

Death Magic 1111

Chapter 1111 Plague of the Fall – Black Death

“Greetings students. I welcome thee to a special afternoon class,” hailed the director from inside the arena. The oval-shaped seating arrangements filled, and students from all departments waited patiently. The director’s word is law, some unwilling participants bit their tongues, and sat. No one’s particularly excited to be reprimanded, especially since a single person could make or break a student’s career; a justified overlook upon the situation, “-to the dismay of the Academic department,” he glanced at the nobles, “-I hereby decree the following,” explosion rattled the arena, “-to harbor the feeling of mutual growth, I will instate a new law, a new condition applied to students who wish to make their voices heard. Absolutely anything goes. Trial through combat. Lucifer harbored feelings of peace and non-violence among his students, to safeguard the fragile peace so many among you hold. I understand the fear, I understand the pain of not being judged accordingly, such I grant the next best thing – to fight for one’s ideals. Conditions have to be met, and the new system will be applied from this moment forward. Only members of the Academy are allowed to participate – with the exception of those for who I’ve given express permission. In the case where one challenged another, the challenger will have to present something of equal value, a promise, a condition, or else an item. Both parties are to accept the condition, the challenged has the right to refuse without questions asked. It is a high-stakes game. I hear the concerns of the faculty and the students, won’t the balance of power shift?” he opened his arms, “-it will shift – a meritocracy. Noble birth, common blood, foreigners? My agenda as the director is to challenge this notion. Do not misunderstand, I’m not headed for the path of equality or justice, my only wish is,” he gave a cold smile, “-for the best to thrive and the trash to be burnt. Those unworthy of this establishment will be forsaken. However,” the chilling speech slowed, “-it will not be forced. Consider it a new option,” he clapped, the lights dimmed, “-without further ado, allow me to present today’s combatants, to my right, Teresa L. Leviathan, and to my left, Vanesa Haggard.”

“Teresa L. Leviathan?” echoed through muffled whispers, “-she bears the family name of one of the kings of hell.”

“The family name doesn’t mean a thing. Ruling power is held by the council – a king without powers to decree his whims is no real king, only a puppet, a display.”

“Still,” Teresa entered, a four-way screen displayed her looks and charm, her stoic beauty had the males in her grasp, she elegantly walked to the center, “-look at her, she’s powerful. I can feel her energy.”

And to the left, “-Haggard, is Vanesa part of the director’s family?”

“I heard she’s the director’s daughter.”

Awry oily dark-green hair – a touch of disdain on her resolute mien; the uniform was messy at best and plain wrong at worse. She yawned constantly, the slumped shoulders and casual demeanor before an almighty opponent, “-they’re outmatched,” said a few vehement watchers. Her trek would last a few seconds, “-come one, come all, my friends,” Asmodeus and Mammon opened a makeshift counter at the back of the seats – the ladies were drawn by his charm, thus, the boys also followed. The tint and somber atmosphere muddled their vision, in that instant – Mammon’s powers and Asmodeus’ enticement had their hands pulling upon the students’ strings. Arde and Lilia reluctantly joined the

brothers' scheme, "-Place your bets," said Mammon, "-we'll take the item and or anything thee holds dear, you'll win big, will lady luck parve thy path with fortune, or will she swallow thee into the depths?"

"Teresa's a transfer student from Dem's academy. I heard she the top of her grade when it comes to combat," Arde said loudly.

"She's going to win, I saw her fight... the girl didn't once break a sweat," echoed Lilia. The thought carried a wave, reaching the ears of others.

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The unlikely alliance sparked a little after the break was over. Mammon was attacked by a band of angry students, "-see," Arde left a trail of unconscious attackers, "-such the price for fucking with the others."

"Hey now, I do the fucking, not him," Asmodeus winked, "-good job handling his protection," to which he hailed at the passing ex-student council head, "-Lilia, come here."

"What is it?"

"Why don't we form a group?"

"Pardon?"

"The director's going to host a battle in the afternoon, tis to show the prowess of the transfer student. Per our nature, tis a great way to make money. Class 3-2's lacking, and I dare say the arrangement isn't sufficient for my guests."

"You mean the orgies?" Arde rolled his eyes.

"You can join if you want," he offered, "-just ask and I will deliver."

"Long as I get my share of the money," said Mammon, "-Arde and Lilia, you too are na?ve."

"Excuse me?" they said with a slight offense, "-I"

"Don't pay attention to my brother," Asmodeus interjected, "-he speaks the truth, General Studies and Combat Class are na?ve. You take insult dished by the Academics without trying to resist," he pointed over Lilia's shoulder, "-there's a prime example. An errand boy from our class – Timee, if I remember right. He's an excellent magic caster but can't stand against three formally dressed noble classes. How pathetic – it's infuriating."

"Join us," said Mammon, "-allow my brothers and sister to show how hierarchy is but a fading illusion."

Back to the present, "-I don't know why I was roped into this."

"Don't feel bad, Arde," Lilia whispered more one-sided thoughts, the smell of a hive-mind lingered. The betting line increased – a few discrete teachers joined, loud music played and spotlights took most of the attention, '-gambling,' Igna nodded, '-they do know how to make this place interesting.'

Vanesa managed to take her spot, "-I'm tired," she yawned, "-the name's," she rose her fingers at the screen, "-written there."

'First, he asks me to prepare for an interview, next he throws me into combat. Look at my opponent, she's not worthy of tasting my powers. Director, you're deliberately making a mockery of my position, I will not stand for the disrespect any longer. Vanesa's your daughter, I will make certain she pays for my humiliation...' she forced a smile, "-Teresa, no need to remember my name, I'm it'll go over your head."

She blinked twice, "-who are you again?" cheers hailed from class 3-2, "-win the fight for us, VANESA!"

"Director," Teresa calmly took a step in his direction, "-might I assume the battle is my admission trial?"

"No, you're already enrolled. Consider the battle to be a welcoming party. We've yet to assign your class, therefore, if you manage to beat her, you'll be assigned to the Academic department, working under Skeptor, otherwise, you'll be stuck with me."

"Director, I would like to challenge this girl for your spot as representative of the academy," the chaos subsided to a pin-drop silence, "-per the edict thee proclaimed."

"But of course," he smiled, "-what will you wager against my seat?"

"My title."

"I do not need your title, beside, value is dependent on the current market. How I see is you're unable to provide the required amount to stake against my seat. In any case, as royalty, I will accept the offer on the condition your title remains yours however, you stake your life and soul instead."

"Life and soul?" the crowd collectively gulped, "-see," he purposefully allowed his power to escape – the devilish features translucently materialized. Purple sparks circled the body, "-doth thee dare make a deal with the Devil?" the symbol of death exuded above his shoulders, the gripping image of the Death Reaper and his scythe.

Teresa held her own, "-then, to make it a fair fight, you will let her represent you," a scroll manifested before them, "-if you win, the seat of Director and its accompanying authority will be relinquished for your taking. If Vanesa wins, you will owe me your body and your soul, including all that it represents."

"I agree," they sealed the contract in blood. Igna left for a private viewing station fixed above the crowd. A fifteen-minute break was given for the fighters to be readied. *Puff,* "-don't sulk behind the door, come in."

"Director, did you seriously wager the position?"

"Luci, you worry too much. Come on, join me."

The fallen angel sat with a flushed expression, "-you seem rather tense. Why the fear?"

"If the wager is lost, we might have a full-scale invasion from Dem's academy. My contact's revealed their plot against our academy due to the loss of their student's lives. I've tried to negotiate, however, Memphe and Cleopatra have refused to see reason, they're arming their morals, putting the lives of the fallen as bait to stage a full-on battle."

"Luci, I know," he puffed, "-never intended on wagering my directorial post. Elixia and I, as well as Graso, have gone over the plan for quite a while. We needed a method of taking influence from Skeptor and his entourage of council members. Greed is one of the more formidable sins when it comes to politics."

Show weakness and they'll flock like vultures to tear at the scraps. I staged the plan for them – alas, the poor stuck-up princess fancied her chances over that of my daughter. She got strung along with Skeptor and the man's ring leader. They took the bait."

"How did they know?"

"I leaked the information," he smiled, "-an open conversation with Skeptor eavesdropping. Half-truths make the world round."

Teresa dawned a skin-tight suit over which was light armor. Each piece radiated power; ancient magic lined with ancient symbols. There was power in her gestures, "-good, Teresa, you're doing a great job. Now, go win," Emmie tapped the lass' shoulder, "-and you'll make our lord proud. Take away that false king's seat."

They entered the arena, the crowd launched into an onslaught of applause. More cheers for Teresa as opposed to Vanesa. The former radiated grandeur – she affectionately looked at the crowd, casting a simple wave, "-GO TERESA!" they cheered loudly, "-WIN IT FOR US!"

'The applauds and cheers, all of it, just for me, such praise. I deserve it, I deserve all of it.'

"Do you hear the chants?"

"Loud," Vanesa yawned, "-I want to sleep."

"Look at you, Igna's daughter. You bring shame to your father. I bring pride to mine; he gave me a poor Valkyrie's armor who lost her way in the underworld. How very unfortunate, with this, I represent the house of Leviathan," Vanesa had but a simple white dress, no shoes, and a teddy.

"My armor is great," she pressed her palms in prayer, "-I'm the best, look," she pulled her dress as to show the fabric, "-I'm a great fighter!"

"Stop talking," a myriad of spells spread, "-I'm here to kill you," multiple elements crashed and exploded, she summoned an ethereal bow and fired, the arrow split and rained in gold, '-swords,' she tapped her forearm, levitating swords converged, *-the wrath of the sea, lurker of the deep ocean – Cathundra!* the floor cracked – water-like hands reached out and swallowed – condensing into an orb that glistened a dark-blue, "-with this," she defiantly looked at Igna, "-I claim my victory."

Igna returned her gaze with a puff, "-I wouldn't be so sure."

The orb cracked; water leaked. Dark smoke oozed, and the ground trembled, '-did she survive?' Teresa quickly gathered her energy to summon a demonic-looking sword, '-didn't think I'd have to use one of the father's scales.'

Mild giggles, a palm reached through the orb and clenched, the barrier shattered – tiny freckles lit the air, "-you tried your best," Vanesa seemed taller, her features were beautiful, her hair tied in a bun, the figure of a woman, "-and sadly, you failed," she rose her hand, the ground parted, a witch's hand extended, "-you lose." *Plague of the Fall -Black Death,* her opponent fell, the shiny armor corroded and the vestments melted, "-I win."

Chapter 1112 "I gambled,"

“An overwhelming victory,” Igna entered the arena to a resounding echo of nothing. Fear, anger, envy, jealousy – the primal emotions, the lust for revenge, the whole academy cried tears, pure influence and power for the princes. “-Everybody loses,” Mammon clapped, “-house is closed.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” he addressed the crowd for the first time, “-I sense murderous intent. You, in seat 605, you’re rusticated for a week, the one next to him, 604, rusticated for not stopping your friend. As for the little one with a concealed weapon, the head of the disciplinary council shall decide thine fate,” he went and grabbed Vanesa’s wrist, raising it up to the admiration of fake lighting, “-to the winner goes the spoils. And today, Vanesa, the Aedric Mistress of Plague and Disease, has proven her worth,” he looked at Asmodeus, the prince broadened his smile and said, “-no worries, director, we will pay your winnings out later.” Healers arrived – Teresa’s darkened skin, necrotic to some aspect, emitted a purple taint, her pupils barely reacted. Most of the spotlights dimmed, and the focus turned upon Igna once again, “-with today’s event, I’ve spurred the wheels of change. Hear me o’ thee who’ve lost wealth, pride, and dignity. It is never too late to start again. Especially here, at the Academy. The calling is education – wisdom. Learn from today’s event – the sharper amongst you were wise not to bet on the outcome, conservatism aided the less bold; do not mistake luck for skill,” he lowered the microphone and left with Vanesa.

School hours neared completion. Arde reluctantly approached the director’s office, “-excuse me, where might I find the director?” he pushed the ajar door, “-anyone here?”

“Director’s in the infirmary,” Elixia returned, her focus glued upon a holographic display, “-something you need?” she turned and lowered her glasses, “-Arde of class 3-2.”

“No, no...” *click,* ‘-the aura behind her words. The director isn’t messing around.’

White, dull, and minimalism, accessible to the Academics, ‘-the infirmary,’ read an outside sign, ‘-General Studies doesn’t have anything this fancy. Even when the rooms are in our school building, they say it’s for them and never allow our students to tend to their needs. We barely make it from professor Luci’s treatment. If not for him – I swear, I’d be a few classmates short,” a soft green hue reflected in the hallway. Arde hurried the pace and glanced inward, the door was left ajar – thus, he pushed and took the invitation. The director towered over Teresa. Emmie, Dementus, Skeptor, and Yu surrounded the lady, ‘-crap-’

“Arde, don’t stand behind the curtains.”

‘How did he figure me-’

“Why are you here, you little-”

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“Not a word, Skeptor,” interjected Igna, “-is this about my earlier invitation.”

“Yes, director.”

“Then, tell me,” he rose a single gaze, “-prove to me your ideals are worth being spoken before of them.”

The heads of department watched with much intrigue. The nature of how he prefaced the boy, and how the nervousness on Arde's otherwise strong expression, added a touch of intrigue. 'Asking me to speak before them... they count among the strongest beings at the academy. We're talking about nobles and heroes from the warring days. How could I speak in that situation?' a curtain of uncertainty drew, and the weight of the task fastened his chest into a fast rhythm, '-the more I breathe, the less I-' he gulped, '-I can't see.'

