

Death Magic 891

Chapter 891: “-who are you, the devil?”

“Lord Gustv,” hurried the worried speaker, “-please, return behind the curtains.”

“No,” he crawled from what seemed to be a cozy hole in a swimming motion, setting sun’s hue hit the man’s vibrant red hair into a reddish-orange. He stood, shy a few inches off the railing, arms in the air and stress on the face, “-who are you, the devil?”

“Doth thee wish for mine true title?”

“...”

“Then, no can do,” he smiled, “-your guardian deity, your founder, the daughter of Rah, Intherna – is very much present. Her strength grows on each day spent in a realm of true power.”

“Lord Igna,” said the hectic fellow, “-I need to know,” he leaned, “-I want to know more about my legacy.”

“Then,” the kept smile kindled, “-council of wisemen. What is thy decision on the way Marinda should move forward?” he glanced to the side, located a cloaked figure, and pointed, “-you, I smell of the blood of Xinfé from here,” he laughed, “-did thee run for the council as to halt thy end?” the hoodie pulled and from within came a beautifully dressed lady – her hair was blue as the ocean, the eyes, lighter in hue, added texture to her sharp jaw and rounded nose, she gritted, the dimples added a hint of maturity, “-why must you interfere,” she vaulted over the railing, climbed the throne and leaned with an arm on her waist and another in a stern finger, “-will the end of Marinda suffice thy lust?”

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“Though I appreciate a strong will woman,” he glared and pushed, her body flung across and crashed onto the first curtained seat, “-I very much disapprove of those who willingly display disrespect,” the crowd gawked in awe, there laid a sudden pressure drop.

“Lord Igna,” motioned the speaker, fear overlapped his visage, “-the lady is the daughter of island’s guardian,” as he said so, her blue-ocean hair cracked into splashes of water, her wounds healed and took another step, the water gathered at her feet and channeled into raw essence.

“Father is going to be angry,” she smiled.

“You were set up,” fired Gustv, “-Lord Igna, run!” he brazenly announced, the crowd, on another look, were gone. A gust blew, exposed the remainder seats, and inside were none but emptiness. A greater aura of doom hovered behind; a pillar of water lain with rock fragments spiraled.

“So much for being smart,” snickered the lady, “-I won’t stand by and allow you to hurt my love’s family. I will save the Xinfé name and prove my love to Djen.”

“Deary me,” he listlessly rose from the seat and turned, wings sprouted – the throne shattered, and he hovered to a land. A vague outline stood before a growing tornado reaching the skies, lightning echoed.

“Cthulhu,” he walked nonchalantly, “-listen here, it’s me,” the bicolored pupils turned purple, “-doth thee wish to be starved for the rest of thine life or answer to that brat’s whim?” the tornado dried, the sky cleared instantly – as for the outline, it took on a more recognizable appearance – long hair grew from the head of a beautiful man/woman, there was no telling for it held no similarities to either sex or known races.

“I-Igna,” it stuttered and walked – leaving behind muddy footsteps, “-helloooo,” the tone dipped throughout the greeting.

“Not much control over the body,” he opened his arm invitingly, “-come ‘ere.” They locked in a tight embrace, “-good on you to show up. Tell me, friend, what happened?”

“My d-da-daughter, help?”

“You mean her?” he threw a thumb over the shoulder, “-don’t worry, she’s strong, she’s your daughter. I guess I might have pushed her a little hard.”

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“Igna hurt my family?”

“No, it’s called a love tap,” he smiled, “-come on, buddy, would you fight me?” the purple regard pulsed, “-you know as well as I do if we were to fight earnestly, stability of the worlds may be jeopardized.”

The still na?ve Cthulhu, unassuming to the world’s ways, blinked emotionlessly, “-no more hurting my daughter?”

“If she gets in my way, then I might hurt her, just a little?”

“Okay,” he nodded, “-just a little, don’t hurt her too much.”

“I won’t,” they laughed. “-Head on home,” said Igna wrapping his arm around the guardian deity, “-listen, Celestials tried to use your daughter to manipulate you into killing me. Be wary about them,” he warned, “-get used to the body and learn to speak properly. There may come a time where we face a combined army – when that day comes, I’ll need you by my side, friend.”

“Understood,” he said, “-I will be ready,” they shook hands and the spirit dissolved into a puddle. Igna spun on his heels and glanced at the daughter, “-father will be angry?” he returned in jest, “-don’t be a fool.”

She ran from the elevated seats and dropped shy of the arena, her hands and legs tied by white-glowing elemental chains bound to the arena wall, “-father didn’t-”

“Why would he kill the man who has kept him alive for all this time? Daughter for naught, thee didn’t realize how much pain he suffers on a daily. The tentacles are stretched from realm to realm, I don’t dare imagine the sufferance. To soothe his pain, I offered a little something I made, a painkiller, a drug,” he smirked, “-till the day arrives where the monster ought to be let loose from the shackles set by gods and demons alike, I’ll make sure he lives painlessly.”

Devasted, the lass lowered her head, the chains unbound and the arms dropped. Her soles turned to water, the body followed afterward; in the end, nothing save a puddle marked her appearance. Up the wall, a petrified speaker sat with rolled eyes and saliva down the chin.

“Lord Igna,” gasped Gustv, “-please, tell me more about Goddess Intherna, I want to know more, I need to know more!”

“Quit the begging,” he hailed the skies, a floating manor broke the clouds, rope ladders dropped – the shadows on the arena were frightening, “-climb,” he ordered, “- I have a few things I must settle.”

Night grew into a darker atmosphere. Inhabitants enjoyed warm meals beside a kindly lit lantern. Music performed live, lined the seats of a renowned and expensive pub, centered on the road leading to the castle. Located in the upper district, a place for the elite, separated by a drop in height(a sharp cliff) – they lived above the rest. Access was through lifts or escalators dug inside the precipice. The latter, outside, was carved expertly by craftsmen and bore various pieces, portraits, and family crests.

The musically inclined pub blitz the ballroom, couples, and younger folks, taken by the music and rhythm, lost themselves. Igna shortly appeared at the front door. The tunes muffled outside, ‘-clearer streets and beautiful buildings,’ he observed, ‘-guess I forgot to take in the scenery after the manor was built.’

Two guards with features to bears spoke with chest, “-who stands there?”

“The Devil,” said Igna leisurely taking steps. Shades covering the figure rose as he approached, “-good evening, gentlemen,” he charmingly said.

“Never seen you around here before,” added the stronger man.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” he reached down one hand and pulled the sleeve, “-here’s my symbol of power,” he showed the crests of Kronos, Nike, Origin, and Death, “-does this suffice?”

“A Celestial,” gulped the second, “-please, my lord, we’re happy to welcome.”

Igna took the first few steps, stopped at the middle, and scanned both, “-if I were you, I’d skip tonight,” gold coins summoned above the palm, “-here, tis a treat on me. Go enjoy the night, I heard the Ava brothel’s brought new ladies from the volcano,” the tone shadily lowered, “-I heard they’re celestials.”

“Celestials?” the noses sniffed as did the ears, “-with pleasure,” rage flashed the corner of the fierce socket, “-let’s go, we ought to teach ’em who’s boss.”

“Right with you.”

‘Temptation,’ he stopped at the handle, ‘-I think I’m truly becoming the devil?’ the straight-face greatened in a smile, ‘-so much for staying away from religious texts. Well,’ he pushed, a blast of sweat, fun, and booze sprinted outside.

At the bar, kept deeper into the pub, sat two men, “-our family’s going to die.”

“Don’t be pessimistic. We lost the battle, not war. I made sure the wisemen knew who I represented. That imbecile brat of mine is set on pursuing those miscreants from Danio. He has a living demi-goddess

vowing for his affection, they marry and we'll easily shoot through the ranks. The imbecile doesn't understand."

"But Uncle, why not force the marriage?"

"We can't. It'll be in bad faith, word spreads quickly."

"What about the devil, he'll come to collect?"

"No, I don't think he'll survive the meeting," the empty seat suddenly held a patron, "-I made a promise to her. If she succeeds, Djen's hand will be hers. I don't care about him anymore, the Xiefe familia will rise from the ashes again, and I'll make sure Marinda knows who they're facing."

"Good idea," added the new patron. The disheveled head of Xiefe turned with a smile, "-see, someone else agrees, "-get him an ale on me."

"-my, Lord Fife, thou art much a sponge for ale."

"By god," the drunken stupor vanished, "-you're him..."

"In the flesh," he rose the mug, "-and I very much appreciate the drink," turned to the side, "-shall we discuss business, my lord?" Fife looked sideways, the feet and hands itched for action, "-don't think of running," a string rose from the floor and tied around the lord's feet, "-one move and I'll take the leg. Refuse and I'll take your life," he bolted forth, millimeters from the forehead, "-and thy soul if tis needed."

"Okay, okay, I yield. What do you want, Lord Igna."

"Good," the tone turned friendly, "-a few drinks here," he ordered.

Time passed in haunting silence. Igna drank with back against the bar counter and face on the dancing crowd, "-look at them," he said after a few minutes, "-enjoying their time, just like us, wouldn't you say?"

"..." nothing but fear, the duo drank, the expression laid on the verge of crying. "Tough crowd," he sipped, "-Lord Fife, as you know, the army, the air supremacy tied to the Xiefe Familia has been smothered and crushed. The outcomes are the same save a little change in plans. Instead of taking the family's crest, I want the leadership to be swapped over to the young Djen. He will lead the family hereon. I'm sure you know," the string turned snake and bite, "-I've injected a poison. It won't kill, but it'll certainly make you feel like you were dead. Long as my orders are obeyed, you'll be free to live a relatively peaceful life, that much is my promise. All your resources, political contacts, and favors will be mine – in other words, you're mine, I own you."

"If I refuse?"

"Let's see," he looked around, "-there, that's your niece," he rose a hand, "-she's pretty, and has a good future ahead of her. God forbid," at that instant, a decorative piece from the ceiling dropped and sliced her cheeks, the music cut and the crowd panicked, "-if something were to happen to her," the nephew ran into the crowd after his sister. "-Today it's a few inches away, tomorrow, or the day after, one by one, I'll make certain the family falls slowly and painfully. The hate of the natives, they love the see Celestial's crash and burn. Imagine her, the pretty face, in a brothel at the edge of town – ravaged by

monsters, tortured for pleasure, and stoned for being part of your family. Sickening, isn't it?" he sipped, "-well, dear 'ol Fife, tis what lies in the future."

"Fine... I'll do what you want."

"Good, first order of business," he leaned onto the counter and looked at one of the private rooms, "-inside there sits the general of the Danio familia," a weapon summoned above Fife's thighs, "-take that, go in there, and shoot."

"K-K-Kill a-a m-man?"

"Yeah," he cheered, "-onward to Death."

Chapter 892: The other side

Trigger, a boom in the distance – already panicked dancehall cried. General of the Danio family stumbled into the main area, past the counter towards the strained crowd. Nephew, brother to the injured sister, harshly made the voice heard, "-give her space," he said. Underneath the silence, the footsteps of a drunk stumbled onto the actual dancefloor. Sweat, spilled drinks and the stench of compact areas lined ground. '-my head', hands on the forehead, blood dripped mildly down the waist. He rose his shirt to a bug bite, "-h-h-help," rashes took the cheeks and chest, he cried in pain and fell, the body wailed in sheer agony.

"Hey, calm down!" interjected cautious bystanders, few ran to his side

"Keep him to the ground!" they ordered, time ticked – Lord Fife exited the private quarters – fingers trembled, he inched with a traumatized look.

'What have I done?' he watched his bloodless hands. Harrowing death cries spiraled in on the dancefloor. Owner of the pub arrived in stride, "-I've called for the doctors," he said and ran to the injured parties.

"How dare you!" fired the angered crowd, "-we dance under the threat of death?" many looked above, "-decorations fell and nearly killed one of the patrons!"

A somber figure latched around Fife's shoulder, "-such is the pleasant melody of death and suffering. Hear, observe, and breathe," whispered Igna, "-take in the lasting sentiment the man ought to ever feel. Watch as he breathes the last breath and imagine your crew, the proud air fleet of Xilfe falling to the volcano – many burnt alive. Those who died instantly were blessed, alas, many suffered," the shadow took a step into the man's field of vision, "-and sadly, for them," he said, "-there was no heaven or hell for the lasting trauma shan't leave," hands in the pocket, Igna shuffled around the crowd and stepped outside.

'I need to know,' a haunting pain in the chest had Fife sprint after Igna, "-DEVIL!" he cried into the dark street. The looming figure waited beside the door; smoke puffed from a cigar.

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"I need to know," the broken man jumped, roughly landed, the ankle turned harshly, yet, he clinched and hurried, "-I need to know, I need to know," he gasped, "-I need to know."

“Know what?” returned a thick puff.

“Will killing more people make this feeling go away?” he sniffled, “-I d-don’t I c-can’t.”

“You’ve killed kin, a celestial. Someone who lived the same as you. I’m afraid, Lord Fife, what thee feels is guilt, tis thy conscience speaking. Pay heed for it never leaves – the guilt is such that one must learn to live with it. If thee wishes for an easy solution – tie a noose round thy head and bid the world adieu. I will be back,” he pushed against the wall and stood, “-and when I return, I shall collect.”

