

## Death Magic 871

### Chapter 871: First Blood [9]

Panic of accountability rose within Loftha's mind, despite the exposed figure, she pulled herself, pain and all, from the bed and slid to the latter's end. There in front laid a cupboard of which held the essentials to covering one from the world. The messages by the mercenaries were troublesome, she got dressed in a subjective darkened hue. Outside looking in, dawn upon the horizon wasn't much to worry about. Loftha's fear actualized, she had brought the mercenaries onto Hidros, the actions were a direct result of her attempts at proving her independence and shake Igna's shadow of affection and belonging. One leg followed the other, mildly skinny trousers tied by force at her waist dawned upon the unconscious Ziu. 'I don't have a phone,' she narrowed and tied the fallen young man upon the bed – in a way to say, 'screw yourself,' a mechanism was hoisted in where if Ziu so much as the thought of escape, a frighteningly sharp knife would drop. Most of the time, the anticipation of pain and suffering doubles, even triples the actual felt '-pain.' Her play on the very principle would greatly affect Ziu's wake on the empty room.

Loftha pushed the door aside and fell against the corridor. There, she gasped for air, the tightly fitted clothes hampered much of the gestures. The gaze subconsciously narrowed as in to say, '-pain,'. By sheer will, the princess fought body and limb, until an unconscious guard. Blood splatter told of the man's untimely demise, '-the Sadian leadership," she winced and checked for any device abled for communication. Fortune wasn't much a pleaser – the closely fitted grasp held naught save bullets and a firearm. '-he died on accounts of not following the hierarchy. Poor soul,' she clambered to a stable stance, '-I need to warn Igna about Ziu,' more distance grew between the room and her, the greater amplified the pain. A loud explosion caught the vigilant Loftha by surprise – mana in the atmosphere drained, she'd pass the unconscious guards mere minutes ago. Intent on following the path, louder footsteps crashed upon the floor, resounding across the empty hall until her station. A bloodcurdling murderous intent froze the spine solid, Loftha simply hung against the wall, no thought in the following course of action. Stern walls were allowed to spin without much effort, the posture remained the same save being 180 degrees turned. Shoulders upon the wall, she watched through blurred vision, two figures split into four and collapsed into one, "-Ziu," she gasped, "-how dare you assault a princess," lack of energy forced one knee to buckle.

"Why?" he snorted loudly, "-you, princess, came to me for help. I accepted," crystal clear chops( Ziu's footsteps) moved at regular intervals, "-I, Ziu Patek, graciously offered to further thy name. Without my influence, the position of Ambassador would have gone to the older sister. A blank check was signed, and to said end, I had wished the payment to be a carnal bonding of our bodies. Ever since the story of the brave princess's survival in a foreign land, I wanted to steal that smug sneer. Nothing infuriates me more than a strong woman, coincently, one who has the drive to fight pushes my libido to greater heights. From the models and actresses I've slept with, those who resists are the most memorable," he walked with open arms, "-join my memory, join the strong ladies whomst dared fight against my libido. I told you," veins bloated, the muscles increased – a definite presence of strength gathered, "-the more you fight, the stronger I get. A book to the back of the head isn't very courteous," he sighed, "-no matter, Loftha, I will have what I want, and what I wish is in thy pants," the fingers curled as in to invite more to what was said. Unfortunately for Loftha, her blurred vision came from exhaustion, the other

knee finally buckled, her head echoed against the wall, “-try your worse,” she gritted, a snarky expression rode upon Ziu’s face.

“Perfect,” he said and leaped – under her nose, the manly grasp tightened around her neck and squeezed, Loftha found herself suspended for milliseconds, in her mind read as minutes. Both landed harshly, although, Loftha took the brute of the force. The struggle for consciousness was hard, Ziu’s lustful mien undressed her chest and waist, he pulled without mercy, a bulge pulled along the pants, tis then, a realization of his strength crossed her mind, ‘-bastard has a strengthening power,’ she narrowed and suffered through the vile undressing, ‘-sorry brother,’ memories of the past and present flooded, ‘-I fucked up,’ \*snap,\* an unrestrained stump, brought by the volley caused moments earlier, flashed and impaled Ziu through the chest. He gasped, confused at the situation, “-Loftha,” grip firm upon her neck, “-fought till the very end, didn’t you,” lack of blood brought lightheadedness, “-too bad,” he squeezed and snapped her neck, “-I never lose,” he dropped and gasped, “-my job here’s done. Princess Loftha,” he side-glanced and caressed her cheeks, “-you truly were the best lady I ever met.” Nothing, the princess’s last attempt worked as did Ziu’s triumph.

Yonder at the Rosesopian manor, ladies and gentlemen of all social classes moved around the driveway and parked. Those unable to find spots were forced to settle in order adjacent to the curved slope. Igna, Vanesa, and Minerva arrived before the event. He got off at the garage and entered a chaotic inside; Laurance adamantly guided the servants. The gentle aroma of food brewed in the kitchen, a lovely tune played in the background, nothing could be more peaceful. Once inside, Minerva and Vanesa split. Igna shuffled along to the common room where once laid Laura’s coffin. Arrived, the television played international news loudly, a coverage titled, “-King Juvey’s sudden change,” seemed very interesting. The narrator painstakingly voiced every word and justifiably added the correct tone. Merely reading wasn’t sufficient, there needed substance, “-our journey takes us to Elendor. Information’s been scarce, rumors say the palace was under attack. Old Cray’s council is left without a backup plan, many high-profile individuals have been reported missing. On consulting with our sources, not mentioned for their safety, we’ve found the true cause... diplomats, politicians, and high-ranking nobles have been killed. All happened supposedly on a celebration in honor of electing a new member of the crowd’s inner circle,” videos and images showed snippets of smoke pillars toward the capital’s vague area. Enhancements of certain aspects added an air of intrigue to the story, “-though tis speculation, we have read unconfirmed rumors of the queen’s death. Since the day of the incident, access to the castle has been restrained by the authorities. We’ve tried, and I truly emphasize on the word tried, information is scarce, even for our informants. The closer we get to the truth, the more elusive it gets. Elendor’s not a united front, join us as we follow the story,” a sudden push toggled the television. Seiran walked in-between Igna and the show, “-master, we have high-ranking guests visiting, would it bother if thee’d put an effort?”

“Fine,” he yielded and followed Seiran. Sparse lighting from the setting sun eventually dwindled, streetlamps clawing up the driveway toggled, an amber hue settled.

“Done,” gasped Igna, “-I’m done.”

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“Congratulation,” returned slow claps, “-the Alchemist cooked for once,” narrowed Seiran, the distance gate opened, messages riddled the intercoms. \*Guests,\* said the guard, the few already pleasant enjoyed drinks at the bar, newly arriving guests took precious time in finding the perfect parking spot.

Expensive vehicles exposed the human error and the misfortune of mother nature, both sufficed for an owner to win. Laurance, Seiran, and Rile served the role of host, their focus extended over the common area. Each joined in certain circles, added comments on current events, and shortly left to other entourages. Role of hosts during high-profile soirees was more, courteous 'hello' and small talk didn't suffice. The hosts were responsible for keeping the conversations flowing, if a debate or energetic conversation flared, it's their responsibility to put the breaks or forcefully kickstart a conversation. Igna subconsciously shuffled to the veranda, there – he looked upon the unveiled memorial to Laura. Taps followed and stopped beside him, a hurryingly dressed Yui sipped juice and threw 'pensive' looks at the garden.

"If you have something to say, just say it."

"Pardon me," she smiled, "-on closer inspection, I've found details relating to Laura's death and Cimier's arrival. The trade lady Elvira organized between her and an unknown group's amplified Snow's influence. The Patek's are responsible, I traced the money to the younger son of Patek, he seems to have sent money to the Sadian tribe."

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"Sadian tribe, the dragon-kins?"

"Yes, they're the scariest mercenaries out there currently."

"And how did such information come about?"

"I might have sent someone to stalk the princess..."

"Right," the arms crossed, "-by all means, stalk the ambassador tasked to mediate affairs from Hidros and Alpha."

"Master..." her eyes blinked invitingly, "-are you disappointed?"

"Not really," the posture eased and turned to look at the gradually increasing common area, "-what did the stalking say?"

"We traced her position to a building in the slums."

"And I assume the building's tied to Snow, Rosespire's not very united on the underground front."

"Yes," she said, "-master," a sudden notification halted the nonchalant attitude, "-I must attend to a matter of utmost importance."

"A matter of utmost importance," he returned, "-just say you're needed somewhere. Much as I admire the theatrics atmosphere it gives, the usage of said words best fitted for plays."

"Whatever," the eyes rolled, "-in a bit, master." The keen observational skill watched, as it did best – acquired body movement reading skills channeled, part of the guest list didn't seem much ordinary. Many wore unfitted suit jackets, their piercing stares scanned face to face.

"Something the matter?" interjected a familiar voice.

"Julius," he returned brazenly, "-hello cousin. Is Malley around?"

“In the kitchen, why?”

“Just asking,” a text suddenly flung across the interface, the same instant upon which, \*-Princess Loftha and Ziu have been found dead. Time of death is estimated to be 45 minutes ago, authorities have been called,\* said Yui.

Igna’s heart dropped, ‘unfamiliar faces,’ he rushed for Tharis, \*BANG, BANG,\* cackled in the distance. Julius’s face dawned a fearful expression, “-Malley,” he shuddered and rushed, bullets shattered the glasses, Igna forced Julius into a bow. Screams echoed, counteractive gunfire drowned the area into panic and fear.

“Cousin!” glared Julius, “-I need to check on Malley.”

By the look in his eyes, there was no denying a would-be father’s determination. \*Mana Control: Spatial-Arts – Wormhole,\* a portal manifested, “-go on,” gritted Igna, “-it goes to the kitchen. If you find Malley, get her out using this,” he dropped a teleportation scroll.

“Cousin...”

“Don’t bother,” glasses shattered further, the number of enemies heightened, “-take the scroll and get her out.”

“I appreciate it,” he said and vanished, the fissure closed, ‘-we’re under attack,’ a touch toggled the lens into combat mode, éclair soon joined the channel, “-master?”

“Ask Yui for details,” he said, “-Phantom’s under attack. We need reinforcement. Bring in the heli-squad, I don’t care,” orders were given, he stormed the room, pulled onto Tharis, and shot. Punches using the acquired martial arts sent enemies to their deaths, ‘-they broke through security,’ wondered Igna stood upon an enemy’s body, ‘-facial features and a tag-bearing alliance to the Sadian people. Loftha must have killed Ziu – I warned her, no one ever listens.’ Spider webs and the unsatiated hunger for blood loomed, the gunfire stopped, Seiran and Laurance hurried into the common room, hand in blood, they gasped, “-master?”

“All’s clear here,” returned Igna, “-where’s Rile?”

“Here...” he said in the powerful wolver-beast form, canines dripped of blood and claws reeked of crimson. \*BANG\* the ground shook, leaving Igna looking vaguely at the gates, “-what’s happened?” he teleported upstairs. Machine gunfire destroyed cars, loud rumbles climbed the driveway – Seiran and her party finally arrived on the balcony, “-master?” they panted, “-what’s happening?”

“We’re under attack,” the expression changed, “-by the Sadian people,” wings sprawled, sprinkles of uncontained power fluttered, “-they will regret the day they dare moved against Phantom,” a flap cracked the balcony and shattered windows. ‘-Sadian...’ projectiles summoned at his back; ‘-die.’

Chapter 872: First Blood [10]

\*Woosh,\* summoned projectiles flung past Igna and exploded in the distance. Onlookers’ unknown to the truth of the matter, watched content to the sudden firework show. More projectiles summoned, fireballs, water bubbles, long as mana sufficed, the primary elements upon each of Igna’s fingers rattled – at times the elements merged into stronger attacks. Water stream and a shot of electricity in

resemblance to lightning simply slid off the vehicles. Roars carried the invaders up the hill, by way of slowing movement, \*Mana-Control: Ice Element, Gergusser Variant – Niflheim,\* a pin hovered innocently, on impact, burst into a tempest of frost. Icicles cracked reinforced windows and impaled the driver of the first mobile fortress. Those, en file indienne<sup>1</sup> slammed breaks – drop in temperature froze door locks, the windows greyed, \*-Erak, we got trouble,” snuck amidst the radios.

“What is it?” thundered an impatient reply.

“The road’s been blocked, we’re stuck in a blizzard. Wire’s burst – the locks are frozen and the windows are about to cave. The engine’s been shut, any vibration will shatter the-” reports cut short, a majestically imposing outline carved across the canvas of white and snow. Wings at its back and a golden hue fluttering like fairies brought speechlessness.

“Report?” fired Erak.

“Someone’s in the blizzard,” they said and pulled onto the weapons.

“If the storm is that bad, why’s someone walking...” no reply, a sudden thud amplified across the channel. Sound of magazines and compact movement slithered through, a mental image cross the leader’s mind, “-let me out!” he voiced, the driver side-glanced and narrowed – the behemoth of a man zipped his mouth and innocently faced forth.

“What do we have here,” giggled Igna, the pupils washed in deep crimson, “-mercenaries?” he tapped, the windows shattered, a blast of cold air froze the crew instantly. “-There’s a reason why ice is deadly,” he casually gripped the driver’s frozen head and pulled, the neck snapped, “-it’s instant and doesn’t cause too much of a mess,” heat on his index slowly warmed the corpse as to harness bounty, \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,\* the crystals pulled, leaving the bodies parched, to hover in a halo. A glance behind showed empty transport, the doors were opened – part of the ice melted, ‘-a fire user?’ he blinked and moved deeper.

