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Ram walked through the entrance hall of the Mage's Guild. He dragged his feet to the receptionists' area and tossed a bundle of papers onto the desk in front of him. The girl at the front desk recoiled in surprise as a loud thud broke her concentration, and she sighed.

"Nice to have you back, Scarlet," she said, donning a smirk. "I take it you didn't take well to the scorching hot deserts of Alaya."

Ram frowned and rubbed his forehead. "Honestly, the things they have us agents do. There wasn't even any magic involved."

The girl chuckled vindictively. "Tough break. By the way, you have a visitor. She was on your list, so we let her wait in your room. A Miss Lilian Rouge, I believe."

Ram's eyes widened at the name. "I see. I musn't keep her waiting then." He waived the receptionist off and turned to the stairs leading up to the agents' quarters. He darted up the stairs and took quick, light steps down the hallway. As he approached his door, he slowed and collected himself. He straightened his coat and dusted whatever sand still hid between the folds of his clothes. Satisfied, he unlocked the door and opened it.

Inside he saw a woman moving things around. Her black hair sprinkled with grey and her face bore the faintest signs of wrinkles. At the sound of the door, she turned around and smiled at Ram, who

responded by crossing his arms and frowning. "What manner of thievery is this?"

The woman giggled. "You never change, Ram."

Ram smiled back. "Nor you, Lily. I guess you can't help it."

Lily had been prepared for Ram's arrival. Having worked as a servant for House Scarlet all her life, she often slipped into her habits even as someone else's guest. She and Ram talked while she brewed Ram's favorite tea, reminiscing about the days Lily would take care of Ram when he was a child.

Ram took his first sip of tea and composed himself. The nostalgic smell reminded him of his old home. "So how are things at the manor?"

Lily closed her eyes thoughtfully. When she opened them again, she discarded the smile she had on up until then. "Things are a mess." She grabbed her knees as she spoke. "He had been acting strangely these past few years, but... he's finally turned."

Ram frowned. "I'm sorry," he said, looking off to the side. He knew who she meant. As his age progressed so did his condition. It is something that

will even consume himself someday, he knew. Ragnell Scarlet, Ram's father, had finally reached the point of no return.

Lily's tone became sterner. "It's not over yet, Ram. He's still alive. Ashbell refuses to kill him, and no one can reason with him. Anyone who tries to lay their hands

on Ragnell gets assaulted by Ashbell. Not even Lacey's threats are getting through to him."

Ram squinted his eyes at the news. He set his cup on the table. The loud jittering of porcelain on glass betrayed

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his emotions. "How many are dead?" He was no stranger to his brother's, Ashbell's, cruelty.

Lily's façade collapsed at the question; she gripped her knees as she spoke: "Ashbell has critically wounded a number of guards, but none have died yet." Her tone withered. "Ragnell has killed four servants already. He can't be reasoned with anymore. Oh, Ragnell..."

"That's enough," said Ram. Although he had no love for the man, he knew Lily had loved him. This must have been hard on her, he thought.

Tears rolled down Lily's face. Silence took hold of the room as she collected herself. "I know you didn't like him. He wasn't the best father to you, but he always put the family first. That's why he asked me to take care of you." She paused for a response, but Ram bit his tongue. "Ashbell was such a handful. He had to keep him on a short leash, and it really—"

"Let's get to the point," said Ram, raising his voice. He frowned at his own lack of control, but continued. "You want me to take care of Ragnell."

Silence again gripped the room. Ram stared intensely at Lily, who slowly raised her eyes to meet his. "I'm not asking you to do this for your father's sake, nor for the family's sake. Not even for my own. Ram, they stole your birtright. You act like you don't care, but I more than anyone else know how much it tore you up inside. I could have requested another agent's aid, but I felt this was your chance to prove to yourself that you are as much a Scarlet as your father. You don't have to return to the manor, or get along with the rest of them. I just want you to face yourself so that you can overcome your past."

Ram clenched his teeth and fists and

looked away. "The man threw me aside in favor of Ashbell. I lost my right to kill him that day."

