

Death Magic 1041

Chapter 1041: Granny

"Before they came, our little village could barely barre against the changing seasons. Look around, the houses are so frail a sneeze could shatter the foundation," granny's waterfall of words halted, she horned onto a perplexed expression. Stephanie watched with a disgruntled look, the sight had granny turn her fingers and wait, the awkward silence endured.

"Speak," added granny, "-I said I'm poor of hearing. Do this old lady the favor of speaking up when something bothers."

"I apologize for my rudeness," she straightened her back, firmed her stance upon the chair facing granny, "-I didn't want to interrupt."

"I don't mind interjections," came a wrinkled smile, "-tell me, little one, what do you want me to retell?"

"My questions about the war, could you clarify this particular section," a holographic display lit, reading a timeline. Granny lifted her chin and squared the text, "-oh, I see," came an understanding cheer, "-days leading up to the army's invasion," her older frame pushed, her posture straightened, or tried – much anguish was felt through the wrinkles. "I was getting to that part," she settled with a triumphant exhale, "-the Revolutionist army, they called themselves the sons of God, was a tiring bunch. On one hand, some preached righteousness in whatever damned definition of the word they choose, fanatics really, and on the other, assholes. Pure and unfiltered waste of space. They were cruel, especially to the men and younger boys. Lashes to the back and heart-tearing screams went for nights and days. I mentioned death marches earlier. Before the Hidrosian army arrived, death walks from around the province would end or pass through here. South of the village lays a massive burial ground. The executed, the diseased, and the wounded – all of them were thrown, left to be ravaged by wildlife. My daughter was taken, and her body was found at my neighbor's place. She was beaten, possibly abused, then disembowel and thrown with her gut hanging out of her stomach. I remember the day like it was yesterday, the memory is etched in my heart. What pains me the most was... was... she was pregnant. They cut her... threw the babe across the village... a show of strength they said, a show of power they proclaimed, an offering to the gods they justified..." tears slowly strolled down the visage passing drain-like wrinkles, hitting her dress and marking the spot black. There was no voice, nothing remotely close to pain or suffering, only silence served as a secret healer. Stephanie reached forward with an embrace. Granny's silent tears poured, her mien, resolute to not break, solidified – though, Stephanie couldn't hold her own emotions. Whimpers escaped, and they hugged.

"Don't cry," added granny, patting Stephanie's as if to console her heart, "-you don't have to cry for my sake," she took the reporter's warm cheeks and wiped the tears, "-I don't cry, I can't cry. I won't give them the satisfaction, I won't let them break me, I won't."

The assistant gestured, "-let's take a break," he offered.

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"No, no, please," came harsh sniffles, "-I want to hear, I want to know." The man simply shrugged with an understanding nod.

“You asked about the girls sitting on the porch, yes?”

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Stephanie nodded silently, “-well, it was per the commanding officer’s order. To put food on the table meant working for the army. We couldn’t get out of the village – the perimeter was strongly guarded since it was close to the frontlines. Strolling a few meters from the village center was reason enough to be killed. There were rations – the stale remains from an already famished army. When food ran low, the army looted – and when we had nothing more to give, they took what they wanted. To cull the herd, they said... those bastards. What could we have done? One of the families, a disgraced noble family that fled after the empire collapsed, was sheltered at the villager leader’s mansion. When the army first arrived – the family didn’t say a lot, they were friendly and engaging, especially the youngest of the three. The father was a veteran, he soon dazzled the village with feats of magic. Clandestine practice is banned, and when the army came knocking after the looting passed and food grew scarce, they stormed the manor. The father stood up for our sakes... it ended with laughter and dismissal from the army. Orders were not to harm any nobles. So much for keeping to their word – they took younger folks, forced some into slavery, and sent others to imprisonment camps. Sadly, an incident involving a young recruit and his forceful attitude toward the noble’s daughters was grounds for the man to take action. He instantly grabbed his weapon and stormed into the barracks demanding the young man’s apology. It didn’t end well; it never ends well. I watched as they threw him to his knees and executed him in front of the whole village. They publicly took the family and made them an example. If we showed cooperation and respect, they wouldn’t be cruel... we had to accept, what were hungry peasants to do. So, our days of torture began... the place I had come to call home was attacked relentlessly – gunfire, some at enemies’ others at my fellow villagers, didn’t take long for many to take their own lives. Those not wanting to be ravaged by the lustful soldiers took it upon themselves to slice their nose and throw it at their attackers... it worked, few were left alone, however, the truly depraved casually threw bags over the bleeding heads and proceeded anyways. You can’t imagine the pain and suffering a constant aura of fear loomed over our heads, I prayed with all my might for heaven’s intervention. I prayed day and night, asking for the blessings of Fenrir, the holy wolf, patron goddess of my clan; she would send me dreams, and hope, saying salvation would come to those who demanded so. It did come when an explosion rattled the whole village. I rushed to my windows that day, I thought something grave had happened. More than anything, I was worried about the orphans left in my care. I peered and saw a giant mushroom cloud in the direction of another stronghold. I don’t know the details, the place was southeast of here, possibly a major facility. Another, bigger more powerful explosion echoed seconds later, the shockwave threw me off balance and I fell. Helicopters swarmed the area. Gunfire rained; I pulled the children close to my chest. Confused Revolutionist soldiers kicked in my door and pointed their guns, I thought I was dead,” she paused and gulped, “-two muffled shots and the attackers fell. Men and women dressed in black uniforms stormed my house, “-we’re from the Hidrosian Army, the Revolutionist army’s oppression will be liberated.” Those words answered my prayer. It took them minutes to clear out an army that had pressed us for more than a year. We were weary still; another army meant more trouble. Surviving villagers were gathered at the village leaders’ manor. We waited for night and then day, the door opened loudly-”

“Greetings people of Jinhe, I represent the allied Hidrosian army. I apologize for the wait and rough treatment. Measures had to be taken to ensure safety. As we speak, a multi-layered operation is

underway to capture the eastern frontier. Rest assured, we will uphold our duties and provide a haven for noncombatants.”

“-Understand, words alone wouldn’t have meant anything. They, instead of talking, showed us outside. A rationing station was organized. The wounded healed, the famished fed, and the feared relieved. Some scars couldn’t be healed. Especially the abused – they simply chose to remain in the village and sit outside their homes expecting a graver situation. The children were taken to an orphanage in Elendor. Those who wanted to take up arms were welcomed. I became the mediator between troubled refugees and army men. It takes time, and here, I can finally say, my job is done. This army has been nothing but grand. They indulged our requests to the best of their abilities. Many of them share their cafeteria, and victims of war get to experience the greater world – to see television shows, listen to music, and watch live broadcasts, to us, those things are foreign, alien. Even in times of peace with the emperor at the helm – access to such distractions was shunned.”

Two loud taps came with, “-is the interview over?”

“Yes,” said granny, “-I have said my piece,” she leaned over for another sip, “-Stephanie, thank you for hearing out an old lady. I can sleep easy,” she smiled, “-good luck on your journey. It will be hard, but the world deserves to know the harsh reality.”

“I will, thank you, granny, for your time and patience.”

They exited, officer Charles exchanged a few pleasantries and thus led the crew outside. A short uneventful promenade arrived on a clearing southward. The gradual curvature of the hills and meadows was washed by the torrent of warfare. Remnants of trucks and exploded tanks – burnt pastures and bullet holes. A tinge of gunpower hung, “-what did granny tell you?”

“A lot of things,” she replied, “-a lot of sad things. Is the war that bad?”

“It’s more than bad, it’s hell,” came a sharp and resolute response. With the camera aiming at the officer, he shifted sideways, “-Stephanie, as I’m a man of frankness, here is my honest opinion; you’re not welcomed.”

“Excuse me?”

“We’ve had our fair share of reporters and war-time photographers. Some were bad apples, they published rather disgusting imagery that could end in my prison time if done back home. We don’t take to reporters. The stories our soldiers share are theirs alone to share, and if they don’t want the world to know, they have a right to say stop. I don’t abide by those who’d willingly rub salt in an open wound. Tell me, would you agree?”

“What happened to those reporters, nothing’s come over the Arcanum or media source.”

The officer simply stared at the withered flora, “-there are answers best left to the imagination. As an affiliate of Phantom, we’re duty bound to obey higher command. Exercise the utmost respect and diligence in the quest for answers.”

“Sorry about the bad apples,” she stepped, “-my duty is to report and share, I won’t back down easily.”

He frowned.

“However,” a rise of the index stopped the aggression, “-I will not trouble those who don’t want to relay their stories. Tell me about Granny, she was very absent-minded on topics related to her.”

“Ah,” he lit, “-granny is our beacon of light. Her help was tremendous in bringing the villagers in order. Without her help, bedlam. Her past is muddy, we did hear stories from others and I’m sure she’s relayed those already. Granny is very wise, don’t let her appearance deceive.”

“Officer Charles, please tell me about yourself.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, I want to know more about you, what is the army doing to help the situation?”

“Very little,” he added, “-our focus is on saving ourselves first. Little help is granted to the refugees. We don’t abuse nor neglect – we provide basic necessities and allow a trade to areas in our control. Making sure they feel in charge of their fate is the way forward. Such were the orders by General Minerva. Day has begun. Stephanie, a tent has been prepared, I ought to attend to my duties.” They parted ways, and the reporter found herself in the middle of the refugee camp. Whole families had settled, patrolling officers sternly watched their duties – the children hid, the rumbustious ran to the ire of their guardians.

Much footage was taken, photos as well. “-I can’t believe this,” gasped the cameraman, “-people are living in such harsh conditions... and to imagine it was worse when the Revolutionist army occupied. What must have gone through their heads when a stranger suddenly attacked.”

“Don’t think about it,” came a present Stephanie, “-we need to do them justice.”

The veil parted, “-excuse me,” said a little boy, “-are you the reporter?”

“Yes, why are you here?”

“To tell you my story,” came a blank gaze, “-about how I was treated.” Grave Reality of War was about to get its most haunting chapter delivered by the mouth of an innocent child. Stephanie’s heart sank, as did the crew – a collective inhale followed, “-okay.”

Chapter 1042: Wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Enough trauma, enough tragedy, enough pain. Stephanie with a troubled look forced a smile. ‘No more,’ cried her thoughts – the little boy held his own, the expression devoid of humanity or life. “-What is it?” she tapped a nearby seat, signaling the boy, who, without much effort strode and dropped. Yellow pupils, ‘-peculiar,’ came a gulp, ‘-what is wrong with him?’

Away from the reluctant interview – Chiad’s cityscape rose as jagged edges over the horizon. Toppled buildings and chaos – the joint army, of which the vanguard was led by Old Cray, threw their weapons on their shoulders and proudly smirked.

“Gentlemen, Chiad has been conquered,” proclaimed a buffed officer. His accolades responded with sighs of relief, “-let the Sadians have their share of fun. Send news to headquarters. Operation Cracker, arguably the most elaborate scheme devised by the Joint alliance, detailed a step-by-step process of capturing the Revolutionist faction’s best-kept secret. The location of GateSix’s headquarters.

“Enemy reinforcement,” echoed, the battle resumed anew, and this time – the allies were forced into defense.

A pin-drop silence settled, “-I killed my parents,” added the little boy, “-I killed them.”

“What do you mean, kill them?”

“I used an ax at night. They slept peacefully. I snuck into my father’s room, rose my arm, and went for his neck. He didn’t die at first... there was life in his eyes, I saw him wake up in confusion. The blood gushed so quickly it sprayed. I saw my father leave his body, the recognition faded when I hammered again. It’s hard work, I don’t know how they cut heads so easily in movies.”

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The crew eerily stepped away. ‘-A knife,’ came in her peripheral, ‘-this kid is crazy,’ she gulped, ‘-should I run or listen,’ one side caution, the other, curiosity.

“Mother too,” the boy added loudly, “-I killed mother too. She slept in the living room. They fought. The tv played my favorite cartoon. I rose my hand again and saw my shadow over her body. I stopped at first. The good times my mother and I shared made me smile. I smiled. But, when the voice said to kill, I dropped the ax and missed. I hit her face and caught her eyes, so I raised the weapon as hard as I could and hit her neck. I didn’t get to see mother’s eyes fade; I saw her breathing stop and her arms fall.”

“How did you come here?”

“A strange man brought me here,” he side-glanced, “-he told me to kill you,” they locked eyes for a split second, he darted for the silver blade, ‘-shit,’ she pushed off the table and fell, flipping over at the last second and barely missed her cheek. * Smack,* a quick elbow pushed the kid off balance, the crew hastened to the door and tapped, “-HELP!” they screamed. Yellow eyes circled by white slowly drowned in black, the features greatedened into those of a monster, the door barged, he drooled. “-FIRE AT HIM!”

Bullets blasted a deafening explosion, the leading guard rose his palm, Stephanie managed to crawl behind the soldiers, and they approached the body slowly. Countless bullets riddled the opposing wall – the body was torn to shred; assault rifles had a habit of tearing through flesh.

“Are you guys, okay?”

