

## Death Magic 741

### Chapter 741: Mother

A conflicted expression tendered Tristin's expression. The chef, upon checking out sweets, high-grade and expensive, went through the motions subconsciously. Her words dropped monotonously; her eccentric nature took a major hit. Thus, without much time wasted, Igna carried on with sweets to the terminal, from there on, the ride headed for Rotherham came to be pleasant.

\*Dring, dring,\* vibrated the phone, elbows rested against the case which laid to the side, the head prepped up to the changing scenery, the shadow of influence from the capital followed into the outskirts – villages and stop-points permeated the main-road, one they traversed a few moments prior using an arched bridge. The railway grew from grown to suspended, running a few kilometers, till it descended onto a manmade desert of stone and dust. A rough-edged hill, similar to a knife to pudding, was carved into a valley for the newer line.

"Hello," he answered emptily, the mind drifted into the clouds.

"Hello cousin," hastily fired, "-return to Rotherham, orders from lady Elvira. Be quick, éclair, the archangel, and Alta are present. A car will be waiting." The call ended.

'Shaky voice, an impatient way of pronunciation, something must have happened. I could ask éclair for more information,' the fingers hovered atop the tablet, '-no, I'll sleep the ride off, fast travel as they call it.' Passive sun ray fell against the side, sneaking into the train – the warmth was pleasant and indulging, a sense of relief washed the thought or more precisely, drowned the mind from itself.

The hospital light, not so easy on the eye, snuck from the bright hallway and into the resting room. '-Where am I?' the face veered to the side, snapping onto the ajar window, '-the townscape,' clambered to a sit, '-Rotherham. Ten years stuck in Hades' realm, I thought I'd have never escaped. I told that boy to not come yet he disobeyed. My ear's ringing from pain. Must be a side effect. Feels weird, the torture and pain seem to have been erased, I remember the images and not the experience. Something's amiss,' from the window to the door, the visage halted at a clock that read, 15:34, and continued to reveal a modestly furnished room.

"Welcome back," said a familiar voice.

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"Thank you," the presence went unnoticed until it spoke, "-Igna?"

"Yes, mother," he returned a comforting smile, "-I'm glad to see you're alive."

"Same here," her expression, joyous at first, fell into regret, "-you know, don't you, about who I am and what I've done."

"Yes," returned a sincere gaze, "-I know the whole story, mother."

"Stop," she murmured, "-I'm not your mother, just a pretender."

"No, I won't. Family aren't those related by blood, family are people who would bleed for you, people who'd sacrifice much to aid another. If we look at it from the perspective of Lord Death and Persephone,

you both were very close, in a way, as his heir, I'm his son, which in turn means, indirectly, I'm your son. I wouldn't have mattered anyway, lady Persephone or lady Courtney, what I know is this, you, the person who stands before me, is my mother, the one who rescued me from myself. No amount of words can ever express my gratitude."

"Softspoken as always," she patted his head, "-I'm glad to be back, Igna."

"Me too," they smiled, "-onto serious matters," he shuffled to the window and pushed further, "-I came by to pay a visit. Lady Elvira's demanded my presence, someone very important has stepped onto Rotherham's soil. I'm clueless about who it is. Mother, as queen of Arda, recovery is paramount. I know what I say is inconsiderate – our disappearance has spread the seed of mistrust across the continent. Time is nigh, dig our feet into the ground and stand firm," the mysterious gaze shifted from outside to her, "-I said I wouldn't get involved in politics. Can't help it, if I don't get involved, you'll be left to deal with a mountain of problems. As your son, I abhor the idea of my mother being treated poorly. What I'm saying is, the burden will be ours to bear – the kingdom's suffered enough, about time for a culling. Stay and rest awhile, I'll help as much as I can. Those who move against us will face the wrath of the Haggard name, that much I promise," the speech took him to her bedside, "-before I forget, your vessel's been bestowed with the boon of divinity. The imprisonment Lord Death cast to sneak thy soul out of the underworld has been lifted. Daemonum Gladio, the scythe, representation of death, has truly been lost. The weapon's merged with your symbol of power," he took her right palm and displayed the symbol of the agriculture and vegetation (a gathered line of wheat; a sheaf) on her wrist, "-the olden powers will return. About the shared link, the death-element of Daemonum Gladio's dormant inside thee. In other words, nothing's changed save the acquisition of the old powers and dispelling of the binding curse."

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"Hold on a moment," she grabbed his arms, "-did you defeat Zagreus and fight against Hades?"

"I have no idea, we fought as a collective, the outcome I wanted came true, therefore, yes, we've won, I'd assume."

"Fair enough," the grip eased, her complexion flushed in fulfillment, "-I'm freed from his shackles. Thank you, Igna, for everything."

"Mention not, mother," he leaned and gave a peck on her forehead, "-I'm grateful to have you as my mother, truly."

'The bliss in his expression and face is genuine. It's so awkwardly cute.'

"I'll be off, take care, mother," he stormed out, leaving Courtney to watch and smile.

'The monster sleeping inside him has been appeased, if ever the blood-lust returns, an angry Igna might as well slaughter a nation if it were to avenge someone he loved. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, how interesting,' a telepathic link established, '-did you hear, Undrar?'

'I did,' returned the other side, '-he's grown and matured. Achilles should be reaching the top of the tower, I wonder what move Igna and his companions will make, can't wait to see.'

'Mother's doing fine,' he strolled past the corridors until a closed-off wing shy to the main-entrance, '-the Q-zone,' he paused and stared, two mages guarded the entrance, they threw a look to say, '-don't

come close, tis for thy own good.' The blurry barrier barely made the outlines of figures in white, '-must be a precaution for the plague.' Outside waited for escorts, "-young master, please follow us," said suited men in black, "-lady Elvira awaits thee."

'An armed escort,' he obeyed till a black SUV, '-they must have followed me since I arrived at the station. Just how much security's present in Rotherham,' engine started, the buildings moved, he watched through tainted windows, '-cameras, I never noticed, éclair usually handles all the nitty-gritty.' They arrived at airfield 06, the private airfield reserved for top-ranking members of Phantom and personal hangar/warehouse for the Haggard's. Most of the family's private cars, bikes, armored helicopters, and military-ranked jets were stationed and maintained here – far from what the populous thought. To hide a secret, the best way was to leave it out in the open, the touchier a subject becomes, the greater grows interest. Airfield 06, despite the amount of firepower, kept underground and in the various hangars, there are occasions where passenger planes land and are taxied to the airport. In more ways than one, 06 was a spare-runway and storage area. A vast landscape of flatness sprawled outwards till the barriers, the only change in level was hangars, warehouses, and the secondary control tower. Runways intermixed with yellow-grassy plains, harbored a group of people and vehicles to the far left from whence they crossed into the airfield. Drive from the entrance to the hurdled group took a few minutes, a testament to the sheer scale of land the duchess of Rotherham owned.

Armed escort gathered around two figures, a lady bearing black-hair and another baring scarlet, the latter was slender and taller to the former. "-We've arrived," said the driver, "-please head on to lady Elvira, young master," said one opening the door.

"Will do," he exited and beelined for the duo – each step closer tugged onto the guards' survival instinct. Head turned suspiciously, fingers at the ready to pull the trigger at a moment's notice.

"There you are," said the black-haired lady, "-Igna."

"Aunt Elvira," he replied, "-long time no see."

"Yes, long time no see," said she without much concern, the mien seemed preoccupied with another matter, her seeking pupils skimmed the horizon.

"Over here," gestured the lady to her side, "-Igna, how are you," red-lip sticks and sharp features coyly suggested to a less-than-amiable personality.

"Serene, you're here?" he walked to her side.

"Don't sound disappointed," she touched his cheeks, "-been a while since we've met. I hear you're single now, might I ask why," she tiptoed for more height, "-maybe now you'll give me a chance, won't you," she whispered softly.

"Don't tease me too much," he replied invitingly, "-I might just take the offer."

"Very interesting," her fingers outlined his jaw, "-perhaps we should discuss the matter further, privately."

"I'm at your mercy," he smiled.

“HA-HA,” her coyness broke, “-I’m glad,” her visage relaxed, “-Been a while, hasn’t it, Igna. Also, my invitation is sound, I mean it – if you wish, I could be-”

“Please no,” he placed a finger to her luscious lips, “-I might indulge too much if I were to take up the invitation.”

“Oh, come on,” she pushed his arm to the side, staining her cheeks with the lipstick in the process, “-I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, when are you starting the harem.”

The tip of the index stained bright red, “-no harem,” he replied, “-too much work,” he leaned to her ears, “-by all means, keep up the teasing and the offer might just come true.”

“Try me,” she replied, “-I’ve been waiting for this.”

“Understood,” he stepped back and shuffled to Elvira, “-my dear aunt, please tell me why I was called?”

“No sign of the plane yet,” she exhaled, her puffed-out chest relaxed, “-have you and Serene finished planning the one-night-stand?”

“Yes,” he replied, “-considering I’m not romantically involved, why not?”

“Whatever you say,” she shrugged, “-you’re a good kid, I trust the judgment. Here’s the deal, the Queen of Elendor and Amsey of Lum is on the way to Rotherham. The man’s personal fight ended favorably, he should relay the outcome personally, I heard you both are quite good friends.”

“I suppose.”

“-And about the queen of Elendor,” her lips tightened, “-the lady’s insane. We’ve been carrying her kingdom through the war, Phantom’s at a loss – we’ve lost the advantage and we’ve lost men. The talk is scheduled for tomorrow. Igna, since your mother’s at the hospital, you, prince and first-in-line to the throne, will speak on behalf of Arda. Time to step into the spotlight, my nephew. I won’t ask much if anything, negotiate on behalf of thy kingdom and show us what you can do. éclair’s already complied information to assess the situation. I’m looking forward to what you can do.”

“Any restrictions?”

“None whatsoever, the Federation’s a gathering of nations, an alliance. I will precede the talks and mediate my concerns accordingly – do what you need to do to secure a future for the lost Kingdom.”

“Lost kingdom?”

“Tis the nickname given through the Arcanum. Arda’s been a victim from way back when humans have always assaulted demi-humans – the disparities aren’t obvious nowadays; still doesn’t negate what happened. There they are,” she pointed, “-the plane.”

‘Mediate talks on behalf of Arda, she must have pulled strings to get me into power. The Blood-Kings faction would explain Serene’s presence. The current issue is Elendor, how to deal with her. My resolve will either make or break it. What approach, the Federation’s new boost was founded on Elon’s dynasty and Phantom’s financial support. Where does queen Gallienne sit, if Elendor is lost, it might give the cue for the Empire to launch an invasion and even worse.’

## Chapter 742: Sister System

Wheels screeched against the dark asphalt, the Federation's emblem wrote itself across the fuselage. The accompanying gust broadly shook the separating grass-path. Elvira had moved from the runway and into a hangar labeled 23 in sharp numbers painted onto the massive gates. The gleaming metallic bird taxied inside to a smoother, cleaner, concrete floor. SUVs parked in a vague semicircle, the guards were posted closer to the vehicles as opposed to the trio of Igna, Elvira, and Serene.

Stairs soon dropped, the armed escort, similarly dressed to those stationed on the ground, descended, exchanged nods to lady Elvira, and fell into formation. A suited man exited first, tall and seeking, the exchanged gaze was one of enlightenment, one who had been through much trouble and clawed from the depth, a struggle to stay afloat in a sea of greed. The resolve, written in wrinkles and dark circles, could be read by any who'd been through a sliver of the pressure the man had endured. Gentle in his motion, the hat came off and soon hung side by side with a leather bag.

Behind, without much time wasted, a lady of slightly lowered height, exited gracefully. Though the hangar to be relatively windless, a breeze at said moment, hit her visage from the side, her hair swayed to the left. A brush behind her ear kept the hair in check all the while revealing the tan complexion of a lady who didn't bear the sign of aging. She glided down and bore no visible tell of pressure or stress. Compared side by side, the lady, who by age was older than the man, seemed younger. Her attire, formal wear for the Elendorian Kingdom, seamlessly fit into the cultural acceptance of the province despite the emphasis on gold jewelry and precious stones. Her neck held a heavy necklace, the hair, held by gemstones, bangles onto her tan wrists and on the ankle, the makeup, a variation on what Alpha's noble used to wear, gave the tan-lady an expression of fierceness.

"Welcome to Rotherham," said lady Elvira, "-Queen Ela the third, it has been a while since you've paid us a visit."

"Thank you very much," she replied nonchalantly, the voice, neither hard nor soft kept composed, at times, the tone would fluctuate and sprinkle a hint of lightheartedness, while at others, would firm onto particular words to show confidence, "-Rotherham surely is a town worthy of the Haggard name," she smiled and scanned, "-I wonder how much money was invested. Life sure must be nice."

"My lady," returned Elvira, "-are you perhaps insinuating the Federation's playing favorites?" the stares crossed and electrified the atmosphere. The gentleman took no heed by the ladies and ambled to Igna who waited silently, a nod of the head led in a firm handshake.

"Long time no see, lord Igna."

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"Long time no see, lord Amsey, it truly has been a long time. The visage and posture are tell-tell signs of the war you must have fought. The trip must have taken a toll, why not rest until the paleness dissipates?"

"How very kind of you," said parched lips through sunken cheeks, "-my complexion's a result of countless sleepless nights. The responsibility was tremendous to bare, Igna," he placed a hand atop Igna's shoulders, "-you devil," spoke in whispers, "-have you any idea how much pain I endured to cover for the little scheme you pulled. The conglomerates outright worthless..."

