

Death Magic 881

Chapter 881: Unfortunate Paperboy

Blood-soaked sleeves, sweaty brow, a beaten knife. The horrible figure of the Cto murderer vanished into the damp night. The date reads the 30th of April, the peaceful neighborhood of Froen, cupped in a meadow of butterflies and birds is stricken by the hammer of injustice. A prominent family, the Deash, are cut down and murdered in cold blood. The paperboy, a young fellow by the name of Timmy – made his rounds, cycling from house to house. On reaching the white fence of the Deash property, he reached for a bundle, parked his bike, and peeped over the fence to a grippingly tranquil sight. The young boy felt his hairs shiver. Determined to complete his job, he shouts, nothing. He shouts again, the wind blows, the front door creaks – through the ajar opening, he narrowed, dark outlines caught the light – carved flesh, blood, torn inner organs, and the damp, dense darkened liquid flowing out the door. A jogger, acquaintance of the boy, stopped on seeing the hallowed expression, a tap on the boy's shoulder returned a shriek. The fear-ridden pale face rose a finger, shaky and uncertain. He carried his sight and landed upon the same horrific scene. He immediately pulled the paperboy and ran across the street, there, he banged upon the front gate – alerting a prominent figure. Lord Aweol of the Anria family. The scared duo, stumbling over their words, explained what they saw – Aweol rushed inside, pulled a gun from his rack, and hurried outside. He screamed for the family to lock their doors – Timmy was tasked to warn the neighbors, and soon, armed with his hallowed mien, the boy pedaled. The local police are called and the neighborhood is locked down.

The coroner took one glance, pressed his glabella, and dismissed the grueling etched memories, “-tis a sight of complete atrocity,” he said, “-Froen's never been subject to such malice and contempt. We will need to perform an autopsy; the relevant parties have been informed.”

A reporter asked, “-cause and time of death, the murderer is possibly still around?”

“Not that we can say,” added a stout, shorter bloke, broad shoulders and a glazed expression, square forehead, large nose, and a sharp, clean-shaven jawline. He thrust his mustache at the reporter's morbid curiosity, “-time of death places the incident yesterday. There's no sign of breaking in or struggle, well for the sake of the husband,” a pensive silent pause followed, the reporters watched, the film crew panned. Deliberation whether to give information ended on the tense crinkles easing, “-by how the body was found, he was butchered alive and allowed to escape, deliberately – blood smears accurately track his last moment from kitchen to the front door. The moment he grasped the handle, the wrist was taken cleanly, there, in agonizing pain, was flipped to stare at his assailant, a murderous cold-hearted fiend who knelt atop him and slashed. Fortunately, the door partly opened, inside's a scene not for the fiend of hearts. In my whole career working as an inspector, I've never,” he bit his word, slowed pace, “-I've never seen such a gruesome sight.” Yellow tapes closed the area, bodies were hauled into ambulances. The cameraman skillfully caught glimpses of white clothes being carried, “-inspector, what of the family.”

“The wife and daughters were killed in their sleep. The cuts were precise and painless.”

“Any ideas on who the killer might be?”

“Until the investigation uncovers more proof, I can't say for certain.” Later that same day, on the romantic forest trail, young Timmy, scarred by the events, walked his bike along the hardened path. He

threw a glimpse through the forest, onto a cold running river. Cloud moved to swallow sunlight; shadows covered the area. He walked, trying to escape the thoughts, flash images of the house until a finger caught his eye. He pressed the breaks and stopped, he blinked and focused, perhaps it was a twig, the mind played tricks – matching thoughts to reality. To his horror, the finger was real, marred in the dirt – he followed the limb and saw butchered corpses, blood sprawled along with the popular camping spot, the knees weakened, he fell – the bike toppled. Evening, prime time for casual runs, the same jogger slowed his pace and joined the paperboy. He once again rose a shaky finger to the bodies. Police were called, the area restricted, and the same entities present for a statement, “-inspector.”

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“They were killed a few hours before the family was struck. The camping trail faces the house directly,” from those words, a narrative build, “-the Cto murderer is back,” he confessed, “-it’s not a copycat either, the motive, the lack of evidence and sheer cruelty.”

The camera panned to the reporter, “-the enigmatic Cto murderer strikes again. The peaceful town of Froen forever sullied; no place too tranquil, no place too safe. If there’s blood to be shed, blood will drip,” the show ended and immediately followed by an announcement, “-we advise families to lock their doors, avoid being alone and keep weapons at arm’s reach. Most importantly, it is wise for you to remain calm. Work with us as we work to uncover this fiend’s true identity.”

1st of March flashed across the counter. éclair sat lonesome before a glass of liquor. Television played in the background, stations reported on the return of the murderer, “-no one’s caught onto the fact that the murder was political,” he sipped, “-the Deash has been quelled,” the doorway clogged, Serene walked and inhaled.

“The sweet aroma of liquor,” she smirked, “-how are you, prime minister,” said she sarcastically gliding upon a stool, “-be a darling and poor little old me a drink.”

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“Right,” he took a bottle and filled her glass to the brim, “-what brings you here, lady Serene.”

“A report to be given personally,” she said, “-our faction’s taken care of the remaining Deash – the extended families have been killed, kidnapped, and made to look akin to an accident. Young master Julius’s already paid for our services in the blood of few newer servants.”

“Don’t call them servants,” he sighed, “-the orphanage in Arda’s not a market for vampires to pick and choose.”

“Please, they know the deal, we provide them with a stable future and all they ought to do is grant us blood, not even a lot might I add, just enough to satisfy our thirst,” her sharp canines gleamed seductively on her taking her drink. “Tomorrow’s princess Lizzie’s piano recital at the famed Glanter theater,” she casually mentioned.

“Not going,” he replied, “-after what happened two years ago, there’s no fixing the relation. Laurence, Rile and Seiran effectively cut themselves from us – Lizzie made her intentions clear and followed them three. They live a modest life, Lizzie’s paying for their employment and residence... so much for the young model’s rise to success.”

"I would be angry too," she justified, "-imagine the one you've vowed to serve had the power to bring someone back from the dead... then, instead of saving your family, he saves everyone else. I'd be furious, honestly."

"We accepted Laura's death. Malley died too."

"Not from where they stand," she returned, "-Seiran saw everything, she was conscious during the expansion."

"If they'd die that day, Phantom would have disappeared. There was no climbing from said lose."

She gulped the drink, "-make it there, don't be an egomaniac. Two years' long enough to weld broken hearts."

"Sure," he rose his glass, "-to peace."

"Peace, sure," she walked coyly to the door and broke into a mist of bats. Later said night, éclair drove to the arts-and-culture district, a short drive from the castle as it laid in between the academic and noble district. Drama, art, musicals, sculpture, painting, name it a there laid a recreational club for said domains. Resounding roars thundered through the street, the prime minister, dressed in formal attire, pulled towards a brightly light building of strange arrangement. No linear building starting from thick to thin – before laid one of smaller but larger proportion. The base held a center rectangle from which squares built outwards to look as if peculiarly stacked dominos. The extension was braced with arms that connected with the ground and the building itself. Lights were vibrant and nice, a poster read, "-from the talented Atelier d' Exsque, auction and exhibition," soon underwrote, "-and works of art from Mosia," lastly ended by, "-sponsored by Raven."

Helmet on his side, éclair climbed the carpeted stairs, a valet glanced, keys changed hands, an attendant politely welcomed him into a quiet open area. Stairs spiraled onto the upper floors, few paintings laid here and there – a sign, "-auction," pointed deeper inside as for, "-exhibition," pointed at the upper floors. He moved to the latter – lavishly dressed nobles exchanged words, smiles, and drinks on a terrace peering towards the east. Corridors split – the illumination dulled on entering the quiet inside where amber lights flashed upward at the frames. '-amazing,' he walked and watched, many held the crest of Exsque followed by the painter's signature. The exhibited works ranged from portraits, still-life, landscapes – attention to detail and eye-catching pieces. Mosia took the stage at the opposing end of the exhibition, there laid abstract, surrealism, and a very vibrant, loose style of expression.

A lady dressed in formal ware stood before a large painting of a woman in a pond of flowers, "-Saint Minerva," he whispered.

"éclair," she replied, "-if it's not for the famed prime minister. How are you doing?"

"Good as I can," he said, her stern regard tore into the tableau, "-what about you, the patron deity of Glenda?"

"Better," she said, "-I love every day I spend here. The more I live with the mortal realm, the better I see why many gods opt trips to the lower world. My powers have returned if that's what you're asking," her arms crossed, "-tis not what you're asking," a harsh side-glance smacked the silence.

"No, I've come to ask a favor," he said, "-a friend of mine, Yui, has gone missing over Marinda. I was wondering if you could-"

"No," she returned, "-I already sold my soul to the devil. No way in hell am I going to bite more than I can chew. My powers have returned yes, my symbol's active, however, my belief and realm haven't arrived. Before I engage in conflict, I must go to Athene and visit my people. So no, éclair, I apologize, I'm retired – but a humble painter."

Alta arrived, "-lady Minerva, you're requested at the banquet."

"Excuse me," she nodded and left – on joining the open hall, sisters of the church of Athena swarmed her side and smiled.

"Alta," he said, "-quite a pleasant surprise."

"Don't play dumb with me," she said, "-I know what happened to Yui, and how she fired her tongue before the empress. Do you know how hard it's been to stop rumors? The Ardanian court's ready to give up on Hidros, and speaking as stewardess of Glenda, I'm inclined to follow their lead. Get yourself together. Arda's in talks with Plaustan and Totrya, if nothing changes – Hidros will split into factions, Kreston and Dorchester, Plaustan, Arda, and Totrya, leaving Oxshield desolate. The Duchess of Rotherham, queen of Arda, has authority over the brains to Hidros's military and economic prowess."

"Is that it?" he returned, "-when things get rough..."

"Oh, don't play the victim card, dear prime minister. You're doing great, I don't mean to criticize. It's just... I don't know, we're losing ground even though we're winning. If nothing changes, the puppet you have running around as master will definitely come in useful during a war. Deash's bow from spearheading the faction against the crown has bought valuable time. We need to stand strong and hold our own."

"I know," he sighed desperately, "-and I'm trying to keep the peace for master's return. I'll do what I do best, collect information and pinpoint who's responsible. Our next target is Alphaia, we need an ace to stand against them – the fear of something greater than weapons made from Maicite."

"And is there such a thing?"

He smirked, "-there is."

Chapter 882: Marinda; 'what is it, why is it, who is it?'

Blurred vision, dark and red, heaviness of a hard impact. The slow-burning of rubber, metal, and fabric, what once conquered the skies majestically crashed. 'Alive,' gasped the heavily wounded Yui, she clawed from the wreckage – smoke filled the air, the wind hurled, the clouds shrieked and Marinda grumbled. By sheer effort and lung filled by the thickening mist, she muddled, stumbled upon a crack in the fuselage, paid no heed, and dropped. Her head fell upon damp grass, foliage blocked vision to the skies, '-my arm's broken,' she cringed, '-don't seem that I've suffered much,' a relieve breath escape. '-crew,' she ran to the front, the cockpit was impaled by heavier branches, the unfortunate pilot sat listlessly. Shatter glass smeared in droplets of crimson, he hung his head as if asleep, the uniform stained in a slow draining red. '-Fuel,' she sniffed and coughed loudly, a fit which brought her to her knees, the stomach clenched and lungs sought for clear respace, '-the mana's going to kindle the fire...' hands on

the damp weed, ‘-move,’ she said to herself and stood. Posture swayed in preference to the right, she subconsciously limped, “-hey,” exited the badly chipped lips, “-are you okay?” she asked, the amber sparked plenty. *Thud,* the ringing subsided into a loud boom, she carried, followed the wreck’s perimeter, and arrived at the opposing end. Part of the heavy shell toppled, exposing the innards – smoke puffed and merged into the greater burning flame.

“Lady Yui,” coughed, “-here,” beautifully tanned arms rose above a seat, it latched and clambered, “-here,” half-burnt visage returned, “-a briefcase,” remainder of the strength flee, before she passed, the valise flung outside. She toppled shortly after a tree carved and flattened half of the plane, no support meant an effortless slice. The shock forced Yui onto her bottom, ‘-she’s dead,’ the half-working interface blinked, the lifeforce of the crewmates darkened, ‘-my leg,’ she gasped at the bigger picture – a piece of metal had lodged into the side of her thigh. The jet blinked red, “-evacuate the area, automated destruction initialization,” said an amorous voice, beeps resounded.

‘Shit,’ fear washed her face, ‘-I need to move, now!’ she glanced backward, spotted a broken log, threw her wrist around one of the branches, and pulled, the beeps shorten in gap. Most of the strength exhausted, regardless, she turned on the injured thigh and pulled, the pain tore into her muscle, ‘-FUCK!’ the final blink sparked, the remainder of the jet sucked into a vortex and imploded, a semi-transparent circle marked where the implosion pulled, the arc barely missed her foot. ‘-All to keep military secrets,’ she gasped and turned to her left, the ground marred crimson in the struggled to escape the destruction.