Later said night, the General of the Danio familia was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospice. Doctors and scholars were stunned; the cause looked similar to the plague of the monster curse. Shortly past midnight rang from an elaborate cuckoo clock. The study tightened – a single door and shut blinders. Books disarranged upon tables and couches.

Tania, back from the vacation, sat on a rocking chair with knees to her head. She bobbed and hauntingly watched the guest. Strong footsteps occasionally wandered outside. ‘-Been a few hours,’ gulped Gustv, ‘-and this little girl doesn’t break eye contact. What sort of place is this...’ Firmer clops broke through the mesmerizingly looped sounds. Igna climbed the stairs, took a sharp right for the study, and entered, “-my, Tania,” the doors shut, coat upon a hangar, Igna gave the guest a once over, “-how long?”

“Since he arrived,” she said and eventually broke the scary posture, “-master, you always said to be wary of strangers.”

“And I said to keep a distance to those whomst thee have no information about. The poor guests on the verge of breaking down,” he passed Gustv and nodded, “-my apologies,” and arrived at Tania. “-It’s late, head to bed,” sweets manifested from the empty palm, “-there, a little bribe.”

“This is too little,” she narrowed, “-I need at least twice as much.”

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“How about this, you take twice and forget about breakfast tomorrow. Little scoundrel,” he messed her hair, “-no swindling your teacher.”

“I have leverage!” she rose her tiny fist, “-I have reports from the scouting unit.”

“And I must ask, where, when, and why did you procure these reports?”

“Earlier today, when I saw you tell him to get on board. Teacher never brings guests. I ran over to the guards, asked for the report, and said you sent me,” she smugly grinned, “-I’m an apprentice to the best,” she winked.

“Good,” instead of twice, Igna summoned an entire backpack, “-very impressive. Here is the reward, there’s gold coin – use them towards the search. Leave the report at my office on the way down.”

“Understood,” arms through the shoulder straps, “-later, teach.”

“Right,” he waved, leaving the guest stumped for words.

“By the curious look, have something to ask, Gustv?” he settled on the opposite seat, opened a bottle of liquor, and poured a drink, “-would you like some?” he checked the table, “-I suppose not, else the servants would have served already. Would you like some now though?”

“No, I’m not much a drinker,” he returned, “-and yes... the girl, Tania, she outsmarted and...”

“Oh, that,” he leaned and sipped, “-tis part of her training. I encourage intrigue at a young age, the earlier they learn how to plan, act, discover, and overturn situations, the better. Strength isn’t solely about forcing one’s head through the door. Sometime, the passive and attentive approach is necessary. Example, you and I,” he smiled, “-I have what you want, and you have what I need. Henceforth, shall we get to the negotiations?”

“Negotiations?”

“Yes,” the fellow held quite the array of extreme expression. Igna fondly observed, for one reason or another, Igna’s glasses were very intimidating, and to a fellow named ‘wiseman’ responsibility for the relatively small shoulder was quite a load, “-you want to learn about Intherna, the information doesn’t come cheap.”

“First, I need to examine the blessing...”

“Sure,” Igna waved, an image of Intherna’s crest hovered to the guest. Pupils reflected the symbol immaculately, “-take in the image. Tis rare to see and hear from Alterian Goddesses.”

“Alterian gods... Lord Igna, you know about them?”

“Yes, and I doubt few know and much less believe in the Alterians. The upper realm beyond mortality ranges from; angel, demi-god, God, low-tier, mid-tier, high-tier, and lastly supreme god. The Alterian gods are those chosen divine with the potential to occupy the seat of the supreme god. Rah, in many religions, is believed to be the supreme god. Naturally, belief and faith play a major part in a god’s abilities. Intherna, daughter to Rah, is also revered by her people, and similarly to her father, she can also occupy the seat of supreme being once certain conditions have been met. Hence, the title of Alterian – a play on ‘Alternate’. How about it,” another sip, another stare,” -does my credibility add?”

The eyes closed, “-perhaps I’ll take one of the offered drinks,” guard lowered. “Intherna’s familia, or the bloodline of Rah...” he horned on the drink, “-because of status amassed by our gods – we’re thought as elites. I don’t have a single idea about who I am, what I am, and what is it am supposed to be doing. My job’s to sit in the arena and pretend to care about what happens. Look at me, I’m a young adult, a celestial. Many in my friend group live better lives in a world far better and greater than this sham of a paradise.”

“You know of the outside world?”

“Obviously,” he pulled a smartphone, “-with good connections, one can easily acquire goods from the outside world. It’s not like we’re bound to this place... I have an aunt living in Hidros, here,” he tapped and pulled on her profile, “-she’s quite the looker. Anyway, kids my age are out there having fun, and I’m here learning about my family’s history. Because of this,” he lowered his neck collar, “-lady Intherna’s mark, I was deemed special.”

“Hold a moment,” paused Igna, “-boy, Gustv, the way you speak is very nostalgic.”

“Yeah, I lived most of my childhood in Hidros, I qualified to enter a magical academy... life was fine, and then, family responsibilities pulled me into Marinda. It’s a misconception that Celestials do not travel, everyone does – tis very rare and many opt to keep the voyage undercover. Fundamentalists don’t take favorably to breaking custom. Why is it you think the bloodlines haven’t united to fight the devil?” Simple, factions are wanting to break from the mundane olden ways. Revolution is out of the picture, Celestials are immortals – the leaders who’ve locked shackles, ‘-retired,’ so says the rumors; are deeply imbedded into politics.”

“The narrative changes,” said Igna, “-right,” he stood, “-take your coat, and hurdle up. I’m taking you on a trip to meet a very special person.” A few minutes passed, Rosespire II climbed ever so higher. Gustv and Igna waited outside, the cold stabbed.

On my title of Watcher, I call upon the powers of the Shadow Realm, unshackle the binds, lift the cloud and open the portal, a mischievous glance at Gustv, “-better hang tight.’

“Pardon?”

A harsh tunnel swept both off their feet, time flashed, and soon spat the duo on a lush hill under a big tree, “-my head,” he winched by the stump, “-where are we?” Sun rose on the horizon, a gentle color of peace, a relaxing breeze, and the sensation of endless possibilities. Gustv walked out into the open to an amazing sight – flying beasts carried parcels and people, they dodged airships above of which flew commercial planes, “-wherein the hell are we?” he asked again, “-this isn’t-”

“Not our world?” added Igna, “-true, tis, not the overworld, we’re in the Shadow Realm,” hands in the pocket, he snuffled down the hill, “-come on, follow,” they walked side-by-side. Maids and butlers nodded as Igna passed, so did guards and occasional nobly dressed personages.

One of the great halls thundered, “-By whose authority did you allow coffee to be served with milk?”

“Milk and coffee are the best things ever!”

“No, it isn’t. Are you stupid? How can one’s sense of taste be so out of reality.”

A humble trader blinked, “-wasting precious beans on the juices out a Judath cow. Who in the right mind enjoys the produce those monstrosities make?”

“Take that back!”

“No,” aura against aura, the bursts arrived in waves. Gustv forcibly looked away per the stinging sensation. Fiery red and inky black hair, “-some things never change.”

The trader, short and on hoofs, trembled at the argument, “-on lady Lilith, what am I supposed to do?” therein, an equally oppressive aura passed. The trader looked up and saw Igna, who casually nodded and entered the battlefield. Gustv stopped beside the trader, both of whom exchanged courteous smiles.

“This is the last time!”

“Every time is the last to you,” screeched across, spells conjured, a fireball against a void orb, they threw with perfect form, Igna teleported in the middle and held his arms in opposing directions. They escaped

his reach, he dipped and clapped, “-HOLY!” life flashed before his eyes, “-Gophy, Intherna,” the smoke settled, “-who in the right mind uses that amount of power in a simple spell?”

The argument stopped – lashes fluttered at him, “-Igna,” leaped Intherna who suddenly flashed and close lined him into a tight embrace “-it’s been a long while.”

“Welcome back,” returned the more eloquent Gophy, her beautiful long hair swayed, “-you’ve grown stupider. Who in their right mind leaps into a battle between high-tier goddesses?”

“And who in the hell uses that amount of power in a simple spell?”

Intherna smiled and took the remark as a compliment, “-well, you know,” she smugly grinned, “-we do. Besides, the spells would have canceled one another.”

Chapter 893: Side Track – Home

“Canceling and leave behind a massive hole in the ceiling?” returned the flushed Igna.

“I mean,” added Gophy, “-not big a loss?” she stared at the ceiling where once laid beautiful works of arts – a dome roof taken by cracks, smolders of ash, and burnt marks. By the time he decided to follow the stare, Intherna quickly pulled his elbow, “-what brings you home?” she asked, aura friendly and energy high.

“Brought a visitor,” he returned, the duo turned towards those in question.

Sight swapped for a watch-tower turned resting area on an eastern extension of the castle. The added wing had capacity for newer flying planes, beasts, and technology in-between. Take Marinda as a place of magical development and added the hardened facts of technology and industrial evolution, the end product; The Shadow Realm. Growth, unlike anything he’d seen before. The more time elapsed, the deeper a feeling of strangeness pulsed.

Sat two by two on the seats, butlers flooded the spiral stairs with drink and snack-filled trays. On the menu, her Gophy snarl and Intherna grin, laid coffee of a lighter color. “-is this the reason for the earlier argument?” Gophy, settled beside Igna, rose her fingers, and crossed her legs, she simply looked down her nose and sipped. Intherna sat to the right, rose her arm, and giggled.

“Yeah,” said her sudden rise in morale, “-milk from Judath cow is a delicacy, never mind the green color, think of it as herbal tea.”

“Yeah, green,” sighed Igna, he looked to Gophy who simply disregarded the struggle. Strange mug in hand, the bubbling concoction boomed – at a point, a visage through the amalgamation of the foams sneered. Faint prayer in mind, he gulped to a pleasant surprise, “-this is good.”

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“I know,” cheered Intherna, “-anyway,” she passed him and looked at Gophy, “-about earlier. I’ll ask the maids to keep the milk away from your precious beans.”

“No,” returned Gophy, “-suppose the milk is an acquired taste. Similar to dark chocolate. I’ll make an effort.”

“And I’ll try to enjoy the virgin broth.”

“All’s well that ends well?” said Igna inquisitively. The duo turned and smiled. By the respace of the peaceful world, a sense of completion cuddled the heart and soul. Two small figures summoned above his shoulders silently. They simply swayed and smiled, breathing in the atmosphere as did Igna.

“The guest,” inferred Intherna finishing her mug, “-what’s a stranger doing in the Shadow Realm? Is he a prisoner?” moment the words captive escaped her mouth, Gophy’s brows rose and long lashes fluttered.

Keep the lust in check,” said Igna finishing the drink, “-here,” he stood and moved to the edge of the watch-tower, there, leaned on the balustrade and faced the goddesses; the wind carried his long hair and rose part of the outfit, “-he, my dear friend, Intherna, is heir to thy bloodline.” Cue to lower the shirt, a very baffled and enchanted Gustv unbuttoned and displayed her mark – a perched phoenix, “-lady Intherna,” he said, “-my name’s Gustv, and I was born to the Rah family bloodline. I bear your symbol,” he said.

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Gophy rose her head above Intherna’s shoulders, “-looks authentic,” she whispered, “-assume you’ve had some fun in the mortal realm?”

“Don’t you start,” she returned, confused and albeit amazed, “-I haven’t visited the overworld in a long time. Last time I was there was when Staxius summoned, there’s also the time of incertitude after the death. I don’t remember, and I wouldn’t know,” she looked to Igna, “-what does it mean?”

“Your symbol,” he said, “-the boy has a few questions to the Rah family. It’ll be a great help if he knew where the legacy began. I mean, he is family, am I wrong?”

“My crest is the mark of my blessing,” she rose on her feet majestically, an implosion of power, grace, and godly aura washed her gestures, “-Gustv, childbearing my blessing, rise,” she opened her arms, “-and truly be part of my family.” A motherly warmth, way different from the scorching hotness associated with a Rah. He obeyed and accepted the embrace.

“Feels good,” said Igna, Gophy watched over the balustrade.

“She found a member of her family. Celestials,” she said thoughtfully, “-they’re very strange. The stage between mortality and immortality, I’d say a level shy below angel in raw abilities but blessed powers able to rival a demi-god, if not a god. All comes to the potency of their crest, blood, and pride in their name,” she examined the looming silence, “-what plans do you have for him?”

“Plans?” he turned, “-nothing great. The boy needed answers and I figured, why not.”

“éclair’s been worried, the world’s in utter chaos. Won’t you return?”

“No,” he said, “-I rather not interfere, not yet. éclair’s doing what needs to be done. Don’t forget, it was my closest allies who pulled the plug and fired a missile. I was assassinated by those closest to me. I know I can still trust them, however, another part of me says to be on edge.”

“Which part,” she knowingly looked at his shoulder, “-is it the Founder or the Cursed King, which part speaks?”

“Who knows,” he smiled, “-and who cares. Tis hard to say who I represent anymore,” one hand hauntingly rubbed against the other, “-a quest to find myself – what is it I represent, what is it I wish to do? I don’t know. Gophy, I had a sliver of what I can actually do, I had a taste of what lives within, and frankly,” he stared coldly into her ominously black pupils, “-I’m afraid of what could happen if the death element fully awakens. I felt the pulse, it reinvigorated my whole being – through it, I was able to change and truly utilize both Alfred and Staxius’s power,” the tinge of purple flashed across the bicolored pupils, “-as a watcher of the Shadow Realm, I’ve truly reached an unsurmountable pillar.”

