

Death Magic 961

Chapter 961: Revenge

“Master is quite generous.”

“éclair, that’s quite the brazen comment.”

“Please,” he smiled, “-I serve the best, tis understandable.”

“All the doom and gloom,” sipped the king, “-I wish it’d fade.”

“Honestly speaking, the room seems uninterested in the life Eia lived. I’ve already said a few words to the press, no way the media’s going to interfere.”

“Queen Eia’s passing,” read a header, “-many of our readers, those who closely followed the quest of repentance would know, lady Eia and her husband, lord Nicola – criminals of the highest degree, were allowed treatment and safety by the king. The one oppressed and wrong for so many years, deprived of love or the ability to give his humongous heart. On an undisclosed date, lady Eia passed, and Kreston’s duke, the pope, presided over the rites there and back, all for the soul’s safe passage. Thus, in the later hours of September the 7th, her body was laid to rest at the royal family’s crypt. The ceremony was attended by little remaining of her family, a few friends, and the lot,” thus wrote a Rosesopian Gazette, similar to the countless others. The knowledge known of the palace’s in and out was great, so they thought, éclair’s uncaring expression told another.

Evening slipped into the night; guests excused themselves. Retainers, including a scrupulously gazing Midne, contempt the idea of cleaning. Nobles or not, ‘-they shit the same as a dog,’ such was the head maid’s saying, ‘-mongrels, all of them.’ Many held smiles, others’ agony, and some were sentenced to the side-glances of their partners.

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Area changes and a smaller, cozier room spreads itself. Couches were arranged around a small table under which laid an expensive carpet. Tall with a chandelier nailed to the middle of the dome-like ceiling. It was no normal discussion nor was the room any better – decoration spoke of war and tragedy, the painting displayed guts and grit – cruelty if one summed the sight.

Two ladies, led by retainers, advanced toward the seats and waited. The outfits were lavish in their own way, both held an air of superiority. One glance sufficed to figure a guess to their age – both were over the fifty mark as told by dyed hair. Wrinkled formed as if proud battle scars of years of frowns and snickering. Locks clicked, opening to Igna in the company of a lass dressed in a simple white gown. On arriving at the seats, he pointed, and said no other words – the lass obeyed with her head downward

“Katherine?” exploded one of the guests, “-HOW DARE YOU!”

“...” Igna wrapped and sat, asking for one retainer to bring drinks.

“Majesty, do explain...” gritted lady Goldberg.

“Lady Goldberg,” he took time before answering; looking almost pleased with her anger. Beside the duchess sat another, Nicola Vonhem Hart’s mother, Duchess Dahnia Hart, current head of the family, “-

lady Dahnia." Two sides of one coin, an explosive personality paired with the brooding, silent type, "-you must understand, today's no social visit. Queen Eia was sent off properly – I do say her soul's rested sufficiently."

"Rested?"

"Lady Dahnia's one for details," he nodded, the lock clicked to a sea of armed guards, "-what about the drinks?" he added randomly to the detriment of Lady Goldberg's expression, '-how did he know?' cried the crinkled eyebrows.

"My, we needn't speak telepathically," he added shrewdly and lifted the lass's solemn visage. Pure innocence and age didn't befit her beauty, golden locks, and blueish-green circles, without much affection, the natural gift her facial structure brought sufficed to make many, men or women, salivate. "Is her serene expression and composed demeanor not the best?" added Igna, "-lady Goldberg, I must sadly relay to what's happened," before the hour was over – he'd recounted in gruesome detail the lady's experiences, torture, and abuse – the way prisoners of war are treated, "-the pain is never-ending, an army of men with bloodied hands hangs on the immoral scale. Regardless of complexion, nationality or what you'd have it; given the order," the gaze amplified, "-people will slaughter one another. And here we have an example of what sexual deprivation has," the image was painted clearly, "-a war, you both," he blinked, "-supported financially."

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"And?"

"Well, picking a side is one's right," he leaned, "-thus my point is proven," guards swarmed their seats, "-welcome to hell."

"Hell?" narrowed lady Goldberg, "-my death shan't come easily. These threats aren't going to scare me, majesty. I'm sad about what happened to my daughter, alas, tis the price to pay for going into war. I do hope his majesty finds it in his heart to "

"To save her heart?" he laughed and leaned, laying elbows on his knee, "-or to save her title?"

"Either..."

"Wrong," he smiled, "-lady Goldberg, on this day forward – Katherine Goldberg will become my fiancé."

"Fiance?" she echoed.

"Yes," he narrowed in resolution, "-duchess Hart; the sins shared by thy son and family name ought to bring memories, yes?"

"I understand," her hands laid atop her knees, "-we're defeated."

"WHAT?"

"Lady Goldberg," she side-glanced, "-might I ask for the drama to stop?"

"What are you, Dahnia..."

“Can you not see?” she looked at Katherine, “-taking the heir of thy dynasty as the bride will inevitably bring the noble houses under one rule. Aside from the Goldberg, there’s the Hart dynasty. There’s no greater way of ending a revolt than to cut off its head. First Eia, second my son, and now, us, majesty, might I ask for the privilege of a detailed explanation?”

“Detailed explanation?” a silver tray arrived – tea was served, “-do you mind if the explanation isn’t chronologically stable, why am I asking,” he sipped, “-let’s start with the rebellion. Military-wise, the battle continues within Dorchester, General Minerva’s flexing her prowess by conquest. Politically, there’s unrest. Nobility’s an illness – yet, many are drawn, tis part of our culture and heritage, much a reason why feudalism continues yet. Hidros is fragmented – easy for invasion from outside parties, we’re in the worse possible state a kingdom can be. My worry was proved at the start of the battle to reclaim Dorchester, an ally turned traitor unleashed floodgates, wiping what little hope of peace we held. Goldberg and Hart dynasty is well-known across the land, from kids to the elderly, many are taught the history such household name played. It brings us to why Dorchester’s rebellion was possible – albeit, in smaller numbers, noble families are a key part of our culture – tis one of the main reason feudalisms works great. Can’t have a king without peasants and nobles, what sort of image would such an inordinate kingdom project? Head of the rebellious faction, upon her death and defeat, scattered affluent families into the wild. No influence means no harm – a part of me hates the idea of nobles of my kingdom turning allegiance towards an enemy state. There comes Katherine Goldberg, heir to the Goldberg dynasty – a dame dressed in an armor of beauty and misery. She belongs to me in every sense of the word, I own her, I say at the risk of sounding misogynistic. Unity of our factions will speak loudly, welcoming nobles in hiding back into Rosepire. They’ll swear fealty to her, uniting nobles and royalists. There’s nothing much to it,” he said, “-for a stronger image, we must become one.”

“What about us?”

“That is the question at hand,” narrowed Igna, “-traitors ought to be sentenced to death. However, on accounts of a long-standing relationship with both my uncle and the previous monarch, I’m not against the idea of allowing thee a retirement confined to a Phantom-controlled manor or hotel. Two widows without siblings – consider it mercy for the arduous fight. Lady Goldberg, your cynical gaze deceive you,” he added, “-in exchange for freedom and retirement, I’d ask but one thing – why.”

“Revenge,” seethed lady Goldberg, “-to pay back my debt. Gallienne and her friend, another trouble monarch, the so-called hero king Staxius, made my life hell. I was supposed to lead, live an exemplary life – instead,” haunting memories returned, “-I was humiliated at his hand and treated badly by hers. They ruined my life, I wasn’t going to stand by whilst Gallienne died a painless death. Her ghost ought to have witnessed how I ruined her pride – she’s no saint, and we know details of her sexual drive. How could one so tainted be loved, I don’t get it... it pains me, it angers me,” she exhaled, “-the day you took the throne, I vowed to make Hidros a miserable existence.”

“Jonia Hart,” narrowed lady Hart, “-my daughter, because of the Haggard’s, her life was ruined. She’s naught but a shell, resenting why she wasn’t born a Haggard. Her journey through the musical academy was painful. As mother, I saw my child turn from loving music to absolute insanity. I couldn’t blame the girl for being talented – therefore, I remained silent until my son, my foolish son, decided to act and woo princess Eia. He took her virtue a year before she turned mature – we kept silent to avoid queen Gallienne’s fury. Sadly, as the Haggard would prove time and time again, they don’t care; the truth was brought to life. My husband suffered a faith worse than death. Lady Goldberg approached me after the

coronation, we decided enough was enough, I didn't want my son to suffer his father's fate. If they can't be happy here, why not be happy somewhere else."

"A story of vengeance," he exhaled, "-the greatest schemes are often spawned from the simplest of reason. Well, lady Goldberg and lady Hart, with respect to the forthcoming and unbiased story-telling; you'll be free with limitations. Go enjoy Hidros for what it has become. We need not end thy tale so shortly."

"I don't know," said lady Goldberg, "-are you naive or simply daft?"

"I second her," nodded lady Hart, "-why allow an enemy to leave without conclusion?"

"Oh," he stood and smiled, "-a simple reason. Lady Goldberg and lady Hart, thou art but side-characters in a tale spanning time and space. Doesn't matter if you live or die," he motioned a guard, "-pick, life or death, your choice, ladies," he tapped Katherine's shoulder, she stood without looking at her mother and followed.

The duo mutually agreed, "-you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yeah," breathed a woeful sigh, "-He left us with no choice."

"I guess," they walked towards an empty wall and faced away, dropping onto their knees and lowering their heads. Midne watched, "-raise your weapons," she ordered, "-in honor of the Goldberg and Hart dynasty, thy memories shall go on, ladies," she dropped her arms and a tempest of bullet fire riddled the castle.

The silent Katherine reached for Igna's jacket, "-is mother dead?" she asked softly.

"First time I've heard you speak," he continued, "-come along," the royal office opened to a mess of files and unchecked reports, "-have a seat," he offered and reached behind the faraway desk. "-short answer, no, long answer, yeah."

"..."

"Don't get it?" he narrowed; "-I guess not. It's simple, they're dead-on paper and as heads of the respective families."

Bodies dropped, "-and you're dead," said Midne, "-transport's ready for safe travels," the ladies knelt confusedly. Head-maid brazenly forced a pie down their throat, '-my body feels light,' whispered one.

"I know," returned the other, "-my hands and legs, my skin, what is this?"

"The pie of life," said Midne, "-rejuvenation," newer identification laid at their feet.

"Yanie," narrowed the youthful blond-haired lady Goldberg – her beauty was true, the apple didn't fall far from the tree. Lady Hart, named Soph, carried another type of beauty, one of dark-colored hair and extreme curves, "-my god, lady Hart, you were bombshell back in the day."

"My," her bands and long dark hair gave a sense of virtuous innocence,"-this is embarrassing..."

"Oh please," she stretched, "-two hotties."

“Ahem,” narrowed Midne, “-if Yanie and Soph are ready?”

“Yes, we are,” they stood, dressed in a more modern outfit.

“Restriction imposed by his majesty is the following; no traveling beyond Hidros, new lives start as freshmen at a university, lastly, abdication from claims of noble blood.”

Chapter 962: Marriage

“You think me a fool for allowing them salvation?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh don’t play coy with me, Sathanas. Nothing’s truer than allowing yourself to watch enemies become worthless. The boon of youth comes with a burden, I rather not go into details.”

9th of September read on the display; Igna found stride at the castle – a strange part of him move clearly and with objective. Sathanas, by her wandering sneers, kept herself busy in aiding Midne and the ministers. A freelance agent of some sort. The defeat of the noble faction and inheritance of the Goldberg title shortly made their way to unscrupulous characters. The king, newly engaged and present, pensively glazed a monitor of various logs and displays. ‘The message’s clear,’ he leaned, ‘-Hidros’ united, the threat of a noble rebellion has been quashed. For the moment anyway. Yumie and Soph seem to be doing great at the musical academy. Out of all the choices, they had to pick the saturated market. Now,’ the logs darkened at certain headings and paragraphs, ‘-the death of lady Goldberg,’ exchanged many messages. Nobles came out of hiding, and soon, as the day ended and the 10th shimmered – those same characters shamelessly presented themselves at the castle.

The throne room grows with the king sitting before a council of peerless supporters. “-Lord De,” narrowed éclair.

“Prime minister, I don’t recognize the king to be the true king,” fired the gutsy noble, “-I’m not a stupid individual. We were foolish in contradicting the prior queen’s decision. For said respect, I’d prefer to swear allegiance to lady Katherine.”

“We also second the proposed idea,” narrowed a group of similarly dressed nobles, “-we’ll serve a true duchess as opposed to a false king.”

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It took strength, Igna noticed, ‘-takes a lot for the ministers to entertain blasphemy against their king. It’s a good trait to have.’

When all was said and done – a queue of nobles lined before the yet recovered Katherine. She spent the afternoon answering to pledges, ignorant to the under-the-table happenings. ‘All the pieces are in place,’ narrowed Igna, the sun draped over the horizon a few hours earlier – he stood straight facing the outside with coffee in hand.

Exhale, the door shut, “-welcome back,” said Igna.

“T-thank you,” returned Katherine.

“Tell me, how were the nobles?”

“Boring,” she said, “-I don’t know, I’m lost as to what my life entails. My mother’s younger and prettier, I’m haunted by visions of my assailant, and most of all, I’m married to the king.”

“Engaged,” he said, “-don’t get ahead of yourself.”

The vacant stare carried deep through the kingdom, crossing lands, climbing mountains to a battlefield. The jaunts of death, echoes, and snaps, the screams of the dead. “-The might generally led his team, carried the wounded, killed the leader, and captured the fort. He with the heart of the strong, armed to the teeth and empathetic to his team, Esvalo the chevalier, a true knight amongst knights, fought thick and thin, from dust until dawn. It was hilarious how easily General Minerva led her forces in foreign territory. Didn’t matter if the army was led by the Sadian people via proxy – her head-on approach and defiant campaign served as a warning, “-don’t anger the Hidrosian people.” What seemed a daunting task turned into a national tale of heroism and grit. October came around, the chill weather eased for a slight warmth -mild distinction drunkards and locals couldn’t make.