“Yeah, we are,” added Stephanie, “-who’s that kid?”

“We don’t know.”

“Hold on,” gritted one closest to the body, “-he’s moving,” and indeed he was. The boyish appearance left, giving rise to a monstrosity of many arms and fewer legs. Yellow burnt vibrantly as the torso expanded twice the size of any normal human, “-FIRE!” the projectiles pinged and ricocheted, “-STOP!” a misfire hit the cameraman’s right thigh.

“HEY, HEY!”

The camera tipped, “-MY LEG!”

"Get out of here!" ordered the soldiers, "-NOW, GET OUT," magical chants spoke in tongue, a submissive hue whelmed the room. A trail of blood swept the hallway, Stephanie hopelessly pulled her crewmate. *Crash,* a black uniform went through the door, through the window, and into the outside compound. Another crash persisted, "-I'LL KILL YOU," growled gutturally, "-I WILL KILL YOU," the stomps shook the compound.

Sirens blazed the compound, "-the refugee camp," went across intercoms. A beast charged, "-sorry," gritted the cameraman, a flash of light caught the beast, it slipped on the blood and crashed through the windows, taking many panes. "-LEAVE, NOW!" he forced her grip, "-GO NOW!"

Kill or be killed, "-good luck."

"Blasted humans," came muffled growls, the fuzzy vision returned, '-where are they?' he scanned, the trail turned left, he grabbed a doorway and pulled, flinging him across, "-WHERE ARE YOU," it barged into the next room and roared, "-WHERE ARE YOU!"

Nothing, *-huff, puff,* nothing save empty bloodied trousers. The stomps rampaged, further along, breaking through walls and killing without discrimination. '-I survived,' blood yet flowed, '-but for how long...' the outside faded.

"Cameraman," a strong grip lifted his chin, "-look at me."

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"Officer Charles... please help Stephanie, a demon..." the head dropped.

Charles rose his head at the open window, "-Tend to him," he ordered, a medic hastily attended to the wounded. Quick on his feet, the officer calmly observed the hallway, '-broken windows, dead soldiers, and a trail of blood. He must have used his blood as a diversion. Bold move in a time of crisis. These' reporters know how to act."

"Report, Officer Charles."

"Speak."

"A demon beast was spotted north of the compound. Our soldiers are on the move. Shall I order the guards to intervene?"

"No, this might be a trap. Order our soldiers to reinforce the gates and mount our weaponries. A demon beast got through security, there may be more to this fight."

"Report," came another through radio, "-bullets do not affect the demon beast."

A sort of sadistic grin unraveled, "-where are the other officers?"

"Left for Chiad half an hour ago."

"Good," he turned at the frightened refugees, "-good timing means one thing, we will be under attack." And by an extremely low probability – an aerial scan conducted by Phantom's intelligence system revealed unidentified troops moving towards the camp through the village. Marksmen immediately opened fire, "-and there," said the officer with a sword in hand, "-that's the sound of Knightfall. Eliot's

on the job, have him take command and call Phantoms, we have a demon to kill,” the blade flared in the sun, “-a hunt at last,” he licked the edge.

Eliot, wielder of Knightfall, calmly laid on his stomach and fired. The weapon’s apparition sat translucently with cross legs hanging off the walls, “-another one few meters away,” she yawned, and he fired.

“Lord Eliot, you’re in command.”

“Good,” he paused and fired, “-have word sent to headquarters. We’re under attack. It’s most likely a half-hearted attempt to take the village.”

News reached home; Hidros. Minerva’s team worked tooth and nail, “-WHERE IS IGNA!” her office reverberated, “-we need his approval to send in the big guns. Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Medusa shrugged, “-I’ll go to the palace at once. Have Elixia and éclair take a look. What would they know, their king quietly laid underneath the willow on the hill. A pleasant breeze swayed the palace garden, and a lovely blue sky scattered by peaceful spots of white flowed.

“Majesty...”

“Medusa,” he smiled, “-how goes it?”

“We need help.”

“Help?”

“Yes, we need help. Our connections to Iqavea are being interrupted. Another entity joined the surveillance race. They might have their own devices in orbit... what are your orders?”

“My orders?” he summoned an apple-shaped crimson orb and bit, “-do they matter?”

“Please, my liege, lady Minerva desperately needs assistance. Too many factors at play.”

“What about Elixia?”

“She’s not here, nor is éclair. A diplomatic mission to the new continent. The ministers have their hand tied after the death of Carla Remington.”

“Ahh,” he sat up straight, “-the Remington share a good relationship with our household. Why was I not informed?”

“Majesty, you only just returned. We didn’t want to impose much.”

“As you please. I will see to the fighting,” an interface lit, “-let’s see how it goes.”

Iqavea, the village of Jinhe; a growing battlefield for the strong. “-No matter how fast you fire, we can’t contain them.”

“I appreciate the input,” he fired, “-would be nice to have options instead of observations.”

An explosion south shocked the compound, gunfire rattled, “-south gate breached!”

“Fu-”

“... Testing, testing, can you hear me?”

Time slowed, “-listen carefully and breathe. Jinhe is surrounded by a force of at least ten thousand. Vanguard has already infiltrated the village. Press the offensive and hold out for five minutes, an airstrike is on its way. Retreat Westward to the border. Reinforcement is on its way from Hols. The refugees take priority – lead them through the forest, those who can’t move, I apologize,” the message came loud and clear. Eliot got to organizing the teams whilst defending from the north. The breach south, a human bomb.

The mysterious voice saw things the fighters didn’t. ‘-Pulled quite the bait and switch. We go after GateSix, they go after supplies stacked in Hols. Jinhe’s the first step. Judging by the numbers and weaponry, they have tanks – that won’t last long. There’s also a threat of artillery. The topography favors them on the hill. Getting rid of the threat is a priority,’ orders for a bombing run was placed, coordinates assigned and bombers dispatched, ‘-that’ll wipe out the Vanguard. Can’t risk moving towards Chiad, situation dire as is,’ the interface wrote, ‘-contacting Charles’.

A team of strangely dressed soldiers came upon the bottom of a cliff. Stephanie backed herself into a corner – the jungle was thick and unforgiving if left to a single man. “He opened the way for us,” came a smug expression.

“Found, you.”

Her frightened act dropped, “-there we are,” her voice firmed, “-a demon beast. Follower of Artanos?” she asked with a tilt of the head, “-we had suspicion of your involvement.”

“Who are you?”

“A special order created by his majesty, Glarios. We belong to a subfamily of the Nightwalkers,” her canines sharpened, “-though we don’t feast on blood – our abilities come from a realm, not of Orin.”

“Glarios, never heard of it.”

“Of course, you haven’t,” she winked, “-no one’s ever survived.”

Twigs cracked, and five more approached, “-I see the reporter has secrets of her own.”

“Look who’s talking,” she winked, “-Exorcist.”

“By the holy name of Syhton, I welcome the compliment.”

“Likewise,” she curtsied, “-shall we?”

“ENOUGH!” a force of a thousand men grounded the beast – a cylinder of pure power came from Stephanie, her palms seemingly pushed against an invisible form, the latter being the cage’s representation.

By the might of our holy goddess, we cleanse thee, impurities brought from the undercoat of hell and its’ associates. We shun thee in her holy name. As the sword of Reknus struck the heart of Meho, we call upon Tsukio, the blade of the eternal, a sword of gigantic proportions split the sky and struck the beast. The engraved runes glowed menacingly.

“YOU WON’T-”

Stephanie winked, the Shadow Realm’s symbol, a dulled halo, floated and pulled the demon out of existence. Dust and remains – clockwork soldier’s core fell harshly. The eyes met, both acknowledging the other’s powers. “Charles and Stephanie, heed my call, thy master demands for thy presence.”

“Master?” she fell on her knees whilst Charles scratched his head.

“Exorcists, thy expertise is needed in Chiad,” the voice cut, thus focusing on Stephanie.

The robed individuals vanished soon after, “-Stephanie, my dear Stephanie, how is the world treating you?”

“My master, it is very saddening. Especially the role you’ve assigned. I’m forever grateful but...”

“Orin is a far cry from home. As chosen, you asked and I bestowed. Thus, thy blessing of experiencing the world from which I hail. I grant thee limited access to your powers – head into Jinhe and help in the evacuation,” he paused, a tremor slithered under, “-there it is, the airstrike. Perfect, Stephanie, have fun, my dear.”

“It will be my honor,” her crest glowed – the half-complete pentagram summoned a temporary circle. Fuse lit, by which as time passed, the circle clicked as if a watch, ‘-onward to death.’

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Chapter 1043: Stephanie’s essay

“Igna, where is Igna?”

“My lady, please, you don’t understand,” hurried an attendant, “-the king has asked not to be disturbed.”

“I don’t care,” Minerva threw her arms, “-I need to see him,” the menacing presence stormed a quaint little observatory. The white figure was illuminated by the moonlight unglued from a massive telescope, turning the pale yet handsome visage. A kind smile unraveled.

“Minerva, how goes it?”

“Don’t,” she rose her hand, “-we need to talk, privately.”

“Okay,” he motioned to the guard, who, with a courteous bow, left.

Things leading to the current predicament were best relayed by Stephanie and he knew what Minerva wanted.

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“After killing the demon beast, on orders by my master – the restriction placed upon my powers was undone. I flew to Jinhe with all my might. A tremor rattled my right, planes made trips to and fro – I could see a bigger army being stacked at the frontier, west, towards Hols. Greenery separated towns, villages, and man-made structures. Surrounding geography favored the mountainous range if you were to move right, towards Chiad, whilst, left, west, there carried a smoothening of the cliffs and sharp

natural impasses. I knew then and there, the prior explosion marked the start of another battle. I flapped my wings and sought a better look – there in the distance was a massive army, nothing to the current battle. I hurried and saw Eliot with his companion, an otherworldly being.

“Hello,” waved Eliot with a large unalarmed smile. I noticed there was an inconsistent number of soldiers, and when I asked, “-where are the rest?” he returned a just look of regret, “-a full scale retreats’ been issued. My team and I are tasked to guard the village until the villagers are evacuated. Moving such an amount will require patience and a lot of luck.”

“Reinforcement will be here at any minute. We should leave, there’s the risk of artillery fire.”

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“Been handled,” he nodded, “-the hill was bombed, would be foolish for them to take the same position. As you said,” he hurled Knightfall over his shoulder, “-we need to leave, not before a little shooting contest.” There, with an energetic hip to his step, Eliot seamlessly ran upstairs towards a truly dangerous spot. The resolute echoes, the unique twang, and the burst of energy spoke loudest. A draft caught my attention, and I looked at a massive opening. Scattered charred remains littered the entrance amidst a plethora of footsteps. Such large numbers required the help of a specialist. I barely fit the profile – only bound to the word my master ordered. I summoned my wings once more, floated to an advantageous altitude, and noticed other discrepancies. We grew tunnel vision, I saw trouble, “-Stephanie,” took me off-guard, the caller read Master, “-north, there’s a legion of unidentified mass moving south. They’re traveling rather fast. Can you see something, there’s interference on my side.”

“Oh, I see something alright,” before I stretched a mass of demons, “-it’s monsters,” I replied, “-monsters from Hell, the domain of the wretched. The Gates of Hell have been opened, master, we might require more than airstrikes to clear those numbers. I see golems, giants, swarms of Heynia(four-legged bats), and a few mid-tier demons. Won’t be a good sight if they make it back. What are your orders?”

“I understand,” said my master, there carried a coldness to the way in which he answered. Frankly, looking at the trial before me, I couldn’t help but feel a little shaken. Tales home always spoke of Hell as one of the worse realms to battle. With my powers gradually shortening, I had to make a move. There, the master spoke again, breaking my trance, “-Stephanie, by decree of the Shadow Realms’ Watcher, I grant thee access to Glarios. Say the word and I shall summon forth your comrades.”

“So be it,” I replied, I no longer felt fear, no longer cared about the task ahead. Alone I was fearful, and together with my team, together with people far stronger, I strengthened. By the clap of my sweaty palms and the ring of my tongue, a portal split the sky. An opposite, more destructive wave fell, it seemed like a waterfall – the raw energy swept the ground in a thick fog. The enemy forces slowed, the monsters that are. A warm pair of hands grabbed my shoulders, they were my comrades, dressed in peculiar clothes dated all around the millennia. The unfolding scene bellowed compelled my focus to stray.

“On your feet,” came promptly. I knew it was directed at me, “-If the battle below interests thee more, be my guest and flew.” I chose silence, seeing as my friends were in a right ol’ mood. I picked remnants of my vigor and faced forward – I felt the seal tighten around my neck, my time would be over sooner than I thought. Thus, in a swift blaze, the angelic figure of my comrades stormed the frontlines and tore

at the demons and beasts like they were ants. I sought for a fight, fought nothing, and ignored the elephant in the room, the Gates of Hell, in the rush of the moment.

