

Death Magic 911

Chapter 911: The Disappearance of Owny Rownder

Pleasureful gasps, mild giggles – strong dominant voices, innocent subdued whimpers – a mix of pink, black, white, blue, yellow, sprinkle other hues of blinding proportions and one would be at La Femme Rouge Club, located inside the well-renowned Odgawoan, city of dreams. The clock shortly touched the morning mark, men in underpants rose from drunkard stupor and flooded the nearby toilets, amidst the chaos, a man surrounded by men and women, a prince, a charismatic walking hazard, “ASMODEUS!” thundered. Opposite of the glamorous philanderer stood lady Kul, a deadly demoness, her nails perpetually stained red, “-wake up, you screwdriver.”

“Lady Kul’s here,” giggled surrounding succubae, “-we’ll see you later,” they waved as did their considerable members wrapped in little clothing – every single one had an allure to them, some fierce, others innocent, playful, and uncaring. The prince rose his head, white powder toppled, “-you’ve had your fun,” she said, arms akimbo, “-duty calls.”

“What duty,” said lazy coughs, “-we’re the unrivaled leaders of Odgawoan. No one moves unless we say so. Evidently, we don’t care much about how the town evolves, long as those at the top are in our pockets, we won’t give the crown yet. Why the stern expression, haven’t seen that in a while,” he stood, panties and bras fell onto the soaked carpet, “-should really redo the wallpaper.”

“Don’t be stupid,” she threw her arms at the new wallpaper, “-changed it last week. Go on, get changed already, éclair called a meeting at the casino.”

“Awe,” he hummed, “-the prime minister has orders for us,” skipped halfway through the side entrance, “-by the way, could you clean up my mess below?”

Her energetic gestures dropped, “-seriously, now?”

“Yeah,” he winked and gave a flying kiss, “-you’re the best, thanks.” Kul shook her head at the concoction of sweat, bodily fluid, alcohol, cigarette, and vomit, “-what a mess,” she turned without the intention of stepping further. Asmodeus’ office, read on the side as she left the chambers, dark-colored carpet carried the step to the ground floor where resided a stage, poles, and a lot of bottles of booze behind jewel-like bars. She ignored the performances and moved to a secluded part of the building; the maintenance area said per the concrete color and well-lit atmosphere. Stairs went from carpeted to harsh and empty, the railings weren’t much support either – piping and electrical wires wrapped along the walls.

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Down under as lady Kul hopped off the last stair and stood before a thick block of black in the middle of which laid a small square. No handles nor an indication of access, her gaze rose to the top-left and a click chimed, ‘-here once again,’ the heavily locked gate parted, she stepped inside to a line of cells, some empty, some full. At the end of said hall laid a bigger room, one darker and reeking of rot. Fortunately, masks were made plenty on a side-table, vis-à-vis which laid a disgruntle man of sunken cheeks, hollowed eyes, and pale skin. He emotionlessly watched through the cell.

A deep thud opened into the religious depiction of hell; red, hot, and foul. Piles of maimed bodies were thrown to the side. A few rodents were present, not to feast on the dead bodies but used as torture on living, screaming beings. A thicket of blond locks immediately caught her eye, Kul shuffled carefully across the matt floor. Still, beautiful blue eyes glanced from chains linking the lady to a Judas cradle, her front stretched onto the pyramid, pain, and sufferance in her eyes, faint movements laid to blood and grits, “-Lady Owny of the Rownder family.” The light-blue crystalline pupils blinked in acknowledgment, “-good,” said Kul, “-you survived the cradle. I mean,” she hopped into the gruesome contraption, threw open a lock, and toppled the infectious pyramid – another pull, and Owny lowered onto a square stool, an invention she thought would never come to pass, “-so much for being actress,” sighed Kul, leaping at the lady’s jaw, “-ah, no tongue and no teeth, they took away your voice. Too bad,” she forcibly pushed her aside, “-man, I don’t get it,” her head shook, “-how could a genetically gifted specimen fall to hell? Worlds a sad place. So much for a life of fame and fortune – knowing the prince of Lust, there’s no way he’d let you go untouched. Worry not,” the ominously somber Kul headed for a toolbox, “-as a reward for enduring our favorite means of punishment, I’ll grant thee a nice and easy death.”

Humph, Owny shrieked, the silent cries spoke volumes, her shoulders shook in defiance, “-trying to resist?” cackled Kul, “-I love a woman with spunk,” the demoness leaped behind the exposed actress, Kul’s long fingernails ran along the lady’s legs, to her stomach, up to her chest and to her neck, “-don’t,” she whispered coyly, “-else I’ll be forced to do unspeakable things. One orifice’ is already destroyed, don’t make me want to ruin the rest. I promise my way of doing things is far worse than the pyramid has to offer. Now, close your eyes and relax,” a rough edge knife rose, the shadow, amplified by lanterns blurred against the stone brick walls. Muffled screams ruled the dungeon.

“Welcome back,” said a well-dressed Asmodeus, “-seems like you had fun. Have a shower, there’s a change of clothes.”

“No thanks,” she narrowed, “-the prince of lust’s definition of clothes ranges from a simple string to, well, you know... nothing.”

They ended outside at the back of the club, “-isn’t the smell of fresh air the best?” he inquired.

“Yeah, fresh air as in the morning garbage pickup, then sure. What about the actress?”

“Don’t worry,” he passed his phone and jogged down a few stairs, “-look at the news coverage. Catch up on her story, I’ll go get the car.”

*The Disappearance of Owny Rownder. On the 31 of December X114, before the clock struck midnight in the city of dreams, one of the more influential actresses went missing. A missing person’s report was filed shortly after when her roommate, Yanette Ender, co-starlet of the hit series *Insatiate*, returned the next day. ‘Owny’s never home late, she said she’d stay at the manor and practice. She’s the hardest working friend I’ve ever met – I left that night fully intending to return before midnight. Things took a turn for the worse, matters grew hard to handle and I soon found myself home the next day at noon. I thought she went for lunch, then, I noticed her phone and her handbag. There’s no way she’d leave without her purse – I don’t believe my friend would be so careless,’ a quote from the heavily publicized statement. Law enforcement had this to say, “-disappearances are sadly commonplace during times of celebration. We have to remember, Odegawoan is secluded, we’re surrounded by forest and unpredictable weather. Aside from Owny Rownder, we’ve had reports of other disappearances. We’re

working each case equally, no life is better than another,” we raised many questions and were returned with cold stares and avoidance. A hotline was broadcasted for any tip which could lead to her safe recovery. Fans of Insatiate kindly gathered outside her manor and placed candles and flowers in hopes of finding her soon,* front page of the Odegawoan Gazette. Other news outlets ran at the chance of profit, speculation stacked upon speculation, die-hard fans started funding campaigns to call on Count Avian Stark.

“Here,” roared Asmodeus, “-get in,” said he opening the roof of his convertible.

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“What’s with the long face?” he asked once on a road headed for the De Costle stripe, “-something happen?”

“Really?” she popped her head in astonishment, “-are you serious?”

“What?”

“Owmy’s disappointed?” she pushed the phone into his face, “-does it not ring a bell?”

“No cause for mystery, is there?” said Asmodeus, “-the lass’s dead, another starlet who leaves the mortal realm too soon.”

Dring, dring, “-the special line,” remarked Kul tapping her earrings, “-hello?” she answered. Asmodeus joined by tapping his earring, a channel of three-person established, “-Asmo, Kul, you guys there?”

“Hey, long time, Odgar, how’s it going?”

“Good,” he replied cheerfully, “-I’m calling on behalf of my wife. Recent disappearance of Owmy, any idea on who’s responsible?” the prince and demoness locked eyes, “-SSY, transfer the call to secure channel,” ordered Kul, the connection forcefully rerouted, “-SSY, trace the caller and examine entourage.”

“Trace called, nothing unusual detected.”

“Gosh,” glanced Asmodeus, “-you can be so paranoid.”

“Rather be safe than sorry,” the other side grew worried, “-guys, can you hear me?” he asked at regular intervals, “-hello?”

“Back,” she replied, “-connection problem, don’t worry. What about the disappearance?”

“I need to know if it’s a gang killing or if she’s truly disappeared. Law enforcement is already stretched thin dealing with gang violence.”

“Odgar, friend, look, Owmy won’t be found, trust. I can’t give details, think of it as a favor. I’m sure lady Valentino appreciates the gesture.”

A faint pause floated, “-so you knew?” interjected a female voice.

“Lady Valentino, how’s the day treating you?”

"Don't you start, it's the fifth this month. Keep killing and I won't have recourse but to formally launch an investigation on the matter."

"No need to fret," he said nonchalantly, "-wait a moment," another tap placed the call on hold.

Kul watched with a, '-what is he thinking?' look.

"SSY, call Starix."

A brief pause, "-Starix here," yawned a half-asleep man, "-what is it, Asmo, I'm not coming to your orgy, stop bugging me."

"As fun as it would be to enjoy the gender transformation powers; I have a little problem requiring the aid of an intellectual."

"Have Mammon do it, I'm not in the mood of playing another one of your games. Last time I heard the word intellectual from that foul mouth I found myself in bed surrounded by ladies I'd never met."

Kul's frown worsened, "-can't fault the prince of lust and gambling to take chances, can you?" he laughed, "-Starix, serious, we're quite in need of help."

"Fine, put the call through," said a yawn.

The call reconnected and held four participants, "-lady Valentino, I present my get-out-jail card."

"Pardon?" she asked

"Ignore the prince," interjected Starix, "-is it the thing about the disappearance?"

"Exactly, law enforcement is under much scrutiny. It's one thing if the target is an unknown, but a star?"

"Really, is that all?"

"What do you mean is that all?" she glared, "-we're in big trouble here."

"No, we're not," to which a few files transferred, "-look here, Owny's a hardworking lass. There's no arguing that fact, yet, hard work alone doesn't help in the cutthroat world of stardom. I mean, the reason she died is for the greed of another, so it seems. I heard Lord Culstan's running for office, a direct challenge to you, lady Valentino, Mayor of Odegawoan. Culstan's known for his love for actresses and the world of fame and stardom. Flip the whole murder on him; there're details on how to make the murder legit. Use Yanette Ender as she who finds the clues which we lay. Law enforcement saves face, Yanette gets credited in solving the death of her comrade and I get some sleep," the call showed three participants.

"Heard the man," said Asmodeus, "-our strategist is one of the best. Follow the plan and I'm sure you'll have another decade on the throne of Odegawoan."

"Man," she exhaled, "-there's no rivaling the power Raven has."

"Not power, lady Valentino, tis a mutually beneficial relationship, an equal agreement, just like the way our master devised it."

"Thank you for the help," she said, the call ended at the sight of the grand casino. Asmodeus' car pulled into private parking, "-we take the office entrance," said Kul, "-it's urgent."

"I wonder what éclair has to say?" they hurried to an automatic door, "-maybe he's retiring?"

"I doubt it," she said, "-he only ever calls when he needs money or someone taken care of. Too bad Alrosia's got the prime minister tied."

"Ha-ha, you're mean."

"Shut up."

Chapter 912: A bleak welcome

"Prime minister, what brings you to the general channel today?"

"Asmodeus," returned from a massive screen, "-I see the princely charm and wit hasn't left. Mammon, lady Kul, I see but three in attendance. No matter," there laid a hint of disappointment over the call, "-do glance at thy screens."

"An invoice?" commented Kul.

"And from a restaurant, damn," gasped Mammon, "-so much money lost in food, what were you eating, gold bricks?"

"No," said the nonchalant butler, "-tis a greeting card from the master."

Silence shook the conference room, and Mammon – more or less the thinker type, stayed neutral. Asmodeus and Kul on the other hand, well, they looked at the bill with further intrigue, "-right, a greeting card..." the prince turned to Kul, who nodded, '-it's very Masterish,' spoke her gestures.

"Yeah, it is masterish," agreed the room.

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"We move into a new stage of the game," said the prime minister, "-matters shall escalate from now on. The reason for the meeting is the Ayder Bill of taxation. Master has plans to foil the invasive prospect. I don't have details as of yet, master's on a trip to Arda. Let it be known, Raven, on parliament when the Adrosian council rejoins to vote on the matter, we shall strike and make it absolute who's the leader of Hidros. Enough rest on thy laurels, Princes – we will need thy influence. Have Starix flown to Hidros soon as possible," upon delivering his message, éclair simply toggled off the call. Shadows loomed in a hallway, 'here they come,' he narrowed with arms crossed at the desk. Narrowly built men waltz inside, paid heed as to no to make much noise, fixed the door, and clopped to the grand desk, "-Minister," said one in the middle, shorter in size and conniving in the eyes, "-what is it I hear, the King's returned?"

"Yes," he replied, "-the king's returned from the jaws of death. We're reserving publication rights on the triumphant story. Imagine the headline," he rocked into the chair and gazed into the distance, "Return of the Hero King. Has a nice ring to it, yes?"

“My dear prime minister, must I remind who’s in charge here?” the Alrosian insignia tied at the breast pocket shimmered, “-parliament is ours. The royal family’s nasty secret is yet to be made public. What happens when news gets out that Queen Eia’s child isn’t the king’s. What happens?”