5th of October, “-good evening, people of Hidros. Tonight is a special night, we have General Minerva on the show,” the camera panned, “-tell us, general, how did you win so affirmingly?”

“Comes down to discipline and order,” she answered, “-we’re bustling with starved younglings wanting to prove might in battle. Frankly, circumventing a force of their size would have been hard if conditions were off,” as she spoke, an unlikely duo watched. Mild crunches of popcorn, the warmth of cold feet under a blanket – the satisfaction of an awesome surround sound system and expensive television. Igna and Katherine watched, “-she’s talking nonsense,” said Igna, “-they don’t know why we truly won.”

“Why did you win?”

“Because we’re us,” he answered, “-animals hunt to survive, and we fight to live. There’s no greater pleasure than winning after countless defeats,” he went silent on Minerva resuming her speech, ‘-why did we win? Simple, we had intel, superior soldiers, advanced weaponry, and most of all, Minerva. She did cause trouble in the past, but at last, the goddess’ confidence has returned. To see it in action is a treat.’ Life in Hidros found its rhythm – stability rejoined the norm. Days turned weeks, which took steps into darting past years; X117 read proudly over the evolved nation of Hidros.

Tap, tap, ‘-morning already?’ darkness blinked onto long lashes and blond hair. An exposed Katherine coyly returned Igna’s gaze, her exposed status kept from cold air by a lavish blanket. Shuffles, Igna rolled over and faced the ceiling, Katherine warmly inched and laid her head over his chest, “-been two years,” she said, “-since I was taken as a prisoner. I dare say, Igna, you didn’t take me, but my soul and heart. Thank you for last night, the traumatic memories are replaced – I don’t feel so on edge anymore, I’m grateful, thank you.”

“Details,” he answered, “-whatever the future holds, I’m not one to decide,” he stood, “-I vehemently said, didn’t I? We’re engaged. Marriage won’t happen, I’ve had my share of heartaches – rather not experience those feelings again. To be honest,” he offered a helping hand, “-love at the end of the day, is but the want for companionship. Acceptance of the other’s flaws, faults, and inherit personality traits. Katherine,” he smiled, “-I know the past wanes heavy, we perhaps have a future together; emphasis on the perhaps.”

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"I know," they walked over to a window, she ambushed by a tight back embrace, "-and I don't need more, greed isn't good. I'm happy, you've stayed by my side, even though I'm tainted and worthless – I'm grateful. Igna," she whispered, "-listen, if you want to take in a concubine or pursue other women, please go ahead..."

"Say it with conviction," he held her arms, "-I rather not," he replied, "-those who I loved have moved on, I don't expect to have everything. Sometimes, it's best to let go," her heart echoed, an embedded chagrin read in his voice.

Knock, knock, echoed the door, "-majesty, are you awake?"

"Yeah, give us a moment," he escaped into the balcony, allowing for Katherine to change and entertain the newly arrived guest, '-the sun, sand, and sea. No castle this time,' breathed a relieved sigh, '- Plaustan, what a wonderful province. Meadows inland and beautiful beaches outward, aunt Elvira's empire of resorts and hotels were mindful not to damage the natural beauty,' dots jogged, some swam, and others simply stretched.

"Igna," said Katherine in her soft and unassuming voice, "-come in."

He entered to a surprise, "-my, Aceline..."

"Hey, Igna," she threw awkward glances, meanwhile he observed.

"Honestly," he stormed through the room and lifted her chin, "-the pride of Hidros should dawn her signature smile and face the world. We're here to celebrate your wedding after all."

"I know," she grabbed his shoulder, "-time's right to fade from the spotlight. Newer generation of stars are problematic and charismatic in their own way. I just-," she looked up and darted, "-don't want to have regrets."

He stopped her advances and held her shoulder, "-Aceline, the past is the past. I don't want to think about what-ifs. The life you lead now is yours, I apologize for my overwhelming selfishness. You know," he woefully kept a strong stance, "-don't you?"

"I know," she stepped away, lowered her shoulders, "-I wish I didn't."

"Aceline, where are you?" muffled within the corridors, "-come out already."

"Your future awaits," said Igna, "-I wish you the best."

"You too," she unclenched her fist – her confident aura escaped, leaving Igna to drop onto a nearby seat.

"She's the one?"

"Was the one," he answered, "-not anymore."

"She still loves you."

"I know she does... I'm king, I have to show respect to her determination. Her feelings isn't love, they're fragments of an affection that never started on the right path. I won't get in her way, not anymore. Aceline deserves happiness, her retirement and marriage will be a success," he stood, the shaky feeling within eased, "-I have you," he grabbed her hands, "-don't dare think of yourself as a replacement. I made my choice on the day I announced our engagement. Katherine, would you?"

"Yes," she tiptoed and gave a kiss, "-you're always thinking about others, always hidden under a veil of terror and death. I love each side of you, the murderer, the cold tyrant, and my personal favorite, you."

Pierrot, most expensive and lavish hotel in all of Plaustan. Elvira's masterpiece and the hangout spot for many celebrities and elites, a night could easily fetch five months' pay from a regular worker. Spread against the backdrop of the sunny Plaustan beach – the hotel had all sorts of activities, from drinking to gambling. Raven established themselves when Alpha grew inhabitable. Plaustan as a whole's now known as the De Costle province of Hidros.

Igna and Katherine casually made the trip to a seaside restaurant. Not to take thunder from the bride, Katherine opted for a more unnoticeable outfit and makeup, still, the charm of a silent strong noble lady sufficed to entertain lustful regards. "Majesty," hailed éclair, "-please join us," a long table stretched, "-please do," added others.

'Minister's grown friendlier,' scanned the king, "-where are Alta and the others?"

"Helping the bride," returned Eira, "-brother," she changed seats, "-hey," said a gentle whisper, "-don't lie. What's the matter?"

"Mother!"

"Arie, why are you here?"

"My apologies, my lady, the young lady was quite troublesome this morning."

"It's fine," she replied, "-come here, Arie," settled on Eira's lap, "-thank you, take a break and enjoy yourself." Chatter and laughter overtook the table, "-Igna?"

"There's nothing wrong," returned the king, "-let's celebrate." As the day progressed, many familiar faces hopped into sight, Malley, Julius, and their twins were spotted running in circles, "-having kids is hard," he complained. "-It's half my fault and half yours," quipped Malley, "-stop being a wuss and catch them already." The comedy routine continued with a drunken Ela dragging a step-ladder into the lagoon. Minerva and éclair scratched their heads, "-what are you doing?"

"Watch and see," she climbed and jumped, letting an "-ouch," after resurfacing, "-DAMN IT!" They could but explode in laughter. A distant rumble of pleading workers, "-my lord, tis not made for the sea."

"Get on, will you," a golf cart passed by, "-MASTER!" cried Asmodeus' party of Mammon, Beelzebub, and Sathanas. They escaped at a jogging pace from a horde of man-eaters, striped bikinis, and weaponized shells, "-faster," cried a higher-pitched Beelzebub, "-we move, we move!" Yonder, at a squint and aid by the lens; Yui was spotted piloting a helicopter with Shanna, Courtney, and Elvira.

"Hey," said a familiar voice, "-long time no see," a well-built Elon dropped at Igna's side, "-want something to drink?"

"I have my share," he tapped a cooler box, "-everyone's having fun."

"Yeah, I saw Starix and the others earlier – they sure are excited about her wedding."

"Who wouldn't be," he smiled, "-it's a private but massive event. We've earned the rest."

"Certainly," worried glances landed, "-Igna, are you okay?"

"I'm doing just fine. Why's everyone worried suddenly?"

"Well, I'm not one to judge, but..."

"But...?"

"The smile feels out of place."

"Oh this?" he opened his mouth, "-I cut myself yesterday, damned thing was injured by an anti-healing syringe. Let me tell you, my fiancé has some weird taste when love-making is concerned."

"Are my fetishes that strange?" returned a blank but murderous smile, "-Igna?"

Gulp, "-I didn't mean anything bad by it. Have a seat already," he slide, to which the gorgeous Katherine sat, putting emphasis on her long legs, locking her curves behind a tame hoodie, "-everyone keeps looking. Didn't realize your fame, Igna..."

"Actually, they're looking at you."

"SERIOUSLY?"

"Seriously."

Elon smiled, "-I guess you're fine," he stood and leaned, "-she's fucking hot," said a discreet mumble.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

Chapter 963: Tragedy is never far

'Guardian of Nexsolium, heed my voice. Tragedy's never far, it waits to strike, waiting for when time's nigh – a viper's bite,' Eira's slumber broke, '-why,' she gulped and sweated, '-a nightmare about the Dorchester massacre. The day father and I lost everything – it couldn't be, could it?' *An omen,* such was the thought at 21:30. 'At least she's sleeping,' a motherly warmth patted Arie's well-cared hair, she slept peacefully, '-how can I worry when she's here,' Eira slept on her side, facing the childish innocence of her daughter. Before another minute struck, slumber took its hold and they slept.

Another day rose, '-again,' exhaled Igna, '-the ceremony's today,' he half-heartedly sat upright, a gentle moan followed, "-morning already," he said, "-get dressed, you'll catch a cold."

"Why should I?" followed a flushed Katherine, "-was it not you who related the many compliments?"

"Words isn't fooling anybody," he slid into fuzzy warm slippers and scurried across the room, pushing the balcony door open, "-besides, compliments are just compliments."

“Yeah,” she added sarcastically, “-I’ll shower first, want to join?”

“No thanks,” he turned onto the railing, and threw a smile at Katherine, “-I’ll have one later.” She but slithered from the warm bed, threw a coy glance at Igna, stretched her beautiful long legs and slender figure towards the bathroom, ‘-come, I dare you,’ said the very little motions made.

‘Good to see,’ he turned once more, this time, leaning against the sturdy barrier, ‘-Katherine’s regained self-confidence. Nightmares stopped haunting her lately,’ an edifice gained height and structure on the beach with the helpful aid of workers. White, frilly, and adorned by classy decoration, ‘-the wedding,’ passed the mind, ‘-Aceline steps into a new world. An iconic star retires for a peaceful and silent life. Gazettes will have a field day publishing.’ No mind to the day ahead, he simply allowed time and nature to guide action and thought, a sense of auto-movement.

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“I’m done, go ahead,” said Katherine drying her hair, “-Igna?” she scanned, “-Igna...” the king’s scarred and tatted body slumbered earnestly. ‘-Igna,’ she sneaked to his bedside and watched, ‘-he looks so peaceful. The messy silvery hair, a relaxed and unguarded expression. Not many people get to see this side of the king, he’s normal as far as is concerned,’ a gust of sudden guilt whelmed from within, a suffocating feeling slowed the breaths, “-are you happy?” she asked, “-are you sure about this. I’m no Aceline, I don’t know anything about you, always mysterious and keeping shut. It’s scary, I’m scared, terrified one day you’ll leave. That’s why I said take a mistress, even if you don’t love me, at least I’ll be of service in bed... I just want to be close to you. Igna, I don’t know when, it happened so quickly... I’m impure and the daughter of a lady who caused so much trouble to this kingdom. It’s hard, everyone knows it’s my fault – I never wanted any of this. Ever since that day... I tried to be kind and help others, but my own mother abandoned me, I was lost and dejected, thrown to the wolves for their gluttony. I don’t deserve a second chance,” her nails unconsciously dug into her waist, “-you’ll leave me, you’re going to leave me. Aceline and you deserve happiness, I’m a side character, nothing more, nothing less. The author of my fate’s decided I’m no good, I serve no purpose, and I will only bring hardship... I’m sorry.”

“Honestly,” warm hands grabbed her cold fingers, “-try being this sincere when I’m awake,” he pulled, she flew and landed beside him, the bed rocked – “-look at you,” he wiped her tears, “-do I look like someone who’d abandoned another?”

“Y-yeah...”

Cough, “-okay, let’s try again. You’re my fiancé; there are no two ways around it. You’re right, I’m mysterious, tis my nature. I’ve learned to keep what’s important reserved. I don’t want anyone else to be harmed by association. I’m cursed,” he turned and stared at the ceiling, “-political marriage is the norm. Listen to me, Katherine, we’re bound by interest. A day will come when we’re separated. But I can say one thing, it would be from abandonment. We’ve lived as a family for more than two years now – spending that amount of time is bound to create affection. Wipe those tears, I decided long ago – don’t worry, and trust me.”

“O-okay,” she laughed and cried, “-if you say so,” her nose burnt bright red – in that instant, ‘-her smile,’ he gulped, ‘-she’s dangerous,’ reference to a sudden urge to protect her joy at all costs.

Tap, tap, “-Igna,” the door opened, “-it’s me,” thundered Eira, her pace slowed at the duo half-naked in bed, “-right, seems the night wasn’t sufficient for lovemaking, yes?”

“Big sister, at least know when you enter,” he rose slowly, “-what’s gone wrong?”

“Change and follow me,” she spun, “-also, Katherine, you’d be wise to wear something less revealing. I know the swimsuit yesterday was modest... you know, people are drawn to what they can’t have,” quick as she came, her commanding presence left.

“What about my outfit?”

“Reference to your body type,” said Igna, “-be more careful,” he laughed, “-who knew being attractive had such a level of danger,” into a semi-formal ware, “-I’ll have breakfast with Eira, seems important. Take care, Katherine.”

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“Take care,” she waved and shortly caught the attention of her own reflection, ‘-guess the empress’ right. I DO look nice.’

Eira’s urgency led to a random spot within the resort, “-the reception?” they sat side-by-side in the waiting area, “-sister?”

“Okay,” she slowed her energetic aura, “-I had a nightmare, a premonition. I dreamed about Aunt Ayleth and how they were massacred on the wedding day. Tell me, are we truly secure?”

“Lest the enemy be an unknown race – we’ll be fine.”

“Suppose the wedding spirits made me anxious.”

