

Death Magic 791

Chapter 791: The Great Collapse [5]

“Master.”

“What is it, Vengeance?”

“The worry was well-based. Before us stands an army of a few thousand. A culmination of elven people, slave-cursed demi-humans, and mercenaries. There are also members of a foreign PMC assisting the general. They’re kilometers from Glenda, directly west from Noctis’s Hallow on the Liberthan Plains.”

“They’ve made their headquarters there?”

“Right sire. Shall I engage?”

“No, have Dulah return – the town guards are beyond exhausted.”

“As you wish, my lord.” The telepathic exchange ended on a cloudy scape of solitude. The given speech riled the few who’d replaced hope with despair, the very presumptuous sentence of no needing military since they had him, worked. For anyone else, the threat would have fallen short.

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“Master, are you headed to war?” inquired Alta.

“Correct,” he nodded, an air of dejection and hatred latched onto his back.

“Thank you, my lord,” said the survivors.

“Mention not,” he replied, nodding at the bowed wounded, “-I apologize for not being here sooner,” he swept their hearts and frail bodies with much-deserved energy. Alta remained behind, choosing to act in disaster relief, her orders were clear and concise, those of the adventuring guild leaped on the occasion to prove their might and loyalty.

‘I was right,’ he passed the arch-gateway, moved onto the arched bridge, and followed towards the council hall. The extension, from last he visited, contained taller rigid looking buildings. The streets were made of cobblestone, eerily flat, and easy to drive onto despite the lack of vehicles. There were motorbikes and smaller trucks – wise choice for traveling and trading, ‘-the attack on Glenda was a distraction to hide the true purpose, the elven kingdom is on its way to conquering the town. Their plan is so easily visualizable,’ as he thought here, the same words were repeated over the horizon on the Liberthan Plains, “-move into Glenda and provide aid to the people. Do what is must to lower their guards and have them pledge loyalty to the elven kingdom. Regardless if our request is heard, we’ll attack in the coming days.”

“Right,” saluted a group of nicely dressed elves.

“Nice thinking,” said a man dawning golden jewels paired by a condescending look, “-I ought to reward you, General.”

“My liege, there’s no need to go so far,” replied the man curtly, “-my duty is to serve.”

A strong gesture said, “-go forth, my fellow-subjects,” they blindly saluted and exited, parting the military tent to grassy-filled flatlands.

“I have to ask,” said a man beside the general, “-will following their orders do us good?”

“Pardon?”

“I refer to the intriguing party which led us to invade Arda from the north. Is it wise to heed their call?”

“I see no reason why not to accept a helping hand. If they helped to fulfill their greed, ‘twould be no issue, Arda is large enough to accommodate a budding relationship.”

“Majesty,” panted a soldier, “-I have a report!”

“What is it, man,” inquired the General, firming his attention away from the thinker.

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“It’s Count Igna Haggard, my liege. He has declared war on the whole of Arda.”

“HAHAHAHAHA,” thundered the king, “-AMUSING, VERY AMUSING.” The tent watched perplexed as any, “-pardon the outburst,” the laughter subsided, “-I care not for the merit in the name, Devil of Glenda. He’s a single man without an army, a weak king without people to serve. We, elves, are the true rulers of this land, our race is far superior, we’re walking gods among the ghoulish races, I won’t stand for pretenders to insult my kingdom. General, mount an offensive once tis possible, raze Glenda off the ground, kill the elderly, take the young for slavery and treat the women as rations to my rowdy subjects. Burn it to the ground, the audacity to declare war on me is a mistake he’ll never forget.” The landscape changed from the king’s tent to a small pond. Here, after a few bushes, slaves were spotted washing dishes and clothes, others carried heavy boxes whilst a few were taken back outside the camp.

“She’s good,” said a group of archers, “-the lass has a scream that makes my heart swoon.”

“Tell me about it,” the bliss faded in the cacophonous inside of the camp.

“Beasts.”

“Shut up, Arlah,” fired the general hidden under a hallowed older tree. The complexion was dark and stood taller than most, the ears were long and sharp, as did the facial bone structure bearing a similar characteristic, a dark-elf.

“Can’t I say what I think?” inquired a similar complexion man – the sole difference was the height, he stood a few centimeters short of the general and had a girlish facial structure opposed to manlier, “-Tigul Nerlie, the general of the elven army.”

“Don’t use my full name,” he facepalmed and shuffled to his side, “-Arlah Kunrid, Strategist of the South.”

“I don’t get it,” shrugged Arlah, “-why would the king so readily accept the offer from another nation... besides,” he shot a glance at the ‘restricted,’ part of the camp, “-the army’s full of beasts. I hate working for this leadership.”

"Arlah," glared the general, "-I will not accept defamatory statements from thee," a knife flashed outside its sheath and ended on the tree trunk, a few inches from the strategist's face.

"Why stop there, should have aimed for my heart."

"Why would I," he exhaled, the animosity vanished, "-can't fully explain it myself."

"Tigul, you're a good general, I'd hate to see a needless death. Arda's infected by a disease of constant anarchy, no one wants to take the responsibility of uniting the lands, they cower behind olden tradition and keep away from reality. Look at the demi-humans... I remember their smiling faces during Queen Shanna and King Staxius's rule, after her marriage, the continent changed for the better and in such short a time. I'd bet my life to say it was the golden age for Ardanian. True unity... it turned to hell when the queen decided to play the king for a fool... what was she thinking, and what was the king's state of mind."

"Sure have been a fan of King Staxius."

"Of course, I am. Tigul, don't you see what he's accomplished. From a nobody in Hidros to a King of Arda and founder of an alliance of nation – none of lower intellect... no forget that no one in our current life will ever accomplish what the Blood-King has created. The people he loved so much are now at each other's throat, I can't bear to see demi-humans be treated so poorly, enough is enough..."

"HELP ME!" cried from yonder, "-I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"

"Tigul," they locked thoughts and sprinted, cutting across the bushes and diving into the closed tent. Before they were an unpleasant sight of four grown men assaulting a young lady, her clothes were torn and a knife was put to her waist, hot charcoal was readied to be shoved down her mouth.

"Explain," thundered the General.

"My lord, Tigul," the four elves shuffled to a knelt, "-pardon the noise this one has made. We'll make sure she can't speak ever again."

"Might I ask why?"

"His majesty requested for a new plaything; she was the chosen brat. A fox-tailed demi-human."

"Tigul," fired Arlan, "-this one isn't from Arda," he said, "-look at her clothes and the necklace, she's from the Empire."

"The empire?" the assaulters choked on themselves.

"Tell his majesty the girl is infected by the monster-curse... never mind," he shook his head, "-I'll explain the situation myself. Take care of the rest, Arlan," he rested his sight on the girl, breathed a sigh of desperation, turned towards the four, "-with me," he ordered. The tent emptied save Arlan and the fox-eared girl.

"About time someone came," she tore off her outfit to summon an exact replica, a frilly light-blue dress ending in a similar colored stocking and shoes, "-the elves are a rowdy bunch."

"Pardon me, who are you?"

"Sorry," she threw a friendly smile, "-name's Ania Gard, a refugee from the Empire."

"How did you get into Arda?"

"I snuck aboard the PMC's boat, spent a few months in the storage area, and found myself nearing a new continent. I took my chance and swam to shore; the current was a hard fight. Magic made it a simple task. I got lost in the forest and caught the eye of a scouting party, they took me to an older-looking man, he said I was fit for the king, and ended here. Lecherous bastards, my body reflectively screamed for help – if it had carried on, I would have used magic... I would have, but... b-but..." her eyes watered, "-they killed another child..."

"My name's Arlah Kunrid, a strategist for the Elven army. You're currently at the Liberthan plain. You ran away from the Empire, any reason why?"

"We're definitely in Arda, right?"

"Yes, we are."

"I ran away in search for my uncle. My mother and father always spoke about him, he's supposed to be the King of Arda... I need to meet him, there's a favor I have to ask."

"Do you know his name?"

"Staxius Haggard," she said.

"Staxius Haggard?" he froze, "-sorry to say, the man's dead."

"I know," she said, "-I just need to meet a member of his family, no matter who it is."

"No matter who it is?" he paused, "-tell me the reason first and perhaps I'll assist."

"Why should I trust the people who tried to assault an underage girl a few minutes ago, tell me, is stupid written on my forehead?"

"Honestly, I don't care for this army," he knelt, "-I'm here to help a friend, nothing more, nothing less."

"Fine, better you than some other freak."

"Sure have a mouth on you," he smiled nervously.

"Whatever. I'm here because my parents were killed; they forced me to get on board the boat before being killed on the spot. I-I... I want to avenge their deaths... They always said if ever they died, reach out to a member of the Haggard family and explain who they were..."

"Interesting," he chuckled, "-girl, you're coming with me. Just so happens we're fighting a war against Staxius Haggard's nephew, Igna Haggard, which makes him your cousin?"

"I guess..."

The hallowed screams of the wind blew through Gieto's valley; due south of Liberthan plains making way to the trade route starting at Solta village. Known for their ale and obsession with liquor, Solta village was considered one of the richer villagers in the kingdom, construction of the wall commenced a few years back – and now, stood as a village of considerable monetary gains. As such, no nobles were

ever able to take control of the land, the villagers wanted to be an independent party; and under their command, created an alliance of independent races – one of many rivaling factions currently in Arda.

“We meeting them here?” inquired Kion.

“Why ask such a pointless question?” fired Igna, ‘-we’re far north of Solta, meeting with the village chief was quite the experience. Turns out the old man is a member of the vampiric clan and purposefully created an alliance to balance the influence from the elven kingdom. Clever people everywhere you look,” the sun had just waved good-bye to the west. The long ever stretching valley, under the vengeful stare of the night sky, lit by the hundreds with torches, “-here they come,” said Kion.

“The scouting party,” returned Igna, “-Kion, leave the battle to me,” he said, “-guard the village. I declared war on my lonesome,” he slid onto the sloped path, “-tis my duty to follow.”

The advance party somewhere around four-hundred man, each walked in a single file to avoid the harsh precipice of the valley, caution level was the same as walking along a robe-bridge. Moonlight made the night lesser fearsome, “-let’s go, men,” said the leader up front, “-a few meters more and we rest at the village.”

“Gentleman,” said Igna at an intersection, “-I’m afraid the walk stops here.”

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“Sure it does,” said a stranger from within the pile of identically dressed fighters. They ambled through, pushing aside said fighters, who returned clicks of the tongue and less amicable glances – glared Igna, then smirked, “-the name’s Oat, I’m a mercenary from the Empire, sent to guard the advance party,” the outline cleared as the distance closed. Igna kept a nonchalant regard whilst the tired fighters breathed sighs and complained in mild whispers. The leader of the march, an elf, waited with arms crossed.

“Are you the Prince of Arda?” he fired, the height stood shy short of the average of the current crowd. There was a cuteness inherent to small things, and the newer addition, Oat; was a proud owner of scars.

“Aren’t you too short to be in the army?”

“Heh, pathetic, being looked down upon by my adversary is nothing new.”

“Right,” Igna postured in the ‘lightning-strike,’ stance, hands-on Orenmir’s scabbard and sight set on a massacre.

“Don’t ignore me,” fired Oat, *I call upon the weapon granted to me by the gods, summon forth, Xe.* a cleansing golden glow shimmered above, coincidentally being eye-level to the observing bystanders, “-face me in stride,” he oriented his spear downwards, the aura shifted in favor of one tightly guarded, “-shall we dance?” he dove, ignorant of the opponent’s power or skill, the attacks targeted vitals spots.

‘He’s skilled,’ the longing crimson pupils analyzed every bit of the fight, from feet to hands – from breath to the blinking, ‘-very skilled actually,’ Oat took the advantage and used the reach to stray from Igna’s reach, attacking from a distance. Spears have always been the better partner to a sword, especially in a tight match of skill, ‘-he’s a summoner, calling upon a weapon that bears a consciousness. They’re a rare breed,’ he blocked and sidestepped along the narrow path. *Woosh,* the blade halted at Igna’s cheek who was pushed to the brick of the thin path; tiny rocks fell, ‘-barely,’ he gasped and lowered the

stance, ‘-can’t react if I go faster,’ he lunged with the Lightning strike pose, unsheathed the blade and sliced Oat’s underarm, the latter narrowly dodged, spun to face his foe with a trembling heart, ‘-fast,’ he thought. A short click marked the swords sheathed, “-good, you dodged,” commended Igna.

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“Don’t underestimate me,” the spear shifted in color – the golden glow of its birth enveloped the weapon fully. It channeled into Oat’s arms, flowing ever so likely to veins towards the heart, *thud,* a beat and he blinked, *thud,* the energy flowed through his limbs and body – the pupils lost any sign of recognition.

“Right people,” voiced the elven leader, “-wrap around them, we’ll follow Oat’s lead.”

‘I forgot about them,’ he rose his guard, ‘-pests,’ branches cracked under the heavy stomps, they pushed into the adjacent tree line without care for the flora, stepping over flowers and plants, some took to the foliage where they dwelled, unholstered their bows and readied their arrows, “-ready to fire,” said an archer.