“Nothing happens,” replied éclair, “-Oxshield has lived under Alpha’s senseless greed for years. Don’t threaten a man too much,” he rose, “-for when the man runs out of fear,” he smirked, “-tis the devil who manifests. And I’m sure,” he narrowed, “-our king’s not one to fear conflict nor repercussion. As from today, do thy worse, I dare you,” he laughed, “-dirt on Hidros’ name is dirt on Alpha’s reputation. What happens when word gets out that the richest empire’s stealing from those they vowed to protect. I’m sure media junkies will have a field day ripping apart the leadership. Who knows, Hidros may offer to sell their secrets to the Wracia Empire. Either way, we’re screwed – however, a dying man has the option of choosing how he dies and how his legacy is remembered. Trust, for when Hidros does end per actions of greedy nobles – Phantom and their allied companies will wage war – a simple press of a button,” he loomed, “-a simple command and what happened at the shores of Whuotan is repeated ten-fold. Now, take this to your master,” he threw a letter, “-tis an official statement on the king’s return.”

“You’re making a mistake, éclair.”

“I don’t care,” he echoed, “-if it comes to war, then let it be for Hidros thrives in war. I’m sure the people won’t mind changing targets from monsters to humans. Scurry along, messenger, leave the decision to those capable of using their brain, not horny old men who move per inclination of their member.”

Ire filled cheeks sharply grasped the letter, “-we’ll see who lives and who dies, éclair,” he whispered, “-horny old men have their way around politics. The battlefield is our territory, come, I challenge thee, bring all those who stand before us, bring those who give such false sense of bravado for when the hammer of justice hits, the sparks of the anvil shall be remains of a fallen Hidros – egocentric warlords. The world’s a place of verbal battle, not a show of sword and blood; you’ll learn soon enough, youngster, yesterday’s enemy is tomorrow’s friend, and today’s friend is but a stepping stone.” The door crashed, shaking nearby decorations, ‘-feels nice,’ exhaled éclair, ‘-the first pawn moves. We’re headed to war without foresight, I hope you know what you’re doing, master,’ the couch buckled.

Achoo, scenery changes from stonelike and clean to rustic and green, ‘-where am I?’ cars and carriages shared roads, buildings were a mix of concrete, wood, and brick. Sky, or what was there, burnt vibrantly, ‘-infused stones?’ he squinted, *touf,* “-watch where you’re standing,” cried a hurried figure dressed in armor. Akin to a river, people rushed the sidewalk, some crossed streets without checking both ways, ‘-I recognize some of the names.’ Blade’s End, Pegasus, independent guilds shared a portion of the city’s ground floor- each building held the guild’s crest, ‘-that’s a throwback,’ he watched, ‘-speaking of guilds, I wonder what’s happened with them,’ reference made to the adventuring classmates he made during the stay at the adventuring academy. Budding groups shared laughter and joy, others shared pain and torment – overall, a well-balanced experience.

“Cab,” he rose a hand, a reptile-drawn hand cart skipped to a stop.

“Where you want to go, mister?”

“The upper floors.”

“Get on in,” said the muscular lizardman, Igna obliged. Many side alley’s later, Igna stood before an open magical circle of blueish hue, “-here we are,” said the lizardman, “-the central teleportation. My fee is fifty coppers.”

“Have two silvers,” said Igna flinging the coins.

“Thank you, my lord,” and off he disappeared. Fondly, hand-drawn carts were common, supplies to livestock, seemed they had no problem answering the call of work.

‘Changed quite a bit,’ pondered Igna, ‘-there used to be stairs and lifts, a central teleportation spell’s conveniently large. Looks like there are a few dotted around the city, it’s changed, got to love it.’ An elf in uniform, after taking accounts of those on the platform, scribbled on a notepad and flicked a lever – a flash of blue cleared the circle.

“Second level,” he gasped, ‘-whoever designed the circle is an idiot. The aftershock’s too much for an ordinary pers-’ to his pleasant surprise, the travelers shrugged the teleportation and went about their day. Youngin’ to elderly, all brushed the affair.

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“Get out the circle,” said a similarly dressed demi-human.

“I need to get to the castle.”

“Castle?” blinked the worker, “-who are you exactly, mister? Transport to the royal castle is done at the northern gate.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, if you’d kindly get off the platform – people are waiting.”

“I do apologize.”

“Head on straight,” added a bystander, “-the northern portal should be there after a few minutes walk.”

“A few minutes’ walk?”

“Yes sir.”

“Thank you for the courtesy.”

“Don’t mention it,” smiled the visibly lesser fortunate couple, “-Arda’s a good place, mister, don’t let the rumors say otherwise. We may look scary and off-putting, however, we’re pure from the heart, everyone’s willing to help lest the luck takes thee to a rogue.”

“I see,” he nodded.

A loud announcement foiled the conversation, “-next batch headed downstairs, please make way to the circle!”

“Later, mister,” said the couple picking up their bags.

'Friendly people,' he headed North as told by the couple, closer the north got the more vacant seemed the street and much more decadent in terms of building architecture. 'Noble district?' went across the mind as he arrived at the clearing – the narrowly spaced buildings thrust themselves as a hallway which stopped at a bright purple light yonder. '-Plaza?' passed the opening, an octagonal shaped area held a purple circle. The octagon carried other similar hallways akin to whence Igna exited. A dark elf sat at a timid kiosk at the edge of the circle, "-is this the portal headed to the castle?"

The elf rose her head from a pocket-sized novel, pushed her locks behind her ears, and revealed golden jewelry, her small eyes quickly examined Igna top to bottom, "-and who might you be?" said a misleadingly stern voice, "-castle access for nobles only, council ordered."

"I'm of noble blood," explained Igna.

"Forgive my saying, I don't know any nobles who wear shorts and a t-shirt to visit a castle. Clothes make the man as they say; not going to get fired so quick after my promotion."

"Right, my outfit, I forgot I wore beachwear," *snap,* fabric wove into a three-piece suit and firmed onto the devil's body, "-how do I look?" he tied the hair in a messy-long bun, "-neat, yes?"

Cough, cough, "-Creation magic?"

"Magically entuned?"

"I'm a dark-elf, of course, I know about magic. I've read about creation magic and the power to turn mana into anything one wishes, which was on the book of Magiology published by Founder Staxius Haggard. Was a theory... how did you?"

"My name's Igna Haggard, nephew of Staxius Haggard and son to Queen Courtney Haggard."

"Holy mother of Earel, the king of Hidros' here," she choked.

"Calm down," he said reassuringly, "-I came to visit mother. Yet, I find myself drawn to the mystery of why a scholar would spend her days working for the magical circle?"

"Oh, simple," she said, "-maintenance of the magical circle is a big responsibility. Depending on which cardinal point gate one uses, complexity differs. It was a member of the University of Rotherham who suggested the idea. Don't know much save what I barely remember. Move to the center, I'll activate the lever."

A flip and off he flashed to the second floor, "-where am I?" he scanned and noticed the castle's watchtower. The first and second floor's architecture resembled more or less the same. Exquisitely dressed figures threw knowing nods at Igna, who returned the sentiment.

"Castle is closed for today," hailed a guard, "-my lord, the queen's asked for the area to be cleared. I'm sorry, please return at a later date."

"Is my hair not familiar?" he blinked, "-please don't tell me everyone's forgotten about the queen having a loveable son?"

"King Igna's been missing since the plane crash, what are you talking about, my lord?"

"I'm right here?" he pulled onto the noble crest, "-see?"

"Holy Mother," he gasped, "-I'm so sorry," dropped on one knee, "-my tone's inexcusable, majesty."

"Raise your head," he said, "-no harm done, can I enter?"

"Yes, you can, my lord," the gates stretched.

'The castle seems empty,' he wandered into bare corridors and looked about for naught, '-did everyone evacuate or did a plague hit the residents?' footsteps caught his ear, '-there,' a silhouette jumped, "-stop!" he called, no reply. The chase soon landed him at one of the bedchambers, once occupied by Staxius and Shanna, he pushed the door ajar, a gentle breeze flapped, "-who's there?" the door pushed further, "-I said no guests!" silvery hair whipped and locked onto the intruder.

"Hello, mother," said Igna, "-long time no see."

"Igna?" she paused, "-is that you?"

"Yes?"

"No," her expression tightened, "-éclair pulled that stunt before, I'm not falling for the disguise, Vengeance."

"It's me, mother," he summoned the watcher's mark, "-I'm back."

"Igna," her guard lowered, "-you, my son, are an idiot," to which she turned for the view.

Silence befell his regard, "..."

"DON'T STAY THERE!" she echoed, "-why the long face?"

"I half-expected a hug or a slap, didn't think I'd be blessed by such a morose welcome."

"You never left," she said, "-doesn't look it but I'm happy."

He followed her curiousness, "-is something the matter outside?"

"The circles," she said, "-have the sinking feeling there's much to the little invention."

"Flashbacks of the church's invasion?"

"Yeah, the fear is always present. Can't know too much about these things. Tell me," She moved aside, "-have you come for a reason or?"

"Yes, I came to visit my mother. Why's the castle empty?"

"Long story, I'll change my clothes. Be with you in a bit."

"Right, I'll wait in the dining hall."

"See you there," said a bleak, uninspired Courtney.

Chapter 913: Mischief

For bleak, the solemn silence hovering over the dining table was a picture-perfect definition. Igna had his arms on the knees meanwhile the Queen of Arda took pleasure in wandering about said hall, she'd stop at paintings and observe.

"Mother, does something or someone bother you?" he asked.

"Not really," she said, "-one rarely realizes how long a year is for another. Time, an illusion thrust upon our minds to understand the process of creation and decay. Something along those lines," she finally made way to the table and sat, "-curious as to why Arda seems desolate?"

"Yes."

"Well," her expression changed into a glimpse of mischief, "-the ancient tree no more stands as the capital of Arda. Said title is held by Glenda, Arda's split into two halves aided by the Ardanian wall. Bottom half is reserved for agriculture and more or less abiding to the olden ways – not to say we're slow in adapting to move, the older folks prefer tranquility over the hysteria of advancement. In many ways, tis the defining reason why Arda's Arda. Our rich tradition and culture are a part of what defines us. Look at the shipping port southwest, many budding investors have scurried to take a slice of the cake, and can't blame the greed of humanity. I mentioned a love for tradition, yet, I've ordered part of the Southwest region to be cleared for a better-supported trade route. Demand for a better way of transport sort of spilled from the northern region, the technologically crazed industrialist portion of Arda. I've ensured the middle half remains how we know and love, full of nature and her children."

"Mother..."

"Yes?" she paused.

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"What brought on the tangent about regions?"

Her long lashes rolled, "-tell me, why are you here?"

"Am I not invited?"

"No," she chuckled, "-it's out of the ordinary. To be honest, the similarity between you and Vengeance's rather mind-blowing. Vengeance's act very much made me shudder any future idea of dealings with Oxshield and Alrosia. Thank god we're self-sustaining, the roadmap laid out by Glenda served as an example for other major cities to boom."

"Mother, mother," he tapped the table, "-do you hear yourself?"

"Yes, why?"

"It's awkward," he said, "-I don't recognize you."

"Awkward, isn't it?" she laughed, "-keep the interaction fresh in thy memory for tis how I and the others felt when a bootleg replacement took the throne. Awkward a mild way to put the distaste," a melancholic smear upon the gallant queen of Arda cleaned, her face brightened as did her stern gaze. "-How was the performance?" she asked.

“Performance?”

“Yes, of the melancholic queen,” she held a smug grin, “-welcome home, Igna, been a while.”

“Now I get my welcome back?”

“Don’t complain. I heard from Elvira before the arrival.”

“I see,” he narrowed, “-a mischievous ploy...”

“Don’t pout,” food arrived ten-fold, music played, the darkened hall shimmered in a sublime golden flicker, it was akin to angels descending from the heavens, “-Welcome back, majesty!” said many retainers, Igna gawked cluelessly.

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Lady Courtney hung at his shoulder and whispered, “-this, dear Igna, is what we call a surprise. Go enjoy yourself, I’ll be right back, there are a few things I ought to settle.”

“Understood,” a swarm of friendly castle residents exploded, he laughed and drank – a surprise welcoming party.

‘Didn’t once sense their presence... guess I was blindsided.’ Still, during the celebrations and after much parole between residents – Igna sneakily exited the music-filled hall and arrived at an empty corridor which carried inside whereupon rose a spiral. Up said steps and spread a view of magnificent proportions – a full view over the buildings surrounding the castle and remnants of Kreston’s destroyed cathedral.

“There you are,” murmured Courtney in an outbreath, “-Arda’s in quite a pickle,” she said holding a jar, “-get it?”

“A pun... right?” he climbed fully and stood at her side, “-how’s Arda in trouble?”

“Ayder’s bill; not the first time they’ve tried to take from us. Dorchester and Arda have had skirmishes for quite a while, news isn’t covered since the matter stays under wraps. Deaths and casualties are placed under monster attack, families don’t dare argue – compensation is lucrative.”

“On paper, Arda’s booming, the economy in the green, I got the reports.”

“Yeah, on paper,” she sighed, “-money is good and all; refinement of Maicite falls into our domain to keep Alrosia’s nosy greed out of our research.”

“And?”

“Don’t give a look of concern,” she reassured, “-I have the situation under control. Don’t underestimate Arda, we have money and power,” therein, she rose her nose, “-before leaving, calibrate the teleportation portals.”

“Ayder’s bill won’t pass, I’ll make sure the message is sent. I’ve been left out of the loop; aside from voting power, what does Alrosia have on us?”