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“The storm doesn’t end...” complained one, “-where even are we, the map says it’s a few meters in front...” blanché grass, naught save darkness of the moonless night, more they walked, the colder it grew, “-where are we?” they turned to stare Erak’s driver, a man dressed in a religious robe beside which hovered a few books. A move of the arm tore through space and broke the icy barrier. If the olden standard of rating spells were to be applied, Niflheim would easily be classified at the peak of its element, a potentially country-ending spell.

“Disturbance in the balance,” said the priest, “-move along,” he smiled, “-the lord’s on our side. Fret not, our god, Formle, shall answer the cries of his people. We tribute the blood and lives of our enemies to his grace. Carry on, comrades, I shall keep the pesky magic at bay,” he thrust outward of his chest, the gesture followed a vague curve, on which, a book flowed in front and opened, a bubble followed shortly, the icy hell dwindled.

“We meet at last,” an opposingly strong aura countered Igna’s walk, “-King of Hidros, nicknamed the Devil of Glenda. I’ve heard stories – you singlehandedly defeated the church’s army,” the outline of half-man and half-dragon stood with arms crossed. Wings hung at his back, half of the visage bore scales and the sharpness assigned to legendary creatures, extremities of the hands fully transformed into claws, “-

the blood of the ancient gods flows through our veins,” he pressed his fists, “-and you, Devil, will pay the price of going against the church. The Wracia empires have kept our customs and way of life a priority – primitive as we stand, our lifestyle is far better than what the kingdom of heretic represents. Look at it all,” he opened his arms, “-manmade towers of God – information, war, destruction, death. It overwhelmingly flows – at the center of such change lays the incompetent leadership, the Riverty household... now, the Haggard, the infamous Haggards. We know, and so does everyone in Iqavea – tales of a family so powerful they drink the blood of their enemies, kill those who so much at looks at them wrong, peddlers of temporary bliss. You,” he pointed, “-export thy sullied dust and beverage, you corrupt the people, make them go mad... Who do you think you are playing god?”

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“Quite a monologue,” said Igna giving slow claps, “-really, I mean, look at this,” he casually turned side to side, “-conjuring a spell, did you think I wouldn’t notice?” the glasses shimmered, “-here’s the news, Erak, use mana within the barrier and I’ll know. Assumption of the title of Devil wasn’t in vain,” he moved forward, the would-be spells cracked on a single snap, “-nor was it a jest,” he smiled, “-magic is a means to an end,” the wings fluttered, sparkles hovered, “-the spellcaster is quite talented.”

“...”

“Erak, you’ve brought a priest to assist in a bloodbath. How moronic, preachers of righteousness stand foremost at the head of slaughter. Tell me, what happened to Loftha, how’ve the conglomerates involved?”

“Heh,” he laughed and shook the wings, “-not going to reveal the truth so easily. I’m not daft,” the ground carved, the extended limbs flapped, “-who cares if I can’t use magic, I’ll take thy head by my hand.”

“Simplistic fool,” Igna sidestepped, lowered his glasses, horned on an important pressure point, “-I control everything you do,” he tapped aided by an invisible hand, Erak’s transformation vanished, momentum sucked and he dropped headfirst, “-true power is the ability to save people one cares about,” he knelt at the restrained Erak, “-I, sadly, I’m not powerful. The Devil adheres to a few rules he’s set for himself,” the grip tightened around Erak’s face, “-and I sadly, have failed myself,” a slit opened Igna’s palm – a mouth opened.

‘Overpowering aura. He’s nothing like what the stories say. I felt it the moment we arrived, Igna Haggard isn’t just a devil, he’s a god, a living manifestation of what power represents. I doubt anything or anyone strong enough to fight or else, defeat him,’ the eyes closed in prayer, “-to the mighty lord above, guardian of the Sadian people, a patron to whomst we yield our soul and harvest, Formle, I, simple servant in service of thy greatness, relinquish my hold over the mortal realm. Devour my soul, take my body and defeat my enemy – Ancient-Arts: Requiem of the Gods,” a bright light forced Igna’s grip – Erak teleported, raw unhampered strength lashed in flickers of bright green.

“I’ve been summoned,” he said and examined the vessel, “-a gracious offering from my people,” soon to lock on Igna, “-and you are the one I must destroy?”

“Formle, God of war,” returned Igna, “-I’m indeed the one thee must defeat. Before the inevitable, I’d advise for thee to take in the air, touch the ground and basque, for tonight, where thee stand shall be thy resting place.”

“Are you an idiot, human?” he blinked, “-never mind, are you an idiot, nightwalker?”

“...”

“No one has the power to slay a god. Even if I’m defeated, which I doubt to ever happen, the vessel shall take the damage, not I, for I live on a higher plane. Still, try, I offer thee the first strike,” he opened his arms, “-do your worst.”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha,” slowly maniacal laughter filled his stomach, “-Formle, I know but one thing, and tis to never give an inch to a cocky bastard,” the fingers went and tapped the belt, Orenmir sheath uncloaked, “-blind as thou art daft. A belligerent god in service of slaughter – the title of God of War belongs to only one, and tis Athena,” the stance lowered, “-blinded by arrogance, my wings, my halo, the divine perspective limits thy scope. Farewell,”

“Go on with it already-” a flash, the head dropped and rolled until it faced Igna, “-the wings of a god, the halo of a destroyer. Ancient symbols drop in and out of existence. He didn’t use the full extent of the power – what is a candidate for the position of Supreme God loitering in the mortal realm...” consciousness faded, “-I underestimated the living world.”

“Not so fast,” before the entity escaped the body, Igna reached and grabbed the man’s soul, \*Box of Alche,\* a chest summoned, \*-create me a body suited for a god,\* fragments of the bodies left in his wake sucked into a vortex, “-here you are,” a naked body of a muscular bald man blinked, “-pardon?” he coughed and looked about, “-didn’t I die?”

“Advantages of being who I am,” returned Igna, “-Formle, a forgotten deity of the Misen Era. Look into my eyes,” he grabbed the well-chisel chin and glared, “-what is it thee sees?”

“N-nothing,” he gasped, “-nothing, I see nothing...” a chilling frost rode along the spine, “-what, who, sorry?”

“My name’s Igna Haggard, Watcher of the Shadow Realm, Heir to Death and inheritor of Kronos, Origin and Scifer will. In the past, I was shunned as the representation of sin, the amalgamation of what shouldn’t exist, bearer of the millennium curse, Alfred, the cursed King, devourer of Angels, and enemy of the heavens.”

“By the gods,” he exhaled, “-explains a lot. Watchers are ranked above and below gods. I’m surprised the stingy guardian allowed thee the honors of bearing the title. Origin,” he reminisced, “-I remember someone or something like that on my coming to reality. Scifer, I have no idea, Kronos I do know is the Supreme God. If you bear his will, means he’s dead?”

“Eons spent in the much-praised heaven has rendered thee numb to current events.”

“Give me a break, I’ve been called to the mortal realm plenty of time. I come, kill a few people, and go back to sleep. The title of God of War, I didn’t steal nor did I assume the honors by choice. Happened during the first war, Alfred against the heavens – I was part of the fight – and I was killed instantly, never regained my powers after that. My symbol of power shattered,” he looked at the forearm, “-see, the

blade's missing the tip. So much for a God of War. Athena's a virtuously scary lady. Right," he stood and looked about, "-I understand a few things, why pull me onto the real plane?"

"I have pleasant memories," he smiled, "-the young god tasked to destroy my fellow people, we fought and on the last draw, I said you were worthy of being called a true god," gates to locked memories opened, Formle found himself pulled into the shaft of time. Fuzzy images of him falling into Alfred's arm shone, "-thee fought well, a believer in truth. Fate had it for us to be on different sides. Worry not, young one, I made sure to spare thy symbol, death shan't come soon. I wish thee a pleasant dream – live and smile, war isn't for those who embody the title of God truly. Formle, God of War, on my title of cursed King, I say, thou art worthy," those very words were sweet and heartwarming on the ears of a dying soul. Hung around Alfred's arms, he smiled, "-I wish war to have never happened."

Consciousness returned, a warmth gathered at his chest, "-Formle," said Igna with the wings shining bright, "-this is yours," the fingers carved letters on the air, "-I return thee thy blade," the broken symbol rejuvenated. A physical manifestation of his weapon rose from the ground, "-my blade," he smiled, "-it's back."

"Welcome to the mortal realm, Formle."

"Thank you," he returned, "-what now?" the blizzard subsided, "-I have a feeling something isn't right..."

"We'll talk about it soon," \*Incoming Call – éclair,\*

"Hello?"

"MASTER, MALLEY'S BEEN SHOT!"

Chapter 873: First Blood [11] (Finale)

At the end of the driveway, after the frostbitten fog of extreme nature, panic ensued. Titled gentlemen and dames, owners and CEO's of Phantom's many business ventures drew their weapons to the yard. Everything happened in haste – the explosion of gates rattled and shook morale, confusion meandered until full-on chaos. Innocent maids, whomst kept their stares at the floor and never spoke pulled on their dresses, the latter tore in half, exposing shaven legs upon which laid straps of guns and daggers. Instant danger approached, many dived into the line of fire, pushing important people from the incoming barrage of intruders. A top-down view of the operation showed aerial dispatch from an unknown source, the fighters leaped into the fray, which so happened to be the yard's helipad, and fired randomly at the manor.

"Laurance!" cried Seiran, "-get the guests to the safe room," she kicked her parasol open, bullets deflected and allowed crucial seconds, defining moments between life and death.

"Lady Elvira, Lady Courtney," gasped Rile, "-please, follow us this way." Never mind the maids, an overwhelming armored force trampled ground and made stride, in the span of two minutes, the manor was under lockdown from the outside. In the cacophony, Julius scurried from the study, '-Malley,' resounded across his temple, '-please be safe,' he snuck to the dining area.

\*Barge,\* the front door blew, grenades flung as Julius landed from the stairway, \*flash,\* a daze had him sprint blindly and caused a major impact against the left shoulder. "Young master," said a whisper, feeble arms carried him deeper inside, silenced gunfire rattled, furniture and glass shattered. Louder



shots, from Phantom's side, fought back. A gasp dropped the support, "-are you alright?" he inquired, vision and hearing yet to recover. High-pitch ringing made it impossible to understand the reply. In the same motion, the shoulder stood straight and gathered pace, a sharp turn and they fell, the daze eased.

'The kitchen,' he came to, "-thank you," he looked to his side and found a lifeless maid' leaned over his vitals. Blood drained and marred the outfit crimson; smoke grew to block vision. Loud steps pressed past him, '-sorry,' he pushed the body and sat against the counter.

"Kill on sight," echoed loudly, "-we spare no one!"

'Who the fuck are they?' he gritted and kept a low profile, '-they took the fight to us,' a black handle barred by the maid's torn dress caught his attention, '-well then,' he reached and pulled onto the dully colored pistol, '-say hello to Phantom's new head of weaponsmith's creation,' on a sound cue, he pulled above the counter and fired. The recoil shot back and nearly took the gun out of his grip, '-there's no surviving this beast's power at close range.' Smaller and quicker steps ran into said hall, bullets rained – the vague sound of string and gasping breaths paused chaos on Julius's side, the eastern wing.

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"Young master," Laurance rummaged through the smoke, "-are you alright?" he knelt and extended a hand. Glass shattered, and before Laurance reacted, a spinning red circle took his arm and ended against a cupboard.

"FUCK!" he yelled, Julius reached and pulled by the force of habit and fell onto the lifeless maid, "-my arm," exclaimed Laurance, "-damn it!" the strings painfully tightened as to stop the blood flow.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," whimpered along with the deadly silence, "-I want to slice and a taste the blood," it said in a very childish tone, "-where are you," the clops amplified till a full-stop, "-I knew it," it giggled, "-my blade took your arm," the demented laughter scanned. Julius and Laurance slowed the breathing, hand signals were effective, of which, by Phantom's training, every employee should understand and master said manner of speech. Laurance said to wait, Julius motioned in reply, '-one bullet left.' Demented laughter, the uncanny mask in resemblance to a shark – an assassin in service of the Sadian militia. Ursula, the blade-dancer.

"STOP!" bullets echoed; the small-sized fighter skipped – illusionary ripples carried her footsteps.

"Poor little maids," a sharp, violent sound of air being slashed, ended with a few thuds, "-the main piece," it returned into the room, "-come out, spider boy. Let me see if my blades are sharp to cut thy strings," the minuscule clops faded, Julius's eyes widened.

"-FOUND YOU!" it pulled around the corner.

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"MASTER," Laurance barely reacted, a defensive spiderweb expanded. Julius turned and shot – her brain exploded, "-JULIUS!" Malley screamed from across the hall – time moved in slow motion, he pulled from the counter and watched as bullets riddled her arms and legs, '-I FUCKING MISSED!' he vaulted; additional gunfire followed by the front entrance. She dropped harshly and gasped, éclair arrived with additional support.

“What happened?”

“Malley’s been fucking shot, that’s what’s happened,” he held her in his arms, “-don’t die on me,” the blood-soaked scroll escaped and fell. After Igna gave Julius the teleportation scroll, he ran upstairs in search of Malley, last he’d heard she was in the study, catching up on a few movies. On arrival, the place was empty, by which a note read, ‘-hungry, went to get food.’