"Wake up," Igna snapped, *cough,* '-he's nervous, I guess they're normal students. Here I was getting my hopes up.'

"Director."

"Here."

"Why, tell me why Vanesa came across as weak. She's strong, why doesn't she use her strength-"

He controlled his mana waves and gently healed Teresa's wounds. The heads turned at Igna with greater interest, especially Emmie and Skeptor, '-tell us, director, why did I fail?'

"Sometimes, my dear Arde, it is better to be a fool or to act clueless. Do you know the paradox of Esmia?"

"No?"

"Ancient text speaks of Esmia, a warrior born to an unknown tribe at the dawn of the magical age. He was the first to utilize mana and the first to challenge so in his weapon. The man was strong, very strong – an army on his own by what the records say. The more he killed, the greater he grew. After countless battles and wars, after having strained his ability to the tipping point – the enemy assaulted his family. He was left disabled whilst the invaders ravaged the corpses of his loved ones right in front of him. Granted, the battles he led gave his people better lives and a better chance at survival. It came to be, they depended on him. You can surmise where the tale heads. It is said, the thinker, Jyanto, deliberated the cause of Esmia's downfall, he figured that, if only Esmia had kept a single ace in the hole, or used the support of those alongside him – his family would yet live. It is a cautionary tale. Vanesa, like my other kids, is strong, and far superior to any students around this academy. They've fought wars in realms you can only dream of seeing. Why do they hide their abilities?" he looked at Arde, "-for peace and tranquility."

"Such a morose reason," sighed Skeptor, "-if they have power, they should use it for their gains."

"Tranquility can only be enjoyed when one has been through cacophony. Like dull mind experiencing color for a first, the beauty of things taken for granted has been a plague over mankind since the dawn of the industrial revolution."

"Mankind, tell me, Director, who are you truly?"

"Former King of Hidros," he smiled.

"The fabled king," Dementus dropped to his knees, "-lord Lucifer used to speak of a man who'd foil his plans. We never had the chance of the full story – I thought the director was an opportunist who stole our previous lord's symbol."

“No, you’re quite right, Dementus. I am an opportunist,” he rose his left hand and showed the fallen king’s symbol, “-the power belief is yet another ability. Anyway,” he looked at Arde, “-you’ve seen my daughter in action. She’s the only one I can say has taken my knowledge and teaching to heart. Vanesa’s all I represent as a teacher and parent.”

“Director,” Arde lowered his head, “-on behalf of class 3-2, I gratefully accept your teaching. Please, train us so that we may one day face the battle head-on.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear,” he clapped, Teresa’s healing ended, “-for now, trust in Dementus and Yu’s teachings. They’re most fit to lead the class – and no more overtraining.”

Everyone rose, and the last bell rang, “-Emmie and Skeptor, care to stay for a bit?” part of the crowd exited, “-Arde, shut the door on the way out.”

A growing tenseness grabbed Skeptor’s heart. Emmie’s short stature and single horn upon her forehead told of her type – ogress, “-something amiss, director?”

He caressed Teresa’s forehead and flicked, the girl sprang to life, “-where am I?” she shot upward and met Igna’s palm, “-don’t sit so eagerly. You’ll blackout.”

‘Tired,’ her head fell back onto the pillows, “-I feel so heavy, what have you done?”

“Healing takes a toll on the body, princess.”

“Could you please not use my title so sarcastically... I know, I lost, okay?”

“Good girl, sleep off the fatigue,” he went around and leaned against the side rail, “-tell me, Teresa, did someone put you up to the fight?”

Skeptor, spurred by a discrete elbow from Emmie, “-Director, why is it so important we stay?”

“Far as I’m concerned, the Design department has nothing to do with battle.”

“Well, I wanted to cross-examine a few things before the day concludes.”

“Director, it was your idea to put Teresa through those tests and interviews. Why wouldn’t she be accepted normally?”

“The lass is a princess and member of the royal Leviathan family. I had to get proper notice-” in that instant, the fog-of-war which plagued his thoughts disappeared, ‘-it’s clear. I never received a notice, and neither did Skeptor, he was blowing smoke,’ he horned onto Emmie, “-I see, you’re the ringmaster.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You were never really Emmie Hens,” *-Mana-Control: Disruption,* flesh and blood melted, falling in heavy goo upon the sterile floor, “-Memphe.”

“Impressive, director,” the noble lady curtsied, “-please do not fret. Emmie Hens’ hold up entertaining guests in town.”

“How long?”

“Start of the battle” she smiled; “-Emmie Hens is working for Dems academy. Director, the rightful heir to the throne belongs to, I don’t care anymore. Director, I apologize for the schemes, I had to push forward my agenda for the sake of the Academy. You guessed right, as we speak, forces from Dems Academy, reinforced by the Council of Demons, are on their way. I was tipped by an informant – I took it upon myself to foil their plans from within. I was too late; Emmie Hens had already sowed for Teresa’s acceptance. Like always, the vice-director couldn’t shake Emmie’s hold over him. Therefore, I sought it best for Teresa to return... turned out for naught, the lass’s thickheaded. The next best thing was to trust in you, Director, I gambled that you might have had a plan just in case. So, before the battle began, in the brief few minutes I got with her, after sending Emmie on a wild errand, I planted the idea for Teresa to challenge thy throne on behalf of her father.”

“-and it led us here.”

“Would have been easier to throw her out, sadly, the faculty’s all under a gag order from Skeptor.”

“I know nothing of this, Director. I was only in to accept a request from Emmie. This noble lady deceived us and placed the princess in dear harm. I dare say, she’s the instigator behind our current predicament. To the gallows I say!”

“Shut the fuck up,” he lit a cigarette, “-Asmodeus.”

“You called, master?”

“Summon the juries, get ready for battle.”

“Understood.”

He looked at Skeptor, ‘-would be simple to kill him. I don’t have time to deal with the repercussion from nobles – his ties reach to the council of demons – I’ll need those connections further down the line, “-Vice-director – a battle approaches. Do what you do best.”

“That’ll be?”

“Take your students and hide. You saved them the last time, yes? I expect the same.”

“What about the townspeople?”

“Not like you to care for commoners. Do what you need – if there are any casualties or deaths, the blame will lay square on thy shoulders.”

“Director,” he rubbed his hands, “-reward for my efforts?”

“What do you want?”

“The items taken by your children, return to my students.”

“Impossible.”

“Then-”

“No, I’ll gladly hand over my portion of the gains. The rest is between you and Mammon to negotiate. Once again, Skeptor, I’m overlooking the blatant act of treason,” he puffed into the professor’s visage, “-next time it’ll be, as you said, to the gallows. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir!”

“Memphe, whose side are you on?”

“Ragno.”

“Just what I wanted to hear. Coordinate with the ground team. I’ll leave the evacuation in your hands. Ereena and Luci will join as reinforcement – will that suffice?”

“Yeah.”

Message, using Yui’s reach, Igna connected to the academy’s intercoms, “-good afternoon students. I have bad news – we’ll be under attack from Dems academy. Those willing to fight – head to the arena, those unwilling, head to the library. Fighting is mandatory for Combat Class and General Studies. You know what you signed for – do not dilly-dally, the academy’s future is in thy hands,” rumbles soon followed.

Puff, “-not going to fight?”

“Teresa. What will you do?”

“From what I heard; I was played for a fool. Father used me as a reason to attack and invade Ragno. What do you know, demons are heartless.”

“Right, they are,” he snuffed the cigarette, “-too bad for them, you belong to me,” he teleported right in front and grabbed her chin, “-Teresa L. Leviathan, won’t you satiate thy thirst for revenge?” the allure grabbed her heart and swayed her emotions, *smooch,* she kissed his forehead, “-per the contract, I belong to you, body and soul, do as thee please, master.”

Chapter 1113 Battle of the Academies [1]

“Students of Dems academy, hear me, your director, your queen. I’m a descendant of the blood of the true Demonlord, Leviathan. Long have we watched as the fallen angels disrupt our realm, long have we watched, them and their ideals, their fascination with atonement. Enough is enough I say, hell is not a place for friends to be made, it is not a place where co-existence lives,” the beautifully dressed demoness moved openly, her gestures open and large – her stance rigid and mind focused. Dems Academy lined before her podium, the students – all of darker complexion and demonic features bit their tongues, ears perked and eyes focused upon a memorial, “-we did our duty – as King Lucifer said, our academies allied, we saw merit in learning their ways, we saw merit in seeing their mentality, learning and evolving. Alas, such mindful thoughts brought upon us the downfall of a legacy forged in terror and punishment. Our purpose is to make the fallen repent. Such has been the lives lived by our predecessors, our forefathers, and the founders. Weakness breeds weakness – like a plague, Lucifer’s Academy must repent. They must atone for slaughtering our younglings,” to which, she gave the floor to a beautifully ornate dame dressed in golden jewels.

“Students of Dems Academy, fellow teachers. Per the ancient laws of conquest – upon the death of a monarch, his domain is to be won by those who are most powerful. The new director of Lucifer’s Academy is no angel, he’s a mere mortal, a pseudo demon passing himself as the Devil. We needn’t stand idly – the day for revenge is nigh. Students, teachers, parents, those whom your precious was lost; as a representative of the Council of Demons, our cause is right.”

A hooded figure stepped to her side. The gestures it cast seemingly tantalized the crowd. Anticipation hung, “-students,” it spoke in an inordinate tone, “-my daughter, she was taken from me,” each word pulsed, the energy rocked the very foundation of the arena, “-Teresa L. Leviathan. My precious daughter. They took her hostage,” the weather thundered, “-war must be waged. Dems Academy, under my granddaughter’s leadership, declares war against Lucifer’s Academy.”

“The council of Demon stands behind Leviathan.”

A somber figure waited behind the speakers, “-Satan will aid in Leviathan’s conquest. They also took my daughter. Lucifer’s Academy will fall.”

Morale exploded across the masses. To fight on the right side, to have the backing of a strong influential name, a decisive battle.

“Cleopatra, Viatnah H. Leviathan, Henry Grant, and Zalem Odd,” they bowed before Leviathan, “-I appoint thee generals of our combined army.”

“Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator shall lead the Council’s forces.”

“Viatnah H. Leviathan, Director of Dems Academy, shall lead our students.”

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“Henry Grant, gratefully take command of king Satan’s forces.”

“Zalem Odd,” spoke a viler personage, one of octopus-like origins, stuffed under a black cloak, spoke from seemingly nowhere, “-shall command King Leviathan’s forces.”

And thus, the battle was set – the speech, as was retold by Memphe’s informant, reached Igna’s ears a few days later. Cleopatra’s forces, the vanguard and scouting unit, had already made it past the great desert of Ong and crossed into the Valley of Geld. All and all, the forces moved linearly southwest. Upon crossing the Valley of Geld, the only obstacle in the way would be an open, steep slope where Luci and the others had forced the evacuation.

A grim reality faced the academy. An evacuation notice was issued – the bulk of the student body left via Skeptor’s well design transportation portal. Those left to defend were called to the arena. Igna stepped into the middle with a relaxed expression, ‘-class 3-1,3-2 and 3-3, I see year two and year ones,’ he approached the mic and paused – nervousness and uncertainty had grabbed their hearts, ‘-morale is low, it’s beyond low – there’s no way they’ll live to fight another day. Yui’s report should arrive in the next few minutes. Now’s the time to test my abilities as a leader,’ he tapped, a large feedback crackled and forced a few with heightened sensitivity to shield their ears, “-listen up, people – Lucifer’s Academy’s lost.”

“What?”

“Are we giving up?”

“Is the director planning to surrender?”

“I’m relieved, only here because we’re Students, not academics. I wish I could run...” mean side-eyes crossed those who thought of defection.

Igna horned onto the pair, “-leaving is not exactly a sin. Listen up, students – take my words to heart and to mind. If you don’t want to fight, leave. There is no shame in taking the fall to stand once again. Honestly, I wouldn’t care to deal with this battle. A strategic retreat sounds great,” he smiled, the tension broke a little, “-years two and below, regardless of your combat prowess, this battle isn’t yours to fight. Third years,” the intent was clear and concise, first and second years left shortly after – in total, about forty-five students remained, “-as you see, those who remain are our only defense. Luci, Dementus, and Yu were kind to stay. The situation is dire. Dems Academy has issued their act of war, they want complete control over Ragno, therefore, they’ll forsake Lucifer’s Academy. We mainly teach fallen angels and demons who’ve inherited said blood. Compared to Dems, who focus their efforts on purebreds, it is a simple matter of discrimination. Angels and Demons are cursed to oppose each other. At best, we have fifty men ready to fight. I expect a complete loss – some, if not, all of you will die. Death won’t come easy, and if they’re coming with a great force – we won’t last a single minute. Tell me,” the voice intensified, “-are you daft enough to lay thy life in vain?”

Hesitation, regret, uncertainty – the words he spoke cut deep through the insecurities, “-ANYONE?” no answer, “-death will be painful, death will come slowly – you will see friends and yourself fall. The town’s devastation – everything built by you, the earlier generations, pouf, just like that, gone. Does it seem fair?” no answer, “-of course it’s not fair. Such is reality, one where the strong win and the weak lose.”

Arde rose his hand, “-why are they attacking us, director?”

“Because of me,” he smiled, “-thus the reason why I say, third years, you will not be fighting this war. Far as the battle is concerned, it is between me and them. I will not stand for objection nor will I entertain disorder. You will be killed if I hear complaints.