"The title of Emperor," she said, "-by signing the alliance, we surrendered the right to decree order, not until the latter is examined and voted on by the Emperor's personal court. Alrosian council is an assembly of representatives, six for each regional member. Arda, Easel Run Gard, and Hidros count as one. Therefore, each state sends two of their representative to the meeting; we allowed Kreston and Dorchester to have their own say. Diversification lowered our voting power, Arda is represented by your's truly and lady Haru. Easel Run Gard is represented by the King and Queen, as for Hidros, éclair, and Prince Julius. Dorchester's represented by Queen Eia and lady Goldberg. Kreston as an exception is led by Pope Carrigan II, Duke of Kreston. Alphaia has the liberty of choosing whoever they wish, thus, I don't much care to know who's on their side. Factor in the Gaien Council, and we have an independent party at the table of the council."

"I see," he paused to think, "-what of the king of Hidros, does he not have the power to equal the emperor?"

"Come on," her lips tightened, "-were you not the one who signed the agreement?|"

"King and Emperor were supposed to be equal in taking decision, 'twould have been possible if Alphaia wasn't so corrupt. Under-the-table deals are common... there's a limit to how compromised a nation is, especially an Empire as rich as Alphaia."

"Well, on the day the bill passes, you'll have Arda's support. Hidros's voting power are Kreston, Dorchester, Easel Run Gard, Arda, Hidros, and the Gaien Council. Igna," she kindly looked at him, "-Hidros voting power of six is split. Alphaia's voting power of six is united and I'm sure it's not hard to turn over one of Hidros' voters. Dorchester and the Gaien Council... they're the weakest link. Looking at it now, you have a solid two out of six. Better start making moves, you have a month to prepare. A tie would cancel the vote – we'll need at least three to turn to our side, a task well, improbable."

"It's not as difficult as you think," he said, "-imagine another nation willing to join the UN-A?"

"Who?"

"Oh, a country of wealth, knowledge, strength, and undeniable prestige. We know the council's not united, everyone's out for themselves. Therefore, it wouldn't be difficult to add another member."

"Their voting power will depend on how strong they are on the global market. Strength is gauged by military might and fortune."

"How powerful would a nation of god spawn be?"

"Pardon?"

"You can only trust those who are willing to die for you, not family, not friends. Complete strangers showed grit and unconditional trust to the devil, in return, the faith greatly affected how I think about the world. Family, big sister, she hasn't done anything to aid Hidros. I understand her priority is with her family, thus where we stand. A new journey begins, a quest to find powerful allies who'll go to hell and back, I swear on my name, those who show that level of trust, I'll make sure they are rewarded grandly."

Incoming call; Yui, "-pardon me," he nodded and touched the earpiece, "-what's the matter?"

"éclair sent news of thy arrival to Raven, well, I mean, it's hard to put into words..."

“Spit it out already.”

“Lord Asmodeus and representatives of Raven hosted quite the lavish party. During the celebration – a young actress, aged 14, was assaulted and beaten within an inch of her life.”

Beep, “-greetings master,” said éclair joining the call, “-Yui’s given a brief remark on the events, yes?”

“Yes, seems the party got wild. Can’t they cover the incident?”

“No, her family is affluent and is resorting to pushing the matter to the Imperial Court. Relations between Raven and the Imperial family haven’t been great. Emperor Markus suddenly increased taxation on gambling revenue – we were forced to launder money through Arda and hid. We owe the government quite a lot of money, something in the range of hundreds of millions.”

He breathed a quiet sigh, looked at Courtney, and shook his head, “-go on,” she said, “-I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Was a pleasure to see you again, mother,” he smiled.

“Don’t disappear and I’ll think about forgiving you,” she winked, more details flooded the channel and Igna made way to the teleportation portals. Finger in motion to remain quiet, he leaped inside the circle, deactivated the lens and summoned magical circles of his own, three symbol addition, and gained nonrestricted access to the various points, “-there,” he stopped at a strange line, “-a backdoor inside. Seems the spellcaster had more in mind,” a flick and the entrance closed.

“Master,” screamed Yui, “-can’t you teleport home?”

“Teleport home?” he stood outside, peering at the tall trees, “-must I remind, my mana consumption’s a little excessive?”

“Do it!” she screamed, *Snap,* mana sucked dry in the vicinity of where he once stood – scorch marks laid in where he waited, “-I’m here,” he popped into éclair’s office. “-YUI!”

“Over here,” she waved with a bag of chips, “-I knew the devil had powers to return. Please,” she rose her feet and pointed at a defeated éclair, “-he needs help.”

“What’s happening here?” inquired the devil standing before the desk, “-éclair?”

A tired mien rose, “-master,” he pushed himself off the counter, “-enemy,” he breathed, “-we triggered more than anger,” he lifted his shirt and showed a bullet wound, “-anti-magic bullets, I got shot...”

“You got shot?” he turned to Yui, “-and why aren’t you helping him?”

“éclair said not to call an ambulance. If not an ambulance, I decided to call on the devil. Do your thing,” she smiled, “-heal the butler from all his wounds and find the culprit, though, I’m sure he’s already been caught.”

Half an hour earlier, on the minister’s daily commute back from the castle’s yard, a strange voice interrupted his walk. One of the maids was seen hunched over the table pale and unresponsive. He rushed to her side, tapped her cheeks, and checked a pulse – nothing, a shadow cross the peripheral, and a thunderous boom struck the eardrums. He fell, stomach warm and adrenaline coursing. A

nonchalant Yui saw the wounded éclair, grabbed him by the shoulder, and hauled him to the office a simple walk away.

"The wound's not bleeding," he said, "-though I'd have more time in settling the incident in Alpha. Raven's mustn't be brought to the imperial court, I need to stop the ordeal no matter what."

"Breathe," said Igna, "-there's nothing more pitiful than a wounded person acting tough. I'll take it from here," he side-glanced.

"Ambulance is on their way," she said, "-I'm not an idiot, called them the moment I saw him wounded."

"Where's the Empress?"

"At her estate in Alpha, why?"

"Oh, I need to talk to her privately. Have a jet readied," he rolled his sleeve and cast a minor rite of healing, "-should hold until doctors get here."

"Master, where are you going?" she asked seeing him make for the door.

"To find whoever is responsible and get some answers," a flash of purple threw Yui's bravado, "-care to join?" paramedic rushed the instant Igna opened the door, "-prime minister," they said, "-are you okay?"

Chapter 914: Trouble in the horizon

"Majesty," guards shook at a sudden overwhelming presence, "-you're here?"

"Keep the small talk to a minimum," he said staring down a dark stairway, "-where's the assailant?"

"He's been taken to the dungeon."

"Good," the king motioned to enter the darkened halls – another guard interjected by stomping his foot, "-majesty," he said with chest, "-forgive the insubordination, I have orders from the Alrosian council to let the man live until further order's been given. The attacker is a diplomat from an Alphan province."

"Diplomat?" he chuckled, "-the man has attempted to take the life of my prime minister, éclair. Doth thee think treason a pardonable offense?"

The guards shuddered, "-care to let me pass?" path opened, and the King's clops echoed into the lower castle level. A jovial Yui skipped, took a glance at the guards, and smiled, "-the king's back, yes?"

"Lady Yui," they gasped for bodies were on high alert, "-you startled us," they breathed a relieved sigh, "-we were asked not to harm the assailant by the council. We thought it'd be a good idea to stop the king from getting into trouble, you know..."

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"I understand the plight," she answered, "-I wouldn't be worried. Take the message to the retainers, King Igna's returned from the jaws of death. Our immortal monarch's here to stay and bring order to matter. For now," she also entered the stairway, "-keep the area restricted. We'll see what comes from the interrogation," she giggled, "-or something along those lines," her footsteps were creepier,

witchlike, an embodiment of evil – such as the shared collective. Figures dressed in armor turned to one another, gestured by nods of the heads, and created a perimeter – a smaller figure understood his task and scurried along to the retainer's quarters.

Down below in the labyrinth of the castle's underground passage; Igna knowingly took turns, passed catacombs, were on a bronze plate scribbled, 'to those lost by the Gehntry fever of XX40,' amber orbs lit the paths and eventually arrived an ominously broadening walkway.

"Here," waved Yui already leaned against a wooden table, "-master, this path is much simpler," she flicked her thumb to a larger entrance.

"Right it is," he said, "-I preferred to take the scenic route."

"Scenic route?" she mumbled and he passed her figure without so much batting an eye. Yui, keen on observing expressions, followed Igna's sharp facial features passed before her, in the heterochromatic iris flakes sparked frigid bursts of purple, a disgust of life oozed. 'What the?' she froze still, unable to move a muscle – two shadows loomed at his side, they seemed to turn and stare, her heart raced not before a loud crash broke the pseudo-paralysis.

Light brown hair, a lighter colored complexion, freckles upon the chin and nose – a little mustache and untamed facial hair, the short stature outline rose its head from the pitiful crouch and stared at whoever had come to the cell. Light off the airholes reflected off the ground, cobwebs and the smell of rot and bodily fluids reign, "-who's there?" asked an audible accent from the Alphian nobility.

"The Devil," he boomed, the man clambered to his feet and shuffled to the iron bars.

"Has the devil come to take my soul?" he leaped at the bars and shook – the dungeon thundered a cacophony of insanity and pain, "-TAKE IT I SAY!" he screamed. Igna rose his finger through the gates, lined it at the man's forehead, and flicked, *crash,* the walls shook, he kicked the door, "-the devil's come to take everything," he said, laughing.

Disgruntled and on his bottom, he rose a severe look, "-do you know who I am?" Igna stopped and stared, "-no, and I don't care who you are," a casual gesture rose the man off the ground, mana waves flickered around the devil, "-tell me, why did you attack éclair?"

"Never," he replied, "-I rather die than speak."

"Right, you rather die?" he mildly closed the open palm, pressure wrapping the attack tightened, "-what" he pained.

"I don't care," *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* dark rods lunged into the target's brain, flickers of white transferred from him to Igna, by the end, the threads undid themselves and the man fell onto the hard ground, not breathing and unresponsive. Igna turned, conjured a bucket of water, and lathed a broken outline. "-Have the man taken to the hospice," he said, passing the confused Yui, "-I'm headed to Alpha."

Later that day, on the unconscious diplomat reaching the hospital; information arrived from the Alrosian Court, the man's identity was the prince of Ital, the son of the Duke of Ital, an influential figure in the emperor's personal court.

One could imagine how the hospital ground turned into a battlefield. Duke Ital, resident at the Alphan Embassy outside of Rosespire brought a group of at least fifty men. Defending was the Hidrosian leadership; namely, Yui and éclair. The duke barged into éclair's room and shouted, "-WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!"

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To which, the prime minister, circled by Raide Rosie, Bleu Aizo, and a few students from the Aizo Academy, simply said, "-whatever do you mean?"

"My son," he shrieked, "-he's in a coma. I heard it was the damned King's fault!"

"Duke Ital," returned a composed Bleu, "-we're in a place of rest. I'd strongly advise keeping the noise to a minimum."

"I don't care," he fired, "-I'm a Duke, a noble! I have power, and I'll make certain thee understands the severity of challenging a noble of the emperor's court."

"Duke Ital," said éclair scanning the well-dressed man of no hair and a strong mustache, "-your son fired at me and nearly took my life. How will the argument of I'm a duke hold in court? Must I remind we're in Hidros's jurisdiction? No matter one's status or clout, the law is equal, doubly so for Hidros. You're lucky king Igna didn't order the death of the prince right there and then. Not rare for people to go missing in Hidros, I mean, our continent is large and some provinces are home to dangerous forests and monsters."

"éclair, doth thee dare oppose the Alrosian Council?"

"No, I surely don't want such an awful squabble. Listen," he sat upright and threw his feet off the bed, "-the hospice is mostly funded by us, and we have the right to stop treatment for anyone undeem of healthcare. Argue or go check on thy son – throw another tantrum and I'll have you and your son thrown onto the street. Care to bet how long he'll survive in the open without attention?"

"éclair..." the eyes widened, "-how da-"

"Enough," interjected Raide, "-Duke Ital, please move from the prime minster's side. The prince will be in arrest at the hospice, until then, no one will be allowed to meet the traitor. Attempted murder of a state official," police officers arrived in full as were members of a special unit who instantly pulled guns on the Duke's armed party, "-Duke Ital, please leave the premises before we have to resort to further action. The life of a diplomat is only worth so much – and Hidros's been the underdog for too long, don't push thy luck else we may... you know, return to our roots, trial by combat." Defeated, Duke Ital exited premises to be ambushed by a horde of reporters, the headline said night read, *Attempt on the Prime minister's life,* and further elaborated in, "-attacker, Yeero Ital was spotted by many eyewitnesses as having shot the minister. A maid by the name of Doreth was shot as well, her injuries are severe. An act of high treason against the court by a member of the Alrosian United Nations – is there more to the story or was it a freak accident? One thing's for sure, Duke Ital was flustered and angry, more details in the video below."

Silence roamed the hallways, "-he's gone," said Bleu, "-we should get going, éclair."

"Let's prepare for war," said Raide, "-a legal battle," the students silently cheered, leaving Yui in the company of éclair.

"Why the sudden shut of mouth?"

"I don't know," she replied, "-I saw something truly disturbing today. Igna's truly the Devil, I heard much about the stories in Marinda, I was there and I know what I heard, never saw it, but today," she shook, "-the sheer uncaringness towards another life, man, I was scared to my bones."

