

Death Magic 901

Chapter 901: Post War

On Elliana's crash; the Devil who'd awoken his past self, vowed to Marinda a perfect addition to his kingdom, Hidros. No matter who ruled, who attacked, or ruined – Hidros, his place of birth, was, is, and would always be his mother. And so, a divisive scheme sparked within his mind – on bringing the Floating castle down, he instated himself into a somewhat known familia's entourage. Elliana and her butler Jae, by sheer luck, were a duo in search of something greater, something more than their day-to-day lives. And so, Igna gave what they wished in the form of an enigmatic demon. Second, the annihilation of the Sen's dynasty and the forceful capture of a god's symbol. A message sent both in the heavenly and mortal realms. Overprotective gods, akin to overprotective parents, sought to keep their children safe but to a certain extent. Gods were stranger entities, far more coy and abrasive than their children, Celestials. From his plane to the mortal realm, let's say the message was more than a well-formed threat.

Thus, the Haggard Dynasty established itself as a true Celestial, who but had three requirements; fortune, power, and the symbol of a god. Three of which the Dynasty drowned in. Behind the scene, under the harshness of the Devil act, the following wars weren't just shows of bloodshed and defiance, no, absolutely not. In comes, Elya, representative of the Lixbin's head, and Ron, representative of Lombart's head. On the declaration of war; the families vowed to see who was the strongest. And in a small but necessary move, after the show of his forces and wit, the representative of Ron's court scurried into Orn village. Underneath the shadowy night, they made a deal – information in exchange for the Lombart's safety. A wise move for Igna was on their heels, and in exchange of the heads of Lombart's lives, the devil wished for a target of higher importance to be presented – there, Zeus's name was uttered – a mention which shook Alfred to his core, the persona screeched internally. The scene was thus set for the later battles. Like the Sen dynasty, Lixbin's heads were brought to the Sen palace, a simple carriage ride from the higher district in Nordway. A man, a lady, and two sons, dressed in lovely clothes and bound by rusted chains were pushed through the gates. The close meeting discussion was never known to Azian familiar or the little entourage Igna built thus far. Like the Sen's, the Lixbin's were thrown on a velvety red carpet.

The Devil sat at his throne(a leathery couch) behind which laid a deathly landscape of mutilation and torture. Limbs left hanging from the ceiling; Igna scanned the prisoners, their fate laid in his hand, was in heaven, was it hell – judgment looked upon the captive emotionlessly.

Sky cackled, black lightning struck the building – a dark presence shrouded in godly mana peered at Igna with beaten white flakes, “-Igna!”

“Lord Lixbin.”

“What is this?” he turned to his children whomst bowed before the heavy presence.

“I'm judging the weak,” he said, “-Lord Lixbin, do not dismay for I haven't forgotten what thee did. Granted, there were times you aided be in the past – all the good was undone per a simple act of deception. Cleopatra,” he narrowed, “-the muse who brought about my downfall. Lucifer and Zeus joined hands to take my symbols. Too bad,” he smirked, “-the symbols will never be found nor will I

allow anyone else to inherit them. My curse of never becoming a god's forced me to take on the title of an equal but perilous path."

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"You were always a devil," he cried, "-as Staxius, must I name the countless heads slain?"

"Please, don't plead," he laughed, "-the god of Darkness at my court arguing if my actions were right or wrong. Will I blame you for taking the path of darkness? No, will I take my revenge? Yes. And you, will you blame the inheritor of Death's element for killing? No, you won't. It goes against the nature of things. Besides, the title of God of Darkness isn't so known by the world. Lucifer, on the other hand," he summoned the wings above the palm, "-is far more valuable."

Stunned, "-what is it thee wishes, Devil?"

"Nothing," he returned, "-I have what I want and get what I wish. Nothing the God of Darkness can offer. Perhaps the soul of Cleopatra, but then again, I don't much care for a snarly little vixen who fooled and caused her lover to kill himself," he crossed his legs and stared at the family, "-the family's been defeated, how about we stay at that. Head of Lixbin, I grant thee freedom."

The God, Lixbin, rose a baffled brow at Igna, then turned to his children, then Igna again, "-why?"

"Kill them with kindness?" he laughed, "-I jest," he rose and walked around until facing their exposed backs, "-I have a fondness for families who look tight and welcoming to each other. I understand empathy and relatability, both of which I used selfishly when it suits my whims. To see a god lower himself to the mortal realm in a plea for his children's life, I'm impressed. More than that," the chains clicked, "-thee choose the path of negotiation and not the path of battle. Many disagreements can be settled in simple conversations, the middle-ground is always a line we should aspire to reach."

Lixbin, confused and amazed, rubbed his hands and exhaled, "-Igna Haggard, I'm surprised. You're truly wise," he looked at the family, "-I assume the kindness is signed blank check?"

"Right you are," he returned, "-when the time comes, I will ask for thy assistance."

"And I'll respect the agreement," in a heavy puff of smoke, the god vanished. Similarly, after each battle, Igna brought the captives to Sen manor where matters went either peacefully or ended in gruesome torture. The latter, bloodied, filled with agony and pain. During said secret meetings of life and death, information about the inner workings of Marinda boarded the chessboard.

To truly overturn the current hold, Igna needed the support of the people and the Celestials – factions who at the time were oil and water. Backed by the Azian family, Igna sowed distrust, assassinated servants, and pinned the incident on other families. There were times he even controlled noblemen to lure noble ladies of other households to cottages where he'd order the nobleman to abuse the unconsenting ladies. Many were conscious and screamed for their lives, some were allowed to live and tell the stories, others were killed, and some had their closest friend and family member walk in on the blasphemous display. Extramarital affairs and abuse were frowned upon in the elite society of Celestials. There was no risk in the plays for the families hid the occurrence in fear of public shame.

Months turned years, Haggard fought wars, gathered allies, force their influence, and gained momentum. On the defeat of the Xinfé familia – Haggard's reached a critical stage – the turning point of

tales of the Devil's influence. He kindly presented two sides of himself – a murderous demon and a caring protector of Orn. Tania's exploit also showed how the Devil could nurture a village girl into a princess. The title of Princess of Faes was bestowed on her by the guardians of the forest, the dryads. To the natives – 'twould be the same to a god descending on the earth to bless one of their children.

Gustv, the inheritor of Intherna's symbol. Rumor of the Wiseman was sometimes the closest guarded secret the prisoners held. Empty shells of prisoners fell upon the floor, Rosespire II landed at the capital. Igna strode onto the street and made for the bridge where young Djen proposed to Mariane, there, pieces fell into order – the outcome of taking Marinda wasn't an idea, but a possibility. Rest is known by history – Xife and Danio played major parts in antagonizing the Wiseman's council. A bait Igna threw to get Gustv on his side. A meeting with Intherna brought the powerful young fellow at his side, thus, angering the last boss, the committee. Facades shattered, layers of protection broken to expose the heart of Marinda's influence, the elderly Celestials.

Smoke puffed onto the empty ceiling; the tranquil lakes chirped and splashed. Many months passed since the War of Independence; Marinda dove into another hidden realm per Cthulhu hunger, therein, time flashed. Those peaceful inebriated days of nothings healed Igna's soul.

Marinda's new leadership acted quickly in implementing acts and treaties. The island would be broken into regions for easier management. Defenses aside, the tall task of rebuilding a stable environment fell onto the capable shoulders of Gustv and his comrades. For most of the idle days, Igna fished and worked as a shop-owner, dawn was on the lake's tranquil mirror. The hectic lifestyle of the capital wasn't much interesting, thus the return of the Rosespire II at Cthulhu. 'Einheim's secret,' he crushed the cigar and exited the quiet manor dressed in working attire, "a simple lie to motivate the troops in taking an otherwise useless castle."

Workers passed the bridge and waved, "Igna," they waved, "how's the morning today?"

"Normal," he returned with a laugh. Fishermen passed, gave quick handshakes, and left for their trip. Igna hopped into the Twin Jelly shop, lit his stove, and began another day of work. For the first time in a long while, the citizen was able to pay for Igna's services that included freshly cooked breakfast, lunch, and dinner at a nearby tavern. Another was partly dropped on him by a vindictive Elliana – the tightly spaced shelves were stacked with items from the capital. Life in a booming mining town, what else was there. Igna lived and laughed, the locals were friendly and also enjoyed laughs. News occasionally came from the capital – improvements of roads and towns; in the back of his mind, there was an unresolved issue, "the beast's hunger."

Mug against the cheerful counter, "that's it for me tonight," said the Devil. Younger ladies frowned at him coyly, "...'

"Not tonight," he said respectfully and left.

"Goodnight," bellowed the tavern, after which he stepped into the chilly streets. Passersby wore overcoats, couples ran to the nearest taverns for warm meals, the always amber volcano's mouth seemed a lighthouse to nightly travelers. The Act of Adventuring was passed to ensure the safe passage of travelers at night. Slowly but surely, the more reserved raced boarded their reach -a different yet reminiscent Ardanian feel sprung along the street and sky.

Woosh, “-Cthulhu,” the voice echoed, “-are you there, friend?”

“Igna,” multiple masses joined into a humanoid figure, “-good to see you,” the speech tremendously improved. “-Sorry, my hunger, I can’t control it for long.”

“Yeah, I understand,” a table and two chairs summoned, “-as it stands, for Marinda to truly reach its potential, we’ll have to give them the mana they need.”

“Kill me,” he said, “-without me around, I think they’ll be happy to live after.’

“No, friend,” shook Igna, “-you will not be dying anytime soon. I promise that much, my friend. We will find another way.”

“What other way, friend. I nearly devoured... daughter was very happy about the ritual. Death’s the only way forward. I pain every day, it’s hard, very hard, I cannot think properly and my stomach controls my action.”

“Well, friend, I have a solution, no guarantee but it might work.”

“What solution?”

“When in doubt,” he leaned into his chair, “-call onto my friends,” the ground shook.

Goddess of Chaos, Goddess of Fire, Guardian of time and Queen of Demons, heed my humble voice, portals warped into reality, the four generals stepped into the mortal realm with the cries of nature, lightning, rain, the sea, everything shuddered on the entrance of the Alterian Goddesses.

“Long time no see,” winked Lilith already at beast’s side.

“And here I thought you’d never ask,” smiled Intherna taking a seat on the table.

“Where are we?” wondered Gophy, staring the cave up and down.

“Hello, Igna,” added Miira, “-you called?”

He coughed, “-lower the auras,” he gasped, “-lim-”

“Oh, sorry,” they returned, the heavy presence nearly shattered the isle’s core, “-so, why have thee called on us?”

Chapter 902: “To free Cthulhu,”

“To free Cthulhu,” returned Miira.

“The Guardian of realms,” inferred an interested Gophy, “-let’s see, the humanoid figure needs some work, and the aura,” she leaned and sniffed, “-very nice,” said the pleasant smile, “-death and destruction. My favorite meal.”

Intherna sprang at the guardian beast and narrowed, “-death and destruction. Too bad,” she echoed, “-doesn’t look all that appetizing to me.”

“Stop,” added a very soft and inviting voice, “-you’ll scare the poor beast into hiding,” Lilith stroked its flexible chin. Igna stepped to add a word, “-well,” Miira interjected, completely cutting him off, to which

he simply blinked a few times, “-taking in a beast of this size will take an enormous amount of mana. It’s stretched its tentacles across dimension and has yet sustained its hunger.”

“See, friend,” he added in a mundane but clear voice, “-there is no hope.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” awed Lilith, “-we were called upon for a reason,” a proud look glistened her beautiful features.

“Can’t look bad,” said Gophy, “-Igna,” they surrounded Cthulhu, “-watch and learn.”

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On Miira’s lead – an unseen and unprecedented spell spawned into reality. The very definition of the world around faded, there laid nothing, and by nothing, there was nothing. Neither was it black nor was it white, no color, no matter, no existence – there laid what was there before everything creation – a massive pool of nothing. The four crests of the Alterian goddesses shimmered, the cave flashed, forcing Igna to raise his hand in cover against the light. *Woosh,* blank, a purple orb hovered in where Cthulhu used to reside – Miira, Gophy, Intherna and Lilith bore flushed faces and satisfied smiles, “-and a job well done,” said Miira.

“What did you do?” blinked Igna, ‘-is this the effect I have on people?’ utter bewilderment for he was right. On occasions of him performing miracles; those around were left either traumatized or simply baffled.

“World transmigration,” winked Gophy stumbling to stand.

“The same spell thee used and nearly caused Alpha’s downfall?”

“Don’t bring up the past,” she rolled her eyes, looked at Intherna, who by same effect, turned at Lilith. They held out their hands, “-transparent,” they said.

“The mirages can’t sustain our full power,” in a comical shrug, the trio fumbled into a puff of ash, leaving Igna to sigh and Miira inspecting the orb.

“Sent illusions instead of stepping into the real world?”

“Don’t sound disappointed,” added Miira, “-I’m here for one. If we’d enter the realm at the same time, I shudder to think the destruction such an influx in power would cause. Look here,” she pointed, “-the reality is forever altered; a break in time and space. A lucky side effect of freeing the beast of the ages.”

“WAIT!”

“What?” she rose from her hunched examination, threw a sharp brow, and tightened her lips.

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Resultant effects hit Igna almost instantly, what would happen to Marinda, the other realms. No words need be said, the expression alone gave the long-haired Miira a vague idea, “-nothing will change,” she said, “-the beast’s been freed. The core’s been transferred to the Shadow Realm,” her fluttering eyelashes took notice of everything Igna thought subconsciously, “-Shadow Realm’s reserve is more than enough to contain Cthulhu. The reserves and production are unrivaled – the foundation’s stern,

more time passes, the better it gets. Remember,” she crossed her arms, “-the Death Element’s intertwined. Every overload it dies and returns twice as strong; like you when the element was active,” the orb suddenly bubbled and hurled a glob of blue, green, and red.