‘Interface’s dead,’ she gasped against a tree, ‘-the bleeding’s stopped,’ she glanced right, away from the gruesome mixture of red, ‘-case,’ she gripped and pulled, it opened and held supplies, emergency contact devices, and weapons. More importantly, portions and scrolls, she pulled the cork off one flask, it opened with a pop, then doused the wound. She continued and downed more – her strength returned, the wounds healed albeit slowly, ‘-enough mana,’ she pulled a scroll, a loud flash of green exploded across the jungle. The wounds healed, ‘-I feel better,’ she clambered against the tree and stood, ‘-pistols with mana-bullets, should work,’ she reached for the last flask, pulled the cork, and swallowed essence of mana. Both guns strapped on her leg, a tap on the case turned it into a big backpack.

“In remembrance to Joh and Antio,” a rock stood vaguely at the center, “-I apologize for not hosting a better burial. I’m sure you will be fine in the afterlife,” she smiled, “-may peace and comfort smother thee.”

A look about showed naught, “-if one is ever lost in the vastness of the forest, look to the sky,” she stared, ‘-no way,’ she paused, ‘-the sky’s muddled.’ The pages flipped, “-if the sky is covered, look for the sound of running water,” a couple of hours past, she stumbled upon a stream, “-on reaching the river, walk with the current, it should carry to the sea, once there, look to the left, the Cliff of Atn will stand proudly. Cross the latter by taking the path around the beach, best to wait for low tides. If tis night, you’ll have to camp.”

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‘Great,’ she sighed, ‘-dusk... good thing I have this book.’ Another couple of hours carried – darkness fell heavily. If not for the moon, there’d be no light nor sense of direction. ‘-We crashed close by,’ she stopped and glanced at the reflection on the waves, ‘-can’t see anymore.’

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“Keep high,” suddenly leaped into thought, “-By mistake, if you’re on the ground at night, oh, there will be hell to pay. I hope thee wield a better weapon than swords.”

Motion in the bushes heightened her focus, pairs of different colored hues rushed, she pulled on both pistols and fired, a distant yelp followed, ‘-got one.’ The cry altered many around, masses trampled from all direction, ‘-run for the trees,’ cried her instinct, she held her breath and sprinted – pistol is drawn, she fired and cleared a path.

The night came to a slow end, sun rose from the east – Yui’s sleep broke per her stomach’s plea for food. One foot dangled, the other laid on the makeshift bed, of which was a tree’s rather large arms. ‘-tide’s low,’ she dropped on the damp ground, passed the bodies of her assailants, humanoid figures of wolves and other animals, monsters, rather, demon, ‘-my attackers,’ she smiled, ‘-too bad thee faces Yui from the Haggard’s. Throw what you want at me,’ she faced the broadening sky, “-I’ll win, and I’ll find my master, there’s no mistake.’

What she thought to have been a week-long search turned into months and eventually, another year passed, the date write as the 29th of March X114. Yui perched upon Atn’s cliff, her gaze fixed over the seas, at the horizon, ‘-how long has it been,’ she sat and breathed. In the long months of adapting and learning the region, she came across the olden-made settlements. The paths were very much intact, untouched, and undecayed by the flow of time. For some reason, what lived on the island never aged. She cupped a fragment of a mirror, ‘-I look the same to when I arrived. Didn’t lose weight or gain muscle. My hair could take more hygiene,’ her lashes blinked at the sea, ‘-I met the people living after the mountain. The village leader’s a young chief, he allowed me into their circle, “-you’re different, the lady who came on the flying airship. The people of my village and the other villages kindly welcome you onto Marinda.”

‘Still have no idea why they’d allow a stranger. Made trades, got better clothes to fight the poisonous rain – weren’t that common. The monsters too, I rare crossed their paths – the pistols must have scared them for good,’ one leg off the cliff, ‘-where are you, master, I’ve been here for so long. I asked them to carry the word, if you’re out there, stop hiding already.’

Start at the beach, move into the jungle, cross the dangerous thicket, arrive at the alps, climb the traitorous heights and move into the middle region, here, the scale extends to months of travel by foot, no horse nor means of transport – brave the ever-changing nature of Marinda, face enemies of increasing strength until the center where rises a massive volcano from which spews orange and red. Gathered at its foot are towns, buildings made of better material, stone and the likes, better paths, and better lives, a place reserved for the infamous Celestials, the patriarchs who live and fly across Marinda on the floating isle. On their mercy, only then will the trip be assured; if not, forget going northwest, you’re dead. A trip made impossible arrives the virtuously massive capital-city of Nordway – a place of leisure and military prowess, a castle embedded in ice and frost, the pride of the Celestials – Einheim. Gods and demi-gods walk the halls, demon gods and demi-gods treads the same shared passageway.

Marinda, what is it, why is it, who is it, multiple questions and no answers? At the peak of the tallest tower of the castle where the ultimate truth of hierarchy exists, sits a foreigner, a stranger who without a moment's notice, landed on the island.

The tale of Marinda starts centuries ago, at a time of strife and uneasiness. Celestials, rulers of the land, grew impatient with the resident's progress. Harbingers of knowledge were scattered to the many tribes, some allowed the strangers, others killed and a few ignored. Those whomst embraced the knowledge attained weapons and moved into an age where magic, the power of the celestials, was bestowed upon their newborns. The lucky born to strong blessings of the elemental gods were taken from their parents and carried to the capital of Nordway. There a life of luxury awaited them; such the story spread amongst the people. In reality, the stronger one is, the more suffering awaits. Impatient demi-gods sought power, and what better way to harvests than to pick the fruit before tis ripe. The self-governed society had no leader nor enforcer, they did as they pleased and were chastised or praised accordingly. Factions formed and soon – laws of in-fighting disallowed interactions – thus, pointing the celestials outward at the residents of Marinda. They did as pleased, experiments, build instruments of destruction, easily skipped from the overworld, into heaven, the domain of Zeus, or the Aapith nation. There laid but one obstacle which disallowed the celestials from leaving, and tis – Cthulhu, the might of the sea deity was ravenous, and under its tentacles were the heads of foolish gods whomst tried to fight the indestructible. Norms formed and the celestials learned to keep to themselves and build a city for their own pleasures. What's Marinda's purpose? Many asked often, and the simple answer, “-a place of strength building,” for you see – the celestials weren't born gods or demons, they were offsprings of true gods who visited the world long ago. Factions formed families – and relatives of associate gods formed their own community, some lived in peace, others, weaker and tainted bloodlines, sent to the mining towns surrounding the volcano, a burning pillar of pure magical essence. Knowledge of the gods shared collective homes – and the result, a dystopian society, Celestials at the top and the Natives at the bottom.

Travelers stumbled upon Marinda since the dawn of sea travel. Most died, many lived to tell the tale of a land of mystic and godhood – by the grace of the guardians, they picked and chose who left and who didn't. Aidn of the Western Wind was part of the fortunate travelers, his advances and fight for survival had a positive effect on the guardians. Thus, he was allowed to live and tell the tale of the land of Marinda. Time passes to a couple of years ago, a mysterious man lands on the island with a beautiful maiden in his arms.

Villages shudder at the thought of a stranger. They stepped, refused to talk, however, the man's charm and allure brought curiosity of the innocent – the children snuck out of their homes and ran for the fields, to a little grotto he called home. There, they learned much about how to use their talents in summoning wind, fire, water, earth, and iron. Weeks passed, the cautious villages, amplified by reports from the guardians – carried to Nordway, there, the bloodline of Sen, God of Wildlife, volunteered to eradicate the pest who taught the natives how to use the granted elements.

'Marinda,' exhaled the young fellow waking from a very modern bed, innards of the grotto build into a comfy area, 'a good place to be,' he rose and moved to a coffin filled with ice, “-Loftha, dear Loftha,” he watched, “-I don't know what to do,” he chuckled, “-guess you don't know either,” he stepped out of the living area, a house built in the depths of the cave, passed naturally growing mushrooms and headed to the vibrant outside.

“Teacher,” exclaimed a little boy bearing features of a bunny, “-what are you going to teach today?”

“Hello,” he smiled, “-I don’t know,” he held his palm, elemental spirits darted, “-how about talking with the spirits?”

“Fairies?” panted another, she’d run from the house and held stains from jam.

“Yes, fairies,” he smiled, “-the forest guardians.”

Chapter 883: Faes

A radiant gleam lifted on the petite faces. The innocence of youth – deprived of the real world’s harm, affected by their own little world. Will to follow was their own, and on their own, the village children, after crossing fields of golden-yellow, skipped over a stream and entered the forest trail.

“Teacher, are the fairies real?” wondered the thinner lass bearing thickly bundled hair and jam prominent on her worn shirt. Freckles marked her cheeks, remnants of maladies laid on her neck downward, little spots of dark to light brown – present on her light complexion. She bore whiskers and no tail, her ears stuffed within the bundle, the rounded nose lifted at him curiously.

“Faes,” he moved and scanned the entourage, two of additional children arrived, siblings of the bunny-trait boy, “-are guardians of the forest,” he explained and gestured for siblings to approach. One bore spotted ears, after the stream, darted behind a tree and crouched. The other, older by appearance, pushed on his toes and stopped, a fatigue glance at the hidden fellow, he reached and pulled. “-We’re going to miss brother.”

Igna halted the explanation, “-Tim,” he said, “-go check on your brother and sister.”

“Why me,” the boy widened his mouth and shook the head, one foot behind the other, he spun and swayed to the noisy two. In the distance, cautious bunny-trait parents clenched their fingers in prayer.

“Tim, take your siblings and go home.”

“But master...”

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“No arguing,” narrowed a deepened tone, “-you won’t miss anything, I promise,” *snap,* a green butterfly fluttered to stand on Tim’s slumped shoulder, “-a guardian fae.”

“Awesome!” cheered the boy, the steps faded, “-come on you two,” he grabbed both hands and skipped over the pleasantly flowing water. Relieved sigh pressed the parents – the father knelt and deeply locked the youngers’ shoulder. The mother wrapped her arms around Tim and laughed, her sharp sense locked onto the butterfly, a quick pinch shattered the fae into green mist.

“Teacher,” eyed the eccentric girl, “-please tell me, what are faes?”

“Not going home?”

“No,” she averted his gaze, “-please, teach me about the faes.”

“Okay,” he exhaled, “-follow me,” hands in pocket, the forest trail deepened, and soon, the stream turned a mild background noise. A fork laid on a broad clearing – right side carried onto slopes until a windmill in the distance. The left side bravely inclined into dark and dangerous territory.

“Terisa, look here,” back against the fork, “-the forest around is alive. Fairies and spirits are not scary, they maintain the law and order of the plants and animals. I call them guardians,” the palm opened, “-with practice,” lines of differing hues trailed as if shooting stars around his hand, “-faes,” many manifested into small humanoid figures. Once in the mood, the explanation boarded into stories and easy-to-understand concepts, by way of listening to the faes, Terisa’s jaw dropped. ”

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“Faes!” she explained, an apparition of purple hue stood on her palm, “-I made one.”

“No, no,” he interjected, “-not made, it’s rude to her, she extended the hand of friendship. Talk to her as you would family, the more you learn, the stronger she will get – and the stronger she gets, the more protection you’ll have. It’s good to have allies, even if the allies aren’t blood-related family or friends. A fae will stay long as you believe in her,” a somber gray lined the sky, “-and faes,” the arms stretched, “-are friends to our world,” a beautiful display of sparks and trails dazzled her mind.

“Wow,” she blinked.

“Time to head home,” he said, “-don’t worry your parents.” Such were the days, weeks, and eventually months. Waking to a dead friend, stepping into a foreign land – expanding powers across the territory and learning the layout and history. Days before the blood moon, the village leader, in the company of an emissary from the celestial, stood in the village center beside a well and a kiosk. The timidly built houses arranged randomly – field workers and craftsmen stopped their jobs, the population of a few hundred bowed, none dared raise a glance at the celestial. Latter, clad in white and gold, shimmered under the increasingly somber weather.

“People of the village of Orn, I speak on behalf of the Sen Dynasty. The capital of Nordway is worried about a stranger who’s snuck onto our exalted eutopia. I carry with me,” he unrolled a scroll, “-a decree from the Celestials, and it reads, ‘-we have heard your plight, we’ve heard the intrusion of a stained beast amidst our ranks. No longer shall the suffering prolong, by the might of our blood, and under the blessing of Sen, God of Wildlife, we hereby pronounce the intruder an envoy of the devil. Evil incarnate, a macabre personage able to taint the mind of the youth. His teachings are not to be followed for they’re evil and pray upon the purity of the soul. Tim, chosen prodigy of Orn village, was badly injured and nearly killed. Justice will be served, innocent Tim will be avenged on a crimson night,’ thus the message,” said the envoy folding the scroll. The seeking dangerous regard scanned the bowed villagers. Sneer on the visage, a vortex summoned and vanished, the atmosphere lifted, loud breaths escaped.

“Osna,” cried an inhabitant, “-we told you not to let the children adventure near that grotto.”

“Little Tim’s wounded because of that sorcery,” the crowd beckoned for blood, the parents shed loud tears and grabbed each other.

“He’s better off dead,” said one.

“Let’s deal the justice before the celestial take the credit,” added another from a crowd of rogues – apparent from the dirtied clothes and inattention to the body odor. The cacophony crashed in waves, Osna barely held. Tiny feet scurried and leaped; “-Master isn’t evil!” screamed Terisa, “-he showed us how to use the faes and how to talk with them.”

