

Death Magic 1011

Chapter 1011: Emperor and Empress

A birthday event to go down in the annals of history. Igna's half-hearted attempts at motivation would be a prophecy. Day broke, Hanna and Anna rushed around the castle, gathered retainers, and ordered the ballroom to be evacuated. Most of the daily proceedings moved to the office grounds, else known as the courtyard. Compared to older history, the latter, which would be used as a residential area, was swapped for offices.

"Nothing else to do," said Elixia. "Master, why not head into town or meet with lady Syhton? She's worried."

"Elixia," he rose, "-be straight," a stern expression locked upon the room, "-is Hidros ready to be called a self-ruling nation?"

"Yeah," she answered blankly, "-majesty, was this not the ultimate plan?"

"It was, I just feel empty. There's nothing to do anymore, the world moves at a steady pace."

"Right," she firmed her tablet, "-majesty, you've done enough," came a reassuring smile, "-allow us the honor."

"Fair," he threw on an overcoat, "-call me if anything comes up."

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"Will do," the door shut on the king's office. Elixia's face slowly vanished as the locks came together. Hands in pocket and with spare time, he vaulted over the exposed walkway and headed for the dungeon. The scanner flickered; he entered the grimly old torture hall. Lashes and moans came from within.

"Tired," Theon crawled, "-majesty," he gasped, "-what are you doing here?"

Igna's relaxed pace eventually overshadowed Theon's restless breaths, "-the ground's dirty, come on," he held a helping hand.

"Thank you," back on his feet, "-majesty, why are you here?"

"Came to pay a visit," he turned, "-my, she looks to be doing well."

"Yeah," returned Theon, "-she's needy alright."

"Theon, go have a shower," nodded Igna.

"Okay," the man caught the hint, "-I will be back in a few hours, majesty."

A mild duck underneath the archway gave into Theon's master office. Cleopatra remained bound by chains with her legs spread and facing some weird contraption.

'Him and his inventions,' Igna pulled onto the lever, the vibrating member halted, he pushed the device aside and snapped, warm water drenched the bloodied mess of sweat. Another clap evaporated said liquid to clean clothes, "-wake up," a few droplets fell into her mouth.

'Not again, please,' consciousness regained within a strange place, "-I'm clothed," she scanned her arms and legs, "-no wounds... what's happened?"

"Welcome to a pocket dimension."

"..." a simple table rested under a big tree. The view through fields, shrubbery, and vegetation felt peaceful. A dull tone covered the skies – it seemed as if a painter forgot to detail the natural ceiling. The fragrance of tea and snakes laid upon the table, "-over here," said Igna, her brain took time processing. A flash marked the readjustment, "-where am I, why are you here?"

"Cleopatra, poor ol' Cleopatra. Have a moment's rest," he said, "-the pocket dimension is where the founder gains absolute control over its very essence. Consider it the lesser version of expanding a domain. Tell me," he sipped, "-how were the few days?"

Her lips froze, her hands remained guarded, a weird shake of the jaw and legs – minute sound caught her attention, "-I'm good," she blinked, "-I think?"

"Don't be so modest," he pushed the tea, "-have something to drink. On my name, there's nothing to worry about. You won't be physically harmed, is that okay?"

"..." reluctance, she pushed herself further.

"Listen," he rested his cup and glared, "-listen to me else, this pocket dimension turns into a chamber worse than Theon's."

"Okay," she trembled, "-what is it you n-need."

"Good," the terrifying presence subsided, "-tell me, why did you come to the mortal realm?"

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"Why did I come?"

"Yes, Lixbin should have had a plan in mind. You know, like the time where thee betrayed Staxius, it's a simple question."

"Lixbin told me to come to reawaken old memories..."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah."

"Fine," he shrugged, "-Cleopatra, for being honest, I give you two choices. One door faces freedom and the second is the dungeon."

"Letting me go free?" she blinked, "-are you sure?"

"Why, is it perhaps that you enjoy feeling Theon's sadistic contraptions?" she rose, kept her glance at a lowered stance, and headed for the dungeon door, "-thank you for the tea," it opened to her never-ending hell. *Thud,* it closed, Igna slammed the table, "-I knew it, I knew it! No one in their right minds would pick the dungeon. She's here on purpose, she's here as part of a greater scheme," the dimension vanished to the flowery orchard.

“There you are.”

“Syhton, long time no see.”

“Don’t give me that.”

As for Cleopatra, her torture resumed. Igna’s suspicions seemed outrageous at first, however, contrary to what they thought – those of the higher realm held no moral compass. What was the pain and suffering of a pawn compared to their advance? She mumbled rough patches of words in-between instruments. “-speaking in tongue?” Theon shrugged, “-whatever, to each their own,” and when it happened, he’d usually brandish a hot iron onto her thigh or waist.

Reports of Alphan movement echoed on Minerva’s table, “-what are these?”

“Interceptions from their military,” returned Medusa dawning a military outfit, “-they’re on the move.”

“What type of movement?”

“Exact wording is being deciphered,” and as she reported, the interceptions lit the collective interface, “-Operation RedGuard is on route. Per orders of the newly crowned Emperor, the church and the noble faction have formed an under-the-table alliance. They’re to join forces and launch a war against the traitorous nation,” the document went into greater detail, leaving Minerva to crinkle her brow.

“I heard the report,” said Eira, “-what are we going to do?”

“I mean, looking at the current status – Alpha’s newly crowned Emperor’s pulling all the stop. The alliances probably involved the church gaining more influence in Alpha. The land and prestige practically fell on their laps.”

“I agree,” nodded Minerva, “-gaining influence. Empire cut back on funding for the church. They’re actively trying to lower their influence. The emperor’s shrewd, there’s been a shift in how they conduct themselves lately.”

“In any case, we can’t ignore the operation. Lady Eira, please have éclair leak the information. Let the emperor decide.”

“Understood,” she left.

“Medusa, contact Clarise, we need to quash their advance before it even starts.”

Sometime later in the coming afternoon, a silvery-white helicopter would enter the Rosesopian skies and ask for permission to land. Panic flooded the castle, Igna and Syhton, having paid no heed to the arrival, continued their flirtatious gathering.

“Majesty, majesty, majesty,” Midne ran, “-where are you,” she horned onto Igna and leaped over ten meters, “-we need you in the castle, right now!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Majesty, don’t,” she frowned, “-put your game face on, right this moment.”

'She's serious. The castle feels quieter. Syhton,' he pecked her cheeks, "-let's resume this conversation later." They left the orchard and took the long walkway, "-majesty," Elixia waited in ambush just shy of the mound where he used to paint, "-the emperor of the Wracian Empire's here for a visit."

"Pardon?"

"You heard me right," she straightened her expression, "-éclair and the other ministers are getting ready to tend to his imperial majesty."

"We've finally caught the attention of the big boss," he smiled, "-where are the others?"

"Private lounge."

"Good," he suddenly grabbed their hands and teleported, "-Hello my dear comrades!" thundered from a pool table.

"Majesty?" they narrowed, "-get off the table."

"..." the air froze. "-Heed me," he thundered, "-we're Hidros. You need not worry about repercussions or anything of that matter. I know we've been at odds against the Wracian Empire for a long time, and yes, they're powerful and influential. Hidros' no ordinary kingdom, we may be small in comparison – our culture and resolve far outweigh theirs. Long years of painstaking work, long years of sacrifice, long years of effort – don't let it be wasted. The Emperor's come to visit, so I hear," he skipped off the table, "-why the worry, why the hesitation. Let's show him the pleasures of Hidros, most importantly, let's show them the Hidrosian courtesy."

"Praise the King!" cried a nobleman.

"Praise the king!" the ministers joined as did the retainers and officials.

"Right, shall we begin?"

"Yes, your majesty."

A clutter of footwork escaped. Ela, éclair, Eira, and Minerva waited in a circle, "-good speech," said éclair, "-majesty, what's the plan of action?"

"What do you mean plan of action...?"

"Igna's correct," added Eira, "-Hidros was never the type to think before acting."

"We act whilst we think," chuckled éclair.

"Adaptability is one of our greatest strengths."

Emperor Ernis Essin and Lia Essin were shown to a lavish lounge. Their entourage, officials from the Empire, were shown to another lounge where Hidros' ministers waited to entertain their guests.

'Behind there sits the emperor,' Igna gathered his breath, Elixia stood at his side. They crossed glances and entered the battlefield. Retainers closed the adorned door behind. Emperor and Empress stood the moment the king entered, '-respectful,' he blinked, and as to return their courtesy, "-it's my pleasure to

welcome his imperial majesty and the lovely empress," he bowed, "-we've never had the pleasure of a formal acquaintance before."

"Sadly not," the slender emperor walked over and gave a hearty handshake, "-King of Hidros, it's an honor to stand here."

"Emperor Ernis, please, I should be the one who's deeply honored," there, in the brief exchange, a feeling of sudden camaraderie ambered within Ernis' innards. The emperor, against all odds, had a healthy frame, the grip told much in ways of training. He dawned short light-colored hair combed to one side, a straight nose, a sharp chin, and a well-built jawline. The dark-brown pupils watched, "-King Igna, I'm truly honored."

"Oh, don't mind it," he nodded, "-please, have a seat, emperor." Snacks and beverages arrived shortly after, "-emperor Ernis, I do apologize for the suddenness."

"Ah, yes," he lowered the cup, "-the reason for our visit?"

"Yes, it would seem Riaz's not here either."

"Well, you see," he held Lia's hands, "-the empire's no longer a united front. Deal the council made to ally with Alphaia has turned our unity into pure hatred. The factions split. I was forced to betray the King of Sadia to keep the palace united," he kept staring at Elixia, "-the nature of our visit is... how can I put this, personal."

"Elixia here is my secretary," nodded Igna, "-if his imperial majesty would like," he glanced at Elixia and turned to Lia, "-how about allowing us to show lady Lia Hidros' hospitality. We are friends after all."

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"Igna, please," she lowered her gaze.

"Understood," firmed Essin, "-if it's not much trouble."

Emperor and King sat alone, "-tell me, emperor, what happened?"

"I had to come to ask the king for help," he motioned as if he were to grovel, "-please, king Igna, I know our realms haven't been on friendly terms, it's understandable, however," he dropped on his knees and lowered his head, "-I beg of you, king Igna, Wracia needs help."

"Emperor Essin," he laid into the chair, "-please raise your head. I'm not interested in begging or anything of the sort. Please, speak to me as an equal. Out of the various kingdoms and states, you chose Hidros, one governed by the Devil. My reputation isn't one to easily ignore. Tell me, Emperor, if I were to help, how would it benefit me."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't," narrowed the Emperor, "-Riaz had us go into hiding. My entourage consists of loyal members from the imperial faction. As we speak, the war's broken within the capital. The church has staged a revolution. We have Hamer's Inc. to thank for the escape. We were supposed to fly to the new continent and take shelter there... alas, another faction's taken foothold of major cities and trade routes."

"You picked Hidros instead?"

“Yes. Your reputation is one to admire and praise, majesty. I couldn’t think of anyone else.”

“Asking an old enemy to help,” he smiled, “-consider my interest piqued, Emperor. Make your case else,” he leaned, “-care to make a deal with the devil?”

Chapter 1012: World-War

“A deal?”

“You heard correctly. A deal with the devil.”

“What sort of deal? By Devil, do you speak of the devil, devil?”

“Devil, devil. Please don’t make me laugh,” Igna eased into his seat. Emperor, shocked at the proposition, held his tongue and breath. ‘Make a deal,’ crossed the mind, ‘-If I make a deal,’ the thoughts carried the eyes to rise at Igna, ‘-I might be playing into his hands. I came here to ask for help, I don’t have any excuse. The empire, I need to save it, no matter the cost. Such is my responsibility.’

“I see the mind is made up. Tell me, imperial majesty, what will it be?”

A rumble permeated throughout the castle, ‘-a spike in energy,’ he narrowed – various guardians materialized from the shadows, “-majesty, trouble,” reported one.

“I know,” he nodded, “-have Midne take care of the issue.”

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“As you wish,” the cloaked figure disappeared.

“Who was that?”

“Guardians of the realm,” added Igna, “-though it’s none of our concern.”

The vibration, on investigation, led downward, “-what’s happened here?”

“Midne,” panted a guard, the hallway clamored with unrest, “-the dungeon,” he gasped, “-there’s been an explosion.”

“Fuck sakes,” violently escaped, “-SSY, Report.”

A monotonous voice answered, “-castle protection has been breached. A single intruder has been detected. Origin, unknown, name, unknown, threat level, unknown.”

“SSY, heightened security to Black,” she voiced and turned to her personnel, “-Issue an evacuation notice to envoys and emissaries. No time to waste, people,” her aura altered, the maid’s outfit shortened by the minute. She stood yet again with revolvers at the ready and a sword on her back.

“Order of the Nightwalkers, take care of our guests,” she narrowed in a secluded part of the castle.

Elixia came in running, the door barged, “-Midne, trouble.”

“I know,” she stood before a storeroom. Countless crates and ammunition depot laid at her feet, “-the guards and retainers are on high alert. Operations under Minerva’s control. Have a gun,” she flung over an assault rifle with her feet. More footsteps ran into the chamber, “-where’s my equipment?”

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“Serene,” they turned, “-it’s over there.”

She skipped, “-what’s with her?” wondered Elixia.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to,” they loaded their weapons, “-Elixia, you take care of the king. I’ll take care of the ministers and the castle. Serene, protect Julius and his family. Time to earn your pay, people.”

Prolonged chaos echoed. King Igna shuffled his way to a window during the conversation. Outlines spoke to him through the windows, ‘-evacuations in order,’ helicopters and military vehicles surrounded the castle perimeter. Dull silence settled in wake of the disturbance. Igna made no motion of entertaining the conversation. Emperor Essin, terrified by the situation, pulled his legs to his chest and locked himself in a state of muteness.

