

Death Magic 831

Chapter 831: Bleu Aizo

The returning voyage occurred without much of a hassle. Alta chose silence over pondering the matter they discussed. Her attention greatly scanned a vintage bottle of wine, dated four decades prior. The price on those pieces fetched quite a sum in auction. The endless supply of money made possible via their fingers in many cups, Igna's call action rekindled the wandering spirits. The outside frames twisted and turned till a familiar arrangement of fences, the gradual slope and cleanly vested bystanders – the noble district. 'He had to bring old memories,' pondered Igna casually waiting on the car to stop, '-I've lost grasp on Leko and his academy, last I remember was the wife taking over, and said wife being responsible for his death, or so I think. Well, I've long since buried the hatchet. A tough month stands before us, the friendly visit of Markus will forge the Alrosia agreement in the public's view, on paper we're allies.' Many kindly dressed visitors kept their walks confined in the inner-castle town; the latter became an attraction spot for those wanting to have a taste of nobility. With money to spare, Igna made it vehemently clear that visitors were allowed on the premises. Security, Phantom, the best there is to hire. The reception was warm and friendly, the doors opened with help of an assisting butler, he ducked into the light, heard his name in chants behind at the castle town, he breathed a smile and waved, the watchers reddened. Skip atop the stairs gave onto the massively open reception-hall, men in suits and ladies in formal attire made the trip from corridor to corridor – during Gallienne's rule, the castle was merely a stronghold used to gather nobles and host gatherings. Igna's rule spat in tradition's face, so was the thought of the archaic leaders, old and proud heritages unwilling to break the culture. In classic response, he took heed of their plight and went ahead into the current state, the castle felt more of a massive office. Many rooms, empty and unused, were turned into meeting places, a whole wing, the military area, was striped clean save a few rooms, and overhauled into offices, reception, and file storage for the companies attached to the royal family. Phantom, its subsidiaries – a branch handled by Julius, and Raven – with éclair as the leader. More additions came in the form of space allotment to the Gaien Council, the members were given shelter in the apartment complex owned by Phantom on the outskirts of the noble district.

The old engine altered into a performing beast; the single step inside brightened his mood and day. There was joy on the worker's faces, the employed retainers, most uneducated with a lot of talent, were granted money and time to focus on what they wanted to accomplish. A new ruler meant changes, Igna's alteration strongly benefited the workers associated with him, if they weren't pleased, how could he order them around.

The alchemic tower, the tallest in the castle, was given to the judicial department. On said table was Bleu Aizo and the best the Aizo Academy had to offer. Raide Rosie's law firm worked solely for Phantom and Raven. The recruitment of Bleu took the world by surprise, for the man reached celebrity status after becoming the youngest attorney in history, he fought one case after the other, turning the narrative and beating the opposition, many of the fights ended before trials via settlements. Somewhere on the way, the young lawyer lost his way.

The night was late, the cloud had settled over the Dorchestrian landscape, castle Garsley lit mildly, he ambled into the inclined line of buildings. On said day, the talented fighter lost his first case – the latter involved a daughter being abused by a visitor from a noble family. He had the facts and argued arduously to naught, the judge was corrupt – the loss meant the victim to be shamed, the scar left her

no option save leave. It had been hours, 'I need to apologize,' went across his mind, he paved his imprint on the muddied pathway, took sharp corners into the 'less' admirable part of town, drunks laughed, waitresses shook as they stood before the belligerent men. 'Geol's tavern,' was scratched on a piece of wood, the sign hung loosely off a protruding nail.

"Come on lassy, bring us more drinks," they exclaimed, the foul smell screamed sweat, alcohol, blood, and cigarette. The young waitress had her bottom touched to which the table laughed broadly, the short skirt and skimpy top didn't help her position. The innocent visage bordered crying, forced to work, she made round for all the nasty crowd. The barkeeper, an older man dressed in thick golden jewelry had his face in a newspaper. Bleu forced himself inside, held his breath, and beelined for the kitchen. The owner stopped to glare over the paper, he rolled his eyes and continued reading. Muffles cries came from the inner room, "-hey, are you ok?" another waitress had her hands tightly around the sink, she hurled blood and sniffled, her nose bled, "-I'm fine," she pushed his hand away. The crying came from another worker whose feet were spotted under a cubicle, "-I feel bad for her," she said, "-another innocent face lost to the rough world of town Garsley, the old man took her back a few hours ago. It's bad," the blood coldly washed down the sink, "-she'll get used to the life sooner or later," she stood, "-if you're looking for Belle, try her room. She's locked herself ever since the trial. Sorry we couldn't be of help," she patted his shoulder and left.

"Ruby," he spun, "-I'm sorry for not being able to help."

"Don't worry," said a kind, understanding smile, "-it's fine, I'm used to the pain. I testified against the owner; my punishment's deserved." Sobbing halted, hinge unlocked, the innocent face lass held her head to the ground and walked.

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'Unbelievable,' he gritted and took the backdoor, 'I made Ruby pay the price for my failure,' direction, the housing building a stone's throw away. The iron-stairs thundered under the loud stomps, the weight pulled before Belle's room and tapped. No response came, he tapped louder, nothing. '-Screw it,' he barged in, the doors weren't so steady; a darkened room exploded an ungodly smell – he choked with the intent on hurling, nose buried into his arm, he ran to a figure hanging from the ceiling fan, "-I quit," wrote in blood on the wall, "-Belle..." the hopeful smiles he remembered replaced into her horrid last expression. A secondary pair of steps resounded to stop at the door, it entered.

"Bleu," it said, "-stand up," warm hands grabbed his shoulder.

"Igna?" he blinked, "-why are y-you?"

"Long story, I had a falling out with my companions. There's nothing I can do save taking requests from an acquaintance. I need money," he looked at the body and room, "-I heard a noble was tried for the assault of a young lass, I guess she's the victim."

"Why are you here?"

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"Don't raise your voice," he glared, "-I'm not an outlet for the failure. As I said, I need money."

"You're going to blackmail the young noble?"

“Not anymore, the girl’s dead. I’d have hung her testimony over his head and forced the case outside of Garsley, you know, tip off law enforcement. Queen Gallienne hates the exploitation of people,” he pushed the weak-kneed Bleu and opened the blinders, the scene told of a struggle, her body and clothes spoke of her last state of mind. Igna took off his glasses and observed, ‘-the message was painted in blood, her fingers had a thick lingering stain. The chaos is not of her doing, someone rummaged through the apartment, the immaculately clean cabinet and well-arranged decorates tell of the attention to detail. Looking at the wall and floor where the mess hasn’t stained her domicile, the assumption checks out,’ next, he moved to the door and leaned to examine the locks, ‘-signs of breaking. The locks are new and wouldn’t break easy,’ he looked to Bleu, “-did the door open effortlessly?”

“Yeah, I barged and it opened without tension,” he clambered against the wall, “-what are you doing?”

“I know how she died,” he said, “-after losing the trial, she bought a new lock and hid in her apartment. Look at it,” he pointed, “-shiny. I’m sure she wanted to sleep off the trouble, alas, the opposition had other ideas. They broke in her room,” he moved to the body, whereby laid telling signs of her arms being held by stronger grips, “-they forced her onto the bed,” reserving the grueling detail, “-made their dues and left. What puzzles me is the mess, someone had her pinned and another, maybe others, went through her possessions. For a decrepit-looking apartment – she lived comfortably, the bed, the cabinet, and the wardrobe, it’s all-new. The writing,” he paused with arms crossed.

“She ran over and wrote her final message on the wall?”

“Wrong,” the head shook, “-it’s meant to look like a suicide. They want us to believe an assault led to her killing herself. The thickness of the stain doesn’t match. Imagine fingerpainting, the more one strokes, the lesser grows the line, and the stain doesn’t thicken, it lessens considering the medium is blood. She doesn’t have any open wounds or places to draw the medium. The strokes are too gentle and straight, her state of mind, the panic – she wouldn’t have steady hands. Look at where the ‘I’ starts, barely in reach if she tiptoed, why would she ever tiptoe, common-sense says one would write below eye level.”

Bleu’s confused deposition settled, the failure no longer hung over his judgment, “-are you saying she was assaulted then murdered?”

“Yes, and the culprits knew where she lived. The noble might have paid for her silence. Tell me, did you notice anything strange?”

“The owner,” he blinked, “-he owned jewelry...”

“-And I assume he didn’t before?”

“No,” the pieces fell into place.

“They made a mistake by adding the message, the width, and curvature point to a literate female, and it’s wise to use another female to write a fake note. The culprits are those close to her. I’ll take the owner.”

“-And I’ll take Ruby,” he gritted, ‘-she lied to me.’

Later that day, Igna hurled a confession from the owner, a human trafficking racket was uncovered, guards from the capital arrived in armored vehicles, “-what of the full-story?” inquired Bleu, those responsible were hurled into trucks.

“Belle must have uncovered evidence on the racket. The noble’s unrelated, he was made to take the fall. Your arrival gave her a chance to escape and prevent further innocent victims. The ring-leaders are powerful, they were merely pawns. Ruby lured the regulars to barge into Belle’s room and do as they please. Since castle Grasley’s under the Goldberg’s jurisdiction, a noble family who doesn’t care, the lackluster manufacturing of proof would have ruled in favor of suicide. Why wouldn’t they, she lost a massive case, tis natural.”

“Who wrote the message?”

“You know full well,” Igna replied coldly. The culprits scrolled at Bleu, cussing and threatening his life. Shortly after, her body was cremated, they watched dearly.

“My job’s done,” said Igna turning from the non-existent crowd, “-I can still blackmail the noble,” he smiled, “-he’s not out of the woods yet.”

“Igna!”

“What?”

“Can I accompany you in thy travels?”

“Sure, you pay for yourself, I’m broke,” he shrugged, “-don’t expect justice, I’ll do what I need for my survival.”

“I promise I won’t get in the way.” Such was how the duo came to become a team. And in those hard years of fighting against the world, a good relation built, the Aizo Group, mainly by influence from the son, Igna was able to gain funds to further his quest in restoring the family name.

Back to current times, a familiar voice spiraled down the alchemic tower, “-Igna,” cried Bleu, “-welcome back,” he said, “-I need a favor.”

“A case?”

“Yeah, we have information on another lead on the case we fought years ago.”

“One with Belle?”

“Yes, we managed to pin the ring-leader.”

“Count me in,” he smiled, “-send them to the royal court, by Tharis’s name, they’ll have their dues.”

Chapter 832: Cellar

Good news said the first thought, Bleu wasn’t shy in pulling the king into a back-room, he obviously kept a strong watch on the passersby, “-pardon?” inquired Igna, the stagnant space breathed into life by particles of dust – the very suspicious lawyer kept a strong arm on the door, he refused to release the handle, in a way, the gesture tilted more towards terror opposed to conniving. At last, he breathed a sigh, covered his mouth, and ambled into the darkened space.

“Sorry about the sudden change,” the fingers erratically rummaged into his pockets – the phone, the wallet, he dug till a feeble slice, “-here,” he pulled a crumpled piece of paper. “-The case is important,” the lips told otherwise, “-this calls for thy attention.” Jumbled mess in hand, it unrolled it on his knee and read, ‘-the cult of Aturnus, worshippers of the god Esyter, have been found lurking around the castle. The report suggests an inner link. On further investigation, the knots tightened around the princess and an unidentified noble. We have reason to suspect much of ploy is being organized,’ a flash and naught, he watched the lawyer, “-you think this true?”

“Yes, I have my reasons to believe so. Her majesty has been acting rather suspiciously after the coronation, she’s on edge.”

“The cult of Aturnus, tis a first I’ve heard of them?”

“Majesty, remember the cult of the mistress of plague – the god Esyter is a supposed inheritor of her powers, the second coming or so is what I’m told.”

Therein laid a grave look on Igna’s face – of which turned to be the mild reflection adding features to the blank stare, “-I’ll investigate the matter in my own time, what of the case, when’s the trial?”

“Later today,” he smiled, “-a high priest in the Tharis sect was going to be the judge,” he paused, “-master?”

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“I’m here, you’d be more at ease if I take the trial?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “-it’s one of the many duties and advantages of being king, the law is thy word.”

“Even if you represent my kingdom, I will be neutral.”

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“Nothing more I could ask,” he escape the room, leaving Igna to ravel in the dust, ‘-judging a case about human trafficking. Supposed it’ll be a nice change of pace,’ he left shortly after. Part of him couldn’t shake the feeling of misplay, a cult in the royal castle was an insult to him and the religious devotees. A seemingly short walk grew into a marathon, every step taken was stopped by a troubled person looking for advice. Retainers, nobles, lawyers, statesmen, politicians, it didn’t matter, they swarmed to him for advice – with a mild smile and a warm feeling in his chest, he accepted and helped unconditionally. Minutes elapsed into the early afternoon; the watch shown 14:32 – the mass of questions dissipated into the open air. He took the outer walkway, a long arrangement of terraces made to be walkways, windows replaced with pillars linked with balustrades. The pleasant breeze carried the promenade further inside where laid a labyrinth of smaller corridors, guides to the maze were maids who nonchalantly turned corners and laughed in conversations.

