

## Death Magic 1031

### Chapter 1031: Olympian Gods

The clog of reality churned in reverse. The mechanism of life, considered extinct – turned on itself. The fallen buildings were rebuilt; the scene played as if a movie in reverse. The prior destruction vanished, and the creation and amazing technology sought their rightful place. The unliving structures flourished – dead walls and concrete remnants returned. Igna's nonchalant expression halted, he motioned a twirl with the fingers; "-what do you think?"

"What did you do?" gulped Lixbin, "-this place," he scanned; the reddish-brown taint, the smell of sulfur and poisonous substance, a complete reset overtook the world. By the end, blue skies, green fields, and clean air were common. An empty town of the modern building stood firmly amidst nature. \*Release,\* he exhaled and leaped, "-that's the town square?"

"Yeah," added Lixbin with back against the stained wall, "-a lovely sight, isn't it?"

"What purpose does it serve?"

"Name's the Red Dome. It's highly influenced by olden tradition. Modernism is great and all, don't get me wrong, the square and geometrically pleasing office buildings were Unsog's pride and joy... alas, the very same building cast a shadow of despair over the populous, before we realized, the unnatural attention to symmetry had brought a myriad of psychological problem, the main cause being Melancholy, else Depression by the current trend."

"Utopia?"

"A utopia by definition is a place of complete happiness – however, in practicality, there will always exist contrarians. We can't... no matter," a salacious glee sprang as smiles, "-what did you do, I want to know!"

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"Lixbin," the aura around Igna settled, "-to control is to be influenced," he rose his shirt, a deep-rooted scar cut diagonally across the abdomen, on closer look the mark was compromised of smaller marks, ancient symbols.

"Curse?"

"Correct," he nodded, "-so many think curses to be wrong. Midas is a prime example; the man was foolish."

"He couldn't eat..."

"Hire someone to feed, gold meant money, the ultimate power." The jovial conversation cut across an asphalted street lined by trees followed by buildings; shops and the like. A distant flicker of traffic light cried, '-cross,' at the crossing. They followed the zebra with Igna childishly leaping from the white rectangle to the next. Lixbin kept a slower pace. Lovely stairs climbed onto the beautifully layered walkways, "-Unsog is very clean."

"Cleanliness was their creed."

From stone echoes to marble clogs, the noise of the walk told much of the promenade. The great building rose on the adjacent sides, larger trees were spotted amidst clean patches of green. The random separation seemed deliberate – an arching doorway led forth into the Red Dome. Fine silk, immaculate decoration – a grandiose air of prestige and reconnaissance, “-let’s sit here.”

“Fine by me.” A large window gave outside, “-the lonely openness is rather awkward.”

“Yeah,” affirmed Lixbin, “-we’re in the heart of Unsog, the place always rattled with activity. The lounge did serve a good coffee.”

“Onto the matter at hand. Lixbin, what are your intentions?”

“My intentions, sorry. You misunderstand, I’m the one who ought to ask said question. The world is restored to a time before the war, I never dreamt it to ever be possible. The show of power far surpasses what I, in my capacity as a high God, can do. What is it you wish, Igna.”

“I don’t want anything,” he returned, “-I have a sensation that the end is closer than I expect. I’ve seen the climax,” Igna quickly shrugged the matter, “-Lixbin, tis not only the planet but the world realm. I’ve restored it so the production of its life force to be a constant activity. Depending on thy choices, the world will evolve. It’s a fresh start, do with it as thee please. The people of this realm appointed you as their Guardian and Deity – their faith lays in thy hand.”

“What about payment, what about you?”

“It was no bother,” he smiled, “-I did so to prove a point. Lixbin, I’m sure “you understand, don’t you?” in so, a guilt-ridden spur locked his jaw.

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‘Oh god... Igna has more power in his little finger than I have in my greatest of conditions. We messed with him, we altered his history, and choose to defy Orin. What have we done... what have we done...’

“Don’t,” he gestured, “-you passing out on me won’t solve my problem. Lixbin, the future holds much of what we don’t know. The point to be made is this; I’m superior to Zeus, and yet, have not to influence to alter the Heavens.”

“I get it,” gulped Lixbin, “-you want a war?”

“Correct. I want a war.”

“It won’t amount to anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because Zeus’ already reached his goal. The book of the past, present, and future are in his possession. I heard Miira, the Guardian of Time, is also in his service. I should know, I was the one who tricked her into giving her word.”

“Lixbin, let’s put our differences aside. Work for me,” he extended a hand, “-and embrace thy deepest desire.”

“...”

“Yes, be cynical, be suspicious, it’s what I require from a potential partner. You have doubts, which shows a willingness to counter my thoughts and ideas. I like that, I enjoy conflict – and I prefer an entourage of wisemen, not yes-men. I should be frank; I restored the world in hopes of us making a deal.”

“Nothing is ever unconditional,” a disappointed exhale followed, “-I should have expected no less from you, Devil.”

‘Go, take the bait, Lixbin,’ Igna kept a stoic mien, ‘-conclude, take the hint; let the rumors influence the judgment.’

“The devil does as he wishes. For a favor, he asks for more,” came a disheartened Lixbin, ‘-what did I expect... Igna, I thought you could have shone the light. I’m an imbecile... was I blind to see us as the same, was I wrong to think you had light within? What sort of question is that...’ he locked upon the confident man, ‘-of course, he wanted more... I walked into his scheme, should have never let my guard down.’

‘There it is,’ he spotted the hint, a drop in posture, “-but,” came an ardent injection, “-I don’t care for it,” answered Igna, Lixbin’s eyes lit. “There’s true love for the world. I don’t have any right on said feeling of glee and pleasure. Lixbin, forget I ever mentioned anything about a deal or contract. Help the world flourish, become its guiding beacon – turn over a new page and follow thy deepest desire, become the light, Lixbin, BECOME THE LIGHT!”

The declaration rattled Lixbin’s very core to the point of tears. They fell silently, “-I’m sorry,” he sniffled, “-I don’t mean to cause such a fuss... I wanted to hear those words spoken to me, I wanted someone to tell me it would be alright, I wanted someone to say that I can become what I want,” in what seemed a pure moment, Igna gave a side-smirk, “-you fucking idiot,” Orenmir slid from her sheath, “-did you think I’d fall for your game?”

Crocodile tears stopped, “-what gave it away?” said an unbothered leer.

“Tears and the slow building of power. Your story is true, it’s all true until the last part. The world wasn’t destroyed by the heaven, no, it was you,” he smiled, “-you killed your creators, lord of Darkness.”

“Well, you have me there,” he swung and shattered the wall, “-the world’s a trap, good luck escaping.” Thunder and lightning crackled; the blueness swapped for a darker shade of gray. Heavy rain poured, and Lixbin was spotted hovering above Unsog, “-to Igna Haggard, tis my welcoming present,” the voice echoed.

‘Man, Lixbin is quite the actor,’ he rose from the seat and gripped Orenmir, ‘-he sensed Zeus’ presence and caught my cue. Lixbin truly is the god of Darkness. How I pity the fools,’ sticking with his part, Igna drifted through the broken wall and glared at two hovering figures.

“Good job, Lixbin.”

“I only did what I owed. With this, my favors to Zeus are over. Do haste, I’d rather be looking at the voluptuous women from Elze than stare at this sausage fest, what say you, Hermes.”

“Right you are,” the divine messenger winked, “-I’ll make it quick. Excuse the intrusion.” Curly hair hidden under a rounded hat landed, and the messenger bore a strikingly modern outfit, “-Igna Haggard.”

“Son of Zeus, else the Divine Trickers; Hermes. Never thought I’d see one of Zeus’ immortal children.”

“Never thought I’d see the one who stole my dear ol’ sister. Tell me, Igna, how is my sister doing these days?”

“Who?”

“Athena.”

“She’s rather well. I must say her talents are extraordinary. Hermes, why would your father ever dare to throw such a fine specimen to the wild?”

“Athena’s a problem child,” inferred the messenger, “-as are you, herald of disaster. Taking a thunderbolt to the heart wasn’t enough to end the suffering. Don’t worry,” he approached, “-father doesn’t know you’re alive. As for me, I’m not interested in his whims – what I care for is entertainment. You know,” came a smirk, “-how a certain personage’s been recruiting fallen gods. I know quite a few things,” he did laps around Igna, “-and as been proven time and time again; knowledge is power.”

‘Cruse was right. Zeus’ isn’t a problem, it’s the people around him. Especially the children. He might be the supreme one – the children aren’t to be trifled with. The Olympian gods are trouble.’

“Igna, give me the symbol of time, else, something of equal value.”

“Come again?”

“There’s a price to pay for my silence,” added the messenger, “-and to that end...”

“Blackmail, yes?”

“I mean, you did go through quite the trouble to make the death look palatable. Removing the bounty is of greater importance if thee wishes to enact thy influence.”

“Don’t mind me saying, Hermes, you’re a piece of shit.”

“Oh, is that so?” he disappeared with only the voice apparent, “-I don’t take kindly to insults.”

Igna threw Orenmir in the air, \*Snap,\* fingers dug into Hermes’ neck, “-being fast is worth nothing,” he formed another fist and struck, the messenger dropped onto his knees and yelped, “-Hermes, poor ol’ Hermes,” Igna struck again, this time a heavy kick to the jaw, knocked him cold.

“IGNA!” Lixbin teleported.

“What now?” Igna side-glanced.

“Don’t just attack an Olympian God. I’d run if I were you.”

Orenmir landed, “-why not?”

Stronger presence gathered, “-Lixbin, go.”

“Don’t tell me twice,” he vanished, leaving a growing tempest to gather around Igna.

“The divine protectors,” said muffled coughs, “-wrong move, Devil. God fear the guardians, us Olympians are in a league of our own, you’ll realize soon enough.”

‘Mount Olympus, their domain,’ noble warriors came from nowhere. The golden glow from the fountain of Eeth ran through their veins. ‘-the same power Nike bestowed,’ he scanned, ‘-I attacked one of the Olympians and the bodyguards have come to play. Let’s see how they fare.’ First of two leaped, two strokes cleanly slit the figures in half, from the bodies, rose more, ‘-cut one and two grow,’ a colder stare turned the foot into stone, ‘-Medusa’s glare?’ came from another guardian... \*Tharis,\* the pistol materialized and fired – taking the medusa casting figure’s head.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,” angels lined Hermes’ injured self, “-it’s done, Devil, our deal is off. With this I bid my farewell; enjoy the coming massacre,” they carried the messenger, who, with a clap, opened the flood-gates, “-KILL HIM!” stronger, diverse warrior under the Olympian gods stormed Lixbin’s world.  
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‘And he’s gone,’ Igna lowered his weapons, what could only be described as an army gathered, “-Hermes gave valuable information,” the marching stopped for it seemed the guardians were conscious of their actions. No sign of aggression came from either party. ‘Their version of the puppet army,’ came a yawn, ‘-meet my army.’

\*To the heroes within the Shadow Realm, to the warriors waiting for battle – to the brave fighters readied to face the world – such is the word of thy master, such is my request for assistance in battle. Arise from thy slumber, take arms, dawn thy armor and show existence true power. Shadow Realm: Gate of Verhna – Meros.\*

Chapter 1032: Mark, else Ark

Untamed beasts clambered – two lines of fighters formed. One surrounded Igna as a way of protection, and the other compromised the guards. Attackers of physical traits forged in the neutral barrier between monster and angel. From one-eyed to three-legged – aerial and grounded, the surge was considerable. ‘-Hermes’ long gone. The feeling of nostalgia,’ therein, Alfred’s memory of a similar scene played; ‘-on the cusp of victory against the vanguard, after he struck an heir of the gods – the latter sought vengeance. Unleashing an army of unkillable macabre,’ such went the thought. The Shadow Realm’s army readied; blessings of the four guardian deities were bestowed on each individual as if a class system. Gophy, Miira, Intherna, and Lilith; shared their might with the realm, and so, those born of the realm were akin to gods in their own way. Comparing both armies was a matter of perspective. Igna, loyal to his ominously bleak ways, ordered one of the many faceless fighters forward. With the Shadow Realm’s uniform on his person and a rifle slung over his shoulder – the masked man nodded. He took one step; screeches from the coming assault blew tempest-like winds. Debris lifted, trees uprooted – the sheer strength cracked windows and broke the door. Igna waited firmly, he brushed his shoulder after the growl and smiled, ‘-pointless display of power. Such idiots,’ a snap slithered from the inner circle (where Igna sat upon a throne of conjured bones) and into the fighter’s ear. The only recognizable feature, the eyes, lit with a flame akin to the Abyssal Depths of Death’s version of Hell. He slung the shoulder, grabbed the rifle, and fired – a beam of pure mana snuffed all in its wake. White fumes hovered where a considerable part of the attacking army once waited. A few steps back(of which one

was to leap into the air) one could see the resulting devastation. ‘The beginning of the end,’ mumbled Igna, “-kill them all,” he ordered – the prior mention of devastation was the sudden disappearance of buildings and associated infrastructure and items like a city structure. Roads were torn, uprooted even. Bases of constructions unlucky to be in the battle’s path were wiped. Take foundation and the massive pillars crumbled under normal circumstances. Igna held his hand up, from which countless magical circles twirled, potent magical symbols and ecriture took the skies.

A complete massacre. He climbed from the throne, latter vanished soon as he rose, ‘-nice,’ he smiled, ‘-no enemies left in their wake. Good, this is very good,’ he tapped and transported the soldiers to their home. ‘-The destruction of an entire city,’ he ambled, ‘-and the disappearance of the godly guardians. I counted legendary monsters in their ranks, spawns of the Hydra and the famed Bird of Ok. Too bad all was in vain. My death won’t come easily,’ hence arrived at the center of death. A point at which the deceased rejoined. Gallops cackled – a fissure tore reality; heavy armor dropped at his side, “-Igna.”