Luci, Ereena, Dementus, and Yu will remain here – their orders are to surrender the moment they enter the academy grounds. Whoever is ready to carry the burden of witnessing my battle, follow Elixia.”

“DIRECTOR!” Lilia shouted, “-can we not petition the opposing army for peace? We’ll give them what they want – isn’t that enough?”

“Lilia, such is the state of things. They won’t retreat even if I were to prostrate myself. Make your decision,” he turned, and a shadowy cloud emanated from his trench coat. To Elixia’s amazement – all of the students followed her into the director’s office. There, a similar-looking personage, “-director?” conjured a few spells.

“No, not the director,” Elixia returned, “-I present you, Vengeance. Our bodyguard,” she smiled, “-we’re headed into a battlefield, wouldn’t want to get killed willy-nilly,” the floor shook, *tss,*

“I’m floating?”

“Out of body experience,” said Vengeance, “-follow me,” he headed for the valley.

Arde kept reaching for Lilia, “-afraid of heights?” the class chuckled.

“Noo,” he shook his head, “-I’m not scared of heights. Only this sensation, it feels weird,” he swallowed hard, “-Vengeance, are we really safe?”

“Well, there are some souls who didn’t return to their previous bodies. Happens occasionally,” the deadpan expression, the serious delivery... “-WHAT?”

“Calm down,” said Elixia, tapping Vengeance’s head, “-he likes to make heavy jokes.”

The wind whistled – the rustling of Orenmir against his pants, the coldness of Tharis’ grip. Hair tied in a high ponytail, the smell of iron, “-nostalgia,” he removed the heavy coat, there, the outfit which had made the previous incarnation so intimidating, carried along the breeze. Claireville Academy’s uniform, ‘-I feel strangely at home in this outfit. I thought I’d never get to use it again...’ still marred by the life of past enemies and dragged underneath its weight of blood and curses.

“What’s with the outfit, master?”

“My battle attire,” he winked and casually left the academy grounds. Asmodeus, Mammon, Beelzebub, Vanesa, Lilith, and Elize dawned on their battle gear. Little did the students know about their Director and what kind of man he was, to them, he was but a whimsical man who’d make a few jokes and pester the faculty members – sadly, more often than not, kind smiles from the blood-soak hands of past fighters, a black curtain into their past, is forced open. There, unbeknownst to the aggressor, awakens a ruthless monster – on that day, many would come to find out why Igna was dubbed Death’s heir.

Geld valley’s forest whispers deafened, *-grant my power, bring thy queen her true form, seedling of the underworld, sprout into life and grow, for there is naught to be withheld; Partial Realm Expansion – Lilith’s Tree of Life,* she clapped, the mouth of the valley went dark. A massive tree grew over the landscape, it covered the forest and tower halfway up the mountain, its reach could be said to be a few kilometers from side to side, not to mention the circumference it covered. Below the foliage, at the crux where the trunk forked into limbs and branches, rose a wooden fortress.

“Cozy,” said Asmodeus, “-it comes furnished,” he smiled.

“I’ve done my part,” Lilith sat beside the fireplace, “-Vanesa, come here,” to which, the latter listened and rested on Lilith’s lap, “-you boys can handle the battle, right?” she turned towards Igna, “-how you like?”

“Better than I expected. We’ve blocked off their access and have a solid base of operation. Lilith, my queen, you sure are amazing.”

“Aw, flattery won’t get you private time,” she pouted, “-you’re a married man after all.”

“Could you not say it like it’s a bad thing,” he looked out onto the valley, ‘-her realm finds her root in the Shadow Realm, once I remove the limiters – they should unleash their true powers. Desperate times call for desperate measures,’ the interface flashed, ‘-there, intel from Yui.’

“Report on enemy troops. Current forces measure at twenty-thousand at two days’ pace. Vanguard of five-thousand led by Cleopatra’s eta, evening.”

'Gives us a few hours to prepare. Killing Cleopatra will bring the wrath of Lixbin – he's part of the Heavenly Convention. I rather not anger them at the moment. Winning our battle is paramount – taking the heads of generals won't mean anything. We need to weaken their forces before a counterattack. How should I make use of Teresa?' therein, an idea came to mind, *-Per the authority granted by the title of Watcher, may thy limiters be released,* flashes of light, "-listen up. Do not engage them in physical combat. Keep the battle far from the tree of creation – we lose the tree; we lose the battle," a scroll manifested above his palm, "-Lilith, when the time is right, open the scroll. It'll take a lot of mana to activate – tis a teleportation spell bound to Draebala. It'll summon the army I have stationed. Use it only if we're at the point of no return."

Souls of the dead, thee who've sworn to serve me in life and death, come to my side. Blood-Arts: Ghouls Requiem.

The air seemed lighter, and a whiff of nausea grabbed their noses, "-what did you do, master?"

"I raised my reserve forces," he smiled, "-Mammon, take this," he threw a ring, "-take command of the undead forces. They're strong, the leaders," shadowy figures, no features nothing, a black humanoid mass rose in the middle, "-either control or automation, the choice is up to you."

"Orders, majesty?"

"Spread out and prepare an ambush, target size, five thousand," said Mammon, "-leave it to me."

'Igna sure likes to jest,' Lilith pondered with her hand caressing Vanesa's face, '-there's no way they'll make it past his forces. He can be quite melodramatic – downplaying the fact of our true might... if he truly wanted a decisive battle, he'd have called on the Shadow's real might – the devourers of worlds.'

Chapter 1114 Battle of the Academies [2]

Cleopatra's forces; the five-thousand worth of council soldiers – trained fighters in their own special techniques and abilities, were a few hours off their destination. The five thousand were split for a faster group, the scouts – counting at least five-hundred demons able to march at double-time through the desert.

Before dusk, when the council's rest were scheduled to arrive, came the scouts. The tall mountain ranges stretched – the upward climb on the other side, one facing the northeast, was perilous. Rain had muddied the ground; the steep slope made no favors on heavy arms. A single path carved up the slope, "-lieutenant, we're at a standstill. The advance team is blocked by a fallen tree. It'll be a few hours lest we cross over and leave some of our supplies behind."

"Time is of the essence," said the silver-colored demon, "-ask them to leave their belongings at the camp. Climb and head for the valley. Us of the council won't be shown by students, trust me."

And so, as muck and filth gathered by the stream – the rain strengthened. A large tree trunk said to be five meters in length and two meters in width weighted heavily on a steep slope. It toppled from the right, crashing into the other side of the thick forestry, setting itself firmly, like a lock. Given the average height of six feet – the council soldiers, dressed in military outfits of differing shades, climbed with aid of ropes. Circling the obstacle was a time-consuming option. Hence the lieutenant's decision. Half of the five hundred climbed over and headed deep, whilst the remaining began the extraction process.

“Report.”

“Speak.”

“The advance forces have successfully climbed halfway up the mountain. They should be arriving at Geld’s pass.”

“The tree, is it removed?”

“No, it’s protected by the forest. We’re unable to utilize magic or destruction spells. They draw power from the network of trees.”

.....

“Such the reason why we’re unable to go around or take another path. We’ll have to remove it physically, no use of magic. A simple hoist and some rope should unwedge the problem. Send word to the advance forces, they’re not to enter the pass until a path has been cleared. Our job is to scout, nothing more, understood?”

“Yes sir!”

Vengeance’s spirit conduit – the bird’s eye view, had class 3-2 in awe. “Do they not see our forces waiting in ambush?”

“Just who are those dark figures, they wield strange weapons. Guns, I take it?”

“Lilia,” Arde widened his interest, “-you read in the library?”

“I was student council president. Don’t underestimate my authority. Aside from that, my lady Elixia – why did the Director say we were going to lose?”

“I can’t tell you,” she shot with focus dead centered upon her holographic displays, “-my master is rather strange.”

“No, I don’t think so,” one of the students gulped, “-the director’s family is made up of the seven princes of hell. Look at the spell her majesty cast. I’m in awe.”

“I must ask,” Elixia broke her concentration, “-Lilith is the queen of hell, yes? why are there four kings, what is her influence anyway?”

“The four kings of Hell and the Council of Demons both share powers in Hell’s domain. Each is granted special privileges upon their lands. Queen Lilith, on the other hand, is more than a monarch, her influence and her part in resorting to the demonkin, have greatly risen her title and reputation. She’s a landless Queen, one in name and power alone. Contrary to the kings, she has the boon of expanding her domain – seeing her powers exceed that of a demon, she’s considered a powerful weapon instead of a ruler. Lilith, her name is renowned all across the realm – her beauty is peerless, and she’s the subject of admiration for many younger ladies. Why the interest, lady Elixia?”

“You do see her as a noblewoman?” she shut her eyes, ‘-you rather not see her true self. Lilith is a bundle of problems in her own way.’

Geld's pass, is a tall, narrow slide within the mountain's peak. Perfect place for an ambush. Stories have been sung about the past and are often regarded as Ragno's first line of defense.

'There was an attack on Ragno long before today. The enemies were snuffed and killed inside Geld's pass. Singing the correct symphony, it'll activate the barrier and close in from out. Placing marksmen on top of the valley would have been enough – considering the stories been passed down and the level of caution they're showing,' a live-feed of the battlefield covered part of Igna's field of view, '-they're not going to budge. The first trap has been set – Luci's weather control is coming to use nicely. Her rain and the conveniently fallen tree – a good opening move,' he smiled, '-sadly for them, there's no waiting for death,' a veil of complete presence erasure cast by Igna, hid a force of five hundred. They casually stood behind enemy lines. Soldiers were hard at work removing the trunk – the heavy rain had forced those up the mountain, to leave their weapons behind. As for those in camp, they wore half of their armor and carried a sense of superiority birthed from knowledge of reinforcement's arrival.

'Spread out, do no open fire or dispel the concealment. Fire on my mark, understood?'

The team nodded and split into various factions, some ran for the mountain and hid in trees, others entered the camp and lay in shadows – a few sat beside a pot brewing a purple-colored stew, "-we'll launch a full-scale attack when we're joined by Cleopatra."

"Lieutenant, permission to speak."

"Go on."

"We have wings, why aren't we flying over to their location?"

"And be caught in a cross-fire?" he narrowed; "-flying is the worst possible way of travel. Unlike birds, demons do not have great mobility, a well-placed shot and we'd be dead. Besides, only the lower demons attack by flight, we're representative of the council, tis beneath us to use such methods."

'A bunch of idiots,' Igna walked into the meeting and waited behind the Lieutenant – none knew of his presence, they spoke and strategized without care, "-Lieutenant, if it happens our main forces are defeated, what will become of the rest?"

"Rescue of Teresa is paramount. I think General Henry Grant has a trump card to play if we ever come close to defeat."

"Did he happen to say what it is?" said a strange disembodied voice. The lieutenant shrugged his shoulder, "-don't insult me, I'm a pawn to be used. Why would they share that information with a grunt..."

Tharis pressed against the lieutenant's head, the cloak of erasure vanished, "-lovely evening we have, won't you say?" *Aspect Nothing – Omission,* *BANG,* it hit and swallowed the target – the headless corpse hit the desk, the open neck bled profusely over the table – confusion and fear barely sparked – *Bang, bang, bang,* three shots and three dead. "-That's the signal," loud gunfire roared up the mountain.

"CAMP IS UNDER ATTACK!" cried overwatch – alas, marksmen clocked in the forest took out their targets with ease. The terror reached the advance forces, who, by the tales of distant echoes, turned for their home – pillars of smoke rose amidst the rainfall, "-WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!"

“GO RETREAT, NOW!”

A thick mist snuck on the mountain path – vision grew to a meter, muffled snaps and grunts. Men fell like flies, “-hold steady!” said the leader, “-move carefully,” the attack was yet over, heavy footsteps cried from Geld’s pass – in a matter of minutes, Igna and his team had wiped five-hundred souls off the face of Ragno.

“Luci, turn off the mist and rain,” he said, ‘-they’ll be here in a few hours. Let’s leave them with a few gifts.’

A grey cat with green eyes emerged from Igna’s shadow and leaped onto his shoulder, “-sorry for the wait,” she brushed against the back of his head and licked her paws, “-was napping.”

“Good, you’re here, Elize. I expect you to fight in the next round,” the fog cleared – Igna’s horror was up for them to see. Class 3-2, a few students hurled using their physical bodies, “-what happened?” they shook, “-why does this feel wrong?”

“Arde, Lilia, and a class of 3-2, I present to you, your director. A man whose thirst for blood has had gods tremble in their shoes. About the time I reveal the truth,” she gave a condescending smirk, “-the founder of the Aapith Nation, do you know his name?”

“Yes,” Lilia said, “-the Cursed King, Alfred.”

“Well educated,” she smiled, “-I present thee, Igna Haggard, the reincarnation of Alfred the cursed, the devourer of angels.” A bell rang – their collective mindset dimmed – those who knew the name were rightfully frightened, ‘-there’s been only one true ruler since the start – Alfred.’

“Guess what,” Elixia took them right in the thick of blood and gore, “-the king’s returned.”

‘Taking a page from history,’ at least fifty wounded demons were impaled in a line leading to the burning camp, “-Vlad the Impaler, such a lovely character.”

“What are you talking about?” came a distant voice.

“Intherna?”

“Empress to you,” she laughed and tapped his back, “-I sent my vassal – heard the news from Lilith.”

“Don’t tell me-”

“Yeah, she returned to the Shadows and told me all about the plan. There’s also the matter of Yui and Elixia – don’t forget,” she scuffed his hair, “-they’re part of the Shadows and report to me as well.”