“We know,” she added nonchalantly, “-we know and we’ve watched the journey. Igna, us guardian goddesses have always said one thing, we’re friends, and we’ll keep an eye until the day thee truly require our help. Trust when it comes, the whole universe, the legacy thee crafted in thy last life shall rush and destroy. Peace is good an all,” a somber cloud rose above her open palm, “-I like chaos, the population grows by the day, life expectancy is long – the cycle of rebirth and immortality is common knowledge. People who die are reawakened in another body and simply carry on their earlier life. A realm ruled by death and time is also unaffected by death and time.”

“From the days of barely affording means, stealing to feed Eira – we’ve sure come a long way,” a gust blasted the duo, “-it’s good,” he said, “-no matter what happens to me – the Shadow Realm will always exist as proof of what my soul accomplished. Alfred, Staxius, you’d be proud.” Therein, the figures sat over the shoulders turned into orbs, “-we’re proud,” they said and vanished.

“Was that?” blinked Gophy, “-them?”

“Alfred and Staxius,” he said, “-we’re one of the same.”

Discussion between Intherna and Gustv arrived at an end, marked by the slowing of speech. Gophy and Igna turned, “-I’m ready to go back,” said a cheerful Gustv.

“Good,” added Igna, “-suppose we ought to leave,” Intherna and Igna traded places, a beam of white snatched the duo – a faint trail of golden feathers floated. Intherna moved to where he stood and peered onto the view, Gophy closed the gap and held onto the railing.

“How does he look?” she asked with mild anxiety.

“Igna seems fine,” smiled Gophy, “-the transformation’s begun. Inheritance of Lucifer’s wings and faith endowed by the people, without a place to rest, has flooded into the Death Element. The dormant heart won’t beat, it can’t beat for there’s a massive hole preventing the production of mana. Instead, the flood rushes through the whole, heals the part of the destruction, and flowed directly into the Shadow Realm. There’s a brighter vibrance to the sun, the mana, and the spirits are fulfilled by the pure essence. He said something about the element pulsing.”

“That’ll be the absorption of soul,” said a blond-haired lady, “-every time he uses the element, restoration is shattered.”

“The day Lucifer’s wings overflow the element is the day the heir to death inherits the death element.”

“Doubtful, he’s cursed to never be a god. Instead,” she walked with high-heels and looked upon the same cityscape, “-Igna may just become a being who we’ve never seen before. Like Alfred, Igna’s a reject, flaws remain.”

“Purple,” added Gophy, “-I saw it. The powers of Alfred, it’s returned.”

“I know,” said Miira, “-and we’ve already seen it in action. Sen, God of Harvest, was pulled from the seat of godhood and forced to give a fragment of his element. By all means,” she said fearfully, “-if even he decides to fly into the heavens and wage war on the gods, there will be blood spilled, and I fail to see how they could win against him. An entity backed by the Shadow Realm and Alterian Gods. Time will tell,” she smiled, “-and we shall watch the growth.”

Lilith, straddled upon a dragon, halted to a stop beside the watchtower, “-there’s a festival in town,” she cried, “-let’s go. Saniata’s performing,” and there, the guardians paid visits into the capital-city where the populous sang and drank on celebration of a new-years for the nation of monsters.

Hurl, “-we arrived in style,” cringed Igna, “-too bad the trip takes a toll on the stomach.”

“My fine,” hurled the young fellow, “-give me a moment,” thick green mixture with morsels laid upon the yard. Hands in pockets, Igna walked into the manor, after whom Gustv followed.

Days turned weeks – as promised by Xinfé’s head, Lord Fife abdicated his position to the young Djen, a quiet ceremony whereby key members of the council watched and applauded the bold decision.

Yet another day rose over Rosesopian II – an armistice between Igna and belligerent familias, birthed by the fear of an epidemic, had the household relatively peaceful. The manor landed at the feet of the volcano, a place where the lesser celestial resided. Reports in hand, Igna exited the shadow of his cave(study) onto the clean wooden floor hallway, he walked straight towards the washroom, on way, Tania’s ajar room caught his attention, he glanced inside to see the lass on her knees before a painting of her brother. “-I will find you, brother,” said murmurs, “-and when the day comes, I’ll make them pay, and if I have to kill to get my word across, I will,” a nostalgic tenseness lingered.

He simply watched and continued the promenade. After the toilet, Igna found himself downstairs on the veranda sat beside a bottle of liquor and cigar, ‘Danio’s military was spotted around key areas near Orn,’ a crinkled map held marks and poor handwriting, ‘-to flee from Celestial’s torture, many parents are sending their children to Orn as to combat the cruelty of famine. The journeys are dangerous, many bodies are found mutilated. Those who make it to a certain area are escorted into the growing village. To stop Orn’s flourishment, lords of other villages have built checkpoints at key locations. Orn has the means to make good on items, the limiting factor is supply and raw material. Food’s not a problem, my grotto’s served a good purpose. What to do,” he drank and thought, “-can’t exactly mount an attack on the checkpoints.”

“Teach,” scurried young Tania, “-I’m ready for battle,” she said, “-let’s go!”

“Right, the battle,” he stood, flicked the cigar, and turned for the common area, there, grabbed his coat, armed guards rallied for a hearty salute. ‘Today’s battle is against a member of the Danio faction. She seems excited, long as her morale is high, we’ll be fine.’ They traveled by carriage on the rough path, the volcano growled – as for the air, warmer and harder to breathe. On arriving into town, the place wasn’t much to speak about – less effort and poor quality of building materials, everyone held strained expression. ‘-an arena built into the mountain.’

Chapter 894: Silent Tears

Sheltered underneath the colossal volcano, an inner town built on magic and the wisdom of the dwarves. A key difference between Arda and Marinda, dwarves here were tall, taller than average. Uninterested per the suffocating interior – Igna and young Tania were soon at the mercy of a battle arena. Banners advertised the battle – “-battle of the prodigies, will Tania’s knowledge suffice or will the Danio’s prodigy win against the odd. Come one, come all,” they shouted, “-to witness the battle of the ages.”

They walked through the main walkway. Scruffy, dirtied mineworkers, the townsfolk – casually wandered. Strained look which eased on seeing friends and family. A battle in town meant rest for the lucky few, and they, without questions asked, took the vacation happily albeit for the lasting few hours.

“Our quarters,” said Igna, “-small but it’ll do,” the door clicked loudly, “-Tania, you sure you want to be alone?”

“Yes, Teach,” replied a determined regard. The lock clicked behind, an entourage of soldiers rose from a cloud, “-take care of her,” he said at the protectors.

“Will do, master,” they replied and guarded the front. Igna, curious about the strange atmosphere, took steps headed into the seating area. Arrangements in a similar, descending order – he ambled to the side representing Tania and sat at a moderate distance. ‘-Everyone sits wherever they can. There’s no sense of loyalty to the fighters,’ he narrowed onto a few settled in dark corners, ‘-they’re napping under the pretense of watching the battle. No sun, and always somber air – crystals of light against the close doom. Mild and uncertain roars of the beast’s belly. Life here must be painful.’ Spectators were mostly men and of demi-human attributes, a few dwarves here and there, noticed by the increased height and the very rare dames who’d sat in the middle of a flock of men. Regardless, the attention shortly honed onto the Danio familia. In attendance was the handler, and lady mother of the family, Vive Danio, ‘-rumor has it, she’s very shrewd in her ways. Today’s battle is important for her and me, especially Tania. Danio holds the answer to why children are taken to the capital. Look about for traces of abuse, none speaks, they dare not speak or play clueless.’ Dressed in trousers, a coat, and dark-leather shoes, Vive’s outfit seemed very practical. Her facial features were contoured nicely, a darker complexion over which was a shaven head of white. Earrings and a drowsy gaze wandered side-to-side, attendants would murmur per a flick of her finger.

The scene was set, Tania entered the field, the arena was half-filled. The princess of Faes made her entrance, wings on her back, combat-ready outfit – a grimoire, bound by a brownish orange, clockwork-styled cover hovered by her side, the book of Fnex. A god-level item so casually given to an infant. ‘-She’s using it,’ he smiled, ‘-the grimoire. I guess she’s serious. Practice makes perfect – use it to thy heart’s content. All the knowledge of deadly spells will be made available at a moments’ call. Fight, Tania.’

Opposite, as she entered the midway line – a somber walkway opened to another demi-human bearing attributes of a bunny, brown-spotted ears, and familiar regard. The humanoid figure wasn’t perfect for it lacked an arm, still, the adversary walked – blood upon the clothes and burnt marks on the cheeks, he rose a straight gaze at Tania, half of the paralyzed face coldly watch, the remainder rose a timid but reassuring smile.

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“Brother Tim...” her composure shook, “-is it you?” she backed away without breaking eye contact, “-is it you, brother?” her voice whimpered.

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“Tania,” returned a stuffy voice, “-you’ve grown so much,” he said – a sudden jolt forced a yelp, the maimed arms flourished into an array of weapons.

“No talking, you stupid slave,” fired similarly aged children seated around lady Vive. Igna knew what Vive wanted to do, and she, by means of provocation, threw a smirk across the arena.

Calm and unshaken, Igna leaned into the seat, pulled a cigar from the inner pocket, crossed his legs, and puffed. ‘-Kin against kin, not a bad idea. Tania’s not going to recover. She loves her brother too much. Lest Tim’s affected mentally, I don’t see them fighting.’

“Brother,” she gasped, “-I looked for you everywhere...”

“Don’t,” he returned coldly, “-don’t come close, I can’t control myself,” in the eyes were pain and solitude, “-I can’t bear to see another be killed on my watch. Look at me,” he slowly turned at the weapons, “-I’m nothing but a killing machine. I don’t have a will of my own, I can’t control...” therein the eyes emptily blinked, “-Tania, kill me, sister...”

Vive rose her chin, “-enough of the reunion,” she said, “-go on, push the button.”

“Yes, mom,” added another.

The boy’s face turned pale, no life behind the pupils – muscles strained and leaped across the battlefield. Tania side-stepped at the last possible second, Igna puffed knowingly. Spears and arrows flung her way, she dodged, the wings summoned barriers, the range had no effect. Tim waltz in with a spear, and still, the faster Tania dodged and barely threw attacks back. “-Brother,” she said, her heart in turmoil – nothing. Tim fought insanely, the limbs tore, blood-splattered, he did damage more to himself than Tania did to him. A cocky Vive rose from her seat and glanced at Igna, “-you,” she pointed, “-are finished.”

‘Someone’s got spunk,’ he narrowed, ‘-fine, I’ll take the bait,’ he stood, a heavy aura fell upon the arena – Tania’s passive style shuddered. He walked past the corner of her eye, ‘-master’s watching,’ went through her mind, ‘-I need to fight,’ the grimoire opened to a specific page – words burnt from the text – an array of magical circle summoned and fired, she escaped by flying backward. the momentum made a hard stop, her boots skid to a stop before a massive pool of dust and ash.

“Lady Vive of the Danio Familia,” said Igna casually taking a seat by her side, “-you wouldn’t mind us having a little chat?”

“Don’t,” she glared, “-you’ve already tricked my eldest daughter. I won’t stop until everything you hold dear is taken.”

“By the way you moved,” he observed, “-the kids are very important to you,” he looked at her guard detail, “-too bad,” lasers suddenly flashed on their foreheads, “-one gesture and they’re dead. Tell me, Vive,” he crossed his legs and watched the tense battle, “-was it worth putting kin against kin?”

“Certainly looks like it,” she masked her incertitude, “-why would the Devil personally pay me a visit. If thee wish for a deal, I refuse.”

“No, you misunderstand,” he returned, “-I came to have a better view on my student. Look, we can watch her expression together,” by which, Igna rose a friendly wave – Tania, shocked by the sudden gesture, accidentally misfired, the projectile teleported instantly inches from Vive’s nose, *Snap,* smothered in sparks, “-she’s not used to the book yet.”

Hands to her head, she gasped, “-allow me to share some very amusing information. The modification of soul and living being,” referenced to Tim, “-is outlawed by the celestials. None has the guts to play god, and here, I see the Danio family messing with innocent children, putting brother against sister, turning goodness into depravity. Was it worth the hassle? An incident of a year ago, fueled by a report of Tim’s injuries, shook Orn village into a mob that went on to kill a little girl and her mother. Now, I’m sure this doesn’t interest you, and why should it, Vive, they had little to no consequence in the greater scheme,” the tone deepened, “-the mother made a pact, a deal. She gave her soul in exchange for the downfall and sufferance of those who took her child and caused pain.”

“-Is there an end to the story? Looks like the student’s about to lose.”

“My apologies,” he faced the crowd, “-about time for the battle to end,” he clapped – chains and shackles binding young Tim broke. Tania summoned pillars of rock, the latter of which threw the incoming Tim over her head. He landed against the arena wall and dropped to the knees, “-I’m free,” he said, rising an eye to Tania, “-I’m free,” a single tear fell. Igna was nowhere found at Vive’s side for he’d returned to his seat – the whole situation felt like a dream, one moment there, the other, gone.

“Brother?” her spells disarmed, she rushed for his unharmed side, “-I finally found you.”

