

## Death Magic 931

### Chapter 931: Home Visit

Adventuring town, Meke, streets, and buildings unchanged. It laid unaffected by the passage of time – one key change was expansion, and such was brought by the emergence of Adventuring as a truly fulfilling job. Advent of the evolved tower of god, a giant dungeon spanning unreachable heights of which its predecessor was beaten into a flurry of treasures and glory, motivated newcomers to do their best.

Circumstance brought about the birth of a new residential area set a few minutes' walk from Meke and its always iron and sweat ridden street. An increase in death and constant bounty of monsters, forced alive by a syringe of no death – random decomposing bodies left dried for research was more common nowadays.

Posters stuck onto random shop windows, announcements relating to new policy changes brought by the capital. Affluent traders held their meetings, debating on whether the policies affected trade or not – so far, by summary, the changes were mostly based on internal and external affairs. Former necessary due to the overhauling of the ministries and its various responsibilities, as for the latter, self-explanatory in the rise of Alpha's advancements.

"Come one, come all, a fresh shipment of food has arrived," cried one of the merchants, the always active market drew more. Amidst the crowd walked a middle-aged lady, a fighter, and by her uniform, a wall guardian. Well-renowned special officers responsible for the safety of veterans and recruits alike.

"Lady Jen," waved an innocent man, "-thank you for saving me," he bowed and hurried with a skip in the step, "-here, a token of my gratitude," he smiled and was joined by his adventuring group, "-thank you again, lady Jen," nodded a girl in said party, "-we would have lost him if not for you."

"Don't worry about it," she smiled, "-long as you learn to be careful."

"I've learned my lesson," said the boy a little flustered from the jestful commotion, "-see you later, miss Jen."

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"Later," she replied, watching as the nostalgic sight of friends scurried towards the Azure walls, '-youth,' she sighed and glanced at her belly, '-maybe it's time for me to take a break,' she paused at various stalls and stocked on vegetables and grains. '-Last night's rescue has wiped me out,' she yawned, barely able to keep her path straight. Past the market, crossing the first lines of shops, she headed towards a three-story building cupped in a very busy intersection – a sign read, "-Berg's armory," she pushed the door and stepped in, a head of blond returned, "-welcome," it spun and made eye contact, "-my, welcome back Jen."

"Good to be back," bags on the counter, she leaned over the counter and exchanged a few kisses, "-closing up for today?"

"Waiting for delivery. Go back and rest."

"What of Yony?"

“He’s with aunt Yume.”

Before now, a few days had passed counting from when the king gave his orders. 4th of February said the calendar, a white-haired lady crossed Berg’s shop, stopped at the window, and glanced inside, ‘-there, found him,’ she muttered in a relieved tone. \*Incoming call: Serene,\* “-good evening.”

“Good evening, Alta, how’s the search coming along?”

“Just confirmed the location, could you forward the rest to his majesty?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, today’s the deadline for finding the target,” she said, “-I’ll stick around for a while yet.”

“As you wish,” the call ended, to which Alta quietly dropped her phone into her pocket and watched, ‘-searching for Leonard wasn’t that hard. I simply contacted the academy, they pointed to the trader’s guild who I have strong connections with, a call to a representative in Glenda told me of a man named Leonard. Back and forth and cross-checking the information took most of the time, glad it’s over,’ she breathed and gulped a cup of coconut water from one of the nearby stalls.

At the capital, Serene barged into Igna’s office blatantly, “-my liege,” she cried and threw up her arms, “-great news.”

“Great news you say?” he glanced over the display, narrowed on her skin-tight outfit, and sighed, “-go ahead.”

“Majesty, please,” she pouted, “-do I not look amazing in my outfit?”

“No comment.”

“Fine, play hard to get,” she pulled a seat, “-Alta’s sent notice of Leonard’s location. They’re in Meke.”

“My, this is great news,” he stood, “-Serene, where’s éclair?”

“I have no idea, must I inquire?”

“No, I was just wondering. I’ve crossed checked the papers, have it delivered to my sister, she’ll take the matter from here, can’t allow the minister of Internal affair bored, can we,” suit-jacket over the shoulder, Igna found himself outside looking at a sorry sight for a parking lot.

“Majesty?” paused a butler, “-might I be of help?”

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“Where are the cars?”

“Lord Asmodeus took ’em, why, is something the matter?”

“Don’t worry,” he exhaled, “-public transport it is.”

“Majesty,” he interjected, “-why not take one of the helicopters?”

“Pardon?”

“Phantom has helicopters stationed at the back of the castle.”

“Right, I didn’t know that,” he muttered, “-lead the way.”

Night swarmed the continent, helicopter faded in the distance, leaving Igna in the middle of a busy market,”-over here.”

“Alta,” he smiled, “-right on time with the task.”

“Cross-checking information was tedious – without éclair or Yui, paperwork takes rather long.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Tell me, where are they?”

“Left a few hours ago – sources have located their house.”

“Lead the way.”

Chatter and laughter escaped various homes, amber light from the inside lit the somber walkway, there was no differentiating between affluent or common. All of the houses resembled one another like relatives. Alta headed to a one painted in light gray with a darker slated roof, “-they live here,” she commented and entered their yard, hopped over white slates until the door, \*tap, tap, tap,\* cried a quick burst of three.

“Coming,” the white door pulled, “-how can I be of help?”

“Jen,” said a figure in the background, “-Been a while, hasn’t it?”

Her jaws dropped, “-who is it?” screamed from the inside amidst the carnage of a child’s tantrum, “-Jen?” Igna stood quietly, no response heightened Leonard’s guard by which he hurried into the hallway and shouted, “-Jen?” her shadow glued to the floor, ‘-what’s wrong with her?’ closer he walked, better grew the view until, “-Leonard, long time no see.”

He blinked, “-Igna?”

“We need to have a word.”

A shared table seated the guests, the host of the evening, Leonard and Jen stood in the kitchen, Leonard’s worried face increased by seeing Jen’s petrified expression, “-what is he doing here?” she asked, unable to think or act.

“I don’t know, maybe for a casual visit?”

“No...”

“Well, stay here and watch after Yony, I’ll see to our guests.”

Drinks and snacks soon filled the table, “-tell me, Igna, what brings the king to our humble abode?”

“Can a friend not check on another?” he asked blatantly with a skeptical tone.

“Ha,” he sipped, “-may we get to the real heart of the matter?”

“Fine,” to which Igna sipped, “-Leonard Goldberg, I’ve come to take you and your family hostage.”

\*Cough, cough, cough,\* “-no need to cause such a mess,” interjected Alta, “-got my clothes all dirty.”

“Sorry, sorry, but hostage?” he gulped, “-Igna, you’re joking, this is a jest, surely.”

“No, no,” firmed the cold monotonous voice, “-I mean what I say, I’ve come to take thee hostage. The reason is simple, and tis political gain. The Goldbergs are influential, to get to them, I have to strike where it matters, and sadly, said target is your child, Yony. No matter what anyone says, you have a legitimate claim on the Goldberg bloodline, a few flicks of the wrist and it wouldn’t be difficult to sow unrest.”

“Is that so,” the breathing calmed, “-Igna, why me, why my son. There’s no point in targeting us, my mother has already forced me to abdicate my claim. You know as well as I do,” he sighed, “-was it not thee who looked into Jen and I’s relation. After she gained power, there wasn’t anything we could do. I managed to get part of my inheritance and escape to Meke. Alta always wanted to be a wall guardian, as for me, I got the deed to a shop and started a business. We live a modest life, food is viably available and the home is comfortable. I have a son and a loving wife, tis the perfect scenario I had wished.”

“Leonard, I get that the lifestyle is peaceful. However, what I said isn’t a request, tis a decree.”

“No,” footsteps echoed, “-you won’t take him away from me,” refuted Alta, “-why do you always interject in our lives. I get it, I’m sorry about the way we treated you, if I could turn back time, I’d stop my old self... but now, it’s getting too much, I get you helped me, helped my husband... we’re indebted, I get that,” her fist dropped onto the table, “-it doesn’t give thee the right to waltz in and ruin everything!”

“Leonard, Jen,” he shook his head, “-you misunderstand, taking thee hostage is but a matter of speech. Besides, do you really have the strength to stand against the might of Hidros’ ruler? Going against the state without backing, I think not. As I said before, I came for a visit, there’s nothing else I wish to say at the moment,” to which he noticed a short figure sneaking into the hallway, Igna motioned to the boy who felt compelled to listen. Tidy feet shuffled until reaching Igna, “-what’s your name?”

“Yony, get back to your room,” gritted Jen.

“Tell me, what’s your name, boy?”

Enchanted by the man, he replied, “-Yony.”

“Good to meet you, Yony,” nodded Igna rising his head at Jen, “-I mean the boy no harm. There’s nothing to be fearful of. Personally visiting is my way of extending an olive branch. Leonard, I can assure thy safety.”

“Only if I work with the crown?”

“Correct,” he said, “-you have a month to decide. I’ll send an envoy next time” he glanced at the boy, “-Yony, you want to become an adventurer, don’t you?”

Jen’s heart dropped, “-what?”

“Yeah,” cheered the boy, “-I want to be strong like my mom.”

“Good boy,” he extended a fist bump, “-as an adventurer myself, hear this advice from an old man – to become strong, one must follow those who are strong. In other words, listen to your mother, she’s quite the fierce lady.”

“I will,” said a glimmer in the boy’s eyes. Door closed in the distance, Jen sat at the table staring at her child intently, “-Yony, what did I say about strangers?”

“Mom...”

“Enough,” interjected Leonard, “-don’t blame him. We can take Igna for his word, we know he’s a man who values his word more than people’s lives.”

And so, Igna left the neighborhood beside Alta, “-why did we pay them a visit again?”

“Sending a warning,” he answered, “-didn’t you notice how the houses around theirs are rather silent compared to the others? I’m sure it’s Goldberg’s way of spying on her kid. She’s a mother at heart, the Goldberg succession prefers male heirs – and her being the head of the family was lucky. Abdicating Leonard from his position pushes the kid into the forefront. Kids are innocent and can be molded, she’s just waiting for an opportunity to take him away.”

“What are you saying?”

“We but merely added fuel to the already burning fire.”

\*Incoming call: éclair,\* “-hello?”

“Emergency, master,” said the prime minister, “-we were wrong about having time. Seems enemy troops have landed in Dorchester – communication lines have been cut, the northern province is blacked out, what are thy orders?”

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“Strike while the iron is hot,” he murmured, “-is there anything we can do to stop the attack?”

“We could send in a bombing squad?”

“The forces, are they scouts perchance?”

“Yeah, we have reports of the ships being little in size.”

“Right, call to arms a bomber squad”

“It would be going behind lady Elvira’s back...”

“Time is of the essence, do as I say,” the call ended, forcing Igna to reevaluate the situation, ‘-we need a general.’

Chapter 932: Air Force

“My lady Goldberg, welcome back to Castle Garsley,” said an overly energetic minister, “-may we perhaps learn of how the parliament meeting went?” the one questioned deliberately slowed her step on entering the throne room, looked at a nearby arrangement of seats and threw another glance deeper inside, “-lady Goldberg?” intervened the hunched figure, a sparkling personality paired with a hunched

spine didn't look great for many saw the man as conniving and mysterious, not to speak of the added horrible scar that devoured his right cheek.

"Where's the queen?" she spoke for a few minutes,"-matters of the parliament are best discussed quietly. Have a meeting room readied, ask the nobles to stand clear from the area, for now, there's much happening." Unhinged by the disrespect the higher powers never thought to correct, the hunched figure nodded politely and carried her orders. Castle Garsley was but a figment of the past, it laid active and present on name alone – the structure itself had been rebuilt plenty of times, bricks replaced and ceilings were redone, a curse seemed to linger, one of constant retrial.

A meeting was soon set for the duchess and queen before the hour hand made much trouble – they found themselves seated within the monarch's office. A minimally decorated road of a simple table, chair, and a few bookshelves. "-Duchess Goldberg," greeted the queen, "-I do hope the voyage was peaceful."

"Peaceful is a big word to throw," she rebutted, "-the voyage was pleasant, same couldn't be said of the meeting. A few days have elapsed and I apologize for not visiting sooner, my lands needed care. As was told on the news and broadcast, the king called a parle to decree his views going forward. Hidros will make its path into true centralization. Many ministers were dismissed, others left on their own accord – many of which requested shelter, thus I obliged and such the reason for the late audience. Lady Eia, I do say, if Hidros takes arms against Dorchester and by way Kreston was excommunicated, the province may be circled from three sides. King Igna masterfully played his cards – divulging information of a royal scandal, putting shame on thy name, and pushing his to the top. Also, a small letter arrived by my room later said day, reading as follows, '-to lady Goldberg, I hope the letter finds thee well. My identity is not of concern nor will it affect the greater picture – I write for a simple reason; a warning. Heed my word and heed the experience King Igna bore, Alphaia is a corrupt nation of greedy aristocrats and business tycoons. For one to make an impact, one needs capital, if one of the richest dynasties couldn't shake the balance of power, there's much said in the silence. I pray thee thinks of the matter carefully, signing a deal with an empire on verge of collapse is the same as getting aboard a flooded boat. There I leave you, my lady, with this warning, allowing a stronger power into one's kingdom will bring the downfall of everyone around. Willingly opening the gates for a foreign army, consider thy actions carefully,' signed, W. Ria and sealed using a crest available only to those placed high in the king's court. "-and there it is."

Queen Eia had the folded piece of paper rolled on her desk, her focus carefully scanned lines after lines, word after word until the end where she exhaled mildly and rose to the Duchess.

