generations losing grasp over the olden ways?' he narrowed, trying to gauge if the babe had anything hidden, nothing, 'éclair gave reports of children being born without the ability to use magic or call onto adventuring skills. Something's happened to the world,' a vague look to the sky, 'if magic disappears, monsters will run rampant. Maybe I'm looking at it a different way, the newer generations are brought in a normal world without potentially deadly abilities, a place without flair. Think, Igna, think,' the lips pressed, 'maybe its evolution taking a stand against the created mess. The combination of a Goddess and superhuman is sure to create a beast...' he narrowed to no avail, 'I was thinking a demi-god or someone invincible,' therein, a realization hit, and he stormed the room.

"Igna," smiled Eira, "-come meet your niece."

"Sorry sister," hurried to Markus, "-may I hold her?"

"Sure," he handed the babe, "-don't drop her," he laughed, Eira threw a cautious gaze, "-I was joking," he returned.

"Right you are," they held hands, before anything said, Igna had the babe cradled.

"Pure grey eyes," he said, "-she's not normal."

"What do you mean, brother?" Eira's heart sank a little, "-is she unhealthy?"

"No time for jokes," gulped Markus, "-that's our daughter, no Ignaish business, ok?"

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"Ignaish sounds like a brand for canned food," he quipped, "-she's the epitome of health," the duo exchanged glances of which he returned to Eira, "-what's her name?"

"Gallienne II Arie Sultria."

"A mouthful," back to the unnervingly silent babe, "-raise, Arie, thou art more than human," a golden hue flashed to which the babe's blanket unraveled into a pair of wings, she hovered before the family, "-I was right," he laughed, "-ARIE IS AN ANGEL!" the room shook, orbs of power manifested at her back, the expression grew into calm before the storm, her tiny clenched fist motioned at her visage.

"Right," *snap,* the wing's retreated into her body, "-no going AWOL just yet," said Igna softly catching the babe, "-there you are," he handed the lass to her mother, "-my niece will grow to be more than a little handful. Her upbringing will require much effort," to which he patted Eira's head, "-and I'm sure my big sister and her husband will kick ass. Glad to have you in the family, Arie. I can't wait to see what time has in store for you," he wiped his hands and headed for the door, "-Brother wait."

"Yeah, sister?"

"Raising an angel is hard, yes?"

"No, it's in the name," he shrugged, "-she's an angel, literally. Don't mind much, she won't cause trouble as her beliefs are already ironclad," a look to her tiny pupils, "-there lives a benevolent soul. Honestly," he halted at the door, "-coming from me, the advice is wasted. She's your child, nothing more, nothing less. Treat her as one."

The hallway carried the muffled footsteps, hospitals were always lively – nurses rushed from one end to another, the lack of staff and influx of patients, most bearing similarities to the monster-curse. He shrugged and took the elevator down, exited the massive hall, and landed under a giant shadow cast by the building. People moved, most excited at the festivities, past the stairs, across the seat, laid lines of shops, restaurants, pharmacies, – all in relation to what a hospice may need. An alchemic distributor and a magic shop as well – some glass frames held the poster advertising the current festival. People walked and took notice, they scanned and shrugged, ‘-erasing presence, comes in very handy,’ briefcase in one hand and cigarette in the next, Igna muddled through till a taxi-stand.

“Got a place for one,” said a driver, “-mister, come on in, we’re headed to the festival.”

“Sure,” he ducked into the back where sat two lovely dressed maidens in short attire, they took one look and smiled, “-you’re handsome, aren’t you,” said the one in the middle.

“And my lady, you’re astonishingly splendid,” he returned, “-tell me,” he went to fling the cigarette, “-no, no,” interjected one at the window seat, “-don’t throw it away,” she gestured, he smoked and handed the bud, “-it’s the good stuff,” she smiled and leaned against the window.

“Tell me, ladies, how’s the festival so far?”

