

Death Magic 971

Chapter 971: "Pure black hair and yellow eyes drowned in a sea of black,"

"A little too late," spat a ghastly pale Yuria, "-a little too late," she said, tilting her head parallel against her shoulder, "-a little too late." Reinforcement arrived as she said, a little too late. Nothing was left alive in her wake – the sanctuary, hours ago – a refuge for the depraved, now laid in a pool of blood. Body parts smeared across walls and floors. Rusty cages held the petrified remains of severed hands – an ash-like structure of those who begged for a chance at salvation. There was naught but hatred. An air familiar to Formle, Kaleem, and Cora. Yuria's innocent face and dignified disposition sat crossed-legged upon a single remaining altar.

They advanced carefully – each footstep was either in blood or remains. At the center, the changed Yuria sat with one foot on the altar and the other left to dangle. Remnants of flesh hung off her teeth. Lines of brownish red marred her chin, "-a little too late," she stared squarely, her eye socket turned inky-black – in the middle of which blinked a yellow circle.

"Yuria," gestured Cora, "-come on, it's us."

"Who is us?" returned a heavily throaty voice, "-us as in those who ran?" a condescending leer struck the trio. Her would-be exposed self was hidden behind a veil of black covering her legs and chest.

"Tell me," Formle advanced, "-are you god or demon?"

"What does it matter to you?" she grunted.

"Oh, it matters plenty," a snap of the wrist conjured an iron cage.

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"WHAT'S THE MATTER?" fired Cora, "-FORMLE!"

"TRAITOR," gnarled Kaleem.

"Don't bother," he snapped – a lance impaled their legs to the ground, "-I won't stand for weakened heart on the battlefield. Watch and learn," he said, looming over the cages, "-tis the price one has to pay. Watch and learn, newbies, watch and learn," he spun to a visible aura. Plainclothes swapped for a black and gold armor, "-allow me to introduce myself," he bowed cordially, "-I am known as Formle, the god of war and patron god of the Sadian people. A pleasure to make thy acquaintance."

"Name's Ergine, a Demonlord awakened by these ingrates," she threw a severed finger over her shoulder. A mild splash followed – the landing told much of what had happened. 'Everyone's dead,' narrowed Cora, '-did she kill them?'

"Right, Ergine," the ominously powerful god stepped forward, "-you're not here on whim nor called by ritual. Give me the truth. Think before speaking for I hate liars more than traitors."

"God of war," she cackled, "-very impressive. A murderous animosity, are all gods so unruly, or art thou the exception?"

“Gods have gotten a better reputation in the millennia I slept. Trust me when I say, gods are not righteous entities,” a prideful air hung by the way he spoke. “-Ergine.”

No take-backs. The once living Yuria leaped into battle, her body instantly dispersed into mist, “-good luck, god, for thou art dead,” resounded a smug declaration. Each breath felt more suffocating, *cough, cough,* “-don’t breathe,” Cora forced in great agony, “-the a-a-a-air. Kaleem?” he turned, no reply, ‘-he passed out. What’s happening, I can’t see anything... please, Yuria, do something...’

From the depth of the shadows, where the god of war found himself; claws and spikes darted forth. Each strike hurt not the body, but the inside. ‘-my strength is draining,’ he opened and closed his fist, ‘-I might lose this battle?’ the simple thought broadened a smile.

“Contemplating thy death?”

“On the contrary,” he replied, “-I feel alive,” he slammed his feet – the air rattled. Unintelligible chants left his lips. Bombardment of ancient symbols pulled, “-damn,” the shadowy entity, “-strong, you’re strong,” into a distorted sense of Yuria’s body. Half of the visage melted; limbs extended far beyond human limits. Any hope of recognizing their comrade faded as did the fog.

‘Yuria,’ Kaleem reawakened, the mind blurry and the thoughts unsteady.

“I don’t want to say it...”

“Then don’t. I still believe.”

“My games didn’t work,” shrugged Yuria, “-how disappointing. Tell me, Formle, have you ever visited the Aapith nation?”

“No, and my schedule doesn’t allow for vacations,” he reached for a curved blade fixed upon his back, *-by authority granted on my name and title, I, God of War, Formle, decree my opponent and I to be locked in mortal combat. Close the cage, rise the flames, cry the pain and glisten through the age; Domain Expansion: Colosseum.* Reality shattered – from the tiny area exploded rows of seats, oval-shaped walls, and sand reaching the arena’s walls. Sun’s ray fired as if flaming arrows.

“No more trickery,” said a mysteriously heavy Formle.

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Ergine’s deformed body disintegrated into a somewhat normal appearance, “-this must be the domain of a high-tier god,” she smiled, “-I never thought an entity so powerful would so brazenly conjure his domain in a realm filled by blood-thirsty demons and power-hungry gods,” she covered one ear and pointed, “-listen, battle cries of the vicious.”

“Ha-ha,” he caressed his stubby beard, “-Ergine, you ought to be faced with reality. Those cries aren’t from the outside – look carefully,” tainted white cages showed but handprints of the desperate, “-gods, demons, angels, humans. I’ve fought them all,” he carried his finger from sides to the top, “-the number of souls trapped in my domain equals that of an entire nation. Thus, I say again, Ergine, gods are sometimes worse than demons themselves,” the ground shook – a crack laid where he once stood, *crack,* the barrier walls caved, *COUGH,* blood hurled, “-what the-” she crashed and bled.

“Never underestimate gods,” he approached, “-worthless newbie.” Cupid-like entities fluttered over the defeated. “-I wish I could say you fought admirably. Cowardice deserves no praise, only shame. Be sentenced to the oubliette, Ergine, and may thee regret the day thou crossed my path.”

THUD, “-well, well,” said a stranger voice, “-the god of war, Formle.”

“There you are, Artanos, or should I refer to thee as Artanos’s duplicate?”

“Astute as always,” he smiled, “-the arena hasn’t changed despite the ages.”

“What do you want, Artanos?”

“Nothing much, I wanted to check on an old comrade. Tell me,” he teleported beside Formle, “-where have thee been for so long?”

“On a vacation.”

“Here I thought you didn’t take vacations.”

“And sure I don’t,” he smiled, “-drop the fa?ade, Artanos, what do you want?”

“A partnership of course,” he mumbled, “-like the good ol’ days. We team up and all be the wiser to the strongest duo.”

“Sadly,” he placed a hand on Artanos’ shoulder, “-bygones be bygones. Water under the bridge as they say. I’m afraid I’ve sworn loyalty to another. Looking at your expression, you already knew.”

He exhaled, “-Formle, come on.”

“Pure black hair and yellow eyes drowned in a sea of black,” Formle gave a disappointed sigh, he pressed his forehead and shook his head, “-I should have known on seeing what she had become. You possessed her, didn’t you, well, one of the clockwork warriors did.”

“Yeah,” he smiled, “-it was me, I wanted to test Igna’s subordinate’s mettle. From what I’ve seen,” once at Yuria, second at the defeated duo, “-I don’t have much to worry. Relay my warmest regards. I’m needed someplace else – titans sure are a rowdy bunch to control,” he inched ever closer to Formle’s ears, “-between you and me, Titan women have an otherworldly taste. The pleasure of taming a strong woman, my, it gets my heart beating. So long, partner, so long.”

Realm Retraction, the colosseum dug itself into nonexistence. The sanctuary remained untouched from when they first arrived – repugnant and stomach-turning. With a slight grin, Cora, Kaleem, and Yuria were teleported into the Shadow Realm.

“Welcome back,” said a passing attendant.

“Where are the guardians?”

“At their respective estates, shall I call for them?”

He rose his head and hailed a passing dragon carriage, “-master?”

“Take these two to their masters.”

“As is wished,” the flaming scarlet dragonaught flapped, leaving Formle with a bundle of tangled body parts. Fluid escaped the dirtied package, “-where’s Miira?”

“As I said...”

“Right, my bad. Have Raphael head towards Miira’s estate.”

“As my lord wishes,” she left. Another gesture brought another dragonaught carriage, “-Frostrest manor,” he said, stuffing the bundle on the side, “-also, I’ll pay extra for the mess.”

“A paying customer is a paying customer,” whimpered the jaded rider, “-always something to happen when I fly over the castle...”

“Did I miss something?” he inquired, sensing more to the man’s jaded comment.

“Yeah, I saw one of the goddesses having a steamy exchange on the hill ‘ver there,” he pointed with a frown, “-don’t know who she was... at my age, catching glimpse of people whilst traveling this fast is tedious.”

“Still impressive,” he returned, ‘-we should be wary. A goddess and my old comrade,’ the lines clicked, ‘-for the love of God, why didn’t I realize this sooner. Artanos is back... he’s Gophy’s lover, the Romeo, and Juliette of the heavenly realm. How in the fuck did I miss such a big development. We were young and they were so in love. I was forced to third wheel; I doubt she even remembers my face as I’d hid in the bushes whilst he snuck into her estate. Good times... if he reignites her cold heart, we’ll be in serious trouble.”

“We’re here,” returned the rider in the same deadpan expression, “-jump, my lord, tis quicker.”

“Merciless,” he slid the door and leaped, “-PAYMENT IS ON THE CASTLE’S TAB,” the voice faded to which the rider winked. Miira’s estate rested calmly beside Kronos’ temple – from the freefall, it looked close. When the ground approached, the distance grew to be quite the trek. Her heavenly estate was crafted more so than built into the side of a limestone deposit. He landed squarely within the courtyard. Pilgrims scattered about, ‘-holy massive,’ he stared up at statues of behemoths shaped as if they held the massive entrance to her home.

‘Boredom is a vice, alright.’

“Formle?”

“Lady Miira,” she passed his side in common ware, “-might I ask the nature of such a normal outfit?”

“Oh, doesn’t it look like a chef’s outfit?”

“I suppose?”

“Nothing beats feeding the pilgrims who trek from around the world. Tell me, why are you here-”

“Noticed the stench?”

“Yeah,” she gulped, “-let’s head inside.”

And thus the greater halls narrowed into a singular sterile room. Minutes elapsed, and Miira couldn't shake her emotions from his labor's fruit, "-when I said to try and save, I didn't mean turn her into jam?"

"Well, I couldn't do much. She was possessed. Come on, we can heal her, can't we?"

"Look at the state she's in," she reached in and pulled a severed head, "-do you think we can revive her, just look at her, it's comically gruesome..." her notice landed upon a sterner gaze, "-what?"

"I imaged her ladyship to be most troubled?"

"By a dead body?" she eased, Yuria's head fell, "-she's dead, there's no changing what's happened. True, I agree I should be more on edge... however," she opened her palm to the materialization of a sandglass, "-I'm not worried." Time around the lass turned – the bludgeoned mess gained a skeletal frame, flesh and skin reattached and the agreeable beauty returned.

Knock, knock, "-pardon the intrusion."

"Raphael. Go on, heal her," she said with childish abandon. He entered, threw a suspicious gaze at Formle, '-what's with her?'

A shrug and a few blinks responded; '-I don't know.'

Greenlight gripped Yuria, "-and there," he wiped his forehead, "-all done. Master, are you well?"

"Don't worry about me, Raphael, what about Yuria?"

"I don't want to know how or what happened. She'll be fine after a few days' rest."

"Are you going somewhere?" she asked, "-the outfit, it's very, how can I put it, otherworldly."

"Yeah, Draconis and the other children have decided to visit father. A surprise visit of sorts. I should get going, I'll see you soon, master. Thank you for the food," he exited the kitchen.

"Safe travels," she said with motherly tenderness, "-now, Formle, tell me what really happened," her apron tightened.

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Chapter 972: Weaver of Destiny

"Pardon?"

"I didn't ask for an apology. Formle, the truth, right this instant."

"Where's the motherly Miira gone?"

"What was that?" she held cutlery, innocent utensils that resembled weapons, "-I couldn't hear over the sound of sharpening knives."

"You win," he caved, "-Yuria was possessed by a clockwork shadow. The latter be a member of Artanos' legion. Before more questions are asked, I'm an old friend of his. We used to be partners before my whole death thing. I'd normally be secretive about the shared bond; but not now, it won't bring much

good. I must ask, no digging into my past further. It's left behind, we all share secrets we rather not reveal. Isn't that right, a not-so-virtuous goddess Miira."

She flashed her azure dots upon his somber visage, "-how did you?" she hushed.

"Lilith," he said calmly, "-I mean, it's not strange to think the relation between you and master goes beyond devotee and goddess. 'Twould be absurd for once as pretty as thineself to not be satisfied. Rather, I'd think it be an affront, one of the highest degrees."

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"I get it," she steadied her breathing, "-no need for announcements of my escapades. Yuria was possessed, I presume a domain was activated?"

"Without my coliseum, her soul would have been lost."

"Good," she lowered her shoulders followed by the slow chop sound, "-the Shadow Realm is under attack, isn't it?"

He knew what she meant, "-yeah," he returned, reading between the lines.

"A traitor?"

"Can't say for certain. Lest the process greatens, I see nothing wrong with a little game here and there."

"Lest those games become an addiction. I sure hope they know what they're doing. If he were to find out, my," her knife halted, "-I shudder to think what such news would bring."

"Either acceptance or full-on carnage. There's no telling; trust is a feeble thing, a valuably feeble word we hold dear."

Kitchen knock, "-my lady," panted Kaleem, "-where's Yuria?"

"Where is she?" fired Cora, "-we need to see her." A rigid presence blocked said requests. Miira stood with arms akimbo, an unimpressed scan washed them in a cold sweat. Pants halted behind the throats, silence felt obligatory.

"No," she said, "-I won't allow visitors. Cora, Kaleem, I was disappointed. Brazen use of powers from the Shadow Realm. Realize, yes? When the powers were needed most – the lack of endurance prevented activation. I say, her defilement and death are thy faults. Head on home, I need not useless guards to protect my daughter. Her chastity was forever stolen and her confidence perhaps to never return. Understand, that actions have consequences. Draebala is no walk in the park. Return to thy masters and ask them for forgiveness, say aloud what happened and how the loss was thy fault."