“Someone’s pretentious.”

“Heard of a mirror?” she snapped, “-seriously, Vlad the Impaler, could you not have chosen anyone else?”

“Well?” he turned at the haunting display, “-it’s a lovely sight. Should have added a few crucifixions,” the jovial tone lowered, “-if you’re worried about me, don’t be, Intherna. I won’t go into a rampage; I’ll control my lust...”

“I’d believe you,” she crossed her arms, “-if only you’d drop that vile smile and visible excitement. Igna, you’re slipping into the path of Asura,” she clapped, the phoenix robe grabbed his shoulders and a separate portal opened. Cold air blew, and a lady bearing light-blue hair, blue eyes, and fair skin entered the fray, ‘-Fenrir?’

“Consider this my help, I should leave. Good luck with the battle, Igna. Don’t forget to message Athena and the others – you know, Orin’s grown rather boring without a world leader around. Seems peace and tranquility have been bestowed upon the main nations.”

‘Still the same old Intherna,’ the Phoenix cape swayed and spewed flames, often molten lava which faded into dust as soon as it broke from the fabric.

Between the cries for mercy and screams of the impaled, Igna turned at the mountain of a corpse and rose his hands, *Once living now dead. O’ thee who’ve lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival* disfigured, dismembered – skin peeling off their faces and the stench of death – an army of slow and disgusting ‘things’ wandered, “-master?”

“A moment, Fenrir,” Elize leaped off his shoulder, changed in midair, and stood eye-to-eye against the majestic wolf.

‘Cats and dogs,’ he turned his focus on the wanders, *Authority of the Adjudicator, I grant thee the powers of strength, invincibility, heightened agility, bloodlust, and the curse of Oveir,* a temporary crest burnt on their foreheads, the mindless horde reacted, “-go forth and attack Cleopatra’s army.” Wings sprouted, tearing limbs and bones – they flapped like a swarm of flies, head first to their deaths.

“Director?” the student’s ethereal apparition solidified.

“Welcome to the battlefield,” he said, “-Elixia, Vengeance, I said to let them watch, not be part of the slaughter,” without a physical body, their sense couldn’t fully grasp the gruesome reality. Murky streams mixed with innards and blood flowed, the rain crashed in waves against the forest – the weeping of the wind and the cries of the tortured, “-is this what it means to be powerful?” echoed Arde, “-director?”

“No,” he returned coldly, “-what thee see is what I consider my creed, my calling, and my gift,” he holstered Tharis and looked in the distance, “-one must climb and stand where no one has ever dared. There’s no help for the dejected, there’s no salvation for the demented, and for me, there’s no point in restraints. I’ve realized something,” he smiled, ‘-I feel alive when my blade reeks of blood and my enemies cry in pain.’

Chapter 1115 Battle of the Academies [3]

“Director?”

“We’re done here,” Elixia quickly called on Vengeance, they left as soon as they had arrived.

‘There’s no forgetting that image, burnt in my head. I’m sure the others feel the same – I think we might have seen something we shouldn’t have.’

“Arde, Lilia, you needn’t trouble yourself. What happened isn’t on you. Such is the responsibility of the Director. You shouldn’t dwell on the fallen souls – tis but the start,” the transient souls flew towards the

academy – Vengeance issued, “-such is the nature of the battle. If you wish to leave, now is the time,” a warning, a last chance at innocence. “...” Nothing came, silent ponder – a bleak impression of the future; the truth.

Meanwhile, the legendary beast, Fenrir, and Elize – squared. Fenrir’s canine’s sharpened, her hairs levitated – Elize’s paws sharpened, her feline gaze narrowed, “-no fighting,” Igna said with hands over both their heads, “-Fenrir, I’m glad you decided to come,” the fiery cape swayed.

‘Master’s strong,’ went through her mind, ‘-it’s been so long since I’ve seen the master. He’s changed. We didn’t speak even when I was brought to the Shadows. Life there was nice, I spent my days in joy. I had a purpose when I sought for something or someone – the growth is uncontrolled, more and more things are brought – boredom’s out of the question... why did I leave a peaceful life behind?’ the answer, his grip softly on her head, ‘-my affection towards my master, the throbbing in my heart, the very warmth I feel in my being. The first time we met that night; my feelings haven’t changed. He accepted me, and I accepted him – we separated due to him seeking more, he wished and he gained. I, what of me?’ the scarred landscape of impaled bodies slowly burnt like paper on fire, bits curled into black crinkles. Memories of the Rosesplan Castle, the Shadow Realm, came to her, the empress.

“Fenrir.”

“Empress Intherna?”

“Are you content with the state of things?”

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“What do you mean?”

She opened her palm, and a portal of the fire displayed pictures of prophecy – words of warning and displays of Igna’s fight, “-a war approaches. It won’t be stopped with academies – for it has been foretold by lady Destiny. The crux of balance is about to change. Igna’s going to need help, he’ll need a chain to bind his murderous nature. God forbid, the Devil’s identity and title’s assigned to death and destruction; certain figures will, without a doubt, try to bring our work down.”

“Why me, I’m but a spirit beast.”

“You’ve far surpassed the title spirit beast. Fenrir, the time spent in the Shadows – do you think it was for nothing?” she smiled and handed a letter from her drawers, “-to Intherna,” read the receiver.

“Oh, Intherna. I write this letter with much distress. Yeah right, I do wonder how the olden women wrote their love letters. Did they start with Dear beloved, or something more explicit, like, last night was amazing? Eh, has a ring, right? No matter. Intherna, I have a favor to ask. Fenrir recently come into the care of the Shadow Realm. I want my comrade to have some rest – she’s been through a lot. I dare not imagine her pain. She’s done some much for me, I have to repay her kindness. Do keep this letter a secret until the time is right. I want you and the other gods to bolster her power – the scripts of ascension will be found at the manor. I’ve written the symbols she’ll need to inherit. Increase her mana capacity, have her train – send her on adventurers and raise her prowess. Once she’s ready, bring her to the manor and have her stand on the circle. You will need a catalyst. Check the drawers for a vile of

blood – once found, splash it on the circle and open the scroll. The spell will take care of the rest,” Fenrir’s mind knew not where to stand – the sudden news hit like an avalanche.

“Here,” Intherna handed another letter, “-to Fenrir.”

“Fenrir,” it suddenly started, “-if you’re reading this, I infer the time’s come for the ritual. The decision is yours to make. The purpose of the ritual is to evolve thy being into godhood. Tis a path I shall never follow or dare to pursue. In the world which is to come – new gods and deities shall be needed to lead the masses. A battle for the future is upon us and the greater dimensions. Victory is not mandatory. You’re free to change sides or ignore my offer. I’m a rational man at times, I can understand reasons why one might choose against power. It is all fair, and none shall be blamed or otherwise. Therefore, Fenrir, the decision is thine to make. Will you join me in battle when the time comes? A question or is it a request, a favor perhaps... the answer will be clear, trust me.” She made her decision on the spot, neither reluctant nor worried. The ritual, her ascension – the process echoed in a blink, a flash of light, and her whole body glowed bright gold. The symbol of the beast appeared on her neck, the open snout of a wolf with protruding teeth fixed upon an emblem of resemblance to the old noble homes.

“Take me to him,” she said.

Thus, dusk fell upon the landscape. A wave of darkness crashed from where the sun had set. Inky black shadows of the elongated forest’s body were cast upon the paths and, completely marred the surrounding. “You came,” he smiled, Elize swapped forms and leaped into Igna’s shoulders. Fenrir remained humane, “-the title of Beast Goddess,” she watched her hands, “-suppose I’m called a god in ancient texts. Alas, the truth couldn’t be further from those exaggerated texts.”

“Fenrir, do you have your answer?”

“Not yet,” she stood at the mouth of Geld’s pass, “-I need time.”

“Take as long as you need.” He jumped to the peak and sprinted across to Lilith’s tree – a jump of a few kilometers in length.

Slow march and muffled breaths, “-lady Cleopatra, the troops are tired. The gradual incline and our double-time walking pace finally took the soldiers. I recommend we rest.”

“What good will it bring?”

The officer, dressed formally in unarmored vestments, clasped his hands and firmed his resolve, “-if we rush to the valley, our troops will be too tired to respond against ambushes. I say we rest for a few hours and continue the march – it won’t affect our arrival time; we’ll still have the night-time advantage. My lady, please consider the consequences of rushing into a battle without preparation.”

“Knowing the enemy’s general,” she sighed, “-he’ll have a plan ready. Good then, Advisor. Have the troops rest for three hours, we will leave as soon as the Srar Constellation moves three.”

‘Good,’ he ran to the front, “-men, we’re setting camp. Please rest your feet and focus.”

“The Advisor did us good,” returned the deep-voiced demons, “-good job on convincing Cleopatra. Being ordered around by a fair-skin woman feels wrong.”

“No backbiting the General. Orders are orders, we obey the council.”

'Troops don't feel trust with our leadership. These men are trained to defend. Why are we being used to attack? Cleopatra's forces should have been placed with the main army, and help defend.'

"ENEMY!" cried scouts hailing from the mountain, '-we're in the middle of setting camp,' a cold shiver went down the Advisor's spine, and he ran to the center of camp and looked at the path. Many were quick to grab their weapons, '-enemy?' he walked forward, contrary to the troops who retreated to surround the General's camp, '-that uniform.'

"Lady Cleopatra, we're under attack."

"Where's the advisor?" she stepped out of her tent, "-is the attack confirmed?" blood and severed heads flew, '-under attack?' she gulped, "-HID, MY LADY," the advisor sprinted through the crowd, grabbed her hands and dashed out the other end of the tent, "-we need to retreat!"

"Advisor, use your words!"

"The uniform, the enemy are scouts. They've changed sides. We need to relay a message to the main army."

The trees shriek, "-how many?"

"Around four hundred. The suddenness took our men by surprise. Lady Cleopatra."

"Such the reason why the council was sent first," Cleopatra grinned, "-Advisor, I can tell the question plagued your mind. You think rationally – it's a good trait. Sadly, the enemy we face is less than rational – he's whimsical to his core and will come up with all matters of strategies with a simple snap. Do not underestimate that man's intellect."

"Raise the barrier and have our forces defend the camp. Use movement five," he ordered, "-GO!"

Movement five, a simple formation to allow ease of transfer during close quarters. A central line is split into two, the vanguard fights the incoming mass and slowly pulls the enemy inward, soon as mana runs low, the second line leaps forward and pushes back the advance with superior power and stamina. The first line becomes the second, and the cycle repeats – move two steps backward and three steps forward – a strategy made viable under the Council's tested defensive prowess.

"Lady Cleopatra, why do you fear the man so?" cries and distant blasts shook the ground, and the remaining unit split into attack and defense – a line formed for the protection of supplies and the General.

"He has a record," she moved around the tent, "-a good record of overwhelming victories against greater forces. I tell you, Advisor, this man has brought an entire world to his feet using his wit and clever distractions. The fall of Lucifer's church, the conquest of Alpha, you won't know the places I refer to – all and all, one can say he brought down a juggernaut of militarist prowess in a matter of years. It didn't matter if he had the title of King of one of the simple villagers – no matter where he goes, he doesn't require much to start his plans. Igna Haggard, the Devil of Glenda, the Hero King of Hidros. Always be on guard, never lose sight of his abilities."

"He's a good leader then?"

“Not only a good leader,” she hung her head, “-a fearsome fighter,” her haunted glare sliced through the Advisor’s curious demeanor, “-an army on his own.”

“Impossible,” he threw his arms, “-only the god of war has such prowess. Formle and Athena are gone from what I know. This is fearmongering and you know it, my lady. Do not sell out council short.”

‘Do not sell him short, fool.’

“Report!” said a demon, “-the enemy forces are pushing our defenses. Movement five’s no longer effective. They’ve grown in ability and skill – the mana emerging from their core has greatedened.”

“One question.”

“My lady?”

“They’re from our forces, aren’t they?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“The bodies, it’s changed.”

“How did you know?”

“I’ga’s made them into zombies. Tis a battle of attrition from this point on. They won’t last,” she clapped, “-use movement zero.” Movement zero, a simple order – open the front lines and surround the invaders, “-Advisor. Go bear witness and wipe out the enemy.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

Four hundred were guided into a killing zone. They clawed and snapped, tearing bodies left right, and center – two zombies killed one on average – those who killed were stronger – corpses left on the zombies’ territory were cannibalized. Friendly faces, comrades in the army, turning sword to a close one was tough, even for a demon.

“NO MERCY!” cried the Advisor, wasn’t long before an effective strategy was born to slaughter the attackers. With this, the first blow was dealt.

‘Attacking without lifting a finger. The vanguard’s all but dead... they were defeated. I shouldn’t have sent them. Moving fast would have made the job so much easier...’

“Report!”

“Speak.”

“The zombies are self-destructings.”

“Pardon?”

“The ones who killed five or more explode and leave a cursed purple taint. Anything it touches decays, the water source’s tainted.”

‘Seriously? You played another hand without so much lifting a finger... a three-level attack targeting my men, their morale, and our supplies...’ she slammed the table and cried, “-ADVISOR!”

Chapter 1116 Battle of the Academies [4]

“My lady!”

“Send the slaves.”

“Excuse me, my lady?”

“Send the slaves. The attackers will self-destruct upon having their fill. Leave the wounded and the incapable. Consider this our way of cleansing our army from weaklings. As the saying goes, an army is only as strong as its weakest link.”

“My lady, would it not-”

“I will hear no arguments. This is an order, I will have my authority respected, understood?”