‘I’m out,’ he exited through the backdoor, stepping onto a lush field of wild vegetation. The gardener had an unforeseen talent in growing the wildest of plants, ‘-beauty lies in unpredictability. When one reaches the border were anxiety clashes with admiration, tis then, true beauty is revealed,’ such was a quote from the very spiritual man. Down a few stairs and 180 to the right, another set of lesser tended stairs buried into the ground, he took each with precision. Weathering of the rocks and moss were commonplace, a thick doorway – the cellar, cried a loud thud. The ceiling shifted, or so it appeared, he

ambled through, checking each corner by habit. Barrels of wine and liquor were stored at a moisty-cold temperature, rats screeched their disbelief, borrowing their heads into cracks. The unmeasured arrangement of the stone block was a tell-tell sign of how long the area stood, and by a guess, centuries. The inner-sanctum, located under the castle in a massive arrangement of hallways and empty rooms – was quite the location to find. By reports from the few guards taking routes into the underground, it was said the ceiling was tall with a pentagram-like kiosk in the middle. Not that it mattered how it looked, Igna dug deeper into the beast's belly – many paths had been used for ages, some bore footsteps others, lesser human steps.

'Strange,' he stopped at an intersection, '-there's flowing current from the right.' Where common sense said to go deeper, an inclined slope headed for the top, he squeezed through the tight archway till a bright explosion, the fragrance of flowers invaded the nostrils, he held his hand over the eyebrows, adjusting to the brighter light took minutes, he squinted and locked onto the pentagram-shaped kiosk. The style bearing resemblance to the olden-tradition of curves and intricate flowery design, each cover bore a red-colored poll, a dried river bed, once flowing down to a moat, held but the sharp curvature of the river. Simple steps lined by rocks led to the construction, light shone from an ensemble of crystals and ores. '-I imagine this place to have been a haven. A flowing river, well-cared terraforming, what is a man to ask.' *Clap, clap,* echoed, he followed the path till a sorry-sight, '-blood,' spotted from a few meters away. He leaped, skipping the dried moat, and landed on the elevated construction, '-the sign of blood,' he closely examined, '-the rumors are true, someone's been here,' *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* finger to the stain, the solid layers cackled into tiny droplets – a sudden pull forced them into a hover, '-the older the blood, the deeper the crimson color,' he paused at each grain, '-right, there's some that dates a few months,' *snap,* it merged into an upright floating arrow, a tap on the tail flung it into the kiosk's slated roof, rocking the latter. A hallowed sound murmured below, '-interesting,' the glasses came off, the sensitivity forced a squint, the tiled bed faded into a wireframe, not only did the floor disappear, so did his surrounding, the very essence of the ground vanished, '-there,' the focus laid in the center, ignorant to the outer objects, '-something's inside,' a sharp headache forced a blink, the glasses went on his nose. Open palm to the supposed hallowed ground manifested splinters of blue, white, and gold, the elements of mana manifested for his sight – complete control over the life-essence of the world, the nonsentient manifestations pulled into an orb over his palm, "-master," said a high-pitched childish voice, "-conjuration, summoning, evil," it said, "-pathway, middle, dark," the spirit imploded.

One knee to the floor, the elaborate design told of a magical circle, *Mana Control: Dark Element Variant – Convergence,* a thick cloud of smoke spiraled through his palm and bore into the center; locks clicked, the foundation dropped to ground level, no separation between the edifice and dried moat. A particular object rose from the center, the shape resembled a torture device used primarily by lustful nobles, a play on the Judas Cradle, made especially for pleasure and torment, a lot of blood drained during the process. '-Ritual,' he paused and stared, "-Come forth: Vengeance."

"Your orders, master."

"Keep guard over this area. Don't act even if there are people trespassing, observe and report, there must be another way they're entering the premises. Keep me informed the moment a presence is sensed."

"Your wishes are my command," he faded into thin air.

Five minutes later, Igna had his back to the ritual site. The kiosk and any sign of his presence were erased. The returning journey took less time, and before long, the great open-sky dawned on the dusty outfit, “-majesty,” said a passing maid, “-the suit’s dirty, shall I fetch another or would you take a bath?” an apple-fill basket rested on her hip.

“No, my dear,” he smiled, “-please carry on, I’ll care for it.”

“As is wished, majesty,” they exchanged nods.

Questions filled the mind, the library of Mantia gave nothing on the god, he scoured every book and nothing, Origin’s sense of being was lost, faded into the abyss of knowledge. Not knowing something burned the concentration – arms crossed and body on auto-response, the subconscious before the royal bedchambers.

“You know I do,” followed by laughter, “-satisfaction is one of the things I love. Will w-” the door barged, Eia blinked, her phone exclaimed another man’s voice, the attire was one lesser befitting nobility – she wore very subjective clothing, her breast almost exposed to the elements without a harness to shield her virtue.

It took one look, he shook his head and passed her side, turned at the walk-in wardrobe, meanwhile, the phone kept on asking questions, the speaker screamed whilst she stood dumbfounded, unable to act or blink, ‘-there,’ he grabbed a gray-colored suit made in remembrance to the Claireville Academy uniform he once proudly owned, the golden buttons were replaced and kept a low-key color whilst the cufflinks were made to bear the dragon insignia. Gold, precious metals, the little accessories fetch little over five figures. A combination spell cleaned his body and hair in a matter of seconds, matching tie and shoe, pairing the formal attire, he exited the wardrobe to a frightened Eia.

“Igna?” she said.

Nothing, he went pass, stopped at the door and threw a cold regard, “-Eia, long as you don’t interfere with me or put my name or my family’s reputation in jeopardy, thou art free to live thine life,” a thud followed into distant heavy steps.

She broke onto her knees, “-Eia, why are you not responding?”

“Sorry,” she said, “-I was interrupted by Igna.”

“Did he find out?” screamed a troubled voice.

“I can’t say. He knows, my outfit, the phone, he knows – I can’t,” tears dropped, “-he told me something and I heard, if you cross me, I’ll kill you.”

“It doesn’t matter, I’ll free thee soon. Besides, we already have the seed planted for a legitimate heir to the throne, no way we’ll let him spit on tradition.” Her sorry expression turned at a portrait of Queen Gallienne sat proudly beside the prince consort. ‘-mother,’ she gulped, ‘-am I doing the right thing?’ time elapsed, her outfit changed into one suitable for the castle, phone in pocket, she exited the suffocating space and made into the altered castle, ‘-people, everywhere,’ she observed, ‘-he’s changed the castle without giving a second thought. Unknown faces, how can he trust them?’

“Have you heard,” whispered a group of very pretty ladies, “-the king’s helping the recruits.”

"I know, the place feels more like an office, and I love it. A friendly atmosphere to better the country, he's the best candidate to rule our people." Interest piqued, the queen matched the group and ended outside, to a newly refurbished building, large and tall, the sign read, '-cafeteria.'

The roads were crowded, families made back and forth, the orchard, flowerbeds, and garden were made public parks – anyone with complaint had rights to storm the castle and meet a representative directly. The very essence of Rosesopian business and understanding was pulled into the castle walls. The connection between rulers and people was closer than ever. 'When did everything change?' the walking slowed into bafflement, '-what did he do?' she entered the cafeteria to see nobles and commoners laughing and eating – the disparities were present and kept for inner thought, mutual respect was the main dish on the menu. A large screen displayed the King's adventure in Alphaia, a performance of a lifetime in the company of Markus, '-why are they?' a seat caught her drop, "-majesty," said a casually dressed visitor, "-rare to see the queen out of her bedchambers." The mention attracted attention, unlike anything she'd experienced.

"-How's the king?"

"Is he kindhearted?"

"Does he change once behind closed doors?" a barrage of inquisitive questions centered around Igna, the waves crashed, she drowned till white-hair pulled her focus, "-Igna," she said to which the others turned. He was in the company of Bleu, "-majesty," they waved, to which he returned their attention with a respectful nod, "-have a pleasant day."

Chapter 833: Words

"Isn't she the?"

"The queen?" jested Igna, "-yeah, it's her, ignore," they followed the pathway. Cars waited at the entrance, Eia, trapped in the flock of peasants earnestly tried to gain his attention, in said moment, the path of escape merged into the hues of strangers.

'He ignored me?' her raised arm dropped in embarrassment, the few clients noticed and immediately whispered to their friends. A spotlight of 'under breath,' comments made the rounds, the center of attention, Eia, had her heart beating in her fingertips, the feet froze, '-how dare he,' she ducked through the double door and rushed for the castle. Returning visitors stared at her, '-they're judging me,' she gritted, '-how dare he put me through- ' anger and embarrassment blinded her sight till she accidentally knocked over a demi-human toddler. He fell hard on the marble floor, "-MA-MA," he cried aloud, the uncaring crowd rushed.

"There," a lady hurried to her balling child's side, "-it's going to be okay," she held him tightly, the bystanders scattered comments on the behavior.

"At least apologize to the boy," a mob gathered.

éclair shuffled across the hall in passing, "-minister?" said the accompanying helper, "-is something the matter?" he inquired looking towards the gathered crowd.

"Seems the queen's in trouble," exhaled éclair, "-come on," he made for the cacophonous chants asking for forgiveness. Two scenes played simultaneously, one subjective and the other objective, the former

played in Eia's head, '-they're looking at me as if I have done wrong. They're blaming me, they hate me,' her fist clenched, '-nobodies dare order me around in my castle. Mother didn't raise me to be thrown by the likes of them,' her angered glare rose to the boy, a flip toggled, the cries turned yells. For the latter, in éclair's point of view, the crowd was calm and collected, most noises rose from the chatter – an occurrence most common after any incident.

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"What happened?" interjected éclair.

"Prime minister," said the mother, "-nothing major my lord. My son was running around and was knocked by her majesty the queen."

"My apologies," he said, "-was the boy hurt?"

"Not really," she smiled and cuddled the boy, "-a little dust on his pants that's all."

"Royalty or not, one must apologize for knocking an innocent boy to the ground," said a cautious bystander, "-it's only fitting."

"This isn't the place to start a conflict," said éclair, "-the boy's fine," he helped the duo stand, "-please, make yourselves comfortable."

"Thank you, prime minister," nodded the mother, the crowd dissipated, "-god damn queen of naught," said a maliciously inflammatory comment, "-she sits and does nothing. You heard the rumors of her affairs; I feel bad for our king – dealing with a spoilt brat."

"Don't speak aloud," hushed others.

"What, am I not allowed to speak my mind?" he shrugged, "-I have rights to my opinion."

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Ire glazed the motion, '-crossed the line,' the eyelids widened, the fingers traced the comment's originator, "-you..."

"-I'd shut my mouth if I were you," breathed a secondary whisper, "-reporters are ready to raise hell if her majesty so much as raises her voice. I don't care if the fault was the boy's, tis royalty's duty to take responsibility and accept whatever is dished. Nasty rumors are floating," the tone deepened, "-I have the recordings of thee bearing all and broadcasting acts of pleasure to Nicola. Trust me, if I wanted, you'd be in jail for adultery," a sharp jab forced her straight, "-try and trouble my lord; queen or not, you will be eliminated."

"Prime minister?" hailed the assistant, "-why the whisper?"

"Oh, nothing much," said a friendly voice, "-was catching up with my friend, isn't that right, majesty?" a boldly uninterested mien stared at her soul.

"-Y-yes."

"Good, let's move on, shall we?"

‘What’s wrong with me,’ her hands trembled, ‘I felt death on my back,’ she pulled on her collar, ‘if I cross them, it’s going to be a bloodbath,’ éclair’s figure quietly left, a sense of fear had her follow his movement, ‘he’s gone,’ she breathed a sigh whilst he cut the corner, until a sudden outburst, éclair’s cold expression locked onto her face and waited for a few seconds. ‘I-I-If h-he t-tell on m-me,’ she hunched and coughed, ‘I’ll b-b-be d-dead.’

“My lord éclair, what are you waiting for?” inquired the helper.

“Nothing, nothing, I was checking on someone.”

“Checking or intimidating?”

“What’s the difference?”

15:45 struck on the clock, parking to the royal court filled at a rapid pace. The case to be tried concerned the capture of a certain Rodle Kornwell, investigation led to his conviction. Igna and Bleu pulled onto the scene, the media was in a frenzy wanting to watch the trial as it was the first the new king had to give judgment upon. At 16:00, two sides faced Igna, the kingdom against the defendant, representative of the latter was Aven-Lit, a law firm specialized in fighting the state. Juries were brought as neutral parties – arch-priest Kahe of the Right, sat beside Igna, he wore the religious uniform of Tharis. Without time wasted, a long-winded debate unfolded, witnesses, evidence, the case Bleu built against Rodle and his organization, Sune ‘ol Kia, were accused of human trafficking, prostitution, pornography, and murder.

Aven-Lit built a good rebuttal against Bleu, however, the man’s undefeated streak wouldn’t be broken. At 17:30, the juries and Igna secluded themselves to decide the punishment.

“I say we let the man walk,” added one, “-let’s not kid ourselves, everyone’s been paid to say no.”

“I guess so. Justice is nothing more to who can pay. This system of juries assisting the judge won’t last.”

“Why bring us in, it works for lower-ranked courts, not the Royal standard, here is judgment reserved for the king himself,” they shrugged, “-majesty, far as we’re concerned, we’ve been paid, the decision is in thy hands.”

