

## Death Magic 981

### Chapter 981: Ortious

Silver, thin as a thread and more potent than the realm itself. 'A blur,' read the mind, '-a blur.' Katherine felt akin to a feather, such was the sense of time. The ground cracked at a magnitude of an earthquake, Igna vanished. A dark fissure snapped across the reddened ground. A mist of raw energy eased and therein laid much of an otherworldly force.

"Nothing you do will help," laughed Artanos, "-even if you manage to win, I've ensured the realm is sealed. Nothing will help, Igna, nothing will. I'm sorry," he resettled upon the risen throne, "-for I have won."

"Winning?" said a distorted voice, "-losing?" what used to be Igna seemed at a loss. The very essence of the current world seemed off. Every step taken, every breath, the littlest of motions stuck. The actions repeated within the distorted spaces, "-who are you to lay judgment on me?" firm regard clawed from the depths of hell. It horned onto the majestic throne of the god, "-ha-ha-ha-ha," Katherine's lifeless body dropped at Igna's feet, "-Artanos..."

He made no remarks, save a flick of the finger. Bronze portals erupted Clockwork fighters of differing size and strength, "-my, Igna," said a solemn smirk, "-no matter the show of power; nothing changes. I will learn everything about-"

"Shut up," an equally demented fissure opened. He rose an emotionless glance, '-die.'

A man on the verge of self-destruction, on the path of asura, the pursuit of never-ending power. Gophy watched, "-it's gone," she mumbled, "-I'm sorry, Igna, we had to..." alas, the preparation didn't suffice, for when she scanned the battlefield, it was no demon, nor God. No words described the amount of darkness covering the ground. Alfred, Staxius, and Igna, the personas merged and fought, swapping from demon to vampire – the powers complemented each other. More enemies leaped, and greater grew the rebuttal.

'Igna,' narrowed the god, '-take it in, this is who you truly are,' blood and guts, mechanical parts and cogs. Bodies on top of bodies on top of bodies there laid no end, '-a personage made for the sole purpose of slaughter. Forgo thy worldly shackles. Romance, companionship, it doesn't matter for a blade's duty is to slay. Regardless of the sugarcoating brought by chivalry – taking the blood of the bad for the good is, ultimately, taking blood. Show me thy true potential.' Just as he settled, a dagger snapped millimeters from Artanos' face.

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'My cheek,' he touched, '-blood...' in the few moments of reflection, a terrifying entity laid within a circle made of lifeless fighters. It panted, soaked to the brim in blood, tearing carnivorously into the flesh of the maimed. Unknown symbols to even the God of Knowledge hovered, \*Crunch,\* crimson orbs swallowed. In a silent motion, Orenmir pointed at Artanos, "-weak, strong, face me," he added calmly.

"I think not," grinned the ring-leader, "-I've had my fun for today. Katherine's dead, won't thee take care of thy lover?" said he smugly. The defeated shuffled. Broken limbs joined a greater entity, a massive abomination of remnants. Legs affixed onto a torso of severed heads – lack of blood added a hauntingly

ghostly paleness. “-No matter the choice,” he resumed, “-the outcome was decided on the very moment thee entered my realm. Rather, the very instant I decided to unleash Katherine’s core.”

‘Yellow... drown in a sea of black...’ shock forced his gaze onto Gophy’s cross, nothing save the macabre constraints stood against a background of distant crimson. ‘-Betrayal...’ passed the mind, ‘-look at her...’ Gophy’s enigmatic persona, so he had come to know and trust showed a flamboyant side. Her cheeks reddened, her outfits revealing and her way of looking down slashed deeply. Her dark figure stood against the throne, and in a way, her leaning into Artanos’ ears, the way her lips moved and how her stare changed, ‘-she feels bad for me...’ \*thud,\* an inner rustled.

“Allow me to explain, foolish Igna. Gophy changed sides and gave her a symbol on my order. She would have swapped sides no matter what, with or without symbol, Gophy’s my lover, and I adore her all so much. Why didn’t I accept her symbol? Simple, her knowledge far outreaches her combat prowess. Chaos is not an element to be messed with easily, nor is it in any way beneficial. Guardian Deity, the title is rather refreshing and kind. It shows how much you respect her, and even when she left, you accepted the departure cordially. I have nothing to reprimand, honestly, nothing,” the softspoken voice halted, “-which is why I had Katherine kidnapped and poisoned. How? I see the expression ask. Hence, I reply, Empress of the Wracian Empire. How could you ignore such a political advantage? We’re fighting on a different level field, Igna. Whilst thee strives for the sake of Orin, I fight for everything else. You’re not me, you’re not even worth the association to my name, dear ol’ kindling.” Katherine’s mechanical steps passed and bore no emotions. Binding chains wrapped and pulled, “-Syhton played the part of a victim well,” he said, “-look, you used every bit of strength thee had. Expanding a realm? Screw that, you can barely breathe on your own. Look at you,” and there it was bare for all to see, the wound’s bled without repair – the presence significantly weakened, “-nothing but the shadow of the prior incarnation. NAMES WORTHY OF PRAISE! STAXIUS HAGGARD, CURSED KING ALFRED. YOU’RE NOTHING!” he thundered, “-A FUCKING CHEF, THE ALCHEMIST?” he laughed, “-WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?”

Condemnation, the knees weaken, “-lost thy sense of bravado, huh?”