Cora got on his knees and begged, "-please, my lady, allow us to see her, even from a distance."

Kaleem followed, "-we only want to be reassured..."

"Reassurance?" she laughed, "-where was it when her life was in danger. You fought, you cried, you begged? No, from what Formle recounted – you were asleep. Must I continue?"

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Jet black hair turned the corner, “-Must you be harsh on them?”

“Gophy,” Miira narrowed her gaze, “-why are you here?”

“To check on my disciple,” she said, “-I know how off-hand you get sometimes.”

“Off hand, pardon me?” she tilted her head, “-Gophy, my dear Gophy, why are you here I ask again?”

“And I reply, to see my son.”

“Right,” commented Formle, “-I’m afraid she’s cleansed from the spell.”

Her uncaring stare snapped onto him, “-excuse me? Care to speak clearly, I’m not much for reading between the lines.”

“And I’m no fond of liars,” he replied, “-lady Miira, I wish thee a nice day,” the footsteps pounded towards Gophy, “-don’t be so high and mighty,” he whispered, “-an ex-lover is no reason to become obnoxious,” he turned the corner – the words only registered. She turned, her lashes flickered with rage.

“Where are you going?” a heavy grip took her shoulder, “-are we going to argue or not?”

“I have no time for nonsense,” she shrugged the grip and dashed. Those with heads to the floor remained so, turtle wishing for repentance.

“Such is the way of life,” she said enigmatically, “-Cora, Kaleem,” the tone eased, she moved forward and knelt, “-listen to me,” she rose both heads, “-Yuria is in no shape to welcome visitors. Reflect on what’s happened for thou art children. Power and strength mean nothing if one can’t save what’s important. It’s the problem he faces constantly. No matter how powerful Igna gets, no matter how great a person he becomes – he’ll always be weak, and such is why he hates his weakness more than anything. Saving a person means more than drawing power from gods, taming demons, or finding legendary weapons. It comes from here,” she tapped her head, not her heart, “-think before you act, think, for when the situation requires absolution, tis logic which makes true, not emotions,” her words coincided with the god of war, “-I don’t expect greatness right away. Walk down a path of thy own choosing – if it doesn’t exist, create one. Never forget, if you can’t save someone, rely on another. There’s no shame in asking for help.”

‘We were stupid,’ he clambered against a counter, ‘-thinking everything would become normal...’

“Lady Miira.”

“Yes?”

“Please open a portal to Draebala,” Kaleem bowed, “-I want to complete what I started.”

“Good,” she smiled, “-on one condition.”

The resolution showed no waves; a concrete mien, “-restriction on thy powers.”

“Restrictions?”

“Yes, find a new way to become strong. Don’t rely on the Shadow Realm.”

“We understand,” they said, “-I get it,” mumbled Cora, “-I get it now...”

Two coins flicked into their hands, “-ticket to Draebala. Go get equipped.”

“Understood,” they saluted and left.

She leaned onto her elbow, ‘-there’s the look I wanted to see. Caution hid between anticipation. They’re finally ready to conquer Draebala,’ another situation came to mind, ‘-Gophy... what’s your position.’

A clearing amidst the forest rumbled. Thick trucks barred as if a cage – foliage shrouded daylight, and one could but see dots of white scattered across the great wall of leaves. ‘And she’s here,’ he stopped, ‘-as I thought,’ pebbles danced, the killing intent cried without restriction. “-Is violence wise?” he asked.

“You tell me,” she answered coldly. He glanced over to see a swirling aura, “-after what thee said, I’m justified to be angry.”

“Am I now?” he turned to face her squarely, “-my words were just.”

“THAT!” she thundered, “-HOW DARE YOU?”

“Make a move,” he lowered his weapons and dulled the aura, “-and it won’t just be me who knows of thy dirty secret. Lady Gophy, thee might think I have muscles for brains, however, having spent centuries beside the god of knowledge is bound to make one wise. Isn’t that right, Artanos’ Juliette. I knew the moment you walked in, the perfume and the way the makeup accentuated thy stern features. It was always his preference to tame strong dames – the goddess of Chaos is as hard as it gets. You’ve met him, haven’t you, my lady, you’ve met him.”

The aura dwindled, “-I did,” she said, “-I did tell him it’s over.”

“Right, such is the lie a teenager would say,” he fired, “-if it’s over, why bother giving a moment’s attention. I shall figure a guess at risk of sounding presumptuous. You yearn for the touch of another, no. You yearn for his touch, you yearn for love, you yearn for someone to hold and comfort thee. Being powerful is a lonely path, one must learn to embrace solitude... Artanos was different; a charismatic fellow with a flair for theatrics. Staxius Haggard had the same scent; cut from the same cloth. You saw Artanos in him, but when time allowed for greater understanding, Staxius chose differently. Lady Gophy, you stand as a shell of the past. Someone sought after by they who wished for an heir or to hold the reigns to a powerful weapon.”

“Stop...”

“As thee wish,” he paused.

“I know,” she added, “-I know what I’m doing is stupid. Still, I want to feel wanted, I want to feel the need to exist. Lilith, Intherna, and Miira all have a close bond with Igna, tis something I can never reproduce. I’m awkward and with a short temper. Trust me, I know. It’s hard, seriously hard,” the destruction harshness associated with her eased, “-how frustrating would be it to have EVERYONE walk on eggshells around you, huh, Tell ME?”

“...”

“Silence,” she turned, “-I get it, no need for concern, Formle,” a disgusted tone gripped her voice, “-everyone’s selfish, I don’t expect anything. Goodbye.”

That night, as Formle had his focus on the stars pondering Gophy's words – a strange sensation gripped the world. A sort of imbalance shook the air.

Purple hair tied in a high bun and locks left awry around freckled cheeks. The crest of Destiny glowed above a room that resembled a tailor shop, “-it's happened,” said a softer voice knitting what seemed to be a hoodie, “-I see,” various symbols lit within her deep gaze, “-times a changing.”

Bells rang from the church the following morning. Populous awoke for their daily tasks. Aromatic perfumed freshly baked bread rose from a boulangerie down the street. The dewy morning, frosted windows and rustic streets of stone bricks, and beautiful architecture held the lovely forms of healthy smilingly inhabitants. A small shop, Violetta' Couture shared the street beside other shops. A cold morning breeze accompanied the air, to the west ambled a small party.

“Good morning, Miira,” said a lady settled onto a rocking chair. An air of nostalgia and comfort exuded, roles of threads and much tailoring produce and raw materials were on display.

“Lady Violetta,” she said, “-may we speak?”

“As you please,” said the weaver of destiny, stopping her knitting. An aid of lesser years moved across and helped in navigation.

“Lady Miira,” interjected Formle, “-is she?”

“Yeah,” she answered.

“Forgive me,” they changed to a cozier inner room, “-I've gotten old.”

“Surely you jest,” said Formle, “-my lady, you look as grand as the palace flowers.”

“Such a charmer,” she smiled with a nonresponsive stare, “-wondering if I'm blind?” she held up her hair, the attendant approached and tied a warm, comfortable blindfold, “-vision is a strange thing. I can say I've seen more than anyone else. Don't worry about this old lady, tell me, Goddess Miira, what brings you to my shop?”

“I need answers,” she said, “-We felt the imbalance yesterday...”

“The worries are indeed well-based. Lady Gophy left the Shadow Realm. She ought to have placed a letter at her estate. There,” the door tapped in the muffled distance, “-the young fellow who came upon the note.”

As was said, a note indeed changed hands until Miira's, “-to whoever reads this letter, I've decided to leave the Shadow Realm. I'm grateful for everything, I couldn't have asked for a more peaceful life. Time moves and people change, suppose I was pushed by the wind of change. By chance that the note reaches Igna, don't worry, I won't do anything to harm the Shadow Realm. In fact, I've already given my symbol to you, and only you. Let's face it, the only reason why I was here was to fill up the position of guard dog. I'm tired of that life, tired of being treated differently. With this, I hope that my disappearance doesn't cause trouble,” signed Gophy.

Exhale, ‘-my head,’ he sat upright, a little parched and nauseated, ‘-sleep's supposed to make one feel refreshed. Why do I feel like ass,’ he stuffily clambered to the edge where he looked about for slippers, a stranger symbol pulsed, ‘-what's this?’ he touched to be drowned in a sea of unrestricted power.

Bubbles of air escaped, the light of the surface dimmed, 'this power,' the eyes closed, '-belongs to Gophy,' *clap,* the ocean parted into giant walls, a lonesome figure hovered, "-Is that you, Gophy?"

Chapter 973: Soulfien

No answer. The lonesome figure hovered, the hair suspended in time – it seemed all around stopped. A mild dark glow associated with chaos bubbled. "-Gophy, answer me," he called, stretching his arm to a sudden jolt.

"Igna," returned a featureless oval shape – there laid nothing upon where Gophy's expression would rest, nothing. A simple dark tone veiled an echo of her voice. The fleeting moment, '-don't tell me,' a similarly expressionless mien cemented, the arms crossed and the stance harshened. "-Are you leaving?"

"Yeah," the voice turned from surround to single file as such to make a relatable discussion, "-I'm leaving."

"Am I talking to Gophy or her shadow?"

"No, you're talking to me," she said, "-I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," he said, "-the symbol of Chaos' been bestowed upon my palm. Gophy, I don't understand why?"

"Feeling of rejection, the feeling of being alone despite belonging to a crowd. I may seem dignified and honest, but my heart inside doesn't share said feeling. Lilith speaks of how you two shared intimate nights. Miira bragged about how she got you wonderfully flustered. I seek not for such trivial things – the thought, the connection, tis said feeling of belonging that I yearn. The only reason why I joined Staxius is that he reminded me of my long-lost lover, my Romeo. You can't imagine the satisfaction he granted, I was taken to Elysium and back. No other could love me like he does, no other. I wouldn't wish to cross thy path. Such is the reason why I surrendered my symbol. I don't need the title and power of a high-tier goddess, I'm done being a feared entity. The little girl inside me wishes to start, to be needed, and to be tended to."

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"No amount of convincing is going to shake the resolve," he exhaled, "-giving thy symbol was word enough. Before parting, allow me to express my innermost thoughts. I should at least speak my mind, yes?"

"Go ahead," the waves crashed against an invisible barrier. Slow turning of the massive body of water, the sense of nothingness under their feet, the feeling of grandness atop and the palpable impression of limbo, no other place seemed fitting, no other place matched the irrefutable climax, "-Gophy, I don't know what impression was left and I won't ask how or why it happened. Having a realm at one's own whim, looking at it, feels boring. Your leaving the position of high-tier goddess saddens me, more importantly, it saddens me greatly that it had to be in such a manner. This symbol means nothing, what I needed is you, it's always been you. Whenever I went into battle, I felt at ease knowing you were there, watching. I know when thee'd sneak peeks; that's why I always acted overly dramatic during those moments. I thought of us as something more than a friend, transcendent upon relations firm by the

mortal world – an unshakable bond forged in mutual hardship. Water under the bridge as they say. I will transfer the symbol to Vanesa. Make no mistake, Gophy, joining Artanos regardless if it were love or whatnot, the end result is the same – we'll turn enemies. We ought to turn a new page. Gophy, my dear Gophy, you were always my favorite. Saving you from Zeus wasn't part of some big plan – I truly wanted to aid a fighter, the personification of what I thought to be courage and perseverance. My selfishness has no limits. One day, when things change – you'll stand proudly as my guardian deity, my comrade, my family. Go, don't turn back, follow what thee wish and take what thee want. Everything will go my way," he smiled.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha," she slapped her knee, "-yeah, you're nothing like him. I like the confident Igna better – you're already a great leader. Until the day comes where we cross paths – I wish thee good luck, my comrade," she spun, "-as for the return, perhaps," her tone lowered, "-a prince may swoop me off my feet," she stopped herself, "-who am I kidding. So long, Igna," the suspended figure disappeared in a massive jolt. The parted sea crashed, pulling Igna deep into a suffocating hellscape, "-gasp," he shot awake shaking at the knee, "-my arms," he gritted. Morning waved outside the ajar window, he solemnly made the trek to his slippers, a journey across the seas of pillows and covers. A bigger push widened the drapes – there, light blossomed further into the well-furnished bedchambers.

'There they are,' a slit in reality opened in black and purple, '-the shadow realm,' he side-stepped to a stubborn portal, it sucked until the other side breathed frigid sighs. A layer of cold and damp under which the passersby tightened overcoats and umbrellas. '-Shopping district?' he looked around, '-haven't been here before.'

Familiar faces exited a cozily fancy shop, the little jingle of bells was a pleasant memory. A loud man voiced crude opinions whilst the accompanier had their gaze upon the stone-brick walkway. "-how very obnoxious. As if giving one's power justifies the amount of work and responsibility left behind. What of the balance, what are we to say to the people, '-I'm sorry, your goddess has eloped?' can thee imagine..."

The downward gaze arrived at leather shoes, '-curious,' they carried to cropped pants, climbing higher, the neatly pressed dark-gray trousers stopped to be continued into a turtle-neck sweater and eventually the visage. "-Igna?"

"Miira," he returned, "-so here's where the portal leads," and nonchalantly joined her entourage. Guards were at a loss, seeking answers through the many vacant awe, "-Violetta' Couture. Give me a moment," he entered and whispered, "-let's talk at the palace," the jingle played.

'-Don't look at me,' she composed her expression, "-to the palace, we have much to discuss."

Formle's onslaught painfully stopped, "-Cat got your tongue?" she smirked.

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"..."

Purple hair parted over a young visage, "-lady Violetta."

Her knitting motion froze, and an attendant veered her head in shock, ‘-my lady made no response to the guest,’ uncertainty gripped her heart, ‘-this’s never happened before. My lady couldn’t see the man or did she see an estranged future...’