“Undrar,” he replied, “-figured you’d be here sooner. I present the souls of the dead.”

“Olympians,” she examined floating auras, “-their guardians. What happened, I count three-digit numbers, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Ran into trouble from, you know, them.”

“The Gods?”

“Who else? Undrar, I need a favor,” he settled on a nearby bench facing a bloodied pool. Latter counted streams of crimson spanning the battlefield.

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“Word to the wise, don’t get in too deep.”

“I won’t,” he returned, “-I need to disappear from their radar.”

“Why?”

“Zeus and Tharis are under the assumption that I was slain. Better for the notoriety to dwindle, I can’t make my move openly, it’ll be akin to changing clothes in public. Anyway, Undrar, this mess here, I want you to take credit.”

“Are you stupid?” she flat out threw her arms in an ‘X’, “-if my dominion is suspected of being involved in the unjustified death of the Olympians... I-I won’t.”

“Okay, okay,” he snapped, summoning a soldier with short hair black, tattooed arms, and a rifle wrapped around the shoulder, “-here’s Mark, goes by Ark most of the time. He’s one of the finer fighters the Shadow Realm produced. Ark, for reason beyond my understanding, prefers silence and sleeps three to four hours a night. Make him the hero of this particular event.”

The soldier kept a reserved expression, “-might I speak?”

“He does speak,” said Undrar.

“He does have a mouth,” returned an unimpressed tone, “-voice your concerns, Ark.”

“Must I be a scapegoat?”

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“No, you’re no scapegoat,” said Igna, “-you will be crowned the hero to take down the Devil and the Olympians. They won’t be pleased, however, I’m sure some other faction will be rather pleased. What say you, care to join a chessboard spanning the whole of existence?”

He pressed his heavy temples in thought, “-what must I do?”

“Nothing far as I know,” added Igna, “-take the credit and see what they throw. Failure else denial is an option. Mark, for my sake, what will it be?”

“I’ll do it,” he exhaled, “-on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“I want a cute partner.”

“Pardon?”

“I WANT A PARTNER!” he firmed. Igna shook his head and summoned a demoness from Asmodeus’ army, the soldier glazed his frown, “-I meant a weapon.”

“My apologies for thinking ‘-cute partner’ referred to a weapon of mass destruction.” He threw his hands into a fissure and pulled a few items, “-the Bow of Aviel, the Sword of Arneh, and the Staff of Ezmer,” once again, Mark blinked, “-a rifle would be nice?”

“My,” with a slight cackle, Igna threw the weapons into the crimson pool.

“-STOP!” Undrar caught the staff, “-these are Relic class weapons, some of them have a religious purpose in Orin, don’t just throw-”

“Ah yes, weapons of ancient heroes and kings – Vesper and her team have been on a fruitful hunt. Aviel is said to have blinded and swallowed the sun, Arneh reportedly sliced the moon and Ezmer brought the dead to life. The rumors exaggerate their capabilities,” he took and threw Ezmer’s staff. \*Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing,\* a hemisphere covered the pool – a beam shot into the sky, parting the clouds and breaking the somber weather, an assault rifle of dampened crimson hovered, “-there I present, a gun,” he pressed the weapon against Ark and tapped his back, “-it uses one’s mana to fire. The purer the bullet, the harsher the destruction. You hold in thy hands a weapon able to dethrone a demi-god.”

“No god slayer?”

“Those of the Shadow Realm are blessed with god-slaying abilities. Now then,” the realm shuddered – an oppressive force pushed, the air grew dense, “-Undrar, rest is in your hands,” he vanished, leaving the duo in an awkward stare-off. A thunderous boom resounded. The sky split to accommodate circles layered on one another as if a tunnel – angelic power and heavenly glee sparked.

“I’m back.”

Undrar returned a colder stare, “-Hermes,” she sighed, “-what are you doing here?”

"Came to take Igna's body of course," he scanned, "-where is he?"

"Dead," she said, "-and so is your army."

"My what?"

"Look around, the blood and gore. Clearly belongs to the Olympians, right?"

"Igna's dead, huh?" the tone dropped as he shuffled about, "-true, I don't sense his presence," he circled Undrar and tore towards a strange figure, "-who might this be?"

A chilling glare rose at the god, "-name's Mark." Hermes ignored the personage and turned towards Undrar, "-who is this kid?" To which she kept a nonchalant grin and gestured, '-look back,' with her brows.

"What's your name?" a cold harsh sensation tapped Hermes' head.

"Excuse you," he turned, rather, tried, one motion and the barrel dug harshly, "-I'd keep my bravado in check." The barrel tipped and fired, "-I said, keep the bravado in check," said a frigid whisper coming from the back, "-trying to injure me won't help your cause, eh."

Mark chuckled, "-and the threats won't bring much," he glanced below, "-your leg, suppose I did hit my mark," blood dripped.

"-WHY YOU!" he immediately reached for a weapon, "-YOU DARE INJURE A GOD!"

Undrar leaped, took Hermes' weapon and tipped him onto the ground, and followed to engage the trickster into a chokehold, "-you're being a brat. Where is Zeus, what happened to the treaty of non-involvement with another god's realm? This here is a clear violation. Want me to take this to Tharis?"

"No," he coughed, "-anything but tha-" and tapped. \*cough, cough,\* "-herald of death my foot, you're a monster, Undrar," came harsher pants, "-you there, Mark was it?"

"What?"

"Work for me," he stood, "-I don't doubt your strength. Killing the Olympian guardians is no easy task – tis one above even a few gods. Besides, you managed to injure my leg – breaking my immortality. You're a strange entity... if left to the other gods, you'll be persecuted and sentenced to a fate worse than these idiots," he kicked a fallen monster's head, "-good traits, Mark, come join me."

"I refuse to work under you," he narrowed, "-though, I'm willing for it to be called a partnership," he rose the rifle, "-what say you, Hermes?"

"..." a simple thought followed, '-is he going to kill me?' \*BANG,\* innards splattered across the cheek and clothes, he turned backward and spotted a risen Undead, "-the curse of Makral. Undrar, send them to oblivion," he skipped to Mark's side, "-you, my friend, are very strange. I like strange. The strong are welcomed to make demands," the tone dropped, "-be sure to mind your place when speaking to anyone else other than me, understand? The heavenly realm isn't as forgiving as I am. I wouldn't want my partner to be killed on the first day."



Orbs of light circled Undrar, \*-Requiem,\* she clapped, the souls departed. “Hermes, you realize bringing a stranger to the upper realm is taboo. It’s your funeral, I’m not here to judge. Stop causing problems, yeah?”

“Right,” he rolled his eyes, “-let’s meet up for drinks some other time. Orin is a fine location for rest and relaxation.” Mark threw the rifle over his back and followed after Hermes, “-comrade,” the trickster laughed, “-I like the sound of that. Mark, from today onward, we’re comrades. Before we officialize the pact, I need to test your skills,” a portal opened to a familiar land – the bright sunlight made visibility poor, “-welcome to Hidros,” whispered Hermes, “-it’s a place governed by Igna, the man who caused my father and the gods much hassle. We don’t know if he’s alive or dead, no matter, the mortal realm does not affect the heavens. Tis a place of non-violence, a neutral zone. We’re going to help Lucifer,” he grinned, “-see the hangar before us?”

“What about it?”

“It’s the Hidrosian Army’s Maicite Powerplant. We’ve been paid in gorgeous women Elze.’

“God can’t interfere...”

“No, no, we can’t. But we can use a proxy,” he pointed, “-land a bullet there, we’ll see a big boom.” The natural canopy of the hillside provided good cover, Mark rose his head and armed the rifle, ‘-firing will make me a traitor. Do I obey or become a partner... what does the master want?’ he gulped and steadied his breathing, ‘-what should I do,’ the fingers trembled.

Firm hands grasped the shoulder, he turned to a transient apparition – invisible to the giddied Hermes, “-do what you must, Mark – thou art a Hero, become the god’s herald of destruction. Our reunion shall be on the battlefield, when the day comes for us to face each other, I will know you did your duty. Don’t wait, Ark, follow the hand of lamentation!”

‘I knew it... Mark isn’t one of us. He’s a traitor working for Igna... this means the man’s yet to die,’ he gritted under the facade of excitement, ‘-got excited about nothing,’ he reached for his dagger, \*BANG,\* an explosion tore the power-plant, the shockwave took both men off their feet – a massive mushroom cloud rose, “-one shot is all I need,” he whispered, “-Hermes?”

“WELCOME TO THE FAMILY,” the god leaped into his arms, “-I was wrong to doubt you,” he laughed, “-let’s get out of here.” The soldier looked away from the chaos, ‘-onward onto death,’ he prayed, ‘-onward onto death.’

Chapter 1033: Two years in two months.

‘Time flies, it truly does,’ words written under a somber horizon. A mushroom cloud held the idle landscape hostage. It was quite the show; airplanes circled; emergency services gathered. A live feed played, Igna held a frown, “-pretty sure Ark was behind the attack.”

“Majesty, we have gathered a list of possible suspects,” said another channel.

“No, leave it be,” he thundered, “-call a press conference, I will be at the castle shortly,” a press toggled his phone. The windswept hilltop provided the much-needed view and distance. “A Phantom ran powerplant exploded earlier this morning. No report on the injured or cause of the accident has been relayed. Efforts are being focused on stabilizing the reactor and recusing life. Nothing has struck Hidros

this hard during this century; has the war for the Wracian Empire reached Hidros' soil? Time will tell, I've been Stephanie from Antom News."

A wrapping sound whispered, a shawl. Somebody materialized, "-at least react," said a familiar voice.

"Waste of energy," came a nonchalant sigh, "-long time no see," he side-glanced, "-Kul."

"Long time no see, master," returned a stronger, much more confident tone, "-we need to talk."

"About Asmodeus?"

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"Yes."

"Let's walk and talk," he offered.

"Lead the way," she gestured. A cigarette lit by force of habit, the path was set in stone(a humbling promenade of promise to experience the beauty and tranquility of nature) thus hung a noticeboard.

"I heard from Elixia, the kidnapping and subsequent torture brought by the gods."

"It was nothing," he puffed, "-I learned more from the experience. Tell me, what's happened?"

"As I related before, mind if I recap?" she asked with a tilt, he blinked and nodded, puffing the smoke away from the walkway, "-Asmodeus left after a demon. We lost good people, I killed close friends, he turned his group against us, I had to fight, there was no escape, I had to kill. Their faces, the laughs we shared, it's all here, it's all fresh... I'm going to get revenge on Asmodeus."

"So he turncoat?"

"I guess?"

"Suppose it's to be expected. Frankness is thy creed. Tell me more about this Charlie, what was he like, what did he do?"

"I don't know, he was a demon, I guess. He showed his true self – everything's liked with operation Wied."

He paused, "-whatever happened to The Royal Theater of Arts and Culture?"

"It opened a few months later. Most of the damage was centered around the theater. We lost many people; Lizzie, Ulgra, Syndra – a few names of the long list of noble representatives who gathered that night. After his majesty left – all the burden fell upon Elixia and the ministers. They handled the affair gracefully; turning hatred into sympathy – placing the blame onto a shadow of a reason," she winked, "-there's my frankness."

"Yes, yes, I get it," he puffed, "-no need to be sarcastic over my comment. I take it all, you have wit."

She stopped in turn, "-majesty?" her gaze dimmed, "-are you not angry?"

"Angry at what?" he snuffed the cigarette, "-at the death of Ulgra, Lizzie?" a cold wind washed his visage and tugged the long white hair, "-I guess not. I'm over feeling sad, I'm over the emotions I hold deeply.

It's," the bud sparkled into ash, "just like the end of the cigarette – everything stops, nothing lasts forever, nothing, I truly mean that."

"Not going to take revenge?" she walked, "I'm disappointed."

"Well, I suppose I should be angry," he shrugged, "alas, fake anger would only shame their memories," a portal opened, "let's go." A roll of the eyes carried through the fissure – a massive coliseum rose on the other side. He gave a faint whistle and stopped in awe, "how big did they make the center?" It was massive, the flowing river grew into an artificial lake – more buildings propped, the sky brightened far bluer than in memory – the long and lovely patches of green separating the buildings added to the overall beauty.

"Impressive, isn't it? the Royal Theater of Arts and Culture; home to a new wing – the Royal Library of Magical Arts. A repository from libraries all around Hidros, including Arda and Easel Run Gard. I've spent day and night scouring pages of an ancient manuscript."

"In search of?"

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"Any hints to where Asmodeus might have run to? Besides, there are some books reserved for only the elites, we talking about relics of the past... one of which is the lost diary of Tempest Haggard. The perfect example of, 'either die a hero or live long enough to become the villain' I respect the man, tales about his exploits are fearsome," she subconsciously led Igna to a massive memorial of gold and silver. It stood upright as a piece of paper upon a pedestal – the writings in gold and page in silver – its scale went thrice the height of an average joe. 'In memory of lords and dames who died on 3rd August of the year X129, we offer a humble memorial from which later generations can remember your names.'

"Come watch our show," an acrobatic young man flipped and did cartwheels, "come watch our show, we're paying honor to the royal family," they caught the eye of many curious casual visitors, the center of which was Igna. The boy flipped, bright crimson eyes locked, and went, "a nightwalker," he commented.

"And?"

The master leaped into a jog, "where are we going?" Igna did not answer save the pamphlet. Past lovely side streets, over a rustic bridge and into a great open space in the middle of which rose an open-air theater, "there," he stopped, "the Order of the Nightwalker. Silent protectors of Hidros," agents performed to an endearing crowd. They hung at the other edge. "Shouldn't we get a closer look?"