"What do you think?" her arms crossed, "-the letter is valid and I don't doubt the intention of the writer, however, there's more to consider here, why was the letter sent, who does it address, and what is told in between the lines?"

"Oh, the latter is simple," she said, "-to not trust a queen who's willingly allowing a greater nation to enter her domain. Might I remind her majesty if not for nobles and their wealth – Dorchester wouldn't have much to offer and the claim of rebellion wouldn't stand. Which is why I ask, what have you planned?"

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A small moment's delay slowed the room's fast pace, Queen Eia shut her eyes and paused, "-letter reads true and underlines faults. However, being wise is not necessarily a good thing. Kreston is deemed unholy by the pope, we support Alphaia's new ruler and by saying so, announce our allegiance to the world. Tis no secret our faction wishes to take Hidros, and similar to us, so does the greatest empire to date, the Alwracian nation. What have I planned?" she smiled, "-the only way to make our rule legitimate is to have the pope dub Dorchester a holy province, making her cause right and just. This is why I asked for Dorchester to join the Holy Crusade against Kreston. Hidros backing Kreston against Alwracia backing Dorchester. We need but be the face of the attacker, money, weapons, manpower, and leave all to the church and its righteous ways. Luckily, nobles have strong sentiment toward the church of Lucifer, most of Dorchester is a devotee of said dogma on accounts of our, well, let's say, fair way of doing justice. Once Kreston is gone, we'll occupy more land, allowing for a more concrete battle against Oxshield."

"I heard scouting forces were dispatched?"

"Yes, they should arrive no later than three days."

"Alright, three days. I'll relay the news to the noble factions – if her majesty wishes to fight a holy crusade, we shall join the effort and aid financially."

"A pleasure to have you, lady Goldberg."

"Please, majesty, the feelings are mutual."

Thus, during the long waited week, Duchess and Queen held talks on where they stood, there was more correspondence, many kept secret and away from prying eyes. Goldberg's estate, built within the confines of Dorchester's infamous noble district, spanned quite a while, "-duchess," relatively tranquil atmosphere shattered, "-trouble," gasped a retainer dressed in formal attire, "-pardon the intrusion."

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"My," she rose a finger, asking her massage and beauty treatments to stop, a simple towel wrapped the lady's figure, by which she tilted towards the retainer and crossed her legs, "-should pardon the intrusion, not be first?" said a well-defined and relaxed smile.

"My deepest apologies," knelt the retainer, a younger man, easy on the eyes and charming through the glacially blue blinks, "-I have news from Meke, my lady. King Igna was spotted inside Leonard's home. By reports, watchers stationed opposite the house retell of the king glaring at them through the closed curtain and I quote, '-the king looked at us as if there was nothing in the way, he glared, we felt the killing intent from a street away. Lord Leonard seemed preoccupied when shutting the door', lady Goldberg, since yesterday, a couple of strangers moved adjacent Lord Leonard's house."

Her heart dropped, no more laid relaxation, "-damned Igna," she gritted and thought back to, "-a word of warning, keep in mind thy line of succession."

"Duchess?"

"Forgive me, I was lost in thought. Have letter sent to the king asking for an audience," the retainer obeyed, leaving her to retake her posture, '-I won't be scared so easily, king.'

Sun rose to midday, a black car drove onto scorching hot asphalt leading into Rotherham – heat blurred the street as hot air rose, no sign of clouds in the skies either. The luxurious car pulled behind one of the three pillars, signaled a gatekeeper, and cruised into the underground parking – the driver was quick to stop and open the passenger door, from which rose Igna accompanied by Alta, “-don’t mean to pry,” he looked over, “-is it wise to be my shadow?”

“Master, is it not a wise policy to study under the best?”

“As you wish,” an elevator shortly pulled them to one of the many offices, familiar corridor, familiar arrangement, \*Elvira’s office,\* two taps sufficed, “-enter,” the lock clicked, he pushed the door inward to be hit by a sudden blast of air, ‘-auntie doesn’t look pleased.’

“Have the girl stand outside,” she fired, Igna turned and whispered, ‘-best wait this one out, she’s not particularly happy,’ the door closed, “-over this way,” said one of the guards, “-a rest area,” he smiled.

“Thank you,” she nodded politely.

“Pleasure is mine,” the heavily built guard blushed, rising Alta’s self-confidence just that bit higher, same couldn’t be said for Igna, room’s atmosphere grabbed his throat, ‘-who would have guessed a single lady to have so much aura,’ he walked, visible unphased by her show of strength, “-Aunt Elvira, you called?”

“Aha,” she narrowed, no visible pleasant expression or courtesy, “-take a seat, dearest nephew,” Igna obliged and was soon staring down a barrel of Hidros’s most powerful faction, Phantom, “-tell me, nephew,” she tapped her keyboard, a holographic display materialized, “-care to explain?”

A report wrote across the screen, “-4th of February at 22:54, a royal decree was issued VT10-BSQD, carrier of Pabruska V1 to conduct a bombing run of Dorchester’s port at the below mentioned coordinates. Per agreements signed by Phantom and the Royal Crown, under the direct command of the King, VT10-BSQD was deployed and outfitted with Dragna V3. Airstrike hit the coast of Dorchester at 23:10. Most of the landscape was destroyed, target – scouting party of the independent nation of Dorchester was wiped.”

“And?” he paused, “-what’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem?” she slammed her table, “-is that you went behind my back and ordered for an airstrike.”

He sternly narrowed, “-lady Elvira of Phantom, did thee not understand what I meant by centralization?”

The betrayal suddenly made sense, “-the agreement?”

“Yes, my lady, I apologize for going behind your back. Time was of the essence, do check thy phone,” he took out his and showed countless outgoing missed calls, “-I tried my hardest to get a hold of you, but it didn’t work. Such had to be the outcome – war is fast approaching, best to show a strong hand now, we’re rulers of the skies and I’ll make sure everyone knows why we focused on it. Therefore, aunt, what now?”

Last night’s memories soon flooded, her pale cheeks redden, “-my apologies, I guess I was too caught up in emotion to see the affair from a logical point of view.”



“Dragna V3’s area of effect is contained, was the best option to take out an army and not cause collateral damage. Lady Elvira, once again I must ask, doth thee wish to assist Hidros in times of war or must I look to other parties for assistance?”

“My,” she smiled and struck a toothache pose, “-Igna, you’ve grown.”

“Pardon?”

“Did you think my army would simply agree to take the king’s order without my approval?” she giggled, “-it was a test, my dear, I needed to see how you’d react. And from the response I got, it’s good, I’m glad. You thought well sending the lesser damaging option and clearly planned on a good location.”

“Easier said than done,” he sighed, “-the coordinate was a guess. Airstrikes are harder to enact – good thing the squadron are excellent pilots.”

“Tis the drawback of flying into enemy territory – I don’t personally like sending my men into the jaws of death. Seems the king had no issues.”

“They acted fast, and so did we. Aunt Elvira, it pains me to ask, I’d like full authority over the air force.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s the hardest units to control and are strategically wise to have.”

“So be it,” she smiled, “-Midas and Sotepios are hereby under the direct authority of King Igna Haggard. éclair’s already asked Phantom to be employed as mercenaries to the crown, shouldn’t be an issue.”

The stance lowered, “-my, aunt Elvira, you sure don’t know how to hold punches.”

“What can I say?” she laughed, “-tis my nature.”

“Very well, there’s much we should prepare. Raven’s sent a significant amount to aid in Phantom’s campaign, consider it a gift for access over the air force.”

“Well, the structure isn’t quite set in stone. Potential is unlimited, comes to the leader’s ability to restructure and form teams accordingly. On the latter – we need a general, someone with unrivaled abilities in the ways of war.”

He emotionlessly blinked, “-I have just the right person,” door shut, announcing the formation of a new military faction under the king’s direct order.

### Chapter 933: Ministry of Defence

One could feel the rough and raspy air grip one’s lung. A landfill of waste, broken soil, and disintegrated remnants of what once lived. Nearby trees curled in flames, spouting white dust smoke from their dried member. A few bodies survived, no one left alive, however, the former told of how great a blast it had been – for said night, a clear message was sent to the opposing faction, ‘-enter at thy peril,’ so said the unspoken threat. Yet another scar adds to Dorchester’s fair skin, her sense of self waning by each strike, each attack, and each resolve.

A rescue party of Dorchestrian allegiance wandered far north to a newer built port. Before their location, the leader of said party discovered what they had searched out for; utter annihilation of

Kreston's scouting forces. Communication wasn't easily made – as said province used Oxshield's grid to connect, war and blatant revolt saw fit their means of communication be cut. A more primitive way of sending messages returned, and before long, a few hours later in the day, news eventually reached Queen Eia's sleeping quarters.

Day had just risen for her royal majesty – thick curtains separated outside from inside, “-enter,” she answered short of her door being tapped hastily.

“Majesty,” answered a familiar face, “-a message has arrived, Kreston's advance forces were wiped out last night.”

“Wiped out?” she gawked, “-how?”

“We suspect Hidros' launched an airstrike.”

“An airstrike,” the news digested plainly, “-have word be sent to the envoy, he ought to understand the nature of our current predicament.”

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Beside Castle Garsley, on a gentler hill rose a church, one surrounded by walls as high as hers. A known underground passage linked both entities. Armed with a torch and a few brave souls, the retainer advanced to complete his duty. Night prior's rained filled the inside with damp and humid air, a haunting silence presided by a disturbingly horrid shriek, they walked, droplets fell at regular intervals – minute echoes amplified down the passage.

A priestly dressed outline prayed at the foot of a religious symbol for Lucifer; footsteps invited his vacantly subtle gaze, “-lord Oat,” nodded the retainer, “-I bring news from her majesty the queen.”

“News you say?” he turned, paying respect at the symbol first, “-tell me, what troubles you?” information relayed from one to the other – news of the defeat barely struck a chord, to which Oat simply smiled at the messenger, “-I understand,” he said, “-entering into enemy territory was a mistake. I will handle the issues from here, have queen Eia rest assured – Western Sect of the four cardinals will aid her efforts in the coming crusade.”

Landscape changed from wounded and saddened to Rotherham. Students walked to their respective academies; scholars returned from their long hours of research – budding businessmen ran to work for a chance at striking gold. Such observations were commonplace, before long, said buildings faded into tiny pieces in a three-dimensional map, ‘-air-force,’ narrowed Igna.

‘The master's more focused,’ wondered Alta, ‘-what's he thinking about?’ Conversation under the rotors wasn't much the pleasing idea. Soon, the crown jewel of Hidros appear on the horizon – Rosepire and its always changing nature – districts were added on top of the already extended districts, namely; Lei, Onel, Juei. The transport touched down on a helipad built off the side of the castle, “-good trip,” he said, stretching the arms and legs. No response had him glanced at Alta, her white and crimson hair flapped, she had her ear pressed against a phone, a few words exchanged and she wore a worried, “-majesty, I must leave,” she firmed, “-those granted the gift of immortality must seek acceptance by the vampiric clans.”

“Right, I forgot about the ceremony of rebirth. Go on,” a crystal diadem shaped in the infinity sign manifested, “-here you are – a symbol of thy hard work,” her outline vanished into the ever-large castle innards, leaving Igna on a request lady Elvira made, ‘-a general.’

‘She’s right, I have just the right person in mind,’ hands in pocket, the king strolled about the castle, descending to the main entrance wherein a deja-vuesque scene came to mind, “-majesty,” said a familiar faced butler.

“There are cars, I’m shocked. Who gave the order for such a lavish purchase?”

“I did,” said a wandering voice, “-hello cousin,” smiled Julius accompanied by Malley, who technically was dead but not, and twins born to the Haggard household, both little ladies. Time elapsed was long – one day the twins were both and the other, Igna stood before Julius’ family half a decade later, “-Malley,” he nodded, “-and I see twins were truly born to the family.”

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“Yeah,” blushed Julius, “-my little princesses are the most precious things ever.”

“I see they are,” to which Igna extended a handshake, “-my ladies, might I have the pleasure of knowing thy names?”

“Anna,” said one, “-Hanna,” returned the other. Igna rose a frown at Julius, “-Hanna and Anna, nice to meet you.”

“Give uncle Igna a handshake,” whispered Malley, the shy twins timidly extended their hands and firmed, “-we’ll go inside,” she said, taking the twins by each hand.

“Julius, why bring them here?”

“Oh, I see,” he breathed, “-sorry, my mind wandered for a bit there. It’s to teach them about what the Haggard name represents. Hanna is the talented one, Anna’s not so much fond of her studies and lesser about hard work, she’s happy looking around the estate, wandering across the meadows, and playing with the dogs. I honestly don’t mind her doing what she wants, first, as a parent, my job is to arm her with adequate tools. Maybe learning about her family’s past would motivate the imagination, I don’t know...”

“Cousin, we’re in rough times. Wandering the palace isn’t exactly the wise choice. Who knows when a spy might jump in, steal the twins and ride off into the sunset,” the interface interjected a sudden spike, “-operation’s successful,” returned a manly voice, “-I have the targets – going to use the teleportation scroll,” simultaneously, Malley ran outside with a petrified expression, “-HANNA AND ANNA ARE GONE!” she cried.

“WHAT?”

Igna facepalmed, “-I predicted the future again,” he rose his arm at the castle, clenched his fist, turned, and snapped – a vortex materialized, “-Anna, Hanna, and a spy,” he said nonchalantly, “-welcome to Rosepire’ castle,” armed guards stormed their way to the king’s side, “-take the spy away, treat him well – I’ll return later for a questioning session.” Everything happened in mere minutes, the now prisoner was forced to stand, a strange device escaped his pocket and fell, “-I rather die than be

imprisoned,” the jaw shifted to a chewing motion, a burst of air had the man held by the mouth, “-no dying on my watch,” glared Julius, reaching into the man’s mouth and pulling out a pill, “-poison.”