Distant gunfire halted; helicopters swarmed the area – missiles locked onto the enemy’s aerial support. Outside, the unforgiving cold took the lives of many. Reports flooded éclair and Yui’s feed, “-invaders have been killed. We’ve incurred a large number of casualties; a few high-ranking officers have died in valiant attempts at protecting their significant others.” éclair turned from Julius’s grief and tapped the earpiece, “-the manor’s been cleared of enemies. Have the medics land and begin the triage – those trained in first-aid are to attend to our injured. Yui, coordinate with the hospice and transfer logistics, I’ll handle the finer details.” A toggle turned to a private channel, “-master, Malley’s been shot!”

A sudden paleness crossed Igna’s expression, Formle examined closely and held his chin, “-distress.”

“I don’t have time to explain,” the twirl of the wrist stopped the blizzard, “-they’re people who need help,” wings flapped.

“What am I suppose to do?” echoed.

“My team will take care of you, find something to wear,” returned Igna, “-we’ll talk soon,” a dark portal opened in the background, from it, seductively dangerous hands clawed and pulled him into a different dimension.

A flash, Formle knelt under a decadent chandelier surrounded by seats arranged in a circular fashion. The scale brought lightheadedness, ‘-massive,’ he blinked and landed on particularly strong auras. Reflected golden hue partly made staring those seated high in thrones difficult, “-I apologize for the sudden arrival, my name’s Formle, I’m the God of War, patron god of the Sadian people.”

“Formle,” thundered, giant outlines clopped in tandem and stopped a few meters away, “-I welcome thee to the Shadow Realm,” said lavishly combed blond hair, “-I am, Miira, the Eternal Protector of Time. I wield the powers from four dragons of old often referred as the Goddess of Kiant,” she stood proudly before her banner.

“What a lovely specimen,” fingers caressed his cheek till his chin, “-I am Lilith, though most people know me as the Queen of Demons,” she spun and moved coyly before her banner.

“Don’t look too surprised,” said a fiery red lady leaned against a marble pillar, “-the name’s Intherna, daughter of Rah, goddess of flames. Nice to meet you, god of war.”

Lastly, an ominously dark air rose from the shadow of the last banner. Jet black hair and pale skin moved forward and glared, “-Gophy, Goddess of Chaos. I don’t much care for anyone save those who are interesting,” she leaned and narrowed, “-bland, the only saving grace is the member thee calls a penis. Whatever I’m sure the ladies of the Shadow Realm to enjoy the seed of a,” she teleported and locked his neck from the back, “-God. Mind your place here, Igna’s yet to decide what to do, therefore, I’d advise modesty and humility. Stand out, and I’ll hammer you in like the curved-”

“Enough,” clapped Miira, “-no reason to give the man the third degree.”

“What?” her tone changed into one friendlier, “-a little roughhousing heightens the morale.”

“Don’t worry,” said Intherna, “-long as you’re no threat, we won’t act.”

\*AHHHHHHH,\* he yelled, “-WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?”

“There we go,” shrugged Gophy, “-another outburst.”

“Shush,” signaled Lilith, “-don’t ruin my fun.”

“Sadist,” side-glanced Intherna.

‘High-tier goddesses, the combined force is unprecedented. The title of high deity can’t be acquired, no one knows how the process works. Gophy, Intherna, Lilith, and Miira, I’ve heard of them despite being kept in a cage... I need to know,’ he glanced, “-why?”

“Because we’re friends and guardians of Igna,” they replied in sync.

“HELP ME, GOD!”

“Hey, which one?” they chuckled.

Matters in overworld harshen. Igna landed to a sign of misfortune and desolation. The first home he acquired, the memories he shared with Kniq and many of the companions he met and lived with turned to smoke. Maid’s bodies were pushed to the side of the corridors, first-aiders ran in and out, helicopters hovered at strategical areas. Some were taken from the balcony, by the garden, the yard, and even the roof. Long as the injured were taken to the hospice, nothing mattered.

“Igna,” exhaled Julius, “-look, she’s still breathing... help her, please.”

‘She’s not,’ he knelt and glanced around – the common area became a makeshift morgue for the deceased and those farfetched from salvation. Unfortunately for Malley, her wounds looked severe.

“Cousin,” he pleaded, “-do something, she saved me, I need to save her. I’ll do anything...” the pupils swapped from blue to gold, “-use my powers, I’ll create whatever you need... save her, I beg you, please, SAVE HER!”

“Save her. Julius, tell me, are those what thee really wish? Look around, plenty of others have suffered the same fate. I can probably save them, however, is that the correct choice. Death gives life meaning, I could give her the curse of the Nox’s clan, give them the blood of the vampires. What about Laura, she could have been saved if I was there, – what then, must I always rescue those who’ve died. Must I break the cycle of life and death to satisfy selfishness? The decision is yours; I made my peace and have revived the dead plenty of time. You have a choice, if we save her, it will be on my terms. Her body’s too far gone for restoration; we won’t have enough mana. Summoning Niflheim took most of my strength.”

“Stop bull shitting,” he leaped and grabbed Igna’s collar, “-you have the power to do what you want. The power to alter reality, the power to challenge destiny, and the very cog of time. I’ve always supported thy selfish actions... what about me, when are you going to help me. You brought Aceline from the dead, why not Malley, why not those who give their lives to save us? Tell me, Igna, why can’t you!”

“BECAUSE I NEVER WANTED THEM TO DIE IN THE FIRST PLACE!” he thundered, “-I’m not powerful, look around, is this the meaning of strength? We couldn’t save anyone, look at them, their pain, their suffering, I don’t want... fine,” the expression fell into a murderous crimson, “-Julius, I apologize. You’ve helped me – I must repay my debt,” he rose his hand, \*Raphael, Archangel of Restoration; thee who sits uninhibited by the flow of time, reach down and extend a helping hand to the miserable and manifest thineself, for I, Igna Haggard, demands so,\* the manor trembled, nausea hit those around, “-good evening, master,” a medium-length curly-haired gentleman stepped from a vortex, “-how can I be of help?”

“Good to see you, Raphael. I want you to save those who’re on the border of life and death – I grant thee temporary access to the might of the Shadow Realm. No need to stop at the living, if the bodies can sustain life, call them from the Hall of Rebirth. I’m sure Undrar won’t mind.”

“Igna...”

“Cousin, shut up and watch.”

Chapter 874: Undrar, God of Death

‘Igna Haggard, my cousin, my brother, my family. He’s the sole reason I decided to stay in the mortal realm,’ reality grew mundane for the one in question, there in a moment of complete bafflement, Julius paused – many of the critically wounded rejuvenated, ‘-he’s not a simple nightwalker, nor a simple human, he’s Staxius Haggard, my father, and the one who rescued me from my eternal loneliness. My real father, Creation, never really cared about what I did. For him, I was a pawn, his creation, someone on whom he could bestow his infinite power. My time spent in the mortal realm – the emotions, the relations, the stardom I had... I did it all, I had everything and still failed to compare to him. He has so much power, more than I ever had, different assets of the same coin, I create and he destroys. I mend and he breaks – his whims, eccentric ideas, and the illusion of invincibility. The more I think, the less I understand, who is Igna Haggard, what is he, and who does he serve?’

“Cousin,” side-glanced Igna, “-you’re very much quiet.”

“Someone very politely asked me to shut up, I figured I’d remain quiet...”

“Haha,” he gave a straight-faced laugh and held the palms relatively close and left space for a strangely shaped orb of purple, black, white, pink, and in-between hues. Similarly, an exact barrier extended over the manor – time stopped, select few individuals walked.

“Cousin?”

“Fret not,” he shuffled to the broken bar, reached over the tipped counter and pulled a bottle of bronze-colored whiskey, “-shall I pour you a drink?” he casually tapped and restored two shattered whiskey tumblers, “-join me,” the hands swayed and rebuilt the bar with ease. Julius watched, “-should we not?” the body turned towards Raphael.

“Leave the man alone,” he said, “-an angel takes a few tries to get started.”

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“Please,” he added, “-I’m only slow because of the sudden increase of power. Going full throttle’s very hard on the body.”

“Right,” he lifted the cup, “-to a good recovery.” The archangel gave a muted clap and summoned various entities, cloud-shaped mists fluttered from patient to patient. By the time Julius arrived, Igna downed three glasses.

“You’re slow,” he said and pushed a drink.

“And you’re an alcoholic,” returned Julius, “-I’m confused, what’s happening?”

“Extension of the Shadow Realm into the overworld. Honestly speaking, I prefer not to interfere with realms besides my own. Here, imagine the overworld is this glass,” he filled his about 75%, “-an this,” he held a handful of ice-cube, “-is the power from my realm,” the grip eased, dropping the cubes until it overflowed, “-the ice’s bothered and rests kindly on the drink. What’s lost,” referring to the spill, “-can’t be returned, no matter what. Now, take away the ice, and the level falls to below 75. Not to bother and add many details, here’s long-story-short, I hate using my true power for the reason of the overworld’s protection and stability. Affecting reality and changing the laws seems divine, and it is, in a way, divine for the god in charge of the domain, not me. By altering the realm’s rules, I’m erasing the governing deity’s authority. Creating objects from the use of my realm’s energy is fine and all – matters aren’t the same when souls are involved.”

“-Should I be scared?”

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“Not really – instead of the backlash turning to the overworld, I’ve ensured something else gets the punishment instead.”

“Will Malley be alright?”

“Julius,” the tone lowered, “-let’s parle as Creation and Death. You’ve grown attached to the mortal realm – there are emotions and woe on thy visage. Tell me, do you regret setting foot here?”

“As heir to Creation, I haven’t used my powers for much. Frankly, part of me forgot I was heir to the strongest being. Still, I can’t but feel weak, this world, I’ve been a part of it for many decades – my face and skin say otherwise. The family we have is the best thing I’ve ever experienced, the adventures we went to build the great wall of Arda, to ensure the safety of the people whomst we owe service to. There were times when I wanted to run and hide, never to look back. I reached that breaking point when Malley decided to leave, I failed her plenty of times, and still, she came back, and I wanted her back. If not for our adventure, I would have never met the love of my life. I, one hundred percent say, I love her.”

“I’m glad,” he rocked the glass and sipped, “-I’m at a cross myself. Should I focus on nurturing my emotions or walk down the path of destruction? Countless foes stand in my way, our way. The world will only grow to be most troublesome. Granted, a simple request to my followers and I’d have an immortal army readied to attack and take over the world if push comes to shove. Here’s my moronic thought, I don’t care if I’m strong or not anymore. Times have changed – and I should change too, the problem is, I

don't know where to start. Should I save, should I care for my people only, or should I extend a helping hand to the needy?"

"Are you having an identity crisis?"

"Not really, the words spoken earlier truly rocked me. I was content on not using my power and letting Malley die – to watch our humble servants die in vain. I'm selfish," he gulped, "-guess there's not much difference between me and who I was before. Alfred," he smirked, "-long are the days gone where I'd horn in on my enemy and make them suffer. I just shrug them off," the bicolored pupils washed in greater scarlet, "-one thing's for sure. Relaxed as I seem, my innards are on fire. Retribution will befall those ruined Laura's ceremony, that, Julius, is my promise as the Cursed King," in that small instant, Julius saw what many couldn't; an unhampered fury – murderous couldn't begin to describe the sheer violence. The glance gave goosebumps, "-Master," a sudden call had Julius jump.

'What's wrong with you?' said Igna through a crinkle of the forehead, "-Raphael, what's the problem?" the duo shuffled into the common area.

"I've healed everyone," he said, "-the dead have been revived, no one will die."

"But?"

"Malley," he pointed, "-her body's alive as a vessel to the little one. If we bring her back, it'll be at the expense of the little one, and if we perform surgery, there's a chance the infant will die after birth."

"..." naught save desolation, "-Cousin," Julius reached with a lowered gaze and hung against Igna's shoulder, "-save Malley. I saw it, you'll take the backlash after the Realm is retracted, the penalty of altering fate is one we mustn't poke. Plenty have been saved, I don't-"

"Julius," he side-glanced, "-shut your mouth, stupid. I didn't go through all the trouble of expanding a grand barrier for nothing. I mean it when I say the Shadow Realm is almighty," he looked to the right at the veranda and clapped, a fissure opened, hooves neighed, an undead armored horse leaped and landed. Atop the steed laid an armored figure clad in black armor. A short vault and seemingly tall entity landed shoulder-level against Igna. Heavy march, a silent stare, and the mark of death in a mist.

"Screw you," the helmet lifted to a waterfall of blond hair, "-Igna, you're an asshole."

"Undrar, I'm sorry, I can explain."

"No, no," she launched forth and had a spear inch from the neck, "-there I was, chilling in the Hall of Rebirth, watching the angels of death transferring souls from humans to flies. Suddenly, the phone rings -a disturbances reported in the mortal dimension. I figured it was a cultist playing with some ancient artifact, I shrugged it off and continued to watch my soap, once more, the phone rings, this time, an apostle of the gods screamed and prayed for someone to help them in their time of need. I checked the globe and saw a massive dark area; my spine ran cold – titans and demons were reported to be in cahoots. Before I could say anything, the angels locked me in the armor and pushed me into the mortal realm. Don't you realize the severity of thy realm, Igna? Outside looking in, it's a fucking HORROR SHOW. The sky's pitch-black, the weather's deadly, winds are literally cracking windows, taking animals and trees, it's a disaster. The ride was supposed to be simple; the mist and backlash have killed so many people, it's insane. Floods through the streets, cars washed from their stand... all that would be

forgotten," her eyes narrowed, "-if you have kept Raphael's greasy fingers from the deceased souls. Revival of the dead is prohibited – if it was done by the heir to death, then whatever, who cares. It pisses me off that he," she pointed, "-he did it!"