“No, you’re not,” he returned the feeling, “-look at it this way, the connection’s been established with Phantom, the Federation, and Elon’s dynasty. What more could a dying beast want; save water and a clear path to Elysium.”

“Cold as always,” exhaled a heavy sigh, “-feels good to be back,” a touch of color warmed his cheeks, “-I don’t regret the expedition, I’ve learned and gained more than a simple man could in a single lifetime,” the grip eased, “-could you be so kind and show me to my room, I’m exhausted.”

“No problem,” said Igna, “-they’ll drive thee to the hotel. Rest and call me when energy is replenished.”

“Understood,” the figure sloppily entered a car, tinted windows rolled, “-I’ll see you later, Igna.”

“Later,” he replied, a portion of the guards followed the man outward. A glance towards the other guest, a roar of the engine, thundered as it did, didn’t once shake the rather crudely worded welcome.

A pull onto the shirt stole his focus, Serene waited coyly, “-over here,” she said, her tightly fitted clothes, blatant distraction effective on the opposite sex, didn’t hold the expected results, “-they’ll keep going without stop. Queen Ela and Lady Elvira may seem crossed by one another, the fact is, they couldn’t be any closer to one another. Rumors have spread of a sapphic bond between the two, tell me, does the argument not seem peculiar and childish at best. There is the world, companionship is found at any corner,” warm feeble fingers interlocked with his, “-they make my cold heartbeat in anticipation. Igna,” she turned, warm cheeks and lustful in the gaze, “-I’ll say it again and again, you’re single...”

“And I’ll reply with,” he pushed her against the SUV, the guards retreated, “-try me once again, and I swear, I might take up on the offer,” he pushed his knee between her legs.

“-Try me,” she glared defiantly.

“You asked for it,” he nuzzled her cheeks, working down to the neck, \*Bite,\* blood trickled, the fingers went around her waist and touched the door, \*Spatial-Arts: Wormhole,\* they vanished into an oval-shaped opening.

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“Hold on a moment,” exclaimed Ela, “-Elvira, didn’t we have more people?”

“Did we?” she side-glanced, a guard hurried to report the information discreetly, “-those two,” the head shook, “-meanwhile we argued, they snuck to share an intimate moment.”

“Are you not surprised?”

“No, not in the least,” she shrugged, “-Serene’s been aching to taste her master, there I quoted her own words. Igna’s a young adult; her constant provocation and his sound resolve is a sign of a matured man. Let them have fun I say,” she smiled, “-they sure lightened the mood. How about we head home, Ela?”

“Lead the way,” she smiled, “-I’m glad to be back,” the shadow cast underneath the jet, where the two argued, made it hard to see – between Serene’s advances and Amsey’s return, there was no way to notice the spark of crimson within Ela’s gaze.

A faint draft snuck inside a tranquil room, curtains to the balcony danced to the tune of distant traffic and everyday life, the clock displayed 09:43, as for the date, the second of December, medium curly

length hair awoke by a thud, ‘-looks to be the next day. Did I seriously sleep all that time?’ he stood barefoot to the wooden floor, shuffled outside, “-nice view, isn’t it,” said a voice from the side.

“Master Igna,” he yawned and held the balustrade, “-how long have you been here?”

“I only just woke up,” he sipped warm tea, “-yesterday was one to remember. The trains truly are an amazing piece of innovation, from Dorchester, Riverwood, Rosespire, and lastly, Rotherham, so many faraway places reached in hours – the extortionate price of the faster line is worth the spend. How was your day?”

“Mine,” he lazily tied the hair in a low bun, “-no idea, I slept it off I suppose. Serious question, what am I supposed to do?”

“Accompany me,” suggested Igna, “-there’s much to do, especially today.”

“If you’ll have me, then sure,” he backtracked and fell onto the beach-styled chair, “-my intellect is above average, my strength in battle is what I have, my fellow angels share their thirst for revenge; an emotion I can’t quite keep under control.”

“Don’t fight it, allow the emotion to flow through thy veins. The comrades aren’t here, however, the burning hatred that flows as we speak is akin to them being channeled through you. The fire will die eventually, there’s no need to act just yet. We’ll make use of the thirst one day or the other.”

“If you say so, we’re tied by a bond, I’ll follow per my will,” light steps scurried against the inner wooden floor, the distance sound seemed to sprint, “-we have guests?” sat by Igna’s side, a confused expression begot but a shrug and a sip from Igna.

“Where are you,” blankets swamped into the doorway, “-IGNA!”

“Good morning, Serene,” he returned nonchalantly.

“You bastard,” she leaped to straddle and grab his flimsy shirt, the blanket fell to reveal undergarments, “-what was yesterday about!”

“Oh, calm down,” he exhaled, “-we spent the night bonding, I don’t see why you’re angry now?”

“No, I’m not angry,” she gritted, “-just annoyed about what we did,” the grip eased, “-whatever, what’s done is done,” she rested on his chest, “-I got to taste my master, I’m happy.”

“And I got to release pent-up frustrations. Also, meet Raphael, an archangel.”

“Archangel?” she rose, brazen about her state – the comfy blanket slid onto the floor, “-nice to meet you, Serene Balthazar, a nightwalker and assistant to lady Elvira, though I used to be the secretary for this man,” she pinched his cheeks, “-I hope we get along.”

“Stop,” murmured Igna, “-my cheeks aren’t flexible...”

“Whatever,” she winked, “-last night was the first step in the creation of the harem, I’ve got you now,” she grinned viciously and skedaddled inside.

“My master’s Casanova...”

“Ignore her claims about a harem, I don’t much care for carnal pleasures. Her provocations tickled my fancy, figured why not. No matter, go get ready, dawn one of the suits inside, clean up the stubble, your bone structure is better without facial hair.”

“Alright, see you in a bit,” heavier steps diffused inside whereby a casual conversation sparked.

\*Incoming Message,\* read the lens’ interface, \*-Federation meeting has been postponed until further notice.\*

“Until further notice?” sat up straight, the menu scrolled to éclair’s contact information, \*Calling,\* it read.

“Hello?”

“Hello, éclair, good morning.”

“Good morning master,” said a very friendly and energetic voice.

“I trust you’re doing well?”

“Very well actually,” though unable to see the expression, the tone sufficed to imagine a large contagious grin, “-been busy with the whole sister system. Claire needs a few adjustments to the core. The artificial core can’t compare to mine, a shaky foundation is bound to break under the pressure. I apologize for rambling on, might I be of service?”

“My inquiry can be put on the backburner, the sister system, updated version of the AFR, right?”

“Correct, the Alchemist sect has been working hard to no avail, no matter the improvement we bring, the core is fundamentally flawed. It’s similar to broken glass – the pieces can be put in place, alas, the bigger picture remains shattered.”

“There’s a simple fix, melt the glass and reshape the picture. If the core is flawed; why not look for another.”

“I’m afraid we can’t find the soul here or in the Shadow Realm, I’ve looked.”

“Not here,” he replied confidently, “-I’m referring to Draebala; the same place I fought you and Intherna. The realm is crawling with fallen gods and demons, the slum and battleground for an egotistical, power-tripping higher being. I’m sure lady Miira can transfer me there, I’ll look for and capture a demon or god to serve as the secondary core to you. Will those terms be acceptable?”

“Impressive, very impressive. On paper it sounds simple, however, Draebala is a battlefield for gods. The mortal vessel might not survive the transfer, let alone the harsh climate.”

“People live in Draebala, there are entities who were born, lived, and died in said world. I’ll be fine. Now’s a perfect time, the council meeting’s been postponed, any idea why?”

“They want to have this particular meeting in person. Easel Run Gard has personally requested the gathering. If I were to guess, they’re interested in the representative of Arda, the prince, fondly nicknamed the Devil of Glenda.”

“Just to be on the same page, Elon’s Dynasty, are they with the Federation or just Phantom.”



“Only Phantom, lord Elon’s not one for politics. He’s too busy enjoying life as a youth, building up the fortune ten-fold.”

“Let them be curious, priority is to have Claire operational. I can’t possibly allow my most trusted aid to face such a quandary alone. Leave it to me, éclair; I’ll depart for Draebala as soon as possible.”

“Understood, master,” \*Transmission Ended.\*

#### Chapter 743: The Pretender

“Alright Igna, I’m heading out, see you later,” said Serene. The conversation-filled living area drowned into nothingness. Raphael could be seen through the ajar door into the washroom, foam masked his jaw, Igna sat shy of an open window gazing onto the outskirts of Rotherham.

“Master, I heard the name Draebala mentioned earlier,” hailed across an open space.

“You know about it?”

“Yes,” he shaved, “-After Kronos was dethroned, Zeus proposed that instead of ruling over different dimensions, any god who was interested in joining the Eipea Empire, which was ruled over by the supreme god, would have an opportunity of creating their kingdom and thus making a new world all to themselves. Hence the concept of domains and realms. The idea took some time to flourish, but once some of the more powerful gods such as Gophy and Lixbin joined, yes, lady Gophy, a very humble follower to Zeus at a time, was in line to have her own realm. High-tier deities joined, ensuing a domino effect. Everyone followed suit hoping to imbue fear into the demon’s heart. Once the Eipea Empire was founded by which the ruling monarch is Zeus, the newfound peace Kronos instated was put into jeopardy as newer gods, launched full-on assaults against the demon and any other entities that could rival them. Seeing the strength of the Eipea Empire, all the demons united and fled deeper into the underworld dimension, they founded a new nation, Aapith. They didn’t have any overseer, instead, a council of high-ranking demons which at a time held Satan, Lucifer, and Leviathan. After the foundation of two stable structures, the Eipea Empire and the Aapith Nation, the armies gathered into a full-out war. It ended in a deadlock, this when it was decided demons and gods would try and get along, yes, you heard me correct, I can imagine the look on thy visage, master. Gods and demons once tried to cohabitate, the majority accepted and those who refused were sent to Draebala – a dimension previously owned by Kronos. It became a war zone and the people suffer to this day, a living representation of pain. Anyone is allowed to go and blow off some steam, the thrill of killing, and the pleasures of hunting weaklings. No war means no fun since each side is blessed and cursed by the boon of immortality. Draebala was an exception to the nonaggressive pact between Eipea Empire and Aapith nation. In fear of a faction getting more members and tipping the power balance, Draebala became a testing ground for any low to mid-tier gods and demons. They would fight each other in hopes of getting accepted into either the Eipea Empire or Aapith. There is the current state in which the gods co-existed with demons and other beings, hypocritical rulership where none has to suffer save the dominion of Kronos.”

“Sure know a lot, don’t you,” remarked Igna, “-the Eipea Empire and Aapith Nation, I’ve heard those names before, didn’t pay much attention, why would I, the concept of godly politics is laughable at best. Come to think of it, I once paid a visit to the empire, I think, tis when I was called to kill Gophy.”

"You flatter me," he exited cleanly shaven, "-Draebala is a testing ground, it wouldn't look very good if an otherworlder invaded the shared domain of gods and demons. The latter is very vindictive, I advise strong caution."

"You say that," the windows shut, "-does it even matter, compared to Hades' realm where the ruler is still alive, Draebala, I assume is without ruler and order, deploying my realm in said land shouldn't be much trouble."

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"Wrong," he argued, "-the lands barren and arduous, deploying the shadow realm would only invite the curiosity of onlookers, master, keeping the domain a secret is primordial, is it not?"

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"You're right," he sighed, "-I'm not totally worthless," Orenmir and the new Tharis laid on the couch, "-I have my swordsmanship and blood-arts," a plain white shirt, grey pants, a backpack filled with supplies, gun and sword to his hip, the time displayed 10:59.

"Master, are you sure about heading into battle?"

"Raphael, I've left 100,000 Exa in cash, head into town and have fun, do I make myself clear?"

"Understood," he graciously accepted, "-if matters grow dire, don't be afraid to call my name, I will be summoned no matter the environment and opponent."

Hence, where Igna stood, a whirlpool of nauseating energy unleashed, Raphael sat nonchalantly with feet kicked onto the table, the television took precedence over his master's departure.

The walls broke, the roof flung, the world disassembled, a blinding spark gave into a pause, '...'

"Potato, fresh potato."

"Come get fresh fruits, Juea is in season, come one come all, you won't find anywhere better priced."

"Monster drops, alchemic concoctions, my stall is open to all who wish to partake in the occult," heavy, flexible, light movements went too and fro, the sight readjusted to a strangely familiar area.

'-Marketplace?' came into mind, a street of merchants and stalls lined against walls, one end headed northward, the other, south. Various personage walked, some dressed in heavy, and other, light armor. A hue of olden air blew through the crowded street, at intervals, alleys would dip in and to the other pathways. Energetic children laughed and ran, nearly tripping onto Igna, from one end to the other, '-crowded,' he thought, barely able to dodge the balls of energy. A pull onto the shoulder strap tightened the backpack, '-the shadow realm,' he walked northward, '-the place's changed quite a bit.' Between flocks of equally arranged buildings consisting majority of the cityscape, a hill climbed to a majestically built castle. The vague layout of the overworld version of Rosepire rang true, '-not quite the same,' he figured, '-the merchant street is definitely the place where the dwarves build my item shop, well, a shop turned brewery. The width seems about right.' Further in, horse-drawn carriage promenaded around town, the area headed towards the castle felt lonely. An hour or so later, after reaching midway the climb to the noble district, a heavy object hovered from the castle and into the center, a projection lit the sky ablaze, "-Citizens of the Shadow Realm, us, the four Generals, have the greatest pleasure to

officially start the Meltonia Festival!” far as he was, the cheers reached his position, ‘-Meltonia festival?’ a glance towards the screams brought a smile.