Night’s darkness adorned the mountain. Something about the night in a forest brought a measure of grieving listlessness. Hard orders, ‘pour débarrassé,’¹ the weak had strengthened morale. ‘Demons are paradoxically inclined. Show pity and they grow dull – push to cruelty, their innate nature against empathy – their self-serving will ought do the rest. Igna Haggard, I’m no fool either. I will fight for what I think is true – you don’t scare me. I belong to the Heavenly Convention. We’re allied. If death knocks, I will widen the door myself,’ pure fierceness and resolve of Cleopatra, the lovely lady clad in gold and blessed with grace, had her hands grasping a sword. A ceremonial testament to ancient demons.

The mountain approaches, “-whispers in the bushes,” said the Advisor, “-scouts have returned,” with a hint of anger, “-my lady,” the tone dropped to a whisper, “-we found survivors. Follow me,” he guided them through two-oxen driven carriages. An appalling look of envy, ‘-why do they look so anxious?’ torches flickered against the soldiers’ expressions. Moans and grunts, cries for pity and death overtook the howling forest. Impaled demons lined the path to the previous camp. Murky and reeking of iron – the cruel smell which one could test – burnt flesh, smoldering in the distant remnants of the camp. Tell-tell signs left awry, “-lack of footprints,” she stared about, ‘-must have come from the trees. They snuck behind, the heavy rain’s taken any warning signs.’

“Report,” said a returning scout, “-we’ve found dismembered limbs. There’s a tree blocking access.”

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“Where were they found?”

“Over the tree and seemed to head down.”

‘-Split the forces,’ she exhaled and turned to her troops – a long line of fighters and supplies reached far the eye could see, given the foliage and orbs of flame, signaling a few in the vague distance, “-take down the impaled and set up camp.” A nonchalant exhale paired with chatter led a few unfortunate victims of lost bets to restore the landscape, “-AHHHHH!” a scream caught them from the top, Cleopatra swung her head into said direction, the advisor dropped his jaw at the adjacent impaled – explosion and white flames – pink-mist where living once stood.

“AN AMBUSH!” she cried, “-DO NO TOUCH THE-”

Too late, the topography, a crafty layout made to drown sudden orders – took the lives of a hundred in mere seconds. A dark-green mist rushed down the mountain, those caught turned blue, choked on their own breath, and hurled blood – blisters inflated like dough and burst, throwing muck over those nearby. Once in contact, painful screams and the cycle repeats.

“I CHECKED THE FOREST, THERE SHOULDN’T BE ANYONE HERE!” he frantically looked at Cleopatra for answers, “-my lady?” he checked, and she was gone. A somber voice came from the top, “-demon of the council, alas time for death hath come. Be grateful,” said a devilish figure hovering above enemy, “-hear me,” he held Cleopatra by the nape, “-to those not succumbed to the Mistress of Plague’s malady, if thee wishes for survival – cure will be found within her,” veins along his hand glowed – power flowed into her nape, her body glowed in turn, veins along her visage and down to her legs, shimmering through her clothes, “-may I have a moment of your time,” said another, a half-pyramid rose, “-the name’s Asmodeus,” he courteously bowed, “-I’m a firm believer in leading by example. It is true a leader must safeguard their troops. Therefore,” chained pillars rose in the center, Cleopatra was harshly thrown on the top – her clothes were ripped, “-here comes the mist,” Igna pointed – the fear of impending doom had hearts beating out of chest, “-the only way to survive is to bond thy flesh with thy leader,” he reached into the crowd, the Hand of the Lamented pinched a random fighter and placed it on the pyramid, “have your fun,” said Asmodeus with a cold smirk, the pupils flashed pink, the demon’s conscious gaze faded, he reached behind Cleopatra, latter of which was straddled on all fours, and gripped, the harsh nailed dug into her waist, claps resounded – her screams followed, “-enough,” Igna threw the demon into the mist. It had no effect – the stage was set.

“IGNA!”

“Cleopatra,” he knelt, “-your forces are nothing but scapegoats. Elite members my foot. You will suffer, and be ravaged by thousands who are yet left standing. The mist won’t kill them, rather, it won’t after the first have had their go. I wish thee a pleasurable experience, Queen Cleopatra. Such is the price for going against me,” he leaned into her ears, “-since I can’t kill you, I’ll make sure you survive with a few scrapes. Don’t worry, the pyramid is a conduit for healing magic, the moment it senses thy death – pouf, regeneration. Of course, it’ll remend thy body for new guests. Lead by example, my pretty,” he grabbed her jaw, “-I forgot to mention,” pure lust had the demons in a flock at the bottom, they drooled, true beasts gave a chance at survival, “-any open orifices’ fair game. She won’t bite,” he looked at Asmodeus, the prince graciously looked at the crowd, “-MAY THE GAME BEGIN!” Demons crawled up the stairs, pushed, and fought for a chance at survival – the sense of doom amplified with the mist taking the lives of those who sat on the outskirts.

‘Wha-’ the ground dropped, “-WHERE AM I?”

“Shut it else it let go.”

“Who are you?”

“Igna Haggard. Didn’t you hear the speech? Advisor, there are a few things I’d like to discuss.”

“What about Cleopatra...”

“Oh, she’ll live, let her have her fun. Of course, she’s being used as a conduit to heal her troops. A general must be honored to put her life in the life of her men. Isn’t that, right?”

‘A warm fireplace, two chairs – a tree house?’ a few minutes had passed, ‘-why did he leave me alone?’ the advisor sat where he was placed. The firewood crackled, the atrocities of the battlefield seemed a distant memory, ‘-the window’s wide open. Could I survive if I leap?’ invisible daggers dug into his back, ‘-don’t think I’ll survive. I’m being watched,’ a room in Lilith’s tree gathered the cozy feelings associated with log cabins. Often called homely, quaint, or else, the starting block for grizzly murders and intrigue-ridden stories. Footstep came at the door, the handle clicked and a man with white hair entered, ‘-a sword on the hip, he’s wearing a uniform and exudes a lot of presence. I don’t detect mana... can power really be broadcasted using one’s image alone?’ a cynical resting frown begot the prisoner, “-am I going to die?”

Igna casually went to a door opposing the fireplace, it opened into the great outside – a view upon the shadows of the mountains, shades of increasing opaqueness formed what little they saw. Orbs often broke the dark veil, Igna lit a cigarette, puffed, then leaned against the doorframe, “-Adjudicator, who are you really?”

“...”

“No answer. You’re part of Cleopatra’s army, yet, there’s a strangeness to the aura. Armies have strategists at hand, helping to analyze the situation of the battle. You, on the other hand, are worthless,” he turned and puffed, “-no sense of foresight,” he walked towards the Advisor, “-still, Cleopatra was forced to keep you at her side. She was a monarch, out of all, I’m sure she understands the truth behind a leader’s success and entourage. Why would she keep you...” he went past, grabbed a chair, slammed it so as it turned away from the Advisor, and then, after a puff, straddled the seat, “-it doesn’t make sense.”

“I won’t talk, it’s the last thing I’ll do,” Igna gave a cold gaze like the opinion didn’t matter, “-for a general, you’re conceited. The overconfidence is going to be your downfall,” the Advisor quipped.

“My, you’re brave,” he leaned, “-suppose a sensible conversation isn’t in the plans. For a moment, I thought you’d be an asset – be realistic, changing sides... alas, let bygones be bygones,” Igna rose his hands and stretched his fingers, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* crystal lines dug into the Advisor’s brain – the dark-red color begot a black and white hue, a pixelated pattern went from Advisor to Igna, ‘-as I expected, the man’s a guard from the Council. He’s under orders to kill Cleopatra if makes a move against the agreed treaty. Memphe, her goal’s been foreign until now. She’s made a deal with Leviathan – to hand over the Academy’s darkest kept secret, the Tomes of Control. The roots of deception run deep. Advisor,” he smiled, yellow shrouded in black emerged, the skin of concealment shed, ‘-he’s a member of Artanos’ army. Artanos’ influence has reached into the Council. It’d make sense why they’d use Cleopatra to lead the council forces. Fortunately, this one seems to be under liberty – the only order given was to supervise Cleopatra. Memphe’s going to double-cross Leviathan and side with the Heavenly Convention. Ragno is a land made of a majority of fallen-angel, it would be right for her to seek the aid of the gods. They must have promised her the academy’s prosperity as a haven for angels, to restore its reputation... Satan and Leviathan’s forces will be hard to fight. Henry Grant and Zalem Odd, renowned demons from the warring days,’ he pulled the control threads – the advisors’ shot into consciousness, “-What happened?”

“Nothing much,” Igna stood, watching over the mountain – puffs of smokes followed, “-tell me, what will you choose, life or death?”

'Did I pass out?' he scratched his head, 'I don't remember anything... what happened?'

"What will it be?"

"Like I have a choice in my fate. I'm a prisoner of war, I don't care what happens to me."

"Fair," he flipped, "-when day breaks, I'll send you back to Cleopatra's side. She'll need someone to hold her hand after tonight."

Igna strolled down the corridor – the princes of hell watched enviously, as did the students who bravely asked for Elixia's insight. They returned ten minutes after Cleopatra's torture, the grand hall of Lilith's fortress carried long tables supported by a stone ground. Branches arched in and out of the structure, "-Igna," Lilith held a seat behind the grand hall, in a smaller, more comfortable room, "-how's the battle?"

"Getting there," he nodded.

"Have Vanesa return home, Beelzebub too, the boy's up to no good again."

"What happened?"

"He's torturing soldiers at the academy."

"Let the boy have his fun. I'm going to bed – send for me if anything changes," a spiral staircase led to an equally quaint room, a single bed, a windowless opening into the starry night carrying a relaxing floral scent.

He laid, 'this nostalgic feeling, it calls to me memories of Shanna Islegust. The days of the past were simpler, I didn't have the power I required, however, the simple days of coming home to my lovely wife, to her complaints of me working too hard on matters of state. Calling treason as it came, leading Arda into a magical revolution. The province's no longer the same – perhaps I changed it for the worse. I wanted results and, in the end, ignored much of what was needed.' Fenrir and Elize kept watching Above his room. Looking in the distance for danger, "-who are you anyway?"

"Fenrir, and you?"

"Elize."

"You sure are a conversationalist, Elize."

"Same to you," they growled and hissed, as for downstairs, Lilith gathered his sons and daughters, "-Mammon and Asmodeus will keep watch tonight. Everyone else, go to sleep."

"Understood, mother."

Thus, the veil of night carried until dawn. The sun shimmered brightly but had its rays diffused in the thick mountain mist. Cleopatra's screams dulled, and most of the demons were lifeless upon the ground, '-Igna...' she shivered, '-I'll have my revenge, I swear....'

Chapter 1117 Battle of the Academies [5]

'What a pathetic dream,' Igna's slumber broke, dawn gazed over the battlefield. 'Leaves a bad taste in the mouth,' muffled thuds soon pulled the attention out the window below, where undead soldiers,

commanded by Mammon, did military drills. Spotters placed at the Geld's pass were mute, 'no signals,' a connection seamlessly formed between Yui and the interface.

tap, tap, "-enter," he said, fully dressed and ready for the day ahead. When it came to Igna and his life – premonition or not, they made quite the impression. Many catastrophes were foretold by said dreams, '-I know well to heed these kinds of visions. Sathanas,' he pressed his lips tensely, '-she's yet to be found.'

A kind dame waited at the doorway, her hand clasped below her waist in a respectful bow. Her long black hair ran down her shoulders, and her slender frame, long legs, and well-proportioned limbs took from her lovely features, a taint upon her beauty – horns.

"Teresa."

"My master," she reserved her voice, Igna took quite an interest in the silence, "-I must confess."

He side-stepped, making the room feel spacious and inviting, "-come on, let's talk inside," the wind howled, the reddish-orange sunrise, tamer to sunset, held the forest in a pinch of subdued colors.

"Master," the interface lit, "-urgent message," he gestured at Teresa, turned away, and toggled the notice, "-Sathanas Haggard has been located," read the message.

'No,' the world fell, the walls crumbled, the ground shook, each movement resounded inside the very bone of his being, '-the dream's a premonition,' he looked at Teresa, her slow movements and unwillingness to stare, '-is she responsible?' the feelings brushed aside, taking the 'him' out of the equation, "-Teresa, you wanted to discuss?" he was able to see clearly, '-getting riled won't do any good. Can't be hasty, I have to trust in her strength.'

Teresa kept her lowered gaze, "-master, I have to confess."

.....

"..."

"It's about me."

"Please, go ahead."

"See, master, I don't want to come across as rude or anything of the sort. I'm a daughter of nobility, I was born to the family of Leviathan, father told me my birth wasn't exactly planned. He was in love, he still is in love and he wanted to have a memento from his lover. Even with the unwanted birth, my father never treated me short of a princess. I was raised with manners and power, the world revolves around me, and I still believe the situation will work in my favor – it's always been like that. Such was my life before I came to your school – here, I was challenged and thoroughly beaten. I learned my allies were my enemies and I didn't want to face the truth. You see, master Igna, without your offer, I didn't know what I would have done. The truth is, I had a choice between the academy or a peaceful life at Dems. I subsequently chose the academy and soon transferred on his orders. Father's very secretive about his love life, it's a taboo subject far as the court is concerned. I wanted to know my mother, but, but, he never spoke a word, he kept up his lie and I was left dejected. I have a mother, I know she's alive... it was Artanos, he told me who my mother was," her long lashes flapped, her horns glowed, "-

Lilith," a weight lifted, the instant she spoke, her knees weakened and she tipped onto the nearby chair, '-relief,' she shook, '-I feel lighter.'

