

Death Magic 941

Chapter 941: Ministry of Finance

Angio and Igna parted ways to much of the former's dismay. Castle innards felt alive, and retainers and office workers had a spring in their step. For the first time in a while, the tension of socioeconomic and external affairs smoothed into a run-of-the-mill pace. Minister of Defense, Minerva, crossed Igna's path in a hurry, she glanced, swaying her hair in a jolt, and carried on hassling her underlings. Prime minister, éclair, was spotted perched on the first level, crossing the inner balcony to his office. Deeper inside, at a newer construction, a large pillar formed by many triangles zoomed up, leaving much in ways of imagination. A triangle made of smaller triangles, such was the display – art or convenience, the king could but shrug and refocus. Scattered maids led the way as if breadcrumbs, eventually arriving at an office reserved for important guests. Around said room laid protection as in blast-resistant walls, a docile magical barrier, and always stationed palace guards. King arrived at the doorway to see the protectors exchange casual remarks, “-how does it look?” he asked.

“Looks pretty awesome,” said one of the guards, “-whoever she is, that lady is amazingly pretty. Don't care if her hair is grey a little.”

“Adds flare if you ask me,” added the other, “-man, I wish I could meet her.”

“Why don't you meet her?” said the strange but familiar voice.

“Oh hell no, I don't want to get fired by the king. Who knows if the guest is one of the majesty's many concubines.”

“Right,” continued the other, “-with our king's reputation and pretty face, I'm proud he represents Hidros man,” he rose a heartfelt salute, “-to king Igna and his manliness.”

“Enough you two,” said a friendly voice.

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“Majesty?” jaws dropped, “-I'm sorry,” hasty bows followed.

“No, no,” he offered fist bumps, “-I'm glad the castle smoothens, I was worried the stress would lower morale...” Curiously, the guards accepted the king's offer, exchanged bumps, and blinked – the door opened and closed.

“What happened?”

“I don't know?”

“God...”

A lavish couch of excellent quality and craftsmanship supported the guests, warm cups laid on the table, ‘-they've been here for a while,’ he concluded and approached, “-Dyu and Ela, long time no see.”

“Master Igna,” stood the former spy, now a full-time man of law, “-thank you for the hasty audience.” Igna passed the opposite couch, stared both up and down, and carried to a desk deeper inside. An

unopened report slept, 'éclair must have left it,' he turned the envelope and saw, 'Easel Run Gard's report,' interested and not impatient, he turned for the guests and waited.

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"Allow me to explain," said Dyu vibrantly, nature of the prior acquired familiarity felt strained, hands tapped, "-lady Ela wants to help!"

"Hold it," exclaimed the index, "-before it all, Ela," he crossed the room and sat opposite the queen, "-I was under the belief that Queen Ela had lost herself mentally."

Elendorian feline gaze didn't once falter, her tan complexion and rigid expression dug into the battlefield, a shield protecting her intent and companion. Dyu fixed on the king, visibly irritated by a subtle crinkle cutting across the somewhat wrinkled forehead, "-majesty."

"Fine," the room dropped, "-make it quick, I don't have much time," he glared at the previous queen, "-I'd prefer she speaks."

Her intent gaze moved at Dyu, they spoke in signs, and she returned at her prey, the devil. Her breathing steadied, her legs crossed and the back straightened, '-it's her,' flashbacks swept his mind, her posture and body language, Ela, Queen of Elendor, a personage Staxius held in high regards made her reappearance without the gold and feminine allure. "Igna Haggard," she said, "-I was once the Queen of Elendor, and I know we betrayed you, well, I betrayed you. There's no questioning the facts, I worked with the Empire, allowed Hidros to enter Elendor, and experience the Wracia Empire. Excuses are poisonous, thus the truth, I led your uncle into his death, I was responsible for the attack. He wanted to help a friend and I abused the trust. It pains my heart to this day, I regret not speaking the truth, I regret not having the strength to warn Staxius – the world might have been a better place, we could have seen the man reach his true potential, not far to see him rule the world if such desires ever crossed his mind. What I mean to say is my actions have caused much trouble, and I'm guilty to this day, unable to shake the feeling of dread – a curse or something hangs over my head. The fear of retribution, I don't know. Paranoia forced me into some strange decision and soon found myself wedded to King Juvey – by that time, I was a shell of my prior self. Drugged and abused, being treated like a toy, thrown from person to person, '-a chance to experience royalty,' so they said, pisses me off!" she gathered her ire, shook her head a few, and stared deeply into Igna, "-everything feels like a dream, I was looking at me from an ethereal point of view, watching as the world crumbled and my life shattered. However, an unlikely man walked into my life, Dyu – he tried hard to better how I was treated, and for that, I'm grateful. If not for him, I most likely would be dead or sold to the highest bidder. A suave young man by the name of Xen entered our lives," she smiled, "-I know it was you, Igna, posing as Xen to destroy what King Juvey sold. My memory isn't great but I know deep in my heart of hearts, you were the one who rescued me, and I know I was crazy, I still am partly. We escaped into Hidros, Dyu and I moved into Plaustan, there, a medical team of Phantom allegiance use a lot of resources to treat my ailment. Don't know how they did it. One day, I awoke from what seemed a dream – the bedchambers and seaside view were all affirmation I needed. I was saved from the clutches of insanity. Regained my sanity a few years prior, I wanted to reach out but Dyu advised against making contact, thus, I spent my life studying the world's state, visiting towns, and getting to know Hidros intimately. Brings us to nigh," she paused, checking if Igna assimilated her story, "-the speech, recruiting capable men and women to aid Hidros' advancement."

“Ela III Eliana, I understand most of what was said. Give me a reason why I should trust one who took responsibility for the death of a national hero. Why must I?”

“Because,” she narrowed, “-I sense a familiar intensity within. Igna, are you truly who you say you are?”

“Right, vacuous questions shall greatly benefit this discussion,” a glance toward Dyu, “-am I to assume this lady is worth the time?”

“Worth the time?”

“Yeah, what if she’s a spy,” he sat back, “-we’re in a state of war and Ela conveniently walks into the castle saying she’s recovered. I remember the prior state, there’s no coming back from alteration in the chemical composition of the human mind, doth thee think me a fool?”

“Actually, it was éclair who held her.”

“éclair?”

“Yes.”

“Let me guess,” he sighed, “-was he accompanied by a boyish figure bearing curly hair?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “-I don’t know why the prime minister keeps company with children,” he covered his mouth and glared, “-does éclair like them youn-”

“Don’t,” he interjected, “-not even for a joke, don’t go there,” he eased, “-Ela’s healed mentally, I suppose.”

“Just like that?” she exclaimed, “-what about the chemical imbalances of my mind, what happened to the doubt...”

“When one’s entourage consists of individuals able to alter laws of reality – not hard to imagine one on the brink of insanity to return in pristine conditions.”

“Now what?” they reached a deadlock, neither knew what they wanted.

“Decisions, decision,” he hunched and sunk into a pensive mien, “-tell me, Ela, if I were to accept, how could thee help?”

“Finance,” she snapped, “-Elendor’s wealth was made possible by my intervention, creating trade routes across the continent, and exploiting the market of spice and jewelry. Wracia is ruled by men, why would they allow me, a woman, to stay as queen of an influential state?”

“The ability to make money.”

“Correct,” she smiled, “-I can handle financial affairs, after all, the role of the ministry of finance has yet been filled. Hidros’ coffers don’t look great, do they?” she leaned, “-I had help from a trusty friend,” Igna knew who she referred to, “-and with said help, easily had a clear view into the Kingdom’s finances. Seems tax is put towards bettering the state and helping the populous – tis written in red, after Alpha left, accumulated debts choked the continent – hence inability to fully deploy for war. You don’t have the funds to maintain war against a prosperous state – they don’t care if victory is achieved by Pyrrhic means, long as Hidros suffers the brunt. Losing Vigrant isle will greatly hamper Hidros’ ability to trade.

Lest Hidros grow self-sufficient, there's no way the Holy crusade's going to ease. I don't understand why the apostle of Athena was put in charge of the army, granted Athena's the goddess of war and wisdom, her skill doesn't really transfer to one under her blessing. Last battle came out of the pocket of Raven and Phantom. Bank of Arda's only pillar holding Hidros' economy, if they fail, we'll be in ruin, far worse than losing a battle or facing starvation. éclair's policies in times of peace such as free healthcare and transport have to be retracted, the state can't afford to pay the growing populous. There needs to be reform; unpleasant but necessary."

Igna rose his hand, "-fine," he exhaled, "-I hear the concerns and I know what needs to be done. Taking on the role of finance minister will probably be the last chance Queen Ela has to be involved in politics. Tell me why intent on helping? Life of luxury in Plaustan must have been pleasant, why not continue the journey?"

"Betterment."

"I understand," he made for the door, "-excuse me, I need a break."

A quiet click lightened the whole room, "-holy hell," she gasped, "-was Igna ever this overpowering?"

"I have shivers," commented Dyu, "-he's a monster without fail."

"An aura that puts Juvey to shame," her pants steadied, '-I was right, Igna's not who he says he is. The way he looked at me and Dyu, the subtle body cues and way of speech, it's uncanny and familiar – he truly is the successor to Staxius Haggard. Here I was thinking it would be Eira or Julius who take the mantle, seems the nephew has more in common with the hero king.'

A cigarette lit under a clear blue sky – temperature felt just right and on the colder side, '-Ela threw me for a loop,' he puffed, '-position of finance minister, I had lady Haru in mind, the merchant guild's master must know a thing or two about making money. Ela's arguments were clear and concise, she brought to light many issues I raised with éclair. Paying from pocket to fund the way will eventually drain Raven's prominence – can't let that happen. Since we moved into Rosespire, the company's been buying agencies, funding productions, and recruiting talents from the various academies. Leina and a few Alphan agencies have moved into the city, the influx in celebrity names has transferred the title of entertainment hub from Odgawoan to Rosespire. I'm glad we did that,' he puffed, "-actors, actresses, and idols are morale boosters for the kingdom – Aceline had a dream to heal the world through music; her legacy lives on.'

"Why not accept her offer?"

"Serene?"

"In the flesh," she winked and lit a cigarette of her own, "-Ela's a good asset."

"Right, you took care of her."

"Yeah," she puffed, "-maybe I'm being biased – Queen Ela's only human and to say she once rivaled lady Elvira in ways of making money, the prestige speaks for itself."

Chapter 942: 'It came from a place of care'

Faded smoke pillars rose, Igna puffed, attentive to Serene's words, "-employing her might send ripples."

“Since when did my master give a damn, pardon the expression, about other people?”

“Well,” he puffed, “-since, I suppose,” and pressed the cigarette against the balustrade, “-Serene, I’m glad, I appreciate the visit.”

“No problem, majesty,” her very expressive outfits stretched to limits on her leaning against the balustrade, her dress felt as if it would rip, “-call me if you need anything, and I mean, anything.”

“No seducing whilst on the job,” he returned curtly, playing into her jestful break in tension, and soon disappeared into the castle innards. Before long, a familiar doorway stood, the guards held composed smiles and stretched for the handle, pushing the door back. Dyu and Ela rose frantically, ‘-they didn’t expect me to be back so soon,’ a glance observed Ela’s tussled outfit, droplets of sweat, and an uneven rising of the chest pointing to heavy breathing. Dyu had a composed expression, one of confidence and pride – a whiff of bodily odor scurried past – by which a stronger scent of flowers followed. Igna settled and sternly posed, staring at the duo with much intrigue.

“Ela,”

“YES,” her pitch heightened, “-my apologies,” she cleared her throat and subtly glared Dyu. Latter but turned at Igna impatiently.

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“Dyu and Ela,” he rephrased, “-I’ve carefully examined the propositions and have reached my conclusion. Ela, from today, starting now, you’ll take the position of Minister of finance. I must warn thee, however, that paperwork pertaining to Phantom and Raven’s internal dealings will remain confidential. Frankly speaking,” the legs crossed, “-I don’t trust you. Ela, the story of betrayal and repentance isn’t one to be easily overlooked. I won’t blame the current turmoil, I’m cynical in nature. Fret not,” he caught onto the sudden drop in energy, “-trust can be earned. I’m grateful Ela, that you came forth to offer thy services to the throne. That being said, a meeting’s been called,” maids burst into the room, “-they’ll take care of thy appearance,” lust in their eyes, drool on their mouths – the maids forcibly took Ela by her arms and dragged her dejected expression into the fading doorway. *Thud,* a loud stomp signaled the silence of Igna and Dyu. Latter felt fingers wrap around his neck, “-Dyu,” said the king,

Gasp, ‘-what was that? the pressure dropped the moment he spoke...’

“Tell me,” continued Igna, “-what’s the real reason for today’s visit?”

“Pardon?”

“Don’t play coy,” he narrowed, “-I refuse to believe Ela simply woke up one day and thought, would be nice to help the kingdom.”

“No, NOTHING,” he coughed, “-nothing of the sort. Majesty, Ela wishes to help, I’ve been by her side for years.”

“And?”

“I know she has good intentions,” he firmed, “-I won’t let his majesty badmouth her.”

“Nice,” commented Igna sarcastically, “-the judgment, can you swear its rational and not lost in the confines of the human heart. Is thy vision clouded by the sight of an ex-royal, one abused and in desperate need of attention and a place to call home? Tell me, Dyu, what doth thee wish?” added pressure in the sentence sliced deep, “-her safety or a chance to have your wa-”

“ENOUGH!” *Crash,* he swept a decorative glass off the table.

“Majesty,” guards barged inside with raised rifles, “-are you safe?”

Igna motioned for guns to be lowered, “-nothing’s the matter. Close the door.”

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Dyu had his face glaring at the cupboard, ‘-what have I done...’

“Look at me,” thundered a menacing voice, the man of law obeyed, “-into my eyes.”