“GET THE PORTAL!” ’twas then, at the cries of another friend, that I lunged forward and shattered the door that weighed tons, or so it seemed by the size and bulk. Was I too strong or were the gates weakened? Nevertheless, before five minutes were over – flashes of light exited. The ground was marred in pure angry red, touched on with yellow and white. I’d be a fool to ignore the scale of such destruction. Compared to the hill, the difference was night and day. The latter held its shape at the very least. Where I stood upon, well, there was nothing. The ground seemed lower and I felt nauseated.

“Stephanie,” the interface rang once again, “-problem’s been dealt with. An evacuation was an overall success. Eliot just left the village; you can catch up at the intersection. Hurry, the seal will reactivate.” Didn’t know, else I would have walked. I summoned my wings once more and flapped. The destination was clear. I flew over wastelands and soon exited onto a lovely array of tall trees. It was sad to see nature be destroyed... no matter the justification, there could have been or were perhaps other ways of dealing. Who am I to complain? Eliot’s unharmed party waited at the crossroads. A sharp sensation snapped, and I immediately knew... the seal reactivated, I lost flight and ended into a thicket.

“Are you okay?” I heard down below.

“Yeah,” I replied, “-I’m stuck.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you out,” said a distant echo. Took the worst part of thirty minutes, but eventually, I was out with scraps and a lost shoe. Eliot paid no heed and continued our walk. Hours after were uneventful. We chatted, and spoke about some of our experiences in this world, he kept referring to Iqavea as if it were strange. I knew Eliot was of this world, but, by how he spoke and rambled, it would be more correct to assume the man was nothing not of this world. A by-product of Phantom’s initiation, I suppose. Master mentioned so in passing. Time passed, and the conversations and thoughts kept me rather busy – everyone had their piece to say. Before I noticed, I was once more Stephanie of Antom news, the reporter.

“Is my crew, dead?”

“No, no. They went first. We’ll meet them at Hols.”

Content on the good news, I walked, clambered rather – the forest was a pain to fight. Branches recoiled, being at the end of the pack meant taking a few scraps to the chest or worse, face. By then, I noticed shuffling to my side, “-Stephanie, I heard about the book you’re writing. Officer Charles mentioned it and said we were free to speak our stories. Would you hear mine?” an unexpected delicious piece of memory dropped on my lap, I would be a fool to refuse. So, I began to record and listen to the passionate stories of brave men. The very men who protect the Kingdom and uphold its tradition. The contrast was evident, I found myself more inclined to their recounting instead of recoiling. We were scolded a few times for being loud; talk about being treated like kids.

A break in the forest led to open space. The frontier was upon us. A massive barrier stretched from one side to the next – the highly militarized zone had surveillance at every corner. A buzz ushered our entrance. It was over, my moment to shine as someone of a greater world was reduced to the commonness of my assignment. There was honor and privilege in the powers I was rightfully born with.

What I didn't understand was discrimination, a word thrown without caution to the wind. Different, it was very much different.

A fifteen-meter divide between each barrier, called the buffer, was made of sand and dust. Practically no plants or weeds dared grow – it was dry and hot. “We control the buffer,” remarked a soldier, “-keep moving, reinforcement will be here soon.”

We went in and out smoothly. Electrical gates shut tight, the buzz and flash audibly apparent. It was yet another sight to behold – I felt free and safe, I don't know why, the soothing aura here, compared to where I was a few seconds ago, was, how can I say, perplexing. The trees were similar, and the landscape to some extent felt familiar.

“Safe,” said a passing soldier, he spoke aloud what I felt. I waved and smiled; “-how can you say safe?”

A judgmental scan went up and down, “-passing the frontier is one of the greatest things that might happen. The buffer is a kill zone. Anyone, civilian or not, without authorization or proper identification, will be shot or electrified to death. It's one of the harder things to do,” the stern man bid me adieu. Separate trucks waited, Eliot calmly extended his hand and showed me to our transport. We rode for the next hour to Hols – midway was stopped, forced to let tanks and heavy weaponry through. The soldiers held grave looks – excited, others petrified.

Great big walls surrounded by a dried moat, carried in them watchtowers that rose with a certain bulb-ness at the summit. I overheard, “-looks like préservatif1,” and so came muffled laughter. More of the town was outside the great walls – we drove up to the castle where the iron gates were perpetually held up.

Touching grass felt amazing after the rough ride. Fellow travelers shared their discomfort through groans, stretches, and the occasional, “-my back hurts.” Eliot and I bid farewells not before he guided me to the medical camp.

“Stephanie,” said officer Charles, “-it's good to see you.”

“Charles?” I paused, “-were the exorcists not needed in Chiad?”

“Have you not heard?” he grinned; “-the army has captured the town. It's a matter of time before we discover what we're really after. The fighting has been grave, I heard there have been a lot of casualties.”

“Why are you here?”

“Change of plans. No matter, what you did back there was amazing. Pray tell, what exactly are you?”

“Oh, that information is confidential,” she winked, “-under strict orders from the king. Where are my crew?”

“Ever the secretive reporter. Your people are inside the cafeteria, they've been healed using magic and are as good as new. Duty calls, I should get going,” he stopped midway, “-I have news, you are to write a descriptive report on what transpired. Orders from the king – I'd attack with inclination to a narrative essay. Our king sure loves his whims.”

The idea didn't quite excite my creative side, not before I had a plethora of soldiers wanting to relay their stories. Do excuse the rush, it was the best I could write in my limited time. I hope this is an adequate report, though, I do beg for your forgiveness master, I don't quite get the assignment. May you be in good health," signed Stephanie.

Chapter 1044: "-he's gone."

"Written decently. But why?"

"Care to elaborate, I'm not fond of backward riddles.'

"Igna, focus."

"I am focused," came abruptly, "-as focused as I can be. Listen, Minerva, when you asked why my answer is thus, there's no why. I did it because I wanted."

"Pardon?"

"You asked about why I did what I did, why I intervened, or why there's someone of my realm resident in Orin, the answer is simple, there is no reason," a flick of the shoulder gestured, Minerva curled her fist and walked, "-I'm going to regret this," she muffled and asked, "-what were you doing?"

"Observation," came an uninterested response. In his tone laid nothing – the vacant gaze and strained customary smile, same motions of expression, same answers, and a particularly stagnant atmosphere. She took one large step and leaned into the telescope. Igna, being the gentleman he is, shuffled, allowing for her chance at observation.

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"Constellations have a weird way about them," he explained, "-I find them weirdly repulsive. Many look in awe at the starry gems, I sigh and shake my head in disbelief. What we see isn't there – the stars are long gone, it's like we're living in a dream," the ominously vague words caught her attention. She withdrew, pushing a stray lock behind her ears, and peered, "-are you okay?"

"I'm fine, truly," he smiled vacantly, "-going through the motions, the cycles, it's not worth much. If immortality has this," he threw his arms open, "-as the future, I shudder at the boredom," he quickly raised his index, Minerva caught her words before liftoff, "-I know there's entertainment, I know the world has more to offer. I haven't seen a sliver of what Orin has to offer... yet, I feel empty, I feel nothing. I want to go on a quest, to rescue a maiden or something fantastic, I don't know, how about Artanos stealing my army or else – you know, exciting. Knowing my luck, nothing of the sort's remotely possible." A dramatic pause, so she perceived, ended with him lowering his gaze, "-your feet," he pointed, "-the ankles, you shake them when you bite your tongue. Get on with it, Minerva might as well indulge."

'Really?' subconscious turned conscious, "-my ankles?" an eyebrow lifted, "-a tell I assume?" quick to shake her head, she gestured, conjuring words in the cauldron of her thoughts. "We heard the news, our army is victorious. GateSix's headquarters has been raided. I hear it will take a few days before the files and gadgets are properly stored. I can say with chest – the war is won."

"Great news?" a solemn beam of moonshine caught the pale cheeks.

"I thought you'd be happier?"

"Oh, I am," he sighed, "-as happy as I can be, considering Hidros counts among one of the strongest nations; economy and military wise. Victory was a matter of when and how," he sharply cut sideways towards the door, latter opened before he reached the handle, "-my liege," fluttered Alta, "-I beg your pardon," her fist yet held the handle, the door laid inches from his face, "-there is news you must see."

"What news?"

"Master, kindly follow me," a gaze shot over at Minerva, "-if the minister would also join, that would be grand."

A detached cabin, placed on the outskirts of the castle wall, carried a dim amber lantern. Shadows could be seen inside, products of the already present guests. Alta, smooth as possible, knocked three times – an outburst of mana(deactivation of a spell) rocked the dusty windows. White hair caught their gaze, lady Eira stood beside a stumped Markus. The now affluent businessman, told by a golden watch and nic jewelry, rose his head, "-my king," he whispered, "-my king, I have news."

"We needn't a formality," he exchanged a nod with Eira, "-talk to me, I'm family, what's got you frightened?" The cabin door locked behind, and a breeze shifted the flame, blurring the casted shadow.

"I received a call from Amber Sultria," he gulped, "-I don't know how she got a hold of my number," he held the device, showing a strange untraceable number, "-I have news, bad news."

"Out with it," he firmed.

"Emperor Lucifer Dawnstar has left," he blinked, "-he's gone."

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"What do you mean gone?"

"Hear it for yourself," he tapped, a recording of the call played.

"Markus, Markus, I know you're still alive. Your big sister still has her ways to do business. I need your help, Markus, help me take back Alphaia from their hands. The church has grown too influential, they threaten capture, they speak of a coup, I might not live through this year. Help me, Markus, I don't know what to do, Alphaia's a shell of what it was."

"I don't know who about Markus, lady, you have the wrong number."

"Markus, stop and listen. Lucifer is gone, I found our room empty. I'm due, I can't do this alone. My people have turned their backs on me, the war in Iqavea eaten has every last bit of money the imperial family has. Markus, please, I need your help, we can't survive... I'll do anything, please come home, I've had enough, I don't want to be head of state, I want to leave, I want to run... please, Markus, we're family."

"FAMILY DOES NOT SCHEME TO KILL THEIR OWN!" the call ended abruptly.

The clandestine gathering sought answers to equally confused reactions. "What's the problem exactly?" inquired Minerva, "-as I see it, we have nothing to worry about. Markus is dead far as the world is

concerned. Eira," she turned, "-would you not be partial to the idea of a life of relative peace. Hidros has been great for you, your family, and your daughter. No good will come, I tell you, nothing will."

"Thank you," she tipped her head, the hair awry off her cheeks towards the floor, "-my husband-

"He can speak for himself," Igna roared, the cabin shook.

"Brother," a frost-filled gust blew, "-don't start," came resolution.

He matched her fierceness, snapping the spell into void, "-and don't you dare mistake me for nothing. Markus, look at me," he ordered, a heavy load dropped everyone's shoulder to the ground regardless of rank or strength, "-I will not have disrespect smeared upon my good faith. Markus, your silence speaks volume. Will you take to Alphaia as chevalier to a sister who plotted for thy death. Answer me, Markus, answer me," rage induced terror threatened the very stability of the cabin – dust fell, the glass cried and the door clicked.

"NO," came screaming, "-I'M NOT UNGRATEFUL!"

The trembling vanished as if it were not there, "-good," he nodded, "-I like when people talk. Brother-in-law, best hope the plea is amusing, yes?"

Nothing described the moment, nothing save the look of horror that had gripped Markus' features. Eira reached over and patted his head, "-no more intimidation," she growled, "-no more, you hear, Igna!" an affront to her standing.

"Wait, Eira, are you mad at me?"

"Obviously," she took one large step and grabbed his collar on one hand and summoned a blade of ice with the other, "-how dare you use petty intimidation on me, your damned sister. You don't go around disrespecting family, it's a new low, even for you," she threw his collar and returned beside Markus, "-don't you dare do that ever again, UNDERSTAND!"

Igna rose both hands as surrender, "-I apologize, I didn't mean any disrespect, my sister."

"Good," she winked, "-as long as it's understood."

'Got me again,' he narrowed, '-Eira, how shrewd of a sister you are.'

Markus rose his chest and breathed. The preparations were small but present, nervousness brought palpitation and blurriness. 'If I speak the wrong word, he'll have my head. How low can I possibly fall,' he blinked from one to the other, '-I was emperor of Alphaia, I was praised and revered. What's happened to me, where's my bravado, where's the trait that made me who I am? I should be ashamed, I've dishonored the Sultria name, I don't deserve the moniker, I don't, I certainly don't have the right to ask for favors... what a predicament... if only I had-' therein, an idea clicked.

"Brother," he pulled himself at equal vision to Igna, "-I'm going to Alphaia."

"And?"

"My decision is made. I will need assistance," he looked over at Eira.

"Before any grand speeches, I will ask only of one thing. Give me the name of those who'll willingly go to Alpha on threats of espionage."

"Eira will come," he grabbed her hands softly, "-my wife and I will go to my home, to Alpha, a land rightfully mine. I've had enough living in the shadows of the Haggards, I want my name, Sultria spoke of with prominence."

"Eira can't go," narrowed Igna, "-I won't allow my most trusted minister to simply abandon ship. Hidros is nothing without my ministers, it's nothing without those who built from the foundation up. I'm no fool nor am I unjust. Markus, tell me once more, what is your plan?"