“It’s great, Jane over here,” she pointed to the right, “-has scored a few whilst making rounds. Good clients with a lot of money,” her fingers strode up his knee to the thighs.

“Right,” he watched nonchalantly, “-business is booming.”

“Come on, don’t you want to hire us?” she slyly moved her lips, “-we could release the tension,” she whispered.

“Pains me to refuse,” the cab reached Naeva’s park marked by a massive tree, “-I should get going,” he tapped his card and exited the vehicle. A side-glance showed the car be swallowed in the lines of traffic. Base in hand, he breathed and passed the outlying barrier, stone brick walkways split around the large area. Children played at the playground, teenagers hurdled and laughed, couples took long ways. Igna walked, ignorant to the surrounding until a bench fairly hidden from view in the deeper part of the park.

‘The case,’ he sat and opened the locks, ‘-a new phone, a gun, a watch and earrings,’ attention locked onto the watch, ‘-good, a mechanical one,’ the white-face had engravings reminiscent of snow – the hands were of a translucent dark-blue pointing at numbers, at six, the heart of the movement shuffled beautifully. A bracelet made from wyvern hide and golden clasps. ‘-A good formal watch,’ it tied nicely, ‘-why aren’t they selling this model?’ underlaid a note, “-greetings, majesty. Pardon the informal way of asking for feedback. Lady Elvira and craftsmen at Phantom have long been discussing the potential of starting our own luxury watch brand to rival Meldorino. Their shops have started to invade the land of Hidros, as the kingdom is proud of creating their own items, we want to issue a direct challenge. With your blessing and insightful advice, we, an unknown team of craftsmen, are ready to take down a giant. At the risk of sounding needy, we wish for our lord to take the position of leader, we wish to work under thy tutelage. The current watch is a prototype, an unfinished piece made especially for his majesty.”

‘Sneaky,’ he admired the work, ‘-they want a leader to take them to the Alphan market. Might not be such a bad idea. Raven’s could do with the additional business. Good on them,’ the focus turned to the

earrings, they were similar to the older version. Once settled, he moved to the phone, smaller in width with a peculiar port at the side. A push of a button unlocked a drawer, inside which were contact lenses.

The interface initialized, lines of codes fluttered left and right, small icons lit above everyone he looked, focusing on said icons brought a summary of the person such as name, wealth (spending power), and social status. ‘-Looks like it can easily infiltrate another device,’ as a test, Igna kept an eye at incoming visitors, they wore sunglasses and chatted loudly, the young adult of the group had his head in his phone. The icons displayed in blueish color, he focused to be faced by a flashing circle, conclusion opened a secondary window, on it was everything the device held, ‘-It works,’ there also laid an option of self-destruction, ‘-what does that do?’ toggled the switch to a contained implosion, “-DAMN IT,” cried the young adult, “-Ma, my phone just died.”

“Shut it, Joe, I don’t care.”

“Ma, look,” he moved forward and showed the smoking pile, “-see, it’s fried.”

The mother stopped, rose her glasses, and stared, “-good, now you won’t spend all that before chatting your imaginary friends,” a quarrel began between mother and son.

The wind blew harshly, sound muted, a familiar aura leaped from a dark portal, “-Igna, to the Shadow Realm, now,” ordered a red-faced Miira, she returned through the cut in reality. The briefcase shut, and he followed to a frigid landscape against which laid a massive temple.

“Where are we?” the chilly wind sent shivers, “-don’t remember this place.”

“Frostrest,” she said and climbed the snow-ridden walkway, “-the temple to Kronos,” they clambered and arrived at a gathering of devotees dressed in cold attire. They hurdled on the marble tiles before a slowly burning fire, many recited prayers, others spoke in the ancient tongue. The few standing paid respects to lady Miira by pressing hands in prayer and moving out the way.

“A goddess, aren’t you,” said Igna, “-why the cold shoulder?”

“Ha-ha.’

“Drop the sarcasm...” Silence fueled the walk, an array of pillars lined and guided the visitor to the center where laid a massive sandglass.