"That was a mistake. I know it as well as you do. But are you going to tell me you're satisfied with that?" Lily regained her hard stare and pressed Ram.

Ram sat silently clenching his fists until he could not feel his fingers. The room filled with an oppressive silence. After much thought, he pushed himself off his seat and made to walk to his bedroom. With his back facing Lily, he spoke: "I'll leave on the morrow. We'll go over the details before then."

"Good night, Ram," said Lily softly. He heard a sigh of relief escape her as he shut the door behind him.



The boy walked through the candlelit corridor. Ahead of him he heard pained screams as he walked through the stone hall. He continued to walk, unfazed

by the carnage ahead. The screams grew louder as the boy walked forward. Sounds of splattering against stone echoed within the abyss.

The first deafening screams gradually gave way to crying whimpers.

The boy saw something ahead of him. Many things littered the floor obscured by the darkness. He walked forward as if mesmerized by the unseen sight. Tearing. Slashing. Gnawing. New sounds emerged from the quieted walkway. The boy stepped on something slippery and fell with a loud splash. The disgusting sounds stopped then, and he pushed himself off the ground, now painted in red.

The boy heard footsteps walking toward him, sloshing with wet sounds on the stone floor. A figure approached the

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boy. The figure stood a head and a half taller than him. "Brother," said the figure.

The boy recoiled. He could not speak. He saw red eyes approach him from the dark. He crawled away and stumbled over himself as he made to get on his feet. The footsteps behind him made awful sounds as they drew nearer.

"What's wrong, Ram? This is what we do. We're Scarlets," said the figure.

The boy Ram could not move. He stared at his palms, painted crimson red. He was drawn to their beauty. His heart began to race and he felt his entire body burn from the core. Ram's breaths became shallow, and he lowered his head towards the sticky red floor.

"Yes, Ram. Show your true colors."

Ram placed his palms down onto the red stone floor nervously. The smell of red blood had captivated him. He placed his tongue on the stone floor and scooped up the fluid of life spilled over the cold stone. He began to gag as he lifted his head from the floor, now realizing what he had done.

The figure laughed behind him. He stood over the crawling body. "You're weak, brother," said the figure. The laughing stopped. The figure raised its booted foot, letting drops of red blood land on the floor beneath. He then drove it down onto Ram's skull, dashing his head onto the red stone floor.

Ram saw the figure of his brother Ashbell standing over him surrounded by red flames. As his vision darkened the malevolent roar of blood fire clouded his head.

Ram awoke drenched in sweat. His skin burned and he could feel a fire in his chest. He had not had any blood in

days, he realized. The burning he felt was that of bloodlust. He, like most of his family, must consume the blood of others to retain his sanity and his life. He knew he could last a few days longer, however, and the burning hunger gave him a peculiar strength that kept him on edge. He washed and ordered the receptionist to prepare the transport then made his way back to his room, where he saw Lily preparing food.

"Good morning," she said, giving Ram a slight smile.

"Morning," replied Ram in his monotonous morning tone, which Lily chuckled at. "I'll be eating light. I can't afford to get clumsy today."

"I'll just make you eat twice as much

when you get back then," said Lily in a childish tone. Lily turned around and saw Ram's face. His face had a reddish hue, to which Lily frowned. "You haven't been keeping up with your feedings, have you?" She sounded worried.

"It'll pass. I'll feed once I'm done there."

"Your father would throw fits when he went without feeding. I don't want this business to happen to you, too, Ram."

Ram felt guilty over having to hear that, but he pressed on. "I know my limits. I'll be fine."

Lily stared at Ram fiercely. She placed her hands at her hips and looked ready to fight. Ram felt his stomach plunge, but he knew he was right. After what seemed like several minutes, she caved in and went back to preparing the meal. The two ate lightly and quickly. The sound of porcelain on glass again took hold of the room.

"Is there anything I need to know about the current state of the manor?" Ram asked, breaking the silence as he put down his tea.

The smell of blood had captivated him. He placed his tongue on the stone floor and scooped up the fluid of life spilled over the cold stone.