"Undr-"

"Shut up, I'm not finished. After all that, all the pain of guiding lost souls on my fruitless journey into a dense barrier – turns out, I was left out. Left to wander, the same as those foolish enough to enter a deadly mess caused by my dear master's dumbass heir."

"Done?" he held the spear's tip.

"Yeah, I'm done," the pent-up frustration eased in a simple sigh, "-what happened?"

Julius and Raphael gawked, "-why are you two surprised?"

"Cousin, what's the unnerving composure before the harbinger of death?"

"This here is Undrar, the current God of Death. Her other soul lives and teaches at the Azure wall, part of the legendary Kniq, rings a bell?"

"-S-sure?"

"Undrar, I need to ask, what's the vocabulary about. Should it not be like, I don't know, ladylike?"

"Oh screw that," she slapped his head, "-no more tact for you. Tell me, what's going on here?"

"We were ambushed, many died and the manor's ruined. I had to extend the Shadow Realm and minimalize the damage," he inched to her ears, "-good news, Formle's back."

"Fuck off," her eyes widened, "-sorry," quick to cover her lips, "-why is he alive, no, better question, why bring up his name?"

"Funny story, one of the bad guys used an ancient channeling spell and conjured a god's soul into his. You're surprised, imagine mine. He's currently with my friends, you know how it goes. On other news, Athena was excommunicated from Heaven and I sort of stole Lucifer's wings and hold the place of god...?"

"Formle, how long will he be?"

"Oh, he's there until further notice," a ring manifested above Igna's palm, "-here, a free access pass to his chambers. Make good use of it and please, don't ruin Intherna's hobby of cooking, she's trying hard to not make the meat roast..."

"Not my fault," she shrugged, "-thank you for the ring," Malley's condition jumped at her, "-saving her won't be simple. She bears not one, but two fellows. Can't believe the supposed technology didn't catch the twins. Her body's alive with the flow of time stopped and all." Undrar, the current god of Death, went through much change over the years. The Hall of Rebirth evolved and stole many devices from the mortal world, the convenience was too much not to have. Strange as it sounded, the gods, yes, those residing in heaven, have created spells for television to be made accessible. The relation between Igna and Undrar evolved greatly during the painful years – she'd come by on him killing souls, they'd chat,

have meals, and dinner. Both Undrar once had a pleasant meeting at the Tower of Aria where Igna, the King of monsters, took them to the top floor and showed off a chest. Inside laid, “-the true treasures are the relations and bonds made along the way,” which in of itself spelled disaster(as most often, the friends and companions are dead). Reaching said floor was a task only a demi-god or a chosen one could undertake.

“So,” she looked at her pocket watch, “-what are you going to do, Igna?”

Chapter 875: Complete Self

“Don’t use magic!”

“What’s the matter, Undrar?” wondered Igna, “-I thought...”

“You thought wrong,” her focus zoomed upon the lass’ peculiar wounds, “-she’s been riddled with bullets, I must know how she died. Raphael resorting to the bodies and matching the souls is a simple thing. The body won’t be used for the recovery, will it? and I know I’ll have to find her soul.”

“Astute and sharp-tongued,” the collective regards turned towards Julius who bore a look of disrepair.

“She died trying to rescue me. Laurance and I were trapped in the kitchen, the assassin took one of his arms, we had no option to act. One bullet remained, I pulled from the counter the moment her steps stopped – pressure in that instant, I missed and she managed to fire her blades. Laurance, fortunately, created a barrier, I thought I hit at first, but no, my bullet landed on the wall and her head exploded. I glanced at the corridor and saw Malley with a gun, pregnant or not, my wife’s still a murderer for the church. She breathed a smile and accepted the incoming barrage, I couldn’t do anything.”

“Understood,” fired Undrar, “-no need for a show of tears, we know how much she meant to you,” the eyes rolled, “-I’ll ask the angels to bring her soul.”

“Here’s my plan,” said Igna unmounting a bench, “-Julius, the Shadow Realm won’t be long until permanent damage is left.”

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“What do you need?” there laid determination in righting a wrong, “-anything, cousin, anything!”

“That’s what I like to hear,” a tap of the fingers and some gestures upon the dirtied wooden floor conjured a magical circle. Lines within the set area had neither geometric nor symmetrical sense. By all accounts, what stood were stray lines pushed abstractly. Undrar, counting her knowledge from Death’s library of knowledge, stared dumbfounded at what the symbols meant. ‘-No way the activation will work,’ said the sternly judgemental sneer.

“Don’t question me,” he returned, sensing her growingly sinister stare.

“Don’t disturb me,” she fired, “-let me call upon the angels,” by Julius and Raphael’s surprise, Undrar reached under her armor and pulled onto a flip-phone, her fingers slid across the number-pad, “-yeah, hello, you’re god speaking. Has any soul by the name of Malley, here,” it unglued from her ears and snapped a picture of the body, “-there, anyone who looks like that?” by the nods and gentle motions, good news awaited.



“She’s there,” the phone snapped, “-her soul’s being transported.” Before her loomed expressions of concern, “-don’t bother,” she fired at Julius, “-this little device here has access to gods, angels, and demons alike. Let me tell you when deities take a liking to the mortal realm, they often steal said devices.”

“Heaven seems nice,” said Raphael, “-not that I’ll ever experience it,” a randomly thrown remark, none knew what was meant, nor did they care to decipher

“Done,” proclaimed Igna, “-Julius, mold a vessel for your wife.”

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Immediately, Undrar leaped forth and did an ‘X’ with her arms, “-what little remaining lifeforce will kill the twins, is that the end goal?”

“We don’t have time for assurance. I won’t guarantee their survival. Julius,” he glared, “-create the damned vessel or I retract the Shadow Realm.”

“Molding a body won’t be easy,” he said, “-tis complex and requires time.”

“None of which we have,” he snapped above Julius’s head, a cloud of rain summoned and cried droplets grey, “-supplements, take them and create a damn body.”

Julius’s mind drew a blank, the muffled rain upon his skin felt nice, ‘-the shot in power,’ he paused, ‘-each drop’s a massive pool of mana, and cousin’s throwing it around like nothing. Summon a body for Malley, come on,’ the eyes shut, ‘-start at her core and build around, the structure, the layers, and finally, the skin.’

Beginning of a waist hovered above Igna’s created circle, “-Undrar,” he said in a lowered tone, “-as he creates the body, I want another soul to reside into the wife’s body. Have it last a few hours – about enough time for us to take her to the hospice and extract the twins. Premature births are gambles.”

“Is that why you called me here?”

“No, if I remember, you’re the one who came...”

“So much for being a good friend,” her shoulder rose, the crinkles around her lips strained.

“Undrar, I’m sorry, there are things I must do to honor the promises I’ve made.”

“Taking the moniker of Devil literally. Let me say this, Igna, if you follow the path of Alfred, the end result will be evil incarnate. Same soul or whatnot, the personalities differs. All the boasting about accepting who you are is but a show, don’t lie to me, I see straight through. Take a good look inside and decide, there are plenty of voices. Resonate with one – Staxius, Tempest, me, the Silver Guardians, our characters and memories all have a part in the decisions you make,” she smiled, “-don’t forget, I bear the title of Death Reaper. The element inside is dead, not to be awakened again – you surrendered it for the betterment of an entire realm and the rescue of Persephone, your lady mother. Good or bad, I don’t know, my job’s to guide the dead, not the living. Regardless of the outcome, I’m a friend, and will always remain a friend. Don’t forget it,” her palms kindly rested on his forearm, “-my mark,” she chuckled, “-it’s still alive and well,” her face tilted as she admired the neck, “-I have my answer.”

“Can’t well remove an awesome mark,” focus turned to the building and broken items, “-inanimate objects broken and defiled, be restored, return to thy prior glory. Heal and shine anew for I, Watcher of the Shadow Realm, order so.” A tremor in a sterile and silent environment pulsed similar to explosions close to one’s ears. Subtle shakes created waves of backlash – ripples flowed through walls and hit.

“Tough,” Raphael buckled, ‘-it’s like being punched in the stomach,’ he dropped on one knee, “-master, you’re too entuned.”

Julius and Igna’s focused pupils linked, deeply crimson inside which burnt the symbol of Alfred, and amber-gold, wherein burnt the symbol of creation, they blinked in tandem, \*Thud,\* a simultaneous end of each spell.

\*Gasp,\* “-I’ve done it,” panted Julius. Malley’s empty body hovered in a tub of energy, Igna’s circle activated the moment the last cell formed. In the entrance hallway, Igna’s right cheeks bore lines of black of which were ancient writings running from the chest, up the neck and hooked the eye, ‘-use more of my power,’ said a distance echo, an outline stood blankly, no face nor recognizable features. “-Alfred,” he returned, “-you belong to me,” he gritted, “-we’re one and the same. Thy rage is mine to bear, surrender and rest, leave all in my hands,” the palm faced up and held Lucifer’s wings, “-I will take back what was stolen from us. I will have revenge on our creators, they’ll pay, there’s no mistake. Undrar was wrong, I have accepted who I am, and if the path deviated to wrong, I shall make the wrong right.” The gray outline cracked, half of the mask fell and revealed his face, Staxius’s visage, “-we’re the same,” he walked and phased into Igna. The heart pulsed, the Death element reacted, “-we’re the same,” he said, another mark burnt itself on the combined symbol of Origin, Death, Time, and Nike, a simple circle which englobed the symbols of power.

“Igna,” hurried from the common room, “-you done?”

“Yeah, I’m done,” he stood straight and exhaled, ‘-thank you, Undrar, the doubt brought what little reservations I had. Not anymore, I’m complete.’

“The souls are here,” said Undrar, two orbs fluttered above her index, “-get to healing.”

A simple motion brought the souls over, he nodded at Undrar and moved to the body. Raphael took the liberty of placing Malley’s actual body on a stretcher. “-Undrar, you’ll stay and watch?”

“Damn right,” she said proudly.

“Lose the armor and look pretty,” he said in jest, “-Raphael, you stay. Some people need healing once they reach the hospice. Julius, keep a close eye on Malley’s actual body – the moment the souls are transmigrated, I’ll retract the Shadow Real. It’s going to be sudden, grit and endure.” Drop dripped, time halted, \*Conjured from the powers of which rules the law of nature, summoned to aid, mine quest art be left alone. Reality is as I dictate, matters affected in Mantia ought to be reflected in the outside world. Realm Retraction Shadow Realm Variant – Rantiam,\* a deep, low rumble clanged.

\*Thud,\* time resumed – television toggled, those on verge of death reawakened. The distant clamor of helicopters marked the return to reality.

“Since last night, a deadly storm has laid its clutches over the capital. Military, the fire department, and the national disaster team have worked through thick and thin to answer calls of troubled citizens.

Meteorologists are astounded at the sudden change, the vicious clouds have traveled throughout Oxshield and caused landslides," the newscaster looked to her side, the camera panned onto a formally dressed gentleman, "-prime minister," she said, "-it's to our knowledge that many have gone missing in the storm. In the last hour, flash floods and overall bad weather are eased."

"Mother nature is a force to be reckoned with. With certainty, the various teams involved are working to bring a calm and peaceful resolution to the unprecedented matter," lighting knocked power, the screen blackened, "-éclair's on damage control," said Igna nonchalantly. The soul transfer was completed without incidents.

Time read 07:00, '-morning already,' he gasped, a sharp pain ran up the legs and smacked against his lower back, "-master," heels echoed onto the common area, "-the... wait what?"

"Don't bother, Yui, the manor and servants have been healed. Call a helicopter, we should rush Malley to the hospital."

"Understood," she turned, her dress wrapped around her knee and dashed forth, the unconscious fighters rose and immediately grabbed their head, "-pain!" some yelled, a pulsing headache restrained much of their thoughts. Any attempts in remembering what transpired were locked, Igna made sure to affect the memories.

Pink short hair landed, the heart throbbed, "-Julius," the facial features were younger and sharper – one could say prettier than her true face. The lips were moderately sized, her nose bore the petite sharpness knock to the Iqavean people, her hair gently covered her ears. Long eyelashes fluttered on the unconscious 'Malley,' she stumped into Julius's arms, "-that's me, is it not?"

"Malley, dear Malley," said a voice in the distance, "-much has happened," helicopter chops approached, Yui pulled about halfway into the room and motioned, "-we have much to discuss," the couple stared at Igna, "-today onward, Malley Haggard is dead."

"Pardon?" gulped Julius, "-she's here, no?"

"Julius, Malley, who will believe in a tale of soul transfer. She should die. Allow her death to mean something, I did mention the events will be as I dictate."

Long nails clawed at Julius's chest, "-what about the infant," she shook.

"We'll take them to the hospice," on those words said, paramedics ran into the room, Igna gave a summary and they took her away. The confused crowd of guests, including Courtney, Elvira, and Elon, watched through blurred stares. Igna took centerstage, Julius and Malley rushed outside and flew alongside the unconscious Malley. Raphael and Undrar opted to stand further in the crowd, Vanesa climbed the stairs and latched on Raphael, "-what did I miss?" she yawned.