“Take ’em away,” shrugged Igna, “-I told you, Julius, the palace isn’t a safe place for children. We’re in a state of war, do bear it in mind,” the family of four soon caught their transport and left the castle to their estate. Igna stood beside a sports car with the dropped item in his hand, ‘-I knew it,’ the door opened upward, ‘-the castle is still compromised. There are spies everywhere; the last one was a fool; he saw high-value targets and thought the escape would be easy. A teleportation capsule,” he threw the item onto the seat, ‘-Cobalt Unit’s getting on my nerves.’

L’Atelier d’ Exsque, a place stuck in time, he pulled to the side and exited, throwing a glance at the unchanging potage of spices, herbs, and vegetables across the street, ‘-I hope she’s here,’ inside the atelier laid a gentle chatter, a strong female voice echoing at a crowd – hung paintings and sculptures were more the better – architecture of the inside never truly changed, same big open space varying in size and depths depending on the area one used.

“Excuse me, sir.”

“Hello,” he returned, “-is lady Marinda around?”

“Lady Marinda... she’s inside, teaching the volunteer class. Should I take her a message?”

“Yes, tell her the Devil’s come to take.”

“Pardon me, sir?”

“Must I repeat myself?”

“No, no,” the attendant shuddered, “-I meant no disrespect. I will tell her right away.”

Marinda taught with all her might, her nails and apron stained by paint, “-lady Marinda,” whispered the attendant, “-the devil has come to take,” he quoted, a chill rose her hairs, “-alright class,” she clapped, “-we’ll end for today, practice the techniques and I’ll see you later.” Cheerful chatter escaped, and the students took a side door and laughed. Strong scent of turpentine followed the apostle, eventually arriving in the showroom, “-devil’s back to collect,” she chuckled, “-good day, Igna.”

“Marinda, been a while. How are you doing?”

“Pretty good,” she replied, “-let’s take the discussion somewhere private.”

“Alright,” they drove off into the distance, making way to a local park, and arrived on a bench shielded by overgrown foliage.

“Tell me, Athena, how’s the recovery?”

“Great,” she beamed, “-I was able to return to my domain. My people are safe and sound, I was amazed to see them unaffected by their guardian’s disappearance. Being hailed patron goddess of Glenda’s reinforced my symbol of power, it’s shy off to my prime, but who am I to argue. I sadly lost the Aegis shield; another one can be forged by Hephaestus. Aside from that, what about you, devil, how was the hiatus?”

“Pretty uneventful, you know, the usual of staging a revolt and creating a better place that suits my purpose. Athena, I’m sure you know, Hidros is in big trouble. Per our contract, you owe me a favor.”

Her mesmerizing gray pupils scanned, almost bracing for an imminent ultimatum, “-éclair told me about his failed attempt at recruiting. I ask the same, Goddess of Wisdom and War, adored patroness of Athens and Glenda, I, humble king of Hidros ask for thy support. My search for a talented individual responsible for shaping the future of Hidros has led to you – I need you, Athena, to take the responsibility for the safety of our kingdom by becoming the General and head of the Ministry of Defense.”

“Wow,” she smiled, “-never expected the Devil to be polite. I guess the talks about me belonging to you were smokes and mirrors?”

“No,” he said, “-I meant what I said, thee’ve made a deal with the devil. However, I’m not daft as to forcefully impose the responsibility on one who doesn’t wish to fight. It’ll lead to chaos.”

“Say no more,” she smiled, “-a simple matter of war is nothing. I’ll gladly accept the position.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes,” she grinned, “-a sword is meant to be drawn, no matter how long it’s rested, a weapon is ultimately made to slay and defend. Besides,” she inhaled fully, “-I love this place, the people, the connections and the bonds I’ve made. It’s all strange to me, strange novel experience, it’s amazing, there’s a choice to do just about anything the mind thinks of, especially in the world of adult entertainment,” her eyes lit.

“Athena?” he blinked, “-pardon, but are you not a virgin goddess?”

“YEAH,” she fired, “-I am, though, it’s hard not to be curious about the consumption of such material. Let me tell you, I’ve seen a lot of weird things.”

“Best we stop here,” he rose an open palm, “-lest the situation gets out of hand. Make way to the castle, éclair will explain the nature of the responsibilities.”

“Understood,” she sprang, “-the taste of blood and sweat, I’ve missed the utter chaos that war brings,” and headed on the path out the park.

‘Too bad, Kreston, Hidros has just recruited a literal god of war and wisdom to handle its security. Now, to handle the spy affair; Goldberg. Visiting Leonard sufficed to push the duchess into action,’

“Hey, Devil,” interjected the goddess, “-tell me, why not call on help from the four guardians of the Shadow Realm?”

“Oh, I rather not, they have the potential to equal the supreme god. They’re always here to help,” he tapped his chest, “-and I love them for it. Deep down, if I go awry, I know,” a brief glance up, “-they’ll spring into action and stop me,” two shadows walked beside him, each more powerful than the other, “-I just hope it’s in time.”

Chapter 934: Diplomatic Mission

“Where are we?”

“Starix, look out the window,” said Yui, gripping a familiar book, “-there I present, Marinda.”

“Pardon?”

It wouldn't be the last time Starix felt confused andwhelmed. The weather made landing rather difficult – in changing times of Marinda, the duo safely arrived. A dirt runway accommodated the flying beast.

Yui was first to step foot, a reminiscent breeze hit her pale visage, “-here we are,” she exhaled, “-the lost continent of Marinda.”

“What's with the book?”

“My lucky charm,” she smiled, “-one written by Aidn of the Western Wind, his survival techniques saved me plenty of time.” She looked outward to the fence meanwhile the plane taxied into an excuse for a hut. Beast-drawn carried galloped to a harsh halt, each thud of their powerful legs shook the earth and shook pebbles. A military man glared out the transport, setting his strong presence over the dirt-bound path. He marched with confidence and pose, striking a ‘-who are you?’ at the visitors when reaching one-on-one distance.

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“Greetings, my lord,” greeted Yui, “-we come from Hidros on a diplomatic mission.”

“I see,” he squinted, firming suspense and releasing said tension, “-a diplomatic mission from Hidros. Follow me,” he ordered.

Riding a carriage in not-so-well-maintained trails didn't exactly feel great on the bottom. Starix held his discomfort as Yui did much by scanning the scenery. The landscape altered into a growlingly rustic feel – stone brick walls, many unfinished and others destroyed, grew to populate her window. People wandered the streets – the uncomfortable ride shortly turned into a pleasant stroll, and they reached the outskirts of Nordway. Streets and alleys gradually rose, similar to a man looking at the stars, the roads seemed to raise their heads at Einheim. Bystanders watched, curious as to why a royal carriage rode across town.

The coachman pulled, forcing the carriage to stop. Djen casually threw his hand around the handle and pulled, sliding the door to the grandness of Einheim. Starix gawked, jaw dropped by the scale alone, ‘-I've seen Rosespien castle, and now this?’ he coughed, “-Rosespire's castle doesn't come close to match this...”

“You say something?” inquired the military man.

“No, I was baffled at the castle's magnificence.”

“Right,” grinned Djen, “-as diplomates of the Devil, we'll make certain the stay is relatively leisureful. If you'd pardon me,” he nodded, gestured to a wandering retainer, and instructed for the guests to be accommodated.

Courtyard swapped for a generously spacious bedroom, “-I guess we're sharing the bed,” shrugged Yui, “-tell me, Starix, thoughts?”

"I can't stay," he browsed the on-hand collection of leather-bound books, "-reminds me of the dark ages spoken in history books, it also reminds me of home," his voice lowered, "-my actual home."

"What you say?"

"Nothing," the head shook, "-Yui, have you met the king?"

"I don't think so," she blinked, "-I met a few of the king's aid during my travels. We're lucky to have a place at night," the curtains closed, "-demons who wander the land are vicious and stronger than monsters we have back home. They can tear a ruby-ranked adventurer as if he were but a porcelain rank."

Similarly, directly opposite the bedchambers – the king's aids settled in a nice indoor bath, "-where's Djen and Mariane?"

"Lovebirds," giggled another, "-we shouldn't disturb them. I've already sent a message to King Gustv – he's getting ready to meet the diplomates."

"Calm it," mumbled Tania, "-lady Elliana, excitement's getting the best of the expressions."

"My," she tapped her visage and sighed, "-I can't keep a straight face," clapped a laugh, "-my bad, I'm excited about the meeting, a lot is riding on this."

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Without much happening, King Gustv made his way into the throne room, Djen, Mariane, Elliana, and Yean stood beside the king whilst Tania, Kuthl, and Jae stood in the background. Gates buckled, and a loud thud marked the entrance of Hidros's envoys, some of the entourage recognized her visage by the warmer received looks.

"Yui and Starix of the Kingdom of Hidros," shouted a spokesperson, the duo made their way to King Gustv, a prominently stronger figure, "-Yui Haggard and Starix," he bellowed, "-welcome to Marinda, I hope the arrival was comfortable."

"Pleasure is ours," said Starix, unwavering before the king's presence.

"It's good to see his majesty again," added Yui, nonchalant by rivaling the subtle threatening auras.

"Tell me," he blinked, "-what's the purpose of thy visit?"

Starix took centerstage and rose a confident sneer, "-to honor the promise my master made. It's to my understanding my king, Igna Haggard, made a deal to aid Marinda in stepping into the international market."

"Wait," Yean interjected, "-Hidros recently lost a big player, Alpha was it?"

"Correct," added Starix.

"Therefore, King Igna thought it best to approach us for aid?" narrowed a suspicious Elliana, "-tell me, why would we willingly walk into potential destruction?"

“Allow me to interject,” Yui, “-my true title is spymaster of the Hidrosian Crown,” they understood her message, dropping the argument for Yui’s say, “-it is true Hidros lost the support of Alpha, arguably one of the stronger empires. I wouldn’t count them as a threat, not now. See, there’s been a recent uprising – a new empress has taken the throne by committing fratricide and killing the last emperor, Sultria VI. It takes time to get a handle on your people, especially from such a tedious matter. The only current threat is a holy crusade by the papacy. We already destroyed a portion of the advanced unit. As matters stand, if the battle comes to an invasion, we have the advantage,” she slowed her speech and locked the king in a stare-off, “-Marinda, be my guest, walk into the international scene and see how rough the battles actually are. Hidros, despite its moderately smaller size, has been able to fight and survive for centuries – we’re not scared of shedding blood, the Hidrosian way is survival of the fittest. Master asked us to consolidate a way for mutual understanding, and a solid path for a potential alliance. Judging at how thee’ve done research and threw sneaks at the other nations – tell me, figure a guess to what’s happening now?”

‘Smart,’ nodded Starix, ‘-she narrated the argument well, the ball’s in Marinda’s court. She challenged them in a contest of wit, spymaster of Hidros, thou art shrewd, very shrewd.’

“Allow me,” interjected Elliana, “-why speak in riddles, lady Yui, we know what thee meant, and tis to put into question validity of our information sources. I admit, our network isn’t grand to compete against what centuries of intrigue have founded – the blood-king’s faction, the vampiric clans, I know about the nightwalkers and their hidden involvement in Hidros’ growth. Real phantom warriors – beings so powerful they could rival platoons of men, win against armies and bring down entire towns,” she paused and rivaled Yui, “-Hidros’ searching for allies, Kreston is the current weakest link. Dorchester’s willing to open the gates for a sea-based invasion of the continent. Alpha and Wracia are in the deliberation of what’s to come of their foundation. Such is the extent of what we know.”

“Impressive,” she smiled and rose a skeptic brow, “-Hidros is not looking for allies – you’ve forgotten Arda and Easel Run Gard.”

\*Clap, clap,\* interjected the king, “-enough,” he said, “-testing one another is all and good, however,” he glanced at the entourage, “-our decision was made long ago, and my offer to work alongside the Devil will remain true. I must share a troublesome piece of information; lady Yui is right, Marinda isn’t exactly ready to stand shoulder to shoulder with Hidros, not yet.”

“I see,” nodded Starix, “-Marinda will approach when they’re ready?”

“Yes we will,” he smiled, “-by the way,” a gesture at one of the aids, “-Tania,” her heart skipped, “-as a show of good faith, why not take Tania to Hidros. She’ll serve the role of ambassador of Marinda.”

“Sorry?” her cheeks flushed.

“It would be our pleasure,” smiled Starix.

“Tis settled,” firmed the king, “-let us host a banquet in honor of future prospects.”

Night covered the capital – drinking and extensive consumption of delicacies flooded stomachs, leaving Starix to hang off the balcony with a pool of undigested morsels.

“Told you not to drink so much,” Yui rolled her eyes.



“What, the drinks were so tasty, barely felt like alcohol, what in th-” another volley of stomach residents escaped. Yui had her elbows on the balustrade and sipped a warm cup of coffee.

Meanwhile, Tania’s bedchambers turned into a chaotic mess of clothes and items. King Gustv and his entourage, inheritor of bejeweled staffs watched with joyful expression, “-seems the student has missed her teacher a bit too much,” winked Mariane.

“It’s not like that,” she pouted, “-I’m going to Hidros for,”

“Yes, we know,” giggled Elliana, “-we should take the night off. Have fun in thy travels, Princess of faes,” the march of boots faded, leaving Tania to lay on her clothes ridden bed, ‘-I’m going to meet teacher... I don’t believe it.’