“Wait for my signal,” said the leader, “-what will it be, Igna. The fight was never fair in the first place,” he laughed, “-tis as the master-planned.”

‘Planned?’

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True it was; the landscape swaps from dark to a tenderly lit abandoned log cabin south of the Liberthan plains. A landmark and refuge for the cold winters, thunderstorms were very common in said area, and the plains, the vast meadows interspersed by groves and dirt paths, “-an old hunting house,” said Arlah.

“Where are we?”

“At the mouth of the plains,” he peered outwards of a mossy glass window, “-see to our right, the path goes on into a dark forest; that’s the Hallowed walkway.”

“Pardon?”

“Hallowed walkway comes from tales of travelers being traumatized to death by unseen entities, tis also the start of Noctis’s hallow, the massive land controlled by the elusive nightwalkers.”

“Arlah, I want to know more about the war,” said Ania with her fox ears brightly up in attention. Footsteps upon the rough terrain heeded the strategist’s guard. A hooded figure passed the blurry window, Arlah slowly inched towards his bow and silently drew an arrow, the figure gave two large strides which buckled the wooden stairs and tapped the door, “-it’s me,” said a familiar voice.

“Tigul,” a relieved gasp escaped, “-you scared me half to death,” he made for the handle and dropped the arrow inside the quiver which shuffle the sticks.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” the hood flew backward, “-was forced to take the sneaky route out. The King wasn’t happy about not having a plaything,” the door locked behind – he threw the hood over a dusty table to the side and made for the fireplace, “-you seem well,” he said to the girl.

"I guess I am," she replied sharply, "-Arlah, the war..." her eyes narrowed into impatient taps against a bear-rug. Tigul leaned on his palm, threw an overhead glance towards Arlah, '-what's with this chick?' articulated noiselessly. Two brief shakes of the head returned as a response, "-the war, yes, I forgot," they gathered and he gave a summary of her story.

The general took time to digest the information, "-sorry to say, Igna will die tonight."

"What is he talking about?" inquired Ania in a strained pitch which cracked at the '-he' part.

"Don't yell," returned the strategist, "-you're in the enemy's camp. Have you forgotten what happened a few hours ago? Luck would have it, Tigul and I have no greater loyalty to the king, we serve only ourselves and are here to help the elven kingdom as proud members of the dark-elves tribe. What Tigul referred to was the scouting party we sent; it's a trap," he unrolled a map onto the rug, "-see this part," he pointed at the narrowed path leading towards Solta marked by an 'X', "-here's the ambush location. They'll meet Igna there based on the geography and the count's undeniable intellect, he'll choose a place which is very advantageous to him. By all means, the fighters look like common foot soldiers," to which he shifted a tad to the left of the 'X' "-the trees are tall and perfect for archers, especially elven arches. War is a game of information exchange. There's also Oat, the Guardian Saint of Lucifer's Western Sect, the Saint of the Spear."

"How strong is he?"

"Very strong. The church is ranked as follows; God, Angel, Saint, Pope, Arch Bishop, also known as the Paladin, Bishop, Inquisitors, Priests, Emissaries, and Devotees. Saints are the first most powerful entity a living being can acquire since Angels and Gods above what we know. Among the saints are four cardinal saints, guardians of North, South, East, and West, each is reportedly strong enough to take an army of thousands on their own. In the current war, Oat is our strongest piece, and he was sent to defeat Igna Haggard in an ambush."

"In other words, the plan was made to defeat your cousin, Igna, who you've never met. Listen, Ania, I'm sorry about what's happened to your parents, it's sad. Forget meeting a member of the Haggard dynasty, they've fallen from grace in the past few weeks."

"What am I suppose to do then... sit around and wait for the next freak to come after me, no thank you," she kept a firm frown, "-no way. Mother and father went on about how strong Staxius Haggard was, I believe in my heart of hearts the nephew will be as strong, they wouldn't have died without a purpose, I don't accept it, I won't accept it."

"Too far, Tigul," reprimanded Arlah, "-leave her to her own devices, we have no say in another person's belief. We'll watch the war unfold from warm cushion seats."

'Right, no need to say more,' exhaled the general, '-she's hard-headed and you're stubborn. I'm right to say Igna has no chance against a saint. For the love of God, they rank above heroes – the church, our underhanded benefactor. Declaring war on the whole continent was foolish, Prince, I dare to see thee unite the kingdom, I for once, have my pride as a leader to uphold.'

Flashes, loud pants, metal against metal, frequent whistling of arrows, '-he's so strong,' gasped Igna, the body held many o' wounds, each healing at their own pace, '-the more I fight, the sharper and faster he gets. Those damned elves, they've blocked the paths into the forest – I have to face this beast on a

narrow walkway, one false move, and I'll be in the depth of the valley. Blood and sweat flowed from his head, wrapping around his jaws and dropping onto the ground.

"Are you done?" he swiped his spear to the right, "-Count Haggard, he who dared declare war against the whole continent, where's the bravado."

"I got you now," said an archer who fired at Igna's face.

"Enough," the hands snapped at the projectile, "-you're being a nuisance," said a cold glare through the blinding foliage. The bowman fell onto his bottom, the leaves shuffled '-he knows where I am ...' Igna broke the arrow and dusted his shirt.

'I hate to reveal anything before a servant of the church. What can I use, no realm expansion? Perhaps the powers of my vampiric blood?' he scanned, '-no, he has protection against dark intentions. What are my options, summon my army?' the thought process froze, '-why am I thinking of useless methods,' he gripped Orenmir tightly, '-this is the weakness I have to crush, the indecisiveness which I acquired from the shared thoughts. I must destroy the reluctance, believe in my body, most importantly, believe in Orenmir,' the blade reacted, a darkened mist emanated ominously, same as dowsing cold water on hot metal, a slow, methodic rise of steam. "Oat," he said, "-I've had enough playing around – I'll meet thee in stride."

"No more interference," he cried to the leader, "-this battle is between the Count and me, I will have none of it." They blinked, the bodies teleported – metal against metal, flashes, '-who is Oat?' the blade grew heavy, Orenmir's bloodlust manifested in bodiless heads screaming across the wood – few unlucky souls took the blunt anguish of the restless prisoners. In more ways than one, the battle wasn't Igna versus Oat, no, it was the Holy Spear of Pete against Orenmir, Igna's cursed sword. Skill levels were matched, and for the first time, their battle was fought purely on skill and physical attacks. The stronger Oat grew, the smoother moved Igna, '-my body,' he dodge, leaving garish footmarks on the pathway. Volleys of the attack met equally by countless parries,

'An opening,' thought Oat, '-not a trap either,' the mind flashed through the assessment, '-the fight is over,' he drew Igna to a downward swing, the instant Igna rose his hand's Oat thrust from the seemingly disadvantageous position, '-Ancient-Arts of Pete's Spear; Rraph,' the weapon teleported through Igna's cognitive abilities, *-clash,* they retreated, '-he understood my intent,' panted Oat with wide-eyes, '-a fearsome man,' he gasped, '-too late, my spear made contact,' he smiled.

'God damn it,' he fell on one knee, "-an attack with intent to destroy my magical element. Wise choice."

"You think so?" they breathed heavy, "-killing is never the answer, would have been a shame to lose such a skillful swordsman."

"Oat, you're very strong," he clambered to a stand by sticking Orenmir into the ground, "-the last strike was meant to disable my enhancement and win the battle without taking a life."

"Doubt I could have killed an immortal being," he smirked, "-then again, the Spear of Pete is the perfect weapon against never-aging monsters. Look at your wounds, they've stopped healing."

'He's right,' vision faded in and out, '-I'm at my limit. A truly amazing battle. Still have to fight the army, better grit, and bear the pain. He hit my element,' *woosh,* he barely missed Oat's visage.

“HOW CAN YOU MOVE SO FAST!” he parried, ‘-what’s with him...’

Igna threw a macabre stare over his shoulder, “-my magical element has already been destroyed,” the crimson pupils gleamed, “-the true battle starts now.”

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“How are you alive without an element?”

“Watch your mouth,” he said, firing multiple strokes in Oat’s direction. The attacks lessened in frequency, a coldness of each swing lowered the spearman’s confidence, “-else you’ll bite your tongue,” he ran through the narrowed path. Rubbles echoed down the valley, any ordinary being would have felt the pressure – instead of facing the potential of his own death, Igna forged forth recklessly.

‘He’s getting faster by the second,’ parried Oat, ‘-the swings are getting heavier,’ *clash,* a downward strike, same to a guillotine being dropped, resounded across Oat’s arms and legs, fatigue grew to invade the mind subconsciously. No matter the skill level or training, an arduous fight had its limit on one’s body, ‘-he’s getting faster,’ he blocked an incoming left strike – the shock sent him to the edge of the path, ‘-is he trying to push me off?’ veins bloated through the neck and arms, he yelled a war cry and pushed Igna.

‘Good, he’s on the defensive,’ went through his mind, ‘-fight me and defeat my enemy. Envision Oat to be my weak self, I have to defeat him to move. There’s more riding on my victory, I need to win for myself, I need to prove to myself I can survive alone. I don’t want to see any of my friends hurt anymore – with or without emotions,’ the blood-filled pupils devoured Oat’s confidence, ‘-I can’t afford to see them perish or hurt. I’ve experienced death more than anyone, and I’ve lost people close to me... there’s no way, if I had to name a weakness, ‘twould be my possessiveness. I have to break free from myself,’ he swung perfectly, lines of white manifested, Orenmir’s blade swam through said lines and into the enemy’s strong defensive stance. Each blow resounded, they who watched were awestruck, ‘-awaken, me,’ he gritted, ‘-time to end this,’ an opening showed itself. Oat rolled himself away from the ledge and placed himself before the forest. Blood and wounds littered his body, the visage’s menacing aura vanished, fear installed within his heart. No matter the strength and courage of a person, the instant the will to fight is lost, there was no return. And in many ways, the entity before Oat wasn’t human, no, far from it – a Devil. Ashy colored hair with whom walks the shrieks of imprisoned souls. Regret, pain, suffering, the worse of the worst manifested themselves in a dark envelope, each step left mild spots of black. The right hand gripped the sword, a flash of red exited his eyes, *-woosh,*

“-I SURRENDER!”

Slash, a smile-shaped cut went around Oat’s neck, blood dripped, “-am I alive?” he dropped to one knee, the injury sustained earlier numbed the arms and hands, the weapon fell, ‘-my head’s on my shoulder,’ he panted, ‘-did he spare my life?’ a glance upward told of another story, Igna stood idly and covered by wounds, the blade sheathed to its resting place – the screams of the dead went to bed. The forest and valley, swept under a palpitating gust, of which, gave an outbreath similar to a sigh of relief.

“Why,” he clambered against the spear, “-why spare me?”

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"You said it earlier," returned Igna, "-would be a shame to lose such a skilled spearman. We fought due to the difference of our cause; I realized the alliance with the church after a few blows. Oat, you truly are a skilled fighter, tonight's the first in ages where I had to dig deep within myself to find the strength. A contest of pure skill; a battle of the weapons, I enjoyed it."

"Same here," he emptily watched his bloodied hands, "-I had fun," he laughed in mild growing increments.

"Don't misunderstand, I didn't give pity – tis a draw, you defeated me squarely at first, chose to stop and target my element instead of my vital spots. Repay kindness ten-fold," wind sunk within his hair, "-Oat, you're a true warrior."

"Honestly," he made for the tree-line and dropped on his bottom, "-the rumors about the Devil of Glenda are not so well-grounded. I heard the battle against the church's unruly invasion of Arda. May our paths never cross in battle again; here's a word of advice, the Western Sect of the Church aren't fundamentalist. We look at the doctrine and choose to uphold only the areas which better the devotees. There are three more saints above me, the strongest being of the Southern Sect. I'd stay away from th-,"

"Enough chitchat," exclaimed the elven leader, "-foot soldiers, ready thy sword. Archers, ready thy bows – the Count has exhausted his strength. FIGHT HIM NOW!" he cried.

'My wounds aren't healing...'

"Worry not, master," a lazily intonated voice materialized from the Shadow Realm, "-don't forget," said a child riding a golden cloud, "-I was the Arch-Angel of Restoration."

"Raphael?"

"Right one," *snap,* "-heal." A bright golden blow blinded the attackers.

"Close your eyes and fire the arrows!"

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"There you are," said the angel, "-all healed. I must add, the Shadow Realm is the best place I've ever been," the strangely stoic angel of before underwent a massive personality change, "-I love it, thank you for taking me in," reality curled into a tiny dark-spot, "-I'm off," he imploded into a whiff of dust.

'They were watching,' hands on his sword, '-about time to clean up the trash,' *Blood-Arts: Enlian,* canines and nails sharpened, an aura of scarlet-colored jewels hovered in a halo at his head, "-Elven army, take my advice, run."

