

Death Magic 951

Chapter 951: Grandfather and Grandson

A single drop of sweat lit. Igna left the dungeon, leaving behind a screaming woman of pitch similar to a banshee. She screamed loudly, woke prisoners, rattled the walls, and forced herself into self-harming tendencies. “-RAIDEN!” cried what would soon become the crying lady of Raid. A nickname given by guards who shackled her hands without care for the shattered forearm – they had her face her dead child, left to fester and decompose – a feast for rodents and bugs.

He climbed to the ground floor, following the radiance of the light atop. In a glance, silhouettes blocked the doorway, thrusting imposing shadows. Backlight rendered recognition a tad difficult.

“Majesty,” whispered disappointed sighs, “-please tell us, please say you didn’t just slaughter a child before their mother?”

“Hello Alta, how’s it going,” he acknowledged the entourage and walked at a peaceful pace.

“Please don’t avoid the question,” inferred Midne, returnee of a campaign in Easel Run Gard, “-the slaughter of little ones is taboo in most beliefs.”

“So are the abuse,” he refuted, “-but hey, the depravity of sullyng the innocent isn’t stopping anytime soon. You know, abusers law-enforcement have to track and capture on the daily.”

“Don’t avoid the question,” said a cynical Alta

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A side-glance locked onto a quieter Medusa, “-what’s the matter?” he deflected Alta’s interrogation, “-you look unwell.”

“Majesty, I’m sorry. I was lost in thought... you know.”

“Ah, worried about Minerva?”

“Yeah, we fought again earlier – I don’t know what I should do, I’m lost.”

Two rapid and big steps passed the promenade, stopped, and spun abruptly. An ire-filled frown stabbed Igna’s casual expression, “-Alta?” he slowed to a stop.

“Don’t ignore me,” she cautioned, “-stop hiding the truth, I need to know what happened. Did his majesty truly do those obscene things?”

“You want the truth?”

“Yeah,” she firmed her stance.

“Yes, you’re king is a child slayer. Does that suffice?” the pace resumed, he coldly brushed her aside, “-don’t ever,” he mumbled. Undeterred, Alta rejoined said group at a slower and quieter pace. The exchange brought silence, none wanted to continue said conversation, and instead, chose to follow the king.

Twists and turns, climbs and descents eventually landed at the inner-castle lounge. An assortment of high-ranking guests at the bar had drinks and entertained drunken stultiloquence. The purposeful way he walked said there was more. Alta kept keen regard – soon to be faced by Piers Riverty, sat lonesome and peered deeply into an abstract painting.

“Prince consort,” a soft twist, suit jacket’s front button escaped its prison and allowed Igna comfort, “-Alta, Medusa, and Midne do take a seat,” he offered, changing expression uncaringly.

“Majesty,” he returned to reality, “-what will happen to my daughter? I failed her,” he sighed, “-I failed my wife and her belief that I’d keep our family strong. Eia had to be stubborn. She’s strong-willed and very prideful – I dare say her ego rivals those of kings. Bad traits all around, Gallienne’s stronger aura kept Eia confined and unlikely to cause havoc. What am I on again,” he sighed, “-a traitor must be treated as so, a traitor.”

Seeing an older man pour his heart, ‘-how sad,’ sympathized Alta, ‘-the man deserves to rest – peacefully awaiting death. What are we even doing,’ she bit her lips, announcing to Midne and Medusa her deeper thoughts.

“Don’t look so defeated, prince consort.”

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“How can I... majesty, I heard about judgment. I’ve nothing left, no one to care for, no one to see nor cherish, I’m alone, stranded. Death seems the only way towards assured happiness.”

“Drop sadness. Prince consort, tell me, have I ever acted cruelly without reason?” he rose his hand towards the left – a cloud of smoke covered the marbled floor, “-actions speak louder than words,” he said, the smoke faded, “-and here, Prince, is proof of said saying.” Before them stood Raiden, a growing boy of gentle expression and messy short hair of blond. “-Raiden,” he spoke, the boy turned at the king and knelt.

“Yes, majesty?”

“Come on, boy,” he tousled his hair gently and offered for him to sit at his side, “-Raiden, regardless of who your biological parents are. Your mother and I are still bound by the vows of marriage,” the boy innocently stared the table, “-as the world sees it, you’re my son.”

“Majesty?” Piers held his mouth, fearful of a downpour of tears, “-what’s the meaning of this?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he ordered maids for a warm meal for the boy and drinks for the table, “-Raiden Riverty-Haggard is a member of my family,” the orders arrived a few minutes later – a pause that felt instant, “-I’m not one to care about lineage,” he turned at Alta smugly, “-did you really think I’d kill a child?”

“Yeah,” she echoed, “-you would, wouldn’t you?”

“Depends,” he sipped, “-long story short, Raiden’s nothing but a pawn, one unlucky to have been born to incompetent parents.” Prince consort was enamored, unable to lift his eye from the boy, “-Piers, listen here,” widened eyes told of undivided attention, “-from today forward, Raiden Riverty-Haggard will stay in your care.”

“Sorry?” he coughed, “-what about him being your son an all?”

“Though he’s my son,” he looked over, “-it’s best he dies, annulling claims of nobility.”

“What about you, Raiden,” interjected Alta, “-Any thoughts?”

He stopped and swallowed, “-mother and father are dead,” he blinked, “-his majesty is my monarch and step-father, I will do as he tells me to.”

“Raiden,” he wiped the boy’s cheeks and looked at Piers, “-whether you understand or not – the world’s an unfair place. From today on, Piers Riverty, your grandfather, will take care of you. He will be excused from his palace duties. Alta’s melancholic thoughts were right, you deserve to rest and have a peaceful retirement. Raiden, your life starts anew, pick whatever path thee wish, and live it to your best. As your stepfather, I’ll make certain the kingdom becomes a safer place.”

“Okay,” he nodded and moved his chubby cheeks at Piers, “-grandfather, I will be in your care, thank you.”

“Awe,” he blushed, “-Raiden, I’m sorry you were born to my stupid daughter.” Before long, the duo of grandson and grandfather left the castle hand in hand. Igna kept the drinks flowing, night grabbed the castle in a rough storm. Lounge lessened in activity, Midne, and Medusa were called to duty by respective ministries.

Puff, “-haven’t said anything since the boy left.”

“I guess I’m lost,” she sipped, “-majesty, the enigmatic aura thee haul is annoying.”

“Fair point. Still, it’s a good thing, would thee rather have an open-hearted king or someone reserved?”

She rolled her eyes, “-I don’t know... and I don’t care. Honestly, what ever was the point of staging the murder of a kid. Whole castle knows of the debacle- is it fun?”

“No, it’s not. Honestly, there was no point, no under-the-table gains or further scheme. I saw Aceline, she still has the same look of affection, I saw it in her eyes. I felt guilty, I couldn’t take my mind off the injustices I caused, she’s the only person who knows who and what I am. A woman I said I’d open my heart to... then they arrived, ambassadors, when I saw Eia’s face, I instantly knew I wanted her to pay damages. I crushed her will to live, destroyed what she cherished, and have her watch as the body of Raiden slowly decompose. She’ll experience the process of decay after death.”

“Vengeance?”

“Yeah,” he gulped, “-nothing more, nothing less.”

Days elapsed; news of the nonaggression pact flourished around Hidros and the world. Ships from the Wracian empire embarked on trips to colonize Vigrant Archipelago. Kreston’s forces were stationed at Port Smith and the capital. Refugees fled to the heart of the province – the holy land wasn’t so good with money and supplies. The white winter painted the landscape – freezing temperatures caught farmers off guard.

Under minister Eira’s orders, refugee camps were built, and food supplies and rations were returned.

“We’re saved,” prayed the duke.

“Our king had the foresight of what would befall us,” commented a wounded Erano, “-exchanging food supplies for army rations, and using said supplies to help sustain the famine. We’re fortunate.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” echoed a fearful duke, “-king Igna’s a great king, he has his feet on firm ground despite hovering above the rest of us. He’s the second coming of Staxius Haggard, the hero King of Arda. We venerate the hero, a man who died young, someone with the potential to have ruled the world.”

“I know the story. How does it reflect a second coming?”

“My gut says so,” he narrowed, “-there’s more to our king. He’s a cursed sword, not a double edged one. The day it’s drawn against the world, we may have to fear the repercussion it’ll have on us. Well,” the head shook, “-we ought to focus on post war efforts.”

Riaz, or to give the correct title; Prime minister of the Wracian Empire – landed at Vlaiwia. A humongous, infinite wall encompassed the Imperial palace. Officials paid their respect on seeing the man, they bowed, he nodded. ‘-Back home,’ the private quarters played a simple melody over the radio, ‘-any more time spent with those mongrels and I’d honestly contemplate suicide,’ outfit on a rack, the man stood bare chested before a mirror – a shadow twirled from head to toe, “-finally,” he smiled, a taller man bearing a strongly shaped nose, sternly fixed eyebrows, petit eye sockets that held an infernal-like gaze, “-back to my honest self,” he stretched and yawned.

“My lord, welcome home,” said an assistant, a smaller man of similar facial features.

“Good to be back, little brother,” he smiled and exchanged tightly warm hugs, “-tell me, how is Ares doing?”

“The general is rather angry at your decision.”

“He should be,” bellowed a smug laugh, “-we won’t go to war, not now. There are things we must do first,” he smirked, “-Hidros’ not of our concern. The new continent waits with fountains of gold and prestige. How is Alpha?”

“There’s a risk of civil war.”

“What’s the emperor going to do?”

“His imperial majesty said to allow the Alphan to bury themselves. We’ll stand ready to pick up the pieces.”

A solemn look snapped at a boldly colored cupboard, “-the church’s crusade ended in defeat. Here’s to us reducing their influence.”

Days and nights passed mundanely – Igna supervised many policy changes and worked closely with the ministers. Before he’d realize it, two months passed, and a colder August said their welcome.

“I get it now,” a eureka moment thrust Igna out of his seat, ‘-Wracia empire had no intent in partaking in war. Falling out with the church makes sense. The answer directly stared at me – how could I overlook such a simple matter. A willing surrender, they fought with the intent to lose. The leaders trusted our

ability to fight off an invasion, they wanted us to do the grunt work. How shrewd,' he laughed, "-man, Wracia Empire is an exciting opponent to go against."

Urgent summons, flashed, "-majesty, you're requested in the throne room."

'Ah, seems the rebellion's made their move,' he slipped into a navy-blue suit and exited the office. Maids working the corridors exchanged friendly waves, those of which Igna returned courteously, "-tomorrow is the Ando festival, yes?"

A startled maid nodded, "-yes, majesty."

"Good," he said, "-be sure to let Midne know. I won't stand for much more hard work."

"Yes, majesty," she beamed, "-we'll let the head maid know."

Decoration and ornament used to show Hidros' wealth remained unchanged. Everyone's mood felt great when exposed to pretty objects, thus, the king allowed retainers to change the decorations as they seemed fit. Each month a new theme, chosen by contest, lit the castle's life – the current exhibit was of the vampiric esthetic.

'Long as they're happy,' the throne room cried a low rumble, guards guided his majesty inside where a man stood defiantly in the company of a few familiar faces. They threw murderous looks at Igna, who returned the favor.

"They want to negotiate," whispered Alta, now direct aid to lady Eira.

"Negotiate?" he stopped and stared, "-are they daft?"

Chapter 952: Godly intervention?

The king settled, an audience of said caliber required tact. Those on the receiving end, the royalist faction, else known as the rebellion, knelt in a line, none dared look at the king save Nicola Vonhen Hart. A seething rage drooled. Igna sat back, rose his cold gaze, and paid heed, "-tell me," he thundered, carrying a bellowing impact within the rebellious faction's innards, "-why have thee come?" before were three gentlemen; the center was Nicola, to his right, a man in a butler's outfit, representative of the Goldberg faction as was whispered by Alta, and to the left, an unknown fellow of orangish hair, freckled complexion, long fingers similar to twigs and prominently sharp nose.

"Why we are here?" Nicola commented through his gritted teeth, "-the audacity..." his chin lifted to a complete halt by the suddenly present head-maid. News of the guest's arrival had her materialize beside the throne.

"Don't you dare!" echoed a timid-looking Midne, her voice had an impact, equal if not rivaling the kings. The latter curved his frown slightly, delighted at her strength, and threw his regard at the trio, "-raise thy heads."

"Allow me, majesty," inferred the butler, "-my name's Theon Rodster, last heir of the Rodster family, an impoverished noble working as direct aid to the Goldberg Dynasty. His greatness, I must implore for the return of lord Nicola Vonhem's son and wife. Queen Eia and prince Raiden are important to us and the people."

A hand rose, signifying for the plea to halt, “-Theon Rodster, I’m glad to see a well-mannered gentleman in this oaf’s entourage. Let me explain thy situation in layman’s terms. Nicola Vonhem, you eloped with my wife, bore a child, and laid claim on my throne. Infidelity is a crime punishable by death, so says the archaic laws we follow, topped only by terrorism and blasphemy. The world, technology, and advancement in research haven’t smartened the populous, nay, only a fraction grows smart, and the other grows dull and inattentive. Making a stable living from adventuring is second nature, everyone knows how to fight. Thus, there’s no reason for people to get wiser, and I don’t mind if they remain bound by tradition. The minute amount pursuing the ways of knowledge suffice for the kingdom,” he stopped, gathered his breath, and checked the envoys, “-what I mean to say is simple; they don’t care.”

Nicola’s anger capped; the regard turned red – fist curled. Opposite, Theon Rodster, kept his calm and listened, “-majesty, please elaborate?”

“Sure, however, the explanation is already there,” an empty side-glance foretold of Midne’s next order. She quietly exited the room. Massive doors thumped behind, “-how’s the audience?” inquired curious guards.

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“About to get heated,” said she lifting her dress and scurrying towards the castle innards. Attending retainers noticed the erratic pace, “-lady Midne, need help?” they asked, she shook her head and carried, eventually passing the outer walkway where the sun’s ray pushed loud shadows of marble pillows onto the tiled floor. The shadows felt like a ladder had been dropped symmetrically. ‘-Master needs this,’ doors to the lounge opened, she scanned and landed on a feisty lass, “-general Minerva.”