"Stories of Marinda, tell me about it."

"Stories about Marinda," she smiled, "-I'd love to."

Night turned day, Igna landed in Odgawoan – the city all but thickened in size, the outer layer pushed against the forestry, expansion made the once outlying airstrip become part of the city. Sun over his head and briefcase in hand, Igna slid off the stairs and touched the hard ground, "-majesty," called a beautiful air hostess, "-what shall we do?"

"Take a rest," he said, "-go into the city and have some fun. We'll be here for a few days, I think. Just be ready to fly at a moment's notice, is that okay?"

"Thank you," her fingers trembled after which she turned to the cockpit and relayed the news – screams of pure bliss echoed, leaving a nice feeling in Igna's chest.

He escaped the hangar and headed inside a bigger array of buildings – passengers ran across the tile floors to the commercial area of the airport. A hard right against the flow of people led outside, clean black tarmac curved and led into the city.

"Hello mister," waved a young driver, "-care for a drive?"

"Lead on," he said, "-take me to Raven's casino."

"Raven's casino," he watched the reflection, "-sir, you must be rich to afford that casino."

"Why?"

"Because only the elite frequent said place. It's a no-go zone for people like me – instead of that casino they bought another opposite them and made it equally fun."

Sweat gleamed as he made small talk, "-tell me," said Igna, "-are you scared?"

"Scared?" he slammed the break at a red light, "-no, not really," he shook, "-it's not like I own them money or something..."

"A-ha!"

"..."

"Don't worry," he returned, "-drive on, my friend, there's nothing to be worried about."

"You don't understand," he added, "-the mafia's very prominent in Odgawoan. Go against them and life here is assured to be hell..."

An electronic store caught the attention, the taxi halted and news played in one of the windows, *Raven under fire for the death of a young starlet!* the car drove and soon were on the De Costle strip.

'There it is,' rose the majestic building, car pulled off the main road, circled around the casino, and slowed to a stop at the entrance, "-there we are," he said.

"Good luck covering the debt," said Igna, passing a note to cover the fare.

"I will, thank you, sir," nodded the youngster, engines rolled into the distant right, leaving Igna standing at the gate. He walked and looked through, "-who's there," shouted a guard.

"A visitor," he replied.

"A visitor?" the armed guard rose from his cabin, "-we don't take visitors last I heard," he stood arms akimbo. Another voice rose from the inside, "-who's at the gate?"

"I don't know, sir, someone says he's here for a visit."

"A visit?" the distant voice approached, "-we don't take customers at the moment, what's the matter?"

"I don't know, sir," returned the guard, "-look for yourself," the familiar voice stopped and stared through the gates, "-white hair?"

"Asmodeus, let me in," snapped back.

"HOLY SHIT!" he jumped, "-OPEN THE GATES JONGE."

"Sire?" returned the guard.

"Don't ask questions, the King's here to visit!"

"King?" the guard leaped into the cabin, flicked a switch, and parted the separation.

The Devil stared with a mundane expression, '-I should really inform people when I plan to visit.'

"Majesty," the prince opened his arms, "-we were excited to hear thy triumphant return."

Igna rose a finger, "-no," he narrowed at the prince's-stained trousers, "-don't you come close to me with thy fluids. Messy hair and clothes," he peeked to the side, where in a car held the silhouette of a lady, "-seriously?"

"What seriously?"

"Prince of Lust," he shook his head, "-can't blame you. Go take a damn shower, I'll head inside."

"Understood, Kul, Mammon and Starix should be at the office."

Chapter 915: Unlikely companion.

Raven's elite; lady Kul, Mammon, and Starix, "-Asmo," cried a disinterested voice, "-how was the minister's wife?"

"Pardon?" rebutted Igna.

Mammon widen his eyes, Kul followed on noticing the change as did Starix eventually, “-master?” they breathed a collective ‘what?’

“Don’t bother,” returned Igna waltzing into prince Asmodeus’s large office, grabbing a seat on a nearby couch, “-how goes it, everyone?”

All wondered what had happened, they looked at one another for answers, answers they wished they knew but couldn’t find, “-master?” inquired Kul firming her curiosity, “-is that you or is it Vengeance?”

“Seriously?” he blinked, “-tis I, the King of Hidros,” before answering another question, a finger rose to a massive screen behind the three, “-what is that?” news read, *Tragic loss of Haania, famed up-and-coming starlet,* Igna threw his hand over the couch and judged, “-The Disappearance of Owny Rownder,” he mentioned, “-I hear about all the death of stars.”

“Master,” said Starix, “-the situation looks dire, case of Owny Rownder’s been settled. We’re waiting for a proper time to bury the case.”

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“Now is as good a time as any,” he said, “-death of a starlet, one of blood to a noble family won’t be solved quickly. Tell me,” the posture swapped for him laying his elbows upon his knees and piercing the veil of which was the trio’s inability to think and process.

Click, door opened, “-hello, did I miss anything?” arrived the fresh prince, “-oh my,” he tiptoed inside and breathed, “-air’s frozen over, what’s the standoff about?”

“Nothing major,” explained Igna, “-I was stumped that’s all. Asking questions begot naught save empty, clueless stares. When in doubt, choose silence – a good enough option when faced by friends and family.”

The prince walked and soon stood above Igna, “-I see no reason to make a further announcement. Master Igna’s returned for a long trip – due to reasons unknown to us, and I’m sure it relates to the balance of life and death, or should I say, deaths – Lord Igna stands before us today as he stood so many years before, our leader and our friend.”

The king nodded in agreement, “-listen, Kul, Mammon, Starix, I’m not here to stop a well-oiled machine. Continue as thee would.”

“Easier said than done,” escaped Starix, “-master, do you not realize how intimidating thee are?”

“No?”

“Well then,” shrugged Mammon, “-long as the master isn’t angry, I’m not one to interfere,” a glance at one of the screens caught the second prince’s attention, “-the casino,” he said, “-they’re getting ready,” noiseless chiming of chips viewed through the monitor sent chills, “-money,” he said and made for the door, “-brother Asmodeus will handle the intrigue,” he said to Igna, explaining the urgency, “-I need more money,” he smiled, “-more and more, more than everyone!” a flash of the outer corridor and the monolithic figure vanished to soon pass across monitors watching the many corridors and hallway.

There, Starix tied his hair in a bun and stood, “-don’t mind Mammon, sire, for he’s the reason why Raven’s able to keep heads in the cut-throat world of business. Speaking of business, suppose we should take care of the Haania matter.”

“On that,” voiced Kul, “-are you sure the starlet is even a noble? We assumed from what the papers and information said. Can never trust those bastards, they’ll do anything for a good viewership,” she leaned over her laptop, “-SSY, Deeper analysis on Haania’s identity and cause of death.” No slower than three seconds, a blast of notification lit her screen, “-I’ve got a lead,” she said closing her laptop, picking up a handbag, and loading a pistol, “-it was a pleasure to see you again, master. We speak later after the mess is settled.” Similarly, Starix took his phone and made it for the door.

“Where are you headed?”

“To cut the snake’s head,” he smirked, “-as the master said, now’s the best time to spring into action.”

Thus, the strong entourage emptied to Igna and Asmodeus sitting face to face, “-what’s SSY?” he inquired.

“A command, SSY stands for Sister-system Yui. Contrary to how you use Yui and éclair, we don’t require the human touch, similar to the many machines reliant on the sister system’s processing power and knowledge. SSY is a convenient way to get things done.”

“I see, tis like when I ask éclair for help. Anyway,” he looked at the screen, “-there’s no reason for me to get involved in Raven’s problem, yes?”

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“Would you?” paused the sneaky Asmodeus.

“Would I?”

“Master, what the reason for thy visit?”

“To exchange a few words with my lovely sister. The Ayder bill,” he mentioned, “-I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, “-one of the greater problems facing Hidros currently. With the town leadership in the pocket, Odegawoan is our playing field. Rivaling gangs have to answer to us – drug trade booms and anyone can partake. If they’re weak to survive, well, not uncommon to find long since decomposed bodies in the wild. Master,” he leaned into the desk, lowering the tone, “-how about we have some fun?”

“No,” returned Igna loudly, “-I do not care for the carnal bonding of flesh, not even with Odegawoan’s top.”

“Damn, how did you?”

“It’s you,” replied monotonously, “-what else is there.”

The prince closed his arms and smiled, “-master, there’s plenty to do. Here,” a bank card slid across the table, “-access to an account, think of it as the profit thee made by founding Raven.”

"I'd rather the money be invested in making the company bigger."

"No humbleness," narrowed the Prince, "-as the Devil," he knowingly smirked, "-money is but one of those things that are there for the devil's pleasure. Enjoy and don't mind how much is gone – destroy the economy if that is what tickles thy whims, for I know and understand how rules don't affect us, martyr of humanity's sins. We're demons by heart and will live to fulfill our desires."

"What if I start a war?"

"Well, Devil," he pressed his fingers together, "-would be wise for the devil to clean his plate. A simple snap will suffice to bring down an army. Long are the days are gone when individuals had the strength to the rival opposing nation on their lonesome. The world's weak, PMCs and weapons are what they call strength."

"I get it, a harbinger of death and all," he stood, "-have a car readied, I'm headed to the Empress's home."

"I'd strongly advise taking a jet."

"Sure, have a bike readied when I land, yes?"

"As thee wish, master," the thick door closed at his back, Igna glided down the stairs, passed the casino where Mammon stood peering over the customers holding a sadistic leer, no heed the prince's intention, he made for the automatic door, nodded at the guards, a lavish car turned to where he stood, "-get on in, master," cried a female voice, visage blocked by tainted windows. Doors shut, and the car sped to the gates and flew for the airfield.

Back at the casino, éclair's forehead crinkled, "-shit. I forgot Medusa was here," quick to change channels, "SSY, Location of Medusa?"

"On a route with the king to the airfield."

"Damn," he facepalmed, "-good luck, my king. Medusa is one of those people who does as she pleases. So much for bringing the definition of Femme fatale into the mortal realm. Oh well, she's a good person, I think, I hope?" taps at the door followed by heels, "-oh hello," added Asmo coyly, "-lady Astria, I see thee wish for more," the shirt button opened.

"Asmodeus," she wept liquid joy, "-the passion felt when we first met makes what my husband and I have shared for so many years, worthless. Please," she ran into his arms, "-make me yours, I beg of you."

"I will," he whispered in her ears, "-you're already mine," the pupils flickered ominously.

Thirty minutes passed, "-there we are."

Igna looked through the window and tightened his lips, "-we're not at the airfield... instead," he looked around, "-is this the red-light district?"

"No," said the driver, "-we're at the airfield. Look to the right on thy phone. Airfield's just a short ten-minute rush away."

“And why aren’t we there yet?” a division between front and back made it hard for the one-on-one awkwardly tense. A gentle aura rose through the car floor, “-I’ve wanted to see you for so long,” said an enamored voice, the division opened to a lady dressed in red slithering into the back, she had her hands resting on Igna’s thighs and a face few centimeters from his, “-tell me, master Igna, how are you?”

“Medusa,” he returned, “-I’m fine, lack a bit of fresh air but content since thee worn an obnoxiously soothing perfume.”

“Man,” she stepped away and dropped onto the empty seat, “-no one’s resisted my temptation before.”

“Taking a page out of Asmodeus’ book on how to get laid?”

Her side-glance told much, “-I digress,” added Igna, “-Medusa, tell me, were you not a priestess of Athena. I mean, some stories speak of thee being killed at the hand of Perseus, turned into a shield, and later given to Athena. I mean, I’ve seen Athena freeze over a horde of demons by wielding the very same shield.”

“I know,” she shrugged, “-I was beautiful before lady Athena’s curse. Just because I had intercourse with a god... well, the vow of celibacy isn’t mine to follow. I was granted another body on condition of taking on the name and soul of an ancient demon, which coincidentally meant that I was to become a member of Asmodeus’ harem.”

“And?”

“It’s fun,” she laughed, “-I do as I pleased and I’m freed from the curse.”

“Not to ruin the celebrations, Athena’s in the mortal realm. Have you met her?”

Medusa’s curly hair froze, she rose her pure and innocently pale visage towards him, glimmers of fear crossed, “-lady Athena’s in the mortal realm?” said a deep gulp.

“Yeah, though I wouldn’t be worried. Medusa, dear old Medusa – thou art beautiful, same to when thee lived the mentioned episode. What’s the plan now, what doth thee wish?”

“Well, before we spoke, I thought I’d enchant one of the more powerful beings, make him my puppet and exact my revenge, no not revenge, something, well, I don’t know, spite? Ok, I didn’t think, I just wanted to make thee mind for I’m confident I can tame anyone in bed, immortal or not.”

“How’s the attempt?”

“Gone to shit,” she laughed, “-well, King Igna, will you punish me for betraying thy trust?”

He shook his head and pulled her in a close hug, “-you idiot. No way I’m going to blame someone for trying to get to the top. Medusa, no matter what the stories say, the Medusa who stands here today is a friend, an ally of Asmodeus, and surely an ally of mine. I don’t care what happened in the past, consensual relation with Poseidon or not – the desecrated name of Medusa lives as a symbol of courage. I, truly, have but the utmost respect for people who take what is made available and turn it into an advantage.”

“Way to make me feel embarrassed now,” she tightened her loose dress, reached at the back for her heels, and tied her hair in an elven style, “-there, much better,” she smiled happily – in which Igna felt a

warm sensation in his chest. "Medusa," he stared, "-you, my lady, are a mankiller," he laughed, "-if it had been under any other circumstance, I would have fallen just as easily as those who came before."

