

## Death Magic 1051

### Chapter 1051: Angela's Past

"Is it not true, Weaver of Destiny, if I were to capture, I would have unrestricted power of the very matter of fate?"

"..." silence. Her lips were sealed. The interrogation room, as was felt, stood as nothing but a guest room placed remotely within the castle. Precisely more were the slow drips and the harshness of the cold floor and equally cold atmosphere. A carefully constructed image of a dungeon flashed before her mind, as for reality, it stood rather frankly. One linen bed, a single chair swept under an empty desk. Angela suffered the brunt of a large window, the breeze was a merciless beast.

"You think silence will alleviate thy fate?"

"..."

"Please, Weaver of Destiny, it isn't hard to fall to my whims, is it?"

"..."

"You leave me no choice," a ripping sensation crossed her chest. Her breast drooled as any suggestion of undergarments was pulled. The needle army, the gust, charged the front lines. She gritted. A shaper coldness poked the middle, she gasped, her ears and cheeks were red hot, "-I will take your symbol by force if needed. Angela, you need but answer, we don't have to use means the Devil is renowned for. I'm a just man, I have said so many times. Give me what I want, and I will give you what you want," he lifted the blade, carrying its sharpness along her skin, "-no answer will signal an unwillingness for cooperation."

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"Like the sound of your own voice?" she firmed, the blade reached her collar, "-I will not make deals with you, Devil. Thy existence is a danger to the tapestry of fate. You dared alter the past, you dared go back in time and rescue your friend, Aceline. She died nonetheless, I don't get how it was worthwhile. My beautiful tapestry, the work of art I had so longed to see complete is... IT'S WORTHLESS! I have no mind to believe in your idle words, Igna, you have no say, you have no power over me. I will do what I want and fight for what I believe. This time, I believe deeply in your destruction, my powers will ensure fate's mighty hammer drops on your evil self. I, I-" she slowed.

"..." no words came to mind, Igna rested a firm grip on her shoulder, the blade poked ever so deeper, it pierced skin and drew blood. The warmness of the wound cried in the face of the chilling gust. Rivers of crimson streamed along her chest, they turned a darker red. He casually dipped his finger and had a taste, "-sweet," he smiled, "-signs of a pure goddess. I guess it is right seeing this body is a reincarnation," he ungripped the handle, the blade remained fixed, "-if you inhale quickly or make sudden gestures, the blade will only get in deeper. I leave thee choice, Angela, if you wish, stab yourself and end the suffering," her silence persisted, though, a perceptive mind noticed, '-her breathing's limited. The flow's stopped, she'll shake with the colder winds.' "Weaver of Destiny, you chastise my position, you called me evil and you berated me with your ideals. Should I be crossed? perhaps, should I have made a strong emotive reaction? You wished. Don't fool yourself, Angela, getting under my skin is

easy if you know where to look. Evidently, Angela, you have your head so far up your ass it's hard to get out for fresh air. Even in the face of death, you prefer to hide behind those warm ideals. Allow me the chance to be enlightened; accepting my offer to enter the Shadow Realm after Zeus' cruel and abusive rejection brought to memory his treatment of Gophy. We welcomed you and posed no questions. To each their own, such is the motto we adhere to the best of our abilities. Then came the prophecy, the truth you gazed in the way future, on the day three become one and nothing is born. The truth you sought was here all along – three became one on the day I was reincarnated, and that day, Angela, has long since passed. I have a habit of keeping quiet, even now, I rather not tell you but it's for your own sake. Destiny, you have power, alas, I have more. Origin," he paused, her expression shifted, the breathing deepened with additional blood, "-steady yourself," said a heartfelt caution, "-you need not be so hasty," he paused, her contours were much crinkled, signs of annoyance or plain fear, either sufficed. "Weaver of Destiny, I know more about than you think. A certain incident comes to mind, the death of-

"STOP!" she cried, "-no more!" her chest blew with so much force the blade dug further, "-I'll do what you say," tears trickled, "-I give up, I give up."

"I was right," he smiled, pulled the weapon, and healed her wounds, "-I need no restrain for one's already in place and buried deep in your past. Angela, you poor soul, it's hard being fake... I digress," he grabbed and shook her shoulders, "-you lying piece of shit. The prophecy was made up... weaver of fate, your lies, YOUR LIES!" he screamed in her face, "-THE BOOK OF THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE IS LOST BECAUSE OF YOU!" she buckled, trembling as the words stabbed mercilessly, "-I apologize. I shouldn't have," he moved towards the window, "-Angela, you're already part of the Shadows. Just stay and live the life granted. Nothing much waits in the other worlds – your own people have rejected you."

"What do you want," she sniffled, "-bringing long-buried memories... WHAT DO YOU WANT!"

"Engraste's location."

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"WHAT?"

"Engraste's location."

"... I can't tell you," her voice softened, "-If I do, it will go against my contract. I can't have them turning on me. I won't."

"Angela, reincarnation is a fresh start. No longer are you or your soul bound to that contract. For one so smart, you can be very foolish," warmth filled his tone, Igna passed the chair and undid the cloths around her eyes, "-open up," a sharp flicker shoveled her blurriness, the blinks were sharp and unfocused. A harsh gust blasted the room, and she found herself wide awake, fluttering her lashes at the coming scenery, "-I can see," she muffled, "-I can see..."

"Angela," he waited at the end with a cigar, "-you're a world-class idiot. Don't you remember the contract you formed?" memory took her back into the sea of the past. The windows of past events passed until she arrived in the third person, overseeing an interaction between her and Igna.

Violetta wept, her sobbing inconsolable by a layman. Igna waited at her side, gazing upon a damp walkway. A soft lantern glimmered over the bench behind which thickened a dark outline of trees and distant skyscrapers, “-Violetta, as is the case in many scenarios, there are winners and there are losers. You used an ancient ritual to conjure one of my companions, thee sought the devil, and the devil cometh. What do you want, what is your wish?”

“I want vengeance, I want them to pay for stealing my precious books. Especially that vile one, he’s the worst. Devil, I want you to erase part of my memory, I want you to remove figments of our contract here. I pledge myself to you and your cause, I wish to become one of your vassals.”

“I don’t mind,” he said, “-what will I get in the offer?”

“The chance to meet him, Alfred’s father. I had a dream, one you don’t get so frequently. It showed me a lot of things, all pertaining to you and your entourage. I’m the key figure; for that dream to become real, I have to forget.”

“Suppose I have nothing to lose,” he held out his hand, “-I accept thy plea, Violetta. From today forth, you shall become a part of the Shadows; someone I’m duty-bound to aid and protect. As you wished, the memories of the contract shall be wiped. Until the day comes when we meet,” Igna vanished, the park, after the aerial view, was located inside the Shadow Realm. Count the hasty drakin to make certain the dangerous skies. The window played another scene, “-you will warn the world about Igna,” came yellow eyes drowned in black, “-you will recount of the dream thee saw. He’s a danger to us, we mustn’t allow his survival,” it skipped, “-kill him,” read a darker scene, “-kill him else we reveal what has long plagued your soul,” the truth surfaced, her vision returned at last, “-Igna?” boiling hot cheeks turned, “-did you?”

“Yeah?” he puffed, “-I said what I said. The memories have returned, I trust you know the truth?”

“Yeah, I do,” she dropped to her knees and bowed, “-forgive me, my lord, I didn’t mean such an offense.”

“Don’t worry, ’twas planned,” the lock clicked, “-where’s Engratse?”

A mirror summoned at her face, “-Dimension Orin, the new continent in the company of other gods, I think?”

“Gophy,” he returned, “-yeah, I guess that’s her,” he turned, “-Angela, welcome to the Shadows. Be free for thy service ends. Go get cleansed, I have much to see.”

“As you wish, my lord,” she spread her wings and escaped, leaving feathers to float onto the yard.

Much happened, Igna kicked his feet on a ledge and gazed at the open sky, ‘-Violetta’s dream came to pass. She predicted and it delivered. I met Grostian, inherited his powers, and brought an end to her predicament. Goes to show how rumbustious the world beyond my knowledge is. Gophy,’ passed his mind, \*BOOM,\* a ball of fire exploded, the legendary phoenix lifted its wings and showered the area in golden flames, “-Intherna,” he smiled, “-nice entrance.” Red fiery hair waved, a pleased expression exchanged, “-been a while,” she snapped, her familiar disappeared. “How are you, Igna?”

“Could be better,” they shared seats, “-where have you been?”

“On the lookout. Igna, the situation is dire. I know not if the information’s reached... Lilith and Miira are trapped in their respective realms. I had a few contacts provide leads, Formle’s looking into what happened to Miira. As for Lilith, she’s returned to the Aapith nation with Asmodeus and the other princes. It seemed there has been confusion in their ranks. The Kings of Hell have trapped her in hopes of you entering hell. Lilith is indeed captured, I doubt she’ll have trouble resisting their advances. Then again, her soft spot was very obvious. I advise against making any moves.”

“Are you sure?”

“I suppose. I can’t imagine her having trouble, it’s Lilith we’re talking about.”

“I heard from Vesper – the floor bosses at the Tower, including Kanad and Kylsha, have gone missing. Ideas?”

“Kidnapping,” she shrugged, “-Igna,” she grabbed his chin, “-are you not worried about them?”

“I am... the bosses have the collective strength of Orin’s combined military force, no, even greater. They were blessed by the Shadows... hard to put in words how much it affects things. if Artanos is behind the abduction, he’s gearing up for war, I guess?”

“No worries?”

“No, not really. I can win easily. Intherna, will you become the matriarch of the Shadow Realm.”

“Pardon?”

“I need you to become the Queen,” he grabbed her hands, “-the people love you... if war ever comes knocking at our door,” flash images of Grostian’s realm, the destruction, “-we will need a strong ruler to lead our forces. I’m being paranoid, I know, I know it very well. Being overconfident will-”

“Say no more,” she sandwiched his hand, “-I will rally the forces and see to the residents. Igna,” her focus turned to the greater picture, the city, “-I don’t think we should be worried. We’re strong, far stronger than any realm that’s come before. Our end will come on our own terms. Such is what I call power, the ability to decide when one’s adventure ends. We keep getting stronger, the realms become vast and full of different cultures across the continents.”

“You’re right,” he stood, “-I have to heal Eira first. Intherna, I trust you,” they hugged, “-please watch over them.”

“You take care,” she smiled, “-and tell the kids they ought to visit.”

“I will.”

Chapter 1052: End of War

Igna returned home, to Orin. Leaving the Shadows felt weirdly right, the people standing guard were competent and ready for the unpredictable. A sharp sensation hit; the portal vanished as the Rosesopian cityscape ambered. Evenings were beautiful, especially if one were to stand on one of the many skyscrapers. April X133 said the calendar. ‘-I’m here,’ he poised, sharpening the memories, ‘-the place’s changed a bit. The expansion’s grand, I feel great,’ he watched from atop a Phantom-owned office.

“Young master, welcome.”

“Welcome, young master.”

He turned, turning the colder gaze upon intruding visitors, “-pardon?”

“My master,” bowed entities shrouded in shadows, “-we request thy presence immediately.”

“My presence?” he narrowed, “-Yui and Alta, is that you?”

“Yes master,” they wore masks and seemed unwilling to part with the enchanted gear, “-I must ask for the small talk to be kept at a minimum,” Alta pleaded, “-we need help!”

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“Help?” a few confused blinks escaped, “-we’re in Hidros, how in the world would a kingdom I so carefully constructed be in trouble?”

“Not that,” Yui intervened, “-will you please just follow?”

Baffled, he followed. The scenery went from the chill and sparkling ambers to the innards of an observation center. A big screen at the foot of cascading seats, the rows held many intelligence officers and the appropriate gear. ‘They know when I arrived,’ Igna watched from afar, not yet making the presence known.

“Master I have matters to tend to, please excuse me,” Yui formally bowed out of the frame. Alta slotted in Yui’s spot, “-I apologize if the matter comes off as sudden.”

“I don’t mind,” they made their way to central command, an area restricted to many, past the array of displays and constant monitoring. The way the area functioned held the topmost row in relative darkness – ins and outs weren’t so much guarded than unnoticed. They crossed, she tapped, and an entrance slid, opening into an airlock. The previous door closed and another opened, not before a scanner went head to toe, “-protocol,” Alta added in passing.

‘The command room, the screens displayed an ongoing conflict. I have a feeling it’s more than a skirmish...’

“There you are!” the lock opened into a freer space, the décor was minimalistic but clean, “-it has been a while, majesty,” said a grey pair of studious eyes, “-where have you been?”

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“Drop the sarcasm, Minerva. What’s going on?” they spoke at a crosswalk separating three corridors.

“What we’ve wanted,” she smiled, “-the end of the war,” came a dishonest wink, “-come, majesty,” she took the center corridor, opening in a viewing area made in the style of a coliseum. A physical/holographic display waned heavily in the center, “-the planet.”

“Correct,” she smiled, “-that, majesty, is the surveillance system working its best. Tis a live display of the end.”

“What end?”

“The end of the war, of course?”

“End of war?”

“Yes, the Allied nation, led by Hidros, has taken the upper hand and is in midst of the final assault.”

“How?”

“Intrigue,” she smiled, “-the Order of Nightwalkers, their presence in the war has revolutionized how nations feel fear. The mere mention of their name is enough to send the bravest into their mother’s arms.” Soldiers held guard, a privileged area fixed onto the side read, ‘-high command.’ Heavy defenses and thus opened a rustic-styled room, “-you’ve made it.”

