

## Death Magic 861

### Chapter 861: Unforeseen Visit

Mediator between soon-to-be warring factions, a position no one in their right minds would ever accept. Such wasn't the case for the enigmatic and charismatic Jonny Dyale of the Dyale and Co, a renowned fashion brand who in past years, increased their influence to Alpha, the promised land. Ruby-red tag along the neck, Lord Dyale, a native of Hidros, found himself on a train headed due east to Kreston. Security at Riverwood was quite the show, armed guards patrolled the very few trains headed for 'enemy' territory. Past the station, the singularly tranquil transit trotted on its merry way, passing the very Hidrosianesque landscape, up hills, through forests, past meadows of colorful plants. Sun settled on the checkpoint at the border. A slow halt muddled onto a station shy after said border – Kreston's undeveloped land was prominently used for agriculture; lack of infrastructure rendered the thickets denser and intimidating.

Setting foot outside sent shivers, guards were few but present. Lack of motion and presence, not to mention the perpetually present fog – a mist of frigid properties.

"Name?" inquired a guard, lack of supplies forced the rebellion into using olden suits of armor – an equivalent to bringing a knife to a gunfight. Blood had yet been shed – therein a staring contest between parties.

"Dyale," returned simply. The guard nodded vaguely into the distance.

"Continue," he said, to which, the mediator returned, the train trotted along, headlights lost within the cold air. The nature of his business was very much important. Representatives from the opposing faction joined in stride at Heu's Church-town, a safe distance from the border and the resistance's stronghold. Once again, guards meticulously searched his person. On completion, an escort walked through gravel streets, residences threw horrid glances from back alleys and mildly parted curtains.

A tavern named Mysteo, cupped away in one of the same alleys, opened its door to military men. The chipper sound of drunks, foul smell of burnt cigarettes and booze. Conditions to Dyale's safety included no speaking to any bystander or otherwise, resident of Kreston.

Weak wooden steps climbed along the tavern's back wall, the structure cried woeful creaks, energetic stomps arrived at a random door, the escort tapped three times and waited. Dyale threw glances at the surroundings, the place was very much the same where murders are reported; gang killings, vengeance, assassinations, and nameless, faceless bodies. Dark and dainty atmosphere, tension was high, any moment could be the end.

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\*Click,\* the impasse widened, the escort subconsciously stopped, there laid fear in his expression. No use in getting cold feet, the mediator stepped inside, the door shut loudly, an amber lit candle quivered, its fire carried to a lantern which brightened the room a little. Two seats, a clear view on the streets below, a small round table, and muffled breaths in the shadows. Dyale pulled a chair, tiniest of movements resounded deeply at his core, he dropped, reached for inside the coat, pulled a metal box, took out a cigarette, and puffed, "-if the intimidation is over, may we get the negotiations started?"

“Fine,” returned the opposing party cloaked under a hood, “-start?”

“I see what you’re doing,” he leaned confidently, “-trying to see my hand before we play, fine,” he puffed, “-we have nothing to hide. The crown wants but one thing, and tis the peaceful surrender of the nobles. My job is to keep the damage at a minimum – going to war will bring blood and tears to Kreston, the sullied nature of the province is sufferance enough. The negotiation isn’t an ultimatum, king Igna’s generous – long as the queen and Nicola are brought to the castle, the rebels will abstain from judgment.”

“So much for the negotiations. The nobles are scared, and I wouldn’t count on their bravery to save the day. Kreston isn’t foolish, those at the top have sent envoys to a particularly war-ridden kingdom, one would say, the cousin to Hidros as they’re born and brought up in a similarly dangerous environment. The rebellion wants but the rightful heir to take the crown.”

“Listen, today’s a trial run for the day when negotiations are truly needed. Here,” a briefcase slammed on the table, “-return lady Goldberg and tell her, I, Jonny Dyale, will always be at a phone’s call away. If the news is to be believed, Erat will surely be a bloodbath – the crown is very open about their plans. Consider this,” he tapped the case, “-an incentive to future parole.”

“Understood,” said the hooded figure, “-it was a pleasure, lord Dyale.”

So on and so forth, a step of good faith from Dyale rekindled the nobles’ sense of companionship to the mediator. The briefcase held items of value to the kingdom, most of which were owned by the rebelling families. Thus, a communication channel between each faction was established – one unbiased and objective.

Concurrently, away from the under-table deals, common in times of strife – Igna sat with legs crossed at Queen Ela’s bedside. She woke, climbed out the bed, shuffled to the wardrobe, threw on clothes, and avoided conversation, night layered the neighborhood.

“Silent treatment?”

“No, no,” she checked herself in a mirror, “-taking in the air and surroundings. How did I end here?”

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“You have Dyu to thank. He asked for us to orchestrate a plan to sneak an innocent queen out of her queendom.”

“Couldn’t help notice the strained sarcasm on the innocent part...”

“Right,” he leaned, “-the federations, we did some digging and found Phantom to have been abused in a pointless war between kingdoms who were friends all along. The olive branch into Iqavea, very noble of you, my lady. Hate to say, I don’t believe a word out thine mouth, if not for you, King Staxius may have lived.”

“Don’t blame me,” she narrowed, “-I warned him subtly. Besides, the nature of our relationship was and still is between him and me, I don’t need an outsider telling me what I should feel.”

“Right,” he stood briskly, “-ruining the Federation and betraying those who fought and gave their lives for the survival of Elendor,”

“Wait, wait, don’t leave. I need to know, what happened?”

“Well, majesty,” returned an unimpressed scoff, “-Dyu rescued thee from King Juvey’s lecherous hands. We put on quite the show, killing nobles and ruining the leadership in Elendor, I doubt they’ll strike again. Queen Ela, I promised Dyu Hidros to be a haven for the queen – far as the world is concerned, you’re dead. I advise finding a new name and starting a new life,” he walked and handed a card, “-here’s my number. Listen, what’s done is done, water under the bridge. Start again and live a normal life – if you wish something more entertaining, send over a summary of thy skills. However,” the tone harshen, “-if there’s even the speculation of betrayal,” he whispered, “-I’ll make sure the remainder of thine life grows into hell,” the lock clicked, “-the food’s ready.”

“Good,” he spun, “-remember my words, majesty,” he crossed Dyu, turned the corner, and stopped, “-she’s all yours.”

\*Incoming Message – éclair.\*

‘What’s it this time?’ he checked the notification, “-master, we need to talk. I’ve booked a restaurant, Loron.”

‘Loron...’ a stop at the kitchen showed Vanesa deep in heaven with food in her mouth, ‘-things never change,’ he smiled and joined her for the meal. Later, on the clock striking nine, Igna pulled into a parking lot, he stepped with Vanesa at his side. The promenade gave onto a very chaotic event. People sang and danced; celebrations prolonged.

‘Dinner at an expensive restaurant. What’s éclair got in mind?’ waiters bore friendly smiles, a stand at the front had few of the cooks sweating before the stove, the queue for Loron was long – Igna walked inside to a completely empty restaurant. A single table to the center had éclair sipping.

“Hello, éclair.”

“Greeting’s master,” he nodded, “-I see lady Vanesa’s here.”

“Tell me, what’s the meeting about?”

“It’s about lady Lizzie,” he said, “-the princess wishes to move onto greater things. Playing the piano and being worshipped as a diva of the classical world has swallowed any semblance of free time she may have had.”

“And, what am I supposed to do?”

“Nothing, I figured you’d be interested...”

“I don’t see how it needed a tête-à-tête?”

Food arrived shortly, Vanesa’s stomach grew, appetite smothered the otherwise listless expression, “-tis about the war, majesty.”

“Go on.”

“Reports arrived from Jonny’s parle; Kreston is thinking of hiring mercenaries. I’m certain they’ll be the same opponents who defeated princess Loftha to an inch of her life. Aside from that, the defeat of

Lucifer's brought the attention of the otherworldly onto us, more specifically, you. I came to say but this, majesty, be careful. Fighting wars on many fronts isn't the smartest idea. Leave the rebellion to us," he sipped, "-I want the king to go in hiding."

"And cower?"

"No, go in hiding and do what thee does best Majesty."

"Kill?"

"Wrong again. Be a slave to thy whims, majesty," he slid a piece of paper, "-on founding the alliance of Alrosia, matters of war is under the jurisdiction of a greater hierarchy. Emperor Markus stands at the top, there's no arguing said fact. Hidros, Arda, and Easel Run Gard each have their representatives. Ultimately, without a vote, Alrosia can not act on greater matters. Thus, my saying, master, leave the statesmanship to us, your trusted companions. Take Elendor..."

"I get it, I get it," he sipped, "-no need to sugarcoat the damned thing. I'm a liability, the rocky state of affairs can't allow me to go haywire."

"I wish there was more I could do."

"No, it's fine. The ends justify the means. Do what thee think is best for the people. I'll stay out of the way."

"I appreciate the understanding," nodded éclair.

"Well," he stood, "-nothing more I can add to the discussion," Igna reached for Vanesa's arms, "-I truly hope, éclair, the bold action doesn't backfire."

Back in the car, Igna sped, the engines roared throughout the cacophonous event.

"Wise choice," said an ominously dark presence, "-keep Igna away from the politics and let us handle affairs of the state. Alrosia will fall into our hands sooner or later," the voice transcribed onto Igna's interface. "-Poor Emperor, they haven't realized the conglomerates are more powerful than before. Any wrong move and the Wracia Empire will have no option but to take the fight into Hidros, we wouldn't want that, not now when a rebellion rages forth."

'I knew it,' he chuckled, 'éclair will never betray my trust. The conglomerates are making their move – Kreston's too much of a liability now, he must have realized it. Until we know how deeply they've infiltrated our ranks, can't act on my own,' before he realized, Igna found himself out of the capital and headed to the south toward the Azure wall. A bright flash blinded the dashboard, a low-resounding rumble shook the desolate street, "-what was that?"

"Pops," yawned Vanesa in the backseat, "-I sense a celestial, a goddess... or what remained of a goddess?" Gun holstered, the dark streets made seeing difficult, especially when he dropped into an untouched savagely growing grove. Strangely, the closer he moved, the easier it got, an uncertain brightness lit the grove of which moved and wailed. Closer, trees were left in the dust around a sharply glowing outline, "-HELP!" it cried, Igna took off the glasses – a strong convergence of raw power dug into whoever exclaimed, "-HELP ME,"

\*Mana-Control: Waves,\* a gesture relieved the pressure – the glow lessened, \*Mana-Control: Vortex,\* he guided the dangerously reactive mana into a condense orb above the palm. The more he pulled, the more it generated, ‘-what’s wrong with her?’

“HELP ME!”

“Can’t,” he pulled Tharis, \*BANG, BANG, BANG,\* three bullets of anti-magic properties hit points of power from what he saw in the fissured reality, a pulsing headache boomed till he wore the glasses again. The menacing presence eased, lights poured from the entity’s wound, the glow laid in a puddle, “-how am I alive?” it blinked.

“Consider it the hand of God,” he chuckled, “-what brings a high-tier goddess to the mortal realm?”

“Talk about the odds...”

“No, I’m quite worried, Goddess Athena.”

Chapter 862: Fall from Grace

“Rather I say previous high-tier goddess?” he observed at the loss of power, the manifestation of her strength fell upon charred earth – a temperate breeze passed the duo. She knelt and held a bleak frown – a recognized look of rejection, “-Athena?” he called, no response. The goddess built her frown into a scowl and threw the vengeful leer to the heavens, her jaws clenched, veins at her neck as well as fists strained.

“Athena?” a shuffled brought her dejected look at arm’s reach, “-look here,” he grabbed her chin and pulled the sky-bound leer to his face, “-look at me,” he narrowed, “-will staring the heavens bring change? How about self-pity, has it ever helped anyone?” the rhetorical questions took jabs, she blinked uncaringly, “-such a sad display isn’t worth thy time...”

“-Should have left me to die,” she held his wrist and pulled, “-I don’t have anything to live towards.”

“If thee wish to die,” he dropped on one knee, “-you’ve come to the wrong place. I suppose a very painful death would have fallen if I hadn’t interjected. Pardon me for being a curious soul,” he reached and pulled a knife from the pocket dimension, “-here, a blade forged in the bowels of, well, something along the line of hell?” it landed at her side, “-doesn’t sound impressive, the bowels of something,” he climbed, “-Athena, if thee wish to die, please be my guest. I’ll wait and dispose of the body. However,” a deep glare flung over the shoulder, “-if vengeance is thy desire, if thee wishes for the wrongs to be right, let’s sign a contract – a deal between you and I. Doth thee wish a deal with the devil?”

“What type of deal?”

“Anything.”

“And I say I want gods to pay for their crimes?”

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“Depends,” he faced forward and lit a cigar, “-what good will killing a few celestials bring. Understand, mindless revenge is the worst,” he puffed, “-no action nor fun.”

“A deal is a deal,” she clambered, fought pain in her legs and back, “-no questioning my reasons.”

“Very well,” half a circle warped between each party, “-swear on thy name, offer thine blood, thus shalt be our alliance.”

“Making a deal with the devil,” she scoffed and pricked her thumb – a golden glow dribbled as opposed to blood, it splattered across an ancient symbol. An ominous cloud of mystery rose from the ashes, it exploded into a dense fog. Growls and cries wailed in the echoey distance, crimson-colored eyes lit at vague distances, “-are you really the devil?” she blinked.

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“I was given the title, suppose I am,” he kept a smug smile and clenched his fist. \*AHHH,\* the sound of a lit fuse carried quickly, a symbol, a simple circle, burnt on the side of her neck, “-consider the symbol a blank check,” he smiled, “-nothing in the middle means I haven’t decided the payment for when the job is complete,” a deep inhale, rearranged thoughts, he blinked and waved, the simple gesture tore the mist from reality. The clear sky felt dull – on a whim, Igna stared at the sky and clapped. Clouds summoned as did a sudden rumbling of thunder, “-there, rain and lightning to set the mood.”