‘I’ve done it,’ he looked to see an unemotive mien, “-majesty?”

“Good,” said Igna, “-good resolve.”

“Were you testing me?”

“Obviously,” the door opened once more.

“Majesty,” stormed an attendant, “-council room is ready.”

“We’ll be there in a minute,” he turned at Dyu, “-take care of Ela. I won’t guarantee her safety – danger’s not from the outside alone, there are those who wish to defile the kingdom from the inside out. War is a disgusting place,” he whispered, “-best not have her suffer the brunt of the future.” King Igna left on words of warning, Dyu could but watch the man fade.

‘We’re in trouble,’ he dropped onto a nearby couch, shutting his eyes at the ceiling, ‘-I told Ela that getting involved in politics this late in life will be at risk for her life. I’m not exactly in my prime either, what happens if I can’t save her, what happens if an assassin gets the better of my wit and kills her... I’ll be devastated. Oh Ela, my Ela, why wouldn’t you listen to me... am I not sufficient?’

A distant ruckus swept the attention, Igna halted before the council room, “-go on ahead,” he ordered the attendants and parted towards the noise. Blabber amplified the more he walked.

“Get this off me, I’m not exactly-” a splendidly dressed dame waved her arms in a not so ladylike manner – a swarm of maids nibbled, giving the expression of said dame drowning in a sea of black and white silhouettes.

“Ladies,” approached the King, “-I said to dress the minister, not pamper her.”

“Majesty, lady Ela is just so adorable. She’s fickle as a feline, we couldn’t help it,” they swooned, opting for a yellow as a primary color and a few shades of lesser imposing colors, it drew on her Elendorian charm.

“Right, I can’t argue the facts. There’s much work to be done. I promise,” the tone turned suspicious, “-long as the work is satisfactory, I’ll have lady Ela be a guest of our palace’s lovely flowers.”

“MAJESTY,” they cheered, “-thank you.”

He side-stepped, allowing the platoon of equally terrifying retainers’ shuffle, “-majesty...” returned a dead-regard, “-I’m no doll for entertainment.”

“Yes, you are,” he replied, “-such as the nature of thy contract.”

“What contract?”

“To serve the kingdom,” he extended an arm, “-shall we?”

“Okay,” she accepted, promenade was slow, Igna meaningfully took a detour, extending the time until arrival.

“Ela, tell me, are you and Dyu dating?”

“No,” she returned, “-I wouldn’t call it dating. We’re intimate if that’s what you asking. As for feelings, well, I don’t understand it myself. I’m not daft, I see how much he cares and how much he’s done. A part of me doesn’t want to let anyone in, I guess I’m afraid of being hurt...”

“Afraid of being hurt,” he said aloud, “-we all have our problems. Pardon my eagerness earlier. The childish demeanor the maids held, the way they giggled and laughed, I was relieved to see them enjoy life and take in their surroundings.”

‘He cares about the retainers,’ she wondered, ‘-amazing... I thought the castle would be stricter and quick to get rid of those unworthy or otherwise useless. Not the case, everyone works at their pace, allowed to make their own decision and pick how they choose to approach.’

“Ela, about your duties,” he interrupted her trail of thoughts, “-I’m sure the diligence will help. Part of me can’t shake the feeling of intrigue, there must be something more, a life of politics at this age, I mean, are you certain?”

“Yes, I am. What will it take?” she pulled her arms and rushed in front, “-tell me, how can I prove my loyalty and will to aid the kingdom?”

“Be outrageous. Marry Dyu?”

“Sorry?”

“I’m only joking, prove to me with your actions. Look around, notice how everyone has a smile on their faces – I don’t much care about how the state looks at the moment. To see them laugh and be at ease, it’s enough, it’s proof that the kingdom is marching towards a better place. I know,” he sighed, “-there are people out there unable to earn, live in abject poverty, and are persecuted. The distinction between the have and the have-nots can’t be made without prejudice and a social class. It’s foolish to think of the world as black and white. Instead of getting rid of poverty, we must strive for a simpler approach, one in the realm of reality, merit. I know very well there are those unable to work – instead of getting rid of poverty, let’s alleviate their worries, a helping hand to those willing to restart their lives. I know,” they walked, “-it’s idealistic to think everyone wants to better themselves, most of the worthless sacks of society wish to sink their lives in drugs and alcohol. Forsaken shall be forgotten, if they don’t want to make an effort, why would the kingdom support them. Therefore,” he narrowed, “-as minister of

finance, your responsibility isn't just stabling our economy, tis to find ways of discovering diamonds in the rough."

The talk seamlessly transitions into a council room of a few, "-Ministers, from hereon, each essential department will have sub-departments. Centralization will be enacted by which requests for funds and other development projects won't be subject to a vote, nay, instead move up the hierarchy – most will be addressed by my closest aid, prime Minister éclair. Of course, if thee wish for a direct audience pertaining to policies and whatnot, they ought to be sent a few days in advance. As the kingdom demands, we shall add more ministers to perform specific duties. For now, the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Internal Affairs, led by General Minerva, Lady Ela, and Countess Eira of Elony will have the fate of the Kingdom in thy hands. Ministers, by my name, thee have the authority to create, choose, and fire whoever suits the need of thy departments. Office space will be created in the castle-town – many buildings have been renovated. Any questions?"

"Might I inquire to why the traitorous queen of Elendor is serving in office?" narrowed Eira.

"Her abilities will speak for themselves. Have patience."

"So, anyone with ability and skill can be made part of the king's inner council without so much a vote?"

He settled and carefully examined, "-lady Eira, tell me, does the word centralization allude thee?"

"No, but for the sake of argument, I must voice my worries," she pointed at the general, "-lady Minerva was spoken of as this revolutionary leader in military might and stratagem, she didn't have the foresight to check the enemy forces and swiftly marched into enemy territory."

"Enough," voiced éclair, "-what is done is done."

"No," she quipped, "-she personally gave the responsibility to lead the campaign, éclair. I won't make excuses," her long lashes fluttered at Igna, "-I hate playing the blame game, I must put into questions thy judgment, brother." The onlooking crowd of attendees were shocked.

"I get it," he replied, "-We lost a crucial battle and now face an invasion. Kreston's asked for help and we've yet to respond."

"Don't blame the king," fired Minerva, "-Eira," she glared, "-or should I say Guardian of Nexsolium. It's easy to point the finger," she side-glanced Ela, "-I mean, if we're talking traitors then," she smiled, "-should I bring into the fold what I know?"

"Enough," said Igna.

"Forgive what I said, majesty, slip of the tongue. Lady Eira, please understand we're not against mere mortals – Ares."

"The God of War?"

"We're going against entities of renown, heroes of war. It's easy to see incompetence outside looking in. Please, come by the offices later tomorrow, I will answer any and all questions."

"Amusing," giggled Ela, "-traitorous queen of Elendor," she smiled, "-the title has a ring. Never mind me, Countess, I may be exiled, but," her smile kept strong, "-my claim on my kingdom stands. I know waging

a war against Elendor is calling for the wrath of the entirety of Wracia, yet, I know my followers will catch wind of certain developments, who knows, we might have help from an unlikely ally.”

“Right,” Igna stood, “-the meeting is officially concluded for today. Don’t forget to check on the offices,” heaviness of the prior arguments wasn’t malicious, it came from a place of care. They understood what the countess meant, and for that, had their heart skip a beat, and thus arrived at the end.

“Sister,” hailed Igna, she turned with a frown, “-we need to talk.”

Chapter 943: Passing

“Talk?”

“Yes.”

“Go ahead.”

“Pretty cold, tell me, sister – are you sure?”

“About what?”

“Blatantly playing the opponent. The dirty truth of unity, a common enemy, not emotions of the fulfillment of loyalty, tis the want to see another suffer. If you’re playing said role, I must add, there will be problems later on.”

Her face softened, “-I admit, playing the enemy isn’t fun, or do I wish so. Circumstances have forced me to act, you said it yourself, there’s no point in holding back. I’m certainly not going to be a hypocrite about how I wish to be treated – give criticism to get some. Hidros’ the only bastion remaining to me and my family, no way I’m going to sit back and watch the fucks from Wracia ruin it all, again. I know how ruthless the church is, experienced it firsthand,” her fist curled, “-taking away my family, people I loved, and on an auspicious day for marriage no less. Brings me to sheer anger – the memories are present, I know every detail, every emotion, it’s a pain. Don’t worry about me,” she rose a hand onto his shoulders, “-I’ll be fine, long as work is done, I’m happy,” said a somewhat gentle smile, “-my family is here, Gallienne’s lucky to have a father. I appreciate the concern, Igna,” he tapped his cheeks, “-I’m happy you care, truly,” she leaned and mumbled, “-about time you care for yourself, little brother.” She left on said note, throwing a wink and giving a brief wave.

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Their exchange left Igna stumped, ‘-Eira is amazing,’ he puffed, having surveyed around the castle to the outer walkway, ‘-she’s willing to do anything for the kingdom. I’m glad.’

Ministry of Defense said a bronze sign in black lettering. Towering office buildings populated the inner-castle town, a place once accessible to the public, a place where the once newly crowned king allowed the populous to visit and voice their worries at the castle turned headquarters. Along the years, said luxury of communicating with public servants casually became less of an option, eventually dying out for a more distant approach. *Whistle,* nodded Minerva, “-a lot of space,” she looked to the side and noticed movers, workers, and craftsmen of dwarven nature perform their duties diligently. General’s department was first settled. Office buildings were a few stories high by which their scale could be seen

from outside the castle walls – the top floor tiptoed over the jaunting protectors. The architecture was reminiscent of the olden day and with improvements to the overall sturdiness.

“Angio,” side-glanced Minerva, “-what’s with the sorry expression,” she narrowed, a few days elapsed since the council meeting.

“Nothing,” he said in a spiteful sigh, “-I don’t know why I wasn’t assigned to the king’s inner circle.”

“Are you daft?” she chuckled, “-an angel of lucifer’s world has no place to stand beside our king. Stop being a prissy princess and let’s get to work,” they entered the ground floor, stepping over cobblestone stairs and passing automatic doors. Layout inside was subject to change and improvement, each department had an allocated budget for renovation – all opted for the default option seeing as it fits and surpassed the set criteria. Ministry of Defense, under the general’s watchful eye, employed competent officers ranging from intelligence to warfare. Angio was forced by her side, as she often commented during lunch hours. Thus, the ministry had a firm foundation, her blunder in the Vigrant archipelago always vexed, similar to a stain on a favorite shirt – the mistake was theirs, unable to wash or clean, never to see it disappear and forever leering.

Ministry of Finance moved in next door on the following day. Ela’s outfits were branded and lavish, she wore them without care, always supported by a swarm of swooning maids. The castle flowers fell for the queen hard, not for appearance alone, the cat-like personality of hot and cold added greatly to her charm. She spared no time, and on the first day of the department opening – lady Haru of the Trader’s guild and a representative of Phantom, Raven, and Elon’s dynasty were called for a meeting. High-ranking profiles nonchalantly shoved the burden of protection on Minerva’s chaotic arrangement.

The day after, a darker, gloomier department moved in beside Ela’s offices. The Department of Internal and External Affairs, King Igna thought it best to have Eira handle mediation within and outside the kingdom. A choice the countess accepted without so much a word said. Out of the three current departments, Eira’s was rumored to be haunted and overly depressing. Why wouldn’t it be, dealing with public matters on a daily had the staff always on edge; Eira understood the pressure and made certain her employees were fit for slavery. Aside from grueling hours and little to no sleep – they were paid more than average – a budget allocated at Ela’s discretion.

Following Eira’s arrival, éclair settled opposite her offices – naming his department as General Affair, thus the departments colligated – settling private channels linking each of their groups, being no more than a press of a button apart. Said system also linked into Phantom’s sister system, granting access to private aid for the castle.

April shone on the calendars, 20th to be precise. One-month nonaggression expired, and Kreston and Dorchester were yet to fight – the holy army settled at a castle-town cupped within a clearing in the Rotten Thicket, facing the sea at a few hours’ march.

“Bishop Greg, we’re reinforcing our forces. Church send reinforcement, they should arrive in a few months. Guardian Saint of Lucifer’s western sect, Oat, has moved for Krigi. We’ve been losing men for the past weeks. Trenches have been built under the cover of night, a forward outpost in operation, we await your orders.”

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“Hold, for now, keep them on edge but don’t advance. General Ares’ yet to announce the next campaign.”

Skirmishes were commonplace, wasn’t difficult to see soldiers left for dead in bushes or worse, exposed to the elements. Life in Dorchester, hard as it is, simply went through the motion. Those able to hunt, fish, and harvest were scared, on the first of April, a cold wind blew from the Winterpar. Winter was here, the temperature dropped below average – a six-month torturous nightmare for Dorchestrians. Closed borders meant no relief for winter, no relief eventually led to starvation. Unmonitored villages made long treks west in attempts of having good faith from Arda.

Castle’s clogs and wheels churned in full swing, a good oiled machine dispatching orders and ways of dealing with the coming winter, predicted to be the worse Hidros would see.

Curtains parted, Igna pushed his bedroom window and stared the piercing wind, ‘-ever since the ministries, my tasks have lessened to the point of a few reports and confirmation of projects and policies. Minerva and Eira seem to be getting along,’ he threw on a heavy coat, finished the morning tea, and exited the apartment, ‘-another day of research.’ By unanimous vote, ministers designated his majesty to depart for Rotherham, a suggestion made by the general.