“To bad about Markus, I heard éclair threw him on a ship to Alpha?”

“Yeah,” she exhaled, “-a talented trader’s best used to trade. I should check on Arie.” Thus, the icy-cold Eira ambled into the distance. 14:30 – what looked to be minuscule pillars from the bedroom rose into a formidable theater, seat arranged and altar to the goddess of marriage placed at the ready. Brides and grooms’ sides filled gradually, and Aceline’s entourage was filled by leaders; Queen of Arda, Kreston’s pope, and lady Elvira to name a few. Scott’s entourage held their own; actors, actresses, idols, and talented musicians.

‘He’s nervous,’ whispered ladies within the crowd. Scott’s fit physique and exalted visage told more than needed to be known. Aceline arrived by the sound of a violin, Piers offered to walk the aisle. The idyllic scene plucked from a movie – wouldn’t last. Eira’s concern rang true, a whistle blew – the violin stopped, Aceline fell to her knees.

“Honestly, Katherine, we’ll miss the ceremony.”

“Not my fault,” she argued, “-Arie spilled juice over my outfit.”

“Right, of course, it’s the child’s fault,” they hurried, he held her hand, “-how’s your leg?”

“Not bad,” she returned, “-could be worse.”

“Yeah, let’s hope for the former,” down the stairs, *Urgent Call,* flashed the interface, *-éclair.*

“What’s the matter?” Igna slowed, Katherine’s momentum had her dash against his back.

“Master,” background ran in true demented fashion, screams, gunfire, and carnage, “-we’re under attack.”

“From who?”

“WE DON’T KNOW!” *Call Ended.*

‘Under attack, everyone I care about is here,’ he unbuttoned his suit, “-Katherine,” he slid a scroll, “-we had a lovely talk this morning, I meant what I said,” *GRR,* a metallic growl leaped for her neck, Igna flashed and slammed the humanoid figure into the tiled floor, “-situation’s grown tedious. My jest turned truth,” a self-healing wreckage gave flickers and sheers, “-these aren’t entities native to this realm.”

“What are you talking about, I’m scared.”

“I know you are, this is why,” he pushed a scroll against her closed palms, “-take this and leave.”

“...”

“DON’T HESITATE, LEAVE, NOW!” she opened and instantly vanished, a single pair of her heels remained, ‘-now then,’ the entity healed, ‘-what are you?’ it pounced twice as strong – Igna countered and easily crushed it’s grayed visage, ‘-what are these?’ sparks and flickers sprung anew, ‘-seems less of an attacker and more of a mechanism, *See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth.* ‘-Clockwork, a race of semi-artificial and semi-sentient golems. Why’s Artanos, the God of Knowledge getting involved?’ the machine leaped, using the same pattern to its demise, a well-timed slash from a nearby knife ended the folly. ‘-Run, Igna,’ he sprinted to a post-war landscape. Once beautiful beaches turned black and dark – the full audience scurried outward – a fortress of ice replaced the wedding venue, ‘-to many at the front gate,’ he ran towards Eira’s fortress – a growl from the transient materialization of Gergusser froze over those wailing at the gates – the walls dimmed, ‘-she’s not warmed up yet,’ open hand to the side, *Hear me, weapon forged in the death of my enemy, relish the thought of slaughter, enjoy the joy of sufferance, raise from thy slumber, Orenmir, COME!* scabbarded landed with a thud, “-vile beasts,” he drew – an aura of dread weighed. ‘-some have blood,’ he parried and sliced, those able of body swarmed his position, ‘-others have mechanical parts,’ he slashed left and right, the swarm grew, ‘-cut one, two raises,’ sweat washed the forehead, ‘-how strong are they?’ no option laid, *Mana Control: Purgatory flame Variant – Endos,* a giant ball of pure flame expanded – blurry outlines of the figures, set against a growing ball of flame, turned into dust. *Huff, puff,* Intherna’s Phoenix robe swayed, ‘-good ol’ partner,’ he gasped, ‘-they keep on coming,’ a squint inside showed Eira and the others extracting the guests.

“Let’s move!” thundered Eira.

“Our priority is evacuation,” said Minerva, “-reinforcements on their way,” reassured the general.

“Stay with me,” healing spells lit a darkened chamber, “-don’t die,” gritted Alta.

“She’s not going to make it,” mumbled Starix, “-we were taken by surprise.”

"I don't care," the greenish hue brightened, "-I'll make it happen, don't worry."

Four enigmatic figures watched, "-brothers and sister – those who dare attack will pay."

"Keep her steady," added a monotonous voice, "-we'll handle the indiscretion."

Asmodeus, Mammon, Beelzebub, and Sathanas unveiled their masks, the powers unlocked per order to the Shadow Realm, "-Mammon, Beelzebub, watch the evacuation. Sathanas and I will hold the assault."

"Sure," a swarm of insect-like demons rose from Beelzebub's cupped palms, "-go help," he mumbled. A stronger Mammon waited patiently.

"Don't get in my way," winked Sathanas. Igna's explosion rattled just as the duo landed over the castle walls, "-well damn."

"Let's ho--"

"Wait," said the prince, "-not yet. Look," he pointed, "-master's having fun..."

Projectiles as powerful as rockets landed across the swarm – each death brought more, the forces grew, '-I love it,' he landed, facing away from the sea, *Souls of the dead, thee who've sworn to serve me in life and death, come to my side. Blood-Arts: Ghouls Requiem,* a profound boom beckoned what could have been the world. Ghouls of vibrant crimson clawed from hell – each dawned weapons and an unjust amount of power, "-Vengeance."

"Orders, my lord?"

"Exterminate them."

Tragedy is never far. Truth in said lonesome sentence touched Igna's heart. For years, '-let go of my own limitations,' ancient symbols wrote effortlessly. Sharp canines, features of a true Demonlord, Igna finally accepted who he was, "-come forth, my demons!" The gate of Vhavla opened; a personal army of trained monsters who'd fought humanity for decades materialized on his side. He stood above the gates and pointed, "-ATTACK!"

'I'm done,' Eira's fortress dispelled, '-we evacuated everyone.'

"What about the rest?"

"Leave it in my brother's hand," she gasped, "-he'll take care of the enemies," ancient writings glowed above her palm, "-to the guardian of Nexsolium; have a taste of my power. My army of clockwork warriors won't die so easily. Heed my words, Qhildir will pay – Lucifer shall rise, and thy world destroyed. Relay this to Alfred, he'll die and lose everything again. Until we meet."

'Artanos.'

Chapter 964: Hidros' Pride

'I remember the day as if it were yesterday. A simple flicker caught us off-guard. Aceline stood resplendently beside the altar. Her face flushed, and her regard was hesitant and present. Scott fared no better, he watched his would-be bride with much respect a child would have towards a parental figure. It seemed to me, at that time, their relationship started from necessity, and now, given a chance to sit

back and think, I guess the bonds truly were born from necessity. Don't get me wrong, Aceline's fame or prestige yet fades – her photos and countless shows are subject to talks among a large audience. The untimely departure of Hidros' pride; first in the foreign land of Alpha, now came to the second, Hidros. Waves crashed vibrantly; the sound of the seething fizzy water hissed. Every blow was a hit of a gong; slow, methodical, and resounding. I'd changed nothing of said memory, nothing save what followed. A whistling, (I thought it be the wind) swallowed our collective breath. Pope Carrigan who'd dawn a special robe for the occasion, lowered his holy book. A splash smeared across his face diagonally, leaving imprints on the skin and glasses. A single second never felt long, and when I remember that day – It was far longer. Scott's guests screamed; a click that unlocked our sealed minds. The bride was nowhere seen – stranger entities crashed – gunfire and magical spells followed; culmination of danger resulted in a palace of ice rising from the ground. It was cold – nothing compared to the caster's frigid expression – I never imagined the icy empress could have such loath. Her white eyelashes flapped – and there, after each blink, I felt a strange frosty wind blow, 'get away,' she said, 'follow them.' I was shocked, unable to process the events, my body and mind were overrun. I had never felt terrified – though petrified ought to be a better description. I mindlessly checked the altar, blood splatter vanished as were the couple. Thunderous gunfire ran through my ears, and stronger deadlier auras shuffled. We were thrown into a line of evacuees, tis then I realized; that star, or leader, didn't matter. When faced with death and an entity so strong – a noble title or prestigious skill, or ability, meant nothing. Death was the perfect democrat, indiscriminatory and unjust. Soldiers died. Hidros' leaders leaped onto the frontlines, I couldn't believe the will to irrationally jump onto death. The morbid curiosity went a step beyond mere passing fancy, no, it bordered obsession. Explosion and loud crashes, I wish I'd heard it better – my ears are yet recovered. I'm certain the tremors felt were larger and more powerful. Before leaving the castle of ice, my attention randomly drew towards two figures perched atop the castle walls. Their scent resembled two more who guarded the escort. Swarms of demons manifested from the little one's clap. 'What are they?' I asked a question that remained so.'

'We shortly escaped. The prestigious crowd was taken to safety. My turn on the waiting list meant I had to stay a while – confined to a lounge. Helicopters passed the somber skyscape, "time to go," said a soldier. I dawned on my hat and nodded. The last few minutes were the worst I ever experienced,' signed D.K Rhodes.

A feathery light paper fell silently upon a great big desk. '-D.K Rhodes,' paused Igna, '-a first-hand account of the marriage debacle. Wish and hope won't help much today,' leather shoes firmly planted with a humph, "-what's done is done," the silent office boomed, ending on a click.

"Majesty," waved éclair, "-about the new policy..."

"Have it redone; I've made a few ameliorations."

"Understood," they parted ways at a cross, king outside and prime minister in. Current decorations reminisced of the olden days, at a time when mana used as power never crossed the minds of scholars. Dimmer lights were installed, and the projected effect matched the esthetic, "-éclair," an interjection halted the thoughtful survey.

"Yes?"

.....

“Take a walk with me,” said Alta, they resumed anew.

“Care to explain?”

“How’s the king doing?”

“Great,” replied éclair, “-I don’t see a reason to break the momentum.”

“I don’t mean that, I mean this,” she tapped her watch, “-been a few months since the incident. Lady Katherine’s yet returned to the palace, I’m worried, truly.”

“Alta, you’re a good person. Realize, a few people were killed, granted, they were not family or close friends – people died on the king’s watch. Not to menti-”

“Yeah, I know, don’t change the subject. I guess our king’s losing himself in work?”

éclair slowed the soaring pace, “-Alta, I don’t mean to sound rude, but that’s quite enough. I understand and I empathize, I truly do. Would making an already tedious situation awkward be the best? Stop and think, there’s a reason why the king hasn’t spoken about the matter,” voice and cadence gradually increased, on the final word, éclair’s focus landed on bystanders, “-my apologies,” he eased, “-I didn’t mean to sound rude. Tell me, Alta, will you share a drink with me?”

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“I’m afraid not, I have much to see at in Glenda.”

“As you wish,” they crossed paths silently, ‘-can’t be tied by affection forever. Alta needs to understand the kingdom needs a pillar of strength and courage, not a fumbling pretend demon. In Igna’s own words, -I’m a devil.”

Rosespire, ever-changing and consistent, the taller buildings reflected against a black luxury car. Many projects were approved and completed – an agreement of worker exchange between Arda and Hidros passed through the mouth was finally written. Magiology expanded exponentially, impossible feats became mere irregularities, with the right people and sufficient capital, anything was possible. Thus, the road took a life of its own, and buses were reduced for a faster, more efficient tramway network. Riverty Hospital wrote in thick black over a massive arrangement of squares and rectangles.

“We’ve arrived,” said the driver.

“Right,” Igna exited to a blast of fresh air, ‘-here we are,’ he dawned his glasses and stepped inside, the use of the frames changed from blocking the strong, reality distorting vision to a mere spell of reduced presence. The unlikely disguise made the king less obvious – for the name had but grown in the small amount of two years.

Room 305 neatly faced the inner-city, holding to a view that’d make any experience hotel manager drool. Many machines blinked and tapped, ‘-here I am,’ sighed Igna, inside laid someone who weighed dear. The door softly slid open, “-Igna,” returned a downward-facing Scott.

“Scott,” he shut the door and made it to the side of the bed. The pride of Hidros looked worse for wear, her jet-black hair laid awry, and her arms and legs withered to a state of skin and bone. A black mark on her neck, a parasite of sorts. A clean-shaven doctor rose, marking down much of his notes, “-majesty

and Mr. Scott,” the sharpness of his visage reflected sternness at the detriment of looking approachable, “-we’ve tried everything. She won’t make it, lest a miracle happens. Even then, I doubt the false gods to be of any help. She’s inflicted with more than bodily wound – there are traces of curses, we’ve asked the best scholars for advice, no luck,” he gently lowered the notepad and nodded sympathetically, “-machines are keeping her somewhat stable. The more time she spends alive, the greater the curse spread and the more her sufferance. My liege, Igna, as next of kin, her fate is in thy hand. We have two options, to keep her in a slow perpetual agony for the day a cure comes or pull the plug,” he woefully stared at the icon, sharpness on his face failed as there, in what Igna perceived, was a look of regret, “-excuse me,” he left.

“Pull the plug or let her suffer,” surmised Scott, “-why did it have to be her...”

“Scott, her life is in your hand. I’ll respect the decision thee makes.”

“No,” he retreated, “-don’t force the choice on me, I’ve suffered enough. Do you think it’s easy...” the widened stare dropped – dark circles and crimson smears, “-I can’t do it... I’m sorry, I-I, I can’t. She’ll die, I rather she dies than suffer. I want her alive but not, I can’t be selfish... she’s,” he pinched his eyes and darted out the room, “-I’M SORRY.”

The tranquil cell of white and blinks settled. ‘-look at her,’ he inched and sat at her bedside, ‘-pretty, even on her deathbed. Her hands are tiny,’ the fingers interlocked, ‘-the curse’ worse than I thought. What do I do,’ he patted her forehead, “-what do I do?”

“Igna?”