“Look,” she pointed, “-a rift opened, it tore through the ceiling and altered the weather into a blizzard – the sandglass’s cracked. The last grain will drop in a few hours, the reset might shatter the sandglass of Aclk.”

“You mean this?” he opened his palm, a representation of the big entity hovered in a smaller reflection, “-it suddenly appeared and I found I could stop time whenever I pleased.”

“You don’t say,” she leaned and examined, “-the sandglass of Aclk is important to the symbol of Kronos, without it, the scythe is left free and unable to contain itself.”

“Suppose the smaller piece is a fragment of the original,” he crushed the smaller version and blew the particles at the bigger mass – cracks molded and disappeared. Miira kept her head high, “-easier than imagined.”

"I know, the bigger they are, the easier it is to finish. The crack must have been my responsibility, I won't call on the power of time."

"Thank you," she rose her arms and gave a tight embrace, "-been a while since we spoke."

"Miira," he whispered, "-I had a fight against Lucifer, and I won," she ended the embrace and watched, "-why are you afraid?"

"I learned who I was before, the cursed King, Alfred. I cut Lucifer's wings and assimilated its powers," he pushed and sprawled the golden features, "-turns out, I may have accidentally taken on the symbol of the cross."

"Why am I not surprised," she shook her head, "-listen, the Shadow Realm is stable – the more time passes, the thicker grows the foundation. You should see the children, they're beasts, far powerful to anything in the overworld. This world is truly unique and ours to rule."

"I know," he exhaled, "-that's why I don't want to stand in way of progress."

Chapter 859: 'Wiser' leader

"Avoiding the visits, looking the other way when the Shadow Realm is concerned. You tell me, the all-powerful man who created the domain is afraid to live in it?"

"Yeah."

An honest answer took the words out of her mouth, Igna studied her reaction and followed, "-my thoughts have an effect on the Overworld. I'm scared I might break the very thing I admire; the four goddesses have a place to live and call home. Trapped souls are sent to our domain by the helpful hand of fate, those reborn of our world do not know what exists beyond what is their reality. Multiple dimensions, ruled by multiple gods – it sounds too much to take in. I rather the people who stay here be free and live a relatively understanding life. I don't much care for the perfect world, long as the majority are happy and chose freely, it's their responsibility to turns things around. Look, Miira," he had his hands in the pockets and shuffled forward, sandglass as a backdrop, they walked till a clearing in the distance. They stopped and stared, the blizzard and whips of frigid ice settled, "-are you and the goddesses happy?"

"Why ask that?"

"Answer the question. After taking what was important to Lucifer, he'll surely return with much to say. When that time comes, it'll be the end of my journey – he won't be alone – the battle will take place in Draebala, the forsaken land. If my destiny is to die, I will gladly give my powers to my closest companions, them being the heavenly generals; Miira, Intherna, Lilith, and Gophy."

"Sure you are," she chuckled, "-I speak on my behalf, I'm happy. The land is blissful, the characters interesting and the advancements exciting. My duty is to safeguard the god of time's property, his land, and his symbol. Time flows differently for the immortals, we don't much care to live in the moment, there's always something greater out there, something we don't know, and something to discover. Igna, my friend, be careful. Taking Lucifer's wings is a declaration of war, and besides, how did you win?"

“The Shadow Realm overpowered him – I might have altered the mana to suit my purpose. He lost, and I won, tis all that matters.”

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“A nightwalker kills a god; it’s as the ancient texts mention. Vampires are powerful and unknown, their curse, their blood, or should I say, Adete’s boon, has grown into quite a show.”

“It’s a lovely process,” the knees buckled to sit on one of the stairs, “-Winterpar Valley, the place where I met the Silver Guardians. To think my journey began from a simple text at a magical academy,” he laughed, “-it’s crazy even if I tell myself it’s not.”

“Silver Guardians, they sound friendly.”