“Isn’t she the devil spawn from that woman?” cried a lady amidst the screams.

“My mother isn’t a witch.”

Smack, Osna curtly back palmed the girl onto the floor, “-devil spawn, little rascal. You have no right to speak,” the hatred condensed around, older kids curled their fists, some grabbed stones, others reached for sticks.

“It’s your fault,” reddened eyes blasted through the crowd and grabbed the girl’s dirtied outfit, “-I should have stopped, he should have never met you,” her hand rose and snapped. The father rushed to stop the mother, “-stop,” he held her arms, “-she’s unconscious.”

“Osna, I said it before, throw her to the monsters of the night. She’s not welcomed here, her mother’s sickly, don’t think the witch can afford to please her celestial clients.”

“Take her away,” the gossip and abuse relentlessly flooded Terisa’s feeble mind.

“Father, let me take care of her,” interjected a youth, the son of the chief, Osna Jr, him and his group amassed stones and sticks. There laid ill-intent in his gaze, the other parents shrugged, “-fine, take her away.” The crowd dispersed – evening swam ashore, Terisa awoke on a bed inside a broken cabin, her outfit tore – the door barged open and Osna Jr’s lecherous mien stared her from top to bottom, the door locked and he slowly walked. Outside, the entourage of kids snickered and laughed – some peeped through the lock, others tiptoed over the window.

Her screams and fits rattled the very wall, Osna Jr ripped and tore, “-standstill,” he said and punched, “-let me have some fun like father,” he grinned.

“Let me GO!” she gritted, ‘-faes are friend, ask for help and they’ll come,’ she halted the struggle, the body relaxed, a bright light beamed from her chest, “-guardians of the forest, please help, I’m Terisa, student of the master.”

“What are you even saying?”

“FAIRIES!” bright lights dazzled the interior, fire spirits burnt her rope, earth elemental locked Osna Jr’s feet, wind spirits blasted through the door and send the perverted observant on their bottom. She sprinted through the night – hunters of the night rose by the call of hunger, “-master,” a sudden dash tore one of her legs clean, she fell and smacked her head. Swarm of monsters circled, a fight broke between hunters, flyers against runners, tension cackled under a thunderstorm. Smothered in mud and blood, Terisa, in her remaining seconds, said a prayer, ‘-to the true God, please, I want you to save my mother and my teacher.’ Blood lathered bushes and trail – the scent of blood by the cabin drew the night prowlers – demented humanoid outlines meandered.

Noise from weary villagers pushed the hunters, a blue flame deterred any predator, “-there they are,” said they with weapons, “-we found them by the cabin.’ No question’s asked, the troublemakers were hauled, “-Osna, look,” said one, “-Terisa’s unconscious without a leg.’

“Leave the devil’s spawn, she’ll serve well in death.” So it was, many knew what Osna wanted to do, and what he might have done, still, as it stood to be Terisa, none cared, nor dared to care. Pity was the few who saw the girl as a child, innocent and forced into an unjust fate. What could they do save spare a prayer in their hearts for her good faith in death? At the village, Osna took charge and led a few hunters to Terisa’s home, a shabby old house left to the elements by the river, it laid far and separated by a grove. In its prime, said home was considered to be peak of luxury – in the days when Terisa’s mother was well-loved and appreciated by her circle. By the poor blue flame, massive shadows cast into broken windows, withered garden, unsteady wooden beams, and the overall stench of decay and rot. How could one live in such environment, “-go in,” ordered Osna. Two hunters cautiously scaled the walkway to precarious steps on which laid the front door, a flash of the lanterns hailed, “-the door’s open.”

“Open?”

“Yeah.”

“Go in then,” shrugged Osna stood a fair distance away. The hunters gulped and carried inside. Floorboards creaked, they moved, the blueish orb guided each step, a table spawned in view – thunder crackled, lightning sparked the interior – toppled chair, recently used utensils, foraged fruits, and stale food on the table, each breath stung the lungs. Rain opened – the hauntingly slow drips fell all around, by will, they made for the bedroom, pushed the door to naught save a petite, well-kept room. The floor laid clean, the smell fragrance and the bed, recently used.

The hunters ran outside with hands over their head, “-she’s not here.”

“-and here I thought we could deliver the news. There’s no way she’ll live her state. Come along then,” they spun, “-good riddance,” echoed the following crowd.

Across the river and onto the dangerous trail, a lady ran at walking pace, her breathing gasped in chokes of red, the sleeping gown swallowed the rain and stuck to her naked body – frigid blasts forced her arms crossed. Complete darkness – lightning occasionally lit the area, a few struck nearby, the isle howled the tune of anarchy.

Her search ended, a grotto lit in the vague distance, she clambered into cover and turned for the inside, there, by aid of the rocks, forced her barefoot onto the sharp ground – pointy pebbles nicked her feet, yet, the soaked ‘witch’ carried herself to a house.

“Help,” she breathed, the voice barely reached, ‘-nausea,’ the expression widened into a hurl of red across the mushrooms, *click,* the door opened, “-who is it?” Nothing, a thud touched his ears, ‘-who is that?’ casually approached the near-death guest.

“Terisa,” a hand weakly grabbed his leg, “-help my daughter, y-y-you’re h-her t-teacher...”

“Help Terisa,” he knelt, held her arms, and stood, she difficultly followed, the soaked gown served no purpose in covering her body, she stood exposed, weakened, and on the verge of collapse, “-I beg of y-you. Help h-her...”

Blue lights bathed the distance wall, nonchalant steps approached “-we’ll kill him in his sleep and call it a day.”

“Or a night,” returned an unpleasant snort.

Chapter 884: Terisa and Laurine

Under the cold weeping night, Igna held his hand to the cave's opening – therein the intruders halted effortlessly. A pensive exhale escaped, he glanced at the fallen mother, her hair awry upon her shoulder, the face pale and with a pleading expression, her fragile fingers stained by mud and the vague spots of red at her feet.

"You don't have much time to live," he said, unaffected by the decrepit visitor. Her lungs wheezed, efforts to open her mouth stopped, words never left her tongue, the intent was there, yet, the physical state disallowed her triumph.

Under a lowered tone – mildly above a whisper, she rose a defeated look at Igna – the knees dropped harshly on the cave's rocky surface, "-save my daughter."

"The villagers are here, either she escaped or was somehow harmed. No matter the reason, they're here to kill, the blood lust is discreet but present. Tell me," he dropped to one knee and held her chin, "-you're not from this region, nor are you a native of this world. The energy within feels angelic, yet, there lays a sliver of darkness, the hubris of a demon. I don't imagine there's much strength left to tell a story. Here, mother of Terisa," he held out an open palm, an invitation, "-heed my words well," the voice echoed, "-my name's Igna Haggard, bearer of lord Death's will, Kronos's sickle, Nike's wings and inheritor of Origin's will, else titled the Devil. Look at me," he leaned forth, "-peer into my eyes and tell me, Mother of Terisa, will you make a deal with the devil?"

Her heart dropped, pain sparked from the feet to her back, the jolt had her squint and grin, "-deal?" she blinked cluelessly.

"Yes," he said, "-a deal. Tell me what thee wish, tell me thy darkest secret, allow my powers to be the sword who slashes indifferently at those who did thee wrong."

"I'm already dead," she said, "-take what you want," she gasped, "-destroy them, the celestials, make them suffer, make them pay for my suffering," she wept, "-save my daughter, she's the only one who justifies my existence. Please, Devil, help me get justice..." he held her head in his arm and ran his fingers through her head.

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"Thy request has been heard, I, on my name, vow to undo the wrong caused." *Blood-Arts: Crimson Treads,* black rods materialized out his fingers and snapped into the lady's head – memories known to her became his, and soon, on her breathing the last breath, was overwhelmed by satisfaction, joy, and pleasure. The last moments were the best she'd experience, and without regret – transferred through the gates of life and death. Her soul, an amber orb, shot up through the cave and joined the stars, after passing the somber cloud ceiling.

Snap, movement resumed, "-what do we do if he's awake?" said short whispers. Drops of the heavy rain echoed and amplified the more they walked. "If he's awake, we'll use this," the leader brandished an artifact, a strangely shaped object described as a miniaturized drawn bow and arrow. "-one shot and it's able to kill a celestial."

"Where did you get hold of such a thing?" the followers inquired in excitement and horror, the blueish lantern gave but a meter's sight.

"I stole it," said the man proudly, "-from the house of a celestial under the mountain."

"If they find out, you'll die man..."

"Who cares," he motioned to get down, "-there's someone ahead."

Indeed, there was, the greedy trio snuck into his territory. A short but loud clap rattled the area, orbs of white flickered, the cavernous inside overflowed in light. Igna leaned against a table on which rested the deceased 'witch'.

"Is she what you're looking for?" he asked nonchalantly, the hands at ease and posture open.

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"The witch," blinked one, "-Osna was right, she is here."

The leader took one step in and fired, "-and what if she is?"

"See," he pushed against the edge and skipped down a step, "-asking for names is tedious. There are times when I want to know the other person, and others, I rather avoid the whole thing altogether. Listen, trio of miscreants – the lady whomst thee so rudely referred as 'witch' is the mother of one of my students, her name's Laurine, and you'd best remember."

"It's forbidden to say her name," said a lesser intelligent companion, the leader, stark and annoyed, side-glanced harshly, "-shut it, Yoen."

"But he says..."

"Yoen, shut up," added the tranquil third one. Dressed in standard clothes under which lined a thin coat of chainmail, the trio was very much experienced in the ways of combat – such was told by the posture, of which was alert and cautious, and placement of their feet, a position of balance and strength.

"Yoen," said Igna, "-tell me, why are you here?"

"Don't answ-" a flick of the fingers sent one flying beyond the reach of the orbs.

"I will have no interjection," thundered Igna, "-Yoen, tell me, what happened, tell me everything," he held out his palm, *speak the truth, puppet to the world, puppet to the laws of nature,* sparks of purple snapped inside the man's head – consciousness left the pupils – he took a step and dropped in a respectful bow, "-we're here to kill you."

"What's the reason?"

"An emissary from the Celestial kingdom has decreed resident of the grotto to be a worshipper of the devil, or otherwise, the devil himself. The day of culling stands a few nights away, when the moon turns red, the hammer of justice will fall and worshiper will be executed under the authority of the Sen Dynasty."

Igna mockingly lifted an eyebrow at the frozen leader, "-see, he talks," said the regard.

“What happened to Terisa?”

“She jumped and tried to argue against the chief’s word. He then smacked her to her place. Young Tim was badly injured, so said the emissary. Tim’s the pride of our village, and he said if not for the sorcery the visitor taught, he’d be well. Tim’s parents lashed at Terisa; the mother nearly killed. By request of the chief’s son, he took her away. We soon found out they were gone – the villagers are headed to the log cabin; they must have arrived already.”

Woosh, projectile teleported into Igna’s inner barrier, there was no time to react, the symbols of power lit viciously – the cave exploded. In wake of the attack, the house laid somewhat damaged as for the cave, a massive hole peered into the outside, ‘it tore through...’ a snap of the wrist, earth elemental faes joined to cover the hole. Mist subsided, the attackers were bound by chains of ice, “-you surprised me,” he turned and cackled, “-it took half of my right shoulder,” he walked with body grievously injured, bones exposed and blood poured, the face remained unbothered, “-sweet, sweet nectar,” *Blood-Arts: Extria,* the crimson liquid sucked from the fellow deep into the cave’s lifeless body – it swirled shyly above Igna’s head, “-you attacked,” *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,* he flicked the pills of crystal into his mouth and chewed, “-and nearly killed me, I shudder the thought,” he posed sarcastically and snatched the artifact. A few glances and he crushed the item, ‘an improvement on scrolls, it carried a very dangerous spell. Judgment of Meia, the demon-goddess of Nala, sibling of Tharis. Guess tales about the Celestials being the later generations of gods is true. I wonder,” he casually held the two by the neck and lifted, “-might there be descendants from Kronos, Nike, and even Athena?” Tiny steps scurried across puddles and into the grotto, Igna, amplified by the orbs, cast a massive shadow on the house – on it was him crushing necks, the lifeless bodies fell and their blood gathered in a halo around his head.

“T-t-teacher?”

“Tania?” he glanced, “-why are you here?” before stood a sibling of Tim, the shy younger sister who hid every time she promenaded around the cave.

“Why are cousin Egor and Yoen on the floor?” she blinked, her flush cheeks and lowered ears projected fear in her eyes.

“Cousin Egor and Yoen tried to kill me,” he returned uncaringly, “-why are you here?” he stepped, she backed off, “-and where are your parents, it’s bad to leave a child out at this hour?”

“Teacher... you’re scaring me...”

“Don’t be,” the oppressive aura dropped, “-I was joking with you,” he smiled, Egor and Yoen rose in the background, “-I need food,” said the former, “-wait for me,” interjected the latter.

“See,” he smiled, “-they’re fine. What happened, tell me?”

At ease, her bunny ears straightened, “-it’s Terisa,” she said, “-I heard from the faes, they said she’s badly hurt. I told mother and father...”

“-and you ran here?”

“Yes, Terisa is a friend. We play in the fields, she even made me a toy... I love her, she’s funny.”