“Lady Violetta,” said Igna yet again, “-I do beg your pardon if I’ve caused unnecessary inconvenience.”

“No, no,” she gathered her strength and resumed, “-lord Igna, I was stunned is all. Take a seat, shall we head inside?”

“I took the liberty of closing the door,” he clopped, closing her rocking chair, “-lady Violetta, weaver of destiny, art thou afraid?”

“Afraid?” her knitting stopped once more – a capable presence loomed from an indenture. ‘-Storeroom,’ wrote across a lovely wooden door left ajar – the disagreement all but fortified, “-I see no reason to be scared,” she said, “-after all, there is little that surprises me.”

“A strong response to boot,” he calmly took her chin and lifted, “-lady Violetta, I’m no enemy, yet, I sense a deeply embedded fear, no, it’s hatred. Your eyes, they may be lost – still, in the infinite greyness, I sense an unshaken resolve for vengeance.”

Long fingers suddenly snapped around his wrist, “-stop thy insolence,” cried the attendant, “-I’ve seen enough of my lady be humiliated, apologize.” A single heartfelt side-glance sufficed. Any lingering scent of bravado scurried into a rising feeling of dread.

“Strong-willed,” he gently lowered his hand, “-I meant no offense, my lady Violetta and lady attendant. It’s a hobby of mine,” he stepped away, “-to test the reaction of people I seldom meet.”

“You jest,” she said, “-a man of thy repute surely gets around.”

“You’d be shocked,” he returned, “-lady Violetta, I meant what I say, the feeling of Vengeance...”

“Speak no more,” she rose from her seat, “-would you kindly help?” she extended a hand in his general direction.

“It would be my pleasure,” he accepted the attendant’s ire, “-do show us the way,” he dug deeper into the lass’ trouble.

“My lord Igna, you sure enjoy teasing people. Quite the troublemaker I see.”

“Not really. The attendant of yours,” he said behind closed doors, “-she’s quite amusing,” a barrier erected per Igna’s snap, complete secrecy, “-my lady, if you would.”

“Very forceful. Women my age don’t have much stamina to handle such steadfastness. ‘nough of chatter. My intention earlier was rude, I apologize for any affront I might have caused. Long ago, during the battle of gods, the first war where a united front was joined for the destruction of the Cursed King, my eyes were taken from me. The king’s minion captured and tortured – those memories are vivid; they took not only my virtuousness but also my sight. For compensation, I was granted a vision that far exceeded reality. I saw and knew everything – the future, the past, I had dominion over what my curiosity peaked. I could never predict him, the man who stole my eyes. I wanted to know why, or if ever he lived to regret the actions – nothing. Earlier, when the door suddenly rang, I felt a sense of terror

wash over. I couldn't sense you nor could I see what thee resembled. The emptiness told greater things."

"I'm afraid, the emptiness spoke the truth. I'm the incarnation of Alfred, currently known as Igna Haggard, Watcher of the Shadow Realm."

"I see," she exhaled, "-what's happened has happened. I'm grateful for the hospitality shown by the Shadow Realm. We barely escaped the cleansing."

A third presence materialized, "-Violetta, I wasn't the one who stole thy vision. It was the gods, my people; demons as was so affectionately dubbed, never did harm to priestesses. My dogma was against the very reality that rejected my existence. Though that time is far from nigh, I must make amends for the harm done. Like a shadow of my prior self, Igna shall suffer the brunt of thy ire."

"Switching souls," she smiled, "-the heavenly art of Soulfien, ability to call upon one's prior incarnations."

"About Gophy," he followed, "-Is there anything particular I must know?"

"No," she replied, "-you'd hope for more information on why she left? I'm afraid tis only her who knows the answer. We did receive a note prior."

With a copy in hand, Violetta's Couture seemed a distant memory. The lock clicked, "-lady Violetta?"

Gasp, the body barely held upright, a slew of blood and tears coughed and cried, "-WHAT DID HE DO?"

"N-n-n-n-nothing..."

"My lady, please," arms around her shoulder, "-let's get you rested."

"Always so thoughtful, Angela. This man, Igna Haggard, is a man of unknown potential. Tis my fault for digging too deep. There's more to him than meets the eye. I shudder to think where his journey leads for even I, Weaver of Destiny, do not know the path of an entity beyond reality. Watchers are chosen few of insurmountable power – though the name's been lost to time, they're ever present, in the shadows, protecting what's close to them."

"Rest, my lady."

"We're fortunate," said Violetta, "-the Shadow Realm is powerful, very powerful."

Lilith, Miira, and Intherna gathered under the eminence of the throne room. Igna ominously walked up and down, carefully inspecting the four goddesses' statues, at times would stop under Lilith's rather short dress and shake his head, "-how accurate are the sculptures?"

"Stop it," she rolled her eyes, "-can't refuse a beautiful carving, can I?"

"Sure, you can," he said, "-guess tis to be expected for the Queen of Demons." Stools laid in a cross, "-please, everyone," he offered, "-take a seat."

"I heard the news," narrowed Lilith, "-Gophy's gone."

Intherna held her fists in silence. There needed nothing for her to formulate, ‘-she’s angry,’ Igna observed.

Clap, clap, “-guardian deities, what’s done is done. Gophy passed along her symbol, one whereby I’ll transfer so to Vanesa. She’s the strongest amongst my children.”

“Not Draconis?”

“No, the boy is far too reckless. Gophy’s power is best kept unused – who better than Vanesa. I hope it doesn’t bother, Lilith?”

“Fine by me,” she said, “-long as Vanesa agrees.”

“Don’t blame Gophy,” he said, “-I for once, stand by her. The position of guardian deity was always temporary – I have no strength to stop anyone from leaving. Even now, if anyone decided to leave, I’d but sit back and watch, unable to act. For that, I’m sorry.”

Chapter 974: Chaos’ symbol

“Don’t apologize, courtesy as of this moment isn’t the greatest idea.”

“Sitting around and doing nothing won’t bring an answer.”

“I have my answer,” said Igna, “-and I told Gophy what I thought. She showed her resolve through the surrender of her title, one of her defining qualities. It’s like this, we can’t get angry for someone ready to surrender everything.”

“Trust me,” slow anger rumbled, “-if she left with her powers and willingly decided to change sides, my, even if you can’t stop us, we would stop ourselves. Understand, Igna, as a watcher, thy responsibility is the protection of the realm and its overall stability. A task completed flawlessly – we know how much was sacrificed in the rescue of Persephone, we know how strong-headed you get. Gophy left by choice, and we’re part of the blame.”

“Won’t feel the same without her around,” said Lilith holding an air of nostalgia, “-look at her statue, for a goddess of chaos, her beauty has no equal save us.”

“Count on the queen to alleviate the mood,” Igna stood straight, “-lady Miira was right, idle chatter won’t bring her back nor change the coming future.”

Just as he thought of a balade home, the hall clamored by the sound of armor, “-guardian deities, it’s Cora and Kaleem...” a shaken guard hurried, “-report came from an anonymous tip.”

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“My contact’s making the wage worth,” the guardian of time rolled her sleeve and summoned a combat-ready outfit, “-about time we step into Draebala.”

“What did the report say?” wondered Igna.

“Have a look,” returned a nonchalant Miira, “-right, I ought to give ‘em a piece of my mind.” Between the subtle cacophony, a stranger figure – oily-haired and glistened in sweat, held their body upright against a pillar, “-lady Miira.”

“Yuria,” beckoned Miira, “-my girl,” they melted into each other’s arms. Redden spots marred around her eyes, her weakened purrs, exhaustion due to woe.

Igna casually glossed over the reunion, instead of focusing on a scroll, ‘-adorned in gold and basked in the teleportation spell. Seem this spy of hers is more than what first appears.’

“Lady Miira, I urgently ask for assistance in a coming battle. Our would-be stronghold is under attack from a coming horde of monsters. Some of my peers have labeled their abilities over the mortal limit. Cora and Kaleem immediately set out despite the incertitude of the guild master. Nobleman of our town has no words to speak, he wishes for the gates to shut. Lest the battle is won, Shadow Realm won’t have a better place to settle.”

‘Draebala,’ he conjured a display, ‘-town in question is Inux, cupped northeast of the main continent on a remote fragmented island. Yeah, the scale could easily fit two or three provinces. The place’s massive for its relatively small size. Conquer Zayan D’olsak and we’ll be set for expansion. The only route of access is the Suen Passage, an arduous trek through the rough seas.’

“Miira.”

Stranger glances returned, “-something the matter?” he inquired to a row of no.

‘He sounded like him,’ passed the collective minds, ‘-he is him...’

“Miira,” he firmed once more, “-about the report, can I come?”

“No?”

“Why not?”

“Because,” she threw her hands on her hip, “-Draebala is a place for the strong.”

“Right,” he lowered the note, “-at least,” Vengeance rose from the ground in a purple flicker, “-take him.”

“Culmination of an entire Kingdom’s thirst for revenge,” Lilith licked her lips, “-I heard about spirit weapon, never imaged it to be so powerful.”

“Oh he is,” said Igna, “-he won’t hesitate to use the fullest of what I have at my disposition.”

“Mantia?”

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“No,” he said straightly, “-Mantia is unique to he who shares the soul of Origin.”

Flick of the clock, tap of the minute hand – portals summoned amidst the grand courtyard. “-May victory guide thee,” said Igna, “-Formle and Miira, show them no mercy,” there was no doubt on either face. A subtle smile formed upon Igna’s face; ‘-we’ve won.’ Lilith and Intherna were content to stand the battle. Latter of whom were spotted perched upon a lovely balustrade, warmly watching their companion leave.

“Honestly sucks,” whimpered Intherna.

"You know the number of people we can send is only infinite," said Lilith, "-power comes at a great cost, and this time, if we were to go all out, I think not Draebala would hold the strain of our powers," a spark, akin to a spirit, fluttered above her palms and up her arms, "-this drop of mana has enough power to level an entire town, change the place of impact and it can easily level a whole district."

"I don't think Gophy willingly gave her symbol," suggested Intherna, "-I mean, look at it this way, why would a goddess give her all for the sake of love. It's not logical, out of us, she always was the thinker."

"Maybe?" Intherna's brow lit.

"No, you don't think?" Lilith followed.

"It's a possibility?" she added resolutely.

"Too blatant, I don't think she'd go that far," hands waved at the incertitude.

"You'd be surprised what love can do. Well, what's done is done. I'm headed to bed. I'm leaving the council meeting in thy hands, Lilith," the figures faded in the distance, Igna saw his companions leave. Greatness of the way the air felt, the way the sun shone, and the way the silence was perturbed in the distance, all brought a feeling of belonging, a nostalgia he wouldn't have imagined.

"Pops?"

"Vanesa."

"What's the matter, pops?"

"Oh, plenty that need not wane thy mind," he shuffled her hair a little and smiled, "-you look good."

"Thanks," returned a dubiously shaped smirk, "-something you want?"

"Yeah," the tone slowed, "-Vanesa, out of my children, you're the strongest and one with unlimited potential. The lax attitude and unwillingness to get stronger are admirable. You subconsciously walk the thin path between strength and greed, as such," Gophy's symbol hovered above his palm, "-I'm bestowing the boon of Chaos upon thee."

"Lady Gophy's power?" she blinked, "-you sure, pops?"

"Yeah," he said, she reached and grabbed – a massive pool of raw energy exploded, rising a funnel far into the sky. Her devilish features blotted and dimmed, "-cool," the energy swallowed into a single dot, "-lady Gophy's strong, super strong," the symbol laid on her right arm, "-not my style though," she exhaled, "-I'm to hold?" her vision narrowed, "-and protect from any other who wishes her power?"

"Yeah."

"Sure, I can do that." Here ended Igna's sudden visit – portals summoned for the trip home, back to the foreign land of dreams and fortune. Contrary to the greener countryside, Miira, Formle, and Vengeance arrived on a craggy landscape. Damp rocks, the ever-sinking somber hue, and a flock of flying creatures, a sort of dots against the gray – sometimes lighter or darker dependent on clouds.

“This place is lovely,” commented Miira dressed in a military outfit. Her uniform held shades of dark blue, gold, and white. White reserved for her hat, under which hid a true monster. Blades cackled at her waist, a noise she paid no heed towards.

“I know,” returned Formle, “-one of my favorite holiday spots.”

“Onward,” she said, “-to my next game.”

An unfair game played by a heavily wounded Cora, “-Kaleem, stop,” he coughed plumps of blood, “-retreat, now,” despite the wounds, he shot and killed.

“Nay,” returned the strong-headed Kaleem. He fought using martial arts; Intherna’s blessing lit a thousand flames – the dull and mundane skipped and punched, leaving charred footsteps on each dodge or side-step, “-hell no,” a block of fire summoned to block a hammer-wielding giant. The attacker growled, each stretch and attack made flexed its massively muscular frame. Another strike bellowed, cracking the shield and barely missing Kaleem- the impact sent him flying into the woodlands.

“-Son of a,” a sudden moment of weakness, Cora looked to his injured friend – when the aura reacted to one superior, he snapped for his trigger to no avail, “-GRR,” the goliath had its hammer inches from Cora’s face, “-DUCK!” a dagger chipped and halted the mortal blow – a visible sense of mockery befell the giant. It rose its weapon and struck, “-don’t laugh at the small,” Kaleem limped with a dislocated shoulder and bloodied face, “-to fight is the will to die,” strength drained, he fell on one knee, “-FINISH HIM, CORA!” the hammer dropped, ‘-thank you, Kaleem,’ a small crack, he aimed and fired, blasting the beast into shreds.

Cough, cough, “-we have more to fight,” they crawled towards one another, “-don’t think I’ll make it through.”

“We’ve been fighting since last night... the army’s relentless, if those vile things are scouts, what’s in the main unit?”