“Midne,” she rose from her slump, “-what’s the matter?”

“I need help,” she said, “-please send a man to the dungeon.”

“Could have used the phone,” she yawned, “-understood, I’ll send a few men.” A quick and firm exchange, general Minerva had a habit of asking questions – not then, by way Midne arrived and sought for men – resolve sufficed.

The stench of rot, repugnant and unbreathable covered the dungeon. A thick mist of the devil’s fumes – the scent of death and blood, circled nooks and crannies. A party carefully watched their steps. Muddied and damp, one wrong move and it wasn’t rare for carelessness to lead to an untimely death against the rough-edged tunnel walls.

Wahhh, WAHHHH, screamed, chills stabbed them to a stop, “-she’s at it again,” echoed a prisoner.

“There wails the screaming lady,” commented another, “-guards, when’s the next meal, I’m getting hungry living off rats.”

“Last meal ain’t coming,” echoed a common accent, “-king’s orders, you’ll die without food.”

“Damn...”

‘Banter?’ narrowed Minerva, ‘-no,’ replied a shortly-lived mystery. Prisoners were shackled to tables, others nailed and many maimed beside opened guts of unlucky survivors. Below the idyllic castle laid an

epitome of hell on earth. 'Hardened criminals,' she blinked, '-they speak to save what little sanity remains. I don't think it'll help.' Louds taps arrived at the shrieks, "-Eia, stand up," said Midne.

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At the throne room – the silence eventually landed on the foreigner, "-who is that?" inquired a cold Alta.

"My name's Po," he replied, "-I'm from the northeast, a child born to the snowy landscape of Konak's peaks."

"Well, Po, why are you here?"

Perpetually squinted eyes lifted and paid heed, "-to pay honors to King Igna."

"Are you not here to plea for selfish gains?"

"No," he smiled.

"He's a spy," shrugged Igna, '-man,' he scanned the interface, '-ever since the project activated, our intel exchange's grown to the point of unfairness. Won't make of mistake of complacency ever again, I will use all I have to go against the world, I'll use everything at my disposal.'

"Majesty?" whispered Alta, "-the man's rather stumped."

"Oh," the line of thought cut, "-my apologies, I should explain how, yes?" his squint turned a single line – the man frowned with his eyelids. "Po birthed from Konak – snowy speaks. I know well of who leads said continent – Snow, subordinate of Cimier, well, Snow's an independent faction working under the Emperor. How should I put it," a brief pause, "-got it, the emperor's poisoned dagger. Getting things done in times of war requires tact – who's more tactful than the underworld. Circumventing trade ban using less than amicable channels. Tis the way the world works," he horned onto Po, "-and you, envoy, are here to test waters for a potential trading channel. I heard GateSix's focus has changed per the decree of the emperor. They no longer make weapons, budget's overloaded since Alphaia came in the fold, hasn't it?"

'My heart,' gasped Po, '-it's being torn to piece, I can't think, the king's aura, he's strong and saw right through my fa?ade. What should I do?'

"Well, don't do anything for now."

A simple reply had the man in complete fear, "-majesty..." before the game carried, doors opened anew, Nicola's shrouded gaze turned to a prisoner. The stench of excrement, urine, vomit, and rot followed the deeply painful scraping of chains. Guards held her by the neck, treated her worse than a dog, a kick threw her before the king – disheveled hair, scratched marks running across her visage, a broken forearm left to fester. Her blue pupils read emptily, Nicola subconsciously stretched his arms, "-Eia..."

"Hold on," affirmed Midne gripping her chains, "-eldest son of Marquess Hanet Hart, I wouldn't touch her if I were you. Lass is plague-ridden; her mind's not exactly present. I mean, for a traitor, our king's mercy allowed her life."

"Here," arrived a body bag, "-your son," guards mercilessly flung the decomposing body of Raiden beside Eia, she screamed and fought, tore herself new wounds, and latched onto the body bag, an

animalistic possessiveness gripped her mind, Midne allowed slack in the constraints, allowing the prisoner to lay over the body.

“Now then,” Igna crossed his legs and leaned into the throne with one elbow over a golden armrest, “-Nicola Vonhem Hart, Theon Rodster, and Po. Shall we proceed?”

Forced to act, Theon took the stage, “-majesty, to respect thy straightforward approach, may I speak freely?” the king nodded, and Theon inhaled, “-we were sent to negotiate on behalf of the remaining nobles. They’re wary of what is to become of Dorchester. The land has been split and the Empire’s no longer supporting the rebellion. Riaz one day walked into castle Garsley, demanded an audience, captured the queen and prince, and left. We were under orders to protect the border and only arrived late to the end. We know it’s over; the crest of rebellion has lost its shine – many of the townsfolk have deserted east and west, braver ones making north to recently occupied Dorchester. Duchess Goldberg, Marchioness Hanet Hart, Marquess Aymer Ragenald, Count Alane Ernold, Count Charle Geurin, Viscount Hewelet Rawlin, Viscount Olian, Baron Joceus Moses, and a handful more have asked for mercy. They wish to return and serve his majesty.”

‘Those names,’ a fragment returned, ‘-they’re nobles who ruled Dorchester long ago, back when I was Staxius, are they not dead?’

“The nobles mentioned,” interjected Alta, “-most of them have died, leaving their crest to heirs who were killed or imprisoned. Most of the noble crests owned by the Dorchestrian council are destroyed or missing. Tell me, Theon, why bring back the dead?”

“Majesty,” he rose a straight face, “-I was asked to speak of those names by the ruler of Dorchester.”

“I’m intrigued,” Igna smiled in anticipation, “-tell me, Theon, who are you truly?”

“I see,” he lowered his head, “-his majesty has figured out the truth. How it feels to be alive again, my apologies, I should have been upfront. War between Dorchester and Kreston, how those days were full of glory and resolve. I miss the old days, especially with the Silver Guardians, princess Gallienne and the Riverty royal family. Never expected the Haggard name to garner such an astounding history, I’m impressed,” a white glow engulfed the man, “-was I missed?” he grew in stature, the complexion eased, the face shrunk into a charming sculpture of what was considered beautiful in the olden days, “-my name’s Theon Rodster – or so is my current identity. You’d remember me as Duke of Dorchester, Sten Parcyvell.”

“Sten Parcyvell?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “-the sadist leader of Dorchester, the cruel dictator. Such is my legacy left to the world, what about you, reincarnation of Staxius Haggard, doth thee not remember?”

“Reincarnation?” sparked chatter.

‘With enough power and knowledge, people of the olden days can be returned to the present. It’s not a great idea – however, it’s possible. Sten Parcyvell caused a lot of problems in the past, his personality and the way he treated his people. I can’t exactly kill him, he’s a puppet – real leader lives on high,’ he glared at the heavens, ‘-those bastards wish to intervene in worldly matters.’

“Theon Rodster; the current show of strength has told me quite a bit. You’re the current ruler of Dorchester, nobles wish for safe passage, yes?”

“Yes.”

“What about you?”

“I want to pledge allegiance to the Hidrosian crown. Looking at Eia,” he smiled sadistically, “-I see the king’s ruthlessness knows no bound.”

“Understood, I’ll consider the offer on one condition. Take news to Dorchester, the land will split into three regions, north, east, and west. North will be controlled by the Empire, East goes to Arda and West to Kreston, basically becoming tributary states for the independent provinces.”

“What about me?”

“Well, Theon Rodster, once the job is accomplished, how about joining us as Dungeon master, head torturer.”

“Head torturer?” he gulped, “-are you sure?”

“Yes,” returned an honest nod, ‘-I thought I’d sent him to Dorchester and have him killed by an uprising of peasants, or be killed here in an unfortunate accident. He was reincarnated, perhaps the gods had no play in the matter, or perhaps they did – until I learn more, best to keep the sadistic Sten close. Who knows, life as Theon Rodster might have changed him.’

“My lord Haggard,” amplified Theon, “-might I ask one favor?”

“What is it?”

“Is it possible for me to enter a slave pact with his majesty?”

“A pact?” he cackled, “-Theon Rodster,” the aura suddenly shifted, a darker presence rose from behind the throne, two shadows stood beside the king, “-doth thee wish to make a deal?”

“Yeah,” he said, “-I’d like to sell my soul, I don’t want to die, I don’t want to go back to hell, I want to disappear, I want eternal solitude – grant me salvation from my past, grant me, an undeserving man, a moments rest.”

“As you wish,” *snap,* “-Theon Rodster,” time stopped, a blurry tunnel stretched to encompass Igna and the butler, “-thy wish has been heard.”

Chapter 953: Rebellious end

‘Eia, Raiden... why did this have to happen, how could it be, why me, why us, why our family. You didn’t deserve any of it, I was the one responsible, I should have been there, I should have taken responsibility,’ a lump of pure hatred slipped down Nicola’s fiery hot throat. An uneasy sensation rose deep within the stomach, it stopped short of mouth – a mixture of hiccups and gag, ‘-Raiden,’ the untamed Eia pulled onto the body bag’s zipper. A fouler stench gripped the throne room, flushing bystanders into the open. They ran for immediate exits. ‘My son,’ crossed the unfortunate father’s mind, ‘-he’s gone,’ silent tears fell.

“Theon Rodster and Nicola Vonhem Hart,” proclaimed the king, “-you’re excused. Return to Dorchester and relay the news. Nobles wishing to earn my favor are welcomed to the palace – especially duchy of Goldberg and marquee Hart.”

“Majesty, will there not be a trial for the traitor?”

“No, Alta, the traitors have been tried,” he pointed at Eia and Raiden.

“What will happen to Eia?” inquired Nicola.

“She will die,” replied the king, “-death by starvation, killed by the plague, any number of options is viable.”

“You killed my son, and now are telling me my wife is going to die...” the tone lowered, unable to raise, “-king of Hidros is truly the devil,” he coughed, “-please, majesty, have mercy on her soul. Allow me to take her stead in death. I trapped her, I was the one who charmed the princess for my personal gains. No matter what I did, no matter the path I took – I spat directly in Queen Gallienne’s vision of unity and tore Hidros apart. Because of me, Hidros can never be the same, the Empire’s on our doorstep – I can’t atone for my sins. Let me suffer in her stead, allow me, majesty, I want to see her live and experience a better life.”

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“Nicola, look, man,” said Midne, “-she’s not sane of mind, plague has gripped her mental and physical self. She won’t survive.”

“I don’t care, let her live the remainder of her life in peace. I don’t care if it’s minutes, hours, days, weeks, or months, I don’t care. If my life is sufficient offering to the king, I’m willing to trade one for the other.”

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King’s character, what would he decide, what would come of the traitors, the last bastion of the Riverty household. Sentimentality aside, there was nothing else to be gained. Deep down, by the solemn casted expression of Nicola’s defeated heart, Igna understood, ‘-no deception in the voice, no resistance in the aura. He truly loves the woman,’ alas, the devil wasn’t an easy shell to crack – and for countless years of humiliation and hardship, ‘-I don’t think I have kindness left to be spared,’ he rose his regard, coming to a decision. “-Nicola Vonhem Hart, on account of love for your wife – I’ll allow thee a chance at retribution. Eia Riverty-Haggard will be spared, her only tie to me is via marriage. I, therefore, decree our marriage to be dissolved, her title of Queen stripped, claims on the throne wiped and her blood being tantamount to the blood of an impoverished noble. Probability of survival is dire,” he sat and watched, observing hope and recognition fuel Nicola’s sight, “-I will afford her only two treatments – use of her arms and her return to sanity.”

Raphael, Archangel of Restoration; thee who sits uninhibited by the flow of time, reach down and extend a helping hand to the miserable and manifest thineself, for I, Igna Haggard, demands so, A flash of light brightened the room, golden glow descended from a lavishly ornate chandelier – it felt as if the stars were plucked from the night, a heavenly outline touched beside the king. A young adult sprawled with medium hair parted down his square visage, “-father,” he bowed, “-how might I serve you?” angelic

wings sprawled and rested. Gleam droplets flapped against stagnant air. Repugnant smell washed – a cleansing aura cleared the hall. “-Archangel of Restoration, heal the promiscuous queen, treat her arm and restore her sanity,” the angelic outline hovered, stretched his palm towards the lass who cowered, biting her inner cheeks in fear. A seamless smile brightened yet again until *puff,* nothing, normalcy settled. A dumbfounded Nicola brought his knees and hand in prayer, a feeling shared by the few retainers allowed to watch the not-so-secretive audience.

“Where am I?” Eia came too with an aching heart, “-my head,” she pressed her temple and touched the ground with her forehead, ‘-this stench...’ guards carried the bag, “-Nicola and Theon?”

“She’s healed...” laughed Nicola, “-SHE’S HEALED!”

“Not so fast, Nicola. I said she would only be partially healed. Her arm and mental fortitude are returned – the plague and monster curse remains, alongside an unknown number of maladies. The only way for her to be cured is to head Northeast, venture into Kreston, arrive at Port Smith, and ask for Pope Carrigan II. He will heal her plight – after all, the saintly pope is more forgiving than I. You will be afforded no alms nor ration, only the basics given to newbie adventurers. Time is short – I advise thee to move... now.” They ran for it, no questions asked. Igna rose his fingers and conjured an ancient symbol, ‘-did you think?’ Nicola’s joyful face was overshadowed by Igna’s cruelty, ‘-I’d let you live?’ he smiled, ‘-the worse kind of pain is found in moments of hope, not in the abyss of desolation,’ a mark familiar to Alta snapped onto Eia’s neck.

“Majesty...” widened Alta, “-the curse of Akina?” he acknowledged her words and said nothing in return, instead of turning to Theon. “-Take my royal decree to Dorchester.”

“As you wish, my king,” said Theon gratefully.

“Alta, prepare the paperwork,” he said, “-show him around, he’s a new member.”

“Understood, my king,” said a distant sigh, “-come on then, let’s go.”

Po stood his ground, not in bravery, but in confusion, ‘-what about me?’ he asked.

“Po, as a representative of Snow, which I’m guessing needs arms from us, will have to wait. The dark guild isn’t easily found, they’ll contact you, don’t stray from the capital else we may never know, a foreigner could be found dead in a ditch somewhere.”