"No," came with a deeper intention, "the gathering feels off. Let's wait and see," a bench to the side provided physical comfort, as for mental; on scanning the other benches, one thing grew apparent – PDA.

"Get a room," she whispered, "reminds me of him and his lusty demeanor... when I find him, I'll kill him."

"My, why don't you both share a room," echoed Igna, "Kul, you sure you don't have feelings for the Prince of Lust. I'm sure the time spent as his partner must have grown-" an icy sensation whiffed, "-no need for the death stare, I'll bite my tongue. So much for being frank."

'Always wants to tease,' her attention rolled onto the neighboring stalls, "-master, I don't want to be weird, but I think there's something wrong."

"No familiar faces in the crowd?"

"No, not that, it's the vending stalls. The area seems to have been closed."

"Well, sit back," he kicked one leg over the other, "-we're in time for the climax."

A tall man of foreign blood described with usually pale complexion, harsh brows, and thick brows over which hung a wrinkled square forehead tore through the people he stared. Each arm carried two draped ladies, the outfit was lavish as for the ladies – the outfits barely sufficed to cover their legs and chest. A sudden gong hit, a performer, a lovely maiden, spurred onto the stage and struck a pose – classical music swung, her movements were graceful to a certain extent, "-she's moderate."

"Shut up, I'm watching."

"Amazing," grunted the man, "-look, isn't the girl just amazing."

The show lasted fifteen minutes. Loud grunts and whistles were blown at intervals during said fifteen minutes – the adjacent crowd was displeased to no courage, and none bothered wasting their time. A smaller, less boisterous outline approached. It tapped the big man and whispered – the latter listened, cutting his loudness. The casual smart figure took long thoughtful glances at the surroundings.

"An argument?" remarked Igna.

"Looks like a normal conversation to me," added Kul, "-master, honestly, what are we doing here?"

"Here's the good part," and he was right for the big man flung his arms in disappointment and stormed towards the stage. Said area was open to the public, anyone with talent and courage was welcomed to set foot on the stage, draw a crowd and perform. For the saturated idol market, having an opportunity for young talent to showcase their skill in front of an audience without the whole glamour and vanity proved a saving grace. Comedians were all the more popular – laughter trumped even the perversity of fans (choosing joy over the fleeting moment brought by a wardrobe malfunction).

The big blob went from left to right, stopping shy of what seemed to the organizer, "-tell me, young man, how much for a private show?"

"Pardon me?"

"You know what I mean," thundered the man, "-how much must I give to have her join one of my movies."

"My apologies, sir, but who are you?"

"The name's Syion Edgar. I've directed many films and have worked with superstars. That girl there has the potential to be a star. There will be money involved."

"Syion Edgar never heard of it."

"I work for Bright Barnacle Film Company. Come on, this is an opportunity to grow."

“An opportunity,” came an uninterested exhale, “-I appreciate the offer. As a leader of this rag-tag group of street performers, I can’t risk one of my friends to be ensnared,” he leaned, “-there might be room for negotiations.”

“Negotiations, what a wonderous word. Please, here are my private details. We’ll speak soon,” the big and the slender pulled to the side. Kul’s gaze pressed.

“Any more pressure and you’ll dig through my head,” he chuckled, “-Syion Edgar of Bright Barnacle Film Company.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s a fake name,” he said, “-the man’s a lying sack of meat.”

“This is boring, what about the Order of Nightwalkers? Very anti-climactic.”

“No, not yet,” he stood and threw a heavy gesture at Syion, “-pardon me.”

They stopped, “-I’m sorry but we’re in a rush,” added the slender man, “-if you’d excuse me.”

“No, no, I was talking to Syion. Pardon me, sir, I’m sorry to say, the lass there is my property. I’ve already made a deal for her acquisition, so sorry for the confusion.”

“Made a deal?” he glared at the leader, “-what deal, I made no such deal.”

“I see, perhaps I’m mistaken then. I’m new in town, heard the market for talent was open. You see, I’m here from Alpha, things home is quite the blunder.”

“Alpha?” the little man’s attention piqued, “-where exactly?”

“Odgawoan, where else?” came proudly, “-the city of dreams. Money, sex, and drugs, you ought to love the high-life.”

“You,” the big man scanned top to bottom, “-good,” he smiled with an acknowledging nod, “-I sense good energy from you, brother. Hey, I’m heading to my flat, want to join – I’ve gotten my hand on a pretty dealer.”

“What about your little friend,” he turned, “-he’s looking at me weird.”

“Don’t mind him, the little man has trouble looking up at his seniors,” he snort two loud laughs, “-ey, let’s go, are you not in hurry now?”

“Yes, yes,” came a desperate sigh, “-let’s go, Syion.”

A condescending wave trailed, ‘-what the hell?’ she watched silently, ‘-how could he just leave me...’

“Kul?”

“Ishta?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I came with his majesty,” she answered, “-he was right, if you’re here, the Order must be at work?”

"Yeah, we've landed quite a fish. An international trafficker. Have tracked him for the worse part of six months with Phantom's best intel. Goes to show how sneaky the bastard can be," he suddenly pressed his ear, "-what is it? Wait, are you serious? No, not possible," he furiously scanned.

"Report came about a strange man joining the target?" she guessed with a tired shake.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"The strange man," she held her head, "-it's the master... he left with the big dude."

"What in the fu-"

"I know, that's him," she stared at the heavens, "-WHY IS HE SO DIFFICULT!"

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Meanwhile, her words of plea fell on deaf ears, Igna enjoyed a nice strong drink in the company of an absolute degenerate. He ripped dresses from partially awake ladies as soon as they entered the limousine, the ride was rough on one side, "-who even are you?" said the timid fellow.

"No one particular," he drank, "-your friend is hung, sure hope the flat doesn't disappoint."

A sweaty moan escaped, "-ay, bro, want to hit?"

Igna rose his hand, "-I like 'em tied, not tired."

"..."

"AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA."

Chapter 1034: Raid

"Kul, we have to talk."

"Shut the door."

"Understood."

A rented flat set in a metropolitan city expansion was a dwarf amongst giants. What little light was present was blocked by the overseers. Telescopic devices were lined against a particular window; an amber boiling atmosphere held. "That's where he lives?"

"Correct," said Ishta, "-operation's ready for completion."

"Who's working the job?" she leaned into one of the scopes.

"Can't tell," he answered, "-we're bound by oath to the throne. Pay it no mind, it'll all be over in a few hours," her stare broke, one arm rested on her hips whilst the free hand went for a soda can, "-what is it?"

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He checked the sides, saw none, cleared his throat, and waited a few seconds, "-how did you know his majesty returned?"

“Had an inkling sensation,” she answered, “-surely that’s not the only concern.”

“No, far as the capital is concerned, the king’s still not here. Reports came earlier – our king’s with Syion, I don’t know anymore. Is there,” he moved closer, “-something wrong?”

“Like?”

“I don’t know,” he backed away, “-he’s changed, hasn’t he? Well, I’ve changed too. My leather shoe, the smart casual outfit, working as an agent for one of if not the most feared secret service in operation.”

“The desk job suited you, did it not?”

“Well, it was fun at times... once I became better, I began to see the world for what it truly is, a shitstorm, excuse the French. Kul, I don’t get how you and Asmodeus were able to live on the other side of the spectrum. You led human trafficking and are part of the Dark Guild, another underground faction that’s but a shadow. No clue about their agenda nor hints, the legality of what they do is in a massive grey area.”

“You’ll have to think of Arda on that front,” she smiled, “-the leader is closer than imagined. Besides, what would the Order of Nightwalker do to a local faction, we’re family no matter the disposition,” her words came across as harsh, Ishta felt the tension.

“Did I cross you?”

“No,” she waited, “-you didn’t cross me.” The pauses were long and sharp, “-a member of Asmodeus’ possie lecturing me about right and wrong.”

“I didn’t mean to come across as a hypocrite,” he bowed, “-I was only making an observation.”

“Don’t worry,” she tapped his back, pushing a smile as to dissolve the tension, “-I was only tugging your leg. You shouldn’t get flustered so easily.”

Night fell in what seemed a snap. Life grew, and the night world expanded with many ‘o flare. The tall buildings carried their flicker tall and high – advertising and background noise followed. The duo of Kul and Ishta waited someplace else, a closed-off area free of bystanders or unkeen observers. Multiple monitors held other agents – dots displayed location – a warning was issued to the local police, consequently, traffic, whether human or non-human, was diverted. What better way than a surprise performance shy a few blocks at a local theater?

“Any update on the master?”

“Nothing so far,” said Ishta, “-good location, isn’t it?” they waited underneath the shade of the giants – a bridge carried cars whilst another hanging line veered off with a passenger tram.

“Out of sight and out of mind. Private property, it’s good.” The base of operation, an inconspicuous truck, was along a single lane that curved away to the main street. Directly opposite the side of said truck, rose a bricked ground that stretched to a chain-link fence. Latter separated unwary visitors from falling to their potential death.

“Beautiful view,” said Ishta with a cigarette in hand.

Kul came up against the chain and peered at slopes leading to the local sewers, “-graffiti’s,” she commented, “-tire tracks. The police aren’t keen on this place?”

“Hang out for the common adolescent. City’ noisy as is – what’s a cackle against a raging storm. Still can’t believe the master is in there.”

“I heard she would be here...”

“Here she is,” curtsied a smartly dressed lady, “-I do hope I wasn’t late.”

“Elixia.”

“Elixia.”

“Kul, my dear, you shouldn’t be so obvious about your emotions,” she winked with a gratifying smile, “-Ishta, how do I look?” a twirl had Ishta all but applauding the choice of outfit, “-splendid.”

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“Elixia, you know full well why-” a press of her lips deadened the would-be high tone.

Elixia removed her finger calmly. “Kul, we serve the same person. There is no difference between, no arguments from which to draw the worse of what emotions ought to give. Tell me yourself, why are you here?”

“...”

“Silence, yes? very well. This conversation is to be set for another time,” her attention drew upon Ishta, the man had his ear cupped. The plan was on track, “-let’s move,” they ran into the parked truck.

From there, a bigger picture mounted. Elixia took on an important role, “-I’ve gained access to the whole flat. It’s an amount of time before we capture the target.”

“Understood,” Ishta waved his fingers as commands, and the symphony of intrigue played.

The heavy stench of alcohol, an unusually large amount of smoke, and the constant hum of zoned-out actresses. A few hours had passed, “-small man, come here,” he waved, “-what’s with the body chute?”

The bobbing figure tipped side to side until the kitchen, “-used for bodies,” he coughed, “-what the hell did you give us?”

“Strongest of my produce,” came a wink, “-I told you, I’m here to do business. Where’s the big fellow?”

“He should be here,” \*hicc,\* “-I need the restroom.” A half-naked man turned from the opposite side, “-hey bro, I finished with the last one. Want to hit?”

“Told you, I don’t much care for them. How was the powder?”

“Amazing,” he shivered with a bright smile, “-never had anything of that kind before. Man, I tell you, it’s the best thing ever. Shire likes to worry. He’s always like this with everyone, paranoid that some secret faction’s going to bust out operations. Nothing’s going to happen, man, I’m telling you, we’re in Hidros, the land of the free. I got more connections in this place than I know what to do with. Between you and



me," he came closer, "-one of my relatives's actually a member of parliament. He's in the justice department – can't say his name aloud, you know."

"Amazing. The amount of produce I could move with those connections would make us both rich men."

"Here's the deal. I don't care about the price – I need produce. I have people working the streets, you know, taking over the turf with fresh sugar. Comparing our products, if you took to the street, I'd be at a loss. Rivals are a pain in the ass, bloodshed, even more so. We can't kill indiscriminately like back home, you know, the lawlessness of Odogwoan. Beggar to superstar, everyone knew what the deal was."

"Why not get a supplier? Isn't there an organization in charge of the drug trade here?"

"Don't say their name," he took a sip from a strange-looking bottle, "-they mean bad luck. Anyway, what's your name man?"

"Is there a reason to know the name of someone you plan to murder?"

"Murder?" he rose an eyebrow, "-brother, do you doubt me?"

"Well, there's one way to get rid of a rival, you know, the old fashion way."

"Yeah buddy," he turned his back, "-I'm a trusting guy, if you cool, I'm cool too. Don't throw around accusation buddy, it's bad for health," three rings pulled half the body around the doorway, "-it's the guy," the phone hung, "-she's on her way. Quick," he ran into the living room, "-we need to hide them, come on," without a bit of tact, unconscious sex-workers were flung over his shoulder, some clothed, others fully naked. Dust lathered the table. Undergarments and used condoms were flung haphazardly, "-bro, I need help here, come on!"

"Go meet 'em. I'll take care of them."

"You sure bro?"

"Yeah," he threw a jacket on way to the living room, "-go quickly – the girl might get cold feet."

"Thanks, man," he clapped, "-I'll tie her for you this time, buddy."

"Anything you need," thus the flat swung tight.

White noise cracked into a familiar voice, "-ahem."

"Get on with it, Elixia."

"Majesty, the target's left the flat. Can you gather evidence?"

"Like what, the piles of hookers, the drugs, or the evidently untasteful décor."

"We have enough to put this guy in jail. Majesty, please get out the premises, a raid is underway."

"Oh please, ending the fun so quickly isn't a good idea," he hauled the girls into the kitchen's chute.

The sound, a metallic scrape and an unhealthy tamed echo, "-majesty, could you tell us what you're doing?" gulped a nervous Ishta.