“Good job,” a snack materialized.

"I'm not hungry."

"Sorry, you made me think of my daughter," the snack changed into a figurine of a doll which wore a white, emotionless kabuki mask. It laid virtually as the meaning of creepy – young Tania's little hands reached to grasp the toy rapidly, her eyes lit.

'Terisa and Laurine,' the orbs shut, the cave darkened. Igna took Tania by the hand and strolled for the village, 'Laurine's memories are interesting. A girl born to the unruly union of a goddess and demon, she bears the blood of both kin, a rare feat. Her soul's split, one part's angelic, the other demonic. She once held a seat at the table of Marinda's elite, an offspring of the angel of beauty. The Celestials, enchanted by her wit and charm, must have fallen prey to the vixen. She's not so innocent, her climb to the top was made from intimate relations with key faction leaders, a steady climb, stepping over dignified bloodlines to reach her goal. Let's see,' the memories passed, 'got pregnant by a god, bore the child, and named her Terisa. After the birth, she was excommunicated from the capital under the pretense of sorcery. Magic's heavily regulated and the celestials hold the key to what is and can't be learned or performed. The fall from grace didn't look so bad, a lovely house was built in her honor – time passed, the people faded, her contacts disappeared, the anguish of ladies turned to torture, betrayed wives and their families chastised her deeply, sullied the reputation and cast a curse of malady on her person. Her punishment, defacement by the claws of beasts of the night,' armed by what she'd gone through and did, he arrived at the village where little Tania scurried for her house. Rain fell harshly, lights sparsely escape the houses, 'are they out?' he continued to the well, 'here's where she was slapped for trying to defend my reputation. She's a sweet little kid, someone responsible enough to take care of her ill mother,' twinkles in the night caught his attention, they pointed into the forest, 'and again, life isn't fair.'

He headed for the lights, 'my blood should be boiling by now,' he watched his fist clench and unclench, 'instead, I feel calm and collected. The attack earlier,' glance on the symbol, "still here, aren't you?"

"Worried I'll take control?" said a faceless black outline, "don't worry, my time has passed, I'm not selfish, we're one of the same."

"Say that it was you who saved me earlier..."

"Yes, it's me, and you shouldn't feel grateful for tis my job. Igna, I'm the past, I'm Staxius, I'm dead, what you hear is your own voice, your own consciousness, for I'm but the remnants of the death element."

"Don't forget about me," interjected another, "I'm the cursed king, and I will not rest, for I'll never live the day again where we're betrayed and blindsided."

"Remember," they whispered, "you're us, and we're you."

"Go away!" the outlines disappeared, he laid face to face at a battlefield, monsters ran circles around Terisa, 'death...'

Chapter 885: "The dice's been casts,"

Halo exploded in crimson darts, some of which split into thinly vibrating threads, an invisible cage of death mounted around the fallen girl. Flyers, such were the monsters, else referred to as hunters, were bee-like creatures mixed with longer limbs, pearlescent beads for eyes; claws-like hands, and bore tails

ending in a sharp spiral. Prowlers, the ground dwellers arrived in many shapes and sizes, predominantly humanoids as in they stood on two legs. Lower half-human, the upper half, not so much. Four, eight, sixteen, there laid no limits on the alterations of limbs the upper body had, mutations brought lower in additional pairs. More tangles one of prowler stood, the lesser was the mobility, however, the sheer strength behind sufficed to unroot a massive tree, breakthrough rock and devour their prey in single bites.

Flashes lit the entourage, Igna waved his fingers, the crimson darts, tiny at first, lunged into the cranium of the beasts, there, it expanded into spears and impaled any unfortunate attacker. Webs of crimson threads expanded and sliced obstacles nonchalantly. Flyers noticed the death and flapped in retreat – the beady stare locked onto an unknown outline. *Woosh,* they flapped, Igna simply gave a backhanded slap – the monster burst across the tree line and exploded in the far distance. Demeanor remained the same, unshaken cold look, intensely seeking pupils, and a carefree walk. On each step, footprints stamped on the muddied ground, from the slight difference, a dark aura rose – the intense feeling of dread and malice followed his shadow – a skull symbolizing death rode upon the shoulders.

‘Problem with the hunters of the night,’ he stood a few feet from a red wireframe around young Terisa, “-vile demons, rejects from the Aapith nation, the amalgamation of the world’s hate and ill-intent, the stain over mankind, trash, you reside here, in a place where heaven and hell merge, a place where Orin (dimension’s name) joins the multi-verse. The spine holding our world safe from other worlds,” he settled, a massive pentagram rose into the heavy storm. Dark, demonic, and terrifying, the night’s marred skyscape hid the intensity of the magic circle – lightning cackled to briefly flash the complex structure, “-your tenacity and attraction to death and destruction. True demons are attracted by the smell of a person’s darkest desire. Everyone rejects thy kind, pseudo-demon, they reject for thee have no intelligence, no sense of self, a free, untamed spirit. Time has passed, mutations too advanced, the curse solid,” he waved, a vortex open and spewed godlike grimoires, capsule of power and translations of the ancient tongue left to right, four hovered – first, the book of Ashen, bound by a gray metallic cover. Second, the grimoire of Fnex, bound by a brownish orange, clockwork-styled cover. Third, an ominous stack of parchments bound by a ring, named, Vyein’s sacrament, and lastly, jet-black hard-cover plastered with symbols and reference to the olden tongue, a grimoire Igna compiled – the book of the cursed King, Alfred.

Placed in a kite-shaped, each bore one of the four cardinal points, the book of Ashen opened, a beam of golden white shot upwards and crashed against the magical circle – the sudden impact fired pulses across the land, the rain momentarily paused and resumed in a harsher and stronger downfall. The grimoire of Fnex flipped through its pages and conjured lesser magical circles around the area, by lesser – it referred to the size, not to potency, for every one of those circles held enough mana to run a car for a week straight. Vyein’s sacrament, Igna reached, picked a parchment from the ring, dematerialized the collection, and flew it towards Terisa, on touching the cage, the page filled the wireframe into a box.

The air changed, a greater presence rode amidst the sky; a floating castle at the helm, a well-dressed Victorian lady holding a fan above her mouth, “-explain, how is it there such an influx?”

“I have no idea, my lady,” replied one behind the wooden helm, “-the gauge’s gone crazy.”

“And you thought I’d be interested in such useless malfunctions?” she peered outward, “-dear me, I sure hope our emissary delivered the message safely.”

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"My lady," came across the station, "-due left, there's a whirlpool of dense mana. Left unchecked – the energy may lay siege unforeseen damage upon the land."

On the ground, Igna waited patiently, on summoning the grimoires, a few seconds passed before the ship beckoned the expanded barrier, '-flyers, prowlers, hunters of the night,' the summoned parchment lured the beast akin to moths to flames, '-same as the Celestials,' Laurine's memory played, "-everything's attracted to mana, and when mana becomes unsteady and painful for the land, painful for the organisms, and painful for the person – there is where the lure lays," a cloud broke through the barrier and rushed towards the magical circle. "-Come, harbingers of death, come, my fellow death reapers, come, those who wished death upon me," he laughed, "-watch, pseudo-demons for tis," he lifted a hand to the sky, "-is how you bring down a celestial!" the tone deepened, the arm fell, a tremendous blast of magic slammed heaven onto earth leaving nothing in its wake. Forest and landscape razed, the ground shook, the volcano reacted and growled – a crater of a few hundreds of meters slowly filled. Smoke and destruction invaded the nearby forest – wind carried some of the fog away from the mountain. The dust settled, rain wailed – Igna stood nonchalantly, the blast which eradicated most of the land around didn't once bother his stance, a vague trail at his back remained untouched as did the box containing Terisa.

Foundations of a caste remained stern, despite the damage caused to the land, the castle, infrastructure holding the travelers of the floating isle, sustained but a few nicks and cracks. Outside looked normal, inside, another story read aloud – tables, shelves, furniture, couch, essentials for a luxurious life toppled; precious works of art, artifacts unique to the various bloodlines – and most importantly, the Celestial.

"My lady, are you safe?" coughed an attendant through fogs of broken shards.

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"I'm fine," she pushed aside a fallen desk and stood, "-what of the others?" she inquired.

"No idea, ma'am," replied the attendant rummaging across the debris, "-there you are," she breathed a relieved sigh, "-your lord father would have been angered if my lady was to be injured."

"Don't play gallant butler now," she scoffed, "-what happened?"

"We were taken from the sky," said the helmsman, "-we're w-were brought d-d-down," there laid complete shock and fear in the stumbling words, "-c-c-celestials d-don't e-even wield such p-power," he panicked, "-someone able to bring down a guardian castle lives among us," he shook, the teeth gnarled, "-help us, mighty gods from the heaven... help us!" he pressed his hands in prayer, a nearby crewman rushed to the frightened bloke, "-get yourself together," he slapped the man's cheek, "-We must save the cargo."

A flicker of bright lights illuminated the nearby crater, spotters scouted the area, "-lady Elliana, we must vacate the premises."

"Jae," she dusted her dress and looked to the front, "-vacating the premises doesn't look plausible..." spotlights locked onto a simple figure, an outline of a strange man leaned against a tree. Chaos brought

by the downfall summoned stronger and scarier creatures of the night, howls sliced through the rain's woeful melody, the wind's waltz cut short by stronger flaps of airborne reptilians.

"-Look at him," she said, "-he's cutting down the demons effortlessly... we travel by air to avoid those vile creatures... look at him, there's no sense of bother or trouble about his movement..."

A disgruntled figure slammed inside the flight deck, "-lady Elliana," blood contoured the emissary's visage, "-might I know our current situation? My presence is required at the capital, we must prepare for the blood moon and rid the isle from the devil."

"Tough luck," she said, "-seems to me the devil's found us."

Indeed he had, a simple side-glance at Terisa said all, '-she's dead, killed by baboons,' *thud,* a reckoning boomed, '-the death element,' he blinked, '-it's here, I've confirmed it. The element can be reactivated by consuming the soul of the dead. I began to offer contracts to people, asking them to sell their soul to the devil – it was subconscious and seemed to project a stern enough image,' he simply laughed, '-fate's a strange 'ol thing. Seems a waste – once I eat a soul, there's no telling where the latter is sent. I can already feel Undrar's disappointment, complications I'd rather not get involved. Souls can replenish the element, let's leave it at that,' he jumped, '-Laurine forged a pact, and I consumed her soul to feed my element. It feels good,' the single thud gave a sensation of completeness, '-duty calls,' he walked.

"Stranger, take more steps and we'll be forced to employ lethal force," said floating pupils.

"Tell your leader," he gripped one of the familiars and peered, "-the devil's come to visit," a simple clench, and the latter died.

Elliana watched from a castle tower; able guards took their weapons and rallied behind her butler, Jae looked at her lady and smiled gracefully.

"What's with him?"

"Lord Leo, I wouldn't be worried. My guard detail is noted members serving distinct bloodline and so, they're some of the best fighters throughout the land."

"Lady Elliana, the only reason I accepted the Azian familia's offer for an escort was partly on the military strength the family wields. Pray tell, who is Jae, and what bloodline does he belong to?"

"Jae's a descendent of not a god, but a demon, the ruler of demons – the charming Lucifer – patron god of the Wracia Empire. I can attest as a member of the Azian bloodline, he's strong, very strong."

"My offer stands as long as the devil is captured alive. The Sen dynasty will fulfill their promise, such is my duty as liaison."

A cold untamed aura settled upon the crater, dirt turned to mud, water gathered in puddles – the air felt harsh on the lung, a band of dozen guards marched against a single man. Leading the former, Jae, a fighter dressed in white and black, no armor, he held a sword at his hip, one golden and bejeweled and a pair of wings clipped against the breast pocket.

"Devil's come to visit?" he uttered at a hearing distance; "-you have a great sense of humor."

"Forgive me, taking credit for another's deed isn't very gentlemanly. The title of the devil was bestowed on me by the Sen dynasty if I remember correctly."

"A fellow gentleman," he gave a curt bow, "-a pleasure to make thy acquaintance, I go by the humble name of Jae."

"-Igna," he returned.

"Igna, might you answer a few questions?"

"Go on ahead," the exchange felt steady and calm – no sign of aggression. Observers; Lady Elliana and lord Leo exchanged thoughts to the civilized discussion. "-I'm impressed," commented the lady, "-many take Jae's mannerism with a grain of salt. Truly, the man he faces is cultured, someone brought by the way of royalty known to this world."

"Were you responsible for bringing down the castle?"

"Will my answer solicit my drawing a weapon or?"

"Astute," narrowed the blond-haired fellow, "-lest it proves necessary."

Igna observed, '-he's strong and confident,' a glance at the guards, "-I'm responsible, and for a simple reason. My student was killed in cold blood and her mother pleaded for her life. I'd have remained silent and carried on living on the isle, content in watching the very evolved way of magic. Events leading to her death stems from the message read aloud at the village. Lies spoke to sully my image. I'd have let the matter go, however," he exhaled, "-Laurine asked me to enact vengeance upon the Celestial. Little Terisa jumped to safeguard my image. What's done is done, the dice's been casts. Jae, you and I know the events will end in either one of us's surrender or death. I hereby offer a hand in respect for thy courteousness, give me the emissary, and the Sen Dynasty – there, I promise to leave you and your master alone."