“Last passage, Chapter three of the book of Ortious’s tale, “-as the wind swept the ocean, as the great wave grunted over the horizon. Ortious raises his head to god of the sea. Ortious, a man of humble means, a man of weak stature, faces the waves head-on. An unyielding spirit, he glares and screams – the waves crash; rending asunder his home and family. The weak Ortious weeps; deeper darkness corrodes. An unyielding spirit stung and tainted – betrayal at the hand of his god, Persee,” he stood and tugged. A nauseating crack echoed – the right hand severed, by which he spun and tugged and slashed at the left. Threads of blood lingered – an uncomfortable silence gripped Gophy’s inner strings.

“Artanos, we should stop,” she said, “-I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“What?” he threw a disappointing side-glance, “-I get it’s hard to watch such a sorry state. And to think the high praises thee sang. Look, there’s the truth... He’s lost it.”

“The betrayed Ortious stand blessed to never die by the sea’s wrath, before what little remained, nothing. The sea reclaimed what was hers – settlements washed anew. Thus, Ortious calls the devil, not the gods, for the gods have stolen his precious.”

“-I mean,” Artanos continued, “-he’s mumbling...”

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"The tale of Ortious," whispered the lifeless Katherine, "-he whispers of Ortious."

"Did she have a soul?"

"No, I thought we killed her already," they narrowed, "-who are you?"

"An envoy from the God of Death," yellow washed in black turned whitewashed in grey.

\*Thud,\* another ripple rattled the inside, "the devil asks, '-what doth thee offer?' Ortious replies, '-hell.'

"Close the realm, NOW!"

"Why?"

"JUST DO IT!"

"ORTIOUS'S DILIGENCE WAS NEVER REPAIRED," Igna yelled. The vocal cords seemed to snap, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, naught remains for I've seized it all, BEGONE," a clap, \*Tactus Interitus.\*

Ashes rained, everything decayed. "-MY NECK," Artanos dropped onto one knee. The raised throne shattered. Katherine's head split, "-WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" the looming figure marched, nonchalant to the crumbling domain, "-YOU PSYCHOPATH, ARE YOU FUCKING INSANE?" Igna hung silently at Katherine, oblivious to Artanos's taunts, "-if I hadn't released the domain, we would have all died." Gophy shed a few tears, "-what's with you?"

"Ortious..." she sniffled, "-isn't the tale of a hero nor is it a valorous tale. It's the story of how a man was deceived by what he thought was a true value. It's the haunting tale of a person who experiences nothing but loss – a man who was shunned by reality itself."

"-And, how does that relate to us?"

"It means," she gulped, "-we've driven him into a wall," she paused, "-as the waves settled on the day of the moon. Ortious exits Persee's shrine, after one last prayer. The starry night glanced upon the idle cabin. Stray shifts of the curtains revealed blood and the bludgeoned head of a god."

"..."

"Weak Ortious walks," continued a distant rumble, "-carrying the burden of guilt. He sold himself for revenge, and when the devil returned to claim – Ortious vanished, leaving only Persee's soul and symbol as payment." Crimson threads fixed into floating daggers.

A palm from Gophy halted millimeters from Igna's closely approaching chest, "-you're not worthy to face us yet," a shock sent him crashing into the distance.

"We leave, now," she ordered, "-I know that look of nothingness."

"What look of nothingness?" her eyes widened in fear, and a crimson dagger drew blood and stabbed. '-he missed,' she jumped back, '-Artanos saved me.'

"What's wrong, Gophy?" the outside world snuck into the faded domain, "-did you look away?"

“No,” she gulped, “-he’s trying to kill us.”

“I don’t care,” a legion of soldiers rose, “-long as we have my people, we won’t lose against the likes of him.”

“The likes of who?” resounded a petrifying dullness, “-me?” crimson threads wrapped and pulled, locking Gophy’s neck from behind, “-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,” no sense of persona, “-I’ll kill you all,” flickers of uncontrolled mana exploded in the distance. Those carrying blood were pulled and flung by Extria. Unfortunate were those who laid empty on the ground with opened chests.

They teleported, “-try again,” said the god of knowledge to no avail. Igna pulled and cleanly severed a soldier’s head, “-this is bad, used too much power. I’m running on reserves.”

“We seriously need to leave.”

“Don’t leave the party too early,” they side-stepped subconsciously – massive blades cracked the ground, “-I’m not tired. Play with me... play with me... play with,” \*thud,\* he dropped onto one knee, “-souls of the lamented, souls of the destitute. I call upon the powers granted in my previous incarnations, I call on Staxius’s name, I call upon Alfred’s name, I grant thee authority to do as pleased with my body. Sever all mortal ties and destroy, the, wor-” three figures leaped to restrain the psychotic king.

“Disappointing,” said a man of pure white hair lined by crimson, “-it seems we were forced to take action.”

“My, what a pleasant surprise,” said a darker voice, “Artanos,” knuckles cracked, “-have thee missed me, your dear ol’ pal, Alfred?” insidious lick of the lips had the god tremble.

“Master-”

“No,” exclaimed Staxius, “-those who betray trust have no right to call me master.’

“BUT.’

“SILENCE!” everything halted, a power, unlike anything ever felt seemed to squeeze Artanos’ pocket reality, “-else,” he glared, “-I’ll kill you.”