“Evacuation complete,” read the interface, “-all units, take position and guard the castle entrance. Those unassigned are to make way to the outpost.” The best of the best entered the battlefield.

‘Why did it come from the dungeon?’ curiosity had Elixia sneak into said area. Aftermath of what seemed an explosion lathered the ground in a thick layer of dust. Bare footsteps of a lady headed outward. Suffocating coughs and a hunched outline clambered to a stand. Another outline suddenly appeared and struck, “-another dead. Come on, let’s rejoin the team,” the shorter outlines sprinted, Elixia hid her breath and presence behind an old wooden barrel.

“Hey, Theon, are you okay?” she followed after the figures left. A few taps of the cheeks, “-you there?”

“Yeah,” he exhaled and gasped for air, “-I’m here,” he pointed inside the dungeon, “-healing scrolls and potions.” Elixia dashed inside with no other questions, “-master, new development. Cleopatra’s gone – seems her capture was planned.”

The message reached the chambers. Smoke puffed, “-I see now,” he turned at the emperor, “-Essin, you’re the real target.”

“What?”

“Before I begin, do you believe in God?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“Answer, do you believe in entities situated higher in the hierarchy of life?”

A pause for reflection, the feet returned to the cold ground, “-I don’t know. I guess I do. How else would you explain the appearance of certain individuals in history, men and women of great skills and ability? I believe there’s more to what we know. Religion and various beliefs have muddled the truth somehow...” he rose his head, “-does this have anything with my death?”

“It does,” he smiled and sat, “-Lucifer, the current emperor of Alphaia, is the patron god of your state religion. Iqavea is the largest continent where most of the population pray to Lucifer. I’m sure the church has more information. It came to me suddenly,” the cigarette snuffed, “-this is all a ploy from the gods.”

The door barged opened, and a swarm of clockwork figures ran inward, “-my, I didn’t expect such a swift response,” returned Igna, “-I see you’re as devious as ever.”

“Had to do what I had to,” winked Cleopatra, “-I must say, part of me has been scarred. Congratulations, I’m no longer the same. Return Lucifer’s wings.”

“Return his wings?” he sighed; “-no can do.”

“Figured as much,” she snapped, the clockwork soldiers dislodged and merged into a small ominous box, “-absolution,” narrowed Cleopatra, “-Lucifer will regain his wings one day or the other. Had to ask,” she shrugged, “-Emperor Essin, I have a message from Riaz,” a display rose from the strange box. The gagged prime minister was tied and gagged. Amber blinders whispered a little light, “-emperor,” someone sliced the gag, “-you must not return. The empire has fallen,” he coughed, “-please escape, emperor, please escape,” another figure burst into frame and snatched the camera, “-dear ol’ Emperor, poor ol’ emperor. King Igna,” Lucifer entered the picture, “-as of this moment, the empire falls into the church’s hand. Don’t worry and stand still, I’ll come soon to claim my wings,” a loud bang followed, “-seems Riaz no longer stands,” the video ended, Cleopatra disappeared, the item locked on red, “-die.”

I call upon thy strength. Stop all who dare oppose mine own will, Death Element: Magical Barrier, Pentagram Variant, Hell’s Gate. Gunfire erupted throughout the castle. Yellow eyes drowned in a sea of black; Clockwork soldiers rushed from portals.

“Close one,” said Igna, “-it left a black smear on the carpet. Midne’s going to be mad.”

“Majesty?” shuddered the emperor, “-what happened?”

“Here’s the deal,” he flicked and the door closed, “-there are greater beings at play. The empire’s fallen, there are no questions about it. I’m sure news of your assassination will echo throughout the lands; the blame will fall on us. They underestimate Hidros. Any mention of the incident should be replaced by our coverage of the incident. Controlling information is how a country thrives.”

“How did this happen?”

“A scheme from the heavens. Best no to track down the origins,” he rose a finger, “-that should be the last of the clockwork soldiers,” silence returned. “A terrorist attack from the rebellion. Essin, as for nigh, thou art no longer the emperor. Our duties stop here,” he stood, “-what’s an emperor without his land. I strongly recommend starting a new life or plainly ending the current one,” a pistol flung across the table, “-there’s one shot. Back of the head should be easy.”

“Is this how the devil operates?”

“...”

“Leave the struggling behind and march onward towards a greater purpose. What about the empire, what about the sacrifices we made? I lost everything, even Riaz. I should have taken the throne earlier, I should have...” he looked at Igna, “-I lied. Lucifer is truly a god; he and his father were always busy masterminding ways to expand our influence. It’s as he said, Wracia needed a dagger, a role Lucifer took graciously. You’ve been a great help, majesty. I’ll rally the remainder of my followers and try to take back the capital.”

“Not going to work,” narrowed Igna, “-as it stands, you’re only options are either to ally with a foreign power to take back the empire or take control of the new continent.”

“...”

‘Cleopatra was the bait. She came here for a reason, to kill the emperor and blame the assassination on us. Stopping a scheme of that size is helpless. I realized it the moment Elixia sent her message. Adaptability is our greatest strength. Enough trying to outsmart Artanos and the heavenly faction. Targeting him won’t amount to much. I better focus on Zeus and his entourage. Hold that thought. Instead of challenging Artanos, I’ll let him do as he pleases. No matter the strike, I’ll make certain we have a way to use the situation to our advantage,’ an unsettling aura firm around Igna. Elixia arrived, “-perfect timing,” he smiled, “-call in a press conference, there are a few things I need to address to the world.”

“As you wish,” she blinked, the king extended a hand to Essin, “-come with me,” he said, “-allow us to be your sword.”

“Sorry?”

“No apologies, remain silent and follow me,” they left the room. Elixia gulped, ‘I sensed it, I saw it, the terrifying entity residing inside the master. Serene always bragged about having seen the master’s true capabilities... if this is how it goes, I’m afraid the balance of the world is no longer an issue.’

An emergency audience was called. Ela, Minerva, éclair, and Eira waited impatiently.

“Glad you could make it.”

“...” they followed the king with a stern expression, “-as from now, General Minerva, our armies will rally. The air force is ready for deployment. Lucifer has overthrown the Empire and Alphaia join the fray. It’s a repeat of Alphaia, unlike them, this time, the subjugated nations will rally and fight for expansion. They’ll strip Iqavea for what it’s worth and die holding onto the land.”

“Are the revolt a certitude?”

“Yes. Order of Nightwalkers has laid the groundwork for a bonfire.”

“We need a good reason to go to war.”

“Don’t worry, that much I’ll handle. Call in reinforcement from Arda, Easel Run Gard, and Marinda.”

“Aren’t we going overboard, what of the other nations? What about the threat of Maicite.”

“No need for concern, I have someone working on that problem just as we speak. Ministers, I want Hidros leading the war. Lucifer and the church think it’s easy to enter the mortal realm and ask demands, I think not. Here are details on military facilities scattered throughout Alphaia and Iqavea. Have preparation readied,” Elixia stood in the distance, “-I must address the populous.”

Camera flashes and antsy reporters covered the conference room. One simple step sufficed for utmost silence. The king took centerstage, “-good evening Hidros. Today was a hectic day. I’ll start by confirming news floating around the Arcanum. Emperor Essin and Empress Lia are in Hidros and as for the Wracian Empire, I’m sad to report, has fallen. Details are hard obtained and from our ambassador’s last report –

the population has revolted against their fellow country. Emperor Essin came to us for help, and I say this with conviction, I'd have rejected the plea. However, the emperor's life was endangered – some of Lucifer's men snuck into our castle and detonated a bomb. Fortunately, our guardians made sure the matter was dealt with. Seeing a long rival fall... I suppose we should be happy, the great empire that held us back for decades, our eventual war for freedom, it's all well and good, but," he looked to the side, "-I can't stomach the idea of such a country's downfall. Our parties have relied on one another, a good rival forced our hands into evolution. Without their involvement, Hidros wouldn't have gained such technological advancement. As monarch of Hidros, on request of Emperor Essin, hereby declare war on the revolutionist faction. To our comrades, to the independent nations, I open our doors for discussion. For balance to be kept, we must fight," he smiled, "-and, there's no greater nation who knows fighting better than us. My dear people of Hidros, time's nigh for World War I."

Chapter 1013: Road to Damnation

"World War I," read loud announcements, "-earlier in a press conference, the king of Hidros ordered for war," and similarly, interviews and open debates circled the new stations. Opposition came loudly and openly, a retort the castle simply shrugged as unimportant. Once the king decreed, there was an argument.

Hours after the display; Igna found himself in the company of Emperor Essin, "-king Igna, I'm deeply indebted."

"No time for thanks yet," he narrowed over a dim-lit desk, "-war's no easy business. We will start by sanctioning sales of weapons and ammunition to the north. Reinforcements of our borders and the safety of trade routes come second. How we lead will dictate how we win."

'The king does not doubt the victory... what an amazingly terrifying man.'

Thus, over the deep blue ocean, at the coast of the Wracian empire – battles broke loose. The rebelling factions gathered around critical towns – the military, back in the protection of the imperial palace – were short on force. Hidros' declaration added fuel to an already waging fire.

"Instead of selling to the rebellion, we sell to the revolutionist. Minerva, the war effort will be thy responsibility. Hidros' goal isn't the capture of the Wracian empire, no, we're after Elendor."

"Going after the weakest link, but how?"

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"Ready the military for an air-bound invasion. Send the naval units, we'll strike during the fog."

"Entering the airspace won't be an easy task."

"And whoever said that?" he smugly paused, "-listen here, Minerva, my previous actions and stances haven't been very kingly. The leader of a nation has responsibilities to provide and care for, a nation is like a babe, tis the father's duty to tend to her every need. I focused my attention on our economic and industrial growth with ultimate goals of self-sustainability. I vouched for the objective's been met. What most might not realize is war," he smiled, "-rather, the greatest obstacle in our path, the empire." The meeting room changed plenty o' times after the conference. Personal meetings of trivial matters

eventually ended with Igna and Minerva sharing a small room – previous storage, as a, respace from the roaring palace.

“But Igna, if the empire truly was that big of a deal, what then?”

“Listen here,” the tone deepened, “-I’ll let you in on a secret. Don’t tell anybody else,” he leaned on the door and clicked its lock, “-the fool, else the jester. As François de La Rochefoucauld best put it;” “ C’est une grande habileté que de savoir cacher son habileté ”

‘I knew this person was no ordinary soul. Before I realized it, I became engrossed in his life, turning from a goddess to a humble servant of his designs,’ as the shady lighting hid the king’s expression, ‘-I’m scared.’

“To said end,” the bicolored pupils pierced, “-I became the fool. My plans for the Wracian Empire’s downfall began the day I entered Elendor and destroyed Old Cray. The house of cards crumbled. Isn’t it convenient how Hidros exited from the alliance, isn’t it tough to believe us to yield on such a profitable arrangement? My dear, everything was planned. The fall of Elendor led to the Empire’s search for another sword. Likely candidates were the Church, Alphaia, and the Sadia people. The Discovery of the new continent was lucky – the empire had more to worry about. Making Hidros a greyman to the world was a challenge, we ruled without drawing too much attention. Leads us to the sword – from the three, depending on who they choose, we’d have more or less a chance to strike. Elendor was supposed to have gone to Sadia... keyword, supposed. Killing major government officials and creating that scandal on the Empire’s sword would lower their prestige if the news were to get out. Instead, they hushed the situation and. we continued. From there, Alphaia fought against the Empire during the invasion of Whuotan. A perfect opportunity to show the back-then unknown potential of Maicite. Worked like a charm, but Whuotan suffered major blows – the war stopped and a deal was struck. My move was made – greed and power, a sword needs raw strength. Afterward, the world launched into a frenzy about fully-funding research of the material. Too bad we’d already monopolized the market. Time passes, and the holy crusade hampered much of the development. Here’s the funny thing, I didn’t expect the pieces to move so simply into my net. Remember Count Qua, vassal to King Ezel’s visit?”

“Yes. We didn’t act upon their warning; how does it relate?”

“It does relate. Merely coming here was the definitive proof I needed. They warned us about Riaz, a blatant tell of dissatisfaction. I agree the gamble was reckless, even so, I played the part everyone expected and showed some semblance of knowledge. With a multi-faced attack, the pieces came together as a sprawling flower. An unlikely alliance between King Ezel and I. Free lords to have access to Maicite. Of course, the alliance wouldn’t have been possible if Ezel was happy with the Empire. Too bad for them, Elendor was going nowhere, and the emperor’s troubled noble’s opposition was inflated by a little bribery. Who better to kill a ruler than poison – Alphaia, despite appearances, unknowingly did my bidding. Odgawoan, the influence of the underworld... man it feels amazing when a long plan comes to an end.”

“Why tell me all of this?”

“You will see soon enough,” another click, and the king disappeared.

‘What does he mean?’ she followed, ‘-the plan’s over, did our king already conquer Wracia?’

To the astonishment of the palace, little after lunch – foreign royals arrived at Rosespire. Leading the march, the King of Greenwhoot, “-majesty, the king has arrived.”

“I’ll be there soon,” he replied, “-treat the king with the utmost respect. Have éclair and sister Eira entertain other royals. We’re ready to make our stand.”

“Understood, majesty.”

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A mirror blankly reflected the suit, two shadows hovered on each shoulder, “-the fool, a great tactic. Putting significant attention on my leadership was a great move.”

“I had to show the legendary status of Staxius Haggard. Only doing my rightful duty as your nephew.”

“Ha, tell me about it.”

“Enough, I’m feeling left out.”

“Of course, you do, Lord Alfred.”