Chapter 886: Culmination of three lifetimes.

"What if I asked the same of you. For the well-ordered mannerism; how about you leave the emissary alone and I promise to not harm."

"No understanding," he breathed a silent gasp, hands slowly muddled into the slightly damp pockets, "-if tis a battle you wish, tis a battle you'll get."

"Oh, I definitely want a battle," the solemnly kind expression faded – Jae pulled on his sword and fixed the blade in Igna's direction, "-go on guards," he said, "-face the man for glory!" the ground shook, a multiple of spells conjured – various projectiles flung and in said projectiles laid full-on men wielder of body enhancement magic and their potent blood. No escape, the swarm wrapped around, an aerial punch grazed his cheek, '-fast and strong,' went across the mind, a kick snapped at the side of his knee, an orb of crystal hovered from which darts fired. *Martial-Arts – Full body counter,* the form eased, the limbs relaxed – the palms flowed, he grabbed the first who'd thrown an aerial punch by the arm, turned and threw him on three others. The darts teleported to inches from his chest – the symbol toggled and a magical circle hovered in-between body and weapon, '-always watching,' he grinned and skipped over a combo, threw elbows to backs of the heads, '-they don't seem to want blood,' he spun and knocked another few off their feet. Those wielding weapons were few, three in total, a mace and shield, a spear,

and a bow. An exalted vibrance about the objects felt reminiscent, ‘-artifact,’ he blinked and squinted, ‘-getting hit won’t be pretty,’ symbols of power separated, a pair of wings crawled through the arm and onto the forehead, where the tips of the wings touched his eyebrows and spread erratically around his cheeks and contours. ‘-Knocking them down won’t suffice,’ he glanced again, the fallen were on their feet in motions for another attack, ‘-the uncaring visage... they’re not warmed up,’ he clenched, a punch squarely took his stomach, “-Damn,” escaped for he didn’t budge. ‘-Too much of a novice to the full extent the ability of martial combat,’ two steps backward created distance – there, he looked upon the slowly amped faces.

“What’s with those guards?” inquired Leo.

“They’re battle-hardened fighters, it takes a while for the blood to get pumping. Once they reach a certain level of motion, there won’t be dodging or blocking the attacks. We live for a prolonged battle, besides,” she smiled, “-by ranking of entities, we stand above mortals, therefore, we can’t be hurt by dwellers of the mortal world. Tis same to facing a god or angel, the more one resist the worst it gets.”

“Igna,” fired across the field, “-are you willing to take us on or is it enough?”

“Don’t count me out of the picture yet,” he laughed, “-else you’ll regret angering me,” the sunken look of fatigue crashed upon Jae with a glimpse of the monster hidden beneath. ‘-I rose my guard,’ he gulped, ‘-I rose my guard from a single stare... what is he hiding?’

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Regard thrust upon Igna’s empty palm, ‘-allow us to help,’ said two distant whispers, ‘-look deep within, look for the knowledge we left, look at the abilities you learned in thy other life-times. Don’t underestimate the arts unique to thine soul, there is no better way to unleash what’s been kept under wraps for so long. Call out to her, she waits, the guardian deity watches, ask her help in prayer – she died for us, protecting a being not worthy of being alive. Come on, rise.’

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‘-Don’t look at the ground, a king must stare the foe right in its face. Don’t repeat my mistake, you’ve learned much and adapted to more. Tis time, Wielder of Death Magic, show the world, show the multiverse, show the damned fuckers in heaven and hell who we are.’

Time slowed, the rain halted, ‘-time’s nigh,’ Igna rose his head, ‘-our legacy stands on a foundation of blood and destruction. I have power now,’ the lines contouring his face lit vibrantly, ‘-the power to draw in strength from what Staxius achieved,’ he pressed his arms in prayer, ‘-the true meaning of power is the ability to let go,’ he smirked, a darker, more ominous presence loomed.

O’ goddess forgotten by the ages, o’ goddess who spread victory and peace over the souls of true warriors. I, humble vessel for thy Symbol, plea to have a sliver of thy strength, the blessing’s hue tore through the shadows and rain. Ancient writings burnt off his skin, the ink-ridden skin cleared, “-book of Alfred,” the grimoire sparked into reality, “-Ex, Eoe, Eon, Looh,” symbols fluttered from the book and stuck onto a dully-colored sheath. Power coursed through his veins, the blessing of Nike kept a warmth to his chest, a safeguard from the deeper anger hidden beneath. Igna’s expression changed, there no longer laid a bicolored, somewhat human light in his eyes – it changed, red against purple, crimson against pure taint; horns rose from the forehead, a tail dropped from his back, the nails

sharpened as did the canines, the hair, white and red, washed into a purple ending in white – crystal clear iris rose onto the adversaries.

“I’m sorry for the wait,” he whispered, “-I’m here,” he teleported at first glance, remnants of footprints refuted the assumption. A screeching howl blasted and stopped shy of Jae’s neck, “-look what you made me do,” he snickered, “-the death of talented guards,” the masses fell beheaded, *Soul-Absorption,* a skull bit from the heavens and swallowed the departed.

“Get away from him!” the top of the castle cracked, an arrow of which was the lady, landed in-between the duo with her fan pointed at Igna’s neck, “-one more step and I’ll end your life.”

“My lady,” leaned and whispered, “-look into my eyes,” he charmingly caught her attention, “-fall prey to thy deeper whims,” her wrist relaxed and ultimately lost grip of the fan, her knees buckled, Jae subconsciously tried to soften her fall, they blinked, before the fan landed, Igna held the emissary under his foot, *I am he who slays without fear, I am he who shall be the last of what thee see. Heed mine call, thou whomst dared to fight the natural order, tis the day thou ought to be destroyed, Ancient Magic – Astral Binding,* cross made of golden, yellow, and a line of electricity through the core impaled the ground and gathered the trio into a cage. “Astral binding, a very effective spell on celestial beings. Look here,” he glared at the lady, “-I don’t much care if thee lives or not,” the glance locked upon Lord Leo, “-far as I’m concerned, thou art but messengers. Shooting the messenger does not aid in war,” he knelt and moved his hauntingly terrifying hands across the cage and onto his neck, “-tell me where the Sen Dynasty resides.”

“I w-won-”

“No choice in the matter,” lines of white impaled Leo’s cranium, “-got the information I need,” he stood and glanced the forest; trees and nature, reliant on mana to survive began to wither, disregard for the sanctity of what laid around, he grabbed the cage, *Ancient-Magic: Teleportation,* and soon laid before on a balcony to a manor within the capital-city. The landscape was jaw-dropping, a direct view onto the fortress castle of ice, frost-pillars and the colossal mountain in its immediate background, day rose in the distance, he walked through the arch-doorway and entered the manor – inattentive servants peered curiously at the strange apparition, “-you’re no-” he flicked, a crimson arrow killed instantly. He belligerently cut across the corridors and made for the main hall, a massive bolted door slammed by a single kick, Leo flung onto the carpet, bloodied and near death, Jae and his lady drifted through a dimension where nothing existed.

“Leo,” exhaled an older man, “-by the lord’s word, what’s happened to you?”

“Master,” he gasped, “-run...”

“Run, me?” he looked at the intruder, “-you, who are you, what family do you belong to?”

“My name isn’t important, carry the terror and fear I shall bring upon thine family to death,” a burst of Staxius’s aura filled the hall and infected the entire manor, “-Sen Dynasty, they whomst dared decree me to death will fall.”

“GUARDS!”

"Don't bother," soon as the side-doors opened, a flick killed gruesomely, the blood swirled into the ceiling where a web of ancient writings wrote. *See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awoken for I order so; Eye of Truth.* for once, the granted sight didn't pain the head nor the body, he looked about, reality dissolved and reformed into lines and threads only he could understand, "-there they are," he locked onto bedrooms, inns across the capital, and through dimensions, *ravel for I've come,* he smirked, and clenched, members of the Sen Dynasty pulled from where they sat or waited. Gathered under a pentagram, Igna kept a cold expression, the purple side burnt deeply to the heavens, *Hand of the Lamented, I bring upon the earth the powers of the shunned child, watch me, the heavens and cower for I, Alfred, have reawakened. Watch as tis my forthcoming, my return, and my message to those who dare stand against me ever again, I will find you,* the hand-stretched across dimension, cut across universes and reached the realm of Sen, where the god watched a field of wheat peacefully, "-let it be known," the fingers wrapped around his feet and pulled, forcibly dethroning a god, *smack,* the magnanimous entity fell upon the mortal realm without a defined shape.

"My children," he echoed – the symbol above churned.

"Watch," thundered Igna, "-as death takes away what was once precious to thee," the hammer slammed and the pentagram dropped and took everyone present's life.

"Who are you," said the shapeless form.

"My name's Stax- no. My name's Igna Haggard, reincarnation of Staxius Haggard and the Cursed King Alfred. Heed my word, Sen, God of Harvest, for tis a message to the heavens. Oppose me once again, and I shall end everything they hold dear."

"You brought me from my realm. What is the reason, Igna, speak for I must return to my world."

"The reason is simple, bestow on me a ring which symbolizes my rightful claim over the Sen Dynasty."

"By words passed in the ancient text. Thou art the victor, hence," a ring summoned from the glowing cloud, "-I grant thee the symbol of my familia, the luck of harvest. Do with it as thee wish, my domain waits."

Igna nodded and clapped, the hand unclenched – God Sen was pulled back into his elated realm where he rests peacefully unaffected by the churning of destiny and fate. *Snap,* the cage materialized and shattered. Lady Elliana and Jae dropped with petrified expressions. Sun rose in the distant east, Igna breathed a relieved exhale, the transformation split into two entity whomst left and stared facelessly, "-see," said the darker one, "-wasn't hard, was it?"

"Allowing us to help is fun," added another more devilish featured purple outline, "-when the time calls, we'll be there to help. Carry our name and strength with pride, Igna – we'll meet soon, very soon," the entities walked into him and vanished. Lines of sheer power across the forehead eased, "-carry my blessing in stride, Igna, for we always watch upon thee, Origin, Death, Time and I, we watch and smile, I know you saw, on unraveling the world, you saw the unseen truth, the real truth." Another ring joined the collections, he dropped by some stairs and breathed, '-scary, my powers are frightening. Alfred and Staxius, my previous selves were power-hungry, and thanks to them, I was able to pull a god from his throne and take the symbol of power. I've yet to answer Laurine's wish. I took the first step – I've taken

over a dynasty. Next, the throne, the place of a true ruler, from there, I'll turn Marinda into an isle suited to rival the Empire,' breeze carried cold air, refreshment washed across his face, '-here I come.'

Chapter 887: Divide and conquer

The defeat of the Sen Dynasty, rumors of the battle, snippets of the truth, and at the center, the man who defeated a god, wiped a whole family, and usurped the family's throne. Such was the news prominent across the capital. More than shock came doubt, the Sen Dynasty were not known for their prowess in battle. Heads of families shortly gathered at the castle for the celebration of new celestial birth. A nice story, a nice cover. The Azian family's loss of a floating castle added credibility.

The following week after said banquet, where none knew how to act, play, or show their cards. Igna took a nice stroll down south, away from the manor he won. The riverbanks shrieked and overflowed by heavy rainfall. Muddied trail rummaged through forest, crossed meadows, skipped grottos, and climbed hills to reach a familiar yet unknown sight. The house, Laurine's home, stood a little late for its age. More than nature, the work of man had destroyed foundations, stolen material, shattered windows, and stolen precious bricks. A shell of its former glory, the river spilled into the front yard. Igna watched and breathed, hands in his pocket, he stared left to right, scanned up and down, then moved inside. Transformation and exertion of the full strength left marks in purple strain running down the right side – a reflection of the mess laid against his glasses. He watched where laid the last meal Terisa had. Passed the living room, shuffled to the sleeping quarter, and there, under the quietness of dawn, the ajar window waved. '-Clean room,' he threw a smile and rubbed his palms, opened the closet, reached deep inside and pulled a hidden lever. There, a hidden compartment flung by the flick of spring – a leather-covered diary laid unbothered by the contempt of rain against the paper. He knowingly placed the object into the inner blazer pocket and left. The nonchalant gaze locked onto Orn village's vague direction, the chin trailed right towards the grotto. Alone with his thoughts, he walked – spirits, fearful of the previous show of strength – after much hide and seek, left the shadows and gathered along his shoulder onto the arms and hovered above the head in a halo. If one would look closer, the tiny spirits forming the halo locked arms and danced cheerfully. The unpleasant scent of Alfred and Staxius faded, unpleasant as in strong, horrifying, and stomach-churning.

