

## Death Magic 921

### Chapter 921: Reveal

Justice always prevails, the biggest lie of them all. He internally scoffed. Alpha on one side, Hidros on the other, Markus watched stumped from his throne, ‘-what can I do, what should I do? They were smug to lay siege on the city of dream, look at them now, a well-combed case took but a few words to dismantle and turn against us. I have to side with my people, otherwise,’ a cold gaze slithered on his back, making way around the arms and around his neck, ‘-what should I do?’

“Silence!” thundered Igna, lawyers stopped shy of choking each other, “-we’re in a court of law,” a glance at the judge refocused the emperor.

“Let’s take a few minutes’ break,” he proclaimed, thus the court paused at around 15:34. Everyone knew there was no further debate, Raide and Bleu won by a large margin. Judge and juries shuffled silently, head low and morale down, a thud, and they were gone.

Igna and party shortly found themselves back at the cottage. Celebratory drinks were ordered, “-what just happened?” said Kul swallowing her beverage, “-we were going to lose, I think.”

“Emphasis on think,” said Asmodeus, “-it all worked as planned.”

“Not necessary,” returned a sober Igna, “-the battle isn’t won.”

“I think it’s won,” commented a new face amidst the ground, a reporter by the name of Parker Jren. Suspicious looks crashed over the messy-haired gentleman. “-Igna,” added a familiar voice from the reporter’s shadow, “-no need to give him the death stare.”

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“Odgar,” rose the king, “-long time no see, friend.’

“Long time, friend,” returned the private investigator, “-meet Parker Jren, a renowned journalist in Melmark,” the bespectacled frightened visage nodded, “-it’s nice to meet you,” escaped faint murmurs.

The king took a few steps and eyed the Parker, “-care to elaborate on, ‘its won?’”

“They can’t fake the ruling,” he explained, “-everything’s taped and on record. My agency is known for being anti-imperial. Odgar pushed for me to get invited.”

“So, he’s the one,” nodded Igna, “-the one who spread the word, yes?”

“Yes, sire.”

“What are you waiting for, go on, have a drink, we’ve got guests.”

Opposite them arrived armed guards the prosecutor, Dhenrie Milo, “-there you are,” he gritted, “-Raide and Bleu Aizo!”

“Milo,” returned the duo, “-you’re rusty,” they laughed, “-always too quick and passionate. What is it, have thee come to settle?”

“One better,” he narrowed, “-the nobles have decided they want no part in the trial, therefore are pulling back. No part means no trial, the victory counted for nothing.”

“No, no, no,” Bleu shook his finger, “-this isn’t how it works. In or not, our clients have been harassed and went through much scrutiny. Chief of Police had her reputation slandered for why, trying to clean up the city of dreams?”

“Tis how we voiced,” resumed Raide, “-we’re counter suing for damages. The nobles will be extradited to Hidros per agreement of the Alrosian Alliance. There’s no escape, and even if they managed to be freed,” he smirked, “-you know what awaits next.”

“Should have thought more,” commented Medusa, “-don’t throw rocks when thy house is made of glass.” Her analogy rang true, perfect words for said instant.

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“No,” cut across the crowd, “-don’t you even dare.”

All watched, perplexed as to why Igna suddenly spoke, Dhenrie’s heart sank, “-how?”

“I know everything,” returned the devil, “-raise an arm and I swear, there won’t be a soul left. Take this,” a note summoned, “-take this to the nobles, the Patek’s,” heaviness in the cottage eased, leaving the patrons space to breathe.

Milo hurried across the street, doors clacked until the judge and jury sat before a council of representatives, “-here,” said the lawyer sliding the note over.

“What is this?” narrowed a masked figure, “-I made it clear, either bring their heads or a settlement.”

Milo shrugged, rifle rose for his head, “-I don’t care anymore,” he exclaimed, “-what I saw was far worse than thy guns. Go ahead,” he grabbed a guard’s raised gun and pressed it against his temple, “-give the order, it’s your responsibility, we did the best we could, greasing palms of those who came and went as far as compromising the emperor. I tell you, there’s nothing we can do – we’ve pushed-” \*BANG,\* brain matter splattered across the walls.

“He was talking too much. Have someone clean up the mess,” cigar lit, “-let’s see this letter,” juries were akin to hostages, emperor Markus had no say and kept silent. The note unfolded over the table, “-dear ringleader, or should I say, Jula Valentino,” the cigar dropped, “-Been a while since we spoke, yes? I admit the plan was great – who would have known Valentino was related to the Patek, a relation kept hidden so as to not raise attention. I’m sure you’re sweating bullets; as wife to my friend, Odgar Codd, I issue the two simple options... HA, HA, HA, HA. You thought it’d be so easy? No, my friend, I’ve seen far worse from people closer to me. Don’t reach for your gun or look around suspiciously,” the note predicted her move, “-I’ll take my time, death’s too easy. What I have in mind is far worse. Now, who’s the traitor, the one who spilled the beans as they say? Secret of Valentino and Cimier is one unknown to most of the world save those directly related. Remember the incident a few years ago when an entity pushed for my assassination, it happened then, I met him, the heir to the Patek dynasty, a shell of a corpse. Necromancy is one of my many talents, wasn’t hard to extract his memories, and would you look at it, I’ve known, yes, I’ve known for a long while. The wise are patient, might have taken years – still, here I am, the one who holds your very fate. Chief of Police, Jula Valentino, on my title of Devil,

you'll serve the remainder of thy life as my slave," a small inscription resembling a blue orb shot out and burnt into her neck, "-think hi."

'Hi?'

'How goes it,' thundered across her mind, '-do you enjoy my gift, of course, you do. None can go against a slave pact, especially when the signer is me. From this very second, Jula Valentino, I own you, and I'll do as I please.'

She slowly reached for her gun, '-good idea,' he said, '-take the gun,' her arms subconsciously snapped at the weapon, '-and point it at the judge,' her body reacted, '-treason, would be a poetic end, killing the emperor and forced to live a life of a run-away dog. Too bad the blood in thy vein's worth something to Odgar. I feel bad for the little ones – how could a mother fall so low. Are you a victim or the assailant, who honestly cares.'

'Drop the weapon,' she fought, '-my arms, they won't move, and this voice,' her face clenched, '-I can't, it's too loud.'

'Point upwards and fire,' \*bang,\* rattled the room, guards and representatives alike watched, "-Hey, are you alright?" inquired a member of her entourage.

"Yeah, I felt like shooting," Igna synced and spoke through her, "-we might have to lose this battle."

"Come on, you're Rlie, spokesperson for Patek. Surely the conglomerates would allow us, the nobles, to fall?"

"We could settle," she suggested.

"With what, they already have everything."

"Authority," suggested Markus, "-we give them control over the Duchy of Owan, it'll include Odgawoan and the surrounding region. United Nations of Alrosia is one of the same, they already run the place from the shadows, why not make it official?"

"Absurd," echoed the nobles, "-grant them land and it's an indirect loss."

"We have too," added Rlie, "-either they have the Duchy or everyone here is at risk of being extradited to Hidros, many share the asset with Rotherham who I remind is under Queen Courtney's direct control. King Igna could easily freeze our assets and systematically force us into poverty."

Markus sighed, "-the lawyer was right, we've abused Hidros for too long, you've abused them. I always stood by to save my family... what now, there's no credibility in what the Conglomerates have to say. We're disunited and on the verge of collapse."

"Give them Owan," suggested one noble, "-if it appeases their thirst then we're fine."

'Look at the house of card crumble,' whispered through her mind, '-a soft breeze and it comes crashing down. Alpha's capitalist stain will never be fully wiped, and I can't blame the empire for the leaders who've allowed the land to be so corrupt. We'll speak very soon, Jula. I don't take betrayal lightly, etch this in thy heart – the Devil owns thy soul.'

Odgar gave a few taps, “-Igna, you there?”

“My apologies,” he rose from a comfy seat, “-my mind drifted. Just look at the way everyone’s celebrating. Brings warmth to thy heart, does it not?”

“I know the warmth,” he said, “-last time I felt it was when we closed the case on who murdered my father. We all worked together, Jula helped greatly in the investigation, never thought I’d land a lady like her, she’s amazing.”

“I’m sure she is,” smiled Igna, “-I’m sure she is.”

“Right, I should leave,” Parker waved in the distance, “-I’ll see you around, friend.”

Odgar held a massive smile whilst leaving the cottage. Starix slipped onto Igna’s seat and stared, “-master, what was written in the note?”

“What note?”

“One you gave to the lawyer?”

“A greeting card. We should get ready; trial resumes in a few minutes.” Asmodeus, Kul, Medusa, Mammon, and Diamon left first, leaving Bleu and Raide to settle on the next plan of action.

“Mind if I join?”

“Please, master, we were finishing the details, why?”

“Raide, Bleu, heed my words carefully. The trial’s over, the nobles will agree to settle.”

“Pardon?”

“When the request of a settlement eventually arrives, listen carefully for they might offer land.”

“Why would they?” both exchanged looks and turned to Igna who vanished, leaving a bat-shaped mist.

Buckets toppled, Igna rematerialized inside a dark storage room, “-come forth, Vengeance,” he arrived with one knee on the ground, “-how may I serve, master?”

“Attend the trial in my stead, we’ll swap places if the emperor asks for us to join the deliberations.”

“Understood, master,” the mist vanished, ‘-this place is dusty,’ he observed, \*-knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing: Partial Realm Expansion,\* a close space swallowed the furniture into a simple square of white and gray. \*Clap,\* footsteps arrived outside the door,

‘-why am I here?’ blinked Jula, ‘-my head hurts bad, did I dream the whole ordeal?’ Shuffles gripped her attention; warped palms rushed and pulled the confused lass into a realm of emptiness and dread. A simple chair rose in the middle, one on which sat Igna – teeth sharpened, long nails – emotionless eyes and a bloodied halo over the head, “-take a seat,” he said, she ragdolled over and sat on a sudden materialization of a completely white chair, “-welcome to my domain, o’ vixen.”

Fear gripped her heart, the legs locked, “-I-I-I-IGN”

“DON’T!” thundered, raw power exploded at her face, “-take my name,” lowered the voice, “-with your mouth.”

“I C-C-C”

“Shut up,” the eyes widened, a humanoid figure from the ground and slammed her head on a conjured table, “-tell me,” he rose from his seat, “-people are afraid of a lot of things, some more than others, ultimately, everyone’s scared of something. Scripture says, ‘-hell is but one’s fear and guilt,’ the concept is very interesting. Hell does exist, not as a judgment cell but as another world,” he leaned over her petrified expression, “-Jula Valentino, I applaud the act. Hat’s off,” he reached over and tipped a top hat that summoned just for the expression, “-alas, the ploy grew into a lie thee couldn’t escape. Enough talk,” he moved closer, “-look into my eyes and tell me, what’s your greatest fear?”

“C-C-Casting c-couch.”

“I see,” he smiled, “-lady Valentino has a strong sense of dignity,” the room stretched, carrying Igna further, \*clap,\* countless men and demon-like creatures rose, “-when they smell fresh meat,” he cackled, “-there’s no satiating their lust,” \*snap.”

“MERCYYYYY”

Chapter 922: Emperor’s requies

Winded echoes of a trauma-ridden sigh settled. Heaviness of a sunken heart, the increasingly itching sentiment along her skin, want to scratch and pull blood; pure infused rage and sadness, Valentino breathed her last breath, chilly wind blew, sending chills. ‘-What have I done...’ silent cries rose to a cartoonish sky; muddled colors, no sense of time, all but the faded shadows of her attackers remained still. ‘-I screamed, no one heard, I pled, no one cared, I fought, lost an arm,’ tears rolled; all reached a stand – a pause in an unknown world, tremors rocked her body, fear and flashbacks stormed her mind, one arm rose in a boxer position, the legs wailed – alas, a minute \*snap,\* fluttered, “-hell has just begun,” said a silently ominous voice. Green hue scanned her body, pain from before vanished, the wounds healed; leaving feathers to linger – she looked, catching a faint glimpse of a gleeful being, arch-angel Raphael.

Meanwhile, cloaked behind gated gates, Emperor Markus Sultria and an entourage of the plaintiffs gathered before the courtroom. Both parties met at the door, “-where’s Dhenrie?” asked Raide.

“I’ll be stepping in his stead,” commented a familiar voice, Lady Maya, Lord Culstan’s attending lawyer, the noble was spotted inside sat at the opposite camp, he rose a familiar wave at Asmodeus.

“Don’t be led astray,” she added, “-we were asked by the emperor to join in the prosecution.”

“And?”

“We’ll settle,” said a representative of the nobles, “-seeing as tis a crucial moment of the deliberation, we’d ask for the reporter to refrain-”

“We understand,” slashed Kul, “-the quicker the case end, the faster we’ll all be home eating a warm meal.”

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“As thee says, lady Kul,” nodded the representative respectfully.

There it was, the closing of the curtains on a heavy affair. Both sides understood who had won and who’d lost. Maya was simple and effective in relaying her demands and went as follows, “-a settlement is best for avoiding an empire-wide scandal. Odegawoan and the chief of police have proven themselves to be dignified. Going from what the police report says of the incident – the lives lost were indeed PMCs of another nation. The teleportation device is heavily damaged for further investigation; thus, we conclude the police force did their duty in maintaining peace. The imperial Department of internal affairs and department of public-order as well as the military will be issued ultimatums to stop any investigations on the matter. The murder of Haania, on inconclusive information, is accidental far as we view it.”