“Now, now,” a humble man knelt at Igna’s side, holding him tightly as if a guardian reassuring their child, “-we mustn’t wish another’s death,” the humble-faced man turned, “-Artanos, such greed is unbecoming a god.”

“Origin?”

“Don’t address me so casually,” a snap conjured another realm, a place within a painting, a place where size, matter, and color laid per the painter’s whim. Bloodied tears scattered, “-Gophy, Artanos, make no mistake, Igna’s far from weak,” the three-entity laid in wait, “-for us, he’s the perfect host, a person we admire taken to hell and back. Katherine, poor lass. They had a lovely future together; I could foresee a kind and welcoming bond. The kinds we all sought to obtain. Alas, having driven him to the breaking point – there’s no return.”

“We might have lost the battle,” fired Alfred.

“We haven’t lost the war,” completed Staxius, they turned and merged into Igna. The erratic cries and screams eased.

“Hidros,” commented Gophy, “-we’re in Hidros. Look, the capital’s over there.”

A look of complete anguish, “-I don’t accept it,” he gritted, “-I don’t accept it!”

“Accept what?”

“THAT HE’S WORTHY OF SUCH STRONG ALLIES.”

“... IGNA!”

Chapter 982: Council of toddlers

“éclair, help me!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Igna’s in danger, there’s no moment to talk.”

“But please, I don’t know who you are?”

“The name’s Syhton, I thought you’d... never mind, we need to go right away.”

Doors opened. The prime minister’s office felt a little out of place, considering there was less traffic to said area compared to the others. In more ways than one, the secluded sight reminisced upon that one, always abandoned house. It’s there, it’s present; some have acknowledged the existence, and others, consciously avoided even its shadow. A summary of events followed – two additions joined the table; Eira and her aid.

“Nothing can be done,” added éclair solemnly, “-Syhton, traveling across realms, worlds, and the domain is one of the harder spells to activate. Lest the data is perfect, the chance of survival remains a resounding ninety-nine percent.”

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“So, we just leave Igna to the wolves?”

“No, not necessarily,” he dawned a heavy overcoat, “-lady Eira, a favor?”

“I’ll attend to the castle duties,” she said with a hint of dismay, “-fighting and I have long parted ways,” she added softly, “-you do understand, yes?”

Prime minister nodded at her confession, closed the door, and held a strange scroll. Location swapped for the coldness of the outside. Time read kindly after midnight – and yes, despite night having sprawled its fingers around the continent, the capital worked.

“A scroll of teleportation?”

“No,” he echoed, “-well, something like that.” A distant flash caught their attention, “-what was that?” she looked northward – a distant ray of invisible light, visible only through the medium of mana-sense, grasped at the stagnant realm.

“No use,” returned éclair, “-would seem, the master has returned.”

And thus, they flew through the night – passing buildings, roads, farmlands, meadows, and hills – dark outline as there was less to see, till the concentration point. The first light of the day, brought upon by the tiresome 05:32, carried the dew-filled plants and associated frost. She stared blankly. éclair blinked.

Soaked, injured, and possibly dead. King Igna, a prominent man shadowed by only his closest entourage, had his body kept upward. The head against a fallen log, the body laid bare and the severed hands dripping blood.

“So much,” said éclair, “-what happened?”

“Ambushed and taken by Artanos...”

A whiff froze the diminishing sense of warmth. A crack, “-who’s there?” fire éclair to a resounding nothing. Peerless sockets watched, “-a monster?” he narrowed – and indeed it growled. The tall figure, a tree-golem, passed the trees and into the open. He talled over the duo – watching through rectangular windows. It rose an arm but halted, ‘-stand down,’ muffled a saddened tone, ‘-stand down...’ he whispered, the Demonlord’s signet ring loomed.

“He leaves?”

“I suppose?” said éclair.

“Here,” commented Syhton, “-look over here,” she pointed at a blond-haired lady, “-it’s Katherine, look, it’s Katherine!”

“She’s alive?” coughed Eclair, “-but how?”

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“I don’t know,” shrugged Syhton, “-I guess she survived, or maybe the domain was smokes and mirrors?”

“I highly doubt it...”

July passed into August, “-Regency of lady Eira,” read a few news articles, “-the royal castle made an official statement pertaining to her ladyship’s regency. His Majesty, King Igna, king of Hidros and viscount of Glenda, has fallen terribly ill. Prime minister éclair stated the following, “-as our king’s muddles through the path of recovery; the established government shall make certain the kingdom is done right. Do understand why such news is best kept within the confines of the castle. Eyes on every corner and ears on every wall. King Igna shan’t be bested, and we will make sure Hidros strive for the betterment of her people,” Arcanum, lined by the nameless comments of inhabitants – read words of comfort. Criticism by those of lesser admiration found themselves alienated. Royal interest faded within the following weeks. Her ladyship’s excellent statesmanship has greatened Hidros’ goal of self-sustainability,” more words dove deeper than surface-level.

Draebala – ripped by the war, fell into a state of blood and gore. Children on their way to the local guild would often be ambushed by severed arms and legs. They’d but take a simple glance and followed – such laid the state of affairs. A world desensitized to the prospect of a painful death.

“Artanos, get out,” door buckled, “-stop being a baby.”

“Gophy...” the door caved, “-I’m sorry,” said the man head down upon his desk, “-I have the worse feeling...”