Words etched deeply, the man stood and left, accompanied by guards. The throne room settled, allowing the king to breathe, ‘-what a mess,’ he stood. Midne gave her due and left to attend her duties.

“Conclusion to the Hidrosian Rebellion,” read a report, ‘-after the tedious war between Dorchester and Kreston – the holy church of Leon, backing Dorchester, and Kreston, backed by Hidros, arranged for the commander, Bishop Greg, was killed at the hands of King Igna. Peace talks were finalized on an imperial decree, stating in exchange for Queen Eia, the empire is granted legitimate claim over the Vigrant archipelago and part of Dorchester’s land. The holy crusade is stopped, holy warriors of Leon and the noble prisoners remain in Krestonian custody, to which the kingdom of Hidros has complete authority over their faith. Agreement was signed on the 10th of June, and a few days later on the 13th, Queen Eia was delivered at the palace. Then, on the 23rd, emissaries, namely; Nicola, Po, and Theon, arrived at the castle,’ Igna broke the focus and stared at his phone, the date read, 23rd of June, ‘-and thus, marked the

end of the revolutionist faction. Per order of King Igna, Dorchester's land was split into three. Queen Eia and Nicola Vonhem were shortly spotted leaving the capital. Theon Rodster swore fealty. Reported spy, Po, was seen making arrangements at one of the cottages, fondly named, Pussy palace.' There, he closed the report, ending the tumultuous chapter in his return to power. The file dropped and landed over the desk, '-Raiden is pronounced dead by infection of the monster plague. What the report doesn't state is how Eia would suffer immeasurable pain on her way to Kreston with Nicola. They think she'll be saved. Sadly, none can save someone who's unharmed. I can picture it, a relieved Nicola arrives at Port Smith, hand in hand with a traumatized Eia – nights of abuse at the hands of demons, flashbacks to the murder of her son, the infidelity, and how everything came crashing down. The human mind can only hold so much – they'll arrive at Duke Carrigan's doorstep only to be told the pope is at the capital, holding sermons to guide Kreston through a theological revolution. The incertitude will force them to walk – inflation isn't easy on noncombatants – they'll arrive famished and unable to speak – Eia's condition will worsen the moment she seeks salvation from the pope. Lucifer's prayers will douse the curse of Akina, a raging flame with alcohol. Sufferance in the last moments, unable to see her lover's face – blindness will set, the abuse amplifies and demons feasts on remnants of her life energy, her soul devoured from the inside bring into reality a demon. I've set the stage for Wrath to be born. Time will tell,' he paused and sipped, '-the gift of foresight.' A presence rattled the room. Furniture and ever playing record player stopped. A seductive aura slowly wrapped her arms behind his back, warm cheeks and the sweet aroma of a dame left a peck, "-hello, Igna," whispered. He calmly side-glanced, "-Lilith."

"Aw," she stepped away, circled and straddled Igna, both watched eye to eye, "-always take the fun out of my coyness," she held his chin with one hand and caressed his face, outlining the sharp jaw with the other, "-I've missed you," she pouted, her long dark-brown hair ran along her shoulders, beauty-mark near her rosy lips, shy of her carefully crafted nose and pensive gaze was in a way, her very own aphrodisiac. Every time her mouth opened, a part of Igna knocked as if a hammer against an anvil, "-why don't you visit, I get lonely at night you know."

"Lilith," he turned his head and rested on her chest, "-don't make it sound scandalous. I'd never dream of having such an intimate relationship."

"Oh please," her fingers ran along the white hair, "-we know, you know better. Jokes aside, I do miss you, Igna," she tightened her grip, locking Igna into a warm and comfortable embrace, "-the curse of Akina, I felt it activate."

"Yeah, it's up to the wheel of fortune to decide if a prince or a low-level demon walks through. I'm hoping tis the former – the power of vices is unbelievably useful."

Her grip lessened, he lifted his head and carefully admired her visage, "-I'm sadly not here for the curse. Aapith Nation, I'm afraid," she said, "-remember those vague mentions of a war between revived titans and the gods?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"It seems the battle's arrived at Draebala. A new continent was born, and the ancient gods and demons have joined hands to dethrone the current hierarchy. Sadly, for the gods, Athena, Nike, and a few more were exiled. Without a general to lead the godly realm, and the Eipea Empire's current mess, lower-level deities blessed with peaceful worlds have been swallowed. Similar to when Scifer conquered worlds – if

Draebala gets lost – victor might have enough power to rival the shadow realm. The importance of Draebala is undeniable, which is why I'm here. Aapith nation needs to rally behind a ruler, their true ruler, Alfred."

"What do they seek?"

"Origin, Creation, Death and Time. Symbols of power you've inherited," she kissed his cheek, the combined symbols of power shone, "-like it is here."

"Time and Death are lost to me," he replied, "-I have Nike's blessing and remnants of what was bestowed by Origin."

"Speaking of Origin, where is he?"

"We're one of the same," he replied, "-Lilith, I can't accurately answer the question."

"I know," she dropped her arms onto his shoulder, gripped around his neck, tilted her head, and pulled closer to his lips, "-Eipea Empire and the Aapith nation are archaic. Don't forget, you're blessed as a watcher – and have a lot of potential, despite said potential, four generals of the Shadow Realm dwarves your power. What I'm saying is simple, let the Shadow Realm become a haven for those willing to escape, allow us to show heaven, hell, and the realms who's the strongest," they locked lips, and the door opened. F

Chapter 954: "-I feel stupid for it,"

"Bad, very bad."

Cold and harsh alters into scorching hot. Two suns burn over a light purple and pink horizon. The color of death washes soil damp. A continental-sized mass raises from nowhere – blocking the suns' gentle shimmer. Inky black mountains, blacker landscape, and vague outlines of fauna and flora. The supercontinent Draebala, named after the world – views itself be braced by another supercontinent, a land known as Tite. Division of Eipea, Aapith, and the independent faction of mankind, encompassing kingdoms and races not allied to either God or demon faction, are thrown into a war. Perpetual in fighting, demons killing humans, angels killing demons, demons attacking gods, the cycle of death and revenge never ends. Draebala's core soaked her body and will traumatized – the sheer amount of raw energy within her solemn woeful silence is palpable. The ground shakes, houses break, and people die, such as the way the world scurries. On a date not confined to reality – a titan god makes his way from Tite to a detached piece of land located a few nautical miles southwest of Draebala. A visiting demon finds the world turned upside – on their casual hunt of human prey, a bigger monster raises from the ocean, the hair doused and thickened by salty water, the face betting one of the ancient gods. He marches as the sunlight reflects against the skin – he reaches to the side; a trident erupts from the sand and lunges at said demon. The only sound was an echo and a milder thud. They looked, afraid to breathe, and saw the unspeakable – a beheaded immortal. The headless body dropped onto its knee – the titan approached, took the dead by its arm, and ate, relishing each bite. Louder motion filled the seaside – soon, numerous others made their presence known – playthings left behind by the deceased were allowed to run. Thus marked the arrival of titans – establishing their stronghold right there at Etiem's castle. Battle was upon Draebala again, never-ending sufferance.

The lips unlocked; Lilith licked hers playfully whilst Igna kept a straight face. A break in the office's silence forced him to lean and check, the door was open, and in the doorway stood a familiar figure, "-master..." narrowed éclair, "-are you done?" the charming queen of demons rolled her head to catch a vague glimpse, "-ah, éclair, glad you're here too. Kindly close the door, I have a business to attend," her free and gentle motions snapped at Igna, her body and mind wanting more, "-don't we?" she grinned.

"We don't," said Igna, "-close the door and wait outside, I'll be there in a minute."

"Understood," locks clicked reluctantly, leaving a sour taste in Lilith's sweet mouth.

"Sure you don't want more?" she offered, "-I mean, you do know my name, don't you?" her index contoured his visage again.

"I'm flattered," he caught her wrist and gently tugged, "-I truly am," he returned a somewhat flushed expression, "-if we continue, I might not be able to control my desires."

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"Fine," she rose from the very intimate straddle, flinging her long leg over his head to his right, she stood strongly facing the side, "-you understand, yes?"

"I do," he followed her lead and stood, "-the memories, they're from?"

"One of the playthings the titans hunted. The human held a contract with one of my demons, once he passed, I claimed the soul and ta-dah, an inside narration of what happened."

"To be honest," they walked over to a less formal couch and sat, "-Titan's numbers are low. I doubt they can-"

"See, you understand now," smirked Lilith, "-Castletown Etiam, a breeding ground for the titans."

"Subjugate and procreate, how unsavvy."

"Survival instinct," she said, "-anyway, how's this world – I sense a large number of tortured souls."

"Those are my enemies. Right, lady Lilith," the tone firmed, "-if it's not too difficult," he extended a hand, "-would thee like to go home?"

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"Together?"

"Yes."

Twirl of the finger, words not to linger, Igna conjured a portal. Both stepped into a different atmosphere, a wave of peaceful mundane activities drowns the watcher, '-what is this?' they stood at the town square where a giant fountain held the sculpture of the four guardian generals. Passersby waved, "-hello lady Lilith," they smiled, "-how's it going," others added, "-good to see you," commented more. A humble crowd gathered, men swooned by her beauty, and women respectfully gave their greetings.

"Now, now," said Lilith casually, "-I'm here on business," she winked, "-let's party later."

“Yes ma’am,” thundered – her command dissolved and many other bystanders chose silence. Queen of demon swiftly grabbed Igna’s hand and stormed onward. Before he realized – lost in her casual conversations and laughter, they were inside the castle, standing inside a warm study. A grand piano in the corner faced a curved window, bookshelves carrying ancient texts from the Hall of Rebirth, lavish carpet on which stood costly furniture, “-holy,” slipped, “-I’m a king and even we don’t have such luxury.”

“Happens,” she settled at a forward-facing couch, directly opposite Igna. Heavier presences arrived and tapped. Intherna, Miira, and Gophy entered nonchalantly, each taking seats at their usual place, a simple gesture closed the curtains.

‘Powerful,’ he observed, ‘-every time I return, their strengths increase ten-fold, how powerful can these ladies get. If we were to go all out, I’d lose, regardless of being me, holder of power symbols. I doubt my other personas make a difference. Is this what it’s like to sit before all-powerful goddesses?’

Miira’s golden hair was tied traditionally, her outfit being a mixture of military and royalty. There laid a certain glow to her, and not only her, a glance at Gophy told of a stronger untamed aura. Her black nails and emphasis on darker colors stood against her paler skin, not to mention her deep pupils. Intherna didn’t quite glow, she felt friendlier, a more welcoming presence – though her fits put Gophy’s to shame. Quieter they are, the stronger the outbursts. She watched attentively, her fiery red hair waved, and lastly Lilith, her outfit all but stole the show when in public, a low-cut dress, stockings, and heels – nothing extravagant with the clothes, all the work was done by her figure.

“Hello, Igna,” said Intherna.

“Hello,” he replied and quickly snapped, “-pardon me, I was dumbfounded at how much my goddesses have changed. It’s amazing, lady Miira, lady Gophy, there’s an unshakable glow to your auras, did something happen?”

“Noticed, ey?” Gophy said in a rhetorical inquisitive tone.

“We’ve surpassed the rank of a supreme god,” affirmed a bold Miira. Igna took the news with a grain of salt, she noticed the cue and followed, “-the title is bold, yet, I’m sure, no, certain, I’m certain we’ve met the requirement to be crowned as supreme god. Well, what’s a title without purpose,” she looked at Lilith, “-I see Igna bears your lipstick.” Right she was, her luscious lip marks stamped Igna’s cheeks and left a bit over his upper lip, “-seems you two get along well.” A strange wind blew from Gophy and Intherna. The former rose her hand and looked at Lilith, “-did we or did we not agree?”

“My apologies,” inferred Igna, “-lady Lilith did so for an exchange of intel,” calmness deflated the room, “-which is why I’m here,” he glanced them one at a time, “-goddesses, Draebala’s in danger. I don’t have much information on the matter save what lady Lilith gave,” thus reports materialized from nothingness, all took a brief look and frowned, “-Titans...”

“Lady Miira, please tell us more about the nature of titans?”

“Titans are demons and gods; they don’t adhere to right and wrong. Similar to gods, rules do not apply to their actions. One key difference is motive, Titans are equal if not more powerful than gods, they have the ability to absorb their enemy’s power. Tis the reason many bear children and eat them afterward – the more powerful the offspring, the stronger the deity, a loop of never-ending growth.

Kronos, during his rule as supreme god fought the titans in the company of gods and demons alike – they fought a common enemy and established the right of the domain known today. Powerful gods have their world to rule and protect, this came about to discourage uprising and infighting, doesn't concern us at the moment. Not much is known about the titans, Lord Death, Kronos, and Scifer have waged and were waging war against them until recently. Lord Death won the battle, and disappeared – Undrar took the mantle of Death and has continued her master's efforts."

"How does it concern us?" inquired a rather unimpressed Gophy, "-titans, gods, demons, we live above the rest of them. Shadow Realm's far stronger than anything known to the combined realms. We should abstain..."

"Gophy," glanced Igna, "-your fingers," he pointed, "-it taps. Glad to see tells haven't changed," he smiled, "-lady Gophy is correct, we don't have to do anything, yet," he scanned, "-what's the point of leaving behind Draebala. Perhaps I'm stupid, Draebala allowed me to meet Intherna and éclair – tis the ex-supreme god's realm with three factions."

"So?" narrowed Intherna, "-what then?"

"Only if my goddesses wish, let the Shadow Realm be known. Aapith Nation and the Eipea, especially the latter, are in disarray. Zeus," he looked at Gophy, "-don't you want to backhand the thunder god? We're strong, there's no argument against our strength. Without reference, who knows how we stack."

"Igna," narrowed Lilith, "-no more beating around the bush."

He sighed, "-I want... I want," he paused and inhaled, "-I want my goddesses to be known across the multiverse!"

"What?" they shot back, "-what are you on about?"