‘Quantifying a person’s strength has never been commonplace in the overworld. Then again, Draebala runs on a separate set of rules. 0 to 100 level is used to distinguish humans and other low-born races. If anyone were to surpass the limits of level 100, they enter the realm of sub-divinity, starting from the lowest, F, E, D, C, B, A, S, SS, SSS. Anyone F-rank is be considered living demi-gods in the Draebala. Sadly, the true sub-divinity starts at rank S and ends with SSS. Since no one of the inferior races managed to get past F-rank, it was assumed that it was the pinnacle of strength. If by some miracle someone managed to get past the rank of SSS, they would enter the realm of true divinity. A realm extremely rare to get into, either born a god or forget reaching said height. Godhood is also divided into low-tier gods, mid-tier gods, and high-tier gods. The same goes for demons as well, instead of low-tier gods they had low, mid, and high-tier demon gods. Technically, there is also another rank, for gods, the title of Supreme God, and for the demons, tis God-slayer. All the ranks point to an emphasis on strength. Only the best is allowed audience and admittance into true divinity, Zeus holds the keys,’ the manor faded into the distance, the gentle slope vexed into a sharper incline, ‘-Origin’s knowledge very important. For éclair to have a strong core – I’m looking for someone in the low-tier demon rank, below is of unimportance. Personally, my physical attribute may range in the S to SSS rank. Not exactly a deity when tis said a done. Hell, I don’t doubt my rank to be in the range of 75 – 100. The last time I visited Draebala, the death element was at an all-time high, the deaths doubled my strength – I could force my way through any fight. Times changed, I don’t have the luxury to jump headfirst into the fray; regeneration will depend on how potent the mana is, a repeat of Zagreus’s tower will only shame my strength.’

“Iгна?” a ball of fire dove onto the asphalt, a circle of flame dispersed, “-is that you?” flaming red hair shuffled to grab his jaw, “-Iгна?” he gave a half-smile, her grip eased, the fire in her hair extinguished, “-it is you,” she transitioned into a warm embrace, “-glad to see you well.”

“Same here, the Meltonia Festival,” said he seeking further explanation.

“Oh, I see,” she looked to the town, “-December’s upon the continent, we thought why not have the whole month to be a giant event. The capital’s the centerpiece, residents from all over the world will join in the festivities,” hasty to grab his hand, “-let’s head inside,” wings of flame materialized, “-why aren’t you flying?”

“Figured I’d take the scenic route?”

“As if.”

The castle gates opened, the castle-town harbored residents, familiar faces. A stable held winged horses, ‘-the valkyries are staying here?’ he thought whilst Intherna gradually increased her speed, they soon landed atop a spire, Victorian-styled doors and windows grew gothic and macabre, the arch entrance, tall and slender, gave into a study, “-where are we?”

“My personal rest area,” she commented, “-there’s a lot of books and a hammock, this baby’s my pride and joy,” no downstairs stairs, instead, a magical circle, ‘-teleportation,’ he figured.

“Take a seat,” she clambered into the suspended bed, “-why are you here?”

“Astute,” he replied, “-I thought Intherna wasn’t much for politics.”

“Is worrying about a friend considered politics?”

“I apologize, didn’t mean for it to sound rude. Here’s the deal,” to which he went into greater details, her expression varied along the journey, “-in the end, I need to head to Draebala in search for souls.”

“I get the picture,” her gaze firmed into the pointy hallow roof, “-I’m sure the risks involved are already known. Here’s the thing, you’re weak, truly and utterly weak bravado won’t work, don’t think I haven’t noticed. The ten-year stuck inside Hades’ realm strengthened the Shadow Realm in exchange for you and your magical element. The curse symbols, the hidden treasures of Staxius Haggard were open and used to preserve what little sanity is left – curses accumulated and reserved strength is but gone. You sit before me as a shell of a former god, demi-god, and warrior. Take away Mantia, any variant of the realm expansion, what’s left is an obsolete mage unable to use his death element, mana regeneration,” she glared, “-the element’s stopped producing mana, hasn’t it.”

“Cat’s out of the bag,” he exhaled, “-saw right through me, the element’s indeed unable to replenish my mana reserves. For me to use magic, I have to call on my mana-manipulation arts. I’m plenty strong, the blood of the nightwalkers runs through my veins, sacrifices have to be made, and I chose to relinquish myself in favor of a better place for my companions. I say I did it for others, and I don’t want to be thanked for it. I don’t mind standing alone, and frankly, I don’t care – what happens, happens, no amount of thinking will change reality. The Death Element’s dormant and I fear the beast to never reawaken, the curse inflicted on my soul prevents ascension to godhood -the only way to rival a god is to unleash the Nevermore gates, which in of itself can’t be activated since the element’s unable to pulse. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, Heir to Death, inheritor of Origin and Time, the titles are for show,” he gave a slightly woeful smile, “-truth is, I’m but a pretender.”

Chapter 744: ‘they who protect, mustn’t be protected.’

“But a pretender you say,” she repeated, “-care to elaborate?”

“You really going to make me say it, aren’t you?” he took a deep breath, eased into an economically shaped chair, the high-ceiling seemed to be a vortex of unknown proportions. The sheer height of the spire made the scape outside to be blue and white. It felt nothing to the usual, Intherna swayed softly in her raised bed, the red hair freed to flow down the side, she watched silently, “-before I begin, you sure this place is free from people’s ear?”

“Yes, there’s a barrier as well. Come on my friend, elaborate, what is the pretender all about.”

“I guess it began when I first awoke on the battlefield from a calming voice. The place was filled with blood, permeated by death, and presided by warriors – I was rescued and taken to an academy for treatment. My memories were blank, I had no name and couldn’t grasp what I was to become and represent. Afterward, I met lady Haru, started the journey as a chef till I met lady mother, there my life really changed for the better. The memories returned, a less than amiable personality in form of a voice took a seat in my higher consciousness. There is where I started second-guessing who I was, never really spoke out or paid the matter any thought, deep down I knew I was a fake, a pretender. Igna could never beat Staxius, and Staxius Haggard, my previous incarnation, could never accept what sort of being Igna Haggard was. The two entities are the same as me, and I’m the same as the two, I understand what

Staxius would have done, and act according to what Igna thinks is best. I know I'm the heir to death – a soul chosen at random to do his bidding. You said elaborate on what I meant to be a pretender, it's simple, I'm acting the part. When I see people in pain, I can't help but snarl and shrug. Turn the situation around, if people I know, those I deem close to me are in danger, I practically swap into a bloodthirsty killer. What remains of Staxius Haggard is the memories, the personality, and the way of thinking is gone, perhaps merged into what I am now – then again, the constant reevaluation of who I am as a person has left me dumbfounded. There's never a conclusion, a simple word comes to mind, fake. Strength-wise, well, the truth is already known, I'm weak. A curse's been inflicted on my soul, a corrupted core can never transcend the mortal bounds and become anything bigger. A massive limiter's been placed, and yes, I can easily circumvent the curse and unleash powers on levels of a god – however, the over usage of the death element has removed that particular card from my hand. I'm stuck in a loop where each part directly affects the other. What would Staxius have done, what would he have thought of, a quandary of concrete proportion has been stamped? I can't complain, I chose to become this way, and the acceptance of a Watcher's power meant my end, the final end to the persona dubbed Staxius Haggard. I'm dead, there's nothing about myself I find to be real, nothing substantial, I exist everywhere and nowhere at the same time. What more do you want me to say," he shot a sincere gaze, "-tell me, Intherna, am I not worthy of the Shadow Realm now?"

"Wrong," she quickly returned, "-there's no need to worry. The Shadow Realm is more than able to make up for the lack in strength, unleash the powers from here into thineself and watch the universe tremble."

"Not a wise choice, revealing the realm is a bad idea, I'd like to keep it a secret for long."

"There," she pointed, "-Staxius wouldn't have taken the safe approach, the man I knew was reckless and rightfully so, any problem or enemy thrown at him would be repaid in kind – there's nothing which could have bested him save the intervention of Zeus and Lucifer. The gods truly neutralized their biggest threat. Meanwhile, we have Igna Haggard, the reincarnation, who's from what I've noticed, is more in touch with his emotions and the latter is reliant on the color of the pupils. The instant the crimson eyes bleed into the white canvas, emotion's lost and he stares, thinking about the better solution. Keep the realm a secret, caution is for the wise, overcaution is for the coward. Sad to say, you fall into the latter."

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"Coward, fool, I don't mind, I'll face whatever comes my way. I have allies and I can count on them when the time is right. The intervention of the four General isn't necessary anymore, I said it before and I say it again, tis thy choice to help or to watch, I won't complain, matter of fact, I don't expect help from the goddesses."

"Are you crossed?"

"Not in the least," he kept a composed expression, "-I think of it to be a blessing, four goddesses for me to pray to, strong entities who, combined, may alter a world's fate on a whim, that is extraordinary."

"Igna," she called, the trail of thought disrupted, "-are you well, is the mind ok, what's the formal tone and lesser approach, do you feel uncomfortable around me?"

"I would be lying if I said no. What sort of person wouldn't flinch in face of a high-tier goddess, I mean, look at you, if it ever crossed thy fancy to destroy, I wouldn't be in a position to stop the carnage."

"Stop downplaying your abilities," she fired, "-makes you sound weak."

"I know myself better than you," he rose, "-at the end of the day, I'm a pretender, a fake. I don't mind it," jumped onto the window ledge, "-takes the pressure away," turned to face her, "-living up to expectation was never a thing I enjoyed. Thank you for the talk, putting thoughts into words has shown the path to take. Take care, Intherna, I'll be on my way," the body fell backward, a gust rummaged inside, glass clicked, the shelves shook and the tables trembled.

'A pretender,' she laid and shut her eyes, '-never thought the day would come where he'd say those things outright. My expectations were high, he doesn't realize it himself, a beast sleeps inside, Staxius's not gone, he is Staxius. Time's effect on a person, the day the killing intent seeps through his body and mind, I shudder to be at the receiving end. Was nice talking to him, I had fun,' the eyelids grew heavy, she fell into a peaceful slumber.

Wings retracted after a sharp flap, a soft landing gave in to the inner castle gate, the secondary precaution in case the fortress was ever attacked. Here, the gravel paths of the castle town swapped for tiles of stone-bricked paths adored by white curbs. A top-down view showed green divided by the orangish pathways, some harbored grass, fruit trees, gardens, a fountain, and much more. Contrary to expectation, the further he walked into the courtyard, the lesser grew guards, sufficed to say, if the people's knight were seen wandering the yard, the insult would reflect badly onto the generals. There's a saying, '-they who protect, mustn't be protected,' one unique to the Shadow Realm. White-stairs rose into an immaculate structure, Intherna's spire could be seen peeping over the rest, '-pretender, huh. The word truly matches what I feel,' he smiled, '-I feel empty, such a lazy feeling, I like it.' Retainers, upon sight of Igna, whispered to their fellow workers, the few maids responsible for cleaning the entrance hall scurried into the vastness of the coming great hall. A red carpet lined the marble floor, expensive stairs held railing of shining dark-wood, slithering its way from an upper-area, portraits of the guardians hung onto an ornamentally crafted wall, the sheer scale put the manor in Alpha to shame.

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"Pardon me, might I ask who you are?" inquired a butler who stood straightly before two maids who held each other.

"Have I offended in some way?" returned Igna.

"Not in the least, the generals have a policy of allowing anyone to visit the castle – though none has ever taken up on the offer. What sort of man would brazen walk through that arched walkway."

"A foolish man," he replied.

"Or a strong man," added the butler, "-curiosity aside, do you have business with our masters?"

"Yes, would it be inconvenient for me to ask for Lady Miira's audience?"

"Not in the least," said the sharply dressed butler, the face bore features of the elven clan, a more intricate scan showed the maids to share the elven blood, \*clap,\* "-ladies, is it possible to ask for Lady Yuria's presence."

“On it, head butler,” they scurried into one of the many halls. A simple upright grin laid onto the visitor; “-will it be a bother if I accompany?”

“Be my guest.”

\*Woosh,\* a heavy boom bellowed, the butler’s face shook, “-by the heavens, they’ve returned.”

‘Who’s returned,’ he wondered, ‘-he’s sweating profusely, what kind of entity has the power to shake a well-grounded man to the core.’ “-Hey, is something the matter?”

“...”

“Hello,” he waved, “-wake up.”

“Pardon me,” the head snapped to reality, “-I apologize for my behavior, my instinct overwhelmed my judgment. It would be best if we leave,” he strode forth, “-follow me.” Distant chatter and laughter permeated; the butler’s advance interrupted by the familiar voices. Meanwhile, deeper in the castle, the maids tapped onto an ajar door, “-Lady Yuria, someone’s come to visit, he wishes an audience with lady Miira.”

“Who has the guts to call onto a general so frivolously,” pulled from the study table, “-let’s go, ladies,” quick to slid into her coat, “-I’ll kindly refuse the man’s request.”

“So cool,” whispered the duo.

\*Clap, clap, clap,\* shadows of powerful entities approached, the chatter, gibberish to the point of sounding akin to ancient spells, cleared into a few audible syllables. “-We should really run, I don’t want to suffer through their games,” mental flashbacks wrote suffering, across the visage, “-let’s get out of here right away.”

“Too bad,” replied Igna, “-they’re already here,” the pale expression glanced.

“We have a new guest?”

“Can’t be.”

“I don’t care...”

“You care, look!”

‘Hold on a moment,’ he stepped before the butler and squinted, sun’s glare made it hard to decipher the faces. Rapid paced steps echoed, “-wait!” the two gawked, “-she’s running, she’s really running!” it leaped, he opened his arms, “-FATHER!” exclaimed a high-pitch squeal.