Her lovely eyes blinked in a coy-innocent, "-sorry?"

"Ignore me," he exhaled, "-the airfield, we need to get going."

"Right," she pulled the handle, "-I'll leave after you take-off."

An impulse shot, "-Medusa," he voiced as she placed one foot outside.

"Yeah?" she leaned and turned, "-anything I can do?"

"Why not come along," he offered, "-I could use some visual candy to smooth over the negotiations."

"Visual candy?" she stopped, "-sure," said a loud cackle, "-master Igna, you truly are whimsical."

"Why's that?" he asked matching her laughter, she dropped into the driver's seat and toggled, "-whatever I thought would happen was flipped over its head. Master Igna, it would be my pleasure to accompany thee."

"The pleasure is mine, I assure you."

Chapter 916: A game of Cluedo

Jet engines tore across the Alpha skies, scenery swapped from the upper plateau to a gentle descent onto the Scaican beaches. A smooth landing had the duo on the hard ground without much effort, same exchange, the pilots and air-hostess bid Medusa and Igna a warm goodbye. The black outline carefully taxied to one of the many hangars, most seemed to belong to other, richer families. As ordered, a bike was handed off by a confused-looking driver.

"Express delivery," she added.

"I know," Igna straddled, "-get on in." Medusa flung her long legs over the seat, tightened her grip with Igna's back, and cozily wore a pink helmet.

"Looks good," he said through the mirror.

"Yeah, good for a princess," she added sarcastically.

"Come on, there's no need to be rude. It weirdly befits thee."

She but turned her head and held a finger, "-no more," said the gesture. Igna pulled on the throttle, tires skid and he blasted off. Roads were fairly empty and tight, difficult for a speed-crazed demon, and home to many accidents. Slopes barred with houses slowly faded into lines of trees which also turned to naught, thus shoving a lovely view of sand and sea over helmets.

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"Master," she called, "-is there a reason why we're headed to the Empress's manor?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd discuss politics. Why, is something the matter?"

“Yes, actually, I have my concerns. Seems to me the intent is to talk; who is to stay the guards won’t stop us, I mean, the empress is one of the more powerful people around the world.”

“Does it scare you?”

“Not so much scare as trouble. I prefer things going smoothly. Vengeance didn’t quite give a good reputation to the king, hell, during the ceremony of thy supposed death – none of the Alphian family showed their faces.”

“Trip too long, yes?” he justified.

“Ney,” her head shook, “-was hosted at the casino...”

“A publicity stunt?”

“No, we simply mourned the loss by granting more opportunities to the players.”

“Medusa,” he chuckled, “-take a look at the scenery and don’t worry about the fight for if it comes to that,” a gun summoned and tight across her exposed thigh, “-there’s a weapon, one shot and it’s able to take down a demi-god.”

She pressed upon the pistol, “-master, a gun taking down a demi-god...?”

“Don’t underestimate the devil. Call it the golden gun of Medusa,” he smiled, the coating of black turned to one white and gold as grew its weight, “-bullets feed off mana. Intent toggled it.” Such decreed the devil, a weapon able to defeat a divine placed in hands of a demon; responsibility, rage, and emotions – all guiding factors to its efficiency. Whilst she admired the new toy, Igna, lost in his thoughts had subconsciously created a trial, ‘-the gun’s deadliness if affected by her killing intent. If she truly wants someone dead, the golden pistol will kill said person. Similarly, if she pulled the trigger unwillingly, the projectile shan’t harm. A good little condition for usage, nothing brings out the best or worse of a person than the idea of absolute control.’

Roads ran along flat-land which led to a private beach – manors were cloaked in trees and walls, Igna’s destination stood upon a cliff in the distance. Imperial Manor, “-stop,” rose a checkpoint in the distance, “-you’re on private property,” explained the army man, “-turn back.”

Igna took off the helmet, silvery-white hair washed with the wind, “-my name’s Igna Haggard, and I’ve come to visit my sister, the empress.”

“Igna Haggard?” they looked at one another, “-sorry.”

“Already?” he mumbled, “-listen, I don’t much care for what you think, a little bloodshed to get my sister’s attention is fine. Who shall be the first to die?”

“HA-HA-HA-HA-HA,” machineguns rose from hidden tunnels, “-my friend, this is Alphaia, we don’t care about rank or prestige. Our mission is our creed – take one more step and the machine will spray thy guts across the ground.”

Sigh, he leaned and touched the earpiece, “-éclair?”

“Yui on the line,” replied.

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"Get me a direct channel with my sister."

"I'll try," she said. Seconds turned into minutes, Medusa turned at the beach's view and smiled, "-boys," said Igna to the military personnel, "-bring us some beer, I'll pay handsomely."

Amused by the man's nonchalant mien in front of death, the leader of the checkpoint brought a six-pack and vaulted across a red and white striped barrier, "-there you are," he took one can and cheered with Igna and Medusa, "-majesty, I'm sorry about the procedure. Without authorization, us soldiers cannot act – such is the way of a growing military."

The king nodded and amiably drank, "-must be difficult."

"Yes," he said, "-we've lost men in skirmishes around the property. Foreign lands don't care about making a mess, often adding bounties and idiots taking said bounties."

Eventually, another call rang, "-sir, it's butler, says okay."

"And there we are," he rose the last can, "-a troublesome procedure to meet family," exhaled Igna, Medusa hastily hopped onto the back, the barrier rose and Igna sped along, throwing a wave and a lot of money for the drinks.

Roads wined and soon entered manor grounds, the bike slowed to a stop, Igna rose his head at an open balcony on which stood a lady and a child. Sun's flare, "-must meet them," commented Medusa.

"Must be," he added, "-let's go," the king offered his arm, to which she accepted; both soon entered to be greeted by maids, the latter of which guided them to the living area. Refreshment quickly, "-the empress will be down shortly," assured one.

"Minimalistic for an imperial family."

"No, more along the lines of, 'if they die, easier to clean.'"

"Really?"

"Classic Haggard style," he said, "-if negotiations don't go your way, either force or simply remove the obstacle. No wonder we use red-ink to sign most documents."

"Red as in signing deals with the enemy's blood?" her blueish pupil mixed with flakes of green flapped.

"Precisely."

A dangerously deep aura loomed at the door, the handle turned to have the guardian deity of Nexsolium framed by the doorway, "-brother," she said, entering, "-why are you here?" her expression spoke much of her doubt.

"Well," he rose for a formal greeting, "-to meet my sister, is that a problem?"

"No, it isn't," they exchanged embraces and settled, "-next time send me a message, the whole manor rang with alarms and sirens, I thought we were under attack, turns out Yui took the pleasure of waking everyone to mention thy return."

"Oh dear," he laughed, "-that's Yui for you."

"Who's the companion," rose a brow.

"Medusa," she said, "-a friend to Igna?" her head tilted.

"Friend," he returned, "-yes, a friend even though we met like a few hours ago. Her beauty's reason enough to keep around, a wondrous piece for the bystanders to gawk and drool."

Long fingers gestured retainers, "-tell me, brother, why are you here?"

"To take back what is rightfully mine," he smiled, "-the crown."

"The crown? Brother, I never took what was yours. The crown was handed to me by your people, prime minister éclair and the Hidrosian council is a mess. No one knows what's happening, no one knows what to do, they but sit around and watch as Alpha direct them."

"I see now," he simply shook his chin, "-Empress Eira, I digress. Have a formal announcement of thee returning the crown to Hidros's council."

"Pardon?"

"Misheard me?"

"Yes, relinquishing the title... well."

"Ah," he chuckled, "-Empress, is it something to do with the Ayder bill?"

"Impressive, yes, it's the bill, I must uphold the trust of my backers. Once the bill passes, Hidros can have their throne back."

"I beg to differ, sister," he narrowed, "-the bill passes and Hidros becomes a shell. I may have been gone for a while," he rose a small coffin above the table; "-however, I have much more in store than you can ever imagine. Don't forget, how we negotiate."

"Loftha!"

"Correct, and her killer, Ziu Patek."

"Igna..." the temperature lowered; "-don't you dare!" she gritted.

"Dare what?" an equally dense presence pulsed, reaching a deadlock of raw power at the center, "-I don't care for Alpha – why would I worry about thy prestige when thee've but watched as corruption and intrigue ruins my kingdom, the kingdom Queen Gallienne fought until her last breath to save. Tis known Queen Eia and I aren't on good terms, hence the current separation. What the people don't know is why, and surely; tying Loftha and Ziu to create an empire-wide scandal, I mean, it sounds fun!"

"Fine," her icy cold aura vanished, "-take back the crown, I don't much care for it."

"Sister," he laughed, "-keep the crown."

"What the fuck?" she thrust to hastily cover the mouth, "-pardon, slip of the tongue. What games are you playing?"

"A game of Cluedo,

"..."

"Testing the waters," he explained, "-sister, I've read the reports already, éclair told me about the mutual deal made to preserve what Hidros has by giving it all to an ally who's also a rival. A roundabout way of deceit that worked. I had to test the ground first, what better way than conflicting requests. I'm glad you're here, sister – keep the crown until pieces are readied."

"Igna," she shook her head, "-I accepted the deal to further my power, not to save your bottom. Hidros's crown is mine even if I abdicated the crown, I'm the eldest daughter. Eia, my sister, is worthless when it comes to politics – her emotions get the better of her action, a poor ruler."

"Poor old her," he said, "-she's the victim in a war unknown to her. Alpha's done more harm than good, and to save face internationally, Hidros' had to bit their tongue and stay silent. I don't care what happens in the future, nor do I care to find out – the present is mine to take and I tell you, if I want to take something, I'll take it. Keep Hidros warm, sister – I know," he smiled, "-I know, until the day comes, please, don't do anything to put you or your family in harm," he rose abruptly, looked at Medusa, and signal for them to leave.

Eira followed to the doorway and watched as her brother left, '-Igna,' went across the mind, '-you, brother are an angel. What we spoke about made no sense,' she grinned, '-words didn't matter since we spoke through an exchange of mana, an ability bestowed by reaching the summit of knowledge. I have Nexsolium, he has Mantia; would be stupid for us to battle. My hands are tied, you know as well as I do – Alpha's nobility has no say in political affairs lest the wealthy speak. The checkpoint,' she narrowed, '-placed there by the same shadow rulers. We're caged birds, cursed to watch everything burn...'

On the bike, a similar conversation sprouted, "-why are we leaving?"

"I have my answer, that's why."

"But... why?"

"Medusa, the Alphan nobility means nothing nowadays. They're puppets in the greater picture, didn't you notice the checkpoint, the retainers, all follow the lead of another faction, one I have an idea of who they are. Remember the bodies I summoned, Ziu and Loftha, she chose the former, thus, I knew who was responsible."

"The Patek's then?"

"Yes. The conglomerate has more information on the imperial family," to which he tapped the earring, "-hello, Yui?"

"Yes, master."

"What did you find out?"

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"A lot, master, gaining access to their private servers, never expected said amount of intrigue for thee."

"I know," he smiled, "-a beer with military officers, I'm not daft, little did they know the money used was bugged."

"Why are you grinning," narrowed Medusa, "-talking alone is a sign of insanity."

"The fresh salty air," he rose a massive smile, "-what say you, let's spend the night at a resort. "

"If it's on you, I'm all for it."

"Of course it is."

Chapter 917: Added Intrigue

Empress Eira's gilded gates closed with a loud humph, she turned her head inward, passed the corridors, and climbed stairs until a particularly ideal room. Hands upon the golden handle, the door opened inward to a gathering of men in suits.

"My lady empress," said one hidden behind a veil of animosity, the Arcanum, "-we heard a rather unruly someone paid a visit. Care to explain the detail of the conversation?"

"And for what sadistic pleasure must I lay bare natures of a conversation I had with my brother. Really," she squinted, "-I'm sure the many maids at the manor shall suffice to give a sufficient enough explanation. We're under house arrest, trapped in thy ever perpetual paranoia," icy cold air gathered at her feet, "-if not for the sake of Alphaia, I'd have hunted you and your family – slit their throat and watched as the warm blood melted froze at my ire."

"Lady Eira, please don't get angry at him," added another friendlier voice, "-the man's but angry at the possible return of the King of Hidros. Thee knows, yes?"

"I know," she replied, "-I'm bound to serve the throne until thy greed is satiated."

"Phrase that way," they laughed, "-makes us look very evil, doesn't it?"

She simply crossed her arms, "-are we done?"

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"Yes."

"Good, tell my husband he need not return home. I will take care of our child, have him suck thy members while he's at it; the useless piece of shi" the conversation cut, leaving a bitter taste in Eira's mouth. '-Why did I ever get married,' she threw the door, shoved aside eavesdropping servants and stormed to her private chambers, '-be an empress said father, it'll be great he promised. Look where we are now, stuck doing the bidding of another. God,' her rage manifested in icy cold breaths, '-Markus and his damned family can go do hell,' doors opened again, a golden glow escaped, her anger quietly vanished, "-mother," leaped a little girl comfortably dressed in a wonzie, "-can we play?"

"Gallienne," she exhaled, "-come here, you little angel."