“Trouble; very troublesome. Adelana and I butted heads all the time, I vaguely remember her trying to betray my trust or something, I don’t know. If not for the mission I sent her sister on, I’d have never realized the importance of human bonds. After I saw how injured she was – I had an epiphany, people in my entourage are there to support me, and I best deliver on their trust. The path shaped me as much as I shaped the path,” he smiled, “-Miira,” turned to match her light-blue eyes, “-thank you for having my back. And I promise on my name, if there’s ever trouble, send a message, I will rush without hesitation.”

“I know,” she held his hands tightly, “-about Raphael, have you seen him?”

“No,” he narrowed, “-speaking of troublemakers, where are the children?”

“Igna, listen to me,” she grabbed and pulled his cheek, “-time flows differently here. Draconis, Vanesa, Raphael, and Saniata are all sixteen, they’re adults. Draconis and Vanesa have much to learn, Raphael is on his way to learning dimension travel. After the assigned task, Draconis and Vanesa returned – they’re on a journey across worlds; a field trip. Yuria, Kaleem, and Cora are acting as chaperons, so don’t worry, I have a constant track on the location.”

“Why tell me this?”

“Tis the duty of children to surpass their parents and masters. Unluckily for them, ancient entities or not, Gophy, Intherna, and I are at the top. Yes I know,” she chuckled, “-we’re awesome. Not the point, the trio are putting their all in training body and soul. The rite of adulthood will arrive, and on said day, you, Igna, will have to battle them in good faith. The outcome will decide if they’re worthy to lead a life on their own or be part of the business. No buts,” she rose a finger, “-if they want to accompany to thy overworld, as a parent, you must accept. I doubt they’ll take much pleasure in the Overworld, the Shadow Realm is plenty of fun anyway. Besides,” she slyly looked around, “-I’ve assigned them to track down and capture various domains. Once swallowed, the Shadow Realm expands into a better version of itself – culture and technology skyrockets regardless of the absorbed world.”

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“Troublemakers,” he shook his head, “-they’re out there making me powerful?”

“You know it,” she smiled, “-leave with an empty mind, Igna. Breathe and look back if taking a step forward grows hard – look and see how much the progress’s been.”

“Always the wise one,” he stood and moved to give a hug, she returned the motion with a tighter hold.

“Take care, Igna,” she tapped his cheeks and smiled, “-it’s always a pleasure to talk.”

“Let’s grab a drink sometime.”

“‘Twould be my pleasure,” a pulse swallowed his body, a lingering scent of darkened aura fluttered on where he stood. ‘-Igna,’ she made for the temple’s inside, ‘-the emotionless attitude and way of not speaking what’s on thy mind is what makes you, you. Deny it, doesn’t matter, we know you care, everyone knows Igna cares. And that, my friend, is why we vowed to follow till death do us part,’ *snap,* she teleported to the castle where sat the other generals. “-I have news, our friend has defeated Lucifer,” the words interjected in between her heels hitting the tiled floor.

“Great news, yes?”

“Depends,” added a voice of reason, “-Lucifer’s not dead, the name alone has power – moment said news reaches the demon world – a war will follow.”

“Doesn’t matter to us,” added another, “-let the demons blame the death on the gods. Far as the outside is concerned, the Shadow Realm is nothing.”

“Right,” thundered Miira, “-which is why I request for the heavenly generals to join forces and keep an eye on their movements.”

“Understood,” the other goddesses accepted, and in a sudden pull, each vanished to their estate. Left in said wake was the banner of their crests, Miira sat at the center with elbows on her desk.

“Lady Miira, Fallen’s call is playing,” added a maid.

“Oh, time already?” the ‘wiser’ leader had but one priority in the evening, soap operas.

Gasp, Igna reappeared on the same seat, the watch displayed two in the afternoon, ‘-a new gun,’ the briefcase laid on his lap, open as if nothing happened. ‘-Dear master Igna, I’m pleased to report, facilities and financial support provided by Phantom have been very generous. My team and I have begun incorporating our proprietary know-how into the weapons. Accept the improved version of Tharis, we heard the prior version was lost in the recent travels. A scout already found and returned said weapon. Nothing else to add, Marie Jude out.’