“éclair, it has been a while.” Not just éclair, the room held members from Marinda, Easel Run Gard, Arda, representatives of the independent kingdoms, and spokesperson for the Rebellion. Familiar old faces were replaced by newer, many of whomst rose unknowingly at the king’s return, “-please, be at ease,” he smiled.

“Esteemed guests, I would request for us to take a break. Matters have been finalized and we need not dwell on what-ifs. We have done what we could have, all is in the hands of our soldiers, with them rests the key to our future, thank you,” said a very vocal éclair.

‘He’s more confident,’ Igna observed, ‘-the mannerisms and way of speech, he’s a different person. I’m glad to see growth. Might have interjected on an important meeting, well, Minerva will take the brunt,’ he side-glanced, she challenged his gaze but was swiftly ignored, “-Majesty,” said éclair kneeling before Igna, “-I have long missed you, my master.”

“My, éclair,” he reached and warmly grabbed éclair’s shoulder, “-you have done a marvelous job, I’m glad, yes, I’m so very glad.” One of the guests hailed, taking éclair’s attention away from his king. The stray gaze echoed in how the king calmly kept composed, “-éclair, do take your time,” came monotonously, “-we can catch up later. Go, duty calls.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” he bowed, “-I shall be back shortly.”

The whole exchange had Minerva hold her breath, “-you okay?” Igna side-glanced and she sharply exhaled, “-what is the matter with you?” from the side, Igna turned fully, “-Minerva?”

“Igna,” she tipped her head, “-have you always been that terrifying?”

“Why?”

“The tension,” she gulped, “-the way you looked at him and the way I expected kindness was stomach turning, I can’t imagine what éclair felt.”

“He’s alright, the man’s grown since the incident.” A quaint Phantom-run cafeteria waited outside the conference room. And here, with a cup of tea overlooking a holographic display showing the outside, Igna took sips with Minerva sharing the table. A hefty meal rested before her rosy lips, “-mind if I eat?” her lashes fluttered.

“Go ahead. Take your time, I’ll need a minute,” the outside was nothing for his interface flashed through report after report – a summary of events lined in bullet points. Documents by the thousands, if not tens of thousands, regardless of the speed, would take a day or a month to finish.

“Delicious,” Minerva’s cheeks reddened, “-the food is to die for,” she wiped her lips, took a few sips, and crossed her fingers in thought, “-care for a summary?”

“Sure.”

“Well, let’s pick up around the creation of the Desok Alliance. Operation Wied’s capture of the IVth King of Estral, Frederick Perret proved a worthwhile endeavor. Estral remains a strong foe, even in the relatively easier battle, Estral proved a harsh beast to tame. Yian-Dho, Konak, the Revolutionist faction, and Alpha. I will keep the details short. Konak’s hold over Old Cray’s territory north was finally cleared by the combined forces of the Greenwhoot army and aid from Marinda’s knights. Let me tell you, the battlefield north is a place worthy of praise. We lost so many people there, reason; choice. The war was being fought on both sides, unlike them, we allowed our soldiers to pick their fate. The combined Allied army’s separation into three leadership, Mine, Minerva, Old Cray, and King Ezel, proved an excellent balance. Old Cray and Ezel ruled the seas in equal measure – despite our lack of certitude when it came to naval battles. The military as well as the air force, the latter of which was supposed to be under the king’s express orders, was transferred to me. And so, we led battle after battle. Word of the tragedy of war resounded with Stephanie’s help. I admit, the first few years of the battle were harsh, we barely made any dent in Iqavea. Things changed in the past six months. A change whelmed Alpha’s support – we found a vulnerability, the Alphanian people revolted; boycotted industries, and forced the kingdom into a standstill. We began our march onto the mainland, fighting back the invaders and freeing settlements, villagers, and towns as we went. Marinda’s generous aid, flying isle, provided the missing piece of the puzzle. We pushed back the Revolution and reinstated the Emperor, that blow alone would have ended the war. Where power resides, so lives cockroaches – the Desok Alliance took the Revolutionist and formally allied with Alpha. Here, I speak of the alliance before the revolt in Alpha, I know, I’m jumping from fact to fact, it’s how I tell my stories,” she brazenly winked, “-where was I? oh yes. Once the sides understood who was on who’s side, we fought and fought. Strategy, intrigue, name it and it was here – naturally, our advantage over surveillance limited casualties on our sides. The war might have taken a strange road if you had led the battles and strategized. Fortunately, I stuck with what I knew worked – and here, as we speak, the final battle rages. We’ve pushed back the enemy to the Desok Alliance’s border from the east and from the north, where Old Cray has reclaimed his land. Konak no longer has free access to the sea – their naval army was wiped out by a series of bombing runs by yours truly. Alpha shook off the alliance and raised their white flag a few weeks ago,” a truly scheming gaze crossed, “-what they don’t know is,” whilst she spoke, the Desok Alliance’s joint effort to protect from the invasion would be shattered by a single entity. Igna covered his mouth, “-I don’t believe it.” Minerva grinned; “-you’ve figured it out.”

“Yeah, you knew what I wanted from the beginning?”

“Obviously. What sort of General would I be if I didn’t understand the hidden meanings of your words, the intent? I’m pleased to inform you, Igna, IVth King of Estral, Frederick Perret, offered to join us as a vassal state. éclair and I decided to seal the news and made him act in cahoots with Yian-Dho and Konak, all the while we gave intel and arms.” As she said, Estral declared independence and headed north,

passing Yian-Dho's borders and cutting sharply left, towards the west, where the Allied forces led their battle against the Desok Alliance.

Words reached the leadership of the respective parties, "-my liege, Estral has forsaken our ancient held pact and turned coat," knelt officers in aid of Yian-Dho's matriarch. The queen, stern behind a veil, spoke through a medium, an attendant in her service, "-Queen Vi says to have our forces retreat. Send news to the front lines and to Konak, the battle is lost. Have the ministers regroup, we have to discuss the future of the kingdom," in her seclusion, the Queen furiously glared at a mirror, '-betrayal... I will not stand idly.'

Further north, past the forest and into the alps, a mountainous castle held supplies and a few thousand soldiers. "General Kon, General Kon," gasped an errand boy.

"Steady yourself boy," he thundered, "-what is the matter?"

"Urgent news from the Capital," he held a file.

"All this in the middle of preparation for the counterattack," he unwound the string-based seal and narrowed, '-to General Kon, it is with great displeasure that we, the council of nobles, seeing Estral's betrayal, the sudden withdrawal of Yian-Dho's funds and its army, think it appropriate to end hostilities. We mustn't exhaust ourselves. We hope the news doesn't come with too much shock.'

"General?"

"Boy, it's over," he squeezed the letter and let a desperate roar rattle the hall, "-we have lost the war!"

April 28th X133, a nationwide television broadcast went live. King Igna in the company of the leaders of the Allied Army, rose before a crowd of curious onlookers. He took the stand and paused, the camera's panned solely onto him, "-to the people of Hidros and friends of Hidros, I have one thing to say, WE'VE WON THE WAR!" firecrackers rattled, the crowded cheers, celebrations went awry from taverns to the streets, the resounding glee came to ease, "-we've led the frontlines for more than five years. The strain taken on us mentally, financially, and emotionally has come to an end at last. I say this from the bottom of my heart, without the people standing here today, we wouldn't have won the battle. If any one of us had been missing, I doubt we could have come out unscathed. I shan't keep thee waiting, please cheer for our heroes," the generals took the stage and addressed the various kingdom. Emperor Essin walked to the stand quietly. The cheers deadened.

"Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, every single one of you, I'm eternally grateful. Especially king Igna. He took a chance and delivered, the Wracian Empire has been secretive... however, from now, I say with heart, Hidros and Wracia will remain friends. I've seen how great Hidros' culture of mutual understanding is. Today's a new day, a new start – I say this to the foreign factions; war is detrimental. We have lost more than we gained. I only hope for a resolution to be resolved diplomatically, thank you."

Chapter 1053: Commendations

"Is his majesty not pleased by the celebrations?" the prime minister, star of the night, broke from a distinguished entourage.

The familiar voice came suddenly, Igna sipped at his sight, "Ah, éclair, the night goes well."



"I think not," the voice lowered, "-master, did something happen?"

"Nothing that would require too much concern."

"Is his majesty not pleased with our decisive win?"

"No, no, don't get me wrong," they walked and talked, soon to pass through closed curtains into a grand terrace, "-I'm glad the war is over. I fear what's to come, as is, trade and the economy have been put in grave danger. It'll require great leadership to carry the kingdom post-war. It's time for the monarchy to take a stand," he sipped, "-our culture is indeed linked to lords and dames; I think, for the future of the kingdom, we ought to change how politics is run. The acting royal family is better suited for the sidelines. I've done my time," he sipped, "-you understand, don't you?"

"Majesty, where is this coming from?"

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"It comes from there," he rose the glass forth, catching the capital's nightlife, "-Hidros needs to evolve, and the war proved how a centralized leadership can be beneficial. It has drawbacks – many can be resolved by cunning. éclair," he grabbed the prime minister's shoulder, "-I apologize for her death," the grip firmed, "-and I congratulate you for a job well done. You surpassed expectation, I think it best you become head of parliament."

"Ma-m-master-"

"Don't," he echoed, "-I decided after careful examination. I left the war in thy hands; the result speaks for themselves. You coordinated the ministers, led from the sidelines, and made damned sure Hidros remained prosperous. I'm impressed, very impressed."

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"My master, please reconsider the decision. Having the Devil of Glenda take the side-lines feels blasphemous. The Haggards have guided Hidros to where it is, tis wrong to see recognition and praise be lost on humble servants like the ministers and I. We did what we had for our king, surely you understand?"

"I understand very well. Change ought to come from the top. We'll make the first move and alter the fundamentals of the world. Putting power in a single person's inviting war, tis inviting unnecessary qualms. Besides, putting the focus of political intrigue in the minister's hands will undoubtedly make Hidros think on its feet. éclair, if you object, say so with arguments against."

"Put that way," the shoulders dropped, "-I can't think of anything I can say to change your mind, sire. When will the decision be broadcasted?"

"As soon as possible."

May 1st, the capital buzzed. Parades of returning soldiers lit the streets in a festive mood. Confetti and praise were flung from balconies and gathered crowds. The heroes of war returned and made their way to Castle Rosespire. Fighter jets flew and tanks paraded alongside other vehicles of warfare.

“We did it,” wept many soldiers, “-at the cost of friends and family,” tears flowed. The relief of touching their birthplace, the explosion of applause and screams – for that moment, the tragedies of war blurred. A stigma that would follow many – sleepless nights, fits of emotional breakdowns, the post-traumatic stress; neither did all heroes wear capes or lived to be strong – they were normal people. People turned monsters for the sake of survival – people turned Death-Reapers, forced to witness unforgettable things and moreover, heart-tearing and stomach-turning memories. Lucky were those who worked to live a normal life, a small fraction, though, those memories will forever haunt their dreams. So, as the returning soldiers paraded across the capital, distinguished members of the Military, the Naval Army, and the Airforce, were dressed in formal military attire and invited for a banquet in their honor. The capital’s daily activities paused, the moment was to be enjoyed and for recuperation of breaths, the latter of which was held since the start of the conflict.

Decoration fitted the mood. Coat of arms lined the walkway to the palace. Royal Guards saluted the coming guests. The banquet was indeed an event to be experienced. Tales of the Royalty, how the nobles lived and the prestigious story of the Haggard Dynasty was always subject to the public’s vested interest. To see the inside was an honor. The throne room, a place reserved for the greatest of celebrations and the saddest of news, carried Flags of many prominent families; the noble crests. A grand space was readied for the soldiers and heroes. Nobles and other important members, for today, watched from the sidelines. General Minerva and other officers lined the first row. The throne presided strongly before the coming soldiers.

“Attention!” cried a guard, “-pay respects to his majesty, Igna Haggard, the King of Hidros and Viscount of Glenda!” white hair fashioned in a low-hanging ponytail, a royal military outfit adorned by medals and badges of honor, he marched towards the throne and sharply spun before taking his seat. The chilling gaze struck, instantly making the authority known.

“At ease,” he said. A harmonious shuffle followed. ‘Minerva looks happy,’ he observed. “-Heroes of war,” he thundered, “-I welcome thee to Castle Rosespire. Without your efforts, today might not have come. As has been passed from the generations, we will honor the brave, the courageous, and the victors. Let us pray for the heroes who gave their lives for our cause,” a minute of silence followed. He rose his head, breaking the silence, “-we gather today for the ceremony of commendations. I have heard the tales of valent soldiers, and you, valiant knights, have proven Hidros’s resolve. You have held the legacy set by our forefathers. Our legend of adventuring, living, and dying by the sword, a collectively shared feeling, has pushed us beyond our limits and set the stage for war. War will never change so long as the thirst for blood exists. Our capacity to do harm to us and other species has indeed set us to be at the top of the food chain. We have won,” he glanced at Minerva, “-and the leaders who gallantly guided our forces to victory, I give my utmost praise,” he stopped and scanned. Making eye contact with various guests rose a sense of belonging. éclair entered the frame and stood below Igna facing the crowd, “-let us proceed with the commendation.” Orenmir arrived on a red cushion and unsheathed the cursed weapon; cries of the fallen and destitute resounded. Terror filled the hall; unhampered specters circled the area. The King was the embodiment of his title. The ceremony began. Soldiers were called by name and rank, many were granted promotions, others medals of honor. Igna personally made sure each and every one felt special.

Three hours later, “-keeping the best for last, General Minerva,” her goddess-like beauty enchanted the crowd, her posture, and gestures gallant and respectful. Igna granted her honors, “-guess I’m the best?” she mumbled, he ignored her jest and concluded the event.