"Surely thee jests," the soldiers surrounded him, "-we won't until Arda is subjugated."

"Don't say I didn't warn you!"

Night ambled through the motions, the starry-filled ceiling shifted from one end to the other, dusk gave way to dawn – an orange mixed with pink and purple sky rose over the horizon, the sun peeped the top of his head. Sunrise reached the settlements; the inhabitants were in motion for their daily tasks. Kion, who'd spent the night on guard at Solta, yawned lazily. A cobblestone path leading east and west carried carriages and travelers, an early morning fog veiled the eastern path. Hooves tapped against the trail;

the carriage halted at the stables shy of Solta's walls. For a settlement, the defenses were strong and imposing. The eyelids grew heavy, "-we'll take the morning shift," said an armored guard.

"I'm fine, really," replied Kion, "-have to wait for him."

"Not much waiting's going to be done on one knee," returned a snarky response. A drift of air carried Kion's confused glance, ending at the foot of a familiar figure, the air-swept round her feet and took to her carefreely tied bun, "-been a while, Kion."

"Alta," he rose, "-you're safe!"

"Never expected you to be here," she replied, "-where's the lord?"

"No idea, he went to fight in the evening, have yet to see him, the morning's risen... is he dead?"

"Possibly," a yearning glance fluttered to the foggy valley, '-be safe.'

Crunch, crunch, crunch, solemn footsteps clawed from where she stared.

"On guard," said Kion drawing his legendary blade, '-the enemy?' Wrong, it was worse. A dark outline drew against the misty canvas, tall and powerful. A low-sounding rumble emanated, the closer it got, the worse grew their fears – Kion unwillingly gripped his sword tightly whilst Alta summoned her grimoire on precaution alone, "-this one is strong," she said.

"Drop the animosity," said the figure, "-it's only me," he said bursting through the muddled scape.

"Master," a frightened yelp escaped, "-are you well?" she hurried to catch the unbalanced stance, "-master, are you well?"

"Do I look well?" he landed around her shoulders, "-Alta, I need a favor; take me to bed."

"Master!"

"Don't misunderstand my intent," a supposed breath of laughter ended in uncontrollable coughs, "-I need to lay down."

"What of the army?" fired Kion.

"Defeated," he said, "-they won't be attacking for a few days."

"Take him inside," said a worried member of the town's guard. Curious at what had happened, Alta and Kion made their way whence he came, the blurry drape cast onto the scene was pulled by the rising sun. Where a prominent grove once overlooked the valley, now laid a clearing of fire. Numerous weapons and armor scattered, the foliage was gone, there laid but charred remains of soil soaked in a gooey substance.

'What's happened here?' went across their mind collectively.

"A survivor," pointed Kion, "-come, Alta," they hurried to the sole-standing tree with its leaves intact. Without the grove to slow the westward gust – the leaves rattled strongly, shaking to its core. Crouched under it was a shorter man beside which laid a golden staff.

"Kion, back off," cautioned Alta, "-the Staff of Pete."

"Hold up," he jumped and brandished his sword, "-what's a saint of the church doing here?"

"Alta, Kion?" the man which seemingly gave the appearance of a cradled young child, glanced up from his knees, "-I thought y-you d-d-died," he sniffled, the voice bordered sobbing. Confused regards exchanged, Kion nodded at her intent and formulated, "-what happened?" regardless of how obvious the background appeared.

"Death and destruction," he said, "-I saw a demon... no one should have such power. He tore through them, ate their hearts, drank their blood... I can't, I can't."

The scent of burnt wood swaps for the scent of skewered meat onto an outdoor campfire, "-someone looks happy," said Ania.

"Of course, I am," replied Tigul, "-the weather was perfect yesterday. In addition to the scouting party, we had an infantry unit of two-thousand move to reinforce the capture of Solta. They arrived at 04:00, the perfect time to stage a surprise attack."

"Wow, I can't believe how much I don't care," she shrugged and hopped onto the grassy backyard, "-where's Arlah?"

"With the king..." the forehead crinkled, "-how hard is it to take an appropriate tone to your superior?"

"Hey, these are good," she ignored his complaining and stole a well-roasted stick, "-very good," said she with a mouth full.

"You're a brat," he replied, "-whatever, I have more ready to go. Better eat up, today's the day we have good news of Solta's conquest."

Legs crossed on the rough terrain, "-the bet is on," she said, "-Igna's going to win."

"Surely you jest," said the general proudly. The hands worked expertly around the body of a dead bunny, "-there's no way, we have a force of at least three thousand making way to Solta. Tis the largest number we can gather; mercenaries don't come cheap. Luckily, there's a large life stock of demi-humans waiting to be turned using the darker-arts. I'd love to see them try."

"I don't get it," she leaned on her palms and stared at the sky, "-do numbers matter?"

"What do you mean?" he rose a curious brow.

"I was thinking of the story about a man defeating a force of seven thousand on his own."

"And, it'll be different. Stories are exaggerated, I can't see anyone lasting an hour, much less a day on the battlefield without food or rest." The nearby bushes shrieked, Arlah carried a hallowed expression, "-bad news," he halted at the makeshift campfire.

"What is it?"

"The king needs us for an audience. Our advance forces were decimated, a survivor arrived bearing a message," *huff, puff.* The seriousness of the situation had the duo drop everything and run for the central camp. Morale shifted between anxious and impatient, "-Tigul and Arlah," said an aid at the king's side, "-we have received this blood written parchment. Care to take a read."

“Minister Ehle.” A suffocating tension hampered breathing, there swelled the want for revenge on the king’s mein. Ehle, a member of the four-elven families, moved his hands in a washing motion, the stare clad in conspiracy and insight set on the future. The general took a breath and unrolled the parchment over the table, “-dear members of the elven army,” it read in beautifully calligraphic lettering, “-I, Count Haggard, have made good on my promise. The scouting party was wiped out, their souls were delicious. I’ve taken prominent members of the party as prisoners; don’t get me wrong – I won’t ransom them, rather, tis for the sadistic pleasure of torture. With that said, muster thy forces – I will make sure to courteously greet the rest. Sincerely, Igna Haggard.”

Chapter 794: The Great Collapse [8]

A small victory, yes, in spite of having been against a force of around three thousand, the act felt pointless in the greater picture. There was a reason why said month would be named the great collapse. Igna’s attempts to fight a war on his lonesome were met with mockery more so than praise, the former came from the people themselves. The tale of his victory made neither sense nor impact, the only solace found was the visible agitation of the Elven King’s action. There on, the days fell one after the other similar to a domino, they toppled until New Year.

Rosespire’s night lit with a thousand flames. Orbs of alternating hues hovered above, there was a nationwide celebration – the new years festival, a staple of Hidronian Culture instated decades ago, at the time where the previous king held his power. Between the news of a war of Alpha against the Empire, the upper-echelon, and we speak not of puny nobles who’ve mind but to fill their coffers and walk over the populous – the fate laid in the hands of royalty.

The castle’s decoration rivaled even the sky-scraping landscape it overlooked; the animation was fluid and so were the people, one of the many hotspots was the Rosian Media Square and Oatway streets. Generously dressed folks, families, couples, name it, and they were present to enjoy what the capital-wide festivities had to offer.

Where the citizens had fun and enjoyed their lives, as they should – a bubbling kettle bordered spillage. Black-colored luxurious cars pulled before the castle gates, the incline slope leading upward had been barred at the bottom with guardrails and rougher-looking fighters. The group entered after multiple checks, crossing the inner-castle town and to the main entrance. The olden style of stairs and craftsmanship harmoniously embodied the liveliness of the outside decorations, a red carpet rolled over the breaks in steps – retainers stood with hands folded before them. The cars shuffled around a fountain till the middle most vehicles halted at the carpet. A bodyguard leaped to open the door; around them carried an aura of despair. White hair ending in bright crimson burrowed through the temperate breeze, hair locks freely followed the wind’s whims, each step taken resounded, the retainers gulped, Igna climbed to unseen heights. 31st of December, he was ordered to visit at least a week ago – tardiness to her majesty could and would be seen as a blatant act of insolence. Still, by the brazen nature inherit to his disposition, he made no issue of cross-glaring those who dared give a malicious stare.

“Lord Igna Haggard,” said an attending noble, “-a pleasure to see thee again,” he said.

“Baron Denlord,” returned Igna stood at the opening to a grandly decorated dance hall, “-long time no see,” he replied courteously. The golden-colored tall-ceiling and immaculately drawn tiles led to an elevated platform at the far end of the gathering – there performed musicians, counting within their

members were Rocher Cartney and his renowned performances. The man had his fingers upon the keys as if a beast with claws on its prey, the harshness in the gestures boldly differed from what was heard, a peaceful and relaxing melody enhanced by Maestro Nevah. The violins were the best he had heard, and within the line of violinist, Igna spotted Celina in a lovely formal dress, she poured her heart and soul into each note, “-pardon me for spacing out,” he returned to the Baron, “-there wasn’t much stock in thy aura. Your son’s recovery has been going very well at the clinic. Be sure, I’ll make sure he’s up to speed and burning asphalt once again,” he tipped his head and carried further inside. The baron, hard as he tried, wasn’t able to hide the malicious crinkle – he tore himself and viciously eyed Igna’s back, ‘-I’ll kill-’ flashed through his mind, a heavy shadow teleported in between the duo, a tall man shook his index finger the same as a mother would to her misbehaving child. The little scene garnered many mild laughs from the attending guests.

“Master,” said éclair, “-what should I do with the man?”

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“Leave him alone,” he replied, “-let’s head for the balcony.”

“What of the party?”

“Julius will handle the pleasantries,” he smiled and stepped outside. As said, the prince took to the inside and charmingly met the nobles who gathered around holding baskets of fake compliments and admiration.

“Pardon me,” inquired a lady standing a few inches shy of éclair’s shoulder, “-might I excuse myself?”

“Why?” fired éclair, “-a maid must stay at her master’s side.”

“No, leave her,” returned Igna overlooking the well-light orchard, “-she’s free to partake in the celebrations. Don’t cause trouble.”

“Thank you very much,” she bowed to Igna, ‘-ha-ha,’ and mocked éclair.

“Master, you shouldn’t spoil her.”

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“Leave her,” he said, “-her eccentric nature brings up the mood. Look at Julius, cousin’s been very depressed – if not for Yui and her very charged personality, I’m hard to picture him escaping the clutches of woe.”

“The master knows best,” he said.

“éclair, what do you think of Phantom and the Federation.”

“Phantom’s holding strong with the support from Elon’s Dynasty. I imagine it’s hard for them the hold-off Elendor’s subjugation lest he flies to Hidros. I don’t think much good will come from the Federation, my foresight is objective, and based on pros and cons, the odds don’t favor an alliance as of yet. Arda’s hard enough to rule; opinion isn’t necessarily in our favor,” the conversation stopped as another stranger parted the heavy curtains.

Igna side-glanced, 'Tan skin, light-brown hair, the face of a child, the heart of a mother, the charm of a seducer, and the courage of a hunter, Prince Easel Run the III. A boy who came to rule at a young age, and at a young age he had to fight alone and survive. Many of his brothers were killed, a battle for the throne, a battle he won in the end,' past memories collided against the present. No longer stood there a child-faced boy, instead, there was a darker and taller man bearing broad shoulders and a certain kindness in the smile. The facial features weren't much to praise nor was it to appall. There was much emphasis on the golden jewelry; earrings, rings, and necklace, very reminiscent of Elendorian culture.

Besides the fellow carried a very humble and stunning lady, her skin radiated, pulling the moonlight to her fluttering eyes and smile. The couple was linked by a smiling little girl of the same complexion to the father and facial features of her mother; a beauty in her own rights.

"Excuse us," said the man, "-didn't expect to have guests on the balcony."

"By all means, make nothing of it," replied Igna. The couple took their time admiring the mysterious pale-gentleman.

"Hello sir," a little tug fell across his shirt.

"How might I help, my lady?" he said amiably to the girl.

"You dropped this," she held a handkerchief.

"Pardon me," he took it off her hand, "-thank you very much for the kindness," a scarlet-colored crystalized rose manifested within his open palm, "-a flower for another flower," he said.

"Where are your manners, Sashi?" spoke her mother with a very gentle hold on her daughter's shoulders.

"Thank you," she said uninterested in speaking, her mind fully honed on the jewel – a gleam circled the big pupils. From childish innocence to slightly cautious regard, Igna took his time in eying the father, who did so at his own discretion.

A heavy silence weighed, Igna took no issue at the matter and faced the orchard once again. The mother and daughter, especially the former, noticed the growing situation and excused herself. "-I have to ask."

"There's no need to shout," returned Igna.

"Are you Staxius Haggard?"

He side-glanced, the reply had the man nervous, '-did I offend?' wrote across the expression.

"No, sorry to say, I'm his nephew, Igna Haggard. You must be the current king of Easel Run Gard. Rare to see the inclusive nation send their royal family to partake in a banquet."