"Only you can sleep through a massacre," he snorted, "-look over there."

"Hear me one and all," thundered Igna, "-I understand many of you have trouble remembering what's happened, and I would not blame you. There're side effects associated with weapons created by the Cobalt Unit. We were attacked, many were injured, a few lost their lives. The enemy was stopped by our combined force, notice bloodstains, we fought them until the last man, be proud of what we achieved."

## Chapter 876: Global Scale

“Despite the efforts, forces beyond our control have struck. One of ours was gravely wounded, she was rushed to the hospice. Blasphemy of celebrations in Laura’s honor will not be forgiven nor forgotten,” the voice lowered, leaving the confused listeners to loom.

“Igna, what truly happened?”

“Mother,” he said as to not draw further attention, “-come with me,” he shuffled to the veranda. Courtney looked over her shoulder and called Elvira, who excused herself from a crowd of influential figures. They hurdled away from windows, “-Igna, you owe us an explanation,” hands akimbo, lady Courtney didn’t care to hide her mood.

A tired gasp followed into a summary of what transpired. From Undrar to the Shadow Realm, he left no details.

“And to think all that happened in a few hours...”

“Aunt, mother, I have much to attend. Check on Julius and Malley, I’ll be expecting good news of twins being born to the family,” a quick twirl and off the figure disappeared.

A rigid expression remained on the Queen’s visage, Elvira quickly noticed the change and pushed her chest forth and tapped the silence, “-stop daydreaming, what’s on the mind?”

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“I don’t know,” she said, “-he’s changed, for the better, I can’t really say. We have much to attend,” her game face locked onto the disgruntled crowd, “-let’s end the ceremony properly,” one foot after the other, Elvira followed with a relaxed expression.

“Leave the intrigue to Igna,” she said, “-I’ve caused much harm than good,” there still laid the matter of alliance between Phantom and Snow, or what she described, “-let’s leave the intrigue to Igna, what do you say?”

“Leave it to him?” she blinked and side-glanced, Igna hurdled with faces she hadn’t seen before, “-I guess the time is nigh for the cursed sword to be drawn. Pity those who tried to entrap us. There’s no mistaking the swirling aura, he means business,” in said instant – Yui, Raphael, Vanesa, and Undrar, gathered around Igna grew reminiscent to when Staxius had his entourage of strong characters. Few of which whomst engrained their names into the annals of history. The Silver Guardians, key mercenaries in the war between Kreston and Dorchester, Deadeyes, founder to the marksmen unit now responsible for the safety of adventurers over the Azure wall. Kniq and the bunch, Serene’s influence by writing the chronicle had truly etched fallen hero’s names into history.

Chilly morning breeze passed, Undrar left, “-duty calls,” she whispered, her mark burnt vividly upon the neck. Raphael walked through a fissure, “-I’m tired, the influx in power’s made my core unstable. It was fun, pops, holla when my talents are needed,” he cheekily winked and left.

View over the capital wasn’t pleasant, trees toppled, powerlines destroyed – the vague view told a greater story. Clouds up high judged from their stand and cast vicious blasts of lightning – accompanying thunder rumbled akin to Vanesa’s stomach.

“Master,” Yui pulled onto his blood-soaked blazer, “-Princess Loftha...”

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“Don’t,” the bigger picture gathered onto a chessboard, “-give me the location.”

A notification pointed to the location on the map, the dot blinked at a random hotel cupped amidst the ‘red-light district,’ such was the real identity kept behind a mountain of fake reports and businesses. Wings sprouted, two flaps, and Igna vanished.

‘There he goes,’ blinked Yui, ‘-should get back to work,’ a glance to her side dropped her heart, ‘-where’s Vanesa...’

“What are you doing here?” fired Igna tearing through the clouds, Vanesa held by his trousers, lips dried and jaw open “-don’t bother,” he halted, the momentum carried her into his arms, “-ask like a normal person, next time, yeah?”

“Not my fault,” she watched with very messy hair, “-pops took off without a word said. I’m coming, I don’t care,” she pouted, “-slept the whole battle.”

“Isn’t sleep and food the topmost priorities in thy life?” they arrived at the general area.

“No, I like to fight too,” she yawned, “-are we there yet?”

“About to be,” he landed atop an uncomplete building. Lines went to and fro, buildings, shops, and random assortments of bricks were layered neatly, the streets connected to one another. Multicolored roofs gave a vibrance to the deserted street – carts and supplies washed from the upper districts. The shop turned drug-manufacturing den laid quietly amidst taller constructions, ‘-long time since I was here,’ he nodded and looked to where Yui pointed, a grove of densely packed houses. He stepped off and fluttered into a gentle landing. Vanesa’s shoeless outfit proved arduous – mud and remnants of the flood were yet to vanish. Her roughly shaped lashes flapped, “-right,” the shoulders dropped, “-let’s go,” she climbed on his back, the greenish long hair wrapped into a backpack.

“Comfortable?” he inquired.

“Yeah,” she replied, “-Lady Gophy taught me to use my hair as a weapon,” she giggled proudly, “-I’ll watch our back.”

“Awesome,” he stepped into the street, mild droplets felt gentle, ‘-watch our back she says,’ Vanesa clocked out, ‘-no matter,’ he walked, past many frail windows, empty benches, unhinged signs. Wind gasped – the area whistled. A compound of a few floors laid from the street. A single dark alley read on the map – Vanesa strapped properly and Tharis at a flick’s draw, Igna walked. Rain dripped, flooded drains spilled and carved the gravel path. A light-brown puddle gathered at the alley’s mouth. The deeper he walked, the more decrypt grew the air. Track marks carried other flooded puddles, frequent potholes created a marsh.

A scan showed no sign of life, a simple one-frame blue door stood above iron-stairs, behind which laid an apartment of some sort. Who were they kidding – the infrastructure held resemblance to ‘love-hotels’. Tight hallways heightened claustrophobia; everything was jammed pack. Stairs arduously took the duo floor to floor until one was fairly large compared to the mess below. Vases and stools crashed

across a room at the end, 'someone threw a lot out the room,' he observed and checked for minute details. The ajar door blinked, white-noise bottled and lit vague shapes. He stopped and stared, a push revealed chaos – an upside room, blood splattered on the walls, one figure laid on the bed, a trail of blood carried to the window and vanished, the trail stopped, 'didn't jump out,' he narrowed, 'there's a railing preventing suicide.' He flicked the lights, rats squealed in pain, a pale faced Loftha rested peacefully on the bed, he moved, the feet heavy, and stopped over her, 'they crushed her neck, what a painful way to go,' the torn clothes and splatter, "you fought until the very end, didn't you," he exhaled, "Yui," he sat at the foot of the bed, "why did you lie to me?"

\*Princess Loftha and Ziu have been found dead. Time of death is estimated to be 45 minutes ago, authorities have been called,\* "why?" he pondered, "the rooms untouched. Yui..." he reached for the phone but stopped, a shuffle in the corridor changed the target from phone to gun. The nonchalant stranger clopped loudly, its shadow cast upon the less than amiable wall. It turned the corner, "stand down!" cried Igna.

"Don't shoot!" he said, "don't shoot," the knees buckled, "don't shoot," he fell, "I don't know where I am... I have a screwdriver in my head, can you help?"

"No you don't," Igna rushed out the door and slammed the man against the wall, "Ziu fucking Patek, did you come back to look at the dead girl, or are you going to pillage a dead woman's integrity?"

"No," he coughed, "I don't know what you're talking about," he gasped, "look at me, man, I--"

"Pops, let him down," yawned Vanesa, "Ziu Patek is dead. The current host of that body is an entity from the Aapith nation."

"Fair," the grip eased and the man dropped harshly, "need help with the screwdriver?" he pulled slowly and painfully, \*AHHHH,\* cried the unknown yet known visage,

"who the hell are you, man?" he asked and coughed blood, the open wound ate itself into full health.

"My name's not important," he glared, "tell me, who and what are you. I don't care, tell me everything."

"Okay, okay," he lowered his gaze, "I'll talk, don't hurt-" Igna moved inside where laid Loftha, a casual seat at the end of the bed, "speak," the legs crossed.

"I slept, the next, I wake into a blurred room of blood and screams. There was a man, a priest, he said he worshipped Formle and said Erak's death will be repaid. Books floated around him, he pressed my forehead and I stumbled through the window and fell. After that, my mind came too, part of me wanted to climb the stairs, I left something important... it's all I remember, I swear."

"He speaks the truth," yawned Vanesa, "the souls unstable. Should investigate the spellcaster."

"Since when?"

"Lady Gophy said wit always overpowers brute strength. Its easier to think than to act," her chin rested kindly against Igna's shoulder, "I have the blessing of Tharis," she held her arms, "look, pops, you're not the only one who have favors from strong gods," she giggled.

“The scales of truth,” he exhaled, “-if my daughter says you’re innocent, who am I to argue. Tell me, what else floats in thy memory.”

“I don’t know, I can’t say,” he shuddered, “-what’s this place anyway?”

A distant voice whispered, ‘-use our power, Igna, use Alfred’s boon, use it to thy fullest desire. Hold out your arm and think, believe in knowing the truth, everyone’s a pawn, stop looking at them as humans, look at them like bugs, Ziu Patek’s killed Loftha, he’s alive. Who cares about the one inside, the outside hurt and possibly molested the princess... what will you do, allow the injustice or find the truth?’ the pupils, kept bicolored, had the crimson side darken, the iris sharpened, the lines felt like stakes, sharpened weapons in service to end whoever they looked upon.

‘I’ll bite,’ he held out his hands, five sharp edge lines snapped at the man and impaled the head painfully, uninterested by the screams, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* the scattered splatter flashed and muted the shouts, ‘-I understand,’ the dark rods transferred flashes of white, Ziu’s memory became his, ‘-the power to freely alter an entity’s mind and take command of their body,’ the rods retracted, he sighed, ‘-Alfred, can the powers grow any more vicious?’ on extracting the memories – the cost came at the exhaustion of his lifeforce, the unstable soul crumbled, he fell, \*Once living now dead. O’ thee who’ve lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival,\* an empty shell rose lifelessly, “-you’ll be a great bargaining chip in future negotiations, \*snap,\* a purple bubbled swallowed it into nothingness. He turned and admired the lifeless princess, “-I’ve saved you before, there’s no returning from death after today. No more changes and the concept of death won’t have meaning. Loftha,” bent over her beaten face, “-why didn’t you listen,” he ran his fingers through her hair, “-the intrigue thickens,” the back straightened. \*Outgoing call: Yui,\*

“Hello, master.”

“Drop the cheery attitude,” he snarled, “-the room’s untouched. What’s the lie about law-enforcement...”

“Master, I apologize,” she returned, “-I did what I have to. Don’t hold it against me,” the interface suddenly flashed red, \*Warning: Projectiles detected,\* “-tis all in éclair’s plan. There’s no united front, master, those loyal will remain loyal and do what is must to keep the dream of peace alive and well. We’re compromised,” she said, “-I apologize, they hold all the cards – our only escape is the death of King Igna.”

“My life against the whole of Hidros,” he sat at Loftha’s side and caressed her cheeks, “-Yui, éclair – do what thee must, we play on a global scale, I will return,” the projectiles made contact, “-until we meet again,” a mushroom cloud rose over the capital, Yui bit her lips in frustration, \*Communication lost,\* froze the transmission, ‘-éclair...’

Chapter 877: Understand, the true meaning of Family.

A contained explosion rattled the capital for days, onto weeks, months, and eventually, years. True to Hidros’s word, peace between Alpha and the Empire was reached. King Igna made great strides in leading each party towards a mutual understanding. The revolution led by Queen Eia concluded. The factions settled into surface-level understanding, behind the scenes, who knew, and honestly, who

cares. Condition on such an agreement was brought by the relinquishment of Kreston. The latter returned to being a pious state ruled by the newly appointed Pope. Hidros weren't the only ones fighting for an equal way of life, the new pope, from what rumors read over the Arcanum and sparsely acquired information by spies, was an agent of god himself. An apostle who went by the name, Carrigan the II, in remembrance of Carrigan, saint of Aphsoltry. A man whose tale was weaved into history centuries ago, the first man who approached the demi-humans. Respect is granted to this day, though the church's left his teaching.

Wracia Empire and advancement towards the new continent greatly boosted the Empire's coffers. Access to the promised land, such became the name of the virgin soil, was limited to the affluent. Emperor Sultria was offered land, and as the head of the Alrosia United Kingdoms, accepted the gracious gesture. Independent kingdoms watched from the sideline, wishing and envying the position of Easel Run Gard, a small and powerless island when it said and done. Many worshipped the King for his masterful statesmanship, together with Hidros, Easel Run Gard, tutored underneath King Igna, launched a technological revolution. The world moved into a new age, the age of Magiology, the true coming of King Staxius's theory. On the agreement between Alrosia and Wracia; Phantom was forced to forsake military secrets, mainly, how Maicite was used to catalyze power. Cobalt Unit would have figured out the process, eventually, after massive backward engineering. The surrender meant one thing, and one thing alone, Hidros, Phantom, and Alrosia were at the mercy of the Wracia Empire. The latter's sword, King Juvey, wasn't very active in the following days and months after the incident at the capital. The loss of key personnel and a simple man known as Xen had truly broken his heart. The rapidly greyed hair lost the vicious tenacity renowned and feared around the world. The Kingdom of Melinda shook by the attack. Many states, on orders of the emperor, were stripped and given to members of the church, thus increasing the latter's strength and lowering the former. A key addition to the political map was the island of Greenhoot; the birth place for the tenacious bearer of the dragon's blood, the Sadian people. Their chiefdom evolved into feudal rulership, at the head, the crowned King of Greenhoot, first warrior of Sadian, King Ezel. By his side, the bishop of Manitee, Lord Zenit of the Eastern Cross. The man under whomst Oat served.