“FRIEND!” materialized a very animated figure, “-it’s worked,” cheered sent tremors, “-my hunger, I don’t feel hungry anymore. I can breathe, look around, sense the world and talk,” he laughed, “-I can talk, Igna, I can talk!”

“The orb’s a direct link for the guardian of Marinda to phase in and out of reality. Cool,” said she in a somewhat sarcastic tone. Her heels echoed to his side and whispered, “-don’t spend too much time in Marinda, the outside world doesn’t look so good. There will come a time when the people will need their king, afterward, there will come the time for said King to take back what was taken from him,” she whispered, “-and I don’t mean Hidros; I mean the Aapith nation. Words of warning; Draebala’s very active – both sides are gearing for war. Aapith nation blames to gods for stealing Lucifer’s wings, and the gods blame the demons for blasphemy of Sen and the death of angels and heirs. On guard for when the time comes where another battle of the higher-being springs, Creation, Death, and Time will need to mediate the fight. No one wants reality to break. I’ll leave you to it,” she finished her monologue, conjured a portal, threw a wink over her shoulder, and disappeared into the endless nothing.

The warning struck, mention of Aapith nation riled Alfred’s persona; “-home.”

Quick shakes of the shoulder snapped the daze, “-Igna, wake up,” riled the energetic Cthulhu, “-let’s eat.”

“Eat? Didn’t you say the hunger’s fixed...”

“I meant talking,” the fingers shook energetically, “-Igna, I’m surprised. You have powerful allies.”

“Not allies, they’re family,” he said, “-my guardian goddesses. There’re more, my children, their friends, the allies I met in my many lives. Now you,” the arms wrapped around Cthulhu’s shoulders as if old friends, “-shall we hit the taverns?”

“Yes please!”

Time was a little after three in the evening. The Devil strolled into Cthulhu’s town in company of Cthulhu. To see his name on a plaque, the guardian deity’s eyes watered.

“Getting emotional?”

“No,” he squinted, “-it’s the smell of fish.” Directly behind the plaque laid the local market; plants, ingredients, spices, and more traditionally, fish – laid exposed for the grab of shoppers.

“Hello Devil,” waved the traders.

“Hello,” he’d reply followed by Cthulhu. They walked; the crowded space opened as people respectfully gave way to the devil. Shortly after, the close duo arrived at a simple eatery overlooking the deep blue lake. A knowingly glance at the keeper, Igna climbed stairs onto a lesser populated upstairs, walked across the wooden floor, and exited onto a terrace where in a quiet little corner stationed a bar. Liquor to the brim and a waiter manned the cleaning efforts.

“Lord Haggard,” said the waiter, “-bit early, isn’t it?”

“Hello Jog,” he greeted, “-I’d be a fool to wait and lose out on such a lavish landscape.”

The waiter, an acquaintance, scanned the newer addition carefully, “-pardon me,” intervened Igna, “-here’s my friend, Cthulhu.”

Jog’s hand froze, “-sorry?”

“Cthulhu.”

“As in...”

“- as in the guardian deity of Marinda,” replied Igna, “-keep the shock to a minimum.”

“As you say,” he resumed cleaning the plates and cups, “-the usual then?”

“Yeah, and my friend will have the same,” they turned towards the lake view and waited.

“Friend, you kept the promise,” he smiled, “-I’ve never felt so free before. Come to think of it, I don’t know why I was imprisoned in the first place.”

“I know,” said Igna, “-would you like to hear?”

“Sure,” he sipped, “-maybe the memories will return, who knows.”

Igna sipped and plunged himself into the deepest annals of Origin’s memoir, a guide took the conscious by the hand and led to a compliment of books and notes, “-Cthulhu; an entity birthed from the curse of the dying soldiers. During the war of Gods and Demons, casualties were at an all-time high – the overwhelming mana had no place to go save for the little orb in the center of the battlefield, a split in reality and time. Domain and dimension, innocent bystanders were targeted, none was spared from the cruelty of war. In the split; the anger and rage of those killed in collateral damage vowed to never rest until the attackers were punished. Goes without saying; when emotion’s run high, there’s no escaping the wrath which ensued. The added emotions built and built until a being sprang into reality – a blessing from Creation, he’d had enough of seeing the souls torture themselves. Past rage and anger, upon death, would be swallowed by the guardian who lived in the split. From souls of the departed, the tentacles grew to stretch and take in the souls of higher beings – you devoured viciously – left no trace behind and crawled to take the throne of a multi-dimensional monster. You were then locked across the dimensions to prevent further expansion. It worked, and here we are, sipping drink off the counter and looking into the faded distance.”

“...”

“What happened, friend?” wondered Igna, “-you look disappointed.”

“I hoped my story to be a little more interesting. There’s no greater ploy for revenge or anything, I’m free to do whatever.”

“Yeah,” returned Igna, “-I wouldn’t say free from doing nothing. Guardian Deity, the fate and security of Marinda lay in thy hand,” the ground rumbled, “-see, the volcano is active, meaning, you’re linked.”

“What about you, friend?”

"I don't know," sipped Igna, "-I heard rumors about a plane crashing somewhere in the zero-district. We'll leave the situation, for now, leave whoever's here to wander the land and see the dangers for themselves. I think I'll rest for a bit longer, wait for the opportune time to wake from the slumber."

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, a tornado rode across the upper-floor, pushed chairs, toppled tables, and blasted, "-DEVIL, WHERE'S MY FATHER!"

"Chill out," returned Igna, "-so noisy, it wastes the beautiful face," he puffed.

"Daughter," rose the guardian deity, "-it's you, finally you," glass on the counter.

"Father?" the annoyance zipped, "-why are you here, what happened, I lost track of the presence... I thought you'd died," her brows rose in relief, "-father," she leaped into his arms, "-you're alive," her racing heart tapped, "-thank the gods."

"No," interjected Igna, "-thank the devil, not the gods," he rose a conniving sneer and sipped. She but ignored the comment, focused her attention on her father, and soon pulled him inside for a father and daughter date. Igna was left to rest in the coming evening breeze and setting sun.

"She came and took the guest away," added the waiter, "-I see the devil's been defeated."

"Don't sing joy yet," he turned and asked for another, "-there's nothing like seeing someone you thought was dead. It's one of those indescribable pleasures."

Time passed, and eventually crossed the 29th of March X114, which moved to be the 1st of January X115.

Huff puff, hands dripping in blood, the first ray of dawn lit the dotted foliage, "-holy shit," gasped Yui with thick hair and salvaged fighting attire, "-the map," she wiped her fingers and looked at a rudimentary drawing of what laid around – a gift from the first village she visited, "-they're very secretive about who and what lives to the north. It's the day of new year, I spent the whole night evading monsters and running senselessly north-west. The people of Yamto were nice and that's it. I've seen the flying castles; when I asked, no one dared to answer. What secret are they hiding?" she muddled through aided by a walking stick, the forest after the village was long, scary, and untamed. "Why didn't I trust them? What if there's nothing northwest, what if this trip is the last I make. Hell, what if master's not even on the damned archipelago." Long hours of walking – stoppage for resupplying and catching little rest she could, Yui made her way slowly across one of the more dangerous forests across Marinda. The growling of the volcano reflexively made not head towards said area, "-give me anything..." *SNAP,* an echo amidst the noisy forest lit the motivation anew, "-life, there's a sign of life beyond Yamto." 1st turned into the 4th, the weather took a change for the worse – rain crashed and rendered the ground practically unwalkable. Desperate Yui snatched herself against a tree, "-Marinda keeps on giving," she gulped, "-how did you survive this land, Aidn of the Western Wind?" mind drifted into the land of sleep, the only place where she'd shake the overwhelming solitude, hunger, and struggle for life.

Chapter 903: Village of Ene

A stumble bundle of vibrations carried off a beaten path. Rain was anything but merciful. Yui, dressed in partly soaked clothes and a rough sounding lung, clambered down the tree, watched as the first ray of dawn announced relatively good weather, and carried towards the sound she heard.

'I'm sure there must be more people around this place,' her cautious and curious eye for detail leveled onto a mild clearing, '-out of place,' she climbed a little slope giving onto a trail. '-if it hadn't rained...' she sighed, looked both ways, one headed in a vague direction of the volcano, the other, westward. The sound of moving parts caught her eyes plenty of times, '-please be a trail,' she hoped and carried along with the clearing. The years spent in solitude, the unhygienic way of living, and the current state of self wasn't great in the mental place.

Growls of stranger beasts blew at cold attire, she rose a lazy and tired frown, "-HOLY!" the eyes widened, '-a beast of majestic proportions,' she gasped, stumbling for her weapon.

"At ease," cried a silhouette over the beast, "-we mean no harm."

"Life," she breathed, "-sorry for the fright." A young man rose over the beasts local to Marinda, six-legged masses of muscles readied to storm and charge their next target. An older man of demi-human nature vaulted off the wagon into the muddied path.

The eyes wandered up and down the very dirtied Yui and ended in a cross-armed examination, "-my lady, you're a foreigner?"

"Yes," she said, "-my plane crashed here a few years ago. I thought I was lost," a chilly wind blew, freezing her teeth into a frantic shake.

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"Stop pestering her," hailed another voice, "-come on," rose another demi-human, "-lady of the crash, please get on," said the lady, old and bearing features to a veteran housewife and scary mother. Before the husband mention another word, the wife held a helping hand which Yui accepted and climbed aboard a cargo-filled wagon. The sweet scent of fruits tickled her nose and revived the sleeping monster, *growl,* pained the stomach, therein, the lady gave a simple and modest smile. Her hand dove into a half-empty basket, rummaged about, and pulled onto apples and oranges, "-there," she kindly offered, "-should keep you until we reach the village."

"Thank you very much," she nodded and ate. The rough road was hard on the posterior, especially on hardened wood. The wife seemed unshaken, and why wouldn't she, her cushion was twice if not trice what young Yui bore.

"Tell me, stranger, who are you?"

Fatigue brought by a somewhat stuffed stomach snapped, "-my name's Yui Haggard," she looked at the back through the passing glimpse of the scenery.

"Yui Haggard?" the lady's eyes widened, her demi-human features rose cautiously, hairs on her arms and legs spiked, "-introduce yourself fully," demanded the lady.

“Right,” Yui blinked twice and popped her head to mention the unbecoming tone, “-I’m Yui Haggard of the Haggard family in Hidros. My official title is Spymaster of the Hidrosian crown. Does that suffice?” her eyes narrowed.

“Wait a minute,” the wagon halted and the husband pulled on the curtains, “-my lady Yui, are you related to a man named Igna Haggard?”

“Igna Haggard?” her eyes sparkled, “-yes, Igna Haggard is my master and friend. I came to Marinda in search of him. Anything you know,” she knelt, “-anything, I’m lost and I need closure. I want to find my master more than anything. Is he on the island, please tell me?”

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“There, there,” the wife kindly patted her back, “-you’re related to the Devil,” she smiled. “-The southern region past the mountain is always left alone and untouched. It’s the magnet for careless sailors to set anchor and rest. Let me tell you something,” she smiled from ear to ear, “-the Devil truly changed our lives for the better.”

“Worry not, lady Haggard,” the wagon resumed, “-we’re headed to Orn Village, albeit a town now,” he laughed, “-if we’re lucky, we may make it in time to see our daughter.”

A na?vely clueless Yui sat with her knees tucked into her chest. The wife spoke of many tales, many instances of the Devil’s wrath, and borderline godly feats. Which in a way felt moronic, a devil performing the acts of God. Still, unfazed by the underlying facts, Yui listened attentively.

It would be another few hours; the sun passed the midway point and the wife ran out of stories. She had her head on a pillow facing her husband’s back, the mind drifted into the peaceful realm of rest and recovery. As for Yui, the lass was invited to sit beside the husband – the overall feel of the voyage changed. The town of Orn was a few days out, and from the weather, grew to be three to four days. He explained the general route and settlements scattered around Marinda.

“First stop,” the path rose to a clearing, “-the farming village of Ene,” they paused at the summit, her cheeks flushed at the sudden change in scenery. The trees were shorter and kind, large fields of plantations spread around a settlement surrounded by a stone wall. Men in armor and weaponry passed the wagon, “-how goes it, Yenth?” signaled the commonly dressed adventurer.

“Eik,” replied Yenth, the husband, “-so-so,” he smiled, “-been to the trading city; they’re swimming in the sudden economic boom.”

“We have to thank the council,” he touched the handle of his dagger, “-well, we discovered another dungeon deeper in the forest. Seems the Prowlers and Flyers are a common sight in the outside world too. Where there’s money to be made,” he rose a high-five, “-there’s fame to be found,” returned Yenth. A sharp clapped signaled the end of their conversation – the wagon slowly shuffled down the slope and entered a loud and rustic village. Many hands worked the field, traders went to and fro, children ran about – those old enough for battle were trained and guided by a man in silvery armor. The crest of Ene was engraved onto the stone wall, “-we’re here,” said Yenth. Subtle movements at the back took Yui by surprise, warm hands wrapped around her chest and pulled, “-looks nice,” said the sleepy mother resting her sharp chin onto Yui’s shoulder.

“Don’t startle her, Hallow.”

“Whatever,” she returned, “-I’ll go check in with an inn for tonight.”

“And I’m headed to the trader’s building.” By way of their expression, she had to make a choice, “-I’ll come with you,” she nodded at the wife.