"It's frustrating," he gritted, "-I feel stupid for it, I talk a big game – I'm honored to have such strong goddesses on my side... still, whenever a problem arises, I choose to disregard the offer for help. It feels disrespectful, so for that reason alone, I want to see the Shadow Realm step into anew age, one where we strive to become the strongest. Something lady Lilith said, 'let the Shadow Realm become a haven for those willing to escape,' heaven and hell are ruined. The closest thing to heaven I know is us. I saw Athena change, Raphael, my children, everyone who entered our realm, and even the monsters – everyone's changed for the better. By better, I don't mean flowers and sweets, I mean stronger and resolute. Maybe it's me, or part of who I am, I want to stick it to Zeus and the Aapith Nation, take back what is rightfully mine, and give the fucker a backhand to hell!"

"Language," retorted Miira, and the collective room brightened. Giant smiles permeated their faces, "-I'm sorry," interjected Lilith, "-they know about Draebala, we talked and agreed before I arrived."

"We gambled," continued Gophy, "-to see what choice thee'd make."

"And when asked to choose a side," resumed Intherna.

"We all picked the same side," finished Miira. They shuffled to his couch and gave a warm group embrace, "-don't put yourself down," whispered Miira, "-we know you better than you do."

"Trust us," said Intherna.

"You're lucky," side-glanced Gophy.

A peck caught his attention, Lilith winked and he exhaled, "-very lucky." Quick on his feet, "-my lady goddesses, Draebala's our next target. Knowing my strength, I won't help much in the battle, my duties call home. I selfishly ask for help in the conquest of Draebala."

"We know," they smiled, "-let's stick it to Zeus!"

'It's here,' he dropped onto a vacant seat, a few minutes that felt like hours passed, '-Shadow Realm's rebuttal against the Eipea and Aapith nation.'

Cora, Kaleem, and Yuria were called to action; a one-way portal manifested into the war-torn domain. The generals watched.

'You'll pay,' went across Miira's mind, '-for the death of my master and Scifer, you'll pay...'

'For the humiliation,' gritted Gophy, '-treating me like a plaything, only noticing my presence when I was needed. Screw you...'

'To avenge the death of Staxius,' breathed Intherna, '-this story doesn't end so soon.'

'Betrayal,' sniffled Lilith, '-help is coming, my children, help is coming

Chapter 955: Gateway to Draebala

Gateway to Draebala, on a date not so important in the greater state of things. Cora, Kaleem, and Yuria, students under tutelage of the four guardian deities, arrived northeast at Zayan D'olsak, one of two fragments forming the north and northeastern barrier against the rough ocean. Viscounty of Inux, a military stronghold and port-town for the few livings on Zayan's rather lax farmland and infectious nature of prowling demon beasts.

Salty to the nose, fresh on the skin, and chilly at the feet, such were the feeling after touching down in a foreign world. "-Kaleem, we ought to head southwest," proposed Yuria, the trio were dressed in adventuring clothes. Two suns took quite a while to assimilate.

"Demon beasts," narrowed Cora, "-I feel them," he scanned a nearby tree line – an unused trail climbed deeper into thick forestry. A worn-out sign read, "-Inux," on one side and pointed to an abandoned lighthouse perched atop the farthest northeastern point, atop a cliff of rampaging waves abled to reach dozens of meters. They climbed, following the path, and arrived at a hallway of overarching foliage and menace. Yuria stopped and turned, reflecting on the landscape they'd traversed for what felt like hours. The sharpness of the climb, steep slope, and unhinged rocks led to a damp cove. Gray in color and cold in look, waves fought wars at the horizon, and the sea didn't look pleased. Kaleem grunted, "-fine," she let an exasperated sigh, "-Kaleem's more of a pain today..."

"Of course, he is," returned Cora covering his head with a hood, "-we didn't get to greet the master."

"Right," Yuria calmly reached her backpack and snuck out a wand. Kaleem's stance took much on his master, Intherna. Sparks flew, the body steamed, and white fumes exited the limb.

GROWL, a monstrous beast leaped; Kaleem rushed, Cora side-stepped and summoned a rifle meanwhile Yuria blessed her teammates with magical enhancement – a dagger made of pure flame slit

the beast's head, leaving him willingly exposed, two more beasts pounced, a click and two shots echoed. Skulls blew to smithereen, "-damn, that was close," gasped Cora.

"Yuria!" a sneakier figure, humanoid in nature, rushed Yuria, her expression widened in terror, *Azure fist,* jaded scales covered her fist which instantly blasted the beasts into the cold ground, a shake of the hand shook the blood, "-man," her head shook in disappointment, "-aren't they supposed to be strong?"

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"Get out," ordered Kaleem, "-who stands there?" Cora shot into the foliage, and a shriek and thud returned.

"Please wait!" said a traumatized voice, "-my name's Esh, I hail from Inux."

"Demi-human," observed Cora, stepping in front of Kaleem, "-what's a boy doing out in the woods?"

"N-nothing..." he broke eye contact – whistling of an arrow halted by a simple catch, "-an ambush?" he rose a frown at the shooter. Yuria conjured a wide-area imprisonment spell, "-there, there," laughed Cora, "-ambushing visitors isn't such a good idea, now, is it?" the forest answered her whims, veins grabbed those sat in bushes and flung them into a cage of thorns. Cora asked for a huddle, "-what do we do now?"

"Blow them to bits," answered Kaleem.

"They have military outfits," observed Yuria, "-should we investigate?"

"They're strong," said Cora, "-I can barely sense their auras. It must be unimaginably high."

"Actually," Yuria squinted in thought, "-no, we didn't sense because there's nothing to sense. Mana's been sucked from the world. Inhabitants have evolved to live without it."

"Hello?" waved the demi-boy, "-are you guys done? I sense monsters approaching..."

The shooter, a tall but timid human grabbed Esh's shirt, "-my friend's getting scared," said he aloud, "-let us go or the demonbea-" a shadow loomed behind the cage. Yuria rose her head to an amalgamation of torn limbs and lustful murder, "-RUN!" Paws as large as a child rose at the idle pray, and it swung – the stench of its breath and hairs forced Yuria to pinch her nose. Kaleem vanished, only to be spotted a few meters away.

"Weakling," he commented, the bear was sliced clean down the middle, falling apart around the cage into deep bellows. The body puffed into a black mist and large purple crystal. Yuria cracked her knuckles and stood peering over the captive, "-we give up, serious," begged Esh, "-you guys are crazy."

"Now then, Esh," Cora's demeanor changed, "-tell us more," shackles made of vein tied a party of five, all gaged expect Esh. Race differences ranged from demi to humanoid, depending on what race, the outfits seemed better or worse accordingly. An hour and a half's walk later, foiled by impromptu ambushes by beasts and inhabitants alike – a massive stronghold stuck younder. A pimple on the face of the land, a tube of pure mass, rigid and strong.

"There's Inux, good luck getting in – the fortress asks for cash."

“And that’s why those bandits ambushed us?”

“Yeah,” nodded the boy, “-it’s survival of the fittest. By the way, what’s with the clothes, why don’t you guys have armor or something, I thought mercenaries wore them.”

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“We’re not ordinary mercenaries,” Yuria replied smugly.

“We’re heroes of another world,” said Kaleem, a line that had both Yuria and Cora in tears.

“Such conviction,” commented Cora, “-we’re heroes of another world,” he gave an overdramatized recreation, garnering muffled laughter from the captives and even Esh.

“There, there,” they eased, Yuria dispelled the restraints, “-no more fighting,” frowned Cora, “-scurry on home.”

“You guys are strong,” said Esh, “-a little bit weird but strong. Follow me,” he marched, “-heroes of another world or whatever, the strong rule to protect the weak,” he reached into the dirtied shirt and removed a tag, “-I’m an ungraded adventurer. This hear are my friends, we’re part of the Childeo guild, a band of orphans who support one another. Ken here, the archer, is our second strongest member, he’s E-ranked,” Esh smiled to introduce his friends until a sudden shake of the ground caught all off-guard, a giant worm leaped from the ground and swallowed three out of the five and dove again – Ken skillfully pushed Esh, turned on his back and fired, the worm gobbled his leg and burrowed.

“Yuria, heal the boy,” ordered Cora, “-Kaleem stand guard, I’ll cast a protective barrier,” pentagram lit, a barrier summoned, and Yuria’s healing spell stopped the bleeding.

“Ken...” sniffled Esh, “-you idiot...” the worm leaped to be struck by a jolt of lightning – bells rang from the fortress – horse riding armored guards galloped, “-lady, can you heal his leg completely?”

“I can try if we get the limb back, I doubt it,” the fried worm wailed, each flip of its linear body shook the very ground – throwing boulders the size of cars.

“Well,” young Esh’s body changed, fangs and claws sharpened, “-I’ll get back his limb, don’t worry,” he morphed and howled.

“Werewolf,” commented Cora, “-Kaleem, Yuria, let’s retreat.” Another barrier rose for good measure, “-ahoy!” screamed one of the scouting guards, “-leave the demon to us, head on inside.” Loud cries resounded in the distance, and a platoon of horse-riders, chevalier – galloped through the meadows.

“Jump NOW!” cried Kaleem, another, thicker skinned beast leaped diagonally and burrowed, “-what the fuck is this?” cried Yuria, “-Ken, explain boy!”

“Wormies. Demon beast native to Zayan D’olsak. One bite and its death. I lost my leg, please, help Esh instead.” The full sprint arrived at the fortress’ gates.

“Ken!” said a guard, “-what happened to you?” the party handed the soldier.

“Wormies,” he said, “-boss, tell the kids I’m sorry.” Yuria walked into the touching scene and tapped Ken’s head, “-look down, I’ve already healed your leg, dumbass,” she rolled her eyes and joined the two

who stood peerlessly at the destructive scene. Men bit in half; others swallowed whole – a ray of light shone onto them in said moment.

“Give us the order, Cora,” said Yuria.

“We’ll show them hell,” smirked Kaleem.

“Right comrades,” he moved into the vanguard, “-release the first limiter and give ’em hell.” Symbols of their respective masters shone on the neck; the Shadow Realm’s insignia glowed on their forearms.

Gasp, Cora wiped his brow, remainder of the wormies fell at his side. Yuria rose her arms in dismay, none survived the ordeal. A fatigued Esh fell headfirst, “-got you,” said Kaleem gripping the boy’s collar, “-let’s go,” he walked, dragging the boy. A round of applause welcomed the trio, “-pray tell, who are you people?” coughed an older man.

“We’re heroes of another world,” affirmed Kaleem, this time, none dared laugh. Actions spoke of their caliber, “-take us to your leader.” Thus came to pass the Shadow Realm’s first steps into an unknown world. For the months to come, none could have expected the level of cruelty and dishonesty amount the people, in a town set against a backdrop of crime and death. A place where the strong truly ruled with an iron grip – only time would tell.

Night rose over Rosespire, Igna just left the Shadow Realm physically and mentally exhausted. He dropped on the office couch, “-Lilith is ruthless,” head to the ceiling, “-let’s hope they make enough of a mess to draw heaven’s intruder’s attention.”

Tap, tap, “-enter.”

“Pardon the intrusion, brother.”

‘Brother?’ clambered to a stand, “-ah, Lizzie, how are you?” she stood taller than before, her picture plastered on a few advertising billboards, “-you seem to be doing well last we met.”

“Actually,” she sidestepped, allowing another lady to pass, “-Igna, long time no see.”

“La virtuose de Hidros, Syndra Lordon, what brings a high-profile celebrity to my humble office?”

“I need help,” she bowed.

“No need to bow, take a seat,” he offered. The intimidatingly amber-lit office tugged onto lesser found bravado. Igna took a stern stance, completely observant of her plight.

“It’s Kyle,” she sniffled, “-look,” she rose her long sleeves and showed scars, “-I can’t live with him anymore. I’ve refused the advances – told him to leave me alone, but he doesn’t listen. When I made it as a conductor, the harassment stopped, but now... but now! He’s threatening to kill my family. Kura’s Trading corporation has grown influential in Wracia.”

“I’m sorry, we can’t help. Kyle Darker’s a world-renowned chef. The Darker dynasty is strong. New found alliance has made them quite the powerhouse. What can I do, what should I do?”

“Brother, isn’t there anything we can do to help?”

“Lizzie, my dear little cousin, we can do quite a bit, but I’m afraid not this time. Syndra Lordon, Kyle Darker’s wished to marry you for decades – why not accept?”

“I WON’T!”

“Don’t raise your voice.”

“I’m sorry, I need a solution, I need to do something, anything.”

“Bring him to justice? I mean, as king, I can’t really act for the sake of a single person. Wouldn’t look great, especially since we’ve reached a tranquil stagnation. I’d prefer to ride out the silence. Don’t worry,” he scribbled on a piece of paper, “-take this note to my friend, tell him I sent you.”

“Odgar Codd?”

“Yes, a private investigator. Build a strong case and formally file the matter with the department of justice.”

“We have a department of justice?” inquired Lizzie.

“Right, we don’t. Well, from the case, by the time it’s complete, we’ll have the department instated and ready for action.”

Incoming call – Yui,

“Master, good news.”

“Don’t shout, it’s late.”

“Marinda’s ambassador on her way to the palace.”

‘Marinda’s ambassador,’ he covered his mouth, ‘I forgot she was here.’

“It’s Marinda, they’re willing to join Hidros.”

Tap, tap, “-may I come in?”

“Yeah, open,” the handle clicked.

“Hello Teach,” said the princess of faes, “-long time no see.”

“Tania, my,” he offered a seat, “-how’s Rosespire, to your liking?”

“It’s fun,” she smiled, “-got to have a lot of fun. I spent most of the time with prince Julius, I asked him for a job – couldn’t sit around. Man, I met a lot of stars, people who Mariane would die to meet.”

“Glad it was adequate.”

“King Igna of Hidros, as an ambassador of Marinda and representative of King Gustv, we’d be honored for our kingdom to formally join the council of Hidros.”

Chapter 956: Journey of Repentance

Nicola and his wife, the shunned queen of Hidros, after the 23rd, took to their feet and made way to Port Smith. ‘No doubt,’ thought the husband, ‘-no doubt I’ll save her. After I do, we’ll bear another child

and I'll have my revenge.' Such wrote across the displeased expression. Eia's sufferance had just begun, her feet grew numb and her stomach crossed and pained as if someone tied it into a knot. She barely breathed at times, stopping after a few meters to gather her breath. Despite the show of malady and uneasiness; Nicola saw naught but to forge ahead. A single agenda in mind and a single purpose. The first few days of the trip were normal, normal until a full moon. Nicola went to bed and Eia sat upright beside him, watching the moonlight shone through an open window. Olden and smelling of dust and wood – she stood, the boards creaked a little under her feet, '-how long is this going to continue?' she shuffled to the window and rested her elbow, '-what should I have done?' looped a single question. Frantic flashbacks of Raiden's cold hearted murder played vibrantly. There was no stopping said deluge of agonizing pain – her heart would pump loudly, reverberating throughout her limbs.