“The lovely world of capitalism,” he yawned, “-I wasn’t paid, therefore, I’m sentencing the man to prison. He’ll have a great time on the Yanao Isle. The populous need to understand how justice works, proof, righteousness, all is subjective, too bad the defendant dug himself an inescapable hole.” The break ended; the audience assembled in anticipation. All settled quietly, “-before I pass judgment, there’s something which needs to be put forth. The juries were bribed to have Rodle walk, in the authority of my crown and the acceptance of arch-priest Kahe, I hereby decree the Royal Court to void the jury system – for today onward, the cases will be fought fairly. Assigned judges will have full control over how their cases are tried,” he side-glanced the juries, all hid their faces in shame, the defendant tried arguing a mistrial to which he was promptly shut out, “-I, Igna Haggard, King of Hidros, order the following, Rodle Kornwell is to be imprisoned for life on the Yanao Isle. Members of Sune ‘ol Kia, those who’ve taken lives will be tortured and killed. May this serve as an example,” Igna had more to say concerning new policies.

18:00, a satisfied crowd of bystanders wished death on the captive, law-enforcement forced him into an armored truck, interviewers lined the entrance, waiting for Igna, “-Majesty, tell us more about the judicial system, why are the change?”

“Laws are made to be equal, and those who don’t adhere to the limitation will pay consequences. Our way of living differs from the rest of the world, I don’t encourage killing, however, there’s the act of Dualism in place, tis the Hidrosian way of life. Long as the parties consent to a battle, none will be held liable for the other person’s death. What I absolutely despise is the senseless killing of innocents. We’ve lived under the threat of death, everyone’s taught how to fight and survive – in a time of incertitude, we must firm ourselves to the guiding principles of our ancestors. I am hypocritical by not following my words, disrobing the virtues of the olden ways to suit my need. Still, my intent is on following the ways which make us who we are, not old customs made to better the rich and impoverish us, the people. Before pointing fingers at my wealth, understand I started from nothing and built to where I am. I don’t have memories of my childhood, I was found battered and injured outside the Azure Wall,” he paused, “-what I’m saying is this – right and wrong are subjective, instead of fighting in a court of law, I strongly recommend settling difference outside the system of law. The Act of Dualism will promote independence, and by all means, it doesn’t stop at killing, a simple game of coin-flip could be used to settle an argument.”

“Pardon my asking, will the act of Dualism not make a mockery of the judicial system?”

“You’re right, it will make a mockery of the judicial system.”

“Why, does that not defeat the purpose of the law?”

“No, let’s take you, for example, say you sexually harassed a person, the latter makes a formal complaint to the court of law, and you’re forced before a judge, add in the fact that you’re innocent,” he pointed at the reporter’s tattoo, “-the prejudice of skin tattoos linking to immortal acts has long plagued our society. What then, what would you do?”

“I’d profess my innocence.”

“Right, and what if I didn’t know you were a reporter, what then, the consensus would fall on the lawyers to convey said innocence. Now we say the man failed and you’re charged with assault, how would that make you feel?”

“Betrayed?”

“Yes.”

“Where does this lead, majesty?” fired a skeptic listener.

“To my point about independence. Common sense says not to further aggravate the issue and stay clear of the accuser, tis where we fail. If you had been upfront and confronted the lady, professed you were innocent, and had the evidence to back thy action or apologize sincerely, there’s a fine chance she might accept. She would want the one responsible to pay. Wrongfully convicting someone is a sensation of guilt none has to experience – the case becomes a situation of he said she said.”

“Still not getting the point, majesty.”

“There’s what I mean, there is no point. She thinks you’re the culprit and you know you’re innocent. The judge doesn’t know the facts, nor does anyone.”

“The ambiguousness...” paused the skeptic one, “-if nothing is ever resolved, what’s the point of justice, what’s there to this whole ordeal?”

“See, the very idea of giving justice is flawed. The ideal world exists only to better itself; your ideal world is yours, not another’s. Dualism allows for trivial matters to be resolved by taking into account your ideal outcome, emotions against emotion, the stronger wins, and the loser will by heart know he was wrong,” he returned to the tattooed reporter, “-to your quandary, there’s but a simple solution, confront the accuser and say with chest you’re innocent. If she doesn’t listen, use your freedom to confront her slanderous act, wrongful persecution will always have prejudice over the assumed act,” he paused, “-my apologies, the interview grew into a lecture about how I see the world. Nothing is fair, not even nature – we must learn cohabitation and mutual understanding, be open-minded to grant the benefit of the doubt,” with a nod, he left the court ground into a luxurious car.

Later said evening, the given interview harbored both support and conflict from other leaders and philosophers. By touching on the idea of independence, the idea of self-accountability laid itself in the minds of the educated.

“What was that about?” inquired Julius over the phone.

“The interview?” he sat underneath a willow tree, “-I don’t know, I had to say something, and the best way to muddle my actions was to add as many open-ended thoughts as I could. Break their focus hides the true intention.”

“You took a risk, who knows what the outcome will be.”

“Doesn’t matter, my word is final – long as the kingdom prospers, there will be no complaint,” the call ended, ‘-it’s funny,’ he chuckled, ‘-a very funny interview.’

Chapter 834: Unplanned Scheme

1st of February, time elapsed, Igna found himself sitting before a computer, the day had just risen. The interview of a week prior gave quite the shock. The news persisted on the popular talk shows, touching on a sensitive matter was bound to make headlines, and in the rabble, a lesser-known show, Ion’s Tal, shone from the rest. The host, a scholar who’d graduated from Kiz’ University, ranked the 9th in the Hidros, sat and argued what was said. The more elaboration, the lesser grew to understand – the subject piqued interest, what was justice, what was right, nothing was set – nor was there a beacon to guide the judgment. Unlike the other shows, most of which took an opposite standpoint against the King’s words, Tal sat down and said, “-Self-accountability.”

The backlash affected many courts of law, the act of dualism, a law passed centuries ago – was brought under scrutiny from humanitarian organizations. Where conflict booms, so does the people’s interest and affection.

“Master,” a feeble knock gave into a smaller room, one far from the royal chambers, closer to the butler’s quarters. The bed wasn’t suited for royalty, under a closer lens, the composite was but feathers

and hay, the floor, mildly uncleaned as for light, the sun shone through a gated airway. The place was midway between habitable and lair, “-we have trouble.”

“What could it be?” he stood, pushed the chair, grabbed a random shirt, and made for the corridor, “-is it the interview?”

“Yes, media’s swayed influence citing an ulterior motive by removing juries from the trial. Conveniently overlooking the corruption, seems old dynasties are pulling strings to make their voices heard. Undermining their status was bound to result.”

“-I know,” he interjected, “-my decision is final,” they took the outer walkway, crossed many faces, leaped onto a bike, and accelerated toward the north, “-what’s the trouble about?” he asked once pulling onto the populated roads.

“We’ve been asked to face a council of scholars to debate what you said.”

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“A debate?” the bike blasted through the stationary targets, zigzagging lane to lane, “-will it serve any purpose?”

“I don’t know,” shrugged éclair, “-the interview spawned conflict. Tis the king’s job to resolve their fear and worry.” The media center shortly leaped in view after a few minutes’ drive at full speed. A lesser popular studio was host to the central news of Rosespire – on the set-hours, people tuned to check the countries entourage. An old scruffy guardsman hailed at the duo.

“A king on a bike,” he commented, “-long are the days where a prince would arrive on an armored horse,” exhaled a wheeze.

“Signs of the changing time,” off the beast, helmets pinched under their arms, the prime minister and king showed themselves to the entrance after a flyover going from one studio to the next, the streets kindly held scattered leaves. Workers took their jolly time in picking trash, the visitors were uninterested in keeping the area clean, bushes held cups and empty bottles.

“Shameful,” muttered Igna closing at a revolving door. A tight squeeze gave onto a densely confined atmosphere. The reception was large, yet, the guests in said area chewed the openness.

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“Do they all have a stick up their bottom?”

“Majesty,” quipped éclair, “-they’re the scholars...”

“My opponents?” he paused briefly midway from the door and the reception desk; menacingly watched the line of older men bearing the signature ‘dad’s figure’. “-Those are the losers who’ve dared question my morals. Well, I did spout whatever came to mind before; doesn’t matter, what I said reflects the current state of Hidros. To lessen my workload, I better make the ruling quick and efficient.’ Arguments, counter-arguments, he was ready to head into battle. Once the off-stage introduction was complete, the news anchor took energetically at the headlines. It would be a while till their segment, viewership skyrocketed into the tens of thousands. At precisely 10:30, the segment was pulled onto the scene, a live broadcast streamed over the Arcanum, garnering double the amount.

“King Igna,” said a man with a heavy lower-chin, “-inferring to the Act of Dualism, is the law not barbaric for our advanced society?”

“King Igna, the very idea of leaving a man’s fate onto another’s blasphemy. Only God is true to judge us, inhabitants of the mortal realm.”

“King Igna, the thoughts are idealistic and infant-like at best. Let’s be honest, you wanted to make the Royal Court a place where only the king and select candidates had ultimate power. Ruling the kingdom isn’t enough, you seek to rule our collective freedom.” The questions kept on firing, Igna sat in his chair confidently, actively listening to their query and finding flaws. The mediator, the news anchor, soon passed the baton to Igna. A smug expression laid on the scholar’s faces, “-act of dualism,” he returned coldly, “-we could make an example right here. I invoke the rights passed by the ancestors and declare battle of wits against the scholars,” he smiled, “-on conditions I win, thou art to reveal the truth.”

“What truth?” they narrowed; “-we have nothing to hide.”

“Oh you do,” he laughed, “-why is it we have a representative of Tharis’s sect in our entourage?” he looked to his right, where sat the arch-priest, “-the blessed from Goddess Tharis’ sect have the boon of truth. They know when a person’s lying, the scale of order is proof,” to which, a golden representative of her symbol of power slapped onto the table, “-long story short, this is a lie-detector, but better. The devotees of the righteous god have the talent of knowing the truth and the false. I planned to discreetly implement the relic in our court of law, sadly, the pests that are the media, have laid a stain on my noble task.”

“The conditions you laid, we accept,” fired a reddened chubby visage, “-if we lose, we’ll reveal whatever truth thee say we hide.”

“Perfect,” he rubbed his hands and settled, éclair shook his head at the idiocy shown by the opposing council. One by one, their arguments against Igna were refuted, and not only that, dismantled from the very core. The tenacious scholars knew their way around, firing the questions under the pretense of drawing a statement, regardless, Igna kept calm, breaking their spirits one by one. In the end, the matter came to simplify the removal of juries of which was explained to be preceded by the Scale of Tharis, an unbiased relic blessed in detecting lies.

Twenty minutes passed, the opposition sweated buckets, “-the act of dualism is what one makes it to be,” he smiled at the other side, “-they’ve signaled defeat,” he looked at the camera, “-there’s a virus that plagues our society. It’s not the system of law nor the people at the top, no, on contrary, it’s the blasphemous media. They showed no regard in striking at the kingdom’s integrity,” he signaled the priest.

“By the blessing of the goddess of justice, I, humble servant, ask for thy divine judgment and wisdom,” a jolt of lightning activated the scale to a bright glee.

“Pardon me, majesty,” interjected the anchor, “-mind explaining what you meant by integrity?”

“Oh please, don’t act innocent. Do you or do you not know who these scholars are?”

“I don’t,” he said.

"A lie," the scale tipped to the left, "-a lie, majesty," said the priest. A hallowed look had the man anxiously look behind the camera for answers. The director and producer were held at gunpoint by Igna's guards. The price of demeaning a monarch was most often death, and they knew the facts. The arrival of support was to ensure the feed wasn't cut.

"People of Hidros, listen close, the show's producers allowed traitors," he pointed, "-defectors of our nation to return and have a say in our politics. From right to left, we have men who've been persecuted for conspiracy of terrorism," a quick tap on éclair's elbow, gave signal to hijack the feed. The live video had additional information on the opposition, "-it's shameful really. Losers trying to find a sliver of satisfaction, how adorable. Matter of fact, the news station has been very biased in opposing the kingdom, I ought to sentence them to prison for slandering my name, the king's name," he moved to the center, "-right as it would be, I won't. Freedom is one of the many advantages I wish us to have, opinions matter, long as it's yours and it doesn't interfere with another's morals. I've said time and time again, we're a nation of many races, our cultural understanding far exceeds what the world has to offer, we're united and strong. Please, my dear people, do not let the attention-hungry media take judgment from thy hand. The station will remain active, rivalry is necessary for advancement... yet, if winning becomes so important as to undermine the ways of our people, trust that I'll take the first step in culling the unworthy. For now, may thee have a good day," the feed ended, the studio breathed a collective sigh.

"Let us go," cried the scholars.

"No way," said the King, "-did you really think this would have worked?"

"There's no way," they cried, "-our faces were hidden by an alteration spell."

"Pardon me," he summoned a reflective surface, "-I must have dispelled the alteration when I walked in. Why is it you think I allowed for your flawed line of questioning? Remember well, Hidros will never be beaten by little rodents," both hands slammed and cracked the table, "-target me, not my people, else, I'll show the real reason why my nickname is the Devil of Glenda," the phone panned at the Tharis' scale showing it tipped on the righteous side. The off-air video shot by éclair, upon upload, amassed countless views, taking social media by storm.