“Cleaning the mess,” he narrowed, “-I’m throwing out the garbage. Send men to the location I’m about to forward. An ambulance might be needed, well, if they do survive the drop, it’ll be a sign of good luck.”

\*Click,\* “-I know something was wrong about you.”

“The slender man,” returned Igna, “-that a gun you’re holding?”

“Correct, guess anyone would recognize the sound of their demise.”

“Trust me, buddy, that sound is no longer processed by my brain.”

“Shut up and raise your hand, don’t turn around, I hate the sight of blood.”

“Bravado does change a person’s motivation. Tell me, little man, who the fuck are you?”

“Ernesto E.G. I work for Snow. Sweet dreams, macro1.”

\*BANG!\* the bullet hit and carried the body through the chute, “-gunfire!” cried the truck, “-at ease,” gritted Ishta, “-don’t lose sight of the objective. We’re about to deliver the girl. Come on, it’s time to move out,” he loaded his rifle, “-Elixia, take the lead over logistic.”

“I’ll check on the master,” said Kul, “-you should back them up.”

Low-level thugs guarded the flat. Without approval from either Ernesto or Syion, entry was always denied at the first gate. Things changed when delivery was expected, such were the details found in months of observation.

“Hey, turn off the red lights, I got guests coming,” said Syion bulldozing his way across the narrow pathway.

“Syion,” waved the leader, “-good to see you. I’ve brought her as you wanted.”

The dancer, dressed in a lovely beige outfit, took her steps timidly, “-Syion, sir, I heard a few words from my friend. Can you truly give me the break I need?”

“syion... Syion... SYION!” full-pelts tore into view, “-DON’T, IT’S A TRAP.”

“Trap?” bullets flew – a few cleanly took the dancer to the ground, and the leader was hit in the head. The unbothered Syion glared, “-WHY WOULD YOU KILL THEM, PUTIN?”

.....

“J’ai raison de panse qu’il était des espions.” 1

“Seriously,” he threw his arms, “-now what, we’ve killed fucking innocents... where’s brother, where’s the brother?”

“I shot him.”

“WHY THE FUC-”

“WAIT, Syion, don’t you dare,” he grabbed the man’s arms, “-don’t forget who’s in charge here. I make the decision, you’re the brawns. That is our partnership.”

“Why would you kill him?”

“He was talking weirdly over the phone...”

“The hookers, what about them?”

“Down the body chute... he cleaned them.”

“Espèce d’idiot.”

“He wasn’t that important. Let’s look for a cleaner,” he turned at the thugs and clapped, “-kill anyone who comes remotely close.”

The ground froze in a dampened crimson color, “-ON THE GROUND!” a pressure akin to the gods shoved all onto their knees, “-by Order of his Majesty, us, the Order of Nightwalkers, deem thee, criminals.”

“Who the fuck are they,” muffled Syion.

“Order of Nightwalkers... we’ve done it.”

“Shut your mouth,” came a familiar voice, “-bullets hurt, you asshole,” the dancer kicked Ernesto then spat, “-who’s the idiot now?”

“Dispel the control,” said Ishta, “-we have them in cuffs.”

“What about the other thugs?”

“Unleash the hounds and call the night,” he turned from the snaps of light and screams of terror. The brutality of the killers far elapsed even the ‘thugs’.

“Monsters, all of you, monsters.”

“That we are,” loud laughter echoed into the starry night, the Order of Nightwalkers were feared for a reason.

Chapter 1035: My hardwork

‘Talented taken by vices,’ observed Kul, ‘-what a waste,’ she kept her strain narrow. A tall winding metal chute, lined against the walls, had particular drops and turns, the whole structure was a bad slide. Further down, the tunnel grew to accommodate the flat’s chutes. And there, in the end, on her taking another step, came the decrepit site of decomposing meat and its associated foul stench. The odor lit up the whole underground area, she pinched her breath at times, squinting her eyes as a reaction to the awful stench. Across laid a cabinet, a small box with four glass panels turned at the four cardinal points. Inside sat an unbothered frame – large forehead, receding hairline, and a resting face that sagged. Handprints, bullet holes – the dried color of blood, add the slightly dim lighting, it was a murder house disguised as parking. ‘-Damn,’ she tiptoed over the garbage bin, “-you alive there?” Moans and painful cries escaped, “-hey, wake up,” she kicked, the noise resounded akin to a gong.

“DON’T WAKE THE PATIENTS!” thundered from the cabin, “-I said no NOISE!”

“My bad,” she rose her hand, “-won’t happen again.”

“Better not,” the window slammed louder.

Muddied fingers clambered from the depths. Long and menacing stained by blood and gore gripped the bin's edge and pulled.

"That hurts," the free hand reached for the back of his neck, "-he has guts," he stared at the chute, "-getting shot sucks."

"Are we done?" she blinked, "-tumbling down the metallic chute wasn't hard, was it?"

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"Don't know," he vaulted, "-my clothes are soaked in death. Why do I always get my share of fun in the worse places imagined." Ripples brushed, and the sound of gunfire whispered from above, "-guess the raid is underway?"

"Majesty, why would you get involved in the Order's operations?"

"Elixia," he said, "-got a message when we were at the theater. She asked for a favor and I obliged. We should get out of here."

"...please," came from behind, "-help me..."

"Oh, survivors?" he curiously inched over and scanned, "-say alive if you're alive."

"Alive," came a few grunts and inaudible sounds.

Kul waited with, '-what now?' loaded. Curiously enough, Igna threw inviting regard at the man inside the cabinet, "-what do you do with them?"

No response, for only a glare returned. "-Cold," she commented.

'Looking at the remnants, the bodies are burnt indiscriminately,' a dark mass was spotted directly above the bin, '-clear signs of fire.'

The cabinet door shot outward and slammed as if a hammer to a nail. He dawned on square prescription glasses and limped over, "-I said no noise."

"Didn't make any noise," added Kul.

The receding hairline passed under Igna's chin and tiptoed over the edge, "-survivors?"

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"I think so."

"Doesn't matter," he reached around the back, pulled a Jerrycan, then lathered the inside, "-today's going to be a hot night," said a distant comment, "-kill then burn, burn then bury, what fucking life is this..." the swiping motion stopped, he turned and grabbed Igna's hand, "-there are survivors here, why don't you plea for the lives?"

"Do I look like a saint?"

"A weird one, aren't you," he flicked a lighter and pressed it against Igna's chest, "-do the honors, tough guy."

“Why use a lighter?” \*Burnt eternally, for I, the devil, call forth flame of which purges gods and demons alike. Set ablaze and never wake, crumble to ash, and be vanquished by the wind of change: Abyssal Wrath,\* “-when you can use magic.” The container erupted. The flames howled, melting body and surrounding, the chute turned smooth and dripped, \*Clap,\* nothing was left.

“Holy hell,” the man blinked with confused laughter, “-cruel, I like it.”

“Psycho,” whispered Kul.

“Tell me, what’s your name?”

The glasses rose, “-they call me Lenny. Lenny the cleaner.”

Kul shoved Igna aside in awe,”-Lenny the cleaner?”

“That would be me.”

“This couldn’t have come at a better time. Lenny, how would you like a job working for us?”

“What kind of job?”

“Lenny, I’ll ask this once,” she pointed at the gunfire, “-the OFN just raided. It would be great to settle it here.”

“I clean, that’s my only job. Why would you be interested in my work?”

“Lenny, don’t know if you understand but, the name, Lenny the Cleaner, is spoken of like a hero, a living legend. Your work is immaculate.”

“Right, taking out the garbage is the job of a garbage man. What do I need?”

“Your skill and a new change of clothes.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah, you’ll for us, for Raven.”

“Don’t care who I work for,” he shuffled, “-long as I get paid and have food, I’ll do just about anything – no cleanup for children, even I get nauseated sometimes. Hidros and their child predators are the worse I’ve seen,” the voice trailed, “-insane fucks.”

“Lenny the Cleaner?”

“Master, look, the man’s renowned for his prowess. He can make any dead body vanish. Raven and Snow had a shootout a few months in Plaustan. There were at least twenty bodies piled in one room. Support was out and local authorities were called. I immediately reached out to someone with ties there, but the response was late and dispatch was out. Guess what, when they arrived – the bodies were gone and the place immaculate. No trace of evidence, it was clean. I couldn’t believe my eyes – neither could our associate. With power like that, making more aggressive deals would be Childsplay.”

“Well, Raven is your department, who am I to interject?” Forty-five minutes passed, the flat was fully raided, narcotics seized and hostages freed. Ernesto and Syion were taken into custody. The siren rang

to not much attention. Fireworks blasted in the distance – the muted melody and loud cheers reached the curb where Ishta sat with a cigarette.

“Majesty,” he puffed, “-I heard much from Elixia. You two are one of the same,” he shook his head and tapped Kul’s shoulder, “-you and I have a job to do. Elixia will take it from here.” Loud cheers came from the truck – an operation well done.

“Let’s catch up some other time, master,” said Kul, “-Elixia, I’ll leave it to you.”

“My pleasure,” a tram passed overhead, a distant screech told of drifting cars. The truck slowly headed towards the main street, indicators pointed left and gone – the headlights joined the sea of yellow, red, and white.

Igna had his back against the chain-linked fence, “-Elixia, tell me, what have I missed in the two years?”

“Should I summarize now?” she joined his side and lit a cigarette of her own. He watched as her long lashes slowly blinked, she’d raise her head and puff, striking a nonchalant side-glance and smile, “-checking me out?”

“You’ve changed?”

“I guess so. About the past two years... where do I begin,” she flipped, drawing inspiration from the cityscape, “-the terrorist attack was blamed on the war. Evidence pointed at Alphaia and their faction. It was the first of many bombings that would take the continent by storm. Economically speaking, we weren’t suffering the brunt of the battle. Sending supplies and arms was enough to take hold of the battle. We rallied an army of our own on foreign soil and turned Elendor into a warring state under Hidrosian rule. Juvey and Ezel were amazing in leading their troops. Juvey ruled the seas with an iron fist, and Ezel took guerrilla warfare to another level. They did hit and runs, took supplies, overruled major cities, and uprooted political influence. Estral, Yian Dho, and Konak reacted as we expected. In the following months, they’d wage their efforts in taking the principal province of the late Empire, they did so with ease as the borders linked. It was decided then that we’d strategically allow them the province. That was a mistake, the principal province was well protected by the natural geography. Alphaia’s discovery of Maicite threw them onto the map – they got to research and entered the market we cornered for so long. Wasn’t looking too good – but hey, a few incidents do happen. Most notably, the meltdown of Jenya Plant in the province of Legrury. About then, the Order of Nightwalkers gained worldwide renown as a skilled agency. Nothing of great importance happened – a war was being fought. The city was captured, liberated, then recaptured. We sought to fortify our hold on the remnants of the Empire, and currently have control over the whole of Elendor and part of the Empire’s state. Emria’s still as dangerous as ever – Cimier’s influence has turned half of the province, divided by the Great Alps, into a hotbed for crime and drugs. We found ourselves on the receiving end. Drugs are being imported into Hidros – the money that went to us is being sucked. When money is involved – well, a state can turn vindictive. Arda’s response was increasing the manufacturing of God’s ale and Angel’s dust – the price was lowered and Alphaia was taken, hostage. Snow replied with their God Powder. It’s at a point where deadlocks have been reached all over the world. The balance of power is being settled and the natural order of things are resting.”

“Drug trade is at an all-time high and Hidros’ taking strides in hunting produce that isn’t native?”

“Yeah,” she said, “-to the horror of our usual customer, involvement of law enforcement’s turned eyes on various factions. I don’t know how long we have before a choice has to be made. Either we support the drug trade and gain on the side or stop and hunt down the aggressors. Either way, money will be drained and crime will rise.”

“What about the population, how do they hold?”

“Population’s skyrocketed in the last decade, more and more immigrate and follow their dreams. As for their standing, opinion is split between the factions. Some are for, others against, I’d say it’s pretty standard.”

“I see,” he blinked, “-it’s nothing like I imagined. Here I thought we’d have missiles flying into one another, I mean, mutual destruction is one way to stop all the nonsense. Lucifer, how is he?”

“Emperor Lucifer has united Yian Dho, Konak, and Alpha into a monster of equal measure. As for us, Hidros is joined by Arda, Easel Run Gard, Elendor, Emria, the kingdom of Greenhoot, and Marinda.”

“Guess we don’t like violence yeah?”

“We’re bound by our reputation of diplomatic approach. If no one bothers to fight for peace, the world’s gone. This is why we take the foolish ideal. Lucifer forced our hands and now we have to live up to expectations. Too big a military response and we can have the shaky balance turn awry.”

“Good news, are there any?”

“Hidros happier than ever,” she smiled, “-the common folk doesn’t feel the pressure of war or the outward aggression. Plaustan’s boomed, and the beaches and high-rolling lifestyle have taken the rich and famous. Our economy is greater than it’s ever been. People have more money than they know what to do with; that to is a problem as vices such as drugs are the unfortunate end of many. It always circles back to it.”

“Didn’t imagine the concoctions I made desperately to raise money for my companions so many decades ago would take the world into such an age. I have questions about Phantom – surely the nefarious stories have been disclosed.”

“Phantom’s criminal association is known but without proof. There’s no evidence linking them to the underworld, far as it looks, the giant is as clean as it comes. The Dark-Guild, they’re still a shadow, whispered on the street and feared by local ruffians. To be honest, master, the world is fine as it is. We’ve done what we could and have nurtured and strong mindset. Being from Hidros is pride – a badge of honor. Centuries of hard work, centuries of being thought as the worst of the worse.”

“Is it over?” he breathed, “-did my hard work better Hidros?”