“Gustv, we have to talk,” narrowed Elliana, the others shrugged her request and continued along the walkway. Amber lit lanterns scattered across the castle yard, duo shortly arrived at a fountain.

“What’s on your mind?” inquired Gustv, seeing her troubled expression.

“Hidros,” she said, “-are we sure it’s wise to ally with the devil?”

“What are you saying now?”

“Don’t get me wrong, without King Igna’s help, Marinda would have been doomed, unable the shake the cultural differences. We must be rational, and willingly ally with a shaky nation will undoubtedly put us in jeopardy. I mean, was it not the same when Hidros entered into an alliance with Alpha? We represent Hidros and they represent Alpha in our situation, they’re the stronger and prosperous party. What if Hidros’ corrupt, what then, we could see the tide shift – people don’t change easily, we must prioritize our welfare.”

“Basically we forget the devil and carry on until our kingdom has a strong foundation?”

“Yeah, in summary.”

“Seriously?” he shook his head, “-listen, we’re not going to be screwed over by Hidros. They know the pain of being betrayed, and if there’s something Mariane’s taught me, tis to trust unconditionally. The choice is hard, either we make it on our own and are at risk from an internal issue or we ally with Hidros, have their backing, which I remind, the deal signed with the devil.”

“He’s not going to hold us accountable...”

“He won’t,” firmed Gustv, “-the devil will collect, but he won’t snatch.”

“Elaborate?”

“King Igna’s a man of principle. Tania will perform her duties as ambassador. We’ll wait,” he smiled, “-and fix ourselves first. Did you not read the report?”

“What report?”

“This,” he undid a knot and opened a scroll, “-King Igna’s declaration of centralization. I told you,” he smiled, “-a clean slate for our eventual alliance.”

“Put that way,” she exhaled, “-it’s alright I suppose.”

Another day rose over the horizon, similarly – a wind of change blew across Rosespire’s streets. Workers hurried for the bus, traffic slowed to a snail’s pace, and trams filled from workers across the continent, such was the brusque Rosespian rush hour.

Gentle taps broke Igna’s sleep, “-master,” said a whisper, “-master,” blurred vision shook the consciousness.

Igna yawned, “-good morning, Medusa.”

“Good morning,” she smiled, “-how are you?” a warm cup laid on the desk, “-judging by the number of papers, not so great.”

“Yeah,” he sipped, “-who knew getting rid of incompetent ministers would increase my workload...”

“Must I respond?”

“No, it was rhetorical,” he drank, “-by the way,” before adding another word, the doors tapped and hastily opened. Medusa’s cheerful expression dropped, and a burst of murderous intent exploded, forcing Igna to summon a barrier at the growingly intense aura, “-calm it!” he cried.

“Medusa...”

“Minerva, stop it!” narrowed Igna.

“But she’s here...”

“I know she is,” said Igna, “-and you must accept it. Medusa and I are partners, just like you and me. Listen to reason, there’s no point in bringing up the past. I’m telling you, Minerva, just listen,” her charged aura dampened, the hair lowered onto the shoulder as she threw a menacing gaze, “-explain, Igna.”

“Have a seat,” he offered meanwhile Medusa waited in Igna’s shadow, ‘-she’s terrified of Athena, I would be too.’

#### Chapter 935: A fair maiden’s tale

The story of Medusa stretches far into a place where the concept of time didn’t exist. Her name was passed down from text to text – writers took liberties in crafting her tale, now in the X1XX era – her name is but a figment of ancient literacy. Though the stories have changed hands, lost in the ages of retelling and ballads – the main characters in the Gordon sister’s death are much closer to those ancient tales.

Medusa was a revered and beautiful maiden, born by the sea, her story is one of resemblance to olden romantic affairs. Where a young maiden falls in love with a hero of another land, he arrives, slays demons plaguing the world at said time, and is revered by the town’s folk. Medusa, known to the villages as the prettiest in town, a lady of unknown origin – no mention about her parents was soon the subject of idle gossip. Her parents, those who found her washed ashore as a babe – were happy to have raised her. Her beauty stuck many budding new poets and artists – she was as any heroine was in a fable – an unreachable mount to climb, a gentle heart breaker. Through the many offers of courtship and

unruly advances – there was but one hero who managed to steal her heart, Perseus. Perseus, as in any good old hero was, adventurous and full of energetic vigor. His charm and easy expression took the heart of many maidens, and so, the hero arrived to slay and though he expected to capture and leave the isle – tis the hero's heart that was captured, and the perpetrator – Medusa. She, fairest maiden on the isle, spared no second thought for the hero. She didn't care, her gaze and mind fixed on the secret of her origin, the sea. Perseus led many campaigns, from importing the more refined tasting food to showering the maiden with flowers and jewels, but naught seem to catch her attention. No, save an ingenious moment of imagination on a rosy evening.

Wandering the shore, checking the sea, looking at the sand – such as Medusa's routine on moments freed from work. She stood in the water, her dress slightly raised, her hair tied in a messy bun, and the orangish backdrop resplendent upon her mild freckled cheeks. For another time, Perseus made his way to the beach – found himself enchanted by a maiden who didn't once dare blink a glance in his direction.

Tis there, the quick witted Perseus called, “-o' lovely maiden, thee who stands peacefully before the setting sun,” she turned with a melancholic expression, “-as night settles, I vow to set out on a quest,” he firmed, “-a quest to learn about thy origin, a quest to answer thy deepest desire,” and it was set, the hero skillfully found her weakness – the ever burning desire for an answer. It was there after the hero promised the moon, that her heart swayed – they spent months, he'd venture far into the deepest part of the sea seeking answers – she would stroll along the shore, waiting for her lover to arrive. Perseus and Medusa's story was quite a topic for local gossip, a hero falling for the isle's fairest maiden and her rejects and his persistence – it was without a doubt the making of a great love story. Alas, tragedy was yet to strike – and there, on a similar cold evening, Perseus set out on his quest to never return again, for you see, he had sinned, fallen in love with another maiden, a rival if not superior to Medusa's beauty; Andromeda.

Tales of Perseus' quest in slaying a sea monster to rescue Andromeda were quick on the lips of bards and on the flutes of traveling poets.

Eventually, Medusa's fear actualized when on one of her routine walks along the shore, came upon a bard who recited the adventurous tale of Perseus and the lovely Andromeda. It's said she cried tears of blood, forever closing her heart and vowing to serve Athena. The gracious goddess heard her tale and accepted Medusa as one of her priestesses. Ever since the betrayal, coyness, and female charm associated with Medusa slowly tumbled into the gossip of a grotesque monster, eventually reaching a known truth – Medusa wasn't the lovely maiden once revered by the townsfolk. Jealousy, envy, hatred, and disgust, such were poison that slowly tainted her heart and soul. Life after was nothing but filled with hardship and heartache – as a priest of Athena, Medusa was often tasked with trials and barriers to overcome – those of which increasingly intensified.

On a cold winter night – at a time when the town slept; Medusa, overwhelmed by constant teasing, subject to insult, and forced to endure unjustified hardship, was slowly led by a mysterious voice to a place she'd only vaguely remember. A crescent moon reflected against the peaceful water, the sky was clearer than before – each star mapped onto said reflection, the undeniable call of the sea, the feeling of intrigue and mysticism had her feet swallowed in shallow water – a distorted shell of her outline sank her heart, she fell, dowsing her dirtied dress in salty cold water, a fright tied her hands in prayer, it was there, in a moment of complete misery and despair that a figure rose from the sea. A bearded old man,

announcing himself as Poseidon, God of the Sea. Her heart dropped, the god shared no ill-will nor did he care about her appearance, he simply smiled and extended a helping hand. The maiden accepted and was led into a world unknown to her – the world under the ocean, a place of deep blue and color, a cold place, one sharing the sentiment of her cold heart, at the center, a melancholic god – a strong divine presiding his throne. A moment's weakness, enviousness to have what Andromeda stole, and the want of having what was hers return manifested in a night of passion. She frequented the god, became part of the sea for she had found where she truly belonged, the mystery of her birth soon vacated her mind; Medusa's thirst was quenched, or so she thought. Breaking her vows of celibacy begot an earnest response from Athena.

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Medusa's hair withered into snakes, her body aged considerably, her skin turned blue and green, and anyone who looked at her turned to stone. Her first victim was those closest to her, family – and soon, was exiled to a faraway island, left to wander the shoreline and enact her vengeance on those who'd wronged her. Many were lost to her curse, and soon, Perseus was given a new quest, kill Medusa. It wouldn't be long before he cruelly sliced her head and presented the latter before Athena, who by which had the priestess' head carved into her shield and bronze armor. Medusa's story is neither sad nor joyful, for it was but the life of one of many ancient prominent figures.

Igna's office charged, flickers snapped at nearby metallic objects – Medusa covered in his shadow, her head lowered to the floor. Minerva was yet to forget, she stepped, throwing the balance of the room into chaos, “-Stop,” said Igna coldly, “-enough,” purple sparks flew across the pupils.

“What is she doing here?”

“She's my aid.”

“Right, having a cheater come into the inner circle tells of what type of king you are.”

“Shut it,” he fired, “-Minerva, you know the truth, accept it.”

“What truth?”

“THAT YOU PROTECTED MEDUSA!”

Silence, Minerva meaningfully glanced at Igna, changed her target to Medusa, and left, slowing her pace at the doorway and relaxing her shoulders, “-I will be at the temple,” the door locked, Medusa dropped onto her knees and panted, her forehead dropped against the floor in an unpleasant muddled thud, “-come now,” he dropped onto his bottom and tapped her back, “-she's gone, raise your head,” something felt off, her aura changed, the long flowing hair thickened, her skin color turned blue, “-MASTER,” she rose a hallowed expression, part of her visage decomposed, her lips dropped, “-help...”

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“Yeah,” \*snap,\* her transformation halted, a pair of tiny wings manifested above his open palm, they flapped a stream of golden sparkles, “-why must you make me worry?” in a simple motion, Igna overwrote Athena's curse, instead, challenging the power into a necklace, “-there, the power petrification.”

“The curse, it’s gone?”

“Yeah.”

“How can you be so nonchalant?”

“I just am,” he stood and extended a helping hand, “-told you, we’re comrades.”

“I should leave. I’ve betrayed lady Athena before, I must not repeat the past...”

“Misunderstanding,” he said, “-tis a matter of misunderstanding. Leave it to me,” a tap on the earring, “-éclair, have an escort ready for Medusa.”

Her solemn expression couldn’t comprehend the king’s orders, “-why escort?”

“To keep you around. I’m not exactly fond of having runaways.”

By church, Athena referred to a holy site used by devotees; the structure was built in a manner where nature was emphasized, and anyone was free to pray to whoever they wished. Minerva’s sternness all but amplified, she scared many potential worshippers just by being at the center of the room, “-what was that there?”

“Pardon?”

“You know what I mean,” firmed Igna, “-playing cat and mouse won’t help anything. The curse was cast again, why is that?”

“I see,” she exhaled, “-here I thought Medusa was finally able to be freed from her guilt. The curse’s not exactly a curse, more of a defense mechanism. Medusa asked for forgiveness, I purposefully had her undertake challenging tasks and strive to be a better version of herself. Sadly, there’s so much I can do – her own guilt brought about a persecution complex – she sees herself as nothing more than an option, love is a powerful thing,” her grey iris turned to a marble statue, “-all because of Perseus and Andromeda – there’s no self-confidence.”

“The anger was?”

“To test and see if the guilt lingers. Should have kept watch, I’m afraid the curse’ been unleashed.”

“Not going to happen,” he said, “-she’ll be fine. No more trial by fire, I’d prefer a tête-à-tête, well, who am I to say, Medusa’s thy priestess, not mine, patron goddess of Glenda.”

“I apologize for bringing his majesty into our drama.”

“Don’t worry, long as you promise to talk it out.”

“No promises on resolution.”

“Long as an effort is made, I’m pleased. Now, a serious affair.”

“Which is?”

“We have a guest at the dungeon, one who tried kidnapping prince Julius’ twins. He had this,” the device exchanged hands, “-does the crest bring memories?”

“Goldberg..”

“Correct, could be a fake crest or perhaps true, who knows.”

“The prisoner?”

“Catching my drift?”

“Right,” Minerva’s sternness grew into a menace, “-leave the patient to me,” she rubbed her hand connivingly. It wouldn’t be later in the evening that news arrived at the King’s desk, “-majesty,” beamed Minerva, “-the man was a treat to question.”

“Might I ask if the man’s alive?”

“Yeah, he’s alive, no question about it, last I checked at least. No matter, the man is a spy working for a PMC employed by the Goldberg dynasty. Seems the family’s negotiation with Sadia, the captive was a direct student of the King of Greenhoot, first warrior of Sadian, King Ezel.”

“Uncovered a spy ring?”

“No, he was adamant in keeping that part secret, we tried but nothing happened. Although, he did mention getting his orders through an encrypted source.”

“Tell me, General, what’s the plan?”

“We wait,” she smiled, “-I’ve ordered for a rehauling of the army and naval forces, as for the air force, their abilities are in thy hand.”

Up north, a fleet of sea-based motherships moved towards Hidros, an invisible force of tens of thousands that would have remained undercover if not for a certain returning jet.

Time read the next day and the office imploded, “-master, we’re being invaded!” cried Yui atop her lungs.”

“Invaded, how?”

“By sea,” she said, “-we spotted the Krestonian crest on one of the motherships.”

Minerva was forced into action by moving part of the naval force to a remote island, thus marking the start of a holy crusade against Kreston.

Chapter 936: Holy Krestonian Army’s General

A war council immediately snapped into action, leading the discussion was Minerva, newly appointed General and minister of defense, beside her were Eira, Igna, éclair, Yui, and Starix, “-where are we right now?” inquired Eira flipping through her tablet.