“We’ve read the reports,” said she, a few weeks ago on an urgent meeting, “-unidentified projectiles have been spotted around Rotherham. Phantom has seamlessly dispatched of the threats and are looking into the matter. Have a look at this,” she shared a file pertaining to weapons testing in Alpha, Igna’s employment of a nuke that ended dispute and war in Whuotan. Resultant images had an impact, “-Hidros has been keen on researching weapons of destruction. Having a better gun is always a plus in battle, therefore, I’d like for his majesty to put the intellect to use and focus on researching Maicite and ways to counter threats from the air. We mustn’t allow for the skies to be conquered, our air force is our pride, similar to the Wracian naval forces.”

“Advent of the ministries will alleviate the burden off the king’s shoulders,” added Eira.

“Thus, allowing for more free time,” commented éclair.

“Majesty,” narrowed Ela, “-at the risk of sounding rude, may we ask for thee to work on something more concrete opposite to chilling around the castle, twiddling thy thumbs, and reading reports?”

“Sorry?” he rose a curious gaze, “-am I to assume thee thinks I’m procrastinating?”

“No, god no,” they refuted in tandem, “-same to how we were assigned position suited to our skills and know-how, would be best for us to have the creator of the first Maicite catalyzer to take the lab by force again.”

“Don’t worry about the projects, master, I will have daily reports issued for thy viewing pleasure,” he tapped below his eye.

“I understand,” he exhaled, soon to find himself at the University of Rotherham. Nights were filled with paperwork, even though éclair said the task would be alleviated, a cynical paranoia had him pull all-nighters.

Early morning around the campus was peaceful. Mist from the coming winter and overall cold had many dress comfortably. Didn't take long for rumors to spread about a renowned researcher working in Marie's facility.

He pulled into the lab's parking lot, shut off the engine, and sat; the phone vibrated, "-hello."

"Igna, it's Jude," she coughed, "-help..." her voice felt flemish, perhaps a cold or worse.

"Take a deep breath," he ran, "-explain, what happened?"

"We were experimenting with the projectiles, and one of the researchers found an inactivated vile. He thought it was the key holding the answers," *cough, cough,* "-on opening the item, a burst of miasma... problem's been contained somewhat," *cough,* "-he's at risk of death... you were right," *cough,* "-chemical warfare..."

Wind in the ears and a thud within the heart, Igna sprinted across the walkway, vaulting over the gate and storming deeper inside at a restricted part of the lab, warnings played in a loop, part of the building was locked out.

"Excuse me," he gasped, "-where are Marie and the others?"

"On the other side," answered a researcher, "-we couldn't get here in time. Until it's contained, there's no reaching them, sorry young master."

"Okay," the breathing steadied, all the doors and windows were locked, curious onlookers took glimpses at the metallic barriers and left to a quarantine zone stated per protocol. 'SSY, connection to the server.'

"Connection granted," said an automated voice, "-greetings, majesty."

"SSY, show surveillance feed of lab X5," multiple screens materialized, he skimmed and reached the affected area. '-researcher looks like he's about to time, wait, why would there be a v...' it suddenly dawned, '-SSY, background check.'

Incoming Call: Marie,

"How's the containment?"

"Around 90% complete, the man's dead, I might have inhaled-"

A bellowing of mana shook the containment room, "-no dying on my watch."

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!"

"Came to help," he nonchalantly looked at the infected, "-signs of the monster plague..."

"Igna, why are you here?" fired Marie.

"To help," he sighed, "-besides, I had nothing else to do. Grab the suits," he ordered bystanders, "-let me figure it out."

"Marie, why's the king here?" inquired curious attendants.

"I called him," she exhaled, "-didn't expect teleportation," they dove into the protective suits and locked onto Igna.

"Ready?" he asked, throwing caution to the wind.

"DON'T..."

A press unlocked the containment room, and the king brazenly walked inside and shut the doors, stopping at the window to give a few waves.

"WHAT IS HE DOING?" they shouted.

"It's my fault," facepalmed Marie, "-should have never called. éclair's going to be mad, no, screw that, everyone's going to blame me for the death of his majesty... I see it now," imagination ran wild, "-the death sentence."

'I see,' he leaned over the unfortunate soul, "-please," gasped the remaining breaths, "-kill me..."

Igna stood by and watched, "-why should I, traitor. A vile, quite the story," he narrowed, "-too bad the facility's hard to infiltrate. Seems weird when I checked the footage, you're not dying, you're immune – luring researchers for infection, tell me, who doth thee work for?"

"No one," he sprung, throwing the right hand armed with a shattered glass at Igna's neck. Sadly for the man, the devil wasn't keen on being assaulted unprovoked, martial-arts reflexively parried the glass and chipped into the man's neck, hitting a major artery and staining the glass crimson.

Chapter 944: Port Smith

The bulk of the splatter dripped. Researchers shared the expression of dread and fear. A man was butchered without so much an inch of hesitation. 'Spy,' thought Igna, scanning the area, '-pretty sure if I check,' a few taps led to naught, '-there, the database is empty. A nonexistent human, what a shame, so they'd have us think,' the hands rose maniacally over the deceased. Lock down all but had the laboratory in a vacuum-like state. Crystals of gray snapped at the spy's head, mild flickers moved back and forth, '-there,' he released, leaving the body dry and shrunken.

'We're a bit too late,' he moved towards the stained glass, grabbed a nearby cloth, and swiped, "-do we have contacts in the pharmaceutical world?" he asked, the voice resounded behind the onlookers for noise didn't travel across the room. Marie jumped and checked, the speakers suddenly spoke, throwing her already hesitant nature in a loop.

"Marie?"

"Yes, we have a department."

"I'll contain the infection here, everyone in quarantine must make their way to the lower labs. Order for a first-aid area – the gravity of the biological weapon isn't to be trifled with," when saying so, signs of the plague appeared. The arms and face darkened, skin flaked, adding pressure suffice to crumble the necrotic areas, "-you see," he pointed to a darkened finger, "-the plague is worse than I imagined," he tapped, the member fell, "-I'm certain the infection rate is worse than the actual malady."

The whole laboratory closed, none left the building, a triage was established, many showing signs and symptoms were sent to the ground floor, and those unexposed were placed on the higher floors. Marie led the orders, her words and demeanor guided the confused and the desperate, ‘-are we under attack?’ crossed her mind many times. Death of the researcher sprinkled doubt, ‘-if they infiltrated this far, who is to say there aren’t any others?’

Meanwhile, as the hours passed – Igna stayed confined. Worst was yet to come, and he understood how much the pain would affect judgment, *connecting éclair,* read the interface, “-master?” he answered, “-what a pleasant surprise.”

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“No time for idle chat. Any updates on scout unit in Arda?”

“They reached the beforementioned area a few days back. The search is long as they have to traverse the Ardanian rainforest. Why, should I have them increase the pace?”

“No,” a report crossed the channels, “-here’s where we stand.”

The Prime minister took a few minutes to read, the voice returned impatiently, “-are we under attack?”

“I dug through his memories and found the nature of the mission. Infiltration of Hidros’s brain, Rotherham. I have reason to say the city’s the focus of their attack. Perhaps it’s a ruse, who knows, can’t make moves on assumptions. Have it relayed to Elvira, I’ll leave the rest in thy capable hands,” said a mild chuckle, “-prove thy worth.”

“Prove thy worth...” echoed, the call ended, leaving éclair idle in the new office. ‘-Biological weapon unleashed at the laboratory. Infiltration of Rotherham’s airspace is a play to test the capabilities of its defenses. Destruction of the lab ran simultaneously with another mission. Like master said, playing a guessing game won’t achieve much,’ he stormed out, crossed the street, and entered Countess Eira’s office. A melancholic receptionist answered éclair’s sudden arrival by showing the way up.

Tap, tap, “-enter,” said an unimpressed voice.

“Lady Eira,” he walked to her desk and placed a report.

‘He seems weary,’ she checked his demeanor and stared at the paper. More lines read, the narrower grew her harsh squint, “-right,” the paper fell and resounded silently throughout her desk, “-what are we supposed to do?”

“The secondary mission must involve biological warfare. We’ve yet to find the source of the launch.”

“Tell me,” she leaned into her chair, “-did it ever cross your mind the attacks could have been from another mothership?”

“It did, probability-”

“Enough,” she interjected, “-probability means nothing in war. Don’t underestimate thy enemies,” éclair soon found himself following the countess to the ministry of Defense, there, a sudden council meeting brought into the fray the newly formed ministries.

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“Let’s skip formalities,” said Ela, an acknowledging nod went around. They took up the reports and ingested the information.

“What about a cure?”

“We don’t have the facilities to mass-produce a cure even if the malady is treatable,” voiced éclair, answering Ela’s question.

“Is the attack confirmed?” inquired a suspiciously skeptical Minerva, “-what if tis a ploy, a carefully planted lure?”

Alas, the general’s hopeful skepticism turned nightmare, *-urgent report,* flashed, “-lord éclair,” gasped a frantic young man working the market street of port-town Smith of Kreston, location of rest for the Hidrosian Naval force.

A volley of rain droplets crashed against man’s castles, nature’s ire felt through a drop in temperature. Heavy gusts sprinted down Monsia Range and swept the streets. Traders hurried to shelter; inns and taverns opened their doors. Take away overindulgence in religious practices and one would have a typical townscape of reminiscent architecture. Warm fires lit the insides amber – albeit the middle of the day outside felt more towards the coming of dusk. In one of the many inns, a little boy of demi-human nature found himself trapped in a loop of never-ending coughs. Healing potion and magic had no effects – worried parents hastily ran to the local physician, knocking at his door and screaming for help. The father’s desperation forced his hand onto the handle, the door opened without struggle. The smell of burning caught his heightened sense, “-fire,” said the father, “-call on the local guards.” Bystanders drew to the house immediately.

“What’s happening?”

“The doc’s house is on fire,” cried the father, “-take him to the inn.” A terrified mien slapped the father, “-he’s not...” said the mother, “-he’s not b-breathing.”

“WHAT?” torn between fire and son, the man chose the latter, leaving the house in the hands of the coming guards. He frantically tapped his son’s cheeks, however, there was no coming from death – black marks soon marred the neck, chest, and abdomen. Similar marks appeared on the father, who looked at his wife in disbelief. Under the listless gaze of the mountain peaks, the monster plague took the life of a family – they fell quickly, sending terror across the streets – guards were stumped, unable to control the panic.

“THE PLAGUE!” ran across town, “-THE PLAGUE!” Tavern and inn owners threw their customers to the elements, shutting their doors, and closing their windows. Temperature dropped further, young adventurers – orphans of the fighting age, died of hypothermia – many succumbed to the symptoms; Port Smith had a firsthand preview of what was to come. Doctor’s body was never found.

“We need medical supplies,” cried the attendant, “-lord éclair, help us.”

“When was this?”

“A few days ago,” he narrowed, “-communication lines were cut, and the town suffered a blackout. Infected are quarantined at a manor. If nothing changes, I’m afraid the entire population will drop.”

“Understood,” narrowed éclair.

“We’ll handle it,” interjected Eira, “-this falls in our department’s responsibility. General Minerva, you’re with me. éclair, have my brother find a cure as soon as possible and send the news to Lord Stark. Ela, we need medical supplies, understood?”

“Understood,” echoed, seats emptied, leaving éclair to think, ‘-Eira took charge of the situation. I was hesitant to take action and worried about ghosts. Should stand to learn a thing or two.’

Silence, peaceful tranquility of mind and body, ‘-pops,’ whispered a familiar voice, ‘-wake up,’ it said softly.

“Who is it?”

“Me,” replied a listless Vanesa, “-pops, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he rose from her lap and looked around, “-what about the plague?”

“Gone,” she burped, “-they stole the curse from me,” said a smile, “-pops, remember when you sent me across the world to spread illness?”

“Yeah?”

“Turns out the humans are smart to alter my babies and turn them into greater fiends. Still weak,” she glared, her oily green hair dropped beside her cheeks, “-pops, why not call me?”

“I don’t know,” he clambered, “-I’m being stupid.”

“What?”

“I’m being an idiot,” he tapped his forehead against the wall, “-I can end the war in a matter of seconds, all I have to do is walk into the battlefield and unleash the puppet army, pride of the Shadow Realm’s forces. I don’t know why I hesitate, feels too easy; I want to fight a war but not use my powers, does that make sense?”

“Not really,” she shrugged, “-pops, stop being indecisive,” she yawned, “-I notice it happened when the girl Loftha died... there’s, I don’t know, something weird about the aura.”

Incoming call – Duke of Kreston.

“Hello.’

“Greetings majesty,” said a grave tone, “-Kreston’s under attack. Dorchester launched their offensive earlier this morning – I was unable to send information to General Minerva, thus my call. Settling of a new church, a puritan way of following Lucifer’s teachings – it sounded great, majesty, I would have loved to be the face that leads the religious province of Kreston to theological marvel. As it stands, Brigadier General Erano Dunslav forces won’t be able to counter the forty-thousand men strong combined holy army. As the duke, I must lead my people to victory – Kreston has a combined force of ten thousand peasants. Pitchfork and rocks won’t survive against guns and tanks – such is a disparity of

warfare – an advanced nation raises their banner against us. What happens today will be spoken in legends – I won't allow a single man to destroy Kreston's legacy. Pardon the sentiment, majesty. I would have prayed to my god, yet, something about you, majesty, can't quite put my hands on it... my chest warms when I devote myself to his majesty instead of my lord. I've taken most of thy time. Majesty, promise revenge for Kreston, promise the safety of our province in my death."

"Promise," echoed a distant sigh, "-Pope Carrigan II, fight and win. Hold on the offensive and don't yield, for tis grit and perseverance that wins a battle, not prayer and hope," the call ended.

'They're out there fighting for Hidros, what am I doing,' the head shook, '-I wanted to keep my hand hidden until going face to face against gods. They dared intrude on my people's peace,' purple flickers dotted around his limbs, "-Vanesa, any cure available?"