“No matter,” he brushed off the spirits, ‘-it’s time to put an end to this mess. King Ezel’s here as planned, I’ve won,’ the tie straightened, and he marched straight for the throne room. Tall, well-built, and strong in presence, the king of Ezel had more appearance to high-level adventurers compared to nobles.

“King Ezel, a pleasure.”

“My dear comrade, Igna,” he opened his arms warmly, “-a pleasure to see you again.”

“Majesty, the pleasure is mine.”

“This won’t do,” he rose his index, “-no, it won’t do, we’re comrades.”

“Ezel it is,” they laughed, “-shall we?”

To Minerva’s awe, both kings entertained a trip to the private lounge where strong alcohol and good food flowed freely.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ she stopped steps from the lounge – laughter and pleasant conversation fired akin to bullets. Cold hands suddenly pressed against her nape, “-ish,” she jumped, “-what’s WRONG... with you?”

Igna met her gaze and nodded, she returned in kind and shuffled out of sight, “-ELIXIA!”

“A goddess shouldn’t eavesdrop.”

“Well, what am I to do?” she spoke in a hushed tone, “-King of Greenwhoot walks in as if he’s a long-time friend. We only signed an alliance to benefit the rest of the world – how’s this camaraderie warranted?”

“You don’t get it?” they came onto the outer walkway, “-best he explains.”

Strong alcohol rose, “-the war announcement was rather brave.”

“Going to war against a rebellious faction is nothing more than calming a petty squabble.”

“Fighting for Essin goes against our agreed proposal. If he regains power, what will happen of us, you did promise.”

“I know,” he sipped, “-Dreqai and the neighboring land will be transferred to the Kingdom of Greenwhoot. As for us, we only want Elendor, a small province in comparison to the land Greenwhoot’s about to inherit.”

“Dividing up the land before a victory, are you certain?”

“No, I’m not certain. I’d be a fool to consider a battle won until the white flag is raised. Ezel, the independent kingdom will rebel; Konak, Yian-Dho, and Estral won’t sit idly. It’s a battle between the east and the west for scraps in the middle. Smaller realms like the kingdoms of Lime, and Thie have already fallen under backlash. War is definitely assured, thus my worry about those three. Elendor as a whole is defenseless, ruler less, and in a state of chaos. Sure Greenwhoot’ military power can help quell the inner-fighting, it’s going to take more than raw power to contain those powerhouses.”

“I understand that much,” added the king, “-still, what about the empire itself? Any idea of the status?”

“Too early to tell.”

A strong presence halted the conversation. A rough man of olden age limped, “-just who I wanted to see.”

Ezel stood, “-King Juvey.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” he asked for them to settle, “-I know I’m in rough shape,” the trio settled, “-bring this old man the strongest booze you got.”

“I’m confused, King Igna, why is King Juvey here?”

“Well, the king’s an essential part in the coming war. I’m sure the details will become apparent as we continue. Before that, I would ask one simple question, do you accept a partnership with the Devil?”

“Wouldn’t have come if I had doubts,” returned Juvey, “-getting old in years, consider this my mark in history.”

“Surely you jest, Old Cray, you’re name and infamy has been burnt in the eyes of countless dying souls and disgraced nation. You’re as infamous and fearsome as they come.”

“Compliments from the devil feels a little wrong,” he gulped, “-what about you, Ezel? Care to join this old man in battle?”

“I- I don’t know.”

“Listen, Ezel, I understand working with one’s old enemy leaves a bad taste. Even still, the world moves regardless of one’s feelings. Think clearly Ezel, would you prefer an alliance with us or change side to the East.”

“As if that’s an option,” he sipped, “-without Hidros, our country’s technology would yet be in the magical age. I’m in, what’s your plan?”

“King Ezel, King Juvey, I’d like for our kingdoms to lead the assault over land, sea, and air. Hidros will have command over the air force and military considering we’re sending more than fifty-thousand troops. King Ezel and King Juvey, I want your kingdoms to take control of Alpha. Whuotan should be a simple affair. We will coordinate our actions through the military office.”

“Right, it’s not just the empire, we have to be content with Alpha. Pardon my asking, Igna, are you sure you’ll be able to take over the empire?”

“That’s not my objective,” he smiled, “-Malida, King Juvey’s land, is strategically beneficial for battle against the empire. Seeing the battle will be done mostly on land, my kingdom takes the lead. Of course, reinforcements will be welcomed.”

“Konak’s already taken one-third of Emria. The natural mountain range provides ample cover against a full-blown invasion.”

“Simple matter of timing,” he smiled, “-King Ezel and King Juvey, I’m grateful for the help.”

“Greenhoot knows war best,” added Juvey, “-it’s the only thing we can do.”

“Same for Malida, this old man wants to relive the old days of the war. I prove myself worthy of Nike’s blessing.”

World War I, a battle for the Empire or what remained of it, from a coup d’état to a full-blown rebellion. War truly ravaged Iqavea. Dormant kingdoms such as Konak, Yian-Dho, and Estral, holders of considerable military and economic means were on road to damnation. At the center of battle sat a single man, the Devil, cloaked in a lavish suit and bearing a non-expressive mien.

“King Ezel and king Juvey, please stay for my brother’s birthday party. We must celebrate whilst we can.”

“As you wish,” three war-mongering factions allied, ‘-the power of intrigue.’

“Master?”

“Ah, Minerva, interested in the second part?”

“Yes please.”

“Follow me.”

Chapter 1014: Independent Kingdoms

“Second part, majesty, please, I’m intrigued.”

“Speaking of intrigue, do you know how a sword is kept at bay?”

“The physical object or an analogy?”

“Physical object.”

The goddess’ step slowed to a thoughtful march. The decorated walls passed by as did the chaos of unexpected guests. Come at a crosswalk, Eira and éclair shot past and rattled words, “-restraining a sword; break the blade or block the sheath.”

“Simple and effective,” they turned left for the grand hall, “-see, there’s a simpler method. Why not take out the swordsman.”

“...”

.....

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“You didn’t specify.”

“Nor did the world,” he answered, taking her frown, “-decisions are made on assumptions, the worse of which fail. The reason, why I bring up the sword, is to put in mind the image of Wracia as a swordsman and the associated nations as his weapon. Picture it now, Wracia as a tall buff warrior and you a puny recruit, what are the odds?”

“I’d blast him with a spell or conjure my weapons.”

“This is fun for you, isn’t it,” he stopped, the grand hall held many o’ guests. Midne was spotted drowning in the booming crowd, “-ignoring my analogies and focusing literally.”

“Can’t help it,” she leaned and tapped with her shoulder, “-tell me, what’s the second part?”

“The act in where Hidros shows might. Juvey and Ezel came to our doorstep – kingdoms known for their violence. Recruiting Ezel couldn’t have been any simpler. They showed their hands and I acted upon the weakness. As for how, the key to our success, is Order of the Nightwalkers. Blessing of the Primo Progenitor and the united front. I had units move north and investigate the Empire, they pulled the strings linking the noble faction to Alphaia and had Greenwhoot slowly become shunned. Nasty rumors, lack of prestige, affiliation to the devil – and the paperwork to support said claims. We struck at the core belief; their religion and doctrine. Once sowed, we but waited and they came to us with the alliance. Of course,” he side-glanced, “-manipulation is one of my many talents,” passed the grand hall, larger hallways carried into multiple directions, “-Juvey’s discovery was on luck. One of the nightwalkers, unfortunately, found themselves on the wrong shipment to Melida. There, were rumors of the king yet lives perked interest, wasn’t difficult to track the man for he’d returned himself to a farm and lived a modest life. We spoke over the phone. I could tell there was fear and regret in his voice. We struck a contract – immortality in exchange for loyalty and rulership over the provinces. That’s how they came to us. As for Wracia, the die was in motion. Thus, today,” they arrived at the palace’s entrance and looked down the marble stairs, “-the culmination of my many years of work.”

“Hate to say it, but I don’t believe so.”

“Ah,” he grabbed her shoulder, “-I didn’t ask for approval nor your belief, dearest Athena. I said so on a whim, I wanted someone to know what happened.”

Light footsteps scurried up the stairs, “-Uncle!” narrowed Hanna with her arms akimbo.

“Why is the palace filled with guests,” fired Anna, “-what about our deal? Father’s not been home since yesterday, we missed his birthday.”

"I do apologize, Hanna, Anna, as you've heard, Hidros' declared war. Today's only the second day, and don't worry, we'll host Cousin's birthday later this evening. Have your dresses readied and expect more guests to come," he smiled, "-the bigger the better. I'll happily stamp the royal seal if I'm forgiven, yes?"

"Uncle," the discontent turned smiles, "-we know about the war, and it's alright."

"We came to ask lady Midne if the party could be moved someplace else."

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"No need to concern yourselves, the ballroom is untouched. Rosepire castle is bigger than you think," they calmly exchanged handshakes and carried on their merry lives.

"A party?"

"My lady," panted a disheveled Medusa, "-emergency council, the military, and navy."

"Right, well, majesty," she spun and saluted, "-time for us to shine, thank you for cracking the barrier, allow us, your sword, to slash through."

"Incorrect," he narrowed suspense, "-you're no sword, thou art firearms!"

"Better," she bowed and darted for the courtyard. '-I've really done it,' turned for the palace, airships hovered and played news of the war. Julius' birthday was one to remember for it was the start of the World War.

Mild glimmer lit the office, the door pushed ajar with, "-Igna?" muffling through.

"Syhton," he said over the desk, "-I'm here, lock the door behind."

High-heels clopped, her outfit wasn't one to ignore as it reflected her prestige and status, "-thank you very much for the help."

"Words don't suffice," she crawled over the desk and straddled his legs, "-I've come for more," her hair swept to one side and sharpened canines dug into his neck, he casually patted her back and continued working, "-Syhton, seriously, I'm thankful for all you've done. I wouldn't have asked for anyone else." She eased on the drinking and grabbed his chin, "-are you sure," her large blue eyes shimmered, "-are you sure you want to say that?"

"Yeah," no other time for words, they locked lips passionately; the interface dimmed and minutes turned into hours. 12:49 tiptoed into 14:16, "-honestly, Syhton, I rather not do this again in the office."

"Why not?" she freshened her makeup, "-seemed you enjoyed the little escapade."

"Ha, ha," he regained his seat, "-about the report?"

"Here," she dropped three files, "-details on the independent kingdoms. Why the sudden interest?"

"You don't know?"

"Know what?"

'Suppose her flight was long.'

"Know what?" she pulled his tie, "-Igna?"

"War, Hidros' headed to war."

"Great news."

"Yes, good news indeed."

"Igna," she grabbed his cheeks and pulled, "-there's something bothering you, tell me, what's the matter?"

"Something to do with the heavenly realm," he exhaled, "-I rather not involve you in that mess."

"Tell me."

"No," he brushed off her hands, "-never again."

"If this is about Gophy," she pulled his chair and grabbed his chin, "-look at me right this instance, Igna Haggard, Devil of Marinda, Watcher of the Shadow Realm, Inheritor of Death, Time and Origin, if not for my intervention, you wouldn't be in such a good place. I'm shoving my kindness down your throat, you know why?" she leaned forth, "-it's because I've learned everything there is to know about you and those around you. I'm a goddess, one worshiped by more people than there are living beings in this realm. I willingly gave myself to you," she narrowed, "-I'm no longer chaste. You, Igna, have to take responsibility, do I make myself clear?"

"..."

"Stop playing games, do you think I harbor feelings for Qhildir?"

"Don't you?"

"Fuck no. Don't ever test me like that again."

"Scary," he smiled, "-wasn't my intention to test, Syhton. We're indebted to each other, there's no arguing said fact. I feel bad for playing around and taking advantage of your affection... doesn't feel right if I keep up the selfishness."

"Drop the morality," she laughed, "-stop the sentimental speech. You know as well as I do, our relation transcends the mortal definition of amour. We're tied by a contract," she smiled, "-my personal devil, drop the facade and tell me, am I to be used in a ploy against the gods?"

"..."

"No reaction, a strong poker face," she smiled and leaned on the desk, "-Igna, I don't say this with ill intent, however, there comes a point where the poker face is bigger tell than a slight glimpse of emotions."

"Seriously, you're worse than me, so much for the gallant virtuous goddess everyone admires."

"I'm no light," she laughed, "-the stars no longer mean faith or persevere, as Rosespire's nightlife shrouds the starry beauty; corruption and truth have muddied my perception. It's a nice feeling and I wouldn't change it for the world for I'm the Daeirq Empress of Luna."

“Okay, you made yourself clear. Syhton, I’d like for you to destroy Qhildir.”

“A chain’s as strong as its weakest link. Good idea, leave the destruction to me,” said a seductive wink, “-any time limits?”

“No time limit,” he smiled, “-keep an eye on them. Miira’s with the Eipea Empire – should be easy to make contact with. Just don’t go overboard, I know there’s a score to settle.”

“I’m not tied by revenge,” she stood, “-unlike someone I know and love.”

“Ha, ha,” he remarked sarcastically, “-just for the record, it was part of a bigger plan.”

“Sure, it was. Anyway, you best not do anything stupid too – many lives depend on your smarts, Igna.”

“And my sanity depends on you.”

“Yeah, yeah, your heart and all that.”

“Someone’s dismissive, come on, Syhton, I only helped around with the torture.”

“No more,” she arrived at the door, “-go to hell,” she pulled her tongue and slammed the door.