“I’m glad you returned fast,” Igna said to Yui, “-now then, let’s focus the attention on the map, how long until the motherships reach Hidros?”

“I’d say a few days,” narrowed éclair, “-if we intercept then on the Vigrant Island, there may be hope yet.”

“Vigraant Island,” thought Igna scanning the map voraciously, ‘it’s a good place to protect from attacks northward, alas, Vigrant island is home to other smaller isles, each drifting further north. Krestonian army could very easily land on the top most island and march way south, cross the waters during low tides is but a simple task.’

“Master?”

“Vigraant Island,” he glanced at Minerva, “-was the naval army dispatched?”

“Yes,” she nodded, “-I gave orders for an advance force to mobilize, scouting party should arrive later today. Fighting on the sea is a whole different type of warfare, I doubt the enemy and their escort to venture directly, might do a circle around and hit Dorchester from Alphan water, which completely undermines a potential outpost on the Vigrant archipelago.”

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\*Tap, tap, tap,\* the door rang, “-message,” cried an intelligence officer, “-Dorchester’s marching into Kreston.”

“Dorchester’s attacking?” they blinked, Minerva immediately drew on the Hidrosian map, scanned and pointed at Arda, “-have forces dispatched and make their way to Krigi. Capturing one of the trading outposts should pressure them,” without a moment’s hesitation, general of Hidros made way to the intelligence officer, “-war is upon us,” she said before reaching the doorway, “-majesty, I expect great things. éclair, take command and conquer Vigrant Island, Starix – take a small team of intelligence officers and move to the border,” quick and decisive, no doubt in her words or action – the council was more than a little enamored at her show of competence.

Council room emptied save Igna and Medusa, the king reflected on the current military affairs, ‘it’s come to war, finally,’ he stood, ‘-something I can look towards.’

Up north, on the already stressful borders -reinforcement units of tanks and supply trucks arrived to aid border patrol. The unjustified invasion of Kreston, by which Dorchester used the influence of the papacy to achieve, was much a subject of discussion across the various influential families. Neighboring villages left said area, opting for a safer trip south.

Geographically speaking, Oxshield, the center most province of the continent of Hidros – the place where Rosespire and Rotherham make their home, had a massive advantage. They shared borders with each of the other provinces, an advantage that could also turn into a complete downfall of the province. A united Oxshield has the ability to send and ask for reinforcement from the other allied provinces. Similarly, the other provinces could ask for reinforcement from the central province. Currently, Dorchester showed their malice towards Oxshield, and Kreston remained more or less neutral – the duke was most astonished on hearing a battle breaking loose.

Minerva, else, Athena waited patiently at her desk – her want of leaping into battle quelled by the overwhelming number of unanswered reports and fragments of intercepted intel. She and her team, assembled but a few hours later after the emergency council, were hard at work. One glanced at the map sufficed, she understood terrain and the difficulty involved in leading a hastily assembled Regiment of 4,356 soldiers under Brigadier General Erano Dunslav, who stood before her little bit then a few hours later, into battle.

“General Minerva,” he saluted, “-I hasted from border patrols.”

“Brigadier General,” she sternly stared at her subordinate, “-tales of your quick wittedness in face of danger has been proven time and time again,” a story told by the medals of honors, “-times nigh. Have your forces move northeast; you will reinforce the Krestonian defense until further orders.”

“Question,”

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“Go ahead.”

“What of the method, am I free to act as I see fit?”

“Lives of four thousand is in thy hands, I expect nothing less from their leader.”

“Understood,” he nodded, “-if you would excuse me.”

Erano’s regiment wasn’t known to be overly strong nor resistant, close aid to her, Starix, wondered why the general saw fit to send a relatively smaller unit compared to the estimated ten-thousand Dorchestian soldiers. Hadn’t been an hour – tenseness in the general’s office reached suffocating proportions, “-general!” cried Starix, “-you must see this.”

“What?”

“Look,” he pointed, “-Brigadier General Erano’s ordered his regiment to take the train to Kreston.”

She smiled, throwing her arms on the hips, and nodded joyously, “-I was right, smart men like him are gems for our army.”

“He’s a smart man,” without hesitation, “-SSY, Kreston, and Rosespire’s transit are to be evacuated, the trains will carry military personnel.” Minerva watched with a ‘-you can do that?’ face.

Serene of the Blood-king’s faction shortly made her way to Arda, there, she met with Queen Courtney and asked for her majesty to join the battle. She refused and pointed the finger at the independent vampiric clan. Quick on her feet, instead of an army, Serene asked for permission to march an army all the way from Oxshield to the Northwestern border shared by Arda and Dorchester. The Queen agreed on the condition her people not be dragged into the following battle.

Serene’s low-cut dress was quite the attraction, ‘-and Arda doesn’t want to fight,’ she exhaled and exited the castle, soon to stand at the foot of the ancient tree. ‘-Can’t exactly go home empty handed, the capture of Krigi was left to the King’s discretion,’ she reached into her bag and pulled a strange mirror, a few flicks followed in a loud flash, “-Noctis’s Hallow,” read across the interface, and would one know – there stood before her, manors of the clan leaders. While Serene handled affairs in Arda, Igna sat in his office, Tania’s confused visage told of the sudden arrival, an inkling to speak showed in mild taps of her fingers, she veered many times, same old movement, from couch to the desk and back.

“There,” a long call ended, the king breathed a sigh and glanced, “-hello.”

“Bad time, I guess?”

“Not really,” he toggled a few monitors, “-you’re here as an ambassador?”



“Yeah, Marinda can’t help in the war effort right this moment.”

“I know, don’t stress,” another call interjected, “-Asmodeus and Kul, drop by the office.”

Tania kept her observation – Prince of Hell and Demonlord made their appearance, “-I appreciate the fast response.”

“No problem, master, tell us.”

“Asmodeus and Kul, we need to firm our relations with Easel Run Gard. Wracia Empire would not support the crusade lest there’s something in it for them. Maicite,” he narrowed, “-Asmodeus, Kul, and Yui take the next flight to Easel Run Gard – have Yui raise an army of undead and station them at our mines. Reinforce the area, we never know what will happen, the best thing is to be prepared,” nothing else followed, and the duo soon met with Yui and were off. Leaving Igna pondering as to his next move.

Days passed – the competency of éclair’s leadership was brought to the forefront. He stood beside a few familiar faces, namely; Alta and Midne, “-glad you could make it,” wind swept Hidros’ naval flee.

“Long as I’m of help. What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to use magical schematics to lay the foundation of a fortress on the middle island of the archipelagoes. We’ll station the other ships behind and wait for their move. General Minerva conveniently left out the part of how rough the sea could get at this time of year.”

“Breath of fresh air,” gasped Midne, “-going to battle,” she beamed, “-my blood’s pumping.”

“I wouldn’t be so excited. Hidros hasn’t exactly invested much in the ways of naval warfare. The ships we own were partly engineered by Cobalt Unit, and modifications were made by our own team, compared to the air force, the ships do not have the Hidrosian workmanship. Well, it’s nothing major.” A black outline straddled over the horizon, dawn was shy a few minutes, “-we’re here,” said éclair, crew outback scurried along the deck, the captain ordered for the ships to anchor down in formation a few nautical miles away. Soldiers were dispatched on smaller boats to scout the area.

First order was the settling of a base of operation, communication to the Vigrant archipelagos was a tedious task on the reason of its lack of structure. And so, the operation began. First scouts touched shore a few minutes later, dropping onto the damp sand and an untamed jungle. The advanced unit of fifty soldiers skillfully made their way into the island to secure an area. Once scanned, a secondary unit was dispatched – this time, containing combat engineers and medics – they would be in charge of establishing communication with the fleet. \*Bang, bang, bang,\* shots were fired – an ambush laid waste to the incoming secondary unit – lack of knowledge of the area proved fatal, first blood is drawn, the battle of Vigrant began at full force.

“It’s too silent,” narrowed éclair, “-where’s the helicopter carrier?”

“At the back,” returned an officer.

“Have them take to the skies, I have a bad feeling about this,” he narrowed through the bridge windows. éclair’s premonition was right on, for when the helicopter circled over the island – there was naught left of the advance unit, a streak of white peered through orangish sunrise and \*boom,\* a burst of fire, the

helicopter was hit which soon crashed and burnt into a ball of flame. What Hidros' force didn't realize then was that the Wracia Empire had already made a stronghold on the archipelago.

Date 15th of February, the battle of Vigrant went strong although at the expense of powerful attack helicopters, prized inventions from Midas. The increasingly losing battle had Minerva in disarray, the battle was being fought on two sides – Kreston and reinforcement from Erano's unit held strong on the border, latter of the two was led by an exemplary leader – he forsook the idea of strength in numbers, instead, pushing for more agile and evolving warfare, they'd conducted night raids, targeted supply lines and skillfully used Kreston's limited naval arsenal to limit Dorchester's freedom.

Reports rained on Igna's desk, "-Kreston's using new artillery and anti-air weaponry; we've lost five helicopters in the span of a week, and no progress has been made. What's Minerva thinking?"

\*Tap, tap,\* "-enter."

"Majesty, might I have a moment?"

"Please, come on in," he offered, "-tell me, general, I heard the war's going badly on Vigrant archipelago."

"Soldiers are dropping like flies – one thing's confirmed, Hidros isn't suitably trained for naval warfare. It was strange how the ambush worked, the soldiers found this," she slid a familiar item, "-a teleportation capsule."

\*Urgent Call,\* "-speak."

"General, the battle of Kreston is nearing its end – most of the enemy forces have retreated. I have reason to believe the invasion was a scheme, there's a greater ploy at play."

"VIGRANT ARCHIPELAGOS!"

"Pardon?"

"I have to go," she stormed out, realization suddenly hit, the battle wasn't for Kreston, no, it was for the full control of the archipelagos. Athena, the goddess of warfare, was outsmarted as if taking candy from a baby, "-I was bested, but how?"

A letter arrived at Igna's table, "-to the gracious King Igna, or should I say, inheritor of the god of death. It's with great pleasure that I write this letter, my name's Ares, God of War and General of the holy Krestonian Army. The holy crusade isn't a battle of the mortal realm, no, sadly, your offenses to the heavens have forced many of the leading deities to put into action a rebuttal of the disrespect we've suffered. Lord Lixbin and Lucifer send their regards. Do send my warmest of regards to Athena, a rejected goddess unworthy of being hailed as a general. 'Twould be wise for his majesty to take the battle in his own hand. Devil, thee must pay – Draebala shrieks in anticipation, I'm proud of how it turned. So long, majesty."

Chapter 937: Priestess of the sea

An inner gong traversed the Shadow Realm's variant of the Hidrosian landscape. A particular group of troublemakers had their hands full at teaching newer students birthed from the realm. A glamorous lady of light blue stared at her students through a bleak mellowness – she exhale desperate sighs in

quiet and observed, ‘-nothing else to do,’ her eyes rolled, ‘-the Shadow Realm is peaceful, too peaceful. Everyone’s happy and everyone’s having fun, go slay monster says the general, I don’t want to get my nails chipped...’

“Saniata,” cried a uniquely recognizable Draconis, “-Raphael and I will take the kids on a dungeon visit. Want to tag along?”

“No,” she mundanely exhaled, “-I’m fine, have the snort nose kids enjoy their time off,” the ground beneath her feet scoffed – the air around her wasn’t very inviting, “-what’s with her?” wondered Draconis, her silhouette vanished into the forestry.

“Don’t know,” returned Raphael, “-she’s feeling a little down.”

“She’ll come around,” he shrugged, “-alright kiddos,” facing the bigger crowd, “-ready for adventuring?”

“YEAH!” they cheered; it wasn’t long ago the role was replaced – the student became a teacher.

Saniata’s noticeable figure strolled through the city, she had her hands hidden inside a white hoodie covered in flakes of pink petals. Bystanders, shopkeepers, and wanderers took one look and knew she belonged to the ruling family – a member of the Haggard Dynasty.

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‘Why doesn’t anyone care to have fun,’ a docile expression and slow pace carried her figure up the slope leading into the noble district, ‘-Draconis’s mature now, he doesn’t go out and cause chaos. Vanesa’s more Vanesa since her return – won’t tell us what happened and chooses to sleep the days in her room. Raphael, don’t get me started on him, Arch angel of restoration travels to the overworld regularly, Starix and éclair find his services advantageous. What about me?’ she came upon a reflective surface telling of a blurry view of her upper torso and half of her head. The bold-straight line covered, resting her lips into a heavy frown, ‘-I trained under lady Intherna, inherited a lot of her techniques... I’m considered an adult, still, everyone treats me like a kid. Why me, I only ever wanted to get strong, to spend time with my father, is that so much to ask?’

“GOD FUCKING DAMN IT!” murmured beyond the impromptu reflective surface, ‘-I know that voice,’ she stepped away and took a greater look, ‘-it’s the manor. Something interesting,’ she scurried for the front gate and casually leaped a few meters, ‘-that’s éclair,’ she sprinted.

“Damn it to hell,” cried a defeated howl, “-we’re going to lose the battle...” their gaze crossed, “-Saniata?” puffed éclair, “-why are you here?”

“I heard a noise outside,” she rose her head, “-what about you?”

“Ranting is all. Hurry on to the castle, lady Intherna’s waiting.”

There it was, she cracked, “-stop treating me like a kid!”

“Alright,” he rose a finger, “-no need to burst a blood vessel. I’m sorry, do whatever you want,” he rolled over, instead choosing to puff at the cloudy overhead sky. Saniata didn’t care to retreat, instead, thrust water streams from her palms and landed on the balcony, “-éclair, take me to the overworld!”