“Understood,” cheered Hallow vaulting off with the energy of a younger lass, the landing felt harsh, Yui cringed for the ankles in vain, “-let’s go,” returned a sassy side-glance.

“Hallow changes when she’s around the smell of booze, keep an eye on her,” murmured a whisper. Off on a mix of gravel and stones, the carriage muddled into the way distance. The buildings looked relatively the same, mostly modestly built houses. ‘-This looks like Arda,’ she stuck to Hallow, ‘-demi-humans, adventurers, young mages and villagers running about their day.’

“Surprising, isn’t it?” added the wife, “-it didn’t always look like this. A few years ago, the same people were starved for food, money, and basic commodities. Many families, including ours, were struck by tragedy and misfortune. To see everyone, smile and have a chance at survival – my heart’s warm just thinking about the journey.”

“Lady Hallow...”

“Hallow is fine,” she casually said wandering the alleys and roads.

“Hallow, the tales told in the carriage build my master to be a complete fanatic. A murderous monster without care for another’s life. Albeit, I don’t refute that statement – why accept him, more specifically, why accept me?”

“Oh darling,” she tightened her lips, “-don’t worry, no one’s angry. Marinda’s undoubtedly a safe place,”

“...”

“-at times.”

Yui simply kept a blank expression.

“Forget it, who cares about the politics or whatnot. Enjoy the town,” without fail, opposed to an inn – a building of alcohol, women, and men rose above Yui’s glistening forehead, “-the Morris Pub.” Hallow pushed her weight through the door, locked at the barkeeper, and jogged to the counter.

Therein, the worker, a muscular man of traits of a lizardman, threw a warm smile deeper at back and shouted, “-HALLOW’S BACK PEOPLE!”

“YAY!” cheered the scattered entourage, “-drinks on me!” they yelled and rushed the counter, one by one, her corner was stacked with beer mugs, and ale. Yui shuffled to her side and pulled onto the dress, “-what?”

The barkeeper horned onto the stranger and pushed a free drink, “-on the house lovely lady.”

“Thanks?” she downed the cup and squinted at the lizardman, “-why’s everyone cheering for Hallow?”

“Oh, she’s a celebrity,” he bellowed, “-Hallow the Sponge is a name renowned across the pubs and taverns around the isle. Look over there,” he pointed, “-awarded to Hallow, the best drinker and eater.”

“Once she starts drinking, there’s no stopping lest the world ends. No matter the number of drinks in her system, she never gets drunk.”

Yui but kept a worried expression, “-don’t worry,” said another larger figure behind the counter, “-we know not to serve her too much. Lady Hallow’s a lovely person and one of influence over the pubs and inns.” Over the following hours, she drank and drank, Yui joined the festivities and followed. More patrons flooded Morris, bards played without end. Soon, Yui realized why Hallow was so popular as told by a quieter more observant bystander, “-she lost her children and was persecuted by the Celestials. The responsibility of a mother and daughter’s death laid partly on her shoulder – since then, their family’s life was never the same. Their house went in flames, at times they had nothing to eat – and soon, another child was born dead. Regardless of the misfortune, without help, the family rose as one, especially Hallow, she smiled and kept a positive attitude – her smile was contagious. Before trading was viable, the husband and wife undertook dangerous routes throughout Marinda, they made trips were no other trader wanted to step. The courage and bravery helped save plenty of lives by them delivering medicines, and soon became the only couple who braved the journey to Nordway. It’s people like them, adventurers, a beacon of happiness and motivation who help make the isle a better place. The harsh times could have increased crime and murder, yet – stories similar to theirs flooded the taverns and inns. Even if there are outliers, the majority of the populous have a solid grasp on bad and good,” the tone lowered, “-if they tried to harm – the devil and his servants would be at their door knocking. Said fear alone helps keep the crowd confined.”

The night carried, Yui, flushed and drunk, found herself taking a stool and sitting outside the well-lit entrance. Sparkling starlight went in a circle, “-Yui,” a strong pull broke the intoxicated mien, “-let’s go,” said Hallow in the company of Yenth. Soon as they reached the inn, the couple shared a bed whilst Yui fell asleep on the second.

Day rose, the windows tapped loudly, “-wake up,” cried wandering figures cloaked in black in the gray filled morning mist, “-wake up,” the windows tapped again. Yui half pulled herself from the bed and meandered to the window, ‘what the?’ long sticks went from door to door waking the residents.

“Morning,” echoed a chipper voice, “-sleep well?”

“I guess so,” she yawned, “-what happened last night?”

Hallow gave a humble smile, “-we had fun,” she cheered, “-let’s go. Breakfast and we’re off.”

Yenth, gathered around a nice meal, further explained the trip from Ene to the village of Urg, would pass through a Celestial’s castle; Yin. “-We might have to camp out in the wild,” to which he looked at Yui, “-I saw the weapons and a tag on thy neck. Fighter?”

“Yes,” she returned.

“Good, you’ll be our adventurer then,” they ate, “-no use spending money when we have you to thank.”

“Quip pro quo…”

“You know it,” he winked.

Chapter 904: Maiden of the south

Company of Yenth and Hallow, to Yui's mind, was the best thing fate could have bestowed. Using the momentum of last night's drinking session, Yui found herself on the wagon headed to the village of Urg.

"I heard rumors," said Yui wanting more information. Ene village disappeared for growingly tall foliage. The wagon gave the appearance of sinking into the ground – the path seemed to cut within the ground itself, "-about the trip from Ene to Urg being dangerous."

"Yeah," returned a pleasantly grinning Yenth, "-bandits and monsters are common. Many have a different outlook on crime, bandits are not a new type. Rogues exiled by the villages and settlements created groups and force themselves into hiding. The trading route goes through the Epizna forest," to which he rose his fingers at the unchanging scenery, "-the trees can grow to be enormous. Epizna forest and the land here to the south is the territory of the Elven people and comrades. Protectors of the forest. It's quite a task crossing the route."

"And, the monsters?"

"Should be simple work," said a sleepy Hallow, "-long as the elven people take care of the threat, we should be fine. Part of the journey's become considerably safe – and I use the considered as means to but add a little hint of safety. The council had the elven people sign to work as protectors of the forest."

"A good and safe trading route is a positive for those at the top."

And so, their journey traversed many obstacles; dangerous paths, ascending sharp hills, crossing dangerously feeble bridges, braving the unpredictable weather, and more importantly, the coming climb upward to the highlands on were nested the village of Orn. Dusk broke over the forest; an ice-cold glare loomed over the wagon.

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"A bit farther," pressed Yenth, "-we should be there," pitch darkness swarmed the area as lights flared in the distance – the narrow trail divulged into an open area. Running water splashed ominously – during the day the sight would have been one to wonder. At night, the context and nature changed.

Yenth masterfully guided the wagon regardless of the levels of light. Evidently, the demi-humans were accustomed to the night. Hallow vaulted in her typical fashion, "-hard ground," she cheered. Yui followed her lead, "-where are we?" she asked, noticing amber lights in the distance.

"A camping ground for merchants and traders," she replied, "-come along."

They crossed man-made structures, supportive pillars, campfires, and strange huts placed at the edges of the camp, "-looks different."

"Don't mind the huts; tis for the guardians," remarked Hallow headed to the bed of water, "-come along," she gestured, "-the flowing water's best to have at night." Aided by a trusty metal mug, the mother took a swig and laughed, "-amazingly refreshing."

Yui, guided by an amber light from a lantern the couple gifted, knelt and accepted Hallow's drink – the cold liquid swished around her teeth and refreshingly dropped to her core.

“Amazing,” she exhaled a hearty sigh, “-what about the lights in the distance?”

“Adventurers, merchants, travelers or whatnot, who knows really,” she stood upon hearing twigs, Yenth’s shadow materialized from the somber woods, “-I’ve secured our place in the company of an adventuring band.”

Hallow energetically pulled Yui’s hand, “-let’s go.”

A humble gathering of war veterans gathered around a crackling fire. Many exchanged stories of wars and adventure. “-Everyone,” announced a giant of a figure looking over the flame with a mug in hand, “-let’s raise our mugs to lady Hallow and lord Yenth.” Startling applause rattled the surrounding, flying critters flapped the foliage and disappeared into the moonless night.

Yenth opted to side with prominently dressed gentlemen, “-trading,” mentioned his wife scurrying to a band of female warriors. She dropped at their side and smiled; the applause vanished as soon as it appeared. ‘Looks like common courtesy to greet the couple,’ observed Yui.

“Come here!” gestured Hallow, the entourage of fighters scanned the curious addition.

“New traveling partner?” they inquired.

“Yes,” she returned, “-she’s quite the catch.” Without any word said, Yui was seated in the middle of a circle of veterans, “-tell us, m’lady, tell us a bit about yourself,” they sipped, “-pale skin and human appearance, are you a Celestial?”

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“No, no,” she warmly said and looked at Yenth as well as Hallow, both gave a nod, ‘-guess my identity’s not necessarily a secret.’ “-I crashed landed on Marinda a few years ago. I spend the worse part of three years surviving the harshness of the isle.”

“Wait a moment,” interjected one, “-crash-landed, are you the fair-skinned lady who was spotted at the zero district a few years back?”

“I suppose I am, saw no one else save myself.”

“Holy shit,” the man roughly rummaged through his knapsack and pulled onto a piece of cheese, “-to the maiden of the south.”

“Maiden of the south?” she blinked and stared at the equally confused faces.

“Sorry, sorry,” the man rose before the fire and saluted, “-my name’s Astic Otle. A Celestial of the Otle familia; I fought in the war of independence. Before that, I was in charge of a team tasked to monitor a survivor to the south. The maiden of the south greatly impressed us with the fighting prowess and ingenuity,” her story soon became one that she heard from a second-hand account, “-counting amongst her achievement is the slaying of Ragne, the earthworm demon.”

“Ragne!” they cheered.

“Ragne?” she but kept an observant mien.

“Tell us more!” said the crowd, “-we want more!” they cried.

Took quite a few minutes before remembering, “-so it’s that pest,” she murmured and recounted how it had been on her trail for months. By the end of the story, most fell asleep and the few interested watchers eventually dozed to the sound of the silent night.

WAKE UP! cried a distant echo, “-bandit attack!” loud clangs awoken the drunk soldiers, “-over here,” said a familiar voice, “-follow me,” it was Hallow, she’d made a path into the bushes, “-come with me,” she ordered. Yui subconsciously followed. Loud cries and explosions erupted in the distance.

“What’s happening?”

“Don’t worry,” reassured Hallow, “-just get in the wagon,” she grabbed Yui by the pantaloon and flung, the secretary flew for a few seconds and landed harshly. Yenth was readied and sprang the beasts into action. Adrenaline filled Hallow’s face turned bright red, “-the rush of traveling,” she and her husband shared the same sentiment.

“What about them?”

“They’ll be fine,” said Yenth, “-I’m not losing my cargo. The veterans are strong enough to dispatch of the bandits.”

“Why are we running then?”

“Because we have to,” added Hallow, “-a bandit attack is rare and is sometimes signs of a deeper ploy. Those types of attacks are often the work of restless souls trapped by the heaviness of Marinda’s darkness. Killing the bandits is akin to killing zombies – there’s no point save one survival. Even when the zombies are killed – noise, light, the scent of blood, usually serve as premium bait for the Prowlers and Flyers. Forget about the past and look forward,” she tightly held her dress.

‘Who am I to question their judgment,’ Yui’s shameless self-righteousness got in the way, ‘-Hallow and Yenth’s probably went through more than this. I shouldn’t pry.’ The trip resumed earlier than expected; the hours skipped silently. The events rendered the aura quite anxious for the couple and passenger.

Later on, at the clock striking noon – the party arrived at the last landmark before Urg. “-the castle town of Yin,” said Yenth, “-see the path here,” he pointed to a clearing southwest, “-goes to a fishing town,” the carriage pulled opposed the latter path and climbed a steep slope. Glimpses of Yin’s guardian towers sent feelings of dread down Yui’s back, “-the architecture’s similar to nightwalkers.”

“Ahh,” clapped Hallow, “-you know about the nightwalkers?”

“Yes, quite well actually, don’t know about nightwalkers here.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” the carriage finished the arduous climb. Pale stone, Victorian-style railings, overgrown grass over part of the castle wall after which laid a dried moat. Patrolling guards flung their suspicious brows at the carriage, which slowly made way over a suspended bridge.

“Remain quiet for this one,” murmured Yenth carefully. Hallow’s chirpiness dwindled, the wife but watch from her widened pupils – an arch-gate tiptoed a stone’s throw away.

“State your business, traveler.”

“Yenth,” he replied, “-we’re traders and bring items from the trading city. We’d like to spend the night for my traveling buddy’s very sickly,” he referred to the horse-like creature.

“We must check with our lord,” added the suspicious guard.

Yui suddenly vaulted off the wagon and imposingly made her way to the guard, “-state thy allegiance, nightwalker.”

“The Sabbath Clan,” returned the perplexed guard, “-why ask?”

“Sabbath Clan,” she smiled, “-I’m a member of Haggard Dynasty.”

“The Progenitor,” they bowed, “-a member of the Blood King’s faction is always welcomed within our walls. May I have the honor of thy name?”

“Yui Haggard, spymaster of Hidros,” she reached around her neck and pulled a crest, “-here, this should prove my title and background.”

A bat-shaped shadow materialized behind the closed gates, “-there’s no need for such a display, lady Yui,” bowed a familiar face.

“Lord Kyoin?”