“VANESA!” he hugged tightly, “-how are you,” they spun joyously.

“Father?” the remainder rushed into the fray, “-POPS!” an ox-like charge dug into his chest, tipping the balance, ‘-brace,’ they gritted and fell, “-POPS, POPS!”

“Draconis,” he clambered to a sit, “-energetic as always,” the boy went around and hug tightly from behind, he hopped in a way to rock Igna back and forth, the warm cheeks took comfort in snuggling to Igna’s face, “-it’s been so long,” he said, “-feels like ages since I’ve seen you three.”

“Hello pops,” waved Saniata, “-long time no see,” she stood neatly, “-I don’t get why it was necessary to rush in and ambush the man.”

“Shut up flat top,” fired Draconis, “-shortening the skirt won’t take away that flat chest of yours.”

“Draconis...”

“Forget about them,” said Vanesa, “-look at me, look at me,” her oily visage and messy hair brought nostalgia, “-pops, pops, am I pretty yet?”

“What, you have something to say?” fired the boy, “-here I thought the meat to have given some sense of intelligence. Looks like I was wrong.”

“SHUT UP, BRAT!”

“HA-HA, flat-chested Saniata’s angry. Girl, you look like a grade-schooler, calm down,” he pulled his tongue in a grimace.

“Pops, pops, look at me,” Vanesa latched around his neck, “-I want food and play, play with me, I want to sleep, no, forget the play, let’s sleep.”

“You foolish boy,” she called onto her lute, posed strongly, then played, the melody sent needle-like projectiles.

“Not fair,” a weak fire barrier conjured.

“Tis but music, meathead, something you wouldn’t understand,” the notes intensified.

‘My children,’ he smiled at the cacophony, ‘-I did miss them.’

#### Chapter 745: Debate

Yuria stopped, her coat whisked against her back sharply, the accompanying maids who watched the floor more than the front nearly ended into the lady’s back, “-the three devils are here,” she said.

“Three devils my lady?”

“The three children,” whispered the other.

“My bad,” apologized the former, “-I was lost in admiration. If the devils have returned, so have the generals.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” added Yuria with a tone of dismay, “-them three are the best and worst thing to ever happen to us. Powerful entities and whimsical to their core, the head butler’s been traumatized thoroughly, I dare not imagine the pain they’d have caused.” A brave smile lit her face ablaze, she whipped around the corner, the coat trailed in her sharp motions – the corridor stretched into the grand-hall, chatter and laughter echoed, ‘-what in the?’ they once again stopped shyly, this time, one of the maids ended into Yuria’s back. She quickly backtracked in fear of having offended the lady – the body and face tightened; her fist clenched in anticipation for punishment.

“Calm down,” said the sister-like figure, “-we’re alright, the rulers treat their people kindly, we don’t have to worry.”



'I won't have believed it,' the sight before was of the same band of mischievous devils affectionately cuddling another. The standoffish Saniata joined in, a scene Yuria could but gawk at speechlessly, '-she's being held so warmly, the lady hates affection, does she not?' a close look showed a peaceful expression, they napped.

.....

'Ran out of energy after a few minutes,' thought Igna running his fingers through Vanesa and Saniata's hair, the two girls laid with heads on his legs and body onto the floor turned fluffy cloud. Draconis sat back-to-back, the fiery breath sparked upon irregular exhales, '-Saniata's grown in height and so has Draconis, the aura is calm and composed, and in a way, better. Vanesa, what can I say about her, she exhausted herself upon trying to speak loudly, my adorable awkward daughter.'

Yuria, who kept to the wall, circled to the head butler's location, "-are you alright?"

\*Gasp,\* the face froze, "-lady Yuria," hands to his chest, "-you startled me, please do not sneak on people, it's rather crude."

"Sorry, habits. I have so many questions," she took a closer look, "-the master has returned."

"Pardon me?"

"Don't look surprised," she paused – the glowing hue from the entrance perturbed momentarily by shadows, "-most do not know about the master. Here's a brief introduction, the man who calmly watches the three devils is lord Igna Haggard, the Watcher of the Shadow Realm and father of them three."

\*Clap, clap, clap,\* "-Yuria," wind rose ever-flowing blond hair, "-we've returned," said Miira. Her tall stature could but stand out from a distance away, beside her were Lilith and Gophy, the two looked somewhat confused at the gathered crowd, "-why are the retainers in the great hall?"

"I presume the holiday spirit," added Lilith.

"Not likely," refuted Gophy, "-our retainers are too stern to enjoy the free time allocated."

"Yuria, care to explain?"

"Lady Miira, please look for thyself," they gave way for the goddesses to approach. Three stairs marked the end of the entrance hall, the beginning of the great hall, a generous tunnel which led into a massive cave, such was the impression if decorations and craftsmanship were taken away.

"I'll be damned, look who's decided to pay us a visit."

"Igna," gestured Lilith, "-long time no see," she nonchalantly moved to his side and sat, "-the cloud's very comfortable."

"Credit to Vanesa," he replied, "-she's always ready to nap, have to admire her for it."

"The Aedric mistress of maladies; for her age in the evolution of her powers – she's got Starix and Kaleem beat in raw power alone. No wonder she enjoys sleeping so much, I asked once, and her reply

was, 'working hard tires me, I'm already stronger than where I need to be. I will only try if pops ask me to. Sleep is love, food is life' so you see, she's quite the energy conservationist."

"You're right," added Miira, "-the cloud sure is comfortable," her tall stature dropped onto the hovering fluff, a slight flush filled her cheeks, "-never expected you to visit."

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"And I've never guessed the realm would have a one-month holiday."

"Pleasantries aside," interjected Gophy, "-why are you here, where's Intherna, you must have spoken, right?"

"We did, and I say, went pretty well. I'll cut right to the chase, I've come to ask a favor," a shot to Miira drew on Gophy and Lilith's curiosity.

A glare from Gophy and Lilith built onto the pressure, unbeknownst to them, the crowd of retainers grew by the second, '-so serious,' she thought, "-what is it?"

"Open a portal to Draebala."

"Draebala?" the target switched, "-are you insane?" fired Gophy.

"Not going to happen," voiced Lilith loudly, "-no way, no way, I refuse to accept such a request."

"Lucky for me, the request is for Miira, and not you, Lilith," the reply, harsh in nature, spawned doubt and suspicion across hers and Gophy's mind. Miira's openness to the request reflected by her posture, simultaneously accepting and curious.

"Why should I send you to a warzone?" her stare narrowed.

"Please, Miira, don't tell me you're entertaining the idea," complained Lilith.

"I side with Lilith on this one," said Gophy, "-the council decides, I see two against one, the decision is without argument. Igna will not be sent to Draebala."

"I see," said a tiresome exhale, "-shouldn't have expected much," soft taps on the children's faces broke their peaceful sleep. They sat and rubbed their eyes save for Draconis who snored. Igna stood, "-if the council of goddesses says the decision is final, not much I can do – I'll find another way. Thank you for the welcome," he turned his back on them (faced the entrance hall) fully intent on leaving.

"Hold on a moment," a ball of fire burst onto the tense debate from the entrance, "-I side by Igna," warm hands grabbed his shoulder, effectively stopping the early departure, "-Pretender or not, you're my friend," she smiled.

"Intherna!" gritted Gophy, "-are you insane, sending him to that world is suicide."

"And?" she hopped and rose to Gophy, "-must I remind the events which led to his current state."

"There's no need to go there," interjected Lilith who rose to grab Lilith's arms, "-what happened was a mistake, we've all agreed."

“Still, a mistake is a mistake, the saying, ‘-we’re but humans,’ do not apply, our prestige alone defy such a cowardly way of thinking.”

“You’re right,” she firmed her resolve, “-my mistakes are a rightful point of argument. Still, what I speak is true, with or without the mishap, Igna would have been decimated. Draebala isn’t a world suitable for beings of another world, only the strong enter – there’s no way he’ll survive, not after the trauma and pain afflicted by ten years of imprisonment inside another’s realm.”

“Miira, please, side with what’s right,” requested Lilith, “-she comes from a place of genuine care.”

‘One side wishes to respect my request, the other is crossed, they wish for me to remain safe. Both sides are right, what a baseless argument,’ he stepped into the fray, “-Lilith, Miira, Intherna, Gophy,” roared across deeply, “-the argument is pointless, the blame lays on me for not thinking the matter through.”

“This isn’t about you, Igna,” fired Gophy rudely, “-tis about Intherna and her habit of crossing whatever Lilith and I have to say.”

“A council of yes won’t bring about Elysium – debates bring forth innovations, the latter being paramount for the world to evolve.”

“SILENCE!” he thundered, the hall bellowed, “-I will hear none of it. Gophy, Intherna, I order thee to shake hands and makeup!” a tinge of purple flickered across the bi-colored pupils, they watched, confused by the outburst, until the hands moved subconsciously into firm grasp, in turn, altering into a short embrace, “-my bad.”

“Master?” the eyebrows burrowed, “-did you just?”

“Y-yeah,” he winked, “-the words slipped out. I don’t know, the sight of a pointless argument made my blood boil. The goddesses don’t become the taint of disagreement, you who rule the Shadow Realm are friends first, leaders second. If my request causes such folly, I rather it is forgotten – there’s no need to be vexed, I’ll drop the idea.”

“I’ve yet to add my point of view,” said Miira after what seemed to be an eternity, “-I agree with Gophy and Lilith’s worry, yet I side with Intherna. Hear me before passing judgment, Draebala is a world fueled by chaos and destruction, we know much about it, especially Intherna, who was subjected to fight and risk her life. If she, one personally affected by the domain, accepts the master’s request, I think we ought to trust her judgment. Worrying about his safety is an insult to the Haggard name, has he ever called for help, has he ever backed down from a challenge, no. We’re free to do as we want – then again, the freedom mustn’t impose on the other, which is why we have to vote to decide what happens. As it stands, tis a deadlock, the wisest choice would be a compromise. How about Intherna escorting the master?”

“Having her there would be reassuring,” said Lilith, “-I can live with that.”

“What about you, Gophy.”

“Why is it you always try to walk on eggshells around me, Intherna, you’re honestly a pain to have around,” she shuffled closer, “-I couldn’t be more grateful to have thee as a friend. I’m sorry about the argument, emotions got the better of me.”

"I'm sorry too," they sincerely hugged the misunderstanding away, "-worrywart."

"Now all are resolved," turned to Igna, "-why not stay the night and depart tomorrow. I'll need time to ready the portal."

"Sure," he smiled, "-if you would have me."

"There he goes being modest," teased Lilith, "-where's the man who ordered goddesses to shake hands, very bold."

"Pops?"

"Vanesa, Draconis, Saniata, what's the hold-up, lets go into town."

"YAY!"

Energy from the discussion died out, Yuria was left in the company of lady Miira and Gophy, Intherna chose to sleep the day away, whilst Lilith teleported to tend for Beelzebub.

"What do you make of it?" wondered Gophy.

"The test went according to plan," said Miira, "-I don't feel great about the underhanded fashion we handled the matter. Intherna knew what we wanted and she delivered, we're on the same page."

"I'm glad," exhaled Gophy, "-I never want to fight again, it drained my energy."

"Agreed. Igna's still the same, a respectful man who doesn't think highly of himself and focuses attention on the realm. Part of me wonders why he downplays his abilities so much."

"Intherna told me about the conversation they had," added Gophy – a lavish garden waited below, gardeners tended to the flowers, straw-hats shielded against the boiling sun, "-he called himself a Pretender."

"New one, a pretender. He's worthy of our trust and support, sounds pretentious and I hate saying it, if by any means he'd fail the strict requirements, I'd have personally refused to aid. Draebala isn't a light subject, he could risk our existence. The Watcher watches, and he's doing so to help éclair. Head into town and explain the situation, I'm sure it'll relieve him to know we were testing him."

"I'll leave that to Lilith," she shrugged.

A few hours later, the center of town cheered and bathed in the symphony of laughter and good energy. Draconis wrapped about Igna's neck, Saniata chose to walk whilst Vanesa insisted on being cradled, to meet her demand, she rejuvenated to her younger self.

"Let's stop here," said Saniata, "-here's the stall," her eyes shimmered, "-they've got accessories."

"Take you time," returned Igna, "-we'll be at the eating area. Don't get lost, if anything happens, call for me."

"I will, see you pops."

Warm plates brought onto a small circular table, the crowd was very much active, "-here, food," he presented to the half-asleep Vanesa.

“Awesome!”

‘Why would the goddesses test me, I’ve only just realized the absurdity of the situation.’

“Master,” whispered Lilith, “-here I am.”

Chapter 746: Festival

A radiant dress, faithful to Rosespire’s festive wear, added onto her irrefutable coy. Without much hassle, she snuck her way around the table and sat, her gaze firm on Igna’s cold drink, droplets condensed, the temperature, though average, felt hotter, an itchy sense of discomfort went up the back, “-glad to see you?”

“Why did you say it in a questioning tone?” her curvy lips straightened, an inviting flush made a stern gaze.

“I was only joking,” he returned, “-here, want some?”

“Sure,” they shared the drink. Her posture kicked back, nearly hitting a wandering child, “-where’s Saniata?” her shoulders refocused, her back straightened.

“Went off to buy accessories?” returned an uncaring answer, “-Draconis’s out of energy for once,” a side-nod displayed the boy curled onto the hard bench. The discomfort didn’t seem to bother for the smile and sparks of snores made much of the current state. He ran his palms across the boy’s hair, “-tell me,” firmed onto her deeply inhaling the shared drink, “-why would the goddesses try and test?”