"Prince of Arda, the representative of tonight's meeting. Safe to say the fate of the Federation rests in our hands," he followed Igna's example and watched outward to the trees, "-Elendor's spoke of the betrayal. Without their military to deter war "

"What's Easel Run Gard's station, what is it thy nation wish to accomplish."

"I happen to owe a lot, more than a lifetime could repay, to the Haggard Dynasty. I won't run nor will I hide, joining the Federation and following Staxius Haggard was my goal from the time we met. I idolized your uncle, he was a great man, someone I had never seen before. With time I grew to understand the intellectual genius that founded the Federation. I sure don't want it to crumble, my kingdom's not on terms to send reinforcement or financial help. We're nothing, our economy was but jumpstarted and thanks to investors from Raven's," he blinked knowingly, "-the Maicite's mines are turning a good enough profit, my people can afford to eat and grow crops. The harsh climate isn't kind – fishing's the only stable industry... we have it rough."

"Still is impressive you managed to control the kingdom long as thee did. Not exactly simple to rule in trying times, Arda's had its fair share of demons." In wake of their parole, butlers in tuxedos came to call on King Easel Run the III and Igna. Traversing the landscape of high-profile guests as much a hassle as walking into a minefield – the bad press associated with the Haggard's was plenty for backroom slander. The turns were curt, and the hallways small and dark – and soon enough, they climbed an array of vexing spiral stairs.

"Guess it's time to see what happens to the Federation," said Yui with a platter of snacks.

"Don't speak while you eat," returned éclair, "-no matter the outcome, we have to focus on post-battle recovery. Phantom's losing its edge and the Elon Dynasty's grown silent. Haven't heard anything from Alpha yet, the network we acquired isn't doing much."

"You mean the little spy I caught?"

"Yeah, her network isn't worth the resources. I say just kill them and be done with it."

"Not fair," argued Yui, "-what of the lass you brought, Wendy or whatever was her name, she has a network too... don't see much weight in her organization."

"I guess it's unfair," he held his chin, "-how about this, we merge the two and see what happens."

"See what happens?"

"Yes," he cheered, the music gradually swayed the emotion of many. Where the leaders gathered felt desolate, a round table held the hovering body of a planet. Queen Gallienne sat at the head of the table, Igna was to her left after an empty seat. King Easel sat to her immediate right, with no ears nor additional presence, the tower was sealed tight. A holographic display broke the rounded planet, "-I, Queen Gallienne of Hidros, welcome thee, guests and friends, to the Federation's council," the imposing and courteous tone dropped, "-I say we get started."

"Let's start with the obvious, Elendor's betrayed our alliance and has joined with the Empire," said king Easel.

"Anything to add on the matter, prince of Arda?"

"Can we drop the formalities," added Igna, "-the deliberations today will dictate how we move forward. I'll be blunt, the Federation, ever since its inception by my uncle, great idea as it seemed, hasn't accomplished much save break the bonds of potential allies."

"How do you answer to that, King Easel?"

“Being part of a greater body has allowed my kingdom to flourish, what about you, Queen Gallienne?”

“I side with Igna on this,” her tone wavered, “-the years aren’t so good on me. I admit to having lost the sharpness I had when I was in my prime, the Federation has grown into a liability,” she said, “-if a party collapses, the others will follow,” she looked to Igna, “-Any thoughts?”

Chapter 795: The Great Collapse [9]

“I agree with her majesty. The Argashield federation has been a liability from the start. I imagine my uncle wanted to have his friends, of which are her majesty, Queen Gallienne, King Easel, and Queen Ela, to be in a circle with him at the center. The death’s brought many o’ unprecedented trouble – no matter the vision he might have had, the gathered parties of today haven’t the mean the sustain another person’s dream. I will speak on behalf of Phantom; we fight for supremacy in the world of weapons-making and technological advancement. The University of Rotherham is counted among the best throughout the world, and still, the innovations we bring are for the betterment of the people. The never-ending battle of us fighting in Elendor’s battle was a damned fa?ade. Let it be known, our army was wiped, and a few retreated with barely their lives. It’s a shame for me and my company. Money’s scares from jump-starting Easel Run Gard – with Arda in the state it’s in, there’s much to be said in keeping appearances. Don’t get me wrong, we bear the brunt of the backlash, and the previous federation meeting wasn’t any better. We held up because of Queen Gallienne and my lady mother, who I remind, isn’t in a position to lead currently.”

“I’m grateful for the Federation,” said king Easel, “-benefits aside, Easel Run Gard’s gain most from the interaction. We were able to connect to Hidros, and thereon, grew our culture and knowledge – a poor nation as we are, have no say in what will and won’t happen.”

“The dreaded moment’s come,” exhaled Gallienne, her friendly expression simmered into a hardened line, “-deep down, I held on for the sake of my friend, Courtney, and my bitter enemy turned friend, Staxius. I wish he were alive, the world’s changing before me, the people, the landscape, the country, everyone’s evolving into future I fear I can’t tightly grasp. My rule has lasted a few decades; in fairness, I’ve devoted myself to raising a worthy Queen for the sake of Hidros. I achieved my goal of uniting the continent, we got rid of the despicable church of Kreston, the result, Arda was stricken by death.”

“Hidros was born from bloodshed, built itself on a pool of dead bodies, and will thrive in blood. The old generation has grown weak,” he flipped a pen around his finger, “-I mean no disrespect, majesty.”

“Mention not,” she smiled, “-the truth is the truth. Therefore, we must decide on the Argashield Federation’s future, what will it be,” she shifted to Easel.

“The Federation has been good for my kingdom; I’d love to see it evolve and grow stronger,” he kept a neutral stance, expression shifted to Igna who held his chin and thought.

“Tis decided, the Argashield Federation cease to exist from today onwards.” A moment of silence diffused from his words, the table knew to take a moment and reflect. There was power and weight behind the name – breaking an alliance would only make them weaker. In a way, it was the natural order. Kept in the back of his mind, Igna thought of the events leading to the destruction of the very things he built as Staxius; all were attacked, naught left unblemished.

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"I have a proposition," interjected Igna, "-majesty, if you'd listen, I'd love to hear your thoughts on a particular idea I have."

"Go on," she said, focused on the idea, Easel followed her lead. The holographic globe shifted into an updated map of Alphaia and the routes taken by the Empire in their attack, the northernmost province cupped the rougher part of the battle currently.

"Alphaia." The line of thought immediately clicked via a shimmer in the queen's pupils, her lowered stance rose in anticipation. King Easel watched cluelessly, "-they're under attack. Elendor left us – meaning, the power balance is heavily in favor of the Holy Empire. There's no way to fight against them – Alphaia is a powerhouse on their own merit. They have the funds and technology, most of the things we used are imported from their industrial heavy policy. Consider this, the Holy Empire and their newly allied continent were renamed to the Holy land of Ernel. From what rumor says, the place is ripe with virgin lands of bountiful resources, there's no telling what is hidden under such a vast terrain. Imagine they join hands – they'll become unstoppable; Iqavea's size dwarves that of Hidros and Alphaia. Now is the best time to join forces with Alphaia, the birth of new power to tip the balance."

"The idea is sound... I imagine it be hard to gather Alphaia's leadership to join us. Their way of the ruling is very different from ours, I dare say, they're much more strict on the subject of warfare."

"Give me a moment," he pulled onto his phone, tapped a few numbers, "-understood, master," flashed on the message, the hovering display pulsed, a circle turned, the dots alternatively blinked, *-connection established,* said the screen, "-hello?"

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"Greetings, Emperor of Alphaia," voiced Igna loudly.

"Igna," he said with a somewhat relieved tone, "-I thought it was... never mind," the stressed contours eased, "-I'm glad you called, there's a something I ought to ask."

"Before we continue," it displayed the room, "-I'd like to introduce the Queen of Hidros and the King of Easel Run Gard."

"I understand," the lips pressed, "-Igna, if this is about us joining the Argashield Federation, forget it."

"You misunderstand," he countered the expected answer, "-as of this moment, the Federation is dissolved. The news of Elendor's betrayal must have reached thy ears. Each of us represents our own kingdom, the gathering is merely a joined feast for the new year's."

"I should have expected so," he chuckled, "-tell me, Igna, what's the stance you'll take?"

"Regardless of any alliances, I have sworn to help my big sister in trying times. The Haggard dynasty owes a great deal to the Sultria dynasty, I will perform my duties as thy brother-in-law."

"Now isn't the best of time to discuss a potential alliance. I'll be free in the coming week – would be wise for the world to hear the breaking of the Federation. Queen Galienne of Hidros, and King Easel of Easel Run Gard, I, Emperor Sultria of Alphaia, graciously invite thee to a banquet next week. The formal invitations will be sent shortly," the voice eased, "-Igna, might we have a little chat, privately." On the request, he excused himself from the tower, climbed out a window, and made for the slanted tiled roof.

“What just happened?” wondered Easel, ‘-is the queen well?’ there was an air of insanity about the current expression, her smirk bore a sadistic nature, the faint open mouth breaths she took blew a cloud of ghastly-colored gray mist, “-King Easel,” her craving stare, reminiscent of a snake, zoned on him, “-Igna’s grown beyond my expectation. I should congratulate Courtney, the boy is very talented. Alpha’s given us a chance to form a new alliance, the Emperor’s desperate, the war must not be going as planned. Tis a lifetime chance to ally to a powerhouse of a continent, Alpha, and Hidros, I shudder to think of the endless possibilities,” the king but kept his head and nodded, a simpler trail of thought followed his expression, ‘-if I stick by Hidros, I’ll be associated to Alpha sooner or later, opening trades to them will greatly benefit my kingdom, she’s right, I have to seize the opportunity.’

“Igna,” spoke casually, “-is it wise to have Hidros and us be associated?”

“Well, there is a need for a new powerhouse to rival the Holy Empire. Besides, the war’s granted us many opportunities which would be very damning in times of peace. What is it you wished to discuss?”

“My mother-in-law... lady Shanna, her appearance is nothing I’ve ever seen before. Her way of speech, she nonchalantly took over my family’s trust without even breaking a sweat. Not her, there’s lady Courtney, lady Elvira, and lady Serene -they’re monsters in sheep’s clothing. I can hardly keep up with their eccentric nature, how-”

“I’m glad to hear they’re not depressed. Be careful, two of the four have complete authority on a kingdom and a rivaling conglomerate. How goes the war?”

“Pretty bad; the imperial family had to make an appearance for the people. Can’t show weakness before them – my generals are handling the brunt of the battle; I only hear snippets of the outcome. Eira’s been itching to jump on the battlefield... no telling how long she’ll remain still.”

“For the sake of the world, Alpha needs to stand firm against the Empire. Listen to me closely, the importance of your battle will reflect how the world moves. If you lose, there won’t be another opportunity to reclaim the lost land, and since the Church’s spearheading the battle – believers are more likely to agree and nod. You have to win, no questions asked, win and show the world Alpha can stand against the Empire. Prove the might isn’t in word alone.”

“Igna, I need to be honest. The time I spend in the company of Eira has made me realize one thing, Alpha’s fortune and path carved by my predecessors is a heritage I took for granted. I feel at ease, tis strange, the calmness in face of war, part of me believes Staxius watches over us. I’ll do my best, not very Emperor-like.”

“Does it even matter, we’re family, I’ll help when the times require me so. Take care of Eira and the guests, tell them not to return to Hidros. If they grow too heavy a burden, get in contact with éclair, he’ll organize their stay at the Odgawoan manor.”

“Not that,” he said, “-I’m happy they came, my mother seems to have found a burst of energy. Good luck on thy battle, I heard about the war of the Devil of Glenda against the Elven King. Taking on a whole nation alone, bravery or insanity, I know not.”

“It’s going to last a few years,” said Igna distantly, “-join as a new pillar to Hidros, become one and face the Empire.”

"I'll think about it, goodbye for now," the call ended. A chilling breeze whiffed inside the jacket, 'the breaking of the Argashield Federation, I truly thought I had made something great for us to rally behind. Seems the safety net wasn't sufficient.'

The council room waited silently, "-welcome back, Igna," said the queen.

"Thank you," he pulled his chair and sat.

"What are the odds Alpha is willing to form a new alliance?"

"I'd say around 30%. Depends on how the situation affects the emperor's judgment. It's wise for us to ready ourselves."

"It's settled, the council is officially concluded. See you at the banquet."

The dancehall shuffled at the sound of a sorrowful violin, many couples took to their partners and danced, the overall atmosphere was pleasant. Good food, good drinks, and good company. Opposed to joining the celebrations, Igna soon found the castle at his back, the guards gave no second thoughts. The slope steadied into a bearable incline, he walked, 'the council ended, the federation collapsed. Troubles keep on stacking; the war goes badly in Arda, the public isn't welcoming of my intervention. I'm tired and want to rest,' he pulled out his hand and stared blankly, 'what am I supposed to accomplish? Get strong, no, protect those I love, no, I'm lost. There needs to be change, I have to change first, everyone's always going on about Staxius... is it possible the previous incarnation was better than my current self?'