Cough, blood gushed, “-Tania,” he exhaled loudly, “-I’m sorry I couldn’t be a better big brother,” he reached and tightened the left-arm around her shoulders, “-my body won’t survive for long. You’re big and strong, stronger than me. The magic you used, it’s what Teach used to show us, the faes,” he looked to the dull ceiling, “-I see them, they fly in a circle around you, always there to protect, and always there to help. Tania, I’m proud,” he clambered; pain, humiliation, torture, and the inability to see his little sister grow – the insides set ablaze, a shadow loomed over his shoulder, ‘-enact thy revenge,’ it said, ‘-take back what the stole, take what is yours, Tim, TAKE IT ALL!’ amber erupted into ablaze.

“Brother?” she grabbed his finger.

“Tania,” he gave a half-smile, “-allow big brother to get rid of thy obstacle,” a loud pulse shook the arena, Tim vanished – blood laid where he once stood, *Crash,* explosion rattled Vive’s side, “-DIE!” he screamed, a demon-possessed the inner-fury -heads, limbs, blood, muscles, guts, everything tore from the siblings who’d so mercilessly tortured, abused, insulted, humiliated, guards turned at him to no avail – they rushed and were slaughtered – Vive’s white head turned a mix crimson. Unrelentless blood lust veered at Vive, thereon, *Book of Fnex, I call upon thee, powers bestowed by the Devil, burn my target, free the soul and liberate the anguish,* between silent tears, Tania hardened her heart, *-guide the lost to an unseen truth. Heed my word, arrows of Fen; deliver finality – Termie,* a volley of golden arrows impaled the berserk, each hit disintegrated the body – nothing left in the wake of the end – remnants of the arrows faded – the blood of the children had washed seats and railings alike. Knees to the rough ground, more tears flowed, “-forgive me, brother, I wasn’t strong enough to save you. I’m sorry, I’m

sorry," she cried, "-I'm so sorry..." a soothing melody played in the background, Igna held a flute to a tune of memory and joy to Tim, a song the boy loved, one the siblings often fell-asleep too. On hot days on the field, when times were peaceful, the duo often ran to Igna's grotto and rested in the shades. Accompanied by a gentle breeze, he'd play the same song sang to him by his mother in the last life. "- You did great," he patted her back, "-I'm proud, so is your brother, Tania," he tapped her arms and sat on the ground, "-laugh, Tania, smile. Don't cry, celebrate the memories," to which, she turned and smothered her runny nose against his arms. '-Good on her,' she looked at him with a failing smile. Hand in hand, he stood and exited the arena.

"Teach," back at the manor, "-why," she said, "-why don't I feel bad anymore?"

"Simple," he replied, "-when one celebrates another's death, the memories don't become painful, instead, they're prized flashes of the past. Tim was enslaved by Danio, and like him, so were many other children. We're not done yet. Laurine and Terisa will have their revenge, Tim's death won't be forgotten. Marinda will change." The intensity in the words and gesture had Tania on edge, "-I'll do what you say, Teach. I won't let what happened to me happen to another – that's my promise as your apprentice. Show me the way to true power, master – I'll work twice as hard."

He smiled, "-I know you will," a gentle pat of the head and horse clops took the attention. Over the balustrade, a familiar face arrived on another carriage – on it, the crest of Rah.

Chapter 895: Twin Jellyfish

"Good afternoon, master Igna," sparked Gustv.

"Good afternoon," returned Igna locking the study door behind. A howl of distress loomed over the volcano. An eruption was imminent and such, the towns flooded underground layers for safety. Igna looked at a magical contraption, a geometrically pleasing square on which showed an overview of the town. Gustv, in his gasp for air after the very energetic greetings, took notice and settled. "-It's begun," added Igna, "-the signs of changing times," he smiled, "-the Danio's will shudder before raising a finger to me or my family."

"Might I ask what happened?"

"You may not," he returned, "-the nature of certain actions is best kept at a reach from where none may know. What concerns thee is simple," he rose a knowing stare – Gustv nodded in recognition, the gesture stumped and aura frozen. "I do apologize if it came across rude," returned he lightening the load, "-tell me about the adventures," he smiled.

The comforting admission settled the wiseman's heart, "-Danio's are the familia who's promised the inhabitants, those of talent and ability, a nice welcoming life in the greater city. As you speculated – the talented are called to be playthings for the strong – no matter how gifted the 'chosen one' is; a simple matter of showing who's strong and who's weak. It's not unheard of those children beating their opponent; Celestials, heirs to families. Those incidents are common to those residents of the volcanic town."

"And?"

“About the matter of secrecy. The battle today has showed the council how badly inhabitants are treated and namely, lied to.”

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“Were you present at the match?”

“Sadly not, I was unable to attend,” he reached into a bag, “-for I was busy finding this,” he pulled a scroll, placed it upon the table, threw his back against the couch, and smirked. Igna leaned, narrowed his visual hold over Gustv, picked the item, unrolled it over his knee, and read: ‘-Wiseman; it is with great distress that I write on this very chilly day. By means of carriage, my companion and I have visited the location thee marked. To our disbelief, an inhumane sight of natives spread across our collective field of vision. Rectification upon the location, the camp seems to have moved a few kilometers Southwest, after the great Perette Fall. They nested around the lake – away from any living creatures. My dear comrade, a Celestial of allegiance to presently unknown faction, kindly offered to make the dangerous descent. After much trial and error, and a potential gruesome revival – we made it to the lake, and here, found what I described earlier. By the holy name of the great one, I was stumped, unable to talk or act. The captives accepted their faith crudely – no hint of rest on their faces nor the wish for salvation. It seemed to me now, as I write this letter, the lack of hope was a matter of knowledge. They knew deep in their hearts, dreams about a better life were fading. I truly implore someone, anyone to help them. My comrade, unknown for he chose not to be named, vowed to act. The faction knew and chose to ignore the matter of lack of influence and power. For the past years, we’ve watched Lord Haggard, make a name for himself as the Devil. Though we don’t care about details pertaining to the nickname, we’d like to make sure all bases are covered. And so, on thy word and honor, Lord Gustv, we place our trust in Lord Igna,’ it ended with a signed L.

Igna rose from the read with a pleasant look, “-enlighten me, how does this make sense timewise?”

“Lord Igna; never mind the lack of influence and number. There are always outliers; contrarians who see the world from a differing point. So happens, Marinda doesn’t favor change, it rewards complacency and obedience. Merit in fighting the river is but fatigue and possible exile to the volcano town.”

“Hence the reason why we’re here,” he smiled, “-I’ve met members of said faction, and they, frankly, are not up to the task which presents before us,” therein, a deeper conversation outlasted the evening, fell in the depth of night and rose alongside the sun. A fortnight later – the same sun rose over the same background, lighting the same trees – glancing upon the same people walking from their humble homes towards the rustic mine.

Rosespire II nested in the middle of town, on a body of muddied water. Currently, the water reflected the light, shallow ends were clean, one could see the underbelly of the beast. A bridge linked the manor to an old fishing dock.

“Morning, Lord Igna,” waved passersby, disowned or otherwise, humiliated Celestials sent to a life of manual labor and sufferance.

“Good morning,” he returned, lifting a net, “-today’s the best yet,” he cheered to fishermen boarding their rafts.

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"If Lord Igna's says today's a good day, who am I to interject," laughed a slender frame of a man. Little to no hair on the scalp, sunburnt decals, and weakened arms, he dropped onto the raft, used a stick to push against the bridge, and paddled away into the deeper side of the lake. Immediately after the bridge and dock, on a little climb to the outlying street of the town, laid a little shop named; Twin Jellyfish.

"Morning my lord," said familiar faces, "-I'll need an order of bread and these items," a list laid upon a wooden frame erected to support a simple slab of glass.

"Quite the order," he jokingly said and turned, throwing head towards another room, "-How's the fish coming along?"

"In a minute," returned a younger snap. Reassured, Igna turned to the lady and shuffled to the side were laid a counter on which held various items, predominately ingredients and supplies.

"There you are," he said, returning her empty basket, "-come along later, I have plans to make a buffet."

"Will do, my lord," she respectfully bowed and left. Out the shop, a large line of housewives, orphans, and the physically impaired gathered.

"Where's the bread and soup?" he asked.

"Coming," returned sharply – the shop laughed joyously. The arrival of the devil, on the day where Gustv paid a visit, shortly settled on the muddied lake. Once a great source of water for the town's folk turned ecological mess on disturbances by the actively growling beast. The entrance was met with mild disapproval. The no-name town bore similarities to home – Hidros. People of all races and backgrounds could simply move into a village or town, start a business, undertake an apprenticeship or simply join a guild, none asked questions, and the personal lives of a person remained so, private. Here grew the same aura – excommunicated, shunned, or otherwise abandoned Celestial had no stomach to endure judgmental sneer of other, possibly better-doing families. Under the same banner and same sufferance, the townsfolk grew close on the inside and suspicious on the outside to the extent of, '-live and let live.'

The moment the devil set foot – rumors flooded the streets and pubs. Add recent events of a massacre of high-ranking Celestials to the list, sanctions would indeed befall the town – a simple string held the already treacherous life whole. Husbands readied their spells and weapons to drive out the devil. Instead, on arrival at the lake – a fresh start of water, fish, and newly restored dock turned fear into bafflement.

In typical Igna fashion – the moment the crowd grew to a sufficiently pleasing number; wings summoned and he hovered, "-to you, the people, I have but one thing to say. I've decided to move here – I'm sure news travels fast, and I'm certain thee heard of Orn Village. The struggle of famine and overwork is very obvious, I don't promise much, what I can say is, I will work to pay my due." And that was it, an ominously vague statement. Day's past, a shop erected – fumbling housewives, peaked by the new establishment – entered the very mundane looking shop. Hence, the start of a goodwill venture. Exploiting weaknesses and spotting opportunities. Dependence on the no-name was both advantageous and disadvantageous to the celestials, a fact Igna understood very well.

"There you are," he delivered the last customer, "-later," he smiled with elbows on the counter.

An audibly tired sigh exited the backroom, "-done for the day," yawned young Tania.

“Good job,” he gave a high-five, in her case, a low-five, “-the more you use the grimoire, the better you’ll get.”

Horse hooves clopped, a black and golden carriage passed the shop and halted a few steps ahead, “-Tania,” senses heightened, “-go to the manor and be ready for battle. Alert the scouts, tell ’em we’re on high alert.”

“What about the guards?”

“Have them coordinate with the scout unit. Lest I give the signal, don’t fire.” She escaped by means of a transportation spell. Louds boots tapped; the floor shook till large outlines gathered at the door.

“Lord Igna,” the barrier threw open, two massive guards ducked and barely fit through the doorway, “-the name’s Azo, I represent the committee of Celestial.”

“Which committee, the conservatives or the liberal?”

“There’s but one faction, and tis our faction,” he proudly stood, “-we have been called to investigate the devil’s property on lake Maneno.”

“Under whose authority,” he crossed his arms, “-And for what reason?”

“On reason of murder of the Danio’s heir and cost of lady Danio’s sanity. Poor soul can’t think for she’s gone mad. The committee has been watching – at last, we found the perfect piece,” he showed the crest of Rah. “-Wiseman Gustv was very informative.”

“Right,” he passed the counter and grinned, “-Gustv’s not going to speak, why would he,” he whispered, “-when he doesn’t know anything.”

“He might not know,” returned the astute stranger, “-however, this letter might be of interest. One signed by a certain L.”

Igna took a moment, “-the committee’s not daft,” he hopped onto the counter and sat, “-tell me, what does the committee really want?”

“Destruction of the Devil. Before the intimidation begins, I’d like to add, the council’s a joint alliance of various powerful families. You’re a nuisance, and as a bug, we must squash before it spreads.”

“Very amusing. Committee of Bloodlines, you have me stumped. There’s no point killing a messenger, is there?” he smirked, “-what am I to do,” the feet dangled strangely, “-I’m at a lost for words.”

“The game is over, Devil. We’ve snuffed the flames of revolution.”

“Or have you?” the head tilted, “-from what I understand, Danio and Xife will be allies soon. An impossible marriage turned reality; the head of Danio accepted the new head of Xife’s offer. What message will that send?”

“Nothing major,” returned the astute scholar, “-riddles won’t do much.”

“Or will it?” Igna circled the man and walked to a side window giving onto the bridge, “-tell me, messenger, are you wise to read between the lines?”

A moment's inspiration took the scholar, a vengeful glare struck Igna's exposed back, "-devil... the mine, the volcano, the marriage. You want to be known across the continent, and now that you have the committee's attention, people will be more willing to listen," he snapped at the carriage.

"Never underestimate the power of subjection and influence. Now," he snapped; "-I'd advise thee to scurry along. I shan't move, bring an army or gods next time, I'll kindly wait.

The scholar took a simple look outside and exhaled, "-we're leaving," he said.

"But sire?"

"No question's asked. We're already in enemy territory, there's nothing to gain," he turned but kept his face at Igna, "-I'll have my revenge next time." It truly was a silent battle, words spoke one thing, gestures said another, and ultimately – the scholar knew he'd lost.

'Interesting and dangerous fellow,' a similar aura hit, '-the mark of Zeus,' a glare outside the window and saw the carriage run along, engraved by the supreme god's crest. '-explains it,' exhaled, '-looks like the committee will be a fun opponent after all.'