‘Marie Jude out?’ he blinked, ‘-bit of a weirdo, isn’t she,’ he looked in front and remained still, the much-used sense was freed to roam – movements in the bushes, foliage rubbing against one another, the wind carried a fresh scent, the warmth of his body and the cold of the outside balanced cozily. As for the sights, he simply chose to close his eyes and breathe. *Crunch, crunch,* feet against damp grass, tiny footsteps approached, he kept a tranquil aura and breathed till a sudden tug. Before stood a petite figure of a girl, she wore a simple dress covered in mud, her limbs were skinny, the long hair ran till below her waist. One shoe and the other, barefoot, the visage, partly covered by the hair, held a connivingly sinister leer, dark greenish and oily in appearance. One hand held a dirtied teddy, “-Vanesa?” he blinked. She rose her arms and leaped into a big embrace, the smell and damp feeling of her clothes wasn’t much pleasing on the scene. On holding her tightly, he noticed her hair, they were thick and smelled of the sea, “-Vanesa, don’t tell me...”

"I forgot to teleport," she yawned, "-everyone left after the battle. Pops, I don't know what happened, I lost memory... I wandered the world from town to town until I smelled you, again..." he pulled away and stared up and down, "-you've grown a little."

"Pops, I'm..." her stomach growled, "-hungry."

"Understood," quick on his feet, "-tell me, Vanesa, any reason for the visit?"

"Lady Lilith said I learned everything she had to teach. She said I was free to do what I wanted. I tried napping," her always listless stare held influence, it seemed the laziness carried onto those who stared her eyes directly, "-got lazy of napping. The Shadow Realm isn't fun, I wanted to stay by your side, pops."

"By my side, huh?" he smiled and hoisted her in his arms, "-light as a feather in the body of a middle schooler, don't you want to increase the height?"

"To much work," she yawned, "-I tried being grown up like lady Miira, I was tall and had her curves. Was too tiring walking in heels, I returned to being a child and tested age groups. Found this to be perfect for napping, it's big enough to fight and small enough to be lazy."

"Sure, talk much more."

"Yes, lady Lilith said to talk even if I don't want to. She said if I say enough words, the others will fall asleep."

'What has Lilith been teaching her?' Out the park onto the pavement – cars muddled from left to right, the grandness of the streets carried the vehicles into an array of tall buildings in the distance.

"Pops, look," she pointed to the side, "-a fast food joint."

"Really, fast food?" he narrowed.

"Chips..."

"Say no more," he shrugged and ambled into the crowded establishment – afternoon meant a break for many businesses. Vanesa's appearances didn't send good impressions on the guests, many of which wore formal attire. The lack of care had the tables muffle worrisome sentences about the girl, "-is that a trafficker?"

"I heard on the news children are exploited. Look at her, she's dirty, no shoe and in a daze, maybe the man drugged her?"

"Call law enforcement," motioned another. Unbeknownst to the sudden change in the air, Igna followed the queue till the register, there, he tapped Vanesa's cheeks, "-go on, choose," the worker gulped – a crowd gathered at the entrance, an alliance of workers and customers. Vanesa placed her order to no avail, the worker remained unresponsive.

"Ma'am," he moved to the register, "-my daughter needs food, would thee kindly get back to thy job?"

"Enough," said a man blasting from the staff-only area, "-you, sir, need to get away from the child."

"I beg your pardon?" quipped Igna.

“Let go of the child,” cried the others, “-abductor!”

“Stop mistreating our children,” said another.

“Good,” he said and lowered Vanesa onto a nearby table, after which she instantly dropped her head and watched the drama.

“How could you drug a child?” pled a lady, “-have you abused her?”

“Silence,” he thundered, “-I’m proud of the strong morals, citizens,” the erase presence ability faded, “-it’s very good,” he smiled, “-I’m happy.”