Meanwhile, Igna and Medusa spent their time at a resort, peculiarities of Haania's death hidden plainly. Kul, vested in her standard suit, held her sunglasses on the tip of her nose as she peered over at the hospice. For the death of such reported magnitude, there sure weren't a lot of people, media would

have easily swarmed the poor lass's family in attempts to gain a few bucks. 'There,' her focus narrowed, two smartly dressed men exited a lavish car and hurried to hospice's front, 'I remember,' a tap on the watch conjured a medium size holographic display, "SSY, call Diamon."

"H-hello?" escaped moans and pants.

"Diamon, am I interrupting?"

"No," few shuffles and shushed grits cleared the channel to an audibly cleaner area, "-how can I help, lady Kul."

"Diamon, I need information on these two," images crossed the channel, "-I remember spotting them around the red-light district. Human traffickers if I think back?"

"My lady," her tone sent a troubled vibrato, "-speaking of them is taboo at the moment. I can say one thing, the district's gearing for a festival. Wine and meat will be on the menu," distant cries interrupted, "-come on already," said a manlier tone, "-I need to head in a few minutes."

"I got what I need," said Kul.

"Always here to help," the call ended.

'Trafficking, here I thought the ordeal was over. Starix's foresight of controlling the trade instead of letting the matter get out of proportion help but to slow the problem. Haania was assaulted and beaten to death,' she flicked across the display, "-SSY, search for Haania."

Incoming call: Starix.

"Hello?"

"Come to my location, right now!" cried the retainer.

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"Understood," no question's asked, she slammed on the pedal and tore across the empty streets. It would take less than a few minutes for her to get to the border of the southwestern side of the map, a region tied with territorial dispute amongst the newer gangs. Muzzle flashes lit the skies, unfinished roads and semi-built buildings provided much in ways of cover.

Huff, puff, "-Kul," Starix's bloodied face lit, "-you're here, I'm glad," he held his shoulder, "-I'm shot but okay."

"What happened?" she asked.

"Ambush," he cringed, "-it was well planned, got past our magical defenses. The way they fight," he coughed, "-trained individuals, not gang members."

Bullets whistled and exploded a man's brain, "-fuckin' hell," innards of the guards sprayed upon Kul's growlingly intense visage. "Go get them," said Starix, "-for the sake of our men." Gun fired stopped periodically, a silhouette of a lady walked from Raven's side, guards stopped and stared, many, still breathing bled from their wounds, others covered and shook, barely able to aim their weapons – yet, in the traumatizing agony, those who covered veered their heads and screamed the loudest. There was

nothing worse than letting a comrade die, and if one died, another would spring to avenge said death; such was the code of loyalty amongst the fighters of Raven. None upheld said ideal more than lady Kul, arguably, one of the strongest figures in all of Alpha.

“Rest, men,” jolted across the minds telepathically. Her body altered, terrifying orbs of black summoned at her back, her nails sharpened, the hair undid itself and hovered, a wing-shaped aura rose at her back and sharpened into lances, no disputing the fact – before them rose someone who broke through the highest rank of being a demon-lord to reign as a contender to princess of hell, a title, and rank awarded to the strongest demons.

Outlines of the fighters showed through walls and barriers, a flick of the wrist teleported projectiles at the attackers who but saw a flicker and death. Others brave to fire had their bullets swallowed and crushed into sprinkles by other orbs, a mental map of the attackers formed, a line of best fit linked head with head, “-die,” one of the lances darted following said line and beheaded everyone and everything in its path and returned. Kul reached and nonchalantly grabbed the bloodied lance, her feet touched the ground, her hair landed upon her shoulders, and the orbs vanished, “-SSY, Medics.”

A team of experts was dispatched via helicopters, remnants of battle were erased – far as the city was concerned a skirmish had broken out between the local gangs. Starix took much in ways of damage, “-surgery,” sighed Asmodeus, “-we could have used a healing spell,” argued the prince, sitting on a metallic array of seats pressed against a lonesome corridor wall.

“Got here too late,” returned Kul, “-surgery’s fine. Might have a scar, time was of the essence, and waiting for someone adept enough to heal his wound, well, sounds insane just saying it out loud.”

Mammon and a row of investigators stormed the hall, “-Inspector Cornword,” said Asmodeus, “-what brings you here?”

The smart-casual-dressed Inspector rose his gelled back hair, fixed his glasses, and looked around accusingly, “-Raven,” he said, “-Asmo.”

“Yeah?”

“I have good and bad news.”

“Good one first.”

“The incident will stay off the record. No one wants to get involved, department’s scared of what it means,” he reached into a briefcase and pulled a badge, “-look here, the insignia of Elendor’s PMC.”

“Elendor?”

“Yes, the sell-sword of the empire.”

“Thought they were inactive since King Juvey swore not to fight again, why, what’s the matter?”

“Let me ask you a question. What do you do when a sword is worthless?”

“Throw it away or replace it,” the realization hit simultaneously, “-it’s them,” added Kul.

Cornword nodded affirmingly thus confirming the doubts, “-the barbarians have become part of the Empire.”

“Hard to confirm,” cringed Asmodeus, “-we don’t know much of what happens in the empire. Information is scarce between the nations.”

Kul rose from her seat, “-a little visit to an airport is in order. No way they could have flown or even taken the road, it’s improbable.”

“Improbable it is,” he said, “-for you see,” the man took out another parcel, “-fragments of a teleportation device...”

“Not again,” went across the mind silently, “-not again, not when Odgawoan’s finally recovered from the monster invasion of the north.”

“We’re of the same mindset,” said the inspector, “-it took quite an effort to dispatch the monster and the army.”

“Well, I should get going,” said the inspector, “-Lord Asmodeus, I hope Raven has a solution. We don’t want Odgawoan at the mercy of PMCs. I’ll look for some other avenues – it thee have any secret plan or weapon, time’s nigh my friend, time’s nigh.”

“Brother, I’ll go with Cornword.”

“Understood, brother Mammon, take care.”

“You too, brother.”

No matter how much they went over why, no answer sprung, “-thinking about it won’t do anything,” added Kul, “-there’s something I need to follow up on.”

The prince handed a file, “-there, information on the guys. Diamon sent ’em when you were in battle. Be careful, Raven consciously stays away from them, reason’s on the first line,” she opened the clip and read, “-associates of Cimier.” Kul simply turned and left, her silence spoke volumes, ‘-sorry about that, Kul. Cimier’s not an entity we should engage, we already stand at the top, and there’s no point in risking our position. Election’s soon, can’t afford to have scandals, Odgawoan must remain in our control to level the playing for Alphaia and Hidros.’

Next day rose peacefully for Igna and Medusa. Breakfast was at their bedchamber. Exchanging a warm cup of tea over the balcony spread onto the idyllic sea-scape soothed the coldest of souls. “-Man, last night was refreshing.”

“I know,” commented Igna, “-never realized a massage could do the body so nicely.”

“I know,” added Medusa, “-and the food...”

Incoming call: Asmodeus,

“Hello?”

“Master, we’re in trouble. Please make way to the casino, I’ve already sent the details. One more thing, Starix’s at the hospital recovering from a severe injury,” Igna’s tranquil expression closed, “-Medusa, enough fun, we need to return.”

Return they did for a jet waited patiently – three and half hours later, the busy cityscape rose over the airfield. A sport’s car waited shy of the hangar, “-master,” hailed Kul.

“Something the matter?” he asked, “-I never knew you to be this kind of person. Tell me, what’s the matter?” he entered the front seat, Medusa hopped in the back and winked at the tense Kul.

“Where too?”

“The hospital,” he answered. First few minutes were silent and a little suffocating, Kul eventually broke the ice, “-master, we lost a lot of men.”

“I read the report – barbarians are behind the attack. Same who beat Loftha within an inch of her life. Fragments of a teleportation device, if it’s complete, we might have a bigger problem on our hands. Elendor hasn’t said anything.”

“They may be tied with human traffickers.”

“Pardon?” her suggestion was wild and begot a wide-eyed, ‘-huh?’ from Medusa.

“Sorry, I was thinking aloud.”

“No, it sort of makes sense. The attack happened in an area where they’re known to frequent. The route’s also used to transport cargo by Raven, a little bit of studying and one can easily trace and understand what Raven’s up to. Starix smartly mounted a decoy run based on his gut – the man’s clever, I admit that. Teleportation technology is available to one research facility, the Cobalt Unit. It ties since none of the barbarians have ever stepped foot in the city. Speculation aside, we know they attacked,” the hospital came in view, “-and made a big mistake.”

“Hello, master,” greeted Asmodeus, “-how was the parle?”

“Not worth mentioning,” he darted for Starix’s room, “-my, don’t look so good do you?”

“Master.”

“Save your strength, we have people to catch,” a flick of the wrist remotely shut the door and closed blinders, *Raphael, Archangel of Restoration; thee who sits uninhibited by the flow of time, reach down and extend a helping hand to the miserable and manifest thineself, for I, Igna Haggard, demands so,* a portal slit reality and materialized the angel with a v-sign, “-hello master.”

Chapter 918: “A contest of intellect?”

“Don’t hello master me,” slashed Igna. Archangel Raphael conjured symbols from scriptures, levitated them above the wounded party, and clapped, an inward blowing breeze gathered over the bed, sparks and ambers flickered – a core of blue rose out of Starix’s chest. Shadows manifested from what he saw, walls stretched and the ceiling shattered into pieces. The latter being but a rationalization Starix’s mind made to circumvent the lack of information – blue core burnt a yellow graze and *puff*. The shattered

room was unchanged, blinked saw the world return to normal, “-what happened?” asked the strategist, patting his arms and chest, irritation of a healing wound vanished, “-what happened?”

“Don’t cry,” halted Igna now sat beside the bed.

“My wounds are gone?”

“And?” he casually admired the machinery, “-technology’s sure advance,” he lifted, turned, and offered a helping hand, “-let’s go, Starix; we ought to show the world Raven’s might.”

“My wound’s gone,” he rose, “-I’m sure I saw an angel?”

“That’d be our little secret,” added the devil inches from the handle, “-keep it between us lest thee wants me to inflict the wounds again.”

“No, no, no,” chin swayed hastily, “-I’m grateful, really.”

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A brighter light pulled into the solemn hallway, “-Starix, master,” they called, “-you’re back!”

“Yes, yes,” said Igna aloud, “-wish the man good recovery after he’s gotten some space,” a look at Asmodeus, “-trouble.”

“Let me explain on the way to the estate.”

Thus the full party of Raven, save Mammon, took off for a manor overlooking the De Costle strip, one of the more desirable properties around. A big open lounge area overlooked the southern scape; clicks of twos formed, Igna chose a lovely view and a burning hot beverage.

“What can I get you?” asked Asmo mounting the bar counter.

“A beer I guess,” said Igna, “-I had something strong, didn’t go down well. Perhaps my body’s getting old?”

“Ha-ha-ha,”

“What?” he turned to Medusa.

“Master, you getting old is a hard picture to get,” she laughed, “-and immortal with aging issues, hilarious.”

“You, Medusa,” he placed the icy cold drink against her cheeks, “-were better as the silent brooding type.”

“Hmmp,” she shrugged the jest and pouted for another round. Starix and Kul left for the comfort of a more private area, not prone to pry, Igna eventually gave to his vices.

“What was the problem about?” he asked, now changed to a massive holographic display.

“War, master,” said the prince surrounded by lovely maidens in various erotic outfits, “-there’s a war brewing,” being a part of his harem, Medusa was also forced to change but into what? She slithered

from a portal dressed in a snake costume, nothing gallant or pretty about the statement – all but a friendly joke.

“HA-HA-HA-HA!” exploded Asmo, “-the joke never gets old. Come on around, Medusa, there’s plenty of room to get around.”

“Whatever you say, prince of ass,” she vaulted and settled at Igna’s side, “-may I?”

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“Permission is meant to be asked before, not when the deed is done...”

“Don’t care,” she mumbled and buried her knees in her chest and in a way, laid on Igna as if a child looking for the comfort of their parent. The Devil obliged the request and focused on Asmodeus’s group, “-war, yes?”

“Here,” he motioned and files arrived at Igna’s phone and also over the interface, “-a teleportation device, I know that, what’s the issue?”

“Issue is speculation, we have sources that place the object in the hands of the barbarians, the latter posing as legitimate members of Elendor. Tis all a blur, Elendor’s supposed to be under Old Cray’s rule – the sheathed sword. What if the empire forced upon Old Cray an ultimatum, either take back the blood of those who’ve harmed the empire or leave and by leaving you know, be massacred for the viewing pleasure of the Victorian crowd.”

“The prudish onlookers. They make no effort,” he said, “-no effort I tell you.”

A distant shuffle – something along the lines of doors or windows closing mildly inconvenienced the entourage, ‘-Kul’s headed out,’ thought Igna, ‘-one of two ways, either she’s out to get food or is on her way to deal justice.’ A messy-haired Starix limped into the frame, “-there you are,” cried Asmo.

“I need a drink,” he growled, “-Kul’s insane.”

“Her insanity is justified by how strong she is,” rationalized Igna, “-leave her to her own devices, we may see quite the change tomorrow.”

“Master, you don’t understand, she’s going after the Patek’s.”

“Is that right?” he rose a drink, “-to Kul’s successful campaign.”

Ding, ding, “-who is that?” day rose out the window.

“I’ll check,” said Asmo, “-good morning?”

“Asmodeus!” called a strict man, “-we’re representative of the imperial court. We’ve been sent by his imperial majesty to bring into question Raven’s possible dealing with the underworld, also, the company has been accused of treason by a respected source. They’ve shown proof of law enforcement aiding to cover the treasonous act!”