Lily paused then stirred her own tea. "The servants have abandoned the main building fearing for their lives. They have been ordered by Ashbell to bring in food regularly, lest he suffice with eating one of them instead." She continued to stir her cup. "Ashbell has Ragnell stashed away in his room. I haven't seen him in over a week now," she said somberly.

"Are Lace and the rest expecting my arrival?"

"No, I left without their permission. Lace would likely welcome your aid for now. She is furious at Ashbell for seizing the manor, but she obviously lacks the power to do anything about it. She has been taking it out on everyone else lately."

"My dear cousin. I will refrain from meeting her. I could do without another Scarlet to put down," he paused. "For now."

"Oh Ram, don't say such things," said Lily, genuinely worried. She paused, filling the room with the sound of ceramic as she continued to swirl. "What are you going to do about Ashbell?"

Ram stood silent for a moment before downing the rest of his tea. "That's up to him," Ram said firmly. "You'll be staying here until I get back, Lily. That's an order."

Lily looked down at her now lukewarm tea and fell silent.

Ram got up and marched into his study to prepare for the trial that awaited him. Ram picked up his wand, dark brown and hardly longer than a pencil. He twisted off the cap, revealing a hollow core, then poured a store of his own blood into it from a vial on his shelf. His rich Scarlet blood would fuel his magic, which he had discovered he had an affinity for as a child. He often read books in Scarlet Manor's library with Lily, and there he uncovered a grimoire used by the Scarlets of old, long thought to be unusable. That discovery convinced Lily to send Ram to the Mage's Guild to

refine his unique talent and escape from Ashbell's grasp.

Ram put on his long, red coat, specially assigned to him by the guild to protect against milder sorcery. The trailing red fabric he once thought mocked him now filled him with courage. He walked back to the other room spotting Lily on the way out. "I'll be back tomorrow at the latest. I'll make sure to bring a keepsake of Ragnell's."

"Thank you, Ram. Don't do anything reckless." And with that, Ram departed for the carriage that had been waiting on him.

He had been an agent for four years now. In his time he had seen the worst humankind has to offer. The Mage's Guild was specifically designed to deal with profound cases of magical abuse that the locals could not handle on their own, and thus Ram dealt supernatural phenomena for a living. Ram could not shake the feeling of apprehension that took hold of him, however; he looked over the data on Ashbell and Ragnell obsessively, and written there was nothing he did not already know. Still, he shuffled through papers to pass the time until the rider informed him of their arrival. He still felt the burning bloodlust course through his body as he leapt down from the carriage.

Ram called out to the rider. "If things get rough, hurry back to the guild. I'll make it back somehow." The rider nodded as he watched Ram walk resolutely towards Scarlet Manor.

He entered through one of the side entrances leading into the kitchen. He saw no one inside. The door to the main hall dimly illuminated the once busy kitchen of his youth. The sound of his own footsteps echoed as he examined the surroundings. As a child Lily had brought him with her to the kitchens where she worked often.

The floors were always spotless then, the dishes clean, and a servant always stood ready to meet the family's needs. However, Feathers and fur now littered the dirt encrusted floor. From the looks of it, Ragnell seems to be eating his meals raw these days, Ram thought. He skirted the kitchen and made his way to the main hall. The ceiling loomed well overhead, with light creeping in through stained glass windows over the front entrance. With no torches lit, the room glowed a dim red that the Scarlets had a fancy for.

Ram inspected the servant's quarters in the attic just in case, but Ram found them as empty as Lily had informed him. It was in one of these rooms that Ram had been nursed back to health after sustaining severe injury at the hands of his Ashbell. The servants had always taken well to Ram because of his relationship with Lily, but now he had no one

to rely on but himself. He descended back to the main hall and keenly looked at the entrance to the basement, where the Scarlets made their home. He made his way down the familiar stone steps into the underground chambers. He pulled his wand out from his coat and traced a circle before him. As the tip traveled through the air a warm blue light lingered. When he completed the circle, it glowed red for a second and then ignited into flame at the wand's tip..