"If I can't take Eira," he calmly grabbed Igna's shoulder, "-then I will simply have to ask my brother-in-law for assistance, won't I?"

The remark came suddenly, Igna burst in whole-hearted laughter, "-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA," a single tear contoured his visage as he grabbed the stomach in pain, "-I can't," he laughed furthermore, "-Markus, you unpredictable fool. I accept," he eased.

"MAJESTY!" thundered Alta, "-you simply cannot."

"I second Alta," came from Minerva and Eira, "-a king can't leave his kingdom," therein, with a simple smile and shakes of the head, they knew what they said. Igna held a smug expression, "-should I spell it out?" he grinned evermore.

"It would apply if the king did anything," Minerva exhaled heavily, "-whatever, my king," came sarcastically, "-you always do as thee peace anyway. What's the difference."

Disgruntled acceptance followed, "-thank you, Igna."

"No, no. My help isn't cheap," he looked at Eira, "-I will watch over your husband and see to it no harm is done."

"What is it the devil wishes in exchange?"

"The Philosophy of Ventria,"

"No," she crossed her arms, "-no way, you're not getting a hand on Nexsolium's most precious grimoire. I won't allow it."

He moved and held her shoulder, "-Eira, give me the book. I just want to check one thing, that is all. It will be in our best interest," he twisted the grip, "-and, under the record, I want you to become a member of the Shadow Realm. I want us to merge our powers, I will then know you to be safe."

"Igna," she gripped his wrist, "-choose between the book or me. You can't have both."

He paused for a solid minute, '-Philosophy of Ventria has answers about the Watchers. Vengeance stole part of Morpheus's powers; if it's to become useful, I have to get my hand on that grimoire. On the other hand, there's Eira, the one whom I rescued as Staxius and live with as her younger brother. Between family and knowledge, what is it I truly desire?'

Crimson and white shot open, “-you,” he smiled, “-thinking about it meant seeking my inner desire. No one should lie to themselves, and you, my sister, are most precious to us.”

She smiled an icy-warm grin, “-I knew you’d pick me, I know your priorities, brother. If you had chosen Ventria – it would have been the last of our bond as siblings. We are equals, regardless of how powerful you or I become, we are equal and we are family,” she grabbed and pulled his forehead against hers, “-hear me, Igna.”

“I do,” he also grabbed her back and tapped, “-as siblings, we live, and as siblings, we shall watch the death and rebirth of all.”

Thus it was decided, “-Alta, have Midne ready us for departure. We will leave later tomorrow. Markus, I will borrow Eira – take the chance and spent it with Gallienne, she misses you.”

“I will,” the cabin emptied – darkness swallowed the outskirts gluttonously. Thick foliage hid the outwardly active nightlife. A piercing wind blew from a singular path amidst the forest, “-why did we come here?”

“To stay away from the castle,” she lit a cigarette, “-getting away from the chaos inside does good for the body,” the cold and narrow path broke into a wide space, and the view expanded fully on Lei, the district lit ablaze. Spots lights took the sky, “-Vorn is performing for the last time today.”

“Well, good performers never die,” he conjured a portal, “-we head to my realm, brace yourself, I’m very proud of what it’s become.”

“Lead the way, brother.”

Chapter 1045: Elixir of Engratse.

‘He mentioned so in passing, he said the Shadow Realm was his home, he said the place was amazingly advanced and peaceful. Nothing comes to what he said,’ Eira and Igna pulled onto a floating isle, a label marked its name, location, altitude, and heading. The sky was nothing more than an inconvenience, so she examined through her wonderous gaze. Swimming was a method of crossing the seas invented for convenience. Similarly, those of the Shadow Realm invented their own way of traveling across space. A massive grin peered onto the capital; an expansive array of buildings and patches of nature. The continent was large, very large, and also, very strenuous on the weak. The intense mana-spheric pressure, a name picked in honor of atmospheric pressure, was extreme.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

A buckle snapped, and Eira stumbled, “-you alright?” he shuffled and took her shoulder, “-are you okay?”

“Yeah?” rose a rather tried expression, “-am I pale?”

“Yeah, paler than usual?”

“The mana, it’s hard to breathe...”

“My apologies,” he took her hand and leaped, landing perfectly in one of many elegant watchtowers. Everything here played as if a movie; it was better than a movie for it was reality, their reality. The folks,

residents, were very pretty. No, a single one could be said to be unattractive – complexion ranged from one end to the next. Though the latter might have differed, the lack of black and brown hair was astounding, a complete opposite against Orin. The clothes drifted back, and Eira held a murderous leer.

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“What?” he returned calmly, shrugging the dust off his shoulder, “-should I have given a word of warning?”

“Yeah, a head’s up would have been nice.”

Was long until they came upon the outside. Igna’s castle reign supremely on their side. Its shadow was enormous – a stark difference between the sun and not as shown in the differing hues. Common hit Eira like a train – replace flying airships with floating islands. The sky counted more of them – flying freights linked the many stops – dragons roared deathly roars and flapped their wings with tornadoesque strength.

“Young master,” bowed many retainers.

‘Powerful,’ she gulped, ‘-they don’t have to look intimidating or anything, a simple smile reveals the true terror. How is this place possibly real?’ Questions floated until a grand entrance. The palace stretched with unbelievable strength – gold, gems, name it and there it was plainly displayed. No security either, anyone could reach, grab, and flee. Stronger individuals roamed the halls – a gentlemanly butler courteously approached, “-my lord, might I be of service?” came elegantly.

“Yes,” returned Igna, “-I’ve come to initiate my sister.”

The butler scanned; “-shall I ready the Ilian Hall?”

“Have the usual items be brought. I will need the area to be cleared.”

“Understood my lord,” he nodded, “-if I may be so bold, the lounge has been very much dull without the guardians. My lord, will you not pay them a visit?”

“I will,” and thus, the butler vanished into smoke. Eira stumped at the raw power of the attendant and saw her opportunity rise when they entered a room of various passageways.

“Igna!” she pulled and forced him aside, knocking his head against a marble pillar, “-what the fuck is this?”

“...” he casually checked for blood, inhaled, and grabbed her arms, “-Eira, stop freaking out!”

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“HOW?” Footsteps; he cupped her mouth and side-glanced, ‘-no one,’ came an exhale, “-what’s with you?”

“No, what’s with you?” she gasped, “-don’t you dare silence me again.”

“My bad. Tell me, what’s the matter?”

“The butler,” she muffled, “-was he not arch-demon ranked?”

“Aha,” he smiled, “-you noticed, yes?”

“Why are such powerful entities your servant?”

A quick tap marked the resumption of their walk, “-you see, my dear sister – I had a dream, I had a plan – I did what I did for the sole purpose of this. The Shadow Realm, is a place without rivals, a place where gods and demons alike can fight asylum. I don’t mind their allegiance, and honestly, I don’t care. They can attack or fight – I’m confident in my people. What’s a criminal if he can’t act upon the more primal instinct? They’re rats, aimlessly prowling a den of lions. You see, I don’t have to care – I know the outcomes.”

“I guess. What about the pressure, it is not normal for a realm...”

“Such the fun part, my sister, the Shadow Realm doesn’t have a single core. The world is strong, it gets stronger the more we feed. Trust me, Vesper and her people have taken care of extra-dimensional conquest.”

“What do you mean?” before her question even reached, a door opened suddenly. The question did come, he simply blinked at a large gathering of strange artifacts. Glass cages held on pedestals contained various hovering orbs. Some differed in size, others in width or else color.

“Looks like planets.”

“Correct,” he smiled, “-for every world, we capture and absorb, their people and lifeforce and forfeit. If they survive the Shadows, they can live in peace. We’re just, well, to some extent. Don’t get the wrong idea – tis not tyranny. If they’re worth saving, whether culturally or whatnot, they’re spared and given shelter.”

“The planets?”

“The conquered,” he said, “-the captured. The defeat turned into a core for the betterment of the Shadows. Julius was a great help, I am sorry about the strain it put on him. Too bad, such is the price to pay sometimes.”

Eira’s heels slammed, “-what did you do to him?”

“Nothing grave,” he echoed her defiance, “-sister, it would be best for us to remain calm. Julius is healthy and happy. He’s back home.”

“Are you hiding the truth? If not, I dare you to lie to my face.”

He smiled.

“IS THIS FUNNY?”

He rose his arms and snapped, “-sister,” more lights flashed, “-do not underestimate the Shadows,” before her stretched a harrowing sight. The planets, previously in the dozen, skyrocketed to hundreds – the lesser attractive were thrown onto shelves and locked. Godly items placed upon racks and holds, relics spoken of in legends were at arm’s reach.

“What on earth?”

"Sister," said a sinister grin, "-we're not good people, we never claimed to be good people. I'm fair as are my accolades. If we want something, we take it, if there's room for negotiation, we negotiate. We treat people how they treat us, and you, my precious sister," a shockwave brought the goddess to her knee, "-are no exception for impartiality is the bane of justness."

"Justness?" she laughed, "-dig yourself out of the ground, Igna. What I see are genocide and ruthlessness. There's nothing courageous or brave – you're nothing more than a monster."

He vanished and reappeared with a hand on her shoulder, "-and who do you think I am?" he leaned with sharp canines, "-Eira, remember my title, I'm the Devil."

A creak shattered the tension, "-my lord, the hall has been readied."

"Excellent," he clapped, "-sister, please follow me."

She stood with his aid, '-the prophecy might be real,' and walked with distance, '-Igna's... I don't know, I don't get anything about him. I can't judge his action, the thoughts are whimsical... that room screamed of pure evil, pure power. The prophecy,' her heart raced, '-this sinking feeling, Igna, are you...' her pace slowed, "-Igna."

"Yeah?"

"On the day when three joins one, and one becomes whole, no entity of greater strength shall surpass the might of he who controls the three. By the powers bestowed on the circle of creation and death – by the rules imposed for the sanctity of reality, and the safeguard of everything; nothing mustn't awaken for if he bears his true intent, all will fall without resistance."

"My prophecy," he blinked, "-what of it?"

"Nothing mustn't awaken," she gulped, "-you've awakened, haven't you?"

"Nothing is me," he said, "-the prophecy is a warning to the heavens, a warning to the factions who see me as foe. Look here, Eira, I won't hold your hand or dictate thy action. As goddess, you have the right to freedom. We've butted heads in the past and I don't mind doing so. You fear me," he said, "-I sense your terror, you fear the Shadows, you fear what I've built. This here is my legacy, my ultimate quest accomplished. What side will you take, will it be a repeat of history of when the gods and demons struck my heart and enslaved my people, will it be the same where they storm my realm and steal it by force? No," pure unbridled rage sparked in purple, "-I won't stand by. If they want to come, I invite them, and you, my sister, must choose nigh."

"Brother, you're not the same."

"Neither are you," he narrowed, "-you're focused on your family, focused on your husband. I'm grateful, I truly am grateful. Eira, you're my family, and family is those you're willing to die for. I'll die, hell, I've killed for them. What about, am I your family? Do you think I'm repulsive?" he inched forward, "-am I, not family, have I not proven myself time and time again? Must we go through the cycle of doubt and trust, must we be subject to our worldly emotions, WHY DON'T YOU SEE ME FOR WHO I AM!" a pulse shattered windows and walls. Retainers arrived with high-tier magic, stopping the fall and reconstructing the damage as if nothing happened. "My apologies," he exhaled, "-I got out of hand. Forget what I said," he spun, "-will you join the Shadows?"

“I refuse.”

Igna’s shoulder dropped, “-you refuse,” he stared at the ceiling, “-I thought this would happen. Suppose my predictions have been right in my time as Staxius. Your guardian said we would butt heads – we’re one of the same, therefore, we don’t match. Such are thy exact thoughts,” a hiss permeated, Igna lifted his right arm – the translucent coil of a reptile fuzzed, “-the curse of misfortune is my companion. No matter the opposite, Eira, I will win, no one stands a chance against us. The Shadow will retaliate, we will destroy lest our peace is left unharmed.”

“Igna, it’s not that,” she dropped on one knee, “-I lied. I was never in control,” her right eye spurred flickers of yellow – a thick veil of darkness corroded half her body – machinelike tubes impaled her right and left, “-I’m sorry, I don’t think I can-”

He turned and exclaimed, “-Gergusser, SHIELD HER HEART!” an ice shield thickened, and he opened his palm, “-take them, Serpent!” two unblinking sockets glared, and a shockwave of peerless power tore through the very essence of reality. Her body split, one half fell backward with resemblance to a spirit – long curly hair with hands pressed in prayer tipped into vacant space; nothing. The other, physical and infuriated, gasped, “-Artanos,” grinned Igna, “-you lose this time. Don’t bother trying to find the Shadows,” he moved, “-for, no matter the light shown, a shadow is always cast,” the serpent hissed, he held up his arm, “-take him,” venom filled teeth sunk through reality and touched the thread.

Qhildir shot upright and gasped, “-he found us out.”