12:00, the castle's massive stature rose in the distance, Igna kept calmly underneath a willow tree with a canvas propped by an easel. On it was oil paint mixed into various shades. He'd painted a lovely composition leading from the tree, into the middle of the flowers, and through an archway headed inside the colossus.

"Good news."

"éclair," he replied, the minister scaled the hill from the left, backdropped by another array of flowers and trees, "-what brings the busy minister to my humble refuge."

"We've been apart for a few hours, don't speak as if we've met after years. The video I shot has gone viral, the people feel at ease from the outburst. It went according to plan, when the feed cut, an unresolve taste had the watchers look for more, therein laid a carrot, the earnest feeling of a king who cares."

“There are multiple faces, I’ve shown a caring, protective, and idealistic side – to be relatable, I ought to show my flaws – which coincidentally is how my fame came to be, a weapon of war, the devil.”

“Master, I have to ask.”

“If the interview was planned?”

“Yes, did you know the outcome?”

“Not really, I said what came to mind, sometimes, it’s best to let the actions happen. By not calculating and taking a risk, I couldn’t predict my actions, neither could those wanting to break my claim, an unplanned scheme. The more my rights are acknowledged, the better the odds. You knew what I was thinking, didn’t you?” he rose a conniving eyebrow, “-panning to the tipped scale implied my actions to be just and truthful.”

“Not to brag, on entering the studio, I felt the intent, besides, I was asked to bring the guards. The media will think twice before attacking our decision – we’ve created a massive valley where the freedom dangles in the distance. They don’t realize the darker side of what’s happening behind the scene.”

“I preach about freedom and whatnot – what I excel at is manipulation – controlling media, the flow of information, and the narrative. Long as they’re happy, I’m pleased to act however I wish, Hidros will become strong, and I’ll make sure the whole world realizes said fact. Have the researchers ready the unnamed project, next step is the domination of the skies.”

Chapter 835: Report from Elendor

“Before that, take a look at the report,” a tablet pulled before Igna’s face. ‘Report: Elendor,’ read the title. Glare in the irritation of interruption during the painting had éclair nonchalantly raise a hand and leave, towards the archway. ‘He knows the expressions are for show, maybe he knows too much,’ brush dipped in turpentine bearer of an insanely strong scent, a mixture of alcohol and something dark and rough so was the prevalent odor emitting off the painting. The chair retreated into the shadows, he swiped across the expensive-looking device, smudging the edge in an oily red, ‘-by unknown,’ said the attachment.

It began with an italic, “Greeting,” Igna squinted at the choice of font, “-to whoever is reading my report. I suppose it ought to be someone very high in the pecking order. Not to worry about me, formality has never been my strongest suit. On the day Elendor declared their betrayal on the Federation, I was sent by lady Elvira to seek the truth. On my decade-long adventure, I discovered truth and secrets. Before I begin, I’ll recount the events in no particular, knowing when and what happened won’t matter since it already has. My job was to investigate, and here is the fruit of my labor. Currently, I’m in the employment of a law firm in the employment of the royal crown; I made quite a name in fighting impossible cases. The only way forward was to enter the upper echelon’s circle, the path of a noble was cut in the great economic collapse of my sponsors, what better way than to be equal, my job requires they speak the truth – the best possible outcome. Firstly, my duties were to investigate what happened to the Phantom forces, the events were wiped from the mouth of many, I searched, got involved in a dangerous dispute between an army officer and a member of the underworld, the former ordered the assassination of the latter – the discreet matter backfired and the matter slipped into a newspaper’s sweaty hands, they publicized the ungodly act, in the end, the officer had to stand before a

tribunal of stubborn fools. Meanwhile, my dictator of a boss forced his defense in my hands, more details will require a deeper dive, hence, a citation to the actual case file,” the sentence ended by the letter [1]. “-All said and done, not to brag, I won and easily. Afterward, the officer took me to his private chambers, we became good friends along the way, and for my efforts, he knew my gluttonous hunger for hidden files and conspiracies. I saved him from death – you see, the man was a hoarder, unable to relinquish files, part of his habit allowed for his safety. Nothing like a little friendly blackmailing. By the lucky turn of events, I made my name known and got a handle on what happened during the evacuation, the battle of Endrona. Phantom’s forces were trapped and killed one by one, a betrayal from those they protected, Lieutenant General Osta of the Elendorian army made a deal with King Juvey, Phantom on a silver platter in exchange for peace. After reading the report, he forcibly took the papers and burnt it, insurance or so he said. Once again, I was left to wander the land of Elendor in search of the unknown. The more time passed, the greater grew my workload and the more information I gathered. By some miracle, years after, I stood before the Queen’s castle, her and King Juvey were in bed, I was called to negotiate the term of their changing sides. Queen Ela seemed pleased by the arrangement – her fake smile said otherwise, my place isn’t to judge. She surrendered her power for a shot at peace; the Imperial influence slowly muddled through the gates and invaded Elendor. A new order soon beckoned change – and I don’t remember when exactly, a shift strangled the common. I was tasked to evacuate lord Elon – don’t ask how, I pulled so many strings, nearly blew my cover to save the man. The estate was captured, I was drafted to compile papers for a lawful acquisition. More trips, the outside world affected our politics, the Federation’s dismantling had a profound impact on Ela – she’s kept as a pretty bird, caged inside the castle to only be admired from a distance. I’ll stop my storytelling, here are the facts, Elendor betrayed Phantom seeing a dire situation. The Queen had to get in bed with someone she hates, the rumors of Elendor having been part of the Empire are true, she has intended to fraternize, be an olive branch into Iqavea, a scheme plotted by the emperor. Trades were established through her, they did everything in her name, it’s sickening, a pawn used till dust remains. I know what’s going across the mind – the facts sound closer to opinions. Elendor is part of the Wracia Empire, the sympathizers of Queen Ela have been killed and removed long before the plot to attack Glenda, it’s a shithole. The Queen didn’t betray us, it was her entourage undermining her influence. Remember my cover almost being blown? Turns out, the Queen had her doubts which turned confirmation when I hid, giving orders about their plans in attacking Lord Elon’s estate. She stopped and stared, I won’t forget her regard, it was kind with an understanding smile, “-to the ruler of Hidros, forgive me for betraying the alliance I swore to protect with my comrade, Staxius. The death was planned, I tried my best to stop him, sadly, the man was too ready for a fight, which inevitably cause his demise. I betrayed my friends and I regret it to this day. I won’t ask to be saved, my title is nothing more than a pretty podium, I don’t have influence or authority – Juvey’s a crazed bastard, throwing me from bed to bed. I don’t expect sympathy or forgiveness, I’ll pay my debt,” her condition for silence was I included those words in the report. After said day, I spent most of my time at the castle, helping the few followers escape the kingdom. Thus ends my report, to whoever is reading, I have a simple request – when time is right for my extraction, I want the strongest fighter to be our guard, I’m getting her majesty away from the kingdom,” he pulled from the report and landed on the painting, ‘-I figured as much, the queen is a double spy. Seem the creation of the Federation gave her real hope, a chance to escape her cage of backstabbing. What’s done is done, the past doesn’t matter, Elendor’s part of the Empire, and we have an armistice,’ the focus landed on bluer font, “-Extraction scheduled for the first week of February,” said a message from éclair.

A wandering maid joyfully made for the orchard, “-pardon me!” thundered a voice on the hill. She locked, her basket dropped, ‘-King Igna,’ she sweated, he rose and stormed to her side, “-am I interrupting?”

“N-no, my I-liege.”

“Good,” he pressed his lips in a straight line, “-would it be possible for someone to take my supplies to the atelier?”

“Y-yes,” she gulped.

“Good,” he nodded, “-have a pleasant day,” he stormed inside the castle, vehemently looking for the prime minister, the trip went from a populated area near the throne room to a restricted council area up to one of the many towers. *Clash,* the doors echoed, a chamber of screens laid before him, éclair sat in the middle, raising an eye to Igna.

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“Who dares interrupt the meeting?” fired one of the screens.

“Majesty,” said éclair, “-why are you here?”

“Hamer’s Inc,” he said and made for the center, “-the extraction of Dyu, member of the Ghost Squad. He asked for the strongest fighter to be sent.”

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“Igna,” said Elvira through another screen, “-tis a bit rude to interrupt.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, turning to be shoulder to shoulder with éclair, “-I read the report, and I presume everyone present has a role in the coming operation?”

“Master,” sighed éclair, “-tell me you’re not planning to join the battle?”

“I think I am,” he smiled, “-under the guise of a simple fighter. We can’t bring much attention; an agreement was signed.”

“Wrong,” interjected lady Courtney, “-the peace agreement hasn’t been signed yet. It won’t be official until Alrosia is recognized as an entity.”

“More the reason for discretion. The report omitted the part of Dyu wanting to extract the Queen from Elendor.”

A darkened ‘-what,’ flashed the many screens, “-tis only fitting.”

“No, I’ll ask Dyu to stand down,” fired Elvira, “-I won’t endanger the King of Hidros in a petty rescue mission of a snake, who knows, her kindness might be another ploy.”

“We agree,” said the room of elites, “-the queen of Elendor must be shunned for her actions.”

“Wait,” lady Courtney slid across the refusal, “-Igna, tell us why you want to save her. Is there merit? The operation is under the jurisdiction of Phantom, last of which I heard is to be under lady Elvira’s command.”

“Frankly, there’s no merit,” he shrugged, the audio-only screens lit to show faces, “-the more I think of their betrayal, the less I see her name. In no reports was the queen ever directly involved, her attitude remained more or less the same before and after Dyu’s stumble. If Elendor’s truly not in her control, what’s the point of her being there. She’s the queen and may provide crucial information on the Empire’s activities. A turned spy is more useful than resentment. The request is selfish, I will accept aunt Elvira’s judgment, Dyu asked for the strongest fighter, be mindful of what the request means.”

“We simply cannot endanger the king in a simple rescue.”

“I agree, powerful as he is, going into enemy territory is asking to be captured. We have no idea on neither the technology nor weaponry.”

“I vouch for my master,” said éclair, “-bringing one of our own homes is a priority. I don’t want a repeat of December the 15th.”

“I’m biased,” giggled Courtney, “-do what you wish, Igna, the only condition is victory.”

“Comes to what lady Elvira has to say.”

“Fine,” she caved, “-do what you want. My only condition is stealth, under no circumstances is the identity to be revealed, do I make myself clear?” The room fell into silence, the screen toggled and the lights flickered.

“How fun is it to trouble me?” inquired éclair.

“Very,” he replied, “-I appreciate the support, éclair.”

“You know full well I was going to accept Dyu’s request.”

“We’re similar when family and friends are in question,” he waved and slid down the spiraling stairs. The bottom gave onto an empty corridor at the far edge of the castle, empty save a gust and whisper, “-master, I have news.”

“Out with it.”

“It’s true, the underground area is used in rituals. A new warping spell is utilized to sneak in and out of the area, as for the procedure – countless couples have intercourse and sacrifice animals as well as slaves. The kiosk and its device are made especially for Queen Eia, she’s the priestess from what I’ve observed. Nicola and a few others take turns getting the blessings, it’s sickening, she enjoys the torment and torture, pure lust and desire in her eyes.”

The fist clenched, to which the breathing steadied, “-about the area, anything else?”

“The structure says it hasn’t been used till recently, I ought to guess after the marriage?”

“I see,” he turned and ambled along the hallway, “-I knew she wasn’t a lady of her word. Continue observing, I have something else to attend.”

“As is wished, master,” Vengeance faded, and as fate would have it, Eia clambered up another remote set of stairs headed under the castle, she rose her head to lock onto Igna, her clothes were ripped, blood dripped down her thighs and ended on the mossy-stone steps.

He stopped and stared top to bottom, ‘-pathetic,’ said the expression. Her feet froze, the knees buckled, ‘-what have I done...’

Chapter 836: Banter

Igna simply strode from her humiliating posture. In a way, the disappearing of the broad shoulders crackled fear. Heels in hands, she pushed, clambered against the mossy-stairs with lesser grip, a forceful thrust pulled the floor from her feet. Her head made for the wall, “-I got you,” said a nameless retainer, “-majesty, you ought to be more careful.”

“T-thank you,” the focus remained on the crimson-tipped hair, the light soon flashed the figure into obscurity of the lonesome echoey hallway.

Vengeance’s report and visible confirmation, irritation of betrayal, the castle boomed actively, people came and went, traders negotiated, merchants bargained, companies sent representatives for favors – the tide of change

Servant’s quarters, a dim screen reflected against Igna’s white-shirt in a blue tinge. With the added light of the opening and a mildly ajar door, he kept to the keyboard, typing and drawing conclusions on the coming operation.

‘éclair’s made the plan simple and effective. Dyu makes it to the palace under the premise of a business deal, there, makes contact with the queen, and then escapes. That side depends on him and Ela, few of the Ghost Squads have infiltrated the palace. My role’s a bit uncertain. After they leave the castle grounds, convoys will bolt to the nearest airfield depending on the situation. The plan makes more sense in application, guess I’ll leave the details to him,’ a whip toggled the screen black, he stared watching himself, ‘-this isn’t like me, part of me doesn’t want to pay attention, the other part wants to plan until I’m spent. A difference of priorities, Origin,’ he gritted, ‘-his emotions are getting in the way,’ he gripped the mouse, “-STOP,” it went across the room, ending beside the door. “-PATHETIC!”