“What is it?” fired Medusa, rising from a castle of pillows and blankets.

“People from the Imperial court,” yawned the prince, “-should I send them away?”

"Imperial court?" caught Igna's ear. Meanwhile, the prince and lass talked about what to do, Igna, dressed in a lavish bathrobe of red outlined with gold arrived at the sternly stood men, "-Imperial court," he sipped tea, "-pray tell, on who's authority have thee come to harass Raven so early in the morning?"

"And who might you be?" narrowed the messenger.

"No one important," he returned, "-tell, who gave the order for such a tyrannical decision?"

"I-I," a brief moment of doubt, "-it doesn't matter," he said with chest, "-we're here representing the court. Asmodeus is therefore needed at the capital for a trial."

"What?"

"A trial?"

"Yes, a trial, sire."

"Trial it shall," shrugged Igna, "-let us see how the imperial court works. We'll be there later this afternoon," the door flung shut, leaving envoys stumped and unable to react. Rhymical steps shortly exited the building, leaving Igna to stare at a tired and hungover Asmodeus.

"SSY, leave Rosie a message," *beep,* "-hey buddy, Raven's gotten themselves in a bit of problem. Could you fly over and bring the best thee have – tis a matter of imperial proportions," the message drop akin to a bomb – the lawyer, choosing to have a quiet morning glanced at his phone, saw the header, "-POA," and casually listened.

"COME ON!" kitchen shook, "-IMPERIAL COURT?"

Back to the estate, Asmodeus strangely looked at the ceiling with a sadistic grin, "-and what are you fantasizing about?"

"Rosie's temper," he giggled, "-just imagining how he'd react gives me a weird sense of satisfaction."

"Yeah, if there was any way to label you a hardened idiot, I'd do so right away."

"Why the rude comment?"

"Oh, don't kneel there and throw puppy dog eyes at me," sipped Igna, "-not going to work."

Medusa, firm over the couch, squinted at the banter.

"And what's on thy mind?"

"Casually joking in a time of crisis. Raven's potentially at risk," to second her, "-if it goes to court, Raven may be asked to reveal more..."

"Let it go to court," said Igna, "-the scheme will lead to a court case, their battlefield. I found it strange how Elendor was called, a teleportation and unnecessary unrest; namely the death of Haania. I've found the answer, and you," he pointed at Starix, "-thee take pride in being my second in the world of intrigue. Have a few minutes to think, come back not with reason; but a solution, not any old solution either, I

want a rebuttal enough to shake those at the top. Here, I'll extend the deadline to an hour, take men, resources, whatever you need, tis all on me."

"Challenge," he smiled, "-must I act on the scheme?"

"No, I need the solution – for I have one myself already. We'll pair both and have the company vote."

"Understood."

"A contest of intellect?"

"Yeah," firmed Igna, "-no better way to improve than through combat. Where's Kul?"

"Here," a disheveled blood-soaked demoness hovered into the lounge. Starix crossed her side and nodded, leaving the demoness perplexed, "-where's he headed so early in the morning?"

"To find a scheme to place against the master," explained Medusa, a warm shower later, they sat around the same area, threw feet over a table, and watched television, "-I don't get it," added Kul, "-why ask Starix to make a ploy against yours?"

"Cause it seemed amusing," he replied, "-here," he turned towards Kul, "-how was the expedition. There was quite the commotion from what I heard. Not to reject the effort, did you accidentally give away information?"

"M-maybe?"

"Aha!"

"How?" turned the whole room, "-HOW DID YOU?"

"Simple," he smiled, "-I guessed," the anticlimactic response slammed the attention, "-such a tease."

"Go into details about what thee did yesterday," the onlookers watched and gave a keen ear, enough to force Kul's cheeks cherry, "-after master arrived yesterday, I spoke with Starix on matter of the Haania case. I surmised she wasn't an actress – I mean, I looked for movies or shows; nothing. People don't pay particular importance to child actors, they're there to add background. Asmodeus' celebration was open to everyone, that day, on master's return – the casino made a lot of money. First, Haania was reported as beaten and assaulted – such was the testimony of witnesses, later on, she was pronounced dead – one thing is, the testimonies don't justify her dead. Beaten within an inch of her life, I had Yui look around and came across many photos and videos taken at the casino and some circulating around the Arcanum. Her injuries weren't brutal nor did the assault take place. The next course was the hospice, there I staked the area, no one came to mourn her death – an up-and-coming starlet not having any fans turn up? Don't know about you, the narrative doesn't add. Two representatives of the trafficking ring owned by Cimier showed up, and that was the time Starix asked for backup. I returned to the hospital, her body was gone and the staff refused to give information about the next of kin. Dead-end might have made me a little angry, so, I leaped on my bike and drove straight for the red district to meet with a contact. To my surprise, there was a heck of a more care present. Took the side entrance, entered the brothel, and shuffled to a window, there I saw them hidden in the crowd, my targets. Sadly, before I took a better look, they vanished and a screaming fight between owner and customer broke loose, the latter, belonging to one of the gangs threatened to kill. Thinking nothing of it, I made my way to her

room where I heard a skirmish, flung the door open, and there, looming over her body was a man holding a knife – the next time I know, he was on the ground with his neck snapped, their reaction told me – I had killed one of them, two minutes later, the opposition laid nothing more than puddles. We rummaged through the bodies and found guns, drugs, and a phone. We burnt the bodies and everyone went to their normal business. Diamon begged to visit Asmodeus. She's a friend so I said yes, Mammon's with her at the casino, she needs rest."

"Guardian of the Red-Light district," applauded Asmodeus, Medusa, and soon, Igna, "-no wonder they love you."

"They're people just like us," she said, "-I won't forsake them no matter what happens."

"Good," smiled Igna, "-kindness and a strong sense of what is right and wrong, I'd want nothing more from my friends. Kul, I love you," he professed.

"Pardon?" exclaimed the crowd.

"Don't misunderstand," he laughed, "-her retelling painted a good image, whether conscious or not, you knew to add revertant details; such as cars, the figures, the attack, and the shouting contest. Let me say," he held the grin, "-it was a premeditated murder. Seems the local gangs aren't working alone but under a greater faction. From Kul's display, I'm sure it must have struck fear in the puppet master, hence explains why the imperial court wanted Raven away from Odegawoan."

Chapter 919: Mystery of Haania

"MASTER!" gasped a troubled Starix, "-I'm here," he panted, exactly an hour passed and the man stood pressing files in-between his arms, "-the problem and solution, I have found them both." Eleven read on the clock, and the trial was scheduled for three in the afternoon. Therein, Raven settled on couches and faced the weirdly excited Starix.

Holographic display lit, a presentation wrote across many slides. Igna sat beside a focused Kul – by how he had spoken earlier, the plot seemed very much tight and complex.

"Mystery of Haania," read the title, "-and the involvement of PMCs and reported envoys from the Imperial court," he said, focusing on the main points, "-my short investigation, and I base it on assumption and circumstance; everything is tied by a bigger player. Haven't found a name for the latter, the trail dries after the starlet's body is taken from the hospice. Let's start with the starlet – she's not known, hasn't been featured in films or anything along the lines of stardom. I called a few contacts and they explained to have seen the starlet link with a certain someone, a familiar name I'd assume – Lord Culstan. Reputation as a deviant shines as high as the sun. Both were spotted exiting the lord's estate while his wife was away. I followed that lead to reach the reporter and writer responsible for the article. The heading was apparently a misprint which resulted in the gazette selling more than ever before. Populous swallowed the lie, a spicy story of romance and abuse, especially with a child. Some people are sick in the head," he cringed a little and flicked across many slides, "-there we stand. Involvement of PMCs, as I managed to dig out was to infiltrate Odegawoan via a teleportation device, how does it tie-up? Well, I don't know since the attack feels random, and thee personally know that I disagree with events occurring randomly. Cause and effect are how life carries through the illusion of time. It must link somewhere, didn't have much time to explore said avenue for I horned on a more interesting party; the

name of those who voiced concern of Raven's activities at the capital. Eira Haggard," he said, "-the imperial family asked for Raven to be placed before the court, my little finger springs toward a political conflict between the king and empress. Perhaps the Ayder bill? Nonetheless, a solution to turn said event in our favor. I thought about it and with what little time we have available, I think there's but one option, and tis the path of agonizing force. Diplomacy can only help so far – Empress Eira's proven much too fickle, thus, I suggest we take lord Culstan to the court and have him take the fall for the assault of Haania. Playing on the narrative of a cheating husband, we can add the cliché of a jealous wife, who I mind you is daughter of one of the familia – Vermillion. Obviously, pushing her into the limelight will bring into question the family, thus, we have them casually throw the blame on clueless, nameless faces. The leeway it gives will suffice in turning attention at those who lie, thus exposing the City of Dreams for what it is. A thought which many, many affluent families won't agree with," final slide passed, she breathed and blinked at Igna for approval.

"Good," he said, taking a few minutes to consider the options. Entourage looked at him for his thoughts. The Devil sprung into action by taking a seat where Starix stood, "-feedback," he asked the observers.

"Don't understand the whole of it, but hey, sounds like something master would come up with," grinned Kul.

Asmodeus held his clean-shaven chin and thought, "-a few inconsistencies; we'll take quite the risk if the assumption turns out wrong. My cynical side screams at the mention of an affluent family, what if they're behind the plan, we'll be undressing before them bare. A few more conservative moves such as not fully investing into a rebuttal would appease my heart."

"Money," added Mammon, "-brother, I could sway the affluent folk with a promise of gold and riches. Wealthy all want but one thing, and tis to get richer. What better way than to have me," the monotonous speech rumbled, "-lure them into my domain."

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Medusa simply shrugged off the affair, "-not updated, I'll bite my tongue."

"For the timeframe given, Starix, the plan is good, but not excellent. Doesn't have an inkling of foresight. I suppose the touch-and-go strategies work to some extent. In summary, I want you to try and change the way thee approach a problem. Kul," he turned at her, "-I noticed you said it resembles one of my schemes, and you're right, it does sound like me," he looked at Starix warmly, "-good job. Intimidating me isn't the way forward – I have loved to see more of the touch-and-go strategy, I know I said the latter needed to be changed. I agree it has to be changed but not in a way to alter the idea fundamentally. I digress," he slowed, "-my turn I suppose. I'm sorry about this," he looked at Starix, "-I've already readied a plan and it's been put in motion. As we speak, Vengeance on way to the print," he rose his phone that flashed, "-and here we are; the message."

"Master, the press will issue an apology. Other agencies have taken to slander the misprint as an act of ill-faith."

"Good," he smiled, "-Haania's death is related to Lord Culstan," a video played over the display, "-there we see the lord's servant beating on the poor lass shy off the camera. This, my friend, is what I call evidence. By all means, what happened is true for it occurred in a different time and place, the ultimate

alteration of truth,” an orb of pure essence hovered above his palm, “-we won’t use said evidence. Instead, it’s been sent to the lord alongside a nice letter that reads-”

“Lord Culstan, it has come to our understanding that you have been involved in illicit acts pertaining to an underage girl. Our department has much in the ways of evidence, two eyewitness accounts, and video footage from thy surveillance system. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the department, the evidence has been sent to another party, one belonging to thy suppliers. We find it strange how they could backstab a loyal patron. Sources mention said clues to have been at the capital to pressure Raven and the whole of Odgawoan into giving to their capitalist greed. Thus, the police department has sought refuge with one of our backers, Raven. For more information, please contact Asmodeus,” signed, Chief of Police.

“-I called a favor, and she agreed to send the letter on condition it is wiped. A simple enough condition. Hence, we move to the next stage,” *incoming call: Raide,* answered on loudspeaker, “-POA!” he sighed, “-what have you done this time?”

“Nothing,” replied the prince, “-by the way, you’re on loudspeaker, keep the insult to a minimum.”

“Hello Raide, how was the teleportation?”

“Master Igna?”

“Yes, did you find the scroll nauseating at all?”

“No, no, it was a pleasant journey.”

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“How’s the meeting?”

“The negotiation was a success – Lord Culstan’s agreed to testify. He was pleased by the opportunity to join Raven in our effort. Bleu and his team should be on their way, minister éclair said it’d take a few hours.”

“Understood,” said Igna, “-fly to the capital.”

Everyone watched cluelessly save one person, Starix – there laid ire in his gesture, “-don’t be angry,” voiced Igna, “-the contest starts now. We have two options, my actions till now were to level the battlefield. What path we take is up to you.”

“Master, what about your plan?”

“Oh, I don’t think my plan will work simply as we don’t have information on the traffickers. From what Kul retold – their gang has been massacred, I doubt the murde-” a moment of inspiration hit, “-Starix, what say we work as one?”

“Pardon?”

“Close the awe,” he laughed, “-take Kul and Mammon, I want thee to hunt down the faces she saw. Bring them to the capital. Use whatever method is needed, I don’t care, just bring them there. Mammon,” they locked eyes, “-you know what to do.”

"Yes sire," he nodded and shortly hurried outside, leaving Medusa and Asmodeus.

"What's happening?"

"Everything moving so fast.'

"Oh, nothing much," hurried Igna, "-Raven's won the battle," quick on the fingers, *outgoing call: Odgar Codd.*

"Odgar Agency, how can I help?"

"Hello,'

"Hello, who am I speaking to?"

"Igna Haggard."