“Aceline?” he motioned to stand, “-don’t,” she said, feebly holding onto his hand, “-don’t call anyone... let’s talk.”

‘She can barely project her voice... what’s happened?’ Igna snuffed the urgency and cupped her hands.

“Tragedy is never far, Igna, look at me, am I pretty?”

“Yeah,” he smiled.

“Good, I want to look my best for when death comes,” she spoke slowly and meticulously, almost as if choosing the easiest pronounceable words.

“I can still save you.”

She shook her head, “-I want to retire. I’m tired, this is the end of my life. Igna, tell me, where’s Staxius?”

“Right here,” he replied, “-look at you,” the face dropped to a nonchalant expression, “-the idol who sang in war. It seems we both reached our limits.”

“Is that you, Staxius?”

“The one and only, my dear Aceline, the one and only. Are you sure about this?”

“Yeah, I’m content to call it quits. I did love long you oh so much, Igna, Staxius, I love you so much. What if we were married, what if I became your queen – I dreamed of us all the time but,” her parched lips barely moved, “-it was never in our destiny.”

“I know,” he leaned and gave a peck on her forehead, “-Aceline, let me selfish one more time.” She shook her head and looked through the window, “-here she comes, the harbinger of death,” the room halted in reality, a gorgeously dressed Undrar pulled her skeletal horse, and it vanished with her smoothly on her feet. “Hello, Igna.”

“Undrar?”

“Surprised?”

“Yeah, I am, why are you here?”

“To take her soul. Aceline’s subject to quite a lot – you plucked her soul from the past and altered the very fabric of birth and death. Frankly speaking, I don’t know if it’s possible to reinstate a corrupted soul through the cycle of life and death. She’ll be stuck wandering the line between reality and the ethereal realm.”

“Nothing can be done?”

“Hence why I’m here. If her soul can’t pass, I’ll escort her to the hall of rebirth. There, perhaps she’ll find a warm place to stay and wait out the end of time.”

“So gloomy,” he glanced over, “-Undrar, thank you.”

“For what?”

“Looking over me,” he smiled, “-I’ve decided to be selfish one last time.”

A scythe wrapped around his neck, “-don’t think about reviving her, Igna. You’ve caused enough disturbance,” her tone struck, the current sovereign of death wasn’t going to take insolence. He pushed her weapon, “-Undrar, don’t be an idiot,” he ducked and made towards the frozen body, “-I’ll transfer her to the Shadow Realm. Doesn’t matter if she lives there or in the Hall of Rebirth.”

“No,” cautioned Undrar, “-the clockwork curse on her soul will tell Artanos where she is.”

“Oh, don’t forget who I am,” ancient symbols materialized, “-with this, the clockwork spell will disintegrate,” and it did literally turn to smoke, “-Undrar, you’re amazing.”

“Where did that come from?”

“Oh, nothing much, it’s just something I wanted to say for a long time. It came to me in a dream, I spoke to someone, a strange man of military background – said the name was Mark, or so I remember. Dreams are weird things,” he rose his palms, *Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration.*

Chapter 965: Artanos, God of Knowledge

“Soul transmigration.”

“Correct, there’s no better place for her to live. Shadow Realm is safe, I can guarantee that much.”

“I guess that’s fine,” she exhaled, “-seems I was worried for naught. Aceline’s rebirth within a realm of silence and happiness.”

“Thank you, I’d have been stump between making a choice. This is for the best,” the frozen room eased, the tick of the second hand increased, the minute snapped and reality followed. Aceline’s body laid lifelessly, her soul passed – the body shortly matched; heart slowed and breathing halted – machines pulsed into flat. ‘May you live a peaceful life from here on,’ he took off her mask and caressed her mildly warm cheeks, “-until the day comes when you’re able to remember, enjoy the new life, Aceline, you deserve it, you deserve to rest and enjoy a new start. I’m glad,” a painful relief, an oxymoron feeling; washed over. A familiar scrape, the door opened. “I’m sorry,” shuffled a saddened Scott, “-I’m sorry I left.”

“No harm done,” returned Igna at her bedside, “-she passed,” two simple words. Scott’s heart dropped, ‘-she’s gone?’ mumbled a voiceless reply. Glances swapped from Igna to Aceline. Igna stopped and softly nodded, “-she’s gone, my friend, she’s gone.” The pain of loss suddenly hit like a truck.

“I never got to say goodbye.”

“Neither did I,” returned Igna, “-Aceline’s dead, again...”

.....

“Why,” Scott dropped, unable to stand, “-why did she have to be her?”

Igna turned on himself, “-I’ll call the doctor, stay with her, Scott, stay with her,” slid off the room door, the constant back and forth, a pendulum of dread or hope. A similar situation occurred in the distance, families slid the dreaded barrier, some begot a nice welcome, others, a sad and painful hello. Death wasn’t far, as was tragedy.

“Majesty?”

“Aceline’s dead,” the hectic nurses’ station paused, “-she passed a few minutes ago.”

“Aceline’s dead...” added the doctor with a tone of finality, “-I’m sorry about your loss, majesty,” regret swung the faces of attendants, alas, the call of duty forced the mask of brevity. “-She died peacefully,” said Igna, “-I know she did.”

“Understood,’ nodded the doctor, “-I will get the paperwork started. Please, take whatever measures they see fit for her last rites.”

“I will, thank you,” and so, Igna watched as the hospital carried out its duties. Many others received news of the dead. Before long, a cigarette lit solemnly underneath the shadow of the great white hospice.

Puff, ‘-yeah, the pain of losing someone. Never thought I’d experience it again. Didn’t expect you to come out so suddenly,” a little figure materialized above his shoulder.

“Neither did I,” he replied, “-Aceline’s our best friend and lover. She was always looking above the mundane rumble, an idealist by heart and a world changer by action. Look around, look at Rosespire,

look at the greatness of the capital city, look at the posters, the advertisement, the advancement in technology, the airships, and most of all, look at the sense of safety it gives. It was possible because of a single person, Aceline – an idol we met during times of war. We'll never forget her performance against the backdrop of Claireville Academy – her soft words and charming persona, what I'd do to see her again."

"Enough reminiscing," puffed Igna, "-I appreciate the nudge."

"Don't mention it, me, we're one of the same, understand, me?"

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"I do."

A colder evening breeze swept the building. Droplets of rain rode upon the foggy gusts, shining silver under the lamp's hue, "-guess it's over," he snuffed the cigarette, "-hello, éclair?"

"Majesty?"

"Aceline's dead. She breathed her last breath a few moments ago. I want her body cremated, make the necessary arrangements – her final rites ought to be held at the castle."

"The castle?"

"Yes, she'll receive a royal's ceremony."

"Understood."

Media locked on the news, and her passing lit a flame within the Arcanum. Fans from the world over grew to send their wishes. Her body was transferred. A large crowd gathered outside the castle gates. People carried candles, and Igna stood at the forefront of her casket. Black and white uniforms of suits and dresses. Guests present at the castle attended the event. General Minerva, an apostle of Athena, presided over the last rituals. One could say, by observing; that not many cries were heard. Whimpers and sniffles, soft whispers of their shock. Her death came without warning – a state of unrealism yet lived within the minds of many. News coverage spoke greatly on the matter. Wasn't long before the compilation of her performances and dedicated broadcasts of her movies overwhelmed many networks. Forget Hidros, her death resounded around the world; people gathered in mass and walked in remembrance of the idol – she truly was the world's first and only superstar.

As next of kin, Igna was invited to speak – final rites were finished. The king strode to stand over, "-Aceline's one of the best people I've ever met. Everyone who knew her would say the same; her life story is etched into the annals of media history. Everyone's heard of her name and at least heard one of her songs. She's one of the best people I've ever met, I can't stress it enough. Her passing was untimely, death is a part of the way of life. Still, I know she rests in a better place. The unification of the world using the power of song, such was her goal. I'm proud to say, Aceline, you did it. The world speaks thy name in prayer, they join hands to remember. If I were to speak honestly, I'm afraid I'd take the whole night. Instead, I'll leave it at this; Aceline, you'll always live through your music and movies. An artist never dies for their work lives the rest of eternity on their behalf," he left under a veil of muffled cries. The throne room realized her passing to be the truth. Like waves who'd retreat after pushing up the beach – the heaviness of death sowed its seed. Crowd took turns in wishing their goodbyes. Many left

flowers, others left notes, to each their own. The city streets awoke under a somber night sky. Her procession was nothing short of royalty. Her body was driven around, passing the likes of Lei, Juei, and Onel. Residents perched upon their balconies threw flowers. A rain of petals covered the dark transport. At midnight sharp, the procession reached a crematorium sided beside a church to venerate Tharis. Royal guards tightened a perimeter as fans grew anxious – many felt their faces against the rusted iron gates. “-Let us in,” they shouted, Igna, Julius, Scott, and Piers carried her coffin.

Smoke rose up a chimney, casting a disorganized trail up the sky, “-per ancient teachings, we’ll leave one behind.”

“Let me,” voiced Igna, “-Scott, please, allow me the honor of watching her last moments.”

The flushed man maintained a woeful disposition, “-as you wish,” he nodded, “-I’ve not the stomach,” he covered his mouth, “-the pain’s too much, I can’t.”

“Be careful,” said Julius, “-don’t break just yet.”

“Come on,” added Piers, “-you’re not alone,” they held Scott by the shoulder.

“Understood, his majesty shall remain behind.”

Time passed, “-you and me,” he sat and peered through a glass window, “-slow burning of a lifeless body. Nothing changes once flame takes a hold of a person. Same old sight, same old scent. Undrar raised a point earlier, why would a curse only affect Aceline? the nature of the attack, there seemed no greater motive than to cause chaos. And still, the entities fought viciously, others died by similar methods. Aceline was the only one targeted by Artanos’ curse. I get it,’ the fist clenched, “-Artanos wasn’t targeting her, he wanted me, he wanted the Shadow Realm. It’s become personal – taking Aceline’s life to reach me, how wise, how wise for the god of Knowledge, a bumbling idiot without prospects. ‘ attention turned to a message, “-Igna, there’s something you need to know about the attack. I chose silence over truth, I needed to investigate things on my end. Tis a point where I’m stumped – we’re on the precipice of battle, the targeted field will either be here or Draebala, such my conclusion, ‘To the guardian of Nexsolium; have a taste of my power. My army of clockwork warriors won’t die so easily. Heed my words, Qhildir will pay – Lucifer shall rise, and thy world destroyed. Relay this to Alfred, he’ll die and lose everything again,’ such the message I received. Brother, I’m afraid our enemy’s no king from the mortal realm – our fight’s moved to the heavens. Artanos is a high-tier god who wields tremendous power, one could say you and him art the same. He wasn’t born a god, rather, made one from the bond of a titan and angel – a wielder of two symbols of power. He’s not all talk – the clockwork army is in a way similar to your Puppet army. Be ready for what’s to come, Igna – we won’t know until he strikes.”

‘A battle against a god?’ he paused, ‘-interesting. I always knew we’d face the heavens someday. Artanos,’ Alfred’s memories opened, ‘-a man of unrivaled combat prowess. He’s strong, very strong – stronger than Lucifer and wiser than Athena in some respects, a superior version to us currently.’

A golden white circle slit reality, ‘-a portal?’ long legs stepped through, a tall man of pure black hair, yellow eyes drowned in a sea of black, sharp chin, sharper jawline and an outfit deemed worthy of a gentleman. Golden earnings matched the eyes, “-dimension Orin,” he scanned, “-I see my coordinates were right, the poor ol’ thing had to die.”

“Artanos,” said Igna.

“My,” he smiled, “-I see someone’s wise.”

“Coming from the god of knowledge, I’ll take the compliment.”

“I love it,” he stepped forward, “-such a cynical gaze, makes my heart leap a flutter.”

“...”

“Why am I here?” he asked rhetorically, “-well, I thought I’d meet you first – heard a lot about the mysterious man of Orin, my old rival; reincarnation of Alfred. Alas, I was wrong – the powers of the death reaper no longer beat, I don’t sense the death element. Weak,” he narrowed, “-no scent to speak of, no power to call on, what a shame, truly it is a shame.”

“Suppose weakness’ one of my many traits.”

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “-I love the sarcasm. At least the personality is quite entertaining. Tell me, Igna, where’s Kronos’ sickle?”

“Pardon?”

“Don’t play dumb,” waves of energy emanated, “-what I hate the most are people who lie.”

“As for me,” Igna strode into Artanos’s face, “-I hate presumptuous pricks. God of Knowledge or the wielder of a whores’ mouth, I’ll kill anyone who stands in my way.”

“Is that so?” they butted heads, and a clash of energy rattled the ground, “-I like you,” he winked.

“Same,” returned Igna, “-you’re interesting.”

The auras dwindled mutually, “-man, it’s been a while since I met someone so strange. Tell me, are you truly a human?”

“No, I’m simply, Igna Haggard.”

“Well, Igna Haggard, the first impression’s great. As a sign of respect, why not tell me where Kronos’ sickle resides?”

“I’d have to kill you once I did.”

“Now, now, don’t get ahead of yourself,” he vanished and drew a dagger. “Too bad,” Igna held Artanos’ wrist with one hand and drew Tharis with the other.

“My, you’re formidable,” the grip ease, “-I digress,” he nonchalantly vanished to the previous position, Igna easily followed the movement, “-now that the test’s over, care to speak on why thee asks such a bold question?”

“My intentions are simple, to return glory to the Titans, and also, I own Lucifer a favor.”

“Titan’s have invaded Draebala, I suppose thou art the leader?”

“Correct,” he smiled, “-consider me the supreme god of Titans or G.O.T for short.”

“One vowel from G.O.A.T.”

“Greatest of all time?” he smiled, “-sadly, that title goes to only one, my love, my life, Gophy.”

“Artanos, what say we keep the battle between those above heavens confined to a true battlefield, Draebala.”