‘A troublesome goddess,’ the subconscious smile faded, ‘-reports on the independent nations,’ he grabbed the file named Konak and read, “-Konak, located in the northeast part of Iqavea, is home to the continent’s taller mountain ranges. Due to geographical difficulties, Konak’s access to the sea is hampered by land from Yian Dho, directly east, and Emria, directly north. Currently, Konak’s invasion of Emria following the fall of King Juvey’s kingdom has expanded their realm and access to the sea. The economy is based on illegal money, the capital, Miok, is correctly named the Murder Capital of the world. A government riled with crime, corruption and the underworld carries the economy. Abject poverty has birthed slums which spread from town to villages – the taller buildings are drowned with countless shacks. The leader of the Nation is Snow, who behind the shadows, is controlled by Cimier,” the interface updated the information, “-Yian Dho,” he opened another, “-Yian Dho, a xenophobic nation of skilled merchants that came to power in the olden days. Blessed with an abundance of natural resources, including precious gems and spice – Yian Dho’s economy has remained strong. Reports suggest most of the Empire’s annual income is generated from Yian Dho’s clever marketing. Life is mundane, a dictatorial leadership undermines freedom of choice. Yian-Dhonians are born for one purpose, to serve their country. Military strength is mostly reliant on mercenary nations such as Sadia and Estral,” he lifted another file, “-Estral,” read the title, “-a country of mercenary and culture of bravery. If Old Cray was the Empire’s sword, then Estral is the Empire’s shield. Forged by a history of peerless victory, no other invasion of Estral has ever been successful. Despite the lack of attention to basic necessities, Estral’s culture of fighting and strength has given rise to the prominent adventurer. Contrary to Yian Dho’s reluctant of learning about the world, Estral youth often set sail for Alpha or Hidros – many prominent adventurers of Tier 4 and higher are Estralian by birth,” he closed the files and lit a cigarette, ‘-the reason why the Empire’s been a pain to deal with for so long. Each kingdom has a strength and a weakness, alone, they don’t mean anything, together, the kingdoms are strong. Compensating for the other would have been impossible to strike, alas, time’s changing. Estral’s no longer as resilient as the report says, striking from the outside won’t amount to much, striking from within, now that’s the way forward.’

“Urgent Report,” read the interface, “-Estral, Yian Dho, and Konak have announced the creation of a new alliance. The Desok Allied Kingdoms were headed by prominent members of each faction. They’ve taken arms to reclaim the empire and have declared war against anyone who invades the kingdom.”

“Another puzzle fits,” he puffed, “-was a matter of time. They’ll take Emria first and establish a hold over the northern and eastern seas. Thereon, lead a direct attack against the revolutionist factions – I’m sure the Desok Allied Kingdom’s in talks with Alphaia. The major players are here. Welcome to the battlefield, gentleman, welcome.”

Such was the emergency Minerva faced, ‘-he’s insane,’ she sighed, reading a message from Igna, “-here we start.”

Chapter 1015: The illegitimate child

‘A spectator, I’m only a spectator,’ nameless blurry faces twirled, there were no pauses nor breaks, ‘-they asked me to sit tight and wait. Juvey, Ezel, some key figures in the world at large. What’s Hidros aiming towards?’

“Imperial King.”

“Yes?”

“King Igna would like an audience.”

“So be it.

Same office, different lighting, and less cumbersome paper stack, “-good evening, imperial majesty.”

“King Igna, I’m surprised.”

.....

“Chaos begins from the point of origin,” he added, “-as for us, there is much we must discuss,” the blinders closed for a relaxing hue, “-as it stands, the empire’s no longer an entity.”

“Has it been destroyed?”

“No, but it will be destroyed. A new alliance was formed hours ago, the Desok Allied Kingdoms. The independent nations seem to shift into an alliance with Alphaia and the church. Depending on the Emperor of Alphaia’s decision – the war might extend into Alphian territory.”

“Are you sure?”

“I see you’re up to date,” he nodded, “-Alphaia’s infighting won’t bring much in the short term. Once the fighting stops, they’ll rise to power; such is the way of an affluent land. Emperor Essin – the world’s finest are on the field, this game of chess will decide the future. Considering armaments and manpower, it could be a few years; I’d expect around four, for the battle to cease.”

“Wracia Empire’s no longer a fearsome entity. We’re being torn apart from all sides. Look at Hidros, everyone here’s ready to fight,” he suspiciously pierced the king, “-it looks to me the place was ready to dismantle the Empire from the beginning.”

"I love it," said Igna, "-I love it."

"..."

"Emperor Essin, you figured out Hidros' plan, a little too late for that, however, there's much to be seen from the sidelines. Emperor, I dare say Hidros' bears no ill-will towards the Empire, we only bear ill-will towards the rulers, and so, I point to the previous Emperor. The shift in power and turn of leadership. You ordered, as new Emperor, to stop providing influence to the church. The righteous were getting a little greedy, such vice was only amplified by Alpha's abundance of morally bankrupt officials. Not that it's wrong to flaunt money around to get one's desire, for an institution that preaches right from wrong, comes across as hypocritical."

"What about the discussion," he paused, "-no discussion is it. Tis a one-way slaughter."

"Don't be so uptight. Emperor, I said Hidros would aid in taking back the Empire. We will fulfill our duty and we will instate Wracia on our terms. Rebellion and Revolution, are the two factions in fight currently. Desok Allied Kingdoms will join the battle as a member of the Rebellion."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Rebellion is the people who staged the uprising. As for the Revolution, they're led by the people fighting back against Wracia's religious oppression. You added fuel to the fire by admonishing the church. Desok, far as it seems, are on the Church's good side, therefore, they'll join the Rebellion. As for the Revolution, they're those fighting for freedom and not the fall of the Empire. It seems counterproductive, though, such is the truth. Hidros will join the fight as an independent party and add pressure on the three inner provinces. Most of the fighting will be to the south, a shame really."

"Is the Rebellion bad?"

"No, they have their beliefs as does the Revolution. My objective is to gain the seat of power for the Wracian Empire. Blood will be spilled and the country will be destroyed. That's the end game, we focus on the present. Essin, out of the three kingdoms, who is most likely to turncoat?"

"Most likely to turncoat?" he paused and sunk into deep thought, "-Konak and Estral."

"Better choice would be Estral."

"Yeah, but how did you?"

"Adventuring," returned Igna, "-Estralians are known to be frequent guests of Hidros. Striking a deal at this moment is presumptuous. However," he tapped his finger, a cloud of dark mist materialized, "-orders, my lord?"

"Establish communication with the Black Unit, begin operation Wied."

"Understood," the mist disappeared.

"What's operation Wied?"

"Wait and see," he chuckled, "-Essin, stripped of the title of Emperor, what will you do?"

"My fate is yours to decide. We haven't struck a contract, and I doubt there's any need."

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“Correct, there is no need to strike a contract. Still, even though I planned the destruction of the Empire, I never thought it’d fall into my lap. See, Essin, coming here was both a blessing and a curse. Don’t fret,” he stood, “-I gave my word. You will be treated as royalty, if you want to work, there’re plenty of jobs. Tell me, what do you want to do?”

“What is there for me to do?” he shrugged, “-I’m still emperor in name, the war is in my name and for Hidros’ cause to remain just, I should be at the forefront of the battle.”

“Essin,” he exclaimed, “-you’ve surpassed expectation. And so, Emperor, as King of Hidros, I will make certain of thy return to power.”

“Long as the war is stopped, I don’t care what happens. King Igna, I’m putting my faith and trust in you.”

He side-glanced, “-I wouldn’t go around spreading trust. Still, if his majesty wishes to entrust the future of Iqavea in my hands, I will accept. Make yourself at home, emperor, take in Hidros and experience the life you never could at the seat of power.”

‘Best deal I can get,’ he exhaled, “-as you wish, majesty.”

“Igna,” he refuted, “-call me Igna.”

“Igna,” he gulped, ‘-I wonder what’ll happen to Iqavea once the war is over.’

The door opened and closed, and Midne came in stride for the emperor; they split ways. Alta leaned against a balustrade giving onto a lovely patch of grass and rose her hands. He firmed her gesture and pulled, “-Alta, welcome back.”

“Thank you. I saw the emperor and saw to have a transcript of the negotiations. Majesty, are you serious?”

“About what?” they walked.

“The lie... the falsehood of giving back the Empire.”

“That,” he dropped his shoulder, “-no matter what happens, Essin won’t see the seat of power. Not now anyway.”

“You’re a monster...”

“Hey, I never said I give charity.”

Time elapsed, and the pace gradually eased as orders reached their destination. Many factions rose to action, and a particularly nasty order – Operation Wied, was in motion. Golden rimmed handles opened to a lavishly dressed dancehall. Music swayed and chandeliers gleamed, decorations reflected Hidros’s fortune. Guests came one after the other, Hanna, Anna, Midne, and plenty of retainers welcomed the prominent figures. A small get-together turned reception.

“Lia, stop,” came a muffled from a faraway room, “-it’s enough, please.”

“Oh, stop it,” she crawled from a crouching position, “-éclair, my love, my heart’s burnt from the past ten years, I’ve yearned to see you, I’ve yearned to feel you again, please, tell me you love me, please, tell me I’m not wrong.”

He grabbed her shoulder and pulled for a passionate kiss, “-I told you, don’t make so much noise,” the sudden lock seemed to calm her demons, “-you’re boiling hot, something the matter?” she took his hand and slid it down her stomach, “-yeah, I’m too hyped up,” she licked her lips, “-calm me down, take responsibility.”

“Fine,” he flipped and slammed her back against a table, “-let’s calm your demons, Lia.”

The castle grew cacophonous with joy, laughter, and music. Igna, having paid visits to many of the guests – found an escape into one of the towers. Spiraling staircase at interval carried little slits giving into the narrow deep-purple sky. ‘-is that crying?’ the pace slowed, ‘-someone’s here?’ an ajar door gave into a clean room, sharp whips and flashes resounded. He pushed the door further to a large mirror and training equipment for dancing. Overwhelmingly big tears flooded down puffy cheeks, “-what’s a kid doing here?” the latter struck a pose, “-are you serious?” he stopped and stared. Light reflected against the flowing tears.

The door slammed shut, the girl’s posture crashed, she toppled and slid backward to a corner, “-please don’t hurt me, I won’t run away from practice, I swear, mother, please.”

“Slow down, kid,” the light toggled, “-I’m not here to hurt you,” he ignored the lass and admired the tower, “-I heard the place was renovated to train dancers, never thought it’d be to this extent.”

“Who are you?”

“Just a passerby, what about you, little lady?”

“...”

“Scared of strangers, that’s a good trait to have, little lady. You were doing ballet, weren’t you?”

“...”

“Not much of a talker, but still, the arabesque was pretty. How old are you?”

“Eleven...”

“Amazing. Looks like you’ve trained for a long-time.”

“Who are you, mister?”

“Now, where are your manners?”

“I’m sorry. My name’s Ulgra Essin.”

“Mine’s Igna Haggard. A pleasure to meet you, Ulgra. Are you the daughter of the emperor?”

“Yes,” she lowered her gaze, “-I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

"Using the room."

"It's only a room, don't worry about it. You've been taught well. Tell me, Ulgra, why were you crying?"

"Oh, I wasn't crying."

"Lying's not a good idea," footsteps rode up the stairs and blasted into the room, "-ULGRA, WHERE ARE YOU!" screeched as if a banshee's dying wish. The girl shuddered, her whole body trembled, "-Lia," narrowed Igna, "-is that you?"

"Majesty," her tone shifted, she dropped to her knees, "-my apologies, majesty."

"You're looking for Ulgra?"

"Yes, my liege."

"She's not here," he returned, "-as for you, best straighten the dress and clean the stain from your collar. It's unbecoming for a noble lady to walk around with the seed of another pleasantly displayed. If it's not a hassle, please keep the romance to a minimum, I won't stand for shame to be brought upon the castle's heritage, am I perfectly clear?"

"A thousand pardon, my liege."

"Don't stand there, go have a shower. I'll ask for a change of clothes to be brought."

"As you wish," she scurried into the depth. Igna toggled his interface, "-éclair, where are you?"

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"At the function, why, what's the matter?"

"Could you come to my location?"

"Sure?" the call ended; he turned his gaze at Ulgra.

"Why did you lie?"

"Adults are full of shit," he smiled, "-I told you not to lie then went ahead and lied. These are the kind of things you should expect as a noble daughter. Wipe your tears and dance," he extended a handkerchief, "-show me what you can do," she clambered, her expression swapped from miserable to resplendent. Her flexibility and deliberateness in striking poses were sharp and beautiful.

"My bad," the door buckled, Ulgra's short display ended, "-did I miss something?"

Clap, clap, clap, he went ahead and patted her head, "-Ulgra, you have potential."

Her expression shrunk, "-mother called you majesty, who are you..."

"The King of Hidros," he smiled, "-and this here is the prime minister." éclair nonchalantly approached Igna's side, "-a little lady, who is she?" the composed air around Igna shifted, he grabbed éclair by the collar and slammed him against the wall, it cracked, "-MONGREL!" éclair coughed blood, "-m-m-master..."

He reached deep and threw a powerful punch. éclair crashed against the mirror, shards dug into the arms and legs, “-you fucking idiot!”

A half-bloodied visage watched helplessly, “-what did I do...”

“Look there, that kid’s been abused since her birth. Look at her hair, it’s black, her eyes, deep blue, and the way her face is constructed. Can’t you see, that’s your damned daughter.”

“My daughter?”

“Yeah... with hair like that, it’s obvious she’s not the child of Essin.”

“Why are you worked up, majesty, because of a kid?”

“No, because of Lia. She’s running around the palace sucking the life out of my ministers. I don’t care what happens behind closed doors – at least have the decency to have her clean your seed, yes?”

“What?”

“She had,” he paused, “-never mind, I’m sorry for throwing a fit.”

“My head,” éclair yelped, “-going to pass out.”

Chapter 1016: “-the older days were unforgiving,”

“Alive again,” echoed loud pants, “-master, you have some explaining to do.”