The orchestral performance ended on a memorable low-note, Celina was quick to gather herself and make for the balcony, "-éclair," she said, "-where's Igna?"

"I don't know," he replied accompanied by Yui, "-haven't seen him."

"Good performance," said Syndra following Celina, "-let's grab something to eat." An air of woe hovered around Celina, "-Hey, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," came a stoic reply, "-something to eat, sure."

Chapter 796: The Great Collapse [10]

'Where there is good fortune, there is bad luck, the pendulum swings from one end to the next. Tik-tok walks the clock, time embodies what I deem worthy, time follows the framework I settle, destiny is a fierce lady, one who never forgives, and never forgets.'

Alarms rang across Rotherham, the AFR toggled in a bloody red hue. Images filled the command center's screen, the radars pulsed to encounter multiple unrecognized projectiles, *Warning, incoming attack detected,* flashed across éclair and Yui's interface.

"We're under attack," said he telepathically.

"Engaging anti measures," she replied and placed her platter. The air tightened around the duo, there was much less to say nor approach – incoming guests felt the presence and chose ignorance.

The silent moonlight night was a thing of beauty, 'where am I even headed?' wondered Igna turning towards the manor, *beep,* 'caution, leaders are to evacuate Rotherham.'

'What is this about?' the stride closed to a stop, "–éclair, report."

"Master," said a hurried voice, "–we've detected incoming projectiles from the north. I fear tis a direct attack on Rotherham. The sister system is in action to counter the attack, however, there are more than a few dozen. Our inventory isn't large enough to combat the horde."

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'No...' he stopped, "–éclair, what's the eta?"

"Forty-five minutes."

"Have the employees evacuated, issue a warning to the town, have them retreat to the bunkers. I'll handle the attack, no way I'll allow for a repeat of Glenda," the transmission terminated. éclair, who'd been in the company of Celina, Syndra, Yui, and Julius, gave a hallowed expression. The prince's expression dived, "–éclair, what's the status?" inquired Yui.

"Master Igna has said to leave the attack in his hands," said a hallowed expression, '–don't do anything foolish, master.'

"éclair, where's my brother," three gentle taps broke the despairing trail of thoughts.

"Princess Lizzie," he turned to an entourage of grave auras, "–a pleasure to see thee."

"I'm here," waved Julius, "–how was the trip, Lizzie."

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"It was good," she held an open palm, "–what about brother Igna," a faint orb of rainbow-colored lines dulled to greyscale, "–I can't feel his presence anymore."

"Come with me," Julius stood, "–let's go get something to eat," he said and took her hand, she threw a suspicious glare over her shoulder till the heavy curtains broke the damning line of sight. Syndra, sensing the troubling circumstances, excused herself to another table, the balcony turned gloomy at seats.

"Isn't he hot?" shuffled a few whispers.

"I know, he's dreamy," added others, "–is he a model?"

"What's a damned butler doing taking the attention of the ladies," gritted shorter and chubbier nobles, "–we are affluent, we deserve the praise..."

"Ever the lady killer, aren't you, Casanova, Rile."

"Master éclair, there's no need for passive aggressivity," the light blue eyes scanned the tables, the pure-white wolf-ears twitched at the cold, "–and please do not use Casanova as my name, gives my master a bad reputation."

"Shut it, Rile," interjected a deep monotonous female voice, "–éclair, we've all received the warning to evacuate, what's this about?"

"Laura," he breathed, "–I see lady Lizzie's entourage has arrived. Where's Laurance?"

"Inside," she pointed, "-escorting lady Lizzie." A deeper sensation of agitation bubbled in the corner, a lady dressed in black latched forth and brought her hands onto the table, "-annoying," she said, "-éclair, Yui..."

"No need for violence," sighed éclair, "-thing is, Rotherham will be attacked in a few minutes. Our anti-air defenses can only do so much; a magical barrier won't help since they broke through the first layer. I suspect anti-magic."

"What then, what are we supposed to do?"

Beep, Beep, Yui's phone rang. She glanced over, toggled the screen, scanned the lines, then fell onto her chair, everything at that moment changed. éclair's phone went off, *-Warning: Projectiles detected – target, Rosespire's castle.* They looked up, the tip of a giant nuke laid at their heads, "-guys, sorry," said éclair, "-we might have miscalculated a few things," it made contact – an intense shock of white and bright yellow exploded through the castle, devastating even part of the capital, a heavy mushroom cloud rose, the ground trembled impatiently.

'What?' the heart sank, '-this sensation,' he stopped midway the journey to Rotherham and watched onward to Rosespire, the mushroom cloud and explosion carried over the horizon, '-no, no, no,' the heart raced, the crimson pupils bleached into pure white, '-no,' he flapped, akin to pulling a trigger and shot himself across the sky. "Call éclair," he requested without reply, "Call Yui," the interface fuzzed in and out of working order, the constant feed of information the butler provided vanished.

'What happened here,' he landed, the streets screamed in horror. A deathly cloud loomed in place of the majestic castle, the roads leading up the noble district were blocked by rubbles and smoke, '-this can't be possible,' he forced himself through the carnage, excruciating heat charred his fingers on trying to enter. *Huff, Puff,* the confused eyes widened at the sight of a mortally wounded man, "-Cousin," it said and fell, within his grasp was the faceless body of someone close, "-take care of Lizzie," he coughed smoke, "-we were bested, everything is done."

"Don't surrender," he rushed to Julius's side.

"Sorry I had to go out like this," he smiled with the remaining facial muscles, "-I had a great time in the mortal world, thank you for rescuing me, brother, I have to leave, goodbye," the body fell backward.

'Julius,' a terrifying storm thundered, lightning struck without prejudice – buildings caught fire – the ashy barrier was yet to ease. It poured onto Igna who sat emptily, with both Julius and Lizzie in his arms, '-once again,' the breathing calmed, '-I've it all, again.' Far in the distance, the AFR held strong to no avail, the abundant nature rained heavy, bit by bit, chunks of the city was taken – people were slaughtered under the pressure whilst the three skyscrapers imploded.

'If only my element worked... if only I wasn't such a coward... if only I was stronger.'

'Where there is good fortune, there is bad luck, the pendulum swings from one end to the next. Tik-tok walks the clock, time embodies what I deem worthy, time follows the framework I settle, destiny is a fierce lady, one who never forgives, and never forgets.'

"WHO'S THERE!"

Heels echoed, "-my, my," it said, "-seems to be my lover's heir has lost everything."

“Who are you,” he scowled, “-an enemy?” spikes of red manifested, “-tell me, now!”

“Chill,” it said and approached, the figure showed itself to be tall and slender, “-nice to meet you, Igna, the name’s Eveline. Most know me as the Destiny,” she bent and pinched his chin, “-I came here to deliver a message, young one. Thy master says, ‘-the day I breathe my last breath is the day Eveline gives this message. My time as the god of death has come to an end, I’ve fought the battle against the gods and demons for so long now, I can’t even remember thy face. With my expiration and thy curse of never attaining godhood, the seat of death is left vacant. It can’t be helped, I will bestow the remainder of my powers and make the Bringer of Death, Undrar, into the next God of Death. My heir, I’m proud of what thee has accomplished, hearing about the various tales always made the pain easier to bear. I was happy when you died and tried to break the curse of misfortune, a truly valiant effort. I’m proud, truly proud. Tis at a stage where Zeus’s gained what he wished – the heavenly realm will forever be altered. When the supreme god takes the throne and sacrifices a young babe to the Goat of Saeon, tis said, the alliance of good and evil will awaken the Gate to Exnorra, the land of Titan, the land of fallen gods, the heaven of heaven, the resting place of the strongest warriors and angels. Nothing is to be done, the ritual is over – the war is over, I had hoped to have thee join me in battle someday. It’s fine, there are things which can’t be changed. Thank you for saving Persephone. I guess this is goodbye, there’s nothing much I can say, the death of your death element is a result of my death, I apologize, I haven’t the strength to reawaken thy powers., take care, my heir, I’ll be watching, forever and always,’ get all that?”

“Did my master perish?”

“No, there’s no way I’ll allow the fool to die needlessly. I had to uphold my promise, no matter what anyone says, I, Eveline, have the power to rewrite destiny.”

“If only I could do the same...”

“Rise from the ashes, fallen warrior, time is nigh for a standoff. Face the enemies head-on, and reawaken thy mind to the darkest depth of the Abyss, draw in the powers which have been buried within the forgotten persona,” she floated in a transit mass of white, “-lord death will never die for you see,” the white shadow formed a circle, “-he has been reincarnated as the son of the Jade Emperor. He knows what needs to be done,” the circle reformed into nothing, “-you, Igna Haggard, have his blessing – don’t worry about being weak or strong, worry about being true to yourself,” a hand reached deep inside, “-the cursed power of the miserable,” ancient writings burnt themselves on his arms and legs, “-AHHHH,” he screamed, the jarring pain within his brain bordered a meltdown, “-you and your master are the same,” she smiled and took her humanoid form, “-causing trouble all the time,” she grabbed his head and kissed his forehead, “-wake up from thy dream, Igna. The memories will be fuzzy – I hope the feeling remains, never forget the pain for I, Eveline, have granted thee the powers of King Alfred, the cursed one.”

It is said, the story of King Alfred follows a boy born from the union of a titan and an ancient demon, a child birthed on the night of a blood moon. All he touched decayed, all he loved withered, and ultimately, all he cared for, vanished. No hope over the horizon nor semblance of pity towards those who mistreated him from birth until the ascension to power, the king fell into insanity with greed to exact revenge on the heavens. The very same gods who averted their blessings were pulled from their clouds and butchered, the story of King Alfred isn’t valiant nor is it heroic for the man is naught but evil. He killed, vowing to be alone as to not lose what he cared, closed his heart until he became a devil, the

strongest the divine realm had seen, the founder of the Aapith Nation, the great patriarch, King Alfred the Cursed. Stories surrounding his death is clouded, neither the gods nor demons know of the truth, none save a single entity, Death.

‘Where am I?’ a gentle melody played from the dancehall. A calming golden hue fell outside from the ajar curtain, friendly chatter chuckled at his side, ‘-a dream?’ he woke to a sharp pain at the back of his eyes, ‘-Kill them,’ said a whisper, ‘-kill the gods, defeat the gods, end the gods,’ the colorful surrounding washed with a layer of deep red, ‘-revenge, I have to kill them!’

“I remember,” *thud* ‘-my life before Staxius Haggard,’ the mind cowered, ‘-I remember.’

“Majesty, we’re ready to greet the enemy,” said a ghoul of a servant.

“Worry not my subjects,” he found himself back in time, reliving a memory through the eyes of another, “-the Aapith nation will endure, the god’s art be killed. I, King Alfred, the cursed, will destroy everything,” a dark pit of nothingness stretches to a faint orb of light, “-I will slay God himself.”

“Hey, Igna, are you ok?” said a familiar voice, the vision broke.

“I’m fine,” he replied, ‘-I remember, I was the founder of the Aapith Nation, the abyssal king, Alfred the Cursed.’

Chapter 797: The Great Collapse [11]

‘The hatred, the humiliation, the abandonment, I feel it, everything’s flooding back. The secret behind who I was is finally known – I now understand why I never had trouble taking or making another person suffer. I chalked it to part of my being Staxius Haggard, seems I was wrong from the start. The gods I killed, the powers I stole, the curses which inflicted on my person, I understand how I was and what I was to become. The last memories, when death came for my life, we struck a deal, I would be reincarnated to exact my revenge on one condition... forget my memories, forget my powers and embrace the powers of the Death Reaper. I accepted the contract and was reborn thousands of years later. Before I knew it, I began asking for people’s souls and forging contracts, I thought it be fun to act like the devil,’ an ominous black smoke enveloped his palms, ‘-I was wrong, I wasn’t acting, I’m the devil, the great Patriarch. Origin must have known about who I truly am. Eveline, lady Destiny herself broke the locks on my soul, the cursed powers. I feel elated, my mind’s calm, I sense the tranquility of the world pass through my legs and climb to my chest. The Aapith nation, a gathering of powerful demons is the spawn of my seed; my blood flows in the veins of the ancient demons. The name Alfred isn’t one to be proud of, I’ve always dreamed of stopping what I did, wanting to choose the light, envious of what the heavens had. Gardens of golden fruits, a cheerful atmosphere, acceptance, and liberty, what I had was darkness, solitude, and hatred. Every time I created a friend, the gods would smite my efforts, the darkness I inhabited eventually grew into a wasteland for the despicable and tainted. They killed, assaulted, and performed whatever they wished – they called onto evil, the demented nature of the expanding universe brought to life the opposite heaven, the prison of those who rejected the heavenly doctrine, the place I built single-handedly, my home, Aapith. In the end, my emotions culminated in a power of which the gods feared; the power of Damnation. It is said, if insults and ill-will are constantly thrown at a tree, the latter eventually falls from the manifested malice. I ripped angels from their heavenly clouds, tore their wings, and sown them onto myself, I ate their flesh to get a humanoid body, I took their eyes to grant myself sight, the spawn of a titan and the beast of Aneu created me, a tangled

mess of my parent's lust. I had nothing and stole everything, the cursed name of Alfred, I always had a single dream, to find beings with whom I could share and give my everything too. I tried to accomplish so with the gathering of demons, in the end, the gods saw it as nothing more than a call to arms – the first war of Gods versus Demons was my doing – shortly after, I willingly surrendered to death, what I created wasn't what I envisioned. I grew worse by the day, snapping the necks of any who crossed my sight, plundering settlements, invading the mortal realm – the only one able to defeat me was myself. I remember everything. What flows in my vein isn't power, it's the taint of my actions... I understand why I was infatuated by the curses and stride towards the darkness, my soul knew who and what I was, and so, my brazen attitude to kill. I feel better, I can finally accept myself for who I am – two lifespans has elapsed, Alfred the Cursed, and Staxius Haggard, the God of Death, what remains is the third life, Igna Haggard,' he had his head against his arms on the table, the dream-like state of self-analysis shuddered, 'a premonition,' the eyes widened at the balustrade, 'this feeling is too familiar,' unknown to the rest, he threw himself at the rail and looked to the sky, 'the pain behind my eyes,' it narrowed, 'what powers Alfred acquired is the ultimate variant of the Hand of God, the Hand of Lamentation, the fingers which stretch from hell and latches onto unsuspecting angels, the reach-in infinite, the area of effect is infinite, and where I wish it to be birthed, infinite,' the reawakening of the persona of Alfred, brought alteration to his self. Transparently shaped horns protruded, in addition to his wings, of which was the wings Alfred forcefully ripped from the captured angels and grew a tail of the beast, one he inherited from the bonds of his parents.