A rumble, a bad omen. The vanquished foe rose from remnants – this time, too. “-out of power,” gasped Cora, “-can’t muster the strength to release the limiter.”

“Best we die as heroes,” he gritted, “-to fight alongside my friend, nothing rivals this feeling,” alas, the scene told a far different story. Granted, the forest did reek of the defeated – many of the battles came at a far greater price; stamina. Curtains were to shut – newly risen beasts gripped their hammers and leaped, “-ONWARDS ONTO DEATH!” they screamed, *douf,* “-idiots,” carried a confidently amused voice, “-you’re not fighting monsters, we’re facing off against Titans,” few claps cleaned her hands, “-go for the head or go for the heart – the only way to defeat a god is to have the powers of a god slayer or be blessed by the boon of immunity.”

‘Seconds, mere seconds,’ shuddered Cora, ‘-she dashed across the forest, grabbed their heads, and slammed them into the ground, no special powers nor a sense of her mana. Goddess Miira dispatched them as if killing ants.’

“Confused?” Formle returned from the opposite direction, “-here, the heads of the fallen,” he flung a dozen onto the ground, “-that should be it for the scouting party. Cora, Kaleem, let’s head home.”

A siege was upon Inux, as such, when the newer party approached town's gate, "-no visitors," hallowed guards.

"It's us," cried Cora, "-we're from the adventuring guild."

"Y'all never registered," said another, "-go away, we don't need strangers."

"Seems we are abandoned..." mumbled Cora in a lowered voice. A greenish glare, scales climbed her fist, *SMASH,* "-there, no need for fret," she entered and glanced at the bystanders, "-the name's Miira, and I'm here to speak with thy leader."

"Seriously..." scattered fragments painted the ground.

"Count on master's friend to share the same brazenness to authority," chuckled Vengeance, "-allow me to restore the door," as soon as they entered, he turned and created better fortification from thin air.

Two chairs, an office, and a trembling nobleman, "-speak thy name."

"Plu Oden, I'm the new mayor of Inux. On the order of the king, the previous noble was tried as a traitor and executed. I'm to guard the place until a new nobleman is elected as ruler of our town."

"Executed, let me guess, for harboring my men?"

"Yes," he nodded, "-for sheltering,"

"-Speak no more," she threw her feet over the desk, "-Plu Oden, an army marches for Inux as we speak. It'll take no more than hours to completely besiege thy town. Instead of them, how about surrendering to us," she smiled, "-we'll protect the town in exchange for information and total immunity. We won't harm the local populous lest they grow malicious."

"The army which moves for Inux is part of a new nation, the land of Titans. They've already laid siege to Zayan D'olsak's capital. We remain as the only free town amongst the Ilse."

"Thus thee understand how important we are, yes?"

"No..."

"My, you're rather crude for an imposter. Forsake the disguise, native of Eipea."

"I see," disguise faded into the apparition of a middle-aged man, "-how disappointing."

"Eipea and Aapith faction won't stand still – they'll launch their own counterattack soon. You being here means but one thing, a surrender, and destruction of the free states."

"I was, not anymore. Tell me, lady Miira, I'm not opposed to joining a better faction."

"And I'm not interested in a turncoat. However, we can strike a mutual agreement."

"Protect the town and I'll make sure-"

"No, you'll take the credit," she smiled, "-I just want a place to stretch my legs and enjoy the taverns. No one parties like the Inux."

"Welcome to the town of drunkards. Lady Miira, long as the town is protected, we have a deal."

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“Great.”

Chapter 975: Settlement

“Onward,” cried an elderly gentleman. The somberness tied to Inux grew over the coming distance. Time for battle was nigh. Between the agreement struck with the new mayor and Miira’s nonchalant attitude towards the incoming ruffian; an air of freshness grabbed the small populous.

Cora and Kaleem, previously wounded; waited on the mediocre frontlines. Many passed comments. Affluent traders, as they were; ordered seats above the town wall. Town had no guards to populate said prime spot.

Clock struck noon – the first line of soldiers lined the horizon. Acquired information instantly went through the window. Invasion of the Titans was only a small facet of the true story, “-yeah, I figured as much,” Miira pressed her golden-brown spyglass and motioned at her small team, “-listen here people,” she clapped, her voice carried loudly, “-the time for battle has come. Victory won’t come without a few deaths, sacrifices the town is willing to make for the safety of thy families. The Titan association has made its intent known. Even so,” she rose her palms at the horizon, “-today, Inux’s far stronger than before,” and swiped – a sentient fog-like snake swallowed whoever stood between her and the forest. The dust settled all so quickly – and in a matter of seconds; what laid before the invaders were ashy remains of the attackers.

“MY LORD, our first line has been decimated. They have a goddess on their team.’

“Here I thought the Eipea Empire was on verge of collapse,” the white-haired man, taken by the flow of time, rose slowly and tapped rhymical. A distant shuffle announced the presence of a greater Titan; a champion. It rose, blinking a single pupil over the massive forestry.

“Go capture Inux,” ordered the older man, “-we need them dead.”

They blinked knowingly, pushing themselves upright and standing far above the tree line. Steps rattled the very ground – Miira held a pleasurable snicker, “-here it is,” she laughed, “-the strongest,” azure scales covered her arms, ‘-my physical abilities should be more than enough,’ a dash and a punch. She crossed a distance of kilometers in seconds. A bone-shattering crack befell into total victory.

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“IT’S BEEN DEFEATED!” cried a messenger who, by a swipe of a blade, had his head cleaned from their shoulder. A mist-like entity killed nearby guards and fighters – no trace of survivors, “-hello,” said Formle sitting beside the leader, “-a pleasure to make thy acquaintance. The name’s Formle, a wandering adventurer.”

“BLASPHEMY!”

“Nay,” he nonchalantly pushed a blade through the man’s neck, “-tis battle.”

A methodically paced step halted below the carriage, “-all done?” inquired Formle.

“No survivor,” returned Vengeance, “-they were easy for Titans.”

“No,” he vaulted onto firm ground, “-they were strong, not strong to us but strong here nonetheless. Goes without saying, the little force was probably just another scouting regiment. He’s no fool, the campaign here was a gamble – a few men for the price of prime real estate.”

A warm welcoming party waited for the heroes. Hope, finally, hope was here; soon as it came, the same personification of the hope set about for another trip. “-My lady, are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Miira, they stood before an empty three-story building set in the backdrop of the townscape, no overly attractive nor dull. The perfect balance between function and pleasure, “-you’ll take credit and Inux lives to see another day. News of thy exploits will bring exiles from all over the isle, those who lost their families and friends. Buckle up, halo-bearer, for work will but increase as time follows.”

“What of you, my lady?”

“Oh, I’ve had my fun with battle,” she exhaled, “-was rather boring, the previous battle. Disappointing really, I thought the siege would have been a battle ripped for a bard’s regal. Can’t always get what we want,” a snap summoned a doorway, “-tis the circle of life,” she crossed into another world. A veil hung momentarily, “-in her place,” inferred Formle, “-you’ll have our assistance,” and so, the Shadow Realm fixed their stronghold in Draebala at a backcountry town known for its depressing atmosphere and damp climate.

Cora, Kaleem, Vengeance, and Formle, each took a room and shortly gathered in the common room. A fireplace burnt the sweet fragrance of scented dots, “-this place is nice,” added Formle, “-Cora, Kaleem, would thee ease on the demeanor.”

“My apologies,” they said, “-today’s battle revealed a lot of truths. We’re no way strong to confront Draebala in full.”

“It’ll come with experience,” added Formle, “-if the limiters were removed, I’m sure the battle-”

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“Limiter’s no excuse,” said Kaleem, “-we’re innately weak without help from the shadow realm.”

“And still, even if I were to unleash said powers, my goddess abandoned Draconis and me. How could anyone...”

“Don’t bother,” refuted Kaleem, “-lady Gophy is gone. Complaining won’t bring her home.”

tap, tap, “-coming,” answered Formle, “-you two better shut it.”

A mediocre fruit basket rose knee-high, “-thank you for saving our town,” said a little lady in her tens. Her mother nodded positively in the distance; the lass smiled with a few lost teeth.

“Thank you,” he accepted the basket. Curiosity proved too great a vice. Faces mashed against glass panes could be seen at the nearby window, “-a fruit basket,” commented Kaleem in a comical voice.

“They’re weird,” returned the girl.

“Ignore them. Thank you for the gift, little lady.” She scurried to her mother’s side with a little flushness on her mildly dirty cheeks. Once again, the mother bowed graciously. Her actions prove to be a catalyst. Many unfamiliar faces exited their shelter and threw words of welcome at the newly settled family.

“Welcome wagon is here,” mumbled Vengeance, “-I’m going to bed.”

“No your not,” fired the duo, “-we’re going to make friends,” they leaped into the main hallway and sprinted outside, “-LET’S CELEBRATE!” they screamed, the crowd followed, “-TO THE TAVERN MEN!”

“To lord Igna, our arrival was well-received. I foresee many obstacles in our path. My task to find lady Gophy won’t be in vain. Cora and Kaleem have adjusted to Inux’s gloominess. A member of the Eipea Empire offered his services to our cause. Lady Miira’s display was quite the topic of discussion. We’ve only just gotten started on Draebala. Come what may, I swear, I won’t lose against him ever again. The Shadow Realm will reign supreme,” signed Formle.

“POPS!” cried Draconis, “-the vacation was awesome,” a few days elapsed since then. When he returned, the four troublemakers were posed as if a team of superheroes. Memories of the smaller stature felt like only yesterday. Now, as he watched from his bedroom, they all had a growth sprout.

“It was my pleasure,” he smiled, “-safe travels home,” Draconis left, presumably for the toilet.

“Pops,” the classier Saniata approached, “-can I stay a while?”

“Want to have a go in the entertainment world?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, “-I mean, look at me,” she skipped backward and twirl, “-there’s no questioning my beauty, am I right?”

“Yes you are,” he said, “-take the portal and this letter, tis one of recommendation to my cousin. He’s a big name in the entertainment world.”

“Awesome,” she joyously jumped, “-I’ll take the world by storm.”

Vanesa did as Vanesa preferred. Face down on the mattress surrounded by pillows and hauntingly disfigured puppets. Saniata left his room, whilst Draconis entered again, “-tell me, what troubles you?”

“Pops, I’m scared,” said Draconis, “-my teacher’s gone, I don’t know what to do anymore. Everyone’s picking a path. Saniata wishes to become an entertainer. Raphael is already skilled in his arts of restoration. Vanesa’s the strongest out of us – it leaves me, I’m energetic and a strongminded person. I seriously have no idea what to do anymore. When teach was around, we always had fun sparring – she’d go all-out once in a while and destroy my body. It was fun, we exploded abandoned castles, sneak into the overworld and destroy monster settlements,” he chuckled, “-Vesper’s face was always a treat to see. She’d snap and have us rebuild the settlement. Instead, we ask someone else and once the settlement was complete, we’d destroy another. It was more fun when Vesper discovered who cause the chaos.”

“Not anymore,” returned Igna, “-Gophy left for good reasons. She felt unwanted by us, the place we call home grew to distance her. Emotions and a person’s state of mind, God or not, is a mystery in and of itself. Don’t blame yourself for her disappearance – it happened spontaneously. There’s no one to blame, no one, hear me?”

“What should I do?”

“Draebala,” he said, “-if thee wish to spread chaos and destruction, there’s no better place than there. Cora must feel alone as you two were both close to lady Gophy.”

“So, Draebala?” he licked his lips, “-how strong are they?”

“Very. Cora and Kaleem were mortally wounded”

“SIGN ME UP!” any signs of gloominess vanished – Draconis was born anew. The sharpened teeth smile contagiously, “-summon me a portal!”

“Right now?”

“YEAH!”

“Sure,” he obliged.

A taller figure came by, “-pops, I’m needed back home.”

“Save travels, Raphael.” the strong auras vanished one after the other, leaving him and Vanesa to accommodate the bedchambers. The sleeping beauty, or so he’d think out of parental obligation, had her mouth open and drool over his pillow, ‘-seriously?’

Status, wrote the interface, “-an uprising has taken Alphaia by storm, the continent is in full on civil war.”

Incoming call: Julius.

“Cousin?”

“Cousin, I need a favor,” said Julius, “-Alphaia’s in a state of war – a news broadcast wishes to hear a few words from their monarch.”

“Just a few words?”

“The pay is irresistible, I had to ask.”

“Fine, I’ll record a short video. Will that suffice?”

“Yeah, also, don’t worry about any filters. Speak thy mine, majesty,” the call ended, leaving Igna to scour the surveillance system for information on Alphaia’s current state of affairs. The camera toggled to the King dressed in a formal suit and tie, “-greetings Hidros, I’m very surprised an anti-royalist new station would ask for the king’s opinion on the matter of Alphan uprising. To be fair, my message will be broadcasted to other stations and lastly, a transcript will be put on the Arcanum. One can never be certain, changing the narrative is the news’ job. That aside, my opinion on the Alphan revolt is as follows, ‘-a long time coming’. Hidros enjoy cultural freedom unlike the world has ever seen. Until a few years ago, Alphaia also shared in said glory. Playing the blame game is a fool’s errand which is why I’ll say this – religious, political or otherwise any sort of oppression will have an exit. To people who’ve experienced freedom, they’ll yearn and strive toward what they once had. Oppression works only after a few generations down the line – when the time comes when those who knows, perishes. It seems certain factions have decided against the rigid dogma. Alphaia’s going through a renaissance of their own.

When bloodied blades are put to rest and the chaos calms; a newly reborn Alpha shall greet the world. War and Hidros have walked hand-in-hand, never to understand the true meaning of peace. Saddens me to say, we're fixed in our roots, and I'm proud. Cherish what thee have and strive for betterment," the video ended. It would later be shared across the kingdom; the king's words were gentle and read like a tale. However, those wise knew of the underlying message.

