

"Shouldn't Nito be back by now? It only takes a day to get there and back."

Ban tossed his hand of cards onto the table and kicked his feet up onto a nearby chair, "You should have more faith in Nito, Carlin. The pocket rocket hits me hard once and you start acting scared. She'll be fine."

Carlin stared at Ban, his mouth filling with more than a couple of rebuttals, but just sighed and shook his head, "If you say so."

"I do say so! So, shuffle the deck and I'll take your money for a change!" Ban pulled his legs off the table and sat straight again.

Illu spoke from the side of the table, "So when he comes to arrest you, what should we do?"

Ban paused for a moment and stared at the ceiling as if it held the answer in all its infinite wisdom, "I dunno, hide?"

Everyone at the table stared at the Tyrant to the point where even he began to feel some embarrassment. Eventually, Carlin broke out of his stupor, "Dude, you gotta take accountability for this if it goes wrong."

Ban waved his hand at the voice as if he was shooing him away, "Bah, bah, Oracle of Doom Carlin, spare me!" The rest of the table chuckled as Carlin shook his head, "Seriously Carlin, have some faith. If we want the High Priests to see us as more than their lapdogs, then we gotta show them we can move on our own."

Illu spoke up from across the table as Carlin passed out everyone's hands, "You have to understand they only see you as their precious lapdog. We're your guard dogs, a wall of bodies in front of the important one. You don't make decisions like this with that in mind Ban."

Ban frowned, "You guys know I don't see you like that, though."

"Yeah man, we know."

"That's why I'm doing this in the first place!" A somber smile spread across Ban's face, "We pull this off and we'll all get a little bit of respect around here!"

Lain slid his hand of cards toward the center of the table, “I guess man, I just think you’re poking this bear a little too much. He kicked half your jaw off last time, and you only got away because the Phoenix stopped him.”

“What are you saying?”

Lain sighed “I’m saying it’s been a year since then, and you sent Nito to go meet that guy directly. We don’t know what this guy has turned into in the last year, and now she’s late getting back. Whatever happens, take it on the chin this time.”

“Alright, alright.” Illu said from her side of the table, “Let’s not act like Nito’s already dead. Unless Nito did something insane he shouldn’t be able to find out who she’s allied with.”

Ban slapped the table, “Thank you, Illu. That’s-”

A loud crash boomed from the floor below, like the window beneath combusted with the force of a Dragon Killer. Ban focused on the metal door ahead of him, the only way in was through a wall or through there. A light spear formed in his hands as he slid out of his chair like a predator stalking its prey. There was no more Piety in the building except for those in the room and Illu would have sensed and notified them of Mana by now.

Hurried steps made their way up the stairs behind the door. Ban’s skin tingled from anticipation and Lain supercharging the air. The steps were there at the door, and Ban’s eyes burned orange as he searched the movement beyond the door, it was sloppy. Keys began to jingle in the doorway and Ban’s stance began to relax. *An attacker wouldn’t use keys.* He lifted his arm and the other three relaxed in kind.

Eventually, Benji burst through the door and fell to the ground in a heap, “Boss...boss... I-I don’t-”

“Your words Benji! Speak!” Ban snapped.

Benji rose to his knees, shaking every inch of the way, and the prize he held so dearly revealed itself to the room, “it just came through the window...”

Nito’s head.

The four of them could only stare at the sight ahead of them before they were blindsided by the next surprise. Their earpieces flickered to life, slight static filling their ears.

“Hello. Can you hear me Ban?”

Ban snarled, he couldn't detach himself from Nito's head. The blood around her neck wasn't even dry yet, the way her skin tore-. He couldn't think about it, but he couldn't look away. Lain was right, he would-

“Don’t act scared now, we’ll speak face to face soon.”

“Why? What did Nito do to you?” Despite the anger he couldn't help but ask, she didn't deserve any of this.

“Nothing.” *Is he serious? He just killed her? “Doesn’t it hurt?”*

The rage.

The confusion.

He couldn't think straight, he just wanted an answer.

The Tyrant rumbled with fury, “Who are you?”

“Accountability.”

The connection severed.