“Look around,” she smiled, “-there’s no greater place on earth than here.”

‘Two years go fast,’ he looked at the cityscape, ‘-I guess my hard work did pay off.’

Chapter 1036: Curse of Mortality

“My intervention’s not needed anymore, or is it not welcomed?”

“Don’t say such things, majesty.”

“I’m not being passive-aggressive,” he explained, “-the world doesn’t need entities like us anymore. The concept of God, demons, angels – it made sense in an era where there lies naught but magic, swords, and the fight for survival. The advent of weapons, Maicite – all have grown into a fabulous world of understanding and logic. The dabble in Magic will remain part of history, and it should be. Powers of old have gotten scarce and strong. A low-tier fireball cast in the days of old, if used now, would kill many. Slow usage has greatedened the mana in the air, less magic user more the potency.”

“The era of magic is at its end?”

“I guess,” he shrugged, “-adventuring’s there as a constant; it will remain as long as the tower of god shines.”

“About the destruction...”

“The Maicite plant?” he scoffed, “-there’s nothing about it. The attack isn’t from this realm, rather, the other realm. Speaking about those, tell me,” he inched, “-what is the state of,” a message rang across the channels.

.....

“Warning to all agents, this is not a drill. Return to your immediate base,” said the intercoms. An outward broadcast cried the song of despair, a high-pitch that waded in intensity, “-to all citizens, this broadcast is not a drill. Projectiles have been detected half an hour from Hidros, we repeat, projectiles have been detected. Evacuate to nearby shelters,” the warning looped, Igna’s cigarette fell.

“An attack?” he glanced at Elixia, she returned a nonchalant shrug.

“I guess?” and without so much a sliver of hesitation, she took off towards the side-street and scanned. He followed in her shadow – a minute later came a roofless sports car. Engine tore right between the chaos of evacuation – traffic fled once side, the king and his aid headed towards another. More details wrote upon the interface, éclair joined the channel as did the ministry of Defense and Internal affairs.

“Evening.”

“Igna’s back,” added a composed Eira, “-let’s keep the reunion for later. Minerva, any updates, we heard the broadcast. Rosespire is in full evacuation.”

“There’s reason to suspect Alpha’s sent the first attack,” she added, “-explosion at the powerplant, now this, it’s the perfect opportunity.”

“Elixia, were you not she who suggested the attack was unrelated?”

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“I had it from a good source,” she physically leered, “-what are our options?”

“Orders have been issued to the Airforce,” said Igna, “-a squadron just left shy of the Vagrant Archipelago.”

“I hate to say this,” intervened Minerva, “-once missiles are launched, there is no turning back.”



éclair took the channel, “-submarines and silos are opened for a counterattack. Once the king gives his approval and speaks the oath, it will be done.”

Silence followed, Elixia elbowed to no avail – Igna had his head to the clouds. Airships held emergency warnings; advertisements were swapped for the end of the world as it seemed. People of no means ran, and trams and trains changed into a crisis-specific set of instructions.

“MAJESTY!” came at once.

“Pardon. I was deep in thought,” she accelerated, “-how long until the missiles hit?”

“About fifteen minutes,” relayed éclair. He turned to Elixia, “-give me access to the satellites.”

“Okay?”

‘There,’ the interface toggled, ‘-I see, there was no misunderstanding. They did send missiles. What a bunch of bull,’ he grabbed the wheel and pulled harshly, the car flew off its wheels by which time it hung upside down, he took Elixia and smoothly left the slow-moving vehicle that in reality flew in the three digits.

“WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT?” a ball of flame took the empty street – traffic didn’t much care for they all kept forward.

“We need to talk,” he dusted the shoulders, “-you all,” he said into the intercoms “-the attack is true. Alpha ordered for our destruction, that much is certain. What justification is there? War? Who knows, and who in the hell cares,” the broadcast escaped into the main screen by the aid of a passing local reporting station. A cameraman ran over with a reporter in tow, “-Hidros,” he smiled at the camera, “I hope you’re doing well. Tonight’s peace was shattered by news of a potential catastrophe. I’m deeply sorry about the loss of precious family and sleep time. Believe me, I’d be warm under my blanket at this hour. Age has quite an effect on this old body,” he smiled, “-take my words to heart, people of Hidros. Your ruler, your leader, your monarch, and sovereign,” he grabbed the lens, “-is no mere mortal. Neither is Lucifer, the emperor of our enemy. I speak with certainty on this matter – for our realm to remain peaceful and without disturbance – I shall take my title literally. The Devil of Glenda no longer extends his influence west, no, my comrades, the influence spans the whole of Hidros. To you, Lucifer,” he glared, “-my kingdom and her people are stronger than you think,” trails of light came into view, “-your five pathetic attempts have resulted in three being destroyed. The rest,” he turned, “-well, I consider it polite to return an unwanted gift,” wings expanded. The Devil’s true form came to the forefront. Sharpened canines, pointy ears, longer hair drenched in red. The wings spread – an aura of darkness enveloped his person, and sparks of purple twirled. “Do not mess with my KINGDOM,” a flap threw the cast off their feet.

‘Missiles,’ he reappeared over the weapons, ‘-concentration’s enough to destroy a city. Five of them would have ended Rosespire. How presumptuous,” he softly got under the two, placed his hands on each, and slowly reverted the trajectory. Smoke coughed; power lessened – a guide accurately marked the correct path for a returned to sender. ‘-Disable the warhead,’ a touch crumbled said piece into dust, ‘-and go,’ he pushed – and thus the projectiles boomed into the distance. A news helicopter at his side, the reporter cried inaudible words against the loud churn. ‘Enough hiding,’ the wings flapped and he instantly appeared on the street where traffic halted. “Here is your king,” he smiled, “-people of Hidros,

I truly am the Devil. The strange is commonplace and magic was once our creed. Don't forget where we hail, don't ignore our roots. Just because things are more convenient doesn't excuse compliance. What would have happened if I were to die, would you watch as the kingdom dies? Or like heroes, would you have led aid and before your own protectors? Think Hidros, what are we, what do we represent? To people watching from overseas – Hidros means no harm. We're a military faction by heart. We thrive in bloodshed; the cycle of murder and vengeance won't ever disappear. It is what makes this world what it is. Thus, I say these words, become strong so that kindness is second nature. Let regret not take one's heart, show strength in persevering, and believe, that behind struggle and pain waits for the Devil. If nothing works, I will be here, I'll be at arm's reach, take how many retries it takes – Hidros will be safe on my watch, that much I promise. To those who wish a direct challenge, my people will be waiting." Thunder cracked; the broadcast ended.

'He detected the fear and uncertainty. Being gone for a few years meant much in ways of complacency. The king's presence is what's needed. His servants will do the bidding, and make the kingdom a better place. His name and influence are driving factors for a kingdom of loyalists and compatriots. Devil of Glenda is famous as is, a monarch recognized the world over. Igna is the ideal ruler – he knows when to act, how to act, and the measure of strength needed. It is true, that what makes king Igna terrifying isn't the strength or otherworldly powers, no, tis intelligence and foresight. The accident, the news crew – it was planned, he wanted a show and he got one. Scary,' a shiver struck – cold air blew as the chaos settled.

"My king, it is a-a-a-an h-h-honor," stuttered the reporter. He calmly grabbed her microphone and smiled, "-you need no be scared," without hesitation, noticing her shiver and reckless attire, threw his coat around her shoulder and nodded at the crew, "-the night gets very cold," the devilish features trailed into outlines as did the bubble of power, "-crisis' averted. Please head on home. Public safety will take over," sirens and ambulances arrived. The police skillfully unclogged traffic and helped the smooth transition. The Devil vanished into the crowd – broadcast hit the minister's screen.

"Igna?" came an exhausted sigh.

"Sister?"

"Little brother, I swear you're more trouble than before. Good job stopping the crisis. There's a revision to be made in case of another attack. We're looking at an overhaul, Minerva."

"Yes, I heard it clear, no need to rub it in. Congratulations on a passive-aggressive resolution. The world knows who we are, only took a few years. Expect praise or hatred, Devil, the church won't be kind."

"As if it matters," said a scoff, "-welcome back, master." Moment Igna's appearance hit the other side, the nukes landed at the center of a military compound and the head of the state's manor. The message was clear and Lucifer seethed, "-why didn't the attack work!" he threw arms, '-Igna, why must you always get in my way... don't you worry, I'll make sure your friends never leave the depths of hell. The other kings won't sit ideally, the poor ol' devil. Neither will I."

A few hours before, \*Smack,\* black hair echoed against a white table, "-poor ol' goddess. Sucks to be here isn't it. You got careless," Lucifer's curly hair hid his gaze, "-divide and rule. You're a pathetic excuse for a femme fatale. What did you expect, Syhton? Was I going to let you leave, would Zeus and Qhildir not have become aware of the rudimentary strategy? Why," he grabbed her sharp jaw and

pulled, “-look at me with envy, look at me with lust. I’m Lucifer, and you will do my bidding. No longer a chaste goddess, are you?” he laughed, “-poor ol’ thing. Zeus has a thing for the innocent. I’m not keen on black hair,” he pushed, her head echoed against the floor, “-so sad, really.”

“Lucifer, shut the fuck up,” a shot of energy turned the black hair white, her eyebrows and eyelashes followed, a sense of purity washed her whole self, “-I’m revered and prayed to for a reason,” her powers melted through binds and grabbed his throat, “-my name’s Syhton, and I’m a high-tier goddess. Your strength pales in comparison to mine, a fallen angel. You’re nothing, worth, and are nothing. Intruding in the mortal realm was the last mistake you made,” a cursed symbol materialized, “-as why,” she smacked the symbol on his forehead.

“MY HEAD,” he dropped backward and cried, “-IT BURNS!”

“The curse of imprisonment, henceforth, on my name and power, you will forever be bound to the mortal realm. You are to become a mortal and live as them – you will be their emperor, you will be their champion, and you will be subject to the barrier of attainment. Once more thee allowed pride to overwhelm judgment.”

“What have you done... what HAVE YOU DONE?”

She stepped over and moved towards the door, “-I’ve cursed you to a life of mortality. The true wielder of Lucifer’s name is Igna, not you. A wingless bird is not free, and you, Lucifer, are nothing more than a pawn. You won’t win, you can’t win, for it’s been decided,” wings spread, “-I’m headed home. I appreciate you making the job easier,” her outline was noticed climbing into the heavens.

‘Igna...’ in a fit of rage and humiliation, Lucifer ordered an empire-wide attack. The unsanctioned action brought only five out of their arsenal. ‘I was outsmarted again,’ he gritted. Therein, yellow amidst black rose from the corner of the room, “-Lucifer.”

“Artanos.”

“What is wrong with you?”

“I’ve been cursed,” he slammed, “-that bitch played me for a fool.”

“I did say not to intervene in mortal affairs.”

“ARTANOS!”

“Don’t raise your voice at me. Lucifer, step down from the position of Emperor. I have tracked down the location of what I need. We can leave this domain after I take it.”

“Where is it?”

“Tower of Aria,” he chuckled, “-Draebala will be mine.”

Chapter 1037: God of Dream

A flicker, a spark – the night encompassing the stars. A familiar dawn rose, warmth nurtured by a lovely arranged fireplace crackled. Deliciously pleasant drinks made the rounds. A different landscape rose for it was at the feet of Mont Blank, directly west of Noctis’s Hallow and Glenda.

“Master,” said a familiar voice, “-Queen Courtney is ready to see you.”

“Thank you, Alta,” he rose, “-I will be back shortly.” Long corridors stretched as did the growingly slow-paced footsteps. ‘-Emergency summons,’ he straightened his tie at a reflective chestplate, ‘-I wonder what mother has to say?’ The greater door buckled; a lavishly decorated hall expanded alongside a red carpet. Many guests were gathered, drinks served and layers dressed as a reception. There held fewer humans, more demi-humans, and non-humanoid beings. Vampires, the elusive Werewolf clan, Dwarves, and the lizardman, who now went by the moniker of Reptilians. A center throne kept Courtney’s long glossy hair.

“Majesty,” bowed many bystanders. Some lifted their drinks, others tipped their hats, the arrangement was very olden.

“Majesty,” he arrived.

“My son,” she rose her uniquely bleached eyebrows and smiled, “-it’s a pleasure to have you,” her gestures turned towards a pressing crowd, “-if you’d please excuse us,” they broke from the gathering, slithered through the scattered groups and eventually arrived at an open terrace. The door closed with a fragile shriek, a sound that forced an involuntary cringe.

A breeze whistled, “-lovely night,” she smiled.

.....

“Lovely indeed,” he returned.

“Lovely night without the constellation of Syhton.”

He stopped, the prior sentence came out of nowhere, ‘-her tone,’ he narrowed, “-mother?”

“Are you hiding a secret?”

“What secrete, mother, there are many things we keep from each other. I will need more details.”

“Keep your diplomacy for the bureaucrats. I am your mother; I deserve a straight answer.”

“As your son, with all due respect, I deserve a straight question.”

“Okay,” her fingers tightly wrapped in a bottle, “-is it true you killed your ex-wife?”

“No.”

“Tell me the truth, how did she die?”

“Who died?”

“Your wife, Igna, Gallienne’s daughter.”

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“Why is this topic being brought forth tonight of all nights?”

“Because,” she unrolled a scroll, “-my contacts have come upon damning evidence that places you at the center of a scheme to kill off the queen. It also states of an affair with the goddess of stars, the chaste goddess; Syhton.”