Thus, an age of relative peace ensued, where the Wracia Empire, United Kingdoms of Alrosia, and independent nations lived through trade and a collective understanding of war and its disadvantages. The golden age of conquest faded into text onto history books. The newer generations arrived with some bearing magical elements, and others, naught save the affinity for the basic elements. Magic as in spellcasters altering laws to cast fireballs and summon barriers was replaced. Similar to music, the culinary world, and art – it lived through various noble families wishing to keep the history alive. Far as the general population was concerned – the ability to cast spells without incantation under a military context, such as; adventuring and monster-slaying, solidified itself as the new norm. No longer was there a need to understand how the process worked. The era of Claireville Academy ended, from which, spawned the beforementioned dogma of commoners straying from the magical path. Magiology on the other hand, spiraled into a great subject where many scholars worked. The umbrella Staxius opened grew to shield even the Wracia Empire and other nations. The founder's notes were regarded as national treasures for Hidros – copies were made but none could ever decipher the tongue in which it was written. Speculation and intrigue around the pages spawned various rumors; 'he who understands the founder's words will understand the true nature of the world.'



'The pages contain the secret to immortality,' albeit, the latter already existed in the form of Nightwalkers – true elites in the upper echelon.

Sun rose over the capital, April 28th of X113, read upon suspended holographic displays over the castle. Few advertising airships flew on the simple reason of nostalgia. Airships were akin to clouds over the capital, no matter the advancement, they would keep on circling and give news through text. Improvements came in form of smaller vessels that flew in even pairs. Elon's dynasty and the University of Rotherham worked to simplify the holographic display and boost its strength, resulting; little toys abled to project screens as large as full-sized buildings.

Camera flashes and snapped flooded the castle's inner wall, the royal transport arrived. From it, exited King Igna and prime minister éclair. Everything looked the same save a few changes here and there, the inner-castle town repurposed into offices for the various state-driven departments. The front of the castle, the same space a few years back, didn't move, the interior changed into minimalistic and clean. The receptionist came equipped with expensive holographic displays – opposed to paintings, there laid windows through which one could see the Alrosian market, price increase, and price drops. Investor meetings, the proposition of expansions, and application for loans from the Ardanian bank. There laid a key difference between Alrosia and the Wracia empire, money. Hidros stands as the richest continent in the world, people live a lavish life, commons to the truly rich – poverty remained; however, the good faith of the King provided shelter and food for those unable to provide for themselves.

Plaustan, untouched and relatively undiscovered, had the biggest change. Hotels, resorts, restaurants – the domino effect; lady Elvira, on knowing travel between nations would become accessible to everyone, invested a lot into building an empire of resorts. The gamble paid off, travel boomed into a highly profitable market; businessmen, conglomerates, each rushed, the gold lust. The land-owning nobles watched from their palaces as investors ran to them for a permit to build. The Guardian of Plaustan, an old friend from the Staxius era, simply told the buyers to return to the capital and negotiate with the King's team. Thus, another gamble fortified Hidros's spot as a country of wit. Villages turned into towns; towns built into cities – diversity of careers made the heretic continent a viable land for survival. Despite the church's obsession with keeping tradition, Carrigan II, earned himself the title – Duke of Kreston, and contrary to what many expected, opened the gates to his land. He allowed other religions to settle and truly build Kreston as a province of faith and worship. No matter the pressure placed on his shoulder by other priests, Carrigan the II never wielded for he was hand-chosen and groomed by the Church of Syhton. Backed by them, and bearer of a noble title – such was Hidros's play in keeping the continent united.

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Igna and éclair entered the castle, passed security, and vanished into the inner layout, “-negotiations went well,” exhaled éclair, “-good job, Vengeance.”

“Whatever,” he shrugged, “-two's elapsed, we've yet to find the king or princess Loftha. Should we really carry?”

“Trust me, Vengeance, I'm doing my best for the betterment of Alrosia.”

“You say that, negotiations strayed. Without Emperor Sultria’s vote, we can’t waltz into Iqavea and depart for the promised land.”

“I’ll get his vote, don’t worry,” he skipped and passed Vengeance, oncoming nobles caught his attention to which the prime minister stopped and began conversing. Vengeance simply rolled his eyes and carried along, the outer walkway, exposed to the elements by the archways of marble, soon turned towards the common room left untouched since Igna’s departure. An outline sat at the counter, “-Yui,” he approached and took a seat.

“Vengeance,” she sipped, “-how was work?”

“Boring, I sat there and read a script.”

“No one wants to bring up the incident of Laura’s ceremony,” she said.

“What about you, how’s work?”

“What do you think,” she slammed the counter, “-I feel like shit. I gave the green light, it’s my fault we lost Igna, who knows where he is. I went and checked, there was nothing, nothing save a disfigured body. Did I kill him... I don’t know.”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” he said, “-we did what we must. The death was orchestrated by the church in cahoots with Alpha’s four greats.”

“Alosia United Kingdoms, what a fucking joke,” she exclaimed, “-a united front they say, if the master had chosen not to ally with those damned puppets, he’d still be alive, not a shell. We screwed up, bringing Sultria into Haggard’s business was the cause for all that trouble. I can’t unsee it, the arrival of Patek, the death of Loftha and possibly Igna, it’s fucking insane – we wanted a strong front against the Wracia Empire, what we got was a two-faced Empire of cowards. The emperor has no influence, not to mention the empress, she’s just a figurehead, a supermodel. We accepted them and took on their weakness, because of that,” she slammed the counter again, “-éclair was forced to betray his master, I know damn well how gutting that must have been. He told me about the dinner, the face master made, the reserved smile, it was like he already knew what was going to happen. The call I made with him, he didn’t once blame nor chastise my betrayal, master simply accepted it for what it was... WHY,” she yelled, “-FUCKING WHY!”

Vengeance looked at her with a hallowed expression, he motioned countless times to remained silent, alas, it didn’t matter. A lift, headed to a helipad, opened at the start of her monologue, from it exited a fierce-looking lady cradling a toddler. She stopped and lent her ear, on Yui completing her speech, the lady handed the babe to an assistant and walked, sharp red heels stopped at her back, “-pardon me, Yui, care to repeat what thee said?”

“Why should I?” she sipped, “-nothing I say is ever accepted or taken into consideration. Vengeance, thank you for being a good listener, I know we share the same loyalty to the master. I regret what I did if I could turn time, I’d disobey éclair and followed my heart’s wish,” the stool spun to the guest, “-holy mother of all gods,” her lashes fluttered, “-it’s you, Empress,” her expression didn’t once feel threatened, “-how very gracious, the visit must have cost thee much trouble.”

“Yui,” the dangerously annoyed stare passed from Vengeance to Yui, “-kindly, if you don’t mind, repeat what you said?”

“Pardon her,” interjected Vengeance, “-she’s a little drunk. You know, frustrations of strenuous work.”

“No, I’m not overworked,” she fired, “-here’s the truth, supposed elder sister to Igna, you and your empire failed my master. I don’t care anymore, I’m done serving hypocrites – the capital is dull, the people walk without much attention, the castle is boring. There’s no life, no character, a simple shell of glory my master’s arrival,” she reached for her phone, “-Yui, éclair – do what thee must, we play on a global scale,” the transmission cut, “-those,” she plastered the recording over Eira’s face, “-are the last word he said before being blown to bits. Guess what, Loftha died by the hand of Ziu Patek, the alliance between families to bring peace to the stability of Alpha was just a ploy, a scheme neither the spymaster nor the king could detect. Ambassador, what a joke, to think, they’d have the guts to ruin a funeral, a ritual master respects the most. Before he went, you know what he did? He bought land around the family crypt and ordered anyone who served the Haggard and its affiliated companies to be buried there if they had nowhere else to go. Tis the caliber of man my master was – someone who truly understood the meaning of family.”

Chapter 878: Yui’s voyage

“The nerve,” clapped Eira, “-how dare you,” her knees rose in stride, her index followed below Yui’s chin, pointed upwards. The cool, composed Empress lost her footing – mist grew at her feet and froze the marble floor. Sat at arm’s reach, Vengeance escaped from the line of fire, pulled his phone, and dialed. Yui’s words cut to the heart – an entourage of ‘yes-man’ wasn’t healthy for a person, let alone one of her stature. The entire world crashed and fell; splinters from stands dropped, ‘-Igna’s gone,’ wrote amidst the crash. The slow realization of what had happened clambered past the misdirected norm of which she’d grown to understand.

“Family are those who’re ready to bleed unconditionally. Igna bled, and bled, nothing ever mattered; in the end, there was nothing left. He accepted the grand truth of survival of the fittest, true to Hidros’s culture. Time was at an end, and he left.”

“...”

“Empress Eira,” gasped éclair against the doorway, “-my apologies,” he ran in-between the disagreement and motioned for breathing space, “-I’m late. You must call before arriving. A woman of thy caliber can’t be allowed in harm’s way,” he flashed at Yui, “-please, let’s move to a more open area.”

“No,” her heels hammered onto the ground, “-I will not move, nor will I speak until I know the truth,” she glanced at Vengeance, “-éclair, is he truly my brother?” she pointed.

“By all means, ye-”

“-and don’t make the mistake of lying,” she narrowed, stunting any rebuttal he might have had.

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“My lady,” he moved and spoke in a lowered tone, “-wise not to scream, wall have ears.”

“So?” her arms crossed coldly, a hardcover book of light-blue summoned, the pages flipped by aid of an invisible hand, it drew onto a red bookmark upon which a bubble expanded, “-there,” she said, “-the ears have been cut. I need the truth, speak. Is what Yui said the truth?” her heart raced, ‘-please don’t,’ passed fragmented thoughts, ‘-I won’t accept it. How could I have been blind to my little brother’s disappearance, how could I have been,’ another thought interjected, ‘-Markus...’

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“I have no idea what Yui said,” he skid over onto a bench, poured a heavy drink, twirled in their general direction, kicked back against the counter, and drank, “-it’s probably true. Tis a long story, please, take a seat, I’ll start from the beginning,” the tale wasn’t heroic nor was it anything to be proud of. A tale of an unfortunate truth, misplaced kindness, Igna’s failure to see right from wrong, or rather, the conscious blindness. “-You see, majesty, the master was definitely wary of the conglomerates. I advised on many occasions to clear Alpha before signing an alliance. Time was nigh, either the pact was made or the Empire grew stronger – at the time, we had little to know the information of their forces. The climate was rough and we’d just fought off invasions on two fronts, Easel Run Gard and Alpha. There’s no doubt master played a great part in freeing Alpha. The help was done without expectations or favors. He simply did what satisfied his morale. Ask Yui or those in master’s inner circle – we’ve fought out in the open and in the shadows, assassinations, kidnapping, ransom, the list carries on and on. We did what we must. Alas, on the signing of the agreement, the United Kingdoms of Alrosia – became an entity of great power and promise. Emperor Markus would be seated at the top, followed closely by King Igna. Frankly, Emperor Markus at the top was supposed to have been a puppet ruler – Hidros calls the shot and supplies military might whilst Alpha supplies the necessary funds. The more money we have, the greater the stride we’re able to take. All for nothing,” he sipped, “-look at Hidros now, two years later, we’re prosperous, one of the richest kingdoms in the world. People pay taxes happily – businesses, investors, and the monopoly of Maicite, which I remind, was an asset we still hold despite sharing secrets on the method of operation. For the sake of a shaky peace treaty, and not to look bad before the global audience – Markus’s acceptance of land granted by the emperor shoved us down a hole.” Doubt rid Eira’s solemn expression, “-no wonder,” he said, “-the deal was an under-the-table affair. Once firm, a deal I remind was fixed behind our backs – I was forced by the conglomerate, Cimier, Snow, and PMC’s under Iqavea’s thumb to stop supporting my master. The expedition king Igna led to Elendor was ousted by a mole, we confided with Alpha so that the operations takes place without incident, around the time of the signing. Backstabbed, Alpha’s damned compromised network of intel exchange blasted our doors wide open. Before I blinked, the conglomerates held all the cards. I received the ultimatum of removing King Igna from political discussions – the Alrosian council would supersede the king’s decree,” he paused and refilled the glass. Yui watched, weary-faced as did Vengeance, albeit slightly calmer, “-nothing I could do or say – we shattered the Empire’s blade, King Juvey, and they fought back in slicing our king’s silver-tongue. Laura’s death was unexpected, Loftha brought the Patek’s into Rosespire. Fighting them on home ground was a simple affair until the big emblem of Alrosia waved. Ziu Patek killed Laura,” he sighed, “-I requested lady Elvira to send her as emissary. It was the only way I could have saved the little dignity we had. Master had no idea and suspected lady Elvira; she also had no idea that I pulled the strings. I did what I had to. In the end, the ploys built on one another until another ultimatum, this time, one in which war was at stake. They hung the line of Hidros violating the international treaty in form of the attack on Old Cray and his faction. World War or the disappearance of a single person – my choice was obvious. Master would have done the same in my

shoe, I regret what I did to master on an emotional level. Logically speaking, I'd pick the same option – a quality I acquired from the years spent at his side. They knew about Vengeance, luckily, King Igna was beloved by the people – a sudden disappearance would shatter the unity of our people. Thus, a duplicate king at the expense of the true monarch's death. Yui gave the greenlight – the explosion was broadcasted live to the true leaders of Alphaia," he paused once more to gather his breath. Eira blinked emptily, a great big mystery unfolded before her crossed arm. éclair's tone shook at times, alcohol was but a self-inflicted punishment to speak the truth, "-if you fight, we'll rebound. What the Empire didn't know was that we sent an affluent noble to study at the Church of Lucifer. Charm and wit and smart networking allowed Carrigan II, now Duke of Kreston, to ascend to the title of Pope, apostle pope for he bore the wings of an angel. Iqavea wasn't pleased, therein, sent the man to Kreston. The leadership of the Church's in the hand of the four cardinal archbishops; the people have recognized Carrigan II as the next religious head, balls in the noble's court. Once a beast grows big, direct confrontation is but disaster assured. Instead, sent a virus – a malady, infect the beast from within and grin. The council of Alrosia's under the conglomerate's influence – a hail Mary gamble worked."