Athena gawked, her mouth slightly opened at the nonchalant display of power, “-Igna?”

“Changing the weather is easy,” he shrugged, “-all one ought to do is use the massive pool of mana left unused. You see, goddess, there is much we have to discuss.” Following the display of strength, the duo struggled to exit the dense grove.

“So much for being almighty?” commented Athena.

“Don’t,” he chuckled, all the while fighting stray branches, uneven ground, the sudden interjection of rocks able to twist ankles without warning – a clearing rose in the distance. Lights flashed on and off, “-Pops, here,” waved the blasé Vanesa, her repeated assault on the headlights brought a genuine smile on Igna’s face.

“Where are we?”

“Hidros,” he replied.

“Hidros...” she looked around; “-the air sure feels different.”

“Let’s chat in the car,” he hopped in the driver’s seat.

Vanesa reluctantly climbed into the back seat, “-I called it,” she yawned, “-a fallen celestial.”

On starting the engine, a confused stare from Athena landed on a nonchalant frown, “-I get it,” he reached and locked the door, “-seems the goddess has much to learn in the mortal world. Here I thought we were friends...”

“I forgot, ok?” her eyes rolled, “-time passes differently, and I guess, I forgot how humanity worked?”

“Yeah, enough excuses,” the tires screeched till facing a vague direction towards Rosespire.

“What did the little lady mean by called it?”

“If not for her, I’d have driven past. Enough about her, tell me about you, how does a high-tier goddess fall into the mortal realm?”

“I don’t remember exactly. Here goes nothing,” she sunk into a pensive expression, “-the heavenly realm isn’t much fun, therefore, I usually spent my time in my realm; Athens. I know, don’t look surprised. I don’t much care for innovative names, what matters is inside anyway. I spent most of my days within the Garden of Lone, painting, sculpting, name it, and I’d have done it. There were rumors of demons starting a rebellion, something to do with the rise of the fallen king, Alfred. I dismissed the rumors, content on spending my day painting. I couldn’t help shake a feeling of misplay, I headed to Zeus’s realm, the heavenly castle. It was supposed to be a casual visit – when I arrived, all was in chaos, the calm and composure was gone just like that. Zeus’s slumber had followers run to the next leader in search of faith and guidance. Lixbin had a field day controlling the masses, the other gods strengthened their realm, those of lesser power joined factions, a united front against the rise of demons. Rumors of Alfred had the heaven in fear. At said visit, I came to spot Lucifer and Lixbin chatting. I nonchalantly went and joined their conversation. The topic was the sudden death of angels, those present said viciously shaped hands clawed through heaven’s gate, grabbed angels, and pulled them to the mortal realm. Pure terror flashed on Lucifer’s face. He vowed to undo the harm caused by said hands, after which, he descended. Lixbin tried hiding his convincing sneer, we both knew it was impossible for him. Next arrived the news of Lucifer’s disappearance – heaven and hell shuddered. Reports spoke of Lucifer’s defeat; some said the prince was found in a weakened form at the entrance of the Aapith nation. The domain between each faction, Draebala, suffered a surge in power, celestials and demons flew to the warring domain – Celestials blamed Lucifer for Zeus’s slumber, demons blamed celestials for having masterminded the arrival of Alfred to lure Lucifer. Ancient texts speak of Alfred as the only entity able to best Demons and Gods alike. As if it wasn’t enough – efforts to halt the rise of Titans failed, the eternal abyss shattered, ancient demons and their leader, Kronos – part of him, rallied behind a distant domain. As for I, the gods called a council to best discuss ways of stopping the demons – the arguments ranged, things grew violent. Death, Creation, and Time were pulled from the equation, the pillars holding the power balance are nowhere to be found. The symbols of power are gone, many rose the nonsense of a mortal possessing each symbol. We laughed as said proposal came from a faction under Lucifer’s control. As goddess, I chastised and mocked the very idea – a simple soul can never hold such power. After the meeting – I received a message from Hermes, the last thing I remember was being hit in the head,” she looked at her forearm, “-my symbol’s gone, my owl,” she sighed, the beautifully stern visage bordered woe and loathing.

“At the risk of sounding rude. Goddess Athena, are you or are you not the goddess of war and wisdom, one of the strongest, if not, the strongest deity within the heavenly realm. Heroes of war, demi-gods, and plenty in between have sought thee for advice. How, and I mean, how, does one so high in the pecking order... fall?”

“Complacency,” she shrugged, “-if not for a certain someone, I’d have kept my wits about me. Instead, my focus was drawn into putting emotions on canvases, I wanted to see the world from many different points of view.”

“I’m honored,” he laughed, to which she flung a deeply judgmental leer.

“Your turn,” she reached and pulled his face from the road, “-can’t help notice the scars, where are the symbol of power?”

“Truth be told, the story has merit. Death and Time are in the hands of a mortal. Creation’s symbol is in the heir’s possession. Rumors about Lucifer’s defeat are true,” headstrong outside the windshield, “-I stole his wings, I killed the angels, and the reason the heavenly and demonic realm is about to crash are results Lixbin’s scheme. I served my own purpose, after knowing my true origin, how I was forsaken by everything, I sought to regain what I’d lose. To my surprise, the life of Staxius gathered the necessary tools for my ultimate ascension. Alas, Lucifer knew, perhaps he understood my actions of which were deprived of hidden motive. I wanted power – he killed me and cursed my soul. I can never be a god, my soul stained from walking the righteous path. I wonder if it was for the better – in the end, I reached the title of Watcher, a position above godhood. Goddess Athena, I wouldn’t put it past to say the downfall was the result of my actions. Therefore,” he lowered his guard, “-on the contract we forged, I hereby offer myself in judgment,” the car screamed to a stop, he stepped out, walked to her door, pulled the handle, and gestured for her to exit, “-here,” he dropped Tharis into her cupped hands and shuffled away, dropped on his knees on the side of the road, bound his hand at his back and relaxed, “-the anger, the hate, channel said power into the weapon, it will respond to the emotion. I advise stepping closer and placing the barrel against my head for insurance. My word is my word – take the first step in clearing the anger.”

“Igna,” ire fueled her face, she shakily rose her hand.

“WALK CLOSER!” he shouted; “-else you’ll miss.”

“Playing mind games, toying with my emotions,” she gritted, “-how do I know you’re not bluffing. I will pull this trigger.”

“And I count on it,” he returned sincerely, “-if I’m the bane of why a famed goddess was banished – I love nothing more than answering for what I’ve caused. Swear by the name of Tharis, judgment, and justice will be delivered.”

The shaky forearm stepped closer, she blinked – within her heart laid far more than mere hatred, betrayal, rejection. Bane of her downfall laid with a lowered guard on the side of the street, rain followed – droplets washed her oily visage.

“Stop stalling.”

Rain muffled her footsteps, a hard, cold surface pressed against the back of his head, “-there, that’s it,” he grinned sadistically, “-pull the trigger,” the eyes closed, ‘-a nice way to end.’

“WATCH OUT!” she screamed and tore the gun from his head, strong presences flew shy above the street, “-REVENGE FOR LUCIFER!” they cried, a volley of projectile spells flung, Athena sidestepped, \*AEGIS\* a golden shield summoned, a wave deflected the first volley, a summoned spear flung across and impaled an attacker. The deflected spells scattered and exploded extreme balls of fire, in what seemed to be a mist – turns out, the shape was a gathering of similar strength demons. Athena held strong with her shield on which laid Medusa’s head, a flick opened the latter’s eyes into a wash of grey, part of the frontlines fell.

“Guess now isn’t the time,” Igna placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled, “-watch,” the hands pressed, wings sprouted, a burst of fire gathered, he twirled and concentrated the surrounding mana and flicked a tiny beam impaled carried across the swarm, it lit the demons, they laughed, as did Igna, \*Die\* the



highly condensed beam expanded in a deafening boom – the whole area shook, echoes reached the cacophonous Rosepire. Left in its wake was a giant fissure that devastated the street, nothing save dust and rubbles laid, “-job well done,” he spun and smiled.

#### Chapter 863: First Blood

A glaring thunderstorm loomed over head, the sky turned darker than most nights, visibility stood at a measly couple of meters, the thickening mist of demonic critters exploded into a thousand pieces. Snow, or what seemed to be snow, hovered, the ranging storm growled and snapped flashes in the distance.

Igna casually dusted his shoulders, pressed his lips, and narrowed the eyes, a few blinks confirmed what he'd done, the street headed north was destroyed beyond belief. No sign of tarmac nor manmade structure, remainder being the moist inside of the earth. There, he moved to the precipice of where the spell activated, a 'V-shape' crevasse of apex being Igna's tiptoeing over the edge, expanded the devastation. ‘-Now that's a spell,’ he smiled, pleased by the results. A sigh turned the figure towards the hallow-faced Athena, her gray-colored eyes and stern reaction remained still, time around her froze. He strode forth, leaned, gathered the pistol, pulled on her hands, dropped Tharis, turned around, snapped, and chanted a few words. A menacing rumble burst, reality fractured in before her eyes, the broken roads and sign of battle faded, the damage whisked till the gentle rumble of the present storm.

Droplets splashed across her open arms, Athena blinked and watched. No matter the thought gathered or action the body wished to make, she stood still, unable to act. Igna observed and shuffled to her side, casually resting on the car bonnet, “-Lady Athena, seems to me demons decided to attack.”

“Yes, demons,” she replied after much strife, “-how did you?”

“A simple spell really.”

“Devastation of such proportions isn't simple...”

“I understand the confusion,” he pointed at Tharis, “-and I'm even more so ashamed. You risked your life to save me, conjuring the Aegis shield and summoning spears. Brings me to joy a goddess moved to protect the one who caused her woe.”

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“Stop,” she sighed, “-I've fallen from my position of power,” arm held to the stars, “-look,” she painfully watched, Igna joined, the symbol of power grew timid in vibrance, her presence wavered, the more time elapsed, the greater grew her human side. Rain flooded the street, “-we're even.”

“Pardon?”

“You saved me.”

“Nonsense,” he interjected, “-Lady Athena, thou art not saved until thy rightful return to thy throne.”

“Sadly, dear, the only way I return is if we went to war against the heavens. Between the gods and angels, whomst resides in the upper realm – not to mention the alliance with demons; heaven's gate is perhaps even more so guarded. And to think, I once controlled the heavenly forces.”

“Goddess Athena, if war is what thee wish,” he turned and stared her squarely, “-war is what thee’ll get,” the intimate closeness reddened her already flushed nose and cheeks, she felt every breath he exhaled, “-besides,” the tension broke, “-you made a deal with the devil,” he chuckled, “-your problem is my problem.”

Rain’s torrent crashed, Igna and Athena found themselves on the road towards Rosespire. In a similar glumness, Athena carried her emotions to the raising the next day. The castle sparkled in action, gears churned with exception to the King’s input, he remained held within the inner-palace behind a piano. Alcohol to the side, he drank and played, Vanesa ate breakfast and watched television.

A simple and beautiful melody hung in the air; much effort was placed on straining notes. A thud shattered the simplistic balance of melody and silence, “-Igna,” an expensively dressed gentleman ran into the room, “-why aren’t you in charge of the war?”

“Emperor Markus,” he returned, “-a pleasant surprise. How are the baby and my big sister?”

“They’re in the dining hall, the babe cries for food. Enough about me,” he shook the head and rode into Igna’s face, “-what about the revolution, what about the war? I thought it’d be handled by now...”

Calm under the assault, Igna but watched, “-don’t remain silent. We need to answer to the people, the alliance is a big-”

“Markus,” he interjected, “-the alliance is signed. Far as the people are concerned, those who want to cause a ruckus, will do so at their own leisure. The new leadership must be mutually respectful,” he inched forward and lowered the voice, “-between you and me, Alphaia’s leadership isn’t very united. By rank, the Imperial family looms over our head – the pressure’s felt by my trustworthy companions. éclair’s taking much of the unsavory concoction from selfish ministers in thy court. The revolution won’t end easily. I can decree the revolution’s traitors and sanction their deaths. Yet, a genocide...”

“Speak no more,” the speech slowed, “-I apologize.”

“No need,” he returned, “-I strongly suggest focusing on the newborn. Head on home, brother, the plane’s ready for departure. No use staying in a possible dangerous area. I’ll need the ambassador to be present no later than next week.”

“She’s on her way here,” he gestured, “-Loftha’s got insight which proves useful against the revolution.”

The outline faded into the distant halls, Igna threw back the drink and played. Heels echoed till where he sat, “-who was that dashing man?” asked a coyly dressed vixen.

“Stop it.”

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“What?”

“Lady Athena...” head in his palm, “-I said to fit in, not play femme-fatale. A virtuous goddess is best suited for worship...”

“Really?” a sigh emptied the weight on her shoulder. She skipped a few steps, reached for the counter, poured a very strong drink, and downed it akin to dwarves, “-here I spent hours stalking Serene...”

“Bad idea,” he returned, “-Serene’s personality is less than-”

“-Less than what?” froze a passive-aggressive hum.

“See what I mean?” he shrugged and signaled for another drink. Serene coldly scanned him top-to-bottom.

“Here,” she leaned seductively, “-a message from Julius. We’re headed to Dorchester,” she winked and vanished into the bat-shaped mist.

“See?”

“See what?” narrowed Athena.

“Her cleavage and purposeful seductive hue. It’s hard to breathe when she’s in her seductive mood. She is one of the very few I’d hate to argue against. That woman’s scary, very, very, scary.”

“What should I do then?” they sat side-by-side at the piano, “-fitting in is hard.” In the same area, a priestess passed across the windows, her hands pressed in prayer and attention on chants and muffled worship.