“Never had intentions to lay siege over the mortal realm. It’s a waste of time to crush ants. It was a pleasure, Igna. I hope the nature of our relationship remains diplomatic, even during times of war. Best get to work, Draebala’s not for the faint of hearts.”

Chapter 966: The New World

“If it’s not terribly inconvenient, my children would like to get settled somewhere. Care for a suggestion?”

“Lord Artanos, you surely know much of the world already. Even still, if my opinion is to be considered, why not settle far east, past the nation of Alpha, over the great deep blue sea lays a land of untouched treasure. The new continent, a name yet to be officialized by the Wracia Empire. The land is vast and resources on ‘first-come-first-served,’ principle.”

“My, but the continent is so far from civilization. Am I to stand silently as my children are left ignored by the world?”

“Far the clockwork machines are concerned, a novelty is best presented on an unblemished plate.”

“It would seem my lord Igna, you sure are one hard nut to crack. I shall take the advice by heart. Expect great things from my children, ‘twould be awful, terribly awful if my children get so very anxious. Till we meet again, lord Igna.”

“Fare thee well,” he replied, the room appeased. Aceline’s fire burnt amiably unlike Igna’s inner fire. A flame of hatred burnt, ‘-insolent bastard,’ he clenched, ‘-has the audacity to speak to me as if we were equal. Said arrival disrupted the flow of thought – a sense of cluelessness settled, Igna held himself propped against the glass window. Aceline’s charred remains were a reminder of reality, ‘-why did I get so angry?’ he breathed, meticulously calming his inner rage; a fireman’s arduous battle against his flaming heart. A single drop of sweat fell, the silent crash brought a familiar sensation.

“Majesty,” a mild tap broke a loss of time.

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“Pardon,” he excused himself, “-is something the matter?”

The hesitant worker shyly pointed, “-Aceline’s ashes have been collected in an urn. We took the liberty of placing her remains on the counter.”

“My, I must have lost track of time,” a glance told 02:30, ‘-late.’

The same boy hurried behind the very same counter. There, he reached under a labyrinth of carton boxes – digging deep by the flinch and strained expression, “-here,” he exclaimed victoriously, “-a

briefcase,” the dusty yet study silvery-colored case resounded against the counter’s metallic surface, “-a perfect match for Aceline’s urn.”

“I appreciate the gesture, thank you very much,” thus, Aceline’s funeral came to pass. Not the same could be said about the king, for throughout the week, things grew suspiciously troublesome.

Knock, knock, “-enter,” returned the same, unfazed voice. éclair scurried inside, closing the door behind – date had skipped, “-majesty, there’s an extensive military program General Minerva wishes to put in action. I’ve sent a notice a few days before, didn’t want to get chewed out again,” a feeling of satisfaction laid upon éclair’s features. Alas, on setting sight upon the desk, as he had come to know, a diligently hardworking king; satisfaction turned horror, “-Majesty?” he tiptoed and scanned, no luck, ‘-he’s gone?’ éclair advanced further to the large desk, ‘-remnants of policies and reports across the kingdom. Seems files were piled on for a few days. Did no one notice the monarch’s disappearance?’ amidst the pile of files, a hand-written note, calligraphic and beautiful was kept just at eye-level. Hidden in plain sight whereby only éclair and his interface would notice. The small rectangular note unfolded into four greater rectangles;

Dear éclair,

I know this is very sudden and irresponsible. The past few days after Aceline’s death have been hard. I can’t concentrate, it’s too hard a burden to bear. Day in and day out, the news, the media, my social feed, everyone speaks of her. I’m glad she made such an impact in death as was done in life. Yet, I feel myself draining after each mention I see. It’s painful, truly painful. Therefore, I leave you with this, my dear prime minister, I shall be taking a trip to the new continent. My sister can explain in greater detail, she’ll step in as my regent until the end of June, which comes to a few weeks, no greater than three. I wouldn’t worry much. Hidros’ government’s full of talents. Lady Ela and Eira should suffice. I do hope the kingdom continues its path to prosperity for we’ve reached stability a few months back. Until I return.

Sincerely, Igna Haggard.

‘I need answers,’ just as he was to crumble the paper, a thick door opened. A glimmer of light snuck within the room, silvery hair flowed, “-Majesty,” voiced éclair.

“I appreciate the title of regent, majesty’s a little on the nose, don’t you think?” returned a snarly Eira. She tapped her fingers and telepathically sought and brought files onto a little ice-golem, “-you seem vexed,” she narrowed, “-is the note, from my brother, yes?”

“You do have his foresight, suppose it runs in the blood. Tell me, lady Eira, at risk of sounding rude – what is the meaning of this?” more specifically, ‘My sister can explain in greater detail’. Eira waited, her unsullied righteous gaze scanned line to line, “-I see. He’s off on an escapade,” the golem’s flat palms tightly gripped important files. “-You see, éclair, Igna has a habit of leaving without notice. We should be grateful he said anything. Here, follow me, I’ll explain on the way,” the solemn room locked silently, “-Artanos, the god of knowledge,” she elaborated, “-any ideas?”

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“Read about it,” he replied.

“Good, I’ll surmise.” Ministry of Internal and External affairs wrote in black on bronze, and Eira’s main offices rose in the distance. Greater expansions since the days of old.

“Understand?” she finished her story at the start of her department’s pathway.

“Artanos visited our king, I get the gist. Why didn’t he say anything?”

“Don’t ask questions we know the answer to. Enough,” she stepped forward, “-you’ll work with me today, revise Minerva’s request, and send the budget to Ela. We’ll move forward if she approves.”

Those very words brought a frown on éclair, “-if she approves? Right, as if she’ll spare us money.”

“Quite a mouth.”

“Lady Ela, why are you here?” shuddered the prime minister.

“I was by lady Eira. Suppose I’m not welcomed,” she narrowed, “-I’m the stingy minister, aren’t I?”

“Ignore him,” said Eira, “-we have work to do,” she slowed her step and speech, “-Ela, do realize, the budget cuts are so harsh it makes the department gasp. Be tactful, we needn’t another heart attack.”

“Fat businessmen are easy prey – the oaf went into shock when I denounced his trafficking before the Department of Justice. Not my fault he was weak of heart,” she rolled her eyes, “-pathetic.”

“Yes, yes, we know the vendetta against the chubby old man. Stop projecting,” their chatter faded, and a gust blew – carrying leaves and pebbles. Ladies in dress forcefully threw their hands downwards so as to not be exposed, a straw hat was spotted in the way distance.

‘I know that hat,’ éclair traced the trajectory to a lady.

“Lady Katherine’s back,” commented a passing Midne, “-have fun with Eia and Eira, two pretty flowers on each arm.”

“Shut up,” he muffled, ‘-flowers, more like vipers.’

A phrase meandered over her shoulders, “-lady Katherine,” whispered a timid attendant, “-lady Katherine,” yet again, the words fell on deaf ears.

“My hat,” she muttered voicelessly. The frame was picturesque. Katherine stood akin to an angel descended from the heavens, her golden locks, fair skin, and slender frame. If one were to place a description on what the heavens proudly withheld, Katherine’s beauty would surely suffice.

“Beautiful,” muttered the shy attendant.

“Hello,” she turned, “-Were you waiting long?”

“My lady, you looked so distressed a minute ago, did I cause an affront?”

“No my dear,” she replied warmly, “-you did no such thing. I know the palace life is tedious at times. Keep up the work, Midne’s a slave driver, I know, but still, keep strong.”

“About that, lady Katherine,” she pressed her palms, took a few minutes, and gathered strength, “-lady Midne told me to become your personal assistant,” all in one exhale. The fleshy color turned bright red. Katherine smiled, “-my dear, don’t be so uptight. I’m here to help, honest.”

“Lady Katherine,” she looked afar towards the distant array of municipal departments, “-a strange fellow approaches.”

“Lady Katherine,” gasped a gardener, “-your hat,” he presented the object, “-I found it stuck to one of my trees.”

“I see,” her melancholic mien swayed, “-my straw hat,” she pressed it against her heart, “-a gift.”

“Please, my lady, we should head to your bedchambers.”

Katherine’s locks were untied to flood her shoulders. She squarely stared a mirror propped up on a lavishly decorated vanity table. Each brush of her hair begot a silent gaze from herself, ‘-I auditioned for Auder, I hope it goes well,’ strangely, on her straightening her hair, a small note caught her attention. A folded note prefaced by black ink in a stylish calligraphie. “To my dearest,” she said aloud, unfolding the note.

Dear Katherine,

I know the months have been hard. You’ve auditioned for various modeling agencies. No doubt your figure and beauty are cause for praise – I can certainly understand why modeling agencies would be hesitant in employing a royal as a model. The job is not renowned for its tact and well-treatment. It’s flashy and best and shameful at worse. I was never a man to stand in one’s desire for growth. Take my word to heart, I’m proud. No matter what comes, I’ll always stand by your choice, Katherine; not by promise nor vow, simply, I want to. Since Aceline’s passing, matters haven’t been so great, I often find myself wondering what I should do, what I should accomplish. No doubt there is a myriad of issues that requires my attention. Sadly, I’m in no shape to lead, one must know to retreat and take in the greater picture. My apologies for the guerrillaesque ambush. By the time this note reaches, I’ve had already landed in the new world. I shall be home very soon. Auder’s known for its high standards, you made a good choice this time. I’ll wait patiently for the coming success, Katherine. Take care, I’ll see you soon.

Sincerely, yours truly

Igna Haggard.

‘Notes,’ a breath of virgin air washed the face anew. The loud helicopter chops rose in the distance, “-until we meet, majesty.”

Land beyond the eyes could see, irregular peaks in the far distance painted in blueish gray, a rush of green carrying from right to left as one moves closer to the midground where farmlands add a hint of color, namely; yellow. The paths, rocky and subject to transport, horses and carriages. ‘-Good thing Raven invested in land,’ he turned, swapping scenery from vast unknown to a village, “-Caro’s Village,” read sign written in Wracian letters. Residents were unfazed by the helicopters.

“Ahoy,” said an old gentleman tending the fields, “-you must be with crows?” he smiled with little teeth remaining.

"Ahoy," returned Igna, "-Ravens," he said, "-do you know the way to Carne manor?"

"Ah," he clasped his dirt-filled hands, "-go on straight into the village, when you see a brothel pull a hard left then carry on into the forest. Should see a logger's cabin, pick the road right and slowly climb the hills. Should arrive at Carne manor. The usual road's closed – some fucker blocked the passage, newbie woodcutters I tell you."

"I appreciate the help, thank you ol' timer."

"They call me Jimmy. Holler if you need anything," he propped the fork and went on into the field.

'That's the brothel,' he slowed to a stop and glanced right – a horde of miners entered town. Many yelled loudly, some laughed and others winked at passing dames. He ignored the bunch and turned left – workers winked and whispered, "-come, I'll give you a good time."

'Population's predominantly of fair color, must be colonists from Wracia.'

The old man stopped amidst his work, "-ah shit, I forgot to tell him about bandits."

'Log cabin,' he rose his gaze, "-there it is." Ruffians leaped from bushes, "-put your hands up."

"My," he stopped, "-I see the choice of outfit's rather controversial."

"Are you mocking us?" they narrowed, "-we're gentlemen robbers."

"Wearing a suit," he unholstered Tharis and shot one, "-doesn't make you a gentleman. Now," he resumed, "-if you wish to live, get out of my way."

Chapter 967: "Heroes,"

"Hold on, hotshot."

Igna side-glanced, "-doth thee wish to die?" he aimed, a brisk sound of knees and clothes hit the ground, "-please allow us to follow you," they asked with foreheads pinned.

"Follow me?" he stopped, "-I'll have to refuse," a snap lit aflame the body of the deceased, '-I shouldn't have shot, they seem like kids. The death's left them distraught,' he narrowed in thought, '-who cares,' no second thought wasted, "-right, gentlemen robbers. Here's the deal, I'll be staying in Carne manor for the coming weeks. Drop on by, there might be work to be done." Banditry, a life of petty crime scalable to assassination and kidnapping – no code of conduct or sense of self-preservation. An appalling frown voiced much of Igna's thoughts. Past the log cabin, save on empty days, rose a trail. Meadows of vegetation, herbs, and many unknown plants. A keen observation for medicinal and produce for narcotics was always a priority. Money and health, walked hand in hand in the upper echelon. Igna's fruitless scan, after much of a tedious climb, reached its destination. Yonder stretched a long-cleared part of the hilltop. The manor yard was massive and ended on tall walls guarded by onsite security.

"Carne manor," he said, resting a briefcase before a great big gate.

"Who stands there?"

"Igna Haggard,"

A red dot peaked, and a hidden compartment slid, “-welcome, master.” The locks clicked and rotors rumbled. The inner yard stretched greatly – land cultivated for food crops. Demi-human gardeners, dressed in Phantom’s uniform, worked the fields. Sound of the gates, their varying-sized ears turned before the necks followed. “-Majesty,” they waved, “-welcome,” said they joyously.

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‘Food and cattle?’ the former showed itself towards the right, cupped adjacent to the walls and fields, ‘-for a manor, this looks more like a farm.’ A building rose squarely, indentations such as breaks in the flatness of the walls were brought by marble pillars, windows, and decorations. Nothing extra was to be said, it was a manor, one big, tall, and expensive. Retainers waited at the top, head of which was a butler, “-welcome to Carne manor, majesty.”

“Pleasure is mine,” he returned, “-I’ll be in your hospitality for my stay, I hope we get along.” An escort carried the luggage. Butler gave a guided tour, “-your room,” he said, “-the dining room,” he continued, “-the lounge area,” he said once more, “-and lastly, the common area.”

“Great,” affirmed Igna, “-the place is perfect for a pleasant holiday retreat.” Return from the tour followed linearly, the corridors held the usual decorations, armor, and such, “-head butler,” carried a softer voice, “-head butler.”

“Here, here,” he said, standing tall as to be noticeable, “-over here.”

“Head butler,” gasped a cat-eared lady, “-outside, the mistress has arrived and got into an altercation with some gentlemen.”