"Yeah," she smiled, "-I got the cure right here," she conjured a pill and exhaled deeply, "-I should go..." said a woeful tone, '-pops has what he needs, I'm not needed anymore...'

"Actually, Vanesa, care to join your old man in battle?"

"What?"

"Must I repeat myself?" he smiled for the first time in a month, "-let's go."

"Okay," she cheered and dropped her shoulders, "-hungry..."

'I smiled,' they hurried downstairs, and threw cartons of pills onto the table, "-Marie, here's the cure."

"WHAT?"

"Cure for the plague. Seems the attackers lacked imagination."

Ministry offices danced in folly, no end to the reports, "-I wish we had a bird's eye view on the continent," gritted éclair, "-Dorchester's launched an attack and the province's had their communication line cut. Port Smith's attack was a ploy – it make sense, drawing focus from Kreston towards Rotherham – the threat alone sufficed. We fell hard into their hands. I hate this."

"Outplayed," commented Serene.

"Why are you here?"

"Report from King Igna," a video played across the screens, "-to the ministers, Duke Carrigan II has asked of Hidros in their time of need, as a friend and ally to the duke, I must act upon my responsibility and aid his effort. General Minerva, have reinforcement retreat east, make way towards Port Smith. Erano Dunslav's unit will face off against the forty-thousand men strong army. I won't stand for arguments – tis a decree from thy king." The next day soon climbed the horizon, king Igna's message was heard clearly, no room for arguments – the ministers obeyed, putting trust in the sovereign. Train-bound reinforcement arrived at the Krestonian Cathedral and made way northeast.

"Marie," echoed, "-is it ready?"

"I guess," she returned, "-we needed a sure way of propulsion. Haven't tested it yet, are you sure, majesty?"

“We need to send a message.”

Chapter 945: Enforced Surrender

‘A message? More like an announcement.’

Late evening muddled over Aina Forest, a massive patch of trees, wildlife, monsters, caves, and hidden soldiers covering a massive portion of land at the Krestonian-Dorchesterian border. The area was different from most around – contrary to other borders. Imagine a wave, the trough, and the peak, the former is where the dividing line was drawn, as for the peaks, well, they each flourished into their own land. One could see the other side when standing ashore, firing their gaze across an unnamed lagoon, each side shared different references, in the end, reduce to a simple dot on the map. Dawn at the coast was life threatening, the moment the sun vanished – light snuffed immediately – darkness eroded the gentle rays, covering the thicket, adding a pool of black as a reference to the sea. Brigadier General Erano’s forces spread across the forest, dressed in adequate camo and equipped with silent rifles – not standard issued but custom made for his men. Erano’s military history spoke volumes, and his men were bards ready to retell the tale of an absolute madman.

The grass is always greener on the other side; such goes the saying. When confronted by the reality of Kreston and Dorchester, it couldn’t be farther from the truth. Kreston carried beautifully lush forestry, amazing wildlife, and a landscape that would make any painter drool. Dorchester held strong, remnants of trees, barren soil, and open areas – if compared as hair, Kreston would have silky long hair as Dorchester would sneer at her opponent, baldness and unmistakable bald spots, a difference vested as night and day.

Months elapsed; each side studied the other. When the time came for battle, Dorchester made no effort in hiding their intention – sending troupes running through open fields, leaping over makeshift wooden fences, and prone at the first line of cover. At the risk of being discovered, Erano opted for the enemy scouting unit to advance, willingly sacrificing a chance of picking off the runners. Outside looking in, Dorchester’s scouting unit’s commander; Viscount Olian, a defector from Hidros; was trained at the military academy, graduating with high honors and proving his might in many o’ campaigns before the succession debacle. Fame for unorthodox tactics, sending light on their feet troupes to establish an advanced position was the first order of business. Erano, despite arguments from his fellow attendants, stuck with his gut and allowed a force of a few hundred to swim deeper, slowly cutting their escape.

Slowly, the terror of Erano’s trained unit shone – Olian received news of a safe passage through unexplored territory. Under a moonless sky, troupes were filed to a stronghold, namely; a cave. Whistle and muffled snap, a soldier dropped. Alarm raised to no avail – a narrowed path channeled by bushes and unknown terrain, pitfalls and the bunch hidden admits the scenery, those very flashlights used to guide became targets, before the retreat or a counterattack could be issued, Erano’s dubious ways ensured a flawless victory. Unmatched on land, the battle seemed to turn in Kreston’s favor until Olian took action, reading the situation masterfully. “They’re not fighters,” cried one of the soldiers – on a further look, they were prisoners of war, demi-humans, and villages outfitted to look like Dorchesterian soldiers. It dawned, Olian used innocent lives as bait – Erano’s disbelief was short-lived as artillery fired rained over the forest, killing a few and seriously wounding many.

“RETREAT!” he ordered, spacing proved a godsend, an escape followed, so they thought. Similarly, on the darkened seas, a boat carrying troupes crossed the lagoon and landed north at an unexplored area on either side. Cliff and rough seas proved much to handle, Kreston had no option but to focus on important areas, leaving an opening for exploitation. The boat was spotted by a retreating soldier, barely able to make camp, “-north,” he related to a grievously wounded intelligence officer, on his dying breath, the man opened a channel to Erano and passed, leaving the line for intel exchange. The brigadier General made camp with a wounded shoulder, the sight of injured fighters passed his mind as a report hurried into his ear, “-doesn’t look good,” he exhaled, fighting through the pain, ‘-the northern district is under Dorchestrian control – they can push south and capture Port Smith. No fighting from the northwest either,’ greater detail reached the duke, who made way to an outpost in the forest.

‘Using the night to send troupes silently across the lagoon, how did we allow for such a blatant mishap,’ he and his makeshift army arrived at only a few military supplies and ration, ‘-we’re fighting a losing battle,’ deep down, under the moonless night, Duke Carrigan knew, ‘-we’ll lose.’

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Hope of reinforcement laid at Port Smith, quarantined from the province on the uprising of a new variant of the monster plague, ‘-it makes sense,’ he blinked as did Erano miles away, ‘-they used the lagoon during the ceasefire, send troupes under the cover of darkness. We were none the wiser for lack of resources.’

Viscount Olian, for his notorious reputation as a womanizer and hater of demi-humans, showed intellect and sound judgment in battle. In the few days after battle rang – Kreston found themselves at the end, victory nay but a dream. Central, so became the name of the Ministry of Defense, refused allocation of troupes.

“Brigadier General, what now?” inquired the duke dressed in religious attire.

“We’ve asked for reinforcement, no luck so far,” replied a wounded Erano, “-I wish I could stand side by side with my men and fight,” they stood on a hill, peering over the thick dark-green foliage, “-I can only imagine the battle.”

“We can only imagine,” added the duke, “-who’re we fighting?”

“Viscount Olian, he’s a good leader and better strategist. If only we had more resources...”

The Duke paused and glanced at a letter, “-Central ordered for your troupes to retreat, destination, Port Smith.”

“I saw,” added Erano, “-substituting able fighters for the village folks. Willingly sacrificing our inhabitants... I understand the merit, still, it won’t leave a good taste.”

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“About that, tis a voluntary armed force. We made sure to speak of the low survival rate. Kreston will face a food crisis, funds and resources were drained in the early stages of the battle.”

“In a way, sending them into battle alleviates the coming food crisis, skim off the top and watch the glass fill again. Desperate measures in a desperate situation.” And so, the battle continued, days became

weeks and weeks turned months – 25th of May. Winter settled firmly across Hidros, seas roughened and the winds blasted, temperatures dropped below the norm. Northeastern peaks affectionately named Sibling range, on accounts of its jumps and drops began its transformation into a white scape.

Dorchesterian forces who invaded the north, forced to climb Sibling's range were uninformed about a local legend. 'When the peaks whitened with their snowcap, retreat for when white beast crashes, naught is to be left alive.'

Erano puffed fog from inhaling a warm cup of tea, Monsia's cold personality rubbed against Port Smith, freckles of white – icy cold streets – winter was nigh. He approached a door and tapped, pushing into a warmer inside, "-Brigadier general," waved Duke Carrigan sat before a warm fireplace.

"Duke, I didn't expect a visit," they sat, casting their lonesome shadows against empty seats, "-where's Jerad?"

"Poor fellow was diagnosed with the plague – doctors arrived earlier. Poor Jerad isn't great on his feet," he coughed, "-winter's especially cold this year."

"Tell me about it," shivered Erano, "-I have news. Winter's grasped Siblings' high. We can expect Dorchester's hidden forces to finally make a move. They hid for so long; I wonder what they're up to."

"Maybe they're dead?"

"Speaking of dead," Erano firmed his mug woefully, "-I heard the last of the ten-thousand was found dead at an unmarked camp. Seems starvation got the better – we barely have enough food to go around town never mind a voluntary army."

"Time's rough, we're living off goblin meat, well, we lived off said meat. Winter's settle, no wildlife nor fish in the sea – whatever reserves we had was sent to Oxshield in exchange for ration."

Brigadier General studied the duke, a warm friendship built over the months, "-we might need to surrender."

"General?"

"I'm sorry, there's no way my famished soldiers have morale to handle a full-scale invasion. They haven't trained for such harsh weather; I've asked part of them to have drills at Monsia high – results were worse. Growing plagues forced the stationed naval army and us to control the malady, burning the deceased, many of them children and women – takes a toll on one's psyche. Northwest invasion's forcing many to make a run east, not knowing the situation."

The door echoed, a messenger drenched in blood held a letter, "-Duke Carrigan," he handed the envelope and ran. "Holy Church's insignia..."

"What?"

"You know what it is," Carrigan threw an exasperated exhale and unfolded the paper over the counter. Erano's curiously had him unconsciously leaning over the duke's shoulder. "-To pseudo-pope and his heretic followers, the true church of Lucifer decrees for Kreston to be made a vassal state of the Leon papacy. If thee wish to comply with our orders, we promise to reform Kreston's heretic ways and start a righteous way of following our lord and savior. If Duke Carrigan opposes our demand for surrender – our

troupes will launch an unbiased attack on the whole of Kreston. You're surrounded, and with help from the Wracian naval forces – there's no winning against our might. We expect great things from you, pope Carrigan II. May the word of our god guide thy heart true," signed, Bishop Greg.

"Demanding a surrender."

"An ultimatum," exhaled Erano, "-I'll mobilize the troupes."

"And I'll contact Central."

A colder winter rose over Oxshield, a month of painful battle and reports countless casualties piled onto Igna's desk. General Minerva, on orders from the king, was forced to stand down and not help Kreston. The only help provided was via scarce rations and limited ammunition. Eira's department had her hand full dealing with Krestonian court members demanding remuneration for Hidros' lack of involvement.

Tap, tap, "-I'm coming in," Minerva entered a secret laboratory built under Phantom's military fortress, "-this is where you've been, majesty."

Igna's slumber broke, and magazines toppled as he straightened from a couch, "-Athena, how long has it been?" he yawned, "-I heard much from the exploits."

"No," she threw her hands akimbo, "-Igna, enough is enough. We received a demand for surrender, Kreston will be lost if we don't act. Throwing the populous to the wolves, what kind of monarch does so..."

"The kind who wins," he stretched and turned her attention to a display, "-our secret weapon's ready. With this, the range of the air force increases and so greatens its accuracy. I heard about the revolt and how it was resolved the Haggard way."

"Majesty, drop the jests – Kreston needs help, Erano's proven his might time and time again, we should answer the call for reinforcement."

"I guess it's time. How are the new units doing?"

"They're ready, a month's training won't suffice."

"Tis good enough – long as they can hold a firefight, we don't need much. Tell Erano the good news, Hidros' sending twenty-thousand, distribution and allocation will be at thy own discretion," numbers flowed around his fingers, "-Athena, it's time to get serious," he said on her reaching the doorway.

"As you wish, majesty," the door clicked, leaving Igna to open a communication channel, *Connecting – Ela,*

"Majesty, long time no see."

"Yes, long time. Are the medical supplies ready?"

"Yeah, any time thee wish."

"Good, make preparations, they'll be dispatched alongside reinforcement."

Central's answer spread hope, Hidros finally decided to help, '-of course, we were going to help. Taking a month off to adjust and retrain personnel at the cost of a few thousand. Their sacrifices won't be in vain," lights toggled up a massive silo.

"She's ready for deployment," gasped a fatigued and smelly Marie, "-majesty, you're a slave driver..."

"To win, we had to sacrifice the lives of many to buy time. Their deaths won't be in vain. Here's the culmination of Hidros' know-how and our hard work – we're entering a new age. Be ready, Marie, for it's no message, tis an announcement."

Chapter 946: Sky conquest

'My answer,' a ray of light flickered, '-is to have dominion over the skies, an idea I had so many years ago, a secret project we were able to finish.'

"This is it?" interjected Marie, "-the project éclair haunted me about, the no-name flying thing..."

"Yeah, it's no ordinary thing, with the equipment it carries, we'll have a view over the world – reaching far and wide. Antenna and receptors can only carry the signals so far. Our technology current, as the world experiences is more than enough. Information transmitted by mana waves is able to carry across the continent without so much fading. Trouble arises when source and recipient are cut – leads to chaos, and the waves are then forced to bounce until death. This, on the other hand, has the ability to pinpoint and guide said waves."

"I get the process, what of the reason?"

"For world domination."

"You jest?"

"Yeah," he glanced through the protective glass onto an opposing room of researchers and renowned scholars. All under Phantom's payroll and employed at the university for cover, "-Cobalt Unit's shown consistency and grit."

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Launch in three minutes, glared an on the nose red signal. It blinked with mild screeches.

"Will it end the war?" inquired an excited Marie.

"The battle, yes," they circled to the command room, "-the war, not so much. Remember, we're fighting a holy crusade. Victory by theological means often comes to a single point – consistency. Doesn't matter if weapons, lives, or whatever is lost – long as the defending faction keeps strong to their beliefs, an answer will be reached sooner or later."