“Alright. For forgetting what’s happened here, and I assume dropping case involved nobles, what’s thy offer?”

“Duchy of Owan,” said the emperor rising from his throne, “-may I have a private moment with King Igna?” collective inner-circle looked at the king of Hidros, “-master,” tapped Medusa, “-pardon me,” he snapped to reality, “-I was thinking about what to wear,” quick on his feet, the duo moved to a back room, leaving the court confused and relieved. No longer did the trial follow tradition; high profile individuals meant more leeway on the methodology.

Raide turned to Bleu, throwing his shoulder in bafflement.

“How did master know?” whispered Bleu.

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“I don’t know...” they looked at Starix, “-give me a moment,” he shut his eyes and gathered the events in order. ‘-Knowing the nobles, there’s no way we were going to win. Forget moments before the trial, begin when we arrived – no, after that, remember, subtle clues, changes in emotion, yes,’ he locked onto an event, ‘-no, don’t you dare. I know everything,’

‘There it is, the missing piece. We conveniently forgot about the outburst – felt strange. Armed guards, a disheveled lawyer, and his sudden disappearance. In conclusion, the note, master must have discovered a truth that rattled the noble party to their core – but what? Milo is gone, possibly dead or kidnapped.’

“Figure anything?” whispered Asmodeus. He shot opened his eyes to an array of intrigued faces’ haunted sneer, “-sadly not.”

“What?” disappointed rolls and shrugs swept the attendants.

“A note.”

Curiosity flickered, rekindling flames of intrigue, “-tell us more.”

“All changed when master handed a note to Milo. Notice, he’s not around... we can assume he gave the note and was not well received for it,” a small debate sparked on the nature of why Milo had disappeared.

“Emperor Markus,” bounced around minimally decorated walls, “-I’m here, what is it thee wish to discuss?” A paranoid jitter had the man stare longingly at curtains and walls, “-we’re alone, I assure you.”

“I’m sorry,” he dropped onto the opposite seat, a once lovely full-head of hair laid as faded memory, wrinkles scrapped his forehead and cheeks, despite the heritage – the shell of a man sat with lesser meat on his bone, “-I’m tired.”

“Tired of what?”

“Of being thrown around. My wife kicked me out the manor,” he rose a dejected look, “-all because of the damned Alosia Alliance.”

Igna tossed his finger in, ‘-don’t,’ motion. “-The alliance was a good idea. You and I are family, memories I share with you during that concert vividly bring a smile. Our intentions were good but the way by which we ran headfirst was idiotic. For once, I didn’t realize how corrupt Alphaia was and you didn’t realize how headstrong and vindictive Hidros is. When dealing with my people, one must abide by the long-standing idea of survival of the fittest. Alphaia’s backers exploited us for all we had, pushing away Easel Run Gard and Arda in the process.”

“Don’t change narratives,” fired Markus, “-I know we’re corrupt, so do you. Odegawoan, the city of dreams has always been under Raven’s control in legal and illegal matters. I turned a blind eye.”

“For the money,” said Igna, “-with us at the helm, the families are under control and maintain a balance of power where everyone wins. Tell me, I’ve read the reports, Odegawoan pays more tax than any other realm in the empire, money which goes straight into thy coffers. I asked éclair to help the imperial family; Alphaia’s ruled by money and I made sure to send a fair share, brother-in-law. What’s happened to the finances? Well, let me guess – conglomerates got wind of the profits and moved against the imperial family. Big sister’s preoccupied with maintaining the status quo, and you, unable to see schemes were led astray. I don’t blame anyone, honestly, what happens happened. I was assassinated, well, faked my death to see the world powers filled their roles.”

“I can’t anymore,” he exhaled, “-I tried to fight against them, the conglomerates, but I couldn’t. When the court order was issued, I knew nothing of the matter – they briefed me five minutes before arrival, and here I learn of a teleportation device being used to instigate war in my domain... what the FUCK?” he cried, dropping clenched fists upon the table, “-I’M DONE!”

“Calm down,” said Igna raising his hand, “-here,” a potion flask manifested, “-drink this.”

Red with frustration, the drink seamlessly shot back; cold refreshment rose from within, “-I feel relaxed,” he blinked, “-what is this?”

“God’s ale, refined to a point of ecstasy. No cause for worry for I brewed the beverage. Tell me, are you calm?”

“Yeah,” a genuine smile curled, “-been a while since I’ve felt free from my troubles. I’m sorry about everything, I never wanted Eira to be in harm’s way – locking her in the manor was the only option. Playing the fool is my only trump card, years of acting like a fool’s made me a fool. Not afraid to admit the scope of intrigue’s far beyond what I can process anymore. I tried to follow thy uncle’s footsteps, the

great king Staxius, there was something magical about him, the way he moved and walked, the instant he entered a room – a comforting heaviness gripped the heart for thee knew he was on thy side. Chronicle of the Haggard Dynasty inspired me to walk in his footsteps – a true unrivaled genius.”

“I know, and I understand the feeling. My uncle was great but there’s something thee needs to know.”

“Yeah?”

“He was a fool.”

“If Staxius Haggard is a fool then what am I, what are we?”

“No, not literally, let me explain. My uncle’s story starts as a man born and raised on a battlefield – built to be a killing machine by his father, the experiment sought to turn an elementless kid into a powerhouse; in the end, the loss of his soul, a heart that could feel made him literal death for mages in the battlefield. The story’s long though one commonality remains – he was always alone, never turning to anyone, always keeping his fear and pain to himself. Self-sacrifice, taking hurt for someone else – for those who care for him. What sets my uncle apart wasn’t his strength nor his murderous intent, rather, his intellect; imagine a man creating a whole field of studies without having prior teachings, he founded Magiology, a core research subject in today’s age. Do you want to follow in his footsteps? No, even my big sister – his true successor was unable to reach a fragment of what he was; the thirst to reach her father’s standard eventually led to her downfall. She played an unwilling hand, turned against him, was envious and angry about never achieving her dream of standing by his side, and sadly, the cultivation led to his death. The story’s known too but a few and it’s a sad one. I see the same thing happening to you,” a pensive look held Markus’ face focused, “-tis the Haggard curse. Anyone who follows in his footsteps will see the world turn against them.”

“What about you?”

“Me? I’m Igna Haggard, son of Courtney Haggard. Like big-sister, I have the blood of Staxius Haggard in my vein seeing they were twins. A king’s as strong as the people around him, I vowed not to repeat the mistake my uncle did. Instead, I followed the path of assembling strong people, companions and friends I proudly call family. It’s cliché I know, power of unity and all that – however, there’s a reason why ancient texts speak of unity. I’m no way near as powerful as my uncle, still, I take pride in what I’ve achieved, alone, I’m not that strong; but,” he smirked, “-if the time ever comes when I’m in trouble or at an impasse,” terrifying shadows rose at his back, “-my guardian deities will swoop in and save the day.”

“I’m impressed, yet I fear I’ve already stepped beyond the point of no return. Alpha’s gone – nothing to be done or changed. Eira warned me about signing a deal with the Empire, I heeded her call but not the conglomerates, they willingly expanded into Wracian territory. Trade between our empires strengthens each day – and their influence slowly takes effect on a few of the people converting to Luciferianism. It’s a cultural invasion and I can’t stop it; the imperial family is but for show.”

‘Markus’s not a fool, he knows what’s happening.’

“I’m relinquishing the Duchy of Owan to you, King of Hidros. Develop the land and rise the City of Dreams to heights unseen to us.”

“What about you?”



"I don't know," he exhaled, "-the drug will wear off, I feel my paranoia returning," he gave the same look to when Loftha died, "-take care of Eira."

Before another word was said, a decree laid upon Igna's lap and the emperor vanished into the hallway to conclude the trial.

'-Idiot,' Igna looked at the ceiling with a hallowed expression, "-Markus, the path you're about to take will lead to death. I've seen that look before," scroll in hand, "-who am I to get in the way of a courageous man. Know, Markus, for when the time comes, I'll know," he exhaled, "-I'll know when it ends."

The case ended, leaving representatives of the nobles visibly irritated, Emperor and King locked eyes outside, '-Igna, you know, don't you?' time slowed, '-if the path of the Haggard's leads to misfortune, tis my fate.'

### Chapter 923: Urgency

Going by the King's reaction, out of the celebrating party – Medusa took notice of his demeanor. Nothing had changed, for the most part, still, her longing glance couldn't shake a feeling of unrest. Asmodeus and Mammon eagerly made plans, "-master, let's go celebrate the acquisition of Owan."

"No at the moment," replied Igna, "-I ought to see a matter completed. Would you care to escort the others home?"

"Are you not coming with us?" interjected a somewhat tipsy Kul.

"No, not right now," he said, breaking from the crowd headed to Odgawoan. Dusk painted the sky a gloomy dark, stars were unseen for the Melmarkian nightlife was loud. Time elapsed, most left – a victory for Raven and Odgawoan.

King found himself strolling up the Monstrio Boulevard, named after the first movie that grossed an enormous hundred million. Shops varied in themes, many focused on current trends, selling merch of popular shows. He watched, drawing some similarities to home. Passed the boulevard, crossing many intersections, a brief hop on a flyover – a five-minute tram ride laid a religious compound. A holy church belonging to God Lucifer. 'Markus spoke true,' he shuffled into the courtyard, a security guard nodded for the church took visitors 24/7, amber street lamps added to the rustic Victorian-style borne from the Wracian Empire. Crest of Lucifer carved above the open doorway – he stepped in and immediately sensed a burst of energy; a pair of wings, one of the many signs symbolizing their god glowed, '-the energy's strong,' shrugged Igna.

"Welcome to our church," said a sister in religious robe, her fingers interlocked in prayer, "-how can I be of help?" she asked. Over her rather small stature laid others shabbily dressed individuals – attendants graciously guided them through the western door.

"I came for a simple visit," he smiled, "-might I take a seat?"

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"Go on ahead," she smiled, "-take as long a time as you need, our lord surely watches over thee."

"Sure, he does," grinned Igna, "-have a good evening, sister."

“Thank you, sir.”

‘Something inside forced me to visit the church,’ down upon the cold wooden bench, the focus immediately turned at the upwardly sloped ceiling.

“Igna,” a little figure puffed into reality.

“Staxius.”

“Ignaaa,” growled another.

“Alfred.”

“Why are we at the church?” they asked, perched upon his shoulder.

“Thought it was you who asked of me to come here?”

“No, no, no,” they synced, “-Lucifer’s place of worship is the last area we ever want to be.”

“Surely, he’s not that bad?” said rhetoric jest.

“Igna...”

“Fine, fine, cut the death stares.”

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“If nothing’s of interest, we’re leaving.”

“See you,” they puffed, leaving Igna alone with his thoughts. Strangely, on having some shut-eye, the right palm warmly burned, ‘-what’s this?’ he stared at the mark of Lucifer, the wings, ‘-right, reacting with the church, are we?’ Prayers inside fueled the wings, a burst of energy physically showed their mark – golden lines ran up the arm, into the shoulder, up the neck, and dove into the right eye.

‘My eyes, it hurts,’ reality shattered, ‘-the lenses are unable to control my,’ he shut ‘em close, only to reopen after a brief minute, the thudding pain at the back of the pupils eased, ‘-where am I?’ area altered into a break within space and time. Lucifer’s wings flourished at his back, the bench shortly turned dust – a massive castle of golden glow hovered in the distance, below laid nothing, the wings flapped, he blinked, the emptiness turned mana, mana turned element, and elements brought forth a countryside, rooftops dotted about, tiny heads moved to and fro, large fields of crops headed into the distance only to be stopped by forests, dips in the ground, or mountains. More importantly, whistles passed his ear and fluttered for the castle, rather, behind the massive structure. ‘-I can tell that thing isn’t small nor big, from here it looks immense – up close I shudder.’

Drawn by curiosity and the pulsing of the crest, Igna flapped – shot across the skies akin to a bullet, he passed the previous whistles, ‘-angels?’ massive walls rose in height, he slowed to a halt and landed – seeing there were angel-like figures following said path. The wings beautiful folded in resting position, many of the bystanders looked at him strangely, to which he returned at them with equal strangeness. Sunlight snuffed, shadows of the gigantic walls swallowed the ground in a darker hue, he followed the geometrically pleasing arrangement of bricks eventually arriving at the foot of the archway.

Senior staff pointed at a few unruly angels, ‘-this is all too similar to a school...’ he cringed and skipped to the staff, “-pardon me,” asked Igna, the sterner looking of the trio rose his head, thrusting upon the barrel-like figure, “-what!”

“You see, I’m lost and in need of direction.”

Silence, the figures lowered his gaze and dropped in prostration, “-my lord, thee’ve come,” he sobbed, “-at last, the city of angels is cleansed. My liege, my lord, my savior, welcome home,” they cried, “-we’re pleased to see you again, it’s been so long, so long indeed,” they cried, “-Lord Lucifer, welcome home.”

‘Lord Lucifer?’ he reached for his phone, nothing, a downward glance showed completely differing clothes, he tapped around, ‘-everything’s gone, medals and the shows, a military outfit?’

“Please follow us,” a squad of imposing auras dropped, “-my liege, follow us.”

A large office rose, escorts of earlier vanished, leaving but confusion, ‘-principle...’ he walked and shortly caught his reflection off a full-body mirror, ‘-blonde hair, a white and gold outfit, my face’s changed a bit... hold on,’ the expression dropped, “-I look like Lucifer.”