“Gentlemen robbers perchance?”

“Yeah,” she gasped, “-that’s their name.”

Up the stairs and onto a balcony, ‘-there they are,’ he stopped. Sathanas gripped her fists ominously, “-why are you here?” he barely identified from her lips.

“We were invited by the manor’s lord for an interview. Move along, lassy – we don’t want the blood to be spilled before the master’s gate.”

“You prick,” she hardened her fist, bright reddish orange flash to a complete halt. They dropped, unable to comprehend, ‘-death...’ shuddered the legs, ‘-we’re dead.’ Her fierce red hair turned to a nonchalant Igna presiding over the balustrade. “-You’re free to go,” she mumbled and entered. ‘-Who knew a single glance could possibly stop wrath?’ they stared at one another as she followed the long walkway home, ‘-he’s gone and become more terrifying.’

“Sathanas,” scenery swapped for a cozier atmosphere, “-long time no see, how have you been?”

“So and so,” she said, “-tell me, pops, why are you here?”

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“Pops...”

“What is it?” she tilted her head, “-Vanessa and the others use pops, don’t they?”

He motioned as if to wipe tears, “-you called me pops, I’m glad.”

“Pops, melodrama doesn’t suit.”

“I know,” he returned, “-tell me, how’s life in the new world?”

“Long or short?”

“Long,” he firmed.

“The new world,” she paused, waiting on drinks to quench her thirst, “-let’s see, the place huge. Its scale is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Wracia Empire is big, and you know how few areas are undiscovered, lands deemed too dangerous for exploration? Compared to Iqavea, the new continent dwarfs it. Terrain stretched from cold and snow to warm and tropical. The maps ought to be drafted by éclair soon. Native inhabitants, conveniently named the natives, have been forced into labor, working in mines and fields. The pay isn’t enough to sustain life. The colonies brought sickness and advanced weapons meanwhile the natives fought with bows and arrows. The richness of nature and the abundance of a resource is much a disadvantage as it is a blessing. Colonies settle at supposed mines, and the greedy force slavery onto the unlucky natives – mining towns and villages come and go as time pleases. Move northeast, pass the peaks; a great war fights between the native people and the invaders. Only a small part of the southwestern front has been properly culled, as they often mention. You saw it earlier, new world in name only, for the general populous have not much to their names. The farmlands barely provide for the growing population. Many spend their life savings on a one-way ticket, hoping to come across streets bathed in gold and fortune to be grasped. Reality’s no kind heart, for it jams the sadden truth down their throat. Unemployment, prostitution, drug trade – a new world hand-made for crime and unrest. All I could manage,” she slowed her speech, “-tell me, pops, why are you here?”

“On a customary visit,” he said, “-I met a strange fellow, he asked where to settle and I proposed here.”

“A strange bloke did arrive a while back – he’s settled at Port Dawn, one of the largest cities in terms of population. It’s a few day’s rides on horseback from here, else we could use the trucks, that’ll cut the journey into two days.”

“Does he employ the use of mechanic objects?”

“Yeah, he opened a shop, the Clockwork Factory. Mayor of Dawn’s pretty impressed. Why, is the bloke an ally?”

“On the contrary,” he tightened his lips, “-I wouldn’t say tis a good thing.” Igna’s arrival marked a new start, a turning of a page. Like him, great many o’ things awaited the harshness of Draebala.

“Watch out,” the ground levied into a shower of boulders, “-jump for it!” a vicious growl snapped from a tiny figure – sharp claws swiped, turning giant rocks into smaller pebbles, “-good job,” fired Cora, “-YURIA, THE SPELL?”

“DON’T RUSH ME!” she bellowed, *-song of the fairy, melody of the ladies – turn to ash turn to stone, brightened in lieu of downfall, Melty.* an orb rose to rain threads of bright pink – an army of monsters – vested in armor and oozing power beyond the norm found themselves stuck.

“Barbarians,” mumbled monotonously, “-die,” exclaimed Kaleem tapping his sword, the blade extended into a white line where he simply turned and evaporated the attacking horde, “-WATCH OUT,” Cora vaulted over Kaleem, summoned a pistol and fired – brain matter splattered over the dirt path.

Lightning strike, exclaimed Yuria in the distance – the odor of burnt remains spurred, “-we said no more lightning strike,” sighed Cora, “-smells like ass every time something gets fried alive.”

“No fighting,” returned Kaleem, “-got a long way until home.”

Esh’s loud breaths shortly caught Yuria’s attention, “-are you okay?” she asked, whilst the others thought to claim the monster remains, “-we said you didn’t have to fight.”

“So, do I have to sit like a kid?”

“Yeah,” she coldly added, “-you’re just a kid. I understand how much this quest counts for you and the others. I promise we’ll give it our best,” she smiled, “-don’t forget, Kaleem begged for you to come. Don’t try so hard,” a rejuvenation spell healed most and restored plenty.

‘Heroes from another world,’ he stood, ‘-they were serious... taking down elite monsters like it’s nothing. Invasions are dealt with by the palace guards, not adventurers. Are our strongest warriors nothing compared to them?’

A silent yet strong hand extended, “-let’s go,” said Kaleem’s body language. Little Esh agreed, and the quest continued. Nights of unrest, turbulent days, a trek through mountains, over rivers that blasted at the speed of a power washer, the journey was arduous, eventually, “-there it is,” a clearing in the forest marked the final location, “-it’s here,” skipped Esh, “-the cleansing lake.”

“Wait,” Kaleem walked in before Esh, Cora and Yuria followed his gut. A pristine body of water, liquified gemstones or so it seemed, set before a gorgeously flowing waterfall, “-we have guests.”

A man and woman waited; they bore no resemblance to normal humans nor races they’d seen before. Male and female, such was the only description to be made by the blurred figure brought on by cluelessness.

“Dead?” Cora stepped first, the assumption turned wrong – the duo started as if a machine, pulsing of the hearts rattled ominously. They turned to a sight of half-flesh and half machine, drowned in the color of brown, gold, and silver; a classic combination of dwarven technology, “-you guys sentient?” fired Yuria, Kaleem vanished.

“Correct,” they responded cordially, “-we’re children of our almighty father, Artanos. He asked for us to guard the lake. In honor of his great name, we shall obey his command.”

“For sentient beings,” Kaleem returned nonchalantly, “-you sure are dumb,” he tightened a sack’s knot, “-Cora, let’s run.” Nothing need be said, the trio sprinted, Yuria’s feeble frame easily grabbed and carried Esh, a boy who now held a disappointed expression, “-SO MUCH FOR BEING HEROES!”

“Don’t sweat the details,” they laughed, “-do you think us fool? The set-up, the wording, cliché, cliché, cliché, this ain’t no fantasy novel, Esh, we’re here to win!”

“What’s a fantasy novel?”

“Don’t worry about Cora, he turns stupid when adrenaline rushes.”

“Hey, lord of cliches, what about the encore,” mentioned Kaleem, bright lights sparkled, a sensation of utmost despair filled the jungle, “-I wouldn’t be worried,” they seemingly darted left and right, clueless as to where the paths actually led. In a sudden ambush, the pair leaped into the frame, the legs turned wheels, “-you THINK US FOOLS?”

“DON’T MOCK THE HOLY NAME OF OUR FATHER!” sharp blades flung and exploded.

“CORA, DO SOMETHING!” cried Yuria, more they ran closer grew the attackers.

“Jump sideways on my count,” they sprinted, darting at an inhuman speed rivaling demi-gods, “-three,” they readied mentally, “-two,” the bodies followed, “-ONE!” they jumped sideways and crashed into prickly bushes. “FUCK!” cried Yuria, “-IT STUNG MY AS-”

“Over,” Cora side-stepped, “-don’t underestimate us,” he smiled, the clockwork worriers flew off a cliff, *unity unravel, reality shatters, the call of the fallen is the pledge of the vanquished, come forth,* he clapped, *by the blessing of my patron goddess, be annihilated, GOPHY’S MIGHT.* A blinding explosion rattled the mountainscape which carried round the continent – the echo was heard at the farthest town, “-and that’s how it’s done,” he smiled, “-thank you, goddess.”

A flying spell was cast to lift Yuria’s bottom, “-why me,” she cried, “-it’s always me to gets stuck in the worst spots.”

“Landing was soft,” said Kaleem with Esh in tow, “-we landed on these,” he rose a soft, comfy looking slime, “-it was like sleeping on my lover’s chest. Squish and warm,” the exalted expression focused, “-Cora, I need these monsters for research.”

“The hell you don’t!”

‘They’re gone,’ Esh slowly inched to a jaw-dropping sight – any signs of life below were destroyed, a massive cup laid where once the forest reign supreme.

“Impressive, yeah?”

“Cora, what the hell. You guys fight, swear, act like kids and run whenever danger’s close. Then, from out of nowhere – you go and do something like this, WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” returned Kaleem, “-we’re seriously heroes of another world.”

“A world which makes Draebala feels like a walk in the park,” added Yuria, “-don’t sweat the small stuff, we ought to return,” she summoned transportation portals.

‘We could have escaped...’ poor boy buried his forehead in his hand, ‘-unbelievable...’

Chapter 968: Adventuring’s dead

“Onward home,” the portals exited shy of a den. Few ladies dressed in religious robes; sisters, rare for a world dejected of god’s mighty presence, “-Esh,” said an older one energetically, “-come on in,” she invited the accompanying crew, “-I went into town earlier, I heard great things about your friends.”

“Whatever,” he ducked under the warm embrace and shuffled, joining a click of kids. Sweat and smile, “-innocent happiness,” commented Yuria.

“Blissful ignorance,” returned Kaleem, “-they’re good kids.”

“I would agree,” followed the sister, “-sadly, no matter how good they were, someone thought them a disturbance.”

“Yeah, abandonment is an issue alright,” said Cora, “-we should turn in our quest. Sister, we’ll be back later to deliver the medicine and potions. Yuria,” he turned, “-stay with Kaleem and watch over the kids.”

“Right,” Cora tapped a signet ring with a swipe, “-onwards to the guild,” the broken sight gave a sense of security. Years of battle, and harsh trials against nature’s amazing force worn the structure into a desolate imitation of a scary orphanage. One of those types is perpetuated as unholy and vile in Rosesian cinema. That aside, Cora noticed a familiar building rise to stop after one floor.

‘The depressing expression never changes,’ he gathered himself and approached. What little remaining adventurers fought wore decent armor; nothing to drive home about – bear minimum. Party and party members exhaled at the sound of adventure, “-Cora,” waved a passing team, “-good job on returning home.”

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“You guys headed out?”

“Yeah, wormies have attacked the supply cart. We’ll be joined by another town’s party. Take the days off,” he added with a comforting smile, “-it’s good on the skin.”

“Danger and the shitty pay,” Cora resumed, ‘-no one wants to be an adventurer. Traders make more money, the talentless of them can make a profit of a few coins per trade. The skilled lavishly gather necessary funds on multiple, if not a single trip.’ Once inside, similar to the orphanage; time veered its ugly head. A simple noticeboard laid on one side as if someone had thrown a full stop into another’s sentence. Plenty of requests were ignored, a few left to turn brown, and others picked freshly by the budding adventurer. The guild assistant, a lady in her mid-thirties, hovered tellingly over the counter. In no way did she fly, Cora approached, her tall stature was brought by her race; the condemned nonhumans. Seek far and a name would sure be found – though, she herself preferred the name, Montague.

“Lovely weather.”

“Cora,” she said with mild amusement, “-you didn’t die?”

“We’re hard to kill,” he laughed, “-tell me, what happened to the quest listing about goblins?”

“A few newbies took on honor.”

“And the guild allowed it?” he asked with a sense of reprehension.

“What else can we do, we’re out of adventurers. The more experience one has, the stronger one grows. Anyway, how did your trip go?”

"It went alright," he laid the sack, "-I need the guild master."

"Right," she turned and propped her massively tall back, "-GUILD MASTER!" the room resounded. A backdoor barged open hastily, a confused middle-aged man gawked, "-what?" he stood disheveled, with messy hair and an unchanged outfit from nightwear, "-are we under attack?"

"No, Cora requests an audience."

"Just that?" he exhaled, "-come on then," said a determined gaze, "-leap over the counter and let's talk. I'm not changing my clothes for a single meeting."

"Let's talk he says," muffled Cora, the floorboard creaked, "-just me," he passed Montague, "-no monsters here," said a reassuring tone. The guild assistant looked away, guild doors opened with familiar faces. Guild master's private quarters shut. '-Good a place as any,' they sat opposite one another, "-guild master," the man sat with an amusingly strong aura. The hair was partly gray and black. Long sleeves and trousers gave the impression of a child in hand-me-downs.

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"Cora?"

"I've completed one of the more difficult tasks. I do think it's time for a promotion."

"Right, you and your party have been breezing through the quests," he blew with an undermining tone at the adventurer, "-tell me, Cora, did you ever think what the actions will entail?"

"Yeah, completing quests is one way of helping people. Many of the postings are old and lifeless, long as money's involved, I'm happy to fight."

"That's the problem," fired the guild master, "-it's not about fame, prestige, or fortune. It's about the future. Adventuring used to be a great job, something to be proud of, vigilantes – our very own heroes. Now, it's changed; the populous has strayed from said path. It's a long-lived past. The reason why our guild hasn't shut down is the number of adventurers who yet live. They've learned to pick their battles and only choose danger when the town is in question. What you and your party have done is undoubtedly a feat worth praise and fame, so it would be centuries ago. Now, my friend, nothing matters. To each their own. Everyone for themselves. There's no unity nor friendliness – we're united on basis that we're from the same place, drinking the same water, eating the same food, and breathing the same air. You made it look easy. Youth are an impressionable bunch; they'll follow what's cool. Your party's exploit has breathed a new life into the guild. New recruits sign up every day at the harsh gaze of their parents. The population is low as is, now we have the youngin wishing for glory in battle. As a parent of two, I'd never allow my kids into a battle, not anymore – the skill gap between monsters and us has exploded. We can't compete, we can't fight – tis a fool's game."