“I know,” he gulped, “-how about a nun?”

“A sister?”

“Yes, you’ll be praying to yourself?”

“Is this a joke?”

“It’s a good idea...”

“Praying to myself...” she facepalmed, “-sounds wrong on so many levels. Fine, I’ll do it.”

“Great, I was wanting to add a lady of worship to my circle. Until the issue of power is resolved, lady Athena, thou art be the Apostle of lady Athena.”

“Minerva,” she said.

“Minerva,” he confirmed.

A phone call or so later, a group of devout nuns arrived in mass and knelt at her feet. Athena cautiously flung glances at Igna who but had his hand in prayer at her, “-hear me, o’ sisters of faith to the powerful goddess of Wisdom and Warcraft, Athena. We, humble walkers on the mortal realm have the honors of welcoming the true Apostle of Lady Athena, Priestess Minerva. Her claim is legitimate and her voice pure, please,” he said, “-present them with the shield of Aegis, sanctify thy claim.”

‘What scheme...’ before thoughts manifested, Igna sneered smugly. The walls around Athena crumbled, ‘the devil...’ therein, the golden shield summoned, the nuns had risen their hands in prayer – such as the arrival of Priestess Minerva, the true Apostol of the patron goddess of Glenda.

A simple call to Alta and the situation was handled. By Ardanian standard – each village or settlement had their claim on worshipping any deity they wished. One could say, part of how a settlement is recognized. Village crests often incorporate the crests used by sects. It didn’t take much time to firm

Athena as patron goddess. Whiskey in one hand, he watched as the goddess was taken, on the way out, she made meaningful glances at Igna in a way to say, ‘-you’re on my watchlist.’

\*Ding,\* a notification snapped, “-murder in Rotherham,” read the title, ‘-murder?’

\*Incoming call – Lady Elvira,\* “-Igna,” he said.

“Good,” relief washed her voice, “-Igna, take the first train to Rotherham.”

“What happened?”

“Yui will transfer additional information.”

He rose from the piano and stared at Vanesa, the latter had her face deep in a bowl of cereal, “-pops?”

“Put on some clothes, we’re going out.”

After éclair’s request to stay from politics, there wasn’t much to focus on. Athena’s arrival felt more but a hurdle to skip, her presence meant the situation beyond the mortal realm grew tediously dangerous. ‘-I don’t feel rage or anger,’ he thought whilst in the shadow, ‘-her arrival made me feel sort of peaceful. Calming, to say the least. There’s so much happening and so little I have to do. Being king’s nothing special,’ he flashed his face, ‘-just sit and order people. I’ll have to source my fun someplace else.’ The clock struck 10:40, Igna and Vanesa were dressed and ready for departure. A simple toggle the presence faded from the public’s attention – the castle boomed frantically, a pleasant sound of advancement and woe, some revel in the bliss of profit, others wallow in their losses.

An hour or so later, Igna stood before one of the three skyscrapers. Far as the public was concerned, nothing happened. Security was on high alert, “-young master,” bowed one of the guards, “-lady Elvira’s inside.” Continuing on the given path led to a grand hall. Stairs carried onto the other floors, elevators were cupped in the center, shy after a chandelier. An entourage of stern expressions emanated an aura of ‘do not enter,’ blocked access to an employee-only area. An equally tense frown deluded the guard’s showmanship, the circle broke and allowed entry to a backroom.

He entered – air ducts were shut, the atmosphere felt dense, spiderwebs coated the walls and lockers. The victim, a lady in relatively good shape, had her head smacked against one of the lockers. Blood splatter had a different, ominous pattern.

“Igna,” gestured lady Elvira, “-you’re here,” she hurried to his side.

“Good to see you, auntie. What happened?”

“A murder,” she said.

“Where’s law enforcement?”

“That’s the thing. I can’t call on law enforcement, the matter extends into a matter of the royal family’s security.”

“Pardon?”

“The web, can’t you see?”

“Hold on,” on close inspection of the victim, “-Laura...” he knelt at her disfigured face, “-the guard to Lizzie. Where’s she?”

“Lizzie is fine,” reassured Elvira, multiple footsteps barged into the room – Seiran, Laurance, and Rile, personal guards to the princess, “-Laura,” muffled Laurance dressed in black hidden under a hood. They made way to the deceased, “-idiot...” gritted Seiran, “-who did this?” the nightwalker whipped toward Igna and Elvira, her anger rattled the room.

“We don’t know,” returned Elvira.

“Don’t,” said Rile holding Seiran’s hand, “-causing a mess won’t help anyone.”

“Where’s Lizzie,” fired Igna, “-where’s she?”

“Outside,” returned Rile, “-we rushed soon as we heard Laura...”

“Right,” Igna moved deeper into the room, “-everyone, out,” he gestured, “-since we’re not involving the police, tis a matter pertaining to the underworld?”

“...” Lady Elvira kept her mouth closed, she forcefully refrained from answering questions. Laurance, despite the composed image, stormed his way to Elvira, there, guards leaped forth to halt the advance, guns were drawn on one side, spells were manifested on the other, Rile bore his claw as did Seiran, Laurance had treads around the guard’s neck who in turn had their guns on the trio.

\*Clap,\* the spells disenchanting, the mana wavered, a pull of the index flung the weapons across the room, “-look at you,” he said, “-Laura’s dead and the blame games already started. Stand down,” he ordered.

“No...”

“Seiran, I’m not asking, I’m ordering you to stand down,” he glared.

“I answer to princess Lizzie, she’ll be devastated... Elvira called Laura here, she knows why she died.”

“Even so, stand-” Laurance resummoned his treads and cleanly slit the hands of Elvira’s guards, “-I don’t care,” he jumped and summoned a poison-filled needle, “-my sister’s dead because of her.”

“STOP IT!” a bright light pushed each party back, musical notes fluttered from Lizzie’s multicolored aura, “-Laurance, Seiran, Rile... don’t.”

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Chapter 864: First Blood [2]

“Highness,” they bowed, Seiran’s expression didn’t budge. The anger towards Elvira lingered, Igna, stood beside the body, observed silently. Lizzie had grown over the many years, she stood tall and proud, a coat of pearlescent colors moved around extremity to extremity. Her outfit, reminiscent of the adventuring gear used by Kniq, was quite popular, being featured in multiple magazines. Her status as a prodigy didn’t stop at the piano, the beautifully sculpted visage and persona placed her at the top of the modeling world. Each gesture, each movement held grace and purpose – she inherited her father’s confidence and mother’s grace. Her ever-changing pupils glanced Elvira, on which she respectfully

curtsied, turned at her companions, and motioned for them to settle. Wounded guards screamed, having a hand-sliced didn't seem least pleasing. The blood-curdling yelp escaped- additional forces rushed to be stopped at the door. Taps at the door resolved by Elvira's motion to an uninjured guard, he left to assure the others.

\*Raphael, Archangel of Restoration; thee who sits uninhibited by the flow of time, reach down and extend a helping hand to the miserable,\* Igna held an open palm above the wounded guard – the pain and shock knocked him unconscious. A rift of unknown origin, per the onlooker's point of view, opened and puffed a cloud of greenish-purple. The maimed limb regenerated; wounds ate themselves into health.

"No attacking the guard," chastised Igna, "-Laurance, Seiran, and Rile," up from tending to the wounded, "-do you realize what happened?" he walked – an air of complete control followed, Elvira, and her very imposing team seemed naught in comparison. Laurance's anger, Seiran's frustration, and Rile's confusion all dissolved in a thick layer of judgment.

Said emotions locked their feet; illusionary chains wrapped and tied the retainers. Any shift of unnecessary movement begot a disturbingly angry growl – not from Igna, rather, the air around him, a malignant fluid shadow. The expression remained cavalier to the point of uneasiness. Lizzie gathered her courage and walked to shield the trio, "-what?" she said with chest, "-is something the matter here?"

"Princess Lizzie," he returned, "-I'd advise stepping away from them. Tis a shame," he said, "-an embarrassing situation. Laura lies in a puddle of her own blood. Instead of finding a solution, they allowed emotions to take toll and risk," he leaned with the intent on headbutting the princess, "-Lady Elvira's life. I don't have to remind where the hierarchy falls. Her hair is worth more than their lives combined," the palm opened to spawn countless orbs of white-flame, "-endangering my aunt's life is the same as terrorism against the state."

"So?" she stood fiercely, "-I'll protect my comrades," the envelop of shifting hues expanded into wings and a halo, "-I'm a daughter to Staxius Haggard, I will fight my own kin if people to me are at risk."

"Sorry to say, cousin, my decision isn't to be argued against," \*snap,\* an anvil of uncontrolled power dropped those present, the guards passed out, Lizzie's entourage felt on their knees as did she. Lady Elvira stood nonchalant to the outburst.

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"Is that it?" she refuted, "-you'll kill them?"

"No," the aura vanished, the tone swapped, "-never, what am I, a monster?" he chuckled, "-I only implied what would happen," a look on the trio showed them cowering before Igna, "-tis the price paid for standing against the current. Someone has clarify where you and they stand."

"Is that it?"

"Why, is the princess feeling a little helpless?" he asked rhetorically, "-if they've understood the possible consequences – I humbly ask for the room to be emptied," he threw a cautionary stare over the shoulder. Elvira's tight lips motioned a timid, '-okay.'

“Really, cousin?” back to her feet, “-you think intimidation is going to best my protectors?” her posturing ended on deaf ears – Igna was long gone, examining the uncanny circumstances of Laura’s death. She shuffled her pouted lips and turned to check on the trio, “-my cousin’s-” expectation of unfazed attendants crumbled. Each had their hands covering the ears, the face pale white – any semblance of personality or character was lost, in said instant, what returned the princess were withered plants torn by gusts. With help from Phantom’s on-duty guards, the room emptied, Lizzie and her entourage were taken to a separate room on the upper floors. Lady Elvira joined the sudden quarantine.

‘Now,’ left alone, ‘-Laura,’ he leaned and observed, ‘-you weren’t killed by trauma to the head, were you?’ he reached in and carefully examined her nose and mouth, features barely hung on her visage, ‘-right,’ notes added on the interface, “-Yui?”

“Hello master,” replied through the interface, “-I was wondering when you’d call.”

“Where the additional information I was promised?”

“I forgot,” a clumsy picture passed the interface, “-Laura was found earlier this morning by one of the workers. Security footage hasn’t spotted anything – no blood leading in and out of the room. Seems the body magically appeared. Lady Elvira had asked Laura to carry many under the table deals with the Musical Academy. Since the debacle a few years ago, the relation’s returned to normalcy.”

“Let me guess, we sell narcotics directly to idols?”

“Yes, money comes in and we move the product out safely without middlemen. Snow’s influence on the street’s hampered business, some dealers sell subpar substances under our name and try to tarnish the reputation. The outlying district’s no stranger to unknown bodies being discovered in abandoned houses.”

“How does it tie with Laura?”

“No idea, ask the lady directly.”

“Fair point. Have medics take her to an autopsy. There are a few things I need sorting,” he took a glance at her fingers and clothes, ‘-no tags?’ the thought ended suddenly by Yui’s interjection, “-On the mention of Snow; there’s a gang who’ve made themselves at home a train stop away at the village of Emcure.”

“And?”

“They’re distributing on our turf...”

“Your point?”

“Whatever,” the call ended.

‘The body was arranged to look like an assault. Why, what’s the reason for leading the investigation in a certain direction. From what was said, she was delivering packages for Elvira – aunt seemed blanc when they rose accusations at her. What did she do?’ he escaped the room and stumbled on Vanesa eating an apple.

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“Pops, teleportation was used,” \*crunch,\* “-a scroll.”

“...”

“What?” she messily ate the fruit, the juices dribbled, “-they used teleportation...” said her dead-expression.”

“Of course, they did.” Between Vanesa’s constant mention of teleportation and the elevator being locked – a climb to Elvira’s holding space carried onto vexingly immaculate tiled stairs.

“If not for the forced trips, my sister would still be alive.”

“Oh shut it, who do you think pays for the living expenses. Let me add, boy, money doesn’t come easy.”

“Whatever, we live to protect and serve the princess, not be messenger...”

“Right, blame me, blame the supplier. Listen, she died on her own watch, if Laura was taken off guard by simple hoodlums, I greatly overestimate the princess’s protection. Say, what if this incident truly shines a light on your incompetency.”

“Oh shut up woman, don’t speak about my dead friend. She was strong, stronger th-”

“ENOUGH!” thundered the hall, “-it’s unbecoming to see the same side argue. My cousin said it best earlier, petty screaming fight won’t and will not resolve the situation.”

“Since when are you on my nephew’s side?” narrowed Elvira, “-Princess Lizzie.”

“Aunt Elvira. I look at you and I feel bad. The mighty businesswoman took down by a few accusations. Did you really have a hand in Laura’s death?”

“That’s it!” Laurance pounced, “-she’s dead.”

A flash of black took Laurance face by the hand and held it against the carpeted floor, “-no fighting,” the grip eased, Igna teleported in the middle of the argument, “-it’s not been fifteen minutes.” Vanesa skipped to Lizzie’s side, “-hello.”

“Who are you?”

“That’s my daughter,” said Igna raising from holding Laurance, “-Cousin, do take care of her, yes?”

“Fine.”

“Seiran, Laurance, and Rile, keep an eye on them.”

“Why would we? Lady Elvira said we’re not much better than her guards, ask them for protection.”

“Can the persecution complex end, this is getting tiring,” he motioned the door, “-aunt, we need to have a tête-à-tête, for the love of what’s holy, Seiran, put on your big girl pants, don’t you dare,” he glared, “-sully the prestige of being a nightwalker.”

The room locked – each went their different ways. Elvira breathed a relieved sigh, “-I was getting tired. Igna, I’ve done this for a long while – never before have I felt this way. I know I didn’t kill Laura; I



certainly know the job I sent on yesterday wasn't harmful. Her death's surprising, Laura's strong, it's the reason why I chose her."