Forced on her knees, the sound broke Nicola's sleep. "-Are you okay?" he asked, barely able to keep the vision clear. Darkness snuffed the room, a shadow or cloud, something unseen but tangible choked moonlight. Her visage, visible in only the partialness of waning outside light twisted and turned, and her eyes widened to a shriek. Unseen to Nicola but present to her – demons rose from the floor, dropped from the ceiling, and hovered by the window – the colors painted in grayscale – Nicola's figure vanished. An unbeatable force gripped and pulled – she screamed her chin across the splintered wooden floor – wind or what was felt turned over the dressing gown. She gathered her breath, soon to realize her elbows on the floor and body in prostration – a whisper said, '-sufferance.' She choked – the curse marked its prey, she screamed and cried – fighting for her life. Nicola stared blankly, unknown to her current state, "-stop playing," he rolled his eyes and went back to sleep. She screamed atop her lungs, begging for mercy and salvation, but nothing – claws dug into her skin, scratch marks went down her sides, blood and sweat dropped, and color in the eyes faded.

'Don't faint,' said another whisper, the fading consciousness returned – this time, she found herself facing the ceiling with legs spread. Wretched demons plagued her vision, they laughed and toyed, paying no heed – after all, no matter the pain or resistance – to the world, Eia simply laid on her back.

Daybreak shimmered, she sat upright, '-a weird dream...' such was the thought until '-scratch marks...'

"Go take a bath," said an uninterested yawn, "-you smell."

"Nicola?" she called to a resounding no, he slammed the door – heavy footsteps carried deeper along the corridor. '-What's happening?'

Days were hard – no money nor supplies to go around, Nicola found it hard to make ends meet. The last resort came after they pawned much of their belongings – jewelry and the likes. Nights were harder. Nicola slept soundly, as for Eia, her painful days had just begun. Demons of all kinds plagued her room, scratching and pulling – tied and gagged – there laid no limits to the sexual depravities they mustered. After she'd suffered enough, demons took pleasure in torture, no scars on the body – her mind began to crack, the brief line between thought and reality phased, perpetual agony.

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Port Smith loomed over the horizon; a traveling merchant accepted the duo on conditions he'd spend the night with the lady. Nicola's macabre personality worsened, he nonchalantly accepted, seeing Eia for

her title and way of retribution. The carriage stopped at one of the inns, where – husband and wife got into a fight, a secluded room thundered, “-Stop!” he cried

“WHY SHOULD I, ALL YOU DO IS COMPLAIN!”

“I DON’T!” *smack,* she hit her head against the table and fell, tears of blood dropped.

“Don’t ever argue, I own you, you’re nothing more than a waste of air and space,” the door clanged, where outside the merchant waited patiently. Nicola exhaled and narrowed, “-she’s inside, I don’t promise complacency. If you die, it’s not my fault.” On those words alone, the older gentleman tipped his hat and entered, “-before you continue, here’s a word of warning, she’s plague-ridden.” Those words alone halted the man’s rush of blood, “-plague-ridden?” he stopped himself, “-well, it was only a trip, I don’t need to risk my life.” Nicola left, uninterested in the outcome. Wind and cold made waves, unprepared for the weather had his body trembled. The walk eventually arrived at a local lord’s manor – a refuge for plague victims, “-excuse me,” he rose a hand to one of the attendants.

The soldier, hands full with a heavy carton, stopped, “-Nicola,” he sighed, “-outhouse, go to the outhouse.” Confused as to why the soldiers beheld his appearance with much animosity, Nicola panted his way to a warmer outhouse. There, Brigadier General Erano rose a brow, shook his head, and laid a report on his desk, “-Nicola Vonhem Hart. Traitor to the crown,” he clicked his tongue, “-his majesty sent news of the pilgrim of repentance. Sad to say, you failed the test. Did thee think anyone would allow traitors on their wagon?” he reached into a drawer and pulled a news article, “-here,” details of the trial, Eia and Nicola’s betrayal, immoral acts, and greed were written in bold. A transcript of their audience, precisely the part where the king graciously offered the duo a chance at forgiveness, painted a clear image. “-Stooping so low as to sell Eia’s body for a simple trip. How shameful. Orders are orders,” he exhaled, “-the capital, head to the capital and confess thy sins. The pope will decide thy fate before the lord.”

“The merchant?”

“-Was a soldier,” returned Evalo, “-a simple test to check your integrity. Turns out, there was naught to expect. If only you’d have found another way – Eia would have been given this,” he rose a flask, “-medicine,” both hands hit the table, “-GET OUT MY OFFICE!” guards kicked him outside – knocking his head onto a rock, “-leave town immediately,” loomed the general’s imposing shadow. Shamed, Nicola grudgingly returned to the inn to an array of moans and cries. He rushed and pushed the door to see a nurse tending Eia’s wounds. The merchant, dressed in a military outfit, side-glanced, “-so much for integrity.”

“Left to fester, she’d be faced with an infection,” cried an attending physician, “-for love said the report,” the man all but confessed his disbelief and disappointment, “-guess an oil stain can’t ever be cleaned from a white cloth.” They exited the room save the soldier, “-pack your bags,” he ordered, “-and leave town. Orders from the general.”

Duo solemnly walked a parade of shame – guests of the inn watched as they arrived at the ground floor with lowered heads and left the establishment. All along the streets stood disappointed looks from the townsfolk, “-traitor,” whispered some, “-scum,” said others. All and all, it was the worse day for anyone. Amidst an overarching blizzard – Nicola and Eia eventually arrived at an abandoned log cabin settled a

few kilometers from the capital. Worsening weather made movement difficult – no fire wood nor adequate source of fire, both glared at one another, seething rage and murderous folly.

“I regret meeting you,” fired Eia.

“Likewise,” answered Nicola, “-if only I was smart enough to have charmed another woman.”

“I wish I’d have taken the right path and adhered to my mother’s wishes. My life would have been so much better than this. You’re the worse thing to ever happen to me – because of you, I lost my title, my status, my reputation, and my child.”

“Oh, shut up, conniving bitch. You’re much an accomplice in the rebellion as I am. After all, didn’t someone always say the throne is rightfully theirs. Why did I bother coming to rescue a worthless whore. I wish the king spared no mercy – I wish he’d publicly hang you.”

The night passed and day rose, and the weather settled. Eia and Nicola rose from a rough intimate night, “-I hate you,” she spat.

“I hate you too,” he returned, throwing on their outfit and setting for the capital. A step within the beautifully crafted townscape changed their moods entirely – stone, limestone, gorgeously carved wood, stone bricked walkways, and the gem, a cathedral worthy of the gods. Tall and home to colored windows – it was breathtaking, nothing could compare to said architectural marvel. It took a few minutes to arrive, and when they did, the scale but amplified. Devotees prayed, and warm and friendly nuns approached, “-Lord Nicola and lady Eia, please come this way.”

They entered a massive prayer hall, with golden statues, and ornate stained glass dressed in various patterns. The peaceful openness sent tremors down Eia’s hand and body, ‘-I’m not welcomed here,’ she gulped, looking around to be overwhelmed by the size. From a hallowed archway came the head of Kreston, Duke Carrigan the II. He held a holy book and stood towering before the duo, “-welcome to the Krestonian cathedral,” he smiled, the eyes squinting through frameless square glasses. “-I heard much, and I know why you’re here,” he explained slowly, “-Nicola, doth thee wish to atone?”

He rose a defiant gaze, “-no. I’m here only to save my wife, not be entranced by religious talk.”

“My, such attitude for one who threw himself at the church of Leon for reinforcement,” focus turned to Eia, “-nuns, grab her,’ he ordered, “-you see, Nicola and Eia, I’m not only the pope, I’m the duke of Kreston. Like the words of gods resounds through my people, my word and voice as ruler also resounds, albeit in a more fearsome way,” they walked towards the altar, dressed in gold, precious metals, and gems. A mysterious figure caught Nicola’s eye, a lady bearing dark-brown hair, a seductive smile, and a beauty mark near her lips, her nose upwards was covered in dark vail, akin to ladies dressed in remembrance of the fallen. The church swapped into an oblique office – religious robe turned formal suit and tie, “-now,” he sat, “-king Igna has given full authority on thy punishment. Nicola, to atone for thy sin and affronts, many of which are written here,” he mentioned a report, “-you will be sent to work the graveyard and clean the catacombs. You will be afforded basic necessities, aside from those duties – you shall join the church as an Emissary, taking the vows of celibacy. Only repentance and sincerity shall improve thy life. Take how long it’s needed – more affronts and the dungeon shall be thy last resting place,” without a chance at rebuttal, armed guards took away the man.

“You,” he grinned, “-a worshipper of the dark god, tis time for proper cleansing. The nuns shall attendant to thy physical needs. Tonight, we perform the rite of Trian.” Day turned to night in a snap – Nicola’s punishment began in the sewer – as for Eia, dressed white – her restrained had her lay upon a stone slab. Pope stood at a distance; a circle of sisters stood around each holding hands. Deeper in the shadow waited for the same peculiar lady. Words of faith thundered – her vision blurred, demons manifested in full, they dug their claws into her stomach, clawed out her organs, and danced. The horrific sight had many on the verge of puking, they couldn’t bear to look. Culmination resulted in her eyes turning bloodshot red, she screamed and cursed, and ire threw burn mark – she shunned the world, all who did her wrong – she cried, the weeping lady returned. *Thud,* silence, her eyes faded, tiny hands clawed from Eia’s torn belly, a little girl with black hair, red eyes, and three marks running down her collarbone, “-overworld,” she said calmly, pushing her tiny body over the deceased, “-who dares summon me?”

“I did,” the circle broke, and the mysterious lass ambled, “-welcome, Sathanas, my dear daughter.”

Chapter 957: HSP

“Mother,” spoke the babe, “-been a while,” she stretched her tiny arms to be carried by the lass. “-Pope,” she turned affirmingly, “-far as stories goes, Eia died to frostbite. You’re free to do whatever with Nicola, long as the bloke doesn’t interfere. Trust me,” her vibrant stare read, ‘no mercy’. “-If the kindness returns to bite us,” she grinned and abruptly turned, “-you know the rest.” A flick of the wrist and off she was – helicopters laid on standby. 13th turned 14th as the moon spoke clear and the sky listened – a private jet landed within the secluded airfield kept at the side of the capital.

‘Done,’ Igna peered through the airlock and stretched, ‘-finally home,’ he glided down the stairs and touched firm ground. ‘Days of deliberation – being welcomed as a hero was quite the scene for Eira,’ said a jestful smugness.

“Majesty,” she followed, “-care to explain the overwhelming welcome we had?”

“Oh, that would be the years I spent in Marinda,” he added nonchalantly, “-I wanted a sort of vacation, to solve the mystery of the not so mysterious continent, yeah?”

“Looks to me the continent’s been claimed.”

“By my influence,” he smiled, “-the leadership, king and ministers, were hand chosen. I’d have remained there if the situation were different,” a car halted, “-shall we?”

An hour passed; the time came for breakfast. Castle lit as if a friction match, retainers ran to and fro – workers yawned at the castle gates. Guards squinted through drowsiness and scanned tags.

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“Majesty,” the warm inside felt homey – save the crude depiction of death by the romantic means of vampirism, “-isn’t it time to change?” he inquired at a passing maid.

“We like the style,” she answered, “-and thought it best to keep what’s lively.”

“As you say,” he nodded, glanced at Eira, ‘-wait?’ or so he thought, further looking back show her sharp turn towards her offices. ‘-My home,’ deeper within the castle, where the corridor’s dulled and the

carpets stopped – an ominous area without much to encircle laid the famed King’s office. A pull clicked heavy golden handles – the room thudded or inhale, ‘-irony,’ briefcase over the table and face to the couch, “-I don’t have a house. I have more money than I could ever spend – Ela’s careful preparation and sometimes rash investment’s growing our economy steadily. Can’t say the same for Kreston, they’re in heavy debt.’ He sat and lit a casual cigar, ‘-being king isn’t easy.’ Days spent in political dealing, accepting or rejecting policies, making trips to construction sites and much more – King of Hidros’ repute all but grew. And then there was the space conquest – to watch over the world. A flip toggled the screen, and details pertaining to said quest wrote in bold, “-following the success of the 25th May’s launch. Researchers of the Alchemist guild, Gatesix, Midas, and scholars of the University of Rotherham, have joined hands in establishing a new faction, Hidrosian Space Program, HSP for short. Very imaginative,” said a side comment. “-All employees, including researchers to janitors, have been vetted and locked with Phantom’s non-disclosure chip. Funding in the numbers of a few hundred million has been secured jointly by Phantom, Raven, Elon’s Dynasty, and Oxshield. 30th of June – by his majesty’s overview of magical schematics – three new rockets were built. They were launched the following day consecutively and placed into orbit – Alpha, Iqavea, and the area beyond the first. It’ll take a few months for the rest to be dispatched – the orbital surveillance system is said to be operational no later than December. Director of the HSP, after much consideration, has been decided to be placed under Lady Clarise’s direction,” signed, éclair.

‘HSP, very imaginative name. I was right in my gamble,’ a greater holographic display spawned over the coffee table, wrapping the room in a blueish hue, “-I can see clearly into the main continent. Their advancement in technology is great, greater than ours. Keeping their cities, networks, and power structures connected. What is this?’ he narrowed onto a childishly colored button, the description read, “-financial dealings of the Wracian Empire,” a subpart addressed his majesty directly, “-a press of the button runs a little devil I injected during our dealings with Alpha. Spawn of the superpower created a line for me to follow, within the first weeks, I infiltrated most of their departments. Majesty, I can imagine the look of confusion – but remember, we’re lightyears ahead compared to them in the field of intelligence. A side-product of my birth and birth of the sister system. We can’t affect the empire on a widescale, hell, haven’t scratched the surface. Our Achilles’ heel is processing power, for now, please be content with this little bottom, a press and we’ll steal a few nonchalant Exa from a population of a million.”