"Kids are signing up for battle," he narrowed, "-parents shouldn't be worried. I mean, it is the guild's responsibility to correctly gauge the difficulty of particular quests. Montague, the recent hire – I heard a tale of how she was captured by monsters. Forced to do unspeakable things. Her hallow stared, and look if a lady of her size can be bested by mere monsters, imagine newbies. Adventuring is not dead, perhaps it's dead here, but to me and my friends, we'll be adventurers by heart. So," he placed a sack, "-there are the supplies for the last quest. The rich nectar of the gods."

Smack, a brisk breeze echoed, “-guild master, we have trouble.”

They hurried outside, “-help,” gasped a deeply wounded man, “-the kids, they’ll be slaughtered, someone, anyone, help them...”

Cora immediately turned at Montague, “-the quest record, give it,” she ran for her desk and panicked. Her large scale shuttered like a leaf. Guild master took no time in popping the cork and administering medicine.

“I’ll go,” said Cora, “-no promises,” he passed the door and teleported to the orphanage.

A humbly rested Yuria waved, “-Cora.”

“No time,” he grabbed her collar and pulled, seamlessly lifting her from her seat.

“I get how Esh felt,” she brooded, Kaleem was spotted inside.

Orphanage swapped into a labyrinth of tall trees and unsettling noises, “-Cora, are you sure it’s around here?” suns set sails towards night. “-Yeah, it must be around here.”

A crumbled piece of paper was nailed onto their bags, “-goblin kill quest,” said the title, “-they were spotted around Loek hills. Please, my daughter was kidnapped. Somebody, anybody, help...”

“Over here,” waved Kaleem, “-I see a cave entrance.”

“Hidden behind bushes,” gritted Cora, “-alright, get ready for battle. This is going to be tough,” on saying so, he noticed a faint smear at the cave entrance.

“Blood,” said Yuria, “-it’s a few hours old, the adventurers, I’m sure.”

“Kaleem, you love killing small monsters, any plans?”

“Let me take the lead,” he swapped the weapon for a short sword, “-Yuria, use a detection spell, maintain it until I say stop.”

“Understood,” mood within the party shifted, “-Cora, kill on sight.”

“On it,” he summoned an assault rifle, courtesy of Phantom – a cross-dimensional package delivery system, one given by Igna in jest. Links to Mantia and the blessing of their respective goddesses. Kaleem slid to a shuddered halt midway, painful screams bellowed within, “-traps,” he laid horizontal with the slope, “-no mana until we fight.”

‘Kaleem always speaks a lot when we’re in battle. I admire his strength,’ Cora followed as did Yuria.

“What about the screams?” whispered Yuria, “-are we not going to save them?”

“No,” echoed Kaleem, “-we’re heroes in name, not in application, Remember, we’re here to dispatch the horde, the screams will stop soon enough,” as finished, the cries of mercy halted, “-told you, time’s nigh for them to come out,” they crouched at the entrance, “-we’ll wait for them. Going in without knowledge is a death trap.”

Tiny shuffles shortly told of the green devils. Many bore long noses, gnarly teeth, bald heads, and a face only a mother could love. All held weapons; daggers, clubs, staffs – unmistakably from previous kills. The

unknown horde approached in rows of four or five. Kaleem had his hand open, an invisibility spell was cast upon the party. He held, tension increased, “-NOW!” Cora rolled over, and Yuria cast a blinding spell. Bright lights and muffled snaps, “-twenty dead,” said Kaleem, “-scouts,” he grabbed and flung Yuria across.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” the land felt harsh, she hit her head on a goblin’s stomach, “-KALEEM!” no chance at rebuttal – he dashed past and flew a flask that crashed in the distance.

“Why did you throw me?” the silent, current leader faded into the shadows, “-Kaleem?” muffled feet ran, another horde leaped viciously at Yuria, *Blessed lights from Mantia, shine thy strength into the mortal world, cross boundaries of black and white – dazzle and fry, electrocute and kill,* “-disgusting fucks,” *Euen Z’Dah!* the spell chained one onto the next, leaving a pile of bodies, “-STOP THE SPELL!” exclaimed Cora, she clapped, “-WHAT NOW?”

“You’d have killed the survivors...”

“Good job,” Kaleem returned from the shadows, “-the area’s clear. Honestly,” he said with a hint of disappointment, “-a high-tier spell on goblins?”

“Oh shut up,” she stood and dusted her clothes, “-wait until we get back, I’ll have a meal ready.”

Footsteps echoed, the darkened corridors exposed to the visitors, “-this place, it’s haunting,” added Yuria.

“A stagnant feeling of dread looms,” commented Kaleem, “-it’s the trapped souls of the fallen. There’s more to this place than we understand,” and from what he said, the comment turned sour. “-Poor kids,” exhaled Yuria, “-tortured and killed.” The bodies were left to rot, most naked and few in good conditions, a standard set very low for charred or maimed bodies were considered acceptable, “-never had the chance to live a full life.”

“Leave them alone,” passed Kaleem.

“Trouble,” added Cora, “-yeah, this place has gotten worse,” after stooping under a small passage, a great room opened. Five altars were laid at the extremities of a pentagram.

“Symbol of the Aapith nation,” added Cora, “-I know demons are quite wondrous creatures seeing they’re partly born from our master. This... yeah, doesn’t look right.”

“Fake,” said Yuria, “-it’s make belief. Looking at the texts here,” she skimmed a notebook, “-the necromancer tried to create life.”

“Yeah, create life the biological way,” cringed Kaleem, “-we have one survivor,” he pointed, “-look.”

“Poor creature,” Yuria reached out her hand.

“WATCH OUT!” abyssal-colored sockets opened and leaped, Kaleem barely pulled, Cora turned and fired – brain splatter washed the dirty and repugnant altar darker. “-CAREFUL!” puffed the shooter.

Lightning bolt, a flash passed his head and hit, “-same to you, idiot.”

A dagger flung, “-you both are,” commented Kaleem.

“Ambush, they’re formidable, I’ll give them that.”

“Well,” she dusted her clothes, “-no survivors.”

“Think twice,” said the ominously pleased Kaleem, “-best’s yet to come. A dungeon.”

Complete darkness shrouded the inside. No distinction made – right, left, whatever it was, a solemn whimper fluttered. ‘Breathe,’ a press of the trigger, “-there, no more enemies left.” Yuria lit orbs of white, “-good thing they included night vision.”

“Looking at it rationally... Cora, using a gun in a world where technology has yet advanced into the industrial era is simply bringing a machine gun into a knife-fight.”

“Shut up,” the weapon vanished into a blue glove, “-not my fault we’re superior.”

Chapter 969: A prayer

“Bury the sarcasm,” said Kaleem. A great big divide warned, a cautionary sign built on the essence of those left in torment. Cora intercepted many enemies. Patrol through the hallowed cave turned lines of cells was gently mild. A putrid odor rose at times. They caught whiffs; Yuria’s handsome face would crinkle, her nerves blotted, and her breaths minimum. “-Our mage’s unable to breathe?” added Cora maliciously.

“Ha-ha,” she returned a dead expression, “-I’m laughing.”

“Enough fooling around,” gritted Kaleem, “-look ahead,” a concealment spell hid their presence. ‘Weird,’ thought Cora with a rifle at the ready, ‘-if they were taken captive, where are the ring-leaders. The monsters have been easy. Suppose our gap in strength is to be considered.’

“Don’t be smug,” said Yuria, her tone had a chilling effect.

“Mind read again?”

“No, it’s experience.”

‘I guess she did have an affinity for observation.’

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The somber innards were a task in itself. Night vision or spells of clarity did naught. The shadows felt alive – a curtain of dark mass hung at the start or end of their current path. Screams of the innocent did echo. Young and heart-tearing in nature, “-Kaleem?”

“Let me think,” he hushed, ‘-go in head first or send Yuria?’ as he were to check on the latter, she quietly hid in Cora’s shadow. The confused man watched as she snuck, “-no,” affirmed Cora, “-we’ve used her as bait enough today.”

“Damn it,” he cried with a gambler’s sportsmanship, “-what then?”

She took initiative, “-why are we even hiding,” she stood and stretched both palms to the heavens. Her pose was that of a sister awaiting a divine revelation, *Goddess Miira, my one and only guardian, shine thy light upon thy humble student. Reveal to me the secrets of time and reality. Unravel the lies and

show what lays ahead,* her incantation was definitely a prayer, not a spell. It lacked the usual flashiness with which Yuria prided herself. An orb flickered into existence. Her marred visage; brought upon by Kaleem's leadership, distracted a real sense of relief that filled her mien. The light descended upon her heart – wherein a gentle mist bellowed. Black turned gray, “-let's go,” she walked confidently, “-we're blessed by my goddess.”

‘A blessing?’ narrowed Cora, ‘-no, it's far more than a blessing. We're in a cloud that's broken space and time, we move according to our will, and reality's unaware of our presence. This is the same if we were to erase ourselves from the weave of destiny.’

Shadow before the exit entrance grew to have lines and a pulsing dot. “Shadow was indeed an entity,” said Yuria. They passed through into a sanctuary. Compared to the prior ritual hall, the area stood stoutly. A similar arrangement of altars, and cages of chained prisoners. Ritual men, dressed in heavy black hoods, made their moves on those they fancied. The unfortunate lads and lasses were thrown onto concrete slabs, the altar. There, the cold roughness of the surface cut lightly at the bare skin. The discomfort seemed purposeful. Heavy robes laid over their victim, many of whom screamed and cried. The forceful ones were tied – no use of torture devices. A man in darker overalls bearing the reddish crest of an unknown faction stood at the center. Beside him were the remains of a body, “-night is upon us, gentlemen.” Forceful fornication halted, the robed servants slithered from their prey – latter drenched in sweat and tears. Some bled from their orifices, others contemplated their situation. In all, a heavy cloud of despair topped the sanctuary. “Let us begin the ritual,” they undid their robes to an appalling sight of naked men. New blood was pulled from the cages, and thrown into the center at the leaders' feet. He gave a lustful smirk, grabbed the first of four, and pulled her head near his crotch. What followed couldn't be described, Yuria had no stomach for such a scene. Minutes passed and the first offering received everyone's seed. Her cries had etched themselves within Cora and Kaleem's wavering hearts. Various short glances were exchanged; ‘-should we save them?’

‘No,’

‘How inhumane,’

‘I know,’

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‘Let kill them.’

‘Not now,’ such were the silent conversations. The final piece of the puzzle; an unknown entity of shadowy properties loomed. “-My lord,” prayed the leader, “-please accept this lonesome offering,” the hand clasped, the temperature dropped.

Her face turned pale – the eyelids opened beholder to a darker tint, complete blackness, ‘-the same as earlier,’ went through their minds. The pale body sat upright, a smirk formed slowly to no avail – a snap threw her head backward, and a loud stomach-turning crack echoed.

“Another failed project,” gritted the leader, “-bring out the others.’ Pure fear washed the prisoners – witnessing what had happened and no prospect of a future, they pulled back through the limited cages.

“No point hiding,” they laughed, “-goblins are mercenaries. Here’s the deal, once my lord has a stable body for consumption,” the nature of the room changed. Just as Cora was to speak, an ethereal hand pulled Yuria from their cloud.

“YURIA!” cried Kaleem, “-GO!”

“No, we can’t... lest the cloud allows us to leave, we can’t. This is bad,” each pulse boomed, ‘hold in there, Yuria, don’t do anything rash, we’ll get out, just hold.’”

“Master,” knelt the cultists, “-tell us, humble fools, who this lady is?” the leader nodded as if in full conversation, “-a suitable host?” the men rose lustful smirk. Consciousness was nay, for being pulled abruptly knocked her sense of orientation. The eyes blinked, the lungs rose, the heart pumped, and all subconscious tasks resume. Alas, in no way was she present. Yuria’s tall and slender frame, long legs hidden behind her adventuring robe came to be exposed. The leader couldn’t hide his excitement, “-SUCH A pretty visage,” he took no time and ordered chains, her unresponsive self was propped at the end of the table. A nasty lick of the lips foretold what was to come. Cora and Kaleem fought, they pushed and wailed – nothing was to be done. Yuria’s innocence was taken, her chastity robbed and her dignity destroyed. Her consciousness returned all-to-late, the sight rock of her body – silent tears fell, ‘-my goddess,’ escaped a defeated warrior, ‘-I’ve broken my vow of virtuousness. I’m not deemed to be called a follower of Miira,’ with what little strength remained, she rose her hands and tapped her symbol, “-release,’ Miira’s blessing shattered.

“She moved,” said one.

“Flip her over then,” said another, panting with sweat and pleasure, “-let us enjoy more.” They force themselves deeper, she could but remain silent, fighting in her own way. Where heroes would have swooped in and rescue the damsel in distress, hers was nowhere found. Cora and Kaleem’s presence faded, and the cloud she conjured disappeared. “I’m sorry,” she looked at the ceiling, “-I’ve failed.”

An explosion threw the duo onto grass, “-YURIA!” leaped Kaleem, “-where are we?”

“Shadow Realm,” said Cora, “-she sent us home. What the fuck is she thinking?”

Before another move was made, valkyries circled the duo, “-come with us,” they said coldly. A council room beckoned the four generals.

“Cora, Kaleem,” said their respective goddesses, “-what have you done?”

“My lady,” inferred Cora, “-if I may speak freely?”

“Go ahead,” said Gophy, “-don’t waste our time.”

“Yuria’s in danger, we must return.”

“She’s already gone,” thundered Miira, “-Cora, Kaleem, I’m disappointed. I thought I sent you expressly to protect my dear student, not throw her in the fray. She removed her blessing and spoke words of the dying.”