They arrived at a darkened room of many screens and many o' scholars. An open glass showed the object in question, a press dulled said light and invoked a blacker curtain. On second thoughts considering security, if something went wrong – all personnel would hastily meet the death reaper. A health and safety hazard overlooked on pride and honor pertaining to a magical barrier. Igna and Marie waited at the top of the descending array of tables and chairs – the countdown ticked into single digits.

A slow rumble ran through the floor, into the soles, and up the body. Marie glanced, “-this is exciting,” said a childish glee.

“Mark the date,” mumbled Igna, “-25th of May,” rumbled turned tremors – noise and light were immediately blocked to provide security. Zero, read the screen, tremors amplified into indistinguishable vibration, no up and down, for at the rate it shook, one could but feel the weight and speed.

“Pardon?”

“Don’t worry,” he pushed against the wall and moved to a command desk, “-good news people,” he said into a local microphone, “-we have taken off.” Screen flickered to a camera following the projectile, a trail of pure white pulled into the skies.

“A reverse shooting star,” commented one of the newer recruits.

In a time of chaos and mistrust, Igna achieved a goal set long ago, to monopolize the sky. Calculations ran in tandem, checks and cross checks, real fight just began and at the helm, dawning a headset as his helmet. Wherein people did complex mathematical calculations using the sister system, he sat in his chair and gave the answers on top of his head, all of which were accurate to the designated decimal point.

“What kind of man is he,” inquired one, a sterner gray-haired gentleman sat further up, “-Marie?”

“Our king,” she replied, keeping a familiar childish glee, “-why do you ask?”

“I don’t know,” he looked and pressed the forehead, “-it amazes me how a young man has such intellect. I’d label him a genius if I had the right...”

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“Doctor Ain, don’t sell yourself too short,” she smiled, “-without your expertise, many advancements in the astronomical field wouldn’t have been possible.”

“No need for compliments,” he added modestly, “-an old man knows his limits far too well to be discouraged. Today’s an event the world should celebrate, we’re the first nation to send a man-made craft into space, we’ve conquered the skies. Still, I can’t help but feel lost and underwhelmed. War,” he shook his head, “-illogical thinking leads to massacre and unnecessary loss.”

Midnight pushed the 25th into the 26th. Invisible lights in the human spectrum glared on stationed marksmen’s scope. An order immediately hammered against Erano’s listless night, “a company of enemy units spotted at Sibling’ Range,” said the urgent call. Palms against the desk, Erano soon found himself jogging through the colder night – barely able to keep a steady footing on accounts of the frozen walkways.

“Attention,” he entered his unit’s quarters, “-a company’s been spotted. To arms everyone, those ready for a fight – make way north and hold, we’re defending, not attacking. Settle yourself, men, for we’re facing an invasion.” Central ordered Erano’s troupes to march for Kreston’s capital. Remaining 3400 men separated, allowing only 200, including the Erano, to remain. Rest was placed under the duke’s command, albeit until reinforcement arrived from Oxshield.

Muffles snaps landed, garnering an immediate reaction of cover fire. Siege of Port Smith began, bullets were sparsely fired, ammunition for Kreston and cover for Dorchester, neither wanted to give in to a disadvantage. Before taking the town – Dorchester had to capture the only path viable for movement, straying off the path meant certain death, as for said path, Erano prepared with forward facing defenses.

“Good luck,” prayed the pope before a relic of priceless worth, “-Erano, may the Lord protect thee in battle.”

Location, somewhere inside the unexplored southwestern region of Oxshield – a land permeated by valleys, forests, rivers, and unexplored territory off limits to the public, lies a military training facility. The area’s reclusiveness and always familiar-looking nature made it the best suitable location for Phantom’s subsidiary, Sotepios.

“Majesty,” saluted a decorated officer, “-it’s ready.”

“Good,” he said dressed in a military outfit, ‘-the air force’s strength comes from man and machine, Midas and Sotepios.’

Igna soon found himself on a metallic grate overlooking a clean hangar of many pilots, “-Graduates of Sotepios, cadets, veteran pilots, I thank you all for being present in our kingdom’s time of need. For the past month, in conjecture with Colonel Hems, training and formation have been tough. The implementation of newer, faster, and deadlier jets has increased our ability to strike fast and hard. No matter how fast or deadly our forces are, without eyes in the sky, there’s no point in sending our pilots into potential death. My responsibility as General of the Airforce is to lead my men, I won’t stand for pointless deaths. It’s my belief people have the ability to do what they wish and strive toward. Persistence, discipline, and loyalty are fundamentals told of in studies and training, easier spoken than done, and most of all, applied. Stories of war heroes, seemingly superhuman entities abled to defy death themselves and face their foe head-on have been sung for long. Time’s nigh for a new chapter to be written. Nothing’s a guarantee, and I won’t make false promises,” he scanned the room with a cold rivaling winter, “-tools, knowledge, and support. Midas has provided the technology and Sotepios with the knowledge and training. Rest, comrade, is in thy hands,” he stepped away, leaving room for Hems, a well-built man of little to no hair took center stage, “-it’s been a while,” he said, “-time has come to prove your worth. Be at the ready for deployment – the nature of our operations will range from attack to support. There’s a reason why the kingdom invested greatly in conquering the air, prove to his majesty and the kingdom that we’re their rightful protectors.”

“YES SIR!”

Corridor echoed by loud steps, “-Hems, have them ready to deploy paratroopers. Coordinate with General Minerva, time’s come to end the battle.” They exited to a massive open space lined with hangars and runway strips, “-I’ll leave the rest in your hand,” he climbed into an AFR-controlled jet and left, saluting Hems on his way out.

“Right, how’s the satellite?”

"In geostationary orbit, I don't believe it," cried the intercoms, "-we asked for a bird's eyes view and got one better. Systems are operational, we can intercept communication and control the flow just by saying the word. Who designed the internal components?"

"Your's truly," he smiled, "-don't fret over details, how's the battle looking?"

"Neutral, Dorchester's stuck on the mountain, a blizzard seems to have grasped the mount. Aima forest's crawling with enemies. Managed to locate a forward base of operations. It looks to me like the whole invasion of Kreston was a ploy," the interface widened, "-Alpha's reinforcement is on its way. Once Smith is captured, it'll take a few hours for them to arrive – what should we do?"

"What else, send the bombing squad, we'll test the XF-X20, heir to the XF-23."

Day rose, and the siege of port Smith amplified in scale. Dorchester's forces, using destructive means of artillery, forced Erano's retreat. Concurrently – preparations to take the capital were completed, before any warning was issued, Dorchester's forces rushed and caught the castle off-guard, taking the town hostage, and stationed forces were forced to surrender.

Bishop Greg and viscount Olian's operations were very successful – Kreston's capital and the port were basically under their command. Central's reinforcement arrived late; such was the collective mindset.

"To victory," cheered the bishop.

"To victory," returned Olian with women at his beckon call, "-Kreston was such an easy target. Never realized we had won the battle before the invasion even started."

Sound of engine played, '-too bad for them, they don't know who they're up against,' opposite sat leader of the Black Unit, a familiar face, Thempa and his fellow comrade, Kendy of the subjugation squad 05.

"Ready to drop," said an attendant – the fuselage opened to the passing senary of Aina forest, "-GO, GO, GO!"

Kreston's capital; hidden amidst prisoners were members of the Sabbath Clan. Signals were exchanged, and holy soldiers held strong, making rounds and suppressing revolt. Blink and done, guards assassinated – weapons returned to Erano's captured unit, everyone stormed the gate, shooting and killing on sight. The battle for the capital resumed anew, "-we're going to die," cried one, "-we escape and their larger force will wait to kill."

"No," said a nightwalker, "-everything's been planned," he said, rushing for the light at the tunnel. They barged into fresh air and gasped.

"Hello," said Saniata holding a rifle to the leader's head, "-glad the escape worked."

"We surrender!" signaled the officer, reversing the roles.

Black hair and grey pupils galloped through town, "-who was that?"

"I don't know..."

Erano caught a glimpse, “-general?” she darted past, followed by soldiers rearing to fight. Gunfire rampantly sang the song of death, “-Aegis shield, protect my comrade and freeze my enemies,” a golden ray of light sparked the cold winter scape.

“REPORT!” cried a retainer, barging into alcohol filled room, “-VISCOUNT OLIAN, BISHOP GREG...”

“WHAT IS IT?” narrowed a murderous Olian, “-ruining my fun...” he stabbed a nearby apple and ran to choke the man, “-I SAID NO VISITORS.”

The chubby bishop rose his snot-filled nose from the breast of a defiled, beaten, and bruised demi human girl, “-let the man speak,” he wiped his drool.

Cough, cough, “-we’re under attack.”

“Were under attack,” resounded a darker voice, Igna moved into frame, latter being the doorway, “-a measly hundred guards for protection, I must be dreaming.” Thempa scurried and whispered, “-all enemies have been neutralized. We’ve captured sons and daughters of nobles.” The king nodded and entered.

“King of Hidros,” glared the Viscount, “-long time no see, majesty.”

“Long time no see, traitor.”

“Why are you here?”

“To deliver this,” he handed a letter.

“This is...”

“The ultimatum. Please, have a read, I’m proud of the prose.”

After the passage signed by the bishop, fresh ink read the following, ‘-go fuck yourself,’ signed, Igna Haggard. Olian dropped; “-the battle is over,” he murmured, “-Kreston’s won.”

“VISCOUNT!” cried the bishop, “-what’s the meaning of this, what about our arrangement, what of the great-”

Snap, a bullet dropped the chubby fellow, “-so much for following the righteous path.”

Chapter 947: Strike

“Kindly take the oaf away,” motioned Igna, “-Viscount Olian, let’s have a little chat,” said an outwardly ominous side-grin, “-take the demi girl and treat her with care,” he faced the guards, “-goes for the other captive.”

“Yes sir,” they saluted and stormed in tandem, steps crashed in thunderous roars, castle Gris was located behind a valley of dunes and overreaching nothingness, following said dunes one would arrive at Dorchester’s less than amiable forestry that gave onto the Kreston’s Aina forest. A resolution was reached in mere minutes. Prisoners and slaves were unshackled and pushed towards a make-shift military camp. Guards once in power had their hands tied and thrown into the dungeon. Goes without saying, captured nobles and high-ranking officials fetched quite the price – a responsibility Thempa graciously accepted.

Suffocating silence, the likes where one's own conscience and guilt rages, defiling a moment's rest and peace. Doubt and fear, the thought of what was to become of the future. 'How did we lose...' he wondered, facing the cold ground where once laid the bishop's body, 'my plan, my foresight, our advantage... how could we have lost?' Similar to a hunter prowling its prey, Igna made subtle yet impactful eye contact. The way in which he walked and observed the room showed deeply on Olian's sweaty forehead.

"Now," the silence cracked, a notification blinked, "-you must be wondering how we won?"

"Yeah," gulped the viscount, "-how could a weak Kreston fight, even with Oxshield's help, our forces far outnumber yours."

"Where should I start?" a vacant desk proved adequate. Igna weighed against the ledge, lit a cigarette, and puffed, following the smoke rise into nothingness, "-I admit, stratagems used to push and harass Kreston's borders were well formulated. Never once did thee allow for the truth to escape – crossing the lagoon under the darkness, stacking soldiers at the north in preparation for an invasion of Port Smith. It's all well and good, however, you lost the moment Brigadier General Erano entered the battlefield. Yes, most of his men have perished, Kreston's suffered and we were basically on the verge of collapse. Fortunately, when news of the monster plague reached our ears I understood. For the months a massive game of cat and mouse played, Erano against Dorchester's advanced force, all seemed pointless and trivial until the appearance of a physician at Port Smith. The populous was happy to have someone trained in the medical field, illness and injuries are rampant. Missiles, constant attack on Rotherham. The intent of using biological warfare. It was like attacking a person's eyes, latter reflectively block, allowing the attacker to plan their next move. Chronologically speaking, the tale's all over the place, however, it shouldn't matter, ay, viscount. Infiltrating our lab, staging a terrorist attack – too bad I was present. Should really keep the mouth of the employed shut. Never mind intrigue within Oxshield, let us return to Port Smith and Aina forest, more specifically, your ace in the whole – occupation of Sibling range. During the non-aggression period, Dorchester had a field day plotting the next move, a direct line into the enemy line, otherwise, our back. When battle erupted for the second time – Erano was fooled and forced into retreat, albeit fighting to keep a level ground. It would be a tumultuous month for Kreston – Central ordered a restriction on reinforcement and limited the supplies. And let me guess, the intel was leaked," he checked Olian's flushed visage, "-so much so you knew exactly as to the happenings of our forces. Preparations ought to be made," he puffed, "-didn't realize winter would be upon us so soon, did you?"

Olian's averted crossing gaze, opting to stare behind the king, "-moving silently meant relinquishing supply – inadequately equipped fighters are but needless weight. There's a reason why Sibling high is feared. No matter, Dorchester's persistence led to great strides. For that, I'm ever so grateful – it lit a fire underneath my comrades. Siege of Port Smith, another decoy. By the time forces could invade, you gathered most of thy army and rushed Kreston's capital, thinking Arda's naval army would easily conquer the port. Too bad for it all culminated into nigh – Arda's fleet has been sunk. Port Smith's under our control, General Minerva's probably cutting her way up the mountain, thrusting your men's lifeless bodies."

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“Capital,” he interjected, “-there’s at least thirty thousand men stationed, I doubt an equal or greater force could have returned the favor.”

“Oh, the capital was bound for capture,” he said nonchalantly, “-why, did you think Kreston’s towns and villages hold value?” cold eyes settled amidst cigarette smoke, “-no they don’t, Kreston fought for their lives, I simply watched and waited for the appropriate time to strike. I don’t care about the lives lost, they fought valiantly.”