“Huh?” he crushed the cigarette, “-not the place to enjoy a stroll.”

Her face froze, ‘-something the matter?’ he observed, ‘-Saniata’s acting more level-headed, that’s saying something.’

“Don’t,” she sighed, “-things never change. Tell me, éclair, why were you screaming?” she joined the cloud-gazing.

“Overworld,” said he solemnly, “-we’re in complete disarray. Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong – if I don’t straighten my campaign, Hidros might be at risk.”

“Pops losing a war is hard to imagine,” her regard glazed, “-what’s holding the army back? Am I not wrong to say training of those soldiers was a priority, especially since pops’ in charge.”

“You’d figure wrong. Master wasn’t home for half a decade; I was forced to channel military focus into a stable economy – there’s nothing worse than famine, I had to act, no questions asked. Naval warfare isn’t exactly Hidros’ strongest card – we’re surviving and evolving, however, there’s less of a chance at victory.”

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“Why are you here then?”

“Needed a place to rest and think.”

Saniata’s long lashes stared éclair top to bottom, her long fingers tightened around the balustrade, a deep inhale, “-take me to the overworld!”

“Huh?”

“I want to fight,” she gritted, “-life in the Shadow Realm is more than peaceful, I’m bored, I want to go and explore the world – exploring this one already makes me want to die.”

“Right and how will exploring the overworld be fun exactly?”

“Competition,” she smirked, “-there will be people wanting to kill, and I want to do my fair share of slaughter. Look at me,” she grabbed his chin and pulled closer, “-I’m an adult, not the little kid you remember.”

He grabbed her wrist and pulled away, “-still a kid in my eye,” he smiled and released the grip, her arms dropped, the face glazed with a disappointed mien, “-alright, I’ll bite, we’re lacking in manpower – take down a ship and show me what it means to be a resident of the Shadow Realm.”

“A ship?” she scoffed, “-I’m no resident of the Shadow Realm, the name’s Saniata Haggard, daughter to my uncaring father. I’ll make damn sure he notices me.”

A few days after Ares’ letter arrived, worse came to reality, pieces of information slowly filled Igna’s deck, ‘-we were played for fools, battle of Kreston was never a priority, using ten-thousand men as sacrificial pawns, they retreated in time to avoid greater loss from Erano’s regiment and focused attention on fortifying the sea. Trap was laid out from the beginning, not hard to imagine Dorchester sending their forces to the isle months if not years in advance – they knew the importance of the archipelago. Our naval forces sailed into an impasse – stuck in the middle of Dorchester’s coastguard and the Krestonian fleet. How did Minerva not see... no, don’t blame her, it’s my responsibility for

putting her in charge. I should have been more careful. If the transmission between us and the envoys dispatched to Marinda was intercepted – ‘twould have been easy to send false information. We jumped the gun thinking the advantage was ours. Fortunately, internal affairs have been quiet since big sister took the job, those of opposing opinions have been found dead to frostbite.’

\*Tap, tap, tap,\* “-master,” gasped.

“I’m here,” he returned nonchalantly, “-General, what a pleasant surprise. Been a few weeks, yes?”

“Yes, since last we talked?”

“Since last, I got the letter. How about it, General, is the battle for Vigrant archipelago lost?”

She crawled to a seat and dropped, “-forget the war,” her expression fell, “-this came up in the missing in action report.”

“Saniata Haggard. Last seen leaving for battle on 1st March at 23:40.”

“Is that all?” he blinked, “-no picture nor details on the mission, what is this?”

“I’m afraid you have to ask éclair directly. From what I gathered, she’s responsible for turning the tides of battle by wrecking destroyers that pinned our escape route, her efforts allowed for a tactical retreat.” It was quite a sight; a heroine came to their rescue in a time of need. None knew the origin nor did they care – her blue eyes and blue hair were all the recognition needed; a slender body able to raise the sea into a destructive nightmare – lives were saved, prime minister and his aid led smaller campaigns throughout the coming days – priestess of the sea, such would become Saniata’s nickname in battle. She would take to the skies on the back of the legendary griffin – the latter of which defiled heavy weaponry and reined down hell. Novelty of the hit and runs took the opposing army by surprise, and for a first in the battle – had the enemy on edge. Fortune of battle could only lead her so far – seeing the deaths, éclair ordered for a tactical retreat – Minerva accepted, and the tide of battle was truly lost when the Krestonian army captured the centermost isle of the Archipelago. Escape was easier said than done, and so, an elite force compromising Saniata and a few soldiers left to clear the waters for a safe retreat. At 00:00, contact was cut – an explosion of condensed mana shook the seas, “-clear,” the last ever transmission.

Igna stared at Minerva, the fingers galloped across the table, “-so, she’s dead?”

“Uncertain.”

“My,” he sighed, “-suppose my daughter’s efforts were praise worthy. What of the people she saved?”

“Last of the ships should arrive at Kreston, we’re currently fortifying borders. Arda managed to capture Krigi and its people, what are thy orders?”

“Grant them refuge, if they want to leave, let them.”

“What are your orders concerning the war?”

“We’ve lost the battle of Vigrant, Kreston’s next, do as you see fit, Athena, we’re against Ares.”

The goddess quietly excused herself, shutting the door and breathing a cold breeze, “-how did he take the news?” inquired a silver-haired lady.

“I don’t know,” she replied, “-lady Eira, I had no idea what his majesty is thinking.”

“Can’t help it,” she said, reaching in for a friendly embrace, “-focus on Kreston, fate of Hidros depends on it.”

“Right, there’s more to come,” she cleared her mind and marched forth, leaving Eira leaning against a pillar before the king’s door, ‘-I have a bad feeling, he didn’t react to the news of her death, it’s unlike broth-’ \*CRASH,\* a thump shook her feet, she sprung for the handle, “-IGNA?” nothing, curtains flapped in the wind, a glass statue laid in fragments, retainers hurried, “-my lady?”

“Where’s king Igna?” gasped Athena.

Eira side-glanced, “-you know.”

Blurred memory of bubbles rose, a light muddled and an ungodly siren rang. Waves of confusion swept the mind, and soon, those distant memories drowned, forcing the consciousness awake, ‘-cage, I’m bound by chains, was I captured?’ ringing in the ears escaped for distance chatter, ‘-I remember getting shot by a blast of mana...’

“Look who decided to wake up,” narrowed a disturbingly disfigured man, “-Saniata Haggard, the daughter of King Haggard. Looks like we struck gold,” heavy boots slammed the cage.

“Enough, Euro,” said a calmer voice, “-forgive my companion, he’s a little insane, to which the man tilted his head in an odd position and cackled, “-no insane, I’m not insane, I’m not, believe me, I’m not.”

“Euro, silence.”

“Okay, okay,” he flung a sack over his shoulder, “-I’m taking these for my collection. Later, boss,” dismembered limbs and severed heads, all gathered in a bloodied trail, “-ignore him,” added the taller man, “-how rude of me, my name’s Angio, I hail from Lucifer’s domain. I detest the title of an angel,” he leaned over, “-yet, tis how humans refer to us, entities from another dimension. Are you confused?”

“...”

“Silence, no matter. Your griffin was easy target practice for my colleagues. King Igna must know by now, Kreston’s not only backed by those of this world, but also demi-gods and angels from our world.”

“...”

“Say something, please,” he exasperated, “-talking alone makes me look insane. How about this, I give you three questions as a reward for a somewhat entertaining fight.”

“Where am I?”

“An outpost on the Vigrant archipelago.”

“How long has it been?”

“Today’s the 5th of March, do the math.”

“What are you planning to do with me?”

“Ransom I suppose,” he shrugged, “-truly depends on what he has in plan. Look around,” a snap brightened the tent, “-these are men we captured, loyal soldiers who kept their mouths shut until the end. I admire such a level of commitment. I wouldn’t bother escaping, see the collar around the neck? It’s a convenient mana-draining device. People of this world have advanced in ways of slowing the prominence of mana-users – goes beyond the title of god or demon, get hit by one of their invention and tis death,” he smiled, “-of course, we partly used the corpse of the god-slayer,” he hastily covered his mouth, “-there I go again, have a bad habit of divulging information.”

#### Chapter 938: Vigrant Massacre

‘Why,’ a trail of white darted across the skies, ‘-why did it have to be her?’ anger, fear, hatred, disappointment, no emotion could describe how he felt – everything inside jumbled. Past came to life, history repeated itself, ‘-it can’t be,’ he gritted, biting the inner cheeks as to keep a sense of reality, ‘- why does her life matter so much,’ he flapped, gradually increasing the speed, absorbing mana in an exorbitant amount – the broken vestige of the death element thumped; losing Vigrant archipelago, losing the first battle of the war – nothing seemed to reach an inch to how troubled he felt. ‘-I’m not losing my daughter, no, I’m not, I won’t let it happen,’ the sheer speed ripped part of the clothes, pulled onto the very fabric of his skin, latter of which rejuvenated, ‘-Lizzie,’ crossed the mind, a traumatic experience that carried well beyond the grave – remembering the casque, her body, the funeral; despair spawned off powerlessness – Devil as he might have been dubbed, unable to take the mantle of a god, Igna Haggard had weaknesses – the latter of which weren’t weaknesses on their merit; Draconis, Vanesa, Saniata, and Raphael. Just the thought of her being kept captive sufficed for the king to fly into battle – and fly he did, crossing the whole of the continent in minutes, trip that would take hours by plane. White turned purple and black, and the aura of Alfred manifested in devilish features, horns, sharpened teeth, claws, sharper nose, and more refined facial features. \*See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awoken for I order so; Eye of Truth.\* reality shattered, billions if not more tiny threads reached to the heavens – mana strings attached to living beings, inanimate objects, anything that absorbed and released mana – the very essence of reality could be tied to the singular most known and yet, misunderstood law of nature – Mana.

\*Crash,\* a massive burst of energy decimated a chunk out of the Vigrant middle isle, “-what was that?” cried nearby stationed guards, “-an attack?” an electrifyingly heavy presence bellowed within the jungle’s belly, a beast, a monster, no, a demon – patrol dropped in their tracks; majority hurled on accounts of a suffocating aura. Each step taken, grass and vegetation around said area withered, a simple touch of a tree sufficed to drop the leafy overlord.

‘Where are they?’ he scanned – a primordial feeling of lust warmed his inside, ‘-I feel amazing,’ he walked, ‘-this feeling, the pure blood lust,’ helicopters passed, \*Powers to bring down my enemies, powers to bring down my foe, from the abyssal depths of hell to the highest peak in the heavens, shudder, cower, and fear, my anger is not to be triggered, my rage is not to be quelled and my lust is not to be quenched,\* arms to the sky, the devil clenched his fist, \*-bow before the power feared by even Creation himself, Hand of the Lamented,\* nothing, the helicopters imploded by an external force – one so great it crumbled metal as if crumbling paper, fiery balls of paper. Explosions rattled the vicinity, gunfire snuffed suddenly, and the overwhelming feeling of approaching doom.

“-Lord Angio,” hurried a messenger, “-we’re under attack.”

“By who?”

“We don’t know.”

“Is Hidros launching a full-scale battle?”

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“No, the enemy fleet departed our waters days ago. My lord, this is the work of another entity,” by which a half-bloodied fighter stumbled inside, “-demon...” he died.

Angio rose his chin and smiled, “-have my comrades join me at the prisoner camp – send the news to Bishop Greg.”

“Bishop Greg already began the transportation operation,” added a new face, an intelligence officer, “-lord Angio, we must retreat. Who knows what weapon those heretics might have sent – we cannot allow for a repeat of what happened in Alpha”

“I know,” replied the charming man, “-have them evacuate to the nearest transport ship, we can’t leave without our precious cargo.”

All and all, Angio stood alongside three others, all blond-haired and blue eyes, “-why the noise?” yawned one.

“It’s war, my friend, such as the nature of war,” commented Angio, “-ever changing fun, isn’t that what you like?”

“Fun has its time.”

Another made passes before the prisoner’s camp, “-speaking of fun, you sure I can’t touch the lass?”

“No,” added he calmly, “-pristine items are best kept safe. Who knows if she’ll even be alive if you start,” the group laughed and threw aside the curtains. The hurling odor of decomposing bodies had them push their nose into their elbows, “-what putrid smell, I almost feel bad for captives.”

“To the victor goes the spoils.”

Angio snapped, brightening the dauntingly disgusting room, “-precious angel of Igna,” he smiled, “-long time no see. How long has it been, two weeks?” an unshaken will returned his glare, “-have you come to end my life?”

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“No, by god’s name no. Haven’t I made it clear, that you are precious to me and the Krestonian army,” dropped on one knee, “-seems a monster was unleashed onto the archipelago. Too bad, pains me to separate thee from thy father.”

\*Giggle,\* he frowned, “-why are you laughing?”



“The monster isn’t a monster,” she laid back and crossed her feet, “-that, my dear ol’ capturer, is the strongest man I know,” a burst of wind blew the tent, leaving the cages and bodies exposed to the elements – a petrifying somber aura froze Angio and the others.

“What’s with the expression,” pouted Saniata, “-Cat got your tongue?”

Heaviness sprawled across the land, killing reeds and plants, “-Saniata,” resounded a deep looming echo, “-close your eyes and don’t move,” an entire platoon of soldiers circled the area, Angio forced himself straight and shook as he turned towards the monster, “-w-w-who a-a-re y-you?”

Igna closed the gap faster than a blink, “-the devil,” he tapped Angio’s forehead, and a distant crash cried.