'The land of Marinda,' he wondered, '-sure made a big entrance. After éclair and Yui's ultimatum, I could but send Vanesa to the shadow realm and randomly teleport Loftha and I. I wonder how long it's been. The attack on the empire hailing from the sea – valkyries and the guardian of Glenda, a Dullahan, were from here, the isle of the mystic. Pulsing the areas revealed many hidden passages, the place is random and unresponsive to normalcy. Magic's outlawed, or so they say not to harm the isle. They want fear sowed, a good strategy for technologically lacking inhabitants. Celestial and populous, a massive wall of difference raises before both. One side lives in luxury on floating castles made for destruction and the other strives to make ends meet,' the peerless grotto waved per cast shadow of the foliage's rustle. The bodies of the attacker were left untouched – one thrown across had his skull cracked on impact. The remainder, dead on the little girl's arrival, projected the image of being alive from Igna's ability to control the dead, the zombified hallowed expression motioned to the house. Eventually, on mana exhaustion, they draped the stairs. Igna's steps soon clopped and waited at the middle, there, he pushed one of the bodies and it toppled – the reek of rot fumed the air. In the near distance, mushrooms took a more avant-garde appearance, they looked menacing and potentially deadly, '-taint of the cursed,' he spotted a faint trail of black sneaking its way hither to said mushrooms.

Inside, by a wave of the fingers, Loftha's gallantly arranged casque sunk into a pool of black. Essentials followed, and before much longer, as the orangish ray glazed the inky-black forest – the walk brought Igna to the village. People went about their day, some ran for the fields, others made trades to a passing voyager of other villages, none spoke about the incident, and the lecherous Osna Jr, sat at the well, teased little Tania, “-your brother is dead, he was weak. Call the master,” he laughed, the villagers but threw jaded sneers. On brink of tear, Tania pressed her hands, the boys maliciously poke sticks at her arms and leg. “-Going to cry?” inferred the teenager, “-go on, cry so the well fills up,” the gang exploded in laughter.

‘Faint and audible,’ smiled Igna with arms crossed, ‘-looks like Tim taught his siblings the basics of magic. Summoning a spirit takes more than will,’ he judged, ‘-but it’ll do,’ a faintly lit sparkle, broken and injured – guardian of Terisa, shakily made its way to protect the little girl. He rose a finger, an army of spirits rushed her side and lit her body in vivid glow – the sticks burnt, a handmade of water reached from the well and pulled the boy – a loud splash pulled the focus of the bystanders.

“Tania, what are you doing!” cried a strict voice from behind the trader’s cart. Crimson pupils under pure-white fur ran for her child with intent to slap, “-no more witchcraft!” she rose an arm, the little girl cowered reflexively, *smack,* a wall built between mother and child. Igna ambled into frame, the drenched Osna Jr clambered from the well and gasped.

“Don’t raise a hand on an innocent child,” he thundered, “-where’s the bravado when the boys were teasing. Where’s the vigor in slapping another mother’s child?”

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The crowd split, many watched in fear and hate, “-the devil,” gasped the mother, whilst little Tania’s eyes sparkled. Terisa’s spirit, healed and strong, marked itself on her arms as a butterfly.

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“What are you doing here?”

“Where’s the anger?” he asked and held a hand to the little girl, “-how can you so nonchalantly scream at her faults.”

“You,” cried the father, “-you nearly destroyed the whole village – there’s a massive crater and the forest’s in pain, is that what is considered noble... the Sen Dynasty will co-.”

“You mean this?” he flashed the ring and held the decree, “-look at me straight,” he thundered, the chief sprinted, “-my name’s Igna Haggard, and I’m the devil,” a thud showed outlines of his devilish trait, “-my actions are grounded in what I believe to be right. I choose the path of nonviolence, free to live the nomadic way. Alas, the stupidity of your kind, to which I pity for thy brothers and sisters, inhabitants of Arda, are some of the best, smart, and cordial people I’ve met. Expectation and reality, I’m disappointed,” he tore the scroll, “-as my title dictate, I’m the holder of the Sen Dynasty’s authority.”

“Celestial...” the crowds murmured, unbiased listeners bowed, many stood in confusion and others outright defiant.

“Chief of Orn Village.”

"Here," hailed the exhausted man, "-how might I help?"

He looked around and breathed in the village's sorry state, "-bring Osna Jr and his band before me."

"Might I as-"

"Speak when spoken too," returned Igna coldly.

The angered young man walked at him and rose a confident leer, "-lower your head boy," a sudden drop forced him onto the cold floor, "-your father failed, thee must have a lesson in humility," he looked at Tania and patted her head, "-as nature dictate, strong are the winners and weak are the losers. Tania, for the harm this fellow's cause don you and your siblings, for the pain he caused your friend, for the injustice the villagers thrust upon Terisa, the friend you remembered so well, and her mother, a lady unable to move by malice, will you fight and prove your worth." Most of it went in one ear and out the other, she looked to him and tilted her head. A relaxed smile escaped his regard, he knelt on one knee and opened his palm, "-after you asked me for help, I know your parents beat and said mean things. They're afraid, trust me, your mother's acting hard to please the village chief. Beat Osna Jr and I promise, they'll stop being hard."

"Will father and mother like me again?" she fluttered.

"Yes they will," he reassured. Her petite hands took his, and there, the butterfly on her arm lit, "-go and show them what Tim and Terisa loved to learn, show them your magic, show them the spirit's love."

Worried villagers approached, "-lord Celestial, isn't it unfair to send the little girl in battle against a monster?"

"Osna's no prodigy," returned Igna, the crowd gave space for the battle, "-today's the day where the strong become the weak." Opposite them, Osna handed a short-sword to his boy, "-kill her, and spare no pity. I'll have the parents exiled."

"Understood, father," he grabbed the handle and rushed.

'Teacher said fight,' she stood with her stained dress and blinked, the boy was twice her size. Rather than look her opponent, she pressed her hands and prayed, "-please, spirits of the forest, I need help," the butterfly burnt, dark-blue fume climbed her arms and latched on her back, there -a pair of butterfly wings expanded, it flapped and threw the boy off his feet. Nearby spirits rushed, a small book rose above her hand – the pages flipped through strange words and lines, her body knew exactly how to move. Osna jr rose on his feet and ran, she tapped a page and projectile flung at his face, elemental spirits restrained the movement. 'She's gifted,' he smiled, '-I knew it. She has a strong affinity for the spiritual world. Terisa imparted her talents, the last prayer before she died.'

Annoyed by the defeat, Osna Jr looked at his father, he nodded, the boy smirked and pressed the pommel in Tania's direction, a torrent of pure magma spurted, "-idiot," he leaped into the line of sight, held out a finger at the liquid and blew, the fire froze, there, he flicked and shattered the spell, "-are you stupid?" *snap,* Osna's bone shattered, "-don't test me."

The shattered parts floated, "-Hear me, people of Orn, Tania defeated the chief's son, the next heir of the village. In my name, I order Osna, his followers, and his son, to be exiled to the north. Thou art to

make a pilgrimage to the temple of Sen, there, on arrival, will thee be granted the right of a safe passage,” else a death sentence.

An hour later, Igna watched as the followers headed deeper into the forest, he spun towards the village.

“Father, are we going to die?”

“No, junior, I have a plan,” he rubbed his hands together “-we’ll circle and attack the village. If I can’t rule, what’s the point in allowing them to live,” at the head of the pack, confidence gave swagger to the body language. He looked behind, half of the team was dead – bushes rumbled, humanoid creatures took heads viciously, haunting screams drowned, the forest devoured.

‘See you in hell,’ back against the massacre, Igna soon arrived at the village center. There, those open to the idea of a new leadership waited cordially.

“To you who decided to stay, I welcome thee to the village of Orn. Elect a new leader and use these,” he conjured a plethora of building supplies, “-to reinforce the homes, make a barrier and overall, create a better life. Future is in thy hand,” he looked at Tania and her parents, “-in exchange, I’ll formally take Tania as my apprentice. The capital isn’t a eutopia – celestial abuse and torture. Orn and his followers were part of a secret group to keep the order. From today onward, the village of Orn will be under my protection. Prosper and spread the word. Tania will be the sword who cuts the celestials from their palace, that, I swear on my name. They will pay for the death of my students.”

Chapter 888: Empty Fortress.

Bells rang loud, clamor rushed amidst the coliseum. Celestial’s peered from their elated seats, talking and laughing about the amusing stand-off. One side held a child, a girl, the other, a knight of the realm who drew his sword against a short but sparkly figure. Her eyes burnt a reminiscent flame, one unshaken by size or strength, one at the ready to defeat. Two gongs marked the start, before their eyes, the little lady transferred into a fairy princess, guardian of the forest and wildlife. Sat at her back loomed a sanguine sneer, one dark, cold, and joyful. He looked on, dressed in peculiar clothes; a military-style uniform – Claireville Academy’s suit, first outfit that ever gave a sense of authority and a place of belonging. He watched confidently through a rounded glass. Seats immediate his were empty – attendants knowingly avoided his gaze – fear, envy, jealousy, hate – the mixture ranged.

Three gongs echoed; the chevalier laid defeated at the hand of a purple hue. Tania, princess of the faes, gave a lady-like curtsy to the crowd, her stare infuriatingly looked upon the stronger familia, then turned to the ominous aura, she smiled and struck a cheerful pose with her fingers in a V-shape. He returned with an acknowledging bow of the head.

“He did it again,” muffled greater figures, “-how is it possible?” they whispered. Intrigue and incertitude thickened, deceitful clouds rode over their heads, “-it’s the one backing her,” they concluded – helpers rushed the field to assist the fallen celestial, “-take him out and the balance won’t be troubled.”

Ill-intent washed through the helmed chevalier for he flung a dagger at the lass’s back. Less than a second, Igna stood, wind from the displacement carried the dust, the blade laid in-between his fingers, “-hear me, Celestials,” said a conniving laugh, “-there is no way any of you have the strength to defeat my student,” the blade shattered, “-and you,” he locked onto the man and snapped, “-I shan’t stand for cowards,” the heart imploded and he dropped, “-may this be a warning, no matter the champion, hero,

or god. Paint me as your greatest enemy. Raise a finger at her," he turned, a wall of blaring flames curved to cover the arena, "-I swear, a more painful death will await thee."

The eruption dropped and left no trail of the intruders, "-we must do something about him," urged spectators held at the highest seat, "-else they may think us jokes."

"Don't fall for the bait," said a wiser voice, "-he's inviting us to battle on his term. We rather wait and see how the situation unfolds," Thus ended the sixth match of the Haggard dynasty, placed a few months after the events of Orn village.

"Xinfe, Danio, Lombart, and Lixbin," paused Igna at the manor, '-four dynasties I must defeat for Laurine's contract. Xinfe, God of Wind, Danio, God of the Fallen age, Lombart, God of Mischief and brother to Lixbin, lastly Lixbin, the God of Darkness. Lixbin's faction is strong, very strong. The others are a mystery to me,' he sat in the middle of a fish pond in a cozy kiosk, surrounded by trees, lovely flowers, and nicely placed rocks. After a lovely crimson bridge laid an out of theme training area. The equipment, layout, and lifeless combat dolls, if given a monetary value, would rival the price of multiple houses in a good neighborhood. Said price was not accounting for Igna's enchantment over the area, parchments - words of power, symbols comparable to weapons of mass destruction.

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Whoosh, a misfired spell flung short of his nose, "-easy," he yelled, "-nearly took out one of my eyes," he jokingly said.

"Sorry," she returned, "-next time I'll aim for the eyes."

"Good girl," they chuckled and she returned to her intense training. 'Tania's a sponge for everything I teach, she adapts and takes in knowledge, unlike anything I've seen before. She's genuine, the real deal. The mark of Andrea, guardian angel of the eternal forest lays on her forearm. I nearly missed it,' he blinked, '-she's like Shanna if I had to say, not as strong as her, not yet,' time halted, '-we have guests,' he looked at the bridge, two mysterious figures nonchalantly peered against the railing. Tania readied spells, Igna shook his head and stood, "-lord and dame," he said, "-to whom do I owe the honor of the surprise visit?"

"To Elya and Ron of the Lixbin and Lombart familia. I represent the head of the family, whilst Ron here represents the Lombart. I apologize if he doesn't seem in the mood to speak," apparent by the hooded outfit and jaded mien.

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"Nothing to apologize for," returned Igna, "-tell me, Elya, what does your master stand?"

"I've come to declare war," she said, "-the Lixbin familiar, joined by blood to the chevalier so coldly murdered at the previous battle, will be avenged. We came to give the Gruen Urn."

"A formal declaration of war," he observed, "-so be it," he returned, "-if tis war thee wishes, tis war the'll get."

"As guardian of Orn Village..."

"I don't have property or land, therefore, nothing to protect or attack. Fighting is prohibited in the capital. I understand – the war shall end once one surrenders or decimates and take the leader's head."

Declaration of war through the use of the Gruen Urn. On the opposition receiving the item, he or she can choose to break the urn, thus setting the stage for a brutal wave of death and destruction or if accepted; can mediate the battle somewhat. Conditions varied per the opponent's discretion. Elya and Ron, soon as they came, disappeared. Distance footsteps arrived, "-were those Elya and Ron?" narrowed Jae, "-don't tell me," he locked the Urn, "-a declaration of war," he threw his hands and did a 180. Lady Elliana arrived a few seconds too late, "-what happened?" she thrust covered by the hand fan.

"Look," said the exasperated Jae.

'The Urn,' her heart sank, "-Master Igna, please, there must be a limit to the aggression..."

"No," he returned willfully, "-the more the merrier," he said, "-the defeat of Lixbin's forces shall bring about a new order, one where I stand as ruler of the isle. Nothing will stop me," the ground growled, "-nothing save the famished hunger of Cthulhu."