"And there," he clicked and eased into the seat. A fiery aura stormed into the room, "-master, a word."

"Sathanas, I tell you, be warmer with thy words. It's unbecoming a lady. One must speak eloquently."

"Yes, yes," she crossed her arms, "-I've located Port Dawn and the Clockwork Factory."

"Is that so," he stood, "-and what nature of devices have they in store?"

"Gears and cogs, work of drawven technology."

"To see their business," he turned for the cupboard, "-I should get ready. Have a carriage prepared, I'll leave as soon as possible."

"One condition."

"Yes, you can come along," he smiled, "-didn't think I wouldn't notice."

"..."

Chapter 976: A royal selfie

A few days trip, "-come one come all," cried wanderers, "-prices are the best in town," they said. A tall building stretched beside the elaborate port. Ships of varying sizes and craftsmanship were anchored. Foul-mouthed sailors were quite the common sight. "-Mine Inn," said the tall building, the ground of which was covered in restaurants and places for a hearty drink. Igna walked arm in arm with Saniata, "-this place sure looks alright," he commented.

"To a wealthy man it's a trading heaven," she answered, "-for those in the lower social class, not too great."

"Isn't that the same everywhere," the journey stopped shy of a bridge – a large canal went through the lines of buildings, blocks squares, and rectangles eventually headed to the sea. Long the canals, deeper within the town, were the populous' rubbish, filth, and waste. Little further and local factories joined the fray, "-what a mess," said Saniata, "-We should hurry, don't wish to carry the plague."

"Falling in will surely awaken a person," he narrowed at the growing mess, "-no matter, let's head to shop."

One and true reason finally stood before them. A low-key shop took refuge amongst other shops, above which were apartment-like settlements. Lines of drying clothes and other necessities were crude on the mind. Seeing a person's choice underwear, wherein laid marks of brown or red – the haunting display had Saniata increase her grip. "-Clockwork shop," read the name. lovely gadgetry and intriguing complex mechanisms were shown on the displays. They carried, pushed through a painted blue door to a slap of oil and machine-like odor.

"Ahoy," bellowed within, "-welcome to my shop," a man dressed in a blacksmith's apron appeared, "-I see," the face immediately tightened, "-lord Igna, what a pleasant surprise."

"No, it's not pleasant," he quipped, "-I see thy discomfort over thine visage, lord Artanos, rather, his double?"

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"Yeah," nodded the shopkeeper, "-the name's Artanos, a split personage of my god. What brings you to my humble shop?"

"Easy on the animosity," he entered, "-I bring only my curiosity. Seems thy shop's affluent."

"Noticed?"

"How could I not. Many inventions seen so far have carried a strangeness to them. One wherein resembled the work on display. The new continent, how do you find the place?"

"It's alright," he returned, "-would have preferred something more along the lines of Rosespire's nightlife. Virgin land is always fun to conquest. Tell me, what brings you here?"

"To sign a non-aggression pact. If we were to fight head-on, the realm surely wouldn't survive."

"Orin's got a charm to it," interjected Artanos, "-I promise not to harm the dimension,' I don't have quite the level of destructive power my darling has. She sadly left thy care. Worry not, my lord, I shall keep her safe and sound, as well as satisfied."

"Long as she's happy."

"You're quite selfish and aren't afraid to show smugness. Such unrelenting confidence."

"Being this old is bound to make one confident. Tell me, Artanos, about our war?"

"We need reassurance too," he moved forward, and a strong flash of light gave into an identical figure exiting a portal, "-Lord Igna," said the true god of knowledge, "-we're both astute men who keep our cards hidden. You know as well as I do, tis best for our intention to remain secretive. Keep the other one guessing, so ought to be how tacticians attack. As for us, being faced against someone of equal if not greater intellect, the guessing game is more of a fifty-fifty gamble. Therefore, I'd prefer to agree on terms sealed within the confine of a blood pact."

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"I'm all ears," he said, "-rather, how about we both have a maximum of three."

He nodded affirmingly, and thus began a long minute of thought.

"Do no harm to the realm," said Igna.

"Limit the harm to the populous," added Artanos.

"Act in a way befitting thy mantle," said Igna.

"Freedom of choice in political matter," added Artanos.

“No direct confrontation lest within Draebala,” said Igna.

“Conflict ought to be settled diplomatically within Orin and physically within Draebala,” added Artanos.

A seal forged by their blood burns into dust, “-no hidden meaning or loopholes,” added Artanos, “-I mean, circumventing laws is what this world has excelled at. I’m glad to see you show thy heart bare. Safety of Orin is paramount – such as what you had me believe, and such is what I shall believe. King of Hidros, as a resident of another realm, I shan’t interfere within the mortal realm’s matter. My double shall be our liaison.”

“The children?”

“They work peacefully in the mines. Some have departed for Hidros and have joined adventuring parties. Half-clockwork as they are, my children have beating hearts and emotions. I don’t control their action, at least not when they’re out there living life for themselves.”

“Well then,” they firmed handshakes, “-enjoy thy stay.”

“You too, majesty.” The cries of merchants carried weight. Clockwork shop was long in the faded background, “-Saniata?”

“Yes?”

“Why the glum?”

“I don’t know. I thought seeing Artanos would make my bone quiver in fear or something. Expected someone strong, someone, who’d make me draw onto my powers... I don’t know, the discussion felt normal. Boring folks talking boring politics, what’s the point anyways?”

“Ah,” he tapped her back, “-my dear Saniata, you’ve misread the situation. It wasn’t an ordinary discussion. The words and hidden intent were all the more I can stomach,” a passing moment of weakness knocked the balance, “-my,” he stopped and glanced over the bridge, “-took a lot out of me.”

“...” if her expression were to be representant at that moment as a symbol, the contours would vaguely decrypt a question mark. “Parle is one of the greater weapons one possesses. The ability to change a person’s mind using words is unrivaled. Artanos knows what he wants and what he can willingly give. Entice thy enemy, show them what they can’t pass, thus, they’ll move per thy direction. Artanos is shrewd, however, I have something on him that he’ll never have on us, my guardian deities. Taking Gophy was his way of saying hi. Suppose her surrendering her symbol wasn’t part of the masterplan,’ he smiled, “-I mean, I would be angry too,” he narrowed, “-like those fighting games popular nowadays. Unlock the boss and he’s useless, I swear,” he clenched his fist, “-those who made Ikian Tournament... I’ll have them pay, I swear.”

“It’s just a game,” she said, “-isn’t the king too old to play what is at best, a set of moving pictures for kids?”

“You think it easy to refuse my aunt?” he turned with a pained expression, “-enough of my trouble, here’s what happened,” they crossed the oval bridge, “-us winning the battle in Draebala must have risen curiosity amongst the Titan faction. Inux’s a safe haven now that we’re protecting the town – as the other faction were to understand, tis a member of the Eipea Empire who decimated the Titan army.

Morale rises within the godly faction by which they'll move their army onto the main continent in an effort to finish what one of their own commenced. Leave it to the gods, ruthless as I say they are, their sense of loyalty and camaraderie is unrivaled. Zeus' hatred towards Titan is well known, I'm sure Draebala is on the verge of full-on war. Artanos has to regroup and retreat, otherwise, a future invasion' out of the picture."

"How are you so sure?"

"My," he smiled, "-I have myself to thank. Vengeance's on a cleansing mission across the world. He'll slaughter anyone with traces of Artanos's magic. The souls and bodies captured for further testing," he rubbed his palm silently, "-anyway, we should head back."

And so he did; the countryside after meeting Artanos grew to become a nice little outlet for reflection. Though none knew, the matter of Gophy and Aceline greatly touched him, "-the days pass without change. The never changing scenery. Saniata's whims and random accidents involving exploded heads of ruffians. New continent sure had quite the interesting prospect of limitless vision.

On a particularly idle day, Igna settled himself on the terrace with a book in hand and drinks at the ready. The gentle chirps and rustle carried an audible sense of relaxation. The blue skyscape, on him lowering his glasses, held a strangely shaped projectile. A press toggled the surveillance system, by which gathered information at an astounding rate, "-no missiles," he sat upright, "-hold on," on closer inspection, "-it's a plane," the latter took a trajectory, which in itself, had scary implications. "-and it's coming this way." Fiery clouds of smoke, "-right, the plane's about to crash," it passed overhead, if not for the lucky glance, "-the Wracian crest," wings sprouted and flapped, "-SSY details on the flight?"

"Flight XXE, destination, new Wracia, passenger count, unknown."

"Yeah, the lack of information is telling," the lens switch modes – a few flaps he flew faster than said pummeling pile of iron, "-someone important's on the plane, I know it," he scanned, quickly able to distinguished passenger from staff members. "-SSY, hijack command," the controls locked within the pilot's hands, "-the probability of survival 24%," said the assessment. A display soon marked part of the field of view. Red spots held instruction on what had gone wrong – Igna flapped, passing the hublot wherein he noticed a lady in her mid-thirties, "-Empress Lia Essin of the Wracian Holy Empire," read her tab, '-nice,' he went to carry the sister system's orders. Survival rate increased slowly to a peak of 45%, "-evacuate," returned an alarm, "-crash imminent. Survival rate, zero!" a great wall of peaks suddenly said hi, *Blood-arts: Crimson Threads,* he broke into the fuselage, "-EVERYONE, JUMP!"

"Who are you?"

"Don't ask questions, just jump," he grabbed the empress and leaped – the staff of three followed – a massive ball of black mixed with orange and yellow crashed in the distance. Igna laid on his back, facing the incoming passengers, '-I see,' a quick check heightened who to save and who to not, '-bodyguards are best left to die,' he flapped and forcibly caught two, and rushed for the last, alas, the latter was hit debris. Foliage crashed and the four fell at a relatively harsh speed.

The untamed forest showed no sign of trouble, "-my arm," a glance right, "-it's broken," indeed it was, for one needed special equipment to see how the bone shattered, "-you guys alive?" he clambered, "-hello?"

“Alive,” said one.

“Same here,” returned another, “-might have broken my leg.”

“And you?” he turned to a visibly terrified lady, “-are you well?” she carried a light-gray hair, darker than Igna’s pure white. Her pupils were light-blue, big and representative of air of nobility, big lips, and a firm sharp nose; qualities native to Iqavea.

“I’m alive?” she blinked, “-I’m alive?”

“I guess,” he stood, the shattered bone healed to complete restoration. Her inviting gaze carried no favor. Igna casually moved on to the remainder two – a pair of none identical twins, “-who are you?” inquired the sister.

“A wanderer,” he replied, “-are you wounded?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, “check on my brother, he’s pretty bad.”

“The right leg looks bad,” added Igna, “-no pain?”

“No, the adrenaline’s made it numb...”

“Gather round,” he ordered, forcefully pushing the ladies onto the brother who gasped, *Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes prospective, watcher watches, creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht.*

Fast chops scanned the forest line, “-a helicopter?”

“Correct,” said Igna, “-our rescue party is here,” a greater opportunity couldn’t have graced them. Question on who he went between the trio, more meaningful on the empress’ visage than the others. She peered over the fast-passing tree line, ‘-he had the wings of an angel and carried himself with strength. Who is he?’

Meanwhile, on the familiar group chat; a message arrived from Igna, “-guess who has the Empress of Iqavea in tow?” Igna threw the peace sign in a selfish with the ignorant passenger. A slew of responses fired, those of which he casually ignored.

Chapter 977: Lady Katherine’s silent smile

July, location, Rosepire’s private airfield. Aircraft’s harsh landing squealed. A darkened jet taxied to a similarly somber hangar. Stairs lowered and from the cockpit rose a familiar face, ‘-back home,’ inhaled Igna, ‘-what a great surprise.’ Unbeknownst to the king, after the very liberal selfie landed upon the group chat, an explosion of messages and voice called ensued.

“This is Hidros?”

“Yes,” he replied.

No time was wasted on ceremony, for it would seem, the king had more pressing matters to attend to. The castle was yet notified of the arrival. At the crack of 09:00, as the town revived from the prior night

– two bikes passed the castle gates, “-was that?” narrowed Eira, a whiff of air from the steeds tussled her hair. She immediately stopped and turned, “-I’ll be right back,” she said, scurrying at a jogger’s pace.

Colorful helmets lifted to familiar faces, “-brother.”

“My, big sister,” he unsaddled with the intent of exchanging a tender embrace, “-it has been far too long.”

“It would seem so,” she replied, “-wait, no, don’t change the subject. What of...”

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“You mean the Empress?” he turned, just shy from her audible range, “-over there.”

“Igna...” without a time wasted, “-good morning,” said the Empress, “-it’s a pleasure to make thy acquaintance, lady Eira. Igna has recounted much of thy tales of bravery.”

“My, I’m flattered,” she said, “-if you would,” an urgent sting from a fellow worker hung, “-we’ll discuss the matter, later.”

“Sister, it would be great if you could extend the recency?” She turned, bore no remark, and rolled her eyes.

“Ice cold,” whispered the empress.

“My sister for you,” he turned at the castle, threw keys onto passing butlers, and headed forth.

“You two are with me,” ordered Sathanas closing their distance, “-I’m headed to Glenda after, is that okay?”

“Long as the damage is kept minimum,” he quipped.

“I understand,” they split inside; king to the inner chambers and Sathanas to Midne’s quarters, else referred as the Doek the Cruel’s den; a character who lived hundreds of years ago, a particularly cruel king with a flair for torture and punishment as a way of repentance.

A solemnly gentle melody hummed. The calming effect diffused through open windows, by which, Igna stopped and stared. Golden locks stood beautifully before a row of children dressed in uniform. They held a notebook and drew – the surrounding flowerbeds and pleasantly colored flowers added much to the calming area.

“And we’re done,” she clapped, “-good work everyone.”

“Thank you, majesty,” they bowed, the emphasis placed on their shiny crests – the royal academy.