“Lady Yui,” he smiled, “-we have much to discuss. Please,” glanced the traders, “- the famed Lord Yenth and lady Hallow, welcome to Castle Yin.” Gates echoed, the entourage split, Yenth, and Hallow were busy showing their wares to the castle residents. Yui, on the other hand, was taken to the upper floors of the fortress, Lord Kyoin, Baron by title, freely strode up spiral stairs and reached an open upper floor.

“Please treat yourself to the armory and have a warm bath. We’ll speak in a few after you’ve freshened up, the trip’s undoubtedly been tedious.” Maids quickly took Yui by the hand and ran for a bath.

‘I had a bath,’ she combed her hair before a mirror. The castle flowers brought outfits of various kinds to please any taste a lady might have, ‘-lost a lot of hair in the process,’ she sighed and looked around, ‘- this feels wrong. I’m accustomed to the basics, everything feels too extravagant.’ A military uniform laid underneath the dresses, “-this is perfect,” she dawned the white and golden outfit, “-Hidros’s uniform’s always classy.”

“Lady Yui,” hailed the baron.

“Lord Kyoin, might I ask to why a representative of the Sabbath clan’s here?”

“To search for you,” he said, “-lord éclair asked the nightwalkers for help in searching for the mythical land of Marinda.”

“And? Did it take three years to launch the search party?”

“No, I arrived on the island a year ago and was mostly focused on the political changes brought by the influential council. A lot’s changed and I have a hint of who’s responsible.’

“I understand now,” her arms crossed, “-you were sent for King Igna.”

The silence was loud, “-must I spell out who’s more valuable?”

“No, don’t waste your breath. So, what’s the situation in the outside world?”

“Bad, very bad I’d say. Hidros’s shakier than before, the Alrosian’s Alliance grew into the worse deal we could have made. Arda’s able to grow despite the pressure pressed by the Wracia Empire and the traitorous inside of Alpha. The same can’t be said for Rotherham and Rosespire – the economic paradise of Rotherham had to forsake most of the trading activity to diplomats of Alpha to ensure an insider-free trading environment. It’s a shitshow, and honestly, I don’t see how the parliament can stand the insult any further. Hidros’s being torn from the inside – Lord Elon, Lady Elvira, and Queen Courtney can only do so much to hold the crumbling innards. Some reports even mention Alpha conspiring with the conglomerates to greatened military might.”

“Who’s a friend and who’s foe?”

“Us against the world,” he said woefully, “-we need the tide to change, and we need the real king to take the throne. Prime minister éclair publicly admitted to King Igna’s disappearance in a staged plane crash.”

“Radical but wise move,” she shuddered, “-we need to find the king.”

Chapter 905: Last Stretch

“How is it a wise move?”

“Look at it from their perspective. The fake king’s already caused more harm than good,” she assumed from the gathered information, “-with the king disappeared, it’ll give Hidros some breathing space. Yes, Alpha and the opposition will gain influence; don’t matter, long as we have time and space to breathe. When was the plane crash?”

“A year ago,” he returned, “-lady Yui, I also came to the same conclusion. Sadly, the results weren’t much different. Instead, Alrosia got high on power and decreed the Trader’s act, which I spoke of earlier.”

“Emperor and Empress?”

“No idea, they are preoccupied with their child.”

“Pathetic,” she snarled, “-anyway, I should check on Yenth and Hallow.”

“We’ll arrange shelter and sustenance,” he gestured in a polite and well-informed manner.

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Next, the courtyard, Yui glided over a few stairs and landed at the stone and gravel path shaped in a cross, connecting the four sides of the square castle wall. Hallow and Yenth charismatically lured the younger palace flowers into purchasing their wares; perfume and extravagant accessories built from dwarven knowhow. She shuffled to the shadow of a stable and peered, Yenth’s showmanship and Hallow’s contagious smile, they could sell dirt to the wealthy, or just about anything to make a profit. The ladies of the castle looked at the wares with passion and affection.

“Thank you for your business,” said Yenth packing the unsold items.

Hallow's tired cheeks reddened on turning towards the stable, "-there you are!" she hailed, "-I was worried," she skipped with the vigor of a teenager, "-what happened, I thought the lord of the castle got angry."

Yenth but kept a solemn look, he ghosted the well-dressed Yui, turned towards the wagon, and threw the items inside with a stronger thud. "Don't worry about him," said Hallow holding both palms at Yui's visage, "-he's mad because he's worried. You sprang from the wagon and spoke to the nightwalkers like it was nothing. I shuddered when they returned, not to mention the lord, he arrived with a glazed frown."

"Nothing to worry about," she explained, "-the castle's under the authority of the Sabbath Clan, who've sworn allegiance to the council of Nightwalkers, presided by the Blood king's faction, one founded by none other than Igna Haggard's uncle, Staxius Haggard, a hero in Hidrosian Culture." Yenth's silent treatment faded during the night, a warm dinner, a good place to rest, and more importantly, a very heated conversation between Yui and Kyoin.

Next day couldn't have arrived any faster – the booze-filled study unleashed a gust of sweat and torment onto an innocent corridor. Passing maids held their noses and scurried – Yui ambled from the somber room with impression to newly born undead. She held her arms to the closed window and imprinted her palm onto the cold glass, mist traced the outline, vision focused below onto the courtyard where an energetic Hallow waved.

"Lady Yui," gasped an exhausted Kyoin, "-I swear, there's no competing a chosen one from the Haggard dynasty. Honestly, how can one be so adept at political discussion; I dare say tis an unbecoming advantage."

She returned the wave, turned on her back, and laid against the edge, "-such are the words of a sore loser. Advantages are granted to all, one shall but take the cards and turn them in their favor. As teachings from the founder say, he who adapts is he who prevails."

"Easy to say and hard to apply," he leaned against the opposing wall, "-for one of his intellect, there's no question the saying works for him. What about us, the lesser intelligent bunch?"

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"Experience," she added – a lady of the castle strode in her lavish dress, leaned beside Yui, and unlocked the window, "-breakfast is ready," she side-glanced and left.

"What was that?" blinked Yui.

"Jealousy," he laughed, "-I feel for them, ladies who don't know the grandness of the outworld. Political pawns awaiting for their fathers to decide who shall go where and what family shall control what assets."

"Such is the way of the higher realm," she pushed against the edge, tipped her head at the lord, and made way to the dining area. Yenth opted for silence, Hallow's energetic persona didn't take long to enchant the guards and retainers. A lovely and nice change of pace, breakfast finished blandly.

Back on the trail, Yenth fastened the reins and pulled, the wagon rose. Hallow clambered in and soon, Yui followed after thanking Lord Kyoin. Same old background noise, the casual breeze, a careful descent,

a sharp turn right and off they were to Urg. Head on a bundle of clothes, Hallow rested her eyes whilst Yui sat with feet dangling down the wagon's back.

"Yenth," something caught the sleeping mother's attention, "-we have company," she said. He simply pulled close as he could to the trail's edge – loud tremors rushed at them. Blood-soaked adventurers riding six-legged beasts clamored past, "-Hallow, Yenth and Yui," they hailed, "-see you at Urg!" they rushed.

"Told you," murmured Yenth, "-the veterans are strong."

Rear of the party crossed eyes with Yui, a similar wagon to theirs held bodies, 'Astic Oattle,' time slowed as he went past. Vibrations drowned into quietness, the forest's chatter resumed, Yui who had stood to check on the coming threat, lowered to the previous pose, 'people die.'

Village of Urg; a supply depot and training grounds for courageous locals. A tall mountain range to the right sheltered from the harsh eastern breeze, the peak rose beyond the clouds – occasional frigid gusts slipped onto the foot of the mountain. The temperature dropped occasionally, dependent on the peak's mood. Yenth's wagon climbed to a clearing, *boooooom* an echo rattled the ground, Yui peaked at the noise and fell back. The short trip took a few hours. Procedure asked traders to have their inventory checked.

Hallow simply climbed off the wagon, threw an impatient look at Yui. "-Not enough sleep?"

"Tell me about it," she yawned, "-Urg's always a pain. Just look around, young men volunteering to give their lives." Motivation was high, younger fighters shouted. Hallow did as she always does, her route through convoluted passages and allies arrived at a grave beside which laid a field hospital. Earlier's party stood respectfully over the deceased.

'I was right,' gulped Yui, '-Astic did die.'

They took a small trip to an open field and laid down on the cold grass. Sun wasn't hot not was it cold, a perfect balance for a nap. Thoughts went about Yui's head – a question formulated on where she turned towards Hallow, "-what's the point-" she stopped, "-never mind," back to cloud gazing, '-she's asleep.'

Hours passed, the mundaneness of the trips caught up. Travelling held many great things, and other times, many hearts tearing occurrences. Near-death experiences, riding in pitch-darkness, exchanging stories with fellow travelers. She'd experienced it firsthand. Yenth muddled into the field, tapped Yui and Hallow's shoulder, "-let's go," he said, "-We leave now and we'll make it an hour after sunset."

A spot-on estimation, Orn Village – the destination rose as sparks of flames lit the nearby path. 'light orbs,' she observed, '-magic, now this brings back memories of Glenda.' A high stone barrier rose around the village, on which a sign read, "-Town of Orn."

"Don't look at me like that," frowned Yenth, "-village or town, Orn is still Orn." Another successful trip by the couple. They rode to a guild-house, exited the wooden carrier, and looked at the busy street.

'There's a lot of different races,' she observed, "-Hallow, can you?"

"Yes," she smiled, "-let's go," she wrapped a shawl around the shoulder and left into the dead of the night. Destination, their home, a well-built two-story building dressed in stone and concrete.

"I knew it," smiled Yui, "-the trading expeditions are lucrative."

"Not really," she sighed, "-our fortune comes from my daughter's allegiance to the council. Our youngest is," she opened the lock and feet ran down the stairs, "-MOTHER!" it screamed and dived into a tight embrace, "-you're here a few days early."

"I had to see my daughter."

"Who's that?" she rose a suspicious brow.

"My name's Yui Haggard."

"A friend of my teacher?" she blinked, "-well, what a pleasant surprise," the attitude bordered smugness, "-what brings such a fine lady to our home," she whispered to her mother, "-why bring a stranger?"

"Such isn't a way to speak to our friend," thundered a manlier voice.

"FATHER!"

"Tania, long time no see, darling."

Before was a lovely family, an idyllic scene of joyful innocence. "-I suppose I should come back later," she spun.

"Wait a moment," interjected Tania, "-let me grab my shoes; let's go on a walk."

The beautiful maidens found themselves touring around town, "-Haggard, I presume you're a member of teach's family?"

"I suppose," she replied, "-I'm just the assistant of Igna's butler. Tell me, Tania, how did you come to be my master's student?"

"Long story," she said, "-family died and a deal was made to the devil."

"A deal with the devil?" she grinned.

Tania looked the foreigner up and down, "-here to take master away?"

"Correct," she said, "-I spend three years searching for him, living in the harsh wilderness of Marinda's whimsical weather. I know it's much to ask, take me to him."

Stories about the Devil's exploit were spoken along the way, Yui feasted a picture of Igna standing at the peak of castle Einheim, "-what's Igna up too?"

"We don't know," returned a pensive Tania, "-the devil simply abdicated our offer of making him the true patriarch of Marinda. He said, and I quote, 'Marinda is best left to the people of Marinda' I respect the thought, then again," her tone lowered to doubt, "-I'm not longer his apprentice. A student graduates from her master's care when they defeat said master. I challenged master in a duel thinking I'd lose, why would I win, he's the devil. I used all he taught and struck fast, next thing I know, I defeated my master. Took on the title of Princess of Faes and was bestowed a new name of power. Afterward, we went to check on him, he left, leaving a simple letter addressed to the new rulers, "-to those who've

been slain in battle; grant them favor of a pious burial. The dead must be honored, their bravery recognized and their tenacity worshipped. Such is the way of war, some fall, many lose their lives, countries are divided, widespread malice and hate are left to fester. War remains steadfast – I’ve killed more than I remember, and to honor the families touched by said action, I’ll focus on helping the natives on achieving a greater sense of fulfillment. There will come a day when my country will need me, and until that day comes, I wish to stay far from politics and intrigue,” signed, I. Haggard. “-We knew what he meant, it was a goodbye dressed in nice clothing. We decided to allow the devil rest and focus on bettering Marinda,” they reached a viewpoint overlooking the town, “-and you’d look at it, the places grow and the people prosper. Marinda’s ready to be revealed as a kingdom to the world – we’re ready to open our doors and brave the outside land. We’ll do so under the Devil’s banner.”

“The international world isn’t a place for newcomers to spread their wings. You’d soon find individuals readied to invade and take what little thee have.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be worried. We have Cthulhu, the guardian deity of Marinda. We’ve gotten a taste of war; Celestials are complacent to the new age – if it comes to battle I guarantee we’ll endure.”

A resolute gust whispered, “-I’ll conjure the portal to the town of Cthulhu, tis where my master resides. When you get there, please pass on this,” she handed a note, “-the Marindian council waits for when the Devil decides to take in his refugees. We’ll make sure the world knows how great a man Igna Haggard is.”

Chapter 906: Town of Cthulhu

“Why am I nervous?” one step into the portal changed everything. Yui stood at the center of Cthulhu, a booming town told by the gathering of people and laughter. Miners returned from work, adventurers made trips to pubs and taverns, novice parties joined hands with veteran, “-am I in Marinda?” she blinked cluelessly, a loud jet stream blew in the distance, the ground shook to which she stumbled into sudden desperation. Fondly enough, the bystanders passed nonchalantly, prominent were the demi-human races, elves, and dwarves were spotted in localized quarters.