Creek, “-Who’s there?” fired he bluntly.

“Cousin?” returned a blond-haired lass, she veered inside, fox ears peeped before she fully entered, “-someone’s enraged,” hands in her hoodie’s pocket, “-nice room,” said a vaguely interesting voice.

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“Ania.”

“Igna.”

“Hey,” the tune changed, “-why are you here?” he asked.

“I heard from the group chat,” she pushed her phone into his face, “-éclair briefly mentioned the selfish plan, I came to see if you were doing alright.”

“How very kind of a child,” he patted her head, “-how is adventuring treating you?”

“Pretty good,” she sat and closed her arms, a ruby-colored tag glimmered.

“Right,” he leaned into the chair, “-you’re not here for a visit. Go on already.”

“Wow, I knew you were good, not this good. Ok, fine,” she rose her nose and inhaled, “- I need a favor.”

“Depends on what kind.”

“I found this boy I like,” her feet closed, the cheeks blushed, “-and I think, I want.”

“You want him to work under the same agency?”

“STOP!” she rolled her eyes, “-I planned to suggest romance,” the act dropped, “-how can someone be such an ache.”

“How kind to remove the ‘ball’ part. No matter, have him apply and turn to Julius, he’s the leader of the adventuring side, I’m just-”

“Just a king,” she interjected, “-I would have gone to him first,” her focus peaked the door, “-would have if not from what a friend said.”

“Alright,” he closed his arms, the eyes shut, allowing the walls to fade, “-someone’s waiting outside, and let me guess, he’s the butler who saved the queen, the boy you like, am I, or am I not right?”

“Impressive,” loud steps thundered, “-tales don’t come close.”

“Meet my friend,” said Ania, “-Elde, he’s a bit of a weirdo.”

“Quite the introduction,” a frown rose at the boy, “-I usually have a lot of questions I’d like to ask, sadly.”

“-you’re not in the mood,” he completed Igna’s thought, “-majesty, I know the wandering of her majesty’s been waning heavy.”

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A push sent a pen, grazed Elde’s cheek, and impaled the wall behind, “-this I hate, number one, pretentious bastards,” he resettled into a fierce posture, “-second, people who act like they know everything, and lastly, those who copy and are unoriginal. The mind-reading abilities are impressive. Has nothing on someone I know.”

“Cousin,” elbowed Ania, “-I don’t want to be a pain, but you described yourself...”

“I know,” he winked, “-the boy passes.”

“Thanks,” she jumped and gave a quick embrace, “-I’ll see you later.”

“Later,” she left similar to the boy’s confidence, a single glare shattered the fa?ade. ‘-A mind reader – their kind is an obsolete bunch. A worthless power.’ Coordination of the plan went to and fro, éclair thought hard in implementing Igna – using the best piece to start a strike wasn’t the greatest of an idea. Hiding aces, such as their way of battle, attrition, and grit, the longwinded way of breaking opposition by force of value and resilience.

The next day rose on the horizon, the castle never slept, night and day, retainers and workers took shifts. ‘My neck,’ orangish-amber scanned the closed lid, ‘-I must have dozed off,’ he pulled upright to a disturbing sight, ‘-who’s this?’ a mutilated corpse laid at his feet, no blood nor color, aftermath of a

vampire drinking to much blood. *Click,* whispered in the hallway, ‘-this early?’ he rose, stormed the door and grabbed the camera, “-who sent you?” he thundered, the silent quarters came alive, “-tell me!” the more the shouts echoed, the denser grew footsteps.

“Please, let me go,” begged the photographer.

“No, not right now,” a pull had the camera in his hands. A glee screamed hope, the photographer looked to the right and sidestepped to the left, ‘-a faint?’ an expression of bafflement screamed on Igna’s face.

‘I did it, I escaped from the Devil.’

“Right,” *snap,* the bones from within the room mshed into spikes of which kicked the intruder and impaled his clothes onto the wall, matching the running-man escape sign. ‘I was tricked.’

“What happened?” retainers rose with yawns and tired faces.

“An intruder,” he said, “-he tried to frame me.”

“Frame?”

“Yes, take a look,” the camera passed from hand to hand.

“Despicable,” said one, “-makes the third this week?”

“DAMN,” cried a distant exclaim, “-there goes my week’s wage.”

“I DID IT!” screamed another, “-I guessed right, HA-HA.”

“Gather round, people,” signaled Igna, “-those who bet on three times wins, the rest, hand over the cash.” A game, this was the name of the attempts at a damning proof of the King’s activities. The king handed orders to allow the worse of the worse to openly act their plans. A fool had much to teach – those faking and the competent were dispatched before ever stepping foot inside the property. Day rose in a joyful manner – money divided amongst the winner, he took a share of the winnings and escaped outside. éclair had yet to figure a plan, and so, Igna sat on the southern terrace with a lovely drink, watching the landscape of which threw a glimpse of the distant mountains. Meanwhile, inside, the situation grows dire, the palace flowers whispered ear to ear till reaching the king’s attention, “-majesty,” whispered a butler, “-lady Alta’s on one of her tantrums. Two nobles have fled to the castle and three maids are in tears, what’s the next move?”

“Let her tire herself,” a gesture to signal a pleasant death, “-send the army!”

“Majesty, you’re willing to sacrifice...”

“-for the greater good,” he sipped. Palace life was filled with in-jokes and laughter, no one took much of anything seriously. Outside looking in, the atmosphere felt closer to a class before the teacher entered, messy, loud, and stupid. In those moments, the genuine smile and pleasant exchanges built a solid record amongst the participants. Mistaking the laughter for complacency, an open trap for those wanting to harm – never underestimate the shadows of the corridors; granting access, an open invitation to those wanting a taste of devastation.

"Igna," a tornado of fury readied at the archway, the attending butler casually erased hits present and left, "-traitor," he murmured. Mindful not to step onto cracks, Alta crossed the tiled terrace and dropped beside Igna, she drank from the jar directly, slamming the container and wiping her mouth, "-refreshed," she smiled.

"Another tantrum?"

"No," she glared, "-they're too complacent. Another photographer snuck inside; what are the guards doing. Guess what, I passed nobles earlier, they were blatantly speaking of how they'd disrobe a maid and take her to bed, it was disgusting."

"Did you ever think they were joking? The nobles are bait," he shook his head, "-agents of Ghost acting to enforce peace from within. It was your idea."

"Sorry, I heard about the Queen's... and I got angry."

"Look, forget about her, I don't much care. Giving her attention won't help change the unchangeable, she's given herself in body and soul to another man. A maiden's heart is something I rather not touch, not after what I did to Aceline and Loftha."

"No," she slammed the table, "-you're wrong. Marriage, love or not, binds two people as one, she gave her dignity to another man, don't you feel the least bit?"

"Oh, I'm furious," said a blank frown, "-don't I look the part? I warned her... no idea if my threat stuck or not. Listen, Alta, what she does is her business, the greater purpose is to solidify my place on the throne."

"I admire that part of you," she exhaled, "-straightforward and to what's important. There are a few things I need to handle. The intercontinental railway started eight years or so ago has finally reached the Ardanian border after heading to the other provinces. They'll be crossing from Dorchester – I've only just got permission for the landed nobles, Queen Courtney's offered to split the cost."

"I still say planes are the easiest way to travel."

"For a wealthy person, I suppose..."

A silhouette interrupted her would-be tangent, "-I'll get going," she said after taking stock of who arrived, "-take care, master," she rose, bowed, and left.

Clop, clop, clop, "-majesty."

"éclair," returned Igna, "-how gracious of you to make the trip."

"About the operation," he took her seat, "-I have bad news."

"You couldn't fit a pawn of my size on the field?"

"No," he cringed, "-not that, I just can't bring myself to order you around."

"Now getting cold feet?" he breathed a cackle, "-éclair, you've given me orders before, what's different now?"

"I don't know," he shrugged, pushing his regard onto the gentle forestry fighting against the frostbitten sky, "-the plan I made was created..."

"To be ignored if things went wrong – a sacrificial plan if matters derailed."

"Yes," fingers clashed in thought, "-sending his majesty on fool's errand troubles my heart and mind dearly."

"I have a better idea," he exhaled, "-use connections and have me enroll as a butler to Queen Ela, the report mentioned the head-maid looking for a capable combat retainer. They're having a small contest between applicants later tomorrow. Thinking on the matter, I say, having the queen escape later this week is impossible. We'll require at least a fortnight. A high chance of success and a lower risk of detection. Altering my hair color and wearing glasses should suffice."

"Recognition?"

"I wouldn't worry. I'll have Vengeance take my place, we're twins and he's a whole lot more capable in holding back during fights."

"Sending him to Elendor seems easier."

"Understand," said his cold side-glance, "-staying at the castle makes me sick. Looking at Eia's visage burns hatred in my fist, I surrendered my all to answer Queen Gallienne's wishes – if I stay any longer, I may fail."

"I understand," nodded éclair, "-I'll inform lady Eira of the situation, if needs be, Vengeance will sign the alliance papers, tis but a formality. Don't worry, majesty, the entourage you've built consists of the best the world has to offer. With us, there's nothing to fear."

"Quite the sentiment," he smiled, "-there's a vacancy for the spymaster position."

"No suitable candidates..."

"There is one," he looked to the skies, "-Prince Julius."

"Him?"

"Yes, I vouch for his hidden potential. Give my cousin credit, he's worked for the DG, always enthralled in society's darkest shadows, he'll be fine. A place at the castle will make mine and your life easier."

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"I doubt the prince will accept."

"He will," winked Igna, "-a family man needs stability, tell him the Rosespire manor is ready for accommodation if he wishes."

"One condition."

"Which is?"

"His majesty makes the offer personally."

“Deal.”

Chapter 837: Elendor [1]

The night is young says the many romantically engaged couples, solace, quietness, and peace. The same couldn't be said for more than fifty percent of 'bonding'. The world's full of consenting however baseless affairs and merging of the flesh. None knew the truth more than those at the top, a scary thought considering those employing their charms to climb greater heights are often forced into silence.

Moans and grunts fill the lush and quiet night, footsteps of maids scurried from one end to the next, the twinkling of anklets melodically tells of the hurry. Occasional whispers end in giggles, at which point a loud shush resounds. Stars permeate the night more than is perceived, among the dots of white, red, and yellow, a particular formation draws the blank stare of a lonely lady. A round bed veiled behind curtains, the out of rhythm breathing of an older man, she watches through the arched frame, 'la constellation symbolize le relèvement,' 1crosses her pressed lips.

“Lovely,” grunts the man, “-I want more,” he pushes, the bedrocks, “-but my times over,” weight shifts, the bed raises, “-I'll tell king Juvey the deal's on,” belt buckles, the zip shuts, the door locks. Tears on her unblemished brownish skin, marks of red on the white blanket, she raises to lock her chest against her knee, wrapping her arms around both, 'why me,' she washes the stars pass, 'is it punishment for betrayal?'

The next day rose as if nothing happened, same old mundane morning. Maids rushed into the room, each took a limb, clothed the lady, and had her before a skin, attendants dropped to her thighs and cleaned, a pointless smile kept the pretty visage sparkling, no life in the eyes, the door blasted in a kick, “-where's my priced doll,” fired the epitome of a warrior's body. The muscles pressed, almost in a way to reject the thin line of fabric. No queen in sight, he forced through, shoving aside wary maids, “-where is she?” he glared, stopping at the doorway.

She but turned and held her shoulders, “-I heard you did a good job yesterday,” he entered, brushed aside those trying to mend wounds of the previous encounter, “-I have rewards,” he pulled a syringe, “-work more for me,” he leaned and pressed lips on her cheeks, “-good work,” the needle dove into her arms, a shot lit her eyes – vision blurred, to which he tapped her cheeks and made for the exit.

“Majesty, pardon my saying,” interjected an attending physician, “-any more shots and she'll overdose.” The standing crowd shuddered, he stopped at the door and scowled over the shoulder, “-a lowly peasant dares correct my judgment?” he grabbed and cracked the wall, “-an obvious newcomer. Where's the head maid?” panic filled the halls – later on, the one in question was brought onto the gallows facing the servant's quarters, separate from the main palace by a stream. The difference, night and day, one side bore a lush green ground, well-kept walkways, brick pathways, the other, mud, and occasional rocks. The ground cried from constant assault by a heavy vehicle's in and out – additionally, the tempest of gunfire and soldier practice.

“Majesty,” cried a lady in her maid dress, the brick of a king pulled her by the hair and threw her at the gallows' stairs. Rough soldiers pressed their weight against a wooden fence separating each area, one side training, the other, stables, and hanging area, “-mercy, please,” she sobbed, he didn't care.

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“Take off her clothes,” shouted the fighters, to which he rose an arm proudly, the simple attackers cheered in admiration. A sheathed dagger landed at the stairs, “-put it up her arze,” laughed the bystanders, he turned loudly at the thrower, “-who threw it!” thundered, the cheerfulness dropped instantly.