He lunged, “-mother,” echoed, “-please, there’s no need to dig deeper. Nicola Vonhem Hart and his fiancé, my would-be wife, died in curious circumstances. There’s no denying that point. There is also evidence of her scandalous actions; namely, a moment’s passion during negotiations of Hidros’ fate. There was a call to be made, and I did so. As monarch, the choices forced upon us is tedious, we work with what we have. Tell me, Mother, why is her death important?”

“Because,” she sipped, “-sincerity and trust are what I ask. Arda’s moving forward as a base of operation for Elvira’s production. Phantom’s working under the radar, we can’t have doubt be cast upon the royal family at this later stage.”

“The emergency summons, mother?”

“It’s about this,” she unrolled yet another scroll, “-have a read.”

Dated X100, “-the three in one, one in three, have been sighted moving across the ages. Past, Present, and Future are physically involved with the mortal realm. There is doubt to be cast on their purpose. The heavenly realm, Olympians, are at odds. Athena’s rejected her father’s advance; Hermes’s attempted to chase her position from Mount Olympus. A strange force is at play – the world is on a precipice of change. Gods and Demons are forming contracts and deals that threaten the peculiar balance of the ages. I write this with confidence – the three in one will be key. Their powers mustn’t be discovered lest eternity suffers.”

“The three in one, what about them?”

“The scroll was mysteriously found in a newly excavated dungeon. Mont Blanc has a deeper secret. Adventurers have made camp; the better guilds are on the move. I call you here for the simple task of helping the adventurers.”

“I refuse,” he rose his arms, “-I can’t leave Rosespire unattended. There’s a war being fought; I must help my people.”

“Oh, shut it,” she fired, “-the proclamation was grand. By exposing the truth of celestials, belief and religion have gained power. Doubt’s been cast on the emperor, the church’s at their wit’s end.”

“I’ve been thinking,” he took larger steps, “-abdicating my throne-”

“Abdication is not the answer.”

“Mother, if I’m to become Dimension Orin’s guardian, I will have to be active in the otherworldly sphere.”

“No, stop with the excuses. You will do what is needed from here, from Orin, am I clear?”

Once a mother has her mind set, there is naught a child can but compromise. Igna, despite being the king of a prominent kingdom, found himself unable to rival his mother. She sang only praise and gave heartwarming smiles. ‘What kind of son would so rudely disrespect her mother?’ fire, ‘-if only I had known,’ \*cough, cough,\* ‘-I would have been more adamant...’ an engulfing pillar of flames swept Castle

Blanc. Amber and black pressed against the white and gray of the alps – a massive fire burnt, shining beacons of light rained from the heavens. ‘-I’m stuck,’ a solid mass solidified Igna in place. The hall was no longer. The chatter and laughter of the past were replaced by the mutilated demise of the present. Noble children impaled by golden lances. A deep green sun covered the area. The top half of the castle was seamlessly gone. Pelts of snow crackled – a ray shattered from the ornamental starry night. ‘-I can’t move,’ puffs of death meandered – the very ground corroded whilst he remained in place.

“King Igna,” thundered a familiar voice, “-allow me the honor,” sand-wielding god marched. Every swipe of the finger altered the hovering sand, “-I am Morpheus. God of Dreams and Shaper of Reality. You have made quite a name for yourself,” a pyramid symbol tore across the god’s chest, “-outwardly challenging the gods. Self-proclaimed guardian of Orin, I’m no fool. Some might believe the death, others are wary,” he went to and fro, “-fellow Watcher,” he smiled, “-you are true to believe in thy powers. That must be fair,” he suddenly stopped, “-I would rather raise my guard. Gods are awful, Demons, doubly so,” white hair awry against on the floor. Igna’s eyes widened – Courtney was forced on all fours with her head lined against a guillotine. Loud gusts shook the structure of sand – parts shuffled with exception of the blade and restraints.

“Queen of Arda, rather, Persephone. Wife of Hades and Queen of the Underworld. What is a goddess like you doing in such a place?” her icy gaze breathed, he shivered sarcastically. “Hades would very much appreciate having his queen back, I hope.”

Another figure materialized, “-I’m here,” blond hair swayed, and a beautiful face ambled beside yellow pupils.

“Dear ol’ Morpheus.”

“Lucifer,” they shook hands, “-it’s a treat to see you again.”

“The pleasure is mine,” he smiled, “-sorry to call so suddenly.”

“No, it was my honor to come,” returned the god of a dream. Lucifer broke from the exchange, slowly making way towards Igna, “-we’re one of the same, can’t you see?”

“...”

“Morpheus, can you ease on the restraint?”

“I’m afraid not,” the black miasma from Igna gathered at a nearby fissure. A loud thump shook the ground, and droplets fluttered onto lifeless bodies and snapped into ash.

\*Whistle,\* “-he’s strong, yeah?”

“Very strong. One inch and he’ll break. He can hear just fine, make it quick.” Artanos waited in the backdrop with focus on the captured queen, “-look at me,” narrowed Lucifer, “-I’ve won this little game of chess. See the God of Dreams? he’s one who’s transcended the limitation of divinity. He counts among the ranks of Watcher, an entity of unequal power. You, Igna, are nothing like him. Watcher of the Shadow Realm my foot, you’re nothing. Morpheus has true power, Morpheus is what one would say, strong. T’was a good idea,” a body dropped from a portal, “-sending her in your stead.” Syhton cried with her chest sliced open – her heart pulsed and her power drained at every thud. Her skin was pulled, leaving only her muscles exposed. “My people sure know their way around a torture chamber. How

does it feel to be at the receiving end, huh?” a kick forced her onto the ground, “-a high-tier goddess is wasted on someone like you.” The situation began a few days earlier when Syhton cursed Lucifer. A sandstorm of biblical proportion hit the capital. Those afflicted fell asleep – the bustling town of Melmark turned ghost town. No one knew where the storm originated – no one save him, the emperor. At the center laid Morpheus – a contract made eons ago, one forged amidst desperation, “-Igna, you’re not the only one who has friends in powerful places. Better come to terms, my rival, for you’ve played a part in my downfall for so long it’s amusing,” Courtney on the guillotine at the threat of death, Syhton on the floor with her heart literally beating out of her chest, and Igna imprisoned in a cage of sand. More resistance, the harsher the conditions – any trial at movement saw sand burrow into the nasal cavity and jaw.

“Return to me what you sold. Give me back my wings, give me back my power. I want it back, RETURN IT!”

“...”

“No answer,” he glanced at Morpheus, “-let him speak.”

“No, no,” said the wise god, “-if I do that we all die. Look to Artanos.”

Latter rose from the squat and yawned, “-Lucifer, your wings are gone. Give it a rest already. It’s the same deal with you and Zeus, selfish and always on the hunt for more.”

“Are you talking back to me?”

“No genius, I’m saying the facts,” he skipped until Syhton’s decrypt stature, “-look at this mess. You demons have no chill.”

\*By order of the Daeirq Empress of Luna, I command my power’s release, I grant the sapphire of Edicts my blessing. Of the countless of helpless, from the ashes of the fallen, raise wielders of Blood-Arts, shine deep and shine true for under the watchful gaze of Luna, thou art immortal.\* raw energy pulsed and blew gusts so hard it levied boulders and crumbled what little remained of the castle.

“What did you do?” an ethereal shield faded, “-Syhton, what did you do!” narrowed Artanos to no avail. He turned at Igna with a sympathetic gaze, “-she released her full power, doesn’t have any strength to regenerate. What a loss...”

Anger boiled, “-SHE DIED WITHOUT RELEASING MY CURSE!” a body rose from the ashes, a blue gem shone atop her head, \*by the power granted by Empress Luna, thou deserve death, thou deserve a punishment greater than purgatory, Blood-Arts: Fona,\* a blade swiftly gouged out Alta’s throat, “-my bad,” said a sleeping apparition of a knight, “-fell asleep.” Her innards splattered with an equally nauseating sound.

“She missed,” Lucifer held his chest, “-holy hell, she missed,” relief washed over, “-she missed, my god, she missed.”

“No, she didn’t miss,” gulped Morpheus, “-run,” he ordered, “RUN!”

Projectile spells flew, walls of sand rose, the impact threw sands into the air, “-ARTANOS, GRAB LUCIFER AND GO!” The guillotine failed; the blade dropped. \*Teleportation.\* they escaped on the other side, Lucifer coughed puffs of sand, “-why did we run?”

“Are you insane? The symbols – the watchers. Best we leave the monsters to their own demise.”

“Morpheus won’t lose,” he brushed his shoulder, “-take me to Alpha, I’m done with this world. I remained for my wings – guess I’ll never have them back. Who cares, I’ll make another pair. Father will listen to me, after all, I am the son of Creation.”

“And the mantle of Emperor?”

“Over it. My wife can take care of it. Let’s go Artanos, we don’t have time to waste.”

“Fine,” came an exasperated sigh, ‘-might have gone too far. What sort of monster have I accidentally awakened?’ in the chaos of escape, he pulled the trigger resulting in the blade’s drop.

Chapter 1038: Edicts

Putting shape to the shapeless, inflicting death to death. Two meaningless actions. A tornado of raw strength tore the surroundings into shreds. The previously shattered castle that held half of the structure was now a raging pile of dust and ash. Morpheus, the shaper of dreams and reality – held his palm open. Like the exuberant force from Igna, his strength, the dust, rivaled a faceless monster – the shadows.

‘I don’t feel anger,’ the imprisonment gradually shattered, ‘-I don’t feel hate,’ he watched as the tornadoesque aura further unleashed, ‘-I feel neutral, I’m neutral. I saw Persephone’s death, I witnessed Syhton’s last act. How foolish the mortal world is, how foolish the associated emotions. It’s funny,’ time slowed, nothing escaped the movement, ‘-I started my journey as a mage who gave his emotions. I manipulated people for my gain and eventually got what I wanted. I died shortly after, and my attempts at shaking the curse of misfortune worked for a bit until my path shifted to where I stand today. History repeats like the infinity symbol, I find myself having chosen my path. Morpheus is strong, he’s very strong. Killing him would be impossible as he holds the rank of Watcher. He’s a thorn. Think of consequences, the death of he who brings dreams and nightmares to reality might send the world into chaos. My bloodlust is tamed, it’s not here. I know I can win if I choose, I know I can do anything I want. The confidence made me lax, I no longer care to fight. Don’t feel emotions,’ he chuckled at the thought, ‘-here I go talking about nothing. What a life,’ the chest exhaled and the posture eased. Morpheus kept his distance – a crashing tsunami of sand fought against the overwhelming power of Death. Shadow against the beige of the particles; lightning exploded all around, and the wind howled the music of hatred.

‘When it’s said and done,’ he sliced the air, Morpheus fell from the seat atop the sand wall, “-I dictate my path, no one else.”

The God of sleep quickly clambered upright. A visible sense of fear was reflected. He drew weapons and gestured in an upward motion – no soldiers rose, nothing worked. A singular sound echoed, deadening the surrounding.

“Morpheus.”



"Igna?"

"Why do you look confused?"

.....

"Why are we in a conversation?" he scanned Persephone and Syhton, "-we killed those close to you, what is wrong?"

"Ah," he stopped at the center of the debris, "-I ought to tip my head in respect to Artanos. That man is someone who I consider a true rival. He's a pain but all the more fun to go up against."

"Igna," the god flashed his palm in a '-stop' dunes rose, swallowing remains and bodies, "-don't come any closer else."

"Else what?"

"I'll grind them all into dust. Turning them into monsters of the sand would be a trivial matter. I heard all about the God of Death's army of the dead. What say you, care to fight a war?"

"Fight a war?" he smiled and listlessly cleared an area for a throne to be raised, "-this is no war," the throne and the surrounding ground rose in a cube-shaped. Its shadow encompassed Morpheus who rose his head in confusion, "-tis judgment." A subtle snap was heard from out of nowhere. A clock ticked from what it seemed – the seconds thundered and a mild smirk came upon the god's face.

"I know this feeling all too well," the shaper reappeared behind Igna, "-being looked down by another. Don't underestimate the power of Dreams," he blew sand, and Igna's chin dropped in slumber.

\*Be soothed by the sound of water, be warmed by the radiant sun. Rest, fellow dreamer, for tis in sleep that one finds Elysium.\*

A sigh of relief escaped, "-he's out," he stumbled and caught the throne's arm, "-what kind of power does he possess? We've been fighting using our auras, the entire mountain's in pain. To live on the border between genius and insanity, such is the curse of the chosen. You were dealt a bad hand... what's done is done. Long as my dreams have to power to put his mind at ease, I don't have to worry about an ambush."

\*Crash,\* a view over the shattered castle turned into the starry night. A sharp pain pulsed until, "-AHHHH," a yelp cried, "-MY HEAD!"

Igna stood over Morpheus, "-I appreciate the dream," he said, "-alas, fantasies are wasted on someone like me." Silvery white suits of armor clambered, the helmed ones hoisted up the cube. Sand escaped the tips of their weapons or point of damage.

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"An army!" over the very same view rose an enormous arrangement of squares and rectangles. Moonlight echoed off their armor, some shone in bronze, others in white. Strong weapons and heavy protection made the rounds. Obedience and patience kept the force at a standstill.

\*Cough, cough, cough,\* “Igna, I granted an opportunity. I granted thee a chance at escape and rest – you choose resistance and the path to destruction. The three in one were right – you, Devil, will be your end. No matter the strength or the acquired power, there will come a time when it all shall end in blood. Artanos was wrong, so was Gophy – you’re not ready to carry the burden, hell, you’re not worthy as a candidate. Let it end,” the body crumbled into dust, “-for death only understands his melody,” echoed throughout. The summoned cube shook – land underneath the structure caved until ground level.

“Stop, Death,” came a hiss, “-do not engage one of the Watchers.”

“Cruse, what a lovely surprise.”