“Explaining?” by the time the healing spell worked, Igna had moved to sit beside the dancer. Her visage, mainly the eyebrows and lips, slumped and tightened, they spoke the chant of fear and terror, “-I don’t owe you anything, my dear.”

“Well, you do,” he climbed and sighed, “-what’s got you worked up?”

“Hard to pin down,” he shrugged, “-Okay, well,” the face froze, “-would it be relatable if I said I wanted to have a fit?”

“You acted.”

“Yeah,” he narrowed, “-éclair, what’s with the dead look in your eyes, it’s unsettling.”

“I have the right to be angry. So, this lady here,” he inched forward, “-is my daughter?”

.....

“Correct,” added Igna, “-her scars, bruises and less than amiable clothing speaks volumes, yes?”

“You’re correct,” he pinched his chin in thought, “-what will we do about her?”

“No scandal has been ousted. We can assume the emperor would rather keep the information under wraps.”

“This could jeopardize our situation; don’t you think majesty?”

“No, I don’t think so,” a cold stare befell the doll-like lady, “-lest Lia wants to be admonished, I don’t think there’s room for that.”

Large pupils blinked at Igna then turned at éclair, “-who are you?”

“Prime minister éclair,” he bowed, “-and this here is my lord, my master, our king.”

“I know... but why did you lie, why did you-”

“Okay, okay,” Igna interjected, “-this conversation has grown tiresome. Ulgra, follow me,” he lent a hand, “-let’s go speak to your mother. éclair, you’ll come with, won’t you?”

Scenery swapped for the retainers’ living quarters, “-over here,” waved Midne. Igna’s party arrived, “-she’s inside.”

“I appreciate the help.”

“No worries, majesty,” she passed the party, “-I would be worried about Ela.”

“...” éclair sought to push to the door and wait, “-majesty...”

‘Ela?’ crossed Igna’s mind, ‘-I wonder why I should be worried?’

“Let’s go,” he fired.

A closed space added to the tension. Showers slowed and a gray-haired lady exited, “-my, I have guests?” she stopped and stared, scanning the entourage, “-Ulgra,” her jaw tightened, “-and the king,” same tightness eased in milliseconds, “-what brings such prominent figures to the sleeping quarters. Is it perhaps?”

“Not in front of the king.”

“My bad,” she coughed, “-I feel uncomfortably hot when men stare at my less than amiable state.”

“Drop the farce,” fired Igna, “-Lia, we’re comrades. As such, I don’t care much for the libido, however,” he side-stepped, “-Princess Ulgra Essin’s mental and physical state is less than ideal.”

“So, you know?” she sat on one of the beds, unhampered by the way the towels barely covered her body, “-please keep this between us.”

“Go on.”

“After meeting with éclair and the time we spent as friends Igna, I discovered a part of me that I never knew existed. Being blamed for being a seedless witch, unable to bare fruit... the doubt and suspicion cast upon my womanhood... I finally had enough. éclair was the first who taught me how such an intimate bond could bring people together. I tried with many others, and I’m not ashamed to admit it. None could bring me to my knees as éclair did, and despite my nights spent with Essin and the lesser entourage, I was left dissatisfied. She came about – as years elapsed, her facial features and trait grew nothing like Essin. Palace began to whisper; my adultery was put on a show because of her. Essin accepted the facts for facts and continued his way, uninterested in me or my body. From that day on, he never once stared me in the eyes or asked for my company. He chose another and preferred spending time with retainers. Ulgra’s truth was hidden, Essin ordered for the miscreates to be punished and killed, forever silencing what had happened. Her talent for ballet came early during ballroom routines – a renowned instructor saw potential and her life was set... I don’t hate Ulgra, I don’t. I admit having hit her

once or twice... it's easy to put one's frustration onto another, I know it's bad, I know it's wrong. Doesn't matter, at the end of the day, Ulgra, Essin, and I will never be a family. Essin has eyes for Ulgra's talent, I have eyes for the next meal and she, well, she's nothing more than a confirmation of my womanhood."

"Pathetic," murmured Igna, "-Lia, you're an idiot."

"What would you know!"

"Oh, I'm not saying I know how or what you felt, it's childish. Proving the other wrong, using Ulgra as a dig to say, 'hey, it's your fault for not being a man,' I find it," a smile escaped, "-daring. You, Lia, are a beast," he tapped her shoulder, "-do what you want, comrade, the world is one's oyster."

"..."

"What's with the look of rejection?"

"I thought you'd be mad or give a lecture?"

"Hey, I never said I was the morale authority on right and wrong. What happened, happen. I came to ask Ulgra's hand."

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"Ulgra's hand in marriage?"

"No, Ulgra's hand in playing a part in promoting ballet throughout Hidros. Latter's predominately an art governed by the Wracian Empire. It'll be a great way to show Hidros' willingness to accept the Empire, what do you say?"

"If she's happy then I'm okay with it."

"Settled," he spun and tapped éclair's shoulder, "-prime minister éclair, Ulgra Essin is under thy responsibility for today forth. Teach her the ways of the noble, and teach her the legacy that runs in her blood. If push comes to shove, the Haggards will take responsibility and accept the lass as one of our own."

"Understood," he buckled for the first time in decades, a softness took a jab at his heart, Ulgra's confused expression gawked, the door shut to Lia and éclair gazing upon their offspring.

"There you are," blond hair pushed off the side, "-so you knew?"

"Essin," he stopped, "-yeah I did," a simple motion told the Emperor to follow, "-what about you, they don't know your secret do they?"

"What secret?"

"Oh don't play dumb," Igna slowed the pace to match Essin, "-I've known since the days of old, Essin, you play for the same team, don't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"No hiding the truth," elbowed Igna, "-Lucifer's church, despite the god's representation of unconditional love, bares down on those who go against the natural order. You love both man and

woman, I know someone who feels the same and let me tell you, he's a deity when it comes to pleasure."

"Guess I'm figured out," he stopped beside an armor stand, "-King Igna, if you know what I feel and how I feel, can't you see beyond?"

"Oh, I definitely feel your affection, Essin. Alas, my love is reserved for those who give themselves to me completely."

Julius erupted from one of the corners, "-brother," they locked in a tight embrace, "-my dear brother, it has been a while."

"Julius, my brother, you're looking better than ever."

"That's how it is, keeping the bloodline pure?"

"Emperor Essin," Julius nodded, "-have I interrupted?"

"No."

"Yes."

"Pardon me," he giggled, "-I should check on the wife. She's angry."

"Handsome..."

"No gawking," Igna winked, "-Essin, I should take responsibility for éclair's actions."

"No, my king, it's fine. I don't mind it. Lia' drive is hard to handle sometime. Knowing my limitation... sad to say the underperformance led to the current predicament. We live our own lives tied by Ulgra, she's one of a kind, you know. I love ballet and she's the embodiment of grace – I can't wait for her to take center stage and take the ballet world."

"Won't happen."

"The war, yeah, I get it."

They passed many corridors until reaching the grand hall. Bickering on one side caught the attention, "-go on without me," they split.

"Why is he here?"

"Calm down."

"No, screw that, I'm going to give that geezer a piece of my mind."

"Please my lady, don't do anything rash."

"Don't stop me, I swear I'll kick his-" the king appeared in the doorway. Maids narrowly restricted Ela, whose dress was in a right ol' mess. Crinkles and tears, "-Ela."

"You," she shrugged the maids and latched onto the collar, "-Don't!" cried the maids to no avail, "-it's your fault, why didn't you tell me, why not TELL ME!"

“Ela,” he grabbed her wrist, “-if you want to get physical, let’s keep it for after the function,” a deep stare lowered the aggression, “-if you wish to punch someone, punch me.”

She pulled her arms and clicked, “-whatever.”

“This about Juvey?”

“Yeah.”

“Angry about how he invaded Elendor and how he treated you?”

“Yes?”

“Why not kill him?” a gun summoned above his palm, “-here’s a revolver. Take it to his private chamber and pull the trigger.”

“My word,” she latched onto the weapon, a sadistic grin rose, “-you know what to give a woman.”

“On one condition.”

“...” the grin fell for a serious expression, “-what?”

“Pull the trigger and don’t expect Hidros to take thee in.”

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“WHAT?”

“Kill him, I don’t care. Actions have consequences. If you kill an ally of mine, my duty states I ought to return the favor. Considering the hard work and loyalty, I’ll take everything and leave only your life intact. You will be deported to Elendor no question asked. Hidros’ economy will take a hit and we might not be as prosperous as before... regardless, tis the price I’m willing to pay.”

“Way to ruin the mood,” she dropped the weapon upon which contacting the floor exploded into smoke, “-why not tell me Juvey was coming?”

“Keeping track of a person’s action is gambling. You’re smart, you’ll figure it out.”

“Way to keep me on my toes,” came a sarcastic remark, “-my dress is ruined, care to help?”

“Fine,” a light-colored hue restored the outfit, “-head on to the ballroom, the function’s about to start.”

“Right, I’ll meet you there.”

‘Mediating problems,’ he leaned against the wall, ‘-what mess this has become.’

Distant footsteps approached, and a butler in service to lady Synthia, Syhton’s pseudonym, passed through, “-majesty.”

“Ester.”

“Majesty,” he dropped to one knee, “-please, I would like a word.”

“Speak.”

“Claireville Academy, the youngest duke, Julius Garnet, user of the Purgatory flame. An affectionate brother to Autumn Garnet, his little sister, and the reason why Staxius Haggard and Julius Garnet fought. In the massacre of Dorchester, on Ayleth Geua’s marriage, an entity beyond their comprehension killed everyone, no one survived, no one. Staxius Haggard, the father of Eira Haggard, a girl he found as a babe on a river.”

“Were you reincarnated?”

“Yes. As were you, Staxius.”

“Julius.”

“Staxius.”

“It is you,” said Igna.

“Yes, it’s me,” he smiled, “-but you’re no longer Staxius as I’m no longer Julius. I wanted to confirm my doubts... and I’m glad I did.”

“About the marriage and massacre, I’m sorry for not being there. I wish I could have saved-”

“No. Adelana’s growing hatred and the disparities of our group began to crack. We thought the marriage could bring us together... the older days were unforgiving and it happened. My only regret was not confessing.”

“You had a crush on Adelana, didn’t you?”

“How did you?”

“Secret,” he smiled, “-how’s the world, tell me, how is it?”

“Better than I imagined. The disparity between nobles and commoners is all but gone. There’s genuine joy on the people’s faces, there’s food on the table, and Oxshield’ is a shining beacon for Hidros to follow. Never imagine the reunion to be anticlimactic, did you expect my arrival?”

“No, but someone else spoke on reincarnation. Theon, my master torturer, you might know him as Duke of Dorchester, Sten Parcyvell.”

“HA-HA-HA!”

“...”

“Sten Parcyvell as torturer... he’s perfect for the job.”

An echo sprinted, “-Ester, where are you?”

“Midne?” he looked around the corner, “-something the matter?”

“Lady Synthia is looking for her butler. Better hurry up,” she winked, “-best of luck.”

“My bad,” a glance at Igna, “-I’m sorry for the ambush, forget what I said.”

“...” the king locked onto the butler, who exited the room in a hurry, “-don’t be a stranger.”

Chapter 1017: Nothing

"About the conference, is there something I should know?"

"Master Julius, you worry too much. I know Hidros declared war, but still, we have time to relax."

"Serene, cutting corners at this moment isn't viable. I saw brother with the emperor earlier and I heard about King Ezel and king Juvey, what is happening?"

"It will all be explained," journey climbed tension-filled stairways and through darkened halls of murmurs and whispers. Soft tones and sudden silence, a dance he all but drew attention towards. 'Retainers are acting a little weird. The place feels empty even if I know there are more present. What's going on?' Serene's guided tour landed at large golden-rimmed barriers.

"Meeting place?" he inquired, she nodded. A brief pause to inhale followed by a click. The rectangular slabs parted to a silent interior. The sound of flowing liquid caught their attention, "-what's this?" he looked around, "-did we miss the room?"

"SURPRISE!" exploded fireworks and applause; music raged in full swing, "-HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" read banners. Tables adorned by pastries and snacks, a dancefloor of familiar faces, and a performance for musicians. Hanna and Anna hastily went up to their father and smiled, "-happy birthday father."

"Happy birthday," they mutually held a present, "-here's to your health!" Malley joined at their side, placing her hand on their shoulders and smiling, "-happy birthday, Julius."

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"On behalf of the palace," added Igna, "-happy birthday, brother."

A look of surprise, lowering of the blond eyebrows, a flushness added to the gleaming cheeks, and a sudden highlight of the man's lips, "-don't be embarrassed," winked Igna, "-you're adding on years, brother."

"I sure am," he laughed, "-I didn't expect this."

"That's what it means to host a surprise," the twins exchanged with Igna. Thus, the evening's celebration went on blast. Man of the hour, Julius Haggard, went through a lot of chatter-filled circles and exchanged pleasantries.

'A sight for sore eyes,' wondered Igna, he tipped his glass of liquor at the prince and drank. The festivities carried into night, dinner was served, a cake was cut and the dance hall was full of half-drunken men trying their best at courtship.

"Opening the celebration to the noble was a great move," said an exhausted voice.

"Julius," Igna flipped, changing view from over the balustrade to the prince and the backdrop, an archway inside which dance and laughter roared, "-came for some fresh air?"

"I came for a cigarette," he reached into the suit jacket, "-but I guess I forgot my case."

"Here," Igna reached into his and pulled, "-can't believe your fifty-two."

“Don’t say it aloud,” he puffed, “-I don’t care for it. Age’s just a number.”

“Such the excuse used by the depraved. In fairness, age’s just a number for us immortals. I was wondering,” they flipped and stared at the silent garden, “-ever regret becoming something more than human?”