“It was me,” saluted a trembling soldier, to which, Old Cray wiggled his index, summoning an unknown in the crowd. He dipped between the row, similar to a box entering the ring, thrust himself into a strong respectful salute.

“What’s your name.”

“Ryan Antone, my liege.”

“Well, Antone,” glancing at the dagger, “-there’s a shack outback, the hay should prove sufficient bedding,” looking at the crowd, “-to anyone feeling frustrated, here I serve my head maid as compensation. Line up and follow Ryan’s lead. Long as she’s able to work tomorrow, do what you wish,” a menacing look of disgust landed at her, “-look out for yourself next time, the physician is fired, and so are you.” An attending butler hurried to the king’s side, handed a towel, and shook his head apologetically. Screams of mercy cried in between the animal noise, a group of fighters gladly pulled her by the hair and into the barn, the rest – cruelty without care, commonplace in lands ruled by Old Cray. Off the dirtied area and into the freshness of the palace grounds, “-Scorpio, you’ve proven a very useful man. With the maid gone, I’ll need someone to take her place, perhaps a head butler, someone competent.”

“My liege, finding one who you deem competent is naught more than a needle in a haystack.”

“You making a joke since they took her in the barn?” he grinned, the rusty-golden beard shifted, “-I’m an old man and I tire easily. Find someone who’s young, you know what?” they stopped at the entrance, “-the tradition of old, host a tournament, you have one to two weeks. Assemble names – I’ll only accept submission from members of the staff, one per person.”

“Understood,” he bowed, to which elated guests shortly arrived in luxurious vehicles. A familiar old man rose from a convertible, “-King Juvey, I must say, enjoying the night in the company of royalty is a one in a lifetime experience,” the nose and cheeks flushed, “-I was wondering.”

“-someone’s excited,” a rough-sounding laugh eased the air, “-another small loan of ten-million...” the conversations stopped, “-SCORPIO!”

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“Yes?”

“Stop standing around and eavesdropping,” a look of, ‘-move else you die,’ fired in his direction, “-I apologize,” no time wasted, the butler made for the barn. Stomach tearing cries shook the very ground, he passed the horde and grabbed the attacker, “-that’s enough.”

“How the fuck?”

“It’s just Scorpio,” said one in the crowd.

“The butler’s here to hit her too?” they laughed, the lady bled from her stomach and arms, “-right, my bad,” said the forth most fighter zipping his pants, “-I’ve outstayed my welcome.”

‘Animals,’ he shook his head, “-his majesty ordered for another five-kilometer run, after which you’re expected for training on the shooting grounds.” Obedient as could be, the mere mention sparked diligence and order in the ranks, a line formed, and soon, the crowded space eased into the woeful sight.

“T-thank you,” she sniffled, her arms trembled, “-I was g-going t-to d-die.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, “-I’m sorry, I should have been there to take the heat. Hiring that physician was my idea.”

“No, I wanted to see our queen smile again...”

“There you are,” a worried crowd arrived, the gossip swept the castle, in the thick of five maids assigned outside duties, a familiar face with grips on a medical bag ran to the lady’s side.

“-my apologies,” said the doctor, “-I should have kept my mouth shut. I’ve called an ambulance; my hospital will take care of the rest. Scorpio, help me.”

Paramedics rushed a stretcher up the eastern entrance, the place reserved for the armored vehicles, including tanks and supply trucks. Scorpio helped transport the wounded, the prison-like landscape within the castle changed into the asphalted outside, “-I’m sorry, Scorpio,” apologized the maid. The trunk slid shut, and off the latter went to the capital. Simultaneously, a car pulled across the street, a figure exited the front passenger seat and waved, “-Scorpio!” he cried.

‘Dyu?’

“How’s it going man,” he crossed the road and exchanged greetings. Dyu, a strange, friendly, and oddly intelligent guy, such were many first impressions. He bore unusually pale skin, a clear giveaway of not being native to Elendor, orangish colored hair, a chin-split; on the otherwise strong jawline – hazel-colored pupils, thick eyebrows, and sharp eyelashes – the cheeks were riddled by freckles. The suit, dark gray, very formal and expensive, didn’t quite match his overall feel. “-Why the long face?”

“Just another day on the job,” he sighed, “-man, I wish I had your life,” a glance at the cool car made the butler swoon.

“Let’s go for a drive then.”

“Like right now?”

“Yeah, now. Juvey’s got a trip to the capital – some kind of seminar between allies of the Wracia Empire,” a pull of the sleeve brandished a golden-rimmed watch, thin and elegant, “-three, two, one,” the royal transport passed their stead, “-right on time.”

“Dyu,” they crossed the street, “-I’m glad we’re friends.” The drive took the scenic route of the upper plateau, mountain in the distance, they drove to a viewpoint, pulled onto a vacant parking lot on edge of a sharp cliff.

Beer cans opened at the view, both leaned against the hood and drank, “-I can’t do it anymore, I’ve had enough of dealing with the King’s shit. The only reason I’m treated differently is that I have balls between my legs, that son of a bitch is a sexist fuck. Wondering why the ambulance came? Remember the head maid who took care of my son when he caught a cold?”

“Yeah, what about her?”

“He humiliated her publicly, had his dogs unleashed, I had to lie to stop the attack, I felt so bad, my heart can’t take much more, she was a big sister to us, what’s the point of any of this?”

“There’s no point to it,” said Dyu, “-look, Old Cray is a tyrant no matter what we say. He fired her, what next?”

“He’s going to host a tournament, an open bid for him to pick the next attack dog. Ever since he came into power, I’ve seen our queen be subjected to the worst kind of people, he throws her around like a toy. I’m tired, my child’s entering primary soon, I want to be there for him – I want to see my kid grow.”

“Tough luck, Old Cray hates family and friends,” he sipped, “-I owe a lot to Queen Ela, she saved me more than a few times. Feels bad, I can’t reach her lately.”

“It’s the fucker, he’s forcing drugs – she obeyed and recompense? Drugs, subject to be a doll.”

“Dude,” he shuffled closer, “-drop the family act, I know you’re an informant working for the Dark-Guild.”

“Yeah, I’m an informant, the liaison between King and underworld. Who do you think provides the narcotics?”

“My time working at the firms about to end. I’ve had my fill of the toxic corporate world – I want to relax and enjoy the money. Before that happens, I’m going to pull Ela from her cage, she’s suffered enough.”

“Are you dumb?”

“Wha-?”

“Take her from her cage, what then, send her to nowhere?”

“Trust me, I have connections,” he slid a piece of paper, “-call this number and confirm for yourself. We’re on the same side under different bosses.”

“An informant and a lawyer, what could go wrong?”

“Trust the process.”

A few days later, the report ended on éclair’s desk, the final report stating Dye’s successful mission. And so, before much longer, Igna found himself in Rotherham before a private jet clad in black.

No familiar faces to greet goodbyes, he solemnly climbed the stairs, a briefcase held the bare essentials. ‘An informant of the crown and a spy from Phantom, the compartmentalization ensured neither revealed their secrets. I guess Dye trusted his gut whilst Scorpio, someone off the record, had enough of the double life. Family changes a person,’ as did the still-image onto the hangar, engine toggled, he settled on lush leather seats, the air hostess was quite the looker, heels and a shorter dress to

regulation. Hours later, Dyu waited at a private airfield to the east of the castle, one used by the many contacts he had, “-Are you sure about the guy?”

“I’m told he’s the best both our agencies have to offer,” engine roar interrupted the call, “-later.”

Chapter 838: Elendor [2]

“Scorpio,” murmured a disembodied whisper, “-trust is a great deal, remember the true calling and bring thy tale to an end,” surrounding images tunneled into a pin, all pinched in said moment, froze, he watched – heavy breaths and sweaty brows, the arms dropped, the lingering flicker of a message, ‘-serve or they di’ faded.

Tires gripped the asphalt, the distant groves and tall mountains foretold of atmospheric change. The elusively beautiful jet taxied along the runway, following the white line, and moved into a vacant hangar. Sand and gravel, or stone-dust, the lack of light, and unwillingness to investigate left the surrounding area untouched. He paid attention at the border, the grid-fence.

Questions leaped and dance, a ballet of damning curiosity, the thoughts, the ballerina, skipped across the hall till slamming herself onto the wall of realism – keeping expectations in check. ‘-Who did they send?’ Dyu paused and narrowed, ‘-the best is quite a title to have amidst Phantom and the monsters at the top. If they wanted to cause harm to the world, I’m sure they’d make it happen without effort,’ the pressured lock buckled, a whistle took the attention. A row of circular lights hung off the top of the hangar in sets of three; a symmetrical manmade constellation.

“We’ve arrived,” said the air hostess, “-majesty,” the eyes kept fluttering, an allure of intrigue emanated off her mannerism. By the time they landed, Igna left the happenings blank, information of Elendor was hard to find. The smooth stop rose his attention from the screen, the laptop folded into a leather briefcase. He rose, locking on the hostess, “-great service,” he made for the entrance, “-for a man that is,” he whispered. The flirtatious allure choked, the throat locked, “-I don’t mean it’s wrong,” he patted her shoulder, “-you’re very attractive. ‘Twould be rude to say how to live. Do what makes you happy,” he gave a kind smile, “-keep fighting for what you believe in!” the curved doorway swallowed the outline, the weak-kneed hostess desperately held a seat, ‘-Igna Haggard’s nothing from what I heard. He understood what I needed and gave a semblance of peace, I’d have given on my disguise... words of encouragement, a kind leader to those under him, hard on himself and hard on those wanting to cause harm,’ pushing the numbness into the heels, she leaped, grabbed the top part of the entry, “-good luck!” she cheered. He spun midway on the stairway, bowed respectfully, and said, “-to you as well, my lady.”

“Get out,” gritted Dyu, ‘-by the best, they meant the best?’ he blinked, there was no mistaking who marched in his direction; grace, confidence, and a layer of mystery. Heels clopped till standing before the lawyer.

“Greetings, Dyu, we’ve yet to meet formally,” the hands confidently moved forth, “-the name’s Igna Haggard, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Nothing more?” the brows rose in astonishment, “-thee jests,” he dropped to one knee and knelt, “-welcome to Iqavea, my liege.”

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"Dyu, raise your head," he ordered, "-take my hand, we're equal in another land."

'Humble and understanding,' he accepted the gesture, '-I had an image of someone who'd look down on anyone, not on his level. The stories all speak of the merciless nature and will to kill at a moment's notice, what the hell did I walk into?'

"Must have a lot of questions?" said a side-smirk.

"..."

"Lost in silence?"

"Pardon, I was stunned," he shuffled, almost dropping the car keys, "-please."

"Let me drive," he said, a flick swallowed the roof, the convertible stood stunningly impatient, they vaulted, settled in the seats, a press started the roar, he pushed and the car responded. A few turns later, the duo found themselves on an empty street headed for the capital.

"I must ask, why are you here?"

"I read the report," he answered, "-you said the queen saved you from being discovered. Sneaking her out of the continent will be tall order, and I'm sure the runway won't be of help."

"Figured much from a simple glance?"

"Obviously, it looks deserted. The hangar seems clean enough, enough for the rare visit. The place's unused, the Empire's anti-air measures, sneaking a bigger force onto their land would be foolish."

"What about earlier?"

"éclair pulled some strings, a one-time thing, so he says."

"What then?"

"Hamer's Inc. There is much to do, the operation's complicated, tis for the end, at the moment, there's more we ought to think about." The drive lasted a few hours, the slithering road mounted the upper-plateau, sharp curves and dented barriers were common.

"Street racing?"

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"Pardon me, majesty?"

"Don't play coy," he chuckled, "-you race here, the roads, the cars, the skid marks, and the distant sound of blaring fast engines. There's a circuit of racers, I'm sure of it."

'Gathered that from observation alone?' he glanced Igna then turned to the windshield, '-a monster... I've never met anyone so innately menacing before. One look and it seems he can look into your soul; I,' he gulped, '-I pity the enemies.'

"Silent are we?"

"I have no words to say. It's too much to take in," he exhaled, "-the mountain pass here is very prone to accidents. Young racers take the curves in stride, many are sent over the edge and die. I used to race till I pushed too far and rammed into my opponent, he luckily survived by controlling the spin, it was the scariest moment in my life."

"Downward or upward?"

"Upward," he touched the dashboard, "-this baby has more in her stomach than those on the streets."

"Well," Igna gradually sped along a narrow straightaway, "-I'd like to test the lass for myself," gears shifted, the car pushed forth and accelerated, the first sharp corner veered to the right – Dyu anticipated him breaking, instead, Igna kept on the gas, the tail wrapped around the edge and blasted forward. They pressed on till the peak where other racers did laps down the opposite side. The roof covered the car once again. The capital briefly waved over the tree-line, the inclination dove into a slope, he pushed, passing many racers.

Click, it stopped before a comfortably lit restaurant, the buildings weren't tall save a few important agencies, "-Dyu, get out, I'm famished."

"Crazy," he said limping out, "-I nearly pissed myself, how insane can someone get on the streets?"

"With help of magic," a fireball nonchalantly hovered above the open-palm, "-you can do a lot more than just watch. I learned a few tricks; the owner of a racing team must be somewhat competent at driving." Conjunction brought many uninviting stares, the people seemed put off.