“Instructor,” such was her title at times when the students visited the castle, “-may we come again?”

“Long as your teachers allow it,” she smiled and spoke the same response. The children would smile innocently – alas, against their pearly whites, Katherine’s amiable response was little more, for it represented an adult life, a taint, a lie. Her beautifully carved visage was much too reassuring for the visitors.

“Bye, bye,” the voices faded, true instructors guided their burden. The lovely yard cupped amidst a moat of flowers, held more. The childish innocent left – giving way to the truth of the real world, a place where Igna’s scheme once turned a lady’s future upside-down. A place where he disavowed himself from the previous queen. Naturally, palace whispers reached Katherine, who, by herself, would climb a gentle hill and sat, facing the deviously colorful scenery. A burst carried leaves, she turned leftward – facing the palace, ‘Igna?’ her insides sank, for in his company walked another woman, ‘-she’s pretty,’ remarked the distant Katherine, “-who is she?”

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Dring, dring, “-my lady,” said Jue, “-lord Aud has left a message.”

“Jue, my dear Jue,” she exhaled, “-I only just received the message.”

“Transport is ready, my lady.”

“My dear Jue, you always take care of my troubles, I do apologize...”

“My lady,” said her personal aid, “-is something the matter?”

“No, no,” said a distantly faded sigh, “-nothing’s the matter.” And so, as the clock struck a few hours later – a tall building rose amidst a jungle of offices and skyscrapers. The entertainment district flashed louder and carried both the good and the bad. Nothing was ever black and white, scandals involving idols; younger teens arrested for illegal possession, and not to mention – Raven’s direct involvement in setting the trend for western expansion – De Costle stripe made anew, in the image of Rosespire. Decadent walls circled a media complex, inside were host to renowned agencies, musical production houses, or film studios, where local and foreign, established or sprouting – those with means settled.

A smooth stop, “-we’re here, my lady.”

“Thank you, Jue,” Katherine exited a very expensive car. Auder’s Inc wrote upon one of the taller buildings. Climbing the stairs was always a sight, ‘-want-to-be actresses, distressed professionals, and the always-present shady character. It’s true, where there’s money, there’s evil,’ she continued – doors opened, the bustling reception held its breath – a path cleared, ‘-again...’ she continued down to an elevator, soon to disappear into the upper offices. The all-to-familiar backbiting, “-just cause she sleeps with the king, are we to stand aside?”

“Probably slept her way to the top, that one.”

“What a pain, ruining the mood.”

“Why would a royal ever wish to work, it’s an insult to the rest of us.”

“Ugly bitch,” silent and heart-tearing; such was the saddening truth. Jue, observant to the blatant discrepancy, threw murderous leers to no avail. ‘-my lady keeps her emotion hidden. It’s always the same. Mental harassment, no proof for they but say words. They don’t know anything about the countless rejections, the constant feeling of worthlessness and insecurity. Being a royal isn’t easy – they don’t know anything about what my lady so anguishly recounted; how she was abused, beaten, and tortured for having a name. Even when I suggest a course of action, her reply is always the same – a kind smile and forgiving expression. Don’t worry, my lady, even if the world turns against you, I’ll be by your

side,' the elevator opened to a large office. Hallways lined in advertisements – familiar faces of sought-after models – pinnacle of what was considered beautiful.

"My lady," said a shorter man of slightly enlarged proportions, "-thank you for the hasty reply," the chubby visage always kept a smile much to the dismay of his lower shirt buttons. By all means, the man was a jolly fellow – keeping his regard earnest and mannerism courteous, "-excuse me," he gestured to a passing staff member, "-lady Katherine's here for the photo shoot."

"Ah, yes," said the staff, "-why don't you take your lady and get out. The studio is reserved for Leina."

"How is that possible?" he cried, "-we were asked to campaign for Ludva."

"Allow me," interjected a taller suavely dressed man, "-it seems your agency Auder, has asked my stars to represent Ludva. Besides," he leaned, "-for a royal to dress so immodestly would be a disgrace for the royal family. Ludva represents lingerie, the peak of sexualization."

Thus, akin to a push – the doors shut, "-I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," she smiled, "-it's not your fault, Aaran, it's not your fault. I should have given up on this senseless endeavor a long time ago. We should leave, I'm terribly sorry."

Her defeated blue gems lowered onto the hallway floor, "-excuse me," until an opposing party arrived, "-are you lady Katherine perchance?"

"What's it to you?" echoed Jue, "-you here to make fun of her majesty?"

"No, I'm confused is all," he paused and crossed his arms, "-surely, isn't there someplace her majesty ought to be?"

"I apologize for my attendant's behavior. The week's been strenuous on us all. You're correct, we should return to the palace; modeling didn't pan out for little ol' me."

"Aha," he smiled, "-the Goldberg domain's dialect. It's very nostalgic. I forgot to introduce myself, Elon, as in the man behind the Elon Empire."

"Do pardon my master," quipped a smartly dressed secretary, "-my name's Alison. I contacted your manager for the photo shoot. Is something the matter?"

"We were kicked from the studio," added Jue, "-something to do with lingerie..."

"I see," they paused, "-make no mistake, I didn't wish for any misunderstanding," elaborated Alison, "-I asked for lady Katherine solely on what she represents."

"Besides, Ludva isn't only about undergarments," followed Elon, "-if it'd be that simple, hell, anyone with a great body could model undergarment and make it sexual. Ludva stands more than a mere passing fancy," he laughed, "-today's the day we expand. Lady Katherine, would thee kindly become a spokesperson for our new line of beauty products?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The job we asked was for thee to represent a newline of products."

A light at the end of the tunnel – “-are you sure?” Aaran’s gloominess evaporated, “-I mean...” after much hardship and restrictions – Katherine and her small entourage could see hope – the world hadn’t yet surrendered, “-tell me,” a sharp intonation split the moment of relief, “-who said you weren’t invited?” inquired a dense expression, “-let me give them a little piece of my mind.”

The studio ultimately cleared to host a single person; Katherine. The affected suave manager held his gaze unlike the defeated bunch of starlets.

“What’s so great about her anyway?” inquired models lathered in revealing outfits, “-why should we have to yield our stride for another?”

Elon watched from afar in anticipation, “-you sure?” approached Alison, “-I mean, we did refuse her participating at the last minute.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s my fault. I was being stupid. Forget what I said. Here I thought I was being thoughtful to my friend. Turns out, he already knew what modeling meant and more than certainly would have advised against if reputation mattered. Don’t get me wrong, reputation is everything for a public figure; ordinarily. Our monarch’s no ordinary man, he’s a whimsical leader who’s proven himself time and time again. The Haggard are inherently strangely charismatic; no wonder lady Katherine decided to pursue an uncommon path. When I saw her defeated expression and the smile she placed despite the rejection – I understood. She’s a monster on her own merit, a slumbering fighter.”

Imaginary curtains parted; lady Katherine exited the backroom to instantly grasp the studio, “-I knew it,” he smiled, “-she’s a beast, no question.” Beauty’s in the eye of the beholder – such is what’s common sense. However, when Katherine took up the place before the camera lens, there was no mistake – she was the epitome of dignified beauty. “-Send a contract to Auder, I want lady Katherine as our brand ambassador. A new brand and a fresh face, nothing beats a good zero-to-hero story.”

Meanwhile, at the palace, “-Igna...” a cold voice entered his office, “-where are you?”

“Here?” he said throwing his hand over the desk, “-over here,” he clambered to his chair, “-good afternoon, auntie, what brings you to my humble abode?”

“Oh,” she stormed the distance, “-what’s the meaning of this?”

“My,” he smiled, “-you look absolutely splendid today, my dear aunt. The mix between Victorian and modern is very refreshing. Thou art the pinnacle of all things cold and strict.”

“Don’t casually throw around insults. The three weeks have changed you quite a bit...”

“No, I’m just in a good mood,” he said, “-returning home from my trip felt amazing. Too bad sister’s extended the regency.”

“Yeah, she willingly extended your job.”

“I yield, please take a seat, auntie – I’ll answer thy questions.”

“Explain this,” she pointed at the selfie, “-I need to know.”

“Oh, I rescued the empress and her attendants from an unfortunate plane crash. It was quite the heroic feat if I say so myself. We bonded afterward, I mean, the new continent’s no technological marvel.

Peaceful countryside, the smell of old books, and the slow pleasing aroma of tea. What could a man want more?"

"Bonded?"

"Nothing of that sort," he said, "-I'm in no mood of recreating Cheap in August1."

"..." she frowned, "-can I trust you?"

"Yeah," he nodded, "-I swore myself not to interfere with another's love life. Worry not, I'm not so low as to fall for such blatant disrespect."

Chapter 978: "-my lady, care for a contract?"

A sneaky little click loomed by the door. Elvira's stronger demeanor left a while back. Faced with unprecedented trouble, Igna turned his attention to the strange door, '-open already,' he thought, '-don't hang on the hinges,' a similarly unbased annoyance filled his grip that left reports.

"Master," a whiff entered – the scent of blood and maladies. The king's regard shifted, "-enter already," he said, unperturbed by the sudden arrival.

"Majesty," it said, only to enter fully and close the opening, "-are you well?"

"Theon," he returned, "-the excited demeanor, I see an exuberance of innate sexual pleasure drown thy core. I'm afraid I'm not that all interested in my kin..."

"My lord," he laughed, "-you jest, of course, thee jests," a few breaths settled the laughter, "-I meant no offense. It's just," he twirled his big toe, more it moved, the cruder seemed a disturbing reality – either he'd dig a hole or the coy-like mannerism would shatter little patience Igna held, "-THE EMPRESS," he blurted, "-SHE'S PRETTY... AND, AND," everything ceased, the coldness within his resolute gaze, "-is she or her comrades going to be a member of my dungeon?"

"Right," Igna eased, "-here I thought the matter to be greater," drawers pulled, two cigarettes; one thrown with an underarm and the other pinched at his lips, "-here," he muffled and snapped. White ambers lit the chimneys. They puffed.

"The empress is not mine to play with?"

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"No actually," he returned, "-we're in a stable relationship with the Empire if you can believe it. Her presence is known to only a few – the palace assumes she's a distant relative. You know, our shades of grey and white are, let's say, rare. Instead of her, I've asked the department to send over prisoners – those given the death sentence. Who'll care if they die peacefully or painfully."

"My," he puffed, "-I'm a little disappointed. I was sure I'd have my way with such a high-ranking noble. Imagine what secrets are hidden within her mind, yes?"

"I wonder," returned Igna, "-I do wonder. No matter, I'll have them be at the dungeon soon. Good work as always, Theon."

"It'd be my pleasure," he courteously said, shutting the door to a large, resonant office.

'She handled all the paperwork. The desk was filled... sister, you're quite the talented politician.' To the matter at hand, two reports laid side-by-side. One dressed normally within a bounded file, the second – a scroll.

"Report from Easel Run Gard," said the first, "-greeting's majesty, I hope this letter finds thee well. After the incident, returning to our normal lives felt a tad uneasy. Death's around every corner and I dare not slack for once. I safely relay with complete confidence that, Easel Run Gard's Maicite deposited and mining rights have been legally bestowed onto Hidros. The king had nothing to add, stating the following, '-with aid from our comrades of Hidros, our twin-isles has gone through an industrial revolution. Factories, work, and ultimately, money, flows as the waterfalls. Our people have never seen such a way of life before, they're unaccustomed to a full stomach, plenty of rest, and rights', they adapted many of Hidros' policies, almost to the point of being part of our nation. As for the military – our investment in sea-bound defenses and the establishment of a remote base to monitor the northern seas has proved a detractor to many belligerent threats. The independent kingdoms are losing influence quickly. Lest someone stops the expansion of the great empire of Wracia and Alphaia, we could see the world become their playground. We'll continue operations until the isle's strong enough to stand on their own," signed Yui.

'Good news it would seem,' he laid the first report and undid a knot. The paper unrolled to a mess of mangled letters, '-honestly,' he paused and fixed his glasses, '-do they expect me to decipher this mess?'

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"Dear Lord," read the first of very few legible lines, "-after lady Miira's successful campaign, we found ourselves at a standstill. By what was related to me the Eipea Empire's moved onto the mainland – charging their attacks on what little remains of the Titan army. On our side, an expedition has been planned to reconquer the capital. A severe lack of funds, armor, weapons, and manpower was a rude awakening. It can be done if we were to call onto the Shadow Realm's army. We petitioned the request to a decisive no. As such, in view of our foreseeable weakness, I request my lord for reinforcement, we require a man of intellect and foresight. Vengeance's apparent disinterest in intrigue's proven... problematic. I do hope my request comes at no shock," said the last words, "-signed, Kaleem."

"I did expect something along those lines," a touch toggled multiple interfaces, "-hello?"

"Master?"

"How goes it, Starix, were you in the middle of something?"

"No, not really," he returned, "-we were clearing out remnants," a stronger accent cried in the background, two heavy gunshots rattled the speakers, "-my apologies. Lady Elvira's very adamant on how we should dispatch enemies. Might I help?"

"Yes, you're needed in Draebala. We already have a few talented tacticians aiding in our worldly affairs. Cora and Kaleem aren't doing so great. I presume the reports have reached?"

"Yes, I was informed by a contact. Am I to set off right away?"

"Would that be an inconvenience?"

“Not really,” the area around him expanded, a calm and collected disposition hid a massive truth. Starix, dressed in a black suit, fought amidst a gang war. The narrow alleys of a developing slum a few kilometers from Rotherham shed the bloodied tears of pale-skinned men, “-we’ve captured the leader,” said one.

“Seems the battle is over,” added Igna, “-send over the leader, Theon will accommodate his stay.”

“Understood,” they both smiled and the call ended.

“Sir?”