“Out of the road!” shrieked a frantic carriage driver, a cold pair of hands grabbed and pulled Yui from the street, the commotion caused many heads to veer.

“My lady, are you okay?” inquired a muscular, very skimpily dressed warrior of the lizardmen tribe, the buffed arms and chest were loaded in symbology and tattoos.

“I’m alright,” she swooned – the distant carriage shuffled along the somewhat busy street.

“Good,” he smiled, “-off I go then,” he held her to a stand and casually turned towards his entourage of similarly muscular warriors.

‘Gladiators?’ she wondered to as where they were headed.

“Come one come all,” shouted energetic children, “-the battle of the races starts in a few hours. Come get your tickets,” they ran along; people were dressed according to their status. Fair skin, as in no demi-human features, kept visibly higher quality clothes.

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'The volcano,' her seeking stare landed on a towering pillar of smoke, '-aren't they afraid of eruption?' now safely under cover of the sidewalk; smaller steps felt necessary. An unknown place, different atmosphere, and stranger behaviors, '-feels like Arda but doesn't?' shimmering lights took her focus, Yui found herself a few steps forward looking into a shop of various items, clothes, accessories, and precious stones. '-The price is in gold, copper, and silver. How far back is Marinda?' Adrenaline rush of the near-death experience eased, the mind returned to its normal functions, '-bigger question,' she looked around, '-where am I going to find a master?' The crowds didn't look so inviting – a level of doubt and reclusiveness kept the guard heightened.

'When in doubt,' she walked aided by the art of deduction and followed a trail of a drunkard, young men, and chatter, '-get to a tavern.'

Didn't take long, a few minutes' walks and thus presided lines of taverns, cottages, inns, and eateries – the various establishments varied in service and in who they served. '-Guess the none-Arda feel is the lack of trust between the races.' She walked, peered through the ajar windows, and looked around suspiciously. Despite the obvious curiosity, bystanders paid no heed – her outfit, fair skin, and well-combed hair pointed to nobility. Yui even slipped on golden earrings, a pearly neckpiece, thin but vibrant bracelets, and finally, nicely fitted rings.

"My lady," called a timid voice, she disrupted her spying and turned to a gathering of Celestials. Two women and a boy at the center, "-might I ask why a maiden's out on the street?"

"The Devil," she said, "-I need to see the devil."

"The Devil?" they exchanged strange looks and fixed Yui once more, "-we'll take you to the devil no problem," added one of the ladies.

"Never mind," she returned, "-thank you for the help."

"Why not come with us," shuffled the boy, "-we could be of great help. Celestials ought to help one another."

The arms crossed, "-seriously?" she squinted, "-the pitiful attempt won't work. What's the plan, take me to the alley wherein my wares be stolen?" she smiled, "-if thee wishes to steal, ask of your comrades to not so bluntly look at us."

Louds stomps rampaged onto the street, men in military outfits circled the trio, "-give up," said the leader, "-we've trailed thy activities for the past few days. Did you really think we wouldn't catch impersonators?"

"Damn," they surrendered, "-another time," the physical body swapped for a reptilian creature.

"There's no other time," added the guard, "-when the hammer of justice strikes, only the pious and righteous shall be left standing. A long stay at the dungeon should suffice." Other guards rounded the charlatans; carriages arrived in stride; a big rectangular box served as a taste to the coming days of imprisonment.

The wolf-like figure rose a content gaze, "-I'm pleasantly surprised," he commented, "-I'd have never guessed a noble lady to be street-smart."

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"I'm no one special," she said, "-by the uniform, might I presume thy connections expand across town?"

He puffed his chest and nodded, "-good to hear," she paused, "-I need to meet the Devil."

"Lord Haggard," he frowned.

"Yes, I need to see him immediately."

Hesitation in his otherwise lightning-fast replies caused a few concerns, Yui's warm gaze eventually melted the guard's shield, "-you win my lady. Take the road here and head eastward, follow the sweet smell of fish and the warm passing of a lake, and thee'll arrive at lord Haggard's estate. It's hard to miss – a mansion on a lake. No guarantee the lord will take visitors. The best bet would be his shop," he pulled a pocket watch, "-lord Haggard should be getting dinner ready. I'll hurry if I were you."

"Understood," she nodded, "-thank you very much."

"Always here to help," he shouted, "-ask for another guard if ever something bothers thee."

"Will do," she echoed and sprinted at a fairly inhumane pace.

'Master,' passed the clouded thoughts. The lord's estate had a good ring; going by memory, expectation of a massive structure had her prowled the area for an expensive-looking construction.

'The scent of fish and the flowing of water,' closer she got, the farther grew the town's center. Before much wait, walkways grew dirty, the smell of vegetables and raw meat potently kept the market square under a cloud of unpleasant scent. The light wasn't much present either, a few passing guards rose their lanterns, spotted a nicely dressed lady, and continued their patrol.

'Prime spot for getting mugged,' she thought at a reasonable pace, the drainage system headed towards the lake, she followed and arrived at a pit of darkness, '-a lake?' she scanned and spotted a few lights at the center lain on a bridge that headed towards the shore. Yui circled the lake and eventually arrived at the mouth of the bridge, adjacent laid a modest building named, '-Twin Jelly Shop,' lights inside were amber, the silence pensive, and the breeze cold. Her leather boots stepped at the door and tapped. A familiar voice echoed, "-closed for the night."

She tapped again; "-dinner isn't ready yet. Come around in a few minutes."

Once more, "-must I spell out the words?"

Tap, a volley of loud steps threw the door open, "-by Intherna's ire, must I drill the words in thy head?" Hazel-colored pupils fluttered; dark-brown bangs led to a high bun and a rounded little nose, flushed cheeks, and lightly done makeup gasped at him, "-hello."

"Hello?" her mouth opened, "-Is that all?" the pitch shot, "-hello... MASTER!"

"There's no need to pop a blood vessel," he threw his shoulder at the door and returned inside, "-come along."

"Seriously?" she followed with louder stomps, "-I expected a more, '-Yui, I'm glad to see you,' type of response."

"I'm glad to see you," he replied without much effort, "-look at my expression, I'm seriously pleased to see someone of recognition. Don't mind the sarcastic tone, been a while since I spoke to someone."

Looking at King Igna's place of work struck deeply, '-how has he been living?'

"Why the concerned look?" back behind a hot stove, "-don't I look kingly?"

"No, I mean, not really? I never imagined the King of Hidros would be here cooking out of all the profession..."

"Cooking was the reason I got my name and gained my memory. Goes without saying, a person cannot forget where he came from, no matter where he ends."

"..."

"Confused how to address me?" he smiled, "-Igna's fine, there's no need for formality. I mean, look where we are; the freshly born Kingdom of Marinda."

"Speaking of the kingdom, what about Hidros, Alrosia?"

"Thing's happened," he side-glanced, "-you were the one who killed me, remember?"

"I had to," she said, "-forced to else the kingdom would have been destroyed."

"I never said it was a bad decision, to be honest, I'm proud. My comrades acted without bias and chose the safety of the people instead of mine. What's the death of an immortal?" he laughed and coughed, "-damn the smoke."

"What's the death of an immortal?" she took a seat and glared, "-everything," she shouted, "-the guilt I felt, the guilt éclair felt, we were devastated after sending the rocket. I can't begin to describe the scar it left, I wanted to run and forget about it all, still, éclair fought on, so I followed and endured whatever came our way. Is that why you left, huh, character fucking building?"

"Calm down," he threw a warm plate on her lap, "-take a bite, I'm sure you haven't had a good meal in a while."

A table and chair summoned, "-how about dinner to catch up?"

"..."

"Why are you stumped now?"

"The table, the chair, you summoned it from out of nowhere..."

"Right, I didn't sit around and do nothing. The Devil's been busy," he stared her in the eyes and smirked, a dazzle of purple lightning flashed across the bicolored pupils, "-long story short, I'm more powerful than before." Other sets of taps interrupted the conversation, "-a moment," he excused from the table and carried a few baskets to the door. Curious Yui peeped through a window giving into the shop's main area. A sister dressed in a religious outfit graciously accepted the basket, her entourage was compromised of kids and teenagers, "-thank you again, lord Haggard."

“Don’t mention it, sister Ehter. Don’t cause her much trouble,” he joyously cautioned the little troublemakers.

“Yes, Lord Haggard,” they replied and jumped onto the street, Igna threw a knowing gaze at an escort of warriors who patiently stood in the shadows.

“Let’s go, children,” said Ehter. The door clicked and Igna returned to the table.

“Excuse me once again,” he said and grabbed his fork.

“Can I ask?”

“It’s food for the orphanage,” he said, “-rations for the many who were left alone after the war. Since they’re demi-humans, long as they reach a certain level of experience and skill, the body instantly grows into adulthood. Said sudden spurt is a reason why they were alienated centuries ago.” Another bite, more taps echoed, “-pardon me again,” he rose and met the visitors. Same baskets but to housewives, they passed and a few starved homeless people came in turn, he graciously gave them food and finally locked the door.

No baskets or rations in sight, the devil took his throne, a stool, and ate.

“Again?”

“Food for the poverty-stricken families. I give warm meals for the many who cannot afford said basic necessity. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t give out charity without a purpose. Condition on obtaining said meal is the motivation for them to go find work at the guild on a full stomach. Desperation causes death, those who take the meals are usually housewives unable to feed the many mouths they ought to care about. I don’t much pay attention to their situation – the devil’s here to guide and help, not to spoon-feed. As for the homeless, well, nothing can be done, either they’re too weakened to work or are doomed by some illness. Considering how the outside world is, Marinda’s so much better – notice how the homeless were but two. Stick around till tomorrow, they won’t show up and instead will be on their feet ready to take on the world,” he summoned a flask, “-medicine that cures all. The booster against distress and hardship. Tis fascinating, given the opportunity, many will strive to get out of a harsh situation; we need to grant them a chance, such is the Devil’s creed. To give and take when the time demands.”

“You’ve changed,” she blinked.

“So have you, tell me,” he smiled warmly, “-how was the adventure of surviving Marinda,” her face lit in excitement of retelling her story – Igna sat and enjoyed her many tales.

Chapter 907: Kingdom of Marinda

Dawn timidly reflected against the tranquil lake. Igna and Yui’s night is lost in the latter’s retelling of her harsh survival on the enigmatic Marinda. No words need be exchanged, Igna rose from the lonesome study, moved to the grown floor, and got ready for another day of work. Yui followed his step, copied the motions, and was soon helping in the Jelly shop. Deep down, the life he’d come to know and the relations would come to an end.

“Master,” glanced Yui, “-about the return to Hidros?”

Head solemn at the stove, he breathed in a way to gather the passing thoughts. He rose a warm smile at the assistant, “-guess enough time’s passed. Returning now will either make or break the political status of Hidros.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Yeah,” he said, “-everyone’s afraid. The world stage is the end game, screw there and there wouldn’t be anything left – no one alive to pick up the shattered fragments of a fallen nation.”

“Master, let’s do it,” she rose a stern gaze.

‘Days come,’ last of customers passed, the Twin Jelly shop served for the last time. Clock struck a few minutes before noon, he hung his working attire on the counter, threw open a window, and leaned into the refreshing wind. “-I’m ready.”

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“Are you sure?” she blinked, “-I expected more a fight seeing the master despised returning to Hidros for so long.”

“Don’t blame me,” the windows shut, “-circumstances I suppose. Besides,” he smiled, “-the king won’t return empty-handed,” a portal summoned, “-let’s go.” Dressed in shorts, sandals, and a summer-styled shirt; the ruler of a nation nonchalantly faded to a large palace of frigid beauty. A hallway of countless portraits, statues, and suits of armor led onto an equally large entranceway adjacent to which stood armed guards. Yui followed, ‘-I know master’s whimsical,’ she pondered whilst hugging his shadow, ‘-didn’t expect this level of casualness. We’re in the frozen palace if judgment serves well.’

“Einheim,” he mentioned and edged towards the guards

“No access further.”

“Must I reveal who I am?” he narrowed.

“Lord Haggard,” gasped the second, “-please, make thyself at home,” the heavy block unhinged – Igna’s very soft footwear squished over the carpet. An array of noblemen and women dispersed in various circles – each rose suspicious frowns at the uninvited guest. He simply returned the suspicious gaze with one cold and unaffectionate.

“Lord Haggard,” hailed a familiar voice at the foot of the Marindian throne.

The pleasant ritual of greetings exchanged, “-pleasant day, is it not, Gustv?”

“Pleasant day indeed,” he paid no heed to the very out-of-place outfit, “-the maiden of the south.”

Yui nodded, “-suppose word travels fast?”

“Only words of extraordinary feats,” he grabbed her hand and pecked the palm, “-what brings the devil to the castle?” on second thought, Gustv took one step back and breathed, “-never mind,” the tone lowered, “-Yui’s from Hidros, an aid?”

“Good,” said Igna, “-I see the art of observation is developing. Never underestimate unspoken words for they are often key to victory or defeat.” A year was long for the new leadership to settle in their role. “-

the crowd's comprised of Celestials. Gustv, is there a celebration or event we've perhaps interrupted?"

"No," he breathed an innocent laugh, "-we heard from Tania."

"I see," Yui and Igna understood what he meant, "-the departure is inevitable. Still doesn't explain the gathered crowd, is it a formal ceremony or a kidnapping?"

Engaging steps rocked the marble floor, "-Lord Haggard, kidnapping or not, if the devil wishes to leave, neither angel nor god will be wise to stand in his way," said Mariane accompanied by her husband, Djen, who, on looking at Igna, nodded respectfully. Following the couple were Yean and Elliana; the heiress of the Azian dynasty couldn't be seen without her aid, therein, Igna scanned behind and through the crowd, until he locked onto a friendly face, Jae was in the company of fellow assistants.