“Long as we will it, our existence can’t ever be forfeit. World’s full of contradictions. A child wishes to be an adult, an adult longs for the days of old, maybe because of the energetic body or childish innocence. A mortal longs to become immortal and the immortal wishes for the day their destiny types a full-stop.”

“I get it,” Igna puffed, “-suppose it’s the alcohol talking.”

“Alcohol talking?” he chuckled, “-brother, you can drink for the whole of Hidros.”

“Don’t start,” he tapped the cigarette – ash crushed and tumbled, a wind swept the remains, “-Julius, on a serious note, what is the plan going forward?”

“Elaborate, brother.”

“Creation’s heir,” Igna side-glanced, a comforting silence imposed as if a blue sky being clouded by a somber taint, “-the mortal realm won’t remain so forever. Every start has an end, and for us, for me, I know the pain of starting over. You have a lovely wife and two kind and mature daughters. They’ve reached the age of maturity, should take consideration about their futures, yes?”

“Marriage?”

“No, not that,” he puffed, “-they’re free, such is the luxury those at the top can enjoy,” he flipped and tapped Julius’ arms, “-look,” Julius followed, “-if our position was reversed, we would be like them.” Reference drew on a hunched noble egging on his daughters to find suitable partners, “-scouring the dancehall for someone to keep their wealth and prestige, by association, complete.”

“There’s a lot to think about, what brought this on?”

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“Heavenly realm,” he added, “-moves are being made without our knowledge, moves able to destroy reality as we know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Zeus and his entourage sent a clear warning. Remember Achilles?”

“Yeah, member of Kniq and aid to Staxius, what of her?”

“History’s changed and she’s dead.”

“Excuse me?”

“Depending on a person’s action, the repercussion has much deeper impacts later down the road. Take geometry, for example, a simple off-distance of one millimeter can result in a meter long difference.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I confirmed the situation. Those residents of the Shadow Realm and entities of higher level to Orin are aware of the change. As for the world, it continues without hassle.”

“What then, won’t they be punished?”

“I don’t know,” he puffed, “-the guardian of time and space, the weaver of destiny, and the entities involved have special signets burnt into the offenders. Why do you think I’m unable to attain godhood.”

“Because of a curse given by Zeus?”

“Partly... for the sin of reviving Aceline from an alternate timeline, logic doesn’t make sense when dealing with those multiple fragments. The signet of Vagabond... too bad.”

“Is that why?”

“Yeah, we need to consider those unable to see things from our point of view. I’ve made sure those closest have access to my domain. Heir to Creation, if we are to face everything as a team, as brothers as we so affectionately call our bond, I think it’s time for you to create a realm of your own. Only there can one feel true safety.”

“If I do that, my identity as Creation’s heir will be ousted. Father might try to reclaim the symbol. After all, we did ignore his wishes... I, I don’t know, Igna.”

“Fair,” the cigarettes snuffed by a press on the balustrade, “-how about you create a realm within the Shadow Realm. Create a continent using my domain as your core, branch it out, and enjoy the anonymity.”

“Won’t that put your world in danger?”

“Oh, the Shadow Realm’s exceeded both the mortal and heavenly realms. Kronos’ sickle transformed, the evolution guaranteed its existence for all of eternity and beyond. Worlds within worlds, planets, and newer civilizations – the never-ending cycle of life and death. Consider this my way of saying happy birthday, brother.”

“Creating domain within your domain... it sounds fun but what about if I want to bring those close to me, they might not enjoy the blandness of my imagination.”

“Why are you worrying about that,” he laughed, “-they’ll live in the Shadow Realm of course, in another world far better than what we have here.”

More cigarettes lit, *puff,* “-Igna, pardon the suspicion... I just know there’s something more to it.”

“There is something more,” he puffed, “-consider it as rent.”

“What about the present?”

“That’ll be the initial construction fee,” they stopped, stared at one another blankly, then burst into full-on belly laughter, “-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“We...”

"Are..." the laughter hampered understandability, "-Igna," Julius paused, the lips strained... then shattered into another burst.

"Okay, okay," they breathed, "-let's take it easy," the amusement, "-talking about creating another world as if pushing a construction plan."

"I know," coughed Igna, "-the worldly influence is one not to be trifled against."

"About the offer, what should I do?"

"Creation of multiple secondary cores to sustain and boost the Shadow Realm's primary heart."

"..." silence settled once more, the waves of thought washed, '-creation of a core is hard, I can barely manage to make a fifth of what's required with my inherent mana. Brother wants me to create sub-cores and add to the Shadow Realm. The balance between mortal and gods will effectively come to an end,' a realization hit, "-cousin, are you trying to create a land where children are born as gods or entities higher than the gods... don't tell me you're planning to make a heaven?"

"The concept of Elysium is one of bliss and peace. In said regard, I suppose a place for rest would be considered so. Raising the Shadow Realm's status would ensure its survival."

"Breeding beings able to kill gods for the simple reason of doing so is mad, brother, are you seriously trying to found a new standard?"

A somber grin escaped, "-Julius, we're competing against gods. I'll do what I must to make sure those who I care about remain untouched. I was never able to help those I wanted in their dire moments."

"You've gone mad, brother. There's no way such a plan will ever work. Tis possible in theory. I'd require more mana and far more life energy to create subcores. There's a reason only a few gods have the ability to expand domains, they, themselves become cores for said realms."

"Conquering the unknown," he puffed, "-you forget, brother, who I am. Alfred, Staxius, Origin, Scifer, the burdens placed upon these shoulders are akin to blades. I wouldn't have come without a plan. Vesper has been collecting domains and capturing symbols of power on my order. Don't underestimate the idealness of my people," a purple haze flashed across the eyes, "-they wait on purpose and strike when true. Heir to Creation, why not join my quest for absolution."

"Do you hear yourself?" the cigarette dropped, "-Igna, please, wake up from whatever trance you are," he shook Igna's shoulder, "-please for their sakes, don't end up thy own demise."

'What would you know about demise,' the gaze lowered, a silent mist covered his feet and torso, '-what would you know about ending one's own life? I'm selfish, I'm whimsical and I'm self-aware. Julius, you don't realize just yet... my actions today will echo in the future.'

"Brother, wake up!"

"Julius," Igna held Julius' chin, "-look at me."

"..." silence, "-do you see?" said Igna, "-do you see?"

"See what?"

“Nothing.”

“I see nothing?”

“No, nothing sees you,” the world suddenly disappeared, “-nothingness permeates the world, the space inside the space, the force within a force. Truth, false, nothing matters,” and indeed, there laid nothing, “-what’s black, remove it, what’s white, remove it, what remains, nothing – remove it.”

The heart sank, “-HELP!”

Reality snapped back, “-Brother,” whispered Igna, “-look at me,” he lowered his gaze, “-look at me.”

“Brother, I apologize,” the hands trembled, “-what are you?”

“I’m nothing,” he returned neutrally, “-look at the horizon, the cityscape, the place around. The ultimate truth is nothing.”

Cough, cough, cough, blood splattered, a sense of vertigo, ‘-I can’t stand,’ he dropped forward into Igna’s arms, “-brother, there’s a lot the world hides, a lot of people and teachers speak of – the culmination of other timelines, the death of entire universes. It’s all bound by a simple word, nothing.”

“Stop it,” he pushed Igna and fell onto the terrace, “-what’s the talk about nothing, don’t you...”

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“I don’t,” returned Igna with a strange symbol within his gaze, “-I don’t,” it was there, the third incarnation’s true power resounded, ‘-I’m losing consciousness,’ Julius fell.

“Master,” Serene ran outside, “-is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’ll be fine,” returned Igna sat with one knee to his chest, “-got a little high off the produce.”

“Told you not to smoke that stuff,” she rolled her eyes and knelt to help Julius, “-you should stop taking those, messes with your head.”

“A cigarette a day keeps the devil away,” he laughed, “-let’s get him to bed,” they lifted the prince to a nearby room.

“Should do it,” exclaimed Igna, “-shall we continue?”

“Yes please,” Serene winked and locked arms, “-let’s party, the Dark Guild’s way. I’m calling for reinforcement from my fellow comrades. Is that okay, majesty?”

“Have them host it at the manor,” added Igna, “-we’ll take the celebrations there.”

“Now that’s what I expect from my king,” they laughed.

Chapter 1018: Skarla

Between the booze, the drugs, and the fun times; Igna found himself waking the next day inside a bathtub. Lights from last night yet flickered, ‘-what an awful stench,’ a scan showed puke and a troubled maid coming to her daily duty. She arrived and peaked through the ajar door, similarly to when Igna

opened his eyes and scanned – the mess of semi-nude men and women – all of whom were handsome, model in their own way, laid in self-made bodily puddles.

An exasperated gasp followed, “-celebration sure was hectic.”

“My apologies,” said Igna, “-we had a little too much last night,” understatement of the year. A casual stroll led outside through the balcony archway; still open from last night. The balustrade sadly gave downward, ‘-seriously?’ he cringed at someone’s half-digested dinner.

“Brother.”

“Julius,” he returned, “-I see you made it, how was your night?”

“Painful,” he pinched his forehead and slowed pace, “-I feel like death. About the creation of subcores and said business, I’m in.”

“Certain?”

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“Yes, you wouldn’t have asked if it were impossible.”

“Catch on very quick, don’t you brother? I must warn you, my plan will definitely affect what is to happen in the future. The thirst for knowledge and power’s driven my motivation.”

“Why now?”

“Look at Hidros, look at us, we have the world in our palms.”

Julius took a strained stance, “-brother?”

“Not being conceited,” he returned, “-Orin’s exhausted its purpose. Freedom comes at the price of meandering through life. No destination makes the journey, long and eventful as is, worthless. I’ve decided what I want – I’m set. Come what may, brother, I will make sure the world remains safe.”

“You mean the Shadow Realm?”

“...” Igna smiled silently.

As celebrations and overall confidence ran the Rosesopian Castle; per Igna’s leadership and smart negotiations, the time of the eventual conflict increased. A lack of weaponry following the passing days greatly affected the Rebellion’s call to arms. Morale was already low before the start of the battle, an advantage Hidros would gluttonously exploit.

Operation Wied, headed by the King himself, sprang into action later down the week. Konak’s relative architecture muddled between modern and ancient. The stark definition of having and have nots was impaired by a lack of disparity.

Laughter and alcohol livened the town center. An uninteresting visitor came to town weeks prior, her curly hair and skills with a blade, not to mention a Silvery colored tag round the neck, “-Skarla,” cried a drunken warrior, “-over here,” he hailed loudly.

“You shouldn’t be so loud,” she ambled dressed in light armor, “-do we have work?”

“Not really,” returned a priestess, her robe and crest reflected allegiance to the healing god Neos, “-idiot’s been drinking ever since the last job.” A cooler, more composed shorter fellow kept his distance, he kept a rifle and gulped massive amounts.

“Skarla, I tell you, we’ve been looking for a skilled rogue... man, to have a silver ranked on our team, I can’t believe it.”

“I’m the one shocked. I thought Estral wasn’t much...”

“Can’t judge a book,” a loud crash followed, “-and he’s out,” followed the priestess, “-I’ll take him to his room. You should get some rest,” she smiled, “-Daniel here should provide good company.”

And in a sudden fashion, the priest wrapped the muscular warrior in a bundle and carried him effortlessly. Whistles and cheers came from adjacent tables, “-the princess out again,” they laughed, by which the priestess winked and carried forth. Rogue and marksman crossed gazes and fell into a cycle of drinks and orders. Night settled nicely in a small harbor town. The smell of freshly cooked fish; the sea breeze and mildly damp air, “-Daniel, you shouldn’t have come.”

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“I had to,” he said with a little imbalance in the set, “-Yud ordered, have to follow.”

“Didn’t expect my guild assistant to recommend working in Estral.”

“I know. Estral’s advent of the monster plague has given rise to monster towns. People still can’t live without the fear of becoming turned.”

“Hiring monster slayers to kill one’s own kin... I wouldn’t have chosen this job if I knew any better.”

“Skarla, you’re a good person, I admire the morality. It’s something most of the hunters have lost or forgotten. I wonder if I’ll ever regain my humanity.”

“Daniel,” they arrived at the less-populated part of town, “-the disparity between having and have nots isn’t apparent. Estral’s leadership is the responsibility of the various guilds.”

“...” he stopped and brandished his weapon, “-Skarla, word of advice,” the rifle rose, “-don’t talk politics, it’s a taboo,” *bang,* the bullet whistled past her cheek and cleanly impaled a darkened figure, “-drunk or not, my aim’s the best.”

“Great display of skill,” they jumped and stood back-to-back, “-we’re being watched. Who do you think they are?”

“I don’t know,” he aimed, “-there was a report of hunters going missing the next town over. Is it them?”

“I don’t know,” said a chilling whisper, “-it’s not them, it’s me,” a dagger dug into the back, and he instantly fell silent. The fallen figure rose, “-good job, Wendy,” winked pure crimson pupils, “-they don’t know what hit them.”

“Skarla,” she narrowed, “-I got blood on my armor. Do your magic, Ergon.”

The blood levitated from the corpse and clothes, “-killing with a dagger is silent and satisfying.”

"Get's me dirty... I want to use my pistols."

"There's a job to do," he conveniently dropped on the ground and crossed his legs, the hands pressed in prayer and swiftly rose corpse, "-keep up the good work. I'll leave the next move up to you."

"Ergon," she sighed, "-you'll die a painful death one day."

"Not at by your hands," he chuckled, "-half-vampiress."

"Shut it," her eyes rolled with a hint of disgust, "-always the preacher," she leaped onto the nearest roof and glided across the houses until one of the cheaper inns, "-Laps' Mao," read the sign. Entrance gave straight into a brothel, "-Skarla," waved a suited gentleman, "-how was your night?"