“HOW DARE YOU!” screamed the comrades to no avail, once the devil had the taste for blood, there was no stopping the carnage which would ensue. Intelligence officers called for backup – Bishop Greg turned away the remaining one-quarter of the advance army and sent them as reinforcement, unknown to what had been unleashed.

“Your holiness, we’re nearing the shores of Dorchester,” said a holy man.

“May we save our devotees from the wretched hands of the pseudo pope.”

\*Once living now dead. O’ thee who’ve lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghouls Revival,\* demons clawed from hell – religious description of a place of eternal sufferance, tentacles dripped of purple miasma – vacant pupils stared the soldiers – vacantness associated to puppets and dolls, hauntingly unblinking eyes – an ability to see into a person’s soul. They leaped in hordes, chewing, biting, striking, indiscriminate attack, savages in the purest meaning of the term lunged. More bodies dropped the bigger grew Igna’s army – a crimson orb rose atop the battlefield, and everywhere was the depiction of death. it didn’t come swift nor did it come easy, fortunate were those who died instantly because after all, the Devil’s army saw their enemies as prey, lower lifeforms. Fingers were bitten, arms were torn, eyes were skewered and eaten before others – prayers and pleas for mercy recanted tranquility once inherit to the Vigrant archipelago. Reinforcement arrived in utter shock – the common sight of dirt and weeds replaced into a tainted marsh of dark red – severed heads, maimed limbs, last kept expressions of ultimate pain and fear in the bodiless faces, “-halt!” cried a leader, a tiny dart of red impaled his head, he dropped headfirst – confused bystanders rose their rifles to a distant figure, a man of demonic resemblance – a darker aura escaped from his physical self – there stood true terror, “-die.” Fallen comrades tore across their comrades; killing indiscriminately until the last echo of a person’s dying breath faded.

Withered tree, somber sky, corpse-ridden battlefield, and at the center, the devil. Souls of many lingered, \*Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration.\*Life energy swirled into a container, \*Release,\* raised undead dropped, allowing Igna moments respace, “-open your eyes,” chains shattered, “-long time no see, Saniata.”

“Pops,” she stayed on her knees, “-I’m sorr-”

“Don’t be, I’m not one to be angry with my daughter for her wanting a little entertainment. It’s fine, honestly,” he gave a helping hand, “-come on.”

“Wow, how many are dead?”

“I don’t know,” heaviness of his inner presence dampened – the demonic features wavered until naught, “-lost track after the first ten.”

Distant movement caught their attention, “-who are you?” gasped a single survivor.

“The Devil,” he replied, “-who are you?”

“Angio,” Saniata smirked, “-didn’t I say when my father realizes I’m gone, you’ll die?”

“First of all, Angio, you’re not going to die. I need a witness to relay what happened here today,” he casually walked to the traumatized sunken outline, “-this doesn’t count as a victory for Hidros. Vigrant island is yet under Kreston’s rule.”

“THEN WHY!”

“To rescue my daughter,” said a cold whisper, “-the war can be won anytime I want, however, part of me thinks fighting on the frontlines to be easy. Take it however thee wish, the war is between nations, not individuals, thus, today’s slaughter is but a preview of what happens when one of my own is taken hostage.”

“Pops, let’s go already, I’m hungry and tired. I need a shower too.”

A coin dropped beside Angio’s hand, “-if ever thee wish to strike a deal with the devil, thou ought but ask,” mark of death on one side and the crest of Undrar on the other, Angio cowered, burying his head into the blood-soaked ground, ‘-why, why, why... how could this have happened. I’m being led by Ares; we have the backing of Lucifer’s subjects... how could we lose the battle...’ flashbacks looped, ‘-today’s slaughter is but a preview,’ he flinched, the sound of guts being tore bellowed, ‘-this doesn’t count as a victory for Hidros,’ he curled, ‘-the war can be won anytime I want,’ fist to the ground, “-WHY!”

“Hey pops,” Saniata threw a cautious glance, “-what’s going to happen to Angio?”

“Are you attached?”

“Not really,” her fingers interlocked, “-it’s just that he...”

“That he what?”

“That he had me safeguarded from the others. Part of me is grateful, I’m lucky I didn’t experience the true terror of captivity.”

He patted her head and gently messed with her hair, “-next time you go in battle, have the courtesy to inform your old man. Ages’ not exactly easy on me.”

She frowned, “-stop lying, that’s an insult to all the old people out there.”

“Pardon, how would you know how the older folks feel?”

Her fist clenched, “-father...”

"I'm only kidding," a portal gate opened, "let's go home," they entered and soon found themselves inside the king's office.

"That was fun," chuckled Saniata, "-seems pops' have guests."

"Minerva, Eira," he went around the desk, "-still here?"

"We were worried."

"Why?" he side-glanced Eira, "-I simply went out to fetch my daughter."

"Just like that?"

"Yes, just like that," he returned Minerva's comment.

"What about their army, what of reinforcement, for the love of what's holy, what about your safety?"

"My safety?" the temperature dropped, "-have thee forgotten my title?" purple sparks fluttered across his cold gaze, "-come, Saniata, let's get some food and a warm bath. I need a break."

Hidrosian spies interjected an incident report a few days later – one bearing the title, "-Vigant Massacre." Athena hung her head against the desk after reading said report, '-I can't believe him,' she softly headbutted the stacks of papers, '-leaping into battle and singlehandedly defeating thousands of soldiers... what does that make me, I'm supposed to be the goddess of warfare and wisdom, what happened, have I weakened?'

\*Tap, tap,\* "-General Minerva, the ceremony is about to commence."

#### Chapter 939: Misfire

20th of March, after grueling few days passed, the church rose its holy flag high above the Vigant archipelago. News flooded the international world of Hidros' defeat in the baffle of Vigant – many nations; independent or otherwise hoped for a win, alas, the table was stacked against them and such was their loss. Kreston, using the archipelago, settled around the isles and created a direct foothold into Dorchester, opening their campaign to the whole of Hidros. Krigi's occupation pushed Dorchester's enemy line back, allowing for Arda to expand their borders into more fertile soil. Dorchester's center most areas were devastated, unable for plants or agriculture to grow, a sorry sight for any sightseer.

The 20th was quite special, a ceremony of honor was organized by the royal family to celebrate distinguished heroes. International treaties, followed by the church, stated after a battle is won and both parties must have a month's nonaggression pact for soldiers and transition of power. There wasn't any consequence in breaking those pacts save a reputation catastrophe, thus, general Minerva and Ares signed the non-aggression pact of one month, under conditions that other major battles will not follow standard rules; basically, undermining the pact of non-aggression upon winning a campaign. Hidros accepted said terms on behalf of the Duke of Kreston.

News traveled fast; defeat of their homeland left a sour taste – many looked at the Rosesopian castle for answers and held subconscious desire to reach out and help.

Officially, the royal family addressed said situation on the day Vigant isle was lost, coincidentally being the day Igna rescued Saniata, "-to the people of Hidros, many brave soldiers have lost their lives, they

fought hard and strived to win for their kingdom. Alas, the effort can only take one so far, we were ill-equipped, Wracian holy army made their conviction heard by their grit and fight. Vigrant archipelago is lost – the church has entered Hidrosian soil; the leader of the revolutionist party has warmly welcomed the holy church into her quarters. We, the crown, have but one thing to say, war is yet to come. In honor of the brave souls who fought thick and thin, a ceremony of honor will be hosted on the 20th,” broadcast went more into detail, forcing the general populous to stop and think. A prominently subtle conclusion was reached; Queen Eia’s responsible for bringing war. Latter of which; is propaganda from the royal court.

Thus arrived on the 20th, local news channels flocked the throne room with cameras, running their cables around the walls and into the vehicle-filled courtyard. King Igna specially ordered for decoration to be mundane, the dress code was black in remembrance of fellow soldiers. During the battle of Vigrant, if not for a desperate attempt by soldiers, there wouldn’t have been anyone to retreat. The greatest act was undoubtedly Saniata’s courage in destroying pinching ships for the Hidros’ naval force to retreat. Number of lives saved was in the thousands – the crowd looked on at the lady in uniform with great interest.

General Minerva gave a speech, speaking on the values of honor, valor, and loyalty, prayers and words of comfort were spoken for the many lives lost. All and all, the throne room wasn’t much of a place for celebrations as grief had taken many of the attending families.

Time eventually arrived for the award ceremony, Igna was vested in a military outfit, as were the officers and attending soldiers, those not from the army, noble families, and such, were dressed in black to show support. “War,” said Igna, taking a pause to gather attention, “-is a cruel affair. No one wins in war. Even the victors, they’re also defeated by the backlash. Yet, we must fight, a show of might and a show of strength – speaking through the number of death and destruction,” methodical speech, clever pauses, and a trancelike cadence made listening all the more pleasing, “-to the dead we honor their lives and to the living, we hope. A ray of hope did shine, focusing on Saniata Haggard, a soldier who put everything on a gamble, a shaky chance at rescuing her comrade,” the fighter in question stepped from the line of soldiers and marched until reaching the king, “-Saniata Haggard, you’ve proven to be courageous beyond words, showed grit and perseverance against overwhelming odds and stand before us as a true hero of war. I’m pleased,” a red pillow holding a medal arrived at hands of the general, “-on behalf of the kingdom, allow me to grant thee the Medal of Ayen,” she gave a salute and stood straight, accepted the medal, and turned to the crowd – soldiers in attendance stomped their foot rhythmically and sang the national anthem.

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The Medal of Ayen was named after a legendary commander based in a time when vampires and demi-humans were viewed as monsters, the epoch of the great divide. Ayen was reported as a great man of unparalleled leadership – it is said he once single-handedly fought back against an invading army for the safety of an orphanage. Ayen’s also revered as the greatest swordsman born to human parents – a title which on its own speaks for the skill possessed in the arts of swordsmanship. Ayen’s lives on today as many of his strategies and moves are taught to the royal guard – lineage of Staxius and many before him could be traced to the heroic figure.

The ceremony concluded with a few words from the prime minister, and at 15:00, the castle saw being emptied, and many families made their way to the graveyard. Igna undid his collar and waited on the southward facing balcony. ‘-A month,’ he exhaled, ‘-a month until everything starts again.’

“My king.”

“éclair, come along,” he offered, “-why the glum expression?”

“I thought you’d be angry at me for recruiting Saniata...”

“No, nothing of the sorts, actually, it’s perfect. Everyone’s quickly talking about a princess fighting in the war, it’s good to garner public support. How are Alta and Midne?”

“Midne was grievously injured. Alta’s in Kreston, coordinating defense with the Krestonian army. I must ask about the nature of a certain report...”

“The Vigrant massacre?”

“Precisely.”

“Wasn’t a massacre, more of annihilation, they dared capture my kin, I had to strike and show them the true meaning of fear. éclair,” he turned, “-I must head for Rotherham; I’ve realized something – to rival the sea, Hidros must assert their dominance in the sky.”

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Shortly after, king Igna left the castle, leaving éclair slumped over a bar counter in the company of empty beer mugs.

“If it’s not the prime minister,” added a coy Serene, “-why the saddened expression?”

“We lost a battle,” he grunted, “-doesn’t affect us in the least but still, we lost.”

A third presence settled at the bar, “-the usual.”

éclair tilted towards the familiar tone, “-general?” he blinked.

“I see the prime minister’s a gluttonous fiend when alcohol is involved.”

“Haven’t seen anything yet,” winked Serene, “-éclair’s an awesome drunk, just wait and watch,” she giggled.

A quaint little church rested atop a mound in the unregular landscape of Dorchester’s scar, “-bishop Greg,” hailed a lady dressed in a religious robe, “-Angel Anglo’s requested an audience.”

“By all means,” said the bishop turning from the altar. A visibly disturbing expression waited, scars along the cheeks and forehead, multiple bandages across the arms and legs, “-bishop,” he trembled, “-we must be cautious of the king...”

“Why is that?”

“He controls the power of evil,” cried Angio, “-I saw it, I saw everything, he singlehandedly defeated, the amount of blood, bodies, my friends,” shock sucked the failing sense of self, “-we have to run, we must run, please, run!”

“Angio,” soothed the bishop, “-we have the lord’s prayer and faith. Our cause is just, we will prevail and shine strongly – no one can stop us. Losing a few thousand men is nothing,” the veins bloated, a calming voice hid a dark secret, one of which little knew, “-we shall prevail in the greater picture, trust in the words left by our guardian deity.”

“WE NEED TO LEAVE!”

“Enough!” echoed, “-sister,” he side-glanced, “-end Angio’s life. Let it be known,” he gritted, “-deserters and the unfaithful will perish.” Angio resisted and shouted words of concern, a cacophony that soon exited the church.

“I’m impressed,” said a shadowy figure, “-ordering for the death of Lucifer’s student. How ruthless, bishop.”

“It had to be done,” he replied cordially, “-the weak must be snuffed.”

As the days went by, Rotherham’s city life became a common sight, throwing open the curtains and having the morning sun smacked in the face was one of the lesser pleasures Igna carried, ‘-coffee and a fresh breeze,’ he watched the coming of life of the city, ‘-got a few weeks left until the war begins...’ A flicker caught his eye, a trail in the orange clad morning sky, he narrowed, ‘-what is that?’ more minutes passed, the slower seemed the object – faint trail curved and plummeted towards the south, ‘-wait a damn minute...’ rays of red beamed, crossing in the sky leaving a ball of fire, ‘-was that a fucking missile?’ \*Dialing Aunt Elvira.\*

“Hello?” she answered in a half-asleep tone.

“Aunt, I need heightened military privileges.”

“Why to ask me,” she yawned, “-I’ve already everything for the King’s watchful gaze. If it’s not too hard, can I go to sleep?”