Temptation was too great, he tapped and a money counter rolled the same to at a casino. A smaller version of Yui in a bunny’s outfit skipped atop said counter, *beep,* it stopped in the eight-digit range – ‘-what in the... we skimmed a few Exa and nearly covered the cost of manufacture. Considering we only hit a few major cities, imagine hitting Alpha or extending beyond the empire’s border. éclair realizes the scary potential of monopolizing space,’ he paused, held the eyes shut for a few instants, and looked upward, *See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth,* reality undid itself – he strained to focus on mana-threads, four blue colored dots – invisible in some respect, beamed at the planet, ‘-good thing I designed the internal components,’ the palm opened to see the threads joint into a single orb, ‘-the world doesn’t need to know,’ *Concealment,* he engraved the enchantment and clapped, the watchers disappeared. ‘-Should have realized that little flaw,’ an order was quickly sent to HSP for alterations. ‘-Back to my fun,’ the display lit vibrantly, ‘-light blue marks where we’ve infiltrated, dark blue means it’s unreachable. We’ve discovered 40% of the main province. What about Alpha,’ he swiped, bringing the latter to focus, ‘-Melmark. It’s green, meaning

everything's up for exploitation,' a tap brought a jumble of uninteresting messages sent at a rate of thousand, if not greater per tick. 'He didn't lie about lacking processing power – decryption will take a while.' Another button waved with a more obnoxious icon, "-weekly summary," it read, he pressed. "Arrival of Leon has toppled and squandered Alphian belief. The church's taken a draconic way of suppressing individuality – to weed out heresy, they're fighting the local religions and forcing the uncooperative into death marches. Southern provinces are controlled by the empire – the emperor demanded Leon contain their conversion. Melmark's under stress, any false move, and civil war could erupt," he toggled off the message, "-that's why the empire supported Leon's crusade and asked for us to keep the prisoners. Emperor's wise, something has changed at the top – it's not like before, they're making active efforts to keep peace within their borders. Riaz saw two birds one stone. That's why they don't want a battle – handling Alpha's rather complex hierarchy," he sighed.

Notification, read the screen, "-Easel Run Gard's central mine and Arda's industrial complex have reached completion."

'What?' he blinked and dug deeper, '-a secret project backed by the established alliance between Arda and Easel Run Gard, a venture overseen by Hidros. Just how many projects are running concurrently? Is that why we're always on the brink of bankruptcy?' Igna exhaled a loud cry, "-éclair's been planning this for my eventual return. Playing the fool, he hung onto my vision and created Hidros' foundation for the future. It came at the cost of a recession, selling information about Maicite and its technology. You sneaky devil – giving a shot, a sniff into its true potential – like the first high one gets from narcotics. éclair, éclair, éclair, you're quite the mastermind. I shouldn't have underestimated the abilities – you even fool I," the visage brightened.

Knock, knock, "-enter," the interface disappeared.

"Igna," said another scary vixen, "-I'm back," ambled Lilith.

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"My," he offered a seat, '-a bundle?'

"It went according to the plan," she smiled and tapped the toddler's cheek, "-Eia's rage and anguish, her emotion sufficed to bring her," red hair sat upright, stretching her arms and eating air, "-where are we?" abyssal colored eyes landed on Igna, "-who are you?"

"I could ask the same question..."

"Don't be a brat," Lilith tapped the toddler's head.

"M-mother..." said a pout, "-the name's Sathanas, Satan's daughter and princess of Wrath. Mother, why am I here?"

"It paid off," commented Igna, "-I wish we had Satan instead of his brat."

"What you say?" she glared.

"Princess of Wrath," he calmly walked over and held her head, "-it would be wise not to flaunt that anger in my presence," a chilling sensation ran down her back, flash images of death and destruction,

complete chaos, angels having wings ripped and hearts eaten – Alfred made a lasting impression, “-understood?”

“Who are you?” she escaped the hold and scurried behind Lilith.

“Igna Haggard, a simple man with special skills.”

“Don’t listen to him,” said a jestful whisper, “-this here, Sathanas, is your new master. I’ve sworn my heart, soul, and body to him and his cause. The Prince of Lust and Gambling, Asmodeus, the Prince of Greed and Wealth, Mammon, and the prince of Envy, Beelzebub, have sworn themselves fully. Igna please show her the wings,” he obliged to summon Lucifer’s wings, “-defeated Lucifer in battle and has the blessing of powerful goddesses. We’ll spend hours if I were to give a proper introduction. Just know,” she smiled, “-Igna Haggard’s a normal man with special skills.”

“See, I told you,” he crossed his arms, “-my introduction is flawless.”

“My new master?” her inky black pupils narrowed, “-prove it to me.”

“Prove it?” *Thud, thud, thud,* the door opened, “-majesty, we need help.”

General Minerva held a pensive glare, “-lead on,” he said, quick to grab and pull Sathanas into his arms. She blinked cluelessly over his shoulder, Lilith stood in the background and waved, “-good luck.”

A report lit the interface, “-the captured army of thirty-thousand staged a coup. Castle Gris is overrun. They’ve gotten hands on vehicles and weapons and are gunning for Savaview bridge.”

“Any idea why?”

“No...”

“A rebelling army has nothing to lose. We can’t mobilize that quick, yes?”

“Sad to say, but yes. We’re stretched thin dealing with the sudden monster inflation around Oxshield. Handling Kreston’s plague and protection from bandits... not the greatest.”

“Not a problem,” they leaped outside, climbed aboard a helicopter, and darted north. Orders for deployment rang across the air force base – a squadron of armed helicopters was called into action. An airstrike was on standby.

‘Flying machines, what era is this?’ wondered Sathanas, ‘-and why does he hold me so tightly. He’s barely phased by my presence; can my elders truly be in contract with this man....’

Touch down, “-majesty,” said an officer, “-general,” he bowed, “-we’ve heard about the uprising. They should be here later tomorrow, what are your orders?”

“Push the line into Dorchester, we’ll occupy Castle Garsley – have the man erect a checkpoint. I’ve called in reinforcement from the panzer unit. We’ll show them the true terror of the mainland,” ordered the general.

By the time evening came – surveillance showed nothing, transport was lost in the Rotten Thicket without any signs of life.

“What do you make of this?” wondered Minerva fixed upon a real-time map, “-they disappeared.”

“Must have scattered,” he said, “-split their forces into the forest and move south. We might have underestimated them a tad bit. Dorchester’s not under occupation from any armies, borders were only set. And from what I see, there are many strongholds and fortress free for occupation.”

“You don’t think?”

“There is only one option I see. Someone within Kreston’s a traitor.”

“Could have easily been the empire,” returned a tense Minerva, “-we’ve fought for Kreston, and know how much the people love us.”

“A single rotten apple within a basket,” he said.

General’s concentration was interrupted quite a bit – a serious situation needed the utmost attention, and yet, the whimsical king brought along a toddler, one sharped tongue and quick to anger, “-who’s the brat?”

“Don’t know as of yet,” he replied, “-focus on the screen, Athena...”

“Hard to focus when the kid keeps on giving the death stare.”

“Just how she’s wired,” the mind played countless possibilities, “-yeah, we’re going to war again.”

“Against the broken army?”

“Yeah, they’re most likely settling in places where our eyes don’t reach. They don’t have supplies and will likely wage guerrilla warfare, take supply trucks, and capture settlements. Show us thy might, general.”

“...”

Chapter 958: “AHOY!”

‘He challenges me... he’s seriously challenging me?’ to her side, with a toddler over his shoulder, watched Igna. A smugness rose within the air, ‘-I get it,’ she eased on her tense presence and scurried to a bigger monitor, ‘-I’ve caused quite a lot of problems for the kingdom. It’s about time I fix some of it,’ a motivating second wind blew, her gray stare sparked – Goddess of War and Wisdom, a title Igna spoke with much disinterest, expectation didn’t quite stack. A coup ushered by prisoners – on later counts revealed thirty thousand, had the neighboring provinces, those sharing a border with Dorchester, namely; Arda, Kreston, Oxshield, and the newly colonized Vigrant Archipelago – were on edge. Such numbers were the same if not greater to many independent kingdoms out there – a fearsome fact the rulers understood.

“Alright,” said Igna clearing his throat, the sound of helicopters sliced the pensive silence of the mobile control room, “-my job starts now,” he said, dawning on a military uniform. Orenmir strapped to his belt and Tharis holstered within his vest, “-majesty,” a surveillance officer, also a researcher at the university, approached, “-would thee entertain the idea of trying new weapons?”

“Why?”

“Lethalness of rifles, guns, and firearms, in general, has proven a leading tactical advantage in wars. Still,” he glanced at the king’s armaments, “-my liege prefers to use a sword and a revolver, might I know why?” Minerva overheard the genuine interest, ‘-a fair question,’ she looked over and locked her arms.

“Familiarity,” answered the king, “-my sword and my revolver have survived countless o’ battle. They were used by my uncle as well,” he branched the sheathed Orenmir, “-our kingdom isn’t stranger to tales of legendary swords and weapons. Take lady Achilles’ sword, now dubbed as the hero’s holy sword, the first adventurer to clear and defeat the tower of Aris. Her fame extended to her weapon, as for mine,” he twirled the immaculately crafted container and returned to the strap, “-it’s more than enough to handle humans,” he reached and grabbed a slumbering Sathanas by the waist – the lift broke her sleep, drool fell over the couch as he carried her outside.

“Seriously...” she frowned, “-could have woken me...”

“Don’t be a brat,” he hauled her over his shoulder and walked, “-we have a battlefield to visit.”

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“General,” saluted the air force, he nodded at the salutes and entered one of the flying birds. Much had changed since the days of the RS-F2 and its armored variant. The current model written as RS-F9X, Thunderbird, is equipped with the AFR and current state-of-the-art technology brought by Midas. The Control panel seemed quite the hassle, with multiple screens and a lot of buttons, a glance at the shoulder pads told of the ranks, First-Class B for the pilot and Second-Class B for the co-pilot. The squadron consisted of experienced airmen, a taken-for-granted fact.

Connection Established, read the interface – the sister system spoke across the communication channel, “-right gentlemen,” said Minerva, “-tonight’s operation will involve establishing a forward base of operation. Panzar Unit and Infantry have crossed Savaview bridge and are on their way to Frostrest Castle. King Igna’s unit will fly over the battlefield and scout the nearby hills and forest. Expect the castle to be occupied, whether it is or not, doesn’t change the situation. To conquer, we must move, and going forward is exactly what the air force is here for.”

‘Way to lay it on thick,’ Igna shrugged, the cockpit turned and nodded affirmingly. Blades rattled, and a clear night with great visibility marked the start of a great battle. Meanwhile, the voyage northeast began, the general had her hands on the chessboard, moving her limited pieces strategically around the map.

A report flashed by Erano’s screen as if a gong, “-Brigadier General Erano, per the growing situation of Dorchester – I ask for reinforcement to be moved to the Krestonian border,” he swiped the letter and sipped a warm cup of coffee, ‘-months later and we do battle against the remnants. We should have known; well, we knew deep down that amount wouldn’t have dwindled,” with a regiment of two thousand men – he ordered the latter be split into companies of five hundred each – ordering two of the four to move northwest, keeping the remainder – one in Port Smith and another at the capital. Public order was top of the list; Kreston’s distrust would eventually bring the province’s downfall before an army could.

Similar to Kreston, a call to action reached lady Courtney, Queen of Arda and Duchess of Rotherham’s desk. “-To her royal majesty, Queen Courtney of Arda, we of the Hidrosian government ask for her

majesty's support in containing the Dorchestrian uprising. Reports place the count at thirty-thousand. The first operation is being led by his majesty the king, your son, the king of Hidros. We would be humbled if her royal majesty could send forces at the shared border, limiting any influence the uprising might muster," it went into further detail, five pages later being signed by éclair.

'Igna, what are you thinking,' she leaned on a balustrade and watched as the city within the holy tree echoed, '-can we spare men?' an attendant arrived at her side and knelt, "-orders, majesty. Wish it and we will have it done."

"Send notice to the guild, tis a formal decree from their queen. Adventurers of adequate skill are to make their way Northeast and aid our army."

"As you wish, Majesty."

Frostrest castle, marked on their map – was a few minutes out. "-Orders, majesty?"

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"Let me think," they approached to a sudden alarm, *incoming projectile,* flashed the screen, the squadron leader took charge, "-scatter," the rotors roared, countermeasure were deployed – the AFR locked and eliminated the assailant. 'Damn,' gulped Igna, '-they're quite formidable. Impressed yet again,' he slid the door, "-I'm going in – have the squadron scout the surrounding area – Central will provide logistical support." The last sentence trickled onto éclair's work desk.

'Seriously, now?' a brief shake turned into a grin, '-let's have some fun,' the surveillance system activated – a detection spell scanned and gave accurate numbers and location. Information that was relayed to general Minerva. "-Right," her call to order changed – moving the troupes into a strategically superior position.

The general of the air force, however, was seen leaping from his helicopter straight into enemy territory, "-king Igna's entered Frostrest castle," said the current log.

"Seriously," she facepalmed, "-the ruler of our kingdom's on the frontlines. I can't be asked," tenseness of war was snuffed, an imaginary picture of Igna choking a snake, representation of stress, had the various channel exhale laughs and ease the mood. A respace that allowed for a greater, clearer view.

"Alright people, follow your king into battle."

Thud, he landed, no parachute save the strength of his ankle, '-thought as much,' he dusted the boots and ambled into a tree line, '-my body's strong.' Before rose a mossy stone castle – the interface scanned and displayed signs of life, '-looks about a company of five hundred, they have weapons.' Vague tugs pulled his cheeks, "-what?" he hushed.

"Why are we here?"

"To fight?"

"I sense a lot of people; can you handle them alone?"

"Sathanas," he patted her head patronizingly, "-don't misunderstand – the kingdom's army can easily handle this little fortress. I chose to enter the battle to prove my might. Now, the decision is yours,

either join my cause and become one of my subordinates – or, be killed at my hands. I’m not foreign to spilling the blood of innocents to prove a point.”