“Honored guests of today, please, make yourself at home. Today is in your honor, be sure to take advantage of what is to come,” added éclair. The hall remained dead-silent save Orenmir’s death-defying screech.

Igna took a large step forward and addressed the already tense crowd, he sheathed the cursed blade, placed it on the red cushion, and watched. Relief carried on many faces at the sight of it being taken, “-the war has shown our true capabilities. Hidros, unlike the generations prior, has moved from a warring state into one focused on discovery and academics. Adventuring is a great part of our culture. We’re Adventurers by heart, nothing will change our nature. This, my fellow comrades is something to be proud of. Alas,” he looked left and right, “-it brings us to the logical conclusion. Today, aside from being a day for celebration, will also mark the day when Hidros is changed. As King, I formally appoint Prime Minister éclair as the Head of State, and” a collective inhales struck, “-it has shown me how efficiently problems can be resolved in dire straits. The Royal Family shall take a step back from how matters of public interest and international affairs are dealt with. With this, I formally end the Ceremony. Please make yourselves comfortable.”

The news hit and hammered it did. The Arcanum flamed at the decision – television was quick on the uptake, calling in scholars for their views and initiation of debates/assessments concerning the King’s decision. It was one thing honoring the soldiers, and another to turn the leadership upside down.

Antom News brought Stephanie into the picture during the ceremony’s broadcast, “-lady Stephanie, please tell us about the feeling when you received a medal of excellence from his majesty?” inquired a warm-toned excited host as images of the ceremony displayed. “What can I say, Jerald, it was one of the greatest feelings ever. I can’t put into words how honored I felt. I’m sure they feel the same, it’s not every day the king steps into the limelight to acknowledge his people. I admit the feeling is addictive – I feel like I must achieve more to get our king’s approval. He has the power to change people and it shows,” her explanation ended at the start of the announcement. Jerald’s well-combed hair shuffled, “-Prime minister éclair’s becoming head of state?”

Stephanie kept cool against Jerald’s visible agitation. The focus shifted, “-I’m sure the news took you by surprise, lady Stephanie.”

“If you look at it from a jaded point of view, I can see the decision being the right one. Now, I must say I don’t know what his majesty has in mind, none of us can correctly judge a person’s inner thoughts,” she exhaled and gathered her thoughts, “-looking at how the palace has been run, Prime Minister éclair and his track record justify the announcement. He’s undoubtedly led Hidros through trying times.”

“What about our king, has he not brought Hidros to where it stands today?”

“No arguments here,” she answered, “-the problem isn’t that, tis far more convoluted. Only he knows the answer, for what it’s worth, I’m pleased the decision was made in public and not behind closed doors. Rare have kingdoms expressed their intent to the world. It shows the confidence of our leadership,” such was the momentum carried by other news stations. Swapping to an inside perspective,

the decision came without much deliberation. éclair, Elixia, and the ministers have led the kingdom, it was no surprise.

May 2nd rose with hangovers and blackouts. The news about éclair assimilated efficiently. There wasn't any resistance from opposing factions. Veterans were granted pensions and a degree of respect, and healthcare institutions were hands-on with the various 'to-come', calls.

"Majesty," suited men invaded the courtyard, "-are you sure?"

"éclair," returned Igna, "-consider this my last act," he smiled, "-we may have won the war, there's a battle only I can fight behind that door," to which, the prime minister stopped, allowing his monarch to waltz into a conference room.

"No luck?" Minerva wondered.

"No luck," he replied, "-there's no stopping the king when he gets like this," a jovial grin curved, "-leave it in his hands, I'm sure we don't need to add pressure."

Igna's battlefield, the doors pushed inward, '-post-war negotiations,' he smiled, '-the Emperor and I will decide their fate,' opposing council held representatives of the Desok Alliance as well as the head of the Revolution. King Frederick Perret of Estral sat on Hidros' side, further highlighting the betrayal. Crossed glares were exchanged. Both sides gathered respective entourages and murmured, "-Aunt Elvira, King Frederick, Emperor Essin, Markus, Elixia, Queen Courtney, Ambassador Esner of Easel Run Gard, Ambassador Tania of Marinda, and lastly, Representatives of the Independent kingdoms, I'm glad you're here. We will begin post-war negotiations, therefore, as the victor, we have the right to enforce our demands. I will make certain the Sadian People and Old Cray's kingdom receive their due. Oppositions to my leading the talks?"

"..."

"I'll take the silence as no. Take your seats. The negotiations shall be my last act as head of state."

Chapter 1054: 'Last act as head of state?'

'Last act as head of state?' such went round the collective mines. The news was out, yet, it only just resounded. The king's magnificent presence went forth into a battlefield of words and threats. Those on Hidros' side, from Elvira to the Representative of the Independent kingdom, "-his majesty is quite the sight to behold."

"I second that," they firmed, "-the king's last action as head of state. You can feel the tension gather," commented Markus, "-a monarch of his caliber will never be born again, I swear on my good name, find me anyone who may best his natural charisma. None will come, I dare say, none shall ever rise to his stature."

"Why are we speaking as the king won't partake in political matters?" Estranged regards rebutted against King Frederick. He fixed his brow and leaned, "-did I say something wrong?"

The others waited gleefully, "-Frederick," said Elixia, "-you do not know our master as we do. I don't blame you, Frederick. Thing is," she stared at the king's distant back, "-we've known this day would

come. I was specially trained to handle what may come, far as our king is concerned, Hidros's foundation is set. We shouldn't keep the opposing council waiting."

At the door's clamor earlier, mumbles escaped many lips, "-why is he here?" they hushed under smiles, "-we agreed on the condition he wasn't here."

"I don't know," whispered another, "-I was assured by Hidros' Prime minister that the king was well and truly leaving the post of head of state..."

"Settle yourself," came a composed demeanor, "-we shouldn't be dismissed so easily."

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"Lord Whein."

"Seeing Hidros have brought their king, we must change our battle strategy. I will lead the negotiations – representative of Jian-Dho and Konak, am I understood?"

"No arguments here."

"Came for the paycheck, could care less about the result."

"And you?" Whein's older sense of superiority weighed upon an average-looking individual. The man, aged somewhere between thirty-five and fifty, kept a neutral expression. He'd occasionally flash his pupils left and right in a state of perpetual fidgeting, "-will that be okay?"

"No," came a normal response, "-you and I, Lord Whein, you and I," a bit of tension echoed in the speech, seemed the vocal cords weren't pleased for stuffiness followed the ends of articulation and projection, "-we will lead in negotiations."

"As every bit, the child as they say," remarked Jian-Dho's representative, "-I find it hard to think you are the leader behind the revolution. Then again, I suppose having a leader like you is bound to fail."

"Enough," echoed Konak's representative, "-we shouldn't fight amidst ourselves," as tension stacked; a shadow suddenly loomed upon the crowd. Igna's unperturbed expression dug straight into Whein.

"I hear the commotion. Would be nice to see a united team," he kept on Whein, "-I came by to wish luck, seems my actions won't do much save increase the growing disagreement."

The mediator of the negotiation, the Duke of Kreston, Pope Carrigan II, entered the conference room. He presided over his seat which stood in the middle to the side. Chatter dwindled, for he kept a strong gaze at both parties. Silence painted white, "-greetings, I Carrigan II, the Pope and Duke of Kreston, will be acting as mediators in the coming negotiations. Without much time wasted, I'd invite both factions to the tables."

Thus began the battle. Both sides slotted in their seats. Whein's confidence appeared flawless as his partner, the leader of the Revolution's faction, remained more or less in his seat. The constant taps and kicks were noticeable but barely audible. A fog seemed to enshroud those sat behind, their faces or reactions seemed not to matter. Hidros' side radiated. Igna sat openly with the others taking seats behind their kings. The players were ready and the stage was set.

“Before we start, Duke of Kreston, would it be alright if I have a smoke?” he looked at the other side, “-is that okay?”

“S-sure,” escaped from the back, Whein remained steadfast, “-sure.”

“No,” came the revolutionist faction’s leader, “-without disrespect, I’d greatly appreciate it if his majesty would restrain from smoking?”

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The mediator crossed his arms, “-my liege, the castle is yours, you can do as you please. I have no objections, however, I’d appreciate if his majesty could perhaps think a bit about the others?”

“Right, I take it back,” he withdrew the cigarette and stared at the Duke, ‘-why is he getting annoyed?’

‘Majesty, please,’ spoke via the strained expression, ‘-don’t start the games... I don’t want to do this...’ he shuffled a few pages and spoke, “-please, introduce yourselves.”

Frederick’s interest was piqued. A few elbows right begot a cold, “-what?” from Elixia.

“I’m sorry,” he leaned and spoke in the softest way he could, the opposing side gave short introductions in his peripheral, “-excuse me, Lady Elixia, I don’t mean to bother. I find it strange why King Igna would openly ask to have a smoke when he could just do it?”

“Simply put, it’s mind games. By taking initiative, the master made his intention clear. They’re in his palace, in his playground. Whein and the others involuntarily agreed, master was only testing the waters to see where the crowd stood. Revolution’s rep caught onto the subtle move and disagreed.”

“Amazing,” awed the king, “-I can’t believe so much happened in such little instance.”

“Well, there’s more to come. Pay attention to master’s demeanor and how he’ll focus on him.”

“Whein Ko, Representative of the Desok Alliance. I speak today on behalf of my masters and have full authority on what is to be discussed. I hope we can come to a peaceful resolution.”

The stranger personage stood, “-the name’s Krith Seol. I’m the man behind the Revolutionist factions,” he pointed at Igna, “-I come to see you, king Igna, the man who destroyed my plans... I will have my revenge, you hear me, I will have MY REVENGE!”

“SILENCE!”

“...” the pope’s thunderous voice resounded in those sat closest, “-I apologize for Krith,” said Whein hastily, “-he’s a bit weird. I trust you forgive the lack of decorum.”

“Weirdness makes the world fun,” came a surprisingly understanding reply, “-Pope, if you would?”

“Now, Allied nations, please introduce yourselves,” name and title, nothing more, nothing less. It eventually came to the king, “-Igna Haggard, King of Hidros, otherwise known as the Devil of Glenda. Hear me, Desok Alliance, do not be mistaken – we’ve called the meeting negotiations, however, we know full well what it truly means. Therefore, Whein and Krith, I best hope you’re ready, if not,” he grinned, “-I will make certain everything becomes mine.”

'Death,' crossed their minds, "-shall we then?" the aura vanished as quickly as it appeared. \*Gulp,\* "-So, let us begin with the simplest," he stared at Krith, "-the Revolutionist Faction's fate. Hidros waged war on behalf of Emperor Essin. Afront to his name is afront to my good name. You, Kirth, mastermind of the Revolution, have since then halted your activities, right?"

Kirth lifted his chin, the fidgeting slowed, "-yes, we have lost the war. The revolution's disbanded."

"Are you sure you're speaking the truth?"

"Yes, I'm speaking the truth."

"A lie," echoed from the other side, "-a lie!" said a maiden dressed in religious attire. "On Holy Mother Tharis' name," she held a golden scale, "-what the man said is a lie."

Igna said nothing, Whein's look of fear at Kirth said all, "-Mediator!" he hailed, "-might I know who the maiden is and why have we not noticed her before now?"

Igna rose his arms, "-negotiations or any legal procedures are overseen by a representative of Tharis' church. They have a custom of not revealing their blessings to detect lies. The goddess of Judgement is harsh when one of her children decides to use their power for selfish reasons."

"-how does that affect us?"

"Fairness and justice," he smiled, "-is it not for the good of everyone that we're hosting negotiations? Tell me if I'm wrong, would it not have been simpler for us to take what we wanted?" Vacant stares dueled Whein and Krith, neither knew what to expect.

"Enough, enough," the pope ordered in vain, a little argument broke through Desok's ranks.

Frederick elbowed yet again, "-what happened now?"

Elixia rolled her eyes and shook her head, "-The church of Tharis is neutral in nature, their teachings revolve around justice and fairness. The sister is a devoted believer, lady Tharis answered her prayers with the gift of detecting lies. It's not the lies they sense per se, but the intent. I said look at Kirth, what do you know, master's going after him right away."

"Why would he bother?" he shrugged, "-Kirth's no big deal, is he?"

"See," Elixia smiled, "-the way master described starting with the simplest – an image of worthlessness is instantly projected on Kirth. They'd want to get the easiest out of the way before getting to the bigger problem, the land, which in of itself is no trouble at all."

"Why are they arguing, are they not a team? I mean, they were united before Igna arrived, they seemed like friends before-"

"The seed of doubt," she explained, "-the moment master entered the room, he was out for blood. Divide and conquer, he placed Kirth below Whein and guided their thoughts to think of Kirth, arguably the better man, as the lesser man."

"When did all that happen-"

"Shut up," she hushed, "-they're continuing."

“Enough!” the pope thundered once more, “-if I hear any more bickering, I will end the negotiations with a blank sheet for Hidros to do as they please.”

“Settle down, settle down,” the noise subsided, “-we apologize for the rudeness. Please, continue,” Whein took control.

‘Just like I wanted,’ he looked at the sister who respectfully held the scale, “-Whein and Kirth, please look at the sister, she has a cloth around her neck. A mouth tie, we refer to them as the Silent, in respect for their devotion of not speaking save when their duty calls. If not for me, think of her as one of your own. She’s impartial and will speak to the fairness set by the gods.”

Yian-Dho’s representative shot up and bowed fiercely, “-our people are very religious, so, I would give my thanks to you, sister, for being a devoted follower. I make a humble request of forgiving my comrades and making the negotiations fair.”