“No, he didn’t,” returned an enamored Artanos, “-what about Eira, I thought she was your pawn. How did the connection break?”

“I don’t know, I had her drink the elixir of Engratse.”

“Whatever,” he scanned, coming upon a bite mark on Qhildir’s arm, “-what’s that?” took a minute for the conclusion, “-the curse of misfortune?” gulped a frightened Qhildir... “-what-”

“No, impossible, the curse shouldn’t work like that... no, the curse can’t play favorites, it can’t, it goes beyond what’s written in scriptures.”

“Artanos,” shrunken cheeks and sunken pupils glared, “-look what you’ve done... look what you’ve done,” the god fell into a deep slumber, the skin wrinkled and age took its toll, “-SHIT!” he kicked the bed and shook his shoulders, “-WAKE UP, QHILDIR!”

No response, ‘-Igna,’ he gritted, ‘-no use. Qhildir’s not going to wake... he takes with him the whole of Nexsolium. I shouldn’t have trusted the god of philosophy, what a joke... no matter,’ stronger warriors lined against the wall, ‘-I will have my revenge, trust, Devil, trust. This is more than enough to prove your threat

Chapter 1046: Weird Place

Cruse stood beside his partner, Igna. A sorry sight laid upon a large comfy bed of beige. Maids made trips. Various items were brought – potions, scrolls, name it and the medium laid. “The elixir of Engratse,” Cruse commented. Igna, who sat beside the unconscious and heavily wounded Eira, rose a blank gaze, “-the Elixir?”

"Yeah," the man proceeded over Eira, grabbed and pulled her lower lips – brown stain marred her gums, "-Engratse is the god of alchemy. The man's renowned for inventing various potions able to act on heavenly beings and the likes."

"Could have been another?"

"No," Cruse stood firm, "-the perfect tell is under her chin," they rose her head, and under laid the symbol of an alchemic flask – a flask. "Need more proof?"

"No," returned Igna solemnly, "-I did what I could," the gaze shifted left and right, "-never expected that level of maliciousness. Serpent, you bite the invader?"

"Yes, and I have no doubt the victim lays in a deep slumber. I do wonder, why is she in that comatose state. We relieved her soul and you imbued her with life anew. We did all as is written in the Deishik records. This result's not possible, it's just not."

"Deishik record wasn't our only option. I could have forced her soul into another body."

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"Wrong," interjected the serpent with an all-knowing gaze, "-for someone of high intellect, you sure think of stupid ideas. Igna, I say this with your best interest – the otherworldly matters are yet accustomed in thy mind. You know but you don't, it's a paradox that separated mortals from the immortals. Different laws apply, if not no laws, the latter cases are most difficult to handle. Eira is the Guardian of Nexsolium, the Librarian – she's earned her title of goddess and currently ranks as a mid-tier goddess, impressive for she has a domain, the library. What we don't know is how deeply the Librarian is affected," Cruse moved from the bed directly into Igna's line of sight, "-hear me, Igna, Eira's injuries won't be healed using brute force. Finding the answer will be strenuous, I dare say she might never wake. The attack I used was one beyond the realm of reality – we both understand Nothing as our common creed. Tis akin to blasting someone out of existence."

"I know, it was an in-the-moment decision. Never expected an infiltration of the soul..."

"Tis the power of Engratse. We have the matter of Orin, what will you choose, Igna?"

"The decision was made before I even decided," *Hear me, Vengeance, thy master calls,* a flash of pure power shook the very castle ground.

"Orders my master."

"Vengeance, you dealt with the matter of Morpheus nicely. The Ruler of Dreams shan't interject," the crossed regards were filled with meaning, "-head to Orin, deliver a message to Elixia, Alta, and éclair. Be my replacement – I can only guess at how long it might take. The task ahead," he glanced Eira's unconscious body, "-is a tall order."

The spirit glanced, "-do you have something to say?" Igna asked.

"My master, are you proceeding into the heavenly realm? Has the time come for my master to enter the battlefield of the gods?"

"Yes, now's better time as any," he dashed to the window and peered, "-the preparation has been made," a darkened orb hovered above his open palm, "-I feel my element resounding, it's anxious. I'm ready as it can be," said a smug smile.

"Will it not be moving into their hands?" inferred Cruse.

Igna fixed the man's unblinking stare, "-partner, you should know by now, Artanos isn't dead. You must have bitten some other poor sod. He'll use said opportunity to spread the word about my presence. I defeat before them. As is said, fool me once. shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

"I get it."

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"Vengeance, are you ready?"

"My master," he bowed, "-will be okay if I use the Shadow army?"

"Do as you wish, I have one condition, don't destroy the world or its people. Use the Shadows sparsely, we don't want a spotlight on Orin, do we now?"

He came upon the window and looked at Igna, "-I must apologize in advance.'

"For what?"

"For what's to come," a grin sparked, "-the war might end."

"Long as it's a collective decision, what happens, happens." Thus, Vengeance disappeared – leaving Igna with Cruse and the unconscious Eira. There was a great amount of doubt and deep thoughts. Igna kept his gaze outward, watching the passing scenery of roaring dragons and advanced technology.

Knock, knock, "-Enter."

"Igna, good to see you," came the stone-faced Formle, "-how are you?"

"God of War," stared back coldly, "-glad to see the good shape."

He flexed; "-the constant battled in Draebala's strengthens a man's build. Not to mention the overpowering flow coming from the Shadow Realm. I heard rumors about what happened, is she the princess?" to which he walked over and examined, "-Engratse's work," he shook his head, "-that man's a terrifying deity, counted as an Anarchist God, same as me. You know, the type of God of an 'other' allegiance."

"Was I the only one clueless?" he paused, "-Formle, how goes the battle in Draebala?"

"I thought my reports were delivered?"

"They were, I refer to now."

"We're a growing faction. Full war's broken out in the central continent – I tell you, the alliance between Aapith and Eipea didn't last long. Aapith took their chances and allied with Titans, Eipea, as the strongest, fortified, and turtled in their regions, The Shadows are fighters for the people, such is the reputation Starix said would work best. We've taken in nobles from the other kingdoms and have

separated the Zayan into two entities – one ruled by us, the other, by the people, as our vassal. Things are pretty grand; your children do good work.”

“They should,” he peered silently, “-Formle, I would be happy to chat, sadly,” he looked at Eira, “-I must find a way to heal my sister.”

“If it’s Engratse, why not ask him?” escaped without much thought. The problem instantly clicked, “-and where do I find him?” narrowed Igna. Formle waited, staring intently at Igna until he widened his gaze, “-my apologies, I didn’t mean that literally. Tis a figure of speech, a bad habit I got from always heading to the source of the problem. You know, when a noble decides to not cooperate – a personal visit, you know?”

“Ah yes,” he smiled, “-the Haggard way of negotiations. So,” he looked again, “-any idea where I might find this Engratse?”

“No idea... I mean, wait,” the eyes shut for an instant, “-Violetta might know.”

“Who?”

“Violetta, the weaver of destiny. She has a shop right here in the capital, I think there,” to which he pointed in a vague direction, “-the place’s quaint and frequent destination for lovers,” a telepathic message caught his attention, and he moved his arm towards the ear and nodded, “-I ought to go. Good luck, Igna, may you find the answer thee seeks,” he rushed for the door and stopped, “-I know you know this but, Igna, the four Generals are no longer in the Shadow Realm. Did they leave on their own accord or simply got bored, I don’t know, what I understand is that the Shadow Realm is powerful and overwhelming – a perfect domain for anyone wanting to conquer the whole of eternity. Well, tis my belligerent side talking, conquests are always fun. I will be on my way, fare thee well.”

The invisible Cruse materialized, “-interesting fellow,” he added, “-considering Formle is also an Anarchist Deity,” he caught Igna’s movement in the peripheral, turned to see him throwing on the suit-jacket and tapping his feet, “-come on, serpent,” he stretched his arm, the boy morphed and coiled, “-Cruse, you know you can head home if you want. I’ll take it from here,” deep resolute pupils watched, “-alright,” it puffed.

‘No hesitation,’ came a perplexed laugh, “-I’m heading out, sister,” he neared the bed and caressed her forehead, “-I promise everything will be fine. I’ll make sure you return as one of the Shadows. I’ll do anything, even if it means killing a god. Rest well, sister, rest well.”

Wings spread, he flapped – darkened angelic features fell as he circled the sky. The to and fro was harsh, air-space was rather populated, “-watch where you’re going,” cried in the vague distance – people flew and rode in flying carriages. Special routes planned with a special string displayed the various routes and directions. ‘-A road in the sky,’ he shook his head with a smile and carried on – a bigger isle rose a few kilometers from the castle. ‘-Looks promising,’ he flapped, passed clouds and the beautiful downward cityscape to the road, or air-route headed northeast.

“The Romadian Island,” read one sign. A massive shadow passed overhead, ‘-a black drakin?’ a beast of the size of cargo planes back in Orin, flapped past to Romadian. Many couples turned to catch a glimpse of Igna – the visage was easy on the eyes, as for the hair color – seeing as there laid commonness, many thought he was but a handsome man taking a stroll. Some gave scrupulous squints, ‘-couples...’ he

observed, ‘-great...’ came sarcastically. The route mapped horizontally with the isle’ bricked. Two final flaps and he landed, coming to a stop after a small jog. He tapped his shoulders, clearing away sparkles, and scanned.

“Visitor, over here,” hailed a guard, “-you there, sir, please come this way,” they segregated the coming groups. A terminal-like structure rose, “-visitors are requested to pay their visiting fee at the kiosk, thank you,” spoke the intercoms. ‘Payment?’ he followed the queue, glancing over the shoulders of visitors and generally looking about. ‘-Romadian island wasn’t here last time I checked. What’s with money?’ the queue passed till Igna stared at an attendant blankly, “-name and payment, sir,” came a monotonous response. He leaned closer, “-Igna Haggard, no payment.” She blew a laugh and rose her head, “-sir, we stop people for looking at the guests bizarrely. We won’t fall for the scam. Romadian island is under the authority of Goddess Lilith, as such, we request payment on her behalf. I humbly implore you to pay the visiting fee, thank you.”

“I’m the Watcher of the Shadow Realm, for the love of god, give me some credit...”

“Sir, please step aside if you won’t pay,” she hailed guards with angelic wings, “-take him away,” ordered the attendant, “-claims to be the Watcher.”

“Another one?” the guards laughed, “-please sir if you would follow us.”

A room labeled, “-waiting area,” opened to a rather strained-looking interior. Empty tables paired with chairs. Gaged, chained and otherwise restrained guests filled said chairs.

“Sir, if you would wait for a few minutes, we have to check a few things.”

The guards simply left. The other ‘guests’ threw sympatric gaze as he settled. ‘-Impossible, why didn’t they believe I am who I am?’

“Ah, got caught sneaking in?”

“...”

“Yeah, you,” said a short but energetic fellow, “-I’m talking to you, new guy. Don’t worry, the angelic police are lax. They’ll give you a slap on the wrist and then, freedom.”

“What about you?”

“I got caught many times,” he chuckled, “-Romadian island has to be protected because of lady Violetta. She’s a well-known overseer, we have guests visiting her for consult all the time. She’s a superstar, the pride of the capital. Did you sneak in trying to get a reading?”

“Not exactly, no, why?”

“Man, she’s hard to get a hold. Once you get a taste of her talents, it’s hard to go back.”

Something about their clothes, Igna observed closely, “-why’s everyone dressed with a similar make?”

“Her talents baby,” cheered the man, “-she gives a reading only if you buy her clothes. Let me add, those things cost a pretty penny.”

“Mr. Etern,” came loudly, “-Mr. Etern!”

“My call,” he stood, “-nice talking, hope we don’t meet here anytime soon.”

He left, “-Mr. Igna,” came from the other side, “-Mr. Igna!”

‘What a weird place,’ he clambered, ‘-what a weird place...’

Chapter 1047: Romadian

Sleepy-eyed and bored, “-any reason to why someone may impersonate the Watcher?” white teeth pressed against a pen, “-sir,” the officer, or so it seemed by the outfit, rose her chin and slowly tapped her desk. “Sir, I don’t have all day,” her body shifted and looked behind the expressionless guest. He, without so much a word say, turned for the door and moved. “Resistance is a matter to be tried under the Elemental Guardians,” memories of stronger beings whelmed, a sinking sensation grabbed his chest, he flip and stormed her desk, “-DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?”

A single strand of hair buckled, “-no?” came a sarcastic expression,” -that’s why you and I are here, hello, are you right in the head, sir?”

“You little pes-” the door widened, “-let the man go,” came a supervising officer.

“Has yet paid his fee.”

“Don’t worry about the fee,” narrowed the officer, “-we’ll discuss the incident at a later date,” the compressed expression – more on the lines of harshly knitted brows, released at Igna’s sight, “-if you would follow me,” came a similarly subdued tone.

The chaos of entry and departure faded in the way distance. The officer, a man of rather strong build, waited underneath foliage parked alongside walkways.

“Explain?”

.....