"Why me?" feet kicked onto another chair, "-solving murders isn't my profession of interest." The large vacant space felt very unnerving – chairs laid in a somewhat orderly arrangement. In retrospect, orderly if the arrangement was made by drunken workers, the carpet and curtains held the scent of cigarette. A glimpse of white in the corner told most of what happened.

"Who else should I have called?"

"I don't know, a private investigator?"

"Like?"

"Odgar's Agency. Don't forget, I own them and their business. Far as I'm concerned, they're very competent."

"Not wrong," her emotions tightened, "-what if I said I missed you?"

"Doubtful," he smiled, "-I appreciate the thought, aunt."

"Appreciate the thought. Damn, I must be rusty."

"Aunt, be honest. Going in circles will only prolong the discussion. What job did Laura have?"

"Mule."

"Pardon?"

"Mule... why the surprise?"

"Didn't expect an answer."

"Oh right, deflection. Listen, Igna, I'm not responsible for her death, I'd never want her to die. Look at us, look what the death entails, doubt sparked the fuel of cacophony and mistrust. Granted, my outburst didn't help the situation... whatever," she shook her head, "-don't sit there and judge, I need answers."

"Clearly my point. Laura's a mule, she delivers narcotics to high-profile individuals, names if mentioned may subject Phantom to scrutiny. Am I correct?"

"Yes, which is why I can't."

"Auntie, Laura wasn't just a mule, was she?" her dark pupils enhanced with makeup flickered suspicion, "-she's a spy."

"Hah!"

"Before anything is said, aunt, let me say, her clothes were without tags and nails unnaturally clean. Vanesa said the body was teleported, and I have to agree. Still, the blood splatter on the lockers must have come after her death – that much explains the irregular pattern. Whoever teleported her must have set the scene and left. I've stored a thread of the used mana. It'll take time to examine, considering I'm the only person able to manipulate the matter freely."

“-Can we find the culprit?”

“No idea, the cause of death is yet to be determined. I don’t care for the previous targets, give me the name of who she visited this time.”

“...”

“Aunt?”

“Promise to keep composed?”

“Right, go on.”

“The Patek Dynasty...”

“ARE YOU INSANE?!”

“I have my reasons, Igna, listen. Cimier came to us with a proposal of an alliance to share the market. Seeing the Alrosia alliance, I couldn’t help think the underworld would be joined in some weird fashion. I accepted negotiation, to parle and clear differences, the talk was scheduled later down the week. I sent Laura to showcase our product, I didn’t expect.”

“AUNT!” he facepalmed, “-how could you be so careless? Patek’s really...”

“Igna?”

“Auntie, I’m...” he exhaled, “-speechless. Didn’t it once strike as a trap?”

“No, why would I be worried,” she returned confidently, “-we control everything, their channels were monitored and checked by Yui. If they made calls overseas, I’d have the reports in written form on my desk the next minute.”

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“Didn’t it cross that there are several ways save the Arcanum to communicate? How about face to face, or a fucking letter?” next thing, the chair toppled. “-Igna,” fired Elvira, “-don’t you dare!”

“Dare what, not show respect?”

She centered, “-I’m the leader of Phantom, I’m due my respect.”

“Right you do, lady Elvira, forgive me, a nobody, I clearly don’t deserve to smell the same air,” the door locked loudly, ‘-worthless.’

Chapter 865: First Blood [3]

“Dear cousin, I apologize for the analog medium. Matters have grown hectic since éclair announced your parting from major affairs. I don’t much care for the drama between king and prime minister, long as the people aren’t in harm’s way. Serene and I have found a viable contact in Dorchester. Where money, drugs, and sex are involved, there lies a way to make a deal. Our fight against the rebellion will depend on the talks. I do miss the good old days of leaping in weapons first. I heard from Alta; Piers returned from the trip to Kreston. I couldn’t catch his report, nor did he even speak if I remember. There’s much going on – you know well as I do, the way the war ends is if either you or she dies. Anyhow, take care,

cousin. The future is in our hands, the Haggards will prevail, no questions. Tis what we do.” signed Julius Arnet Haggard.

The note laid pinched between Igna’s index and middle fingers vaguely in assortment to resemble a cigar. The air around him felt cold to the skin, the breeze gentle, and the sky, empty. He sat on a lonesome hilltop cupped into the groves called parks, at different intervals around Rotherham. The well-ordained town sparked and cried a thousand flames – hovering airships, advertisements, brand names, and models – Lizzie was spotted in a very stern pose in portrait advertising clothes for Lum.

Besides was the cordial Vanesa, her feet swayed and her arms cradled a bucket of fried chicken – every bite left oil smears, a sight not much appetizing, as Igna silently avoided her thoughtful grasp upon the townscape.

‘A moment of reflection,’ he pondered, ‘-Patek is involved and she sent a trusted ally to deal with them. How stupid can she be?’ arms crossed in a toothache pose, he watched the street, two lanes, one of white and the other red passing one another. The sheer number of vehicles was a marvel, especially in a relatively arduous economy. ‘-More I think, the less I understand. I don’t want to take into account emotions – there lives plenty of organizations and businesses. Holding all the aces is impossible – long are the days gone when I’d always have the upper hand via a simple phone call. The agencies, the government agencies – latter established well before I took claim. What is a man to do?’ he watched, waiting for the phone to ring.

\*Incoming call,\* and it did at dusk, “-Igna,” he answered.

“Afternoon, majesty. I’ve received the autopsy report. Shall I send it via the channels or would you prefer-”

“Hold it, I’ll be there in a bit,” the cog crackled, rusted splinters blocking the wheels of intrigue snapped. Bit by bit, the experience of scouring information, piecing together snippets of information, the lost chessboard manifested, the pieces moved anew, ‘-I’d forgotten the way,’ a pleasant grin carved the lightly sealed mouth. ‘-I’m getting old,’ doors to the car shut, Vanesa followed into the passenger seat, her bucket laid empty, the oily fingers hovered centimeter from the lavish interior. Igna gasped at what she’d do. Surprise, she conjured a spell and completely cleaned her arms, “-what?” she matched his antsy leer.

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“Nothing.”

A half-an-hour drive later, the car rolled into the medical district, Central Rotherham Hospital, wrote in the distance – a massively white-shaped block of concrete broke the harmony of the neighboring buildings. Vehicles to and fro matched sirens, the scene very hectic regardless of day and night.

“Right, we’re here,” he said shutting off the engine, “-Vanesa?” a glance showed a lass in the world of dreams, her cheeks plastered against the fogged window, “-wake up,” he tapped, she snored and coughed, “-pops, let me sleep,” said a yawn.

“Fine,” the doors locked – he looked upward, past the building and to the sky, memories of the demon attack hadn’t fully digested. Darker the cloud, the more uneasy grew the atmosphere. Fortunately, the

interface read, ‘-the potential of rain, 80%’ which took the mystic away. A battle across corridors, long hallways, open-air, lines of patients – after many signs he arrived at the morgue. Large, dark, and gloomy, he shuffled till a man dressed in common attire covered by a lab coat, “-Majesty,” he hailed.

“Doctor,” replied Igna stopping at the tall man’s side – a kind expression, well-kept hair, cleanshaven facial hair, and a posture that read confidence.

“It’s an honor,” he swooned, “-I’ve heard and read so much about you, majesty. Seeing you in person, it’s... it’s a life-changing experience.”

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Igna saved but kept a neutrally amiable regard, “-cause of death,” before long, the doctor got about to the situation, “-no injuries on her body – the trauma to the head was postmortem. Cause of death is this,” he handed a note, “-a drug overdose. I’m not familiar with the composition, it’s rare, I sent a sample to the lab – results should be out in 24 hours. I did my best to mend the wounds and have her face presentable.”

“Good job,” said Igna stepping into the room – the light did nothing to add color; a greyscale washed the area woefully. Add the slow trickling of rain and a painfully beautiful piano piece and voila, a scene fit for cinema, so went across Igna’s mind. Driving past billboards and advertisements greatly affected the psychic. Pulling the white sheet showed Laura in a better state than when she was before. The face reconstructed, the sunken eyes, pale skin, and blueish lips hit home, she was dead. In that instant, Igna ran his fingers through her hand and smiled, memories of Alicia Raze returned in small increments. A subdued rage erupted from within, the chest and back of his eyes felt hot to the exhale.

“Majesty?” inquired the doctor, “-is something the matter?”

“No,” he covered her face, turned, and left.

The car door slammed, Vanesa’s dream shattered, “-what!” she cried and wiped her mouth, “-pops, silence...”

“Sorry,” the engine toggled, “-Yui, where’s Lady Elvira?”

“At her estate, why?”

“Tell her I’m coming,” anger glazed his regard, “-if anyone gets in my way, they’ll die.”

The past was something easily shaken, the pain of losing Chef Leko and Alicia was reinforced by Laurus’s death. A horrified Yui relayed the message – the manor lit suddenly. Security drew their weapons at the tall gates.

Headlights pulled onto the premises, the armed guards squinted and allowed access. Elvira sat with legs crossed before a large screen playing the news, a wine glass in hand and cigarette in the next, attendants were arms reach away. Engines roared into her property, it toggled from which Igna exited. Vanesa kept herself at his side – those foolish to so much glare fell on their faces.

“Don’t knock them out,” he said bearing a smile.

“Pops, where’s the anger gone?”

“Hidden behind a mask,” he said, “-scowling at someone heightens their guard. Now that I know why she died, there’s more my dear aunt choose to leave.” Security outside and inside differed by uniform and weapons – once at the front door, “-young master, lady Elvira’s said to postpone any meeting until further notice. I’m sorry you came all this way.”

“I see,” he returned a shocked expression, “-Vanessa, seems to me my dear aunt is playing hard to get,” he side-glanced and she clapped – those mounting defenses dropped, “-Yui, open the doors.”

“Master, I can’t, I’m underemployment for lady Elvira...”

“Is that so,” the channel swapped, “-éclair, sorry to burden you, a gate needs opening.”

“Understood,” returned a somewhat drowsy voice, “-midnight’s the best time to sneak into someone’s property,” he yawned, “-Yui, you should understand my master takes only yes as the answer, no if’s and but’s,” the reinforced slabs clicked, he pushed – the heavy frames flung inward, “-nice place,” he rummaged inside, the décor was much in alignment to a nightwalker’s gloomy crimson taste. Furniture and portraits were very Victorian style, the stairs carried much in way of character, gothic railings, subliminal mentions to death, an inside joke as immortals could but dream of the day where all ends. The maids hid their faces behind veils, none made attempts to stop, instead, they froze with hands at their waist in service.

“May thee guide to where my aunt waits?”

“Follow me, young master,” said one from the line of devout servants.

‘Nightwalkers,’ he examined, ‘-if their master is in danger, I can expect a massive battle to explode.’

“We’re not going to fight,” said the maid, “-our orders are to protect Lady Elvira from outsiders. Young master, thee bares the blood of the first progenitor, as such, we can’t disobey the orders of our true leader.”

“Long as I get my answers, I’ll be content,” she halted a thick oak door kept behind heavy curtains. He continued inside a big room; a line of shabbily dressed children laid to the side, their necks open and face filled with fear, a look opposite them showed Elvira sitting behind an oppressive desk. Her long-fingers wrapped the wine-glass seductively – the gluttonous mien laid on the children, “-Nephew,” she exhaled, “-was my warning not sufficient?”

“Oh, pardon,” he walked in front of the line, “-didn’t think my dear aunt would be partaking in wine tasting. I don’t care much for them,” he looked over the shoulder, “-seems fine to me.” A long pause carried till she took the hint and left the area, the children kept subdued smiles.

“What is it?” they stopped at a corridor wherein Elvira pulled curtains and watched the outside, “-surely, Igna, you didn’t barge here...”

“Autopsy report is back,” he said, “-Laura was killed from OD.”

“And, could this not have waited until tomorrow?”

“No, it couldn’t. Listen, Aunt, I apologize for my behavior earlier. You’re right, respect is due and I understand what I did was wrong.”

“But?”

“There’s no but, not this time,” he exhaled, “-words have only done so much. Laura was killed by an OD, how do the name Leko and Alicia ring?”

“Igna...”

“Don’t,” he rose a hand, “-I was powerless before, you said they’d be punished. Sadly, I’ve yet to see the results, Patek’s walk the continent freely, the underworld market is sullied – the godfathers have gone into hiding. I’m embarrassed,” he leaned, “-which is why I’m not opposed to taking the matter in my hands. Tell me,” he narrowed, “-you knew Laura was walking into a trap, she was bait, a powerful and lovely lady being sent to satisfy the lustful pleasures of that damned Patek. I know he killed Alicia and I’ve remained silent – trusting your judgment to be best. Tables have turned, aunt; if not for me, Phantom would be scraping the bottom of the barrel. We hold true power, we have what others wish, and tis, not weapons, tis Maicite – look at me,” he grabbed her hands, “-all I want is the truth, did you know?” she averted his gaze, “-auntie, tell me, did you know?”

“No,” she exhaled, “-I didn’t know the heir to Patek was the mediator. If I knew, I’d have sent a man instead. Leko and Alicia’s death have hung over our heads, guess what, they’re not the only ones who’ve died. Every week,” she broke his hold, “-every damn week there’s a funeral. Someone close to Phantom is killed in a gang attack – my wardrobes filled. Good men, family men, die on the street like dogs. You’re right, if not for you, Phantom would have long vanished... guess I’m grateful,” she tapped his chest twice, “-but you see, Igna, if not for me, this whole organization will amount to nothing. The fear our name holds is enough to deter entire kingdoms. Laura’s death did affect me, still, I don’t want to cause friction, not until the Alrosia embassy is settled. Hold your hand, nephew, I can’t believe I’m saying this to you,” she grabbed the back of his head and slammed the foreheads together, “-get a grip.”