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"The devil crawls from hell," remarked Elliana, "-welcome to the palace."

"The attitude's no better," interjected Igna, Mariane chuckled.

"In honor of Lord Haggard, founder of Marinda, we, leaders of Marinda request his lordship to crown our new king, Gustv Rah," the distant crowd sucked into lines – soldiers appeared suddenly and ceremoniously held their weapons. "-You look surprised, my lord," echoed the announcer, a lovely dressed Kuthl.

Wings fluttered, sparks fluttered – light around the throne heightened; a projection of the blueish sky stuck overhead, "-don't dismay," said the princess of faes, "-teach. Today's when Marinda takes a step into the outside world." Yui made her way into the crowd and watched as the leaders regrouped.

The new committee impatiently waited for a reaction, nothing escaped Igna's timely blank expression, "-why?" he shook his head, "-why did you think I would be a good person to crown the king?" he faced the crowd and rose a confident gaze; jolts of purple and blank enveloped Igna – aura around the castle dropped; it physically pulled, *snap,* circles of raw power emanated; bicolored pupils turned white, black wings ending in golden features sprouted, the canines sharpened and the outfit swapped into one of the godly proportions. White and gold mixed with strips of gray and red, energy-charged overhead, "-to the kingdom of Marinda," echoed throughout the whole isle; a seamless wish begot a nationwide transmission, "-I, Devil, have but warm words to say. Birth of a nation is the same as the birth of a babe. She's innocent and untainted by the mountain of bodies left in wake of the war of independence. Future and present are in your hands, will the child grow to be mature, responsible, and dependable, or will she fall prey to the world's vices, time will tell. Seize the present and work together towards thy ideal future. Believe in what thee thinks Marinda need – Marindian, believe and voice thy thoughts, behind me; Gustv Rah, Djen Xinfé, Yean Ainsworth, Mariane Danio, Elliana Azian, and their aid, Kuthl, Tania, and Jae. Today the list stands at eight, tomorrow, may it rise, may it prosper, and for thy sakes," he paused, "-may thee survive," the devil sharply turned, the majestic wings enamored many who laid eyes upon what the prince of hell had cultivated. A majestic crown fit for a god summoned above Igna's palm. Adorned with jewels, magical stones, and ancient inscribing of blessings inside said stones, Gustv and the others lined in the middle of the split crowd, "-Gustv of Rah, doth thee swear by order of justice and fairness to guide thy people to a better future?"

He lowered his head and crossed the chest with his right arm, “-I do.” The golden crown lowered into a flash of amber – the crown emitted constant rays of gold intermixed by occasional hues of diamond, emerald, and ruby.

Next were the aids to the king, each pledged under the Devil’s oath and were granted various items in recognition of their position. A common denominator; white gloves and medium bejeweled staffs of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, and grey. They took part in addressing the masses, in the end, Igna rose to the crowd once more, “-as king Gustv takes the throne; there lay greater obstacles ahead. Marinda will be known to the outside world, and the outside world will most definitely know of Marinda, the archipelago of wonder and intrigue. To the new Marindian Nation!”

“TO THE NEW MARINDIAN NATION!” exploded across the archipelago. Kuthl leaped in front of Igna and shouted, “-ENJOY THE CELEBRATIONS!”

“CELEBRATIONS!”

The broadcast ended, the golden glow faded, Igna spun at the newly crowned king and his entourage, “-sneaky little fellows,” he smiled.

“Lord Haggard,” they stood at the throne and radiated, “-thank you for everything.”

“Don’t mention it,” he spun, impatient Celestials swarmed the throne, far as they knew, the devil was gone. A remote spell teleported Yui into Rosesplan II, “-can you believe them?”

“Back already?” she looked around, “-what did you do?”

“Multi-teleportation,” he said, “-before we leave, I ought to handle something in private.”

“Take your time,” she said. *Snap,* a cloud of mist lingered, ‘-the devil crowned a new nation,’ she stepped out and strode along the bridge, ‘-this is Marinda. The second coming of Arda. Master was right, he’s not returning empty-handed. Just looking at the committee painfully tells how much they idolize him – I won’t be surprised if they erect his statue or something,’ sat with feet free over the water, ‘-I’m scared too, what if Hidros isn’t there when we return?’

Miles underground at a secretive and familiar place, “-Cthulhu.”

“Igna,” echoed from a well-maintained eating area, “-how are you, friend?”

“Good,” he said, “-I see the restaurant’s coming along nicely.”

“It is,” the guardian deity beamed, “-what about you, friend, I sense doubt...”

“Well, I’d lie if I say I don’t have doubts. Just one of those things that bind me to reality,” quick to shrug the heavy subject, “-the day’s here, friend.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s have a drink,” offered the deity raising a bottle.

“No can do I’m afraid.”

A disappointed shrug returned the bottle, “-what then, friend?”

“I’ve come to give this,” keys dropped, “-Rosespire II is yours, friend. Use it as your new home, no more staying underground. Twin Jelly shop will be a good place to start knowing the outside life. I’ve asked some to help alleviate the stress. It’s a good start, trust.”

“If you say so, friend.”

“Been a pleasure, Guardian Deity. Until we meet again.”

“Until we meet again.”

Back at the manor, Igna took a look around, gathered documents and interesting teachings on magical applications, various renowned scholars at the capital, and turned the lock for the last time. Yui noticed his outline and stood, “-how are we headed home?”

“Teleportation,” he replied, “-I’ve asked a good friend to provide sufficient mana. All I know is that we’ll be in Hidros, no guarantees on where.”

“Seriously?” her heart dropped.

“No,” the spell activated; a beam shot into the midday sky, heaviness across the land eased. Celebrations at the castle carried, “-he’s gone,” said a saddened Tania, “-my teacher’s gone, just like that.”

“Hey, Tania, what are you doing over there?”

She turned, allowing the wind to tangle her hair, “-some fresh air.”

A meteor-like projectile struck one of the castle’s towers, “-fast and easy trip,” he coughed, a thick layer of dust imploded.

Yui sneezed, “-where are we?”

“A castle tower?” brief rummaged through the toppled boxes gave onto a string, “-there,” he pulled and gave entry to sunlight. “I guess we arrived at a storage tower.”

“The Hidrosian air,” she snuck under his arm and threw first look at the landscape pointed eastward, “-the orchard and flowers have grown.”

“I’d be disappointed if there were no changes,” said a distant voice, “-found the stairway.”

“Why not stop and take in the sight?”

“A little someone decided to hog the view.”

“Come on, I didn’t think it mattered.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said halfway down the hatch, “-hence not stopping to take the sight?”

Yui’s energetic step followed, “-you know, master, that was pretty rude.”

“Oh my,” he stopped, “-I swear I meant for it to be rude.” She bit her lips and stopped, Igna ignored said pout and hurried along the dangerously set stairs. That particular tower was nested in the inner castle,

the entrance was rebuilt to lead outside. ‘-the area feels numb,’ he walked knowingly, took side-entrances and reached a popular walkway, ‘-the colors have dulled, what’s happened to you, Hidros?’ Yui skipped and gave remarks at the slightest of change, “-where are we headed?”

“The inner chambers; I need to find éclair.”

“éclair?” she blinked; “-can’t you call him?”

He stopped, she flinched and said, “-oh right, we just returned from Marinda.”

He cut into a narrower passage, “-come along, what are you waiting for?” The emptiness didn’t feel the least welcoming, “-here we are,” he horned onto a door, *Prime minister’s office,* Igna smirked and threw open the door. A baffled éclair gawked, “-I’m back.”

Chapter 908: “-what’s my title again?”

“I’m back,” simple words echoed, éclair’s expression rose and dropped. Igna, the king of Hidros, stood in the middle of the prime minister’s doorway. “...” said the mind, thus, the date writes itself as 8th January X115. Half a decade elapsed, and much is known of Igna’s stay inside Marinda. Hidros and the international political climate went through much changes. The Wracia Empire and the United Nation of Alrosia became household names, two de facto leaders of the world, superpowers abled to wipe each other at a moment’s notice.

The rise of Magiology in the field of Maicite proved fortunate for the world as a whole. Advancement in various fields skyrocketed; air, sea, and land travel grew accessible to everyone. Cost of plane tickets lowered, and many travel agencies cropped up in large commercial districts. Rosespire, Rotherham, Odogwoan, and Melmark; cities of utmost importance – many infrastructures depend on both nations. Hidros and Alphaia were more lenient when it came to foreigners contrary to the Wracia Empire whose leadership closed on itself. Cutting access from most of the world and preference placed towards the development of the new continent, named, Wacia. Non-aggression agreement between Wracia and the United Nations proved necessary for the development of both superpowers. The rivalry all but grew – scholars from the Cobalt Unit fought against researchers from the University of Rotherham; a subsidiary of Phantom’s large pool of research and development.

On the surface, the events didn’t seem much too difficult to understand. People lived their lives and repeated the cycles of eating, sleeping, and working. Underneath, once one dives into the pool of intrigue and inner power struggle, matters grew tedious. Handling an exponential growth of the populous, including their thinking power and rights in how things are run proved quite arduous. Especially wrongful pressure from investors, corrupt politicians, and state officials from Alphaia – they forced mandates, loopholes, and ways to steal money from Hidros bustling coffers. Arda and Easel Run Gard, on the threat of being swallowed by the officials from Alphaia, declared their independence from Hidros, thus standing as separate entities from the Alrosian Court of law.

Easel Run Gard thrived in the overwhelming demand for Maicite. Phantom and Arda shared technology and know-how on the refinement of the ore separate from Alphian greed. Henceforth, the fortune of Arda and Easel Run Gard jumped to equal that of Elendor, surpassing the smaller independent nations. Where money mattered, Alphaia saw itself at the top of the food chain; the industrial revolution had many countries outsourced to a nation where a strong work ethic counted as the people’s pride.

Machinery flocked the southern districts; Skouso, Legury (famous for the first missile blast of unknown origin), and Oglor. Whoutan's became a haven for the rich and famous – most of the monster problem was relegated to the western side of the province, a dividing mountain range proved efficient in stopping advances of the weakening monster population.

A close second stood the Wracia Empire backed by the four conglomerates. Non-aggression pact made it easier for the eastern trade route to be established, the same route used by the Empire to invade Whoutan. Money dictated everything. Third stand Hidros, though disparities between second and third were sky-reaching.

Hidros's meritocracy was tainted by nepotism of the corrupt alliance of nations. The nation suffered many blows after signing the alliance. The founding of the current power ruling each nation – the unfairness and injustice, blatant abuse of power has very well stripped Hidros. If the continent had been a lady, her clothes would have been ripped and her body forced into humiliation by her assailant. The once culturally rich continent laid but the remains of a once-revered hero.

Currently, it stands there on the open seas as a trade center for the rich and a haven for the religious factions. The population live in relative modesty as opposed to full-on poverty. The rich either fled to Alphaia or have taken refuge in Plaustan and its inherently free-spirited court of law. There is but one saving grace, and tis Phantom's military might and Elon Dynasty's massively rich wealth. The duo has battled the four conglomerates of Alphaia. Cimier and the Dark Guild remain secretive about their inner workings. Narcotics are bought and sold, and the vice-filled lifestyle of Odegawoan proved lucrative for a relatively unknown company, the Raven. All and all, the deeper one dives, the more discrepancies in the world's nations become. For the common folk, long as the food is on the table and money to be made, they'll live quietly in their villages and settlements.

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Matters turned for the worse a few months ago. éclair, unable to answer for King Igna's supposed laziness and inability to restore Hidros's reputation, staged an air crash in Dorchester.

'Disaster strikes Dorchester,' read various headlines, '-Sunday morning, the king of Hidros planned a diplomatic meeting with the independent land of Dorchester and its neighbors. However, the king's royal transport wouldn't make the journey. His majesty's jet crashed somewhere in Winterpar, the famed alps of the Dorchestrian sky. Search efforts have located the crash but no sign of the king or his crew has been made. Primary speculation has said the force at which the plane crashed must have vaporized the King and the crew.'

A week passed after the crash, and a new headline read, '-the revolutionist party advances,' said a boldly titled article, "-unforeseen events of the king's disappearance has raised the question on whether the title of king will be transferred to the Queen or the heir of the kingdom. Royalist factions have argued, '-an empty throne is a sign of a weak and irresolute kingdom. An heir must be placed on the throne and guide the nation towards a better future.' Wherein, King Igna's entourage snapped with, '-putting an unfit heir on the throne shall but spell disaster,' reference made to the child. Pressure heightened at Dorchester's border – it is reported the Revolutionist faction has sent armed forces to patrol the area. Hidros replied in stride by moving their forces to the north. There's no saying what the Queen will choose."

Result; by a sudden twist – the Alrosian leadership intervened with aid of Kreston and Arda. If Dorchester acted maliciously – the trio would mount a full-scale attack against the province of nobles. A decision was made for Empress Eira of Alphaia to occupy the throne in lieu of the heir. She will sit at the top until the heir of Hidros is old enough to take the throne. Long as the noble faction was concerned, Empress Eira had the blood of Queen Gallienne coursing through her vein.

Smack, éclair overplayed his luck, leaned a little bit too much, and fell, “-my head,” he cried. Igna entered accompanied by Yui, she softly closed the door and skipped to a nearby couch, threw her feet on the table, and pulled a copy of a fashion magazine. A flash imploded, an outline of a powerful spirit knelt with head bowed to the King, “-Vengeance,” said Igna, “-job well done,” he said, stretching an open hand at the spirit, “-return to my shadow and rest.”