Contrary to the lass whose burden lifted, Igna suffered a thud, a shock – her weight chained to his feet, '-Leviathan and Lilith's child. Teresa L. Leviathan,' he stared outside, '-Sathanas,' he side-glanced, Teresa's relieved expression tightened.

'His aura,' she swallowed, '-did I see something wrong?'

"Teresa, care to answer a few of my questions?"

"Sure?"

"Do you regularly enjoy torture?"

"Yes," she beamed, "-as a member of my father's court, I was blessed with the responsibility of dungeon mast-"

"Okay, good enough," he interjected, "-did you find the prisoners a little lax?"

"Yes, they died easily."

"Recently, has Satan and Leviathan made any correspondence, perhaps an exchange of gifts or else pleasantries?" a gamble, '-Asmodeus's last account of Sathanas going missing is her trip to her father's realm. Common sense would say she's trapped there, however, there are no signs of her lifeforce, even when I had Yui scan the domain. My dream's convoluted message showed flash images of Sathanas and Teresa... the ending, the former died at the hands of a strange entity. I wonder if...'

"How did you know?" amazement took her visage, '-I got my proof,' he held the aura.

"Last question, did you have someone new join the dungeon, perhaps a lady with crimson hair and a bad attitude?"

"A lady with short crimson hair joined the dungeon, she's not like you described. She has no meat on her bones – she's lost weight if she even had some. Her hair was a mess and she reeked of smut. Don't know what happened, she had a strange collar around her neck. I never asked her name, she refused to speak or eat. Her vitality, now, she's fierce when it came to my games. Her body healed almost instantly – the silent withdrawal of her audible yelps, the quiet suffering, and the squeamish look she gave when I dug my claws," Teresa's face melted, pink cheeks and flushed forehead.

"Calm down," he said, "-good on you. Now, if you'd kindly take the arousal out of my chambers, it would be great."

She left – two spirit animals soon leaped into the room, a cat and dog, the feline perched on his shoulders, the dog soon changed into a human, "-good morning master."

"Master," the cat quietly licked her lips, "-I'm going home, call me when battle draws," the shadows swallowed the feline, leaving Fenrir in the company of Igna.

'There's tension in the room,' her nose noticed lingering stress and arousal, "-master, did you-"

“Don’t you even go there,” he jokingly pinched her nose and scuffled her hair, “-I’m not interested in children. Teresa’s a strange case... from what I’ve heard through reports coming from Momphe’s informant,” he quietly lit a cigarette, “-knowing their move is good, wish I could shake this feeling. I don’t know who or what to trust – the truth’s grown blurry – conflicting purposes, I don’t want to be trapped.”

“Master?”

“My apologies, Fenrir,” silence had settled, passing over fourth-minutes on the clock, “-did you stay long?”

“Not really,” he looked over, “-the bed’s rather comfortable.”

‘And she’s sleeping on the bed in her wolf form,’ he puffed, “-Fenrir, go find Asmodeus and relay this message, “-the attack on the academy is a single piece in a greater game. Establish contact with our men in Draebala, audit the situation – ask for Formle, he’ll be of aid,” would take a few hours before Asmodeus could be found. In the meantime, Igna headed for Lilith’s chambers. A secluded room built in the deepest reaches of the Tree, the branches leading to her place were of a brighter color, the floor was wooden compared to the stone floor everywhere else, and upon those wooden floors sat a cozy carpet. Her door was at hand, oval and chubby in appearance, “-tap, tap,”

“You can knock, you know?” she muffled.

“Tapping the door is too common,” the lock clicked and open inward automatically, Lilith held the bed with five or more semi-naked women drenched in sweat and under her covers, “-you changed teams?” he fired.

“Cleansing,” she eased off the bed in similar vestments, or rather, lack of, “-have you come to the feast?”

“No, not really,” he watched as she moved to a decadent vanity table.

“Could you pass me my undergarments dear?” she pointed at a drawer, “-the black laced ones,” she winked and sat, Igna reached over with the Hand of the Lamented, the fabric seemingly floated to her table. She seductively got dressed and remained in those very undergarments, “-not flustered?”

“Turn off the charm, won’t work on me, Queen of Demon.”

“Using my title,” she stared at his reflection, “-Igna,” she slowly combed her hair, “-we hate beating around the bush.”

“Teresa L. Leviathan.”

“Yeah, what about her, she’s your new toy, isn’t she?”

“...”

“Igna, stop playing games.”

“What do you know about her?”

“No idea and I’d rather not care.”

“Well, I did expect that from you, Lilith. Would you care if I said she’s your daughter?”

A crash, her comb fell – her expression remained stoic, her attention was harsh, “-say that again?”

“Leviathan and Lilith, the story’s not as complete as you’d make me believe.”

A smoldering passive aggressivity spread, “-Igna, don’t play these games with me. We know it won’t do us good,” she turned and stared, the women awoke, “-GET OUT!” tiny feet darted out the door, the door slammed, Igna and Lilith held the tension, neither broke.

“Someone has trust issues, doesn’t he?”

“Lilith...”

“What?” she shrugged, “-I’m speaking the truth. Let me guess, you think I’m like the others huh? Gophy left to meet Artanos, and Miira grew weary of your whims and left for the Heavens. Intherna remained because she feels pity and, I’m here because I care. The guardians of the Shadow Realm, such a prestigious rank, isn’t it? We’re nothing more than flowers to be displayed, isn’t that right, Igna? You never cared, and never will care. The only reason you’re acting strange is because of Teresa, what if I had relations with other people, does that affect you?” she paused, a mix of anger and sympathy filling her voice as she trembled at a few irregular syllables, “-you don’t see my loyalty, you don’t see why I’m angry. Even now, you’re thinking I’m playing mind games,” she lowered her head, “-the answer is clear, get your head out of your ass, Igna. The answer’s always been there,” tears rolled down her cheeks.

He watched, no reaction whatsoever, “-done?”

“ARGG!” she stormed over and grabbed his collar, “-don’t dismiss-”

“Calm down,” he grabbed her wrist and pulled her into a close embrace, “-Lilith, I never said I questioned your loyalty. The words you said, it’s true, what you said about me and the Guardians is very true. I never had those thoughts, really,” a ghastly howled pressed the room,-

‘so much pressure,’ she buckled, ‘screams of the dead. Is he pointing Orenmir at me, I feel the tip... he’s going to kill me?’

-and forcibly had Lilith on her defensive, she barely rose her gaze, the weapon’s energy pressed and pressed, “-the simplest answer I find is to kill. If I pressed, the blade would easily go through the back and out the front – you’d be like the demons we impaled. I don’t appreciate outbursts, unwarranted outbursts,” the blade sheathed, “-well, that is in the past. You were being unreasonable, and I know, I’m unreasonable too,” he smiled and knelt, guiding Lilith’s unsteady footing and head into his lap, “-I came to learn the truth. Will you trust me with your truth, Lilith?”

“Do you trust me?”

“I do. You wouldn’t have fought against Leviathan – knowing your promiscuous nature, I doubt the event to be traumatic, unlike Vanesa. Besides, you did remain for my sake and even conjured this Tree despite the toll it takes on your energy. It’s normal that you’d find energy easier during mat-”

“Don’t,” she put a finger to his lips, “-I’m not a whor-”

“No, you’re not. I never said that. Just a lady who enjoys intercourse, nothing wrong with that. Trusting you is my decision, breaking that trust is your choice to make. I had my trust broke a few times, not the greatest of experiences... the vengeance was sweet. Enough about me, I rather not come across as the victim. We have our issues. Tell me, Lilith, will you place your trust in someone like me? Consider it like an investment in the stock market.”

“So much for asking trust when one has a cursed sword pressed against her back,” her breaths steadied, “-a gamble is a gamble. Fine, Igna, I’ll tell you.”

Chapter 1118 Battle of the Academies [6]

“It all started when I was taken from my home. You know the story of the cursed maiden and how I was defiled and exiled. The story’s grown over the years, we can’t separate fable from the truth. Honestly, I won’t even know where to start if I was to narrate my origin. What you’re interested in is how Leviathan and I met. I’ll set the scene – I was alone and desperate, the demons had finally grown into their true potential. The Aapith Nation, the foundation of the four kings and the demon council – I played part in both, granting favors and forcing my powers upon the starved lands. A young king, Leviathan, was ostracized, and like him, when the council came into power, they dismissed the kings’ authority – why? Lucifer. A stranger in a xenophobic culture, an invader. Wounds from the wars between gods and demons were fresh, neither side wanted to compromise. we cross-pathed randomly, maybe fate? I know not. All I remember is a frail young man – his authority taken by his right-hand man, an older Arch-demon whose name and renowned flashed across the Underworld. Come to think, you and him are rather close – said Arch Demon was none other than Draconis. One of the Ancient Demons, those present before the rise of kings and council; their power is absolute. Council and kings, at the time, were weary of the Ancients, else known by Elders. A strangeness gripped the underworld, under someone’s orders, Elders were hunted and imprisoned, and the attacks were unfair in numbers, often employing the worse strategies to win. When faced with a behemoth, no matter the method, all is fair. There, the Elders’ power gradually faded, and Draconis took up arms and allied himself with the weak-willed Leviathan. Then, the two stood firmly over Leviathan’s territory, which yet remains today – it was in part thanks to Draconis’ firepower. He conquered the hellscape on his lonesome, a warrior to his core. Draconis showed loyalty towards Leviathan – I was a regular in their courts in those days, you know, they loved their parties with roasted humans and tortured souls as the orchestra. Tis there, I overheard a ploy, the Council approached Leviathan and filled his ear with baseless fear. He grew so overwhelmed, that the very next day, on Draconis’ return, ordered the Elder’s imprisonment. Draconis was replaced, and Levithan forsook his loyal aid. They stared at each other, Draconis and Leviathan each understood the task – and Draconis accepted his fate. I later overheard this, “-If I hadn’t ordered Draconis’ imprisonment, they’d have killed him. We took control of Council-owned territory – they want to control their land but I’m not going to yield. If they want to control, they can have it, but I’ll remain as the King, and the people will grow to love their ruler, I’m betting on the long game.” And like it was planned, well, suppose it was – Draconis escaped his dungeon and was never seen again. How did he run? Leviathan. He asked me into his office and courteously spoke his will. I said yes, it seemed to run, and there, I aided in Draconis’ escape. After that day, I spent most of my time in Leviathan’s realm – I was intrigued by his design and what was ahead for the people. The council hated my presence, so I figured, bouncing from village to village, and traveling from town to city might do some good. On one of my trips, I was ambushed by assassins, you guessed it, the Council. Was rather simple slitting their throats – challenging my power was useless. Strangely, as I was to kill the last, Levithan jumped into the rescue – he was

found bravely and lost. I had to carry him to the castle – boy did he blush, I teased relentlessly, the willingness to dive renewed my interest. For the next few decades, we grew close – the world around evolved and the tension was palpable. Another war was on its way – the ascension of Zeus. Leviathan became a king, he held power, and was a shining example of his namesake. Good things eventually end. He professed his love, I said why not, love hadn't been a word I used so far. I thought the relationship might have done me good – we were a couple for at least a decade, in that time, I gave birth to a few of his children, and in the end, I gave birth to a little girl. I don't remember her face, a revolution exploded around Leviathan's territory. We were trapped and imprisoned, Leviathan watched as his people, those he vowed to protect, rushed into the castle and killed his men, our children were executed. Wasn't late for a blade to me on my neck – I used the remainder of my power and scattered my soul across the ages, death seemed boring, but to them, I died. To me, I slept. I don't know what happened to Leviathan afterward – well, not until we were taken, hostage. We were imprisoned in my castle, one built by Leviathan – when we met, I thought he'd be merciful, but I was wrong. He changed, for better or worse, he was no longer the man from my memories. Affection is hard to dismiss, I felt something when we crossed eyes, well, I wish the feeling was mutual. He made his demand, I refused, and the story is as you know – total defeat. Pathetic, isn't it? here I am, posing as a queen of tremendous power, but instead, I'm just a girl, my body may well be the fancy of men, but my mind is still as it was – playful and compassionate. I'm glad I awakened when I did, and I'm grateful it was you, Igna," she reached and caressed his cheeks, "-because of you, I gained more than I ever lost. I found my children – the princes. I gained a family, and I was blessed to witness a world grow – the memories served replace the bad thing about my life. I'm happy," she smiled, "-I'm happy."

Igna held his gaze over her face, he watched and blinked as she poured her story for him to hear, "-Lilith, you're stupid."

"Pardon?"

"You heard me," to which, he held her on her knees, "-you're a stupid woman. Why didn't you tell me sooner," he sighed, "-Teresa L. Leviathan is the last girl you conceived," he breathed, "-thus, she's your daughter, Lilith."

'My daughter?' she bit her lips, "-seriously, you're not lying?"

"No," he exhaled, "-Teresa is truly your daughter," he stood and soon opened the door, "-Teresa," he extended his hand, "-I'd like for you to meet your mother," he stepped out, shut the door and lit a cigarette. 'A reunion is like flipping a coin. Teresa's given me her soul and body, there's no fighting a contract I signed. Lilith poured her heart, she won't leave like the others. Lilith and Intherna, they're the only people I can count on at the moment. Everyone else is rather weak, my juries are yet trained for battle. The Adjudicator's power, like Origin said, is not complete. For the realm to be a realm of justice and law, I'll have to locate Tharis, she's the key to their growth. I had planned on doing so after taking the academy – now this battles' strained my agenda. Last I heard Tharis' was in hiding – no idea about her location. Miira might know, but I doubt she's alive much less conscious. I'll have to make due,' a shadow materialized, cutting his casual promenade, "-master, we've spotted the main army. They're half a day's out. Leviathan and Satan's forces have allied into one and are pushing the front, as for the student army, they've been placed as a reserve and are a day's out from the battlefield."