“King Igna?” they narrowed, many instantly pulled on their phones, “-why are you here?” they stuttered, the manager stepped forth and blinked, “-m-m-majesty?”

“Let me clear a misunderstanding. Here, my people, is one of my children, Vanesa Haggard.”

Chapter 860: Media

“Child, majesty?”

“What about the traitorous queen?”

“We need answers, majesty.”

The appearance of the child, especially after the Queen’s cheating ways were brought to light, didn’t shine much of a good spotlight on Igna either. An underlying thought of ‘-what if the king cheated on her?’ sparked curious onlookers. The questions exchanged ears to ears, kindly making sure the king to not hear what was being said. Phones pulled, the Arcanum-savvy youngsters leaped miles onto social media. The sudden jolt went so far as to reach éclair’s attention, who sat at the royal court, standing on the judgment of spy from the Rebel’s army.

Notification pulsed mildly, Yui summarized the situation on éclair’s interface, who coincidentally, sat at the state’s side and admired the lawyer’s abuse. There laid no escape for the accused, innocent or not, the scale of Tharis proved very much useful in exerting justice.

“What should we do?” dinged Yui.

“Send an escort,” the thought materialized into words. “-I’m busy till later tonight.”

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“Understood,” her picture faded into grey.

‘Master, what trouble have you gotten into this time?’ harsh blinked laid upon Bleu, a man of strong intellect and charisma, ‘-there are more pressing matters to attend,’ he narrowed, the focus fluctuated from peer to peer.

A strongly toned message flashed, an AFR-equipped car toggled in a slow rumble – tainted glass rendered the interior a mystery, a horrifying sight, no driver.

“Majesty...” The onslaught of questions grew exhausting. The king stood imposingly in front of the sleeping Vanesa, “-we need answers, did you cheat on the queen?” a mass flocked outside the fast-food

restaurant, security was choked by the sudden increase – cries and shouts, fanatic followers plastered on the window – any second and the wave could shatter the glass.

“Majesty, please,” begged the manager, “-address the crowd... we’ve called law enforcement.”

“Understood,” the pensive silence broke, “-Hear me, people of Hidros,” the voice sufficed, a thunderbolt struck and brought tranquility, “-you deserve the truth,” a live-broadcast played on Lokka and Thawn, “-Vanesa is my daughter, and I say so without care for blood relation. She and her siblings are my precious gems, my family, heirs to what I’ve created and built. Don’t let the appearance fool thee for they bore the Haggard name. Let’s answer the questions, Queen Eia and I were married a few months back. Take a look at Vanesa, does the math add up? Obviously not. I despise the world adoption, to me, Vanesa and her siblings are my children, I will stop at nothing to protect them. Look at me, Hidros, I’m the same as you, however, my responsibility is to safeguard what Queen Gallienne has built. My private life is not for discussion – Queen Eia made it blatantly clear where her heart belongs. Nobility is based on loveless marriages, such as the truth, brothers marrying sisters, keeping the bloodline pure, tis the heritage we hold dear to our hearts, tis the way the rich remain rich. And Queen Eia, I don’t blame her, not do I hate her – I’m disappointed, that’s all, the same emotion I feel when my loyalty and character is brought into question,” he pointed at a customer, “-Miska, of the Andiel Gazette, the infamously anti-royalist paper. Instigating the public, forcing them to question their beliefs, how despicable,” the head shook in disappointment, “-and here I thought being open about how the kingdom moves forward would promote unity,” he moved to Vanesa and tapped, “-how low have your morals fallen. A child sits with a growling stomach, what do you do? Question the integrity of the parent.”

Sirens flashed, a special unit of public safety arrived in armored vans, they dropped and rose a perimeter, broke the dangerously opaque crowd. Security opened the doors for the unit, “-Majesty,” said the leader, “-we’ve come to escort,” he said, to which, Igna and Vanesa left. The masses of differently colored and shaped heads parted, a nice car rumbled – settled inside, “-let’s go,” he said, “-no food, I’m sorry.”