“It’s only your imagination,” she replied and entered, “-I bring snacks. Tell me, what’s troubling you this time?”

“I don’t know,” he straightened, “-after we left, a painful sensation grabbed my stomach. I don’t know... honestly.”

“Terrified of his entourage, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, who wouldn’t be. I mean, the first incarnation was nightmare enough... the second one, my word, he’s the worse thing I’ve felt. Good thing the man known as Staxius perished before turning into what could have possibly ended our worlds. He screamed and my whole domain strained, all that without a body nor any mana to speak of.”

“God of Knowledge, worry not. We’ve won, there’s no greater truth than so. Igna’s lost, and there’s nothing he can do to return himself or his lover to reality. The fear of losing someone precious, the fact that people have died on his watch. Abandonment issues,” she said, “-we’ve gone far enough, I think the beast who slumbers has awakened. We never know what he’ll become...” memories played instances where Igna lost it, “-the way he moved and slipped through our defenses. He didn’t even wince at severing his hands... we should stay on guar-” a shockwave exploded, a dark mass moved so quickly they couldn’t react, “-THIS IS FOR MY MASTER!” soaked in blood and tore to pieces, “-DAMN TRAITOR!” cried Vengeance, “-you will suffer the consequences, high-tier goddess. Biting the hands that fed you,” he turned and slashed, “-he won’t stand for the affront. Good luck, Artanos, your army will fall sooner or later, and if the Titans don’t win, we’ll claim Draebala just to spite thee,” the weapon vanished into dust.

“Holy mother,” Gophy cringed in pain. A blade ran through her stomach and into the wall where she laid inches off the ground.

Artanos buried his face in his palms, “-my eyes,” he said, “-my eyes, I can’t see anything...”

“Retribution,” thundered a subconscious voice, “-the payment for cheating the devil is never-ending sufferance.”

Far from the gore-filled world of Draebala, rose a kind morning over the colder Rosespire. Weeks elapsed ever since that day. Palace carried whispers of their troubled king. éclair found himself interested in the empress’ thoughts and ideas. They shared many nights, as for Syhton, her time was mostly spent caring for Igna. On the day they reached the palace so many weeks back, her light blue pupils lowered for acceptance.

“Midne, let me care for him.”

“Why should I? The king’s our king. I have an army of maids and butlers readied to handle his every need. Why must I bother to answer thy quest for self-satisfaction? I heard the story; our king’s defeat came about by thy plea for aid. His accepting nature allowed for a travesty... answer me, goddess, why should I?”

“Because,” dropped on all-four, “-a goddess isn’t worth anything of great consequence. Especially since the goddess’ has been shunned. I wish I could have helped. I would have helped, but no. There was nothing to be done.”

“Which means that you’re worthless,” she narrowed, “-more on my point, why should I bother?”

“...”

“No fight?”

“Because,” she stood, “-if he were to be ambushed again, I’ll want to make sure my weapons are ready to impale whoever dared hurt my friend.”

“Friend,” she paused, “-such a hypocritical word. Fine, you may take care of him on one condition.”

“...”

“Chores ought to be done by us. You’ll stay by his side, and not just his, but also the fiancé, Katherine.”

Slow sinking reality of consequences tugged upon Syhton’s heart. “Katherine?” her room would always open slowly, wherein, the fiancé sat at her vanity table dressed in her sleeping gown. A melancholic leer plastered along with the mirror, by which time, a mild-mannered attendant would exclaim, “-her ladyship’s asked for no visitors.”

‘Kicked out again,’ she resumed towards the King’s chambers. Machines beeped, and healers and scholars flew from every corner of Hidros.

“I can’t heal an afflicted mind,” whispered a dashing young man of curly hair.

“You sure you can’t, Raphael?”

“No, I’ve tried... my spell or ability does not work. Pops bit the dust badly. Who knows what state of mind he’ll be in when he wakes up.” Footsteps faded, éclair passed a corridor to a slowed stop, “-eavesdropping isn’t a great look,” he side-glanced, “-until we speak.”

The days passed into August. Syhton’s daily routine of checking Katherine begot the same response. She carried her jolly way to his bed chambers. Didn’t take long for her godly charm to win over the palace flowers.

The door opened inward; a soft ray flashed upon the bed. The comfy sheets strained, and there, as her eyes followed the path of anarchy – a melancholic figure sat upright. He carried his bicolored pupils from the window to the door.

“Igna?”

“Syhton,” he returned emotionlessly, “-good morning.”

“Good morning?” the door shut, “-Igna, are you feeling well?”

“I suppose I am,” he returned, “-how long has it been?”

“A month?”



"I see," he lowered his gaze, "-where's Katherine?"

"Pardon?"

"She's alive, isn't she?"

"Yes, why?"

Memories flooded his mind; that night returned vividly. Once Staxius and the others merged – the fanatical reddened hue washed, clarity cleansed the mind anew. '-she was brought back to life... a clockwork replica, he staged the whole instance to break my mind. The real Katherine was kidnapped... they threw her onto the ground, and I couldn't move. He destroyed her mind, everything she ever represented... I lose, again and again, I lose, unable to protect those precious to me. Gophy, Aceline... why, why me of all people. I wish nothing more than a place to spend my days happily. I wished for a time when the world grew to meritocracy, nothing. Artanos spoke true, I'm not worthy of being called our third incarnation. Perhaps Staxius... if I beg hard enough, I'm sure we can alter personas. I mean, it doesn't matter who takes the helm, it doesn't matter, does it?' the cold expression drained, and he toppled into his side blankly.