"Master, is something the matter?" éclair approached the solemnly stood Igna, no answer turned, no emotions in the eyes or physical stimulus from his voice, 'the aura has changed,' he thought, keeping a close eye.

'Igna's presence has changed,' thought Julius, the chatter of married ladies swarmed the personal space, he kept a smile and laughed along, 'darker and more sinister...'

"Brother, how did you like my performance."

"Celina," he broke out the trance and watched the beautifully dressed lady, "it was splendid. The notes were emotive, they relayed the hard work and passion thee had," he said, "I'm proud to say, Celina Haggard, you're truly independent."

A sharp stabbing pain choked her words, her nose reddened, "thank you," she lowered her gaze to his chest.

"Come now," he held her chin, "you worked hard, I can see it in your eyes," took her fretting arm, "your hands don't lie, the culmination of the effort and dedication. I couldn't have asked for a greater gift on this new year."

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"Stop it," she shuffled closer and rested her forehead on his chest, "it's embarrassing."

"I have to say it," he patted her shoulder. Those watching the outside scene felt warm and joyful, the wholesome exchange brightened the atmosphere, smiles boarded, fake grins swapped for genuine joy.

"Way to make me jealous," said Julius in jest.

"Brother Julius," she leaped.

"Don't fret," he laughed, "-your friends are inside," he threw his thumb backward, "-go on." A reluctant gaze went from Julius and then Igna, "-go," nodded Igna, "-don't worry about us, your journey has yet to start. Look at them," she turned to where he watched, a crowd of talented musicians waited with open arms, the maestro and pianist gave acknowledging nods to Igna, who returned the favor.

"If ever things get rough, reach out," said Julius, "-we're family, and family helps one another."

"I will," she grinned, her face glimmered in pure bliss, "-thank you so much for everything," her heels clotted for the dancehall where waited a warm party of friends.

"The satisfaction of hard work being rewarded," added Igna, "-she's grown into a strong woman. I forcibly took her father's life and tormented her mother, in a way, I felt responsible to take her in as my own. There are those deserving of a chance, and others, unworthy of the thought, I'm glad she falls in the former category."

The prince listened attentively, the balcony cleared to have only the duo under night lit sky, retainers of the royal family guided the guests to the dining hall. It's rude to make good food wait, thus the seamless transfer from one place to another, "-cousin," interjected Julius, "-the aura around you feels calmer and peaceful. Are you well?"

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"Yes, I had the courage to accept who I am and what I stand for. It sounds childish and very obvious, accepting who you are is a matter very close to one's heart. To accept oneself means to accept the reality of one's flaws and embracing said imperfections."

"Igna..."

"No need to add any further. Julius," he faced the prince squarely, "-Apexi and the bad press with the company, what have thee decided?"

"I don't know..."

"How about joining hands with Amsey?"

"The one from Lumian O'dla, wasn't he ousted from the entertainment world on accusations?"

"Correct, technically, he stepped away from his position until matters blew over. In turn, the influence he held over the entertainment district in Alpha was conquered by opportunistic agencies. Our current predicament bears a lot of similarities to his situation."

"And?"

"And he says. Sacrifices have to be made. If only my plans were heard from the start, the media wouldn't have been on our trails like they've been."

"What did the plan entail anyway?"

"To go down and bring everyone with, a forceful restart of the entertainment industry. The nature of a problem occurs when someone takes issue with a particular instance. Imagine every agency being

blamed and accused of similar if not, worse slander, they'd do everything to save face, and in doing so, crash and burn, Apexi would have had a chance to say, they treated their idols better than the other agencies, therefore, the under-table agreement would have been acceptable. There you thought I'd have fired the employees and ruined their lives, no, I'd have ruined everyone's life... in a way, the field would have been fair and equal. Nothing can be done, part of the workers under Apexi will shift to work under Amsey. Ask Yui to schedule a meeting, I'm sure the man impatiently waits for his time to strike back, the remainder will be moved to my newly acquired racing team, 'twould be a great opportunity to flex Phantom's intellectual staff's imagination on the track," a worried éclair stormed outside, Yui followed close behind.

"Master, Rotherham's under attack."

"I know, missiles from the Empire."

"How?"

"I had a vision."

"A vision?"

"Yes," he looked at the sky, "-there's a nuke making its way to the capital."

"How can thee be so calm?"

"Can Rotherham survive the attack?"

"Depends on the AFR," he glanced at Yui, the lass shook her head, "-there's the answer," shrugged éclair.

"Tell me, éclair, what kind of person doth thee think I am?"

"Pardon me?"

"Forget it," the shoulders slumped. A dark mist manifested at his feet, the hair hovered, outlines of wings, horns, and a tail spawned, "-when there are two options, the wise choice is the third option," he held an open palm to the sky, *-the hand of the cursed king, manifest for thy monarch demands so.*

Warning: Incoming Projectile, cried the alarm, "-cousin," shuddered Julius, "-how did you know?"

"I told you," he smirked, "-I had a vision," *Hand of the Lamented, I bring upon the earth the powers of the shunned child, watch me, the heavens and cower for I, Alfred, have reawakened,* an inverted pentagram burnt in white – a bodiless palm expanded over the entire castle, "-die," he clenched, the giant mass buckled in a massive explosion.

"The AFR can't handle the incoming waves," cried Yui, "-Rotherham's going to be destroyed."

"Not on my watch," he faced the town, the same pentagram burnt inside the retina, '-I see it clearly,' the palms thrust again, warning of projectiles disappeared.

"Cousin?"

“Relay this to her majesty, the Empire’s launched a direct attack on the capital. War is the only remedy,” the words cut heavy, “-I have to retire for the night,” the semi-material wings flapped.

“éclair, the projectiles were wiped by an unseen force, some scouts say an unseen hand swatted the attack.”

He remained still and without answers, “-give me a moment,” he breathed, ‘-what power has he used?’

“The hand of the lamented,” said Julius, “-I heard of it in tales passed by my master,” the hands shook, “-there’s only a single entity able to utilized such a cursed power, Patriarch Alfred himself,” a chilling jolt went up the butler’s shoulder, “-are you saying?” they exchanged meaningful glances.

“I had my doubts,” the prince fell a nearby chair, “-it explains everything, a soul of a human would never be able to contain the wills of gods and demons alike, the pressure alone would shatter the being into nothingness.”

“The tale of Alfred the cursed is real?” fired éclair.

“You’re a demon, you should know the origin is based on truth.”

“I know, but I-I-I...”

“Hold on a moment, what’s the Alfred business about?”

“Pardon us, Yui, this is beyond our station. I fear, our master finally reawakened his true self.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“No, it can spell disaster if the anger is allowed to roam free...”

Chapter 798: The Great Collapse [12]

X103, the start of a new year and the start of a new persona. The town of Glenda found itself partially lit with fountains and decorations. The dead were mourned, and thus, the mark of a fresh start wiped itself upon Igna. He’d spent the night within the Shadow Realm, choosing to play with his children except for Vanesa who left on a mission around the world. December was supposed to have been a month of rest – sadly, nothing went according to plan. The offensive of the mysterious attackers stopped and the many companies threw themselves at damage control.

Whispering winds from the valley hung over a hooded duo’s head. The early morning mist and due brought sniffles and sneezing. The flushed-nose Ania held close to Arlah.

‘The spear saint Oat was traumatized when he returned, a single person defeated the party and defeated the strongest fighter our army held. It must have left a bad taste in the king’s mouth, I wonder what he thinks of following next?’

“Arlah, are you having a bowels problem?”

Pausing at her sentence, he slowed to give a once-over, “-why do you ask?”

“Because there’s much pain I sense from thy visage,” she chuckled, “-you have the face of someone who’s constipated. I heard banan-”

"Enough, now isn't time for jests. We're inside enemy territory," by the looks of things, the narrowed path tightened and rose to the top-end of a stone wall shy of the peak.

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"I'm curious," she took pleasure in tiptoeing over the edge, "-why accompany me?"

"To an audience with the count of course," he smiled, "-the war's over. The Clan leaders will return and lead their army onto Liberthan plains." In wake of the battle, Kion chose to shelter at Glenda under Alta. There were many rounds he made from Glenda to Solta. The damped and muddy path bordered with weeds and scattered trees, the trips were made in solitude and utmost silence. Lucky was a day where he had to escort a traveler or a peddler.

Clueless to the situation in Hidros, the Ardanian atmosphere was jarring, '-I'm bored,' carried across Kion's mind, '-Solta's up next,' he climbed the westward path, came upon the intersection of the valley and trade-route. He stopped at a signpost, opted to look north at the foggy scape. Steps in the unseen mist forced his hands to move for the sword – if not for the additional chatter, he might have attacked. Two hooded figures rose from the cloud, the tinier-sized fellow hunched on its knees and panted, the taller fellow pointed and laughed, spicing their conversation with jestful mockery.

"So much for being energetic."

"Shut up," it threw her hood backward, gently colored fox ears bloomed with a sparkle, long eyes patiently looked the stone wall which ultimately led to Kion's stead, they crossed glances. The cautious Arlah moved between the two.

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'Their chatter stopped, very curious,' he clenched the handle, the taller figure shuffled around inside his hood, the faint outline of a protruding object above the shoulder gave a cause for concern. Was it a sword, a bow, a spear, or a rifle, depending on the weapon, '-I might need to kill them...'

"Hold on," interjected the smaller figure, "-you there," she side-stepped away from Arlah's shadow and prominently stared at Kion, "-my name's Ania Gard, you are?"

"Kion," he replied, '-a fox-eared demi-human. I've only heard of them in stories,' he glared the taller figure, "-you're a dark elf."

"Correct," he removed his hood, "-and you're a hero."

"Suppose my outfit and sword is blatant," said a nervous chuckle, "-tell me, what business do the elven people have with us. Wasn't taking demi-humans as slaves enough of a satisfaction?"

"No," Ania interjected forcefully, she stood on her tiptoe and narrowed her glance, "-he has nothing to do with war. I'm here to meet the Count, I come from the Empire... my parents told me to meet him, we're long-distance cousins."

"The way you said the last part is very suspicious," sighed Kion, "-I shouldn't be surprised if thee turns to be a spy," he twirled onto Solta's gates, "-there a few errands I need to complete before we get moving. Head inside and rest at a tavern." The early morning hours, often nicknamed Sloth's hour, was troublesome for many, waking in the cold winter to the dark outside, a choice between a warm bed or

the frigid ground, many opted for the former without thought, to sleep was to rest, and to rest was to visit the heavens. Similarly, after spending the night at the Shadow Realm, a portal for Glenda opened. The weather shifted from open and calming to close and humid, ‘-I’ve returned,’ he sat on a used bed and stared at the clock, ‘-Glenda manor, I forgot about it, should visit soon,’ he smiled and dropped backward, ‘-a nap sounds nice.’ The cold gave to hotter midday, doors opened brusksly, “-Alta, please, I wish to ask thy hand in marriage. There’s nothing more I want in this world.”

“Lord Crose, I understand your feelings; you’re very easy on the eyes and have a fortune associated with thy dynasty,” she pulled at the table and dropped files, “-even if I returned the feelings, I cannot tie myself to another. This town is my responsibility, I have to stay and oversee the growth, I take pleasure and joy in my craft. I’d earnestly implore thee to respect my choice.”