Chapter 896: Danio – Xinfu

"Sire, what happened in there?" the black and golden carriage pulled from the no-name town. On the growing rumble, the ground shook. Inaccessibility of the rocky and rough road proved quite the telling task on the scholar's noble posterior.

"It was a silent exchange of threat and message. I understand why many have fallen for the Devil's charm and lure. They had no idea what they were walking into, nor did they ever decide to prepare themselves against changes in the battlefield. The moment we walked into the shop, for example, was the instant where many things changed. You were wise to point the little girl scurrying upon the bridge – she held the key to our life and death. Didn't you notice how the devil nonchalantly walked to the side window and gestured? He made it painfully obvious that we were in his territory. I'm scared and excited at the same time – I've never met someone able to equal my intellect before. Celestials are weak-minded, bound by tradition for lack of imagination. The council of families will bow to me, I'll take control of the pawns one way or the other," the mouth stopped save the thoughts, '-I have the blood of the supreme god running through my veins. I won't allow another to ruin my plans,' he narrowed, '-long as we don't get in each other's way, devil, we'll have a mutually understanding relation.'

Similarly, Igna with head out the side-window, watched the lovely sun settle behind the mountain, "-master," scurried little Tania, "-is everything alright?"

"Everything's under control," he smiled, "-Zeus's bloodline is part of the hidden upper echelon," he turned away from the window and leaned similar-sounding clops, and the fumbling of a carriage arrived. From it a younger fellow leaped and pulled into the shop, "-lord Igna," he gasped with hands on the knees, "-my apologies," the head rose timidly, "-I'm late. The Committee's on the way here," he said.

"A little late for the warning," he returned, "-the supposed L and the liberal faction have been noticed by the Committee. It'd be wise to relocate and lay low for a while."

The cautionary words felt naught to the out-of-breath wiseman, “-I beg to differ,” he rose sharply, “-never underestimate the power of a collective mindset. Everyone saw the committee waltz into town, ignoring the pain and suffering – and made straight for the shop.”

Igna simply smiled, “-I’ve handled the affair.” As they spoke, news of the encounter diffused across the town, from open-air to the suffocating underbelly of the earth. Word traveled fast in a tight community, especially for one where the Devil help alleviate famine and hardship. The narrative was so, ‘-the celestials are angry at the devil for granting us free food and accommodation. They came with an ultimatum; the town will be at risk lest the devil leaves or the distribution of food stops.’ Believe it, when matters of an empty stomach and basic live supplies were in question, there was no going against the flow.

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“I will believe so,” returned Gustv, “-what’s next?”

A breeze swept through the humble Twin Jelly shop, “-we wait and watch.”

Wait they did for months elapse; growing tension between Celestials festered. Two polarizing factions rose; one inherits to pursue the olden ways – conservatives, and the second, those who suffered most under the regime settled by those in power – liberals/ revolutionist faction. Without influence or strength to rival the stone-cold conservatives – those of the new faction had to get creative. The result – was a wedding, a grand ceremony whereby many parties were invited to celebrate the union of Danio’s and Xinfé’s. Both sides shared their little remaining wealth to host the event – and under the table, Igna supplied the rest.

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A guard detail was dispatched to ensure the safe coming of the bond. One sent to monitor the Devil’s activities. On a nicely decorated field – bordered by the generously arranged table upon which laid delicacies from the Twin Jelly shop – the groom made his way to the altar where a member of the Ingyn, familia, goddess of marriage, held a holy book. Igna settled in the background in the company of Tania. Her eyes were upon the delicacies, “-I can’t believe I made so much food.”

“I’ve said it before,” he returned, “-when it comes to magic, even a child can cook,” and not to dismiss her hard work, “-and when it comes to cooking with magic, none rivals thy hand, young Tania.” She simply returned a cordial smile – her attention soon swapped to a ground of children running about the chairs playing tag. Her feet rose, “-go on,” said Igna, “-go play with them. I don’t want to be responsible for depriving thy childhood.”

She scoffed, “-I’m not a kid. I’m an apprentice,” her bunny ears spiked, soon, the lass was none to be found save behind a ground of noisy children. On leaving the girl to her devices, Igna took a small trip towards the nearby bar, grabbed a glass, turned to face against the table, and watched. Both sides filled slowly but surely. For a marriage set to be in a forest, the grass and path were tidy. Town laid little to a few minutes sprint.

Uniformed guards stomped to the table. The leader, a differently dressed gentleman, noticed by the cap and higher rank, broke through the mass and smiled, “-Lord Igna,” he smiled deviously, “-tis a pleasure to see you.”

"If it's not Yean," he returned, "-how goes it?"

"Pretty nice," the regard scanned the entourage, "-a gathering of likeminded individuals."

"I do suppose there will come the time where thy party and mine shall be interested in the same outcome," he narrowed on Yean's signet ring, '-an L,' he exhaled, "-dear me, would you believe there's quite a commotion in the capital about a slave-camp found at the great Perette Fall. A representative of the Committee had very interesting material to go over. Those of which possibly life-threatening."

"Lord Azo, yes?" he returned, "-the man's quite a trouble maker," the air changed mildly, "-I should focus on rounds," turned to the mass, "-let's go." The guards slammed their feet and continued along – an awkward exchange, one in which Igna sipped and smiled.

"My lord," whispered the one behind the drinks, "-we've detected movement in the northwestern sky. Shall I ready our forces?"

"Yes please," returned a joyful jingle. Minutes passed, seats filled, the groom walked the aisle to the altar and kept a strong face. Pressure on the youngest head of the family was palpable in an adorable way. Between the kind expression, flushed cheeks, and noticeable hints of joy and embarrassment – younger ladies swooned at the cuteness.

A noticeably intense presence arrived in the company of a lovely middle-aged woman, "-pleasure to finally meet the infamous Devil," added the very charming woman, "-I do hope my husband and son haven't caused much trouble."

"Please, it's no problem," returned Igna, "-the past remains the past, the present and future is ours to control. Please," he gestured to the front-row, "-have a seat whilst the bride's ready." The charming lady nodded and scurried forth.

"Master Igna," murmured the intense presence, "-what should I be doing?" blinked Lord Fife, "-ever since stepping down, I've lost the purpose of life. My wife's gone insane in her spending and lavish lifestyle – the family feels separated and the pain of shooting an important member of my daughter-in-law's family stabs deeply."

"Lord Fife," returned Igna, "-the way forward is to forget the past. The trauma thee suffered was for the betterment of the family. See," he pointed at the same relatives at the pub, "-she's here alive and well. Ravish for Marinda moves into a new age."

Uncertain, the middle-aged man lowered his brow, emptied the heavy aura, and shuffled to his wife's side. After them, came a familiar face, shaven white-hair, and a pitifully somber expression. Lady Vive, dressed in full-black, locked onto Igna, immediately turned for the bride's side and ran. The husband, Lord Vilian – a stout figure of a warrior took few steps and dropped his blocky forehead upon Igna, who simply returned a noncaring cheer. "-Lord Vilian, I'm glad to see the half-complete Danio family. The stunt thee pulled; I'm assuming it no longer lingers? I don't care what thee thinks, the Danio's are under my firm grasp. Move against me and I'll have thy family's dirty secret exposed to the whole of Marinda."

The large shoulders eased into a mundane stare, "-Lord Devil, I've said it before and I'll say it again. Since the loss of my boys, my wife and I no longer have the strength to endure torment in this cut-throat world. I hope you're happy, I hope thy consciousness isn't guilty of ruining my family forever. Allow me

and my wife to enjoy the remnants of happiness we can muster, please," he took off his hand, bowed respectfully, and moved forward.

'I don't buy it,' narrowed Igna, 'I killed their children, I'd be vowing for vengeance or salvation. Forget the latter, tis the former – Danio is God of the Fallen age, an entity representing chaos and desolation – precisely how the family should currently feel. By strength of Militia, my army ranks in the top two. The committee's joint alliance and Lombart's reserved forces,' a sudden call to action by the priest sucked the collective crowd. "-We gather here today..." the speech carried into one of unity and peace between the factions wherein the fathers were called to the altar and asked to exchange jewelry as a sign of understanding between both families. Igna sat restlessly, the lack of emotion from the Danio side was troubling. A century-old rivalry was not so easily settled.

In the sky northwest, a massive shadow wrapped the ceiling of tall trees; mammoths in size and intensity. Ropes lowered, shapes dropped one after the other, "-it's here," passed through a rudimentary communication channel – one birthed by magical circles layered around the vicinity. A special force of skilled fighters muddled through the thicket. Scouts with scopes to their eyes locked onto the crest, "-the crest of Lombart," jolted across the circles.

"Listen to me," spoke across the rivaling's channel, "-targets are the Xilfe's head, Djen, the father, and the mother. Shoot on sight, we're moving per the will of the supreme god. Our cause is just, and by the support of the Committee, we shall prove the strength of our pious relation to the olden ways, the true way of life."

The pieces fit, Igna looked at the Danio's side and saw no trace of the bridge, "-I expected an ambush, not of such small case." Suddenly, reports came from around the cardinal points, "-we're being surrounded," no orders to shoot was issued.

The bartender side-stepped to Igna's seat, "-master, the more time's wasted, the risker grows this wedding. What are thy orders?"

"Well, there's but one order," he exhaled, '-Azo, you didn't think I'd anticipate an attack?' a murderous look sparked, the attendant knew what it means and soon rushed behind the counter.

Stood in the caged island of Rehn, a second biggest floating castle in Marinda, a feisty scholar stared upon a free-floating map. "-Dear Mariane," he said, casting a leftward glance, "-too bad you allied with the devil," he grinned. Chains bound her feet, arms, and head to a metallic frame, "-so much for being in love and trusting evil. They'll soon realize the true terror of facing the olden teachings," an equally ominous spark loomed, "-we do some bad crazy shit too," he cackled. A voice whooshed through a scroll, "-the battle's begun, we're being shot from unknown locations."

"Carry on," he said, "-we'll lose a few men but gain ground. Have the casters place the summoning spells when the safe-zone's are captured. We'll take this fight even if it costs us our lives. Kill or be killed, my fellow comrades; FIGHT!"

Meanwhile, at the altar – Xilfe's waited to no avail, "-lord Vilian," called the lady of Xilfe, "-might I ask to where young Mariane is?"

"She's on her way," he replied, "-my daughter has to look the prettiest she's ever been."

Chapter 897: The zero-sum game

Assorted in petals, lovely white dress, jewelry, and a look of utmost affection – Djen’s expectation tumbled into naught save an image of a nasty gruesome reality. Danio’s had nothing left to keep, nothing else to give, and nothing else to strive towards. The ugliest exchange a person could have; a battle, the zero-sum game. Quick on his feet, Igna snapped – a hemisphere sheltered the entourage, the Devil teleported before the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he bowed respectfully, “-I would like to take a moment and say the following, ‘-foolish imbeciles,’ he glared the Danio familia, “-playing a zero-sum game isn’t wise, not if the opponent has unlimited asset at his fingertips. Yean, our guard detail of today, tis a pleasure to see thy faction be at the mercy of the Committee. No matter,” he sighed nonchalantly, “-wars at our doorstep,” a pistol materialized in his grip, “-and I see no reason to allow the enemy to live,” the barrel pointed at Lord Vilian, “-heed my words carefully, to gods and demons willing to oppose me; you will taste the bloodied mountain on which I sit. Good day,” he shot, the lord fell – panic crossed guest to guest – no motion; the ground laid in a taint of purple from which rose hands.

“No use running,” said Igna, the gun suddenly snapped westward and fired, the projectile barely missed Yean who fell and hit an enemy, “-Djen, I promised a marriage, I promised it to be in the company of both families. However,” the expression turned blank, “-I didn’t specify if they’d be alive or dead.”

The caged island of Rehn swam across the sky, its shadow engulfed the ground – a fanatic Azo gave orders, hands upon the map, he blinked unknowingly, “-how are we not making progress?”

“Lord Azo, our weapons are too weak. Relics aren’t working either. Shall we send the spellcasters?”

“If Relics aren’t working, the casters will be sitting ducks,” he squinted, “-what about the safe-zones?”

“The northern team has captured an advance position.”

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“Mana’s being jammed,” he looked outside, “-reroute the casters through a northwestern path. Take it around the thicket, have the supporting teams break into smaller units and scout. The more we know, the better,” in his mind, Igna led his forces as well, and to the scholar’s horror – the devil was found sat on the altar holding a wine-glass before an audience of frozen figures.

“The Danio familia,” shuddered Djen, “-they’re all dead?”

“Not dead. More like in a deep slumber. There’s no use beating ourselves on what’s happening outside,” and when he said so, a bright fist slammed and puffed on hitting the barrier.

“What was that?” fired the lady of Xinfo, “-are we safe?”

“By the potency, I’d say the talent of one of the warring factions. This is getting interesting,” he sipped, and as predicted, the battle grew tense. Igna’s army took key-position and waited patiently, a sudden increase in the southward attacks tugged on the flow of battle – telltale sign of weakness or alterations. Unspoken words, knowing actions – the Shadow army took heed and slowed their advance – half focused onto their heels whilst the other half forked northward, taking both northeast and west.

“What about Mariane?”