“Still,” Olian insisted, “-how could we lose?”

“Townfolk and stationed guards are trained assassins and rogues, masters of the killing arts. We had agreed on sacrificing the capital for a quick victory, never imagined it working so effectively. Staged a coup, freed the captured soldiers who willingly surrendered, and had them attack from inside. Once the battle restarted, twenty-five thousand infantry surrounded the capital and attacked from the outside, trapping your men in a crossfire. The leader surrendered the moment the battle began. As for us, well, we used paratroopers and voila, the conquest of castle Aien. Tis, dear o’ traitor, is how one wins against overwhelming odds.”

“ARE YOU MAD? Proclaiming victory is an insult in the face of the lives lost. Do you have no shame, king?” He vanished from the desk and seamlessly reappeared before Olian,

“No matter the path I take, no matter the lives lost, I will win the damned war. Believe me when I say this, viscount – the devil has yet to take the battlefield. On the day I’m forced to march for the sake of my kingdom, I swear, I will lay ruin everything thy master holds dear,” he pressed the cigarette against Olian’s forehead, forcing squirms, cries, and beg for mercy.

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“Majesty,” arrived a soldier, “-is something the matter?”

“No,” he casually rose from the defeated viscount, “-take him away.”

Blood dripped. Minerva’s rigid expression turned, ‘-I’ve done it,’ a path of lifeless corpses littered the pathway: petrified, impaled, or beheaded, the goddess of war and wisdom shook her sword, making a curve of red along the rocky ground. Intimidating growls of fighting metal beasts circled and hovered, “-lady Minerva,” said soldiers, “-the town’s cleared. We’ve begun treating the wounded and healing the afflicted, what are your orders?”

“Take half of the men and march toward the capital.”

June’s colder regard washed over Hidros, from the pretty beaches of Plaustan to the higher peaks of Winterpar, the cold was upon the continent. Ambassador from the revolutionist faction of Dorchester arrived for peace talks, Queen Eia made the visit personally. Rosespire’s castle cordially welcomed the guests as for the populous, radio, television, and newspapers voiced much of their discontent. A deadlock was reached, neither faction could oppose the other, and the further battle would only be detrimental.

Piers Riverty waited patiently for a blimp in the dull somber sky. Igna threw glances outside the castle towards vague directions of the private airfield, “-majesty,” hailed éclair, “-am I late?” he asked, entering Queen Gallienne’s once prized study, a library that but increased over the years.

“No,” he closed the curtains and made for a cozy wooden staircase, “-I see the prime minister’s in a great mood.”

“You bet I am,” he laughed, “-We got one over those bastards.”

“Language,” fired from a distance, two silhouettes sidestepped from the corridor’s overwhelming shadow.

“Ela and Minerva, I’m pleasantly surprised,” back on firm ground, “-the outfits do shave away years”

“Majesty, is it that hard to give a compliment,” said strained smiles.

“I jest,” he rose a hand in surrender, “-please don’t take my head, ladies,” casualness slowed to a stop on receiving a notification, éclair firmed his expression.

“Ambassadors landed,” he said, “-éclair, Minerva, Ela, today’s talk will either set the pace for a non-aggression pact of forge ahead into full-blow war, the latter we must prevent.”

“Pope Carrigan’s legitimized his claim as the puritan church of Kreston.”

“All the better,” added Igna, “-it’s time for a party,” the castle shone a thousand flames, corridors adorned with luxury, halls proudly carried Hidros’s heritage – armors, weapons, and grimoires of fabled heroes, including Staxius Haggard, Tempest Haggard, Riverty royal family, sword saint of Oxshield, Raulf Serlo, now a retired man, just to name a few. For the occasion, Igna brought his private art collection painted by the likes of Athena, Jean Frank, Calious Bagard, and Julia Dahli, a simple piece by either three could fetch in the range of a hundred thousand and million. The Grimoire of Youth and the Necrolaon by Kieoa, rare books sought by scholars the world over also hosted in the King’s inventory. Not to forget the wealth of jewelry and rare gems. Arrival of said collection sent ripples through the community, and art lovers from the world over rushed to catch glimpses.

‘This,’ he moved about the collection, a massive hall filled with trinkets and objects of worth, ‘-Aceline’s microphone and the enchanted guitar,’ stored in a glass cage, ‘-the world had to set us apart,’ he sighed, ‘-I wonder what if we stuck together and grew as a couple. What if Gallienne never pushed the throne on me, what if the divine kept to themselves. What would my life have been if I were still Igna Lyoko, a boy ridden with amnesia, the path of cooking, without it I’d have never known my true identity. I’d have remained a side character watching as the world built and crumbled.’

“Very decadent,” silky black hair reflected against a gemstone, “-the Haggard’s are very wealthy,” heels clapped against the marble floor, a beautiful dame came to a stop at his side, “-my microphone and guitar.”

“Aceline?”

“Hey,” she set her gaze firmly on his lips, nose, then pupils, “-been a while.”

“My, I’m speechless, quite the aura, Aceline.”

“I was blessed by the Goddess of Arcana,” her gaze shifted to the microphone, “-I admit, seeing my items locked in a glass box is weird.”

“Tell me about it,” he sighed heavily, “-I’m glad to see you, Aceline.”

She reached and grabbed his collar, “-Igna, look at me when you say it.”

“I can’t,” he tapped her wrist, “-I feel guilty. Selfishly brought thee to life, and selfishly abandoned our relationship to honor a promise of another woman. Can’t stand to look you straight. Funny how I don’t feel anything for atrocity I’ve caused to others, when it comes to you, well, I don’t know, I’m just me.”

She wrapped around his arm and pulled, “-I know,” she smiled, leaning her head against his arms, “-I know you’re just you, Igna, a whimsical person by nature, a wanderer.”

“There you are,” interjected another, “-Aceline, we need to go,” panted Scott, “-Igna, you’re here too?”

“It is my castle,” he said in jest, “-it was great seeing you, Aceline, until we meet again.”

Thud, Scott’s chatter faded, the sound of her heartbeat overwhelmed the inside, ‘-Igna, you haven’t changed a bit. Hidros praises the accomplishment, the sacrifice, and leadership – no one understands what’s inside, they don’t know the real Igna, someone genuine and caring.’

“Aceline,” Scott snapped above her nose, “-wake up, we have work to do.”

Physically inferior airplanes braced the airstrip, Piers Riverty waited at the forefront of a row of suited guards, “-staring won’t make her come faster,” added Saniata lounging over the car bonnet. “-Old man Piers, sure about this?”

“Yeah,” said the gray-haired prince-consort, “-Eia’s my daughter, I know she’s done the worst possible thing for the kingdom, still, as a father, I can’t refute my own blood.”

“Be like pops more,” she sprung to a stand.

“What does that mean?” he inquired skeptically.

“Be affirmative,” she stretched, “-pops not afraid to say when he’s wrong. I mean, he barely visits us and has a way of forgetting people’s affection – still, he’ll never abandon someone without repaying their kindness. What I’m saying is don’t be afraid, face her head on, that’s your right as her father.”

Chapter 948: ‘May she rest in peace.’

A parade no less worthy of an emperor swam across the city streets. Procession compromised of soldiers, military personnel, flying squads, and a show of might carried tremors. Onlookers watched through skeptic glasses, the latter pointed to a single foe, Queen Eia. Vested in military uniform, the march arrived at the shore, passing the big castle gates and entered the inner-castle limits. “-Changed,” she commented, “-look, father, the area’s changed.”

Piers currently sat beside his daughter – flushed many lines of thought, eventually arriving at the elephant in the room, ‘-why the sudden personality change?’ It began a few hours ago, after Saniata gave her cold, objective view in an attempt of soothing the prince, she accidentally opened the floodgates to suppressed emotions.

Eia landed, her plane taxied into where the escort waited, stairway rolled to the side and opened with a bellowing humph. Out exited the ambassador and a few attendants dressed in formal attire. A harsh mien laid the few seconds after she exited, perhaps the light catching her eye or the sun’s sneaky reflection game. She stood before them dressed in Dorchestrian gray.

'Prince consort is anxious,' observed Saniata, '-fingers are a good tell.'

Father and daughter stood face to face, allowing the tide to settle, "-long time no see, father," she threw a curveball and immediately locked around Piers' back. He rapidly rose his hand in warning at the guards, many of which rose their guns.

"She's unarmed," said a bodyguard, "-here I was under the impression it was an escort."

"Foolish are those willing to trust in another's faith," added Saniata, "-gather round people," she drew a midair circle with a twirl of the index, "-Lady Eia is an important guest in today's talks. Let us show them Hidrosian courtesy."

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'How could she have hugged so brazenly,' still scenery swapped for the inner castle, '-I don't understand, we're enemies, told her plenty of times, never listens.'

Eia was first onto firm ground, throwing an observant gaze, "-populous sure hates my guts."

"Unfortunately, the more rebellious kind were excused," added Saniata cynically, almost as if cutting any foothold the lady could muster.

"I do hope the welcoming ceremony's far more generous," she sneered, returning Saniata's remarks tenfold.

A line of retainers waited on the steps; carpet rolled in honor of the ambassadors.

'Castle's lively,' she blinked, entering the renovated office area. Workers carried on their daily duties, ignoring her presence and focusing on their jobs – only part of the castle entertained said occasion. No hint of genuine welcomeness, a steady aura of uneasiness climbed her feet to her shoulders, '-so prosperous and intimidating.'

"Welcome to our castle," greeted éclair, "-honorable ambassador, if you'd please accompany me," escort halted at the start of another corridor – Saniata broke off the march and scurried elsewhere.

"Prime minister," she paused, "-is my bodyguard free to participate?"

"Who says no," he smiled, "-we welcome observers."

Duo hung in Eclair's shadow, opting for whispers and giggles, "-never expected them to be so rich."

"Neither did I," she replied, "-such a lavish ceremony. Living out in Dorchester proves harsh on a person's sense of value – I miss the castle life..."

Without warning, éclair arrived at the start of the throne room – knights in black armor pushed heaven's gate. Chandelier, lavishly dressed guests, fetchingly expensive decorations, a melodic symphony led by Syndra Lordon and her orchestra, headed by Aceline, Lizzie, and Celina to name a few.

"Amazing," escaped her lips, "-how can they afford such luxury?"

“Breaking the Alrosian Alliance had perks,” said éclair slyly, “-remunerations were discussed under the table. Besides,” he looked onto the king’s entourage, “-the Haggard name is entrenched, no shaking the royal family’s abundant wealth.”

‘Entrenched,’ she narrowed, ‘-the wealth is rightfully mine. Don’t worry, Hidros, when my son takes his place as the legitimate king, I’ll live a life of endless fortune. Whatever the world says, it all belongs to me, I care not for excuses, tis my birth right.’

“Sister,” said a solemn kempt personage, “-I see the travels weren’t hard.”

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“Empress Eira?” her mouth widened, “-pardon, I was out of line. It’s a pleasure to see you again, sister.”

“I wish I could say the pleasure is mine,” she blatantly showed discontent, leaned into Igna’s ears, whispered, faced éclair, curtsied, and carried on her merry way.

“Always the charmer isn’t she,” added a nervous chuckle.

“I should rectify a misunderstanding, Lady Eira is the Countess of Elony. Seems another entourage wishes for my participation, if you’d excuse me, my king,” bowed éclair, “-I shall be back shortly.”

Ela and Minerva kept a certain distance; entertaining idle chatter with focus on the coming exchange, “-Queen Eia,” he narrowed, “-long time, yes?”

“King Igna,” she curtsied, “-with all due respect, I certainly didn’t wish for my arrival to be made such an auspicious celebration.”

A shuffle from Ela missed the ambassador’s attention, Minerva forcibly tugged onto Ela’s hand, “-laugh internally,” said she through gritted teeth, “-don’t want to ruin the reunion.”

“Can’t help it,” she turned her lips inward and strained, “-it’s too funny.”

Over the distance, Igna calmly explained, “-ambassador, I’m sorry to say, today’s celebration is in honor of the brave fighters who live to tell the tale. Tis also an occasion to mourn the death with smiles and respect – honoring brave men is one of the smaller pleasures I get to host in my position. I dare say, peace talks are secondary. Anyway, Eia, I hope you find the celebrations to your liking, I doubt Dorchester has the means to entertain such lavish ornaments,” he strode to her ear and whispered, “-yes, I’m showing off,” he winked, “-enjoy the party, we’ll speak formally when it’s over.”

A bitter taste filled her palette and nostrils, ire-filled leer cut short, “-drink’s madame?” interjected a beautifully dressed waiter – handsome and well defined, truly a gentleman fit for the entertainment world. A simple smile, the leer lowered, her strained posture eased, “-thank you,” she sipped and scanned, ‘-where’s Riaz.’ Equally, if not more handsome men and women roamed the halls – beauty be a subjective prospect quickly exited the preverbal window, retainers in attendant were handsome, no ifs or buts about it, they truly were epitome of new-age set standards. Pretty faces at her beckon call – smooth music, the constant flow of beverage, there was no beating said atmosphere, Eia was soon enchanted, carried by the swing of the melody to exchange pleasantries, making herself comfortable, opening her guarded persona.

Gulp, three fingers of whiskey down in a single drop, “-another,” ordered Igna, next room held a somewhat reserved area entertaining gambling, drinking, and the usual under-the-table affairs of the underworld.

“Hello pops,” waved Saniata hopping onto an empty right stool.

“Pops,” added Vanesa climbing the empty left.

“What are you girls doing here?” he leaned.

“Came to pay a visit,” said Saniata, “-was hoping to get some drinks too...”

“How old are you?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged, “-we drink back home, taught by iron-clad stomach Miira and the voluptuous Lilith.”