“My lord, you should be more careful. It’s hard enough to keep track of so much. Without warning from the castle, our predicament might have escalated direly. I heard much from Formle – lady Violetta is at her estate far north.”

“What about the situation inside?”

“My lord, best leave said disturbance to us, please?”

“Fine,” the wings shrieked, “-I’m not very accustomed to the ever-evolving ways of the Shadows. Send my compliments to the workers, especially the lass who pressed my patience. She deserved praise for the unwavering attitude.”

“I will. My lord, if it’s not too much concern, I would rather you keep to the walkways. Flight zones above are reserved for transit, we wouldn’t want any incidents perturbing our balance.”

He sheathed his wings, tapped his legs, and cracked his fingers. “Suppose I ought to take the scenic route.” Romadian island didn’t disappoint. Any feeling of urgency to Eira’s troubles seemed nothing more than a little inconvenience. ‘People here worship the Watcher and the four generals. I shouted and nothing happened, even the officer, he didn’t once bat an eye at the intensity of my lingering aura.

Residents of the shadows don't take no for an answer, they're true to their hearts. Such conviction is the only product of fantasy... how poetic. I set about creating a utopia, the latter crafted itself into a far better realm. People make a house a home, and here, the population made the land into theirs. They shaped society and are adept at managing on their own. A self-ruling kingdom – the ideal Rosespire of Hidros.' Romadian, aside from the romantic and pure-hearted affection, carried another side, one made apparent on the walk north. 'The air is pure,' he breathed, finally settling into the island's own atmosphere, '-serenity and peace. A sense of driftyness from one's own mind. Escaping one's own thoughts; it's amazing.' He said it best, and visitors caught on; many spent their times under the shades of beautifully grown trees on a seat made of soft grass, "-I feel at peace."

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A moment's respace was only but a moment's respace. After the bench warming couples and meditating mindful individuals, the pathway opened to less nature and more angular houses – soft on the eyes and easy on the surroundings.

'A village,' he walked through the center, passing a well around which many children of non-human features, flapped their wings and threw spells. Fireballs, snowballs, lightning surge, the basics of the basics. A stray ball flung passed his face and burnt a single hair. The recognizable smell drifted, "-sorry," waved the child, "-didn't mean to send the magic your way," to which they ran back to their mischievous games. He spurred on.

"Strong," mumbled audibly, he'd passed the village and entered a denser thicket, "-those kids were using spells that'd count as mid to high tier if ranked. To think they're only kids, living in the more unstabilized parts of the Shadows. I shouldn't be surprised," a few shakes of the head, "-I knew the risks when embarking onto this journey. The faster the horse, the stronger the leash. If the balance falls, even mildly, there could be unrepairable damage done," big protruding walls broadened.

"Violetta estate," read a bronze plate. The image of a vampiric castle would be wrongly associated with said particular building. It wasn't big nor overwhelming – the walls were tall but only to one's shoulder. Glancing over was Childsplay for a man of average size could tiptoe and see what he sought. Altars and strange statues took the forefront, symbology, and meaning following the Violitian Sect, or else an organization dedicated to the study of witchcraft. Orin had its own version – to put it simply, the symbology was linked to the Weaver of Destiny, Violetta. Her own barrier domed over the estate, and the forest's animosity grew at the intruder – humble shades turned eerie patches of darkness, the kind one experience whilst walking down a dark alley or into an abandoned building. Igna took his stand and pressed, arriving at the gates and bellowed three loud crashes.

The forest rang, "-kicking the gates might not have been a good idea," the scraped mess of his leather shoes stared back blankly, almost with a sort of disappointing sigh. The main entrance opened followed by an equally loud, "-WHAT?"

"Here to meet Violetta."

"Not here, come back another day."

He lunged, formed a fist, and shattered the barrier, ancient symbols of power dimmed, “-won’t take no for an answer,” he glared at the attendant, who, with a brief motion, parted her purple hair and tilted her head, “-it’s you.”

“Can say the same thing about you,” Igna returned smugly, “-I broke the barrier,” he flicked a rather old lock and entered, “-I’ll let myself in.” The attendant’s wide gaze waited patiently, she blocked the doorway with crossed arms, “-long time no see, Angela. Good to see you doing so well.”

“The feeling isn’t mutual,” her focus loomed at the shattered barrier, “-why?”

“Because you wouldn’t have believed me.”

“Obviously I would,” her voice felt strange – discrepancies he immediately locked and went into investigative mode. ‘Blocked doorway, shattered barrier, lack of response save a loud scream. Not like someone who knows’ reaction,’ he took another step, this time climbing the stair, “-no!” came a resolute Angela, “-my lady Violetta’s not feeling we-” before she finished, he pivoted on the same foot and dashed for a window. ‘-got her,’ he smiled, she jumped after trying to block his view – alas, in the same motion of seemingly heading to the window, he spun and sprinted inside.

“I win,” he stopped, “-don’t lie, Angela, what happened to the Weaver of Destiny?”

“Whatever,” she closed the door and ambled upward, “-what, not going to follow?” she jabbed once in the middle of the stairs, “-come on then, unwanted guest.”

The outline of a lady rocking back and forth lit in the translucent reflection of a circular window. Her motion cast a massive shadow along the back – a thin veil of dust covered some part of the area – there were signs of inoccupation. The frigid figure swayed constantly. The closer they approached, the thinner grew the apparition. Violetta’s wrinkled visage was paler and strenuous, her cheeks were hallowed and a horrified expression froze her face still.

“She’s dead?”

“I don’t know,” Angela passed Igna and cupped the Weaver’s wrinkled long fingers, “-when I call mistress’ name, her eyes spark for the smallest of seconds. Might be my imagination... I found her here before you ask. No idea when or how – my duties were mostly to help out at the shop... seeing her popularity, mistress decided to live in relative quietness here in Romadian. The move was worth it?” they watched, thinking about what might have caused the freeze, “-why did you come, Igna?”

“Angela, tell me,” he summoned two seats from nowhere and faced the white outline, “-what were you thinking?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Maybe it’s a sort of disease, I mean, snakes have to shed, maybe tis mistress’ way of shedding?”

“Ever the optimist.”

“Why the visit?”

“My sister,” he turned, “-I’m here to heal my sister. I needed Violetta’s foresight to see what I need,” the smile turned sinister as he faced Angela, “-you can’t fool me. How long will the mind games play out,

Violetta, let's see how much you can endure.' The expression had quite the entertaining look on Angela, her long ears wiggled.

"Violetta's gone," he stood, grabbed her collar, and pulled, exposing her collar bone under which laid her symbol of power, "-looks interesting," he summoned a few symbols of his own, "-I heard it mentioned in the Deishik record, symbols of dead or immobile entities can be taken by anyone who wields a particular spell. One lost to the ages, the ancient arts of Mystian, falling under the authority of the great-god Grostian of the VIth Fall, by calling his name and shredding the symbol from the target, one can simply assimilate their powers and make it their own. Hurry up," he glanced over his shoulder, "-Angela, bring me a knife."

The floorboard creaked, the glimmer of a blade and its shadow took the vacant attic, "-bad idea," she struck and broke the weapon, Death's pentagram vividly ambered, "-killing Death is pointless," he rose, shrouding the room in a darkened mist of pure dread, "-I say with my chest, Angela, you've sin for undermining my powers," the shattered blade hovered in a circle around her neck, "-I'm fair and try to not come across as hypocritical. I don't mind using another identity to get what one wants – the fear of revealing a secret should be on your account, not mine. You were foolish to assume, Angela, or should I say, reincarnation of Violetta," her trapped body faded and reappeared behind with another blade pressed against Igna's neck, "-as the prophecy said, you must be eliminated, Igna, you can't be allowed to become one. Three must never be one, you have to die, I'm sorry."

"The one who sees all is confident," he exhaled, "-I command the efforts, Violetta, however, I must apologize," a warm sensation bellowed as a knife struck forth, blood dripped, "-you shouldn't underestimate the one who made the realm," a knife was indeed struck – the victim fell, and it was Angela who dropped on her knees with a scream. The inanimate body of Violetta remained in a stabbing motion.

"Shall I consider this a suicide?" he laughed, "-get it, because you stabbed yourself, literally?"

She tipped and fell on her side, shrieking as the pain intensified, "-the knife is a relic," he examined Violetta, "-bronze blade hails from the Hephaestus' workshop. Ah, the influence of Zeus tainted my humble abode. Violetta, why did you fake your death?"

"..."

She but suffered, her muffled cries and teary eyes were a sight to behold, "-we met so long ago, I said I wasn't your enemy and that I didn't take your sight... seems you regained them and were not happy about the conditions. Let me guess, Lucifer added the condition that I must be slain for the sight to remain."

"..."

"I'll take that as confirmation. Should have known such a worthless plot wouldn't have helped. I heard Violetta gave readings to those who purchased her clothes, from what it seemed, the shop is popular and people are more excited to come than before. Rationale leads to a simple conclusion, you couldn't have died since they validate her presence," he loomed over, waiting for any response but got none.

"Weaver of Destiny," he knelt, "-far as I'm concerned, whatever deal you made will be nullified. The demons won't return your sight – there's more and I wish I knew. Why look far when the answer is

here,” he smiled, “-I am Igna Haggard, the Watcher of the Shadow Realm and the one feared as Nothing.”

Chapter 1048: The Great God Grostian

Heavy pants and a looming sense of dread captured Angela’s face. She breathed or tried – the wound ambered periodically. Her purple hair was awry, the softness marred for plumps tied by her blood, latter of which followed the creases and hallow lines of the floor.

“Violetta, poor old Violetta,” a chair summoned, “-how could you be so foolish?” he straddled the chair and sat with its back in front, the chin kindly laid over the crossed arms, “-efforts ought be rewarded, I think?” her painful expression crossed with crinkles, noiseless sighs and exhales lessened. Color in her cheeks dulled, beauty of the living was true as for when the living die – the corpse laid as but an ugly remain of what hides inside. Guts, gore – a disgusting display. “A lady’s beauty is only surface level for when one seeks deep, they find the organs,” came randomly, “-someone said that, I think, don’t know. Weaver of Destiny, when are you planning to drop the act?” There was no act to drop. He watched. Her eyes slowly faded – the glimmer of life within dimmed. The eyelid froze, the color of her iris – a cross between light brown and green bleached into white. Something Igna was very familiar with, something his body did when the powers surged.

“Seriously?” he leaned on the chair and narrowed, “-are you honestly going to die?” a bronzy flare flashed. The shadow of the clouds released for the sun to shriek a powerful ray, “-the knife?” he stood, peculiar to bronze hue. It laid protruding from Angela’s side-way corpse, the pommel or handle of the knife, it lit and carried a few intriguing engraving. Violetta, the prior body, solidified – the shadow fell beside the reincarnation – it was akin to seeing the past and the present buried at the same time. A physical representation, her body, and the ethereal manifestation, the shadow.

“Overestimated her,” he pulled and held the knife into what little light invaded, “-using anything from Hephaestus’ workshop is considered rare. Engraving tells of a very nasty spell – one of self-destruction and sufferance. Explains why she felt confident, I would be if I were in her shoe. One stab and the entity will be subject to the wrath of the great god, Grostian,” a gentle motion wiped any evidence of the blade from existence. ‘The power of Nothing,’ he ambered to the window and flicked the lock – a burst of air and outside noise rushed inward. He lit a cigarette and puffed. Outside flourished the beautiful estate, a formidable yard of likes éclair might have been jealous of, a growing orchard with the kindling of trees native to the floating isles and the distant thicket. He flipped and puffed, the wind carried the smoke.

Sun fell a few meters, the evening drew near and the forest howled. Igna waited in a weird ritualistic chamber locked deep within the estate’s secret. The pale Angela laid on her back in the middle of a pentagram. Multiple pages floated amidst a rain of ancient symbols and flashes of mana. ‘Breaking the curse is going to be difficult,’ he stood over the altar holding Angela, he rose his arms and nicked the thumb. ‘Based on my assumption, she’s dead. I miscalculated and expected too much from the Weaver of Destiny. Who wouldn’t be led astray with a title like that? She who knows all barely knows much. The curse says, ‘-whoever falls for which they are slashed or stabbed, their life-energy shall become prison on Order of the Great God, to be locked and forced into sufferance to never see the light and forever be used as the fuel for the furnace of Gieol’ I don’t know much about Grostian, the name rarely comes up in the archives. If Mantia doesn’t have it, I’m sure Nexsolium, no need dwelling on the past.’ Droplets fell. A sinking sensation bellowed, and the whole island wobbled as whispers and murmurs flooded the

visitor's collective psyche. 'Only way to find the answers is to get her back. I have a habit of making matters harder on myself.' Pages circled like a tornado, the point being the spot where the blood fell. Violent winds crashed, tearing at the rocks and religious items. *By my order, open the gates to the cursed domain, carry me to the pits of despair, take me to the realm of the Great God, Grostian,* massive gates tore up Angela, splitting her body in half as it rose from the great concentration of energy. Thick and layered by ancient diagrams – such laid the colosse 1ahead. It didn't open, no, it waited. The handles morphed into giant skulls that lashed at Igna – one bit the shoulder, the other, the leg, the sharp teeth bit and flew backward, crashing into the adjacent walls.