“No clue,” returned Igna, “-either she’s dead or barely alive in a prison somewhere. Look at the state of the battle,” a display conjured, giving a bird’s view over the barrier and surroundings, “-Lombart have lent their forces. Many Celestials have died already – their loss is my gain, and vice-versa. The Committee wants a zero-sum game, and I’m willing to wait and watch. Djen,” the view narrowed, “-see this massive shadow?”

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“The floating castle of Rehn.”

“So you know what it represents?”

“Yes, and it’s nothing to be taken lightly. Tis one of the two floating castles armed with weapons able to total town. The size lowers the speed, orientation, it’s coming here,” he blinked.

“Good, even better.”

A loud beam of light fired north into the skies; under it were charged remains of a forest. The ash settled and a stronger army advanced, each equipped with magical weapons.

Advance units fired, “-no anti-magic bullets, master,” spoke across the channel, “-reinforcements are Celestials able to deflect attacks. Permission to equip superior bullets?”

“Denied, everyone save the southern team retreat to the barrier. Fork teams, cut across, and move south. It’s about time I head into battle,” he casually landed and veered a pleasurable smile, “-to the people of Marinda,” an orb summoned above his palm, the blueish free-floating objects swayed intelligently, the fingers eased and the entity rose into the clouds. Relatively sunny turned somber, a dark-blueish representative of evil sprawled across the whole of Marinda in a vein-like manner. Celestials and Natives, taken by the change – wondered if the end of time arrived.

Wings sprouted, the golden glow from Lucifer’s believers made the impossible, possible, the powers of Alfred overflowed his right-side, devilish features, sharp canines and outlines of a horn rose above the head, red and purple, Nox and Alfred – a snap at an imprisoned captive shattered the cage – from it, a pulse warmed the Death Element.

“About time this whole power struggle is settled,” convoluted lines across the skies showed the feed of war. The Devil flapped his wings and dived into the incoming crowd of Celestials.

“THE DEVIL IS HERE!” they cried – he expanded a web of crimson and pulled; heads fell without resistance; blood channeled into condensed essence. He popped the orbs and continued the slaughter, one by one, the dignified background of the Celestials fell. ‘There are many ways to overturn a leadership. Through words or through arms; in a dystopian society like Marinda, words don’t suffice,’ martial-arts aided in the quick dispatch of the stronger fellows. Protections unaffected by bullets were torn by his fingers until their hearts. Igna pulled, all happened under the watchful eye of Rehn and reinforcements, and squeezed the beating heart into his mouth, “-the taste of blood,” a flash of lust jolted across. Fear took the fighters by their heels, proud Celestials turned, exposed their backs, and fled. ‘No, you’re not,’ he jumped, pulled Orenmir from the scabbard and sliced; screams of horror, the cries of the dead, ultimate fear, an unwinnable situation, majestically golden white wings turned purple and dark, the splatters of blood added much to Igna’s face and outfit, “-this is what I live for,” the death-

element pulsed, *thud,* Staxius's dark aura emanated from his feet – nearby plants and trees succumbed by withering. The Devil was here, he walked with his sword and the mark of death in his shadow; the whole continent saw what none ever wished to see.

Rehn's castle moved for Igna, Azo; traumatized by the display, keeping a level-head. "-it's over," whimpered Mariane, "-the devil's coming to collect," she gasped.

"And how are you so sure?" said a stern side-glance, "-yes, he's killing my men, but guess what," numerous beams shot into the skies around the barrier, "-it was the plan all along," a loud mass rocked the very core of the floating isle, "-to slay a monster, one must become a monster, and to slay the devil," he sneered, "-one must become a devil." A spear instantly impaled Mariane, "-and to make my point, you'll become the flag which I wave," the arms grew in size, the feeble body enhanced to grab the impaled Mariane – in the posterior and out of her chest in-between the cleavage. An ominous presence shattered the wall, exposing the inside of the helm's room.

"Welcome to Rehn fortress," grinned Azo around which fluttered bolts of lightning associated with Zeus.

"Color me impressed," returned Igna, "-I see you've made a Mariane brochette, would be better if it was charged," he snapped, white-abysal flame smothered and grilled the unfortunate lass, "-there, looks better crispy." Azo held pinched his nose and dropped the spear.

"How could you?"

"You wanted to kill her, I simply finished the task.' Purple sparks ran from white-to-red, the bicolored leer cried, '-no mercy.'

Azo rose his chin and puffed the chest, "-the battle is mine."

"How so?"

"I've captured the marriage ground. I give the order; they'll slaughter everyone and everything. Danio's were gracious in teaching the ways of modifying living beings – Celestials sense no pain and obey the words of the greater one. Once we kill Xinfu, we'll walk into the pitiful volcanic town and enslave the Celestials into their rightful place. Orn village will have a special part to play, don't worry, I'll make certain they experience the outworld's pleasures."

From the shattered wall, he breezed through the interior and arrived at Mariane, "-pitiful to see such a lovely lady go without experiencing the pleasures of romance and the associated vices."

"I wouldn't fret. She's no longer pure. Danio's sold everything, including themselves to the Committee. What better to serve than to partake?"

"Everywhere you go," he rose a disappointed stare, "-evil takes on the same boring air. Pillage, assault, torture, can't thee innovate? I mean, the Mariane-brochette was pretty lovely, albeit I take credit for the work."

"Devil, time's nigh, surrender."

"Pardon?" he spun, "-surrender? My dear, why must I wave the white flag in a battle that I'm winning?"

"Stop bluffing."

“See for yourself.”

After the capture of a northern safe-zone, reinforcement walked south to the barrier, the surrounding factions split to find the marked safe-zones – mana in the atmosphere settled to a chain-reaction of summoned portals. One after the other, teams stormed the area where Igna once stood. Little did the ground team know – the silent army Igna summoned took a bigger detour and chipped at Lombart army’s heel. Permission for utilization of magical bullets was granted – they fell like flies. Fighting in forestry was never a good idea – soon, the opposing army felt the consequences as bodies dropped. Young Tania spared no mercy for she handled the protection of the Xilfe familia on her lonesome.

“How?”

“Experience,” he said, shuffling to the baffled Azo, “-here’s a message to Zeus,” Orenmir in hand, “-for when he killed me, here’s my payback,” the sword ran through the stomach and pulled upward, splitting the chest and head in half, “-no enhancement,” an ancient symbol laid on Azo’s back faded, “-the battle is won. Too bad, the first mistake was coming to me; ever since then, I was able to hear, see, and monitor thy actions. How does it feel?” he stared the ceiling, “-Zeus, tell me, how does it feel to be bested. No more, thee hears, no more will the intervene in the mortal realm. The day on which thee decide to attack, I will ensure the destruction of Heaven. Trust for I speak as the Devil.”

Holdover the weather eased, the sun returned and played. Remnants of the battle soaked into the earth.

‘Mariane,’ he admired fondly, ‘-you remind me of Loftha, another strong-willed lady who I once called friend, *-knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing; Partial-Realm Expansion,* a wrap tied the charred lass.

“Are you sure?” the galloping of a horse neighed at his side, “-are you sure?”

“Undrar?”

“Yes, I came to pass the Celestials to their afterlives. Her soul is in limbo – pulling her into the mortal realm will mean exercising a large amount of the Death Element. If you do that, there’s no telling how the recovery process will be.”

“I don’t particularly care,” he placed a hand onto her immaculately crafted shoulder-piece, “-her life was cut short like Loftha. Don’t take away the only good deed I’m about to perform,” he knelt, “-I’m no longer the Heir to Death, the seat’s been filled – you make a better Death Reaper, not me. What courses through me is the past; you’re the present and future,” the figured returned to normal, naught save the bloodied outfit, “-go on, the warriors are due some respect.”

“As you say,” she vanished into a wormhole, the air eased. ‘-You and me, Mariane, let’s get you to your lover,’ a grimoire summoned, *Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes prospective, watcher watches, creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht.*

Chapter 898: An Alcoholic

Flower petals fluttered underneath the unblemished sky. A cruel twist of fate, Mariane walked towards the altar in the company of Igna. The bride’s side consisted mostly of soldiers of Igna’s army – where

vows of love were to be exchanged, a couple of meters away – pits of fire spewed the disgusting scent of burnt flesh. Columns rose, and still, under a somewhat dazed atmosphere, Djen and Mariane locked eyes with one another. It was obvious – no words need be exchanged, the affectionate look of love and admiration, respect and loyalty, can't make it up, the love was present and thriving. On customs per the Goddess of Marriage; Ingyn, the couple warmly took each other's arms and committed to the priest's sermon. Alcoholic

On said warm yet chilly Friday – Marinda changed fundamentally. Union of Xilfe and Danio settled in a new age. On the latter's side, the new head of family transferred to the traumatized Vive for she'd not only witness the death of her children but husband and key family members. Such scars would disrupt anyone, regardless if one was God or not, the loss of something precious stung. Lombart's utter defeat and the death of Zeus's sole familia mortally struck the council. A true zero-sum battle, what they lost, Igna gained, and so, Xilfe, Danio, and Haggard's grew powerful and united. Other influential families hurried into Nordway, and for the time being, Marinda split unfavorably against the Celestial supremacist faction, in other words, the Committee.

As for the rest – land was divvied amongst many. Danio's tainted reputation wouldn't be clean for a long while yet, even so, the replacement head, Mariane, pledged herself into the service of righting the wrong her family had caused. Backed by the Devil, whomst actions were gruesome, malefic, and outright wrong – satisfaction brought by the downfall of the oppressors was well-received.

The volcanic town was named Cthulhu in remembrance of the guardian deity beneath their feet. Henceforth – the revolutionist faction had a purpose, influence, and a place to call home. In the following months, under the watchful eye of Igna – military operations were carried around the isle. Checkpoints previously under the Committee's faction became safehouses for adventuring natives. Disparities were common, Celestials were Celestials and Natives were Natives, still, the unrelenting efforts of the newer generation slowly swayed opinion into a more neutral standpoint. On completion of the military expeditions, settlement of newer guard post – focus turned to better roads, a project that would last a couple of years.

Cthulhu's daughter, a love-stricken lass – strangely celebrated the union of Xilfe and Danio. The infamously temperamental figure, in the later months, was found at Igna's court which until now remains at the new capital.

Months eventually led into years – Igna lost track of time, Marinda was strangely convoluted for time was no constant. At times, one month in the outside world was two months in Marinda, others, one day felt like a week. Overall, time moved faster in the land of the Celestial. The day would eventually arrive when the factions would move into Nordway and truly free the land and people.

"Teacher," an older familiar voice echoed down a minimalist hallway, the sharp footsteps stop immediately of a door and knocked, "-teacher, they're here," the tone heightened. No response, it tapped and latched onto the door handle, *click,* "-master," a heavily dark room flashed into Igna's half-awake state.

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“What,” he groaned, the lights flicked, “-the meetings in two hours, not now,” he turned, bottles fell onto the wooden floor, one hand reached for a pillow and soon rose to his cheeks, “-turn off the light, I prefer the darkness...”

“No,” refuted the taller and more mature Tania, she strode to the couch, pulled the pillow, summoned a cup of cold water, and poured.

“Coldwater?” the bicolored pupils locked onto her, “-at least conjure alcohol,” he yawned – the faint look he gave left a strong impression, Tania’s ears and tail reflectively heightened, “-what meeting anyway?” he sat upright, sifted across the empty bottles and lazily did the shirt buttons, “-what is so urgent you’d wake the devil from his slumber?”

No answer, Tania speechlessly blinked, “-master,” the title swapped, “-I mean, teacher, sorry. I was asked to wake thee by lady Kuthl.”

“God,” he let a cry of agony, “-not her again,” he stood and muddled towards the work desk at the edge of the room after a few stairs, the tall ceiling was well utilized in storing ancient books, scrolls, and relics found across Marinda. The land was truly a place once blessed and loved by the gods. Bookcases went from floor to ceiling, some shelves were unreached and others, shackled and bound by elementally charged chains. ‘I’ve been so lost in the energy crisis,’ he pushed aside many drafts, “-where’s my crest?”

“Here,” she replied with the latter in a locker around her neck, “-teacher, did you forget?”

“Forget?” he blinked, “-right, yeah, I forgot. It’s the drinking,” he laughed, ‘-the years passed by, I’ve lost track of time. Whatever,’ he glided down the stairs, “-the crest of the Devil. How did the southwestern people react?” reference was made to a separate part of Marinda, another mass of land around 1/4th of Marinda’s size.

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“Devil’s crest is very powerful,” she smirked, “-the moment I show this symbol, everyone shuts up and listens. The island chief was receptive to the idea of linking both masses by a bridge. Tis the reason Kuthl’s here?”

“Either she’s here for that or I’m in for another long day,” soon headed to a mirror, “-Tania, cast the cleaning spell,” the arms rose in a T-pose.

“I do recommend a shower once in a while?”

“What’s the point,” he blinked and stared at the lass’s reflection.

A grimoire summoned at her fingertip, “-whatever thee says,” she snapped – a tornado swirled the day’s of no shower, oily hair, and lack of care away – a cleaner, sharper version of Igna winked at the mirror. He quickly pulled a suit-jacket, tied the leather shoe, threw on a white-dial watch, and tightened the tie.

Tania on the other hand, in typical demi-human fashion, aged considerably. The stronger she grew; the more were the physical changes. Currently, the lass stood in her early twenties with a military outfit over the well-trained figure.