Konak’s representative kicked Kirth’s chair, “-don’t forget, this negotiation is already done. We’re here to take back what we can salvage. Don’t fuck it up. Hidros’ affording the losers’ courtesy. Honor their customs,” he inched towards Kirth’s ear, “-don’t screw it up else I make sure your people die.”

“Can’t you see he’s playing us?”

“Enough,” thundered Whein, “-I’ve heard enough. I should have known you’d be... whatever,” he looked at the pope, “-we apologize,” and changed to Igna, “-if you would?”

“Kirth, tell me, is the revolutionist faction active, or have they gone defunct?”

“We’re still active,” came an annoyed response, “-using her in this negotiation is cheating. Call a Moderator.”

‘Moderator?’ cut the crowd.

Igna sat back in his chair, ‘-a Moderator, he’s not from Orin. Kirth’s a reincarnated soul from Scifer’s world. Never thought I see them here, \*See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth.\* ‘I expected as much. The man’s gifted in various wars. He has a talent for warfare and knows his way around the table. Blessed to be a Strategist,’ purple flashes flickered, ‘-no reason to hold back.’

“How is the revolutionist faction active, what is your next move?”

“As if I’m going to tell you,” he narrowed, “-I don’t need this, I’m done with the negotiations. Pope, I want out of here.”

“No,” guards blocked the door, “-Whein, as leader of the losing faction, tis thy responsibility. Kirth’s unwillingness to speak has painted a bad image. Despite our best effort, tis how we’re being rewarded.”

“Majesty,” added the pope, “-please.”

Whein’s hand trembled, “-Kirth, I don’t care what the revolution has in mind. I will do my duty towards my people – you, far as I’m concerned, have chosen your path.”

“WHAT?” he lunged and gripped Whein’s collar, “-after all I did, is that how you choose to REPAY ME!”



## Chapter 1055: Kirth's favor

"Guards!"

Whein and the frustrated Kirth were separated. They felt the raw strength of the guards, who, without so much a semblance of pity, rushed with curled fists. It was no pleasant sight to see – someone's eye could have been taken out. A feeling of edginess remained.

"Has your side settled?"

"Yes," Whein cleared his throat, "-Kirth's actions were unforgivable."

So, the conversation continued. Igna took a reserved attitude after the outburst, the opposition grew more conversational; sometimes dropping into meaningless rants. Whein's nervous chuckle and 'all-over-the-place,' stares were quite amusing as commented by Frederick.

"My liege," said the pope, Igna's waning interest sparked. A glance to the side showed Kirth gagged and bound at a guard's feet. '-Poor puppy,' he shook his head mildly, "-Whein, we're past the point of no return. The last incident," he brought what they didn't want to confront.

"The king's going there?"

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"Hush it, Frederick, I want to listen."

"-as was proven to my council and I, has placed a label of insubordination. We afforded politeness and courtesy, we granted ardent warriors their due in respect. Like us, your soldiers are heroes to their own merit. I think highly of them," he begrudgingly eyed Whein, "-the leaders, not so much."

"Please, king, do not be brash in your decision," he intervened hastily, "-we don't want further escalation. Our side has suffered enough, please, I beg of you, reconsider!" came a sincere plea for mercy. Igna made no gestures for relaxation, the tension stacked and stacked – standing on a foundation of incertitude, the house of cards would crash at any time. Whein's gestures equaled that of a child who knew he had done wrong, Igna's presence of authority added a sense of deep despair. Sweat, the usual tells of nervousness – Whein exhibited the traits openly to the frustrated dismay of a helpless Kirth.

"No more," Igna rose his voice, "-Kirth has surrendered his right to a fair trial. I order for his action to be paid, the punishment," he horned onto Whein, "-will be decided by you. We will take into account the severity of thy decision and how we will proceed. Tis obvious what we must do. Still, I offer an opportunity to gain our belief," he shifted onto Carrigan. The pope followed on Whein, "-a fifteen-minute recess." The meeting paused, leaving Whein in a predicament beyond his ability.

'Come on Whein,' Kirth gritted, trying his best to signal his partner, '-don't take the bait, it's part of Igna's plot. WHEIN, COME ON!' no luck, the man waited deep in thought feeling the weight of an entire empire's fate on his shoulder. Yian-Dho and Konak's representative wasn't much help either, for they whispered passive-aggressive comments and left the room.

"Classic," Elixia approached Igna, "-master, tis a masterclass in getting your way."

He rose his index, “-I’ve only started. Don’t think I didn’t notice the mumbles between you and Frederick. Keep the whispers quieter next time – having a step-by-step comment on my thought and actions is weird, even for me,” he ambled into the quiet conference room. Kirth was yet defeated. Still, the solitude of not being heard rendered the process more difficult.

Igna untied the gag to a deep exhale, “-must be fun to see me suffer.”

“You were suffering?” he stared emotionlessly. Only then, as the Devil gazed upon Kirth’s defiance, did he understand the meaning of terror. The coldness on his visage, the way he looked, ‘-he doesn’t see me like a human... anything of that matter. Suffering and woe are nothing, he shrugs off matters we place on pedestals. I’m scared... I’m scared?’

“Kirth, how’s the reincarnation.”

The face widened blankly, “...”

“I’m right. You’re not of this world. You chose to retain your memories and carry overpowers that might be useful in this world. Sadly, the place the gods sent your soul is not the same as is told in your world’s literature. Welcome to Dimension Orin. The place of your demise,” he crouched, “-your fate is being decided by your comrades as we speak. I hope you had fun, there won’t be retries. For there is only despair and ultimately, death. Here’s my prediction, they’ll beg for lif- no, never. Your life will be the token that saves them. I wish I could feel bad... you’re nothing but a pawn – like all of us, we’re pawns to our destiny,” he inched and settled at Kirth’s side, “-care for a cigarette?”

“Didn’t you openly threaten me?”

“Oh, someone thinks highly of himself,” he puffed, “-a smoke at last,” and extended the box, “-you will take one.”

Kirth agreed and puffed, “-I want to go home...”

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“Why are you in Orin anyway?”

“I died,” the fa?ade dropped, “-my life home was pretty nice. I had a good career ahead of me, my parents were rich and I was courting the best woman I had ever seen. My generation didn’t live to see war, our forefathers loved butchering. I awoke one day in space. A soft-spoken goddess said I was chosen to deliver your world from its oppressors. Man, I was mad, I wanted to know how I died, but no, it never happened. She sealed her lips and forced a chance for success in this world. I had nothing to lose, you know? I was already dead. What’s the point anyway? So, I swallowed my pride and embraced it. Success in Orin, are you kidding me? I came to life in a small hobbit, my parents were poor and druggies. I was sold to the church and was forced to bow to Lucifer’s teachings. I hated every moment of it, I hated it so much I wanted destruction. The opportunity presented itself and I went for it, I became a member of the Revolutionist faction, and the rest is history. I was appointed leader after having served the faction my entire life. Then today,” he puffed, “-I was invited... I know deep down my head is going to be claimed,” he exhaled, “-might I ask for a favor?”

“Depends.”

"If I'm to die, I want you to kill me. I rather die by your hand than the bullshit of this god-forsaken world."

A cacophony of footsteps rushed the entrance. The participants settled, and the pope took his post. "Where have you been?" whispered Essin.

"Quite an impatient tone," he said over his shoulder, "-did Whein offer to settle?"

"This is no courthouse."

"It is, fundamentally, the negotiations are a trial for damages. What did Whein offer?"

"He said he'll give us Kirth and any demands we might make. He asks for the safety of the Desok alliance, they don't want to lose more lands."

"Is that so?" observation revealed, '-Yian-Dho and Konak are colluding. I can't guess what they wish to gain, well, there's no point guessing what they can't have,' he motioned at Essin, the emperor inched, "-can you quote him?"

"On what part?"

"his demands."

"The Desok Alliance wishes for the safety of her and her people."

"Interesting. Sound like there's more to uncover."

"All in attendance," Carrigan thundered, "-we shall resume the conference." Attention narrowed on Whein.

"Care to reveal the decision?"

"We have decided Kirth's fate is best handed to you, majesty. We are ill-equipped to decide the fate of a man who stood as our ally. Our perception is warped, we request for Emperor Essin to decide the man's punishment for it is his imperial majesty's whose land was sullied by the Revolution."

'Seems Whein is back on his feet,' Igna rose his hand, "-fair assessment. I'm disappointed. Emperor Essin."

"It is true the Revolution's action have defiled the Wracian Empire beyond repair. A tough road stretch before us. According to Imperial law, Treason or conspiracy for Treason is dealt with the Death Penalty."

Kirth's head dropped, the opposition abandoned one of their own, "-Emperor Essin has spoken," Igna stood, "-Kirth is hereby sentenced to death," and vaulted over the desk. Death's shadow prominently ambled, his shadow cast a dark veil over Kirth's helpless sight. "To honor Kirth's request, I will be the executor," Orenmir materialized in his left hand, "-may thy death carry thy soul to salvation," he swung and sheathed, blood splattered against the wall diagonally upward. Kirth's lifeless body fell. Igna turned at the crowd, "-take him away," he clapped, "-Pope Carrigan, we may need a few minutes to clean." Thus, another recess was called.

"What now?"

“Watch.”

The conference resumed. The scent of blood lingered as did its imprint. Fear grabbed their hearts, it was no coincidence he killed Kirth before them, “-why did he have to do it here?”

“I don’t know,” returned Elixia, “-for once, I don’t get the merit in showing the opposition that side of him. Master began a good rapport, what’s the motive here?”

“Lady Elixia is interested,” winked Frederick, she tightened her jaw.

“Whein,” echoed the king, “-tis about time we bring the negotiations to an end. My demands are as follows; we keep the lands we hold. Estral is annexed by the Wracian Empire. Elendor is split and shared between King Juvey and Ezel. Hidros will take compensation equal to the damage we incurred. Is that acceptable?”

Yian-Dho’s representative stood, “-majesty, paying for damages will leave our factions ruined. Estral also had a part in killing your forces, why are they not condemned?”

“They have proved their worth. Following my previous demand, Konak will sign a contract banning military development.”

Konak’s representative echoed, “-unacceptable! I can’t think of anything worse for our province. Majesty, surely thee knows of how brutal our nati-”

“I won’t take no for an answer. Whein, I am only asking to keep what our nation won in conquest. Besides, Hidros’ not taking land, we don’t care to increase our influence. The damage has been done.”

‘Taking money from Yian-Dho and suppressing Konak’s military. I was right to trust in the king. My intent, he read it.’ Bickeringly followed – Igna and Whein made clear their motives, “-as representative of the Desok Alliance, seeing to the granted authority, accept Hidros’ terms.”

“Good,” he smiled, “-what about you?”

“The Desok alliance wishes to found an international organization focused on war prevention. To said end, we’re willing to conform to any practice...”

“Yian-Dho will not join such an organization.”

“Neither will Konak,” firmed the representatives.

Whein looked unphased, “-Yian-Dho and Konak are duty bound to obey my orders. Shall I take the matter to the senate?” they silenced at the mention, “-king Igna.”

“The foundation of an international organization for peace,” he scanned, “-such an endeavor takes time. It will have to be discussed by our allies. Expect an answer in the coming months.”

“So be it,” they shook hands and signed formal contracts and treaties. Hunched shoulders left the castle grounds into state-owned vehicles. A banquet served much entertainment inside – war had officially ended. King Igna made himself scared and chose to sip tea overlooking the terrace. ‘Kirth, a strange fellow.’

“Master.”

“Elixia and Frederick.”

“My apologies, king Igna, I need to know why the negotiations ended so anticlimactically.”

“It looked easy,” commented Elixia.

“Looked easy,” he sipped, “-honestly.”

“Don’t insult the king,” interjected Essin, “-what we saw was a masterclass of taking control. It looked easy from the sidelines; such is the mastery of any skill, for when a true master comes, the hardest of tricks will look simple to the layman. I must ask, Igna, I was under the impression that you’d leave on a bang.”

“I did,” he gulped and rested the glass, “-I took Yian-Dho’s financial ability and Konak’s military. They were the ones standing in our way. Peace can be officialized. Emperor Essin, I hope Iqavea and Hidros will forge a new path to the world ahead. Hidros has many allies who trust in us and not in Iqavea. You have a difficult road ahead. Look to Juvey and Ezel for aid; warlords as they are, they understand the importance of peace.”

“What about Hidros, what do we get from the trade?”

“We get a powerful ally,” he smiled, “-a united front in Iqavea,” he spotted éclair and waved, the prime ministers hastily answered the call.

“Majesty?”

“Word of warning. Beware of the Church. Markus’s attempts to reclaim Alpha will end in tragedy,” speaking of him, the man overheard and approached.

“Majesty, are you?”

“Markus, you need to be careful. Make use of the connections made today – I promised I would help... taking Alpha with my aid won’t mean much. You must do it on your own. The people here are most competent. Good luck,” he walked straight through the crowd, the king’s last act as head-of-state secured the world’s unforeseeable future. ‘-Engratse, here I come.’

Chapter 1056: Istra

“Have you heard?” echoed words and sharp taps, “-about your supposed hero?”

“About what?”

“Kirth,” the taps stopped at a bench, “-my lady, you should really pay attention to the summoned minions.”

“Why should I?” returned long black hair cut in a way to emphasize the visage. Sharp eyebrows carried a dignified look. One pupil wore inky black whilst another wore yellow surrounded by a sea of black. Her sharp blink and gentle motion gave a sense of confidence. She took long and meaningful pauses, “-after all, their death is only fuel to the burning fire of life. I granted an opportunity to grow,” her shoulders dropped, “-suppose none can be as unusual as the famed Scifer.”