"Master Igna!" they choked.

"No time to chat, send the call to Odgar."

"Right on," the channel deviated, "-Odgar speaking."

"Hey, Igna here, are you at the capital?"

"Yes, why the hurry?"

"Don't ask questions. There's going to be a massive case at the Imperial court. Here's a transcript," the message landed, "-send it to trusted reporters, I want the news spread across the capital. Can you do that?"

"I see," he paused, "-relates Odgawoan, yes?"

"Yeah, we win and the town won't be trifled with ever again."

"Say no more."

Glimpses of the exchange gave a brief idea, '-putting public attention on the trial means we won't be fighting on foreign ground, but neutral ones. City of Dream has a good reputation for thrusting unknowns into stardom and turning the poor rich.'

"Master, where are we headed?" they jumped into Asmodeus' car wherein Igna leaped out of the estate, "-surprise," he smiled, *incoming message: Mammon*

Pass the casino, over the bridge, and there laid a Raven-owned hotel complex, "-why are we here?"

"Follow and don't ask," they climbed to the 9th floor and pushed open door numbered 91 into a somberly lit room. Flickers from television rose in the distance, "-who's there?" asked a timid voice.

"Raven," replied Igna flicking on the lights, "-Mammon must have spoken of our arrival?"

"Yes," said a lovely lady bearing medium lengthen blond hair and a body described as slender, centimeter from starvation; her face didn't strike much for it held familiar traits to people native of Iqavea, "-my name's Igna," said he entering, "-and here are my companions."

“Medusa,” waved the lass.

“Asmodeus,” bowed the prince.

Her mildly wrinkled cheeks rose at the mention of Asmodeus,” -leader of Raven,” her palms pressed in prayer, “-please, I need protection.”

“Diamon,” added Igna, “-please raise your head. We’re here as a friend, Kul spoke of how thee risked thy life to help her investigation.” The strangely alluring man walked and sat against her, “-help us once again and I’ll personally ensure any incurred debt is forgiven.”

“Really?” she blinked, and an amber lit blub hung over their heads, the breeze from the door swayed the source, “-what must I do?” her voice trembled.

“Diamon, let me ask this if you had a choice between forming a bond with an angel or make a pact with the devil, which would thee choose?”

Silence of reflection tied her lips, and she blinked, looking for answers in Igna’s bicolored pupils, “-I’ve prayed for my whole life, always begged for the gods to have mercy on my soul. I was taken from my home and thrown into slavery, my story’s the same as many others, we were taken before a god who simply watches from the heavens. I’m lucky I was sent to Odgawoan, grateful, I guess the gods answered my prayers somewhat – I met people with far worse stories than mine, and still, their smiles rendered mine to naught. Righteousness can only take one so far; I’m forever tainted, unable to escape the life of vice I follow. I don’t deserve an angel, instead, tis with the devil I’ll side.”

“Diamon,” he smirked, “-angels and demons are naught but morals rationalization, simple as that. I ask of your who, not why.”

“Devil!”

“Great,” flickers of the purple cross his eyes, “-Lady Enia Punio of the Punio dynasty, doth thee wish to offer thy soul to I, the devil?”

“T-t-the d-d-devil?”

“Yes, the devil. Offer thineself for I promise all thy deepest wishes to come true.”

Chapter 920: Justice always prevails

“Melmark’s Newsletter brings you news from the city of dreams, place of love, sex, and drugs, Lord Asmodeus of Raven is forced at the imperial court on suspicion of treason. A source of ours has confirmed the event – lack of public attraction has raised a few concerns; will the case be fought fairly or will the higher power duel the contest. Time is the only tell and you bet, our newsletter shall be first on the scene.”

“Marian’s Gossip; Lord Asmodeus, known for a lavish lifestyle and whimsical approach to business is without a doubt one of the reasons why the City of Dream has reached such a point in Alphian culture. We hear about the crime, the mob bosses, and the climb to the top – we’re secretly enamored by the brotherhood showcased in retelling and even more so by the ‘on the edge,’ lifestyle. The familias have been around for decades – and, without efforts from Asmodeus and his team, who knows how many more would have died. It’s not a secret the city’s overwhelmed by crime, yet, statistically speaking,

fewer bodies are found and lesser people reported missing. Now, the truth comes in form of a decree by the imperial court – Raven is the main focus of the story, justice is the hero, and they're the villain, such is the propagated idea. Good or evil, who are we to pass judgment?"

'Andian's Talkshow', "-What are your thoughts on the decree? Comes to us by Maek from Djueon. Well, Maek, it's interesting, everyone's captivated by the idea of people controlling others from the shadows. Asmodeus is more or less the embodiment of the very idea – I have to take a neutral stance. Evidence and facts lead to conviction, part of my cynical side scoff at why the court would keep such a story under wraps, fear of publicity? I doubt it since the justice system's proud of showing their cases to the public; for us to know transparency is the utmost focus. Add a high-profile figure, backed by a lot of clouts, politically and financially – bound to raise brows. Who knows," said the host, "-one thing's for sure, I've never seen something go viral so quickly. Who's in the right or who's in the wrong, we don't know; let's wait for the Imperial court's statement." Low, mid, and popular newsletters, talk shows, news broadcasts; name it and the sudden spark of mystery lit the populous' mind ablaze with theories. Countless outspoken stars took to their social media, prompting debates on various subjects.

Minute hand ticked onto 13:00, an announcement went live at the imperial court's side – "Raven, as well as the current Mayor of Ogdawoan, have been ordered by the court on damning proof of alleged treason. We, of the imperial council, take the accusation of treason seriously, any possibility of harm to our empire must be snuffed. Seeing the delicate nature of the accusations, it was thought best to keep media coverage out of the courtroom. Selected news stations will be allowed into the courthouse as to uphold transparency."

"What a morose statement," yawned Igna, "-Diamon, my dear, would you like drinks or food?" he asked, glancing over.

"I'm good," said the lady, "-thank you for the gesture." A jet-black outline flew across the skies, passing mountains and farmlands until the apparition of lines of vertical rectangles, and a suspended railway soon whispered into sight, time read 13:30 – Raven landed.

"There you are," hailed Raide in a navy-blue suit, beside whom stood Bleu Aizo and his team of smartly dressed associates.

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"Did we take long?" inquired Asmo.

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"No, you didn't," narrowed the lawyer, "-I've read the court order – it's solid."

"Not too fast," interjected Igna, "-I present you our way out," he smiled, "-please."

A timid Diamon moved up front, and rose a perpetually tired look at the lawyer, "-my name's Enia Punio, heir to a now broken dynasty."

"-Pardon me," stepped Bleu, "-how will she aid us?"

"She's the target of the gang," he smiled.

"And, what does that have to do?"

Raide rose his arm at Bleu, ‘-let him finish,’ said the gesture.

“Treason they said, I think not. We’ve gathered evidence on the attacker – Starix should be here with the masterminds.”

“Let us walk and talk,” suggested the lawyer, intrigued at what the devil suggested. Promenade turned drive, and drive soon landed at imperial court – a place that quickly put the royal court of Rosespire to shame. Opposite the battlefield lay a humbly quaint cottage-style eatery where Igna and Raven sat.

“I get what the master is coming at,” nodded Aizo, “-everything lines up for a win. It all depends on the prisoners and if Starix can capture them,” the moment he spoke, bells twinkled to five outlines, “-we’re here,” said a sadistically pleased demoness.

“We must ask of you to leave,” said one of the waiters.

“They’re with us,” said Asmo, returning from a toilet break, “-pay no heed to the outfits.” Unable to rival the prince’s comment, they walked past the stumped waiter.

“The party is here,” smiled Igna stretching his fingers at the captive, lines of white snapped at their head, to which they dropped.

“Master?”

“Don’t worry,” he said, “-was making sure they won’t lie.”

Twinkle, yet again – this time a slender man of pale complexion entered, “-Lord Asmodeus,” he knowingly moved at the table, “-tis a pleasure to make thy acquaintance.”

“Likewise, Lord Culstan, likewise. Care to join us for a meal?”

“I rather no,” he refused politely, “-its good manners to arrive at the court an hour before. I shall take my leave,” a smartly dressed lady walked into sight, “-my lawyer and lovely assistant Maya will take care of anything thee need,” the noble lord exited and a tall lady Maya sat at the table of dangerously infamous names. Raide and Aizo took the lead- Igna settled in his seat, allowing the heroes of said evening to take on a giant.

What followed was one of the greatest court hearings ever to take place in the Imperial court. “Both sides settled around 14:45 – Raven’s lawyers moved to the front and exchanged a few words with the prosecutors – renowned names in the judicial world of Alphaia. Nature of the case was quite an arduous knot to untie; both sides carried big names; nobles and wealthy businessmen on Alphaia’s side against Raven, whereat the King of Hidros personally attended the battle. Emperor Markus Sultria arrived at 15:00, begetting a standing welcome from either side. A brief description was read to him by a representative of the church. I’m obliged to say, witnessing such a trial is the highlight of my career. Raide Rosie gave a simple yet effective opening statement and thus began the trial. Prosecution was quick on facts, showing all the reasons why Ogdawoan needed to be changed and how the mayor, not present for said hearing, was dismissed as a corrupted party. They slandered her reputation without caring for her prestige and heritage. Defendant took their inflammatory comments and scoffed; pushing a burst of laughter amidst the crowd, Bleu apologized for the comment and explained why he had laughed. Putting into question the intention of the prosecution. General Valentino is a hero of war, a man who’s protected the life of Alphan for decades – taking digs at her daughter, first Chief of Police, a

woman of integrity, badly painted their canvas of character. At the sounding of the first-hour mark; a witness was called to the stand, one countess Eria Humdh – key advocate for the treachery charge; and I quote, “-I have been to Odgawoan many times, and I have seen the state of the city of dream. Let me say, tis the city of nightmares. Crime runs rampant, the rich get richer and the poor grow poorer. Alas, the reason why I stand here is to bring to light secrets kept by the Odgawoan elites. My butler was there,” she sniffled, “-a poor bystander, killed in cold blood by her!” she rose her fingers at Kul, “-I was there, I saw everything! she conjured magic and killed countless men without even batting an eye. She’s a devil, personification of evil,” tears carried down her cheeks, and evidence was brought into the fray, a missing fragment of a teleportation device. Without reports to back her claims – the idea of it having been wiped under the rug came into the forefront, truly placing blame on the chief’s character. Even more so, more credible nobles were called to the stand, showing proof and receipts of corruption and their under-the-table dealings. “-at the risk of being charged and humiliated, noble lords and dames have chosen justice and truth. Arrival of PMCs without a doubt the fault of Raven and the corrupted Odgawoan. Sadly, it’s not the only victim taken by the tragic environment – for we were contacted by the mother of Haania, a starlet with a bright future who was assaulted and killed by Lord Culstan,” damning post-mortem images flooded the courtroom, the emperor looked shocked and distressed – a shock factor which rattled the whole room. At the time, it looked as if there was no arguing the truth, Raven were traitors for having allowed enemies into the city. Level of corruption testified by the nobles greatly added to the veracity of said claims. Moreover, defendants silently watched as a massive case was built against them – we all knew it was over, there was no coming from said attack. The vocal prosecutor threw a smug grin, leaving Raide and Bleu exchanging confused glares. “Lord Raide and Bleu, is there something wrong?” I quote from one of the rare times the emperor spoke, “-the looks of confusion is troubling.”

“My lord,” rose Raide, “-we’re perplexed, who is Haania?” the crowd simultaneously clenched their lips, three little words, “-who is Haania?” foretold of a massive crash. Prosecution rose defiantly at the disrespectful tone Raide used, however, the defendant simply looked at the judge and jury, calmly gathered his thoughts, and said, “-Haania’s not a starlet, nor have there ever been reports of her existence. How easy was it to attack us not knowing the truth, Chief Jula being corrupt? How very disrespectful.”

Kul was brought to the stand, “-tell us, lady Kul, why were you there that night?”

“I was investigating a trafficking ring,” the answer and questions painted a narrative, one of true justice. Bleu joined to refute all of the previous arguments, giving rise to an empty battlefield, one where they fired shot after shot after shot. Treason? No, for it was a covert operation in clearing Odgawoan from ruffians. Haania? a sad story which lord Culstan refuted of never having met the lass – and the captives, two representatives of Cimier’s trafficking ring, were placed before the stand for all to see and question. There, it changed from righteous to a failure of the judicial system – many of the nobles who confessed wanted the trial to stop, and it led to widespread chaos of shouts and insults. Many rose their fingers at the emperor, “-end the trial for it has been corrupted, there is no justice here!” Seems the arrival of the captive truly sent echoes, many held terror in their faces. “Emperor Markus Sultria,” rose a thunderous voice, “-as King, I demand the trial be moved to Hidros. The level of corruption and ill-will displayed by the prosecution and the inability to enact justice has truly disappointed me, thus I question the existence of the Alrosian Council. My family has been placed on the stand and scrutinized on baseless

rumors, not to mention the noble's blatant lie and inconsistency. I wish for Alphian people to see where the corruption truly hides."

"We of the defendant will countersue the state of Melmark for slander on behalf of Raven and the Chief of Police. Nothing's more appalling than making a joke of justice. Our cause is right and fair – we shall take the matter and have a worthy judge, an apostle of Tharis to preside," sounded the layers.

"I end the entry with a quote from King Igna, "-regardless of thy station – justice always prevail, no matter where one is."