A council of three sat upon round kindergarten stools. Colorful colors and childish drawings, "-my other selves..." the trio turned, "-hear me out, please..."

Staxius turned and smiled, "-no," he flashed, "-I won't return, no thank you. Listen, Igna, we intervened to control the powers, nothing more, nothing less."

"Third incarnation," narrowed Alfred, "-tis thy time to shine. When the day of reckoning arrives, we'll welcome thee to our council of past wielders."

"Though, I don't think there will be a fourth incarnation," fired Origin, "-the last thing we need is someone incompetent."

"Igna, stop being a bitch!" exclaimed Staxius, "-pardon my French," he smiled, "-listen here, buddy," Igna found himself at the center of the circle of childish seats, "-Artanos got into thy mind. Look at us, we're an evolution – a stepping stone for the next generation. Trust me," a sinister look glazed his eyes, "-if either one of us wanted, we could take over the vessel and lay carnage. However, I'm not interested in returning, nor is Alfred. Your action and way of acting are refreshing. Not the cold-hearted murderer or a conniving mastermind, you're just you, the man who took the title of Devil. The Devil isn't exactly the representation of evil as so many religious books claim, the devil is someone wanting to rebel. We're shadows of a bygone era. Heed my voice as one betrayed – learn and adapt. The battle has just begun."

"Don't worry so much," said Alfred, "-just go back and live, fight, and win."

"Okay," he vanished, leaving Staxius to say, "-so much for my plan to return and take over."

"Yeah, we all had the same idea," shrugged Origin, "-to have control over the strongest entity to ever live. Seems' the third incarnation doesn't realize how rigid strong his mind truly is."

"Yeah," gulped Alfred, "-just look at the scale of this prison."

"I need a nap," sighed Staxius, "-see you, boys."

## Chapter 983: Yumi Haggard

"Igna, Igna, Igna."

"Awake," he replied, "-I'm awake, no need for a scene."

"Igna, finally," said a troubled expression.

"Yes, I'm alive," he sat straight and faced the cold outside, "-did I pass out for long?"

"No," she said, "-you didn't."

"Right," he slid off the bed swiftly and slithered into the sandals to an echoey corridor.

Syhton remained still. '-why did he have that expression?'

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\*Knock,\* "-the lady said she doesn't wish to speak," carried across the doorway. The lock clicked, "-don't fault me for wanting to see my fiance," he entered, leaving the attendant astonished. Her lips spasmed, "-don't mind it," he said softly, "-may we have a private moment?" She carried on outside, shutting the door and skipping by the way her shoes sang. Katherine sat under a comfy blanket. Her face, was ever so pure and her aura stagnant. There laid an air of intrigue to the way she glanced. Her empty stare landed on Igna, no response.

A muffled drop followed; someone fell. '-Why,' went across his mind, '-why... am I never to experience...' he stared at the carpet coldly. Being so low to the ground reflected his state of mind. There was nothing else to be added. The world's many stimuli faded to only the dangerous quips of the inner thoughts. A painful memory returned. The last instance of the battle, at a time when the shadows returned and the bloodied vision eased. Associated pain of torn limbs forced a cringe; a failing comparison to what he saw. The malicious Artanos sought to bring Katherine back to life, but the question of if she had died or not remained unsolved. A familiar spell, Rend, was cast, not before the lass dropped to her knees beside Igna. She screamed and cried – the voices never reached. He watched as if a silent movie – seeing the one he vowed his empty seat cry crystal tears. Her figure, soon overshadowed by an Artanos' taller stature, plastered himself at her back. He rose an arm to Katherine's head; she gave no reaction.

Silence, Rend was cast – her body toppled and he lost consciousness.

"Katherine?" he rose a dulled mien, "-can you hear or understand me?"

"Yes."

"Do you know my name?"

"No?"

"Do you know your name?"

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

“Katherine.”

“What else do you remember?”

“I was told to remain quiet by the lovely lady who cares for me.”

“Anything catches your fancy?”

“Am I royalty?”

“Yes, does that surprise you?”

“I suppose,” and on the last syllable, her lovely locks turned right – the sky outside shifted into a growing thunderstorm, “-where you close to me?” she asked.

“I guess you were,” he returned, “-we were engaged to be married,” he closed the distance and sat beside her bed, “-tell me, Katherine, you don’t need to carry this burden alone.”

“Wow,” she blinked, “-how could I have possibly become engaged to a man like you?”

“Ah, the slow burning question,” he said in jest, “-Behold, a king?”

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“A king?” she chuckled, “-please, I know kings are far more fearsome... I don’t know, I guess some part of me feels kind of, I don’t know, relieved?”

“Katherine, listen,” the voice lowered, “-if I surmise correctly, you lost your memories?”

“I guess,” she replied, “-I don’t remember much of anything. It’s frightening. Waking up to an unfamiliar place, unfamiliar area, and unfamiliar faces. You sat there doing nothing, the feeling is all so strange. I mean, I don’t know anything. You’re left to the mercy of a stranger, to the mercy of another... everyone here is all so kind. She gave me books and this,” a phone laid on her bedside, “-I mean, I knew what they were and used them effortlessly... it’s very strange.”