"They reacted faster than I imagined. Report the situation to Mammon and Asmodeus."

“As you wish,” the shadow disappeared.

“Vengeance,” he snapped, another translucent figure appeared, “-track down Memphe and Emmie, I want them captured alive.”

.....

“Consider it done,” he vanished.

‘What will I do with Teresa,’ an idea sparked, ‘-with the death of Lucifer, Pride’s spot has been freed. Teresa’s shown a great ego, the world revolves around her as she so nicely said. She’s the spawn of a king and Lilith, so it lines up. Couldn’t have planned it better myself. The next move,’ he cracked his knuckles, ‘-is to locate Sathanas. If my guess is true, Sathanas is imprisoned inside Leviathan’s realm. Teresa must have tortured her – short crimson hair, it’s her, I know it... even if she’s changed, I wouldn’t confuse one of my own. All comes down to you, Lilith.’

Igna’s preparation for war began, and at the fortress, Lilith’s retelling of her story to Teresa went as one would expect. The lass held her breath throughout the story, “-and that’s the reason... Teresa.”

“My mother is the Queen of Demons,” Teresa hang her head, “-this is overwhelming. I thought I was the product of a loveless affair,” her face rose with a smile, “-I’m glad I was wrong, I’m glad it was you. Father sounds so different.”

“How is he nowadays?”

“Father has a perpetual scowl. He’s merciless to enemies and even sterner on his people. The towns and villages live in constant fear of the King’s wrath. From what I heard, father quelled the revolution singlehandedly – he killed by the thousand and slaughtered women and children in front of their families. There are similar stories throughout his reign... it’s normal now, they know not to go against him. If they obey, father rewards them with leniency and freedom – the fear of his judgment is enough to stop any thoughts of revolution.”

“Sounds like a great ol’ time,” said she sarcastically, “-Teresa, I heard from Igna you surrendered body and soul?”

“It was my foolishness,” she sighed, “-well, no matter what happens, I will win. Father’s coming to rescue me, I know it.”

“So, what about the whole thing with following Igna?”

“Between us, mother, I think following Igna is like giving one’s pride. I’m not going to fall so easily. Even if he has complete authority over my being, I won’t stop being who I am. And when father wins the battle, I’ll be freed.”

“Poor child,” she clambered on her feet and moved to her bed, “-you poor child.”

“...”

“Teresa, you must understand,” she changed clothes, “-that by torturing the girl with short crimson hair-”

“-HOW DID YOU KNOW?”

“I know a lot,” she tapped her earrings, flaunting the golden shine and differing hue of the precious stone, “-and experience tells me, you’re in for a world of pain.”

“Mother, stop the showboating.”

“Showboating?” she chuckled, “-you will see, the depravity on which Igna thrives outweighs any offense thy father might have made. It’s not showboating, it’s the truth, an ugly truth. You’re nothing more than a commodity... your life is over. Take solace in this, you’ll stay with me from now on, with your brothers and sisters. There will be purpose in the new life ahead.”

“What are you talking about, it’s not like I’m going to di-”

“Exactly,” Lilith used shadow step. A blade ran straight through Teresa, ‘-warm,’ she coughed, ‘-I feel warm... is this my blood?’ she fell on her knees, “-why?” her head snapped against the ground. Lilith held the earpiece, “-Igna, I killed her, this what you wanted?”

“You used the Dagger of Earsfall right?”

“Yeah, I did. Man, killing ones own kid is depraved.”

“Says the one who accused me of the same cruelty. Killing someone close is nothing more than another day at the office.”

‘Using Earsfall sure made the task easy. She won’t die, the stab knocks the victim out of her physical body. The coronation ritual, good luck, Igna.’

Cleopatra’s chains severed, and she hit the ground hard, with dark circles, a woeful expression, bloated eyes, purple in color, and bloodied bludgeoned lips, her lovely skin scraped and bruised, torn and ravaged, “-how was the experience,” he kicked her over and stepped on her exposed body, “-man, look at you, so pitiful,” he puffed, “-they went to town, you can barely speak, the demons took advantage of every opening, just like a chess game,” *chuckle,* “-my apologies,” he held the laughter, “-it sure feels great. I must applaud your efforts, Cleopatra, taking so many members is admirable,” he leaned over and widened her mouth, “-well, you got teeth left,” *smack,* her head snapped to the side, she hurled blood and filth, “-two choices, Cleopatra. Join me, or be sentenced to a life of similar torture,” he grabbed her hair and pulled her upward, “-look at the undead army, they’re ready for round two. What say you,” he whispered, “-death is too easy, you won’t die on my watch,” *smack,* he kicked her to the ground and stomped her stomach, “-filthy,” he spat on her face, “-what will it be?”

Chapter 1119 Battle of the Academies [7]

“Go fuck yourself.”

Smack, smack, he kicked, she rocked – the eyelids fell; so she thought moments respace, cold water chilled her to the core. She shot upright, her wounds rejuvenated and attention veered into the distance, ‘-what happened?’ she gulped, twisting her gaze.

“I healed you.”

“Igna?”

“How goes it,” he gave a friendly gesture, “-long time no see.”

“Long time no see?” the confusion ceased, the pain of her memories crashed, her hands trembled, her feet shook, “-monster...” with a inhale as big as one taking a bite, “-Lixbin won’t forgive you, Igna. You harmed a member of the heavenly Council, they will retaliate in kind-”

“Quit the pathetic whining,” he walked past and stood arms akimbo before an army of undead, “-look there,” he proudly smirked, “-the scouts you so effortlessly brought to my doorstep. There are many things left unknown in the world, some can be found through lore, others acquired by knowledge. Alas, what I hold in my hands is one unnamed and unfound,” the closed fist turned and opened, “-for it is nothing.”

An unimpressed expression remained, “-kill me already.”

“Not interested,” he returned, “-you’re more worthy as a prisoner. I’ve wondered this question before, are gods caring or do they shed their skin like snakes?”

.....

“I don’t-” her mouth froze, invisible claps locked her jaw and twisted her throat – the question, basic as it seemed, sore deeply. The wind built, and daybreak was upon the lonesome Ragno. Cleopatra’s scene swapped, a large free forest reduced to a bleak cell where roaches and mice made their feast. Long iron bars, close to no lights, a hard-as-rock rectangular edifice, her bed. The gloomy outlook drowned, like the reflected rays across the distant hall on her face – a slow miserable extinct.

The undead army of five-thousand, lit anew by Igna’s spell – marched double towards the horizon. The death march of sacrificial pawns began – the expected place of battle, at least twenty kilometers to the northeast – near the surrounding edges of the desert.

‘The matter of Sathanas,’ the gates to Oriantia widened, like a wound through reality, a hazy cloud begets the caution of curious bystanders – namely, the students under guard of Elixia. Having called Vengeance to action, the students were asked to remain in the fortress – and here, with each sharing doors with two or more, begin experiencing the thrill of war.

“Yui, dear Yui, you got information for me?” he entered the war chambers. The table radiated a purple shine, a humanoid figure waited patiently in the corner, “-my master,” came a familiar voice, “-it’s my pleasure to make your acquaintance in this form.”

“Yui...” he stopped and stared, short dark-purple hair, a small rounded nose, freckles across her face, a body of which have been the fancy of many, long legs complimenting her thighs and her upper torso, which was wrapped in a red shirt, barely reaching her shoulders and stomach. Every movement pulled the fabric, and looking at the design – a cat of vibrant colors, “-are you wearing children’s cloth?”

“How did you know?” her arms widened, tell-tell signs demanding a warm hug. Igna obliged, “-Origin said it’d look good.”

“Doesn’t look comfortable. More on the fashion dilemma later, how are you in a physical body?”

“The powers of the table,” she beamed, “-the more mana is fed, the greater the power, and with the Shadow Realm’s supply – we overfilled the capacity. Instead of wasting the mana, the table intelligently

ordered external storage, and a humanoid vessel was born. It didn't take much to make it mine. Goes without saying, if mana runs out, the table's going to pull the body back – not a pleasant thought, but hey, at least I get to experience what life is outside of my core."

Guilt, or perhaps sympathy, a shallow line of indecision, 'the expression Yui gave, it's neither joy nor is it regret – she's made peace with the eventual death. She has that expression... what is that expression?' a flicker, 'the mortality of the temporal host, to know one's limit makes one adjust. She's taking everything in stride, she's... she's-'

"Master?" her big eyes widened caringly, "-are you okay?"

"-Like a human."

"I beg your pardon."

"The expression on your face reminds me of humans who've lived fulfilling lives taking their last breaths. It is a pleasant look, I must say."

She tightened her lips and squinted, '-human.'

"I didn't mean offense," and so, with a tap on her shoulders, "-enough jest. I need to know what you've learned."

Gears switched, *clap,* the table radiated a holographic display, "-by your order, master, I investigated Satan and Leviathan's realm. I detected fragments of her mana in Satan's realm... such is the location I reported before. Leviathan's realm, well, I traced and found nothing. I dug deep and poured heart and mind into the detection abilities – nothing. Leviathan also, I didn't notice his presence, and weirdly, master, Leviathan's realm seems empty. I went back to Satan's and him too, there was nothing."

"No men in the realm means one thing," said a figure leaning against the doorway, "-battle."

"Battle?" Igna looked at Origin.

Origin answered the ponderous gaze, "-it is custom for the Kings' of Hell to empty their realm before heading to war. It's part of the edict issued by the Council. To leave one's people behind is akin to leaving one's child when going to work. It was issued long ago, at a time when a town was massacred by angels. The council forced the decision, and the kings agreed on one condition," he walked up to the table and dialed a location, "-that the people's safeguard will be overseen by the Council," the new map flashed suddenly with countless red dots, "-see."

"They've gone to war, against who?"

Origin breathed slowly, "-Igna," he tightened his expression, "-if you don't know the answer, who else will?"

"Do you?"

"Yeah, I have an idea. I promised I wouldn't get involved. Victory or defeat, I vowed to accept the outcome," he tipped his head, "-Adjudicator, thee must think. What is the purpose of today's battle."

Igna sat facing the various maps – a live feed of Ragno was shown as well, ‘-what am I overlooking? Did my vision stay? Have I lost sight of the plot? Think, Igna, think...’

“Master, you got a message.”

“Pass it.” The interface glowed, “-lady Lilith and Teresa demand an audience.” He rose, “-duty calls. Leave our channel open, Yui. Keep the updates regular. Alert me once the undead army meets with the main force.”

Another slit, another dimension, ‘-the throne room?’ he walked out to Lilith standing beside Teresa, ‘-put together, they look like mother and daughter,’ he sat upon the throne after a few steps, “-Lilith, Teresa.”

“Igna,” Lilith spoke first, “-I have a request.”

“Lilith,” he narrowed, “-I asked you to knock out her soul, and I remember you reporting the success. What happened?”

“You see,” her memories rushed, “-after I stabbed and knocked out her soul, a part of me suddenly grieved. The pain was unmistakable... the feeling of abandonment, the feeling of loss. I couldn’t bear the sign of my daughter turning pale and having her life turned to shreds. I want you to reconsider... don’t make her- if she takes on the burden of Lucifer, I doubt she’ll be of any use.”

“...”

“Master,” Teresa knelt, her clothes yet stained by her blood, “-mother revived me shortly after. I didn’t know what to think or say... she apologized and asked me what I wanted. I said I’d reveal my will before my master...” she glanced upward, “-since day one, my priority has been power and influence,” a damned expression of lust and pleasure grabbed and pulled her cheek, a demented smile surfaced, a shade of filth and muck, her true self, “-didn’t care if I had to sleep with my father or my own brothers. I didn’t mind sharing my blanket with generals, I pulled every string I could to get sent here. I knew you’d find the truth, I was reliant on that,” she tilted her head, “-and would you know, you broke the shackles binding me to my father. Releasing my true emotions – for that, I am most grateful,” she snapped, and a translucent contract appeared, “-are you shocked?” she chuckled, “-this is the contract we signed when I offered my body and soul. Guess what,” *snap,* “-these things do not take effect-”

“-lest the Oath is recognized,” he finished her sentence, the contract burnt and crumbled into ash, “-you really think I didn’t know?”

Her jaws dropped, ‘-the contract is void, why is he acting so confident?’

“You used the sigil of Moon, the only entity able to void contracts as they come, the Daeirq Empress of Luna.”

“Contracts are forged to never be destroyed. For love, the Goddess of Stars, Syhton, betrayed her promise to Death and begot the title of Daeirq Empress of Luna, forever binding her to the moon and quelling her shine. Since then, her powers are associated with erasure, the voiding of agreements. Do you know how much I had to pull before getting my hand on that fucking sigil?” she gasped, “-oh brother, so much entertainment,” giggles pulsed at short bursts, “-I got one over the devil,” a mangled stare rose at Igna, “-TIS NO SIN FOOLING THE DEVIL!”

STAB, Lilith fell on one knee, blood dripped, “-how could you?”