Other footsteps came from an adjacent archway, “-lady Gophy, someone is here to see you.”

"To see me?" she stopped, flicking through her thoughts, "-very well, lead the way," she ambled until the archway where her dignified frame froze, "-Kirth's death was unexpected. Have the news relayed to him," the curious man tipped his hat and smiled shy of the shadow. She followed onto a rocky walkway made of plates of smooth stone scattered about. They looked like an island in the middle of a green ocean. The sun brightened much of the colors, and the associated heat, as shown in the distance by passersby, was unbearable. Some pitched their shirt and hopelessly blew, others fanned.

"Lady Gophy, are you not hot in that attire?"

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"Not really," she scanned her robe, "-why, does it look hot?"

"I'm not one to judge," the man retracted his words, "-pardon my intrusion," and led the march at a faster pace. She kept her own, '-what did I say?' she wondered. Shades shone sloppily from humble tree foliage. 'Who could it be?' she wondered and entered a chapel set in the shadow of a greater church rising from whence they came. The immediate humble shadows thickened, and a gentle air blew to no equal of the summer heat. Bushes, otherwise shrubbery were allowed free roam; only to be cut when they elapsed into the walkway.

"Priestess," waved a few.

"Good morning," she replied, "-the heat sure is unrelenting." Her jovial comment garnered a few laughs, a sharp cut thus waited the cold innards of the chapel. Paintings of gods and demons lined the walls in reproduction.

"Please, the guest is inside," said the aid, "-I will attend to my other duties," the doors locked, and silence settled.

'Silver hair?' caught her attention from the front row. She hastened her pace, '-who can it be?'

"Gophy."

"..."

"Long time no see," the silver-haired man rose, "-I see you're doing well."

"Igna?"

"In the flesh," the gestures widened, "-the chapel is quite the sight to behold. I do wonder what resides in the church yonder."

"What are you doing here?" she pressed with thin lips.

"A cordial visit," he smiled, "-it would be rude of me not to introduce myself before the church. I hear only good things from the residents. A church that makes a village a town, it does not disappoint."

"How did you find me?"

"Gophy, dearest Gophy, I do not owe a traitor explanation," he tipped his head with a friendly smile then headed for the door.

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"IGNA WAIT!" the rumble resounded, he paid no heed and soon vanished through the parted doors. 'What is he doing here?' her heart sank, visible irritation crinkled her brows and blemished her dignified appearance.

"Pops, can we get something to eat?" Vanesa came from the chapel's shadows.

"Sure we can," they locked arms, "-Vanesa, I'm impressed you don't dislike the heat."

"It's terrible," a glazed look crossed her regard, "-I'm going to pass out."

"Not on my watch," he pulled and snapped, "-this should keep you calm." A cloud hovered above her head from which snow fluttered. The bystanders swallowed their breaths in awe, 'is that magic?' they wondered. A flashy new family entered the quiet trading town of Istra, situated Northeast of Port Dawn, over the mountains and through the unexplored jungles set at a few week's journeys on horseback and days via train. Istra, aside from being a normal trading haven, also bolstered an unparalleled crime rate in the regions bordering the seas. Istra, as seen above, was split onto sections. The slums and poverty-ridden region bordered the port, whilst the trading town was fixed upon a cliff overlooking the peasantry. The port, the main town, and the mines further northeast, or east of the port/slums. Three main sections new visitors ought be familiar with. Access to the main town was not restricted by law, it was maintained by the sense of superiority thrust by those at the top; mostly wealthy successful businessmen and industrialists. In many ways, Istra could be seen as the Port Dawn of the North. Wealthy Alphan industrialist Thoas Duquant, a very famous name in the world of business and abusive factories, reigns as the mayor. A decision that came about from his efforts to build and expand regions made for the New Continent's industrial revolution. The gamble worked and during the war, he stacked his fortune by supplying factions with metals for the production of weaponry. Duquant is, as many writers have quoted, 'the embodiment of severity,' the second coming of Draco. Thus rendering access to the town virtually inaccessible to the commoners. An example of such a level of segregation was the church, whereby the bigger church was built to honor the haves, and the chapel, for the have-nots.

'The olden days of Hidros,' crossed his mind, "-Vanesa, care for something to eat?" they came upon the port side of town; ships waited at the harbor. Rails carried shipments from the industrial section, heavy factories blew whistles and pillars of smoke, and the sky could be seen painted as gray and solitary. Murky waters held dead fish and sea life. The repulsive smell sufficed for a weak stomach's defeat.

"Igna," a handsome lady rushed into his arm, her large light-blue eyes gazed into his soul lovingly, "-I'm here," she pulled his head and exchanged a warm kiss. Her romantic gestures came to the dismay of sailors and overall hardworking men. Hard palms, and hands stained in the shadows of oil and machinery, they could but glare enviously.

"Pops, we're too far out."

"No, it's fine," he continued along, taking note of the ships, "-I have petitioned the harbor for space to rest our yacht," to say Igna and his family stood out was an understatement. First, it was him, the king of Hidros, man to wealth unimaginable to the layman, his partner, the absolutely stunning Syhton, her beauty equal to that of a goddess, and the aloof Vanesa, with her clinginess. Igna no doubt stood out; word around town was of a couple looking for a residence.

A sweaty office worker hailed, “-lord Igna,” he cried, “-lord Igna!” and ran.

Syhton took Vanesa by the hands, “-we’re going for lunch.”

“Okay,” he nodded, “-here are the keys. Don’t make too much noise,” a pointless endeavor for soon a beautiful sounding engine’s roar thundered. Candy apple red, such the color racing up the roads to the town. ‘-Always with the flashy car,’ he intrinsically laughed, “-Lord Igna,” the man gasped, “-I’m sorry.”

“Take your time,” he lit a cigarette, workers carried on their day, loading and unloading cargo from the many vessels, “-we’re in no rush,” he puffed and motioned at the hangar, “-follow me, the heat’s rather arduous, is it not?”

Relief washed the office worker. The comfort of an air-conditioned hangar, Hamer’s Inc, said the massive emblem, standing out as the bigger and better facility for storage, “-my lord, are you sure we should be here?”

“Hamer’s inc,” he puffed, “-is owned by us, don’t worry,” he casually sat on steel-stairs, paying no attention to how it might have dirtied the expensive-looking suit, “-have a drink,” he pointed at the wall lined by vending machines.

“But I don’t have change...”

“It’s free,” he puffed, “-hurry.”

Pure happiness went down his throat. He looked up feeling refreshed, “-my lord, it’s about the Master of the Harbour,” a letter changed hands.

“To whom it may concern. It has come to my attention that an unknown ship wishes to dock. I’m afraid the harbor won’t be able to process the request. The port’s already under much stress from the constants ins and outs of produce. The discussion will not be up for debate. As for the request to dock privately; such request ought be taken through the mayor’s office. Good day.”

“Even here,” he crushed the cigarette and shook his head, “-I can’t seem to have a break.”

“I apologize-” the phone rang, Igna rose his finger and checked, ‘-Syhton?’ he answered, “-hello?”

Screams and cries burst through, “-Igna, it’s me,” she spoke calmly despite the abuse being thrown, “-we have a situation with ruffians. These mongrels dare think they have power, what should I do?”

“Put the leader on the phone.”

She rolled her eyes and glared, the vocal bunch froze, “-who’s the leader here?”

“...”

“There’s no leader. You need to leave our well-respect establishment. We don’t serve the likes of you here, slum dweller,” the high-end restaurant murmured estranged comments.

“Is she even allowed to be here?”

“Commoners ruining our establishment. The world’s gone to the dogs.”

“Look at her outfit, she’s not even worth the garment.”



Smug grinned lowered on her table, “-hear that? Tis the established speaking. We don’t need your kind.”

She rose her big blue eyes, “-imbecile.”

“Don’t ignore me!”

Phone to her ear, “-satisfied?”

“Yes I am,” the door swung open. Synton’s table was trapped by larger-looking armed men. Vanesa threw annoyed glances, “-I’m hungry,” she said. He stared, the ruffians subconsciously parted for him to take a seat, “-now then,” he smiled at Syhton and Vanesa, “-a good place you chose. I hear the food is to die for.” The comments kept on stacking, and words of the incident reached the kitchen, front of the house could do naught but watch in despair. ‘The church’s crest. Gophy, my poor little Gophy, did you really think sending these idiots to pester would amend anything?’

“What’s happening out there?” cried the head chef, “-why have you stopped working?”

“Chef, there’s trouble. It would seem commoners have entered the restaurant.”

“What a pain,” he dropped his towel and exited, ‘-the new continent’s not as great as they say. Alpha was one thing, this is another. I don’t get why the worthless think they’re something when they’re not. Wealthy playing the role of nobility, how insulting. If they were to incur the wrath of a true Hidros bred noble, I’m sure they’d see reason,’ the chef entered with somewhat grayish hair and still a sharp jawline. Red collar signified the rank, “-what may the problem be?”

“We have no problems to speak about,” Igna side-glanced, “-Kyle Darker.”

The man froze, “-what’s the matter, Chef Darker, have you seen a ghost?” Igna remarked.

“Majest-”

Igna signaled no, “-we did nothing,” added a very vocal Syhton, “-my daughter and I came for lunch, we were then ambushed by these unruly men and forced to endure their sailor mouth. I tell you, I haven’t heard such vulgarity since the streets of Anene. Is there no security in this fine establishment?”

“My lady,” the chef spoke slowly, “-we meant no disrespect,” he scowled at the ruffians, “-by any means, we take great joy in serving only the best for everyone’s experience.”

“Excellent, do have these men leave,” he stood and faced the restaurant, “-as an apology for the nuisance, allow us to pay for your lunches. Order what you please,” he turned at a waiter, “-bring out the best wine money can buy. May the delicious meal quench thy palettes from these unruly characters.”

“To the noble,” cheered one, “-to the noble,” the room joined. The ruffians were escorted and the restaurant regained its tender atmosphere.

“My liege, it is strange to see you here.”

“Likewise,” he smiled, “-would you believe me if I said I flew all the way to enjoy your food?”

“No, no,” chuckled the chef, “-I can’t stress it enough, my liege, I’m grateful for what you did. Without your help, my family would have been ruined.”

“Please, long as good food is served, I have no complaints.”

“Thank you, my liege,” he shuffled to the side, whispered a few words into the manger’s ears, and left. The latter approached, “-my lord, my lady, would you please follow me?” they passed under a golden chandelier and entered a privileged area, “-please, have a good meal.”

“Finally,” Syhton exhaled, “-now this is fit for royalty.”

Chapter 1057: “The Devil’s in town.”

“Acquainted with the chef?”

“Yeah. He worked in Hidros not long before moving to the new continent. I tell you, the food he cooks is the best in the world. If matters turned out a little differently, I tell you, I might not have been here today. I could have been a chef working for myself or in a renowned restaurant. Who can say, what comes often goes, remains are naught but what we wish we could alter.”

Vanesa and Syhton choose their focus; food or conversation. The choice was clear, they made it easy to ignore Igna and enjoy what came upon trays. Cordial staff, a longing look from management, envious scatters from the lower floors – this was life as he had known.

‘I left a life of luxury, one where I ruled at the top,’ the restaurant’s backdrop brightened, and taps of grand piano emulated the atmosphere, calling in a deeper sensation of belief and reflection. He watched, softly chewing the meat of scarce rarity, monster meat. ‘I visited the tower of Aria, there was nothing to be found. Monsters disappeared. Should I have stayed longer, Engraste would have escaped. I choose Eira in the end, was it for family or the simple fact that she’s useful. Who can say, truly, who gets to say what defines my intentions? I’m whole, playing a character from the start. No one suspect or challenges my intentions. Am I who I say I am or another character? Alfred vanished, the selfish bastard. Who’d known, the Curse King had daddy issues? Repulses me even thinking about it.’

Syhton’s long fingers waved, her telling gaze egged, ‘-someone’s behind,’ he made no motion, instead choosing food. Vanesa’s listless stares crossed the newer guest, she watched top to bottom and fell onto the replenished plate. Syhton’s clear blue pupils rose, snapping at a stranger, a warm brush of air lit the latter’s cheeks. She noticed the increased breathing, ‘-already won,’ crossed her mind, ‘-leave it to him I suppose.’

The gentleman; dressed according to the restaurant’s code, wore a pink shirt tucked into checkered grey pants ending near his ankle. The brown leather shoe told off class for its design but was mediocre in terms of quality. ‘Strange,’ Igna caught a glance in his peripheral, ‘-the top and bottom look expensive, and I’m sure he’s well associated. The shoes and the socks, they’re not of the same make and quality. They look cheap, who is this man?’

“Pardon me,” came a shaky out-breath, “-might I have a word with you?” he horned onto Igna. Without fail, Igna ignored the interaction – focusing his attention on Syhton’s beauty and charm. “Excuse me,” said the man once more in a stronger tone, “-might I have a word?” Igna rose his brows, “-a word?” he narrowed, “-and who might you be?”

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“My name’s Fedia Duquant, the son of Mayor Duquant. I come on behalf of my father.”

“Fedia Duquant?” Igna’s piercing eyes rattled Fedia’s curled hair and brown complexion. The man stuttered for a bit, not knowing when or how to react. An awkward silence settled, Fedia fidgeted.

An interface lit, ‘-Elixia,’ wrote across the lens, ‘-Scan this fellow.’