“Correct,” a presence walks through the walls, “-you look like Lucifer but are not the master for the master has been stripped of his power. False god, how dare thee take the appearance of my master, my lord, my savior.”

“Quiet,” he rose a finger above his shoulder, ‘-focus, think back, where am I?’ a golden ring circled the white pupil, ‘-there, I found it, my way back,’ another blink and the ring vanished, ‘-I’m in Lucifer’s realm, my guess would be a reaction between the symbol and the prayers.’ An awkwardly angry stare glazed through the reflection, “-why are you silent?”

The entity pointed to their mouth, “-right, speak,” a tape slowly pulled from the lips and faded into sparks.

“Who in the world are you?”

“My question precisely,” he made way to the desk and sat, “-explain.”

“I’m Luci, a servant born to aid my master. I’m an archangel in service of Lucifer.”

“Igna Haggard, the one who dethroned Lucifer. Tell me, Luci, are we in Lucifer’s personal domain?”

“Yes, we’re in Ragno – the dimension ruled and guarded by my lord.”

“Tell me more about why I see angels instead of demons?”

“My lord is a god, therefore, those born to his realm are angels who serve him without question.”

“What about Lucifer, where is he?”

“We do not know, for the last time we felt his presence was in a visit to the mortal realm.”

“Last question, why are you answering?”

“A one who dethroned lucifer and assimilated his wings, symbolic to his majestic power and strength – the name Lucifer is technically yours seeing as thee bare his wings.”

“Makes sense,” he laid into the chair, “-stand up.” The entity obeyed, “-take on thy true appearance,” flesh added to bones, clothes soon covered limbs, a young man rose, or so it seemed for on closer examination, he bore feminine traits as well, “-kneel.” Luci dropped on one knee, “-at ease,” to which the angel rose upright with a frustrated squint.

“Speak thy mind.”

“Who do you think you are, coming here and ordering me around. I’m an archangel in service of Lucifer, I will not bow my head again to a false lord.”

Unable to pass the chance, “-kneel,” he ordered through a smug grin, the angel dropped once again, “-at ease,” he laughed. Rather than standing, the angel simply turned over and sat, “-are you happy?”

“Very happy,” he smiled, “-it’s been fun, too bad I can’t bare another instant in Lucifer’s place. May thy lord someday return,” \*snap,\* sermon ended, devotees exchanged words of praise with their comrades.

‘What a strange experience,’ the church soon remained but an object in the distance, ‘I should really check on Valentino,’ \*Teleportation.\*

Guttural screams rattled, “-enough,” he thundered, approaching the unsightly Chief, a wave healed scratch and bite marks dotted all around her body, another gesture clothed and settled the sobbing lady on a white chair, a table and chair rose per Igna’s step. Burgers, fries, and soft drinks materialized, “-some fast, comfort food,” he winked.

Fear captured her heart and soul, there laid no sense of self in her empty focus, “-don’t act insane,” one handheld the burger the other manifested threads linking to her brain, “-there, should be normal.”

\*Gasp,\* “-FUC-”

“No swearing.”

“What am I?”

“Eat,” he ordered, “-the vivid memories will serve as a reminder not to betray me again. Let’s talk future, as spokesperson to Cimier and Patek, I want you to go on as if nothing’s changed. I don’t much care for the connection; we got what we wanted and more. The result is going to affect Markus, keep me informed if any assassination plot gets announced.”

“A spy,” she ate.

“No, a slave,” another bite, “-the only reason your alive is because I allow so. Don’t get a big head else you won’t be the one who dies, rather, it’ll be the child and husband who suffers. Odgar is my friend, it would pain my heart to take aim at him, but guess what,” he smirked, “-I’m the devil. If I have tortured your child and husband for the whole of eternity, I’ll do so. Finish the food and scurry home. Odgar’s waiting,” he gripped and pulled her arm, “-look here, tis the symbol of our pact, a reminder to what’ll happen if thee ever go against me, yes?” a muffled snuffle stopped by a snap, releasing Mantia and allowing for Valentino to run. Igna kicked his foot up the table and enjoyed the food.

‘Duchy of Owan is now a part of Hidros and mine to rule, I control the Viscounty of Glenda and Duchy of Owan. Parting with his most valuable land will paint a target on the emperor’s back – the look he gave, Alpha’s going to be overturned. A coup d’état is very likely – nobles don’t take lightly defeat.

Conglomerates have had their eyes on his land, latter out of the picture, saddens me to say Markus might die... and if he dies, the throne will fall into princess Gallienne's hand. No,' he sat upright, '-they won't attack now, would they?'

\*Urgent Call,\*

"Hello?"

"...Help," crackled, "-att-," it cut off, leaving him distraught, '-what if that was what they wanted. A reason to rise against the nation – Markus's look earlier was a warning,

\*-calling éclair,\*

"Hello, master,"

"No time for greetings. éclair, have Raven take up arms and mobilize around Odgawoan," the call transferred to Raven, "-everyone, listen closely, I want every armed force out on the street, contact law enforcement and ask for all calls to be routed, Alpha's going to war."

"Master, surely thee don't think-"

"Reports from the northeast, a large platoon was spotted."

"DAMN IT!" \*teleportation,\* a leap and thus rose a quiet and dark seaside, '-the guard station's empty,' he sprinted to the manor and saw icicles and ice throughout the property, "-master?"

"Starix, éclair, take command – it's happened, the conglomerates have waged war. Call in an emergency council home, strengthened our defenses."

"Understood," the call went dark, leaving Igna to wander the wasteland of ice. \*See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth.\* '-traces of Maicite,' a barrier of ice blocked the entrance, '-sister, tell me you're alive,' he scanned, \*woosh,\* '-death element, I feel it, not mine... another death reaper.'

#### Chapter 924: Eruption

A robed figure stood perched over the manor's roof. Starlight reflected against the mirrors, a distant clamor rang akin to the falling of a gong. Igna faced the opponent with an emotionless expression. Robe faded into the night, the devil shifted his head, the presence reappeared, "-we meet again," said the entity.

Igna turned and smiled, "Exia Longeth, one of the inheritors of death, I was under the impression Draebala kept thee?"

"After my defeat," pure rage held his tone superseded by an enviously murderous intent, "-I was lost, didn't know what to do. I wanted revenge, I wanted my companions to return and there," he paused, patted his face as if to check the expression, "-I heard it, the voice of salvation, the voice of truth, the voice of my master."

"Pleasant," said Igna, "-Longeth, I mean no offense when I say the conversation doesn't interest me. Far as it concerns – you were defeated and had the companions slain for lack of strength. If tis a cliché of, '-

I'm here to take from thee,' I'll strongly recommend against for you see,' he vanished to stand whispering behind Exia's guard, "-we don't have to fight. Looking around, the scene tells a pretty story of a powerful entity trying to kill the Empress; unfortunately, tis my duty to safeguard the empress and her daughter. The orders thy master gave has been completed, retreat from here else," he vanished again to stand above the manor holding an orb, "-death will be the last master thee answer too."

"Igna," stood at the devil's back, "-I'm powerful..."

"Yeah, still slow on the uptake," having followed the devil, Exia teleported behind to show he was capable of similar if not faster movement. Alas, there was much less the man could have done, for in one hand suspended an orb and the other, quietly wrapped around his waist laid another spell ready to strike, "-a battle of getting into one's weak spot, seems I've won, I bet my spell's faster."

"Ha-ha-ha, the voice said thee liked to bluff, and here I'm going to call said bluff and show I'm the better version!"

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"Ah," he spun, caught the vaguest glimpse of Exia, and blew, a green like hex flashed onto the man's forehead rendering him immobile, "-the hex of cursed time," said Igna looking upon the attacker, "-Exia Longeth to whoever thee serves, I've reached a stage where I need not fear gods or demons. Heed my words when I say I don't wish thee harm. You are a victim as much as the world is – you lost thy companions and for that, I'm terribly sorry. Words aren't enough to relay my sentiment which is why," a scroll manifested from thin-air, "-as an act of good faith, I give you this; a god-level scroll of healing."

"Revival?"

"Yes, revival. I know the body of Alexia's kept safe for the day when thee can revive fallen comrades."

"How did?"

"We're the same," he said coldly, "-the world shapes those around us, and those around us are shaped by our actions. It's an afford to the title of Death. Serving a master short of thineself, look to the stars when the world seems confusing for the universe holds the truth to many o' things. Focus on knowledge, forsake the thirst for blood, and trust in the word of a fellow man who inherited Death," in solidarity, Igna knelt and patted the man's shoulder, "-The Curse of Misfortune is one we can never escape. I've lost family, friends, lovers, fortune, and worse of all, I lost myself. We can never escape the daunting curse laid on us by fearful deities – the voice is using that pain for its advantage. Draebala is a good realm strife by hardship as is – the bonds thee'll make will be worth every bit of effort given. Exia Longeth, it is good to network, however, here's a word of advice from a political thinker, "-he who helps another man to power is setting himself up for ruin, as said power has been brought either by diligence or force, of which both are suspect to the man who has newly become powerful." 1

"Meaning?"

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"The man who comes in power will always be wary of the means used for his ascension. Therefore, he who stands at the top will always be cautious of those who helped. In a way, the thinker makes a point against the idea of being rewarded for helping another."

“What then?” he unfroze, “-what should I do?”

“Turn yourself to learning. Learn from the mistakes of others and don’t be baited to g against me again. I swear, Exia if thee exhaust the fraternization showed, there lays a world far worse than Draebala. ”

“Understood,” arms rose in surrender, “-Igna, allow me to confess that I bear no ill-will for the death of my companions. I understood what had to be done – the voice offered salvation and power, hence I followed in hopes of us crossing paths again. I learned about history from a book, a chronicle written by a lady named Serene. The empress is safe, I wasn’t able to reach her – the librarian of Nexsolium is truly a strong one,” a transient pupil blinked into life at Exia’s feet, said eye transformed into a nasty mouth wherein it chowed, turning matter into pure essence, “-my time’s near,” sighed Exia, “-thank you for the insight, I will strive to be better.”

“Don’t let the curse of misfortune win, for there can be co-existence. Until we meet again, Exia Longeth,” a smile was all the response needed. What felt like hours was but a few minutes on the watch, Igna hopped off the ceiling and broke into the manor, wounded retainers gasped for air, many laid dead, frozen by the icy-cold Niflheim.

He observed the bodies for corpses never lie, ‘-they rushed up the stairs,’ he took a quick look, ‘-not to help the empress. They share space with the guards,’ a squinted told of familiar faces, ‘-yeah, they’re the guard detail from the border. Seems everyone here’s an enemy.’

\*Cough, cough,\* bloodied hands clambered against a marble-tiled counter, disheveled hair hid the lass’s face, “-Samara,” he laughed, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* lines shot into the maid’s head, drawing on the memories and energy, “-good enough,” the threads retracted to form a halo, ‘-a good assumption, everyone here is an enemy. No reason to starve myself,’ \*Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,\* an abundance of blood forcefully tore from the deceased, reaching into a crown of blood, ‘-enough for the cleanup,’ he dusted the clothes and continued deeper, the manor held an escape hatch that ran into the ground – closer one moved the colder it got, he shivered, rubbing the palms to save any remainder of heat, “-ask for help next time,” said a whisper, warm lit ablaze, ‘-Intherna?’ a glance backward showed her prized Phoenix robe burning in its majestic glory, ‘-a god-level item used as a heater,’ an inner chuckle could but escape, ‘-goddesses, you truly are the best people alive.’

Speaking of alive, the same couldn’t be said on the shared border of Dorchester and Kreston. Reports of Dorchester’s army rattled the Krestonian holy army, “-your holiness,” shook a room in the cathedral, “-we have reports of the Dorchesterian army moving for our borders.”

“How long until they arrive?”

“A day when taking account of the scenery.”

Another messenger ran into the room, “-holiness, we received an urgent summons from the capital,’ the archbishop rested his holy book, carefully rose from the desk, and moved to the archway, “-how many men can we muster?”

“We don’t have men to speak of, sire for the holy army’s gotten the order to evacuate villagers at the border.”

“The life of the devout is worth more than taking the life of an aggressor. Have the general take care of evacuation – forfeit the border and erect a single line of defense at Castle Omley. Have transportation readied – a revolution has begun.”

Similarly, on receiving news, a military outpost near Savaview bridge immediately moved to capture the point of transport. The leader of the scouting force, Baron Inje, Captain of Injei Troop, immediately made move on taking the front lines. Their assault was stumped by artillery fire from the opposite camp, forcing mages to conjure barriers on either side, preventing rains of death from above.

“Captain, we’ve lost five-man and four are badly wounded. Rosespire’s sending reinforcement, any further action against Dorchester is to be held lest they dare invade.”

“Good enough for now, what of evacuation?”

“Second Lieutenant Jonathan Gold’s handling the evac. No information is known of the Dorchestrian forces.”

“Leave the decision to the higherups,” narrowed the strong-faced Baron, “-we have but one duty, and tis to protect the bridge,” thus the officers excused themselves from a mobile headquarter, ‘-war’s come at last,’ he wondered whilst checking supplies and manpower, ‘-four hundred men won’t suffice,’ a tap brought a smaller man, “-you called, my lord?”

“Have the mage’s corp build and fortify watchtowers.”