“Why my lady Alta, why must thee be so cold. Is wanting for a town to grow so, a town who cared naught less about thine life, the sole objective? I dare refute the choice, please, take my hand in marriage, the Duchy of Hornell welcomes thy intellect.”

She kept her back to the gentleman, vowing to stand strong and not be swayed, “-the Duchy of Hornell ruled by the Hornell dynasty. A place of many villages and a singular port-town, it is said, before the construction of Arda’s western port, traders had to travel south. Time leaves all behind and moves, the heritage of the Hornell, especially their coffers, has run dry. Must be hard to be independent rulership in a warring province. Geographically, the town is safe from invasions thanks to the rougher sloped mountains. It must have been the stories of Glenda which brought thee to us, a young noble wanting to take Alta’s hand must first prove himself to be worthy of her name. I dare say, Lord Crose, you have not the required prestige to ask for her hand in marriage. I won’t stand for opportunistic idiots. What you’re after is her skills, not her heart, and for that, I refuse.”

“Who the hell are you,” fired the gentle-faced man, “-Alta isn’t exactly pretty on the eyes, she’ll have to beg to have someone of my caliber ask her in marriage. She’ll be forever forced to overlook this shame of a town. Excuse the insolence, yet, I must say what I think, and tis the truth, a lady of her intellect will be used without ever having the chance to experience romance.”

“Who says so,” Igna rose from the bed, “-don’t you insult her,” he thundered, “-Alta’s beautiful in and out, her heart is soft and her mind sharp. Begone,” he gestured loudly, “-I, Igna Haggard, will not stand for insults to my trusted Stewardess.”

“This isn’t over yet,” the brown-haired noble forced himself out, scatters footsteps ran echoed along with the tower until it faded.

A flat warmth laid on his back, “-you were here?” inquired a murmur.

“Sorry about the noble,” said Igna, “-were you interested in him?”

“Not particularly. The man is easy on the eyes and has a lot of money... what else could a woman want, sadly, I-I.”

“Crying is unbecoming of you,” he spun and grabbed her shoulders, “-look at me, Alta,” her freckled rounded nose stared deep into his eyes, “-you’re beautiful, never let anyone else dictate who you are as a person,” he wrapped around back and tightened a hug.

“Thank you,” her body seemed to melt by her relaxed breathing, *knock,* the door barged open, “-I’m sorry, did I interrupt the prelude to a feisty midday snack?”

“Kion,” her voice cracked, “-what ar-.”

“Never expected you to have tact,” he said, grabbed her palm, and dropped a handkerchief, “-a woman should wipe her own tears and look forward, my stewardess is strong, I believe in her wholly.” She made for the bed whilst Igna made for the desk.

“Master, sorry to say, said desk is but a furniture for my room,” in what he thought to be his office turned out to be Alta’s bedroom. The confusing situation served for a few laughs – shortly after, Igna found himself at Glenda’s extension within the town-hall building on the third-floor at end of the corridor. The administrative floor, so said the noticeboards. The walk to the new office was broadening – there laid a sense of pride within the bystanders and inhabitants. Crossing the arched bridge and waking into the town hall was a thing of praise as only the affluent did so regularly. By all means, the hall was opened to anyone, to avoid trouble, a guild-hall stood to the side, after a road. Common troubles and complaints were handled yonder, filtered, and finally brought to the hall’s attention. The reluctance showed the level of respect the hall wielded, especially since the town grew to be the Capital of the olden rulership.

‘A clean and simple office,’ he nestled behind the desk, presided by blinders, “-Kion, care to explain?”

“Right,” he tore the meat off a brochette, “-I bring guests.”

“Guests?”

“Yeah, we hitched a ride from a passing trader and made it to Glenda. They’re in the lobby, I think Alta’s speaking to them.”

“Understood,” he leaned and took out his phone, placed it over the empty desk, and tapped the screen, a dim blue screenshot outwards with multiple windows, “-send them in.” Before long, the guests stood timidly at the entrance, Alta remained on hand to Igna’s side. To an outsider looking at Igna, the terrifying aura which lain his body movements and sharp facial features were enough to dumbfound the coldest of men.

‘Fox ears and tail,’ he observed, ‘-a very rare species, why is she here?’

“Are you Igna Haggard?”

“Yes, and you are?”

“Ania Gard,” she took bold steps towards the desk, “-this letter should explain my situation,” a frizzled orangish enveloped threw its dying breath at Igna.

“It has seen better days,” he said and broke the seal, ‘-Dear Staxius Haggard, it has been a while since we spoke, I suppose thee goes by the name of Igna Haggard. Before asking how I know, remember this, I was part of Kniq and the olden party. We might have run away – however, the kindness shown has never been forgotten. I’m sure you must have an idea by now, the little girl’s face and features are blatant. Auic and I are writing this letter while we sit overlooking a mob of angry fundamentalists. Our story is one known to Undrar, we relayed much of our correspondence to her. The years I spent with

Auic are the best years I ever lived. The end is upon us, our faction was uncovered and will be culled shortly. Our legacy runs in her veins, Ania, she has her mother's features and her father's magical prowess, not that it matters. There's so much I wish to say and lesser I can add. Please, take care of our daughter, she's hotheaded and eccentric; she'll ask for thee to avenge us, and I request this, please don't. We choose said lifestyle and looking back, we should have flown to Alpha instead. What is done can't be undone, we leave on this, on the day the letter is received, I want my master, Staxius Haggard, to promise the safe-keeping of our daughter. It's selfish of us, we know, circumstances dictate sacrifices have to be made, farewell, we're grateful for everything. Signed: Auic Gard and Avon Gard,' he rocked into the chair and allowed the paper to drift onto the table, '-Avon and Auic...'

Chapter 799: The Great Collapse [Finale]

"I have to know, are you the one my parents asked for?" strong gestures told of her mindset, the tone used wasn't much respectful towards a noble. Igna took a pause and inhaled – the brief movement sucked her audacious confidence birthed from an adrenaline rush fully. Alta kept at his side, her energy was flat, in a way, served to contrast against Igna. He gave a few once overs, reached for his drawer, and took a cigar. It was the first time he sat at said office, still, Alta and her diligence ensured Igna's surroundings never changed no matter where he resided. The cigar, bigger than what he used to smoke, needed to be clipped – therein, he held the object to his side where Alta swiped effortlessly, a fragment fell. He snapped it alit to a white blaze. A few puffs hampered the visitor's breathing and view. Arlah displayed the most disgust by covering his nose between his elbows. A feeling of fear washed Ania, the energetic movements drained at each puff Igna breathed.

"Tell me," he leaned into the desk, thrust his chin at the young lass, "-what is your story, give me a summary. I'm sure you understand the severity of the first impression, I'm willing to forgive the prior attitude. When asking for a favor, one must know to bury their pride and beg if the situation requires it." Arlah subjectively formulated his opinions on who sat before him, '-a stern man with power,' he observed, sympathy to the lass's situation, '-he doesn't hold back and cares not for a fellow relative.' The words stuck at her pressed lips, intimidation from the judging stares closed her posture.

Tap, a light touch brushed against her shoulder, '-what?' she turned to an understanding Arlah, '-I understand,' the fingers relaxed.

"My name's Ania Gard, I'm the daughter of Auic and Avon Gard. My life, in general, was spent learning the teachings of the Church, they taught magic and how to read and write. My father was an instructor at a private academy, he taught magic and I learn my art under his tutelage. For the better years of a decade, I never realized the immense pressure my parents and their rebelling factions were under. The church has a monopoly of everything, the inhabitants are zombies, they pray and worship the church, they do what is told, and are closed-minded to differing ideas. When I turned sixteen last year, they told me about their journey in a Hidros, they recounted the stories of their adventures in the company of a man named Staxius Haggard, who I was told to be my uncle. Father always said we bore a connection deeper than blood ties. Then, in the leading months to where I stand, my parents forced me to board a ship headed to Hidros – I watched them be killed mercilessly by servants of god as I hid in a carton box. All I could do was watch silently, their loving memories faded – I wish I was strong, I wish I could have saved them. There isn't much purpose," she stared into the distance, "-I'm not a fool, exacting revenge is out of the picture. I don't have a goal, no family, and nothing to offer," the empty gaze fell on him, "-I delivered the message, my quest is complete. What happens next is yours to decide, cousin."

"What happens next is mine to decide?" he breathed, "-what if I said you're not welcomed, what then, what would you do?"

"No idea," she shrugged, "-perhaps work as an adventurer?"

"I see, you don't have an objective in life," the atmosphere eased, "-tis a shame your parents died, I wish I could have spoken to Avon one last time. Ania Gard, the decision of thy inclusion into our family rests with my mother, the head of our family. Be assured, from today onward, I take responsibility to care your needs. What life are you accustomed to?"

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"A normal life," she said, "-why ask that type of question?"

"Ok, what is normal?"

"We eat twice a day, live in a two-room apartment, I guess?"

"A modest life," he sighed, "-Ania, I mean not to brag, the Haggard Dynasty is considered one of the wealthiest in the world," he called onto Alta, "-would you please do the honors?"

"As you wish," she shuffled to Ania, "-please, follow me," the ladies left the room. Kion sat solemnly in the corner, menacingly watching the elf's moves.

"You," said Igna, "-I'm thankful you escorted her on goodwill. To show my appreciation, I'll grant any request thee wishes long as it not direct in my way."

"I could never," he bowed, "-we may stand on different sides of the battlefield, my admiration for the Haggard dynasty runs deeply in my vein. To speak to the Devil of Glenda is an honor in of itself."

"Strategist of the South, Arlah Kunrid; I've heard stories about the campaign you led to Castle Hart, the siege was stopped midway due to lack of supplies. I have my reasons to suspect the one behind the stoppage to be the king who has a very shallow view on what needs be done."

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"I'm pleased," he smiled, "-Count Haggard, I must ask a favor."

"Which is?"

"Please end the war," he said, "-the reason why I visit is to personally give this," he unrolled the scribbles of a scroll, "-the king received this as a gift to honoring the church's orders. He's a greedy fool – if not for my friending and me, the elven people would have been subjected to misery. He doesn't see the wrong in imprisoning demi-humans – the act is pure to satisfy the church's doctrine, as it looks, elven races haven't yet to be heralded as monsters. The day they switch their belief is the day we lose our advantage."

"Hold a moment."

"Pardon?"

"Why relay said information to us, we're enemies."

"No, I have never viewed Ardanian's as enemies. My belief aligns with what King Haggard believed. The differing races are to unite, not fight. I was wary at first, however, it seems to be the wisest choice to place trust in thee. Win the war for the sake of our people."

"Who launched projectiles at Glenda?"

"PMC under Elendor's rule, they're stationed north, shy at Cape's view bay."

"Understood," the hologram displayed a top-down view of the province, "-Arlah Kunid, I ask this, are you willing to betray your king and swear allegiance?"

"Returning would spell my death, therefore, I have no option. A deserter has no right at mercy, so says the king."

"What of your friend?"

"Tigul Nerlie, the general. He's strict and loyal." Kion joined the discussion and a meeting for a counterattack went into place. The hours elapsed, Ania found herself sitting outside the town hall at the back, a lovely marble fountain held the figure of a babe pouring water out of a pot. Children skipped about, "-how was it?"

"Count Haggard," she slid to the side.

"Cousin is fine," he said and sat – dusk was upon the city, "-seems you opted for boyish clothes."

"They're more comfortable," she smiled. Leather boots swallowed her dark-brown pants, a yellow buttoned-up shirt was kept under a similarly brownish colored leather jacket, "-and costly."

"Here," he slid a phone, "-this device is connected to a very helpful assistant. Keep it on you at all times."

"A phone," the light reflected against her pupils, "-my friends and I dreamed of owning these... the price easily could afford three-month rations."

"With Avon and Auic, I doubt life was woeful."

"You're right," the lanterns lit, "-we were happy, I was anyway."

"What you feel is what matters. I informed the head of the family earlier. Welcome to the Haggard Dynasty, Ania. We may not share blood, still, I'll think of us to be family," he turned to her gently.

"Will take time for me to adjust. What should I do?"

"Whatever you want," he laughed, "-the sky is the limit, a scholar, doctor, performer, pilot, assassin, fighter, anything you want."

"I want to try adventuring," she said.

"Adventuring... are you trying to find your own adventure like Kniq did?"

"Yes," her lips broadened, "-I want to experience what my parents recounted."

“Then tis settled,” he stood, “-I will have arrangements made for thy enrollment at the Adventuring Academy.”

“Are you for real?” she gripped his sleeve.

“I am, follow what thy heart dictates and live a life of no regrets.”

“Understood.”