"Boring. Have them bring dinner to my room."

"Got it," he said, she walked past, "-wait," and stopped.

"If it's a job, have it sent with my meal, I can't be asked to wait."

"As you were," he nodded, "-please enjoy tonight's specialty."

The ever-present moans and screams faded somewhere around the second floor. The place bore home to surprisingly good insulations. The room buckled from the corridor, '-finally back,' the armor and weapons dropped into a basket. A press toggled the television, she slipped into her underwear and scurried into the showers.

"On the subject of recent deaths of hunters, the guilds," said the cause of death was unknown. No connection has been made though the mysteries triggered the imaginative minds of the younger folks. Tim Hael, guild leader of YWC, the peacekeeping faction, had this to say, "-we're currently expanding our search for weapons or anything that may relate to the mysterious death. There have been reports of disappearances too. Investigation has ruled out the possibility of a conspiracy to the detriment of some station's narratives. Many of the bodies share signs of Transformation, they were killed by the Turned." Mr. Hael refused to comment further. Slayo's been in a state of shock, many hunters have turned toward Dehnzo for work," the shower deafened, the news' volume lowered, "-poor Slayo, they don't realize the town's slowly turning."

Beep, "-the door is opened," she shouted.

"Evening Skarla," came a friendly voice, "-watching the news as usual?"

"Making small talk as usual?" snapped back, "-food and go."

"Fine, fine," he smiled, "-always the teaser, aren't you."

"I'm no client," she side-glanced, "-go tend to the adventurers, I'm sure there are more who seek after the hangman, or sorry, the hung-man," the mix of sarcastic remarks dulled at the sound of a click.

Dinner was served alongside a chip, and a press toggled a holographic display, "-good evening majesty, rare for you to call."

"Wendy, stop playing hard to get," returned the king, "-I know you're angry about what Aurora did, don't pull it out on me, I'm only asking for a favor."

“Yes, yes, I know my liege, what is it thee wish?”

“I’m sending over the details on your phone. There’s good reason to believe the information. Check on your end just in case. Operation Wied is crucial to the war, don’t forget.”

“Yes, yes,” she exhaled, the television displayed battle footage, “-I’m curious, why the personal interest. I know my king to be whimsical and forgetful.”

“I’m not forgetful, just driven,” he chuckled, “-let me bribe you,” a swipe of the palm summoned a box over the table, “-new and improved. Consider it a present from yours truly.”

“I do wonder why I got involved in this mess sometimes. It will be done, my king, please don’t worry,” the chip vaporized. A briefcase laid upon the table, “-food first,” a mental battle between food and case broke loose, ‘-I’m hungry... but also curious...’ Skip two minutes later – a half-empty plate and opened case told much.

“RatX,” she held two pistols, ‘-the best GateSix has to offer. Why did the king send such powerful weapons?’ a sea-serpent design slithered from grip to unusually long barrel. ‘RatX, Pesticide,’ was engraved on the side, the on her grip was one of a rat with two swords behind, ‘-seriously?’ she pressed her forehead and laughed, ‘-always with the jokes. The name does sound like a pesticide.’ Details of the next mission laid on the phone, ‘-I have to abduct a royal, kill their entourage and send a message. This goes beyond plausible – killing the entourage will make certain those factions are on edge,’ a small comment said, “-and about the killing, who do you think the targets were until now, hunters? No, my dear Wendy, the targets are personal guards to many hidden elites.’

The headline of ‘-World War I,’ wrote across the television, ‘-the army is recruiting.’ The half-full plate eventually emptied. The morning sun rose over Dhenzo, ‘-morning already?’ drool covered the pillows, ‘-must have dozed off.’

Tap, tap, tap, “-Skarla, you in there?”

“Coming, coming,” palm around the handle, “-what?” she gazed listlessly, “-what is it?”

“Emergency, a hunter was found dead earlier this morning.”

“Do I care?”

“You should, it was Daniel. The YWC is here for questioning... we’re in a bind.”

“Right, I’ll get changed. Have Ishta work his charms.”

A painful silence filled the brothel. Workers peered through their rooms, and the host, Ishta, stood courteously at the entrance – his entourage, sexily dressed ladies, and muscular blokes waited patiently. The collective sensual energy expelled a sort of aphrodisiac.

“Why have you so rudely encroached on my property?”

“Ishta,” said a stuffier, less attractive fellow, “-YWC has found many issues with the establishment. As such, we demand the place to be searched on orders by the guild leader.”

"I forgot to mention this property belongs to a guild founded in Hidros. YWC's jurisdiction doesn't influence us or our businesses. Far is concerned, this place is a lounge. Find another excuse."

The representative curled his fist then exhaled, "-Skarla, a member of your guild, is under suspicion of murder. Bring her, or we will have to settle the matter the old fashion way," a group of medium-ranked hunters gathered.

"Don't get your panty in a twist," fired an unimpressed Skarla, she skipped past Ishta and landed before the representative, "-the name's Skarla, and I'm innocent. I rather this place remains," she scanned the hunters, "-and I doubt we'll have much trouble dealing with these idiots. Thugs for hire posing as hunters, such blasphemy, I wonder what the news would have to say."

"We get it," the tension hung, "-still coming with us."

"Yeah," thus they carried on deeper to the town hall.

The priestess and warrior had their faces to the ground. The impending silence was unbearable, "-leader," voiced Skarla, "-what happened?"

"It's Daniel, he's dead..."

"Don't talk," said a YWC member, the media swarmed and flashed photos, "-who informed them?" he cried.

"Don't know and don't care, bring them in and lock the doors."

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Chapter 1019: Charlie/Yonpo

"Unfortunately for you, the body was identified as Daniel. Fortunately for us, we have witnesses placing the last known location. Their report paints a very damning image," cells were split. Skarla, the warrior, and the priestess were under close observation, "-shall I extrapolate?"

"No," returned a composed Skarla, "-I'm no fool, guild assistant. I will speak no further than is needed. Don't bother think I'll working with you dogs," she scanned the fellow opposite and side-glanced at the one-way mirror, "-I know you're there, guild mate of YWC. No matter your clout," she hooked her tag with her thumb and smiled, "-there are consequences and procedures, yes?"

The observing assistant, the same belligerent bloke of a few minutes ago; bearer of a ready-made suit and unkempt hair, "-leave her," he said with a twitchy remark, "-we'll probe at the other."

A sudden tab shook the observing entourage, "-message from the top," said an assistant, "-the murders are to be solved, the YWC mustn't lose faith. They explicitly asked for your name and adamantly said there would be repercussions."

"..." he listened in silence contrary to those around.

"Not fair, is it?"

"Can't argue, orders are orders."

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"They're always like this," complained one, "-loving to play secret organization, when the hammer strikes, there're none to come in aid. It's us, assistant-"

"No more," sliced the would-be rant.

"But-"

"I said no more," he narrowed, "-arguing with one another won't help the situation. Take a breather, I'll figure something out."

Minutes cut into hours; Skarla sat comfortably, "-any update?" the door opened.

"No," returned a sleepy observer, "-she seems at home. Hard to imagine her as the prime suspect."

"Well, killers are often the charismatic type. The more they enjoy the game, the harder it gets for us to pin down the cause. What about the other two?"

"Charlie's going there as we speak."

"Charlie," exhaled the fellow, "-I rather not be in their shoes."

A click and a squeak, "-I'm sorry about that," said a well-mannered gentleman, "-media outside's giving us plenty of trouble," he comfortably dropped onto the seat and smiled, "-relax," came as a counter to the suspicious glances, "-I'm here as your friend. Tell me, what's your name and occupation?"

"The name's Iyan, no family name. Occupation, full-time hunter, I bear the crest of Rarknor."

"The Rarknor guild, are the rumors true?"

"I fail to see how it affects me."

"As I said, I mean no harm. Please keep the hostility at a minimum."

"Sure, I'd like to see how you'd fair sitting in a chair whilst your friend's murderer runs loose. I'm seething if you wish to know, the moment I know who did this, I swear-"

"-Run, enough of the bravado," a switch in tone shook the dynamic, "-JWC has informed Rarknor about current events. We have full authority over what's to happen. Let me refresh your memory, Iyan. The YWC serves as a conduit between the ruling party and the guilds. As such, we are host to many perks associated with said position. Though it's unspoken, we YWC are the peacemakers, we keep you, I, and the general populous safe. To that end, I would prefer the truth... let's not waste time."

"Yes, yes, the ever vigilant YWC. Why was Syne dragged into this?"

"Syne, interesting subject you highlight," the door tapped, silence diffused – a stern attendant murmured a few words and delivered a report. Charlie's demeanor lit. Iyan sat back in wait.

"The world is full of surprises. Syne seems to have a rather shady past. Seems my comrade was a little rough in extracting information. Comes with the territory, I mean, hunters are very much subject to bruises here and there," Iyan noticeably gestured, "-it reads here her pas-"

“Enough, don’t.”

“Why, what’s the matter, are you going to help?”

“I’ll drop the attitude, what is it you want?”

“Don’t frame it scandalously, I assure you, my job is to only seek the truth, nothing more, nothing less. Sadly for you, this conversation has no merit. One of your friends ratted you out. They called you by name and pointed out various pieces which link the case strangely. A history of temper, alcohol abuse, and frequent visitor to that god-forsaken brothel. It’s impressive Rarknor allowed scum to be in their band of warriors. No matter, all I need is a confession; the case stands on shaky ground, you know, conjecture and all.”

“Who ratted me out?”

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“Who did indeed?” he rose, “-there’s something I ought to check, care for something to drink or eat?”

“Bring me water.”

“Right, it’ll be a minute,” the lock clicked. A humble figure waited across the corridor, “-how goes it, Yonpo.”

“Bad,” he answered, tipping his head and straightening the ready-made suit, “-what about him?”

“No, no, what about the brothel, I heard the manager gave quite the talk.”

“Scum.”

“Moving on, what about the priestess?”

“Don’t know,” he answered, they came upon another door, “-she might break or might not, hard to tell with the religious type. Here are a few notes – do your magic.”

“Not magic,” he reached for the handle, “-only a hobby.” The observation room hosted more attendants, “-there he is,” they followed closely, “-he looks so confident.”

“Charlie’s not to be trifled with,” added Yonpo, the crowd parted as he drew upon the mirror, “-terrifying thing about that man is,”

“Hello,” played through the intercoms.

“-his way of analyzing the person in front. He knows what to say and how to say, he knows what they want, he can draw their desires; something about him,” Yonpo shivered, “-give’s me the chill. He’s not normal.”

“Sister, I hope my fellows didn’t harm.”

“All is as god planned. We came here to learn about my dearest friend’s death. Why has it taken so long, why are we being treated like criminals?”

“Protocol,” he answered, “-the guild needs information and confirmation. If the problem isn’t cut at the root; many others will follow the path of needless death. Sister Syne, might I be blunt?”

“Please.”

“Last night, where were you?”

“My room, why?”

“With anyone particular?”

“No, not really. Does it matter?”

“Yes, it does. According to Skarla, it seems you and Iyan are pretty close. Her statement was confirmed by many.”

“...”

“Excuse me,” he stopped, “-I’ll clear the picture a little. We have strong evidence pointing at Iyan. Skarla’s reinforced the hypothesis.” Heavy frowns lowered her brows, her posture tightened and her cheeks flushed mildly. Silence settled; thoughts clanged louder than words, her heart raced, and the beating in her chest boomed, “-Sister Syne, please don’t misunderstand my intentions. I’m here to solve the murder of your friend, we have to catch the monster else others shall lose their close ones like you. I asked if there is anything to link Iyan to you and confirm his location last night, the finger may start pointing another way.”

‘Iyan’s the prime suspect. Skarla’s saving her own skin... what should I do? Please, my lord, guide me so I can be freed and save my companion.’

Tap, tap, tap,

“-excuse me,” he made for the door, “-what is it?” whispered, murmurs recoiled, “-you sure?” he turned on himself and narrowed at Syne, “-it would seem there has been another death. I do apologize, until the situation is cleared, we have to keep you here.”

Questions of legitimacy flooded, “-another murder?” Yonpo and Charlie stormed outside.

“Seems like it,” added Yonpo, “-another hunter found in a similar state.”

“Doesn’t this prove their innocence?”

“Charlie, time like these makes me envious of your sense of justice. My job is to find the culprit, no matter the method,” empty halls echoed onto light in the distance. Voices and horrified expressions layered the already thick atmosphere.

“Charlie, Yonpo, I strongly recommend these,” an attendant handed masks – thick metal sheets pushed inward to an observation table. “Found a few minutes ago,” said an attending physician, “-cause of death, well, the decapitation speaks for itself. Same burn marks and foul stench. A strong reason to link the cases.”

“Identity?”

“Unknown, the guild tag was taken. This lovely fellow has nothing to say,” a charred mass, wrinkled and withered skin without expression nor identification, the last states of nature’s cleaner oozed the stench of death.

Both attendants returned, door to Iyan’s room opened, “-sorry for the wait. Here’s the water. Iyan there’s a simple solution; prove you weren’t outside last night, give me a reason to believe you didn’t kill your friend.”

“Who ratted me out?” he glared, “-tell me and I’ll consider speaking.”

“Finding a job as a foreigner in Estral must be difficult. Different cultures, different standards, social norms, and acceptance are rather prejudicial. To mind my benefactor’s interest, I won’t speak further. Doesn’t matter in the end.”

“Syne and I,” he paused, “-It’s her,” he slammed the table, “-I know that rogue betrayed me. Syne can vouch; we spent the night together.”

A broad smile escaped, “-Iyan, you truly are a gentleman. I’ll confirm with the sister, and if it’s true, we’ll have a smooth ride for the enemy, yes?”