“Understood,” the man left no questions asked, ‘-decoys to buy time. Time’s nigh, leaders of Hidros – will the leaders efficiently win the battle, or will a revolt lay siege to the heritage of the Riverty name, I hope the Prime minister’s ready.” Weariness heightened the guard of the capital – armed forces in Arda marched to the fortress city of Balei in the northeast, after the snow-peaked mountain ranges.

Rosespire’s castle rang, “-Prime minister, we’ve issued an emergency summons. Duke of Kreston has answered the call.”

“Thank you,” nodded éclair, ‘-about the only one who’d answer. Most if not all the nobles have moved to be sheltered by Dorchester.”

“Report,” arrived another, “-Dorchestrian army is of at least 60 thousand strong. There are rumors about reinforcement arriving from the Empire.”

“Understood, you’re excused,” a mountain of data blasted the butler’s mind, ‘-Alpha’s responsible for the backlash, master, I hope you understand we can’t fight a war on both fronts. The warning saved us this time, there’s no telling what will happen and who’s just in the war.’

Ice melted and dropped, Igna felt his way deeper inside a passage until a distant blue reflection, “-there,” he crossed the opening and stood before a massive cave built on pure ice, at the center laid a divine dragon curling its tail around the empress and her child, “-Gergusser,” commented Igna raising a hand to the giant, it replied by blowing through its nose.

“Big sister.”

“Hmm?” her white eyelashes flapped, “-Igna, why are you here?” lines on her forehead immediately crinkled, “-were you not at Melmark?”



“War’s broken out,” he said, “-seen it firsthand, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” she patted Gallienne’s head, “-barely escaped. What now?”

“I’m afraid the Imperial family of Alphaia’s not needed by the state. Everyone’s made their move, Markus relinquished his claim over Owan to us – seems the shadow leaders weren’t pleased by the occasion.”

“What about Kirr, Amber, Xyra, and Hyde?”

“Don’t know and I don’t care. Big sister, it’s best for you and little Gallienne to return home, to Hidros. Alphaia’s hostile, the Alrosian Alliance’s void.”

“How would you know?”

“Here,” he pulled on a video, “-earlier today, after many revolts by the state against the emperor, the former deemed emperor Markus to be unfit to lead the nation for the reason that he willingly gave land to the King of Hidros. Details of the trial pertaining to Raven and their actions have been kept secret – there’s a systematic erasure of the proof and earlier reports are retaken. It’s fair to say, Alphaia’s leadership has fallen – civil wars erupted in the capital, and members of the public want answers on why the emperor was so unfairly dethroned. A force of tens of thousand is moving towards the City of Dreams, capturing towns throughout Owan. We’ll keep close on the events – for us to the people, please evacuate to shelters,” the connection cut, “-and there it is,” he sighed, “-information blackout, Alphaia’s done for. We need to leave right now, sister, no use protesting.”

Chapter 925: Defence

Empress Eira stared Igna frankly, forcing a guarded stance for he expected many protests. By all means, why would one not care for her husband, family was important, yes? Turns out, the empress swallowed her ice-dragon, lifted young Galliene into her arms, “-let’s go,” her heels tapped and cracked the ice, shattering the ice barrier throughout, “-have I missed something?” she stopped, “-brother, were you not the one who spoke of urgency...”

“Well,” returned blankly, “-I expected at least a little bit of-”

“-of protest? Yeah...” she held on the ‘eah’, “-not going to happen. My priority is the safeguard of my child,” a soft caress crossed the perpetual cold-stare, “-she’s the only reason why I’ve stayed in Alphaia. A child is happiest with a father and mother, politically, Alphaia isn’t safe from what you retold.”

Mild vibration was sensed, prompting Igna to focus through the walls, “-seems there’s a lot of militia. What say you sister, shall I take care of them or do we make a grand exit?”

“What grand exit are you thinking about?” she narrowed, “-I’m not conjuring my guardian spirit as a means of transport – a flap of her wing and the whole area’s bound for a destitute icescape.”

“Not to worry,” they continued down the escape hatch, climbing a tunnel that rose through a neighboring hill, “-I have a plan,” a push toggled the seal which unpacked into the open peak. Lagoon reflected a pinkish glow, adding to the inky outlines brought by dawn.

“Better make it fast,” commented Eira failing to settle her white locks against the sea breeze, “-I hear helicopters.”

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“Not ours,” fired Igna, “-better keep her close,” he stretched his arms in a fist – lightning struck the signet ring, \*by the power of my name, Igna Haggard, true monarch and leader of the monster realm, I call upon thee, protectors and guardians of the inhumane realm, manifest in the true title of Demonlord,\* relatively empty skies rattled lightning flashes and thunderous growls – static energy swallowed the trio – the symbol of the Demonlord flashed above their heads from which an army of flying monsters exploded, followed by gigantic legendary beasts, namely; a dragon. Fair to say the western seaside shuddered, leaving no time for escape – unknown tourists wandering the beach were killed and devoured – there was no controlling the black-winged clouds, “-Demonlord,” grunted a dragon, “-I have come to serve,” it cried a wonderous war chant.

“Hop on,” winked Igna nonchalantly.

“Don’t mind if I do,” returned an equally brazen Eira, he took her sister’s arms and pulled. Once seated, the legendary figure flapped – tearing trees and creating craters, another growl turned heads of the murderous clouds.

Meanwhile, in the capital, Emperor Markus sat facing the window from a high-rise. One leg over the other, he watched the booming cityscape – multiple steps stormed the door and tapped, “enter.” Shuffles and footsteps rose guns at his head, ‘-it was her,’ he caught a glimpse of the reflection.

“We both knew it’ll end here,” said a figure dressed in a military outfit.

“Not to say I’m surprised,” he spun, “-playing the fool had its advantages. One of which is that I get to see who orchestrated the uprising.”

“Taking all the credit would be greedy, our network grows deeper with each passing day. There’s no stopping a worm once it starts.”

“Lest the worm is drawn to the surface,” he smirked, “-like now, isn’t that suspicious?”

“Don’t kid yourself,” fired the imposing figure, “-out of us, tis I who inherited a superior intellect. United Nation of Alrosia, good while it lasted – good as we sucked dry resources meant for the betterment of the Hidrosian people. We know how this ends,” they rose their hand, “-too bad, you know too much,” \*bang, bang, bang, bang,\* tears fell, “-stop,” they said, “-enough, the man’s fully dead,” turned for the doorway, ‘-we’ll meet again in hell, don’t worry.’

\*Poof,\* “-WHAT!” cried an insane man rising to pat himself, ‘-I’m not dead?’

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“Welcome to the world of the living.”

“Welcome to the world of the living?”

“If I wished to hear my voice, I’d have spoken to the wall. How do you feel?” the familiar voice approached, drawing on the curtains, “-Emperor Markus, or rather should I say, Markus.”

“I feel weird.”

“That’s because I’ve transmigrated thy soul,” echoed Igna. Time read midnight on a faraway clock, arrangement of the room was hurried – office desk was quickly cleaned, “-I told you, I’d know.”

“So you saved me?”

“Not really – you’re technically dead, one known as Emperor Markus has left the mortal realm,” Igna motioned at the door, home to a small rectangular window, “-the empress said and I quote, ‘-A child is happiest with a father and mother,’ it rang a chord, remembering how hard it was for me, and for Eira too. We know the pain of being brought up by single parents. In what good conscience would I, uncle to the child, allow for her father to pass without acting. Believe me, I’d have watched you die – thank your wife and daughter, they’re the reason thee stand, reincarnated.’

“By reincarnation did my appearance change?”

“Not really,” a mirror summoned, “-still the same, the hairstyle’s changed and the skin color has darkened – wear these,” he handed a pair of circular glasses, “-Markus, from today, thou art but a simple man, a musician perhaps? The violin skills were quite a shock – I made sure to transfer everything.”

The newly awakened man, confused for the most part, slid his feet onto the carpeted floor, a chill rose across the thighs – the world was new, all felt like a big feeling of Deja-vecu, one knee buckled however, “-careful,” reacted Igna, “-take your time, the body is yours.”

‘My family,’ he inched, stretching his arms, \*click,\* a petite, ‘-papa,’ escaped inside followed by a thud. “Was it worth the trouble?” armor clamored.

“Was it worth it?” turned towards Undrar, “-yes it was,” he smiled, “-thank you for the favor, god of death.”

“For the people thee killed, I suppose an exception can be made,” she leaned in a whisper, “-good job handling Exia. The man is clueless as to the heritage he was bestowed.”

“He’s a good kid, go easy on him – a fellow Death Reaper of another universe, sounds fun, yes?”

“No, I hear but the exhausted cries from constant misfortune. Well, I should leave – good luck, the mortal realm is in quite a predicament.”

‘Say that again,’ he moved to the window, ‘-Raven forces are stationed north. Investing in better outposts and barriers was a good foresight. The question remains, how long can we hold against a rebellion?’

\*Incoming Call: éclair.\*

“I was just about to call you.”

A pause drew, “-master, Alpha’s not the only place of uprising. Dorchester has made their move – we’re expecting their forces to be joined by PMCs of the Empire. One of the northern naval bases has reported activity – seems they’re not going to hide.”

A simple chair drew towards the window, and there the devil sat, “-we’ve ruled out diplomatic possibilities?”

“Ruled out, master, there’s a communication blackout enshrouding Alpha – if not for the transmitter at Eldow’s high, we’d have no way of speaking. I strongly suggest evacuating Ogdawoan.”

\*Tap, tap, tap,\* “-master, the army has arrived and they have tanks,” panted Starix, “-what are thy orders?” Heels clopped and proclaimed, “-mana detected all around the city, we’re under siege from all sides.”

“Public services are out of order – powerlines have been cut,” gasped Asmodeus, “-we’re running on backup energy.”

“A squadron has been spotted to the east,” motioned an energetic Mammon, “-what are your orders, master?”

Igna turned to the crowd and exhaled, “-we have two options, evacuate or fight. Judging by the expression, it’s do or die,” he pulled a map, “-without information and sudden power outage, the fog of war is great. Starix, coordinate with public safety and issue an evacuation of the northeast front. I’ll take care of the incoming squadron. Asmodeus, Mammon, and Kul, time’s nigh for battle. Choose a cardinal point and defend until power is returned.”

“Master?” spoke over the intercom.

“éclair, listen closely – as it stands, there’s no way we can evacuate easily. City of Dreams is too precious a commodity. Mobilize the army and contact Phantom, Hidros won’t lose in the matters of war.”

“Are we holding back?”

“No, I want the invasion squandered without a single enemy left alive,” murderous intent scrapped from deep within, sending a clear message, ‘-no mercy.’ Off the channel, Igna scanned his entourage, “-hear me,” flashes lit the streets, “-I won’t accept Ogdawoan falling. We’ll fight until daybreak – once the sun wakes – Starix, activate the manor’s AFR detector, they’ll live to regret today.”

“Master,” interjected Kul, “-please, lead the battle northeast. I can handle the squadron.”

An icy cold sensation broke inside, “-go fight and don’t hold back. The life of the citizen, as well as the town, is my responsibility,” brother and sister stood face to face, “-I give you my word.”

Nothing need be said, four different colored hues dispersed along with the cardinal points – the ice empress summoned her staff and robe, a crown of white-blue told of her power, “-come to me, Gergusser,” a chilling growled shook the abyssal city and climbed said skyrise. Torches, lamps, anything with light was used to evacuate the populous, policemen and firefighths kept the people calm, those outside were forced into buildings – streets lessened into memories of its customers.

Kul transformed, a shot of purple hue ascended to the heavens, passing Carter lake on her right, ‘-there they are,’ an arrow-shaped formation blinked yonder, ‘-holding back is courtesy. I’ve lived my life besides my master not having a chance to go all out like the good ol’ days. Demonlord versus machines,’ the fast approaching killing machine locked, ‘-reason states,’ orbs summoned at her back, ‘-those chosen to serve master will always prevail,’ they warped and instantly destroyed the fighter jets in a fit of blaze worthy of Gophy’s blessing. Killing instinct horned onto foot soldiers, “-good evening,” she landed, “-welcome to the city of dreams,” gunfire rained.

To the west, Asmodeus yawned, “-come, my fellow companions,” an army of demons rose, “-go take their soul, feast until none remains earthbound. Show them the Hidrosian courtesy.”

South of them, Medusa walked beside Mammon, “-humans are so easy to manipulate,” perched the prince over a standalone boulder, “-whisper their whim and they follow.” An active Medusa side-glanced, “-would be nice if you didn’t sit on my masterpieces,” her eyes burned a vivid gray, turning many into stone, ‘-so much for a difficult battle.’

The Devil descended Northeast, facing Fuda Mountain, and the funnel headed into the city. Foot soldiers, cargo trucks, and tanks, ‘-an envoy for occupation,’ armored beasts rose slowly, ‘-a victory can be easily assured; problems arise when we’ll move to Hidros, annexing the Duchy will be a simple task. What to do,’ he paced up and down the road – distance rumble of the heavy beasts closed, not before armed soldiers pointed their flashlight holding barrels, “-who stands there!”

“At last,” proclaimed Igna, “-welcome to the city of dream, foolish invading army.”

\*Bang,\* “-did you kill the bastard?”

“No idea,” they said, “-might have gone overboard with a turret.”

\*Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk,\* an unscathed figure discarded the smoke, “-listen closely,” jolts of purple, white and crimson flickered throughout the body, “-no one interjects when I speak,” he dropped his fist, soldiers blinked, the tanks crushed akin to knife on butter, “-Die,” he flicked, the bloodied shells flung forward, taking few trucks and personnel, \*snap,\* a ball of fire exploded. Burning rubble shone a light on the attacker. Wasn’t long before gunfire echoed across the mountain range, \*-VENGEANCE!\*

“Yes, master?”