"Mind your tongue," he thundered. The confused skulls pulled back like a turtle, shaking as their bones clopped, "-damned guardians."

One of the skulls dropped its jaw, "-who are you?" and spoke without articulation.

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"I'm one wanting passage to Grostian's realm."

"Passage to our master is not attained easily," it said, "-for one must prove their worth before setting foot into the Great God's domain."

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"I need not prove myself," he shot back, "-for the Great God must prove himself to me."

"Stupid one," added the other, "-payment, we must have payment!"

"Wait, brother, wait," interjected the other skull, "-we mustn't be hasty. The fellow is strong, very strong, I sense his energy, I sense the intent."

"Are you sure brother?" they gawked each other, "-very well," and soon melted into giant white handles. A deep inhale and *woosh,* the gate collapsed.

'Where am I?' focus returned at the edge of a cliff with back against a raising mountain. A heavily deep brownish-red covered the horizon and the world, like a filter placed upon one's face. The hue had no highlights, no, for the darker bits were dull and bleak – inky black patches of shapes scattered here and there. 'A valley,' he observed, 'nothing for miles. Where did I bring myself too?' the more he narrowed, the lesser grew the distance.

'Whimpers?' he looked up, '-wow,' the drop over on which he stood was nothing for the cliff climbed far beyond the clouds into an equally brown skyscape. '-Guess I ought to fly,' the wings spread and he stepped, the instant he dropped, the whole perception swapped – he emerged out of a lake and fell ashore on a rocky beach. Semi-translucent waves crashed, not like the one home, but rather, ones of a weaker strength. The droplets hovered weightlessly – the domain was strange, very strange. A glance below showed his burnt feet. The shoe melted as did the pants in a more classic burnt fashion. 'Stepped off the cliff and fell, I'm sure I flapped my wings but it didn't matter. I guess I fell into the other side, what I saw as a valley was the reflection that lay on the surface. I wasn't on a cliff, I was underwater, or under whatever this veil is?' he leaned over the strange water, it drew on, emptily without stop. '-Weird lagoon,' he spun and faced craggy rocks and patches of emptiness. Some parts were there and not, '-I can sense there should be more here, there's not. Like a missing puzzle, you know what should be there

but can't picture what it represents. What realm did I get sent to?' The wings spread, '-my foot's healed, touching that surface is lethal, I should be careful,' he flapped and had vantage over the area. Once more, part of what he saw wasn't there, though he knew it ought to be. '-There should be an island there... I'm sure I know there's an island there... no, wait, why am I trying to see?' *See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth.* The real picture unveiled – mana-lines converged, and if he had opened his eyes to see, the point would be deep in the ground behind harsh surfaces. '-I know this sensation, I just have to believe,' he aimed at the point and flapped, instantly firing him at the ground. He phased right through and slowed, '-feels stable, it's more stable,' he opened to a massive furnace operated by stranger beings. Screams were thrown into gates, the churns crashed as if they ate the fuel. Waves snapped as he landed – the lashes were unforgiving. Regardless, the workers of undefinable shapes did their due.

'The furnace's tending to a domain's core. I understand, what I experience was what remains after a domain's core goes over or under its capabilities. Whoever owns this domain must be dead, there's nothing to define its reality. Long as I believe this place exists, I should be fine. The question now is who's keeping the belief, who believes? The screaming prisoners perhaps – conscious prisoners forever doomed to watch and fuel a dead domain,' a bronze-plate read, '-Gieol's furnace'.

"Help us, help me, I want to leave," escaped from suspended cages, "-help!" they begged, as he walked. The furnace burnt a couple of meters away, even raising one's head fully wouldn't give a sufficient angle to see the furnace's top.

'At the bottom carries buildings,' he marched, '-there she is, I have her string,' he followed until a workshop hidden into the bowls of the mine-like city. Buildings stacked on one another, destitute and empty of light save flickers. Hammer swings dashed, and sparks lit a heavy shadow against the walls. No doors nor windows, he approached, the swings roared. A muscular old bearded man drenched in sweat swung. '-There's Angela,' the lass was thrown in a basket with the mark, '-unworthy,' burnt into her forehead.

'No mistaking the symbol, that's Hammer of Grostian on the bicep.'

"Who's there?" the hammer dropped, "-visitor, in my domain?" he turned and tied his hair, "-who are you?"

"Might I ask who you are first?"

"Name' Grostian," he answered, "-this here is my realm, and you are?"

"Igna Haggard. You're the Great God Grostian?"

"No, no," he answered humbly, "-I was a Great God... I hate the title, I'm a Titan, not a god. Tell me, Haggard, why are you here, have you come to deliver this old man from his misery?"

"Why hasn't Death come?"

"Death can't come. What is there to take from nothing?"

"From nothing?"

"Yes boy, Nothing. Come on, I want to show you something," and so, intrigued at the strangely friendly invitation, Igna followed. Grostian pulled a torch and seeped deeper into the workshop's lower floors.

"Mind your head," he ducked and reached for a handle, "-and here we are," they exited, "-the top of the world."

"Top of the world?"

"Yeah."

A floating island in green and blue, idyllic colors and rainbows over a pearly blue lake, "-I'm proud to call this island my bastion. Working day and night to keep this place afloat is my only purpose, how long has it been, how long have I swung?" there laid emptiness in his eyes, "-questions I don't care to know."

"Grostian, I'm curious, what happened here?"

"War," they settled under a tree overlooking the lake, "-a war for love. I'm to blame for bringing him into life. I sinned for I loved. My domain's always been pretty, it has always remained a subject of worship, we used to host parties and enjoy our times. There I met her, a vixen who stole my heart. We bonded, sharing the first entity birthed from our union. Our child wasn't what I expected, I regret not taking his side, I regret my fear. I'm not a Great God, I was hailed for my powers but never respected. Our child was a curse, everything he touched decayed, he had the potential to end all... look at my domain, he killed his mother and very nearly killed me, I surrendered... he returned as an enemy to the gods and slaughtered... I couldn't fight and was overwhelmed by newer gods. The domain was ransacked... what little power I have is in Gieol, the furnace burns selfishly until the day he returns. Destiny foreshadowed my son's return, I have to survive until he comes," he turned a sympathetic smile, "-visitor, are you my son?"

Chapter 1049: "Are you my son?"

"..."

"Silence is telling. Visitor, are you or are you not my son?"

"What good would it bring if I was?"

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"So you're not my son?"

"I haven't said no either. Great God Grostian, before I answer, I would like to know more about how the realm died, how it fell, and what did you do to acquire the title of Great God as a Titan."

"You're curious," he smiled, "-let's sit." A fresh breeze whelmed from the adjacent lake; its reflection caught them many times. The water surface gently moved in tiny ant-sized waves. The scene was set, the Great God, very much old and somewhat exhausted, pushed his broad shoulders against the tree and relaxed. The legs eased for he sat rather openly. The muscles told of their wear, the clothes bore battle scars, the time spent in the workshop that is."

"Allow me to preface the narration with a warning, most of my retelling will follow my logic and remembrance. Events may or may not be in order. When time must be considered, we're none the

wiser for it's a relative prospect. Kronos' power is strange and ultimately, one of the foundations governing existence I suppose," he paused, knocked his head back, and shut his eyes, they reopened with an empty stare for they saw not the present, but rather, the past. "I came into the greater scheme of existence from nothing I suppose. I was branded with a strong symbol, my parents I don't know, did they live or did they die, I searched, but no answer. What I remember is this, I woke up one day in a desert during a massive sandstorm. I walked for I knew what had happened, I came with memories of many things, mainly the usage of my abilities and how everything came to pass. I persevered through the storm and arrived at a battlefield. It was disgusting – many entities fought and lost – races, stranger beings, entities, everything laid in that sandstorm, that desert. No one's ever known of such a place, it was strange, it was as if someone or something had performed Koduku 1 but on a large scale. It was the trial for life, the battle for deliverance. I was never meant to be, I came into being from nothing, and the latter forever seared my soul. After, I set on a quest to find my parents. I now know the quest was for naught. I wasn't born from a union, rather, I was born from the collective emotions of the battlefield – I was the product of the Koduku, an entity who fought and survived everything. My search for the inexistent parents led me to cross multiple domains until I eventually stumbled onto a growing land, Kronos' realm. Draebala became a constant place I'd visit. In those times, there was nothing to be had, the Titan rules with iron fists and killed those unwilling to follow their lead. The gods came about after titan intermingled with other races they stole from independent realms. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I continued floating from realm to realm, crossing domains in search of answers, I never found what I needed. I found other things, met strange beings, lived different lives in their land, learned the customs, and followed what tradition was made. I was a traveler, not yet a God; never knew the meaning. I gained a reputation for when I returned, many titans – the monarch of their own estates and land, greeted my travels with envy and want for souvenirs. They wanted me to bring items, and what they desired most was, you guess? Entities. I agreed, not knowing any better. By the way, the question about my powers must have sparked the intrigue a few times, I've yet to speak on that. I'm strong, I'm powerful, no one can rival the abilities I've locked for millennia. Why was I the only one allowed to travel? Simple, others couldn't handle the strain of going from place to place, it was akin to tearing oneself and rebuilding said self each time one traveled. Of course, some titans were crossed when I unknowingly entered their playground – they vowed violence and swore by their intent. I had no mind for prolonged suffering, much of my battles ended in two or three moves. Either imploding their core or swallowing their soul, are two very effective ways of sending a message. My exploits were well known, so much that some titans would pay me to visit other titans. Well, in those scenarios, someone did lose their standing. It didn't affect me, so, I spent on traveling as I would. As time passed, I became old, the abundant land to explore grew odd to me, and I began losing interest. Draebala's climate swapped – the tension was ablaze around the newly crowned capital. I took my chances and refused alliances with the Titans. My last quest was simple, to find and inhabit a small realm where I can watch as eternity evolves. Ended quickly and not without some turbulence. The reason for the climate in Draebala was the discovery of a hidden faction; the Demons as is openly known now. They consisted of titans and gods who were against the current titans. One of said demons stumbled into a realm I had set for conquest ages prior. She was dark-haired, had a brown complexion, and was an heiress to magnificent horns. Her wings were dark and sharp, and so were her daggerlike canines. Let me say, my words can't describe how fierce she was in person, she was out of control. Our first meeting, if you can call it that, ended with us dishing out harsh punches at one another. My, those days were the best," he grinned, "she captured my attention by how she'd lived her life. Not much was known of her past – needless to say, I have

speculation it was spent in training for the Demonic faction. One clarification, the demons of today are nothing like what they were – the demon was but a name of a faction, not a race like it is now, and her, she was a titan or goddess grouped under the title for convenience. We fell in love, I founded my realm,” he stretched his arms, “-the place we reside in today. Our bond gave birth to Alfred, she named him and I watched. I was happy, well, happiness which would last a few days – Alfred’s birth came at the cost of my lover. He eradicated much of what was here and present – everything he touched decayed, everything, there was much I could do but forsake the babe. So, to ensure his safety, I abandoned the babe under a realm considered Evil for its time. He was to live his life under the Blood Moon in the forest of Iye, the one place where darkness had ample life to breathe. After no more incidents came and I found myself rebuilding half of the realm my son destroyed. Time passed, and they know how much time went – I remained the same person and eventually fell in love with another woman. A maiden of the Heavens, Raftal, the Goddess of Serenity. Here my knowledge of the others grows cloudy. As I spent most of my life following Alfred, I never knew what happened with the other gods. What I know for certain is the name of Alfred, the Cursed King, was to be feared by most. My title of Titan eventually changed to Great God, seeing that I was feared by many who knew my real identity. They knew they couldn’t and so attached God with my title and called it a day, they won, and later generations would remember me as a god, not a Titan. The son I had abandoned returned with a vengeance, I half expected him to die in my sleep. Raftal and I had another son, he was more smart than strong – he had an ability to create matter from naught, the same as creation but restricted to his world. He came to be known as Artanos, the God of Knowledge. He was fearsome to those below, however, affectionate and loving towards his mother and I. We were a happy family, I bestowed much of my powers onto him, many things I acquired in my travels, and even granted him the symbol of the Craftsman. Deep down, even when I looked at Artanos with a fatherly warmth, my heart couldn’t shed the feeling of rejection, I betrayed myself and my wife, I was destined to carry that weight. In my frantic thoughts, I set about to seek Destiny, they told me that my son was alive – we would meet one day. I strengthened my resolve and returned home... alas, what I found were death and destruction. The war between gods and titans escaped into my world, Raftal was killed because she loved me... or so were the stories. Artanos fought and lost, he watched as everything we loved was destroyed. I arrived too late to rescue what remained... the battle was fast but the destruction vast. I found myself at the world’s core, fixing what could be fostered... then, it happened, I sensed him, the Cursed King. He appeared in my shadow and had a look of complete despair – hatred filled his gaze, and with the nauseating surge of power, I knew what he wanted, my life. He looked at him, no words would calm him – thus, I was set to rectify what I brought into existence. We fought for days, he kept on getting stronger – calling forth angels from the heavens and tearing their wings for power, it was gruesome and cruel, I had never seen anything of the like, not even from the Titans whose persona was on being cruel. He devoured and soon, I found myself calling on powers I thought I had... due to inactivity, they remained locked and I lost,” he undid a few buttons and showed a massive scar running across the chest, “-I died, he won and vanished without another word said. By order of the Hierarchy, the injury was temporary... Artanos didn’t see and left with a deep underlying hatred. Raftal died by Alfred’s hand. I couldn’t do anything... there was nothing for me, both of my sons thought I died, thus, I decided to cultivate remnants of the world. Destiny’s word implied more... thus, I kept on keeping the world alive. Many entities were born from my world; my offspring. Alfred took a part of me when we fought, he took my innate ability to restrain myself and my overwhelming power. I channeled the overflow into creating others... I guess I wanted to quell my solitude with more children. They came to life, spend their days, and grew until maturity. We bid

farewell and they left, I don't know how many have gone, they never visit. Perhaps some have died, and perhaps others are the ruler of their world. Engratse, the god of Alchemy, was one of the more devious children I created. He held an air of mischievousness... always demanding that I hand over the symbol of Notig," he exhaled, "-I don't know much after, Engraste left the world recently with the promise to deliver souls for the world's rebirth. I agreed and have done so for centuries now. You," he blinked, "-visitor, are you, my son?"