He watched skeptically, “-fine.”

“Pops,” tugged Vanesa, “-can I have some too?”

“Why not,” he smiled, summoned an empty basket that soon filled with alcohol.

“Thanks for the drinks,” waved an unsteady Saniata, “-we’ll be back,” she turned the corner, met with other noble young adults of their age, and scurried into the castle’s inner confine.

“Was that wise?” inquired Starix who also hailed the bartender, “-majesty, why the party, imagine my surprise when I returned to a glamorous castle.”

“Come on now, Strategist, have a gander.”

“Let me see,” beer in hand, “-morale.”

“Correct,” they cheered, “-a show of strength and relief at the top eases the mind. If we take breaks – subordinates won’t feel threatened to relax. Hard work and dedication, we’re blessed to have such loyal followers. About the matter, is it settled?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “-Alta and I have established a stable line of communication with the vampiric clans. They’re willing to join the council as mediators of peace.”

“Another day, another ally,” he rose yet another glass, “-speaking of Alta, where’s she?”

“Glenda,” he returned, “-handling her duties as Stewardess.”

“Right,” they sipped, “-she’s amazing, isn’t she.”

“The lass was a member of the hero’s party. You sure knocking back this many drinks is smart?”

“Don’t worry,” he stopped at the seventh’ glass, “-trusty o’ drinks are men’s best friend.”

“Dogs?”

“No, you idiot,” he tapped Starix’s head casually, “-time’s nigh.”

Clockwork, impeccable timing, “-majesty,” said maids, “-we’re ready to proceed with the ceremony.”

“Has the duke arrived?”

“Yes.”

“So be it,” Igna rose, “-time for the game to begin.”

Backdoor deals, under the table agreements – romantic endeavors hidden inside castle gates, the intrigue of head exploding proportions. Kingdoms, by a rule, never hosted celebrations without an agenda in mind – many of the invitees held their own greedy means to attain. Music slowed to decibels over silence, unnoticeably swayed – King Igna was announced to the crowd with the aid of a thunderous voice. He sat, allowing for éclair, Ela, Eira, and Minerva to take center stage.

“On behalf of the kingdom,” said éclair, “-we’re grateful for the efforts and grit showed in war. Worry not, the party shall continue,” he smiled, garnering a few giggles from tipsy bystanders, “-in honor of the collective military accomplishment, General Minerva would like to speak a few words.” A dense aura stormed her stance. Resemblance could be drawn to Igna’s equally terrifying presence. “-Warriors,” she thundered, “-the battle of Kreston was hard fought, many allies were lost. We mourn their deaths and respect their wishes – their tags forever chained with ours,” her beautifully stern regard entranced the room, “-today’s an auspicious day, for tis the day we stand firm and face the world. Hidros shan’t be bested, we shan’t lose – our devotion and your loyalty, my comrades, are the most precious things to the future of our kingdom. Small as we are compared to the wider world, our heart is larger. Dorchester showed their hands and proved their worth, veering the ugly head of discrimination. We’re a proud multi-racial nation, fair-skinned, dark-skinned, long tail, small tail, scaled or nay – we’re the same at heart.”

Igna took the stage, “-as general Minerva said, we’re one. In honor of the brave fighters, let’s observe a minute of silence.”

Fighters stood with hands on their chest, and minute faded, “-let the ceremony begin,” added éclair. Distinguished fighters were promoted, given medals, and congratulated personally by the king. For his action, Brigadier General Erano was awarded the highest honors – fighting a battle of attrition, protecting his men, and joining the front lines. The retelling of the countless accomplishments would but make short of what was seen firsthand. In all, the ceremony lasted three hours. éclair ended the last on the agenda and gave the floor to his majesty.

“Comrades,” he bellowed, “-the war isn’t won. Countless skirmishes lay in our path to peace. For fighting to cease, one must kill – the concept is absurd. We’d love to return home to our families, alas, what comes next is far worse. We pride ourselves as a nation birthed from a simple motto, survival of the fittest. Time’s nigh for reversion to the olden ways – take up arms, take up swords, train, do what is must, if thee wish to fight, come join us. Your kingdom needs you,” he said directly into the live camera, “-may the celebrations continue,” the feed ended with a reporter summarizing the event. Music played anew; the atmosphere lessened into celebrations. Distinguished warriors made the attraction of palace flowers.

“Eia’s cauldron should be boiling.”

Incoming Message – Starix, “-meet me at the balcony,” it read.

‘Quite informal,’ he dodged the crowds and threw acknowledging glances at éclair and other ministers.

Starix hung over the balustrade, “-majesty,” he said noticing the footsteps, “-my apologies for the urgent summons.”

“Don’t worry,” he joined Starix’s enamored look at the orchard, “-what’s caught thy fancy?”

“Look,” giggled Starix, “-Queen Eia’s in love,” he pointed, “-majesty, was this the reason for the decadent celebrations?”

“Whatever do you mean?” he lit a cigarette, “-she found herself attracted to one of the incubuses,” a jovial puff escaped, “-nothing beats blackmail in a negotiation. Who’s recording the romance?”

“Look carefully.”

“Right,” he noticed a massive camera, “-little on the obvious side.”

Starix drew the cross of death, “-may she rest in peace.”

Chapter 949: Peace talks?

“Not very nice, wishing death upon an esteemed guest.”

“Please, there’s no way his majesty thinks of such trivial matter.”

“Who’s to say,” he shrugged, “-I’m an admirer of love.”

“Right,” Starix hung on the ‘ght,’ part, throwing suggestively annoyed looks at the rather odd couple, “-wait, where are they?”

“Vanished behind the line of trees there,” pointed his majesty, “-let the broth simmer,” he spun, “-I’ll be inside. Send for a maid once enough material is gathered, also,” he smirked over his shoulder, “-the gardener’s shed should be a great fit.”

There was no describing the alluring feeling of a maiden’s heart – Eia felt as if she were back in her prime, ‘-I’m free to love, free to choose, and free to entertain,’ a manly grip held her by the waist and placed her upon a ledge.

“We shouldn’t,” her flushed cheeks and inviting gaze countered a pitiful attempt at deniability.

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“Allow me,” returned a soothing exhale, “-you’ve suffered a lot, the worlds against you, everyone’s an enemy. You should enjoy what the world has to offer, allow me to show thee the way to Elysium,” he reached underneath her dress, she gasped childishly, “-majesty,” he softly laid her against the table and moved into her legs, “-peer into my eyes,” he caressed her cheeks, “-and relish the thought of youth.”

Affairs at the upper echelon weren’t unheard of. Most were palace whispers, idle chatter of bored maids. In her case, promenading couples stayed clear of the noisy shed, moans, and screams muffled despite the confined and secluded area.

“What you up to?” a friendly tap startled Starix.

“My,” he refocused, “-lady Minerva, how’s it going.”

"How's it going?" her arms crossed, "-since when does the strategist use how's it going?"

"Ah," he sighed, "-no use hiding the truth," he held out an earpiece, "-have a listen."

The virtuous goddess frowned, raising an eyebrow, "-what is that?"

"A little something called passion of the day."

"Right..."

"I regret it," the head shook, "-regret it when I said it. Please forget that comment."

"Tell me," she kept her composure, "-why the sudden interest in carnal desires?"

"Didn't thee notice the voice?"

"As if I'm one to listen. Who is it?"

"Ambassador," he laughed, "-in her attender's own word, 'relish the thought of youth.'

"Certainly, I mean, standards pretty low for her to fall for such a blatant ruse."

"Asmodeus's incubuses are all over the castle. Their charms are irresistible."

"I'd say," her interest wavered, "-send someone to fetch her, we're ready for negotiations," an unimpressed Athena left the 'youthful,' balcony in direction of the washroom. 'Blackmail before parole, have an advantage over the other. How will Igna use the ace I wonder?'

Time passed and an unkempt Eia barged from the shed and fell onto a flowerbed, '-what the hell?' she gasped for air, heart raced beyond control, her legs trembled, pins and needles rippled and a neatly dressed fellow leaned to offer a hand, "-my lady, Eia, are you well?"

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"Yeah, I think I can manage," she accepted his hand coyly, "-you've awakened feelings I thought I'd lost, just who are you?"

"My name's Ishta, a humble worker in service of his majesty. Now, my lady, our exchange, I rather it be kept a secret," he whispered, "-we don't want rumors to spread, do we?"

"Rumors?" she slammed her hand against the shed, boxing the courteous butler, "-who cares," her cheeks flushed, "-Ishta," she grabbed and pulled his tie, having their lips millimeters from contact, "-I want another round."

"My," he closed the gap deeper, "-someone's raring for an adventure."

"Let me lead this time," she sadistically bit her lips and pulled the incubus.

Starix send a report to a dull negotiation room, where on one side sat Igna and the four ministers and on the other, Riaz, Eia's bodyguard, and a small party of statesmen. "My apologies," Riaz broke the ice, "-my ladyship is usually very punctual. I should go find her."

"No need," interjected Igna, "-why don't we start the preliminary talks. No decision will be made – not a bad idea to get the formalities out of the way." Forced to accept the king's generosity, Riaz nodded, '-my

lady, you've put us in a tough position. Making a king wait is a worse offense. Look at the glaring attendants – if it had been in Dorchester, the ambassador's head would be on the floor by now.'

Footsteps shattered the silence, Riaz's opportunistic mien dropped, seeing a maid opposed to her ladyship. A note arrived at his desk, "-majesty, it's from Starix," she whispered, "-Queen Eia seems preoccupied."

"Understood," he replied, "-drop the flushed expression, a lady mustn't look so excited." She covered her mouth, made a half-attempt at a bow, and left, "-what you say to her?" soon whispered from éclair's cautious stance.

The letter read, "-to my dear master – we've captured all of Queen Eia's indiscretion. At the risk of looking suspicious, the footage will be edited to seem like security footage. Creating a narrative is best done at the hand of professionals, but we can't employ them, therefore, I'll take the responsibility of watching the film and sending compromising pictures. Suggestive hints should suffice for smooth negotiation,' a snap burned the note in a white puff, "-shall we begin?" he looked at éclair, who signaled assisting personnel. Both sides shared expectations of what was to come of the peace talks.

"On behalf of the Holy Church of Lucifer – lady Eia will be representing the church. Her word is to be viewed by the same standards of the late pope Greg," cautioned Riaz. Both sides went back and forth, allowing the attendants to speak their minds, debating and coming to their own conclusion. A deadlock meant neither side had the upper hand – the most likely scenario as it presented itself was mutual peace and heightened military movement.

'We control Castle Gris, a strategic location for Dorchester. Latter control the archipelago,' passed éclair and Minerva's mind, '-we have at least thirty thousand men captive including prince and princesses. We fought to the bitter end – not allowing a single fighter to be caught by the enemy.'

'Our inventory's only worth as much as they're willing to pay,' observed Minerva, '-what's thy move, Dorchester.'

Minutes turned an hour and a half – maids brought teas and snacks, a kick in Riaz' face. Peace talks turned picnic. Oxshield kindly kept a respectful stance – smilingly courteously yet emptily at their opponents.

Click, the handle moved, Riaz turned with low expectation, "-my apologies," said an exhausted representative, her arrival calcified the room. Everyone wore their best poker face, all except Eia – delirium of her satisfied exchange was read and smelt. Riaz sheathed his disappointment, "-my ladyship is present, shall we start the nego-"

"No," exclaimed Igna, Riaz's heart leaped, '-we're done...' bounced within the cranium, endless possibilities of the nature of their punishment ruined what little confidence was held. "-let's have a recess. Lady Eia seems a little out of her usual self. Please, take the time needed to get her under control," without question, Igna's tone made certain for them to understand he held no respect, "-let's rejoin in a couple of minutes." King and his ministers left on a high note, side-glancing a confused Eia.

"What's with them?" the distant sound of the closing door announced privacy, "-I made it a few minutes late is all, what's the big idea?"

“MY LADY!” he sprang to a harsh stand, “-do you have any idea how long the king’s been waiting for us. Wasting time is the worse offense a leader can do to another, my lady, please tell me it was in reason.”

“Is youth a good enough reason?” she winked.

“Youth?” speechless looks ended at his feet; attendants were beyond appalled, “-what does that even mean?”

“Let me tell you,” she grabbed his hand and closed the gap, “-I was taken to a world I never experienced before. A place equal to Elysium, I wish I’d stayed for longer. By the way, why’s everyone looking at me strangely?”

“My lady... are you under the influence?”

“WHAT influence?” she tilted her head, “-I only had sex a couple of times, why, is that bad?”

“WHAT?” he forcibly held her mouth, “-you did what?” he eased.

“I had intercourse,” she blinked vacantly, “-is that not allowed?”

“Was it consensual?”

“Yeah, I practically forced the man to stay. Let me tell you, it was the best moment of my life,” she exhaled reminiscently, “-what of the negotiations, I’m ready to win this battle.”

Riaz dropped and buried his face into his hand, “-why did they pick you?” he murmured, “-I came all the way from the Wracia Empire to this mess. Are you serious, giving my position as a direct council to the emperor to this atrocious display. Whatever happened to basic morale,” he sat back and glared the ceiling, “-what ever happened to not betraying your husband. For the love of God, you’re the mother of the rightful prince,” his expression dropped, “-my lady,” quick to grab her shoulder, “-no one saw you, right?”

“Don’t think so?” she replied with the same drunken tone.

Meanwhile, Riaz brainstormed, Igna and his ministers waited inside the royal office, “-why did we leave?” sipped éclair, “-what was the note even about?” Igna conjured a holographic display and allowed the facts to speak for themselves. A bigger game unfolded, from Piers to now – all went according to plan. Saniata entered the office casually, “-hello pops.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I present the heroine of tonight’s game, Saniata Haggard.”

“Pardon?”