“It is very strange,” he returned, “-and honestly, I guess it’s for the best.”

“...”

“Drop the look of suspicion,” he exhaled, “-your memory loss is my fault. We were ambushed by an enemy; I couldn’t protect you. The truth, do you want to hear what sort of person you were before, from a subjective perspective?”

“Sure!”

“Katherine Goldberg had a dark past. A war shattered the unity of the realm,” he continued explaining, her affectionate gaze deepened the more he spoke. Intrigue, drama, and death – he spoke true and reached the near end, “-despite all that, you remained strong and fought, ultimately agreeing for a political marriage. You’d unite the noble faction and I would unite Hidros. Those plans are out the window,” he smiled, “-even if you regain your memories, there’s nothing to unite. Hidros’ is already fragmented by the arrival of enemies on our northern coast. Here’s my word of advice, Katherine – you’re free to leave.”

“Sorry?”

“Don’t hide it,” he laughed, “-you’re free to leave and forge a new way in life. Find new love and live a fulfilling life. In a way, I’m saying to forgo thy past and forge ahead.”

“My memories,” she said, “-they might come back... then, then, maybe?”

“No,” he shook his head, “-the spell used destroyed every single memory you had. There’s no rebuilding a shattered glass. Such’s the truth of our world,” he rose a gaze to the sky, “-Katherine, for my sake, for the sake of the promise I made, would you consider my offer?”

“Of starting again?” she narrowed, her hands strained a little around her phone.

‘A tell,’ he toggled the interface’s infiltrating capabilities, ‘-the institute of Arts and Craft,’ read the last visited page, “-my offer extends to enrollment at a university of plain or manual labor. The sky’s the limit,” he said confidently.

“Then,” pushed her phone over, “-I would like to enter this place!”

“A university... doable,” he smiled, “-on one condition.”

“Condition?”

“A retainer will remain at your side; no memories and all, life can be tough without knowing commonsense.”

“Is that all?”

“No, you ought to dye your hair and change how it’s styled.”

“So I don’t get recognized?”

“I guess,” he smiled, “-as long as you’re happy with the terms – I’ll have the arrangements made. You’ll have an apartment and a car to make the journey to and fro easier. How about it, Katherine?”

“...”

“What is it?”

“Katherine Goldberg,” she gulped, “-I don’t know that person... please, may I have a new name?”

“Yeah, it’ll be no trouble.”

“Yumi,” she said, “-you pick the family name.”

“Family name,” he narrowed, “-Haggard?”

“Yumi Haggard... okay, that’s fine by me.”

“Thus, it’s settled,” he smiled, “-Yumi, from today onward, thou art a member of the royal family, Haggard. My cousin is from a distant family. No need to worry, I’ll have a few of my people create a legend of Yumi. Learn the ways of the palace until the paperwork is finished. Experiment and have fun around the capital, after all, you are a member of the prestigious Haggard dynasty.”

Two sides to a coin – one poisoned by darkness and the other, propped by a caring light. Katherine’s room shut; a glimpse of her joyous expression hung until the door closed. Igna exited, he carried an expression of nothingness.

\*Click,\* “-welcome back?”

“Syhton,” he paused, “-still here?”

“I mean, yeah?” she narrowed, “-I was waiting.”

“I guess it’s fair,” the balcony door slid.

“Did something happen?”

“Suppose I owe thee an explanation,” he recounted what transpired. The burden of truth stacked upon her weakened heart – the more he spoke, the greater seemed her fault and ultimately, as the devil concluded his soliloquy, a single tear dropped.

“A disappointment,” he echoed, “-what a disappointment. The world at large knows nothing about their existence. They lead simple lives guided by ups and downs, faced with challenges they can overcome. For us, there’s no learning from a mistake – the latter might spell disaster for our realm. Everyone at the castle is hardworking and talented. The ministries, expand and gain more offices depending on the population’s needs. Our coffers have grown exponentially and public fate in the crown and government has been exemplary. I couldn’t have wished for a greater result...” he gripped the balustrade, “-then why, why do I feel like shit!” he hammered upon the marble barrier, “-why don’t I feel a sense of accomplishment. Look around, the capital’s expanded and grown marvelously prosperous. The place is the new entertainment hub of the world – the successor of Ogdawoan. Why then, why do I feel nothing... why me?” he sat and headbutted the railings, “-why me, why me?”

“Igna?”

“I’m sorry,” he stared at the sky and sighed, “-don’t worry, I need a moment.”

Therein, warm fingers ran along to a tight embrace, “-what now?” he asked with a cold tone, “-Syhton, don’t,” he warned for her fingers meandered around his chest with intent of more.

“Why not,” her warm forehead rested against his back, “-why don’t you take advantage of the situation... am I not attractive enough?”

“Shut up,” he said, “-attractiveness’s worth nothing in the greater state of things. How can a goddess feel insecure about her looks – it comes with the title. Honestly, Syhton, I don’t know where this feeling hails, I beg of you, stop it,” the last words, ‘-stop it,’ came forth as a dying beast’s last howl. Nails dug into his skin, she flung around and knelt facing him, “-don’t brush me off so easily,” she grabbed his chin, “-do you forget who I am?” her eyes flashed a beautiful light-blue, “-I’m no ordinary goddess,” she grabbed his collar and pulled, licking his ears and whispering, “-I don’t care.”