“Will do, my king,” he kissed the palm and vanished. Behind the desk, éclair clambered, the forehead crept first followed by the shoulders and torso.

“Speechless?”

“Astonished,” he replied and crossed the table, “-king Igna, you’re back,” he knelt.

“No need for formality,” Igna interrupted his bow and stuck to the butler with a loud and tight embrace, “-we’re friends before all of that political dressing,” hands-on the minister’s shoulder, “-tell me, how have things been?”

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“Bad,” said a fearful shake of the head, “-Hidros’s not what it once was. We’re but slaves to a higher power. I’m at wit’s end – everyone’s gone.”

“They left after weighing the pros and cons of sticking around. It was wise of us to separate the entities. Venom can only flow so much.”

éclair looked at Yui, “-her plane crashed, right?”

“She survived the years in the wilderness.”

What about you,” he rose a confused brow, “-there’s a sense of elation and pride. What have thee done?”

“A lot,” he smiled, “-I didn’t venture to Marinda for a stroll. I was there for a simple reason.”

“Which is?”

“Whim,” he laughed, “-come on, old friend,” he spun, “-let’s take a stroll and discuss politics.” A mighty stroll it was for the King and Prime minister found themselves in a supercar blasting across the asphalt to Rotherham.

Igna lowered his window and dropped the speed, “-a lots happen,” he said turning into a road passing through the center of town, “-the three towers,” he watched fondly, “-Rotherham’s impressive. More buildings from what I remember,” éclair didn’t seem pleased, “-something the matter?”

“Yeah,” he exhaled, “-after you left – I had to take the spot of villain. As a result, most of the Haggard dynasty hates me.”

“Do I care?” he tapped éclair’s head, “-you’re my right-hand man, nothing will ever change said truth,” the luxurious car strolled at the foot of one of the skyscrapers. A valet scurried to the vehicle, blinked at the prime minister, and locked onto a silvery-haired man, “-young master!”

“Hello,” winked Igna, “-Been a while, hasn’t it?” he handed the key, “-take the baby for a joyride, I’ll send a message when we’re over.”

The man gleamed, “-will do, young master,” envious onlooking valets watched, to which Igna simply gave an expression of, ‘-better luck next time.’ They entered the always growing inside – men in suits moved to and fro, beautifully dressed office ladies ended their shift and exchanged laughter with their colleague.

“Excuse me,” he moved to the nearest receptionist.

“Yes?” she turned from her display; “-how can I be of help?”

“Is lady Courtney around?” inquired a polite voice.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“An appointment?” he looked at éclair, signaling the prime minister to come over, “-does this constitute as an adequate appointment?”

“My,” she gulped, “-young master Igna, it has been so very long. Please head on to her office, I’ll have her notified.”

He leaned over, “-tell her it’s only éclair,” whispered.

“A surprise?” she winked, “-will do, young master, will do.”

A lift soon arrived to carry both men. éclair kept throwing meaningful glances, “-is there something wrong with my face?”

“No, no,” he replied, “-I’m surprised. If it had been Vengeance, I’m sure the receptionist would have told us to wait.”

“There are differences between a copy and the original,” the lift dinged, “-mannerism and confidence,” he said, “-subtle clues non verbally enhance how one is perceived. No matter,” lady Elvira’s office stood bluntly, he pushed opened the door to moans and pleasurable screams. Two ladies were deep in sapphic love over Elvira’s large desk.

“Right,” he shut the door on éclair’s nose, “-now this is a fun sight,” he laughed, “-two ladies having fun on my aunt’s table. Tell me,” he snapped, undergarments covered the exposed selves, “-Is this some kind of kink?”

“L-L-L-L-L-L”

“Don’t stagger,” he said and turned for the knob, “-any idea on where my aunt is?”

“Downstairs,” said the other, “-young master, you won’t tell, right?”

“Long as the desk is clean, I have no qualm. Do return to the bond,” he left and arrived at a frowning éclair.

“Moans,” he interjected, “-must be the Sapie sisters.”

“You know of them?”

“They’re world stars in the adult entertainment industry. Not the first time they’ve shot movies in the lady’s office. Kind of thrilling, isn’t it?”

Igna nodded, “-must have been hard not to intermingle with people of thy kind.”

“No, I’m good,” he returned, “-I asked lord Asmodeus once, never again, the seductress nearly took my soul by the way she worked. My inner demon is terrified of his harem, they truly are the envoys of pleasure and lust.”

“Here I thought Rotherham to be in grave trouble.”

Exactly halfway along the skyscraper resides a five-star restaurant built for the pleasures of rendezvous and business meetings. Famous people were common, especially Hidrosian stars. The entrance was reservation only, furthermore, the price and location automatically shaved most visitors.

“Igna, if the lady’s at the restaurant...”

“Business meeting, whatever, I don’t care,” they stood before an ornamentally filled door, “-what’s my title again?” he smirked.

“King?”

“No... Devil.”

Chapter 909: “Wait and watch, auntie,”

A confused, ‘-devil,’ escaped éclair’s already stunned expression. The second requirement for the mind to the process was foreshadowed by Igna waltzing into the private lounge. He gave a simple yet meaningful smile – guards at the door slid to the side. The silvery handle, warm to the touch, opened into a scene ripped from a movie, not that Igna’ had seen what was in vogue at the cinemas. Rationalizations aside, he entered with confidence and an allure that instantly pulled on the neighboring table. Openness projected grandness ending at the big windows thrown upon the Rotherham townscape. Blimps in the night sky fluttered to and fro, planes, helicopters, and secret military projects.

“What do you mean, devil?” the prime minister dragged behind the headstrong Igna, voluptuously bicolored pupils sought left and right top and back for a glimpse of Elvira’s coffee-colored hair and slightly tanned complexion.

“Excuse me,” inferred a well-dressed attendant, “-we’re reservation only.”

“Reservation only?” Igna’s search paused, wherein he took éclair’s arm, whomst pondered the title of devil, and dragged him to the center, “-shall this suffice?” inquired a warm Igna presenting éclair’s face as if an all-round pass. Aback by the sudden display, “-perhaps I should ask my manager?”

In éclair fashion, a holographic display propped above a rose-gold bracelet, “-here,” he said, “-I’ve made a reservation. Now, will you excuse us?” more pressing matters had the trusted minister waiting.

“Everything checks out, yes?” inquired Igna overlooking the attendant’s diligent work ethic.

“Yes sire,” he said, “-the table’s set for the private quarters,” to which he glanced farther in towards steps leading onto the elevated floor. Music swayed beside said stairs, a podium held a piano and a violin, each of which was masterfully played. The soothing melody passed the duo’s hearing, Igna’s walking slowed at the lovely performers, “-éclair,” he stopped at the stairs, “-are musicians well paid?” éclair followed the inquiry, landed at the musicians, “-ah, yes, they’re well paid,” he affirmed, “-lord Genth on piano and lady Yukia on violin. Revered performers in the world of classic music, why?”

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“Thought I’d pay my admiration through financial recompense,” one foot over the stair, “-seems there was no need,” hands in pocket, the noble Lord, as appeared to the estranged entourage, carried himself and the prime minister onto the upper floor.

Dressed in the dark, Elvira sat with her legs crossed in a somewhat short dress, her appealing outfit drew the attention of her date, a middle-aged man of Iqavean nature with, a long sharp nose which broke inclination after a sizable nose bridge. Little to no hair upon the scalp, fingers unusually adorned by jewelry and a thickly layered expensive coat. The latter bore definitions of military ware.

“No,” said éclair, “-master,” he spoke in a strict and confident tone, “-the tables leading to lady Elvira’s housed to guards. The restaurant has a policy of total discretion when it comes to business dealing.” A painting thrown at the wall of the restaurant held what seemed to be scratch marks. Igna’s observant gaze thrust at the tables and eventually led to the window.

“Too bad,” added Igna, “-seems the dealings aren’t innocent in nature. Tell me,” arms crossed smugly, “-how many people have died?”

“Pardon?” he blinked, “-how did you?”

“Observation,” he said, to which another waiter ran for the duo.

“This way,” he said in an erratic pant, “-please.”

‘Well, he hurried to us, suppose our arrival’s made it to the top of command,’ the devil gave a reassuring nod, “-do lead the way,” he gestured.

Settled behind a circular table, arguably the best in the house, Igna threw a warm look at the waiter, “-we’ll order in a bit, for now, bring us the best liquor thee have. Money’s not an issue.”

“As you wish,” noted the waiter, “-I’ll be back very soon.”

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“Take your time,” added éclair, “-master, how did you know about the deaths. I know there’s no connection to my internal system yet – finding out such a detail’s impressive. I know of only a few people able to deduce much from a scene, looks to me, the devil,” he said in a very liberal tone, “-has done some leveling.”

“Don’t bore me,” slashed a sudden apathetic voice, “-pardon,” the personality swapped, “-we get out of hand at times,” said a few coughs hiding flashes of purple behind red and white. “Answer to the question, tableau, we’re at a reputable establishment, point proven by the entourage, attention to detail, and quality of musicians employed. From that, we can safely assume a lot of business deals have taken place – the nature of the violence was made blatant by the change in furniture, the scraps on the painting, and the newly replaced glass. Lastly, we’re in Rotherham under the authority of our own leadership, therefore, a murder or two isn’t out of the ordinary. Seems like auntie’s not doing so great. Those military men,” he gestured by flicks of the brows, “-not from Hidros, neither are they from places I’d know of. The man has features to a foreigner – that alone doesn’t reveal much.”

The same waiter arrived with a few dated bottles cupped in briefcases, “-best our establishment has to offer,” he said, “-which would you like?”

“Price ranges from 150,000 to 400,000,” he looked at éclair, “-what can 154,000 afford nowadays?”

“Accounting for inflation – nowadays that’s the price of a modest home in a remote village or a somewhat luxurious car. Working average wage ranges from 5,200 to 7,200.”

“Right,” he turned at the waiter, looked at the five bottles that cost 1.3 million combined, “-we’ll have all of ’em.”

“Pardon?” gasped the waiter.

“Did I stutter?” he blinked, “-éclair, I don’t even have to ask how Raven’s doing. Send the bill to whoever’s leading, consider it my, ‘I’m back,’ message.”

Prime minister éclair locked eyes with the waiter, shook his head in amusement, and handled the payment wirelessly, a tap of a card and a notification snapped, “-t-t-thank you?”

“Hey,” interjected Igna before the man left, “-if you were me, which would you prefer?”

“I’d take this one,” the fingers hinted at the cheaper items, “-good tasting wine is hard to find. Heard good things about this brand on the Arcanum,” the lips suddenly locked and gaze lowered, “-I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have spoken so freely.”

“Chill,” whispered Igna, “-I see the manager here’s got a chip on his shoulder. Here,” Igna rose, “-ladies and gentlemen,” the voice carried throughout the room, “-in honor of a great service by this lovely lad here,” he pointed at the waiter, the curious and envious crowd, especially the female demography, admired the charming white-haired man, “-I, Igna Haggard of the Haggard dynasty will gratefully pay for all the bills tonight. I find there’s nothing more pleasant than to share a good experience with others, and here,” he tapped the recruit’s shoulder, “-an earnest working young lad dared to serve my companion and me,” he stepped back, “-to that, my dear fellow, I commend thee,’ quick to pull onto a briefcase, “-here, have the wine bottle, tis yours.”

The entourage, distant and avoidant on the outside, were helpful within save the exception of a few, needless to say, the vampiric allure and charm sufficed to gather a round of applause, leaving the young waiter as the star of the night.

“What was that about?” narrowed éclair.

“What was what?” he blinked; “-didn’t you see the young lad being tormented by the manager. No matter,” he sat and smiled, “-look what my little displays caused.”

Jaded black pupils looked over Igna’s shoulder, and landed upon a confused group of soldiers closing at their master’s side. The broad man stood, threw his handkerchief, spat on the floor beside Elvira, threw them aside, and glared at Igna. A band of angry guards reflected against éclair’s pupils, “-KING IGNA!” cried the broad man raising a pistol, “-YOU RUINED,” *woosh,* he vanished, left the guards stumped, appeared behind the belligerently broad-shouldered man, *crack,* knee shattered, the man fell hard onto the cold ground – panic rose on the lower floor, “-how dare you,” the devil pressed upon the man’s head, “-how dare you insult a person of my familia before my eyes?” he crushed, muffled coughs and whimpers escaped.

“Don’t!” fired a prominent screech, “-don’t kill him,” surrounding guards rose concealed weapons at Igna and Elvira.

“LET THE MASTER GO!” shouted a poor excuse for a bodyguard.

Elvira approached, a dark presence through the openness of the restaurant, her black stiletto pumps reflected ambient light, “-greetings, auntie.”

“Shut up,” she tapped Igna’s head, nudged him aside, locked onto the emissary, “-you fucking excuse for a man,” she spat, “-don’t you disrespect the Haggard name, you barrel-shaped ape,” she kicked with such force that his jaws broke and teeth fell, “-call in the cleanup crew,” she rose her heels and stomped, the bottom splattered in dashes of red, blood escaped, skull impaled, the man yet breathed, “-the fat keeps you alive, huh?” she stomped and stomped and stomped, all that remained was the shadow of a truly merciless entity beating down on a living being. Last stomp in, she threw her undone hair back, locked onto the table, reached for a bottle, popped the cork, and guzzled. The square bottle neared halfway, “-take a seat,” she slammed the drink and sat, “-éclair, head to my office, ask ’em for the clean-up team.”