"He's awake, we should head to the flying castle."

"Understood my lady," returned Jae, "-Been a while since it screamed."

"What about my..."

"Information about the factions is here," she threw a leather bag. The island rumble, the guardian deity's starved stomach.

Igna shortly summoned a portal to an unknown area. Tania knew not to ask questions, though her side-glances were curious. He simply smiled and gestured to focus on training. Whispers and lesser amplified growls. Armed with an orb of light, he made way deep into a tunnel system under the volcano. Unintelligible cries carried – the vexing, uneven path gave onto somewhat flat ground. An orb of blue hovered at the center of a lake of tentacles. Scavenger rats ran for the middle where a cloud of taint fried the rodents.

"Enough pouting," he thundered. The grove of tentacles opened, there, a humanoid figure of dark-blue complexion exited. Semi-transparent and bearing no resemblance to man or woman, it walked and left molten footsteps, "-good." The figure laid a few meters away, Igna carefreely reached and patted the entity.

"I-Igna," it shakily pronounced, "-f-foo-d."

"Understood," two chairs and a table made of purple flesh rose by the figure's gesture. "-There, specially made mana-noodles," a bowl of pure essence dropped by its chin, the undefined visage licked its lips and dug into the bowl.

'The feared guardian of Marinda, a shapeless form who but wishes to eat. Stumbling here was a fluke, so was surviving the encounter too. A beast abled to spread its limbs across dimension's scarier than anything I've faced before,' once the meal finished, Igna left – the tremors stopped and he reappeared at the manor. There, time elapsed. Tania grew stronger by the day, she searched for her brother and

Igna's covertly worked in wiping Laurine's list of enemies. Nearing the first year spend on Marinda – war was over the horizon.

Lixbin's army of voluntary celestials stood at Orn's doorstep, a simple stream separate danger to safety. The terrain didn't favor the attacking army, however, it didn't matter for their strength consisted of under-the-table alliances. Help from other familia, there was no holding back.

Igna settled as a gate before the village's defenses. Forces from the Shadow Realm were summoned and surrounded watched the village. Lixbin's army, the general, Shin, crossed a valley, where they expected traps to be laid, and arrived at the clearing leading to Orn. The river and grove were but little inconvenience.

"General," cried a scouter, "-the devil's on a watchtower playing the flute." The gates were wide open and paths inviting to the opposing army. General Shin, straddled his might steed breathed a loud laugh, lieutenants at his side were bemused, "-my lord general, why are you laughing?"

"Fellow soldiers, look upon the man who plays his flute," he rose his spear, "-he thinks he's Zhuge Liang employing the empty fortress strategy. Tis an insult, I won't have it. Forces, be at the ready to attack, the village is ripe for the taking. We knew the battle would end once the army moved, and here we are – free from duties of the capital. I won't be fooled by the Empty fortress strategy!" horns and drums sounded commencement of battle.

'Igna,' movement rushed past, '-you don't have an army, else the valley would have been an easy way to think our numbers. Tis a good idea to open the gates, by the reputation, we know the terror you represent. However, the risk is when you're on the field. Now, you but stand upon a watchtower and played a flute.'

Amidst the rush, Igna gave a side-smile and played melodically, "-Zhuge Liang's strategy worked based on psychology. I know Shin enjoys reading older military books and strategies, I also know the personage he enjoyed most was the fable about the empty fort. I'm not insulting Zhuge Liang, instead," forces overwhelmed the village, "-I'm paying tribute to the fable. A battle of wits, one where I hold the pieces and thou art the pawn upon the chessboard," soldiers dressed in black leaped from their hiding places and sprayed, the sweet melody of gunfire and death, Igna joyously accompanied the destruction with calm notes of the flute. Shot after shot – units hidden in the groves shy off the river, found themselves at the enemy's back. Lixbin's army was stuck in the middle of an ambush – unknown weapons to them were utilized and killed senselessly."

"General Shin," Igna dropped from the tower and walked, bullets whistled past, he dodged and stood beside the horse, "-the battle is lost," he smiled, "-driven by pride and knowhow of warcraft. You sought war, you brought up the reason for an army to be sent against innocent villages. I know, I have eyes and ears all around," he taped the force with his flute, it vanished and the general fell, "-look at me," rattled a very somber voice, "-who was it that planted the area of war in thy head?"

"Planted the idea of war?"

"My aggression, the military prowess I bragged about. I wanted war, and I still do, you were unfortunate to fall so easily into my trap. We, outsiders, are born from the very idea of battle, Hidros is a cutthroat

continent. Never,” the flute laid against Shin’s neck, “-ever think about fighting again. The war was won before it ever began.”

Both arms rose, Shin’s proud expression and jet black hair lined the ground, “-I surrender. Igna Haggard of the Haggard Dynasty has won against the Lixbin familia.”

“Good, that’s what I wanted to hear,” he rose an arm – survivors were bound in chains and sent back, bodies of the fallen were hauled onto supply carriages, a massive shadow hid the fortress, “-there’s our ride,” he said, “-my floating castle isle, Rosespire the II.”

Chapter 889: My price is simple, destruction

Genesis of Rosespire II, a replica of the manor, glided smoothly towards the battlefield. Perched were countless faceless soldiers wrapped behind their masks and guns. Marinda and floating castles worked hand in hand. Silence brushed the opponents into a jestful silence. And so, was the beginning of Igna’s war against the whole isle. The defeat of Lixbin’s army didn’t deter adversaries, au contraire – a shelf gradually stacked with many urns, vases, formal declarations of war whomst belonged to the opponents; a sign of the battle’s he’d won. Consider, in the days, weeks, and months he worked tirelessly, planning strategies to ascend.

Xinfe’s familia, top on the list, was defeated in a heated aerial battle. The god of wind’s pupils was, as name said, greater threats over the landscape. Victory was close, Igna’s manor against a fortress surrounded by a fleet. The battle sparked at the eastern front – in a tumultuous flight zone per volcano. He boldly attacked and flew for the summit of said peak. General charged with eradication darted behind Igna. None paid heed for the volcano, the fleets eloquently accounted for the condition and possibility of an eruption. To their dismay, the manor flew over the beast’s mouth – air lacking and a single mistake potentially deadly. Igna sat on the balcony and faced the opponent. This time, instead of a flute, he held a cup of tea. Clamor recoiled across the manor, its underbelly held canons loaded with rockets, one shot one kill arrangement. Regardless of the threat, the fleet swarmed, landscape shuffled into familiar territory. No Threat of eruption, ‘-we’re safe, the volcano recently growled. It won’t be for a few weeks,’ justified the leader upon the helm. “To glory and restoration of the natural order!”

“Glory,” Igna rose a cup, “-to thy glory in death,” the manor cleared the mouth, a sudden rumble shook trees and wildlife, Xinfe’s just only passed the volcano, there, Igna simply tilted his head and sipped. Magma hurled, Marinda seemed sick to the stomach – debris, ash, and hot glue swallowed the offensive.

“Did we win?” a sudden burst pushed the manor.

“Yes we did,” he replied, “-good job on winning the bout earlier.”

“It was easy,” winked Tania, “-now we go home?”

“Yeah,” escaped, the princess skipped into a nearby room. Soon after, they landed at the village where the lass ran into her loving mother and father’s arm. As for Igna, there was much to do at the capital.

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Hand in his pocket, the devil walked through the very clean and rustic streets of Nordway. Tranquility rested over the alleys and lanes. Carriages, well-dressed lords and dames out on casual promenade, a youthful boy serenaded a lovely lady upon a bridge overlooking a canal where boats paddled.

Igna climbed and reached the summit of said bridge where he fondly gazed at the proposal, “-my dear Mariane, queen of my heart, lady of my life, please, I humbly ask for thy hand in marriage.”

The dame, slightly older than the boy, pressed her hand against her mouth and gasped for air, her pupils lit aflutter as did her heart. She innocently held her palm, the fellow grabbed and kissed. She accepted the proposal, he rose, swept her off her feet in a tender embrace. Onlookers clapped and cheered – flower petals rained from the skies.

“Beautiful,” said the dame, stretching her arms in the air playfully.

“I know,” said the fellow tightening his grip around her waist; sunset reflected against the clear water, “-it’s very romantic.”

“Did you ask for the flowers?” amiably inquired the enamored dame.

“No?” on looking back, there was no trace, no one, nothing, a beautifully arranged basket laid at their feet. He reached for the handle; the dame scanned as did the bystanders.

“Congratulations,” read a folded note, “-from the Haggard familia,” the message continued inside, “-lord Djen of the Xinfé familia, I wish thee and dame Mariane of Danio all the best. The Xinfé and Danio factions may scrutinize the bond; especially as the Xinfé have now lost their fleet in battle against my faction. Meet me at Len street in the Azian family shop. Bring dame Mariane as well,” signed, Igna Haggard. The excitement faded, the crowd shuffled along – dusk whispered.

Djen’s amiable face froze, “-hey, Djen, are you well?”

“Mariane, we’re in trouble,” he clenched, “-Xinfé’s fleet was taken down by the devil.”

“What does that note say?” she snatched and watched, her expression shortly drowned in fear, “...”

“Our marriage,” he said, “-I haven’t discussed the matter with father.”

“Neither have I,” gulped Mariane, “-I-let’s m-meet him,” she said, “-I m-mean?”

“Are you insane?” he hushed over her shoulder, “-speaking his name is taboo.”

“I don’t s-see an option... Djen,” she grabbed his shoulder and shook, “-look at me.”

He didn’t, “-stop ignoring me,” she shook again, “-if you don’t, I will, I swear. I’ll do whatever is needed to make our relation happen.”

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“It’s a trap...”

“It’s not,” she squinted, “-trust my gut feeling. Why would he cheer on our marriage?”

“I don’t know?”

Orange, pink, red, drained from the evening-bound sky. Street lamps faintly lit the capital. Local restaurants and pubs welcomed guests – a warm nightlife ambled. Opposite of one of the more popular pubs lay the Azian family shop; a place of wonder and collection. Two shadowy figures loomed against the door, a taller outline stepped and tapped, light from the inside shortly blurred by a pair of legs under the frame. The lock clicked to a warmly dressed attendant, “-we’re closed,” she said politely.

“I was called here by,” a quick reach into the cloak, “-him,” he pointed at the card.

“Right, follow me,” she side-stepped, the supposed inconspicuous figures snuck inside, the attendant shook her head at the pub opposite, “-idiots,” she murmured, laughter thundered from the pub.

“Mariane and Djen,” said Igna with feet kicked up on a table. A hauntingly angered silhouette watched from the corner, “-Jae,” he hailed, the knight next-room ran.

“Yeah?”

“Please take her away, she’s making the guests scared.”

“Oh, my bad,” said a sarcastic heavy comment, “-excuse me for being pissed at an intruder barging into my office, didn’t even have the courtesy to say hi, and simply shoved me off my chair. Not that, you lit a cigar using my..”

“My lady,” Jae took her hand and forcibly exited the now quiet office.

At ease in the chair, Igna waited patiently. Truly, the lord and dame shuddered, their fate laid in his hand – judgment waited on the other side of the table.

“Shall we get to business?” the ice shattered, “-Mariane, take a seat. Djen, stand behind her,” they did so without hesitation, “-tell me,” he rose his chin to Mariane, “-tell me, young dame, what is it thee wish?”

“What I wish?”

“...”

“I want us to be married without scrutiny. Our families aren’t much known for our courteous treatment of other Celestials... you can imagine,” she lowered her gaze, “-people aren’t exactly ready to do favors...”

“Why not elope?”

“Easier said than done,” answered Djen, Igna glared, the fellow understood the message.

“Leaving Marinda is out of the question.”

“No, I’m referring to a village, perhaps, or even the mining city at the volcano’s foot. From what I’ve seen, Celestials are freer there than here.”

“Might I ask a question?” the shy Djen rose his face confidently.

“Yes, and you can sit.”

“-Why make him stand in the first place?”

"Simple, really," he stared the dame, "-a man must take charge and protect his lover. There's no shame in having a stronger partner, even if the latter is a lady, still, generalization aside, tis good manners for the man to take charge," he leaned, "-and tis for a simple reason – if you're weak, tis best to be used as bait, and if it's the contrary – well, I don't have to elaborate further."

"Bait?" fluttered the perplexed Mariane.

"Yes, and I doubt you'll understand the reason," he glanced at Djen, "-for he's learned what I mean," a natural pause settled, Djen gathered his strength, "-why send a note?"

"Oh, that?" he reached into a drawer and pulled a pistol, a sword, and a pen, "-think it as my congratulatory gift. I have no issues with the Xinfé familia, they've been dealt with, and I'm certain the news reached. My problem's with you, Mariane. Marriage is thy wish; I can make it happen."

"No eloping nor going against our parents' wishes. I want to be wed and blessed by our families combined."

"That, Mariane is a tall order, yet, I digress. My price is simply the destruction of the Danio familia. The order of Danio, don't think me a fool," he narrowed, "-your father was he who brought Laurine from a place of relative ease. I know the dirty little secret the Danio family shares. Tania, my heir, is half Laurine and half heir to the God of the Fallen age's blood. Three choice present themselves. First, a pistol,' he pointed at the metallic device, "-this weapon has the strength to kill, and even me to come extent. Second, the sword, draw the blade and basked in its greed and bloodlust, lastly, pen – a truce settled between you and me, a contract whereby I'll take what I pleased once your conditions have been met. What will it be?" he smirked, "-option one, kill me. Option two, take up arms and join the battle, or third, form a contract with the devil."