"I'm confused," she blinked, "-Iqavea knows of Igna's death?"

"No, not death, they simply know the King's very receptive to innovating ideas. If they push their luck – we can always call favor from Kreston. Allies turned adversaries and vice-versa, the world's funny, isn't it?"

"I'm not laughing," interjected Yui, "-understand, empress."

"What we say in this room, stays in this room," a suspicious frown rose at Eira, "-Empress?"

"My lips are sealed," her knees weakened, "-here I thought everything was peaceful."

"Peace comes at a heavy price, and sometimes, that price is the life of a loved one."

"What about Igna, where is he, I presume he went into hiding?"

"No, we don't know," he returned, "-as for Loftha, I'm sorry to say, she's dead."

"Dead... I thought she was-"

"Staying in Rosespire? Yes, I know. Emperor Markus knows the truth, don't underestimate the four great's reach."

"My little sister's dead... I never thought."

"That's the problem," fired Yui, "-no one ever thinks," she sidestepped and glared éclair, "-I'm done serving those fuckers from the council. Enough is enough, my created purpose was to assist the family, not enemy. No more, I quit," she exhaled, "-I'm going to find master."

"-And where do you think you're going?" her body froze, not on the ice, but on a gesture from éclair, "-remember thy place, puppet. You're nothing without me or my soul, you weren't even supposed to be alive..."

"-But master whimsically created me?" she laughed, "-I know, I was made for a purpose, whim as is, master created and birthed me, I won't, I can't, I've had enough. Unfreeze me, éclair, threats are master's specialty, not you, not me."

“Sharp tongue of yours,” he sighed jovially, tenseness between them subsided. The storm left – calmness washed the shore after the sand rose alps, Eira growled from up above, “-and she’s off.”

“Off to where?” arms akimbo, “-is Igna alive or dead?” she glared, “-ÉCLAIR!”

He but simply smiled, “-who am I to say?” he shrugged, “-no one knows what he thinks, really. I don’t doubt his return.”

“What about Yui?”

“She’s going through one of her episodes; It’s the third this year – she’ll be back before long. Her journeys are quite the tale to behold, I wonder where she’ll fly to this time.”

“Cthulhu,” muttered, the words fell on drunk ears. The harsh booze had the innards in relative warmth. By which, most of the innards slumbered as charcoal. Eira’s barrier vanished, a glance at the drunkard prime minister didn’t spawn much confidence. Cries from her babe took the attention.

Time followed into the evening, nothing much changed – all was the same. People returned from work, others headed to work, and mostly, the air felt little more than a casual breeze. The drift settled onto Rotherham’s runway. A slick jet equipped for strong weather toggled its engine. The pilot, a graduate from Sotepios, and a plane made by the geniuses at Midas, her belts strapped, luggage kept to the side.

“Lady Yui, I must ask again,” said a friendly air hostess, “-have you read and understood the risks this flight poses?”

“Yes,” she returned, “-long as I’m there, I’ll be fine.”

“Understood,” she shuffled for the cockpit, where the engine’s thrust. ‘-Please be right,’ her fingers crossed, ‘-master Julius mentioned a continent where magic and beings of old existed. The origin of demi-humans and inhabitants of Arda in general,’ a map drew on her laptop, ‘-an area far to the west, accessible only at certain times throughout the years, a place where questions prevail more than answers. The continent of Marinda,’ said a book to her side. The jet pushed, and off they were, lights blinked and an arduous trip to the famed land began. Months of planning culminated said instant; Yui’s unlimited access to the Arcanum and Phantom’s network allowed for quick information gathering. Her attention was drawn to the mystical continent by a book written in the early X050, a very old piece by a known voyager – Aidn of the Western Wind. The rustic, leather-bound book replaced the laptop, “-by god, our week spent on an island similar to paradise, brought on us, travelers, a hope of land for resupplying. Let it be known, many o’ ships have suffered to the sea’s fury, tentacles large as mountains, waves reaching the sky, fireballs falling from the heavens. We sought in to discover the mystic land, by the many trips, tis understood the seas calm at a certain time and rages on others,” she flicked the page, “-on arrival, the landscape is one straight from a fantasy novel,” beside which laid an illustrated picture, “-flying island, gigantic trees, a rumbling volcano and the presence of beings we know not.”

Chapter 879: Marinda, the land of the mystic

Marinda, else known by, Arine, is an archipelago comprising of four to five isles. The reason why I say four or five is very simple, our ships aren’t steady enough to brave the northern seas. By the name of Lucifer, I shudder as I write. Today marks the second coming of my crew’s expedition. The king of Ensuren glamorously offered rewards for souvenirs we may bring. Monarchs and their weird sense of

taste for rough artifacts and whatnot. Seas south of the island are very deep and glide in a jetty of rocks, perfect for docking. The latter, build from always wet rocks, carries itself into a somewhat symmetrical shape. The natives are very able, and reclusive. Bushes shift, the tide rises, and the sea bears its claws. The weather on the beach relatively stays sunny save the occasional rain. Marinda's exceptional climate is a thing of wonder, immediate after the beach, the trees gradually thicken till darkness.

Left of the sand-ridden scape, climbs a big cliff of steep proportions, at the edge, on glancing up, lives a womanlike intrusive figure. She looks upon us with contempt, such was the projected image by the somber skyscape. The breeze carried a salty aroma mixed with the freshness of the humid jungle. At high, before the mentioned cliff, was named by the first crewman who conquered its sharp slope. Multiple trips carved a path, and during said trips, we came across a grotto, thus providing shelter. No more reminiscing, currently, the grotto's expanded – and Marinda seems tame. Every facade examined, another builds. If not for the grotto, many would have perished in the rain, a lesson taught the hard way. At high, a brave and competent man, died from poisonous rain, droplets hit his head, the hair and skin melted almost immediately. We assumed rain to be unhealthy and kept into the damp shadow.

On expeditions, tis best to have an entourage of multiple professions. By fortune, on the first trip, we hauled with us a scholar. He soon drew on his books and wrote, 'Marinda's rainfall isn't of natural belonging. If rain actively melted matter, there would remain nothing of the isle. Therefore, we can conclude, the rain is triggered when certain criteria have been met. The working theory, strangers to walk the land,' such he carried the study with pride, and ultimately figured, 'we tested meat during many rainfalls, captain Aidn ordered the crewmen to not adventure during shroudy weather. The safety of the crewmen came first. The call was intelligent, for upon further examination – the melting of a man's skin came to these criteria, exposed to the element and in direct sight of a rough-edged cloud. Sound insane, however – the shape is distinct, I shall include illustrations to better help gutsy voyagers.'

As the scholar said, after many long nights of debates on empty stomachs – the pain of hunger outweighed the idea of death. Many of us figured if death came, 'twould be painless and quick, a bearable thought when faced by insanity and hunger. We believed the words, tied leaves to sticks, and formed rudimentary umbrellas. The plan was simple on that cold, famished evening. Spotters from the ship located the cloud, and from what we saw, didn't affect matter on the sea. At the suggestion of my crew, we ventured into the jungle, the isle's mystic destroyed our collective commonsense. What is right, what is wrong, we walked blindly – a babe experiencing the world. It rained that day, one burnt his arm – however, we had hope. The trees weren't affected, the leaves simply shrugged the poison. In the later week, craftsmen tied together with a chest piece, arm brace, and a helmet made from the leaves. By the end, we all looked like bushes come to life. Ridiculous as it seemed, and by God, we all laughed till tears and coughs; they worked. We were able to hunt and scout the area – my friend, a cartographer, had trouble sketching and scaling the area – his compass failed, as did the many other measuring equipment. In the end, we used a stick on the beach, the shadow cast to determine time and location. The first few months were tough – nevertheless, we fought and explored. The bliss and bemusement of discovering a virgin land – it was majestic. By the end of the stay, we managed to cross the thick jungle by way of bridges amidst the branches. The deeper one is, the taller and wider stand the trees, leaves can grow to be the size of an arm or a leg.

The night, arguably, was the worst part of the stay. Demons' roam and prey, the noises, we've yet to encounter the prowling beasts... glances here and there, close calls. The unknown is best left unknown,

we weren't going to walk into the lion's den. Half a day's trip along the suspended path comes to an open field. Herbivores are docile behemoths who calmly graze on the tall grass overlooked by a massive valley. We killed moderately, dried the meat and fish – and overall, kept a low profile. We ended the stay after six months – the initial plan of leaving after three months cut short by the changing weather, the seas suddenly cried furiously, there was no escape, the island became dangerously active.

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'Keep high,' became our motto. The more height one has from the ground, the greater the chance of survival. Many lost their lives to the isle's unpredictable climate and norm. Some eaten by plants, others poisoned by little pricks – the list goes till a total of twelve. To them, I pay my respect; Henry, Falter, Douglas, McGree, Jonathan, Permillia, Anson, Jozep, Balsmo, Tony, Cartner, and lastly, Atn. To you, my fellow comrade, I pray for thy well-being in the afterlife. The graves stand at the peak of Atn's cliff, on watching the vague outlines of their gravestone, our ship resumed its journey east.

From then and till now, various unsuccessful trips have been made. Five years later, I embark once again with a new crew to the unknown land. We arrived safely as predicted by the season. To my surprise, nothing changed, the place seemed the same as when we left. Five years is a long time, and the expectation of any settlements standing in good shape is pretty low.

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The cliff waved on high, the sky clear and spotless, the reflected sun – seemed to me the isle welcomed us. The footprints remain, I'll never forget that first day, excitement, and enthusiasm of the crewmembers, enough to make a grown man dance. Later down said week, we discovered our paths and progress unfazed. Contrary to the first, random crash with Marinda, we came prepared to discover the place's secret.

Passing the jungle, a path was etched to brave the valley, tall mountains, rivers, and open-air. 'Keep high,' the mentality never changed. The crew split into smaller expeditions, each built their settlements and focused on the independent task. Personally, my interest was drawn by the inhabitants, weird creatures I'd never seen before, that whomst we hunted and ate. Three months into the trip, my living-quarters is barged by the panting of a frightened member of the alpine crew. I hurried to find the rambling of a traumatized fellow, "-the island is alive," he cried and wept, "-the volcano will end us, it'll blow and destroy the world. The voices, they speak, and they say we're not invited beyond the valley. Cross the border and they'll hunt us... let's leave, let's leave, let's leave."

The team leader stepped in, "-Captain, we don't know how it happened, we were about to reach the peak, and on the final stretch, he collapsed and went crazy – the man tried to jump and kill himself. We halted the climb and returned – supplies ran low."

"Good choice," I replied, the poor fellow was taken to the ship where he remains fatigued, moving in and out of sleep. Soon after the incident, weirder things happened – many went missing to return naked and bruised weeks later. Blueness in the ceiling above faded into grey – the rivers pelted, the wildlife scrambled, change was upon us. The bay where we docked moved, large tentacles wailed, the very core shook – it was unbelievable, distant rumble – a high-pitch screech rendered many unconscious. I somehow survived – as did a few of my crew. We were stranded, the ship, fortunately, didn't take damage – by a lot of unconscious crews, there was no escape.



Two weeks later, a few reawakened, tis then, I began to think – what if the isle wasn't a landmass, but something which lives and breathes. It'd certainly explain the sudden vanishing, hence, I ordered the braver men to climb and continue the alpine expedition. This time, I'd fight with them. We spend the worst part of five-month catching on the previous team's progress, we built rudimentary stop points at key locations.

At the peak, we clambered and instantly were washed by a tempest. The view, nothing to what I'd seen before, the mountain gently descended onto meadows and forests. There laid settlements, yes, villages or towns, the volcano breathed molten orange. We weren't alone, no – the island of Marinda wasn't fit to be called an island, the scale was far bigger and deeper. Rich land of undiscovered potentials. A little village caught my attention, and we ventured deeper. The downward climb was simple until the village gates – the inhabitants were people crossed with animals; rumored demi-humans. The village elder, a strong man with strongly shaped members muddled through the crowd and glared, “-foreigner,” he spoke, “-the might and wrath of our guardian deity have spoken. You, brave soul, beat the mountain's rough terrain.”