“It began with Piers,” he explained, “-prince consort was having doubt, we asked him to give the queen this little pill to alleviate any potential risk of infection. I mean, we did return from a plague-infested province. As expected, the fatherly love didn’t suffice, he had not the stomach to subject his daughter to some random medicine. Instead, as agreed by the sign, she arrived at the bar demanding booze – a signal I knew the plan had failed. Thus, we opted for the second, seduction.”

“Pops, Vanesa did spike the queen’s drink...”

“Even better.”

“So, what’s the whole peace talk about, broke persisting laws, yes?” poised Ela.

“No, not really,” he shrugged, “-merely circumventing what is deemed appropriate.”

“Brother, dear brother,” Eira applauded the scheme, “-a game well played. Listen up, people,” she gathered the ministers, “-we’re given an opportunity to take what Dorchester stole. If morality of current turn of event is inadequate – resign.”

“What resign, just like that?” argued Ela.

“Good or bad,” added Minerva, “-who cares. The war continues without bloodshed. If I, apostle to the goddess of war and wisdom is unbothered by said morality, what’s the excuse?”

“I meant nothing grave. Only wished to bring the matter of resignation.”

“Right, right,” éclair jumped into the fray, “-calm down, lady Eira and lady Ela, we need not draw blood here.”

Tap, tap, “-majesty,” skipped a confident Starix, “-I have the pictures.”

“What pictures?”

He stopped from placing the other foot, “-I’ll be back later...”

“Don’t you run,” Minerva teleported and grabbed his wrist, “-do tell us of the pictures.”

Revealing images soon passed from hand to hand, “-damn,” added éclair, “-Eia can be quite the freak. Imagine using a watering can in such a way...”

“Don’t praise her,” exhaled a dejected Minerva, Ela snickered.

“What’s the matter?”

“For a virgin goddess, you sure are free.”

“Whatever does that mean, Ela. Is there maybe something you’re trying to suggest, like my vow of celibacy?”

“No, don’t twist the words. What’s with the complex, Minerva, I was only kidding.”

Clap, “-good work, Starix, we’ll take it from here. The ambassador should be ready to talk.”

Five heralds, key holders of Hidros fate entered the room indifferently. Igna horned onto Riaz, the man sweated buckets, fingers stained in ink and a despondent Eia at his side.

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‘No way I’ll let you out from the discussion,’ *Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes prospective, watcher watches, creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht.* her eyes widened into a loud thump, “-what have I done!”

Chapter 950: Raiden Riverty-Haggard

'What have I done, what have I done... they look at me knowingly. Skeptical regards, why did I get influenced, why did my body willingly move. Was I drugged, is all of this a scheme? Look at them staring, they know, don't they. I'm not wrong, I was forced into giving myself, yeah, tis a political scandal, I was abused...'

"A failed line of thought," said Igna to éclair, "-she'll spin the situation the moment we bring on the incident. Let's watch and wait."

"Ahem," Riaz cleared his throat, "-since both sides are present, shall we begin?"

Dorchester went first, an attendant unrolled a scroll and read the leader's demand, "-considering victories, we, the church of lucifer, demand Vigrant archipelago's official annexation into Dorchester's region. Sibling's range as well, for the latter now hosts an outpost occupied by many of our soldiers. We request for captive nobles, their children, and prisoners of war to be returned," he paused, "-all in exchange for a non-aggression pact between Kreston and Dorchester."

"Seriously?" remarked Minerva, a response that rattled the other side, "-what of the holy crusade, what of the unity of the church, was there not supposed to be a bigger fight. Calling in quits makes the death and suffering worthless – will Dorchester truly afford such a dishonorable defeat?"

Eira rose her hand, taking Minerva's point, "-question isn't whether will they, but can they."

Riaz entered the conversation, "-please, allow me a moment to explain," he courteously asked, the ministers willingly lowered their query, "-details of the scroll are highlights from Leon. Dorchester represents the crusade, therefore, dependent on lady Eia's wishes, demands art be altered. We've yet to speak on the Krigi affair – seems the town's under Ardanian rule."

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"Arda is its own kingdom," voiced éclair, "-what they do is their jurisdiction."

"What about justification?"

"Arda has the right to start and end wars as they wished. Bear in mind, that the kingdom is fundamental in Hidros' diversity. Without their knowledge and support – reaching our current level of understanding would be impossible," he swiped through plenty o' articles and flicked one across, "-the enslavement of Krigi," read the title. "-Close proximity with the border allows for residents to move."

"I get it," nodded Riaz, "-they were only protecting their people. I see no harm, will Arda retreat from Krigi?"

"Depending on certain outcomes, they may entertain the idea," said a smug éclair.

"Let's talk damages," interjected Eira, "-Dorchester's heavy use of artillery has laid waste many towns and villages, not to mention the number of lives lost. Rebuilding takes money, and I doubt the church will grant charity in rebuilding a state they deem heretic. My offer stands like this," she flicked a display of her own, "-pay damages and we'll release the prisoners – not all of them, for many have set prices," she smiled, "-a proliferate network is worth weight in gold."

"Did I mention, it doesn't have to be on paper," whispered a nonchalant Igna, "-long as we receive the money or items equal their value; you'll have the prisoners."

“Should assume his majesty seeks for monetary gains?”

“Yes sir,” added a cheerful Ela, “-money for the lives of your people. I mean, it’s no skin off our backs. Hidros is very liberal in dealing with an increase in population – more mouth to feed sometimes results in unmarked mass graves. Who is to say really.”

“Krigi’s release, prisoners, and Sibling high for money?” surmised Ela.

“No,” interjected Igna, “-we’re trading, not selling. I strongly believe your country has no means to pay for Kreston’s reparation. I’m not daft,” he horned onto Riaz, “-you’d have suggested a way of paying the debt monthly – reach a certain amount and the church backs out. No way,” he watched, “-Sibling high returns to Kreston. You can have the prisoners except for the nobles and their offspring. In exchange for them, I’ll take lady Ela and her child as ransom.”

A sudden, ‘-what?’ went around the room, “-MAJESTY?” riled Riaz, “-HAVE YOU DONE INSANE?”

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“No, I’m being rational,” he steadied the room by deepening the aura, “-Ela’s a person of value, she leads the revolution, an earnest pain on Hidrosian soil.”

“Basically,” Riaz matched his regard, “-this is a negotiation between Hidros and the Wracia Empire, not Kreston and Dorchester?”

“Catch on quick,” he nodded.

‘We give them Ela, and they’ll allow us to move into Dorchester. It’s too good to be true death...’

“Ask away,” said Igna.

‘How did he...’ Riaz shook, ‘-is he reading my mind?’

“No, I’m not reading your mind,” blinked Igna, “-speak already, we haven’t all day.”

“Dorchester, what will become of the province?”

“Tis for the leaders to decide. Vigrant archipelago’s already part of thy domain. Not the greatest of perspective, however, I prefer to entertain the idea of having a wise enemy than an unpredictable ally.”

“Dorchester... fine,” he firmed his stance, “-we’ll split the land into regions, Krigi and the neighboring land will fall into Ardanian territory. Borders between Dorchester and Kreston will remain – I want Vigrant archipelago and this,” he drew a line over the northern region, encompassing most of the Dorchestrian sea, “-how does that sound?”

“And the prisoners?”

“We don’t care,” he smiled, “-they were the pope’s men, not followers of the Wracia Empire.”

“Well then,” Igna rose, “-this settles it,” both parties moved into the middle and shook hands, “-an official non-aggression pact between the new Empire and Hidros.”

“As the right hand to the emperor, I officialize the agreement on this day under the Wracian Crest.”

Eia's defeated look meandered left and right, unknown to her future, "-Riaz?"

"My apologies," said the man, "-as king Igna said, we rather share a wise enemy than a daft ally."

Igna shortly ordered his guards to take the queen away, leaving Diaz exiting into the cloudy Rosespian skyscape. "-My lord," said the ambassador, "-I must ask, did thee know of my involvement with the emperor?"

"Yeah," he replied, "-sending Eia was a premise, an underhanded test. Warn the emperor," he stopped, "-Alphia's a poison that eats from the inside out."

"I'll take the word with great care," he said, "-wise king of Hidros."

'Wise king he says,' the figure disappeared into a row of vehicles, '-not wise, Riaz, but deadly. It worked out in the end,' he finally breathed a sigh of relief, '-Hidros single biggest threat has been deflected,' back against a massive willow tree, '-countless intercepted transmissions painted a clear picture on the once gray world map. Alphia was at risk of civil war, and the Wracia empire fell out of favor with the church, instead of focusing their attention away from the crusade. New continent's going through changes as well – local tribes have banded together and waged war on the colonists. General Ares of Lucifer's holy army – there's so much a religious state can achieve. The last hope of victory – naval reinforcement, was wiped out by the bombing squad. A one-shot victory,' head against the stump, '-it's over for now,' the lids wavered into darkness.

A flick reduced illumination, and dusk fell, bringing frigid gusts and indiscriminate droplets. Rosespire castle danced and swayed, celebrations imploded – drinks and amusements swept even the sternest of retainers.

"Peace talks?" sipped éclair, "-what a load of bull."

"Hey, don't talk so openly," narrowed a flushed Ela, "-I get the gist, seriously, what happened earlier?"

"His majesty found and exploited an opening," commented a flushed Starix, "-Riaz's a spy for the empire."

"How do you know that?"

"Intel exchange," said éclair, "-someone's proactively researching our enemies and intercepting communication."

"What do we get out of it," pouted a very drunk Ela, "-no money..."

"Peace," said Eira, "-Hidros won't be attacked openly nor face invasions. Brother paved the way for proxy wars to be a resolution of conflict. This way, we're not affected directly. Very shrewd and well calculated."

Minerva gripped a mug, "-was it right?"

"Yeah, it was," laughed Eira, "-all is fair in love and war."

Official documents were expressly delivered, "-in exchange for Queen Eia, the empire is granted legitimate claim over Vigrant archipelago and part of Dorchester's land. The holy crusade of Leon against

Kreston is stopped in the name of the emperor. Holy warriors of Leon and the noble prisoners remain in Kreston's custody; sentenced to the oubliette. The Kingdom of Hidros and the Wracian Empire signed a nonaggression pact," droplets fell – cold air washed the floor in an icy fog, "-what of it?" echoed Igna, "-the castle dungeon's a nice place, yeah?"

"Igna," her eyes glazed, "-how dare you..."

"Eia, dear Eia, poor ol' daughter of the elated Queen Gallienne. You can't and won't ever be able to stand as her replacement. Your mother was a great ruler – she unified Hidros and achieved every goal she set out for herself. Compared to her, you're naught but a pest, a virus that ought to be squandered. I sacrificed my heart to honor her last wishes. What about her daughter?" he slammed the iron bars, "-what did she do? Betray her trust and bore a child from another man."

"SO WHAT?" she fired, "-I LOVE NICOLA TO DEATH, I DON'T CARE ABOUT ANYTHING!"

"Right," he eased, "-a selfish brat can never understand what standing at the top entails. Lavish life, money, pure bliss? No, the sufferance of those responsible for the fate of millions of lives can never be understood by the likes of you. Greedy spoiled brats," steps marred the dungeon, the argument cut short – a lovely young boy dressed in lavish clothes walked slowly to the cage.

"Raiden Riverty-Haggard, son of Eia Riverty-Haggard, Grandson of Queen Gallienne and Prince Consort Piers Riverty, watch, child, here's your mother," the boy tightly held photos, a twist unshackled the rusted heavy lock. The light-haired boy of pale complexion scurried inside, and Igna followed.

"Raiden," she leaped for an embrace, "-my son, I missed you," her face regained color, affection and love gleamed, "-what happened?" she tapped his cheek, "-Raiden, look at me..."

"Mother," he tapped her shoulders.

"What is that?" she grabbed the photos and dropped, "-IGNA, WHAT IS THIS?"

"There, Raiden, it's your mother," he sighed, "-her actions have caused the kingdom a lot of hassle. You were raised to be a king, to one day be Hidros' successor. Eia, isn't it fun, a family reunion?" her heart sank, a lump strangled her throat.

"Igna..." she covered, her whole body shook as a feather, "-why is Raiden here?"

"Well, the rebellion's proud to have Raiden as the legitimate holder of the throne, yes?" he leaned shy of the boy's shoulder, "-a king must be kind and cruel, a type of man who understands but isn't fooled. Eia," he bellowed, "-the blame lays on you, and you alone. Today's the day retribution strikes," the back straightened, "-using one's own child for political gain and support from greedy bastards. Well, his legacy was forged on blood," the delicate sound of a blade leaving its sheath rattled her heart. Haunting cries of the death thundered around the dungeon – Eia struck to the ground, unable to move or act, her jaws locked in horror. "-Farewell, Raiden," the boy clenched his palms and lowered his head, "-I'm sorry, mom," the words reached her ears in slow motion, Orenmir struck, blood splattered across her face and body, the tiny figure dropped lifelessly.

"RAIDEN!"

He grabbed the back of her head and forced it onto the bloodied corpse, “-have a closer look,” he pushed her head deeper into the gruesome mortal wound, “-your son,” he pulled back her head, her visage stained in red, “-is dead, unable to experience life and the amazing world around,” he reached and grabbed the resting saddened expression of Raiden, raising his head to match her eye level, “-take a good look, Queen Eia, tis what happens when thee go against the devil,” he nonchalantly flung the body against the jagged rock, splitting the cranium on impact. He pulled her hair back further, “-how does it feel to know he died with the thought of his mother betraying him. He died knowing his mother’s infidelity. He died knowing she was the reason for his death,” *smack,* a back-handed slap had her fall into the boy’s puddle. She reached forth, trying to get a hold of his body, “-worthless,” Igna stomped, shattering her forearm, “-you failed him in life, the fuck will you accomplish in death?”