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The impromptu visitor rose a debate about the privacy of those in the spotlights. éclair and Yui released explanations on the Igna’s statement, further elaborating on Vanesa and why he hated the word adoption.

“Earlier this afternoon, King Igna was spotted at Yenk’s Burg. Many presents said they first thought King Igna was a kidnapper, as shown here,” photos displayed, many of which pointed at Vanesa’s less than adequate clothing, many pointed to abuse in the royal family, “-the king’s entourage had this to say,” said the anchor, “-the adoption of Vanesa Haggard happened many years back, during a time of war. A babe was found abandoned and at the mercy of a Cult in worship to the Mistress of Plague and maladies. King Igna fought to dispense of the cult, saving the child in the process. Her identity has remained private for security reasons. Under the succession law, Vanesa doesn’t have claims on the Hidrosian crown. However, she has a legitimate claim on Glenda and the associated land,” the paragraph went on for much longer until, “-the King’s private life isn’t up for discussion. We, the humble protector of the crown, will ensure a repeat of said situation never occurs. The King enjoyed the promenade around the capital, joining the conversation, making new acquaintances. Events of today have revealed the truth – royalty is best kept sheltered. Blasphemy to the king is a crime one paid for by

the death of the blasphemer. Newly added policies promote one to have their own opinion. Alas, the implantation will take a slower approach.”

“Any opinion on the statement, Lord Esto.”

“Saddens me to say, they’re right. Royalty is best kept from the public’s attention. We saw what happened, if it had been in a potentially dangerous part of town, the ordeal might have ended in tragedy. Andiel Gazette has blatantly accused the royal family. If the media aren’t careful, Hidros will truly become a place ruled by fear. Accountability falls in our hands, I dare say, the future is in our hands. Accept King Igna’s rulership or join the rebellion of Queen Eia – who knows.”

“Thank you, Lord Esto. In other news – five bodies were found-” the television toggled.

“Watching the news?”

“Well, before you turned it off,” narrowed Igna, “-cousin, how did the council meeting end?”

“Badly,” they chatted in a room deep inside the inner-castle. An area crossed from public access, furniture, and arrangements were done with a lounge-style in mind, a stacked bar, after the counter and stools, continued till a piano. Further forward were tables, a large television, vibrantly explosive sound system, and out-of-place beanbags. Gentle lighting provided both a casual and formal atmosphere. Julius stopped at the counter, poured a drink, and shuffled to Igna, “-the Gaien council won’t break. It’s split into noble versus royalist, the former has an influence on part of the public businesses, whilst we have support from a majority of the provinces. We have influence, they have money, well, had money if we take the Bank of Arda out of the picture,” he sipped, “-where’s Vanesa, I heard you two made quite the show.”

“Yeah, I saw,” preliminaries of another car tournament played, “-it worked.”

“What did?”

“Playing the victim card,” he chuckled, “-the sheer amount of sympathetic comment left on the released statement, worth every word.”

“What?” he leaned, “-explain, cousin.”

“All part of a bigger plan, once we’re ingrained as the norm, we won’t have to worry about rebellion or other headaches.”

“Point about hating adoption?”

“Plays into the narrative of child abuse. It’s known the adoption of children is a facade used by disgusting nobles to wrap their deeds in a coating of innocent and good faith. We know what they truly desire, and tis the torment of the weak. Don’t underestimate the thinking power of the Arcanum, they’ll piece together the intent and come to a conclusion I ultimately sowed.”

“I see,” he smiled, “-very shrewd – the influence of the nobles will falter seeing the efforts of the Goldbergs in rescuing war orphans.”

“How’s Malley doing?”

“She’s fine,” he nodded, “-mother’s taking care of her at the manor.”

“I see.” *Incoming Call – Dyu,* “-nice talking, cousin, go spend time with Malley and check on Eira, she’s still at the hospice.”