“My task’s done,” her stare returned from the cuckoo clock, “-I’ll check with Lord Gustv. Marinda’s about to change once again,” the tall disciple soon vanished into the echoey corridor.

‘I know,’ he exhaled, ‘-I know what thee mean, Tania, no need to passively suggest our course of action. Marinda’s not stable, we need Nordway and Einheim castle to truly provide for the growing population. Celestials weren’t so wrong after all. The methodology was very barbaric but still – demi-humans and the native population reproduce and evolved quickly. A child, if given proper training can grow to adulthood in less than six-month, even earlier if the teacher’s good. Take the strong, weaken the tribe, and stun their growth – and energy needs. The mana isn’t very potent, there’s a lack since the Guardian Deity takes a massive share of what the life on Marinda needs to grow. Guess the ancient way wasn’t foolish – there laid a bit of sense in the actions,’ in turn, Igna walked and shut the study – drafts titled, ‘-Marinda’s energy crisis,’ fell. Round the stairs, onto the ground floor, and to the common room, a sudden chirp slowed the trip for the bar, “-Kuthl.”

“Good morning, master,” she smiled, her lovely blue hair curled at her shoulders and fell over her back, “-did you miss me?”

“No,” he blankly returned, “-how’s your father?”

“The mana’s sufficed for now,” she tiptoed into his shadow.

“No teasing,” he returned and held a glass of whiskey grabbed on the way over, “-here, quench thy thirst.”

She accepted and jogged to a nearby table, “-the bridge between Marinda and the southwestern island is plausible...” she crossed her legs and sat, “-lest we build it with infused ore, I don’t see a way the construction will resist father’s growl.”

“There’s a way,” head in a secret cupboard, “-a simple way to solve the energy crisis and acquire the material needed for the bridge. The focus is on developing Marinda into a somewhat self-sustaining nation.”

Kuthl silently admired her drink sway, “-and tis the capture of Einheim. Devil, you’ve been after the castle of ice from the start, haven’t you?”

“What can I say,” he pulled a dark-tone bottle, “-I’ll get what I want. The castle’s a place of wonder, the heritage, and culmination of what the gods left behind,” a thumb-flick popped the cork, “-Nordway’s the heart of Marinda – without the capital’s knowhow in channeling the volcano’s energy, we won’t be able to sustain the growing population. The battle’s going to be hard, and I doubt my full power will help – the enormous amount of mana I swallow to fight isn’t viable. Can’t endanger the already shaken balance.”

“So?” she sipped, “-what then?”

“To take the capital, we’ll need the help of everyone,” he smiled.

“Everyone?”

“Yes, without the support of the natives, we’ll lack man-power. Geographically and technologically, we’re lacking. My fighters utilize weapons from outside, take them out of the picture. What of the

Revolutionist faction's military might? Bow, swords, and spears. Medieval-level weapons and the occasional spellcaster. Not a matter of number, the capital's the biggest challenge yet. To move forward, we'll eventually have to bring down the impregnable fortress."

"And how are we supposed to perform said miracle?"

Half a bottle emptied, "-trust," he cheered, "-the factions are out there working towards what I envisioned."

She hopped off the ledge, "-well, I suppose I'm done for today. Devil, thee best not drown in liquor. See you at the council meeting. I'm ready to be mind blown, father of the nation."

"Don't you dare," he squinted, "-I'm no father to this damned nation!"

She shrugged the yell, "-one day or the other, you'll realize Marinda's more than a mere island. There's a reason why the gods choose here over there."

'Look at her trying to sound ominous,' he drank.

Out the manor, '-I always wanted to say that,' she giggled and jumped onto a horse. The lonesome manor breathed over the body of water, fishermen did their usual trips and Igna sat peering over the veranda. '-Look at me,' he stared a reflection, '-an alcoholic.'

The devil did as he pleased; the happier entourage of natives was very humble on the soul. The day he charred Mariane never left the thought; the pleasure of watching another suffer, the sheer number of people he killed on said faithful day of change. '-I feel like a piece of me's cracked, a thread binding my sanity to earth snapped. Alcohol's a good way to keep my mind fresh. Undrar gave good advice, the recovery of the death elements compromised. I have a lot of power,' he stared the empty palm, '-knowledge of far more than life and death. My glasses,' he removed the frame and turned to the ceiling, '-reality's my whim. Embracing who I am and what I was meant to be has soothed my mind, but not my heart. Father,' teachings of Tempest Haggards resonated within, '-what is wrong, what is right?'

Carriages stopped at the Twin Jelly shop. Uniformed Celestials exited their rudimentary transport and scaled the bridge. Gates opened, and they entered the manor ground. The front door also opened without much said – steps changed from soft too harsh upon the wooden floor. A shake of the head and the remaining drink down the throat, "-another day of business."

"Master Haggard," greeted Gustv surrounded by a small entourage, namely; Mariane, Djen, Jae, Elliana, and Yean.

"Gustv," they shook hands and exchanged embraces. The meeting soon transferred beside the bar, inside the lounge area. Drinks on the table, and cigar at arm's reach, each took a seat around a tall table.

"Elliana and Jae," he smiled, "-how's Rehn's performance so far?"

Elliana scanned and held her up her chin, "-you destroyed our floating castle and replaced it with one deemed a marvel. The Azian familia's grateful."

He looked at Djen, "-Lord Haggard," nodded the more confident head of Xinfu, "-we've successfully completed the assigned military tasks. The last the strongholds will be defeated later tonight."

“Good,” he turned to Mariane, “-and the people?”

“For now, it’s livable. New settlements have sprung and trails leading to and fro are more dangerous. Prowlers and Flyers have adapted and know to attack at night. Cthulhu’s in a state of crisis. The ceasing of mining operations has left many unemployed and unable to eat. Wide-spread famine and poverty are on the horizon lest something changes. We’ve hampered said eventuality.”

Chapter 899: HCF

“The HCF is ready for battle,” intervened Yean, “-time is of the essence. We’re the voice and heart of the people, we need to take back what is rightfully ours. In the final battle; our benefactors have lined many villages – the elders and leaders are adamantly positive. If it comes to war, then war it shall.”

‘Humanitarian Celestial Faction,’ paused Igna, “-Yean, you realize tis a tall order?”

“Who are we kidding,” laughed Jae, “-my lord Igna, thou art the Devil. Marinda has witnessed what the devil does when times are rough.”

“Another massacre,” puffed the holder of the infamous title. He looked at the faces, no use employing deeper probes or deception to find the answer in between the lines, there was but a simple and great goal before them, the destruction of Marinda, dismantlement of the oppressing society, and the birth of a new age of equal opportunities and expansion, “-before we go to war,” he smothered the cigar and rose a tight sneer at those seated, “-there’s a truth about Marinda that you need to know. Marinda’s mana supply is finite, lack of resources stunts a populous growth. In layman’s terms, consider famine as an understated similar situation. Our Guardian Deity, Cthulhu, is an entity equal to gods and demons. I won’t go into much detail about his origin, the stories are far stretched, and honestly, there’s no point in reliving the despair he might have felt. For the years now, I’ve personally attended to his hunger and limited the impact of the enormous mana the guardian needs to stay sane and in control of the powers. In a time of sheer hunger, Marinda goes under into a lost domain of nothingness. Tis his place of respace, a place where the mana consumption stops and recovery begins. We’ve all experienced it, and the truth isn’t far out of the ordinary. Celestials and I refer to the Committee; was and perhaps is aware of the dangers presented before us. An increase in population strains the mana supply, similarly, the use of magic, even if tis a small fraction of the available supply; has an effect. Time ticks upon a doom’s day clock; we’re running on unrenovable power. On an instance of the second-hand snapping at 12, the backlash might rupture the careful balance of realms Cthulhu’s linked.”

“Wait?” they took a collective to inhale, the air waved confusedly. Yean, representative of the HCF’s military faction, threw his hand on the table, “-are you saying?” he thrust himself up, “-the fight for freedom was a lost cause? All we did was aggravate the situation?”

Elliana, the spokesperson of the Revolutionist faction, rose a saddened but determined crinkled upon the table, “-how long will it take to recover the mana needed for a one-blow victory?” They knew what she meant, and in a fit of anger, Marianne, first contact and a great help in humanitarian efforts in aiding the weak, fired her signature side-stare.

“Seriously, thee wish to cut the growing population?” her pitch heightened.

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“Don’t talk down to me,” rebutted Elliana, “-the economic strain of growth is one we can’t handle at the moment.”

“Then what, shall we slay in the thousands to gather enough mana for an all-out attack?” delivery of the unspoken idea placed the truth into perspective. ‘-We’ll be doing far worse than the prior regime,’ said the brief painful silence.

“We could always pass a decree of no mana usage?” narrowed Jae.

“Impossible,” throttled Elliana, “-without magic, many of the fundamental projects necessary for a mild glimpse at Nordway will be stopped. Mine’s stunted activity has harmed us more than them. We’re definitely tittering on the edge.”

“What then?” shrugged Yean, “-shall I order my men to slaughter countless lives?”

“If it lowers the mana consumption, then I’m for it,” said a woeful Elliana, “-Mariane, we need to look at the future. Natives reproduce quickly – coupled by Lord Haggard’s gracious donations of food and supplies to the weak; the battle against famine’s slowly coming at a manageable pace.”

“So, we sacrifice the lives we fought so hard to protect?”

“Would have been better to take the castle before going against Zeus.”

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Gustv and Igna waited patiently; in where such decisions ought to be made – a strong voice would generally dictate the course of action. There was good and bad in both situations – and it favored the genocide of many. On a chessboard – ‘twould simply be a matter of sacrificing a pawn to take on a bigger fish.

“Move to a vote,” fired Yean.

Gustv looked at Igna, saw but an empty expression, returned at the table and rose his hand, “-if it really comes to a genocide; I strongly recommend sending them out of Marinda. If they brave the ocean and reach Hidros, there may yet be a home for them. Sadly, I see no reason why the rudimentary ships ought to be sufficient.”

“Such a childish point of view,” rebutted Yean, “-false hope. Seriously? That’d be worse than what the Danio’s did.”

Marianne gnarled at the statement; her arms nearly flung for the man’s visage. Djen, watchful and understanding air, grabbed her thigh and squeezed her into a non-violent approach.

“How would a man react if one said; the revival of a family member or the safety of an entire tribe?”

“Pardon?” all rose a confused look at Igna.

“Answer my question,” he sipped.

“And we presume picking one is the loss of the other?”

“Correct.”

Yean instantly picked the first option. Marianne, Elliana, and Jae picked the second. After much self-deliberation, Gustv joined the fray and picked the first. *Crash,* “-I’d pick the third option,” added a beautifully annoying voice. Shades of blue on her head, lighter hue in her eyes, pinkly rose lips, and a palpable aura of dread and salty scent. Kuthl walked, pulled a seat beside Igna, and dropped her bottom, the room echoed in her unrestricted motions, “-am I wrong?” she placed her hair behind the ears and kindly smiled at Igna.

“Third option?” Djen’s eyes opened, “-she’s right. There was nothing that said we ought to pick either choice. The question was open-ended from the start. Tis assumptions and restrictions we added to make sense of the situation which eventually limited the thought process. And when Elliana asked, ‘-picking one is the loss of the other?’ Lord Igna simply replied, ‘-correct,’ which in no way meant an ultimatum.”

“What’s the point of the question?” wondered the intense Yean, “-am I just to make a decision without knowing the whole story?”

“Yes,” said Igna, “-that’s the point I was trying to make. We make a decision based on the limited information available. Sometimes, the choices present themselves and we can’t think outside the placed limitations. A sad but honest truth, a sentiment of staying to oneself, conforming to values placed on us by others; the very nature placed on us by birth. Here’s what the answer revealed. Yean’s straightforward and doesn’t much care for balancing the choices – he picked the best option available to him at that given moment. Fast decision-making is good for a leader, a general, a man responsible for the lives of many. And for argument’s sake, either choice meant nothing. Tis, not the answer I was looking at, but the process of coming to a said answer. Marianne, Elliana, and Jae gave their answers a few seconds apart from each other. Jae and Elliana are a single piece, I admire Jae’s some time-out-of-the-box approach, however, here, when placed in a difficult situation, as not to be placed behind a backlash, opted for the majority. Self-preservation, if things went wrong, they’d share the blame equally. Djen waited out the ultimatum and was first to realize what the last participant, Kuthl, had to say. All and all, such is how our council stands. Now,” he looked at all around, “-what will it be?”

“Do pardon the rude tone,” gulped a strong-headed Yean, “-we didn’t come here to be told the truth of why we make decisions. I want to know what Marinda’s going to do, how the people are going to be killed or saved. Nothing more, nothing less, simply, I need answers,” on said point, everyone else rallied and nodded affirmingly.

“Poor ol’ fellows,” said a click of the tongue, “-why the hurry? If Marinda was going to end in an hour, I’d used 59 minutes to think of an answer, not rush into the fold like an idiot. Haste isn’t always the answer, Yean, thee should realize, I mean, the battle of Carth was a blunder of military misdirection and impatience.”

“The battle of Carth,” the persistence aura dropped magically, “-I guess there’s truth in what you say.”