“Test,” \*cough,\* her eyes watered, “-my bad,” a red liquid flowed down her nose, the loud coughs brought mild attention to the table.

“Here,” a handkerchief pressed against her nose, “-take care of yourself better,” she took over and held the cloth.

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“Embarrassing,” she murmured, the watery eyes settled, “-the juice went down my nose, it burns.”

“Take your time.” The bustling crowd’s too and fro took the motion of a pendulum, left and right, Igna served as the center point whilst the blurry feet moved freely – time seemed sped, albeit in illusion.

“Why goddesses would test,” her hands made for the carton cup that bore a presumptuous emblem of a muscular pig wearing sunglasses and ‘hitting ’em weights’ so said the local.

“No more drinks,” he snatched the cup, “-explanation first.”

The shoulder slumped, she took accounts of the area and formulated her words, the lips opened, “-best to be safe than sorry, you know the precaution we ought to take. The idea of you being tainted by the time spent in said tower wasn’t out of reach, ten years, that’s a long time, sufficient to change a man for the worse. When Draebala hopped onto the table, the others grew distant; there was no telling what thee thought or wanted to do. The prior argument was one they had earlier. Fortunately, Miira mediated the different points of view – when you arrived, there was no holding back, feelings flew at one another. The rawness of their words wasn’t acted, they knew it had to be done and fully expressed

their thoughts. In a way, I'm still reluctant in you heading to that god-awful place. 'If Igna makes open threats or refuses to see reason, we'll shut him out, no questions asked. No one will help him – the answer is, there's no answer, what he says will have to be respectful and open-minded. If he's unchanged, I'm sure he'll take the blame for the argument and ask for us to stop fighting, even so, if we continue, he may take action, we wait for that moment,' those are Miira's words, she orchestrated the ordeal. The result succeeded expectation, you're free to do as is pleased."

"Precaution," he leaned and smiled, "-very well."

"Pops, I'm back!" said a cheery lady amidst the crowd.

"Over here," he waved, "-I see the shopping trip was worth the wait."

"Definitely," gleamed Saniata.

"Lilith," he slipped in a few last words for the night, "-good job on taking care of Vanesa, she's got a hold on her power, matter of fact, great job to the four goddesses. Draconis, Saniata, and Vanesa have turned into upstanding troublemakers, oxymoron, I know, still, look at the expression, tis all worth it." On that, the night made its way across the loud gathering, an unexpected bonfire rose dangerously close to the center of town; percussion tapped, singers sang, lutes rang, the party only but started. In the folly, the goddesses took time having one on one time with Igna, the conversations and laughter were similar, he but watched and moved to their whims and often, outrageous requests.

"I want a giant display of fireworks."

"A fountain of overflowing ale."

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"A friendly bare-fisted cage fight."

"A lover, or one to douse my fire."

Courage and grit, enduring their torturous ways, '-I'm beat,' he thought, '-look at them,' the bonfire burnt – most logs charred and barely lit, '-they danced without care.' Guardians or whatnot, status didn't matter, populous and protectors intermingled. '-I better retire for the night,' he stood, one hand cradled Vanesa, whilst the other grabbed Saniata by her waist, Draconis had buried himself onto Igna's back. \*Ancient Magic: Teleportation,\* in before the conjuration, a sharp jolt flew across the forehead, '-I can't,' he panted, '-it's worse than imagined.' The cheers and musical hysteria softened by each step, the night grew apparent, stars firmed against the darkish purple clear sky. A jaunty back alley traversed into the north-eastern side of town, puddles of water-dipped and rose, the ground wasn't so much level. \*Blood-Arts: Elian,\* wings sprouted, Draconis lost his grip, \*Mana Control: Wind Element Variant: Flutter,\* landed in a bed of air. The greater the force applied, the faster he flew, a few flaps sufficed to completely disappear from the event. The manor stood grandly, the cold outside wall resonated against the clear sky, the moon was one to burn akin to the sun. Loud taps against the barrier, "-who is it?" inquired an intercom.

"Igna Haggard."

“Master,” it gasped, “-please, come in.” Up the jarring slope, along the curvy road, arrived the manor in a nostalgic beauty. A silhouette outlined against the well-lit porch.

“Welcome home,” said the shadow.

“éclair, mind giving a hand?”

“With pleasure,” the children were soon put to bed. Tiredness from overexertion, no blood to refill the stamina, fell into a somberly deep sleep.

The clock strikes 03:00, the famed devils hour announced in three tinkles upon a pendulum – a steady breeze flapped the hoary moonlit curtains. A chill subconsciously pulled the blanket onto the drifting sleeper. Unknowingly, the heavy eyelids move to favor the ajar window, there, the light dimmed against the curtains casting a semi-transparent shadow on the bed.

‘What the?’ a scrape caught his attention, ‘-what time is it,’ the eyes opened to be faced by a tall shadow, red beady eyes glared onto him, the window crashed by a forceful gale, “-WHO’S STANDS THERE!” he leaped, grabbed the figure’s neck, and pushed down, “c-chill,” it tapped, “-I yield.”

“Vesper?” moonlight shimmered against her scaly visage, “-don’t scare me like that.”

“You were scared?” she slithered onto the edge of the bed.

“-yes I was.”

“I feel bad for the woman who tries to sneak into thy bed. I would have died on impact if not for my species’ inherit firmness. You asked the question after nearly killing the intruder, not a nice way for negotiation.”

“I’m sorry for being spooked. Honestly, why not tap on the window or better yet, take the normal route, walk through the entrance, climb the stairs, and then knock.”

“I figured it be easier to sneak in,” she shrugged, “-the weather’s not so nice at 03:00. No matter, I’ve come to speak about a serious matter.”

“Understood, follow me, we’ll speak in detail over a warm cup of coffee or hot chocolate, any preference?”

“Hot chocolate.”

Two warm glasses, a friendly grin on her visage, and an emotionless stare on his swiftly moved to the veranda, Igna leaned against the railing and gazed the garden, the same where Lizzie’s grave rested in the Overworld.

“The tower in Plaustan is about to be conjured. A high-level adventuring party, spearheaded by lady Achilles, is currently at level 196, it will take a few weeks until they reach 200. King of Monsters, you should know the tower was a creation from Scifer, he poured his heart to create a place for all races to train and earn treasures. The outer appearance might say otherwise, I stand firm, the intention was good. Lady Kylsha, the guardian of floor 100, was bested and nearly killed, the next demon guardian is Kanad.”

“Kanad and Kylsha,” he sipped, “-I remember them, those two were in the god slayers party. They made a mockery of the king’s birthday at one time, always throwing pebbles my way, very annoying.”

“It must have been, master Scifer saw thee as a threat, one far more important than the supreme god. That aside, I’ve come to request aid from my master,” she bowed, “-please, when the adventurers reach floor 200, take Kanad’s place and show them despair. Beat them within a brink of their lives, kill if needed, I care not, the tower must continue to rise. Preparations are ready, trapped souls and their life-energy have amassed, the core is ready to expand and rebuilt to a mystic-level dungeon – 400 levels, layouts from 1 to 200 alter; I’ve asked a legendary-level caster, an ancient hero in another world, Merlin, to take the core of a defeated realm and bestow it onto the tower. The request is simple, defeat the adventures and proclaim thyself to them, raise an indomitable dungeon to challenge the adventurers. What say you, my liege, interested?”

“I like the idea, facing the adventurers in a climactic battle. What about Kanad, will he not be angry, I mean, I would be if I’ve stood for so many years waiting for people to reach my floor.”

“There’s nothing to be worried about, the levels are linked by portals. They move in and out of the dungeon at will, he’s been involved in books more than anything. Regardless, what about you, master, will thee take the challenge?”

“The team of adventurers must be strong to have bested Kylsha. Achilles will be at the center. I’m sold – have the coming floors be the hardest they’ve ever seen. My escapade to Draebala might last a few weeks, even months, or a day, depends if I find what I seek.”

“Understood,” the cup tipped, “-I appreciate the hot chocolate, I’ll be on my way.”

‘Kanad and Kylsha, they sure were a pain to deal with alongside their master. Merlin, a caster from another realm, thing’s gotten very interesting.’ On those words, dusk to dawn, the festival, from 06:00 to 09:00, stopped for daily cleaning.

‘Today’s the day,’ sword in hand and gun to the hip, ‘-Draebala, the hunt for a suitable soul. Let’s do this.’

“Master, the guests have arrived,” said a voice in the hallway.

“I’ll be down,” he exited, breakfast was served to the children.

“Hello,” gestured Intherna in the company of Miira, “-last night sure was one to remember,” they commented.

“Especially the time where a certain lady wanted a fountain of ale,” he glanced to Miira, “-and a cage for one-on-one fights,” he moved to Intherna, “-a very eventful night.”

“What is done is done,” said they straight-faced, “-the portal’s ready to go. Here,” two crystal orbs hovered, “-one each, those are teleportation crystal, if the matter grows dire, destroy them, you’ll be spirited away.”

“Good,” said Intherna, “-now then, Igna, are you ready?”

“Yes, shall we move out?”



“Are you sure?” interjected Miira, “-what about the children?”

“We’ve already gone over the situation. Besides, exchanging goodbyes isn’t really my strong suit.” In a flick of the wrist, Miira brought to life red-colored circles, vertical, horizontal, and a few slanted, “-may the blessings of the four goddesses be with thee, Igna.”

“-Wait, we’re going now?” a glance towards Intherna showed an excited expression.

“Of course,” she grinned, “-did you expect a massive show of power, or perhaps we were to teleport away from the manor,” a conniving wink lit her otherwise mature disposition, “-no here, we do things simply and effectively, good luck, Igna, see you!”

‘Oh, come on,’ the body hovered and imploded, a circle of orangish-red puffed.

“-what happened!” two figures slid to a stop, “-Lady Miira?”

“Draconis, Saniata, socks on the wooden floor is dangerous.”

“WATCH OUT!” éclair exclaimed.

“Vanessa train,” mumbled a monotonous voice gliding towards the two, their mien froze, she caught their heels, the duo tumbled, “-strike,” returned a slothful thumbs up.

#### Chapter 747: Draebala

Despair and desolation, two who walked hand in hand, a closed loop of sufferance. A hard wrathic gale forced down the mountain, the trees or what appeared to be the forestry, cried in sharp intervals. “-where are we?” he wondered, Intherna, a few steps forward, threw her sharp chin to the side, whereby a line of densely packed plants bristled. Her fist clenched, a sense of worry washed her face. Flames tenderly lit the ends of her flowing hair, her eyes narrowed, “-Get down,” she ordered, a crescent shape projectile slit the prior dense plants in half.

‘Wind cutter?’ sidestepped Igna, Tharis unsheathed, the receiver, Intherna, casually dropped backward, the back of her head nearly touched the ground. The projectile crashed yonder, she sprung with a fiery orb within her palm; motioned in a submarine pitch, \*bang,\* for the size, a large explosion rattled the vicinity.

‘Malice,’ glanced Igna, ‘-such a tremendous aura,’ he turned on his heel, aimed towards the back, facing an upward path headed for a jarring mountain, pairs of red sprinted, galloped, no matter the phrasing, a horde of unknown creatures ran. ‘-Channel the mana from the atmosphere,’ the updated weapon lit, barrel, slightly longer than the previous version, the slithering dragon had a darkened hue fill from its tail to the menacing head whereby he fired. One-shot, one kill, “-we should retreat,” fired Intherna, “-down the mountain is a bad idea.”

“You insane?” they leaped to lean against one another, “-will climbing increase our chance of survival?”

“Hell no,” she gritted, “-wiser move is to head down, still, look at the horde coming from below. The entities here are resilient but not foolish, if we gun it they won’t be able to follow. No flying.”

“Understood, I’ll open a path, keep the horde at bay.”

“With pleasure,” she smirked and jumped, a hovering raiment summoned to carry countless fireballs, a whip and a deluge of explosions shook the ground, a meteor shower on first impression. \*Bang, bang, bang,\*

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‘Too many to handle,’

\*Come forth, Vengeance, slay my enemies,\* a shot of nothingness rampaged across the path, the ground carved under its sheer pressure, “-Let’s go,” he called, “-the path’s cleared.” Between guarding the back and foraging a path onto an unknown area, the adventure didn’t follow as expected. The hours swam, Igna led the charge until a remote cave overlooking the area.

Hands against the top of the entrance, a tired glance to the realm broadened the horizon, the inherited somberness unique to Draebala cleared at specific parts. Mountains, forests, the landscape was rough and primitive, a constant feeling of terror presided over his head.

“Come on, rest,” said Intherna, “-I’ve cast a barrier, we’ll be safe until daybreak.”

“Great,” he exhaled and shuffled inside, the low-hanging ceiling proved hard to freely move, a small fire summoned without conduit, it burnt nonchalantly, no smoke, only heat.

“Here we are,” a black portal summoned, “-sleeping bags and dinner.”

“You’re prepared, nicely done. The portal, a variant of the Spatial arts?”

“Pocket dimension, I say it to be more of a variant on the Shadow Realm,” they sat around the fire, “-this place is far worse than I remember.”

“Tell me about it,” she dove into her plate, “-last time we were here I fought éclair, the layout of the land is foreign to me, here’s the deal, if we want to find a suitable soul, we’ll have to cross the thick forest and make it to one of the towns.”

“The spots marked by the sun?”