The wand now illuminated the otherwise black dungeon that he once called home. As he descended the stairwell a strange but all-too familiar odor sent a surge of disgust through his body. He continued down into the first level, containing the library where Lily would tutor him daily. He lit the torches that he would light every morning in anticipation of Lily's

arrival. The dim torchlight revealed the source of the disturbance: body parts and blood strewn about the once plain stone floors. The welcoming smell of mold and dust had been overtaken by the pungent odor of death. He frowned at the discovery, hoping that he would not resort to this in his older years.

The warm torchlight revealed a thicker trail of blood leading to the second level. He closed his eyes and took a couple deep breaths, then descended into Ragnell's lair. The floor sloshed loudly as the blood sucked the sole of his boots with every step. The further into the dark he went, the stronger the odor became, setting every hair on his body at end. He heard nothing at the bottom of the staircase. Once at the bottom, he lit the torches surrounding Ragnell's room, hoping to get a response. He felt a chill at

the absolute silence that filled the basement. He stepped in front of the wooden doors leading into the chamber.

He thrust his wand out in front of him, and, again, a trail of soft light followed in its wake. He cut the air with three fluid strokes, and the pattern of light exploded before him. The door gave way in an instant. The candles

He cut the air with three fluid strokes, and the pattern of light exploded before him. The door gave way in an instant. The candles in the hallway flickered out as the door was blown back into the room,

in the hallway flickered out as the door was blown back into the room, and from within he heard an unintelligible yell accompanied by laughter. Ram felt his stomach turn at the sounds and instinctively raised his arms to cover his face as a sorcerous wind gushed out of the door in response. Ram's sleeves protected his face, but the wind sliced the exposed skin of his hands and tore his wand into dozens of wooden shards that scattered the now darkened hall.

"Hello brother," said the figure as he

stepped out of the chamber. Animalistic screams from inside roared as he stepped forward.

Ram let his hands fall to his sides and stared down the figure emerging from the dark. "Dear Brother. I presume the main event is behind that door." Ram took a look at Ashbell. He stood a foot taller than Ram, and gripped the family's two-handed runesword, Scarletter, firmly with one hand. He was lightly armored to allow for unbridled movement and donned a cloak, no doubt offering some resistance to sorcery.

"You won't be laying a hand on Father," said Ashbell.

The dark tone of Ashbell's voice made Ram quiver, but he could not afford to lose his edge. "He always did spend all his time with you," he bluffed.

"I guess even you can have feelings for another human being." Ram was relieved to feel his blood run down his fingers as he stalled.

"Someone like you wouldn't understand. You always failed him, Brother. That's why he chose me. You were too weak." Ashbell lifted Scarletter up, holding the blade in his other hand. "He entrusted the future of the Scarlet family to me. This is the proof."

Ram bit his lip. Scarletter, the Sword of the Successor. Originally Ram's inheritance, Ragnell disinherited Ram after Ashbell's assault. "You're right. Now why don't you be a good little boy and kill your father?" Ram faked a cocky grin.

Ashbell steamed. "Why should I have to kill him? We have the power. We are the law. We will live on. If maggots like you have to die for us to live then that's fine by me." Ashbell appeared to be done talking as he readied his sword.

As Ashbell reeled Scarletter back and

made to charge forward, Ram threw his left hand out in front and quickly slashed the air with his bloody index finger. Red light followed his finger and formed a rune, from which a wall of red light expanded. Ram did not pause, continuing to stroke the air as Ashbell tried to break through. Every time Ashbell slammed on the wall, a chunk of glowing rune would vanish, but Ram's hand was faster, and once he gained a sufficient lead he dashed towards the stairwell.

Ashbell gave up hacking at the wall. "You're not getting away, Ram!" he yelled. Below Ram's feet the thick bloody floor burst into flame, running along the red path two floors up. Ram braced himself as the bloodfire raged, hiding his body behind his red demonleather coat.

Ram's red barrier kept the bloodfire out of Ragnell's chamber as Ashbell planned, but the other presence within the room began to stir as the smell of burning blood reached him.