“Yeah, I know, we planned to visit soon.”

“Catch you later, cousin,” a machine of many cogs, Igna’s inner-circle truly had the authority to do as they pleased, the eventuality of war increased distribution for Phantom. Selling weapons to their kin for the slaughter of the same kin.

Igna pulled into a manor in the middle of a residential district, high-priced property, lush driveways, clean streets, and peaceful aura, doors locked in the distance, Vanesa walked a few steps apart, her focus drowned onto her phone. *Knock, knock,* gates to the property closed automatically, the lock clicked. A valuable painting leaped at him, shuffles came from the right, “-majesty,” gasped Dyu, “-I’ve been waiting.”

“I know,” said manor was built by a previously prominent trading family, their tale sadly ended tragically, upon crossing paths against Lady Elvira of Phantom, the prominent family, notorious for their mercilessness against competitors, were found dead in the massacre known as the Cto’s Butcher. The name spawned from the serial killer who targeted rich folks, the news coverages were continent-wide – echoes of which still resounds today on forums dedicated to murder mysteries. Links to Phantom were never established, nor did the name Elvira ever rose. Law enforcement clueless, the Cto’s butcher walks the street, many rumors point to the murderer’s death. The family’s businesses and fortune were mercilessly devoured by other sharks, and in the end, Elvira acquired their estate. The Cto butcher remains ominously mysterious, none know when he’ll strike or if he’ll ever strike. Such being said, the truth, a morosely bland explanation – the Cto Butcher was nothing more than a concocted story built in nearby villages. Death of influential people, a convenient eraser for Phantom and their rise, ‘-Aunt Elvira’s story is quite the hit,’ he shuffled deeper into the manor, ‘-good thing she stopped before it garnered more attention,’ a simple door unlocked to a lavishly open room. At the center laid Queen Ela, timid and harmless under a comfy blanket. Igna turned to Vanesa, “-the fridge’s stocked. Have Dyu make something to eat.”

“Food?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“I need clothes...”

“We’ll go shopping in a bit.”

“Fine,” she mindlessly turned and headed towards the bar.

“Here,” interjected a troubled Dyu, “-Vanesa, the kitchen is that way.”

‘For her cleverness... Vanesa’s grown into an airhead,’ a side-smile led into the silent room. Weeks elapsed since the escape from Elendor, and since then, she’d remained in a deep slumber. ‘-Marks on her arms,’ he examined, ‘-healed bites on her neck,’ he pulled down the blanket and exposed less clothed Ela, ‘-injuries from head to toe, they truly didn’t care.’ Daily healing by the best court-mages culminated in the current. Igna removed the blanket – white lingerie kept her dignity at a minimum, ‘-la

constellation symbolize le relèvement,' was scarified across her stomach, 'Ela's not an idiot,' he paused, '-she must have meant something. Elendor uses the stars as conduits to utilize spells,' arms crossed, he took off the glasses, reality distorted, the bed vanished, emptiness leaked into the room, the queen's figure lit into a black-silhouette of many lines running from her heart to the limbs, '-the circle of Edth,' dark dots at points of interest matched the constellation of Edth, a kite on top which overlapped across. '-If I press these points,' he flicked specks – the dots imploded, the flow of mana restored, *Mana-Control: Healing Element – Full Body Restoration,* she levitated, the wounds regenerated, '-and that should do it,' a potion flask was pulled from his storage dimension. Few droplets landed in her mouth, the irresponsive lady's pupils moved despite the closed lids, her chest lifted and dropped. The fallen blanket drifted to its original place, '-how old is she?' he wondered beside the bed.

"Unfamiliar ceiling," said a faint muffle, "-who are you?"

"Igna Haggard, King of Hidros," he replied, "-you're in Hidros. We've cleansed the body from remnants of narcotics."

"My spell's broken?"

"Yeah, it was pretty easy to figure."

"So much for that," she sat upright, "-a lack of clothing, why am I not surprised?"