Drinks and meals filled the table, "-let's talk business."

"The assignment starts tomorrow, on the 7th. It'll last however is needed."

"éclair surmised the main point; I'd like to hear more."

"The goal is the extraction of Ela from our continent."

"A simple matter, teleportation."

"Magic is off-limit. Using the latter frivolously is bound to raise concern. The church has a strong doctrine against magic casters – witch trials are real and very common at the royal capital."

"I don't understand," he sipped, "-teleportation would be a simple matter of a few seconds."

"No, no," he shook the head, "-there's a reason why magic's shunned, if it's ever known the queen used magic to escape – the continent will have a strong reason to go to war."

"Limited choices. Suggestions?"

"On top of the extraction, we'll have to be discreet, not potentially cause an uproar among the current leadership. Lord Elon was ousted from the kingdom – a strong man like him treated akin to a pest."

"I get the picture, and honestly, the simplest answer is to leave things as is."

"That I cannot do, we're on a time limit, the king's been using drugs, any more..."

“-and the barrier of no return will be crossed. Quite the predicament,” he paused, “-infiltrating the king’s entourage’s foolish – I’m better suited to be a personal attendant to Ela.”

“Bad idea,” he cringed, “-Juvey won’t allow men near her.”

“Great idea actually. Stories speak of Juvey as the epitome of a warrior’s spirit, if the stories are true, he’ll answer to the ways of old, the strongest decide for the weak. This is gearing to be fun. I’m representing Scorpio, right?”

“Yes.”

“The battle will happen in two days; I’d best get ready.”

“Actually, participants are required to stay at the castle, something to do with background checks, they’re wary of spies.”

Dring, dring, “-I have to take this,” said Dyu. The orange-haired figure was quick to dip outside and talk, ‘-getting close to the queen is no easy task, she’s drugged and the king’s a strong one. What are my options,’ he sipped and eased, ‘-magic is out of the question, I can’t risk starting a war. Hamer’s Inc will play an important part – I trust éclair to handle logistics. Rather weird to not be in the shadows and giving orders.’

“I have to go.”

“Where?”

“The hospital,” he said, “-Scorpio got shot.”

“Let’s go,” said Igna, “-you drive, will be easier.”

No information, a blind rush into an unknown area – ambulances screamed red, paramedics hurried. Dyu stormed inside, he turned and picked corners as if owning the place till a waiting room. In it was a lady, hands pressed in prayer before an empty wall, “-Hey, hey.”

“Dyu.’

“What happened?”

“They said he was struck in the middle of a drive-by shooting. A lot of people were hurt.”

“What address?” interjected Igna.

She watched confusedly, looking at Dyu for answers, “-meet...”

“Xen, a friend of Scorpio. Know anything about where it happened?”

“I don’t know,” she sniffled, “-ask the police officers?”

‘Like hell, they would talk,’ he turned on himself, “-I’m going out,” he said, “-call me if anything happens.”

“Wait!” Dyu blocked the passage, “-if you’re going there to fight, I have to stop – killing has a repercussion, and I won’t let you throw-”

“Throw the plan away?” a cold glare chilled the spine, “-get out of my way.” News reached the palace – many were scared for what was to happen, the tournament was the least of the worries.

“éclair,” a touch on the earpiece, “-is it possible-”

“Done, master, I’ve traced the location, tis displayed on the map.”

“Thank you,” a murderous look swept the mood, he leaned at one of the seats, opened his briefcase, and took Tharis, an upgraded version since the dormancy of the death element. Opposed to the inner-magical element, the mana Igna easily manipulated converted from astral to physical within the chamber, a process made possible via the discovery of Maicite. Gun holstered, the panic-filled outside had police cars and ambulances to and fro, the walkways emptied, lights from buildings extinguished. A simple man in common attire walked, a briefcase to his side, glasses onto the nose, dark-brown hair tied in a low-hanging ponytail, he marched to the location.

Meanwhile, the attack reached Juvey’s ears, amidst a council of powerful man, he rose, “-excuse me,” he thundered, “-the politics is waning on my conscience. I’m leaving,” he turned, “-someone’s dared attack one of my own, in my name, I’ll make sure they pay.”

Muzzle flash, bullets went from a broken continent store to a gang of masked men – part aimed at the people, the other drove around town shooting at bystanders. “-WOUNDED,” cried an officer, people dropped. The defenders hid behind counters, few customers laid in their pool of blood, the survivors had their heads in the brace position, waiting for help or death.

‘Now’s my time,’ Igna took account of the situation, éclair made note of the attackers and displayed them on the interface. He hurried into an alley, moved towards the store’s back entrance, and picked the lock. The door slid open, bullets clicked, the officer held strong in keeping the fighters away.

“Officer,” whispered Igna moving to his side.

“Who are you?” they kept their heads down.

“My name’s not important,” *bang,* a stray shot blasted the man’s head, ‘-there he goes,’ he shrugged off the blood, ‘-about time I let loose.’

Chapter 839: Elendor [3]

A bubble of awareness expanded; the relevant matter was highlighted. Igna pulled on Tharis, gave a nonchalant sigh at the fallen officer, pulled from the counter, and fired. ‘-Expanding spatial arts without chant or casts, I’m getting strong,’ said a self-indulgent joke. Aim, then shoot, before much time, he vaulted from cover to cover, taking his sweet time – any foolish to enter the area of effect suffered an instant death. Above most thug’s paygrade and their scope of attention, he used bloody Mary. The scarlet crystals swallowed to the ceiling of the bubble, they meandered, unbothered by the chaos, the responsibility, intruders were killed.

“Ahhh,” yelped a distant cough, no glance needed, Igna kept the eyes forward. The cough, well, someone follow his route and snuck inside, unfortunately, the moment he stepped foot, a shape circle sliced the member. Lost of balance tipped the weight forward, the head crossed the bubble – and *slash,* a glob of brain matter smothered against a kitchen sink. A broken line of stopped cars, makeshift cover for the attackers, they fired, no greater purpose than to kill.

'What do they want?' he slid to the wall giving onto the pavement, '-the dots keep on increasing, a gang attack?' back against the wall, he rose his hands at an injured man. Braced for death, the man shivered, the bald head and ears red from tension – a stone's throw to the right laid a woman and a child, they seemed alive, considering the injuries. Tis the child, a snot-nosed boy – he gritted in anger at the attackers, '-interesting kid,' paused Igna slowly aiming at the boy. The latter's heart dropped into elbowing his mother, no response came. Pushing her head and revealing the swollen face did more harm than good, '-unconscious at best and dead at worse,' trigger pulled, bullets hurled in the bystander's direction, *Mana-Control: Waves,* he motioned, the projectiles altered course, pulled a U-turn and dashed outward in good time. Three masked invaders laid a step from entering the shop, the controlled bullets split, three aimed for the imminent targets whilst the rest spread onto the street. In conclusion, six people died in the sudden attack.

A portal to the Shadow Realm opened, the one headed to the storage, a few healing potions pulled, he stared at the boy and flung the flask, "-listen, boy, if you want mother and father to live, make them drink that, it's medicine. After you're done, carry it to the other injured."

"-O-Okay," the plumped fellow rose, the chubby cheeks panted at the physical activity. Drinks were administered, as for the boy, he crawled, belly to the floor and elbows against the hardened tiles, he clambered from person to person, the scar of death burned into memory.

The dots circled, the cars pulled into the alley – transmission was cut, éclair's handy work, '-right,' he reloaded the pistol, blank astral casts needed to be used for the bullets to properly fire. '-Good thing I automated the process,' a thrust paired with intent to reload, activated the sequence. 'Being circled,' attention befell the bodies, *Once living now dead. O' thee who've lost thine life to mine hand, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival.* '-a casual employment of necromancy.' A pool of illness and plague swallowed those far-gone, they sunk to be thrown horizontally from a differing portal – empty stare, burnt flesh, and an immortal body.

"Let's go people," cried on the outside, two additional vans arrived, heavily armed mercenaries leaped to scout the alley. An aerial view aided by the interface made planning easier, '-they'll storm the flank. The rampaging members will charge the front in distraction for the mercenaries – sacrificial pawns. Someone's giving orders, the shooting's stopped, multiple deaths simultaneously point to more shooters, they're scared of approaching,' he smirked, '-the flank as no idea what they'll encounter,' a strong step sent him through the window, the area of awareness moved alongside him, the happening of the shop was but told on the dots.

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"FIRE!" cried the front, he phased through the projectiles and took five heads in seconds, differing perspectives, different speeds. There was no hiding from death, pure white abyssal flame lit the eyelashes, *bang, bang, bang,* the frequency dropped to fully automatic.

"They're having fun at the front," said one slowly approaching the target. Garbage cans, pools of old machine fluid, the casual rat running past. Two slowly climbed the stairs armed with shotguns.

"Be careful," said the leader, "-they might have traps, I don't want needless deaths." The others gathered in a semi-circle, waiting for the signal, the one which never came, a heavy clang had their

attention to the left. A heavy piece of metal dropped, growls and grunts echoed, sinking anticipation of evil pulled their weapons.

"False alarm," said the leader, "-there's no one."

"Don't scare us like that," they exhaled, pressing focus on the entrance.

"ENEMY," cried one to the other end, two slumped figures stepped past two fighters, the seemingly weak-long limbs swung into brutally cutting through the helmets and tearing half the visage. Guns aimed, "-FIRE!" they ordered. While attention was on the first horde, it didn't occur about the back door, the officer turned with a pistol and fired, the advance party dropped, "-ENTRANCE." Even so, on the right, two additional creatures ran at the mercenaries. Bullets on bullets, the entities swallowed, "-what are they?" shuddered the fighters, "-AHHHH," ignoring the mortal wounds, a simple hold on their targets announced the death. Brainless and starvingly dangerous, dislocated jaws bite and tore necks, the more they ate, the stronger regenerated the bodies, a complete massacre.

Bang, the pistol reloaded, '-last of them,' he exhaled – the reddish tint faded; Igna stood in the middle of the road between smoking cars and deathly wounded attackers. 'Their identity,' he leaned and held a survivor by the collar, "-who are you?"

The bloodied maimed figure held his tongue, "-are you going to talk?" no response, annoyance twitched his cheeks, "-do as you wish," the grip eased, the fellow dropped hard on the face, "-I won't kill you. The police will be here sooner or later."

"WHERE ARE THEY!" bellowed a deeply toned voice, a mass of muscles clad underneath expensive clothes stomped.

"Who?" returned Igna, "-the attackers?" he leaned casually against a car bonnet, "-dead for the most part," he said, "-I left this guy alive."

"Who are you?" he narrowed; "-did you kill them?"

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"They shot first, I had to act."

"You're not from around here," gritted Juvey, "-tell me boy, who the hell are you?"

"Xen," he said, "-these low lives wounded my friend," the tense atmosphere shattered, survivors from the attack ambled slowly across the debris with the chubby boy at the head, "-thank you, mister."

"You saved us," added others

"No thank you needed," said Igna, "-I regret not being here sooner." Sirens disrupted the tranquility, police, and ambulances arrived, paramedics took to the wounded – officers gathered around Igna and King Juvey.

"Majesty," they saluted.

"Don't concern with formality, I'm but a bystander, do what is needed."

A stroll told of the intense battle, the officers watched in awe, “-hard to believe someone one against the Yeo,” body bags filled the street, a crowd gradually gathered behind yellow lines. Igna made himself comfortable by taking the window ledge as the seat. A few minutes later, more ambulances arrived. A tall-man in a brown overcoat took notes, slyly glanced at the scene, and nodded at the reporting uniformed officers. His majesty was requested to stand from the public’s view inside an ambulance. The monstrous presence made relaxation quite a tall task.

“The man of the hour,” said the coat-wearing officer, “-my name’s Coftler, inspector in charge of investigating gang-related activities and crime. I find it curious a single man could best a notoriously dangerous organization and walk away unscathed.”

“Naturally, you’re curious how I killed them?” a cigar lit, “-the boy there has the information you want and need. Cut the crap,” he puffed, “-I’m not interested in backward riddles, be upfront, what do you need to know?”

“A straightforward man, I like it,” he crossed his arms, “-were you responsible for killing them?”

“Yes, I killed them,” he glared, “-am I in trouble?” a slight lean had Coftler pressed his lips, “-tell me, inspector,” the posture changed, “-this Xen group, by the loudmouth of the wandering officers, are quite the formidable opponents. I captured and restrained at least three, granted, I might have maimed part to ensure obedience. From what I gather, I did the police force a great favor.”

“I see,” he exhaled, “-a silver-tongue unknown face, who are you?”

“Xen, I came to Elendor for a job.”

“What kind of job?”

“To fill the spot of a butler,” he smiled, “-money’s been running dry lately.”

“Listen,” the inspector took a seat and lit a cigarette, “-I don’t care how they were killed or why, my only concern is you, I can’t let you leave without proof of thy identity.”

“Afraid, are we?” he reached for the pocket and pulled an identification card, “-there,” it handed, “-I lived in Hidros and worked as an adventurer for ten years. Parents fled Elendor during the war, we had family there.”

“Explains the inhumane strength. I have family in Hidros too, Tier-4 Bronze is very impressive.”