“The expression says otherwise,” a slightly taller, more handsome version of the boy appeared at Igna’s side, “-don’t let the hard works go to waste. The Gods believe your death, killing one of them now will only work against us. Igna, clam down.”

“I know, I am calm,” he exhaled, “-what about the army, he left here and vanished.”

“What army?” he put his hand over the eyebrow and gazed, “-WHAT THE?”

“Know something I don’t?”

“That’s the Sleeping army,” the hands lowered, “-controlled by Morpheus.”

“What about it?”

“They’re infamous for resilience. No matter the foe, they’ll fight even if there’s one on their side. Don’t look active, I say we very well let them alone.”

“And miss this opportunity?” a grand smile took Cruse by surprise. \*Realm Expansion, Shadow Realm Variant; Rantiam,\* the pentagram of Death shimmered against the darkened night.

“Igna?”

“...” no answer, a single thought occupied the mind, \*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, from when you were born and till you die, I hold in my hands the strings which binds you to this world, by my authority, I order thy chains to be severed, spell, Tactus Interitus.\* Dust, the legendary army spoken in tales of old crumbled.

\*By the power bestowed upon me by the Supreme god Kronos, I, inheritor of the sickle, order for the realm to go by mine pace: Time Control – Pause.\* a grayscale orb expanded.

Cruse watched in awe, “-the sickle of time,” he gulped, “-I thought you couldn’t use the powers?”

“You thought wrong,” he wrote multiple symbols on thin-air, \*-knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing,\* knowledge, raw and undefiled, flow across the bicolored pupils. Waves of ancient text, knowledge, and tremendous power known as the Edicts, wove into the fabric of reality.

“Edicts,” added Cruse, “-why can you use them?”

“Edicts work like proclamations. Syhton used her authority and freed Alta, who before her death shattered my cage. The Will of God, as so many mortals name them, is the manifestation of a deity’s

true strength. In my case, I haven't the ability to use Edicts, what I can do is borrow Edicts," he winked, "-raise Infinity, the Emerald of Time!" a soft green glow pulsed throughout his body, "-you should know, Cruse, I don't think I'm cursed nor do I resent the trouble that paves the path ahead. I honestly think I'm blessed, too blessed. A greater entity writes the fate of what is to happen – the three in one know all, and I, inheritor of Origin, know all and understands less." \*Present and never changing, present and never yielding. All who wait break and all made are subjected to thine will. I, God of Death, the humble inheritor of thy power; call upon thee to have mine will answer: Time Control – Reversal,\* instant the cryptic words fell, the wind blew backward, the flowing clouds returned – debris of the castle and the amber lights returned. Guards stood at their station, and medieval forms of transport; horse-drawn carriages, made their journey. The bodies, bloodied lines of torn innards rejoined at various points.

"This power?" Cruse blinked, "-the Supreme god. Igna, why do you have his blessing?"

"Don't you know?" he walked into the middle, "-Time and Death are friends," \*snap,\* another bubble expanded. Dead came to life, broken returned to health. Any sign of battle washed. Knowing glances narrowed to a puff of smoke.

"There you are," said the vexing ache from a troubling climb, "-Igna..."

"Mother," he replied courteously, "-isn't the view from the watchtower just amazing?"

"I saw what happened, I know, Igna, I know you fought Morpheus. We were killed, no way we should be alive. What happened?"

"Realm Expansion," he puffed, "-mother, you should realize by now, the Shadow Realm far outranks any entity that may interfere in my affairs. It wasn't pleasant seeing my family die," he shrugged, "-Death is part of existence. It's what makes life important, such is what I've come to understand," he paused, adding a moment's reflection at the circumstances, "-allow me a favor, majesty."

"What is it?"

"Would you reward Alta handsomely for her bravery?"

"Why don't you do it?"

"She risked her life, there's nothing of much value that I can offer. She's powerful as is, word's of praise shan't suffice."

"Fine, I'll do it," warm hands grabbed his shoulder, "-give yourself time to rest. Trouble and you go hand in hand."

"I know, mother, I know," the watchtower cleared. He lit another cigarette and admired what laid ahead, '-strong, I'm too strong.'

\*Thud,\* an earnest figure speared his side and giggled loudly, "-IGNA!" jet black hair and crystal clear blue eyes fluttered at him invitingly, "-I made it home." He crushed the cigarette and took her sides, "-Syhton, honestly, you had me worried."

"What, the Edict worked, didn't it?"

“Yeah, that’s the problem... the gamble, it was too risky. One wrong move on my part and you’d have never walked the plane again.”

“Who cares,” she pinched his cheeks, “-I knew you’d win. What happened to Morpheus?”

“We might not see the man again – someone’s special on his trail.”

“Are you going to kill him?”

“No, not kill – consider it *payback* for injuring those close to me,” he lifted the goddess, and she wrapped her legs against his back, a passionate exchange made a mockery of the shivery night.

Meanwhile, after many realms and multiple domains came the resting kingdom of the God of Dream.

“Majesty, welcome home,” said many attendants.

“Thank you for the warm welcome,” he replied with a strained look, “- I need rest, could I be left alone?”

“Of course,” and thus opened the royal chambers. He undressed, the pale figure reflected onto a tall mirror, “-hurts,” he cringed, “-an affliction of the old curses. These symbols were used by the Elders. Edicts of the past,” dark spots lathered the chest and thighs, “-give me break.”

A draft whistled, “-who’s there?” no one, he scanned, throwing his neck side to side despite the pain, nothing. The curtains flowed, “-stop being paranoid,” he faced the mirror and froze. White hair flowed over his shoulder, long fingers went around his chest; sharp canines glimmered, “-IGNA?”

“Wrong,” he smirked, “-Vengeance,” the teeth sank, and blood sprayed across the mirror. The god shuddered in horror, “-let it be a warning,” he held Morpheus’s chin, “-oppose the master and tis the domain next. We will make do with the symbol for now,” a business card floated, “-call the Devil next time thee wishes to strike a deal, pitiful Watcher,” loud cackles puffed into the shape of Death.

Chapter 1039: Floor Bosses

“News from Draebala my liege.”

“Good,” said a monolithic figure, “-all is in our master’s fate. I will see to my duties, please inform Kylsha about the family meeting. Drag her to the palace if you must, she ought to see her in-laws once a while.”

“As you wish, my liege,” said a little green gremlin. The current location placed the scene atop the famed Tower of Aria, else known as the Tower of God. Kanad, the established Demonlord, reigns his terror and strength throughout the four hundred levels. To date, the farthest anyone had climbed was floor 50, Gregno, a chimera, the pet of floor 75’s boss, had laid waste to many adventuring parties. Words of mouth followed as such, “-we fought through thick and thin. It was painful, we ran out of potion, and the Chimera regenerated without stop – our party leader, the Silver-ranked Vault-Guardian, suffered the brute of the attack. Our party’s silver-ranked Thief, lady Emillie of the Headington family, was brutally killed. We watched as the serpent’s tail tore her arms and injected venom – she died almost instantly. Most of our party neared death and if not for our leader, I’d be in the jaws of that vile thing. It’s bigger than houses, taller than anything I’ve seen – the reach is fast, lightning quick... rumor speak of four hundred floors... if floor fifty is that hard, I don’t expect any one of us to ever make it past,” as a word from the surviving party made the trip around the local drinkeries and taverns, adventurers only

but fortified their resolves. Some were found, others never to be seen again – their tags often hang around dead torches.

Kanad swept a paper-filled table and undid the scroll. Metallic tags fell, and an iron bucket held the remaining limbs of unfortunate newbies. “Efforts to capture Draebala have ended. The Army of Shadows has established a foothold over Zayan D’olsak. The efforts of Starix, Yuria, Kaleem, and Cora have brought good fortune to an otherwise desolate landscape. In honor of the conquest, a congratulatory ceremony will be organized to celebrate the heroes of the war. In their honor, we of the Shadow Army, warmly extend this invitation,” signed, General of the Army, Starix.

Kanad’s darker skin tone lightened as he smiled into an amber torch, “-this is great,” the view grew – a terror-filled sight spoke volumes. Bubbles of darkened mass, best not to indulge in the greater details, lined what seemed a lake. Arms and floating heads bubbled. A drainage system brought loud lumps in from the bottom. Splashes were muffled and loud – a sort of stomach-turning purr.

“This place,” said a female voice, “-I hate it.”

“Kylsha, welcome to my beautiful garden.”

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“We agreed on not meeting here.”

“But this is why I do this job,” he smirked, “-to watch the brave fall and to snack on their vigor.”

She sassily waved, cutting his remark, “-what’s this about the in-laws?”

“I said,” he paused, “-to be careful when taking trips into the outside world.”

“You live a double life too,” came a sarcastic smile, “-Sir Edward of Longfield.”

“Stop,” he narrowed, “-that name is forbidden. Don’t utter it,” the mood lightened, “-your fiancé’s brought his family to my estate. It would be best for my lovely sister to get dressed and see to his family. I said no marriage... my,” he stopped, “-always wanting more, can’t an old demon not have a break.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” she put up her tight-fitting pants and threw her cleavage over the table as she read the scroll, “-invitation?”

“Yes.”

“Sure thing,” she smiled, “-tell them the Demonlords of Aria will be in attendance,” her heel walked opposite the table, “-did lady Vesper contact you?”

“About what?”

“About the rumors of a single warrior tearing through the minions. There’s no record about the origin nor is there anything on the notice board. Someone new is in town and they’re making strides.”

“It is what it is,” he shrugged, “-a hotshot comes to show his power, gets overturned at floor 30, then comes back here,” he pointed backward, a loud lump dropped and sank, “-and here’s the hotshot,” he smiled, “-a random follower of the God of Knowledge. We should hurry, there’s much to see in the outside world.”

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"Hey," she winked, "-guess someone's as excited as I am about meeting the in-laws."

"Just don't cause problem."

"Whatever," she tiptoed and shuffled his air, "-big brother."

Bubbling rambled. Kanad stopped with a cautious gaze, "-something's off."

"What?" she scanned, "-the pit's always made that sound."

"No," he turned, "-it never made that kind of noise," the bubbles rose and a figure suddenly burst through, "-HOLY HELL," it coughed loudly, "-by the holy name of Artanos, this pit smells of dread."

Kanad menacingly sliced the air, creating various projectiles and spells, "-who dares enter the Demonlord's palace."

It walked on the pit, yellow eyes shrouded in darkness. Kylsha's attire swapped for her battle, "-he's no ordinary follower of Artanos, that's the damned god himself."

"The god of Knowledge?" a snap dispelled the projectiles, "-I apologize for the misunderstanding. We, representative of the greater one, must show courtesy to a humble guest. Please answer me a simple question, are you here as a friend or foe?"

"What I seek is more than what thee have," he returned, "-I'm afraid I come as a foe. To honor the politeness shown," he scanned up and down, "-despite the demonic legacy, I will honor the code. As the challenged, thee have the right on location and the rules of our fight."

Kanad took a long stroll, he edged around the pit until finally stopping beside Artanos, "-we're sensible creatures. Humans are worse of them all. I don't know why or how they grew into having such importance. Look at their feeble self, and look at you, lord Artanos, taking their appearance for what?"

"My reasons are inherently ambiguous."

"As you wish. I request the duel to be fought on the last floor. We will fight on terms governing the sacred climb."

"Tower of God," remarked Artanos, "-I've always heard about its legend across the mortal realm. The adventurers take great pride in walking a dangerous road. That is why I choose my form to be human, for they, out of the many races created, are the only ones who can be called free."

"Kanad, you can't allow this battle," Kylsha interjected, "-for it is within my best interest--"

"Stop," he rose his voice, "-Kylsha, you have guests waiting. Please do not make a mockery of the Longfield name."

"I understand," the aggression eased, '-the look he gave, Kanad's going to fight a duel to the death. Artanos' given our master a run for his money... I don't expect this battle to last. Be smart, Kanad, there's no way the demonic blood wins against the shine of a god... one-sided from the beginning, how pathetic."

Portals opened. Space, massively open space expanded on the other side. The walls radiated for it was covered in a crystal-like material. The overhanging ceiling matched the weather outside. A lonesome watchtower guarded a bridge on the far side.

“Last floor I presume?”

“Yes.”

They faced each other, “-may the strongest win.” Their auras were unleashed; the air sank in how heavy the powers interacted. Kanad lunged, projectile spells followed his step and peppered the ground. Artanos, surprised by the speed, managed to summon only a few barriers before casting enhancement spells. A shock of lightning resounded; Kanad barely escaped for it chipped the shoulder. Dust of the first attack yet settled, a blind spot opened, and with the attack, the Demonlord leaped backward. Metal through butter – such was the feeling. He looked downwards, a spear had torn through his back and into the front. “A chivalrous demon,” tremored, “-what an idiotic concept!” Greater weapons rose, Kanad jumped and barely escaped, ‘-my wings,’ he flapped and scanned, ‘-where is he?’

“Here,” came from above, a single line went across and crashed – the tower howled. The god rose from the ashes of a one-sided fight, “-put up a good fight?” he clambered over the crater, “-I don’t think so,” the golden tint of a heavenly weapon withdrew.

\*Gasp,\* the demon regenerated, “-I thought I died,” he growled, the form took one fiercer and larger. The muscles pulsed, raw energy thickened veins and sharpened his teeth, “-let’s fight.”

\*Arise, my army,\* Clockwork soldiers filled everything, “-did you honestly think I wouldn’t know about the second state?” he hovered whilst Kanad’s position tightened, “-here’s a surprise, I know everything about this place. All your powers, all the hidden capabilities and the weaknesses. I did my research,” he smiled, “-of course, I did have help from a fellow of the Tower. As the mortal realm so likes to preach, if it can talk, it can be bought.” The mechanical beast leaped, Kanad furious fought, and tore through the waves. The more he destroyed, the stronger they grew, a wonderous display of resolve.