“Kill them,” he ordered, holding an open palm that stopped any projectile. ‘-there are more in the tree line, good.’ \*Souls of the dead, thee who’ve sworn to serve me in life and death, come to my side. Blood-Arts: Ghouls Requiem,\* fighters crawled from what could only be described as the pits of hell.

Chapter 926: ‘-a simple gesture and lives were snuffed.’

How the morning rose, how it set, how the sun reflects, how the sky moves, how the wind blows, how nature reacts – a rigid landscape stretched before bystanders of whomst were the trees, over their shoulder peaked Fuda Mountain. Saying there had been a massacre was an understatement – an army of forty thousand annihilated by a shadowy apparition – was there no end to the misery, was there a chance at salvation or victory?

“People of Odgawoan,” shimmered, the first ray of light wasn’t sun nor the break of dusk, lines of white and black shook, transmission hit phones, television, cars, any device equipped with a receiver, “-my name’s Igna Haggard, the king of Hidros. Do ignore charred bodies and wreckage. What I realized in fighting to protect this city is there’s no hope. I make no point in hiding behind false trues, you, the people, deserve to know what’s here and what’s present. Astute Arcanum savvy users’ will have noticed the cut – Alphaia’s in a state of disrepair. Authorities responsible for a victorious uprising have spanned their military influence across the continent. I say this without proof and only basing on my intellect. Saddens me to see such a city be defiled by threats of conquest and invasion. Regardless if I hold a legitimate claim on the Duchy of Owan; attacks shan’t cease lest I forsake my claim. Therefore, a

messenger of mine has been dispatched to the capital – a dangerous task of startling proportions. Freedom can only be expressed for so long – wrong ideas and false knowledge inevitably affects how people see the world – mankind is very entuned to the mistake people make. I speak, let's say, a multiplication table of two and make a mistake at the end, consider it ten right and one wrong, I'm certain many if not most would horn on the singular mistake, effectively ignoring my ten prior successes. Such is the way the cookie crumbles, so they say. A broadcast's normally short and simple, not today, for time is nigh, people of Odgawoan, the decision made now will shape thy life. Stars, starlets, artists, musicians, people of knowledge, inhabitants – by the power granted by my title of King, I extend a warm invitation to those who wish to leave, preparations will be made; I have ordered planes to land at the airfield. Future is unknown to us – I'm a true believer that tis a population who shapes their cities, not the other way around. I'd hate to see freedom of expression associated with the city of dreams be smothered and quelled at the hands of an oppressive force. Raven and their subsidiary will be returning home. Waging war is a long-standing tradition in Hidrosian culture – thus my reason for departure. Abled man and woman of skill, if thee have talents and abilities Hidros could use, I warmly extend my hand and hospitality. As a show of good faith, anyone who wishes to travel needs but bring themselves and a few clothes – Raven will fund the immigration, all thee need is but be present and willing to start again," boots against the crunchy gravel path, "-and for those who think commodities will be handed on accounts of thy status or rank, think again," he grabbed the camera and inched ever so close, "-if it's one thing I hate, tis laziness and procrastination. We evaluate on merit, and merit is how one climbs through the rank. Better yourself for your family and kingdom or stay in the desolate land of Alpha, watch as invaders lay siege to what we built and as they crush our hard work and the free-spirited way," he smiled and dropped the camera, the transmission phased, "-future is in your hand, we're here as an activation energy, torso-less arms willing to push and support those seeking change and victory over a self-impose falaise1," broadcast faded into King Igna heading into the distance.

'Should trigger a sense of urgency,' he stopped and stared up Fuda road, lighting a cigarette, \*puff,\* "-no way we could have defended the city against Alpha and their allies. Best to cut the losses and move operations into Hidros – fortunately, Eldow's high manor's a killing machine – I doubt anyone would dare lay siege to said fortress," a distant silhouette broke through the foggy morning, "-good morning," said an exhausted-looking Kul.

"Good morning," he replied, "-seems there's more to your smile, yes?"

"There is," she giggled, "-master, I couldn't contain myself yesterday so I continued my east, located a secret airfield kept away inside the prologue forest. Shooting stationary planes, killing personnel, destroying the center of communication, supply depot, and finishing off their leaders was a walk in the park. I used every last bit of strength I had taking care of reinforcement," \*phew,\* she wiped her brows and held her hips, "-been a while since I used nearly all my mana reserves. War is fun," she laughed loudly ending in coughs, "-next assignment?"

"No clue," he crushed the cigarette and turned towards the city, "-we're evacuating, no use fighting a war here. Geography doesn't allow for safe supply runs – we're surrounded and the Duchy expands Northeast, not west. If it had been the other way around – access to the sea would have made Odgawoan a key location. It's no use turning the city into a war-torn land field – I plan on returning once all is calm."

Slow up and downs of her long lashes foretold multiple expected reactions; Igna watched, waiting to counter her reaction with a generalized response, “-understood,” her long arms latched onto her hips and stretched, “-I had my fun,” one foot in front the other, the demoness stopped and turned, “-master?”

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Head shook mildly, “-beaten my expectation.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing is all, senseless mumbles.”

Behold a king’s word – renowned stars, high profile actors, singers and superstars queued the same as the common folks and an entourage of rough mobsters and ladies of the night. Title and status meant nothing where they went for a crowd of a few thousand bared down at the airfield, each waiting for a chance to get onto the planes.

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\*Whistle,\* “-that’s a lot of people,” commented a nonchalant Asmodeus, “-master,” the duo observed from a watchtower, “-did thee expect so many to answer our call?”

“I suppose, I understand many wanted to leave. Warning might have been a little too excessive.”

“Understatement of the day,” the prince clapped, “-we heard the broadcast, and boy it was frightening. Blood of the fallen, the flesh and innards of the defeated – tanks and armored vehicles laying in pits of fire – sprinkle low-quality of said broadcast, distorted dialog and thus stands an unforgettable speech.”

“Fastest way to kill the morale,” he said, “-Alpha loves their stars and without a city of dreams to look towards – public order will suffer.”

“Preparations have been made,” said Starix up the spiraling stairs, “-what are your orders?”

“How many planes do we have?”

“Six were passenger planes each with capacity of 350, not sufficient...”

“No problem,” he straightened the jacket and reached for the stairs, “-have Medusa separate stars from commoners – elites will fly whilst the general populous will experience magic first hand,” he winked. An hour after the broadcast – fog swept airstrip cleared as the sun chipped at the clouds, an outline muddied into sight – refugees stood and sat opposite the gate, armed soldiers kept the peace by patrols and raw intimidation.

White hair flourished into the view of many, “-good morning,” he thundered, “-Hear me, people of Ogdawoan, I’m pleased to see the sheer volume. However, due to a sudden increase of capacity – we may have some people wait,” he paused, “-60%”

Chatter of disappointed and angry nature traveled ear to ear, “-my team shall call on the names of the chosen. I trust everyone understands.”

“Alright,” a trio passed the king, “-once a name is called, come to me for verification of identity,” loud roars of passenger planes circled the area.

10:50, “-master,” all the planes landed, “-triage complete, we’re ready for take-off.”

“Carry on the evacuation.”

“Master,” spoke another.

“Yes, Medusa?”

“Problem; those left are angrily saying we only cared for the rich and powerful, they’re right, master,” she breathed, “-did you stage it against the commoner?”

“Acts of cruelty brings forth truth of a person’s heart. Add fuel to the fire, I wish to see who remains calm and who observed the situation. I never mentioned leaving anyone behind. All a question of perception, take note of those who prove studious and observant, even if tis timidity, I care not, they’re people we need in the coming time.”

“Was this a recruitment effort?”

“Yes,” he deeply answered, “-Asmodeus and the rest have permission to evacuate. I trust cargo’s been moved?”

“Yeah,” added Starix hunched over a terminal, “-evacuation is ready – we’ll leave behind gifts.”

“Just what I wanted to hear.”

Outside the gates, a few angry parents cried amidst themselves, “-an open invitation to all,” they gritted, “-yeah, open to the rich and famous. What about us, what about our children, are we going to stand by?”

“I agree, why announce if it was going to be this way. The King doesn’t have much foresight, how great can a ruler be if it can’t accurately gauge the situation. I was a fool to believe in someone else.”

Rocks bounced against a chain-linked fence, “-screw you,” they screamed. Some guards rose their guns, “-ha, shoot the discontent, that’s a way to democracy – take out the infidel. How tyrannical,” they roared – creating a bucket for distress, frustration, and anger for like-minded followers to soak their heads.

Tension simmered for an additional two hours, \*Clap, clap, clap, clap,\* true divide chanted slurs, insults, and professed disagreement on the king’s decision, bringing into question his character and priorities. Guards were ordered to act only if matters turned physical, astute protestors kept a distance and jogged around a bonfire.

“Here we are,” a loud echo halted the protest, “-all the planes have departed,” he called onto an assistant, “-show me those who kept calm,” wherein the broad man pointed to a circle of silent observers and followed to pinpoint individuals across the crowd, “-those designated please make your way forward.”



“KING!” echoed behind the line, “-WHAT ABOUT THE POOR AND UNFORTUNATE, ARE THEY NOT PART OF THE CITY?”

“Shut your mouth,” he bellowed, quaking ground and trees, “-I will hear nothing from impatient wastes of space. Did it not cross thy mind to heed my words carefully? No matter, fool art be fools.

Congratulation, thee who remained quiet and studied the situation; give your name and carry inside, you’ll be allowed to interview with one of the many companies under the crown’s control. I’ve said it before and I say it again – merit will take thee a long way – networking is part of a person’s arsenal, which is why I gave priority to stars, notice there are few A-list celebrities yet to depart, no discrimination was made against the population – we give priority to the talented and hardworking,” and so, massive recruitment followed late into the afternoon – allowing for the king to build a grand teleportation portal, ‘-thank you, scholars of Arda. Good designs are welcomed.’

A line stood patiently, curious to an unknown device beside the king, “-priority of employment is the reward for having been observant and not joined the barking dogs. Carry on, and I warmly open Hidros to thee, people of Odgawoan,” volume decreased, little by little, line of the chosen reached its end – blue gateway turned purple. A mass of rioters was suddenly surrounded, “-WHAT IS THIS?” they cried, Igna jumped onto the teleportation podium and sat on the stairs.

“Three hundred remains, Hidros’s blessed with three thousand willing and able workers. Look now,” he eased with a narrowed look, “-worthless trash,” and upward motion rose the guards’ guns, “-here’s where I draw the line. Insubordination, I consider myself an open-minded person and generous at the time. Bring forward the instigators and I may reflect on thy sentences,” they forcefully pushed forward five men, “-so it’s thee,” he smiled, “-the five men who laid the seed of revolt,” a simple gesture and lives were snuffed.

Chapter 927: 28th of January X11

Barrel smoke rose, “-what happened?” panted survivors, “-why are we alive?” Hurls and agonizing cries echoed, one dropped to the ground foaming, sufferance caused by mana nausea. The devil flung one leg over the other, stared at the survivors, and smiled, “-congratulation, instigators.”

“Why did you kill them?”

“Are you not pleased?” a signal rose a gun to the man’s head, “-say the word, tis nothing off my back.”

“No please,” he dropped forward, slamming his forehead against asphalt, “-mercy, majesty, mercy.”

Shuffles gave into footsteps, “-raise your head,” said the king standing inches from the man, “-have thee forgotten my creed of assembling talented individuals? Consider it a favor,” \*snap,\* a green healing light shone above the remainder, “-scurry on out of here.”

“As you wish, Majesty.”

Days turned into weeks, 28th of January X115 wrote upon a table calendar. Igna, vested in a formal gray military suit sat at his office in the humble company of files upon files of unfiltered information. A gramophone propped on a glossy cupboard holding vinyl played melancholic and peaceful symphonies from an ensemble of Syndra Lordon, la virtuose de Hidros.

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Fumbling amidst the chaos laid dated newspaper of various headings, “-King Igna’s heroic return,” read one, “-his majesty, king Igna of Hidros has returned from a diplomatic catastrophe.”

Another read, “-Dissolving of the United Nation of Alrosia,” dated a few days later, “-on a broadcast by the king, it was announced, “-people of Hidros, it pains me deeply to watch efforts put in by you, my people, in accepting culture and promoting a stable relationship with Alpha for I to be squandered in what felt instant. Hidros shan’t stand to ally with usurpers – we reject acknowledging Alpha as a new empire.”

Following said headline, another broadcast labeled, ‘-the truth,’ drew millions of viewers across the kingdom. At the center sat Igna and prime minister éclair, “-tell us, majesty, what’s the truth?”

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“Yesterday I decreed confidential files to be unclassified; the public is invited to read and understand what goes on behind the scene. We have nothing to hide, éclair and the other ministers were indeed looked down upon as incompetent and I take a fair share of the blame – however, I must draw attention to how the kingdom felt. Hidros was peaceful, going on living peacefully without know to the what we were entangled with, in summary, corruption at the highest level,” in effort to regain the public’s trust – a bold move of showing vulnerability worked, declassifying files rose morale, and the common people knew they were in good hands. Sufficed to say, there was more truths best-kept secret.