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“Yes, don’t let stories about the place alter the narrative; harsh as it seems, people do inhabit the realm. Here’s what I know, there are three nations, Eipea Empire, Aapith Nation, and lastly, Zuyan D’ol Sak, the kingdom of the people, or the refuge people of Kronos. Each controls major parts of the land, and to be frank, the Eipea and Aapith rulership aren’t kind to the Zuyan people, the latter is seen as bait for the strong. Distinguished warriors are allowed to visit the restricted towns, anyone can actually – travel is very deadly, our ambush should have given a glimpse. The better option is to venture towards a town, Eipea or Aapith, doesn’t matter, we only need to capture and kill a suitable entity. That being said, the likelihood of what I said coming to reality is minimum. They won’t take lightly to strangers, especially not us – we stand out, the inherit aura we channel comes from the Shadow Realm.”

“I say we move to a town ruled by the Zuyan, they know the land – not quite interested in being drawn by either faction. I was thinking,” he relaxed, “-time here goes much faster to the overworld, right?”

“Way faster,” she nodded, “-why?”

“Draebala, scary and dangerous as it seems, the people must be strong – I want to learn more.”

“Fair deal,” she smiled, “-curious about the land, are we?”

“Very much so.”

“Let’s call it a night, we’ll figure out where we are tomorrow. Good night, Igna.”

“Good night, Intherna.”

Two gentle taps across the cheeks, “-good morning,” said Intherna, “-did you sleep well?” she held Igna’s head on her lap.

He wiped his eyes and replied, “-good morning?” the brows lowered in confusion, “-did I miss an episode?”

“You mean this?” she caressed his head, “-you screamed in thy sleep, crying about dying and being useless, must have been quite the nightmare,” her awry scarlet hair stopped short of his forehead, “-the first time I’ve seen you in such pain.”

“I’m always in pain,” he rose and nodded in gratitude, “-that is that and this is this, forget what you heard or saw, I’m fine, I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so,” she followed suit, “-I took the liberty of scouting the area for a bit.” A bird, smaller and tamer version of the phoenix, flew inside, perched onto her arms, imploded into golden dust, “-we were teleported to Talia’s Mountain, which means, behind us stands the great Elaps mountain range. Wasn’t able to procure a map, the location is favorable for travel, we’re in the center – which consequently means were in greater danger. The Elaps range is famed for being nests of dragons, they say the peak is so far up normal sight can never discern the shape. Lucky for us, people of Zuyan, else known as people of Draebala, are ingenious in making fortress-villages and towns. All of them are kept within tall skyscraping giants. We’ll rarely come across villages, and even if we do, they’ll be closely guarded. The closest town is to the south, on foot, maybe three weeks of walking, whilst flying should get us there in three days.”

“I’m guessing flying won’t be an option for a while.”

“Yeah, the dragons and flying creatures around Talia’s Mountain are very aggressive. Best we make it to the trade routes.”

“Isn’t the realm fill with battles and constant death?” he shrugged; the prior stories didn’t quite seem to collaborate what she recounted.

“You talk too much,” she chuckled, “-the populous has to live, gods and demons aside, the kingdoms have to live and adapt. You’ll see when we travel, the battles are spectacular and not frequent, two high-beings going head-to-head.”

The downward hike resumed under the somberness of the sky. A full stomach sufficed to start the day right, “-the bodies,” he stopped and glanced the mysterious beings of yesterday, ‘-humanoid in the figure, slumped and savage, the canines protrude, carnivorous,’ he leaned and slightly shifted the dead body’s head, ‘-a primitive necklace with a tooth as locket. Tribal creatures, the attack was premeditated,

they retreated after Intherna's attack – signs point to intelligence, they know what we did,' the examination stopped, a brisk jitter scattered across the tree line.

"Igna, now isn't the time to play doctor," she inched closer, "-we're surrounded."

'They came back to check on the deceased,' he kept one knee to the ground, '-if my hunch is right, we might be able to get out without having to fight,' the eye shut, '-breath and sense their hearts, sense their auras,' a rudimentary greyscale outline scanned the tree-line, '-the hunched back carries spears, some, slender, have perched atop, archers. Where's the leader,' he scoured, '-there, he waits for our guard to drop. Too bad,' he reached for Tharis, flicked to the side and shot, a heavy mass stumbled and fell into the foliage. "-Igna?" she frowned.

'I've been worrying about nothing,' Orenmir slid out the sheath, '-who cares if I can't use the death-element, I fought in wars without magic – don't underestimate me,' a horde of armed entities leaped, some bore their claws, others gnashed their teeth. \*Woosh,\* he made for a lonesome 'hunched-one,' sliced its head clean off, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* a web of razor-thin wire rose suddenly, momentum from their jumps ultimately ended in the deaths of many, heads, limbs, torsos, name it and the body parts hit the ground – inner organs exposed onto the coarse dirt path. Blood hung onto the thread; the massacre reflected in splatters across Intherna's face.

"Stop!" said one.

'Good, the message is sent across,'

"Please, strong one, do not hurt my people," he limped, fell, clawed to stand, fell, and repeated. Strongly shaped facial features woefully reflected the trauma the mangled mess of bodies, "-why, my people," he fell, head to the bloodied path, "-why did we have to take revenge. The holy ones have always said to never attack outsiders," clenched fist slammed the ground, "-WHY!"

"First warrior," archers leaped from their trees, "-please, do not lower your head. We take the blame for the attack."

'They speak clearly and understand one another, are they people of the land?'

\*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,\* "-who are you, people," he returned to Intherna's stead, she kept a reserved look and had her spells ready to explode.

"We're of the Temihan tribe, tell me strong one," the lowered gaze rose to speechlessness. The bodies; body, organs, flesh, bone, grind to a fine gleaming scarlet-shaped apple, "-Temihan tribe," \*crunch,\* "-where do your people reside?"

"In the forest of Kuvah," he gulped, "-what happened to my comrades?"

"I ate them," he returned nonchalantly, "-Temihan tribe, my name's Igna, and this here is my partner, Intherna," he crossed the safe distance, the survivors – five archers, drew onto arrows from their quiver, '-the leather armor and fabric seem to be of the same quality to the overworld. These people know more than is let on.'

"Do not approach," said one, "-the safety of the first warrior is the safety of our village"

“Another step and we shoot,” the bows pulled, “-first warrior, please, retreat,” the foreheads shimmered in sweat, a howl broke the tension.

“That scream,” the bravado dwindled, “-the first warrior...” frightened faces sought confirmation.

“I know,” he replied, “-the ruler of cold is here.” An oppressive force rampaged from the mountain; each step rattled the ground.

“Igna, run,” said the first warrior, “-leave me behind, I will be the sacrifice for the ruler of cold. Run, my comrades, run, there’s no use taking an injured man home.”

“We should listen,” said Intherna, “-I’d prefer to keep my powers hidden, I see no way we can win against such a beast,” she pulled onto his shoulder, “-come, let’s go.”

“No,” he broke out her grip, “-this cannot be real,” he walked steadfast to the frightening aura, “-I don’t believe it.”

\*HOWL!\* pure white fur interspaced by a light blue glared from the slope murderously. A thick mist accompanied each step, temperature dropped considerably.

“IGNA, WE NEED TO LEAVE, NOW!” said a worried Intherna, ‘-that’s a legendary beast, there’s no winning in such tight quarters.’ The rumbles intensified into gallops, he escaped Intherna’s grasp and sprinted onwards to death, ‘-I don’t believe it, the aura, the warmth – I sense it, I know this feeling,’ the scenery blurred by the sheer speed – thickness from the fog wrapped the already thin path tighter. Burning crimson eyes dowsed to light blue.

“HE’S CRAZY!” cried the first warrior, “-ARCHERS, BE AT THE READY.”

“FENRIR!”

Chapter 748: ‘-here I come, ravish for I shall bath in thy blood,’

Lightning strikes, electricity charges through the growing mist. Intherna, restricted by the sudden rush, waits, the expression borders between anger and fear. The wounded warrior, stricken with an immobilizing wound claws to a stand – the poor archer tasked into standing guard had the outfit pulled.

“Why would he rush in?”

“We don’t have time to ask whys,” she replied, “-there are more coming.”

Surely enough, the mist encompassed their position, no sky on an upward glance – vision, only a few meters to the front, had the path vanish.

“Stick together,” said an archer.

“Let’s make for the tree,” said another, “-tis a better vantage point.”

“Understood,” the figures leaped into the foliage, growls, and snares scattered below.

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‘Igna, what in the hell are you thinking?’ she gritted. Beside sat the first warrior against the tree trunk, the injured leg dangled, the pain tightened the tense facial features.

Amidst the carnage, a man stared a giant wolf, the latter, postured in a defensive stance, growled in wait, “-Fenrir!” he exclaimed, “-it’s me, Staxius.” The name seemed to harbor no reaction, the beast but intensified its glare, heavy paws dug onto the mildly snow-covered path. ‘My words aren’t getting to her,’ he brandished Orenmir, ‘-feels nostalgic, we met on a similar path. You’re still alive,’ the resolve firmed, ‘-I thought I lost you,’ the stance lowered, ‘-not going to happen again.’

\*Woosh,\* claws met against sword, “-you’re not Staxius!” echoed mentally, the shock scattered his equilibrium, it capitalized on the opening and dug, broke aside his parry, and tore into clothes. A claw mark quickly filled with blood, he leaped to no avail, the wolf followed and clawed sideways, \*crash,\* he ended inside the forest after flying through multiple stern tree trunks. What remained was broken bones and pierced skin, ‘-not a contest of strength,’ he thrust Orenmir into the ground and pushed himself up, the posture dropped, ‘-Fenrir’s a legendary beast. She outmatches me from the very beginning, we fought a battle of attrition during which I died and doubled my powers. Won’t be possible,’ \*Vengeance, go forth,\* he called, the knees buckled, the world tipped, he dropped headfirst onto a rock, ‘-shit.’ Flashes of light (from Vengeance and Fenrir’s battle) sparked the clouded area, ‘-I can’t see,’ blindness filled his world, ‘-did I hit my head too hard, my eyes are open...’

“Rise and fight,” said an unknown voice, “-my prodigy, no need to despair, I’m here, you have my blood, you have my blessings, and you have my trust. I don’t need to remind you what thee stand for. The only race capable of reaching divinity is ours, reach in deep, focus, and more importantly, trust in thine blood.”

‘Adete,’ vision regained albeit in a single eye, ‘-the best defense is a strong offense,’ he pulled himself up, the wounds healed at an astounding pace, broken bones fused, the muscles reattached and the skin layered, ‘-I’m the first progenitor’s direct descendant, there’s no way I’ll forget.’ Orenmir flew into his open palm, a shot of transparent body crash-landed in a loud explosion.

“Master,” said Vengeance, “-the wolf is very strong.”

“Testament to Fenrir’s strength,” he replied, “-forget overpowering her,” the grip firmed, “-we can’t. Return to me, I’ll handle the fight from here on.”

“Understood, master,” he shifted into a brief veil of black.

Igna fired a strong glance to Fenrir’s general position, it seemed to switch marks, ‘-calm the breathing and focus,’ bleached white pupils trickled into blood-red, the alteration proceeded in increments. ‘-There’s one way out of the mess,’ he inhaled, ‘-I’ll have to use Nevermore, my mana won’t regenerate, here I thought to save it for a better day. Well then, to defeat a legend, I ought to pour what remainder of powers I have.’

The suspended location wasn’t much favorable, a brutally vicious mien fell onto the first warrior, “-it’s coming,” he whimpered, “-my blood must have given it away.”

‘Screw this,’ her palms clenched, ‘-Igna’s aura has dwindled, sorry but I have to step into the battle,’ fire lit her crimson hair, the eyelashes intensified by a blue flame.

\*Death Element: Unleash Aura,\* ‘-what the-’ an outburst of energy halted and dowsed her fire, ‘-this energy,’ she smirked, ‘-Igna’s gotten serious.’

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“What’s happened?” gulped the warrior, “-I’ve never sensed such a dark energy before,” the stomach churned, ‘-I c-can’t,’ he hurled down the side, nausea struck hard.’

\*Deep slumber, deep rest, awoken for the chance at retribution. Gate of which stands before mine way, open for thy master has come: Nevermore – Hell’s Gate,\* the bushes rattled, the wolf’s target swapped, “-Remember me now?” they crossed weapon, the shock rattled through the bone, the elbows and shoulders nearly blew. \*Span across the ages, fear is what held peace, fear is what caused War, fear is the root of evil. I, the harbinger of the ultimate fear, have come to spread and reclaim what is mine of right: Nevermore – Terror Gate,\* leaped backward, the beast followed, angered by the damage inflicted, he sidestepped, increase in power meant an increase in speed, the movements grew predictable, ‘-fighting a monster is easier than a human,’ he ducked and hurried under its belly, she tipped to the side and clawed backward, ‘-no you don’t,’ he spun, ‘-this will mark the end of my internal mana supply,’ \*Unbound by the laws of Heaven to Hell; unshackle mine power: Nevermore – Annihilation Gate,\* and met the attack straight on; the aura took material form, a massive skull indicative of death howled across the plains, “-FENRIR, LISTEN, IT’S ME,” he cried. \*Click,\* a tinge of white held the battle in suspense, ‘-I’ve won,’ the index finger, bloodied by the last blow, ambled to the furry underbelly, ‘Mana-Cancellation,’ an outburst of energy lit the forest and surrounding land in an electrifying yellow tint till a massive explosion – the increase shot upward into a spire, broke through the somber sky, scattering clouds and blasting across the heavenly realm, so thought many in the lower worlds.

“Igna,” her heart sank, “-are you dumb,” she dropped from the foliage, the mist dissipated slowly, ‘-where’s he?’ forceful scans showed naught, ‘-where are you,’ walk turned jog, she glanced to no avail, ‘-where are you,’ jog turned sprint.