‘Overwhelming,’ the speed lessened, ‘-I’m getting weaker,’ they nipped at the armor, ‘-no honor among thieves. I was foolish.’

“Now,” he tapped his fingers, “-the Demonlord should feel how hopeless the battle is. Any moment and he’ll surrender.”

\*Woosh,\* a breeze passed diagonally, ‘-what’s this?’ he looked below and saw blood as well as oil, ‘-what’s this?’

“Kanad, you idiot!” came from atop the wall, “-believe in your sister for once,” the whole area shook, “-Artanos, god of Knowledge,” she smiled, “-I present to you, the Guardians of Aria, the Floor bosses. Here’s the thing about your information,” the supposed snitch, a demon donning glasses and a suit, calmly exited the ranks of the guardians and smiled, “-a double agent is quite the reveal. I do love myself a bit of drama.”

The bleeding didn’t stop, Artanos’ always smug expression drew into a corner. He kept to himself silently. The summoned army weakened, and the tower of Aria revealed her true face, her true

intention. Monsters of lower floors teleported upward; it was as if the body reacting against a virus. Kylsha dropped beside Kanad, reinforcement charged.

'She got one of my hearts,' he held the open wound, 'I, Artanos, was wounded by a nobody. How dare they,' the fist curled, "-HOW DARE YOU WOUND ME!" the words carried across, "-BE BOUND TO THE FLOOR!" everyone, including the clockwork soldiers, had restraints pull them onto the ground, "-DISARM!" weapons vanished, the bosses, else guardians, were lined to protect Kanad. "-RESTRAINED!" he climbed from the hovering cloud without stairs, "-peasants, how dare you take one of my hearts," he calmly touched Gregno, the chimera's innards exploded into golden dust. "-No one touches me without my permission, no one," each touch killed, the demonlord's struggled for a sliver of strength, nothing.

"You," he grabbed Kylsha's chin, "-worthless waste. Did you think that feeble attack would do me much damage?"

"No," she bit his finger clean and spat the index, "-it did piss you off," she smugly grinned, "-who the fuck do you think you are," she spat again, this time on his face, "-you're not welcomed."

He calmly rose, gave an understanding nod, and moved towards Kanad, "-using the girl to get what I want, that is something I would have done. Well, with how things are, the tower belongs to me. Slip of the tongue," he shrugged, "-why did you get angry, Artanos, why," tiny facepalms pressed, "-well, who cares. Bring me the core." One of the greater clockwork entities materialized, "-the core's not here, my lord."

"Have you looked everywhere?"

"Yes, we've scanned, there's nothing to be found."

"Seems that I've been duped," he turned at the demons, "-where is Aria's core? This place is not of this world, it ought to have the string attached."

"..."

"I order you to speak!"

Kanad broke, "-the core can only be accessed by the Watcher. The Tower of Aria exists as an extension of the Shadow Realm. Only our master has the key."

"If nothing else," he clapped, "-may the souls be turned machines, and may the machines fuel my realm."

"Can we go now?"

"Yeah, we can," he answered, "-got what I needed."

"Said the cores weren't here."

"Not core of the tower," he smiled, "-but them," the turned remains of the guardians rose in the backdrop, "-entities with the capability to take realms on their lonesome, who just leaves them lying around?"

Chapter 1040: Stephanie of Anton News



Floor 50 cleared,' read a sharp headline, people stacked in the dozens, "-come get your copy," cried a paperboy, rather, demi-boy for he had features of a dog. 'In an expedition led by the Pegasus guild earlier this week, and on their return yesterday, a great event has taken place. Bosses of the Ultin floors have vanished. Monsters are present and their loot is available for forage. The bosses, however, are not to be found. They've mysteriously vanished. To test, Pegasus's vanguard, led by the prestigious Lord Ven, of Tier-2 Gold, took it upon himself to climb the remaining floors. He returned with confirmation – floor 75 is also empty, thus, the Tower of God's predicament. Adventurers have cried tears of fear – a sustainable income is on its way out. We know not what is to happen. Experts in Magiology have been called. We must remind, albeit the bosses no longer reside – difficulty on the upper floors is ever increasing. Updates will be given when more information is available,' one word described the current atmosphere, bedlam.

In much the same way, following the current trend of days and weeks – the date eventually read 6th of September X131. "Pressure of battle has increased tension along the shared border of the Wracia Empire. Alpha's leadership seems to have fallen onto the Empress' shoulder. Nothing is confirmed thus far – the attack to capture the whole of Emria has been met with many deaths. Konak's offensive is pyrrhic, they won't quit lest the last man dies. Thus, the terror of the north began six months ago. Diplomatic efforts have ended in silence – much of the world has turned their eyes onto Hidros. What will their king do? The economy in the war-torn regions has crumbled. Families are forced into drinking poisonous muck to survive. We saw King in action, he showed much power in countering projectiles able to destroy countries. After that, nothing – the poor people of Wracia have nothing to look towards. Shredded homes, destroyed cities, and famine are on the rise. Alpha's bombing runs over the shared border haven't done any favors either. People wish for a change, and to the Kingdom of Hidros, I beg of thee, as a daughter of Wracia, I beg of thee, please act. Do not hide behind the cushion of diplomacy, there's no peace to be found, no peace," Stephanie from Antom News read a banner of acknowledgment. The camera panned onto the truth of battle – a village, sadly forced into the forefront of the offensive, no longer stood, there laid signs of civilization – tanks, trucks, and moving armies to count the few 'working' things. Beside carried broken walls, torn houses, and the charred remains of unlucky survivors. Shot farmers laid dead in drains separating walkways and sugarcane plantations. Children, small toddlers barely over five, hushed by their mothers, silently entered broken huts, if lucky, a standing house, to prepare meals and entertain the guests. Soldiers in black army uniforms patrolled. Scattered bodies were carried to a safe place, priority soldiers and second the villagers. Tension was high, the women hid, and the elder women glared from their broken hovels. The reporter, Stephanie, was a curious sight for the grudging bystanders.

"Don't look them in the eye," said an accompanying soldier, "-Stephanie, you're brave to come into the frontlines."

"Am I?" she rose a disappointed gaze and continued following the laid path, "-I'd have died without support from you. This isn't the frontlines, there's barely any gunfire," to which she lifted her chin as if to point in the distant horizon. Faraway explosions, the striking fast blast of a military jet passing overhead, a sonic boom, followed by little dots, correctly assumed as a squadron of helicopters, just over the natural range.

"You're not," returned the soldier, "-sorry it has to be this way. War is an awful thing, no one deserves to see how cruel humans can be towards one another. If it was me, I'd have said no, but, Hidros is a

strong kingdom, the people deserve answers and here you are. An icon of our screen trotting in mud and witnessing what war can do,” a harsh left at the well led to a fortified military compound. Walls were tall and gates heavy, she breathed a sigh and followed. Chatter, constant lookouts – makeshift camps and the worse of it all, the first-aid area. The cameraman motioned to rise his weapon, a lens armed with the ammunition of hundreds of thousands of viewers, “-no,” she interjected, hanging her hand on his shoulder, “-don’t film.”

Outside swapped for much of quietness, “-sure hope the cafeteria is to your liking,” said a well-decorated officer.

Stephanie had her sharp gaze wander table to table, “-excuse me,” she pulled her curiosity and looked at the officer, “-tell me, officer Charles, why is there so much difference to the outside?”

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The officer, dressed in a lighter uniform, removed his hat and calmly placed it on the metallic table, “-our soldiers fight day and night. Some of them never return to the battlefield due to heavy injuries. Not exactly easy to call an evacuation, especially here in a prime location for an aerial attack. This place serves as a medium towards heading home.”

“Okay, what about magic, can’t they use potions?”

“Supply is low as is. Understand, lady Stephanie, rationing is one of the reasons our kingdom can afford to fight this war. Not exactly good for business when half of the world is against the other half. You had questions,” he politely crossed his fingers and looked into the camera, “-please, speak your mind.”

“I have to ask,” she pressed forward, “-the women in the village, why were they scared? Most of all, why were the younger, prettier ones placed on the steps as if merchandise? Where are the men, where are the little children, what is happening here?”

Charles calmly caressed his beard with reflection in the gaze, “-I will not comment on the local practices. Understand, lady Stephanie, our forces have only just recently taken hold of the region. We’re still considered in enemy territory. The birds you heard earlier were headed to Chiad, a major stronghold responsible for controlling the region. I’ll tell you what happened, and what will happen; the women are treated like stock, and the previous army, the Revolutionists, were not kind to the locals. Have you ever heard of Deathmarches?”

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“No, what is that?”

“A word forged by the Aedric god themselves. Deathmarches are forced marches of prisoners of war, villagers, or otherwise, through the war-torn landscape. Starvation, dehydration, humiliation, abuse, neglect, thrown in whatever descriptive word you may find and I’m sure it’ll match what happened. Those who can’t walk are left to die or, if lucky, killed at the stop. Children are often left in remote villages, there are accounts of infant bones being uncovered in nearby firepits. The women are often taken in groups, tied by rope, and dragged. The prettier one, as you mentioned, has the honor of serving the brass, it’s a discussing practice, that turns my stomach upside down. The Revolutionist army is on

worse rations than us, transporting prisoners isn't a priority, you get the idea. Stephanie of Antom News, you wanted a story, here it is. Title it the grave reality of war."

"What about our army, what offenses have we done?"

"War crimes?"

"Yeah."

"A lot," he vehemently said, "-goes both ways. Here's a thought experiment – in times of difficulty, in times of extreme body deprivation and mental anguish, would you have the strength of mind to decide between good or bad? In a place where gunfire is white noise and the sight of a friend falling on his head, choking on his blood and suffocating etched into your brain, would you, Stephanie, have the mental capacity to think of something as vague and léger 1as war crimes?"

"I wouldn't know..."

"Right, you wouldn't know. I say this with only the utmost respect to your profession, Stephanie, not knowing is a boon. Knowing is a serious undertaking, tis a contract of bond, a pact, to be part of whatever lays behind the cloud of ignorant bliss. Would you jeopardize your life, your sanity, and your heart, to the taint of what lays in my memory, no, in the memories of the countless soldiers, the refugees, would you, Stephanie, undertake the monumental task of knowing and bearing witness to how bad humanity can get, TELL ME!" he slammed, the table roared to which the camera flinched. Veracity and sincerity cried through the bloated veins, Charles dropped his guard for a second, allowing the inner rage to shine – such as the mental toll upon the faceless heroes, the ones on the front-lines fighting for the sake of their kingdom, family, or other personal reasons.

Needless to say, the interview ended prematurely. She had her face in her hand, the terror of the encounter translated into short but coherent breaths. The reporter would later be introduced to the refugees, an elder with a wrinkled, tenuous smile, who welcomed the young lady and her gadgets into a specialized ward in what seemed a medical building. Her clubbed fingers calmly reached for a cup, took a sip of the lukewarm drink, and returned it to the counter. "Mamma," said Charles, "-these here are people from Hidros, they've come to show the world the war. Would you kindly answer her questions, I promise it won't be long."

"Charles, you ruffian," she smiled, showing her yellow pearls, "-call me granny, not mamma."

"Oh, but you look so young," they chuckled, he turned on his step, stared at the cameraman, and strongly grabbed Stephanie's shoulder, "-don't bombard her with questions. My assistant will be watching, just in case," the heavy boots faded into the hallway. Before them, before the camera sat a mature figure of someone who'd seen many things. Some good, others bad – the way by which Mamma, as the compound so came to know, confidently kept her pace. Her regard crossed Stephanie many times without much care to speak. Her ears didn't seem apparent, her skin, the wrinkles, and burn-line marks weren't common, as for her tone and freckled skin, they didn't speak natural either.

"Mamma, or should I call you granny?"

"Granny," she grinned, fixated on the reporter's lips, "-you have to speak up and articulate well, my hearing isn't very good."

“Granny, I’m sorry to ask, who are you exactly, why are you here?”

“Oh, my story is a long but common one. I’m a lucky survivor you see. I was, like many others, a slave taken from Arda. Didn’t know it at the time, I was born here. My parents were snatched, my mother actually, as for father, never knew him. Maybe it was the master, maybe even the master’s son, or countless friends, I don’t know. Oh, those days...” she firmed on the camera, “-is this broadcasted live?”

“Live?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, but how-”

“You pick up a few things,” she said, “-I’m surrounded by many talented and intelligent people.”

“Tell us about them, tell us about what happened here...”

“Oh, you mean the refugee? Stephanie, it’s bad to speak in undertones. Tell me frankly, honesty goes a long way, little one.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m a hundred and twenty-five.”

“Wow.”

“Not praiseworthy, my clan has a life expectancy of three hundred years. I’m still a cub compared to the elders.”

“Your wrinkles, your scars, are they natural”?

“No, no, god no,” she shook her head lightly, “-my fur, my tail, and my ears were taken. You see, my employer wasn’t fond of non-humans. He forced my hand and threw acid to ‘heal’ my deformities. Been like this since I was at the young age of sixteen.”

“So sorry to hear.”

“No one is sorry,” she sharply entered, “-no one is sorry, no one unless it’s a child who did his mother wrong. No one will be sorry, no one.”

“...” confused glances were exchanged. She even turned at the assistant, the man simply nodded with, ‘-continue.’ Stephanie, with a deep inhale, gathered her courage and spoke, Granny was pleased, her face lit, and what would be known as the Grave Reality of War, set on taking its first steps towards infamy.