“Anyway,” said Igna, “-we’re finally gathered to pass judgment on what should happen next. Make no mistake, today’s the last meeting before Marinda’s thrown into another age.” Kuthl rose from her seat, shuffled to Igna’s back, and suddenly gave an affectionate and tender embrace. She leaned and gave a peck on his cheek, “-everyone, I have something to announce. The changing times forced our hands; therefore, to truly contain Cthulhu’s hunger, Kuthl and I have tied the knot. She’s a direct medium to his

power, through the influence of my wings, we'll make sure mana around Marinda is made available for everyone to use during the final battle. We picked the third option, the option in where only one has to suffer, an option in where an immortal is killed, and when thee looks at it, not a major loss as latter revives."

"And, can we have more information?" the curious Djen.

"You sure?" allured Kuthl.

Before the mouth formed, '-yes,' Djen tasted his own medicine; Marianne's sharp nails dug into his thigh, he yelped and shut his mouth.

"Right," said Gustv, "-what's the ritual about, and is there something we can do?"

"Nothing. Kuthl and I shall handle the other lesser dignified details in private. Yean, how quickly can the army be dispatched?"

"Two days for a force of three hundred to arrive and make camp. Another week or two for the reserves to make the trip."

"And if Rehn takes on the duty of homebase?"

"Three to four days for the entire army to march into the castle. Another day for the trip to Nordway."

"Xinfe will provide with air-support," proclaimed Djen loudly.

"The Azian Familia will gather supplies."

"Danio's will call on the branch families and pulled together a reserve force in case of a counter-attack."

"I'll join the assault team," smiled Jae, "-Lord Haggard?"

"The Shadow Realm Army will provide logistical and ground support. A unit of fifty men should suffice; Tania will command them."

"We're going to war?" blinked Gustv, "-I'll ask for support from the neutral factions. If it comes to the last resort, I'm willing to conjure the phoenix and rain hell upon the castle."

"We have an understanding," sipped Igna, "-coordinate with one another. On arrival of Rehn, start preparation immediately. Before we go into battle, at least three hours before we arrive – send a warning to inhabitants of Nordway. The locals are good assets in post-war. Take in prisoners if they surrender – be on guard, if surrender is a ploy, kill them, no mercy," back to Yean, "-how long until we besiege Einheim?"

"A week if not a month. It all depends on how we lower their defenses."

Djen watched Igna, "-speak," said the devil.

"The special unit's still at the capital. Shall I order them to sabotage the castle?"

A great idea; lights flickered in the collective dread, "-poison the castle well – should have a water system. Cut of food supply and send conflicting reports to the guards. Any advantage we have, we take." Thus, the council ended their discussions. Things looked great for the present – to their blissful

ignorance – the toll said operation would take on Igna was one dangerous, painful, and tiring. The location swapped for a hidden chamber within the volcano, there, Kuthl sat with revealing lingerie. Countless spells conjured around the room, symbols written in blood, grimoires stacked on an empty desk.

She bit her red lips coyly, “-tis time,” she smiled and rolled into bed; a deadly portal opened, “-give me the mana the guardian requires,” she laughed, “-show me what the devil can do.”

Chapter 900: War of independence

Beginning of the end; what else was there to say? Two weeks later, faes of sound and air flooded the capital, ‘-take heed, Celestials, the revolutionist faction have decided to attack and claim Nordway,’ echoed warnings. The operation was simple, tight, and efficient. The gathered mass of willing subjects found themselves onboard the floating isle – destination, a battlefield at a time which would be later remembered as, ‘-the war of independence.’

Troops deployed at strategical locations; per the devil’s promise – mana in the atmosphere lightened the bodily exhaustion and allowed for long operations. The transient homebase made launching counterattacks difficult. Remnants of the top were naught to be found, Igna fulfilled his promise to Terisa and her mother, Laurine. Her anger and rage would surely soothe if she’d been alive. Don’t dismay for the Celestials were far more cunning than anticipated. Generals whomst the devil defeated gathered as a last-line of strategical defense. Populous flee, the army marched into Nordway – the streets were empty. Many surrendered and were peacefully escorted to a nearby settlement built for prisoners and their kind alike. Until a victor was crowned, the townsfolk of Nordway was by all means war criminals. Discipline across the soldiers, their leaders, and officials told much of what kind of people led the battle. Blood kept to a minimum, the courteous warning before the invasion and overall respect endowed trust in the captives.

Five days later, after clearing the town and fighting guerilla forces scattered on the outskirts – Nordway was captured and a newer stronghold erected on the bridge leading to Einheim. Toughness in scaling the beast was the defenses and the dried surrounding moat. Not a mild drop but an opening to what seems the earth’s core. The floor was so deep just looking down sent tremors across the feeble mind. And here, the real battle began – the tenacity and power of the combined army would be tested. Canons roared day in and day out – Einheim’s defenses included a Celestial’s ability to control Prowlers and Flyers, a secret weapon kept from the general record. The diminished Celestial army bolstered their ranks with usable and monstrous fighters. Then again, when it came to a fight; blessed by the gods – the combined army blasted their prey singlehandedly through the aid of magical relics.

Days crept into weeks, and weeks eventually turned another year. A grueling battle, one where many lost their lives. However, by the rise of heroes amidst the rank – Einheim was conquered, the revolt’s flag planted high and mighty on the tallest tower. Goes without saying, the following days were filled with celebration, joy, and laughter. Previously dignified dynasties pleaded their case before the Devil. On the court, before an audience of ministers and stateman, Igna granted free passage to Celestials, and in his own word, “-hear me, the hand of justice’s been dealt. There need not be more bloodshed, those who vow their support and knowhow to birth a new Marinda will be granted shelter and welcomed as part of a united party. Marinda is as much ours as it is yours.”

“Thank you,” they said joyfully, “-we will pledge everything to the new leadership.” The court adjourned, officials intermingled and Igna shortly excused himself from the room, or so was the idea. A line of influential figures, including the likes of Gustv, Mariena, Elliana, Yean, and a few unnamed leaders of the neutralist faction barred the door. Others threw knowing glances at the sudden interjection. Hands in pocket, Igna rose his brow at Elliana, “-care to explain?”

“After deliberation,” she stood her ground, “-we’ve decided the revolutionist party’s leadership to be yours,” they smiled, “-tis no secret the Devil was he who vanquished the likes of Lixbin, Lombart, Zeus. As gratitude, we’d like for you to have the honor of leading Marinda into a better future. Installment of a new nation, the birth of something truly great.” The smiles were ear to ear, however, one wasn’t very fond of the idea, and it was Igna himself. He stepped back a few, lowered his guard, and fondly thought about the prospect.

“I must decline,” he said, “-my actions weren’t to climb the ranks. From the beginning, my intent was to sit back and take in the life around Marinda. Circumstances force my hand; here we stand today. I mean it with the warmest of intentions, Marinda is best left to the people of Marinda, you,” he stretched his arms as if to point to everyone, “-guide the nation, make it equal, make it what thee wish. I’m but a Devil, a leader of another nation, the King of Hidros. Duties bind me to my homeland sadly. I’m not all-powerful or all-knowing, I’m a man who observes, processes, and takes action. My greatest shame is how I stand before you today, I stay stripped of my title – played a fool by bigger nations and put to the sword by my own entourage for the safety of the people I vowed to protect. Humility is a virtue not easily found – and by the gods – I see the radiance of humbleness, kindness, and understanding radiating from everyone here. You were born Celestials, brought up for a life of leisure and power, instead, by ideals of the younger generations, questions asked if what thee possessed was right or wrong – a movement grew. A faint movement – flames of which were snuffed. Regardless if I was here or not, I certainly say that the movement would have taken fire one way or the other. I’m glad,” he smiled, “-glad to have been part of a legendary movement the country will never forget,” and looked at Gustv.

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“Tell us, Devil, who should lead us to a better future?” inquired a minister in the crowd.

He scanned the faces, crossed his arms, and thought, “-my ideal team consists of Gustv, Mariane, Elliana, Djen, and Yean. Gustv takes the mantle of leader and representative of Marinda. Mariane, as shown by her efforts and grit, would lead domestic affairs, she has a golden heart, an idealist who sees the world and populous as her own. Elliana’s a logical thinker, her know-how and background in trading from the Azian dynasty would counteract Mariane’s idealism. They’d make a great pair and I truly think they’d handle internal and external affairs quickly. Djen, a young man of quick wit and rapid growth; put him in any situation and he’s bound to show results as I was proven time and time again. Lastly, Yean, a strong-headed impatient man, don’t confuse with short-fused for he’s a talented general and warrior. The army respects and venerates his bravery, tales of the blockheaded general’s spread – compliment to the veracity shown when faced by a difficult situation,” he paused, “-Kuthl and Tania will make great additions. My student’s already proven her worth in leading the Shadow Army. All the pieces required for a strong foundation are already within reach. One needs not to look further for grass is always greener on the other side.” Warm words of encouragement had the entourage stunned and emotional.

The way he spoke, the way the words rolled off the tongue, and the way the tone flowed, there was something magical to it. Many, if not all those at the court choked.

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“Thank you,” saluted Yean, “-Lord Haggard, Devil or not, we know what caliber of man you are.”

“Marinda’s doors will always be opened,” thundered a teary Gustv, “-screw what the others say,” the formal speech shattered, “-don’t care about ’em. If they can’t appreciate the king they have, we’ll be happy to crown thee king!”

“I agree,” nodded Djen, “-to the man who brought me and my lover together. We’re eternally grateful.”

Elliana coyly looked away and breathed a few words, “-still owe me three gold coins.”

“Right,” he turned, the doors opened to bright light, “-I’ll see you all tonight, the new nation of Marinda, show the world who thee are,” the wrist flicked as ‘-goodbye,’ same as Staxius used to so many decades ago.

The grandness was lonely, he vaulted and flapped to the highest level of the castle and dove into one of the open-air walkways. The marble railings spiked with frosted blue tips shimmered in the sun, he sat with one foot on the ledge and the other off the railing, ‘-finally,’ he breathed, “-Laurine, Terisa,” a close fist rose to the chilly outside, “-rest in peace,” the grip opened into orbs of gold, “-may the afterlife be filled with happiness and love. We’ll meet again, someday, if the eternal hand of destiny wishes.”

Loud footsteps rattled behind, “-Teach!” cried Tania, “-how could you,” she sprinted for the balustrade and grabbed the top, “-I thought we were homies.”

“Excuse me?” he blinked, “-Homies?”

“Yes, I learn the word over the Arcanum...” she held her phone mindlessly, “-whatever. I thought we were an item?”

“An item?” he chuckled, “-look in the context of the words more, little Tania.”

“No, no, no. I’m not little anymore – look at me,” she twirled, “-I’m a full-grown adult. Father’s already got plenty of suitors trying to gain his favor.”

“I’m happy for you,” he said listlessly, “-there comes a time where the students have to graduate from their master’s side. You led my army flawlessly and truly helped change the tide of war. I wish I could have seen you in action, little Tania. I’m proud, truly.”

“Is that it?” she tightened her lips in annoyance, “-what about the grimoires, what about the symbols, what about the profound knowledge of magic and mana. I have so much to learn. Besides, a student graduates after beating her master,” she grinned, “-and there’s no way I’m ever going to win against the Devil.”

Igna looked at her with a saddened expression, “-you’d be surprised.”

“Then,” she threw her glove, “-I challenge thee, master, to a battle. Fight me as you would any other enemy, don’t hold back...”

"I won't."

The area changed to a quaint open space within one of the countless rooms. By the hanging swords, crests, weaponry, and training equipment – it'd be a practice area. Igna grabbed a training sword and stood squarely against Tania, a summoned handkerchief floated – white against the ground, the duo lunged for each other's life. *Crash,* Tania trembled, "-master?" she looked at her side and saw Igna on the ground with a slit throat, "-MASTER!" she cried, the wounds slowly healed by the efforts of the vampiric blood.

Gasp, he shot forward and breathed, "-I told you. There's nothing more I can teach."

"No," she said adamantly, "-that was so weak, even for you master. What happened?"

"Long story," clambered to a stand, "-and I rather not get into the details. By all means, the victory is yours, Tania. You're my first and best student, Princess of Faes, Enexia. The clockwork Grimoire of Fnex is yours, consider it my graduation gift." Long lashes blinked, Igna faded into the bright walkway, leaving the princess on her knees and head turned to the godly book. '-What happened during the war? Master's presence and lifeforce have weakened considerably. Kuthl must know something.' Fairy wings summoned at her back, she flapped outside and dove into the courtyard, "-Kuthl!"

"Tania."

"I need to know... what happened to my teacher?"

"Oh," kind on a stool overlooking an orchard, "-a lot actually," she licked her lips, "-I'm stunned the Devil was able to sustain my father's insatiable hunger for mana. The battle went for longer than expected; and, to make for the deficit, the devil dug into his own lifeforce to quell the Cthulhu's thirst. I'm surprised he's still alive."

"How could-"

"No," the lass shook her fingers, "-don't point the blame at me. The war was a long time coming, Igna understood the pros and cons, weighted the multiple outcomes, and chose what he thought was right," she exhaled, "-lifeforce or not, we're talking about Igna Haggard, an entity so powerful we can't fathom what lays deep within Trust for he says recovery will be but a simple process of rest."

Inside Rosespire II, "-it all comes to an end as I predicted from the start," dropped into a beanbag, "-some rest at last."