\*Huff, puff,\* a small hemisphere kept the fog at bay, before she sat a nude lady who held Igna’s close to her heart, light blue ran through her hair, she bore wolf ears and tail, “-who stands there,” it turned menacingly to Intherna, “-are you an enemy of my master?”

“Enemy...” fire shaped into arrows, “-YOU CRAZY, WOMAN?” a barrage flung to her side.

“You are an enemy,” she rose, nude as could be, and summoned a concrete wall of wind, lightning conjured, “-getaway,” she growled.

“Woman,” a fire barrier halted the jolts, “-that boy is my companion, you’ve got the wrong person.”

“No, this is Staxius Haggard.”

“Wrong, Staxius Haggard is dead, that boy is his reincarnation, Igna Haggard,” the animosity wavered, “-you knew him in the prior life?”

“Can’t be,” the wind wall dropped, “-my soul is linked to his, the soul in this man is my master’s. The scent may have changed, the man is still my master.”

\*Cough, cough,\* blood dribbled, ‘-overdid it,’ the eyebrows knotted in pain, ‘-my mana reserve’s extinguished, the trees on fire,’ he caught a few glances,’-wait, why are we at nearly the same height as the trees... dragons?’ he squinted, ‘-well, if I can’t help,’ \*Go forth Vengeance, protect they who protect me,\* the arm rose momentarily and dropped lifelessly.

“Open the gates!”

“THE WINTER GUARDIAN!” scattered across the dense tree line.

“RUN FOR YOUR LIVES,” exclaimed others, bows, and swords dropped in the infamous creature’s appearance. Elemental projectiles landed around, few trees caught fire, a world-ending menace rose in behind, a tsunami of disaster made its way for Intherna and the others.

“OPEN THE GATES!”

Tribal warriors ran about a stone-build wall, messengers wrapped inside the settlement to call on the chief, “-what’s the matter,” he wondered perched atop a watchtower deep inside the walls.

“Chief,” hurried the messengers, “-the winter guardian was spotted rushing for our village, it’s running from dragons and wyverns. What are your orders?”

‘Dragons and wyverns,’ a brass spyglass magnified towards the area of caution, ‘-isn’t that the first warrior?’ there, through the lens, a familiar face waved atop the giant wolf.

“OPEN THE GATES!” he ordered, “-and be at the ready to use the canons.”

“But chief, if we attack the dragons, they may ravage the village.”

“Can’t be helped,” he gritted, “-have the women and children evacuated to EJu Lake, board the boats, we’ll ride downstream to Lord Enok’s shipping town. Able fighters gather at the entrance, I’ll be there in a few moments.”

“UNDERSTOOD!”

‘Not worth staying and fighting. Life around these parts is hard enough. Good job, little brother, tis the perfect excuse to return. We of the Eael tribe won’t be outsmarted so easily.’

“Legendary wolf, head for the settlement, the gates are opening. We’ll fight them there.”

“Are you sure?”

“The Eael tribes lived through worse, trust me, we’re travelers by nature.”

\*ROAR,\* echoed the wind, Fenrir leaped over the wall, the gate was much too small – they landed in a giant puff of dust, “-brother,” said the first warrior, “-I’ve come defeated and with bad news. Shame me for my weakness later,” Fenrir’s size diminished.

“Who are these people you bring with?” fired the chief vested in rustic colors, a hat, guns strapped to the belt, and mat brown pants with high-boots.

“Travelers,” said Intherna, “-my comrade was injured gravely in the battle against the winter beast.”

“You don’t say,” he took a glance at the unconscious body, “-we’re leaving the settlement, I’m afraid the boat isn’t big enough to hold a beast and its comrade, understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, I do,” glared Intherna, “-natural selection. Fair, take your people and leave, my comrades and I will stay and fight the incoming wave.”



“That was the plan,” he held the warrior by the collar, “-weakling, I said to not attack unless threatened. Most of the gremlins have perished, what a shame. Priestess,” he called, “-come here and heal my foolish brother.”

“Yes sire,” said a lady covered from head to toe in a religious outfit, \*Heal.\*

Cannons atop the stone walls fired in the distance, each shot resounded across the empty settlement. A lonesome three-room house further into town gave straight onto the northern exit. Igna and the first warrior laid in uncomfortable beds, the priestess used all her strength on the first warrior.

“Good luck,” said the chief seeing the healed injury, “-if you make it out alive, head downstream to the port-town of Ventia; who knows, might have some job for tried and tested fighters. Legendary winter beast,” he scowled, the hands tapped his revolver, “-for the countless lives you taken of my people, I ought to shoot thee right here and now. Sadly, would be a waste of bullets. Consider this my appreciation for saving my brother, our encounter ends here, goodbye.” Strangers are strangers, a cross-armed Intherna, stood in the shadow of the house and watched the last of the villagers hurrying onto horses. Behind rose a threat of immense proportion, the true face of Draebala, creatures on par to angels and demi-gods in terms of strength.

“I’ve returned,” said Vengeance, “-my strength has been exhausted,” he said to Intherna, “-monsters are circling the settlement. I bested the strongest wyvern – the others retreated soon after, a brown-scaled dragon’s rampaging through the forest, killing animals and monsters alike. Not long until it veers towards us.”

“Thank you for buying time,” she smiled, “-I’ll handle the battle from here on,” she glanced Fenrir, “-take care of Igna.”

“I’m coming with. Goddess or not, there’s no way such a horde will be beaten on bravado alone.”

“D-Don’t count me out,” said a shaky voice.

“Igna?” strong hands grasped her arms, “-you’re awake?”

“I’m not dead,” he rose, a little tipsy in the motion, “-just shaken.”

“Master?” said Fenrir telepathically.

“I’m glad to see you,” returned a smile, ‘-let’s keep the reunion for later – tis time to fight, I’m rusty, my swordsmanship needs a head start.’

“Alright then,” exhaled Intherna, “-let’s fight,” she patted his head, “-next time, don’t rush in headfirst without warning, understand?”

“Yes.”

‘Great,’ she smirked, the trio barged out the house, flying beasts rushed their position, creatures of unknown origins filled the paths, around each corner stood threat level of apostle and higher, ‘-here I come, ravish for I shall bath in thy blood,’ the pupils dilated in pure bloodlust, ‘-die.’

Chapter 749: Trek through a new land

Charred mutilated body parts dropped. Tornadoes of pure flame and extreme heat rampaged across the dark-woods, the would-be humid climate dried akin to a dessert. Fumes from the resulting flames, upon inhalation, burned the respiratory tracks – Igna stood away from the carnage under Intherna’s blessing.

The breeched inner sanctum yelped, the scattered somberness had made complete 180’s for the longest time, the region’s unchanging climate grew into ‘-Gryan Batlo,’ nicknamed from a very local story about a man cursed by the gods. The fictional story ran in parrel to what the writer thought about the realm. However, on the day Igna arrived, not so cared about the date, the ever belligerous world – bound by eternal struggles, shone and sparked in various colors and hues.

\*Frost breath,\* blasted to his side, the remaining horde froze – tornadoes shy of the settlement twirled and disturbed the flying threats.

‘Finally done,’ dropped to one knee, ‘-my left arm’s broken,’ he tightly clenched an open-wound, ‘-I don’t believe my luck,’ the posture ease for he sat on his bottom and contemplated the skyscape, ‘-I find myself looking up more than scanning the ground. Why I wonder,’ the knees pulled and crossed, ‘-there goes Intherna,’ he observed, ‘-the wings of Rah, so splendid and majestic, the raw power in her aura is terrifying. Fenrir’s stronger than before, I don’t get how, better to ask the source directly.’

“Master,” paws galloped, the ground trembled, “-where are you?”

“Here,” he rose a hand and glanced towards the sound, “-Fenrir, here.”

“Master,” the legendary white and blue fur puffed into her human form, “-master,” the strongly shaped eyes and canines sniffled, ice-cold mist exuded each exhale, her eyebrows flashed in recognition, “-where have you been,” she leaped, he caught with one-hand.

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“Careful,” he gnashed, the broken arms sent jolts across the body, “-I’m injured here.”

“I didn’t notice,” she shrugged and sat onto her knees, her body and figure, the very epitome of strong and elegant, stared him nonchalantly.

“Still no sense of shame when thou art naked.”

“Why should I be ashamed,” she lifted her shoulders, which in turn rose her breast, Igna sank into his palm in bafflement, “-I’m always running around naked,” her flurry ears danced, “-makes no difference what form I take.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he sunk his arm into a dark portal, her expression halted briefly, “-master?” her nose rose, “-what are you doing?”

“Here,” he threw a white buttoned-up shirt and some black trousers, “-too bad I don’t have undergarments. Wear those, for the time being, we’ll get more once we’re into town.”

“About that,” Intherna landed, a cape of flame whisked, rebounded against her back then settled in a semi-hovering state, the eyelashes burnt light blue, “-we may have defeated the monsters, I expect more to come. The sheer amount of power we used is bait for stronger entities, can’t forget the emphasis on strength. The best way to ascertain one’s position is to defeat another. The sun’s already

set," she pointed westward, "-a battle that lasted more than a few hours. I say we leave the settlement as swiftly as possible."

"Understood," he clambered to a stand, "-lead the way, Intherna."

"Luckily," she smirked, "-I found a cart in one of the abandoned houses, they won't mind us 'borrowing' it."

"No skin off my back."

Dusk wrapped the land in darkness, the first star veered its head a few hours after the departure. Fenrir found herself pulling the cart, Intherna sat at the rider's spot whilst Igna slept on dried plants. Rocks and dips in the not-so-cart-friendly path greatly shook the wooden rectangle, for construction and structural integrity, nothing set it aside. One wrong move and the build would shatter. Nevertheless, Igna laid face up, overarching foliage often looked upon him with the grace of a mother smiling at her babe.

'Master?'

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'Fenrir, we speaking telepathically?'

'Yes. We need to talk, don't we?'

'I agree. Firstly, tell me what happened, I want to know the details.'

'I'll try my hardest. I have no idea how long it's been, feels recent, we got ready for Ayleth's marriage, the groom arrived in magnificently ornamented vehicles. Then, I don't know-how, a strong entity infiltrated the event, we were forced into a deadly battle. Friends and foe died, I died so easily I never knew who killed me. Next, I reawakened in an unfamiliar land, I must have slept or something, I have vague memories of attacking people, devouring other beasts, destroying villages. The sharpest fangs win, and that is the extent of my recollection. Though, when I sense the aura of another strong fighter, something inside called out, thuds broke my slumber bit by bit, the familiar aura and pact we forged must have pulled my consciousness.'

'A mindlessness curse was placed on thee, perhaps the job of they who brought you to Draebala. I don't care who did what and why, thing is, I've found you alive and well. Gives me hope for the future. My turn, you have to get up to speed with what's happened,' and so, in a comprehensive summary, the whole story about what happened was recounted.

'Never expected the bond between you and the queen to break, here I thought the love to be pure and filled with trust. Little Lizzie died, everyone, I knew is gone, the family we built is gone,' heavy sighs murmured to the front, '-should I drop the whole Master title?'

'Call me Igna, my powers aren't so impressive nowadays, feels tacky.'

'How long will you stay in Draebala?'

'Until we find an appropriate soul to do battle against. We ought to capture their soul and return home; you're coming with.'

'I'm afraid it won't be so easy, most of my being is tied here, separation will most likely break the remainder of my soul.'

'I wouldn't worry, there's a simple solution, join my realm. The night is upon us, let's discuss the matter at greater lengths tomorrow, fair?' Tomorrow arrived, Igna, Fenrir, and Intherna, motivated by the constant battle for survival, grew close. Restriction on the flight made the journey ever-so longer, a total duration of four weeks was needed. Live off the land, hunt, fish, ravage for supplies – eventually, after reaching the trade route, pulling the cart simplified, though ambushes from bandits and monsters were commonplace. Every morning and night, a stranger side of Igna bubbled from the depths of his mind and body, the subconscious retrained his physique from the ground up. Muscle memories awakened, before long, he could run at the same speed when shadow-step was employed, the vampiric vessel and bountiful abundance of stronger foe's blood strengthened the physical self. Training under the muffled voice of his father, the swordsmanship learned through years of experience found a stable footing.

Current day, three weeks after the arrival, “-there's no point rescuing the cart,” said Intherna. The path narrowed and led upwards to a hill, the vegetation swapped from pine to stuffier, less tall, plants. Trees weren't predominant; the slope side bore overgrown weeds and edible fruits and berries – an uncanny flatness aroused interest.

'Another squabble,' he gave up on Intherna and Fenrir, climbed to the start of the slope, dropped into a push-up posture, and examined the land, '-no rocks, artificial feeling,' he rose and sat on his calf, gazing onto the overgrown meadow.

“Igna, we need to settle this disagreement,” voiced Fenrir, “-should we leave the cart or not.”

“There's no argument here,” said Intherna, “-we both agree to discard the thing but can't seem to accept we came to the same conclusion, very ominous.”

“No, you're making it awkward,” fired Fenrir thrusting her upper torso to show disdain.

Intherna's glabella crinkled, her right cheeks twitched in annoyance, “-I see why I'm angry,” she glared downward, “-the wolf has a better figure.”

“Calm yourself,” he ambled to their stead, “-leave the cart behind, we're far from the mountains, we ought be able to fly, right?”

“Yes, we ought to,” said she, “-why were you staring at the soil?”

“I've learned something in the days we've traveled, the land always speaks in action, if one can observe, one can tell of what is to come. The hill here was previously used as farmland, tis abandoned, I found remains of charred plants, there was an attack of some sort. Without a map, there's no telling where we are.”