“I’d like to stay and talk,” he stood, “-you better hurry and treat the prisoners, one of them is the leader, he’ll talk long as you inject this,” he pulled a syringe, “-a truth drug, with right connections, anything is possible.”

“Narcotics?” narrowed Coftler.

“Don’t look surprised, it’s an unfinished product used by the military. There are things best kept on the low.”

“That’s quite the offer...”

'Take the bait,' said Igna in thought, '-éclair surmised the character, he's the kind of person to do anything long as the moral high ground is his.'

"-think of the people you can save from accepting my offer. No one needs to know what happened, spin a story about the police having a super agent or something.'

"I understand," he reluctantly accepted, "-Xen, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Pleasure was all mine, Inspector," he nodded, "-I sure hope our paths don't cross."

"Me too," they laughed. The last ambulance held the remainder of the bodies, Igna talked his way into getting a lift. Tough luck, the monster of a man, Juvey, stared Igna coldly, the latter gave no second thought, he matched Juvey's glare with one fiercer and colder.

"Boy, what's your name?"

"Xen."

"Did you truly kill those men?"

"Yes." The conversation ended awkwardly, '-best to not acknowledge him for now, I'll play the part of a clueless foreigner. Saying I know he's king will lower his view on my talents – right now, without title, we're equals, "-why were you there?"

"I heard they hurt one of my people, as the leader, I had to intervene and get revenge."

"Same."

"Xen, where do you come from?"

"Hidros," he said, "-I came here to interview for a job at a pretty important place."

"Important place?"

"Between you and me, it's a position to work as a butler for someone very important. My friend said there's a tournament to decide who'll get the position. I thought I'd test my skill fighting monsters on people, could be a fun job," the open briefcase laid on his lap, "-this gun's been with me more than my own family," after which it rested in the case, "-I admire a leader who cares about his people, it's manly, true to the way of the warrior."

The imposing presence exhaled, the beard motioned a peaceful expression, "-the way of the warrior is a forgotten lifestyle. I'm a stubborn old man desperately holding on to ideals."

"And?" an understanding look went and held the king's heavy shoulders, "-holding onto tradition is what makes it manly."

"I know," the face lit, the ambulance stopped, the double doors opened into the emergency area, "-I have to check on my friend," hailed Igna, "-see you around, mister," off the van and into the hallway, the powerful Juvey waited.

'A strange kid, he didn't flinch at my power, a man who wiped a gang of violent pests, my gut says we'll cross paths again, Xen.'

Chapter 840: Elendor [4]

“Where have you been?”

“Had to take out the trash,” said a lesser worried Igna. The dirtied shirt and brownish-red stain drew the intrigue of fellow bystanders.

“Sure,” returned a not so impressed Dyu, “-look,” from their metal seats, he pointed to a suspended block, a television. On it was news reports and witness accounts on the recent shooting, an interview with the inspector said, “-the fight against the darker side of society is one where everyone participates. You, citizens, who sit and do naught, have a say in how our society advances. We’re glad to say, the leaders behind the incident are in custody. My division will make certain they pay for their crimes.”

“Vague, isn’t it?” narrowed the lawyer.

“Yeah, super,” shrugged Igna.

“Read this,” said Dyu, a word-filled table laid onto Igna’s lap, ‘-wise words written by Dyu,’ a massive smirk wrote across the latter’s face, “-read,” flash across the bold smiles.

‘King Juvey, what can I say, the man’s a living legend. Someone strong and powerful, a tyrant, war stories plague the annals of history, the campaigns the man’s led, from a few dozen to hundreds of thousands, it’s safe to say, the king’s a competent leader on the battlefield, despite the troublesome way he acts, the uncaring nature to another sex and race, very close-minded till strength is added to the equation. Wise words to him are the same as rambles, lest the ramble exits a man he respects’ mouth. I’ve worked quite a few times in dealing with the repercussion of his actions. Most often, the strongest of men are also the kindest, not him, I looked into the entourage, was told stories by prior maids, none had anything better to say. Depending on how he views a person, the relation may be awesome or awful. Luck would have it, Juvey cares for intellect, he treats wits and strength the same – the perfect candidate will always embody those talents. I’m sure you’re excited to meet him, Xen,’ Igna pulled, glancing at Dyu and the front, “-what’s this?”

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“Don’t like it?”

“Not a matter of liking or not, what is it?”

“It’s what I wrote to pass the time. I was worried about the battle, worried it’d be compromised. You know, rumors are often based on truth.”

“I understand,” the head shook, “-you’re worried. Fret not, comrade, I’m not angered easily.” Yonder, at the joining of corridors, an overwhelming presence approached. Many bystanders, including nurses – exchanged whispers and gossip. Before a remark left Dyu’s lips, the heaviness stormed to stand behind Xen with arms crossed, “-we meet again.”

The lawyer’s face dropped, “-look, it’s the king, he’s addressing another person.”

“Must be another noble,”

“I know.”

"Hush, the king's known for snapping heads."

"He's so terrifying."

"-m-Majesty," formed on Dyu's mouth

"Hello again," he pulled from the seat and stared the epitome, "-everyone's saying you're the king, are they right?"

"Xen," exhaled the king, "-you are strong. Between followers of warrior's way, we're bound by duty and a greater purpose. I'm indeed the king, Old Cray is the name I earned on the battlefield."

"Old Cray," he said, "-pleasure."

"No need for formality," a stare at Dyu, "-how is Scorpio?"

"In surgery still," added the lawyer, before anything else said, the broad back turned from the seats, the knees clicked and he dropped, "-too bad we're not mentioned on the news."

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"Right," shrugged Igna, "-you'd have blocked the view."

'What the fuc-' crossed Dyu's eyes, he reached for Igna's arms, "-what are you doing?" a cold grasp choked eavesdroppers.

"Whilst you'd be a frame," he quipped.

"I'm afraid my frame wouldn't last seconds holding thy stature," two cold glares turned on one another, the frowns cracked till smiles, "-ha-ha-ha-ha," they laughed, especially Old Cray. "Tell me, Xen," breath gathered, "-when are you interviewing for the job?"

"I don't know, my friends in the operating room."

"I see, explains why you know Scorpio and Dyu. Between you and me, I'm the employer," he whispered.

"I see. Majes-"

"Old Cray is fine."

"Ok?"

"Yes, Old Cray, we're comrades, are we not?"

"Sure, Mister Old Cray?"

He frowned, "-fine, fine, Old Cray it is. Tell me, why the search for a butler, did the last one not suffice?"

"I'm looking for a fresh breath of air, someone exciting and with a personality. Those around me aren't much talkers, they fear power and I admit, it's boring more often than not. Then there is you, a random fellow, a traveler from Hidros, an adventurer. The inspector told me about the deal, I'm impressed, using drugs on an officer to get away from their grasp, tis bold and genius, or borderline stupid, either way, the choices never fail to impress," the beard stopped, he looked on at the passing injured, a gleam scanned the pupils, "-Scorpio submitted his suggestion last. There are ten people in total, including you,

the tournament starts in two-to-three days. Under normal circumstances, he'd give the information of what to do and expect."

"Seeing he's in the hospice?"

"Yeah, I understand," a notification halted the conversation, the voice grew distant, a few minutes later, Old Cray arrived with the news, "-Xen, here are thy choices, come with me to the palace and get ready or stay here."

"Old Cray, I appreciate the offer, but I refuse. I'll stay until Scorpio gets better, it's my way of saying thank you for the opportunity. I want to be there for him, that's the duty of a friend." A nurse scurried into the waiting room; the heavy auras blasted her into an unsteady balance.

"Nurse, how is Scorpio?" asked Dyu, the mention called onto the king and Xen's attention.

"He'll be fine," she said, "-time heals," a relieved exhale carried onto Old Cray's smug expression, "-still going to wait?"

"I guess not," he shuffled to the nurse, "-when will he be cleared to have visitors?"

"I can't say, perhaps in a few days? He's still unconscious."

Without wait, Old Cray made for the entrance, "-meet me outside when you're done," a phenom down, Dyu finally lashed into grabbing Igna's shoulder, "-how the hell?"

"Skill my friend," he smiled, "-or pure luck?"

"Stop, I haven't seen the king act so brazenly to anyone before."

"Of course, you didn't, he's acting. A man of his caliber respects two things, loyalty and strength. Pass my warm regard to Scorpio, I have an interview to get to," grip around the case handle, "-been a pleasure, Dyu." Hence marked Igna, now by the moniker of Xen's arrival to Elendor. In a twist of fate, in wanting to let loose and get revenge for a fallen comrade – Old Cray so happened to be in the vicinity. If it'd been another employee, his majesty would have batted an eye and left the wounded to die.

7th of February wrote on the phone, shyly under the massive 00:34, the constructions eased into a line of flatlands shielded by trees. The car stopped at the eastern entrance, the door unlocked, "-Xen," said his majesty still inside the car, "-I've informed the guards of your participation. Things are different here, you earned the right to address me informally, we're comrades. I trust you understand how to excise caution."

"If tis about me showing off or revealing our relation, it won't happen. What's the point of employing someone who runs their mouth. Old Cray," he turned, "-from now onward, we're nothing save a king and a potential candidate to serve. My liege, I wish a very blessed night of sleep on thee."

"Smart as is strong. I approve," the teeth shone in confidence, "-may the goddess of luck bless thee, Xen," the engine's purred into the distance, leaving Igna alone under the starry-cold sky, '-he said goddess, Old Cray's not entirely controlled by the church. Makes sense they'd allow the attack dog liberties.' It took strides to cross the muddied path, two absurdly strong guardsmen had rifles around their shoulders. *Clap, clap, clap,* the path rose into the distant roof of the dome-roofed palace.

“State your business, stranger.”

“Xen, I’m here for the tournament.”

“Tournament,” glances were exchanged, “-very well,” identification was confirmed, took quite a while, and in the cold interrogation.

“All checks out,” the gates buckled, “-welcome to the Elendorian Palace, Xen. As a participant of the tournament, you’re in line to be the head butler of his majesty, which here, places you quite high up the worker’s hierarchy. Expect to be treated with respect until the strength runs low.”

“Nice way to say you’re good long as you don’t lose.”

“Snarky remarks,” shrugged the guard, “-we’ll see how long the attitude lasts.” A loud echo marked the closing of the gates, instruction said to make for the retainer’s quarters. Soon enough, he marched, éclair instantly went on the offensive and infiltrated their servers. Camera access and markers laid on the interface, ‘-the chips are people marked on the system as important. There’s a hidden dungeon under the castle, prince, and princesses of conquered lands. Why am I not surprised,” he sighed over the intercom, “-congratulations on making contact, my lord. The Queen’s also tracked on the system – I’d have never expected the device if we escaped. Do what is done best.”

The scent of manure rose on the fields, there laid the training area and a mixture of recent edifices – a vector path long the center ended at the gallows. Tall and imposing, he breathed a sigh and watched, on it laid the remains of a soldier, the uniform read, “-Ryan Antone.”

“I heard he died a brutal death,” said a female voice.

“Pardon?” the originator settled inside the shadow of a shed.

“Poor guy thought he’d get away with giving orders to King Juvey.”

“What did he do?”

“The King’s quite the mischievous leader. After punishing a maid for making a decision over his head, he sentenced her to be assaulted by countless of his men. Ryan suggested the idea in jest. However, Scorpio intervened and stopped her torture, tis then, after hearing Antone didn’t finish his job – Juvey ordered his torture and death over the phone. He’s my best work,” the figure ambled into the light, “-the name’s Lessie, I’m a cousin to the king and torturer of the family.”

“Torturer,” before him was a lady, scarred and burned, a mask tied around her mouth, the eyes bicolored by human intervention, the state of the skin spoke of acid burns. Shark black piercings knitted her expression, the nose bridged perforated from one side to the next by an arrow-shaped jewel. Her limbs were skinny and yet, the force in her step wasn’t to be taken easily – the choice of attire, black and very open. Fishnet stockings ran till her thighs, over which laid shorts. Her choice top was but a loud hoodie, “-are you the last participant?”

“Enough about me,” he suavely moved, “-tell me more about you?”

“Stop,” said her green and white eyes, “-getting close to me won’t gain anything in the long run. To think by mentioning my cousin’s name, people suddenly find me attractive,” her medium-length hair swayed, “-I appreciate the thought.”

“And I appreciate the sentiment,” he smiled, “-I don’t care about the title, what I’m interested in,” the large pupils opened at her equally bicolored eyes, “-is the way you torture people,” he smirked, “-do they talk easily?”

Her long lashes lit, to which she grabbed his collar and pulled, “-are you into torturing people?” she whispered menacingly.

“You bet I am,” he whispered, she pushed and suddenly changed, her foot crossed coyly, “-I don’t buy it.”

“Believe what you will,” he turned to watch the hung man, “-he was subjected to Judas’s chair, wasn’t he.”

“Yeah,” hands in her hoodie’s front pocket, “-everyone’s into that damned chair. Obsession with having a sharp object up their asses, cousin was quite adamant.”

“Lessie, I know we’ve just met,” an affectionate glow lit her brittle hidden frown, “-I’d like to see you at work.”

A rush of electricity twinkled across her spine, “-are you sure?”

“I’d be honored,” he bit his lips, “-to see a master at work... I’ll do anything.”

“Deal”