“As you wish, master,” a line lowered from Fedia’s sharp forehead towards the ground. More squares seemed to take in data from the man’s actual position. A separate column displayed multiple files, the borders ranged from white – meaning publicly available to red, indicating infraction of secure data, and sometimes, black, meaning state or agency-protected secrets. The particular column ambered a reddish color for it linked to the Istra’s judicial system. ‘-Loke Huen – wanted criminal suspect of assassination, grand theft auto, fraud, and conspiracy to commit terrorism.’

‘Interesting,’ he lowered cutleries, “-Fedia Duquant was it?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s have a chat.”

They exited and entered a side alley, one linking one side to another. Few people used said path, and shadows of adjacent buildings made the walk more dangerous than it ought to be. The uneven ground – cracked and dug out at parts, made for a risky journey. One misstep and a sprained ankle or a mugging. Igna kept the walk until a rusty gate opened into the restaurant’s back. Shadows from taller buildings rendered the area somber and chilly.

“You have my attention,” Igna said, lighting a cigarette.

“I was asked to meet with you.”

“By whom?”

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“By a certain individual. I can’t exactly say her name.”

“Right,” Igna paused, “-tell me, Fedia, what is an aristocrat such as yourself have to do with delivering messages? Surely the life of a noble is more exciting?”

“I don’t know,” the man watched on enviously, “-I change, you know, like a change of scenery,” he inched ever so closer, “-you’re also very rich.”

“I’m rich with knowledge.”

“No, no, I don’t mean knowledge, I mean materialistic,” a sharpened look crossed, Igna made no remarks at the flash of murderous intent, “-you and your wife’s car. Obnoxiously enjoying extravagant meals whilst more than half the town folk stare for food and basic necessities.”

“Fedia,” remarked Igna, “-the character is slipping. If you are to wear a mask, make sure the strings are attached. Otherwise,” he dipped in behind Fedia and pulled the cigarette against the man’s long neck.

“Otherwise what? You’ll burn me to death?”

“No,” the cigarette transformed, the blade gleamed, “-I’ll give thee a fate worse than death.

“...” neither gave way, Igna eventually returned the blade into a cigarette, “-Fedia Duquant, tell me, why are you here to meet with me.”

He coughed, touching his neck for signs of blood, “-how strong are you?” said a gulp, “-I want to know who you are, mister.”

“Same goes for me,” returned Igna, “-I’m no one special. Only a man who came into wealth due to circumstances. Tell me more about the town Duquant, I’m new around here, and I wish to understand how Istra works.”

Words formulated, Fedia primed his lips, ‘-do not reveal any information,’ hammered from the depths of his mind, ‘-in no way are you engaged in conversation. The man’s a manipulator, he will do anything to get what he wants. You son of nobility, must act your status and show power when the moment arises. Such the will of our priestess, you shan’t fail, Fedia, you shan’t fail, else,’ coupled with the warning came disturbing images of a morgue, ‘-the others might feel more.’

He gathered his strength and looked up, “-nothing to talk about. I came to deliver this message from the port master. He has agreed to grant a spot in the harbor on condition that the officials agree to his terms. Quip pro quo,” Fedia cleared his throat, “-now that’s done, I shall take my leave. Good day.”

Igna made no effort to match the sentiment. He puffed and observed, picking everything movement or tell Fedia might leave. The man’s clops echoed into the distant crowd. Thus, with a nonchalant shrug, Igna snuffed the cigarette and reentered the restaurant.

“How was it?” beamed Syhton under a golden chandelier.

“I should be the one asking,” he smiled, “-how was the meal?”

She shifted sideways, allowing Igna to peer deeper inside, “-ah, Vanesa’s fast asleep. Very well,” he handed over his card, “-go take care of payment. I’ll see to our gluttonous daughter.” The exchange happened just shy of the normal room’s guest. Jealousy-filled stares wrote death sentences on multiple counts to Igna and Syhton.

“He has money, connections, a lovely family, and a beautiful wife. Life is unfair sometimes,” whispered passing comments. Igna carried Vanesa on his back, her satisfied expression was one to be experienced.

“Shall we?” she waited at the entrance; the family exited. Tall buildings and multiple windows felt normal at first glance, however, deep behind the veil of commonality lived humanity’s vices. ‘Fedia ambled into the room without resistance. There were guards on our way out. In the back alley, he didn’t seem phased by the darkness or the reputation of Istra.’

“Alchemist,” Igna paused, “-might we have a word?”

‘Why does he look frightened?’ Igna wondered, their red coupé thundered its way near the restaurant steps. Syhton took Vanesa, “-go check,” she whispered, “-might be important.”

He backtracked towards Kyle, ‘-he seems more on edge.’

"Igna, you have to leave Istra, else they'll get you," he reentered the premises, leaving Igna at a standstill, '-I'm right. SSY; Location scan!' Syhton and Vanesa shut their doors, \*BOOOOOOOOM!\* a ball of fire engulfed the vehicle, shattering nearby windows and shaking the ground. Curious bystanders ran to the street.

"Location scanned, enemies detected," silhouette manifested through buildings. 'And they killed my wife and daughter,' he watched as the car's remains burnt, '-good. I expected this sort of outcome. Now,' he focused on the reaction, '-Kyle's visibly shook, he knows something but not too much. The guests are terrified and seeing the explosion came as a shock to everyone. Hiding in plain sight; doesn't apply here. What's the nature of the explosion?' he walked towards the wreckage. Helpers ran with fire extinguishers and water buckets, '-Istra, Istra, you are a town criminal. I'll fit in nicely.'

"Alchemist!"

"Kyle," he stopped, "-don't get any closer, they might put a bounty on your head. Feign ignorance, for it's the only sure way of survival."

Meanwhile, thrust on her knees with heads to a statue's feet, "-priestess, we have news from the town, a wife and daughter were killed in another terrorist attack. They're the family who moved into town. What are your orders?"

"Leave them be," she prayed, "-I will hear none of this incident. Do not bring that man's name in my presence," her jaws tightened, '-Igna, if you dare get in my way, I will make certain your life becomes hell. Do not think I'm the same old goddess you tamed. I am Gophy, the Goddess of Chaos, I will get my revenge, I will get my way, trust.'

Police, firefighters, and medics rushed onto the scene. The sirens rang loudly with red. The fire went away, leaving a smoldering remain of the car. The investigators scribbled on their notepads and looked around. A comment slip, "-good thing it was the visitors," into Igna's peripheral.

"Are you the owner?" inquired an officer.

"Yeah."

"I'd like to ask a few questions."

"Go ahead," he lit a cigarette. The officer didn't take the gesture well as he raised his brow, "-where were you?"

"The entrance," he pointed at the restaurant.

"Who was in the car?"

"My wife and my daughter."

"Did the car have a history of malfunction?"

"You tell me," he rose an uncaring stare, "-I bought the car at the nearby agency. Ask them. It's of recent make, the most expensive model they had. Why would I waste my time checking if a brand-new car's explosive capabilities."

“Sir, please calm down.”

“Calm down, yes?” he puffed into the officer’s face, “-tell me, are you the one who said it was a good thing the explosion took the lives of my family? I suppose it’s no great harm when the latter is done to a visitor. The judicial department won’t be shamed; an act of random terrorism. Drop the act,” he stood sharply, “-tell your superior officer to watch his back. Istra’s the breeding ground for criminals and low-lives. They’ve yet seen a true monster,” he smirked, “-they will know who’s who,” and disappeared into a nearby alley.

‘I couldn’t move,’ the officer shuddered. Pearly sweat of pure fear fell, ‘-I couldn’t say anything... who was he, what did he do? Why is my heart racing,’ he watched the wreckage. Charred remains were pulled and placed onto stretchers – the medics laughed as did the officers, ‘-were we this corrupt?’

“Throw ‘em in the ambulance. We’ll sign some papers and have ‘em cremated,” exhaled the coroner, “-another case wrapped up boys. Let’s go,” he tapped the van twice, the sirens and presence carried into the distance. “Who’s up for some fast food?”

The deep-seated bicolored pupils glowed, ‘-Istra’s a fun place. I’m going to enjoy this,’ he waited before a metallic door, ‘-well then,’ he kicked the door clean off, entered the room overlooking the street, cocked Tharis, \*BANG, BANG, BANG,\* a trail of white escaped the barrel, “-the Devil’s in town,” he laughed.

Chapter 1058: “Dear Boss” [1]

“Did you hear?”

“The explosion?”

“Yeah, I heard it was some rich guy’s car that exploded.”

“Rich guy or not, we can’t spare time to worry. Load the cargo will you?”

“LESS TALKIN’ MORE WALKIN’”

“Sorry boss!”

Waves thrashed against moist dark rocks, nature’s natural port. An eyewatering sea aroma filled the air and touch which felt sticky and uncomfortable. God forbid the courageous, who, by sheer ignorance, wore baggy clothes to the wind-swept beach. Sun, sand, sea – clouds, rocks, and ocean, such laid the view before a lonesome man perched atop another cliff. The latter overlooked the sea, as for the main cliff that laid in the opposite direction, the scale greatened ten-fold – being perched as if a vampiric castle, though, the city walls were more fearsome than any Victorian-styled buildings. Smoke puffed. Igna threw his legs off the cliff and waited. Night settled – ships horned in the distance, the port worked d’arrache pied else, relentlessly – like ants, fulfilling their duties conditionally as opposed to unconditionally (like the ants).

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“They should be there,” he smirked.

Over the cliff, passed the untrailed forest path and rocky traps – at signs of mankind’s work, the wind follows a siren, one loud and impatient. Three bangs were reported. The officer in charge, the same fellow who took Igna’s report earlier, had his arms heavy with notepads and reports. The driver, another officer, one who made the rash comment, held his foot, “-emergency orders from the chief.”

“Yeah, I know,” gritted the driver, “-filter across the files.”

The scene seamlessly transitioned from the wreckage to buildings shy off the curb. Red in color and rectangular, the indented windows were about all the details it held. The amorous moon escaped for a flirtatious visit, it shared limited light against the setting sun, and the mixture birthed a nostalgic hue. Officers issued a perimeter, blocking off access to the building’s innards. Things didn’t look great from the sidelines. Considering the exalted place in town, many of the inhabitants frowned.

“Another incident?”

“Has the town gone to the dogs?”

“I tell you, we should have moved to Iqavea, least there we ought to have our respect as nobles.”

“Nobility’s no longer important in Iqavea, Alphaia seems the better choice.”

“Shut up and look, they carry stretchers. My stomach cannot bear to see more deaths. We should meet the mayor, he has a duty towards us.”

“I should have known the place would be unsafe. To see our roads and buildings be tainted so easily by the common ruffians, I feel nauseated. Get my bags, we’re going,” a shared sentiment in the greater scheme of things.

The coroner’s car pulled onto the curb just behind the officers, “-what’s the matter again?” yawned the former, “-did we not close the affair earlier?”

The officers, driver and co-driver, exited their steed and threw firm handshakes, “-lord Tile.”

“Tile is fine,” he exhaled, “-to think we’d have more casualties this day. Have you heard from the chief?”

“Yes, the chief said to investigate and do our jobs properly.”

“Suppose it’s not an inside job?” he scratched his head with a bored demeanor, “-what happened here?”

Attending officers rushed to them, “-Lord Tile,” he stood silently.

“Paul, Janth,” hailed a man dressed in casual attire.

“Inspector.”

“Paul, my dear, you shouldn’t drive recklessly. As for Janth, might think of getting some bags,” the inspector motioned inside, “-lord Tile, if morbid curiosity begets thee, I suggest keeping silent.”

A single door opened; the hallways greatedened inside with few officers. Some interviewed potential witnesses and others were kept watch.

“The place feels weird,” Janth commented, “-there’s a lingering scent of death, I don’t know.”

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"Yeah," the inspector nodded, "-a growing sense of fear," he paused on the stairs and threw a hefty glance over his shoulder, "-I say it again, once one sees, it can never be unseen. I'm warning out of care, if I had known before, I wouldn't have looked. Are we on the same page?"

"Drop the theatrics," Tile sighed, "-yet another corpse, we have our share of deaths. Nothing's going to change, nothing."

"If the inspector says it's bad," Paul gulped, "-I think we should heed-"

"Let me go first then," Tile shoved forth, "-lead the way, inspector." Words weren't the only warnings. Recruits unfortunate to glance upon the room sprinted out. Others hurled, the scent of vomit, sweat, and blood hit, forcing crinkled brows and narrowed stares.

"What the fu-?"

"I know," the inspector pulled his strength and walked, "-it's bad."

"We still don't know what happened?"

"Three gunshots were reported after we left earlier," they arrived at the door, or where a door might have been. Splinters and torn hinges thrust across the floor followed by the heavy smell of death. They entered a truly macabre scene. Paul stomach pulled, Janth's jaw dropped and Tile's hand trembled. Flashes blasted, ending on a high-pitched whistle, "-yeah, the gunshots weren't the killing blow, far from it," the walls were lined with specks of red, and even the ceiling had splatters. Three victims, one on a couch, another on his knee with the decapitated head placed on a counter, looking at its own body, as for the last, the torso was sliced open, guts and innards were splattered all over the room, the severed hand was posed in an okay sign and hammered against the back wall.

"Dear boss," said simple calligraphic writing.

The inspector swallowed his nausea and moved to the first victim, one with the decapitated head, "-this here is Thomas Edow, a twenty-five-year-old retainer in the employment of the Jeshia household."

"Demonic," Tile shuddered, "-who in this world has the stomach to do such harm to another human," he shook at the sight.

"I did say to be wary. Lord Tile, will you be, okay?"