“Understood,” he stepped away, “-if attacking them directly isn’t an option. I’ll figure another way. Hear me, aunt, they will pay for killing Laura, I’ll make damn sure the conglomerate knows who they’re messing with.”

Chapter 866: First Blood [4]

The distant sound of Igna’s engine faded beyond the wall – lights gathering from the driveway into the manor faded in order, starting at the gate to the porch. Elvira waited in her dressing gown, the comfy curtain parted mildly, her dark pupils and cynic resting face pressed on the windows. She followed the trail of red leading outside the property, the fingers and hands numb to the touch – on the gates closing, she twirled and hopped onto her large bed, the mattress sunk, “-Yui,” legs underneath fluffy covers, “-stop hiding.” No sound clicked, a gentle elevation in light marked the lady’s entrance, on fully entering the room, the light lowered to darkness – flames caught Yui’s facial features at irregular intervals, the shadows extenuated a glibness, unlike Elvira, had experienced. There laid sternness without her speaking, “-tell me, why allow him access?”

“I tried to stop.”

“Speak when spoken too,” the face, veiled behind a hardcover book, rendered deciphering her emotions difficult.

“...”

“Good. I presume éclair granted him access instead?”

“...”

“That would be a good time to reply,” she shut the book, “-Yui, dearest Yui. As sister system, you work great for logistical support. I was foolish to expect more. Don’t think badly, Yui, for the amount of work fed into thy subconscious each day, you standing here is a feat of praise. When Igna came, you fled instead of standing in his way. Your loyalty remains bound to Igna and éclair. I shouldn’t complain,” she exhaled, “-what’s happened is partly my actions. Phantom’s suffered a great loss,” her composed visage burnt, shadows cast by the lonesome lantern carried passion in the unseen parts of her corners, “- Laura’s death’s affected more people than I realized,” she stopped and took time mauling what had happened and what was to happen going forward. She took breaks, stared at her empty palms, threw her head back, and settled, “-Yui, take care of this mess for me?”

.....

“Pardon?”

“Currently, I’m out of ideas. Nothing I think points to anything drastic. Keep an eye on current events. About the time I delegate tasks. Prove to me you’re capable.”

A sadistic hue sparked the quiet expression, “-lady Elvira, if I’m free to do as I pleased, is it alright if I excuse myself for a while?”

“Absolutely not,” she returned, “-I still require assistance at the office. After hours,” she smiled, “-what is done in thy private time isn’t of my concern.”

“Thank you,” she nodded and locked the door behind. Elvira carried on her the tenseness of frustration. Her actions proved fatal, a good leader must take accountability for her actions, such as the thought running in her mind. Meanwhile, opposite her door, Yui stood with palms clenched. ‘-Finally,’ she breathed, ‘-lady Elvira’s allowing me freedom. Best not waste her time or mine,’ she firmed her gaze across the wall, “-maids, with me,” she stormed followed by a row of servants, “-let’s have ourselves a party.”

Igna’s return wasn’t much to talk about – he found himself at the manor within the noble district, the gates opened, guards nodded, and threw stern salutes. The driveway, curved lines climbing a hill, was met with dark outlines of trees and shakes of foliage. Before long, lights adjacent the pathway guided the journey – and thus, on pulling onto the poach, he threw a pleasing look at the helipad in the distance. Helicopters fitted for battle laid in wait, cautiously waiting for the time duty called. Inky black figures rose yonder, the night escaped into the day – most of those hours were spent on the road, riding from Rotherham.

Held by the hip, he carried Vanesa into the manor, “-young master,” escaped Seiran, “-you’re here?” she stopped from sweeping the interior.

“My word,” he glanced up and down, “-you seem to have gotten a pinch instead of a grip. Progress is progress no matter what,” he shuffled inside, “-the study, is it?”

“The same way it was years before, éclair made sure to upgrade the hardware. I don’t understand,” she watched his back carry inside, “-you own the castle?”

“What can I say,” he shrugged and threw a distant gaze at Lizzie’s memorial, “-this place brings memories. Tell Lizzie we need to speak a few words,” he handed Vanesa, “-find her a bed, she won’t be up until lunch.”

“What’s he doing here?” glared Laurence sidestepping from the common area, blocking the view onto the memorial.

“Laurence,” he headed for the grieving brother, “-I’m sorry for Laura’s death,” hands-on the slumped shoulder, “-I won’t promise much, a lost life isn’t easily repaid. What I can assure is justice,” the gentle pat turned tense grip, “-I have an idea of who’s responsible, all we need is confirmation. Once over, you’ll have a say,” the tense speech broke to fix Seiran and Rile, “-in how the murderer is punished.”

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“I’d ask nothing more,” he muffled, “-thank you, young master.”

“Don’t worry,” he cheered, “-if it’s not too much, I’ve taken the liberties of having a spot opened in the family crypt. She’s part of the family, I want her to be there.” The faces lit suddenly, “-what about lady Courtney, the head of the household?”

“A simple matter of phone call,” he nodded, “-please, let Laura be buried alongside the Haggard’s,” he rose a finger to the garden, “-a statue will be placed in her honors. Death is celebrated, tis the true way we move forward.” Seiran had silent tears falling upon the wooden floor, Laurence’s empty expression stumped into silence, Rile knocked himself onto a nearby wall, the wolf-ears slumped.

“Thank you,” they said simultaneously. Vanesa changed hands and Igna moved into the study.

Woe and silent cries, to each their own; loss of a friend, Igna knew all too well how the feeling felt. Coming from a place of understanding, part of him wanted to make sure Laura’s sacrifice amounted to something. A simple tap connected the interface to the holographic display, a vile of unknown properties hovered, glasses off, ‘-time to study,’ reality shattered, lines of meaning pertaining to multiple ancient letters faded. The remainder built upon itself. Minutes turned hours, Igna worked, the shattered puzzle formed a stable layer, the centerpiece, the captured thread, buried itself onto said layer – from there, it spread, the blueish color sank into the distorted foundation. Hours leaped into days, 20th of March displayed, “-alive,” he gasped, raising an arm to the ceiling, a few minutes ago, the very grounds to the manor shook, “-I did it,” he clambered onto the sofa and dropped face-first onto the cushion, “-I recreated the scroll from a single thread,” an uncontrollable smile laid on his face, “-how long was I out?” a glance at the calendar, ‘-weeks?’ the blinks intensified.

\*Knock, knock,\*

“-Enter.”

“Morning, master,” said Seiran proudly wearing her gothic-style dress, the gloves held sharp nails, each of which was very prominent, “-been a while,” she said holding a tea set.

“Yeah,” he yawned, the display toggled, “-Vanesa, how’s she?”

“Princess Lizzie saw fit to bring her along. There’s a strange bond between them,” she settled next to Igna and poured herself a drink.



“Glad I got to see you drink.”

“Oh?” she stopped her sips and laid the cup on the holder, “-you thought this was for you?” she laughed, “-god forbid that day,” she shrieked. He observed, her foot tapped, the jests felt full of life, “-today’s the funeral, isn’t it?” he commented.

“Yes,” she sipped, “-Laura’s body was cleared to be buried. She’s on her way here – lady Elvira’s took the responsibility personally – the event’s going to take place here, at the manor.”

“Not the castle?”

“No, we rather not,” she refrained, “-bringing attention isn’t wise.”

“I spoke to my mother; she’s said it would be an honor to have Laura rest in the family crypt,” a scroll laid on the table.

“-what’s that?” she inquired.

“The spell used by the disposer. I spend my days in reconstruction, to rebuild a scroll from scratch – a miracle if I say so myself.”

“And?”

“It’ll allow us to track the destination.”

Rage lit the dark pupils, “-can we?”

“No, not now,” he returned, “-rushing headfirst will be foolish. Besides,” he checked the displays, “-if what I think is to be true, the culprit will show himself, there’s no question about it. Aunt was wise in her words – not acting on emotions broadens the mind.”

“Seiran,” whispered Laurence, “-Princess Lizzie’s arrived. We should get ready, the ceremony starts at 11:00. Young master, thee should perhaps change into more fitting attire. The King of Hidros attending my little sister’s funeral, should I cry or punch a wall, I don’t know,” once done, he simply turned and walked away. Igna was left to wonder about Laurence’s sanity, “-don’t worry about him,” said Seiran raising from her comfy station, “-he means no harm, the deadpan way of speech is just him being him. Our little chat grounded reality to where it should be, we had time to grieve – I should let go of the past,” a pocket-sized self-help book escaped her dress and fell, “-I’m an airhead,” she leaned, grabbed the item, winked on reaching the floor then fluttered out.

‘To each their own,’ he remained silent, “-Yui, éclair, anyone there?”

“Good day, master,” returned Yui, “-éclair’s getting the funeral ready. Close family and acquaintances of Phantom will be in attending.”

“Someone sounds cheerful.”

“Well, I was working to fix the mess lady Elvira caused.”

“And?”

"I'm making slow progress. The more I look into the details, the more the fingers point to Leina. Did you know, Laura dealt directly to superstars and their managers – our little friend had contacts in high places."

"I'd love to hear more about it."

"But not now?"

"How smart you are," he chuckled.

"Right, yeah, sure," she sighed, "-master, would be pleasing for my stories to be vaguely taken seriously..."

"I meant no disrespect. Now isn't exactly the time to discuss such affairs."

"Yeah, funeral. I've sent an attendant; he should bring your suit. As for the castle, éclair said the ambassador's got it."

'Ambassador?' he narrowed and sighed, "-understood."

Funerals were always very tacky, the suit soon arrived, the entourage of Lizzie, Vanesa, Laurence, Seiran, Rile, and Igna were readied. Helicopters chopped yonder; the noise sufficed to the district's peace.

They watched from the balcony, "-the funeral doesn't seem real," added Lizzie.

"I agree," whispered Laurance, "-my little sister's already dead. I've dealt with the worse of the pain, I can't..." he grinned, "-this just feels right."

"Like turning a page," added Seiran, "-right," she clapped, "-King Igna, there are a few guests who've asked permission to come to pray for the departure of Laura. Some high-ranking, others not so much, I'd advise for thee to keep a strong persona and not entertain much of the guests. The last thing we want is the media catching wind of what's happened. éclair's cast a net of surveillance, from the moment the event starts and till it's over, any connection to the Arcanum and usage of devices will be monitored."

"Information blackout at its finest," he sighed. As said, guests arrived in dozens, familiar faces from the organization – godfathers and CEOs of various high-ranking brands. In said fold was Queen of Arda, Courtney, and Leader of Phantom, Elvira, arguably two of the most influential figures second to the king.

Laura's coffin rested in the common area – the apostle of Athena, Minerva volunteered to perform her rites. A few hours into the ceremony, many paid their visit and humbly respected the departed, Igna kept close to the body, he watched from the veranda, "-marriage and death," said Julius, "-two events that bring a family together."

"I know," he replied, "-feels odd. No one here knew Laura, and still, they looked to her as if she was a friend."

"Tis the way Phantom pay their respects. I'm impressed, placing her body in the family crypt, it was a great move."

"Not a move, just my way of saying rest in peace," he smiled and suddenly fell on a couple, "-it can't be," he gritted, "-why's he here?"

Chapter 867: First Blood [5]

“Who is what?” inferred Julius, the attention pushed onto the front porch – the mention of guests from Seiran hit home. Igna watched, arms crossed and innards seething in rage – death wrote in his fists.

“Cousin,” he whispered, “-get him out...”

“Cousin,” interjected Julius, “-don’t,” he reached for Igna’s hands and pulled, “-look at him,” the glances missed, “-they’re engaged from what I heard.”

“Engaged?” he narrowed, “-those two?”

“Seems like it.” Igna’s anger and frustrations personified into the attending guest, Ziu Patek, and Loftha Sultria. The former was the root of many losses he suffered, counting among them was the death of Alicia. Coming from the suicide of Lessie, Igna’s empathy wasn’t much present. Fingers ran through the back of his hair, it pulled and smacked the forehead against a very familiar face, “-Igna,” narrowed lady Elvira, her makeup light but present, the outfit respectful and costly, “-look at me, boy,” she matched his breathing and eased on hers, “-easy,” she calmed the ominously glowing aura. The few unlucky to stand in the range were hit by an urge of nausea, one headed to the washroom. The couple made their rounds and stood beside the coffin, Loftha and her partner, the tall dashing Ziu, held hands in prayer and bowed. No disrespect nor mistrust, the custom of respecting the fallen went without incident – Loftha took charge and guided the duo to empty seats. More guests arrived and paid respects, Seiran, Laurance, and Rile were centermost on the day – as immediate family, many condolences floated their way.

“I’m calm,” said Igna, “-stop treating me like a child.”

“Son,” pure long silver hair braced his peripheral and locked beside Elvira, who eased her grip, “-my dearest son,” said the well-dressed Courtney, her expression and present confidence turned the ominous atmosphere, “-I’ve missed you,” she pulled his finger and latched into a tight embrace, “-I apologize for not being there,” Courtney’s similar height allowed the lock to be efficient. On letting go, he purposefully dropped his height and went for another hug, she chuckled and patted his head, “-my, you’ve put on muscle, haven’t you?” she eased onto one of the seats and dropped from looking inside. Igna settled on her lap and controlled the breathing, “-son,” she patted his forehead, “-for one who enjoys pushing others, I admit, this sight is very rare.”

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“Mother...” nothing else formulated, in that instant, nothing needed to make sense. Courtney truly was his mother, the inviting smile, long hair flowing at a whistle – relief washed the core. Igna was just that, Igna, no Staxius, no Alfred, in the purest form of ego, Igna was but Igna, the same confused boy who woke decades ago on the other side of the wall. Someone who started without any knowledge or a sense of self – the few minutes he laid on lady Courtney’s lap were heavenly. Unbeknownst to them, he nearly drifted into the land of dreams. Taps on the cheeks shattered the very idea, he rose and gasped, watching the garden, where which workers carefully placed a covered memorial in honor of Laura.