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Purple flashes sparked, Igna's appearances changed to one half-demon and half-nightwalker, Alfred's aura surged with Igna knocking said power into control through his own. A crack echoed, the half-vampiric side vanished, Alfred's demonic features flourished menacingly, "-greetings, father."

"Alfred," he returned, "-I knew it was you, I knew the moment you walked."

"Father," the demonic features ripped into Igna's normal bicolor stare, "-I forgive you."

'Alfred?' Igna looked around but saw nothing, '-where is he?' he scanned to no avail, '-did he?'

"Alfred," the Great God mumbled, "-I'm sorry about what happened. It was my fault, I should have taken responsibility," he looked at Igna and smiled, "-my son is gone," he added, "-I got to say what I wanted and he listened. We reached understanding at last," a sigh of relief escaped, "-I'm free."

Chapter 1050: Conditia

"Not exactly fair."

"I understand it is not," added Grostian, "-such is the way the cookie crumbles."

"I see the Great God knows the other worlds, yes?"

"I do, I'm a traveler by heart. What say you, Igna, where do you fit in the story, what are you made of? I know of my son, but what about you, you're not exactly him, are you?"

A cigarette puffed into reality, he leaned and lit using void's flame, "-I'm the current incarnation of Alfred. We share the past, the present, and the future. As is seen, I have solidified what my other selves have built. Alfred's presence is gone, I don't feel him," he touched his chest, "-did he find salvation, was he freed?"

"I wouldn't know," added the Great God, "-I can say this, I'm free, and for that, I am grateful, very grateful. In fact, I want you to have the powers that brought me much of my invincibility and strength. Do you, Igna Haggard, accept my offer?"

"An offer for the Great God's power," he puffed, "-it would be wrong not to accept. I have doubts," he narrowed, "-the world you command is no longer hospitable. The war did its due and there's but this floating isle representing what was. Not exactly exciting."

.....

"I see your point. There's nothing else I can offer."

"But you see, Great God, you have much to offer. Angela's soul, Engratse's location, and your world's core," came a cold smirk.

"You want everything?"

"Were you not excited to be freed?"

The muscular build shot up suddenly, a pensive air crossed his face, and the man watched deeply at the distant waterfall. Little of the lake and forestry was pretty and soothing, just so very little. Past the isle laid a nightmare, a place where reality's whims turned to nothing's might. A land plagued by falseness; it wasn't such a great thing. Thus, with a courageous inhale, Grostian turned and stared, "-rumors of the Devil have long piqued my interest. I heard stories from the mouths of my visiting children. Are you that Devil?"

"Why the question, I ought to know more about how you got said impression."

"Very simply," he slowly articulated, "-Alfred's physical features and your hair. Tell-tell signs of the one spoken in legend. Destiny and her followers love to speak of one able to wipe existence," he paused, "-Angela," and resumed, "-she kept chanting a prophecy, speaking of the three in one, the birth of Nothing. You're already here," he smiled, "-and have been here since the third incarnation, is that not right?"

The sun's ray dipped, casting a shadow across Igna's lowered line of sight. A sinister smile, the confidence and radiating aura to prove the words true, he looked up nonchalantly and tilted the fixed regard, "-Great God, you see through me?"

"I was right."

"Yes," he puffed, "-all from the start was orchestrated. From losing my memory to entering the adventuring academy, my escapade in the culinary world wasn't a whim, it was a carefully constructed plan to avoid being detected. Meeting the Haggard dynasty is a hard task, anyone unreliable would be killed mercilessly. Cooking, be good enough and one can be thrust into the limelight without much effort. I met who I needed, established myself, and began the journey anew. Persephone, my adventures are long distant memories – I admit they were done to influence Orin and not the greater world. I know we're virtually undefeatable, my presence is no longer required. Time's nigh for a shot at the real challenge, to climb the real ladder. My goal is unchanged, Nothing is my power and no one will ever defy my will."

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"I see," the smile fell, "-you were after me all along?"

"Obviously. Alfred didn't free himself; they can't leave without my permission. I allowed the Cursed King's rest. He resides peacefully in the Shadow Realm as an avatar. Grostian, I want you as an ally. Join me, join my faction," he extended a hand, "-you will join me."

A tingling sensation ran up and down the body. He shuddered at the thought – the cold breeze of the lakes didn't help for it chilled his spine and froze the fingers, "-what do I get?"

"Freedom," he offered, "-I offer freedom and a place to reinvent one's self."

“Could I surrender my powers and still live?”

“Normally, no,” he fixed the god, “-yet, thee didn’t blink twice when offering the symbol and guaranteeing thy death.”

“...”

“No need for replies. I can assure you, Grostian, you will have a new life in a new world without your powers. What is freedom without being released from the shackles? Such is the nature of dealing with the devil,” he flicked the cigarette and stood, “-what say you, Grotsian, or shall I refer thee as Dad?”

“Igna,” he dropped on one knee, “-I accept your terms.”

“Then,” the Devil extended his hand, a convoluted contract hovered, “-as the one commanding the terms and conditions, I guarantee your satisfaction, Grostian.”

“I accept,” they sealed the deal, a whirlpool of energy darted skyward, shredding the isle into discarded pieces until nothing remained save dust – Grostian’s body churned similarly and snap, ‘-gone,’ he hovered, ‘-Grostian, you’re the definition of what it means to be a God. Truly you deserve the title of Great God,’ specks of dust fell onto the land surrounding the furnace. He landed, ‘-the power of Nothing,’ he smiled, ‘-it’s finally mine,’ a circle inlaid by complex writing surrounded the symbol of death, it seemed to swallow the previous symbols, and a sharp glow settled the symbol as nothing but a circle. ‘-the symbol of death’s been swallowed. It resides amongst the other writings,’ the short walk paused, ‘-don’t tell me,’ a realization hit, ‘-the circle’s filled with complex symbols,’ a heavy pressure dropped, he fell onto his feet and pinched his forehead, “-what is this!” the brows crinkled in annoyance, “-so loud,” screams thundered, the symbol burnt, “-STOP!” a shockwave bellowed, ‘-it’s like when I draw Orenmir. Grostian, you’ve killed gods by the hundreds – he was right... travels and challenges, the man had no equal.’ The furnace howled; molted liquid dropped onto presses that slammed together. Each thrust shook the very ground. ‘Better stand,’ he clambered to a shaky stance, ‘-who knew my goal would be reached so soon.’

The workshop, ‘-I have imagined Grostian to still be hammering,’ he entered the doorless shack and motioned to the glass cage. “-Angela, dear ol’ Angela,” her purple hair and look of distress seemed stuck in time. Igna pressed the surface, the circle lit and the glass shattered, thrusting her unconscious body forward, “-got you,” he caught her arms and in turn drew her whole body into his arms. *Snap,* warmer clothes covered the otherwise nonexistent clothing, “-rest a while,” he lit another cigarette and placed her upon a chair as if an inanimate doll.

Time passed, and a cycle of day and night followed. Crack of dawn bellowed orangish hues so as catch part of the furnace. *To the mighty and to the weak, the sole inheritor of much beckons power foreign to the world. Left unseen and made unfelt, the slip between worlds begins to shatter. The border of true and false grows exposed – and swiftly enlarges the disturbance. Break – Shadow Realm: Conditia.* Time froze, the furnace deadened, the colors drained, and a freezing cold settled. Massive portals opened, and shadowy figures ambered forth – a powerful entity led the walk, her unblinking eyes and viperlike stare matched his own with neither fear nor intimidation.

“Demonlord,” she hissed, “-it has been a while, my king.”

“Vesper, I apologize for not checking in any sooner.”

"Fret not my king, we of the monster race know well about the whimsical nature of our ruler," dragons and flying beasts cast their imposing figure onto the dullness, "-what have thee summoned us?"

"For this," he looked at the furnace, "-here are the remains of Grostian's world. The surface is destroyed, nothing much to salvage aside from that," he pointed at Gieol, "-the core of an ancient world."

"Rare," excitement filled her speed and hiss, "-very rare. It will do nicely in the Shadow Realm. My king, after lord Julius finished completing the other cores, our world has begun evolving on its own. We're no longer required to check in regularly. Be certain, our people are constantly on the watch for any signs of disturbance. Would take something grand to shatter what protection the cores have. No matter," she gleamed, "-shall I take the world now?"

"Yes," he turned, "-start the process. I will see you in the Chambers of Cores."

"As you wish, my king," her arms rose, and many priests joined the chant. A terrifying rumble marked destruction, Apocalypse.

Angela's mind came too, '-where am I?' her vision no longer remained, '-I don't see anything,' her heart sank, "-I CAN'T SEE!"

"Calm down," stronger hands lifted her in a princess carry, "-you'll see again, just drop the act."

An explosion of white wiped everything. No one remained, no one, there was nothing. Consider a place without feature, without land, and without much – now, having wiped matter, one ought to imagine water at a standstill. Take that and remove the color, and any reflection it might have – one is left with transparency; however, the latter is empty for there's nothing to see onto. Take color, wipe black, wipe white – after having removed everything, such is the end product. Simply, nothing.

Chambers of Cores; the same room whereby many worlds laid on pedestals. Torches lit the way forward, '-what is the master after?' pondered Vesper. A thick engraved mirror held her reflection, she leaned, a hand reached and pulled, and her body thrust into a white room with a single chair. Windows gave into space – stars and distant orbs.

"Master?"

"Vesper, welcome to the true Chambers of Cores. You haven't been here, have you?"

"No?"

"It's the place Julius and I built to house the many cores governing stability. The white room is important for your safety."

"Why?"

He summoned a puppet, opened a window, and pushed one hand through. Her expression said all, '-disintegration.'

"Those without my express permission can never truly enter the plane where the cores reside. It's a safety measure. Your people have done good keeping watch and for that, I ought you a great deal. Thus, Vesper, as leader of the Monsters, what is your wish?"

“Our wish?” she leaned in thought, “-master, why spring said question?”

“Service ought be rewarded. Consider it my way of saying thank you. You can have anything within my capabilities.”

“Then, there’s only one thing I want. We want answers about what happened to our people in the Tower of Aria. Monsters we send don’t return – it has our people in complete anguish. We love to battle, fighting adventurers is our work – we need to get back what was taken. Master, please, look into what happened to Kanad and Kylsha, the other floor guardians too, they’ve disappeared. Also, lady Lilith and Miira have stopped sending their reports. Formle and I are quite worried. The valkyries have donned their armor... a feeling of war has engulfed the Shadow Realm, my lord.”

“I see,” he looked onto a newly added core, “-Gieol,” came a smile, “-a core to keep the Shadow’s invincibility,” a cold side-glance landed, “-Vesper, I apologize for not knowing about the disappearances. If they’re gone, I fear only one is responsible, my step-brother.”

“You have a brother my lord?”

“Yes, I have many siblings from what Grostian said. Speaking of him, I want you to look after the man. He’s forsaken most of what makes him a god and will be reborn as one of the Shadows. I trust you know what comes, Vesper?”

“No problem my king, it will be done.”

A flash closed the realm. Vesper turned left, Igna moved right, and the Chambers of Cores laid as the backdrop.

‘What did I do to deserve this? I tried to be a hero, I didn’t want to be at his mercy. The prophecy can’t come to pass. I have to act, I must, for the safety of life, I have to try!’

Clap, clap, clap, footsteps rang, “-Angela, care for some tea?” echoed a snicker, her heart sank and the hands trembled, “-we have much to speak on, like how you tried to kill me... ha-ha-ha.”