“Ah, don’t mind me,” he returned, “-I received great news,” he obnoxiously skipped to the handcuffed and gagged man, “-consider yourself lucky, chap. My lord’s decided you’re to visit a five-star hotel,” said a sneaky grin, “-of course, the ratings were given in the memoirs of past visitors. Who’s to question the words of a dying man,” he cackled, “-gather round, men,” armed to the teeth soldiers approached, keeping a level of alertness, “-I’ve been called to action by my employer. The time we’ve spent together has been great, we didn’t lose anyone and fought off the enemies admirably. Our actions and glory today shall be recounted by the mouths of the lucky survivors. They’ll come to fear the Dark-Guild’s name again.”

“YES SIR!” they saluted. Trails of smoke rose – the star-filled night seemed melancholic. Fear covered the windows. Dismay and distress lay on every corner. The souls of the dead marched alongside the beat of the angels of death. Thus, amidst the starlet night, as Starix summoned a portal home – a constellation disappeared. Falling stars crossed the nightscape, arching over the tranquil resting Rosesopian castle.

“Beautiful,” he blinked and entered.

Starix wasn’t the only observer. King Igna had a warm cup of tea at one of many towers, “-the disappearance of Syhton’s constellation. Has the goddess died?” he sipped, “-or has the heaven’s truly disinherited one of their virtuous goddesses?” the falling arcs felt like fragments of a bigger picture, rather, a gem. They slowly fell, pressing no worry upon the world, smiling silently through pain and sufferance. “-Night truly is the tell of all emotions,” he gulped the remainder, “-I better get to sleep,” *crash,* the cup shattered, he fell onto one knee and grabbed his neck, “-it hurts,” he gritted, “-this feeling,” canines sharpened, the vampiric features clawed from within desperately. “STOP!” a dagger summoned and *slash,* dug into the thighs, he dropped sideways and winced, “-my,” he panted, “-this energy – there are only a chosen few able to draw onto a progenitor’s power. If this happened to me,” he crawled to check the moon, “-what of the others?” a deep red hue enveloped the ever-watchful Luna.

Clap, clap, clap, a slender figure came from where the fragments faded, “-it’s you,” he pulled the dagger – would-be blood crystalized in a deep blue, “-I had my doubt,” he smiled, “-a love story of the gods, what a load of bull. Part truth and part make-believe. Daeirq Empress of Luna, the true wielder of blood-arts. Nice to meet you again, Lady Syhton.” Deep blue gems shone at him, akin to the feared reddened pupils of the nightwalkers. Hers felt different; calm and observant – deep or some might say, “-why are you here?” he asked, clambering through the pain.

“I need help,” said a troubled voice. A heavy shadow, cast by the tower’s spiked roof, alienated the lass’s colors and features. Her ever-glowing stare walked, her feet appeared first through the candescent luna

rays. Her thighs followed, then her waist, and then her whole upper torso exited the blurry darkness. Heavy injuries, a bloodied forehead, a shattered arm, and the inability to rejuvenate, “-I was bested,” she fell, “-by the god of knowledge.”

“Careful,” a quick side-step allowed for the goddess to fall in his arms, alas, the self-inflicted wound proved such a challenge. Both ended on the floor with Igna’s head bouncing off the wall and her head hitting his stomach, “-so much for being powerful gods,” she commented.

“Right,” he sat and held her head on his thighs, “-Goddess of the stars, why art thou here?”

“Can you not see my dying breaths?”

He suspiciously narrowed and laid his thumb over her mouth, “-wait a moment,” a quick stab and blood fell onto her tongue, “-drink up,” he said, “-nightwalkers are immortal, goes double for a god. Take one and the other boon remains, the inconsistency’s nothing strange to me.”

She swallowed, “-see? My wounds don’t heal. The blood’s only sufficient to keep my mind awake.”

“All I need,” he returned nonchalantly, “-lady Syhton, you came to my rescue when I once needed money. You’ve returned to reclaim?”

“No,” answered deeply, “-I don’t care about money or whatnot. I’m a cursed goddess, forced to guide the troubled through their darker times. Imagine taking the pain of all living things who’ve passed through this dimension – hearing their pain, sufferance – it makes one numb, your heart hardens. And even then, when a painful story slashes at the hardened heart – the smallest of cracks shattered everything, everything you held within, everything you thought you’d forgotten. It hits and then silence, the worse pain imaginable.”

“Why?”

“Because you know,” she said, “-you know the meaning of sufferance. We’re not the same but have experienced the worse reality has to offer. Artanos stole my symbol, I was left naked and abandoned – he destroyed everything I had.”

“The symbol yet lives.”

“Of course, it lives, what he stole was a particular fragment of my powers... and I wish that power to not end in the wrong hands.”

“And?”

“Origin’s chronicle,” she said, “-he stole the knowledge bestowed by Origin. He wishes to learn the ultimate truth; he wishes to contact Origin and take his authority.”

“Good luck,” returned Igna, “-Origin’s no longer a simple hallowed figure who sits,” and then when his words piqued her attention – a sudden fade dropped, “-for he’s part of a greater being,” bellowed Igna, “-I say, let him come.”

Her beating heart stopped, ‘-who is he?’ for what seemed an eternity.

“Oh well,” the persona returned at a scarily prominent speed, “-goddess Syhton, say, why me?”

"I just said..."

"No, I mean, what doth thee expect. You chose me for a reason, and I don't presume it's on emotion alone. Come on, we know a goddess thinks of more than those human emotions... I do suppose you were first when amorous escapade became a guilty pleasure. Wounded beyond belief, the powers of regeneration were lost to the god of knowledge. Your existence relies on the populous' faith. If Hidros were to fall, Lucifer's religion would conquer, leaving naught for little ol' you. Fate is rather crude. Leaving the life of a goddess such as thineself in the hands of the Devil," he smirked, "-my lady, care for a contract?"

Chapter 979: Show of Hand

"A contract?"

"Yes, a contract."

"Why should I?"

"Only option laid bare. Without immediate care, I'm afraid, there's no hope of survival. The godly aura oozes. The vampiric blood fights and claws for survival. A commendable effort. As for my offer, it's simple. Sign a contract and become part of a greater family. A deal struck with the devil," he lowered the smirk, "-is one not to be taken easily, nor is it easily granted."

"Else I can die..."

"And leave the world in the hands of an unknown entity. Don't tell me," he distanced himself a little, "-would dying solve the matter of the heart?"

"Pardon?"

.....

"Lady Syhton, goddess admired and prayed throughout my kingdom – It would be of no consequence for the power of belief would rise another of thy kind. Who is to say the successor shan't be a puppet of Artanos, who is to say she'll make a worthy goddess. I'm shunned to ever be considered a god, or anything remotely associated with the righteous side of what humanity prays. I'm a humble man of humble means and humble ability. The greater picture can only be changed by a greater force. Just like rivers abled to carve mountains, you have the strength to affect everything, and I mean my words, everything."

"Igna," she breathed and gestured for him to get closer, "-you're the worse," she whispered at the sharpened ear, "-trying to deceive a goddess with pretty words." Against all odds, her knowledge of the blatant ploy led to a crucial choice, "-I won't say I know what you want, or what the future holds. I'm defeated, a worthless goddess cursed to never regain the might of the stars... therefore, Devil, I would like to sign a contract."

"EXCELLENT!" he exclaimed – a bubble of energy swallowed the tower into a tiny dot. Said concentration exploded into a weightless realm of nothingness. Fragmented colors – unmixed paints same to a painter's palette sprayed across the never-ending blurry canvas. "Where are we?" she landed on a white chair.

“Welcome to the divide,” he said, conjuring a table and another chair, “-we’re in my personal storage realm. Consider it a smaller, weaker version of Mantia.”

“And?”

“Look at thy wounds,” grimoires hovered at his beckoning call, “-gaze further into the world,” she side-glanced, “-and the path leads to nothingness, for its past nothing that one makes something,” it weirdly made sense, a belief only reinforced by the eruption of massive bookshelves sealed under ancient symbols and protective barriers, “-are those relics?”

“Yes, fragments of knowledge known to only Origin and the inheritor of Mantia. There’s nothing that I can’t learn. No mystery nor unsolved riddles,” a snap erected black walls means to shield perception, “-back to us,” he led her focus onto the table, “-here’s the contract,” a translucent seal hovered. Lined by symbols, chants, and the mark of Death, Origin, Alfred, and Time signified its importance, “-make no mistake, those seals are never used lest my guest is important.”

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“Three of the strongest entity known to the heavenly realm, thee wields all three?”

“No,” he smiled, “-I don’t wield nor control their action,” he undid his shirt and pulled, “-my beating heart,” the death element limped, unable to produce mana or act as a shield, “-my mark’s been destroyed, forced to live in the shadows of its predecessor. The current mark’s under Undrar’s command – the true Death Reaper. Origin, well, he’s a part of my consciousness – why doth thee think I have Mantia? Alfred is my first incarnation. My cursed fate of sufferance and betrayal was cleared on the day I learned the truth. Lastly, Time – the symbol’s, well, I don’t know where it’s at. To my knowledge, lord Scifer bestowed part of his powers onto me when he was faced with death. The little rascal was one strong man. Facing Zeus head-on and almost winning, I commend his bravado and strength.”

Her bloodied expression remained unimpressed, “-why should I care?”

“Well, I thought thee’d be interested?”

“I’ve sworn to sign a contract, there’s no need to add butter.”

“My sincere apologies,” the seal twirled and hovered onto her palm, “-care for an explanation of my conditions?”

“Is it not standard?”

“No,” he smiled, “-Au contraire, les contrats sont uniques.”¹

“Why so?”

“For the contracted’s complete satisfaction.”

“Suppose I should listen.”

“Then so be it,” a scroll manifested on the table, “-on signing a contract with the devil, you must understand that thy soul and inherited assets are immediately taken possession by the Devil. As for how

much is to be taken – the collateral will be decided by the devil, dependent on what the contracted asks – the range shall fluctuate. The initial fee of contacting the devil; a soul – unique to the summoner or not will be paid regardless of the contract’s status. Once signed, the devil shall endeavor to see the task accomplished.”

She popped her head in astonishment, “-this reads like terms and service agreement.”

“Influence of the mortal world,” he laughed, “-the summary is basics of what the deal entails. Now, thy demands.”

“A stronger vessel worthy of a high-tier goddess. My complete recovery and the return of my symbol to my crest. In exchange, I’ll pledge myself to the devil and his realms. As for my worldly gains – everything shall be at thy disposal.”

“Are you sure?” he crossed his legs, “-everything for those three wishes...”

“You don’t understand,” she slammed the table, “-I was locked to forever gaze upon the realms. My freedom came on a yearly basis, on the day my people hold a grand celebration – their faith allowed for my escape. It was nice, being able to walk the mortal world and enjoy the lasting moments I had before being locked. Artanos unknowingly destroyed the curse.”

“Hence the falling stars.”

“Yes. I sound like a broken record,” she sighed, “-still, I don’t know what else to say...”

“Then don’t,” he stood, “-a drop of blood,” he said, flicking a dagger, “-and I’ll answer to thy demands.”

She grabbed the dagger, one strangely conceived and awful looking, and tapped. Droplets fell, leaving Igna holding a strange smile, “-what’s with the grin?”

“You passed the test,” he said, “-the dagger’s a cursed item. If the contracted bears any ill-will, hidden malice, agendas, or such, it’ll expand and eat the betrayer. No one cheats the devil, not even the devil himself.”

“Right,” she sustained a tone of skepticism, “-Igna, might I be frank?”

“Go ahead.”

“The devil act, are you making fun of me?”

“No,” he exhaled, “-putting on a show is just a way to relax. I mean, look at the deal from a logical perspective, the gruesome reality’s less of an appetizing meal. Words are words,” the seal burnt, “-as for me,” the room distorted in a circle with him in the center. Her injured body stretched and strained, a moment of pain released suddenly, *COUGH, COUGH, COUGH,* she gasped on all fours, “-WHAT THE FU-”

“My lady,” he smiled, “-welcome to the Shadow Realm,” they stood on a hovering isle amidst the clouds. Below laid the capital-city, “-so high,” she commented, “-the energy, why are we here?”

“Best thee remain quiet,” he breathed, symbols materialized, the energy gathered in a storm around Igna, *See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth,* the bicolored pupils bleached into the pure white sparked by red and purple, flickers snapped.

‘I feel uneasy,’ she retreated under a single tree, ‘-the presence’s dropped, what’s happening...’

Ancient Magic, Spatial-Arts: Disruption. a slashing motion slit her body in half, *Hand of the Lamented, I bring upon the earth the powers of the shunned child, watch me, the heavens and cower for I, Alfred, have reawakened. Watch as tis my forthcoming, my return, and my message to those who dare stand against me, repent!* ethereal palms dove into her soul, she screamed, “-MY HEART!” all the while the torn existence breathed and pumped her godly aura. ‘-found you,’ he gripped and pulled – a clockwork shadow fell upon the isle, *I am the slayer without fear, I am he who shall be the last of what thy see. Heed mine call, thou whomst dared to fight the natural order, tis the day thou ought to be destroyed, Ancient Magic – Astral Binding,* golden crosses impaled the figure, “-and he thought this would suffice,” chuckled Igna.

“You’re a fool,” said the clockwork shadow, “-a fool who allowed us within the shadow realm.”

“My,” he shook his head condescendingly, “-it seems lady Syhton was but a pawn, as are you. Her symbol’s fragment is your core,” he pressed a foot against the shadow, “-as for where we are, tis nothing save a temporary protective dimension.”

He forced a yelp, desperate to gather strength for an urgent message, “-you won’t win!”