“Sorry for the bother,” a tap ended the call, he rushed, grabbed a jacket hung off a couch, slipped into shoes, and vaulted into the elevator. Location, the underground parking, the metallic covers parted, he rushed out, scanned for the parking reserved by Phantom, locked onto a sport’s bike, and darted into the main road. Smoke hung, an explosion was farther than first appeared, around the military compound and a few minutes sprint at max speed, ‘-there,’ debris scattered across a wild meadow. Armored trucks and guards were on the scene, ‘-seems they arrived first,’ he pulled onto a dirt patch, unstraddled the bike, and walked straight at a guard who cautiously gripped his rifle, “-access is restricted to the public.”

He took off the helmet and nodded, “-young master,” saluted the guard, “-please,” the partway blocked by security opened. A few vaults over branches and rocks, “-over here,” waved a taller lady of blond hair.

“Clarise.”

“Morning master,” she held a tablet, “-looks like we were attacked by a long-distance missile. You know the implications, yes?”

“Of course, I do, long distance projectiles are a sure way to end a war. Any idea on the origin?”

“We’ve fed the data into the sister system. Ought to wait for the resul-,” she swayed, lost her balance, and fell onto Igna.

“Are you okay?” he held her arms and looked about, the others suffered similar symptoms and dropped, \*See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth.\* ‘-mana nausea, it’s a warning. Today’s mana, tomorrow’s chemical. The war has suddenly turned messy,’ he kindly held Clarise to settle and moved at the fragments, ‘-who has technology equal to us?’

“Cobalt Unit,” skipped a joyful face, “-greetings majesty.”

“Marie, why are you here?”

“To examine foreign weaponry. Good thing the AFR responded before we acted. Here’s the report from the sister system,” she handed over her tablet, dawned strange-looking goggles, and slipped into the wreckage. ‘-06:25, AFR intercepted a projectile of unknown origin. From the arc and speed, the projectile was most likely fired from Arda.’

‘From Arda?’ he paused, ‘-says here somewhere along the shore, possibly castle Hart.’

“Confusing, isn’t it?”

“How could the projectile come from Arda?”

“Don’t overthink,” she smiled, “-the simplest answer is the easiest.”

“Arda hasn’t changed side – it must have been a misfire. Explains the strange trajectory – the attack wasn’t aimed at anything...”

“Correct, operators must have been novices.”

“If weapons of this caliber were trafficked into Arda, opens Rosespire for ranged attack...”

“Judging by the range, it’s possible.”

“Have the report sent to Rosespire; strengthened our defenses,” he stopped, ‘-what if the missile wasn’t a misfire, what if it was a scare tactic...’

“Majesty?”

“Strengthened our defenses and on second thought, have the reports classified.”

Chapter 940: Angio

\*Ching,\* chimed a dropped golden coin; Angio’s last moment played under the dead of night – a summoned mist swallowed the area. Amidst vague outlines, to and fro’s, and chatter, a contraption tied the man’s head onto a solid table, a lever turned at slow intervals – a plunger-like hat pressed, tightening by each shake of the lever.

'Why didn't they listen to me,' pressure increased, '-why didn't anyone want to hear what I said, why me, why not them. My lord,' an involuntary gasp escaped, cranial pressure amplified – the church used morbidly interesting ways of '-cleansing,' the unfaithful. One of bishop Greg's favorites was the head-crusher, a straight-to-the-point contraption.

Through heavy curtains, Angio, once a revered member of the church, had his head locked in where many heretics, criminals, and enemies of the church previously shared their last moments. To call unfairness would have begotten a sneer, and if lucky, perhaps a grunt of discomfort. '-my last moments,' he exhaled, unable to resist the inevitable, '-everything ends, my faith and passion didn't matter, what a shame,' knelt and naked, a burnt insignia was spotted on his chest – a magical symbol of unknown origins. Torturers often branded their prisoners with similar symbols; in Angio's case, the mantle was attended personally by the bishop.

Wind wept the curtains, sending tremors across the tent and shivers down the man's spine, the cold spurs dug into the exposed flesh, adding color to the complexion. The sufferance of the unfaithful, such as the ways of repentance. \*Ching,\* a chiming ray of memory passed, the sound of cracked bones churned even the strongest of stomachs – muffled and painfully slow, it was hard to listen. '-my faith brought me here, I wanted to honor my lord – all for naught... why would he willingly reject a devotee, why would my god not reach out and help. My comrades, the amounts of lives lost – they don't care, they won't care, I warned and warned, still, they run into the battle willing to die,' a feather glided to the damp ground where a frigid breeze carried its weightlessness across the torturous room, falling into a puddle of brownish-red, white and pure taint – '-if they won't accept me, I'll find refuge somewhere else. The chiming,' pressure made blinking a headache, '-it's he, the devil, he calls for me,' a strong glare defied the crushing pain, "-SO BE IT!" he muffled, "-I ACCEPT," a flash of purple blurted, catching the attention of stationed guards, boots rushed from a padded surface to the cold harsh ground, "-where's Angio?" questions, no answer – a coin laid in wait – empty, a bland piece of black, almost as if it had been thrown into a fire. Farther in, a half-bloodied feature tiptoed in a shallow puddle.

\*Gasp,\* "-where am I?" he coughed, unable to open his eyes and breath.

"Calm down," said a monotonous voice, a nimble clap soothed the worse of his injuries, Angio reawakens in a room suspended in time and space, lost in the infinite annals of time, unknown and unseen by the general mass, "-who are you?"

"Must I answer?" said a strong figure atop a throne of gold, "-Angio, by relinquishing thy intrinsic values, a feat of tremendous effort, you were able to reach out and accept. Tell me," the legs crossed, "-child of Lucifer's realm, what is thy wish."

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"My wish?" he knelt and straightened the back, "-what do you mean, wish?"

"To make a deal with the devil," he added, "-speak, Angio, what is it that you truly wish?"

"Go back home."

"Go back home?"



“Yes,” he painfully shouted, “-I’m done, I don’t want to see that wretched realm again, I don’t want to feel betrayed, I warned them, I tried to say... my words meant nothing, humans are imbeciles, they sentenced me, an angel, to death, how am I suppose to feel? Alongside pain flamed the fire of pure ire, a sight of utmost relish for the devil.

“Is that all?” narrowed the devil, “-nothing more, just going home?”

“Is that wrong?”

“No, but I suppose you wouldn’t know. When a soul dies in a realm, not of his, the spirit makes a long returning journey to where he belongs; sometimes guided by the angels of death. Once home, the soul restores to a state before the departure, rendering the travel a little bit more of a dream. So, you see, dying when one is from another world doesn’t count as death.”

“Seriously?” palms dropped against the floor, “-you saying that... that I didn’t have to do anything?”

The devil gave a sympatric nod, “-suppose not. Now what?” the tone swapped for familiarity; “-intent alone suffices for a soul to sign a deal. Going home will happen eventually,” the crossed-legs posture straightened as he moved his body forward confidently, resting the elbows on his thighs and interlocked the fingers in a wall-like structure, “-tell me, Angio, what about vengeance?”

“Vengeance?”

“Yes, why not give to more humanistic desires, why not seek out revenge?”

“Not me,” he exhaled, “-I rather not stoop to a human’s standard.”

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“It was a human who captured and nearly took thine life – what of it now, change of idea?”

“Put that way, I guess I’m being snobbish. Devil, I’m empty, I don’t know what I want – my sole desire was to return home. Now, you’re saying I would have returned if I kept my mouth shut. Happens, my soul is already bound by contract, do as you would, I’m done.”

He rose, throne disappeared, each step the devil walked shortly vanished – seemed the world in his shadow didn’t matter as it crumbled into nothingness, showing but the abyss.

“I’ve never had one give himself too readily,” Igna held Angio’s chin and lifted, “-look, there a myriad of ways we could end the arrangement, and most involving me doing nothing. Instead of giving up,” he tightened the grip and pulled closer, “-why not work for the devil,” he whispered, “-Lucifer didn’t help for a simple reason,” he murmured, “-I ended him and there’s no coming back,” Lucifer’s wings sprawled and settled.

“Lucifer’s dead?”

“Who knows?” the distance greatened, “-what will it be, Angio, serve me or be lost to the fate awaiting forsaken souls.”

“A hard bargain,” he whispered, “-I accept, I don’t care what happens, use me as you see fit, devil, my body and soul are already yours.”

“Great, I’ll see you soon,” a cold gust swept, throwing the room into a never-ending fall of the great unknown.

25th of March, a few days passed since the unknown projectile crossed Rotherham’s airspace, ‘time sure goes by fast,’ beamed Igna hunched over a workstation, many apparatuses and instruments of Magiological research were arranged neatly, “-and I’ve done it,” a wipe of the brow, “-turning solid Maicite into liquid without activating the element. Eye of truth,’ he covered the left side, crimson part of the bicolor pupils, ‘it not only reveals reality but can be restrained depending on what I focus on,’ prior belief was as follows, the eye of truth could only unravel reality and show the world beyond – for said reason, using the ability greatly strained the mind – not to mention the affinity was also amplified on the day Staxius accepted the Nox’s curse.

All changed on a chilly morning at the campus, Igna woke from his skyrise apartment and made his way to a temporary laboratory shared by the generous Marie, now a well-liked professor.

Cigarette in mouth, Igna entered the campus wearing a classy overcoat, ‘-students,’ he slowed his step, drawn to the crowd. “-Alright, refocus the lens,” cried a student, he took notice of a bench and sat, content on finishing the cigarette. The students were hard at work, “-looks fun, doesn’t it,” added another sharing said bench.

“Yeah, it does,” he puffed, “-I don’t envy their assignments.”

\*Chuckle,\* coughed the bystander, “-I agree. By the way, have I seen you before?”

“Yeah, I work at the lab,” he tapped the ash, “-what about you, sure seem interested in what they’re doing.”

The man motioned by raising an open palm, “-don’t make it sound so scandalous.”

“Wasn’t my intent,” returned Igna, “-Lord Mevy.”

“Ah, you know of me,” he smiled, “-They sure are taking their time in figuring how the camera works. I’m pretty sure,” he scratched his head, “-whatever my students built won’t work,” he laughed, a distant figure call for his name, “-I should get going,” nodded the young long-haired professor. Mevy masterfully handled the invention, calibrated the focus, and turned it towards Igna, tis then, a eureka moment sparked, the shutter, ‘-how could I have been so blind!’

Mevy snapped, “-looks blurry,” said a student.

“Looks fine to me,” he beamed, the picture captured the moment after realization, a blurred figure rising against the sharp clearness of the bench and background foliage, “-I like it.”

‘A simple solution,’ he figured, back to present time, ‘-how I focus controls the level of detail I can gather from the world. Thanks to that, controlling the eye of truth is second nature,’ he left the lab, seeing as the hard part was solved. \*Incoming Call: éclair,\*

“Hello,” he answered.

“Hello master, I have urgent news.”

“Speak.’

“Queen of Elendor wants an audience.”

“Pardon?”

“I know, it sounds crazy, I’m sure the queen died... she’s alive, truly.”

“Yeah, I know that,” he firmed, “-I was the one who rescued her. What does she want?”

“No idea,” said a solemn response.

“Fine, I’ll be at the capital in a few hours,” the call ended, he entered a commuting room and draped the coat over Marie’s favorite couch, ‘-good,’ he stood back, admiring the work of art, a turn and Igna left the research area – latter of which was placed out of sight and out of mind, a restricted zone allowed only to the brightest and best. He touched onto the stone walkway, and nodded a few friendly gestures at renowned researchers and members of the secretive alchemist sect, more prominently, the blue-eyes Clarise.

“Young Master, you finished for today?” inquired well-armed guards.

“Yeah, taking a break,” he lit a cigarette, “-I’ll be back, and if Marie asks, tell her I drowned.”

“O-Okay?”

Briefcase in one hand, coat in the other, he made his way to the campus parking, threw the luggage inside a nice car, and sped away, ‘-Ela,’ wandered across his mind, ‘-why’s she back?’

A few hours ride, “-Rosespire Station,” read across large fonts, doors parted, “-master,” waved an impatient attendant, “-I’ve been waiting.”

“Angio, I said you were free to explore the city...”

“My apologies,” bowed the pretty boy, Angio was a type of man lusted after by many, men, women, and non-humans alike, a princely charm, nicely combed hair, and a suave personality. Employing him as a retainer felt more of a mistake, as Igna frowned at the unwelcomed attention, ‘-why did I,’ he shook his head, ‘-why do I always turn those working under me into interesting characters. Angio would have remained silent and inattentive if I remained quiet, instead, when he arrived at my doorstep, I offered him another deal, one that brightened his mood... a free pass to Lucifer’s domain. Seems the pretty boy was a popular kid at the academy.’

“Master,” they arrived at a private parking lot, “-I’ll say it again, I’m grateful for the generosity.”

“Enough with the compliments. Angio, ever consider a life of fame?”

“Why do you ask?” trains moved overhead.

“Look at the poster,” he pointed, “-a handsome face can make it easy in Rosespire’s entertainment world.”

“No, why would I, master, you’re far more handsome than I.”

“Okay,” he dropped the tone, “-there’s a line where compliments become disturbing, and you, Angio, have sprinted right over.”

“No compliments?”

“No,” thundered Igna, “-come on,” a tap and off the duo went, arriving at the castle later in the afternoon, once inside, on pulling around the fountain, a butler hailed, “-welcome back,” he smiled, “-allow me to park the car.”

“Fine,” keys flew, “-Angio, take this.”

“A letter?”

“Yeah, you’re being posted under General Minerva’s watch.”

“WHAT?”