He placed a hand as if a barrier, “-goddess Syhton, I’m warning you, if this is a ploy, it best stops for when I do call thy bluff, there might be more to repay than mere words.”

“Call it my taking advantage of a heartbroken teen,” she smiled deviously, “-I’ve sold my soul to the devil – you know everything about me. Why search far and wide when what thee can have is here, in front of you,” she leaned for a kiss stopping millimeters from his lips, “-am I not good enough?”

‘Why am I hesitating...’ \*thud,\* the innards tore, “-stop holding back!” cried a thunderous echo, “-THIRD INCARNATION, STOP ACTING LIKE A BITC-”

He took the initiative and closed the last remaining distance. A burning warmth eroded from Syhton’s jaded heart – her teasing, her coyness, ‘-so passionate,’ they stopped and gazed enviously, she blinked invitingly – Igna obliged.

“Igna, tell me now,” she laid face up on the bed, “-how serious are you?”

“As thee said,” he loomed atop of her, “-taking advantage of a heartbroken teen. I did say,” he leaned closer, “-when I do call a bluff, it’s usually when I’m certain of victory.”

“Devil,” she giggled – the curtains drew and the locked firmed. Hours would pass until noon spoke upon the clock. A teary-eyed Igna snoozed peacefully – Syhton turned over and sat, her feet within Igna’s slippers, ‘-he did call my bluff,’ she blushed, ‘-what am I to do now,’ her whole body shivered, butterflies turned her stomach, ‘-why did I have to intervene,’ she covered her mouth in amusement, ‘-my first time was with a devil... I always heard about how great it felt. Other goddesses always went on about how they felt satisfied. So much for the virtuous title...’

“I’m awake,” said an abrupt proclamation, “-Syhton, seriously,” he facepalmed, “-I’m sorry, emotions got the better...”

“Don’t worry,” she smiled with childish glee, “-I’m glad it happened. You seem more you...”

.....

“Man,” he laughed, “-I feel like such a baby,” and went around to where she sat, “-did you manipulate me into this?”

“What makes you say that,” she leaned in deviously, “-very rude to accuse a lady,” her face carried a warmth he’d yearn to see.

“I mean,” he returned a similarly coy look, “-the virtuous are always the more devious.”

“My, then, the devil has nothing to fear.”

“Oh please,” he held her hands, “-manipulation or not, thank you. Even if we didn’t, I’d have said thank you.”

“Don’t worry,” she leaned and hugged, “-I did forge a pact with the devil.”

“That you did, and I’ve come to recollect,” he pushed her onto the bed again, “-care for an encore?”

“I was waiting when.”

Chapter 984: Celina

A hole left unfilled; a wound left unhealed. Gophy's departure and her changing sides had a more prolonged effect on the Shadow Realm. Those of disinterest in politics could have cared any less. The effects weren't felt either – if one were to ask if the leadership or a major change had taken place, an ignorant, 'not really?' would have escaped their lips. In many ways – the sudden departure gave ample time for reflection. The guardian deities, their students, and those around them – from the top to the middle, everyone thought. As most of life follows along a linear passage – time would handle the rest. Trouble in paradise, such was to become the name of the short-lived period.

Far from the godly realm; upon completion of many deeds – camera flashes point anew to the growing capital-city of Rosespire. Her reputation and prestige lay in the balance of a gruesome murder.

Day cried shivers of cold, the meandering figures along the somber crossroads had their arms tightly wrapped around themselves or firmed within their pockets. A wailing gust pushed shower drops against the man-made blocks. The water cascaded down the stone bricks – many of the streams followed indentures. A slowly moving mist swapped the area. Squatters hammered upon a feeble oak door, "open it," said an unidentified muffle.

"Hold on," returned the other – loud clatters beckoned. A distant silhouette passed. The following rainstorm screamed and cried till a triumphant crash. "I'm in," said one loudly shuffling in. A cacophony of whistling gusts and droplets against the window, 'tap, tap, tap,' so it ambled, snuffed into a mild thud.

"This place isn't that bad."

"Been abandoned for a few weeks," returned another.

"Sure about that?"

.....

"Yeah, a few of my buddies took up residence not too long ago. Come on," he led on knowingly.

"Why did they leave?"

"Found a better place," he explained, "us folks need to stick together. Never too late to start again..." the regular steps paused at the sight of a staircase; "I mean... I wish I could go back. This leg of mine," he limped.

"Doesn't the adventuring guild award retirement funds?"

"Nah," he returned distantly, "no way. They're only concerned with reputation. A thug like me had no place there. Soon as my guild learned of my past – it was bye-bye adventuring and hello a new of crime. Too bad," they arrived on the first floor, "a life of crime doesn't pay as well as I'd hoped. Seen too many be thrown to the wolves."

"Wolves?"

"Yeah, it's slang for narcotics. Anyway," the end of the corridor neared, "here's our home for a little while," he pushed, a darker square opened to a repugnant smell, "what the fuck is that?"

"I don't know, it smells like rot... Come on," hands shuffled aimlessly, "light the torch."

A click, similar to a retractable pen summoned light. The squatters narrowed aimlessly, checking corners and peering over their pinched nose, “-there,” the spot landed on a stained dress. It led upward to a half-naked chest overshadowed by a gruesome head injury.

\*Thud\* “-mind your step!” cried one, “-we have to go.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?”