The 1st of January settled into the 2nd. The days would move rapidly, crossing weeks and months – two months of preparations barely settled the conflict between the elven kingdom and Igna. The four clan leaders made their appearance, the Blood-King’s faction cornered the battlefield, supplies were cut – the king’s men were forced to starve, any who’d cross beyond the natural border of Liberthan Plains was killed. The plan went as follows. Glenda would fight a battle of attrition, the last thing the king expected from a single man. Little did they know, the devil of Glenda was a walking army on his own, soldiers were summoned from the Shadow Realm, around six- thousand highly trained fighters in ways of marksmanship, magic, and ancient arts. They were perfect beings, blessed with invincible bodies since their core and soul were bound to the Shadow Realm. It was the same as a platinum adventurer taking on a horde of low-level monsters, or using a long sword to chip a potato. Each fighter had the strength to take a platoon of one hundred without breaking a sweat. Fast-forward to the end of February, the elven army was surrounded and forced into a battle of attrition. Their numbers chipped mildly. Meanwhile, they fought, Igna took to the Holy Forest of the Great spirits. The legendary tree sprawled to have a thicker body. He began by meeting the Dryads, guardians of the forest, explained his intent of reuniting Arda and was given their blessings. With this, he moved to the capital and entered negotiations with the current ruling parties. A fierce battle of wit and will ensued, it took ten days to finalize the deals to many of the nobles, getting them to his side – simply taking the crown wouldn’t satisfy the population. By feeding into the abuse of the demi-humans, he manipulated them into a coup, the leadership was dethroned – the representatives held a vote which also included the populous, all wanted the Haggard’s to regain power. On the 5th of march, lady Courtney Haggard is crowned queen of Arda. Since the elven people had sheltered at the ancient tree, a decision was made to officially move the capital to Glenda. On the 6th, Igna led his forces into a final attack, they captured the king and publicly executed him before his fighters. Two choices were granted, either accept the Haggards or follow the king to his grave, the outcome, considering their treatment and famine was easily deduced.

The Count returned home on the 7th, a festival was brought to the council’s attention. The borders were opened, traders from all over the province made their way to the new capital, plans for expansions were laid upon Igna’s office.

“Congratulations,” said Alta standing at the door.

“It was a collective effort,” he smiled at key figures in the war, “-the battle starts now.”

“Cousin,” a little fox-eared lady rushed into the room, “-report from northern outlook – an army of twenty-thousands has teleported at Way’s mine.”

‘It’s according to plan,’ he lifted the blinders, ‘-the parchment Arlah brought was indeed a teleportation spell. We were right to keep up our guard. Killing the king to draw the attention of the ring-leader. Arda

won't ever be tainted again,' the covers fell, he grabbed his coat and made for the door, "-let's go, we have a war to fight."

Awakening as the Great Patriarch forever changed Igna's life. The truth he came to understand, the truth told by Origin in dreams, everything pointed to Draebala – the world cried in pain, it wanted peace and rest. Before handling matters of another world, the responsibilities to create a stable kingdom laid in his hands. New figures made their way in his life, close people died from old age, therein ushered the Age of Alteration, from human politics to godly politics, the ring-leader was yet to be found. Igna marches forth with his wit and an enlightened persona, '-the gods will pay.'

Chapter 800: Exrion Grand Championship

Engines roared, the asphalt screeched, the boiling hot sun glimmers in a clear blue sky. Before lays a large intertwining circuit, spectators are scattered across, some at the finish line, under the comfort of the covers, others chose to be closer to the action, at hard curves or peerless straight lines.

"Number 03 is on way to his first victory," blares the intercoms, an air of suspense tightened the very crowd, many were on the edge of their seat. A hovering display gave a great overview – it held the immediate location and placement of the racers, '-the last lap,' read across the screen. The moment many waited for arrived, the cars reached the last curve, at the head was a mat-black car over which had 'Raven,' written. Various stickers of sponsors laid on both sides of the door, the helmed driver slammed his foot, "-WE HAVE A WINNER," he crossed the finish line, "-THEO DENLORD IS THE VICTOR!" screamed the commentator. The crowd followed suit, mostly the female demographic – everyone cheered and cried, everyone, save the losers. The racers drove to the garages off-track.

A bespectacled man sat amidst fellow supporters. Long silvery hair was neatly tied into a ponytail, he watched with one leg over the other.

"He's handsome," whispered across.

"I wonder who he is?"

Upon the winner's announcement, he stood, fixed his tie and suit, climbed the stairs, and entered a brightly lit corridor. '-He won,' he thought, listening to the echoes of his footsteps.

"Theo Denlord has won the Exrion Grand Championship," said the screens scattered along the hallway, "-we're here at their garage for an interview," said a well-dressed man who giddied to the roaring car. He held his microphone to the driver, who had yet to remove his helmet, "-Lord Theo, how does it feel to win the famed Exrion Prix?"

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"How does it feel?" he pulled the helmet, "-amazing," he smiled, sweat sparkled against the slightly flushed cheeks, "-every racer has a dream to compete on an international level, the grand championship is a proving ground for the elite. After many years of failures, my team and I have reached the summit," he laughed, mechanics in the background waved their wrenches as well, "-I'm very grateful and honored."

“Thank you for the kind words,” nodded the interviewer who turned at the camera, “-we’ll join shortly for the prize ceremony,” the screen swapped for highlights of the event. A narrator spoke of the long journey the teams walked, the sacrifices made along, and the effort it took to reach the world stage.

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Shy out the entrance hall, an outward passage leads to the track’s inner area, the garage area whereby an oval-shaped road accommodates the various teams who lined the many large buildings. Access is restricted, two intimidatingly dressed gentlemen waited with weapons at their backs. The footsteps scattered in a dancing fashion against the tiled stairs leading outside. The shadow cast by the cool and gentle interior swaps for well-cared foliage of trees lining the walkway that gave onto a two-lane road ending in a massive gate to the right. He turned and approached the entrance; the guards nodded and opened the gates without verification. Tow trucks carried broken cars; some toppled during the race, others crashed into their fellow racers, and an unfortunate few drove straight into an empty wall.

Continuing the journey shortly gave onto the rest area, mechanics worked whilst the racers and workers had their break via drinks through vending machines. The departments were numbered alongside bearing their team’s name, ‘Raven,’ read across one of the warehouses. A large corridor ending in large gates went from one side to the other, in the middle were the workers and the cars. Supply trucks were a stone throw away at a different area. Hands in pockets, a recognizable figure wandered into the ‘work’ area, “-My lord,” cried a simple mechanic, “-why are you here?” he shook.

“Is it hard to deduce?” he smiled, “-I came to congratulate the winning team,” hearing the title be called, those working other stations rushed to the center.

“You shouldn’t have,” said the mechanics.

“Good work needs be rewarded,” he said, standing on higher ground, the wind gracefully flew in his direction, even the sun seemed to give the spotlight, “-in celebrations of having won the Grand Prix, I hereby grant a fully-paid one week vacation to Alpha’s Odgawoan, the De Costle stripe.” The announcement brought tears to their faces, the hard work was recognized. *Incoming Message: éclair.* “Master, transport waits at the entrance.”

Scenery changes from the race track to a road running within groves and meadows toward a tightly sloped hill, upon reaching the summit – it gave onto a great view over Rotherham. The voyage continued till the three skyscrapers – the car pulled at the back entrance whereby a lift headed for an office. It opened to a pristinely immaculate hallway of which had an open view of the town below. A tap clicked the locks, the door opened to a dark office which lit automatically. Various displays toggled to life – the windows tainted to a gentle black.

‘Sigh,’ he exhaled, ‘-it’s done,’ he smiled, ‘-Raven won the Championship. We’ve come a long way, a very long way,’ he thought, ‘-from X102 to X110, the past eight years have been tough, Phantom lost prestige in the business world and Arda grew to a shell of its prior glory. For three years nothing went our way, business was bad, very bad, our companies bordered bankruptcy, if not for Raven, Phantom would have fallen into debt. X102 to X105; the Haggard dynasty was forced to live frugally, Phantom sank – research stopped. Phantom was forced to give the drug manufacturing to us, Snow and Cimier established a stronghold in Kreston – the drug market is highly contested. The Dark-Guilds no longer stand at the top. Elendor forced the Overlord to take refuge in Hidros... profits took a massive hit. The Great Collapse

truly hurt us and our livelihood, sacrifices were made. My focus was on Arda and the economic crisis – life grew painful for the people. We won the war and reconquered the province – the Haggard Dynasty became the ruling family. We couldn't tax the people, Glenda's agricultural reformed was used to feed the starving kingdom. Between Phantom and Arda, I chose Arda and Glenda. On the other side, Hidros failed in negotiations with Alpha, soon, the Federation truly broke into non-aggression pacts and trade agreements. We departed as a family, each picking the survival of their kingdom over friendship. It had to be done, and I don't blame anyone. Alpha's northernmost province was captured by the Empire, and to this day, the fighting continues since Alpha teleported inside the Southern province of Ease(within the main continent) and conquered their trading town. It's a battle of numbers and attrition, the Empire has quantity whilst Alpha has quality, the war is being fought arduously. Frankly, the battles are mostly being settled on the sea of the Aisl Ocean. Julius and I knew holding onto grudges would bring our downfall. Therein, I decided to forget the past and move forward, the identity of they who caused such an upheaval grew less of a concern. Survival over petty squabbles. In the new year of X105, we established the Bank of Arda, there was but one way to kickstart our economy, and it was the creation of Gold. We artificially inflated the economy, granted the people loans to restart their lives, and increased the pool behind which the currency was backed. Needless to say, six months later, Arda elapsed the standard of living and grew prosperous. Villages expanded into towns, settlements built into villages, towns became cities and Glenda expanded massively. Aside from the economic crisis, there laid another trouble in the distance – the limiting factor of power, the catalytic technology employed by the major nations couldn't keep to the growing times – the growth curve straightened, bigger and better meant more power, and the latter wasn't easily obtainable. Finding power became akin to finding gold, if not better. I gambled right,' he smirked, 'I used Raven's funds to invest in Maicite and conducted research, often paying the researchers from my account to get what I needed – the project began on X102 and for the years leading to X106, I slowly acquired rights to major mines, signing an exclusive contract with Easel Run Gard to be granted the full ownership of any emergence of Maicite mines. Vanesa slothfully completed her mission of infecting part of the world, her illness had no cure, many assumed it to have been the Monster Curse that had taken plenty o' life. Smart investors and companies focused their efforts on flooding the medical market, there was profit to be made, she served as a great decoy to hide my plans. On new year's eve of X107, Phantom announces the discovery of new ore and technology to resolve the power crisis. Let me say one thing, that day, Phantom was slaughtered by calls from the major nations, everyone wanted to get a piece of the action, investors came in hordes, we sky-rocketed in price as if it were nothing. By the end of the month, Phantom surpassed Elon's Dynasty, after which the two signed a formal agreement to be a united company named Adam, the profits were sent into better research, the University of Rotherham grew into the best university in Hidros – Magiology's focus shifted to the effects it had on Maicite. Let's say the Empire was not pleased by our efforts, more power to use meant better weapons – the Monopoly the Cobalt Unit came to possess after Phantom's fall was returned. Hard as they tried, catalyst and use of Maicite were exclusive to us, Phantom had control over the world's most important commodity, Power. X107 to X110, the Haggard Dynasty regained our prestige.'

Knock, knock,

"Enter."

"Master," said a lovely lady dressed in blue, "–éclair and I have been waiting..."

“Yui,” he said, “-I apologize, there were things I needed to complete before leaving for the party.”

“Whatever you say, master,” she chuckled, “-Midne and the others wait.” The location shifted from the skyscraper to another newly built building to the west of the three pillars. Renowned stars and starlets were among the guests. Dusk sprawled, Igna found himself before a carpet stair leading inside Apexi and Ansoft’s headquarters. After Julius had talks with Amsey, the duo decided to pitch in and rescue their organization, with the failing economy at said time, it was hard, if not for Igna’s gamble in the Maicite market, the Great Collapse would have been the end of Phantom and the Haggard. Tonight’s event was a screening of a movie the two agencies collaborated on – the story of the fallen Starlet, the same movie said to have been lost, the project Staxius began and never completed. The starring actress was Aceline – after the tour of X102, the various idols split to follow their own paths, Apexi wasn’t able to hold them for long. They swore to remain friends, a promise of which they followed. Years later, Julius gathered idols, many were deep in the Ogdawoan life, opting for an acting career – their struggles to maintain relevancy was short-lived. All changes, and soon, many known idols sunk deeper into irrelevancy – save for one, Aceline, she kept her promise and climbed the ladder to stardom with her trusted manager, Scott.

“Cousin, over here,” waved a cheerful Julius.

“How goes it, cousin,” returned Igna.

“Good,” they joined in a friendly embrace.

“I see Malley’s doing fine,” he glanced at her stomach.

“Oh please,” she chuckled, “-it’s heavier than it looks,” she said.

“It must be,” he nodded.

“Congratulations are in order,” said Julius, “-the Raven’s won the Championship.”

“The victory is fine and all,” they followed up the stairs, “-the true importance was the gathering of foreign teams. A truly international competition aiming to foster good relations between the kingdoms.”

“Alpha has it rough,” commented Julius.

“Long as the war doesn’t affect us, we’re fine.”

“Don’t be so heartless,” the interior showered the guests with golden lights.

“Not heartless, just indifferent.”