“Igna,” said Courtney, “-my son,” she clenched his hands, “-I’m happy.”

“Happy?” the forehead crinkled.

“Yes, happy,” she kept a lovable smile.

“Why?”

“Nothing,” her pearly white teeth escaped, “-motherly instinct or whatnot.” The casual discussion stopped per arrival of men in suits. A funnel of luxuriously dressed individuals eased to display a similarly aged man to Igna, “-long time no see.”

King of Hidros and Queen of Arda stood, “-Lord Elon.”

“Majesty,” he took her palm and touched it with his forehead in a little bow, “-refine as thee are stern,” her expression harshened for visitors, the previous kindness felt wrong.

“Gutsy as thee are smug,” she returned, “-the entourage’s grown much in the years.”

“What can I say, they are my bread and butter – a healthy mind comes from a healthy body and healthy company,” the glance centered on Igna, “-speaking of a healthy company,” he smiled wholeheartedly, “-my friend,” both leaned into a handshake which turned embrace, nothing formal nor respectful – the obnoxiousness was proof of their closeness.

“Son, I didn’t know you were close to lord Elon,” doubt filled her gaze, “-am I to-?”

“No, no,” refuted Elon, “-my friend here, Igna, we go back a few decades. I mean, he did grant me immortality and youth. There lays nothing for me to give when I asked for a price, he but asked for a friend – I was greatly touched. We bonded during the dark-age,” a reference to the hard years Phantom and Haggard’s suffered, “-when ousted from Elendor, I had to run – Igna provided me with a place,” the memories flooded, “-I remember we split the rent on a very cheap apartment.”

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“No, no,” interjected Igna fondly, “-not an apartment, that place was a living hazard,” they laughed, “-We lived together for a while, working as adventurers. Upkeep on our property was expensive...” he cringed, by hazard, much memory came from hitmen and monsters. During those years, life was cruel – every minute spent trying to survive, especially Lord Elon, the man had a massive bounty over his head, and there was Igna, killing bounty hunters for the sake of a friend. Needless to say, none ever got the better of them.

“I know,” said lord Elon, “-spending every Friday night fighting monsters to avoid collectors. Man,” they facepalmed and exhaled belly laughs. Lady Courtney and Elvira watched, arms crossed and eyes glazed, “-remember this?” he pulled the sleeve and showed a bullet wound, to which, Igna lifted his shirt,

“-Yeah, we took bullets to save one another. Good times,” shirt within the pants, “-guess our story is meant for another time?”

“Please, carry on,” said Elvira sarcastically. Elon didn’t catch the intent and went to formulate another sentence – an elbow jab from Igna stumped the lungs.

“Majesty,” attending maids came for the Queen whilst suited men came for Elvira, “-my lady,” they called, and off the duo went, carried by their duties and calling. Lord Elon’s entourage faded into the crowd, Igna and him watched through the veranda window. The area became restricted based on clout, “-where’s Alison?”

“She’s entertaining the crowd,” replied Elon, “-Igna, it’s been a long while since we’ve spoken.”

“Right, it has been,” they settled into lounge-styled seats. Igna rose a hand to the maids – they rushed for the bar and brought the strongest drinks available, Igna lit a cigar whilst Elon lit a pipe, “-not since our businesses regained their momentum.”

“Elon’s Dynasty had more trouble getting from the Empire.”

“What can I say, the range of our influence over the market is enough to capsize the economy. So many loopholes, tens of millions in legal fees, and close to two years of us sharing home later,” he smiled, “-seriously, I didn’t expect you of all people to accept my request.”

“Hey, I was the one who offered,” they sipped, “-the good old days.”

“We speak as if we’re old,” they cheered, “-tell me, Igna, how’s Raven?”

“Doing awesome, my companions are living the life. Odgawoan’s the place to be for the rich and famous. A couple of million and it’s not impossible to sleep every day with top models, granted,” he puffed, “-you’re in league with the underworld.”

“Speaking of the underworld, I heard good things from Godfather Renaud. The contested routes into the Empire seem to have eased a little. Did you?”

“Perhaps?” he smiled; “-the church’s backed off our cases. Elendor’s prime target, I bet you can retake the manor.”

“My life there’s over,” glanced into the distance, “-resorts, my friend,” he whispered, “-sun, sand, and sea, I love my life. Wake up warm and glance at the lovely crowd who come enjoy the beaches, from fat oafs to sculpted figures, it’s a blast to see them enjoy life. Too bad underneath the joy lays a world of crime and death.”

“Where there’s happiness, there’s ultimately sadness. Can’t do much about it,” said Igna, “-I’m glad you came, Elon, it means a lot.”

“Hey, you wanted an audience with the Overlord, here it is,” he laughed, “-the nickname has weight, meanwhile, if they looked at me,” he winked, “-they’d see a charismatic young man.”

“Drop the charismatic part,” jested Igna.

“Ha!”

A light-blond hair young woman slipped past security and panted, “-seriously, you didn’t tell them I was the secretary?” pouted Alison, her appearance changed, crimson-colored pupils gave her alliance, “-Lord Igna,” the glances met, she gripped her tablet tightly, “-I’m thankful for the gift.”

“What gift?” Elon looked to Igna and pressed his lips, “-buddy...”

“Vile of wine,” added Igna, “-welcoming present into the Nox’s clan.”

“Ahh,” he rose the half-empty glass, “-to Alison’s rebirth.”

“My lord, Elon, please, go pay your respects.”

“Right,” he gulped the drink and stood, “-enough for me. I should check on our fallen sister,” quick to extinguish the pipe, “-I’ll be back,” the footsteps went and muddled into the inside’s chatter. Alison pulled a seat, “-here,” Igna fixed a strong drink and passed it along.

A nonchalant knock of the head, “-good,” she wiped her lips, “-I’m no lightweight, Igna. My body doesn’t reflect the capacity. Another drink,” the glass hit the table, he happily obliged. A few shots later, Elon returned, the prior joyful expression tightened to a frown, “-fix me a drink.”

“What happened?” inquired Igna, Alison’s expression shifted from side to side, “-my lord?” she blinked.

“What’s that damn Patek doing here?”

“You know him?”

“Pretty well, Cimier and their underhanded methods,” he gritted, “-they’ve tried so many times to steal my businesses, always trying to buy. They haven’t the financial means and yet brazenly attempt purchasing using OUR stolen narcotics.”

“Here, have a drink,” Igna offered. To and fro from the veranda was quick to garner the attention of guests, many high-profile figures earnestly tried to enter the restricted area. Guards and retainers efficiently shot down attempts, “-calm yourself, Fred,” whispered a clique, “-the first rule of negotiations, make a good impression. Standing out isn’t the wisest of an idea – today’s funeral is in respect to Laura...”

“I know, but we need to meet the King, hell, even someone vaguely close to his circle. If he agrees to speak, we may have a chance.”

“Stupid, look around, most of the crowd here wants to speak to the king. Look,” they motioned, “-do you realize the amount of influence a stone’s throw away?”

“I know, it’s why I’m on edge. Why am I nervous, I own a leading filming company, I’m at the apex of life... compared to them, I... I feel so inferior.”

Ziu and Loftha remained side by side, overhearing swooning over Igna rose Ziu’s prideful nature, “-no,” tapped Loftha, “-don’t, I know what you’re thinking. The answer is no.”

“Let me have a shot at him, come on, Loftha, we depend on one another.”

“No, no,” she shook, “-your history with him is bad. We’re here to pay respects, not start a fight.”

A ground of armed figures flocked the couple, “-Loftha, Ziu, the king wants an audience.”

“See, they want to talk.”

She knew all too well, “-I’ll refuse, thank you.”

“Pardon my saying, this isn’t an offer, tis an order.”

Ziu rose abruptly, the monstrous figure looked upon the backbiters mercilessly, “-come,” he took Loftha by the wrist and pulled, “-I don’t know what’s the story between you, I sure have something to say to the king,” he smugly crossed the common area, once at the veranda, similarly sized guards patted the noble and cleared entry. Igna sat accompanied by Lord Elon. Lady Elvira and Courtney were a fair

distance apart in their own clique which held women of power. Puffs of smoke fluttered across Ziu and Loftha's faces, "-I asked for the lady, what's he doing here?"

"Ign-"

"Don't speak!" thundered Elon murderously, "-you," he pointed and puffed, "-don't have the right to talk or breathe our air," he stood and glared, "-now, before I ask them to gun you down, fuck off." Ziu's vein bloated, "-don't," he puffed as if spitting into Ziu's face, "-must I repeat myself?" he narrowed, "-I said, fuck off."

Chapter 868: First Blood [6]

A combination of anger and frustration washed the young Patek's face. He remained still at Loftha's side, she cast confused glances at Igna and the very influential entourage. Her lips juggled between speech and quietness – in the end, choosing the former.

"Step outside," she whispered.

Ziu glared; intent on getting his way. Elon had a flash of uncaringness; he rose a hand to the guards. They flocked at him and pushed metal objects against the man's muscles – the intent hit home. He lowered his head, pushed an embarrassed smile, and left; two behemoths remained at the young Patek's side. In a way to preserve what little dignity remained, murderously empty threats glared and bounced off, Elon simply ignored the call for attention.

A visibly tense Loftha stood with arms akimbo, "-who the hell?"

"Lord Elon, leader of the Elon Dynasty," said the charmingly dressed gentleman.

"Lord Elon?" she observed, "-quite the change from the prior-"

"Right on," he cheered and dropped onto a seat, "-god forbid I divert my anger for Ziu to you, my lady," fingers round a glass, "-tell us, why would one of thy caliber opt marriage to the Patek's?"

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"My love life isn't for discussion."

"I beg to differ," snarled Igna, "-Loftha, whoever you play around in thy spare time isn't of my concern. However, the relationship and bonds directly in conflict with what I stand for won't be allowed."

"The mighty king is jealous?" she smirked.

"..." a cold air dropped upon her shoulder – black smudge marks popped at various intervals around her field of view, the heart and mind sunk, "-might I remind, I was the one who saved thee. In all intents and purposes, I own you," he sipped, "-life and soul included," the cold glare turned smirk, "-ambassador. I don't envy your position."

"..." fear, the inability to say what she thought or act as she thought, the feet froze against the ground, her breaths deepened, the furrowed brows and crinkled cheeks didn't add to her position either. "I jest," he said on her emotions running wild, "-have a seat. To the fruitful start of a new relation."

Time eventually came for the coffin to be hoisted. Seiran, Laurance, and Rile had the honor of transporting their comrade. Lord Elon jumped to fill the remaining spot – many of the guests took to their cars and followed to the designated address. Once in her transport, Laura drove towards the graveyard – behind followed multiple darkened cars. Law enforcement and a guard detail from Phantom stood by in case of emergencies.

Igna found himself at the back, watching the crowd disappear. Vanesa was first to leave, her and Lizzie's growing friendship was a sight to behold. "-Left alone," commented a snarkily frustrated voice.

"Minerva," returned Igna, "-apostle to goddess Athena, how may I be of service?"

"Be of service?" she grabbed his collar and pushed, ending against a shelf side of the entrance – a few items fell noisily, "-are you kidding me?" she narrowed, "-I'm praying to myself, do you realize how narcissistic it feels?"

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"Not to state the obvious, are you a god now?"

The question hit suddenly, her grip eased, "-no, not at the moment."

"There's my point," he straightened the outfit, "-tell me, Minerva, was the courtesy inadequate?"

"No actually, the church in Arda's pretty clean. The people are very friendly, I but hail, and what I desire is brought."

"Glenda's been looking for a patron goddess. I wondered and leaped between candidates. Syhton was top on the list for I have met the goddess before. She graciously extended a helping hand. Then you," he smiled, "-you came around. the power of faith is one not to discard easily. Look at me," he placed his palm in-between and manifested a miniaturized version of Lucifer's wing, "-seventy percent of the world worships Lucifer, their blind faith strengthened the wings every second. Guess what, by standing at such a peak, I've become a god among mankind, regardless of my soul's inability to reach godhood, I am a god. This," he curled into a fist and pointed at her heart, "-if a silver of said belief is channeled into you, imagine, my goddess, imagine the growth. There's no argument of thy claim and thy dignity. You are pure and powerful – allow the people to believe in you, show them miracles, guide them, faith is a double-edged sword, master the weapon and further advance thy agenda. What I offer is my people of Glenda's faith – stand at my side, Minerva, be part of my entourage. Good company and help are hard to come by – the choice is in thy hand, regardless of the outcome, our contract stands."

"One condition."

"Which is?"

"Painter, let me paint to my heart's fill, and I want to move to Rosespire."

"Two conditions," the arms dropped, "-as is wished, Goddess. You'll move to Rosespire and help around the castle as a council to the people – spread the name of Athena and her grandiosity. In exchange, we'll shop for an art gallery and host an exhibition in the name of Minerva."

"What happened to my earlier paintings?"



“Kept at my manor in Alpha. I couldn’t bring myself to sell.”

“Long as they’re safe,” the heaviness around her feet dropped, a moment’s bliss rose from the withered posture, a glimpse of the Goddess’s true form flickered. Her mild gestures, the weirdness attached to her trying to use her phone – it was truly a thing of wondrous beauty.

“Perfect,” he muffled, she smiled at the compliment – footsteps lined at the door, nuns of the Church to Athena humbly waited for the apostle, “-see you at the funeral,” she waved and merged into the crowd, her hands wailed at a younger-looking sister holding an expression of dread. The focus of said conversation laid to be the phone, “-it won’t work,” yelled in the distance.