“Igna,” she called, “-have you taken care of the guards?”

“Yeah,” he calmly took a seat, the fingers dripped with blood, “-too bad,” *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,* crystal orbs hovered, “-the lifeforce isn’t exactly appealing. I think I’ll just throw them,” he pressed, the spheres squirted red before turning to dust. “-Long time no see, auntie.”

“Yeah, long time,” her composure returned, “-a nightwalker’s body automatically negates the effect of booze. Get high for a few minutes and then it wears off. I tell you, it’s a pain when the mind wishes to escape reality. What brings the fallen king to his domain?”

“Fallen king?”

“Yes,” she sipped, “-the fallen king, times changed, nephew. The capital’s controlled by Empress Eira – a totally worthless ruler who delegates important tasks to an entourage conveniently compromising of key members from Alpha.”

“I figured as much.”

“Guess you’ve heard of Arda and Easel Run Gard distancing themselves from Alrosia?”

“Yes.’

“Same mistake,” she said, “-the same thing happened with the Federation. Once the founder was gone, no matter how hard the heir tried, there was no beating the past leadership. I wouldn’t count Hidros as a free kingdom, we’re at the mercy of the Alrosia leadership. Take that corpse, for example, an emissary of a not-so-loyal noble serving Alpha. He answers both to us and the Wracia Empire. Spies, opportunists, and traitors, it’s hard to find good people nowadays. Long are the glory days gone, Hidros’ not the meritocracy we sought for it to become.”

“I don’t mind,” he said, “-aunt Elvira, I’m here for a reason. I had to leave,” he narrowed, “-I saw the way you ordered éclair around, I know everyone blames him for my disappearance. Thing is, éclair is also tied by tighter strings, because of his selflessness, Hidros stands here today as a unique body – perhaps not free, but still, the Hidros I know and love. There’s much to say and do; my cool-down period is over, sufficient time has passed to show who stands where.”

The leader of Phantom watched, her gaze firmed on Igna’s lips, “-I’m pleased.’

“Pardon?”

“We were at our wit’s end, rummaging through darkened alleys, knocking at closed doors, and screaming at empty walls. Tell me, nephew, what doth thee wish from me?”

“Admission to the University of Rotherham.”

“No, not going to happen. I will not watch you waste time at school.”

“As a researcher. Maicite’s got more potential than one realizes.”

“Do tell,” she said sarcastically.

“There’s a new way in which Maicite can be applied. The Arcanum stands uncontested and ripe for the picking. The world’s interconnected, éclair and I have had plans to expand,” he looked outside at the star-lit sky, “-grab hold of the Arcanum and we’ll have access to everything.”

“Sorry?”

“Wait and watch, auntie,” he smiled, “-wait and watch.”

Chapter 910: Ayder’s bill

A team of white overalls, white gloves, face shields, and blue boots arrived from a side entrance. Lower floor looking up, none could see what had happened save the frequent passing of floating heads. The surgical team, or so it appeared, pull freight from many of the customers – patrons stood midway through meals, glancing at the manager who consciously ignored the mess. Pretense, bedlam of the upper plateau.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” chimed a half-empty wine glass, “-ladies and gentlemen, from the Haggard household, we offer thee our warmest of regard. Please get back to your meals, ‘twould be insulting to the talented cooking staff for having such scrumptious morsels be left unfinished,” the devil smiled, “-my offer stands, if I were you, I’d stay until dessert,” a sharp but dignified twirl later, Igna’s shadow carried deeper into the reserved area. Pianist and violinist were quick on the keys and tight with

the strings; energetic melodies washed. Those who stood halfway, embarrassed by the suddenness of Igna's request, softly lowered onto their seat so as not to draw attention. In attempts to alleviate the tenses, the serving staff pulled on their biggest smiles and carried special meals to the many patrons. Chatter spawned anew.

"What's the secret project about?"

"Aunt Elvira, wouldn't be much of a secret if I gave all the details. There's much to prepare. As for why I visited," éclair stood at the cleaner's side – the latter carefully examined and cleaned the bodies, "- where does Phantom stand?"

"Away from Hidrosian politics," she said, "-we sell weapons and have taken much interest and stake in Elon's Dynasty who's actually headquartered on the upper floors. Our venture has proven quite a dilemma for four greats."

"I see, and I presume there won't be any involvement with Hidros politics?"

"Not until mines have been cleared from the land. There's no way I'll willingly walk into said mess. Dorchester's a haven for the nobles opposing the crown, I've heard whispers of a coup, a conspiracy involving nobles of Alpha and Hidros to usurp the royal family's claim on Oxshield. Plaustan's neutral for now, though seems the capitalist province isn't much for bloodshed, they'd rather flaunt the wealth, take trips on expensive yachts or spend time at one of the many resorts."

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"Don't we own resorts?"

"I do," she breathed smugly, "-the investment's paid off, travel's more common nowadays. We have the maintained peace between the world leaders to thank. Nothing's black and white, many profited, and many lost. What's good, what's bad, I'm not one to debate morality."

"Thy shoe speaks clearly."

"Don't get an attitude with me," she finished her bottle, "-recklessly spending I see."

Igna smiled at the display, "-would be my honor for you to keep the drinks."

"Or you're lazy to carry the cases."

"You know me," he rose from the table, "-let's keep in touch, auntie," and moved towards the empty blood-stained floor, "-Igna," she called, he side-glanced, "-before you do anything, head to Arda. Go meet your mother."

"Mother," he paused and thought, "-I will. Take care, auntie."

Before much longer, Igna and éclair were outside with skyscrapers as their backdrop. A chilly wind blew and carried cigar smoke, "-Are any jets available?"

"Yes."

"Good, I'll take the fastest one."

"I'll make arrangements," éclair stopped, the car pulled into a side street.

Puff, "-what's the matter?" inquired Igna at hands reach from the car.

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A frigid expression froze éclair still, "-bad," he said, "-things are looking bad."

"Care to explain?"

"Master, I'm needed at Rosespire," he hurried for the car, tapped and opened the boot, "-here," a black-brief case exchanged hands, "-I'll send the relevant information," the door slammed and the engine cried a guttural screech, he slipped on the turn and slammed accelerate. Igna stood with a cigar in one hand and a briefcase in the other. A confused valet watched patiently, "-when's the next bus for the airstrip?" wondered the devil casually.

Commuting to the airfield took quite a few minutes, close to an hour. Evidently, Igna walked onto the wrong bus which went around Rotherham, passing the university, terminal, briefly into the residential district to stop at Vaef street.

Slow rumbling passed his back, staring him was an empty field host to peaks and drops. '-Where am I?' said a few blinks, cars were few if not rare, '-the outer city?' he wandered in search of a nice place to sit from which the options were; the ground, on a rock, over a toppled wooden box or the side of the road. Quite desolate for the financial heart of Hidros.

'There we are,' he settled on the rock, brought the case over his thighs, and popped the lock. Inside were a brand new phone, contact lenses, and earrings, '-handy,' he removed the beaten glasses – mana waves lit a flutter, threw on the contact lenses, '-it works,' he smiled, '-blocks my eyes from unraveling reality. A tap of a button and it disappeared, nice,' he pulled on the phone, retinas inscribed on a notification. More importantly, the earrings.

"Hello, éclair?"

"Greetings master."

"Oh, here's a voice I thought I wouldn't hear. Hello Yui, how's the return going?"

"Badly," she muffled, "-I've devoured so many pastries across town – I can barely feel my legs."

"Not that I want to ruin the party, where's éclair?"

"On duty," she said, "-I'm thy assistant. Prime minister is preoccupied with some shady stuff. Don't worry, I've got this," a notification lit upon the interface, "-you're in the quarantine zone before the airfield, an airlock of sorts. The dunes are watchtowers under which reside AFR-equipped weapons. Move to the left, master should see a road."

"Yeah, I barely spotted the path. Is that magic?"

"No idea," her chewing overtook directions.

"Just layer the map and have the jet ready for takeoff."

“Understood.”

Arda, Queendom of Lady Courtney, Blanche duchess, a pleasant title given by the people in honor of her pure white hair. Similar to yesterday, Igna was left standing in the middle of the road, this time, at an airfield of unknown whereabouts. Slow rumbling of the jet engine taxied to a hangar. ‘-Looking at the map,’ an outward zoom, ‘-I’m a few kilometers from the capital, Greenoud. They changed the name?’ a glance upward, he headed for the entrance gate. Expectation turned amazement – the large dusty airfield didn’t reflect how advance Arda grew in the booming of Maicite’s economy. Large roads passed; vehicles nonchalantly crossed – better point to take, emphasis on preserving nature. Forest and greenery were still prominent. A green-spotted car screamed to a stop, “-get in,” said the driver crudely rolling the passenger window, “-I’ll take you to your destination.” Beaten on the outside, rough on the inside, what could possibly go wrong at the hand of a fully-covered demi-human?

“To Greenoud.”

“The vice-capital,” commented the driver, “-are you new around here?”

“Wouldn’t say new, perhaps a returnee?”

“Explains it,” he looked through the mirror, “-back during my adventuring days, these paths were covered with monsters and rough terrain. Most of the major cities are connected nowadays – we have the great wall of Arda to thank. It’s held strong for years, a trading post for the northern villages. Glenda’s the place to be.”

“Why Glenda?”

“It’s an awesome place, the real capital of Arda if you ask me. Greenoud’s a three-hour ride, I strongly advise taking a nap or doing some reading.”

“About adventuring, why are you driving a taxi?”

“I used to be an adventurer, well, it was before I took an arrow to the knee. Goblins are shrewd little demons. Drop your guard and they’ll strike mercilessly. If you don’t my prying, the briefcase, are you an investor?”

Igna glanced in the mirror, took notice of the man’s tag and injured knee, ‘-story checks out,’ he resettled and replied, “-yeah. Returning from Alphaia actually. Heard the Ardanian economy boomed after the alliance with Easel Run Gard.”

“Oh,” he slapped the wheel joyfully, “-I don’t get that Maicite business too much. Arda’s a good place to invest,” he smiled, “-I’ve transported many investors and businessmen before, they all have a hurrying nature to them, always on edge about something. Ticks me off if I’m being honest. Anyway, Queen Courtney announced the construction of a new port to the southwest, seemed on paper it was to become the largest Hidros had to offer. What would you know, her majesty kept her promise, to that, Arda’s become very popular with tourists. Guess I’m rambling a bit too much.”

“No, it’s fine, always a pleasure to hear from the locals.” Aside from the phone, there laid a laptop under the masking foam. Igna pulled on the device and instantly jumped onto the Arcanum.

“The Ayder’s Bill of Taxation,” read an attachment, ‘-let’s see,’ he skimmed the large document, ‘-Ayder’s bill basically nullifies the alliance of Easel Run Gard and Arda, stating the kingdom and province being part of Alrosia are obliged to share profits and knowledge of unknown discoveries. Anyone who creates a piece of hardware, including but not limited to magic, Magiology, research and development of weapons, sorcery, in other words, anything and everything. éclair was wise to hurry home. Seems the Alrosian nobles have garnered much support to pass the bill, and part of the Gaien council was involved too. Well then,’ *calling éclair.*

“Master now isn’t a good time.”

“It is,” he firmed, “-the Ayder bill’s going to be my triumphant return. We have a month before it’s voted on at the meeting. Don’t worry about Alrosia or Alpha, the devil’s here. Since it affects merchants, traders and researchers, have copies made and handed to the public. Put it under the clause of duty to inform. Ask for Bleu and Raide Rosie, I want the best attorneys to cover our bottoms. Long as the legal aspect is covered, I’ll handle the rest.”

“I’ll ask for a meeting when possible and make arrangements for the bill to be diffused along the proper channel. What are you planning, master?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, “-we’ll move as the board evolves. Find our weakest link, a complete rehaul of the king’s entourage is in order.”

“What about backing, we don’t have the influence to overturn the financial advantage Alpha clearly has.”

“Oh, simple affair my friend. If we can’t overturn the table, we’ll simply add another,” he laughed, “-Kreston was granted access to the Alrosian council, there’s precedence. About Yui, have her chained to Serene, I want the seductive vampire to write a short story about Yui’s experience in Marinda. Quote Aidn of the Western Wind and create the second coming of Marinda. We’ve seen how the world was enamored by the discovery of a new continent, and the resources made available. Now imagine the same but better, a deeper legacy with god-like residents, it’ll make the world explode.”

“I like where it’s going,” said a loud belly laugh, “-there’s no topping you, master.”

“Don’t underestimate a man who starve to take what was taken.”

Thus ended the call, Igna rested against the window and napped for the remainder of the journey. Warm taps on the shoulder broke the dream, “-hello, earth to mister man, we’re here,” said the driver standing outside with hand on the open door, “-the city of the ancient tree,” it covered the peripheral and went beyond, a scale undefinable for human comprehension.

“How much?” wondered Igna.

“For you, my king, a humble autograph shall suffice.”

“You knew who I was?” he rose a strange but pleasant brow, “-here,” quick to flip a 2000 Exa bill on the car’s top, “-name?”

“Arnesto Vianl,”

“To Arnesto Vianl, the warm and friendly driver,” the bill exchanged hands, “-now, is my signature priceless or is it worth 2000 Exa, tis the choice thee have to make, Arnesto. I’ll see you around.”

“Pleasure to meet the famed King of Hidros. May our paths not cross again.”

“Not cross again?”

“Royalty and trouble go hand in hand,” he laughed, “-pardon my caution.”

“To the short-lived trip then.”

“To the short-lived trip,” the door slammed, he carried off into the upward rebuilt diversion.