"I will," he inhaled, "-this isn't a gang killing, it's pure sadism. The man seems to have suffered a brutal and torturous death," he scanned the premises.

"I concur," narrowed the inspector, "-the killer made no attempts at hiding his trail inside the room. They were all shot in the legs, Edow here was unfortunate to be the first. Look at the couch," he pointed, catching the room's attention, "-ropes."

"They were forced to watch... to watch their friend be tortured."



“Yeah,” the inspector shivered. Tile called in his assistants, “-can’t determine the cause of death. I’m sure he died painfully – the psychological trauma, I can’t believe my eyes...” the shackled headless body was placed on a stretcher and pulled out.

“Inspector Jack,” Tile rose a firm look.

“What is it?”

“The murders, they’re not related to the?”

“No, no,” the inspector hurried to interject, “-I have confirmation it isn’t them.”

“Do the newbies not know?”

“No, best leave the under-the-table issues to the chief and me.”

A thump broke the coroner-inspector hurdle, “-what happened?”

Paul fell on his bottom with a frightened look, “-under the table,” he trembled, “-under the table.”

Janth intervened, “-what’s under the table?” he froze. Tile and Jack followed and held their mouths in horror, “-a baby...”

“No,” Tile wiped his brow, “-it’s a fetus,” they silently looked at the couch, “-the second victim is a woman...” the outfit and less obvious female features proved the investigator wrong, the first impression’s amassed to naught when faced by a bloodied mess.

The coroner lifted a damp piece of cloth, “-she’s been gutted,” he snapped to the side, “-yeah,” he covered her bludgeoned lower body, “-skinned and ripped to shred. The sheets kept our eyes from the truth... she was pregnant.” A heavy silence invaded. The open window could but whisper the outside horns and distant chatter. The outside world moved as for inside, time seemed to stop – the brutality and sheer maliciousness, Janth reached his limit. The poor lad ran out like many others and hurled into the opposite room where mentally scarred officers gathered. Janth’s vivid pride for keeping the law slipped. Like them, an empty look of dejection invaded the psyche, there was no room for retries or erasure; a permanent scar set about trapping their hearts.

Paul’s eyes turned bloodshot red, “-let me,” he cuddled the fetus and laid it next to the second victim, its mother. Her hair was so damped none could make a description of its color. The facial features were deformed, a bloodied hammer told the untold truth. Her throat and her neck carried marks of strangulation as well as two open holes. Her muscles were torn off her legs and arms. The killer took time in taking her apart like a cruel puzzle piece. Stretchers arrived, her right leg was tied against the couch, a flick of a knife, she was taken, with no name nor immediately recognizable features. Tile and Jake waited. The last victim and the killer’s message, “-whoever they were, the third victim’s no longer human.”

“Yeah,” Jack took meaningful deep breaths, “-what we have is here,” the severed arms hammered onto the wall was a tell, for after they crossed the couch, a bucket carried the decapitated remains of whoever was third. A bed of flesh, bones, and organs neatly nestled the victim’s head, the latter of which was in relatively good condition. The words liar was carved into his forehead.

“I recognize him...”

“You do?”

“Yeah, Loke Huen, the police agency’s secret.”

“I was right,” Jack pinched his head, “-I was right.”

“What now?”

“We find the killer. I have an idea who it might be,” he looked out an open window, “-where are the bodies?”

“From the explosion?”

“Yeah.”

“The morgue. Since they are tourists, the paperwork is a little complicated. We’ve asked the husband to come by tomorrow, why?”

“I can’t say if I’m right, I have a hunch the killer’s targeting us.”

“Why would he?”

“I mean, look at the crime scene...”

“And? Listen, I have no interest in joining the scheme set by the agency or the church. My paycheck comes from issuing death certificates.”

“The wife and daughter... I know who killed them.”

“Yeah, I do too. Loke Huen, wasn’t it?”

“Uh-huh,” he nodded, “-an explosion of that caliber is his department. One’s for certain, the agency didn’t issue his orders. Huen must have acted on behalf of the church. I doubt we’ll get information from those tight-lipped bastards.”

“There’s no honor among thieves. If the husband took revenge, who are you to deliver justice? I’m just saying, if the one who is responsible easily took them out, I doubt one on ones to be a good idea.”

Thus, the night followed. Istra’s local gazette published the news, and soon the whole town was captivated by the murders. The explosion and apartment murders were linked by strangers. Newspapers made their way the next morning. From top to bottom, everyone knew what transpired.

Similarly, a gentle breeze snuck into a rented cottage room. The wooden roof, floors, and logged walls breathed a hunter-cabin atmosphere. Black hair leaned passionately, their lips, “-good morning, Igna.”

“Syhton,” he sat upright and pulled her shoulders into a warm embrace, “-are you headed home?”

“I suppose,” she watched with affectionately glowing eyes, “-are you certain?”

“Yes,” he smiled and kissed her forehead, “-I’m sure this is the way forward. Having allies is great... still, part of me feels responsible for yesterday’s blunder.”

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“Well, as long as you know what you want, I’ll be here.”

“Don’t you have an audition?”

“Yeah, later this afternoon,” she winked, “-Jin the Ripper.”

“Vanesa’s gone home?”

“Shadow Realm.”

“Alright,” they exchanged a warm kiss, “-Engratse’s out here hiding. I’ll draw him out somehow.”

“Just don’t go overboard.”

“I won’t,” they crossed fingers and shared a warm tender embrace, “-good luck on the audition.”

“Thank you,” she stood, “-give Cruse a call, the boy’s been on edge since he entered the academy.”

“He’ll be fine, the boy is a genius,” a portal marked Syhton’s departure.

‘The town’s talking about the murder,’ he looked out the window, the scenery told of hard workers running the streets, ‘-the slum’s a good place to start,’ he slid into his coat and exited the room.

“Hey boss,” said many, “-the killer wrote Hey boss,” the sensationalized broadcast thrust the murder into the limelight. Unbeknownst to them, the killer was a suave man, ‘-who do I kill next?’

Chapter 1059: “Dear Boss” [2]

Vacant stares, a candid look of want. The walk from the cottage to the coroner’s office was stifling and potentially life-threatening. The slums were called slums for a reason. Murky streets and overflowed drainage spewed their filth along the curb. Puddles of excrement and factorial muck concentrated at would-be drainage. Men of few races waited under run-down buildings. Alleys told untold stories – murder, beating, mugging. ‘Place’s worse than what we have home. Our murder capital thrives, here, Istra’s nothing save the mouth of empty lives, unfilled desires, and regret. They walk without care for what’s in front. Youths see themselves as children of the underworld. Family-run gangs offer protection – killing for a modest sum is the norm. Istra’s only one of many lawless cities around the world. Compared to Konak’s reputation, living here seems a thrill.’ Moans flew over open windows, he side-glanced and caught the image of an officer beating down a young woman. Younger boys peeped from the side alley. ‘-The windows,’ he looked opposite to another, this time, a man, being whipped by another man. Demi-humans and ardent fighters roamed, ‘-their outfits reminiscent of a world beyond repair,’ he observed, ‘-Hidrosian armor, concealed weaponry. The slums are truly the place where filth gathers,’ he smiled, ‘-regardless of my prestige and title as king, I belong with them. These are my people, I was like them, and I still am. Istra, what secrets do you hold,’ he climbed a steep slope, buildings gradually improved the farther he walked.

“HELP ME!” cried a younger lady, “-HELP ME!” a lady in high heels sprinted, Igna paid little to no attention, “-you have to help me!” she yelled, armed men, leaped from the side alleys on bikes, and tore the neighborhood with insults and ugly engine roars.

“I got you,” she gasped and dropped her head, “-please, help!”

The irresponsible expression begot a longing feeling of despair. Igna casually took her hands and turned, “-who are you, and what do you want,” their eyes met. ‘I remember that face,’ he narrowed, ‘-short curly hair, big rounded glasses, and a tight-fitting top ending in running shorts and shoes. I know this girl,’ he glanced at the attackers, a crowd gathered.

“Better let the lady go,” came a hard-hitting accent, “-we’re from the Frontlei Gang. Don’t mess wi’ us, sir,” riders unsaddled their diseased ridden steeds, “-hand the gal over,” the leader, a man of demi-human feature, cocked his pistol and pressed his lips. The lady looked at Igna enviously, her fate rested in the hand of a stranger. So she thought, her stare widened, “-young master!” he pressed her mouth quick as could be.

“So you know each other?” inferred the leader waving his gun around, “-two for the price of one, boss,” came a distant comment. An unimpressed look swept the leader, he nonchalantly pointed the gun.

“-Ay, you fuckin’ idiot. Don’t talk when the boss talks,” came another, though, the reaction was more reserved from the boss at said time.

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“Poor ol’ sod. Take him’ home.”

\*Bang,\* the street rattled. Boss man’s head exploded – brain matter splattered, and he dropped. Blood pooled and broke off to the drainage; windows slammed, observers ran and the street emptied. The pursuer watched in horror, “-ay, what the fuck?”

“Don’t,” said Igna’s murderous gaze, “-I’ll be taking the girl with me. Tell the Frontlei Gang’s boss to meet with me at Shaker’s cottage later. I’ll pay for his and her life, understand?”

Another man strongly waved his arm, “-Where do you get off?” \*Bang,\* another dropped. The lady covered her face, and two people dropped in the space of a few seconds. “-Anyone else wants to join the party?” he offered graciously. Riders straddled the oil-ridden bikes; scavengers took the weapons and dropped the bodies into yet another alley. Silence settled.

“Young master.”

“Stephanie from Antom news, why are you here?”

“I don’t know,” she trembled, “-I’ve seen my share of deaths in the war... it’s not like here.”

“Head home,” he narrowed, “-I say this for your own interest. Lest thee becomes one of the elites, the slums are where people like us return.”

She attentively watched, “-have you changed?”

Igna simply smiled, “-have I?” came an ominous projection; Staxius’ murderous intent swallowed Igna’s face, the expression intermingled. “Heed my words, there is no story to be followed. Even if there are, it will come at a great cost. Two lives had to be sacrificed,” he gestured at the alley, “-what will it be, Stephanie.”

“I will stay,” she gritted, “-I have to show the world the truth, I have to make the world see the light.”

“Arrogant,” he focused forward, “-take this,” a talisman materialized, “-wear it at all times. Bath, shits, I don’t care, wear it. Such the only condition I impose.”

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She reluctantly tied the necklace, raising her head to nothing, “-the young master’s gone?” her head dropped at the distant gunfire, ‘-where’s my contact,’ she scurried.

The vexing slopes steepened. The church’s bell tower clanged the melody of midday. A couple of meters from the church, firmed into the upper side of the town stood the police station. Bored guards stood over gates, some fixed on wooden benches, and played cards. Tall walls surrounded the compounds, including, fire-station and coroner’s office. A grave could be seen from the station, and figures in black prayed the salvation of yet another death.

“Identification and purpose of visit.”

“Lyoko Igna. I was asked by the officers to visit the coroner’s office.”

“I see,” the watchman rose an understanding look, “-you’re the unlucky fellow who lost his wife and daughter. Man, I tell you,” he went through the motions and stamped his card, “-I see more and more people lost their families. It stings man,” he sighed and complied visit related paperwork, “-youngin’ lost their lives early. I can’t bear the sight of another crying mother, a traumatized sister or an abused brother. Istra is not a good place,” he handed over a pass, “-well, just the worry of an old man. Head on sonny, I hope your family has a peaceful afterlife.”

“Thank you,” he took one step, “-old man,” and tapped his shoulder. The inner compound was big and tall. Modern offices and stuffy officers sweated their brows in the heat.

“Corner’s office is over there,” said a returning visitor.

“Thank you,” returned Igna. He walked, the intense shadow eased, and the midday sun snuffed at the side of the massive police station. The coroner’s office was humble and square, trees lined the front yard and gave shade to mortician-branded vans. An older-looking woman waited at the reception. She pulled out her teeth and revealed yellow and chipped, “-what is the purpose of your visit sir?” came a strained high-pitch. It was as if she had done so for many years, forcing an inviting tone that pierced the eardrums.

“Lyoko Igna.”

“Husband,” she flicked through her notes, “-take this and head to the waiting room. The coroner will meet you shortly.”

A closed office of brown held three individuals, “-he’s here,” added the coroner Tile.

“I apologize on Janth’s behalf.”

“No use worrying,” inferred the inspector Jack, “-I’m surprised you’re here after yesterday.”

“A voice deep inside said to follow the investigation. I have to know who killed them, I must know their reason and who was able of such brutality.”

"I suggest you stay here, Paul."

"I agree with Tile. Three's a crowd. We don't want the husband to feel pressured," they headed out, "-I have confirmation from Frontlei. None of their hitmen was responsible for the murders. None one knows who killed them... the murderers gained infamous in Istra's underworld. Some organizations might think of hiring the lunatic to further their agenda."

"Jack, the police department is corrupt. So is mine. We brush most incidents under the rug. There won't be much left even if we try to act in authority. Besides, I doubt the murder will continue."

"No, I have a hunch. The husband knows something we don't. He has the secret and if we break him, we might find ourselves the killer."

Freezing cold whispers echoed down the morgue floor. Many bodies lined a single room. The autopsy table yet held blood. Masks were assigned, "-Lyoko Igna, is that you?"

"Yeah," he answered calmly.

"Sorry to say," they stood over two bodies, "-there was nothing we could have done. The explosion destroyed much of their body – I managed to rescue your daughter's face." He looked at them with deepening woe.