Arrival at the graveyard wasn’t big a show. Out of the dozens who arrived, only a few knew the true location, most were pushed to a rented restaurant. Phantom had many policies, and when it came to the death of their close companions, only family members were allowed. The crypt dedicated to the Haggard’s one made on orders from Lady Courtney had the ashes of Lizzie Haggard and the items of the deceased King, Staxius. Minerva gave her last word, the large Victorian-design crypt, shadowed by roughly growing vegetations, gave much-needed cover. “-would anyone like to speak a few words?” tension ran high, Laurance, Seiran, Lizzie, and Rile hurdled as one, tightly gripping onto one another. None seemed to want to speak, the death spawned but more suspicion. Igna strode from the back, passing the guests, and stood beside Minerva, “-greetings everyone,” he thundered, silence befell the crowd, “-we gather here to wish one of our comrades a safe journey into the afterlife. From the bottom of my heart, I know Laura is destined for more than heaven, she’s headed to a place better than where we live, a place where people don’t die easily, a place where the concept of violence doesn’t exist. Dream and idealistic as is, I truly wish her the best of luck. I knew Laura, or part of me knew how she was – Princess Lizzie is living proof of how Laura lived, she treated my cousin as her own, tended to her needs, and answered to her whims. The culmination stands before us as a person we can all respect. Laura’s love and affection will never be forgotten. Wherever thee are, Laura, fret not – whoever was gutsy to snuff out the candle of life will pay dearly. I vow to never stop till the fields are crimson by the blood of her enemies. Laura, you’ll live on in our memories, may thee rest in peace.”

Slabs to the crypt opened, the coffin was carried inside with the help of the closest family members. Cobwebs, dust, and moss were a common sight, rat squeals echoed per step. Laura’s resting area was placed beside Lizzie’s. Twinkles of bells and a splash of wine marked the end, as tradition dictates, on saying the last goodbyes, the harbingers(last of whomst carried the dead person) shuffled in single files and never looked back. Minerva was last to exit, the slabs locked by a loud thud, on such, the funeral ended. Attending guests motioned forth and paid their respects. Offers of flowers and alcohol were made.

Igna watched from afar, the harbinger considered of Seiran, Laurance, Lizzie, and Rile. Under normal circumstances, the harbingers would be immediate family related by blood to the ancestors. It is said, those who carry the dead to their resting place are obliged to be taken to the same resting grounds, a beautifully pleasing way to end. Embraces and goodwill sympathies were exchanged, Minerva noticed Igna and split from the crowd, “-not taking part in the celebrations?”

“Not now,” he puffed, “-the crypt’s too small,” he said, “-our family is big, bigger than before,” a nonchalant Yui skipped about, her gluttonous vice locked on offerings granted by the assisting sisters, “-Yui,” a tap on the earring shattered her rhyme.

“Wha are you going?” wondered Minerva, “-allow the girl a moment to enjoy the snacks.”

“Give her an inch and she’ll take a meter,” he uttered quickly and pressed on the issue, “-Yui,” he said, she looked about, confused to where the voice carried, “-here,” he guided the lost soul, “-here!” a raise of the hand caught her attention.

‘-Damn,’ read the visage

“Don’t look disappointed, come here.” She skipped past the black outfits and gave a loud sigh.

“Master...”

“You’ll have a good serving later. I need you,” he brought the phone, “-is the land for sale?” he handed the device.

“Master,” she sighed and rose a hand, “-please,” she smirked and toggled a holographic display, “-everything is for sale,” her right fingers sprawled across a floating keyboard, “-with the right contact, anything can be purchased,” lines dashed up and down, “-yes, it can be purchased for a couple of thousands. Previously owned by noble stripped of land and fortune. Ouch, must have hurt,” she brought up and old news story.

“Noble burnt to the stakes for harboring a mage, the olden age was very graphic.”

“Why ask if the land is for sale?”

“I want to buy it after all.”

“Master, I doubt it’s an esthetically pleasing area for development. We’re a three-minute walk to the church, and even there, the visitors aren’t exactly the type to enjoy buildings.”

“Who said development,” he puffed, “-buy the land, I want it repurposed as a gravesite for workers and members of Phantom. Many of us have forsaken our families and friends to work under our leadership, it’s the least we can do. What’s a couple of thousand, I don’t much care for it.”

“Another whim?” she inquired.

“Very much so,” he laughed, the door unlocked, “-Minerva, you’re with me,” he glanced forth to Lizzie’s ground, Seiran took notice and tapped Vanesa.

“Lady Vanesa, the young master’s calling,” she said.

“Pops’ calling?”

“Yes.”

“Guess I should leave,” she waved and skipped, leaving Lizzie and Seiran bewildered.

“She’s an odd one, isn’t she?” the muffled cries and paining heartache eased, “-her being here made the funeral bearable.”

“Oddly so,” sniffled Lizzie, \*-incoming call: Manager,\* read across her phone, “-we should move.” The various transports split, a soiree to celebrate Laura’s life would be hosted later that day. For the most part, the time in-between was spent in comfort to one another, or so would be the usual case. Igna,

Minerva, and Vanesa soon found themselves driving around the capital – the destination, the academic district. Students were plenty, many schools competed for excellence – he passed Lizzie’s school, memories of her death lingered till a sharp turn for a skysrise, “-the Tower of Eeln,” he said, “-a project task in becoming the tallest building on the planet. I say it’s done it’s due,” the foundation was large, very large, inside was a place of wonder, hotels to cinemas and theaters, name and it was housed. Highly expensive fashion brand advertisements laid on the windows, “-why are we here?” narrowed Minerva.

“To visit the art galleries,” he smiled, “-I have a promise to adhere.”

Chapter 869: First Blood [7]

“What promise?”

“How can one so wise be yet so dumb,” exhaled along the colder corridor. There was much in way of movement, visitors and workers – a very strange unity amidst the many classes.

Minerva’s world changed, Athene’s and Orin differed completely(Orin being the realm in which Igna was born). Her breath was stolen after every meter square – the massiveness opened till the upper-floors; natural light flooded from the skylights – placing a gauge on the scale wouldn’t do the architectural marvel justice. By more ways than one, Hidros’s landmarks and skyscrapers were finest to be counted among the world – the point is given to steady growth of prosperity. Couples dressed in civilian clothes as well as uniforms were common, families and loved ones exchanged laughs. Higher one moved, costlier grew items, high valued brands – models plastered across the shop windows, Minerva observed, the eyes carefully dissected colors and shapes into an array, a mental thumbnail sketch.

Igna and Vanesa’s outlines nonchalantly mixed into the crowd, bystanders crossed stares and paid no heed, “-Igna,” she hurried on the slumped pace, “-aren’t you famous?”

“Depends,” he returned, “-what you mean is why my presence isn’t being recognized?”

“Yeah, I would assume the elated king to be noticeable?”

“One would think so,” he smiled, “-I’m not so much a celebrity as one would think. A simple spell and my presence is erased – if by chance said spell is broken, I doubt people would pay heed to us.”

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“You say that,” she narrowed across the floor, “-there are few who stare deeply...”

“Ignore them,” he muffled and skipped onto an elevator. The linear pathways turned on one another – once clothing shops gave way to the inner theater – the deeper one walked, the harder grew the atmosphere. Guards pressed visitors, and by all means, the area wasn’t restricted – the décor and way of presentation split the crowd, hesitation, and fear of embarrassment.

Minerva studied, ‘-why aren’t they following?’ she narrowed at the visitors, many turned on themselves, others brazenly climbed, “-Igna?”

“Don’t bother,” he exhaled, “-the higher one climbs, the harsher it becomes. The dirty truth of social classes is truly able and well,” the lift stopped midway, metal plates parted into a completely different area. The structure swapped from open to sections; the color scheme dwindled to clean and

minimalistic. “Mosia’s Gallery,” signaled towards the middle. Cafes and bookshops were common places; canvases left onto the walkways for people’s viewing pleasure.

“Where are we now?”

“Who knows?” he shrugged and continued; the regard fixed on the many galleries.

“So many artists,” she commented, the sections were split to accommodate works of art on various mediums, Mosia’s Gallery, located deeper, had conquered the circle in the middle of which laid seats.

“All the same?”

“Yes,” he returned, “-and no.”

“Pardon?”

“Look, each section is split to accommodate different artists. Getting scouted by them is akin to a miracle, if you’re chosen, consider thy life set.”

“Amazing?” she stopped at a window and pressed her forehead towards a simple piece, “-what’s this?” she blinked, “-an apple... the strokes are sloppy... and the colors, it doesn’t match...”

“Something the matter?” he halted behind her shoulder, Vanesa leaped forward and claimed one of the seats, she reached into her backpack and pulled a laptop, “-Minerva...” he tapped, her trance broke.

“-Sorry, I was confused.”

“By what?”

“Look, the apple,” she pointed, “-it’s simplistic... looks more of a training exercise than finished piece... do people really buy these?”

“Mosia’s Gallery is a renowned art dealer, the reputation is best known in the upper echelon. Between you and me, the place is but a means for money to be laundered. See the paintings, many of them are worthless – some, and I say one out of every forty, is actually worth criticism. The untrained eye,” he tapped her shoulder to a visiting crowd of students, “-look at them for example – those artistically inclined have zoned on a significant piece. The untrained are left baffled at the prices.”

“Painting... a way of expression, it’s sullied, ruined...”

“Don’t bother,” he tapped her shoulder, “-I wanted you to experience how it feels to be on the receiving end. Take a look at the workers, most don’t care for the pieces – there, one keeps on checking the clock for their break.”

“If we came here to hate...”

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“No, no, nothing of the sorts,” hands in pocket, he walked towards the bigger shop – assistants at the door were quick to greet, “-hello,” they said bearing white smiles.

“Hello ladies,” he returned, “-is Thomas in?”

“Thomas sir?” they inquired; “-we can ask...” blank stares went around the room.

“Would be nice,” he replied and turned, Minerva, disappeared, a brief scan showed her in the company of the students, she spoke and adamantly criticized frames, a look to Vanesa showed massive headphones blocking the surrounding.

Inside Mosia’s main showroom, attendants shuffled from ear to ear, asking about the unknown Thomas, words took minutes – a closed room deeper inside held a private meeting. A lavishly dressed lady sat cross-legged before an appraiser, “-number 605 is sold for 643,000 Exa.”

“Yes,” answered an attendant who stood at her side, “-we’ll take number 605 to 610 for a total of seven million.”

“Payment method?”

The door clicked, “-lord Edson,”

“-Excuse me a moment,” he rose from the large desk and politely left, “-what is it?” whispered a muffled grit, “-I’m in the middle of negotiations...”

“Sorry sir, someone’s at the front, he called you by the first name,” she said, meanwhile, Edson kept a close eye on the silent room.

“Did you catch his name?”

“I’m pretty sure the man’s part of the underworld...”

“Right, a mobster,” he turned and held an unimpressed expression, “-now isn’t particularly the time to-” they shuffled to stare into the main area, “-shit,” escaped, “-treat him with the utmost respect!”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask questions, tell him I’ll be out shortly,” fever rid the calm disposition.

The silent room opened once again, “-pardon the distraction,” he replied and tapped the sweat from the forehead, “-shall we return to negotiations?” the waiting duo agreed without much hassle.

Minerva and her energetic passion amassed a crowd of students; they listen attentively, ‘-what is she doing?’ he blinked at the voiceless body movements.

“Here, children, lays another piece,” the tableau in question held 607 on a bronze plate, “-pay attention at the strokes, it’s not complete, the colors haven’t complimented one another. Look at the highlights, the painter failed at focusing on the darker spots, instead, opted to paint the highlights and focus around said area. The composition isn’t much to talk about either, the lines head outside the frame – all and all, it’s a three out of ten.”

“Look at the price,” nodded a student, “-reads 750,000 Exa.”

“Hey, if I were to pay, I’d spent no less than 400 Exa, and tis to account for the wasted colors and raw material.”

On casually watching the grown crowd, an attendant arrived and whispered, “-please follow me.”

“Lead the way, my lady.”

“Pardon my asking, sire, are you a customer?”

“Depends,” he said, “-my associates have handled the various transaction on behalf of my company. Raven’s, should ring some bells?”

“I remember Raven, the company who always has the most lavish items on auctions. None of thy items have dropped below seven figures. Many of us are excited when the seller, Raven is listed on auction – the last piece was a painting from L’atelier d’ Exsque, a landscape of the Rosespien castle.”

“Dubbed number 53,” he chuckled, “-I remember it all too well,” they moved deeper inside, ‘-especially since I was the one who painted it before the trip to Elendor.’

A lady in lavish attire stepped from the office, she passed a subjective scan on Igna – pushed her lips into a tiny smile, then carried on. The attendant exchanged knowing nods with Igna and followed, “-nobles,” whispered the assistant.

“No,” he replied, “-that was Lady Beatrice Hemsporth, of the Hemsporth Dynasty – wife to Lord Asnie Hemsporth, trading family, owners of Raindo.”

“Raindo?”

“Correct.”

“Raindo as in the clothing brand?”

“Yes,” he reached for the handle, “-should have spotted them on the advertisements below,” the lock clicked, the assistant remained speechless, her feet hurried into the main area, where the famed lady walked across and glared at the crowd of students. Minerva paid no heed and casually motioned at the duo, the attendant breathed bullets, lady Beatrice kept her shoulders focused on the comments.

“Thomas.”

“Lord Igna,” exclaimed the appraiser, “-long time no see.”

“Not since the auction,” he sat, “-I see Mosia’s getting high profile visitors.”

“Stiol has been very generous, my job as investor and art dealer’s become truly my true calling. Lady Beatrice just purchased five items for close to seven million. Tell me, what can this humble worker do?”

“I’m here as a buyer,” the legs crossed menacingly.

“Please, shall we move to the private collection?”