Ram could hear yells coming from the room over the fire's roar, but he could not afford to stick around. He raced up the stairs, shielding himself with the coat. Breathing the hot air burned his insides as he ran while the fire's heat singed his skin through his coat. The fowl odor of the basement dwellings intensified as the smoke carried it up, but Ram was relieved to see the bloodfire die down as he neared the final stretch.

Ram staggered as he reached the main hall and caught his breath. After he regained his composure he knew something was wrong. Ashbell could run up those stairs in seconds, he thought. He looked around cautiously, but saw nothing but black smoke billowing out of the basement dwellings of the Scarlets. He began to cringe as he became conscious

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of the pain coursing through his body, but had no time to tend to his wounds before an angry howl echoed out of the smoke. A bloodied human figure emerged. Ragnell Scarlet. Ragnell hunched forward, blackened by smoke and fire. Where he once wore brilliant red fabrics lined with gold trim, he now stood in the same hall sporting tattered blackened rags covered in blood.

Ram wasted no time. He carved out a long chain of runes before him. As he added to the chain the runes spiraled into a circular pattern, and from it emerged a bloody black bird the length of Ram's arm. It perched on Ram's raised arm and spread its wings. The bloodraven opened its beak and let out a silent caw before taking flight, circling the air above the hall floor.

Ragnell noticed Ram and charged forward with blinding speed. Ram crafted another barrier rune before him. Ragnell crashed into the red wall that sprouted forth, sending him flying back. Ragnell vanished before him. Ram hesitated, and the next thing he knew he felt a blow strike him from behind, launching him forward. Ram landed on his chest and lost his breath. He rolled to the side anticipating a follow-up attack. Ram felt the breeze of Ragnell's attack as it grazed his head. Ram had expected Ragnell to be fast, but the records could not compare to the real Ragnell.

He got up and ran, preparing to draw another rune, but he felt a tug from behind and nearly lost his footing. Ragnell took hold of Ram's coat while Ram desperately wriggled out of it. While Ragnell occupied himself with the coat,

Ram began carving another long chain of runes. Ragnell discarded the coat and dashed towards Ram, but a black blur dove down from above and knocked him off his feet. The monstrous black bird tore at the enemy's neck as Ram gave the finishing stroke to his rune.

Before him, the runes formed a red glowing circle; black tentacles of blood emerged and took hold of the enemy's arms and legs, preventing his escape. Ragnell yelled in agony as the black sludge slowly engulfed him. Ram's raven released Ragnell and took to the sky again. With his foe incapacitated, Ram caught his breath then walked towards his fallen father. Ragnell resisted, managing to get on his knees, but he could no longer walk with what was left of his legs.

Ragnell's eyes met Ram's as he knelt down to meet his height. Ram could see that Ragnell's soul had not yet been lost, but it was only a matter of time. The Scarlet family imposed this rule upon themselves to gain the approval of the other royal families: "A Scarlet, once turned to a life of carnage and destruction, must be executed by the highest ranking Scarlet." Because their vampirism grows stronger as they grow older, this end is an inevitability to those born to the name. Ragnell himself honored this rule, killing his turned father, but Ashbell did not follow suit. "This is my job, right, Father?"

Ragnell coughed as the black sorcery spread to his lungs and corroded his insides. A fragile spark of life ignited in Ragnell's eyes as he lifted his sight to his son in front of him. Ragnell took whatever was left of his bounded hands and reached into his shirt, pulling out a dagger. He pointed the dagger towards

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his own chest and plunged it deep into his heart. Ram could do nothing but call back his blood bindings as he watched Ragnell's life force flow into Bloodletter, the family's most precious heirloom.

No blood escaped the wound, and none coursed out of the stumps that remained of his arms and legs. The runedagger impaled within his chest devoured it all. "You did well, Ram," spoke Ragnell weakly, managing to form sound out of what was left of his throat. Bloodletter then took the remainder of his life.