Later on, fighting at the border increased – Igna’s order to counter the Wracian Empire’s forces was stumped. Dorchester’s leadership pulled back their forces, leader of the revolutionist faction, Queen Eia, sent word to the King. Her letter reached his table, never did he expect a piece of a paper to weigh the same as the whole world, “-Dear King Igna, it’s with great dismay that I write this letter. Dorchester and her allies did not raise her army to fight Hidros, rather, we’re expecting support from our beneficiary, the Wracian Empire. As Duchess of Dorchester and rightful queen of Hidros, my ministers and I will officially recognize the new Empire of Alpha and her military as the true leaders. Saint Pope Sebastian Sifer the III will embark on a diplomatic mission and crown the new head of Alpha as the Holy Empress of Alpha, Amber Sultria, General of the Army. Therefore, King, I’d strongly advise calling off your army lest thee wish to wage war against the coming superpower of Wracia and Alpha,” a letter kept from the public. The extent of their knowledge was, “-fighting at the border stops,” said the headline followed by, “-skirmishes at the border of a revolt against the King of Hidros has ceased. An official statement from the Dorchestrian leadership reads, ‘-Skirmishes at the borders were not malicious – Dorchester rose her army for joint training with the Wracian Imperial army. Tis with great pleasure that we invite General Carmio of Landslot, advisor to the emperor to humble set foot on Dorchestrian soil. We ask for cooperation and support, together, let’s support Queen Eia towards her ultimate goal – the unification of Hidros,’ conflicting reports from Kreston say otherwise, nothing’s proven yet and we doubt there to be confirmation. What is certain is the stoppage of fighting – we can breathe easily for now.”

Destruction of the alliance insured a quick and merciless clean-up of corrupt departments. The following days were filled with blood, torture, interrogation, and tedious management of external affairs. Immigrants of Ogdawoan were welcomed openly by a flash of media frenzy, superstars and their gleeful way of life added much to Rosespire. Goes without saying, the influence of Hidros over the world of entertainment increased tenfold – directors, and producers extending even to agencies had the fans sing praises to the king. Whether the king knew that inviting beloved names would sway public opinion

or not remained a subject of debate among comrades. Apparent doom and gloom of prior mentioned event with Alpha stayed a short stay – The Ayder’s Bill of Taxation was cut, allowing the people to breathe a sigh of relief. Rotherham returned under her master, Queen Courtney’s full authority, Phantom rekindled lost relations and allowed for the kingdom to prosper. Alteration to the political climate left Hidros exposed, the mere thought of what a legitimate alliance between Alpha and Wracia sent shivered down political thinkers’ spines.

All and all, it returns to Igna’s office – many changes grew to be accepted by the populace. ‘-Industry,’ laid in bold on the table, ‘-investment into self-sustainability,’ said a footnote.

“They have a point,” he mumbled, pushing the paper aside, “-cutting Alpha brought both good and bad – can’t outsource production. Depending on what Elon decides – either Hidros moves into an industrial revolution or we wait as the pillars of the economy come crashing. We need to bring money into the kingdom, our coffers don’t look so great – éclair’s various humanitarian endeavors to gain public affection have left us worse than before. With free healthcare, transportation, and allowances for the disabled, we’re doing great on the public relations front. Food is another problem, we import from Kura’s trading corporation – no matter what happens, we’ll need food. Glenda has a surplus of crops – having them sell to Rosespire might put us in a better spot,’ he flicked through reports, ‘-there it is,’ he sighed, ‘-the crowning of Holy Empress of Alpha, Amber Sultria,’ a recent memory crossed his thoughts, “-it was her,” sniffled Markus, “-big sister Amber betrayed me. I knew someone from our family led the show in shadow, doubted my lady mother first, then fell onto my brothers, and never once crossed my mind it was her. She always did so much for the family, placed food on the table in times of need, stepped up when father died – we endured silently, saving face for the prosperous nation for it was they, the conglomerate who picked the fruits of our labor,” Markus’s palpable anger washed as the memories diffused alongside a column of cigarette smoke, ‘-Valentino, Amber,’ he puffed, ‘-Staxius’ mantra of not trusting anyone would have worked well,’ a notification blinked, \*-Alpha’s announcement,\* a live broadcast played, Igna breathed, sipping on cold whiskey – a tense aura covered the empty room. ‘-Fate of our nations rests on what she decides to do.’

Castle Impériale De Melmark, gleamed – no expense was spared. A guest list of powerful individuals sat in attendance men of faith of the church of Lucifer, including the Saint Pope Sebastian Sifer the III, key members of the conglomerates, Wracian Royalty, representatives of the independent nations, governor of the new continent, it carried on. Amber Sultria’s coronation was extravagant, placing a new image on the word, over-the-top. Members gave talks and continued deep into profound conversations, Igna watched, his eyes glazed.

Silence cut, a few hours passed and Igna had finished two bottles. Would be queen knelt before the pope who brought forth a splendidly shiny crown, value of each stone could make one drop on counting the zeroes, “-doth thee, Amber Sultria, swear in the name of our holy lord to serve the nation of Alpha justly?”

“I do,” said she politely and so, the pope extended his hand and crowned the new ruler, applauds and cheers roared, the strong Empress turned towards the crowd and smiled, the pope took the stage and spoke, “-to the people of Alpha and spectators around the world, today, 28th of January X115 marks the start of Alpha’s rebirth as a holy Empire.”

“With blessings of Pope and Emperor of the Wracia Empire, it’s with utmost pleasure that I announce Alpha’s alliance with the papacy and Wracian Empire. May today serve as a warning to those who wish to hamper the growth of Alpha,” silence, the announcement meant a birth of a new superpower. Saint Pope Sebastian Sifer took two steps forward, threw his arm at the camera, “-for the pain caused to our believers, I, Pope Sebastian, excommunicate the former pope, Carrigan II, as a heathen who fell short of his duties. Henceforth, the church of Lucifer rejects the church of Kreston,” a majestic orchestra played, the broadcast cut, leaving Igna reclined and in a state of distress.

Eyelids heavily drooped, darkness shrouded the room, ‘-and there it is, birth of a new super empire. Wracia’s military now has the financial backing of Alpha – will it be a curse or blessing, I can’t say. Alpha’s headed for ruin; the church of Lucifer will do what they must to purify the land. Long as we’re not under threat of war, it’s good.’

\*Urgent Message,\* blinked, ‘-what?’ he halfheartedly moved the cursor and tapped the notification, “-Pope Sebastian has decreed a holy crusade against the church of Kreston.”

“DAMN IT!” fist to the desk, “-a legitimate reason to lay waste to Kreston, “-I should have known better. No, screw that, I knew the war was upon us; nothing is turning back,’ he sat upright, \*-calling éclair.\*

“Master?”

“Hello éclair, I trust they’ve received the information?”

“Yes I have,” he sighed, \*tap, tap,\* echoed the door, “-master, the duke of Kreston’s requested an audience.”

“I heard it, the man’s impatient,” \*end call.\*

\*Tap, tap,\* brusquely quaked the frame, “-enter.”

Duke Carrigan burst inside, “-my king,” he wailed, “-terrible, it’s terrible,” he said, “-papacy of Leon has denounced us as a traitor to the lord.”

“I heard,” returned Igna calmly, “-take a seat, pope.”

“Will do,” he dropped and controlled his rough guttural pants, “-pardon me for the outburst, news came as a shock.”

“Pay it no mind,” a suspicious brow rose at the duke, “-Charm and wit and smart networking allowed Carrigan II, now Duke of Kreston, to ascend to the title of Pope, apostle pope for he bore the wings of an angel,” recanted Igna, “-The leadership of the Church’s in the hand of the four cardinal archbishops; the people have recognized Carrigan II as the next religious head,” he quoted from a report, “-tell me, Carrigan, are thee not a native of Hidros, what of the acclaimed charm and wit, what I see is a fumbling mess of a desperate.”

Offense flickered, “-majesty, will slander accomplish good?”

“It won’t,” said the king openly, “-the situation is beyond our control.”

“Yes, and we don’t have allies to call for. Dorchester will be annexed in the holy name of the church, Queen Eia’s showing much of her strength and striving to forge relations with Wracia and Church. Using their backing, she’ll have sufficient power and money to lay siege on Hidros. Tis the opening they need.”

“A crusade in the name of the pope. I hear diplomatic meetings between both parties have taken place and a consensus was reached. We have a monopoly on the world’s foremost valuable resource; Maicite. Duke of Kreston, as a member of the Gaien council – tis the duty of the crown to send reinforcement, alas, raising an army at this time will prove difficult. May we agree on other terms?”

“Which are?” he narrowed.

“Establishment of a new church – a puritan way of following Lucifer’s way. Kreston needs affirmation.”

Chapter 928: ‘-reawaken what I’ve forsaken.’

“In other words, I must dawn armor and bear the title of anti-pope?”

“For the safety of believers, I afraid so. There’s no fighting against the tide leveled at the pope’s speech – for Kreston to survive as a haven, there needs to be vastness.”

Duke of Kreston saw himself unable to process, the mind lingered in a state of listlessness – water of thought felt muddied and increasingly viscous. “-bearer of wings of an angel,” said the king, “-Hidros will take the brunt of the Alpha-Wracia alliance – the world’s changing at a rapid pace – we who stood as support for the superpowers are now left alone to wander. Before setting my sights on the outworld, we must unite Hidros and the remaining superpowers as one, solidarity is what I expect. Enough said I guarantee we have a few months before the holy crusade reaches our borders. It’s going to be a hard year for Hidros, perhaps a harder decade,” he gritted, “-I’m not opposed to starting again,” stern shoulders dropped, “-seems just.”

“Understood,” rose the pope, “-what are my duties for now?” he asked, hungry for more.

“Sit tight and prepare your army for a defensive battle. If Dorchester is going to raise her army and say tis training, do the same. Increase pressure on the borders; I will have men dispatched to Oxshield and Arda.”

“Didn’t thee mention the cost of war?”

“Oh, it is expensive, however, there are things I can do which people mustn’t know about,” he smirked, “-and my talents are blasphemous to the church’s teaching.”

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“Majesty?” blinked the duke, “-is it necro-”

“Enough, pope, we’ve spoken for far too long. I have preparations to see too.” The faded steps returned king Igna’s office to thoughtful tranquility, “-before you leave,” he said shy of a handle click, “-I won’t, and I say this with much seriousness; try not to fall into the trap of schemes. I rather thee focus on thy believers and leave the international affairs in my hand.”

The duke quipped, “-for the king who allowed us to reach such a situation, I rather not heed their majestic advice. So long, majesty.” \*Thud,\* a pensive moment of reflection, ‘-the pope is right,’ sighed

Igna, ‘-been a while since someone dared to criticize my action,’ – therein, inspiration, the fabled lady Eureka coyly winked, “-criticism, the olden truth of a king being as good as his entourage. I’ve been a fool, seriously,’ a chuckle escaped, “-I was lost in the greater picture I forgot what was precious. Happens to the best of us,” he stood, made way to the window, snuck his hands in between closed curtains, and threw one of the layers over his back, revealing a bitter evening, “-rainy season is upon the capital,” he looked at the booming city, ‘-Rosespire, I’ll do what is best to conquer our disagreements. Hidros stands as a multiracial culture of constant improvement, a good foundation to build upon – the populous have made the city more their own – a just judicial system, a just king, and good policies. In times of peace and trade, the established norms would push us towards a prosperous future. The feudal system is still in order despite most decisions being subject to the public and discussed in the parliament. Alas, the current way of doing things is diverse and not centralized; it’s good for the people and bad for the state. Pushing forward stronger policies will be met by backlash and resistance from the populous and ministers. Tyrants have left a distaste in many historians’ mouths. Hailed as evil incarnate – men of power would willingly throw the trust of the people into war. What many don’t speak is of why tyrants turned tyrants; circumstance. Looking at it now, my situation is similar – I have to lead the kingdom through an age of unknown and face risks of total invasion. Religion has no border, the papacy of Leon knows what they’re doing – condemning Kreston bury seeds, kindling who grow and spread, waiting for the perfect time to strike. Let’s play,’ he smiled, ‘-afraid to say, there’s no escaping war and disturbance of Hidros. Might be the end for us,’ he sighed, blinked a few times – an alluring expression of kindness and joy wiped clean, the Staxius’ renowned hubris manifested in stages – he needed to change and to change, there was but one way – return to naught. ‘-control my emotions,’ the eyes closed, ‘-and reawaken what I’ve forsaken,’ two dark masses rose in the shadows, they walked silently and wrapped around Igna, “-are you sure?” asked one, “-calling onto us defeats your purpose.”

“I’m not giving up nor am I defeating any purpose. I’m the devil, and thou art my other-selves. To move forward, I have to give up part of me – which is why-”

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“No,” rattled one, “-no forsaking emotions, the latter is why we exist.”

“You don’t have to change,” winked Alfred, “-we don’t have to change – true lords have the power to change and influence the world to move in their favor,” purple jolts flickered, “-and today is the day thee embraces our true capabilities.”

“We’re one of the same,” laughed Staxius, “-isn’t that what thee says all the time?”

“Yes, we are,” he smiled, “-come forth my other selves, be part of me and let’s take on the world!” the two figures swirled into a condensed circle of black outline and purple center, flakes of white stroked with a brush from inside out, a burst of tremendous aura shook the castle crowd, previous bicolored pupils of white and red turned to red and the newer shade of black, purple, and white. Staxius, Igna, and Alfred joined, ‘-power,’ he gritted, forced onto one knee, ‘-how powerful can they be?’ the heart raced, disturbing the very calm layer of mana, “-breathe,” a warm fire lit inside, ‘-my hearts on fire,’ the heart rate settled, ‘-I’m ready.’ A simple tap dusted the outfit, ‘-Hidros will rise, that much I promise,’ amber light of the corridor brightened the room for a moment, Igna’s shadow passed through the doorway and closed, turning most to darkened silence. Castle’s inside reflected Hidros’ financial state – many decorations were taken for a more minimalistic aura.