“No, my friend, you misunderstand. I’ve come to purchase the business.”

“Purchase the business?” he coughed, “-I don’t understand, sire, what do you mean?”

“Stop playing the fool, Thomas.”

“My lord, I thought we were on good terms. Selling won’t serve either of us... countless artists depend on us to sell their work... it’s but only started to gain traction.”

“Thomas, I should be upfront. The only reason I want to purchase the gallery is so that one of my friends can exhibit her paintings unrestricted by the set regulations. Her judgment is sound and her works are one of the best I’ve ever witnessed.”

“Why Mosia, Stiol own majority of the company. If a deal is to be made, tis through them, and I doubt they’ll move for any amount of money. Stiol has an abundance of funds, eccentric investors, and wealthy folks who spend millions on whims.”

“Thomas, dear Thomas, I asked for the moon, and tis the response?”

“Pardon me, my lord. One of Mosia’s lesser popular showrooms has been in the plans of shutting the door. I’m sure the Eeln management will be happy to rent the area.”

“Foolish Thomas, if it was a matter of showroom, I could have easily rented any of the vacant areas. I want Mosia for the sole reason of reputation. Tis a great way for Raven to clean large fraction of the unchecked balance.”

“Lord Igna, I have to refuse. Selling Mosia’s out of the question, no amount of money will sway our hands. I can, however, offer space for the lady’s paintings to be showcased.”

“Too bad,” he exhaled, “-there are things which aren’t meant to be. Do excuse me for any unnecessary discomfort. I know I come across as rude during negotiations.”

“There’s no need for apologies, majesty. I’m honored you took a liking to Mosia,” steps stormed the door, “-Lord Thomas, trouble,” they gasped, “-Lady Beatrice’s gotten very verbal with an art teacher.”

“Shit,” he vaulted over the table, “-Lord Igna, you coming?”

“Drama, count me in,” he followed outside.

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Students cowered behind a loud and draconic Minerva, “-I disagree, number 608 is the worse piece of shit I’ve ever seen. For three million, I’d rather burn the cash instead of spending another penny.”

“Three million, I doubt you’ve ever seen a thousand in person, damned teacher. Don’t stand there and lecture me about taste, 608 is a masterpiece painted by Eneg, a revolutionist of our generation, there’s no arguing his genius.”

“Genius, sure – if art’s grown so dull and mosaic, what’s the point of painting. There’s no emotion, nothing of substance, the eyes are drawn to nothing, emotions and thought have to be manifested from a single thread of emptiness. This, for example,” she leaped to a landscape of Hidros, “-the colors and strokes are masterfully laid, the feel is of winter, the motive cold and solitude.”

“They so-called emotion is but priced at 60,000 Exa whilst 608 is priced three million. No matter what is said, money is the true determinant of value – pitiful teacher.” Thomas watched in fear, Igna simply walked in the middle, turned at Beatrice, and smiled, “-my lady, ‘twould be wise for the shouting contest to end. Must I infer to Lord Asnie?”

“AND WHO THE HELL ARE-”

“Majesty,” the assistant dropped on one knee, “-I deeply apologize for my lady’s heated personality.”

“Always the guardian. The circus is over, take the paintings and scurry.”

“Will do,” he grabbed Beatrice’s wrist and rushed, leaving Igna and Minerva to blink.

Chapter 870: First Blood [8]

“The nerve on some people,” narrowed Minerva, “-she speaks as if art is her main subject of interest. Dressed like that, I’d assume her mouth couldn’t be far from being dirty as her garden-”

“Enough,” interjected Igna, he took many accounts on the faces the students held, “-they don’t need to understand the graphic details just yet.”

“Majesty, that lady is amusing,” snickered one within the group, “-lady, what’s your name?” asked others, the group shortly pushed Igna from Minerva’s side. A symphony of praise and laughter bellied. Stood still, the petrified Thomas sneaked till Igna’s shadow, the act of looking to and fro, paranoid in gesture, wasn’t much noticed by the passing crowd of few visitors.

“What happened?” he exhaled, “-who’s the lady?”

“My friend, Thomas, here I present the next best thing to brace L’atelier d’ Exsque.” Words of recommendation, Thomas watched, baffled and bemused at the energetic persona. By her wave of the arm, the authoritative points at tableaus, her light grey pupils splashed across the floor, drew interest from the appraiser.

“She’s amazingly pretty.”

“I’d hold my tongue, dear friend. Dressed as she is; the robe of Athena sure befits her figure.”

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“Igna, Igna,” the tongue clicked, “-you say hold my tongue and follow to compliment her outfit. Just what is it about her charm,” they watched, similar to eyeing an unseen commodity.

“Divine?” added Igna.

“Perfectly summarized the persona,” they watched in awe. On matters of acquisition, Igna chose to forgo the thought of purchasing a gallery. The trio soon found themselves strapped to the car seat and pulled along the asphalted roads. Traffic wasn’t all the much pleasing, rush hour settled, tired and slumped office workers dragged side to side – many dug their heads into the smartphones. Reflection of massive advertisements reflected against the shiny new car. Motor enthusiasts watched as the very expensive transport passed. Minerva who’d laid claim upon the front seat, had the side of her head slumped over the window. Refraction of the lights and passing of airships set the scene for the journey.

L’atelier d’ Exsque soon muddled through the light shows. Her focus widened, Igna pulled shy of the academic district’s edge, the intersection split into the four cardinal points, north headed to the castle, east and south to the city center, as for west, it simply headed towards academic buildings; schools, universities and the likes. A corner building, made beautifully with the Ardanian architecture, sprawled akin to a lotus upon muddied water, the latter represented the blank, rectangular offices. From cozy



colors to a modest and peaceful interior, they stepped onto stone-brick pavements. No sign of trash or the casual flying bag, the area truly was wondrously immaculate.

Directly in front of the entrance laid a small patch of land, herein harbored plants of culinary properties. Spices, vegetables, and whatever the owner might have wished to see grow. Retirement rested peacefully on the shopkeeper's faces; a little stand held the bounty.

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"Where are we?" inquired Minerva, her focus drawn onto the garden, "-looks fun," she stopped under the building's casted shadow and smiled.

"Peaceful," said Igna pulling behind, "-come on," he motioned and skipped up the stairs, "-I have to show you something," the darkened interior told of the shop's closure, a tap on the phone revived the whole area, lamps flashed into light – the cooling systems toggled, went so far as opening windows. Before laid a bastion of an emotive piece, never seen works of apprentices and masters, regardless of rank or status, the deserving held center spot in catching the visitor's focus. Her jaw dropped, a bubble of speechlessness hovered, "-beautiful," the lingering smell of solvent and paint, misplaced colored clothes and jars filled with dirtied brushes. Contrary to the first few steps, the interior was less in way of a showroom – the paintings were hung, and tis the extent of the actual 'showing.' Further one walked, the deeper and more chaotic grew the workspace.

Igna rushed upon a few stairs and laid underneath a tall ceiling room, "welcome to L'atelier d' Exsque," he said proudly, "-here lays the fruits of the seed thee sowed so many years ago. I never forgot the impression left by the paintings – recent years were tough and disallowed the commencement to any hobby. Between earning money and hanging on dear life, I finally say, I've made it. L'atelier is a place of sweat and tears, the hard work of masters and the tears, the sorrow of disapproval, the pain of unfulfillment in one's work, the building harbors it all."

"Smells like it," exhaled a giggle, "-tell me, Igna, why are we here?"

"Plan B," he firmed, "-I honestly thought purchasing Mosia's showroom to be a great way of fulfilling my promise. Seems I was wrong, Thomas' poured sweat into his craft, who am I to pull the rug?" he rested against a desk and watched, "-like what you see?"

"Love it," she says, "-I feel the spirits and the emotion. No price tags either, why?"

"The tableaux are for the artist to convey what he wishes. L'atelier is but a medium for the masters to express their craft. Understand," he moved to a rack and pulled onto covered canvases, "-see, the signatures are often d'Exsque's insignia. Granted, they also add the initials."

"I want to know more," she browsed a half-open book, "-what is this?"

"A record of all the material to come out of the brushes. Some good, many bad, it's an amazing journey to go along. It's artist by artist, anyone deemed worthy by the mentors are granted the privilege to catalog all their work into the place's chronicle. Improvement and the divergence into their own styles. So, tell me, would you like to work here?"

"Work?"

“Yes, it’s considered work. You could teach students,” reference drawn to the gathered crowd of earlier, “-if thee hates how art’s been smudged by the stain of greed and money, why not take up brushes and fight the tide. Attack the disturbance from the source.”

“Igna,” her tone wavered into sternness, the joyful expression slumped to a dull stare, “-are you manipulating me?” she blinked, “-showing Mosia’s gallery, the sudden argument against that lady and the children, now this... what I wish I could be doing. Tis all a part of thy scheme, is it not?”

“Why draw such a conclusion? The coincidences were too frequent?” he gave a half-smile, “-worry not, Minerva, I simply wish to honor the conditions set. Part-time teacher and apostle to the goddess of arts and craft. Imagine the growth influence...”

“Know what?” her arms crossed, “-I’ve spent too much time doing nothing. I’ll accept your offer, consider me a guide to the lost lambs.”

“Art is a serious topic, many students bet their lives on the matter. L’atelier is also a place for examinees to hone their skills in eventually enrolling at a prestigious university. We welcome people of all age groups; you’ll see kids playing with fingers and teenagers trying to get laid through the medium of expression. To each their own I suppose,” he exhaled.

Dusk crashed on the horizon, a mixture of pink and orange constituted the sun’s setting hue. Bystanders perched yonder, away from the in and out showers of Rosepire, gasped at the breath-taking sight, especially from Rotherham and the Azure Wall. Time advanced, the moment arrived for a soiree in remembrance of Laura, the event would be hosted at the Rosesopian manor. Unknown to Igna and close family members, Loftha, ambassador in representation of Alpha during council meetings, found herself pulled backward, the chair toppled, her head smacked, and sent jabs of white across her sight. Muffled footsteps stormed inside, one moment her attention laid on overseas news, the next, a half-conscious princess gasped for air.

“Ready to report,” said a monster of a man.

“Mercenaries of the northwest, the people of Sadian. I bid thee a fine welcome into Hidros, the land of heretics.”

“It’s a good place as any,” large hands wrapped about the door and pulled into the living room, “-the princess survived our last attack,” the helmed outline of Erak, “-nice to see you again, princess.”

“Now,” thundered Ziu, “-Erak, gather your forces to the front, I’ve made arrangements for transport and weapons. Today’s insult will not go unanswered – I will make sure they pay if tis the last thing I do.” Below, hidden in the shadow of the slum’s district – trucks arrived in full. Cargo unloaded and thrown inside, whereby; the locks clicked to reveal rifles by the dozens. The strong stature of Erak stared his men, “-choose thy weapons. Be one with the weapon, people may fail you, a weapon must and will never betray its master. Such is the way of the true dragon-kin. Bear us the sun and the moon, from the east rises first light, to the west sets the knife, pulled from mother earth’s heart, we gather under the blessing of Formle, God of War.”

“To Formle,” echoed.

Ziu's unhampered nature bore truth, "-Erak, I'll pay double, if not triple. Allow me a few minutes in private with the princess."

"Lord Ziu, we took on the request on behalf of the church. If not for the Lord Paladin's blessing, we'd never dare set foot into the heretic's continent. We answer to only our superior. Compared to the lord Paladin, Ziu, thee stands as nothing save a bug in the greater picture, a bee with the urge to sting. I advise caution," he stepped from the door, "-lest thee wish to die," the door pulled ajar, a tempest of highly volatile objects exploded across the walls and windows, "-what's that?" he blinked.

"The princess's psychic powers are strong."

"I heard men brag about defeating-"

"-No," he interjected and tapped his belt, "-I won, her powers to me are nothing. To an ordinary person, deadly. With all means, go ahead," he pushed the door further, a lamp flung across and ended on corridor's-stained walls.

"Feisty," he gulped, "-no matter," he reached for the pocket, "-the harder they struggle, the greater my fun," an alarm tinkled, time was nigh.

"Lord Ziu," said Erak, "-join us after the fun is over. I must attend to my men – keep the princess alive, alive enough for me to have my go."

"I knew we were the same," the door locked – objects flung to and fro, the unconscious body of Loftha hovered above the bed, a tornado of mess swept violently, "-looks like we have a pretty thing on our hand," a bottle crashed, powder-filled the room in a glitter pink, she inhaled and instantly dropped. The weight of a stuffy man pushed the mattress, her half-unconscious state blinked mindlessly, "-I got you now," he whispered and leaped, he tore her clothes and forced his hands into her skirt, "-look at me," the other grab and pulled on her jaw, pushing the mouth open, "-I own you, princess. The deal we made isn't over until I say it is. Poor little old you wanting to get back at Igna, reality check, he dumped you, as he did to Alicia. The king isn't worth shit," belts unbuckled, "-meanwhile, me," he dove onto her exposed chest and inhaled loudly, taking in her aroma and desperation, "-squirm, struggle, it only makes me stronger." \*Snap,\* a hardcover book flung across and knocked Ziu in the head, \*GASP,\* she stood straight and panted, '-holy mother,' her hands trembled, '-thank god for the warning.'

It happened a few hours ago during the funeral, after Ziu was ousted, Igna pulled Loftha aside and said, "-be careful, I don't wish to pry, Ziu isn't sane mentally or physically. I've lost a friend to him, I wouldn't wish the same thing on another. Keep your wits about, don't lower thy guard, not until the embassy is satisfactory."

"I'm old enough to take care of my own," she replied curtly, "-I'm not a damsel who's in distress. Mind your own business," the last resounding of her attitude bounced, engines roared downstairs, a radio said, \*-we'll be at the gathering in half-an-hour. Be on guard, Lord Ziu, today's the day Phantom's eradicated.\*