Ram closed Ragnell's eyelids as he slumped down lifelessly. He gripped Bloodletter by the hilt and pulled it out. "Thank you, Father." Ram lingered a moment, then stood up, Bloodletter in hand, and marched towards his coat which laid a room's length away. As Ram picked up his coat, a black cloud exploded out of the basement dwellings. The wind shattered the stained glass windows directly opposite the basement entrance. Falling glass shards echoed in the large hall as Ram put on his coat, knowing he would need it.

Ashbell emerged from the stairwell. His clothes were torn and blood ran down the length of his arms and down his face. He dragged Scarletletter behind him, scratching at the stone floor.

"You're late." Ram said, then paused. "Brother." Ram began stroking the air with Bloodletter, the Dagger of the Undying.

Ashbell roared loudly and swung the Sword of the Successor, releasing another wave of blades at Ram, but Ram finished his rune with a powerful stroke, and the bladed winds recoiled as they approached, scattering throughout the room. Ram heard a scream as the blood raven skewered Ashbell from above, tearing at the flesh of his sword arm. While

Ashbell swung blindly at the demonic bird, Ram carved a complex rune into the air with Bloodletter. The runes stretched out into space as Ram drew them. Bloodletter infused the magic of a thousand years of Scarlet Lineage into Ram's arm as the runes lit the dim hall with a brilliant red light.

Ashbell cleaved the raven in two, and the halves dispersed into nothingness. He only then took notice of Ram, who pointed the ferocious red incandescence at him from afar.

"This is my proof, brother." Ram let loose the rune. From it, a blazing red light surged forth, hitting the back wall of the manor. The Manor wall exploded on impact and the blinding red overtook even the sun's harsh rays. Ram fought the violent recoil that drove him back, but was unable to keep his footing and blown back into the Manor's grand double doors. His consciousness faded as the red light died down and the sound

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of falling debris seized the once glorious hall. He gripped Bloodletter as the darkness took over his senses.

Ram woke up to the sight of his cousin Lace sitting beside him. She wore an apathetic expression as she noticed Ram wake.

"I see you're up. Long time no see, Ram." She gave the slightest hint of a smile, but it quickly disappeared.

Ram fought a pained expression as he tried to push himself up from the bed he laid in. "Have I died and gone to hell?" He looked down at his bandaged hands. At least he knew he didn't dream everything.

"You made quite the mess of the place, you brute. Nevertheless, I do owe you for

taking care of those nuisances.”

Ram felt disturbed by her graciousness. “I figured you would repay me with a stab in the back, but here I am.”

Lace shifted out of her seat and revealed the dagger in her hand. Bloodletter whistled as she swung it at Ram’s throat. She fell just short of drawing blood as she pressed the point to Ram’s jugular. “I like the personal touch.”

“You know, I still haven’t forgiven you for leaving us with that monster all these years,” she said in a low voice, averting her gaze.

Ram’s face twisted, but then he recalled Ashbell. “What of my dear brother?”

Lace loosened her press on Ram’s neck. “Oh, I don’t know. Either you vaporized him or he ran,” she said playfully. She removed Bloodletter from his neck and shrugged. “He’ll be back if he’s still alive. He’s got nowhere else to go.” She juggled Bloodletter around. “I have no use for this damned thing. I never could get the runes to work. I’ll let you have it on one condition.”

“What would that be?”

“Take that old hag with you.” She tossed Bloodletter on Ram’s lap. “Next time you come you’d better be prepared to take responsibility for the family, or I’ll kill you myself.” With that, she spun and left the room in the way she always had when they argued as children.

Through the open door entered Lily who had been waiting outside. She walked up to Ram’s bed and sat where Lace had. “I told you not to do anything reckless,” she said.

“I told you to stay at the guild,” retorted Ram.

“You were out for three days! You had me worried sick, you know.” Tears had begun to well up in her eyes.

He closed his eyes and sighed. “Here Ragnell’s life is held within.” Ram gestured at Bloodletter, which he was unable to grip with his bandages.

Lily slapped Ram. “Idiot!” she blurted. “Ragnell left that for you. There’s no way I’m taking it... Ram, you really are a Scarlet. You always have been. Don’t forget that.” She smiled warmly at the stunned Ram.

“... Yeah. I’ll never forget.”