“It’s because of you,” Teresa released the dagger, of which the red pommel glowed the faint symbol of death, “-god slayer,” she turned to Igna, “-the enchanted dagger given to me by Death himself. It’s strange, never expected death to look so, how do I put it, nerdy?” she strode with grandeur, ‘-I did it, I killed Lilith and put one over on Igna. Father will be pleased. If only I could take the head of Sathanas, it would make this revenge so much sweeter,’ Igna showed no expression, he remained calm on the throne, the presence bigger than before, “-DIRECTOR!”

“Teresa, you poor child,” he lit a cigarette and snapped, the throne hall dimmed, darkness swallowed the edges and greatly reduced the apparent size of the area. The white fire sparked, the ambers of the void flame swayed, “-foolish child. I can respect the brazen attitude. You did good, using the Sigil of Luna, forging a contract, and answering the enemy with compassion and empathy. You had us fooled, that much I can say for sure,” he puffed, “-especially Lilith. She was fooled the moment I said you were her daughter. Well, you are her daughter, can’t beat maternal instinct,” he stared Lilith’s lowered gaze, “-raise your head, Lilith. See, what did I tell you.”

“Suppose you were right,” she casually removed the dagger and flicked it at Teresa’s feet. The Death curse vanished, leaving the lass’s heart beating out her chest, “-you have questions, let me set you straight,” the tone lowered, “-by order of our contract, prostrate thineself.”

“-HA-HA, the contract’s void, you dum-” a powerful energy pulled and forced her head into the ground, the pressure and sheer magnitude had her bones shacking, “-h-h-how.”

“You’re a million years too small to scheme. You can’t compare to the ploys I’ve faced during my life. Teresa, let me set you straight. The dagger, tis nothing more than a weapon I used back in the day. It was lost, and honestly, even if the weapon had been better, Lilith wouldn’t have felt a thing.”

“She fell-”

“She fell with shock. I won our bet – she’s angrier about money than you, girly,” a sick to her pride, “-as for the contract, tis even simpler. Daeirq Empress of Luna, Syhton, is, my wife. As such, I have authority over her power as she does on part of mine. I also forgot to mention, my real title, if to be used properly is, Heir to Death, Inheritor of Time and Origin, Watcher of the Shadow Realm, Igna Haggard, else simply known as the Devil or Adjudicator in recent times.”

Chapter 1120 Battle of the Academies [8]

“Am I supposed to be scared?”

“Not really,” he puffed, “-what you do is your business. I’m but a whimsical man who sees life for what it is,” an unsympathetic look landed upon her complex expression, “-and yours, at the moment, means nothing.”

‘Wait a minute,’ something felt wrong, ‘-did I miss what he said?’ a deep thunder rocked her core, the sensation resounded throughout her bones to skin, “-did you say married to Luna?”

“You heard correctly,” he flicked the cigarette, it bounced and rolled to her feet. She followed the object, and once she looked up, the throne waited empty, ‘-where did he?’ she glanced sideways, but nothing, the effort needed against the pressure imposed on her prostrated posture was tight. Despite

the predicament, a blindness of self-confidence, the lack of self-awareness triggered an illusionary state, in her, in her little world, the throne room was within her palm. It visualized as so, her pulling Igna's string from the distance – the power and comfort – a shuffle shattered much of what she saw.

"Behind," he said, pulling back her head, "-I must say, you created such an elaborate scheme. You don't realize the situation, get your head straight." Her bubble burst, leaving the grim reality at her feet, '-what is this... Lilith is alive... the contract's active, and my plan's foiled. Wasn't he fooled, did I not get one over the Devil?' a whisper in the depth, a disembodied sneer, '-unworthy,' it said slowly, '-unworthy rat.'

"Reality is a hard pill to swallow, isn't it, Teresa? The dagger, well, foolish child, it belongs to a pseudo-death reaper."

"No," she fought the grip, "-lady Undrar gave me that dagger," only to be pulled back into his grasp, "-I refuse to believe it's a fake-"

'Lady Undrar?' he briefly paused, '-she joined the Heavenly Council?'

"My master," a roar came at the behest of a short slam, "-the army approaches. We await your orders, my master."

.....

"Very well," he released his hold and looked at Lilith, "-do you see?"

"I get it," her wounds healed, "-she played a game with my heart. No matter what happens, Teresa is my daughter, I won't let her be destroyed, you understand-" resolve and tremendous strength swept the hall. Distant rumbles reverberated the advent of war.

"A mother's resolve," he walked in front of the prostrated Teresa and lifted her chin, "-listen here, you have two options. Return to the battlefield and face the destiny of those who'd forsake their sanity or, join me, rather, join her."

'I have a chance, an opportunity to fight alongside father's troops. I won't bow down to him, not after my humiliation,' her features strengthened, her lips sharpened, her knitted brow and a straight line across her mouth, "-I WILL NEVER!"

"Doesn't really matter," he smiled. Like blowing a candle, he so effortlessly snuffed her only hope, the chance for her retribution, "-accord to this contract," the ashes of her defiance reappeared, "-you belong to me. As such, all of you, including the soul and that wretched personality, is mine to command. Did you think you had a chance?" he laughed, "-there's no help. Neither doth thee hath strength, nor support."

He stood, "-Lilith, I accept her as your daughter. However, for her to be useful, she will need to face the truth," he stopped, an eminent air of terror gripped her resolve, "-she will answer for Sathanas," without another breath taken, he grabbed and dragged her by her hair, "-Lilith, I promise she will return to you as your daughter. However, I must do my part, and that is, to welcome this brat into our family."

The scene for war was set. Darkened clouds built a somber skyscape. Lightning crackled in the distance – war cry and the clashing of swords, the explosion of magic, and the deathly howl of the deceased.

"War," he stood on the half-pyramid, "-it's always a lovely sight."

“A lovely sight?”

“Yeah,” he turned facing the Juries, “-Asmodeus, Mammon, Beelzebub, and Vanesa. Today’s the day, I’ve had an itch ever since coming to Ragno. The air severely lacks the aroma of death,” he rose his arms, a massive explosion rattled, shockwaves blew soldiers and tipped trees, “-the moment I’ve longed has arrived,” the shadow army mobilized below them – armed with firearms and modern ways of battle, the fear of death set by their exploits would soon fell what most considered an unbeatable force of nature.

“Master,” Vengeance reappeared with Emmie in tow, “-here is the traitor,” he threw her on the blood-soaked ground. An advance camp was reinforced, and here, Igna took his place beside Fenrir and Elize as an observer.

“Emmie Hems.”

“Director-” she gulped, “-what is the meaning of this?”

“I will spare you the details. Emmie Hems, tell me, what side does thee answer to?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she smirked, the dirt added a sincerer feel to the otherwise mundane expression, “-the victorious ones.”

“Well,” he threw a gun at her feet, “-one shot and two choices. Will you, take our side, or take down the life of the enemy’s commander.”

She took a moment, checking the room and pressing her sides, “-I choose the path of neutrality. I don’t care about who wins. Long as I have my job, I don’t really care.”

“Suppose that is true,” the gun returned, “-you’ll be placed under watch until the battle ends. Is that clear?”

“What about Skeptor, he’s the mastermind-’

“Speak, when you’re spoken to. Take her away.”

Minutes turned hours, the battle fluctuated, and there was no telling of what could happen. Henry Grant, a normal fellow with big muscles and a strong face, was a few miles out from the main battle. Two outposts were built opposite each other, one emblem, Satan, and the other Leviathan. Messengers reported at equal measure. A sudden notice had each general run for the other’s input.

“Cleopatra’s gone.”

“Lady Teresa was spotted.”

They left their tents simultaneously, only to spot the other, both hailed. Soon, a common area was set, “-Henry, did you get the news?” Zalem inquired from beneath the mask of alienhood. Between the tentacles and slimy outlook, the main question went as follows, ‘-how does he speak?’

Henry eventually broke his silence and said, “-yes?”

“Henry.”

“My bad, Zalem. Your face is always off-putting.”

“Say what you really mean.”

“How do you talk?”

“Sigh,”

“Did you say sigh?”

“Are you done?”

“My bad,” he gathered himself, “-Cleopatra is gone.”

“Lady Teresa was spotted,” they each waited, “-seems our priorities are different,” Henry continued, “-Cleopatra’s forces were impaled. The first battle came from her men turning undead. They have a powerful necromancer in their ranks – to raise thousands of men, strong men, in such a short instant, requires mana we both don’t possess. Zalem, we should join forces.”

“No, I think the best course is to split our forces,” no signs of how he meant the phrase – no face to judge the intent or context, Henry waited for the elaboration, “-Leviathan’s forces work best alone. You should combine with Viantnah’s forces.”

“Don’t mock me. I don’t need the help of students to fight our battles. Besides, there are secrets even Satan’s army ought to keep.”

“Are we in agreement?”

“Sure.”

Certain victory, ignorance of warning signs. Henry Grant’s forces were first in line – he carried his banner and ran through the meaningless skirmishes. ‘Such a Leviathan strategy, hang back and wait for their approach. Satan’s forces won’t be outdone by cowards. We have the blessing of Wrath – I won’t let them-’ they rode on lower demons, cutting down enemies as they passed, ‘-two-thousand should be more than enough to take over their outpost,’ the noise died down, the forest’ trail tightened – and distant to the first outpost was yet a few kilometers away, “-this silence,” he slowed his troops, “-anything to report?”

“No, my lord,” said a scout, “-no traces of mana,”

“They’ve pushed back our forces,” he slowed the spirit, ‘-nothing to report?’ he looked at the scout, “-explain how two people are approaching?” the army tightened their formation around the General, “-who goes there.”

Mammon strode with hands in his pocket whilst Vanesa skipped, “-civilians?” Henry narrowed. The duo halted a couple of meters away, “-not civilians.”

Bring forth the malady of the ages, “-my lord, the girl’s chanting.”

“Put up the barrier,” he glanced, “-you two should leave. I will not hold back, even if we battle two against two thousand.”

-limit their mana, purge their morale, and deliver the greatest sufferance, spell name, too lazy to decide. Vanesa's dark green hair levitated, a pulse of dense energy rocked the troops, the ground cracked, and green mist emanated, "-sleep," she yawned, "-Mammon, finish please."

"WHAT IS THIS FILTH?" the well-arranged formation broke, "-GENERAL, OUR MEN ARE FALLING," anguished screams thundered, there was no halting the disorder.

"WHAT DID YOU DO!"

"Nothing important," Mammon returned, "-she just put them to sleep. Nothing to be worried about," he shrugged and raised his hands, "-FIRE!" gunshots, devastation, and death.

'What is this?' he looked at his army with fear, '-Satan's protection's not working?' he turned to the duo, '-who are the-' and then, a memory came, "-the one with a cold visage, the one who speaks rarely. That mark under your neck... a prince of Hell."

"Correct," he snapped, a massive beam of blue shot to the skies, the sheer voracity left naught. Zalem watched, "-Henry's forces have fallen. Men, we're launching a full-scale retreat."

"-MY LORD."

"No arguments," he looked at the map, '-the topography isn't advantageous. If only I'd gotten this information before he ran to save Cleopatra. What an idiot. Henry, the sacrifice won't be forgotten.'

Shrieks of despair and plea for mercy, '-how could I have lost?' the murky ground, the deafening sound of strange weapons... "-Henry Grant," dust settled – bones and ash remained, "-general of Satan's army," another pair of footsteps approached, "-how does it feel?"

"To lose?" he coughed and clambered, standing over a massacre of at least two thousand, "-feels right," he smiled, "-Igna Haggard, I presume?"

'He's calm,' came a strange observation, '-like Teresa when I revealed the truth. These people are strange for their kind.'

"Yes."

"Did I walk into your ambush or have you walked into mine?" he cackled, "-lord Igna, there are a few things thee must learn," the dead rose – flesh formed, muscles rebuilt.

"Tome of Venera."

"Excellently spotted," Henry clapped.

"Congratulations, you've gotten one on me."

"I must confess, I didn't expect them."

"Who?"

"The princes of Hell. I know their strengths all too well, judging by our own mistress, she's second to our father and far superior to even I. Too bad, their greatest strength is also the greatest flaw."

"Dependency, yes?"

“Again, I’m impressed by the foresight, Devil.”

“It shouldn’t be taken for granted – I mean, information is a war.”

Heh, “-Igna Haggard. You have two choices. Surrender or we’ll kill Sathanas.”

“Excuse me?”

“You didn’t know?” he smugly pointed at the revived army, “-Venera, the connection, Artanos?”

“Wai-”

“You’ve realized it, haven’t you?” he chuckled, “-the name’s Henry,” he tore his flesh, “-and I serve the god of wisdom, Artanos,” yellow shrouded in black, “-as we speak, Igna, my lord’s in Draebala taking over your strongholds. You’ve walked into his trap, it’s over.”

Bang, Henry fell, ‘-Draebala,’ he held Tharis, “-Mammon, Vanesa, return to the outpost. Tell Lilith to evacuate. This battle is over.”

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“What do you mean, father?”

“We’ve lost,” he gritted, ‘-I was focused on this battle, I didn’t realize Artanos’ real intent. I was certain he wanted the secrets held by Ereena... think back, Igna, think, was there any tell... the schemes, Teresa, Satan, the advent of war... hold on. To mobilize an army of twenty-thousand to siege Ragno – the numbers too small... Artanos... the fucker controlled the narrative. I was dancing to his tune,’ he tightened his grip around Tharis, ‘-I’m outclassed once again,’ he exhaled, ‘-tome of Venera, fighting an immortal army so that I don’t stray from Ragno...’ a voice spoke from within, “-CLEOPATRA!”