"It was only yesterday... we had dinner, we had dinner, we had plans," he shook his head, "-I come from Hidros," he explained, "-I was born into nobility and earned most of my money from clever business ventures. I came here to see the market... I told my wife and daughter, and I warned them, but they never listened. We had the means to afford a great estate and stay in the affluent district. We had the means... what happened, the godforsaken town turned its back. Reality's a hard pill to swallow," a grave look of woe-faced Tile and Jack, Igna gripped their hearts with his words. The white mist of the cold must have hidden the black ooze coming off Igna. The Dark-Arts of manipulation, fake words, fake expression, fake sentiment – Tile and Jack accepted his word as fact. "Excuse me," Igna interjected, "-might I have a minute alone?"

"..." they exited the morgue in utter shock.

"Did you suspect him?"

"Yeah, I thought he was the one who killed the trio. You know, like a sick sense of vengeance?"

"I don't think it's him. Did you see the expression, he was sorry but kept composed. I admire his strength," Tile dropped onto a nearby bench, "-if only we had a sliver of his composure. I tell you; the world would be a better place."

Jack meandered his thoughts, but no clever idea came. Just as the suffocating pressure of bafflement gripped his throat, a radio call broke their entire foundation.

"Lyoko Igna, please speak to my secretary, she'll take your wish as to how your family will be sent off. Incineration is a popular practice," a police car waited with Paul at the helm. Igna watched as the clueless investigators left the premises. 'Go, little lamb, go. I hold the pieces to this game of chess. The devil's taken hold of Istra, I will ooze death till Engratse or the church yields. Gophy, Engratse, my foolish step-brother, this war will start here and end in Draebala, I've seen the truth, all shall be clear. Just wait

and see,' the secretary approached with paperwork, 'I will have my way, and I'll make damn sure it's entertaining,' a translucent shadow seamlessly jumped into his body.

"Did you say something?"

"No," he replied, "-nothing at all."

Yellow tape blocked a familiar alley. White clothes haphazardly covered the victims. "Report?" Jack met one of the officers.

"Two young men were reported dead. Witness speaks of a lady running from the sight of the crime. They were shot in the head and disembowel. The world, '-liar,' was carved on their stomachs.' Tile and Jack approached for a better look. Camera flashes hissed; another gruesome murder plagued the street.

"Identification?"

"No," the officers shrugged.

"No way we'll know who they are," Tile held his chin, "-fingerprints were burnt, the body's virtually skinned, and the faces' beyond repair. We don't have the necessary technology to hunt down their identities."

"We could always call the higher-ups, right?"

"Ask the professors to come down," firmed Tile. Another phone call rang. Jack excused himself to the shadows, "-Detective Jack speaking."

"Jack, I call from the frontier. Do not pursue the matter. It has been resolved," the enigmatic call ended. Jack brought a look of disdain.

"What?"

"Can't touch them," he exhaled.

"The underworld," Tile pinched his forehead, "-should have expected as much."

"It's not a gang-killing... the word liar."

"AHHHHH!" a photographer fell, the duo rushed, "-what's the matter?"

"Look," he trembled, "-Dear boss wrote in calligraphy." The investigators shuddered, "-it's him," they gulped, "-the killer from yesterday... does that mean he's a member of the underworld?"

"We can't say for sure," they pained, "-Istra has a serial killer on the loose," the comment was overheard by a nearby reporter, "-DEAR BOSS STRIKES AGAIN!"

Chapter 1060: "Dear Boss" [3]

A pit of fire swallowed Syhton and Vanesa's body doubles. The whole pretense of losing his wife and daughter came about from a flicker of inspiration. During the dinner, they shared at Kyle's restaurant. The division of classes grew apparent. Such, a kindling of an idea sparked the mind, the wheels clamored, locking hinges and spewing the schema for a simple but grand delusion.

Assistants watched enviously. Igna held his ground, taking time with his fade. The furnace snuffed its howl, the fire faded for heat. One of the helpers beelined for the sterile white floor. There, gathered their ashes and labeled them as, “-Vanesa Lyoko,” and, “-Syhton Lyoko,” under each read, “-a loving wife and an adoring daughter.”

Igna was soon outside the coroner’s office. He held a black briefcase. Wind of change shirked sirens. The neighbors, and the police, were on edge. Another murder hunts the town. Thereon, Igna left on foot. Promenading thru the chaotic alleys. Church, after the vexing array of makeshift passages, else walkways, he arrived at the slum. The immense presence of the subdued cliff was a sight to behold. It reigns silently, towering over the peasantry like a monarch.

“Another murder, did you hear?” came more whispers. The ‘more’ populated part of the slum, the port, and harbor, welcomed many idle men too old for work to partake in alcohol and games of chance. The game of choice is poker. The favorite bet – cigarette.

“Hey, son,” waved one older man, “-you there,” the balding man of very dark complexion narrowed his already crinkled face, “-come here,” the attention leaned on the briefcase.

Igna glanced, “-Shaker’s cottage,” read the wooden frame. An unsteady veranda held the betting older men. No windows to speak about, the place was open and grand. Movement in and out was of differing age groups. On one side were the youngins sneaking drinks and cigarettes from a young age. Another side, the elders – many wore fine clothes, and some were dressed in old formal military uniforms. ‘Veterans,’ he glanced at his watch, ‘-got time before the gang leader arrives,’ he went up to the older man, “-I’m here.”

“Good to see,” the other elders shifted and gave place for Igna at the table. The dealer, a relatively young man, squinted a side-eye at Igna and then followed into dealing cards.

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“Don’t get out of shape, Ben,” said another, “-you deal cards, no side eyes,” vacuous laughter enrobed the table. Both tense and relaxed, there was much happening here and in the background. Yonder rose a glimpse of a cargo ship making port. Those on the ground cried and swore. Unlucky sacks flung into the sea. The master and his servants; legal slavery.

“The briefcase,” he glimpsed the cards and threw chips, “-you come from the coroner’s office. Lost your family?”

“Yeah, my wife and daughter.”

The old man nodded respectfully, “-boy, care to hear this fellow’s story?”

“Sure?”

“Well, my name’s Tim, a retired Sergeant from the army. War is a piss of a thing. My old brain of mind remembers my failures more than my success. Like you, I once held onto that very same briefcase. My wife, I met her during a party hosted by the academy. My buddies and I went drinking, we returned to the party more than a little tipsy. I tell you, the confidence of alcohol is something not to be disregarded, for sheep turn into wolves after a sip of the devil’s nectar. I went in thinking only about having some fun with my buddies. I don’t know how and I don’t know where it started; I introduced myself to the hosts,



no idea if it was smart or not. Well, that doesn't matter. I saw my wife – she was attractive with a magnetic smile. Didn't take long for us to strike a connection, but I tell you, what impression drunk Tim made is something I can't correctly gauge. Wish I had asked her... my wife wasn't my wife. I was an idiot. We dated. Three months later, war struck, and I was called into battle. I returned home after another few months. We eventually moved to the new continent. We started a nice family, I was happy and her smile was as big as ever. One day, I returned from work early. I climbed the stairs to my bedroom and... you know," he sighed, "-she cheated on me with my best friend. Lust can be all-powerful. Perhaps I should have done more to make her love me, perhaps. Well, I couldn't be stopped. Took out my army-issued firearm and nailed them into their heads. The relief and smile I got, I tell you, the joy of eliminating my failure in life. That drunken night which I remember so annoyingly today, the scene I created and how I overthought. I understood one glaring truth, and that is to not care. They launched an investigation but no, my connections were tight. The murder was ruled as a murder-suicide. I stood on that pier like you, boy, I stood there wandering the streets unable to find salvation. You," he leaned, "-the smell of alcohol and death. You killed my men, that is something I don't take lightly. Tell me, boy, who are you and why did you kill my men?"

"Why did I kill your men?" he leaned into his chair and tapped the table and played on Tim's behalf. The sudden move sucked the air out of everyone's mouths.

"Leader of the Frontlei, else, the Frontline gang. My motivation and aspirations are none of your concern. We speak of a world where money buys and trades lives. Morality isn't a luxury afforded to the scums of this earth," he tapped and raised, "-just like the people around this table, there are those who make bets and others to pull," many folded and at the end, only two remained, "-however, there's an exception. We have a better view from the bottom than the top," he went all-in, "-and that is Tim, adaptability."

The opponent folded, and Igna took the chips and tapped Tim's shoulder. "Old man, I'm no sweetheart. I know the underworld inside out. Tell me, how much for the lives I took?"

Tim paused. The table matched his pace. He flipped his card and saw nothing; Igna bluffed, 'that was not bluffing,' he observed, 'he overwhelmed the table with his presence and mannerism alone. He influenced their action...'

"Who are you?"

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"The name's Igna Lyoko."

"Very well, Lyoko Igna. Come with us."

A corridor fixed inside Shaker's cottage was home to moans and screams. One could easily guess the room's purpose. It was without a doubt that Igna had stumbled into a place where he felt at peace. The group separated gradually until Igna found himself in an office with Tim. A heavy oak desk separated the duo.

"Not intimidated?" he paused.

"Not really," added Igna, "-shall we get to the matter at hand?"

"You're the killer?" Tim narrowed, "-I know you're the killer."

"What killer?"

"You're a killer, not the killer?"

"Care for elaboration. Tim, we best speak in terms we can both understand."

"... why did you kill them?"

"Self-defense."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah."

"Reports say you were brutal."

"Suppose it looks that way," he shrugged, "-taking a life or two is not out of the ordinary. Tim," he leaned into the table, "-what's your agenda, what is your true wish?"

A dazed look entranced the leader, the man's form buckled, "-I want to rule over Istra. The other gangs must fall, the church ought to pay for the discrimination. The rich will suffer, I will make damn sure they pay," he snapped from the trance and shook at the hand, "-what happened?"

"Nothing much," Igna returned nonchalantly, "-the mystery killer's out there. He kills without discrimination. Your men were targeted. The police's investigation stopped due to your intervention. It blatantly says you know something. The police will crack down on Shaker's cottage sooner or later."

"What would you know?"

"Matter of fact," he inched, "-I have experience. If you want the Frontlei gang to become more than a gang, you'll have to pay tribute to the mayor. I've noticed no one is close to him, he keeps to the shadows contrary to the church. They're more involved."

"Wait, wait, wait."

"..."

"Why should I take orders from you?"

"Because your life is at my disposal?" he blinked, "-Tim, please don't say you live under some delusion of power. The Frontlei gang is nothing more than ruffians with a knack for violence. Sooner or later, the corrupt police force will awaken. Gangs have authority but tis limited. With the advent of the Dear Boss killer, I doubt they'll remain still."

"I don't care. Whatever you say does not matter to me. I created this gang and I will make it how I see fit."

Igna sighed, "-as you wish," he drop two massive briefcases, "-those are the price for killing your men. Around a hundred thousand exa each. I really thought we could be partners."

A click, \*BANG,\* thundered as soon as Igna turned his back. The echo traveled. “-Congratulations,” Igna smiled, “-you missed spectacularly.” The bullet landed a few millimeters from his head. “Did I tell you?” he turned, “-get in my way and the last thing you’ll have to worry about is death. The deal is off the table, leader of Frontlei gang. See you in Hell.” Footsteps ran towards the office. Igna nonchalantly walked, ‘-he has loyal followers,’ and opened Shaker’s ground floor.

The dealer threw a heavy side glance at Igna who waited in the doorway, “-what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” returned the dealer. He shuffled cards and looked up, “-are you interested in working for a greater organization?”

“Depends.”

“Find me at midnight, behind the church.”

“Which church.”

“One used by the commoners. I expect your presence, Lyoko Igna.”

‘Another intriguing character,’ he thought, ‘-maybe I should send a taunting letter to the police.’ Drawing parallels to the tale of an ancient killer, one of the more infamous demons who’d walk the earth, or in a way, the thought of an imaginative writer, Igna found himself at the inn, sitting near a deadened fireplace with the customer’s chatter gone wild.

“Dear Boss, the last job was hasty. You thought you found me. I overheard the officers bragging to the whores of Amne’ street about the well-endowed investigation. Poor ol’ sods. I had one mind to tear their hearts and smear them across the walls. My first job was a work of art, smearing that girl’s entrail – I can’t wait for another opportunity. Try to find me, dear Boss, I will wait with my arms open for the day you take me to my maker. Until then, I shall be the one who takes the living to the dead.” Signed D.B.K.

The letter stormed police headquarters like a crack of thunder. A copy was made and handed to the local press. News of the killer went viral on broadcast over the Arcanum. What seemed a localized incident grew into a worldwide sensation.

“What is this?” Jack slammed his table, “-can you tell me?”

“It’s a letter,” Tile observed, “-Jack.”

“No, it’s a death sentence. I’m being promoted to Chief investigator. There’s no way, no way, that it’s a promotion. The higher-ups have decided who to lay the blame on for incompetency. Why did the news have to be leaked? If the state gets involved, Istra will be forced into the light... we can’t let our town’s reputation be sullied,” he clenched his fist, “-call in the Extermina Gang. I have a job for them.”

“Jack, don’t tell me...”

“It’s the only way,” he inhaled, “-we have to, otherwise, the freedom the mayor found to gain will be snuffed. The emperor’s back in power, who knows when matters in Iqavea get resolved and he focuses on us. The new continent has to remain neutral, we have to do this, Tile, we have to.”

‘Corruption’s gone through our heads. To hide lies we bury the truth in more lies. I can’t seem... rather, I can’t feel but accept the proposition,’ he looked up, “-okay, I’ll help.”

The night took the city. Darkness breeds death and despair. Such the fear facing the workers of the night – the Dear Boss Killer's arrival rendered nightlife a game of life and death. Jazz and drinking parties hid reality – but for how long.