\*Prime minister's office,\* wrote on brass with black, \*tap,\*

"Enter."

"How goes it, prime minister," entered the King, throwing éclair into a sudden loop.

"Master?" the head shook, "I didn't expect such a late visit," arms furiously scrambled through paperwork similar to one uninitiated to swimming, "-how may I be of help?"

"Drop the act," he said and sat on a nearby couch, "-we saw the news."

"I know," the tone dropped, "-master, did something happen, you seem rather calm."

"Pay it no mind, dear éclair. News is definitely bad for the kingdom, with a foreign body on our lands' tis hard to achieve stability. To win, we must occupy Dorchester and vanquish the opposite faction, else, we ought to bring them onto our side. I can think of a few ways – but then again, our kingdom isn't much better. Ministers are beyond their age – unable to process the current climate. Prosperity has thrown their guards over the counter and recently, the dissolving of the Alrosian Alliance."

"About the latter," sighed éclair, "-I'm happy to report that we've severed all ties. I'm free to breathe and aid my master. I apologize for being compromised, if not for my foolishness the whole ordeal could have been avoided."

"Forget the past," he rose an open palm, "-time's nigh for a chance. The Prime minister, call for an emergency meeting of Hidros' leaders. I want nobles, ministers, and everyone involved directly with us in attendance."

"Majesty?"

"I shall explain later, have the meeting set for the 30th."

Thus, ignorant of his king's intention, éclair went about calling on everyone involved with the kingdom. Gaien council, Phantom, Elon's Dynasty, a few weak noble families, and the list of ministers in charge of the military, internal, external, and other affairs. A gathering at the castle inside the parliament room – the guests arrived one by one and soon filled the area.

"Cousin Igna," exchanged warm embraces, "-my brother, it's been far too long."

"Cousin Julius, I'm pleased to see you well. I see age has been kind on you, by all means, how are Malley and the babe?"

"Malley is well and my little angel has grown. Enough about me, where have you been for so long?"

"I was lost," they spoke for a few minutes – the grand parliament hall was quite a feat in structure. Refurbishing the dance hall to accommodate various members took time, money, and effort, the result speaks for itself; a good open area, desks, and seats placed in an oval arrangement at the center of which sat the leader of designated meetings. The hall grew in mass, parliament members representing the state sat opposite those representing the people, "-I should get seated," said Julius headed to Phantom's entourage.

"Igna, friend," smiled Lord Elon, "-must have been urgent."

“Yes, friend it was urgent,” in a similar manner, Igna met and exchanged words with those in attendance, there compromised even representatives of Arda in the form of Alta, stewardess of Glenda. The likes of Johny Dyale, Johna Et, and Marie Jude were also present. In a complete shock, Duchess Goldberg carried with her the might of powerful nobles sheltered in the north. A snarky expression and unbothered nature told of the prestige, Plaustan, Totrya, and Easel Run Gard each sent their representative. It would be an understatement to speak of how much power the gathered held. Duke of Kreston kept himself to a corner, ‘-everyone answered my summons,’ the king took center stage, ‘-if it had come from éclair I doubt there would be this many,’ and stood before the chair, he stopped and scanned one side to the other. \*Clap,\* cut amidst the chatter, “-his majesty, King Haggard,” shouted a knight.

“Very feudal,” whispered across, “-what is the king thinking?”

Igna sat on the chair, giving the illusion of it being a throne – the arrangement of the room, compared to other times was subtly different – guards were stationed behind Igna vested in armor and wielding swords. The crest of the royal family hung on draped banners, take away the chairs and tables and one would be faced by a replica of dated throne rooms.

“Everyone,” he thundered, “-I’m pleased to see the attendance. As thee knows, the worlds in disarray, news of a novel superpower have put into question the fate of Hidros, to that inquiry I say this, tis uncertain. Dorchester has been making moves behind the scene, and as today’s a diplomatic meeting, we won’t take action against the representative of the rebellion. Duchess Goldberg, I count on thy open-mindedness,” she snarled defiantly, causing the knights to glare, “-Hidros’ a good kingdom, there’s no arguing the fact tis miracle chaos hasn’t consumed the growth. To those ends, I have prime minister éclair to thank – he’s led the country admirably in times of crisis and during my absence, took matters into his hand to promote our growth despite Alphaia’s constant attacks. Here’s the truth – a fake king headed the kingdom for half a decade; the state was compromised and forced to take severe actions, garnering the anger of fellow countrymen. Today’s not the day to discuss the past, nor will I entertain ideal gossip of reasons, today’s an ultimatum, one in where the fate of Hidros is decided,” shuffles strained the silence, people looked around, throwing shrugs and shaking of the heads, “-what is wrong with him?” they inquired internally.

“And there it is,” whispered Julius, “-lady Elvira, I think cousin has finally decided to play for real.”

“Yeah, I knew there was change on the horizon, especially since he so strongly demanded us to be present.”

\*Silence!\* cried a knight, “-the reason for today’s meeting is not democracy, tis judgment. By my title of King, I, Igna Haggard, decree centralization.”

“WHAT?” cried the Gaien council, “-what of the people’s will, what of our way?”

A knight ran at the man and rose his blade to inches before the neck, “-no more interjections,” he narrowed, a severe killing intent rose from forward – the king’s authority slammed shut unnecessary chatter.

Chapter 929: Centralization



“What of the people?” brought into the fray, “-what about them?” he asked nonchalantly, “-what would they understand about what it takes to run a kingdom on the verge of collapse. Neither do I blame or wish for them to understand, roles in society are there for a reason – and I’m all for a meritocracy. It’s selfish to bring the unworthy subjects to justify actions. Long as the backlash doesn’t impose on their daily lives; the states serve them well.”

“And under whose authority-”

“Glad the statement was cut midway,” he glared at duchess Goldberg, “-my lady, Hidros’ foundation is linked to the feudal system. Not much praise to the traitorous nobles, however, I admire them who dared go against the wind and stay a member of the court. To said ends, I’m pleased,” a glance over, “-on matters of today’s gathering, Hidros will hereon become centralized – ministers and leaders dismissed and picked again on merit. éclair and Starix will screen applicants – word’s been put to the public. As we speak now, a broadcast plays,” and as he said, Rosian Media Square, the entertainment hub of Rosespire, lit ablaze. Hectic sideways of hurried pedestrians stopped, each looking onward to the skies at the projected screens and floating airships. Aside from Rosian media square, every channel linked to the crown was ordered to alter its programs. In the forefront of the video sat a man, one known to the public, he who’d remained absent for so long, the king of Hidros, “-good morning people of Hidros, Easel Run Gard and Arda. Announcement of the alliance breaking must have been a shock. Not to us, not the ones who had to deal with the Alphian greed and lust. I speak no ill of the Alphian people, I but blame their leaders – always lusting after power, always wanting to snuff life out of budding new creations. Pains me, honestly, Alpha was and still is a place close to my heart. Thanks to the Alphian people and their open-mindedness, our nations were able to speak and become friends, exchange of cultures bred a more open and inclusive society. I’m glad to have been blessed with patriotic followers – times have been rough and today, sadly, worse than ever, there lays the chance of Hidros’ destruction. A rebellion to the north, Dorchester’s uprising that has wished to give the throne to Queen Eia’s child, a legitimate claim despite my wedded wife’s slanderous ways. It’s no shock,” and he said crudely, “-that the princess isn’t my child. I was offered the throne per the elated Queen Gallienne’s last wishes, my uncle, Staxius Haggard, and her majesty the queen were enemies turned friends. Their stories have painted the pages of House Haggard’s chronicles, their relationship allowed for Hidros to be united. She answered the wish of the late king and soon carried on to her resting place, leaving the crown to me – a simple man who bears the blood of Staxius Haggard. To my people, I ask one question, what doth thee desire? Many will say a safe place to live, others, a stable economy, and even adequate shelter, thus I reply by showing Prime Minister éclair’s humanitarian actions – he made strides towards caring for the elderly, lowering the burden of cost for healthcare, free housing for the disabled and impoverished. Bygones are bygones, an act of generosity is not meant for political advancement – sadly, by the way time changes, Kreston was excommunicated by order of the pope. A holy crusade will be upon us, they wish to save followers imprisoned at the hands of Pope Carrigan. Is it safety they’re after or is it to annex both Dorchester and Kreston? There’s no question war will defile Dorchester’s landscape again, the war-torn province unable to heal her wounds sees old scars torn open,” a moment’s rest simultaneously slowed movement around Hidros, proving the king’s authority and way of capturing their focus, “-my people, as king, I have failed to create an atmosphere of peace and prosperity. Alrosia was a curse, one I’m happy we got rid of at the expense of our temporary safety. Listen carefully here and now, as King of Hidros, my responsibilities have now turned to safeguard heritage passed from generation to generation. I will not stop,” he stood, “-I will not cower, I will lead

Hidros forward, taking attacks from both enemies and friends, I'm Hidros's shield, her sword, and her guardian. I haven't inherited the title Devil King of Hidros for nothing," a piercing glance at the lens, "-balls in your court, my people, will you stand by my side or be an enemy of the state. To the former, I welcome thee and make no promise of the journey being easy, the latter, thou art free to leave and start again somewhere else. When the time comes for battle, think, could I slay a friend, a family member, or a lover? If the answer is no, then you know what must be done. And if the answer is yes – then the blame and guilt are not yours to bear, I shall carry the burden for you for it's the kingdom that proved unable to stop friends from killing one another," intensity in the voice sufficed to skip heartbeats, leaving many wondrous as what was ahead, "-Hidros' getting ready for war, to those willing to stand by us, present thyself at guilds, military outposts and training grounds. I'm looking for competent people, not just fighters, but thinkers, scholars, and anyone with a skill that may serve their state. Future is ours, and today's the first step, I henceforth decree centralization of major factions, I will shape the destiny of Hidros and die trying," he pointed at the camera, "-you, my people, will inherit what we achieve," fingers curled into a fist, "-TO HIDROS!" shouted the king.

"TO HIDROS!" bellowed across the land, from Rosepire's Highrise to the cathedral of Kreston – a formal announcement by the king spurred intent within the hearts of many. Vampire charm amplified by a natural ability to lead and guide emotions strengthened his position as well as undermined the legitimacy of the Rebellion's claim. News stations were quick on the affair, a royal scandal brought to life by the king himself – such a level of openness towards his people, an affair which was detrimental to his claim suddenly grew to be his greatest advantage.

A humble figure perched upon Azure wall, her locks carried on the wind, and her fluttering eyes snuck glances at her right arm, "-Jen, I'm here, your shift is over."

"Understood," turned a matured lady crossing into one of the wall's watchtowers.

"This king man," gawked a young adult, "-I don't know how he does it. I mean, you heard the speech just now, yeah? I'm fired up."

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"I know," she said with a reserved smile, "-Igna Haggard, we were friends once. We met at the academy, look at him now, the king of Hidros," backpack over her shoulder, "-that's just how the king is," she nodded, "-one who turns disadvantages into strength. Don't be careless out there."

"Says the one who's expecting."

"Brat."

As a hurricane made waves across its target, Igna's speech painted a positive picture. There are times when weaknesses are best used to sway public opinion. Feeling of care, admiration, and resolve – all focused on the people and their collective home, Igna masterfully spoke his mind and in doing so, rose morale, thus increasing the likely hood of acceptance.

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"Pardon?" shuddered the parliament, "-majesty, you did what?"

"I did what I had," he said, "-justification is simple, unification of Hidros," he looked at Goldberg, "-my lady, do keep the hatred confined. There is much to come in the few months. The purpose of the meeting is settled – ministers linked to my court will be handpicked. The kingdom moves into a new age, and by all means," he crossed his legs, "-those unwilling to adhere with said changes are free to leave in the company of lady Goldberg." \*Clop, clop, clop,\* a frigid breeze lowered the room's temperature, "-in view of the reform, here I present the new minister of internal affairs, my big sister, Eira Haggard, she will serve a great part in quelling disorder throughout our kingdom."

"Empress of Alpha?" fired one of the Gaien council, "-how nepotic-" protested the representative. Insolent tone begone a swift death, the knight stepped inward and plunged his sword through the man's heart.

"TYRANT!" screamed others, by which multiple other knights rushed and slaughtered those of unequal thoughts.

"It's one thing to be open-minded," he narrowed, "-and another being a gullible fool. May this serve as a message. More information will be sent from the prime minister's office."

Lady Goldberg rose, not once bothered at the deaths, "-King Igna," she curtsied, "-with my deepest respect, I bid thee farewell."

"Farewell, lady Goldberg – may our paths never cross in the field of battle."

She covered her mouth and politely laughed, "-my dear king, allow me to give a word of advice. Centralization will weight heavy, especially to one renowned for his whimsical nature."

"And to you," he quipped, "-a word of warning, keep in mind thy line of succession."

She stopped and stared, paying mind to Igna's worrisome words, "-I will," he nodded and left. Similarly, those present stood, many averted their gaze from the slaughter, "-King Igna," said those remaining in the Gaien council, "-we shall endeavor to keep people's mind at ease."