“Climb the hill already, there should be a town around here somewhere.” The march resumed; the conquest of the hill marked a vantage point to scour the land. Clearing in the ceiling of gray told of the various towns, and here, two rose, one close and the other shy behind a mountain range. “-The path splits at the foot of the hill, what should we do?” inquired Fenrir.

“We can fly,” said Intherna, “-let's head over there,” she pointed to the closest town.

“Understood,” wings sprouted, “-Fenrir, is it possible to shrink further?”

“No problem,” a puff of white replaced the tall and fetching lady into an adorable size, her smaller, puppy dog ears and swaying tail sent a shock through Intherna’s frown.

“How cute,” her pitch heightened, “-I love cute things,” she dropped to her height and pitched, “-Fenrir, you’re cute, stay an infant forever.”

“Whatever,” her petite hands rose to be cradled, “-take me to the town, new undergarments would be nice just about now.”

“Right, we do smell.” They flapped just after checking an olden signpost, ‘Tariel,’ pointed to the right, ‘-Soliaet,’ went to the left. The trip shortened into a few hours – one which would have taken a few days, even a week if matters weren’t favorable.

The town of Tariel, they landed. If the settlement’s stonewall seemed to be big, this one made the other feel akin to a toddler, a tall heavy mass circled the town, emblems of the ruler were carved into the stone itself. Guards, rare, and a few focused much of the attention on the front. A river flowed in and out of the town, thus being used for irrigation outside the walls, the plains of grain and food stretched onto where the eye could not see. Villages were built to support agriculture – the closest jungle being a few kilometers from the settlement.

“Pay no heed to the village,” said Intherna, “-Draebala’s a tough place to survive, with or without monsters and destruction.”

“Are there guilds and taverns inside?” he inquired.

“Yeah, and I doubt we can afford them,” said Fenrir, “-the cost of living is high, very high.”

“How would you know?”

“A gut feeling,” she chuckled, “-shall we head inside?” they joined a line, on ground level, the grandness of the wall seems to go on infinitely, try as one might, the end of the construction could never be seen, it simply stretched, and stretched and stretched. Village people lined, ‘-they wear shabby clothes, traders are given priority,’ as observed by a separate line, ‘-if what I’m told is true; moving freely is impossible. Supplies are the same as gold, the carriages are armored to some extent, fighters stand close. Merchants are to be very influential; leads me to suspect a class system where one’s pedigree is dependent on their wares.’

“Fee of entrance,” the line shortened without his acknowledgment, “-Hey, are you there?” inquired a monotonous voice; the arched tunnel cast a heavy shadow.

“I apologize for my comrade’s behavior,” said Intherna, “-we’re traveling merchants, our cart was attacked and looted by bandits. We’d hope to meet with an acquaintance, is it possible to pay the fee of admission later?”

“No money no entrance,” said the guard, “-please get out of the line.”

“But sire,” she insisted.

“No means no,” replied the guard.

“Come on, Intherna,” said Igna, “-no need to trouble the man,” they jumped out, crossed the trader’s only path, and stood under the tall mass, overlooking a grassy pasture.

“Why did you stop me?”

“Causing a scene won’t suffice. The seduction didn’t work, the man wasn’t exactly alive,” he observed, “-a zombie or golem kind of feel, lifeless and dull. I’d do the same to avoid the human error side of things.”

“What then?”

“We could always ask for information,” sighted Fenrir, “-the village.”

“I see,” he nodded, “-poverty and sufferance, the preferred tool of revolutionists. Gathering information shouldn’t be hard – leave the talking to me.”

Chapter 750: A kindhearted soul

Muddied path scarcely had pebbles flung along haphazardly, a hopscotch type of layout where one had to jump from stone to stone. The village, quarantined by a thinly made wooden fence interlocked by winding iron chain, didn’t hold much. The first impression would say the barrier was built to keep outsiders in, on a better look, the opposite seems to be true, a barrier to keep insiders out. By the latter, the reference is made to animals, pigs, and the likes, chicken and stray dogs sniffled left to right, running other dogs and making an otherwise dull atmosphere bearable.

Indifferent to the mud, aided by their wings, Igna and Intherna hovered till the village center marked by a stone-brick well. Few bystanders overlooking their humbly build houses without windows glared, the openings hidden behind curtains and otherwise fabric made for clothes.

“I don’t think we’ll get much out of them,” commented Intherna, her fists opened and closed, the motion, a moment’s relief for her, sent the wrong message across.

“Well, nothing we can do but try,” said Igna, “-villagers like these often have onlookers hiding in the shadows. They’ll come out sooner or later,” to which he spun on his heel and made way to the well. ‘I heard muffled sounds earlier,’ he thought and ambled forth cautiously.

Intherna matched his motif and spun away from the well, her arms tenderly held Fenrir in a cradle, “-too tight,” exclaimed Fenrir.

“Too cute,” she replied under an overwhelmed snuffle, “-I earnestly cannot get enough of the way the ears are shaped, its flurry and pretty.”

“We’re being watched.”

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‘What do we have here,’ stopped shy of the stone-circle, he leaned, glanced downward into an abyssal tunnel – the downward drop went on till naught was seen, ‘-don’t hide from me,’ the eyes shut, through the weeks of training and battle, senses otherwise dull in times of peace, reawakened – the ability to sense living creatures regardless of lighting, handily illuminated the way. A squint sharpened the image, ‘-small, nearing its life,’ he pressed, ‘-wait.’

\*SPLASH,\* ‘-this kid,’ he dove further, reached through the muddy sensation of calm water to land on smooth and feeble arms, ‘-so weak,’ he clenched and swam upward, ‘-if I grip any harder, the arms might break.’

“IGNA?” echoed above, “-WHAT HAPPENED?” the voices amplified.

“Stop screaming and drop a rope,” he refuted. The next minute, a perplexed Intherna watched and waited, silently judging his action. Fenrir watched similarly without judgment; her mien kept neutral.

‘I was right,’ fingers ran through the child’s buttoned-up collar, ‘-the emblem of the town made in gold, the kid must be from a noble family.’ The scarcely populated village grew by the second, sickle, pine forks, name it and they held it, a mob of ire gathered in solidarity. The village leader stepped amidst the crowd, scrawny and tall, the eye socket was far into his visage, a shadow cast from the overarching temples brought mysteriousness to his motion. Uncared facial hair, bruised hands, muddied boots and pants, ‘-they rushed from the fields. If I were to guess, me examining the well has bounded them together. A nearly killed noble and its villagers; oppression could be the reason or employment from another faction,’ he rose, tapped Intherna’s shoulder, “-dry the boy, don’t use healing magic.”

“Understood.”

“Who are you people,” said the village leader softly, a well-mannered tone unbecoming the visible tension.

“Travelers,” he replied, “-we were turned away from the town and came here seeking refuge for the night. My wife needed water, therefore, I reached into the well and saw a young boy trying to swim.”

“Impossible,” said the leader, “-the well is far too deep for one to see. The weather and lighting don’t make it possible either. Mister, who are you again, I ask kindly, if I’m met with lie...”

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‘Pickaxes, those are masons,’ he observed in the crowd, ‘-the well, it’s to do with the well, if only I had the Nox’s curse of sight, let us gamble.’

“The sound,” he replied sincerely, “-I heard what seemed to be a struggle.”

“Struggle, huh,” the villagers glared, “-the boy look to be unconscious, doesn’t he,” said the village leader.

‘Caught you.’ “-well, how would the villagers know of the boy’s state of being. I think it’s lucky I saved him, there is the Taniel crest, he must be important. He must have got stranded and fell; the slippery ground doesn’t make it easy to stand.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Well, yes, why should I think of more when a mishap is the cause of the incident. Perhaps,” a side-glance to the root of the quandary, “-if it’s to be replaced, the source of water might be a great place to hide a body. Tis customary to fill a well to the brim after the construction of one newly built. A dead body is never acceptable, the water would have been poisoned and maladies would have plagued the village.”

The leader thrust two steps forward, raising his eyebrows to a straight bold line, “-we thank you for rescuing the boy. Times have been hard lately, I’m afraid most of the villagers have to tend to the fields. We couldn’t have noticed the boy, could we now.”

‘And here he gives the clue of complicity, he’s changed the facts to match my narrative. No way they could have rushed here in such a short time, the boy was thrown in maliciously – that much I know, he was unconscious too, I happened on it by chance. Perfect, tis a win-win situation.’

“By all means, lady fate must have thy interest in mind.”

“Please stay the night,” said the leader, “-we have an outhouse to the north, it should provide adequate protection against the night and cold. We’ll care for the boy and make sure he returns to the town.”

“I’d feel at ease if the boy stayed with us,” said Igna, “-my lovely daughter’s taken a liking to the boy,” she heard his word, understood the intent, and began to play with the boy’s puffy and flush cheeks, the cold vanished, a warm flame kept him alive.

“Fair,” murmured the leader, “-may you rest well, traveler.”

“Follow me,” said another leading the charge, by extension, the outhouse was far from sight and cradled in weeds and overgrown trees. A secondary roof of foliage sternly veiled the sloped roof, ‘-better build opposed to the houses in the village. The interior is empty save a few pieces of furniture, there are windows and a fireplace, why’s no one using said place?’

“There we are, mister,” said the guide, “-I’ll return home, lock the doors at night, the monsters often target the home.” \*clap, clap, clap,\* he scurried outside and ran through the mud path, the distant figure seen through the windows, passed from one room to the next and vanished – the reflection of the village caught and stood onto the window panes.

Fenrir’s appearance changed to her mature self, “-stuffy,” she said, growing and filling the shirt, “-what’s the dirt on these people, very shifty.”

“I agree,” said Intherna, they gathered around the fireplace inside the living room – from a lovely round table to a soft carpet, “-and this house is awesome,” she lit a fire, the rescued boy laid upon the rug.

“We might have bitten more than we can chew,” said Igna ominously at the window, ‘-they’ve set their eyes on us,’ he observed.

“Do keep us in the loop.”

“Fine, fine,” he pulled the curtains and made for fireplace, “-at the moment, I have many hypotheses, I lack evidence. The boy is either innocent or evil, to kill a child, one has to have a strong motive, money wouldn’t cut it when the fate of the village is at play. There’s something of more value to be obtained from the death, said route tells us the villagers won’t stand out.”

“Didn’t they say they didn’t know about the kid?”

“Blatant lies,” he answered, “-isn’t it strange the leader kept calm whilst the crowd neared anarchy, they wanted to fight, when I asked for the boy to be in our care, the aura intensified, therein, the leader gave us this place to stay, on which, the aura lessened. There’s more to the place than we know – one thing is for sure; we have a place to stay the night.”



“What about the boy?”

“Let him be the bait, who knows, he may very well be a stuck-up noble throwing his weight, wouldn’t be the first time.”

\*Gasp,\* a loud inhale roused the tranquility, a shadow of the boy slapped across the room, “-where am I?”

“Hello boy,” returned Igna sat with one leg onto the other.

“Who are you?” he took a defensive stance.

“The man who rescued you. Did you fall in the well?” the flames added terror onto Igna’s already intimidating persona.

“Of course not, I was kidnapped from what I remember.”

“Go from the start, tell me what happened.”

“I was out for my morning walk in the company of my butler, I’ve always liked to go out and explore the world, mother and father said outside the wall lives a world far worse than hell, on my coming-of-age ceremony, I decided to venture outside the walls and see the world for myself. I don’t know how and when during one of the rare trips father allowed me to accompany, I saw the prettiest girl I had ever seen. I fell in love, she lived outside, wore shabby clothes and no footwear, despite that, her smile and radiant blue eyes never once wavered. I began to sneak out of the manor to see her again, I bribed the guards and was able to sneak to the village, we met under a lonesome tree in the fields and played. Aulia, that’s her name, Aulia. I guess the other kids of the village didn’t like me, I was bullied but didn’t give, I wanted to stay at her side and would do anything for that chance. However, all changed when a dragon attacked, security harshened, the town’s people were forced to starve – there, my father decided to increase tax on the villagers and pull onto their remaining resources. Many of the children and elders didn’t make it through the winter, when I returned to the village, Aulia told me to not meet her again, her body was little more than bones, I felt bad but couldn’t do anything. I returned home that day feeling defeated – a few weeks passed and I chose to apologize on behalf of my father’s action, I went to the village, she was gone, the villagers didn’t say anything, last time I remember was being thrown in someplace dark, unable to scream.”

“That would be today, boy. The girl, Aulia, is most likely dead, if not monsters, the starvation would have done its fair share of damage. Can’t say I’m surprised,” one leg dropped sternly, he leaned onto his elbows and glared, “-a soft-spoken son of a tyrannical father. What now I wonder?”

“Sire, please, help me find out what happened to Aulia.”

“The blond girl?” he eased into his seat, night sprawled onto the continent, “-look outside.”

“Outside?” he rose on his knee and started thrusting his gaze above the table, the visage of a wide-eyed blond girl returned, a flash of lightning lit her outline further.

“WHAT,” he dropped and held his hand to cover the window, “-what happened to her,” he clawed in terror, threw a look of despair to Igna – countless steps gathered around the house.

“Look boy, we’re surrounded, they want your life. There are two options, give up and be killed, or stand up and fight, either way, the outcome is set, you’ll die. The night’s not so fortunate upon those who dare tread lightly, bloodthirsty monsters will claw out the shadows and kill.”

“What should I do?” he innocently looked onto Igna, “-help me...”

“No boy, the world isn’t kind. My help doesn’t come cheap,” the legs crossed, he sat and stared menacingly with an elbow onto the chair’s arm in a toothache pose. Lightning and a screaming gale emphasized the man’s terrifying presence, “-doth thee dare plea and offer thine, soul, to the devil?”