"Marriage gift..."

"Don't disappoint, Djen, the choices are my gifts. Xinfé's are over, no turning from the inevitable. What will you pick, Djen and Mariane, what will you pick?"

"Mariane," he itched towards the sword, "-I'm not ready to sell my sword. Instead, master Igna – I will join the battle, make me the heir of the Xinfé familia and I promise my never-ending loyalty."

"Patricide."

"I know, we've lost anyway. If I become head of the family, at least then the bloodline will live on. I don't see another way lest I forsake my name entirely... Mariane, what about you..."

"Danio," she rose her sharp lashes, "-is Tania truly my half-sibling?"

"Yeah," said a half-smile, "-the family has considerable military strength. How does one make a union worthwhile; how does one make best of Danio and Xinfé?"

"How?"

"Sign the contract."

"Sell my soul to the devil, how am I to know this isn't a trap?"

"Such's the beauty," he winked and pressed his fingers against one another, "-time's wasting. Young Djen's made his choice, what about you, Mariane, what compromise will thee make?"

"Fine," she leaned for the contract, glanced at the pistol, snapped and lifted in Igna's vague direction, "-how about I make my own choice. Devil, you'll answer to me, I have this weird contraption for a weapon..."

Clap, clap, clap, the items faded, "-good, I'm pleased with the outcome."

"Outcome?" she breathed heavily; her heart pulsed.

"Yes, my present," he leaned into the chair, "-is the gift of courage. You stood and fought for what thee wished. Danio's will fall, such is the way ought to follow. Djen, Mariane – I'm a man of understanding. The new Xinfé and Danio will formally sign an alliance, and thus, set a new age where families are free to join whatever factions they wish. I will offer my protection to the faction. What say you?"

"Leader will be replaced," she gulped, "-alive or d-dead?"

"It totally depends on you," he stood, "-for the envision future to pass..."

"We will need to sign a deal with the devil?"

"Correct. Nothing is guarantee – however, my word is my creed."

They tightened hands, "-Lord Igna, please."

"So be it," he snapped, a flash illuminated the room, "-I will send a messenger with the rest of the plan. Djen, best into hiding, and Mariane, keep the marriage a secret. We don't want unnecessary problems, do we?"

Newly married couple jovially passed the door, "-they don't know what they've done," exhaled Jae holding folded arms.

"They've listen to reason," replied Igna, "-where's your lady?"

"In woe over the loss of the office."

"Give her this," he handed keys, "-the supply containers are loaded."

Chapter 890: Matters of Discussion

"I ought to ask," Jae's peculiarly interested nose turned at Igna, who simply returned a distant gaze. "-Did you know they were going to propose on the bridge?"

"Who is to say," he added, "-suppose god ought to know," the door squeezed and the ominous presence left. Mild cries echoed in another room, "-JAE," screamed a familiar voice, "-I want my office back," wailed the lady.

In the following week; per agreement of a victorious battle – Igna paid a visit to the Xinfé familia. Such was the plan – on unstraddling a mighty white steed, formally dressed officials swarmed.

"Lord Igna of the Haggard Familia, your presence is required at the castle," narrowed a blunt and strict man. On the collars were distinguished family crest, on the breast pocket, medals. There were rumors

about a military faction – one to safeguard the peace and monitor the influences of the families. Rumors, ones he ignored on accounts of, ‘-when it comes, it comes.’

“The day’s here,” he muffled and caressed the horse.

“Pardon?” said one of the officials, by rank and the received looks – stood at the back and hidden behind a lack of medal – sneers turned his way and read, ‘-you dare speak?’

“Excuse him,” green uniform and a resemblance to military outfits worn traditionally, “-Lord Igna.”

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“There’s no need for a commotion,” said he calmly. A glance to the left told of a young boy dressed in shabby attire – by the facial features, demi-human in nature, the scruffy nose, and uncleaned clothes were indicators of a not-so-nice lifestyle.

“Yes my lord?”

“Take care of him, will you?”

“Will do, my lord,” nodded the boy.

“No need for formality, Rusty,” a casual smile reflected positively on the boy, “-here,” lumps of gold dropped onto tiny-cupped hands, therein reached a point of spillage. “Here,” aside from the coins, Igna tied a little pouch around the boy’s neck, “-keep your money in there, none’s going to steal even if they take the pouch, find me at my manor, I’ll make sure justice is served.”

“Thank you, sir,” the now jovial boy waltz into the stables, shy off a cottage serving drinks for the rougher part of town. The majestic castle laid a mighty trek away.

“I’m impressed,” commented Igna, curious bystanders tiptoed above fences, through bushes, and broken buildings, “-I used quite a strange path.” Energy fuelled the front man’s step, he proudly turned at Igna.

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“After months of tracking, we figured you’d be here.”

“Pray tell, why did it take so long for the military to respond?”

“Oh, that sir, I can’t disclose.”

“Why, is it classified information?”

“No, sir, it’s mostly that we know not much of the situation,” in the prideful manner of speech, there rested a sliver of admiration. Igna’s alluring charm, the instant he rode into town, emitted a subconscious fragrance to him, one of charm and intrigue. ‘-Thing’s never change,’ he thought to himself, ‘-since the days of Staxius, Dark-arts and the ability to charmingly lure individuals has always worked. How I missed the pleasures of toying with a person’s mind.’ And in the self-thought, ‘-can’t I get a break?’

'No can do,' returned friendly laughter, '-this is us now, fragments of the same being,' talking to oneself, a coping mechanism Igna developed after much sufferance; sudden reactivation of the death element, the pulses spawned by the devouring of a soul. On the faithful day of the awakening as a new version of himself – more power gathered at his fingertips, and to manage the powers – reluctant on making the mistakes Staxius and Alfred did, the consciousness split among three, the past, the present, and the future. Wherein, Alfred, Staxius, and Igna settled at each respective seat.

"-And is there a reason why you'd so casually speak to the devil?" added Igna wittingly, half in jest and half-serious. The frontman -Yean, threw a shrug and laughed.

"Sir, us officials are simply pawns in the greater picture. We were ordered to carry out a duty, and we pride ourselves on fulfilling the task in the scope of our abilities. Information is scarce, but not as limited as is probably thought. The Devil of Haggard, or the Devil for short, infamous tales of a single man taking on a whole army, outwitting generals we once placed on a pedestal, making nonsense of the established hierarchy, and defeating the symbol of power the populous thought. My, I don't know, it's a thing of glory and wonder. Though thy hands are stained in the blood of many – there resides kindness in the cold heart. Village of Orn; a haven for refugees, war orphans, and visitors. Since thy protection was granted – they live in relative peace and harmony. No longer bound by the rules placed upon them by the higher ones. Between you and I, sir, as are those who stand here, we share similar thoughts about Marinda and how the unfairness rages. We're celestials, born great and ungrateful to what we were granted."

"What is your cause then?"

"Nothing outrageous. Simply the betterment of those less fortunate to be born natives."

"Pathetic," returned Igna, "-ideals can only take one so far. It's good the situation is being understood and viewed from a point of empathy. What then, will the goodwill mission help to save anything? No. Actions are the best tellers of a novel. What are words without effect, what are ideals without realism, and lastly, what is the point of looking on the less fortunate from palaces of gold and glitter? One can never relate to their struggle, and frankly, a utopia is nothing we should aspire towards. A place of true happiness is a place of equal opportunities. Be thankful for what one has and strive to get more from where thee stand. No one will ever be born equal, no one," the walk carried towards a door in the middle of a meadow, "-then again, who am I to talk?" he laughed, "-my actions are my whims. Follow thy heart, and if it says to cause chaos?" he reached the handle, "-then do so," whispered. The door barged and a vortex swallowed and spat them onto an open-space arena. A red carpet lined the ground, elevated seats arranged in a square, and at the front, three entities are hidden behind a veil painted in red, respecting their crests.

"Officers," thundered another, similarly dressed man in front of the three windows, "-good on bringing Lord Igna. You're excused," he said sharply.

"Yes sir," the entourage snapped into salutes. Chatter and whispers rummaged along the sides and back seats. '-noble bloodlines gathered in one place. A simple turn of the finger and they could all be under my feet.'

'Stop, Alfred,' sighed Igna looking over the right shoulder.

'But he's right,' spoke from the left shoulder, '-one snap and we take the continent.'

'Not you too,' he turned to the left and smiled, almost to the point of laughter, '-my consciousness is actually three.'

'See?' they both rose a thumbs up, "-we're the devil and devil?"

"Enough," he breathed, the figures puffed into clouds. Staxius and Alfred, albeit present in the mind, were tamer on the occasion of self-reflection. They lived per Igna's will and sanity. Allies he could call upon during times of need.

The air, suffocating as well as unassuming split the sides into with or against camps. Akin to the officers, there were few bloodlines interested in the changing times, and other, more conservative factions, opposed the actions.

"Lord Igna Haggard," thundered the speaker, "-step forth onto the tribunal."

He simply scoffed, "-pardon my reluctance, I fail to see the reason why I, Igna Haggard, should be placed on a podium to be judged by lesser entities. Celestials or not," he glazed the entire arena, "-thee deserves to stand below my feet, akin to ants, smothered under my shoes," the monotonous threat struck home vividly, "-well, what's the point of a tribunal anyway?" he rose a palm. Spellcasters sprung from the roof and conjured various lessening spells – projectile, others held artifacts – those in the room also rose their dangerous bloodline talents, "-so much for the display of strength," he walked, unfazed by the growing murderous air. The fingers swayed – the tribunal broke and rose into a throne placed at the same level as the three hidden seats.

"Much better," he levitated by golden white wings, "-keep the malicious intent aside," he sat, golden wings shuffled, "-truly, is killing everyone here the true purpose?"

"Stop the bolstering," cried an observer, "-there's no way you can survive our attacks."

"Oh, I'm sure I can," he glared the heckler, "-I doubt; the opposite," the fingers casually pointed up, "-for you see, likeminded individuals, I have more than a few cards to play." A massive, potentially island-ending pentagram spiraled above the arena. A flat-based foundation on which held smaller but potent circles gradually rising in peak, "-and one of them is destruction. Once the contest of showmanship is finished, may we get to the discussion, I don't have much time to waste."

Scholars whispered at the speaker, who in turn transmitted the information to the three windows. "-Lower your weapons," mediated the speaker – the tense aura, presumably from the gathered mana didn't once fluctuate despite the dispelling. Utter horror veered its ghastly sneer, Igna snapped and the potency vanished.

"The devil's real," gulped the more docile factions, "-we thought our combined powers made the unbearable atmosphere. Seems we were wrong, it was him... his magic... the spirits, they're angry and want vengeance."

"Go on," he said with one leg over the other.

“Lord Igna, today’s council of wisemen was summoned on the recent battle pertaining to the Xinfu Familiar. We are told they suffered major casualties – the airborne fleet of the proud god of Wind was blasphemed before its people. Tell me, Lord Igna, how do you plead?”

“Plead?” he laughed; “-I don’t plead for anything. Xinfu’s wanted war, and I graciously accepted per the terms set on the declaration here,” a scroll tied by a red knot summoned, “-for various bloodlines defeated in battle against me, I do feel sorry for they were forced into following the hivemind of greedy latches. Don’t look to me as a scapegoat for thy foolishness. Celestials, remember thou art but fragments of the god’s true power, rats who simply had the fortune of being blessed. In retrospect, if the isle were to be inhabited by the outside world, let me give a reality check, the weapons my army used were basic – there grows and evolve greater and more powerful weapons. War isn’t suited for a spoon-fed society. I’m simply educating on what is real and what are illusions. Poor general Shin and the Lixbin army, ever since a seat was cleared from the top, you, yes you,” he pointed at various figures, “-were readied to take the war against me. Did you think I’d so easily leave the field, no, no, no. I have more business to settle; namely, the murder of a young prodigy Terisa and her mother, Laurine.” Whispers called the Speaker, and he listened. Silence settled, one of which rendered Igna somewhat impatient.

“Lord Igna, per the wise men’s wishes. We order for the senseless war to stop. Laurine and Terisa’s death play no part in our decision, it was made by independent parties; the Sen Dynasty. We’ll deeply regret if more blood has to be shed.”

“Simple answer. Leave me and my familia alone. Don’t bring innocent Celestials into a power play. I hereby declare an open invitation to the familia leaders. If thee wish for a fight, challenge me to battle. And to make matters interesting, I shall only use a sword – pick the place, the date, and the number of participants, the sole condition – only those willing to part their lives and lose their soul forever are welcomed. Everyone else, freedom.”

“No,” the first window blasted open, a man with fiery red hair exploded, “-no one will battle you. If it’s war, it’ll be fought on the same rules. Family against family.”

“The symbol of Rah,” said Igna, “-you must be the one from Intherna’s family, aren’t you?”

“Intherna...” the young ‘wiseman’ stuttered, “-h-how d-d-?”

“I’m her friend and partner,” he rose his forearm, “-I bare the blessing of the feisty goddess.”