“Don’t blame us,” interjected Kaleem, “-I get it, we were supposed to help her. What the fuck are we supposed to do when a damn unknown entity casually breaks YOUR barrier and steals YOUR student. WE FOUGHT TO GET OUT, BUT NOTHING FUCKING WORKED. Do you think I ENJOYED WATCHING YURIA

BE DEFILED? ANSWER ME? She's like a sister, I treat her harshly because I love her so much. She's precious to me, and then that happened, I COULDN'T DO ANYTHING. Power of the gods, what's the point of having guardian deities when they won't even HELP?"

"Enough," Cora rose, grabbed Kaleem's head, and forced him headfirst onto the marble floor, "-my apologies, goddesses. He's animated..."

"Is it true?" Miira flew from her seat, "-tell me, Kaleem, is it true?"

"Yeah," he sobbed heavily, "-I couldn't do anything..."

She shut herself, pressing her forehead in stress, "-if I may interject," a dark-haired man approached, "-would it be alright if I were to join your students in their moment of plight?"

"God of War," smiled Lilith, "-tell us, Formle, what's the true intention?"

"Nothing much," he returned, "-I simply wish to draw blood," he smirked, "-the Shadow Realm is amazing. I'm fond of my newfound home. Therefore, I can't sit back without avenging one of my own. Lady Miira, don't blame yourself, nor do you, Kaleem, and Cora, no one needs to bear the blame for what has happened. Heed to the voice of one who's familiar with Draebala. The place, I say, is worse than anything to have been created by the hands of a deity. No amount of preparation can rival what the domain throws. Remember, for tis not only a place for non-gods but gods and demons as well. The factions lie and thrive, everyone knows what needs to be done."

Miira rose a stern gaze, her face refreshed from prior entanglement. "Formle, I humbly ask for thee to save my precious student. Send her home, no matter what state she's in, dead, alive, I care not."

A portal materialized, "-until we meet again," they leaped through, leaving the guardian deity piercing Miira's seat.

"Explain," they demanded, "-we know a blessing can't be refuted by the blessed. Tis the god who revokes said right. Miira, what have you done?"

"I followed the path of anarchy," she said, "-to gain, one must lose. Formle is right; we checked on the trio from time to time. We don't know what could happen. I knew what was going to follow, especially since the new addition of lady Violetta, weaver of destiny, to our arsenal of heavenly rescue. She foresaw a great tragedy and expression said that destiny was subject to change from those blessed by gods and demons. Strong emotion can change an entire world, such as the reason for gods like Formle's birth – a collective thought gathered to bring an unknown into the very fabric of reality. What I mean to say is, that our children would have been crushed later. They now know the stakes of Draebala, my methods are unkind, however, I do not regret my actions. Yuria's chastity was already lost when she arrived from the captured world. Overcoming thy weaknesses is the true purpose of adventuring, if they don't understand that much, well, I'm afraid we're bad teachers."

"You make trivial matters so ambiguous," yawned Lilith, "-the idea's good, and they'll learn a valuable lesson. Getting rid of softness early makes for a sharper sword in the future."

"I suppose it's normal," said Intherna, "-lady Miira is known for her friendly demeanor and vile personality."

“Correct,” chuckled Gophy, “-on that note, I suppose I should take my leave,” the goddess of destruction left.

“She’s acting weird,” narrowed Lilith, “-any idea, Intherna?”

“No, she doesn’t talk about her private life much.”

“Perhaps an old lover,” the room cleared, leaving Miira to teleport to her private estate – a manor built close to the temple of Kronos. ‘I’m sorry, Yuria,’ the hardened fa?ade broke, ‘-how can master do this daily. Picking the best option despite the happiness of the subordinate. One can’t truly be heartless, can they?’ her hands shook, ‘-I’m a goddess... look at me, shaking like a leaf, how pathetic,’ a subdued portal opened, ‘-I need to see him,’ she stepped through, her godly apparel changed for one fitting of the mortal realm. Sun quickly warmed her body, ‘Carne manor,’ written across a wall. Dry leaves and twigs crushed; her light blond hair turned with a woeful strain.

“Miira?”

“Igna,” she leaped into his arms, “-I missed you...” he calmly tightened the embrace and patted her back, “- shall we talk inside?”

“Yeah, let’s.”

Chapter 970: Heart-to-Heart

“Different,” commented Miira, “-I didn’t expect such a level of craftsmanship.”

“Don’t be surprised,” he guided the goddess, passed halls, turned to pick the scenic route until an arching doorway. Here, locked behind a thick curtain, Igna softly passed the latter, clicked the lock, and pushed. A warm breeze burst, catching Miira’s outfit by surprise, “-warm,” said a calmer expression. They settled on a terrace. Sky brimmed nicely, maids hesitantly brought meals and drinks. Some passed knowing glances at Igna, ‘-who is she?’ were the curious regards. Igna nodded, asking for the curiosity to be maintained.

“How have you been?”

“Normal,” he returned, “-Miira, I won’t play these games. Tell me,” he inched forward, placing his hand on a warm cup, “-what’s the matter? Tis a first, you came to me for help, I’ll do anything I can.”

“Igna,” she stopped whatever fa?ade formed, “-why do you think of us so highly. I’m not daft,” her observant pupils leaped between his shoulders, “-there are three sharing the same body. No, they control different sides of the personage known as Igna Haggard. Tell me, who are you, do you know who you are, what is your purpose, what about the others, ask yourself, are you truly you or just an illusion brought by the other yous’?”

“Slow down,” he rose his hands, “-too little too great of yous’,” he sipped, “-if it’ll calm thy mind, then here’s a short answer. I’m Igna Haggard, the third incarnation of an entity shunned by reality. My personality spawns from the depths of Alfred’s rejection of fate. The uncaringness to kill and take lives spawns not from Staxius, but rather, is carried from the first incarnation. There’s little difference to who I am now. Honestly, saying we three are different is awfully wrong. We’re one of the same, a linear path of evolution. Despite this, I myself, am no finished product. I highly doubt we to become complete.

Rejects may fight, rebels may revolt; the all-encompassing normalization of the worlds shall always hammer the nail that sticks. As for these two," shadows manifested, "-they're present and part of me. No one controls the other, the relationship is unconditional love and hatred for our collective prize and regrets. I did say short, and such is my final answer. I am, who I am, no one dictates who or what I stand for."

"See," she smiled, "-conviction and pride in what thee represents. The answers were clean and precise. I can't match said level."

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"Tell me more," he said.

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"Haven't answered my question. Why do you think of us so highly?"

"On the simple reason that I trust my guardian deities. I do an awful job at hiding my standards. Goddesses, especially you, Miira, have controlled and maintained the birth of a new world. Staxius's ultimate goal and I say so with confidence. The Shadow Realm had always been the only thing he wished for. A place for rest and peace, a place far from himself, the memories of a little kid forced onto a battlefield. My dreams are plagued by nightmares. I vividly experience events that I wish I had never known. Torture, and abuse, he was forced to stand for a week as a mage's plaything. How could someone keep their sanity, and how can I brush off the matter as if it were normal? Then there's Gophy, Intherna, you, Miira, and Lilith, people who I know to trust. Amazing people, I look up to you as a person, not as the title of a guardian deity. I've always thought of thee as my friends – however, my being weak felt rude and presumptuous to act casually. Instead, I chose to keep a formal and quaint relationship. There needs not to be unnecessary harm done. I know it's stupid. Deep down, I have respect and admiration for you all. Our strength and power, the ability to rival heaven and hell – it's your hard work and courage, not me, not mine. I just wanted a simple life for my guardian deities. I've come to realize I'm a whimsically selfish person – who'd adopt and soon abandon a child on mere fancy. Tis one of my greatest flaws; self-acceptance is the path to salvation. Many events spell out what I should do and work on. Even now, this discussion is supposed to be focused on you, and yet, the way you stare, the way I've grabbed thy attention... it's, it's unsettling."

Her focus shook, "-you're right," she said snapping from the deep concentration, "-Igna, have you gotten better in using Dark-Arts?"

"No," he replied, "-Dark-arts has long faded from my skillset. What I possess is experience of decades of," he paused, "-pardon my French," exhaled, "-bullshitting."

"Good ability to have," she said, "-convincing a goddess is no easy task," part of her reservations erased, "-I appreciate it. Pouring your heart out like that requires courage."

"Yeah," he sipped, '-great way to make another talk.'

"I shall begin where we sent Yuria and the others to Draebala. We asked them to create a stronghold for when the day comes when the Shadow Realm decides to reclaim, we'll easily march to said destination. Alas, we underestimated how cruel the place was, and I did something ungodly. I know people in

Draebala, old acquaintances from my days working with Kronos and Scifer, don't forget, said realm is the dominion of Kronos. It began innocently, I had them send reports – willingly placed a young adventurer in their path. A demi-god of sorts, I won't go into details on who he is or what he stands for. Tis a story for him to narrate. The more I read, the darker I felt; they undermined how dangerous Draebala is. Winning battles whilst on the verge of death, calling onto their restricted abilities in times of need. Using the Shadow Realm's vastness is a favor granted to only the blessed. They fought time and time again, clawed their way across difficult quests – laughed and played, when matters worsened, call onto us for help. What's the point of establishing a stronghold if one were to constantly contact their leaders for information. There's no opportunity for self-growth, it was the complete opposite of when we watched your journey. A talented warrior who slaughters on a whim. Choosing the path of diplomacy lest the situation demands the signature Haggard treatment. We watched the struggles, should have been there when Intherna had her army of phoenix warriors ready to invade. You never called for us, never acted upon our promise of mutual aid. To see you win after many failures, accepting you're losses. Death of Aceline, the entire realm felt it, a pain so heavy a hurricane washed over the capital. Guess I wanted my student to experience the same level of grit and sense of accomplishment. There'll come a time when they'll stop and reflect. I shudder. They'll see how they won by relying on their masters; never able to break the title of student. Compared to them, we have Draconis, Raphael, Vanesa, and Saniata – the four children of the one. They've taken a fundamentally different approach; one the resembling yours," her hands trembled as more words came, "-then, I decided to act. They needed a lesson," she bit her own lips, straining her visage to remember the dubious act, "-I-I asked for Vesper," she exhaled, "-I asked for her to stage a play where worshippers of the dark-gods would take up residence and act upon their vices. She did so discreetly – the plan came to pass yesterday. Yuria's dignity was defiled, the traumatic sight facing Kaleem and Cora, seeing their companion be violated. A blessed can't refute a goddess's blessing. Yuria saw fit to distance herself from the mark. They knew, the goddesses knew. None seemed particularly angry, I don't know why... that's," she exhaled, "-that's why I'm at a loss. What's right, what's wrong, were my action truly justified, or did I abuse my power. Tell me, how can you come to terms with the actions thee've made? How to deal, how to deal..." her voice faded on the cycle, "-I'm lost," she melted into the seat and stared at the vacant skyscape. Reflection of blue upon her eyes poetically told what she felt inside. Each flutter felt soft, her sharp lashes stood emptily, like withered trees bordering a lonely lake. In said instant, the reflected blue turned dark – becoming the very lake her lashes bordered.

"Enough," added Igna, "-what's right and wrong? who cares, the very idea is subjective. What's there to think when an action's already come to pass. I won't blame you; such is why the others didn't ask questions. They know what had to be done, a necessity. If tis reassurance, then, I'm afraid, I can't grant it. The only one who can... is you. Me saying, 'I'd have done the same,' would be superficial, and we both know it doesn't stand to those who bear greater responsibility. I won't reassure you, however, I'll say this – to learn, one must fall. The greater the fall, the stronger the struggle, in the end, the more one fights, the thicker grows their skin. Look here, Miira," they crossed glances, "-Draebala's on the verge of war. I don't know when, I don't know how – titans have made themselves a nice continent south. The god of titan, Artanos, God of knowledge, wants the Sickle of time. We met one another, we're cut from the same cloth, such as the feeling I had. It felt like I was looking in a mirror, not me, but what I was to become. I'm not ashamed to admit it... I was scared, terrified even. He had walked the same path I did. Aceline died because of me – indirectly but true. Such the reason why I'm here," he exhaled, "-the new world, so speaks the local gazette. What I see is an exploitative newfound mine. Fortune is to be made –

and here, I suggested Artanos set up camp, and he listened. I must know the intentions before a move is made. Miira, Draebala's out of my reach, I'm ill-equipped to stroll into a new dimension and start anew. As a friend, I request this from the Shadow Realm; establish a stronghold and train our soldiers. Ready everyone for the eventuality of war. When time's nigh for battle, I promise to lead our realm into battle. Aapith was lost to Alfred, godhood was lost to Staxius – I won't stand to lose what's precious to me."

"The request," she finished her drink, "-won't be accepted by me. It'll be they who make us proud."

"All I wanted to hear," he smiled, they both headed towards the balustrade, a faint moment of silence allowed for normalcy.

"Igna, I'm glad we spoke. Putting everything into words, I'm light, I feel at ease."

"Feels good to have a heart-to-heart..."

"Corny," they laughed, "-honestly, Igna, you're amazing. I'm glad we're on the same team."

"If only it was that simple," he mumbled.

"What you say?"

"Nothing, just doing some thinking."

"Well, I should get going," a portal opened, "-until we meet again, Igna."

"So long, Goddess Miira," she stopped midway, spun and charged, ambushing Igna with a peck on the lips, "-not Goddess, we stand more to gain as equals," she winked, "-Lilith's not the only one who gets to have fun," goddess left with a joyous smile.

"Seriously?" he blinked, finding himself on the terrace floor, '-equals she says. First Lilith, now her,' he laid, watching the sky, '-we're not all on the same page, Miira, at least, not all of us.'

A portal rematerialized, "-Miira?"

"Gophy?" she squinted, "-what are you doing here this late?"

"Nothing," she returned nervously, "-what's with you anyway?"

"Nothing," returned Miira equally nervous, "-went on a little excursion is all," the awkward exchange ended. The portal room's tranquility returned – though it had been dark, '-why was she wearing lingerie under her nightgown?'

'Why was she in such a good mood?' they parted in the corridor. A soothing resonance shook her core, '-my love, I wait so dearly for thy touch...'