"Representative of the Gaien Council will fall under Countess Eira Haggard of Elony, once held by the late count Ian."

"As you wish, my liege," they swore fealty. By their example, others joined to show their appreciation and willingness to follow their king – in a single day, influence and prestige skyrockets to heights unreached by éclair. A bloodied meeting turned a gathering of familiar faces, "-quite the show," commented Elon, "-boldly announcing the world of the coming changes. How can we be of help?"

"By staying strong," he replied ominously, "-Elon's Dynasty and Phantom are two powerhouses keeping the kingdom afloat in the international market."

"Don't leave out Phantom," winked a passing Asmodeus.

"He speaks true," a sip slowed the conversation, "-Elon," they moved to a quieter place, "-I need a favor."

"Anything, what's the matter?"

“If the day ever comes where I’m unable to lead the kingdom, I want you to take the helms and get rid of the feudal system, it’s already in my will.”

The man simply watched, “-why me?”

“Because thee see the world in color, the people will need to have the support of a new leader, one charismatic and wise.”

The head shook in disagreement, “-I will try my best.”

“Good, that’s a weight off my shoulder. I should get going, take care, friend, I’m glad you came.”

“You too, friend, and don’t worry, Elon’s dynasty backs the king fully.”

“So long,” thus Igna went circle to circle, exchanging words and giving thoughts on the future. Dusk shortly drew over the castle towers, a calm breeze blew into the king’s office, “-éclair, Yui, Starix, and Alta, I’ve chosen thee to be my closest aid, as such, confidential matters will be divided, and handled amongst you four.”

“Master, might I ask a question?” narrowed Starix, he nodded, “-why us four?”

“Trust is a gamble, asking and receiving trust in itself is what makes the matter such a precious commodity. éclair and Yui have always been at my side, Starix has shown great promise in handling Raven and for Alta, stewardess of Glenda – thy talents have grown exponentially. As such,” he stood and pull an ornamental dagger, “-as a show of my trust, I offer thee the boon of immortality through my blood and heritage as inheritor of the first progenitor.”

“Immortality, master?” blinked Alta.

“Yes,” he said, “-I heard from the Blood-king’s faction. Alta, I know.”

“By all means,” she dropped on one knee, “-please, I wish to become a nightwalker.”

“I must speak these words of warning; he who sips shall walk the night follow the code, and lead the path, willingly or unwillingly.”

#### Chapter 930: Gathering of Nightwalkers

Droplets fell into her mouth, Alta’s face beamed in excitement, ‘-nightwalker,’ passed her thoughts, ‘-I’ve worked alongside them, vanquished monsters, diplomatically aided Noctis’s Hallow – the reserved way of life, noblesse oblige; vampires always strive to help the less fortunate. Immortals do not worry about life, nor do they much care about what is to happen in the future – they’re a different breed of people, one I always aspired to be. My hard work led to this moment – working for my master has made me strong and brought a smile on his people, Glenda.’

“Alta,” the droplets landed on her tongue, “-I granted thee the curse of a nightwalker. Rest is how thee react to the blood, since inheriting from a pure-blooded direct descendant, the probability of you becoming a-” a great reddish-black mist swirled, her tan complexion faded for white, her shoes disintegrated, her nails deepened in a natural black, the activation carried up to her knees, to her thighs, destroying the fabric and foreign items from her skin, it crawled, reach her neck and dispersed. Bright red spawned from the vacuous mist – leading to sharp canines, sharp ears, and sharpened nails. Alta’s

hair changed into pure white ending in spots of red – there laid an uncanny resemblance. She stood undressed; her muscles were well-defined, similar to a well-trained athlete. No trouble nor sense hurry passed her mind, she but simply touched a strange necklace curled around her neck – from it, a beautifully designed gothic dress draped her body until reaching her knees, laced sleeves carried onto her forehead, putting attention onto the newly piercing nails.

“Alta,” Igna watched, “-you are of a duchess rank,” he blinked, “-one of very few, I was expecting a high-rank, not that level of high. Tell me, what thy blood-art?”

“Blood-Arts of Create-destroy, Fona.”

“Duchess-ranked nightwalker, Alta, wielder of the unique talent of creation and destruction eloquently dubbed Fona. I expect greater things. Welcome to the house of Haggard,” he said, “-as a nightwalker and bearer of our family blood, Alta, thou art a true Haggard,” amazed at the increase in strength, Starix sought for his shot at immortality. Thus, Igna side-stepped, his shadow hanging greatly over the strategist. Same ritual and same envy, blood landed and a thick gray mist swallowed the room, forcing Igna to step away. Starix materialized with a sense of slowed time, “-master,” he added, checking the outfit, “-is my butler uniform classy?”

“Yes,” returned the king, “-my dear Starix, what is thy power?”

“I don’t know...” he frantically looked inward, “-I don’t know and I’m scared,” he cringed, “-I mean, I wish I knew?”

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“Take your time and think,” suddenly, a giant image, a map, flowcharts, probability numbers, and much more opened, “-I have the boon of foresight,” he blinked.

“Wait, not a combat-related ability?”

“No,” he coughed, “-master, what is my rank?”

“Viscount.”

“Viscount?”

“Enough about rank,” hurried Igna, “-tell us more about the ability, what happened?”

“I think, well, I don’t know,” he shrugged, “-I can predict outcomes and have a clear understanding of our political climate, I see the world in a very calm and calculating manner.”

“Excellent,” beamed Igna, “-thee truly bears the title of Strategist.”

Starix was disappointed, looking at what Alta inherited compared to him, “-don’t be jealous,” she whispered, “-we have our own responsibilities to the crown. I mean, look at the king, he’s happier about your awakening compared to mine. Goes to show how much the master values intellect over fighting prowess.”

“Yui, my dear Yui,” said he in a joyous tone, “-thee who came to the ends of the earth for my rescue, I’m happy it was you, wouldn’t have chosen anyone better to have at my side in those harsh times.”

“Master,” light scanned her pupils, knife to his thumb – droplets landed again – her eyes cried a river of red, ‘-what’s this?’ fear grasped her heart, no mist nor show of power – there was naught but her standing idly, “-did the curse not work?”

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“Oh it did,” said Igna, “-I sense a Countess,” he narrowed, “-Yui, care to enlighten?”

A flick of the wrist and an upward motion shook the room, semi-transparent mist clawed from the earth, pushing their ethereal bodies against the carpeted floor and rising to her side, “-Necromancy,” she smiled.

“My,” he laughed, “-the necrotic arts of a nightwalker,” he snapped – calling forth a few undead of his own, “-we have the same abilities-” it sudden crossed his mind, “-Starix, Alta, Yui, I understand what’s happening.”

“What is?”

“My powers,” he said, “-you’re inheriting my powers. Boon of foresight, the boon of creation and destruction, and now, the boon of necromancy – they’re all part of me, and now, they’re part of you. My blood doesn’t only carry super-human strength and traits known to nightwalkers; they also carry my abilities. This means but one thing, and tis unity.”

Last was éclair, the prime minister at Igna with intent to speak, “-what is it?” asked the King.

“Majesty, with all due respect, I wish to abstain from being granted powers of the blood.”

“Is that so?” éclair shut his eyes and clenched his fist, “-sure, why not.”

\*Cough,\* “-master?”

“Did you think I’d argue?” no ill-intent nor anger, King Igna calmly made his way to the desk and turned at the fellow attendant, “-Yui, Starix, and Alta, three who’ve inherited the Nox’s clan’ cursed blood, I have but one thing to ask – doth thee wish for a vampiric name or?”

“Is it necessary?” they asked.

“Depends and up to the individual.”

“No,” they said one by one, “-no,” and lastly, “-no.”

“We’d prefer to inherit the name Haggard instead,” they nodded simultaneously.

The king emotionlessly watched, took time before making a decision – a few seconds felt like hours, “-bearing my family name is a simple matter,” he said uncaringly, “-however, the burden of expectation associated with the Haggard name is one heavy and potentially world breaking. I dubbed Alta a Haggard in view of her excellent work at handling a bustling capital in trying times. I know just how hard it is to rule over a constantly changing city – and to see her make it look easy by controlling the growing factions, adding faith to the church of Athena, patron goddess of Glenda, and interacting with scattered independent tribes – reports are telling of her abilities. She’s worthy of inheriting the name,” and suddenly, what Igna meant stuck home. “-Though I don’t mind giving the name, I’d prefer you earn it,”

he said skeptically, “-I mean no disrespect. Yui, Starix – there’s more thee can accomplish. As for you, Starix, I know there’s your hand in helping Raven, I don’t dismay those efforts. Alas, you were helped by éclair, Asmodeus, Mammon, Kul, people who I hold in high regard, it was to be expected as Raven laid its grounds in a foreign land – the foundation needed to be nothing short of the best we had. Glenda in comparison was a village, unworthy to be looked at or even discuss – look at it now, a central pillar in Queen Courtney’s rule over Arda. The second-largest city shy of where the queen resides. Long story short, make it so the name Haggard feels like nothing to you, surpass that expectation, and forge thy way into Hidros’ history. My confidants, the responsibility and times ahead will most likely see comrade die, cities end, and economic disaster.”

“We understand, master,” they knelt, “-until the time comes, we will show relentless grit.”

A silent exhale escaped, “-you’re dismissed,” he said, “-we have much to do. Yui and Starix – there’s a matter of diplomatic nature I wish thee to oversee. Tis pertaining to the inclusion of another kingdom into Hidros’ rank. Yui,” he blinked, she understood his intent, “-them?”

“Who better to aid than them. éclair, prepare for their flight, I leave the discussion to you, Yui,” few taps on the phone, “-Starix, I’ve sent information that may prove useful.”

“The kingdom needs allies...” in the confusion of the open-ended statement, Starix’s new abilities locked onto a possibility, “-master, did you foresee Hidros’ current state?” the room dropped, had the king truly laid the way in the past for the Hidros of the present?

“Who can say?” he added neutrally, “-things happen for a reason. Alta and éclair, stay awhile.”

Yui and Starix left, shutting the office door and looking baffled, “-wipe that expression,” narrowed Yui, “-doesn’t befit the gentlemanly charm of a butler.”

“Yui, come on, don’t you understand what master did?”

“No, should I care?”

“Lord, give me strength,” he sighed, “-listen here, Yui, on discovering the assassination plot and seeing how Alphaia’s corrupt nature was involved, the master thought it best to let them win the battle, taking a massive gamble, one wherein éclair stepped to the forefront and carried Hidros on his shoulder, fighting the oppressive force and leading through the intrigue-filled climate. They share an indescribable bond, that goes beyond trust, I don’t know, I envy éclair and his relation with his master, there’s something more I can’t grasp. Never mind that, tis Marinda – the fabled land of demi-gods. Master understood Hidros would eventually be forced into a rough spot, therefore – time did its job and slowly chipped at the alliance hence the present – Hidros left the alliance without losing much in reputation. To support Hidros, we need allies, and the master went a step further, he sought out the help of a potentially world-dominating super-power. Imagine demi-gods entering the international world – it would turn the dynamic inside out, superior weapons, knowledge, wealth – the possibilities are endless. Did I read the report, flying islands? Imagine how our air force would evolve if we had flying motherships – taking over the world would be a simple matter of sending a massive ship overseas.”

“Lower the energy,” whispered Yui, “-the people of Marinda won’t give much in ways of courtesy.”

“Why not?”

“They worship our king and have sworn to kill anyone who dares go against him. I’m telling you, if it wasn’t for the promise made by Queen Gallienne and the protection of his family and friends, the master would have settled in a superiorly significant kingdom, ruling without contest or effort.” Maids slowed their cleaning and watched as the duo crossed the hallways, “-the castle’s coming to life again,” commented one.

“Get back to cleaning,” said another, “-I’m sure glad the king’s return. The place felt lifeless.”

“See,” laughed the maid, “-we think alike.”

Back at the king’s office, the discussion reached a critical moment, “-Goldberg,” he narrowed, “-we need them to control the noble faction which indirectly influences my wife, Eia’s action. Her attempts are desperate, I doubt Alphaia to take her hand, we have time before they see the benefits. Forging a worthwhile alliance takes time.”

“Suggestions?”

“I remember someone in my days studying at the academy. Leonard Goldberg, the son of the Duchess, was exiled from the family name for the reason of loving a commoner. They must have gotten married and perhaps have a son or daughter.”

“Master?”

“Don’t look at me with suspicion,” he paused, “-find out what happened, location and current status, use whatever resource is needed,” he glanced at Alta, “-tis thy task.”

“Sorry?” she blinked, “-I thought searching for information as éclair’s strong point.”

“It is, but, as a Duchess ranked nightwalker, there’s much to be learned in creating a strong information network. Information is crucial, firsthand experience is key. I’ve sent Serene a notice, you have a week to find Leonard and a month to create a network.”

“Understood,” she nodded, “-I will see to it, master.”

“Good, you’re dismissed, have a good night’s rest.”

\*Thud,\* the room locked, “-master?”

“éclair,” Igna’s guard lowered, “-Been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Your smile,” he said, “-it’s gone, master.”

He paid no attention to the comment, instead, choosing to move from the desk to the gramophone, “-éclair, how’s Marie Jude and Alchemist guild’s research coming along?” smooth piano played, “-which project?”

“No name,” he replied, “-domination of the air.”

“Oh, that,” he paused, “-the papers thee made on Maicite applications made the technology possible, we have a working prototype, a few tests were conducted – the secrecy of the project’s made rather difficult.”