By sundown, we sat cross-legged inside a circular hut. The elder walked in followed by younger ladies, “-stay the night, fellow venturers. We're on the Yamto land. The rulers live to the northwest in the palace of ice. Tis not often we get visitors, and when we do, they often last a few days. Heed me well,” he spoke directly at me, “-I say this with good intent, do not pursue further. Halt the quest – the grand bell must have caused quite the commotion. Stay the night, fellow venturers, stay the night.”

An old man's warning and a little feast for our pleasure, “-elder, may I ask a favor?”

“If tis in my capabilities, I will aid.”

“Are there anything I may bring back to save my crew?”

“-and items to sell,” interjected a merchant, who pleaded to get onboard.

Nothing else needed be said, we were soon graced by a barrage of potions and strange concoctions. They used magic, and were very proficient, little children stronger than our mages at the capital. We accepted the gesture and promised to leave the next day. This on said night I truly understood the meaning of overwhelming fear. I laid on a gentle-grassy slope to stargaze till a massive floating body calmly passed my vision. I drew on my spyglass and zoomed onto the object – there, I saw a figure staring directly at me, a woman beside whomst stood other outlines, a palace,” I gasped, “-it was floating island on which laid a palace,” then and there, my heart sank.

“That'll be the nobles,” said the elder, “-they use the floating island to host grand celebrations across the land,” he placed a hand on my shoulder, my eye suddenly pulsed, the vision blurred, I looked down to see tears of blood, “-you gazed upon a celestial, tis the price a mortal must pay. I, also have paid the price,” tis then I realized, “-I lost both my eyes,” the elder was blind. Dawn came, the great expedition of Marinda ended.' Marinda, the land of the mystic, written by Aidn of the Western Wind. After he returned from the journey, the king and people celebrated the courageous voyage. He kept the details hidden and traveled the world, none knew the reason why he lost an eye. The previous passages were pulled from a journey he gave to his grandson, the legacy of Aidn.' The book shut, Yui exhaled, ‘-Marinda sounds exactly like the place master would escape to.’

Chapter 880: “We’ve always been cornered, without our Devil.”

éclair sat before a council of noblemen. The Empress of Alphaia called a meeting of the leaders, Vengeance kept at the prime minister’s side. The council hall was vast and circular, tables upon which laid names and affiliation. A holographic display at the center displayed the Alrosian crest. Chatter and whisper were common – the vastness drowned the otherwise ‘rude’ interjections.

“On behalf of me and Alrosia, I’d like to thank you for the swift call,” she took center stage, “-on the matter of foreign policies,” she glared the various opportunist nobles, “-on request of Pope Carrigan II, Duke of Kreston, an independent faction from the Wracia Empire, I propose the following,” she said bearing the same authority as the emperor, “-inclusion of Kreston as a council member of the Alrosia Empire.”

“No,” voiced instantly, “-the request won’t benefit us or them. The empire’s evil – the long-fought peace by King Igna mustn’t be wasted. Who knows, it may be a trap for all we know.”

“I second the opposition,” voiced another noble, the faces were few but recognizable. Princes, dukes, the ranks shuttled to Count. The bold announcement felt slightly out of place. She examined each table, “-King Igna, what are your thoughts?” she asked.

‘My thoughts?’ Vengeance blinked.

“Please,” interjected Count Hellan of the Hellan dynasty, “-the king’s got much on his plate. Its best we move for a democratic approach. A voting,” he smirked, “-council members, please,” he stood, “-options have been laid on thy screen. Please vote for or against the policy.” Tension hovered; she noticed the otherwise normal atmosphere. Those who sat in Alphaia’s general direction voted, as for Hidros, they followed suit – the nobles backing Igna hung their faces in defeat. One side bore their chest, the other content in accepting the room.

“The vote’s been cast,” she turned to the screen, “-80 percent have voted in favor of including the Duke of Kreston as a trial member of the council. We shall evaluate the man’s character, after which, we’ll decide if he’s friend or foe. I’m no fool to leak our military secrets.”

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“What’s there to hide anyway,” muffled the Alphian side, “-Hidros’ dominance in Maicite research’s been given to the Wracia Empire.”

“Lord McFowl, please – I’d refrain from making unnecessary comments.”

“No,” he quipped, “-Alphaia needs to booster its military power. We’ve hosted countless negotiations with Phantom and their associate companies. Nothing, they would offer to buy or even trade, is Hidros trying to save face on an international level?”

“Lord McFowl speak the truth, we ought to know what the Cobalt Unit has.”

“What good will it bring,” fired Luther Remington.

“-Baron Remington, I’d mind thy tongue,” fired across the hall.

“We shan’t...”

“Duchess Goldberg,” added another, “-before chasing us, why not chase thine daughter. We hear she refuses to return to her lawfully wedded husband. She bares the child of another noble – Hidros’s influence dwindles by the day. No matter the picture, if not for King Igna and his strength, Hidros would be crushed easily.”

“There ooze Alpha’s true colors,” said a representative of Arda’s court, lady Haru.

“Enough,” thundered Eira, her hair hovered – mist blew from her exhales, “-I call the council for a diplomatic meeting, not a tug of war. Gentlemen, tis a pleasure.”

“Lousy continent,” muttered the Alphian side, “-lady Goldberg, keep thy daughter in check before attempting politics. A beauty of thy level is best kept far from the affairs of men,” the richly deep brown colored door closed in a loud ‘thud’.

Duchess Goldberg threw a glance at éclair, “-I hope my time will be recompensated. The revolution won’t end until King Igna steps from the crown. Lady Eia’s child is the rightful heir,” she stood and three-quarters of the council followed, a testament to the Dorchester and Kreston’s added influence. Representatives of Plaustan, Arda, and Totrya simply shrugged the matter; no passion nor will fight. Hidros was nothing but a shell, a prosperous factory of puppets. Igna’s entourage faded, leaving éclair browsing a few papers and the Empress in the distance. She gathered her strength and shuffled to Hidros’ table.

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“Sufficient proof?” side-glanced éclair, they half expected Yui to barge through the door and scream, “-I told you!”

“The anger runs deeper than I thought.”

“It’s not anger, tis their right as the victor. What did I say, the moment we bring a policy against Hidros, the council will vote in favor of the decision. The attacks have been common and honestly, petty. Tis the state of thy leadership, spoon-fed puppets born into the elite world. You know full well how hard it was to climb to our station – the founder started from nothing, built an empire that’s part of a greater order.

“Kreston’s join the Alrosia council. Won’t it open a door for Iqavea to exploit?”

“The pope, behind who stands the church, is going to take a stand behind us. We won’t yield until the blood of our enemies stains the ground. Don’t forget,” he rose suddenly, “-we’re in Hidros, not Alpha, not anywhere else. Empress Eira,” the visage dropped, “-as a family member to the Haggard, I say this – if Emperor Sultria becomes a liability...”

“Are you threatening my family,” her lashes froze, a cape dashed upon her shoulders, and a staff of ice summon at her finger – claws stopped millimeters away.

Vengeance held his palm, the expression calm and unthreatened, “-Empress Eira, don’t forget, I’m master Igna’s guardian. I’m a weapon, and if push comes to shove, I will fight for what my master holds dear.”

“You draw power from the Shadow Realm?” the sharpened ice moved.

"I was granted the authority to summon a domain fixed in the Shadow Realm. Altering reality in the overworld is a simple matter of a snap and a few chants. Never underestimate my master's foresight," he smiled, "-for now though," the gloomy expression lifted, "-I'm a replacement for the king," he sighed, the weapons lifted.

\*Notification,\* flashed across éclair, "-Yui's plane has gone missing," read the report, "-we can't track the AFR signal."

"What's happened?"

"Yui's plane's gone," he exhaled, "-I ought to return," he rushed, "-Vengeance, head to the manor."

"Understood," he nodded and turned to lady Eira, "-would you like to tag along?" nothing, she faded, leaving only a trail of ice. '-Meeting,' he exhaled and climbed the stairs, the doors opened to a spark of blond hair, "-morning, cousin," said Julius, "-long time no see."

"Morning already?" he watched through a small window, "-another all-nighter. What brings the prince to me?"

"It's about Eia," the steps stopped before another corridor, "-we've gotten news few nobles are planning to usurp the throne on basis of a true heir."

"Usurp the throne. Intrigue isn't my forte," he confessed, "-what did the others have to say?"

"éclair said to act as we saw fit. We need to move discreetly, who better to send than my cousin's secret weapon."

"An assassination?" he muffled, "-Cto?"

"Yes," he smiled, "-there's the list and location," he handed a paper, "-make it look nice."

"I'll make it a work of art," he chuckled, a breath in, he teleported to a hidden chamber in the castle's underground labyrinth. Dusty floor, an array of weapons, and most importantly, the Cto butcher's outfit. Blood-stained white shirt, khaki pants, military boots, and an apron, he pressed a lock, the table's drawer opened into a rack of different weapons, "-this," he smiled, "-perfect," fingers around the butcher knife, a lick of the lips, he teleported to a well-dressed neighborhood. It stood quite a ways away, located to the northeast – a private area reserved for the top of the top – Froen. Sheltered by the naturally beautiful forest and meadows after which laid rough terrain – a remote place fit for those wanting privacy.

Meanwhile, Vengeance did his due; Julius found himself waiting under the three pillars of Rotherham, "-there you are," hailed Serene dressed in her very tight outfit, her shirt's buttons seemed moment from being snapped. Stilettoes and short black pencil skirt – her climb up the stairs to the skyscrapers felt arduous on the clothes. The prince could but avert his gaze and glance at the few gentlemen passing behind, all glanced and admired the very fit lady perched atop stairs.

"Men," she stopped and smiled, "-very easy to distract," the pace slowed, "-has Vengeance been briefed?"

"Yeah, he's ready to strike. What of the bodies?"

"I spoke to the hospice," they entered, "-seems we're in luck," she handed her tablet, "-those two were found dead in a gang killing earlier this week. The bodies were dumped in the forest – some joggers found them."

"-I mean, are they fresh?" he interjected.

"Don't sweat the details," she pressed for the elevator, "-I have the best artists working the bodies. What about law enforcement?"

"Best we leave them out of the loop," the chamber arrived, "-the less who know, the better it will be."

"And on the subject of knowing, I heard Yui threw a tantrum?"

"Yeah, you know how she is. Her outbursts are timed and precise, part of me wonders if they're premeditated or sheer bad luck."

"I agree," she pressed her teeth and exhaled, "-Lady Elvira and Lady Courtney found out the hard way. I'm still shaken by the chaos lady Courtney caused... it was a sight to behold – the destruction of a whole village using a blade. I could never," her shoulders shook, "-you're here about Yui's disappearance?"

"No. Lady Elvira called, what about you?"

"Same reason, I was pulled from a profitable deal."

"Raven's made headline," he tapped her tablet, "-you saved the article?"

"I had to," she laughed, "-we've had so much trouble with Alpha lately. It was good to hear Igna's overseas team fighting relentlessly. They've fully gained the support of the familia. Much of it was on aggressive ploys from Starix. I envy them," the lift stopped, "-Raven's are a team of superstars – masterminds and formidable opponents."

"I know, they run the drug, gambling, and sex market. The rule's pretty peaceful and profitable for those willing to sweat."

"Long as one profit without straining one's hand – the effort is worth every bit."

Guards were more on edge than usual, "-young master Julius, lady Serene, please," motioned one of the guards, "-lady Elvira awaits," he pulled the door ajar, from which, Serene pushed and fully opened the door.

"Lady Serene," said both.

"Julius and Serene," sat behind her large desk, "-take a seat," she offered and pulled her glasses, a tap lowered the blinders, the door locked, a display sprawled above her desk, "-an associate of ours was recently killed by the Skey Faction. The Overlord's asked of Phantom to handle the matter quietly, a gang war might break what little faith the people have in their protectors. Young men and women have gone missing at the capital and the industrial town of Sterkno. We have no idea who or what is responsible. Maybe it's Skey, Snow, Cimier, the damned Patek's, and even the Gaso Group. We're in the dark, hence why I called," she flicked on another screen, "-on growing tensions, Count Avian Stark has sought refugee in Rotherham."

“Avion Stark?”

“Avion, Avian, means the same person. A misprint sort of jumbled the name. Long story short, Count Stark will be moving his family and wealth to Rotherham. I mustn’t remind how much of an honor it is for us to welcome a man of such repute.”

“Heavens no,” returned Serene, “-the man played us for a fool and masterminded most of the Dark-Guild’s downfall and forced the organization onto the hole we peer from today. Clambering out’s not a possibility, the leaderships have been split, a cracked glass can never fully be restored, just like the Dark-Guild’s cowardly loss against Snow. We lost the battle and the gangs know we don’t have the influence to move against Cimier or the four greats. Attack there and they’ll reply in forcing our hand at the Alrosian Council.”

“The decision’s been made,” she said, “-my orders are final. We will grant lord Stark shelter. Tis not a matter of dignity or repute, I’m simply fulfilling a friendship Igna formed years ago. Favors are very important – and the safety of his family is one he can’t downplay. He knows as do I, the moment he lands in Hidros, the life known in the hometown will be gone forever,” nothing would change the decision, Julius and Serene simply nodded, the blinders opened, they left.

“We’re cornered.”

“We’ve always been cornered, without our Devil. Tis hard to say what’ll happen next.”