“Don’t act high and mighty,” her appearance swapped for a young lady, tall and handsome – hair tied in a bun with swords on her back, “-I might not know much about this world,” she held one of the handles, “-killing people’s always been my specialty.”

“No,” Igna refuted, calmly grabbing her hand off the weapon, “-don’t you dare take my fun away, little brat. Just watch,” he smiled and nonchalantly broke into sight. He circled the castle and arrived at the main gate, “-AHOY!” echoed a thunderous yell.

“Ahoy!” returned one of the lookouts, “-state your name and business. The castle is under command of the holy knights of Leon.”

“Open the gates,” said Igna, “-I bring information from lord Nicola.”

“Lord Nicola?” the name sent echoes around – metallic grate churned, lifting to a sea of on guard soldiers.

‘Mercenaries from Sadia.’

Pass the keep – the olden ruined hallows descended to an underground dungeon, there – prisoners of war, those bearing noble features and fair skin were tied and bled, ‘-by the facial features, they’re from Iqavea. Wait,’ he narrowed on a certain visage, ‘-that hairstyle, Katherine Goldberg?’ he slowed, “-guard, tell me, who’s that lady?”

“She’s the spawn of Duchess Goldberg – those stuck-up nobles never give a clear answer. Well, not her, she broke after master said hi,” he snickered, “-so much for being pure.”

‘I was right,’ he passed the cells to a bigger room, “-hello,” waved one of two men standing before a shackled naked middle-aged man who bled from various tiny cuts. The eyes were partially burnt, the visage branded and the chest boiled from a mixture of tar and oil, “-just in time for the man’s shadow,” cackled the sadistic torturer, “-lookey here,” he kicked, the man’s consciousness regained, “-M-M-MERCY... L-L-LET THE P-P-PRINCESS GO.”

“Theon,” said Igna, “-I see you’re having fun.”

“Master, I was bored and found work,” he pointed at the other man, “-might I present, Lord Shafthener of the Church of Leon, Inquisitor of the Southern Sect.”

“Pleasure,” said the well-mannered man. They exchanged a gripping handshake and soon stood side-by-side. Theon had a bucket filled with boiling oil hanging over the prisoner, “-I love this method,” said Theon, “-the way the skin melts around the scalp, carrying hair and blood down the face and onto the body – I call it the Dorchestrian Melt-off.”

“Dorchestrian Melt-off?” repeated the inquisitor.

“Yeah,” nodded Igna, confirming what they’d heard, “-Dorchestrian Melt-off. Can’t fault them for having a great imagination,” a sudden pull toppled the bucket – the substance dropped into a folly of screams and painful cries – the repugnant smell of burnt hair and skin proliferated, a poignant sense of warmth and relief washed Theon’s face, “-I LOVE IT!” he applauded.

“Even my comrades at the capital couldn’t do such atrocities... we’re known for our torture. Before this man,” he nodded, “-our methods have no reply. Tell me,” the situation finally ended on the strange guest, “-who are you, and what brings thee here?”

“My, seriously?” he glanced downward, “-Lord Shafthener, can’t thee see my military outfit?”

“A soldier from Hidros, so what? We have plenty of them here.”

“Allow me to translate,” interjected Theon, “-what the guest wishes to say is, surrender or die.”

“Ha,” the man rose a hand, “-a single man going against my company, are Hidros man this daft?”

“The little excursion has been fun,” *smack,* the inquisitor dropped by Theon’s handy work, “-I’m guessing we best keep him alive?”

“Yeah, consider him a present,” added Igna, “-a reward for your senseless whims.”

“It would be my honor,” bowed the warmly deranged Theon.

‘I’ve employed a nutcase,’ back to whence they came, “-unshackle the prisoners, I’ll clear up the exit for when we leave. Theon, remember, treat them, the better they feel, the more toy’s I’ll give.”

“Understood,” he rubbed his hand shadily, “-leave the prisoners to me.” Leaving a man to boil in the distance – Igna found a true match in ways of depravity. Tharis in hand, he stormed hallowed corridors and shot on sight. Immaculate accuracy and unlimited ammunition for it drew on the outside world for bullets. Outlines made it easy to shoot through walls, and the harbinger of death climbed upward to a firing squad, “-RAISE YOUR HAND!” screamed one, bearing resemblance to the Sadian people.

“My, I seem to be outnumbered.”

“Drop the attitude, where’s Lord Shafthener?”

“Napping,” he returned exiguously.

Additional footsteps charged from the dungeon, “-dead, they’re dead.”

Time slowed, ‘-he’s about to give the order,’ Igna faded, pointed Tharis and fired, the confusion lathered their mind, Orenmir’s screams of death permeated across the fortress – true terror faced them in seething bloodlust, “-die.”

Chapter 959: Interview

Bullet snapped at the first target’s shoulder, he dropped lifelessly and cried. ‘-He’s paralyzed,’ figured Igna, slash after slash – blood bled and gathered – spiraling into a crimson apple. *Crunch,* a force of hundreds dropped, he bit and ate all the while survivors ran for the grated gates, “-OPEN!” they cried, the distant boom of the devil’s footstep amplified, fear grasped the heart and silence – splatter against the gate and outside.

“Here we are,” a nonchalant swing cleaned the dulled blade, ‘-good work,’ he thought, ‘-Orenmir,’ a mist of agony rose from its scabbard – handle clicked, the sword sheathed.

Theon skipped onto the relatively clean courtyard, “-I heard screams,” he said with a maimed finger in hand. Igna frowned, “-oh, my apologies,” he quietly hid the item, “-I like to take a souvenir from my best works. The melt-off was one of the best I’ve ever seen.”

An echoey relief, brought by the sudden shatter of the gate’s mechanism caught their attention, and both turned to a beautifully terrifying lady. Her darkened outfit, reminiscent of vampirism, ambled, her darker gaze rose at the many fades, peering and scanning, locking onto various objects and coming to her conclusion, *whistle,* she nonchalantly kicked a head and continued to the small entourage, “-what happened here?”

“I told you,” yawned Igna, “-taking a fortress on my own is rather simple.” Theon was spotted over the wall, “-Is this him?” he asked holding a facially different personage.

“Yeah,” returned Igna, *Connection to Squad Three,*

Established, returned the sister system.

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“Majesty?” answered the pilot.

“Castle’s been cleared – make the rounds, eliminate any survivors. We don’t need work of said conquest to reach the others.”

“Understood,” and in the distant night-drawn sky – the hardened fighters tactically swarmed and examined the area. Intel blessed by Central wrote across screens, culminating in simple extermination.

Sathanas and Theon followed him into the dungeon yet again, the foul smell of burnt hair and decomposing parts begot a gag from Sathanas, “-breathe through your nose,” returned Igna, “-you’ll get used to it.”

‘Get used to it?’ her pace slowed a few, keeping at the back of the queue, ‘-does he mean I should get used to this?’ her deep regard swallowed the area, ‘-why should I?’ she narrowed, ‘-treating people as if they were naught but toys to be discarded. Humans are the worse on themselves. If they’re safe from repercussions, most will do unspeakable acts. I’m the daughter of Satan, the level of cruelty shown here has my heart racing. I feel alive,’ a slight grin escaped, ‘-this is awesome...’

The injured bloke was chained by the wrist and left to dangle. The bullet wound calcified per Igna’s spell, rather than heal, he burnt it shut and sat, “-wake him,” cigar lit, “-Theon, consider this an interview.”

“An interview?” he cupped his hands invitingly and threw icy cold water, *GASP,* cried the half-naked man, “-where am I?” he cringed and squinted at his shoulder.

“Dungeon,” returned Theon.

“There’s the lord inquisitor,” said Igna, “-napping on the torture table.”

“Ignore the burnt remains,” added Theon, “-tis the attendant of lady Goldberg. Anyhow, shall we proceed?”

“Interrogation?” narrowed the man, “-I won’t speak. We of the Sadian nation don’t yield information to the enemy. I won’t speak nor will I betray, my faith is steadfast.”

“Right, the more you speak,” Theon brazenly impaled using a hot-iron spike – it touched bone and returned – a haunting scream rattled the cage. Lack of structure drowned most of the sound, a little piece of trivia Sathanas and Igna realized simultaneously. After the hot spike, Theon squatted and held the man’s feet, giving a nod as if a jeweler taking an interest in precious metal. A blank, focused expression moved to the back, locked onto a chest, and pulled – the latter was rested behind the prisoner’s heels. Sweat, anger, and pain sent tremors and shakes – a fact Theon shrugged.

“Where are the questions?”

“What questions?” returned Igna, “-were you not the one who announced thy faith? I’m not one to ask for thee to forsake thy beliefs.”

“I did... b-but?”

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“Adrenaline’s a warm drug,” said Igna, “-think whilst possible. After all, once the table turns and the wonder drug is drained – the tsunamic pain shall crash thy psyche into a shell of its former being. Before that comes, you’ll have to contend with Theon,” the petrified captive looked below – unable to move or think.

‘I’ll resist the torture; I won’t back down.’

“Heads up,” said an energetic spurt. Hammer against nail, the man cried – Theon leisurely nailed the feet against the box. He missed a few times, smashing against the feet – little cracks bellowed. Chills ran down Sathanas’ spine.

‘Act of cruelty?’ she lowered her gaze to Igna, ‘-no, this goes beyond cruelty, I can’t describe it – look at them, they relish the idea, each painful gasp brings satisfaction. Are my brothers truly associated with a man like him?’

“Master,” Theon’s focus broke, “-I thought of an idea. Keep our guest entertained, I’ll visit the kitchen.”

A green light glowed, “-there,” said Igna, “-the wounds are healed. No risk of dying from infection.”

“Evil,” he gasped, “-you people are evil incarnate.”

“What do you expect?” narrowed Igna, “-aside from king, I’m known as the Devil,” he puffed, “-a title granted after many exploits,” finger rose, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* crystal colored lines impaled the captive’s brain – consciousness faded into a blank stare, ‘-I get it,’ the threads shattered, ‘-I understand.’ In a brief few seconds – key memories transferred from one to the other.

“We mustn’t allow Dorchester to fall.”

“How can we even help them?”

“Launch an attack. The pope’s troupes are resilient. I know someone who’ll help.”

“And?”

“The pope’s dog, Nicola Vonhem.”

“What can he do?”

“Not much on his own. However, send this.”

“I understand, we’ll take back Dorchester. Thirty thousand men strong is sufficient, isn’t that right, Aaren?”

“As the masters say, I shall obey,” he bowed.

“Go on, save the prisoners and stage a coup, the rest will be ours to command. Make certain thee die before yielding answers. Bite thy tongue.”

Theon entered the room, and Igna’s vision swept under the constant evaluation of possible outcomes. “-a potato peeler?”

“Yeah,” he giggled, “-I’ve always wondered how’d it fair against human skin,” the fearsome figure knelt and laid the sharpened tool over the man’s foot, “-grit or something,” he flicked the nail, a thunderous wave of pain shot upward, *AHHH,* he bit his lips and coughed, “-insane, you’re INSANE!”

“Am I?” he pressed and pulled, the metallic blade effortlessly took part of the skin, “-It’s like peeling a potato,” he commented, “-except, the potato is alive and a little hard to grip. Good thing I had the blade changed,” he winked and continued – the screams but intensified, reaching a point where one could distinguish how much it pained using the echo and sound.

Theon’s method grew merciless. Igna’s thoughts wandered, ‘-Aaren, poor chap being cared for by Theon was instructed to lead the rebellion. He must have been accompanied – the ‘masters’ mentioned a device or alluded to one. Nicola’s a traitor, gathered much with my gamble earlier. There might be more – keep that speculation aside and focus on what I learned. The rebellion’s not random, it was staged, if tis true – they’re led by Sadia or a proxy. Would be bad if the scheme climbed its way to their kingdom – the blatant infraction of Wracia and Hidros’ treaty might send ripples. Wait,” he blinked, ‘-this could be a good thing – I’ve always imagined Wracia as a united empire. Elendor’s obviously not under Old Cray’s rule, tis being led by a shadow king – and I’d bet it’s Wracia’s new sword – Sadia. We could send a messenger and relay our findings – I doubt the palace officials would care. The scale’s a problem. Aaren’s not worth the hassle for them, they’d ignore the infraction and blame the matter on a revolutionist party. Always a loophole to divert blame – I’d do the same. Where does it leave us?’ he puffed and squashed the cigar, ‘-here,’ refocused on the woeful captive, ‘-rather not consider battle. Wiser to wait and watch, who knows, there could be a camaraderie to be born from Vigrant Archipelago. Wishful thinking, we know who’s leading the war – objective, unknown. Tis enough – let them do as they please.’

“Majesty.”

“Theon.”

“He might die if I continue, what are your orders?”

“Might die?” he paused, “-Aaren, tell me, how many people came with you?”

“Four,” he shakily exhaled, “-and they’re stronger and wiser than me. Don’t underestimate the Sadian people, we will have our revenge and we will-” just as a mighty speech was to unleash, Theon stood and shoved a knife up Aaren’s jaw, nailing his tongue against the palate.

Theon exclaimed, “-shit, I didn’t mean.”

The king rose, “-Theon.”

“My heartfelt apology, majesty, I didn’t mean to harm him badly.”

“Aaren yet lives, Theon,” he said reassuringly, “-as promised, we shall enter a slave contract.”

Theon knelt, warmth carried each exhale, “-I’m blessed, thank you, my lord.” A blood seal burnt on Theon’s neck, “-with this, my loyalty is assured. I won’t betray nor act against my master and his belongings. My past reputation is one not to be trusted, nor should I expect salvation or forgiveness. My only want is to be needed,” he knelt, “-and so, majesty, to further thy quest into the mortal realm, I freely relinquish my body and soul.”

“Sten Parcyvell, past is as described, concluded event. Today we stand as Theon and Igna.”

“I understand, majesty, I understand,” he kissed Igna’s palm and breathed a sigh of relief. Day broke outside – the sound of engine ruptured the solemn silence, “-Theon, Sathanas, go welcome our guests,” he ordered, “-reinforcement’s here.” The duo exchanged glances and spoke – the budding start of a great friendship. Igna stopped at the first cage and turned – a naked Katherine Goldberg was tied to a metallic plate, her breaths dim and signs of life barely present. The lock clicked, he entered, ‘-typical signs of torture,’ he examined, ‘-her face was left untouched. Scratch marks,’ a look over the table showed broken syringes, ‘-ah, narcotics. Such mundane hospitality.’