“I’ve already won,” smiled Igna, “-take this message to the god of knowledge,” a simple gesture opened a passage for the message, “-now you,” a delectable grin lit Igna’s visage, *Burnt eternally in my domain, I, Igna Haggard, call forth the flame that purges gods and demons alike. Set ablaze; Abyssal Wrath.*

“AHHHHH,” skin burnt to a crisp within the ever-oppressed fire of the haunted. A soothing wind blew, scattering the ashes in a vacuum. A gem-like fragment hovered, ‘-her symbol,’ he lifted the stone psychically, ‘-damn,’ Syhton’s rather strained expression felt more of a novel-art work. Her body was split down the middle, forced to stretch in a ‘V-shape,’ were in the middle sprouted the tree, ‘-the birth of nature,’ he jokingly dubbed the piece and approached, *Mana Control: Light Element Variant – Astro Krona,* remnants of stranger taint were erased. *Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes perspective, watcher watches, creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht,* her soul regenerated above the weeping body, *Come forth Box of Soul.* the chest clamored beside the tree, every noise flickered speck of dust; like a blacksmith hammering an anvil, *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,* it instantly swallowed her godly aura. The stray symbols gathered at his feet in a pentagram bound within a circle, *-knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing,* pages fluttered into the center, *-Book of Rue, on the first day of the devil’s awakening – the ancient art of creation falls, for the conjurer is a priest sworn to the gods but led astray by evil. The anti-god, the devourer of angels, the embodiment of evil, cursed King Alfred, reaches the heavens and swallows Creation’s heir, gaining the powers of Creation. Fashion into life a perfect replica, grant the symbol of Creation; Yeve,* the circle

burnt,” *Watchers, spectators, names ring high and low, us, unknown to the world’s reality, unknown to the world’s knowledge, have lived in utter solemnity for millennia to come and go. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, beckons my might to be fully materialized without prejudice, reality is but my playground, neither god nor demon shall overcome my authority, face me in stride, face me in fear, reality’s what I wish it to be for knowledge is the true strength: Realm Expansion, Shadow Realm Variant – Rantiam.* It swallowed the circle, forcing world-shaking power into the heavens. A vessel worthy of a supreme god rose within, *I beckon the souls of the Shadow Realm, be free,* he snapped, *Release.* a rush of energy darted from the box of soul and into the empty vessel, *CLAP,* everything halted, Rantiam retracted – every spell vanished. The great veil parted. A tall figure stood presently, she watched her fair skin and tender fingers – her long black hair and piercingly light-blue stars for eyes blinked, “-welcome,” said Igna nonchalantly smacking her forehead, “-with this, I’ve completed your requests.”

Chapter 980: Choice

‘No,’ she scanned her hands, her legs, her body. The palms frantically patted her torso – stray images of the prior ‘v-shape’ piece had her in quite the frantic state. ‘My symbol, my body, my soul. It feels pure, I feel better, this body,’ she clenched and relaxed, ‘-feels more powerful. What’s this strange power?’ she blinked, and her mind faded into the empty white room.

By the flick of his hand, the altered dimension disappeared. A little bird, in shape only, fluttered across worlds – spanning wings and gaining distance. The world changed for the demented, uniquely Draebala atmosphere.

“My lord,” said a voice in a thickly somber fog, “-I bring a message,” said a one-eyed giant.

“Leave it here,” said a few scattered groans, accentuated by moans of a higher pitch.

“Check the letter?” stuttered the female voice, “-y-y-y-you s-should check,” her pauses came in time against another methodical tap, one of a headboard’s melancholic adventure. Its greatest foe, new couples.

A loud exhale came to a stop, “-I’ll check the letter,” he scurried over, and had his feet on a colder floor. A strange package laid upon the table. He leaned with a smile, ‘-I know it’s him.’ the scroll opened, “-Greetings Artanos, how goes it my friend... are we considered friends? Well, I apologize in advance – perhaps this letter came at an inauspicious time, the kind where one needs much stamina to satisfy another. Carnal pleasure aside, I must say, I’m impressed. Embedding a Clockwork Shadow within a goddess’ soul – sending said goddess at my doorstep knowing I couldn’t refuse someone of great influence. Well played. Saddens me to say, she’s alive. Not so much the shadow, I found it fitting to use the fragmented soul as an energy boost. Hope it doesn’t come with much surprise. Consider this from a friend, or the words of a competent foe – I wouldn’t waste time in pursuit of unknown means. Eipea and Aapith won’t stand idly. My faction will abstain from greater political or military action. You know how it goes – a strong foundation and all. Hope the letter reaches thee well. Send my warmest regards to Gophy,” signed Igna.

A puff of dust brought a little shudder, “-what’s the matter?”

.....

“Nothing to worry about,” he returned, gently making his way onto the bed, “-a letter from an interesting chap. We’ve to reach an agreement – seems my test wasn’t in vain,” behind the cordial smile laid a deeper secret, ‘-you replied my favors in kind. Good, Igna, good. I was right to listen to Persephone. Will you bear or falter, time will tell, time will tell.’

Dawn clambered over the silent night. A faded sense of reality wrote across the current skyscape. Stars were dotted against the cold morning hues of a frosty day. Wind wept, “-cold,” shivered Syhton, “-couldn’t you have conjured clothes?”

“Shut it,” he abruptly held upon a pillar, “-I need a few moments on my own.”

‘I’m out of energy,’ he stumbled, “-Igna?” hailed a distant voice, “-where are you?” golden locks erupted from the lower floors, her kempt expression slowed, “-Igna...”

“Hey,” added an awkward Syhton, “-good to meet you?”

“What’s happened to him?”

“I don’t know?” they rushed to the feverish cheeks, “-we need a doctor.”

“No,” interjected a weaker voice, “-I just need some rest. Have éclair handle tomorrow’s details, I need sleep.”

Just like that – he was carried with the aid of the palace guards. A new addition, Empress and Goddess, was offered a guided tour of the capital city. Charmed by Asmodeus’ dashing entourage, they could but accept said offer.

As for Igna, consciousness dove deeper into a familiar arena. A weight carried his body deeper – a furious struggle to maintain afloat, bubbles of air escaped, the light dimmed and the world slowed, “-awaken,” thundered a lowered voice, “-awaken, thy mistress calls,” it came from the deeper blue, a stranger light.

“Who are you?”

“I am you,” said the all-encompassing voice, “-you are me, we’re all us. Awaken, for the sun has set and risen anew.”

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GASP, he shot upright, ‘-that feeling of fear,’ a shiver shook his limbs, ‘-this premonition of dread. What’s going to happen?’ blond locks left awry, a peacefully sleeping Katherine at his bedside, ‘-did she stay here all day?’ a look told of a few hours passage, of which secretly hid the date which read the following morning.

“Good morning.”

“Igna...”

“Did you spend the night at my bedside?”

“No, I woke up a little after midnight and couldn’t seem to sleep. Before I realized it, I was in your room. It was strange to see you so defenseless. There are so many barriers around, I don’t know how to express them... we live on different planes, I don’t know why you’d ever bother...”

“Ah,” he grabbed her hands, “-it must have been troubling, yes?”

“...” she nodded, “-I know,” he added, “-seeing your fiancé in the company of other women. I’d be furious – such is the temporary feeling of mistrust and doubt. I don’t expect a saint. It’s fine to feel that way,” he patted her head, “-I’m a man of my word. When I said you were the one, I meant it. Don’t worry, okay?” he threw a kind smile, “-no one will do harm, everyone here is a friend. There’s no need to worry, okay?”

“Ever the smooth talker,” she said with an alienated tone, “-don’t treat me like a kid,” she held his wrist, “-I know I’m insecure, I know I’m needy, and I know I’m weak. I don’t care if you sleep...” she trailed, “-around or whatever,” and regained her strength, “-everyone knows how great the king of Hidros is. Would be weird if a man as accomplished as he didn’t have a few mistresses, am I right?”

“My,” he tapped her forehead playfully, “-are you practicing lines?”

Her shoulders dropped, “-how did you?”

“Ah,” he laughed, “-I asked my cousin to send over any paper you are to sign; including scripts and other work material. The burden of a royal is hard to carry. You needn’t worry about how it reflects, understand?”

“Feels like I’m adding more work...”

“You’re not,” he leaned and gave a warm embrace, “-congratulations on your first photo shoot.”

‘He did pay attention...’

“Yes I did,” he winked.

“Stop reading my mind...”

A subdued feeling of tranquility washed. In the moments he spent recomforting Katherine, her awkward reply and acceptance of weakness strangely filled his step with energy and emotion. Prior night’s bad dream seemed a little more than a distant past.

Time passed, clothes changed – and Katherine, with a sudden change, asked for Igna to join her in the showers. Warm waters rushed, “-Is this necessary?” he asked, to which she firmed her stance and fired, “-shut up.”

Tender fingers ran along with his hair, “-was the bench a necessity?” he asked for it seemed weird to bring furniture, “-stop talking already,” she added strongly, though her voice failed to convey said intention, “-my mother use to do this when I felt on edge,” her fingers warmly washed and massaged his hair. At that moment, Igna felt himself be freed, ‘-there’s nothing I can do,’ he thought, the shower washed, ‘-what am I suppose to say to repay her kindness?’

“Don’t bother,” she gave a back embrace, “-don’t pay me back,” said a mild whisper. He laughed, “-I see you’re a mind reader now?”

“No,” they laughed, “-I just wanted to say it.”

“Man,” the shower ended, thus the duo dried and sprawled into newer clothes, “-what am I to say or do with you,” for the first time in ages; Igna’s always stressful inner thoughts released. Fleeting as those moments were, ‘-I have to protect her.’

GONG, GONG, ‘-this feeling,’ he held his chest, ‘-this pain...’

A jolt threw Syhton’s rest ablaze, “-not now...” a scanning hue brightened, reality shattered into an ever-growing fissure, “-IGNA!” the room tore apart.

“KATHERINE!”

“WHAT’S THE MEANING OF THIS?” the door opened, “-GET OUT,” he fired, “-SYHTON, GO, NOW!”

“HELL NO,” she sprinted and held his arm, “-not until I get to pay-” the vortex swallowed all to be hurled on the other side.

Artanos waited upon a throne made of black steel, “-welcome to my realm,” he said, backdropped by a red cliff and overall darker colors. A smoldering pit of lava, distant screams of the tormented, “-the land of judgment.”

“Looks like hell,” commented Igna, “-why?”

“To play a game,” he laughed – two crosses rose above the lava, one of which threw restrains at Katherine, “-like you, Igna, I don’t like to play fair. And because of her little escapade,” he narrowed onto Syhton, “-I’ll make sure my word isn’t disrespected again.”

‘Not playing around, is he. I’m not fully recovered. Syhton had to jump in like an idiot. If push comes to shove, I can teleport someone, that’ll leave me defenseless.’

“Igna,” he teleported before the crosses, “-on one side lays Katherine, thy lover. On the other, my lover,” he winked, “-make noise for my girlfriend, GOPHY!” no applause, nothing save a distant eruption, “-choice,” he paced to and fro, “-an option available to the strong. I respect your powers and intellect, however,” they locked eyes, “-I won’t stand for someone indecisive, unable to make the harsher decision when matters. Tell me, Igna,” clockwork items slowly skinned Katherine alive, “-AHHHHH.’

“How does it feel?” Gophy suffered a massive blow from a whip, “-to see people so close be harmed, tell me,” said a sadistic smile, “-I want to hear the cries for mercy, they beg for their lives. I’m a god by title, therefore, I’ll agree to one’s safety. Make no mistake,” he pointed at Gophy, “-she’s worthless; lass thought she’d help by infiltrating my camp. Oh no you don’t. Her treason was staged from the beginning and now,” he looked at Igna, “-so was your defeat. Sending Syhton... I knew of your relation, didn’t take long to dig up paperwork. You’re exhausted, unable to conjure powers. My realm’s a bastion for knowledge, any spell, symbol, or ancient words spoken shall be recorded. On top,” he smiled loudly, “-you have no way of dealing against my attacks,” paper airplanes flew and crashed, destroying part skin and shattering bone, “-this feeling of unrelenting sufferance, how about it,” a clap froze time for everyone except the prisoners. “-Take how long you need,” he said, “-I will return later.” Before he laid a problem, one simple solution – pick one and be done.

“Pick her,” said Gophy, “-I failed my mission, I rather die...”

"Igna," sniffled Katherine, "I c-c-can't," she screamed, "no more pain... I c-c-c-can't t-t-take it," she cried.

"This is my fault," said Syhton, "I'll make up for my mistakes."

"Not going to happen," *Ancient-Arts: Cross dimensional Teleportation!* a flash and silence, "IGNA..." familiar ceiling, familiar walls, 'he used the last of his strength,' her fist clenched, '...' where naught remained, inspiration came in the form of, 'Have éclair handle tomorrow's details,' a quote, "maybe, just maybe!"

He breathed slowly, Katherine's torture amplified. There was nothing to be done, 'I'm weak, always have, and always will be weak. Katherine, I'm sorry, I can't help you anymore. For convenience... my only kindness is to end the sufferance,' he struggled from the frozen cage, "Katherine," he leaped, grabbed a blade from Gophy's cage, and halted shy of her neck.

"Why did you stop," she mumbled, "do it, Igna..."

'Don't look at me like that,' he clenched, 'Shanna, Alicia, Aceline, now you... must I always lose those I try to open my heart to?'

"Igna," interjected Gophy, "don't do it, trust me, don't kill her. Without proper support, I can't imagine what'll happen to you, Igna. Pick me instead, have Artanos kill me instead... trust me, Igna, don't worry, just pick me."

Clap, clap, a forceful pull flung Igna across, "I said no moving," ordered the god, "tell me," he faced the bloodied Igna, "who doth thee pick?"

"Release Kathrine..."

"Wrong," cackled Artanos, "SO PREDICTABLE!" a slew of iron rods impaled her would-be relieved expression, "for tis only the strong who can choose, not the weak. Igna, you're weak and have lost." Her body fell for what seemed hours, 'no...' a burning sensation tore. 'oh fuck,' the line between sanity and monster snapped, 'it's over.'