“Best we don’t cross paths,” he glared, “-also, if there’s anything wrong with Syne, I swear I’ll make you regret it.”

“She’s fine, only provocations,” he exited, another attendant entered to escort Iyan to a waiting room. The sister, he pushed and smiled, “-good and bad news.”

“Bad news.”

“Iyan said you can vouch for his location.”

“Good?”

“He vouched for your location. Sister what happens behind closed doors is strictly your business. Far as it concerns us, we’ve pinned the traitor.”

“Skarla... what about her statement, what if she-”

“Something for us to deal with,” an attendant pushed the door, Charlie remained seated, “-sister Syne, a representative of the church’s here,” a somber presence waited in the attendant’s shadow, Syne bowed courteously.

“Good,” the tone rose, “-the sister and her friend are innocent. We’ll keep Skarla for further interrogation, is that alright?”

“YWC, taking in a sister of Neos is a great offense. We’ll look the other way this time. if the situation ever repeats itself, I’ll make sure YWC suffers.”

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“Please elder, don’t be angry at Charlie, he was only doing his job.”

“Yonpo,” the elder watched with disgust, “-the worst of ’em all. Come on Syne, we’re going.”

Fours passed and Skarla sat patiently, “-sorry for the wait.”

“No apologies needed,” she maintained eye contact, “-is YWC done with their schemes?”

Yonpo and Charlie entered, “-seems your precious team has pointed blame.”

“And?”

“Are you not angry?”

“Why should I be?” she kicked her feet upon the table, “-I don’t care much for another guild’s thought. Tell me, YWC, how many silver ranks are under thy employment?”

“We’re asking the questions here,” gritted Charlie.

“Questions are relevant to enlighten a specific problem or, perhaps, clear up the misunderstanding. Doesn’t work when your mind’s already made up. Tell me,” she narrowed onto Yonpo.

“A question for a question.”

“Deal,” she nodded, “-Charlie, was it? you will stay out of this conversation.”

“HOW DARE YOU!” he slammed the table, she returned his gaze calmly, and the silence settled awkwardly.

“Charlie, sit,” thundered Yonpo, “-YWC has three silver ranks underemployment, all of whom are in Hidros, why do you ask?”

“To draw comparison. Our guild has ten silver ranked, three golden ranked, and a platinum hero. Due to legislation passed over the monopoly of talent, guilds are only allowed to hire adventurers of tier-five and lower. Those above-said rank ought to pass before the central guild and seek approval.”

“And?”

“Well, having silver ranks is a simple matter of procedure. YWC, I hope you know what it means, yes?”

“Putting the focus on your strength won’t change the outcome,” Charlie interjected, “-what if YWC doesn’t have as many silver ranks, we’re still strong.”

“...”

“Yonpo,” she ignored the interjection, “-I’m warning about potential outcomes. War’s underway, Estral will be dragged into conflict one way or the other. And you’re right, we’re different. Guilds in Hidros hold less of a prestigious position compared to Estral, here, the guilds are akin to political cabinets. Would you risk it?”

Chapter 1020: Sides

“Yonpo, please tell me the excuse is not going to work,” a ravenous determination came in heavy gestures, “-please, Yonpo, we have her right where we want. A simple nudge and we can bring down the whole organization.”

“Sense of justice,” little to no remaining strength exhaled, “-Charlie, give it up.” As if he knew movement outside, the door tapped and order to release Skarla fell onto the empty desk, “-she’s free, no questions asked.” A humbling morning turned listless afternoon, same sign read, ‘-Laps’ Mao.’

“There you are,” waved a smartly dressed Ishta, “-how was it?” he asked, nonchalant to the gathering of drooling men at a distant catwalk.

“What’s this?” she entered a cleaner hall, furniture swapped for a podium on which beautiful people walked and showed their outfits.

“A fashion event,” he returned, “-the designer’s a member of Apexi’s fashion branch.”

“Hosting it here is weird.”

“Well, the media,” he nodded, “-is more the reason to host the event. YWC are on the move,” he muffled, “-I do hope the risk is somewhat understood.”

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“Oh, I’m angry about the situation alright?” she unbuttoned her jacket and flashed her holster, “-our line of work is fun.”

“Don’t have too much fun,” he smiled, “-here, a drink,” glass slid glided into her open palms, “-and get some rest. Might need to rethink your strategy.”

She gulped and commented, “-maybe not.” A side-glance through the entrance hinted at familiar faces, “-time to clean up the dirt.” The taller standing lady exited, leaving Ishta to toggle an interface, ‘-YWC are off our trail,’ read a report, ‘-the newer body’s swayed investigation. We should have clearance in a few days.’

A puff of smoke carried into the somber afternoon sky. A gloominess wrapped the lesser attractive part of town, “-Charlie,” she ambled, “-yet not filled?”

“Don’t bother,” he returned sharply and leaned against an adjacent wall, “-I know this place is filled with filth the world has to bear. I’m not going to a standstill and waiting for properness to dictate my conviction. Skarla, reveal your identity and give up that life. It will be easier to repent, it will be easier to accept the end,” a gentle push took the relaxed posture into a strained walk, “-come on,” he puffed, signaling for her to follow. The streets faded into the darker alleys. With the stench of rot and impurities, they stopped at an impasse. Sides were lined by garbage, the walls rose taller and windows within said walls were covered by stained curtains. Puddles and uncommon squeals broke the silence at times – he carried even so to the end. Graffiti brought some sort of visual glee to the rather ugly display.

“Rot, filth, and disgust.”

“Get to the point.”

“Impatient, aren’t we?” he turned and leaned, “-a call came from Hidros a few hours after you left. They ordered YWC to stop their investigation and threatened action on our financial standing. I don’t get how politics can govern justice. I joined to make the world right and save others from a fate similar to mine. Is it hard to want something good, is it that bad?”

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“What of it, why?”

“I’m not a native of Estral you know,” the tone lessened into a friendlier approach, “-the slums, the darker side of humanity, I feel at home here, I feel at peace, it’s this feeling that forces me to hate myself. No matter how much I try, the darkness never leaves, no matter the light I shine, the abyss swallows much of my strength. It’s no use,” he puffed, “-during the war between Queen Ela and King Igna, I found much distress. I was only a young adult at the time, I was readying myself to step into the bigger world. I loved Hidros, I loved everything about the continent, the monarchy, and the way there’s a place for commoners to sit at our table. Father was the freest spirit man I knew, he headed the campaign against Ela’s faction who sought domination through one’s bloodline. We fully pledge our family to the king’s cause... what good did that do... on the day before my eighteenth birthday; a troop of soldiers under the King’s command, they gave the name as; *éclair*’s personal guards,” strenuous efforts carried the crinkles and antsy glitters, “-they took my family at gunpoint and forced us to the castle. My father pleaded his case to no avail. We served our purpose so said the prime minister. We were charged with high treason, my mother and sister were made maids, my father was jailed and I was exiled. Justice my foot, I sought an answer, I knocked on their door demanding answers, but they remained silent. That’s the king you worship, that’s his true nature... once you’ve served his purpose, he’ll throw you aside. Here’s greater hypocrisy, the leaders of Ela’s noble faction – Goldberg and Hart were killed, so they say, but I know better and my intuition was right. They changed identity and became Yanie and Soph. Leaders of the faction who sought to break Hidros’ unity were given chance at rebirth. They live their lives in luxury, enjoying the better part of their lives... meanwhile, we supported the king and had to surrender everything, we were forsaken. Adventuring took me around Hidros, hunting monsters and earning enough money to raise my cousin. The uglier side of Hidros is one not known to many. Those unable to make ends are forced into distress; sometimes left to die and never be acknowledged by the world. Do you know how many others have suffered fates worse than mine? I thought I had it bad but no, there were other families less fortunate taken by human traffickers.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you serve the king, I know you do, you have the same smell, the same scrupulous gaze, the uncaring attitude towards another’s pain, lack of sympathy, and the thirst for blood. Those who’ve sworn to the king have a certain smell, I know one when I see one, you, Skarla, are the king’s dog. My cousin died a few years back, and guess what, it was the supposed protectors who accidentally bombed our apartment. Traces of Elas’ party, what a fucking joke. Never reached the news, did it? even if I voiced my words loudly upon the Arcanum, there was no chance of it gaining attention. Hidros is the worse place on this earth, a dystopia for the useless and a eutopia for the dogs. The justice system failed, far as they were concerned, her name never existed. YWC then recruited me and I began my new life hunting down evil.”

“A cliché backstory,” echoed Skarla, “-answer me this, before accusing the king, was he the one who gave the order?”

“I don’t know?”

“Was he the one directly involved?”

"I don't know?"

"Did the crown not recompense the fallen, did the crown not make amends?"

"they did, but a human life can't be valued."

"Shut your mouth," she echoed, "-pathetic, I don't see anything I should respect. The sob story is an excuse, Charlie, you're mother and sister are maids for the sole reason of making money. Your father was a traitor and you are a fool."

"NO!" he screamed, "-MY FATHER SUPPORTED THE KING!"

"Open YOUR EYES!" she screamed, "-never mind, a shouting contest was never the solution."

From the shadows came two, "-you killed him, didn't you."

"Syne, Iyan. Don't do anything crazy," she narrowed.

"To think we believed in you..."

"To think I thought we were friends."

Charlie hid his smirk, '-fucker was lying to sway their emotions.'

"Skarla, you must repent," fired Syne, "-as a priestess to Neos, I must deliver Daniel's soul."

"-And as Syne's protector, I must do her bidding."

A report flashed before her interface, "-Upon further investigation, targets of Operation Wied are linked to Syne. The target for assassination is Charlie, else known as Mempis of the East, an agent in service to Alpha's secret service."

'He must know, how deep is the connection. Are they after the same thing we are?' she scanned, '-operation Wied is to force Estral's hand... Alpha must be looking for the same outcome.'

Iyan drew a long sword, Syne hammered her staff and rose a semi-transparent barrier, "-Skarla, this is where you die," glared Iyan, "-for Daniel's sake I must take revenge." Her hands reached for RatX, "-enough," came a thunderous echo, and the barrier shattered. Lovely hair flowed, and a charmingly dressed man with features mistaken as either man or woman walked, "-I won't stand for bloodshed in my neighborhood. Syne, Iyan, please lower your weapons."

"Lord Asmodeus."

"Yes, yes, it's me," he smiled, "-and Skarla here is part of my family."

A deluge of rifles and magical circles surrounded the area, and mild laughter came from behind, "-I've won," he laughed, "-ASMODEUS, YOU MAKE YOURSELF PRESENT!"

"My, who's the ungodly gentleman?"

Snaps and deeply nauseating sounds popped. A disgusting member tore through the humanoid figure, it grew in size and into an Arch Demon for it beckoned such an acidic roar the street and nearby buildings

crumbled. “Our Queen has returned,” it groaned a chin shaped like a hammer and teeth sharpened as nails, “-and for her glorious return, Asmodeus, you must come back home!”

“What is an arch-demon doing in the mortal realm?” he rolled his eyes and walked. Skarla dragged Iyan and Syne by the collar, leaving the back alley a place for beings forged in the essence of chaos. “-Queen of Demon is a servant of my lord, why must you lie?”

“You think so?” the arch-demon laughed, echoed puffs shook the ground, “-the Aapith Nation, the dominion of the demons, will always be a place where the Queen of Demon finds her acceptance. We’re tasked with gathering our forces – we will take down the Demonlord. Violetta, the weaver of Destiny, has prophesized, ‘on the day when three joins one, and one becomes whole, no entity of greater strength shall surpass the might of he who controls the three. By the powers bestowed on the circle of creation and death – by the rules imposed for the sanctity of reality, and for the safeguard of everything; nothing mustn’t awaken for if he bears his true intent, all will fall without resistance,’ she refers to him, the man who inherited Creation, Death, and Time. The one you serve. As a prince of Hell, you must join the Queen’s side in battle. Asmodeus, Mammon, Sathanas, and Beelzebub, four of the seven unholy traits must join side with our Queen. Satan, Belial, Leviathan, and Lucifer, the Kings of Hell, are readying forces to end the threat.”

“Why should I join?”

“Beelzebub, Mammon and Sathanas have already returned to Lilith’s side. You remain, Prince of Lust.”

“Fair enough,” he snapped, his magical circles vanished, “-Kul, where are you?”

A fair maiden fluttered, her feet stayed a few inches off the ground, “-what?”

“I’m going home,” he yawned, “-send word to Igna; demons are leaving the Mortal Realms.”

Kul snapped and summoned magical circles, “-leaving Igna is a sin I won’t tolerate. Asmodeus,” she glared, he nonchalantly made way to the suspended gates of Hell, “-take one more step and I’ll have to kill you.”

He reached for the handle, “-Kul, you don’t have the power to stop me. The mortal realm’s exhausted it’s fun... I must see to my queen.”

“BASTARD!” the circles materialized and poured golden-colored lances; he spun and clapped, and demons of heightened rank darted into sight, “-Kul,” he stepped through the door, “-don’t make it any harder,” the demons rushed, she barely kept her attacks (firing lances into swarms of known faces) the reddish hell’s gate vanished, ‘-Asmodeus,’ a thud beckoned – “-Void,” limbs tore head from the toe, summoned black orbs pulled and shredded the demons – many of which were close friends, Asmodeus’ harem, ‘-I’m sorry,’ dropped on one knee, ‘-I wasn’t able to stop him,’ dismembered familiar heads rolled. The haunting expression of Asmodeus’ harem etched. Memories of fun-filled nights, the disregard for normalcy, the laughter, and joy shared by Asmodeus’ harem, culminated friendships, all fade into what laid on the ground, ‘-my friends, I’m sorry.’