“-H-help m-me,” she begged, dressed in skin and bones. He grabbed her cheeks and pressed, “-who am I?”

“...”

“TELL ME, WHO AM I?”

“...”

“WHO AM I?”

“Lizzie...” escaped her drugged stupor, “-Lizzie, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry... I wish, I wish, help, salvation, w-w-w-.”

An overwhelming deluge wiped Igna’s mind, ‘-she remembers, she does.’

“Katharine,” he whispered, “-would you like to make a deal with the devil?”

“A-anything t-to s-shake this f-feeling...”

“Sign here,” a symbol rose above her face, “-place thy hands within the circle,” her palms laid flat, *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.*

Cough, ‘-my head,’ vision returned, “-HELP,” she shot upright, “-where am I?”

“A dungeon,” returned Igna, “-you were captured. A fitting fate to one belonging to a traitorous family. Tell me, Katherine, do you remember our agreement?”

“A deal,” an ethereal pair of hands gripped her heart from within and she choked, “-m-m-m-my h-h-h-heart.”

“Yes, remember the feeling, tis ultimate dread. You belong to me, Katherine, body, and soul for I rescued thee from the pits of hell.”

“King Igna,” she gulped, “-am I to become your concubine?”

“No,” he returned, “-nothing complex, the Goldberg dynasty is thine to rule after all. Similar to when Queen Gallienne had your lady mother as a slave. You’ll become mine,” he winked, “-besides, when time is right, I shall come knocking.” Clothes fluttered on her lap, “-get dressed, reinforcement’s here, we’re going home.” The capture of Frostrest castle – following their return, Rosespire castle’s dungeon took on a new life. Theon’s employment as dungeon master came with many, many advantages. For one, prisoners of war unwilling to speak confessed to all, it ranged to criminal trials as well. The infamy of Rosespire’s dungeon master would but grow as time passed – death seemed salvation compared to capture; such was the mindset of many touched by Theon’s hand.

Chapter 960: Pardon of the dead

Marinda, more specifically, Nordway. Streets wined before nicely built lines of blocks, following the eventual road towards the ever-peering Einheim. Amidst the unsteady crowd of bibulous gusts – a table perched on the upper floor of one said, Carod Inn, sat three figures. A table of one gentleman and two ladies – other more fashionably dressed, as in their clothes were made of thick, glossy, overall, expensive material – courted other gatherings. Many threw regards, whispered comments, and carried on their usual business.

Asmodeus wiped his brow, stuck a wink at one of the passing dames, and continued with his drink. Kul sighed, channeling her focus onto Yui. “Something wrong?” said Kul, noticing the tense expression.

“I think so,” she replied, August 30th – weeks had elapsed since the Central sent news of the rebellion, “-look here,” she pointed her phone, “-see here?” a map told of a large area circling the kingdom’s nautical territory.

“Yeah, I see dots, what about it?” The savvy Kul swiped, turning the diagram into a picture, “-this was taken hours ago, it displays the spot where these were spotted. Tell me, doesn’t it strike as weird?”

“Not really,” returned a nonchalant Asmodeus, “-maybe the device is malfunctioning. Besides you and éclair, include master as well, I don’t know other who’d place much faith in experimental tech.”

“The drunken man has a point,” affirmed Kul grudgingly, “-still,” she stood, “-we ought to reinforce visit.”

“Complacency is the mother of failure,” added the prince, “-before we go,” the focus strangely floated leftward, the washroom. Therein waited a dame, her envious flaps and coy side-glances, “-I’m needed elsewhere,” he threw his jacket and walked.

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“My lady,” he smiled at the bitter reaction of Kul and Yui.

“Look at him,” they exhaled, “-always the lady hunter,” they shrugged, there was no changing a person’s nature, such as the excuse. Rosepire II was anchored where once resided a prominent dynasty. Minutes elapsed, “-I’m here,” waved a sweaty prince, “-my hands were tied,” exhaled, “-literally.”

“Right,” they narrowed, “-I’d rather not be sentenced to your sexual tales.”

The manor took flight northward, the area in question was a few nautical miles from shore. A place of the sea dubbed, ‘-Old Rey,’ for the mysterious disappearance of various ships. Weather at said part of the ocean was wild. A simple mile offshore of Marinda sufficed for a man to be left at sea – whether one would find their way to the isle or not was subject to luck and the isle’s generosity.

Minutes turned hours – mechanical trouble and personality issues rendered the survey difficult. Once over the beforementioned area, Yui’s gaze scoured the dark-blue floor, dots were underneath, and yet, there laid naught. ‘-What is this?’ she scratched her head, took a step back, and flipped the display, “-can’t make head or tails of this.”

“Could be a bug,” interjected Asmodeus, “-a false report...”

“Possibly not,” gulped Kul, “-guys, we need to go, now,” she leaped and landed, quickly sprinted across the courtyard, and leaped over the walls to a sudden halt. Amidst the dark-blue seascape rose a darker-colored fuselage – a metallic whale surfaced.

“What is that?” asked Asmo leaning for a better look.

“I don’t know,” returned Kul, “-I sense mana, that’s about it.”

Yui immediately ordered a retreat, the slow moving Rosepire II engaged, the interjection sent vibrations across, “-what are you doing?”

“I’ve seen enough movies to know what happens.”

“Right, have you?” flaps toggled, pillars of smoke darted at the isle, *thud,* an explosion threw Asmodeus off-balance, “-careful,” he cried, “-don’t turn the ship so hard, Yui.”

“That wasn’t Yui,” hastened Kul, her arms stretched, multiple magical circles summoned -a barrier rose, *thud,* “-again?” she fell onto her knees, ‘-it went through.’ Singles turned volley – the floating island’s bottom shattered and rained boulders over the dark-blue ground.

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‘There,’ the isle faced Marinda, many more projectiles ate at the structure – Asmo and Kul stumbled into the command room, “-we made it,” they said whilst supporting one another, “-Yui?”

“Don’t worry,” said a bloodied smile, “-I got it.”

Rosepire II sprinted with a flick of a switch, crossing the dreaded distance between sea and land, “-hold on,” she managed a harsh landing. Furniture, and decorations, were all destroyed in wake of the sudden attack.

Blood on her palms and vision blurred, ‘-escape.’

“Safety,” gasped a wounded Asmo, “-I was wrong.”

“Yeah,” returned Kul, “-we’re under attack,” she cringed, “-by underwater ships.”

“They’ve progressed so much in nautical warfare...” Yui’s arm shook, ‘-Easel Run Gard’s under attack.’

Purple miasma bubbled. Kul rose her weapons; transient reality altering lances and darkened orbs, “-who’s there?”

“Kuthl,” said a semi-transparent figure, “-I heard the crash. Rosespire II is destroyed, yes?”

“Yeah,” returned Yui, “-we were ambushed, unfortunately.”

It took a few seconds, and non-verbal arguments and resolution using glances and frowns reached a final crescendo, “-Gustv.”

Return to whence they came, exception – a private audience with the King, “-Kuthl’s relayed the gist,” he said, “-lady Kul, lady Yui, please, I’d like to hear more on the matter.”

“King Gustv,” Yui took charge, “-our detection system picked on anomalies. When crossed checked – there were obvious inconsistencies. We checked and it’s plausible Marinda’s under attack.”

“Under attack?” he openly smiled, “-don’t misunderstand, I don’t mean to come across as arrogant. Marinda takes pride in being invisible. You don’t have to worry.”

“Would his majesty not like to know more about the possible attackers?”

“I can figure a guess. They have underwater warships, yes?”

“...”

“Judging by the silence, I’m right.”

“...”

The king simply stood, respectfully excused himself out the room, ‘-oh my god,’ a childish glee invaded the composed demeanor, ‘-I did it,’ he skipped to a private room, ‘-the joy of knowing things. The Devil always knew and had the confidence to bring scrupulous facts to negotiations, I can safely say that I’d get addicted if I had a superior level of knowledge,’ expression swapped, an altar shone in a dark room wherein a sense of scale and direction faded. He walked; each shuffle resounded until an illuminated circle. A tablet of ancient writings rose – a press brought minute snickers and flicks. Jolts of white, threads of silver – echoes of ether, “-speak thy wish.”

“I wish for our seas to be cleansed and for our enemies to be wiped. No mercy to the uninvited. I, king of our realm, offer souls of the will-be captives with respect. Please, guardians of Marinda, save our realm and take their lives.”

“Granted,” reality itself snuffed – Gustv saw himself outside, ‘-the guardian deities shall make due of our enemies.’

Seas roughened – the tides wailed. Beaches cried – clouds of somber mist materialized above intruders. Chills went down Kul’s back, ‘-I have the feeling something extraordinary’s happening.’ Right she was in every sense of the word. Dauting weather and relentless entities mercilessly swallowed the underwater ships.

A whistling fisherman accidentally discovered metallic wreckage at the northern shore. It told the untold, a story of desperation and panic. A tale known to only the missing seamen. Wasn’t long before an elated group of researchers landed.

“Submarines, who knew the empire had such technology.”

“We did,” yawned Clarise, “-stop yapping and load the trucks already. We’re needed at the lab later this afternoon.”

“Lady Clarise’s uncaring attitude towards the title of a director is refreshing.”

“I know,” returned another recruit, “-here I had imagined a dictator.”

‘I gna’s going to drive me crazy. Ordering me to investigate the matter, how are we going to reverse-engineer their technology. I say we should develop our method...’

“Director, we’ve salvaged the wreckage.”

“Understood, have the others load up. We’re headed home.”

Multiple jets were spotted across the sky that day, one headed to Easel Run Gard and another, Hidros.

“My head,” Igna pressed his forehead, “-it hurts,” the eyes cried for a break – the bundle of reports all but grew. *Notification; Yui,* ‘-Dear master, it’s me, your favorite assistant. I’m rather angry at why you’d keep us out of the loop. Imagine my surprise when one day I get a phone call from Central, ‘-go to Easel Run Gard’, it said I didn’t get it then, I understand now. You’re quite devious – but not so. Our transfer was ordered by General Minerva, I confirmed, and was left speechless. The Goddess of Wisdom and Warcraft is coming on her own. She accurately predicted a would-be attack on Marinda without much to go off of. I’m sure the capital’s singing her praises. Suppose I should end my report. Asmodeus sends his warmest regards to Sathanas. We will resume our duties at Easel Run Gard until we speak again,” signed Yui.

Contrary to what was believed, Igna scowled at another message, one that arrived before Yui’s, “-to the magnanimous king Igna, I, humble Minister of Defense humbly apologize for my mistake. Our department accidentally sent a dispatch order to lady Kul, lord Asmodeus and lady Yui to make for Marinda. I doubt his majesty cares about the details of why such an incident occurred. Fortunately, as many would say, fate brought them to Marinda where important information was uncovered. The ill-timed mistake was a blessing in disguise. I would greatly appreciate if his majesty washes his hand with the problem. I’ll personally make sure proper countermeasures are put in place,” signed Minerva.

‘Are they serious, this is comical. One’s mistake becomes an unprecedented advantage,’ *knock, knock,* “-enter,” he said.

“My lord,” curtsied Midne, “-transport is ready, my liege.”

“I’ll be there in a bit,” he said, “-you’re a lifesaver,” he stood, “-about the suit.”

“Ready to be worn,” she smiled, “-please call if anything goes amiss.”

Mundane task, similar to a worker dressing for work, Igna dawned his suit, tied lavishly soft hair, and exited from the royal wardrobe; a massive room cupped within the inner-castle. ‘Queen Gallienne’s daughter, Eia’s death,’ plague ridden remains of the ex-queen’s body was brought to the throne-room. Here, a small assembly of nobles and acquaintances, members of branch families, close friends, and what not, a total number of fifteen, were seated in black. No tears were shed nor grief felt. Piers stood hand in hand with Raiden, the boy was mature enough to know why he lived in secrecy. Pope Carrigan II made the dangerous trip from Kreston to Oxshield, the entourage filled with nuns and priests.

“Nicola’s here,” whispered Alta, “-what are your orders, my lord?”

“Bring him forth,” he whispered, “-keep the shackles. Eia causes much grief in life, let her final moments be quiet.” Gagged and tied, the traitorous Nicola, so would the nickname be known; rushed greedily to Eia’s casket. He shed no tears for only resentment and betrayal displayed, the clenched fist, intimidatingly close distance – enough for an intimate kiss and overall indifference. Alta threw the look at a guard, poor chap nearly choked with embarrassment. “We gather today,” said Carrigan, “-to pay homage to lady Eia,” the fanatical Nicola was dragged, “-her life was short-lived. Most of us know of her scrupulous ways, yet, we must remember, Eia was the daughter of the saintly queen Gallienne. Her actions harmed Hidros and caused harm to many. Even so, she always cared tenderly about her family, and I imagine her logic to have been for the betterment of those she cared about. In death, we honor her cause, and per King Igna’s wishes, pardon her soul and excuse her from all the injustice caused. To be shunned is simple, to forgive is courage. I, Pope Carrigan II, with my authority, pardon Eia Riverty and pray for her soul’s freedom.” The private funeral was shortly taken to the familial crypt where her remains were set close to Queen Gallienne.

More people attended the gathering after her funeral, “-seems many haven’t pardoned my foolish daughter,” sniffled at the back of the party.

“My apologies, Piers, I wish I could have done more. We tried but Eia was far too corrupt, beyond saving.”

“Pardoning her in death is all I asked. Thank you for obliging my request,” they exchanged firm hugs, “-I’m glad my wife placed you in charge, Igna. I never imagined my life to be such a trip – it’s unreal at times. Claireville Academy, my youth, it’s so close yet so far.”

“Piers Riverty, I must ask thee for one last assignment.”

“As you order, my lord.”

“Such is my order,” he smiled, “-take care of Raiden Riverty and enjoy your retirement,” laughter and music elevated the mood. To see a man past his prime smile to tears was warm, even to Igna’s cold heart, “-it’s the least I can do.”

“I’m speechless,” gasped Piers, “-t-thank you.”