“Don’t play dumb,” fired the man with a limp, “-we have to leave. If someone were to see us here, we’d be dead. There’s nothing to be done. Come on, come on, we have to GO!” Scattered steps and fumbling gestures; the night would soon swallow the capital. Dampened lamps ambered little they could. Rain poured akin to silver threads. Red and blue blinked in hues. Reports of trespassing and illegal activities prompted a dispatch from the royal guards.

“Working in the rain,” shivered a recruit.

“Don’t complain just yet,” added another bigger man, “-we have to scout the area first. Such is the duty of the police force,” they exited their vehicles to another ‘on-standby,’ unit.

“What’s happened here?” wondered the bigger man rushing to shelter, else the porch of a nearby shop.

“Tragic,” returned another officer, “-it’s tragic. We were forwarded a call about the bad smell, I thought it’d be something to do with narcotics... turns out, it was worse. We entered the building and found a decomposing unidentified body,” as they spoke, a bag carried the unknown lass, “-the case’s going to be transferred to homicide. No signs of drugs, rule the anti-narco out.”

“Right, well we better continue patrolling,” said the big man, “-later.”

“Take care, Patrice,” said the slimmer gentleman. A mild buckle of the car prompted, “-what happened?” from the rookie.

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“A homicide, most likely,” he answered, “-not our department. Good thing we didn’t come here first,” the car toggled, “-would have been bad. From what I see, the dead girl is in a horrific state. Welcome to the world, kid – let’s continue.”

Location, education district, Rosespire. Day rose like any other day. A brooding ray announced the morning. ‘-my head,’ yawned Lizzie, “-damn,” she winched. A slow tap entered, “-lady Lizzie.”

“Hello Rile,” she smiled, “-how are you?”

“I’m great,” he returned, “-what about you?”

“I’m fine,” a tap automatically parted the blinders, “-I guess I slept alright?”

“No, my lady,” narrowed the handsome Rile, “-you should be wearier.”

“I know, I know,” out the bed-chamber and into the living room, “-the practice’s harder these days.”

“I presume you’re headed to the university?”

“Yeah, I have practice.”



Coffee in hand, Lizzie exited the apartment complex, a great building of noble standard, to the confine of her very comfortable car. 'Morning traffic's going to be a pain,' the engine started – headlights darted upon a foggy gate.

"Good day, lady Lizzie," waved a guard.

"Good day to you as well," she replied. A painful two-hour drive – rush-hour traffic at its worse. Soothing classical music halted for the hourly update, "-and in other news, police found an unnamed body earlier last night. No reports have been published as of yet. Identity of the victim remains unknown."

'Dead bodies have become commonplace within the city,' she narrowed, '-where's this country going...' the bulletin surrendered to classical music.

Gnah university read beautifully. Lizzie arrived sooner, the car halted underneath a tree, "-over here," said a distant voice, "-Lizzie, we're here." Amiable chatter ensued. To and fro of students, new and old; seem a pleasant sight. the campus couldn't have been any better. Braver students dared paint outside – challenging the damp condition to further their craft or quest for self-discovery. Campus whispers carried into a conversation; "-did you hear about the murder?"

"Yeah, it's awful," returned Lizzie, "-no one knows who the victim is."

"Imagine dying without anyone knowing... man, I'm scared thinking about it."

"You always were a coward," added another, and the group chuckled. A larger construction rose in the distance, "-alright girls, I have to go," it came alongside the many melodies of the music.

"Later Lizzie," they waved.

"Later," she replied, quick to hide her smile upon facing the musical department. '-life here is hell,' she marched as if entering a battlefield, '-no one smiles, no one laughs. Everyone practices. Classical music's filled with snobs, rich heirs wanting to flaunt their wealth and push their own selfish narrations. I guess I'm one of them,' she kept her head high, '-I'm the snobbiest of 'em all. I'm a Haggard,' she continued inside, '-the hallway opens regardless of the crowd. I earned my respect and reputation,' she swiftly cut into a recital hall. Syndra Lordon held her head upon a music book. Talented musicians tended to their equipment, the centerpiece of the orchestra; Lizzie Haggard's piano. A pure white gem, a feather of an angel's wing.

"I'm here," she said, "-Syndra."

"Ah, Lizzie," her trance snapped, "-just the person I was looking for." \*Clap, clap,\* a line extended automatically – the musicians followed on after the other. None cared to breathe a word or give a snarky remark. The painful mistaken belief of silence equating to respect played the muted melody of awkwardness.

Lizzie took her place at the piano. Syndra stretched her arms and stared at the orchestra. '-long are the days where we would have fun,' reminisced Lizzie, '-no one here plays for fun anymore. Becoming a successful orchestra has hampered any sense of camaraderie we ought to have had. No one wants to make a mistake or stand out. No one except her, a bassist turned violinist. Celina,' she side-glanced an empty seat, '-absent yet again. Syndra's on her breaking point. No matter what we do, she never

replies.' A slew of mistakes marred the musicians. They barely crossed the three minute-mark – the draconian conductor exploded into a frustrated rant. She screamed, putting to shame any amplification. The atmosphere all but intensified. Three long hours followed, “-break.”

Pure fatigue grasped the flushed expressions, ‘-fucking snobs,’ she narrowed, ‘-a talentless bunch of wannabes. Where are you, Celina... where are you?’

\*Tap, tap,\* the muddled collective glance landed upon a strange figure, “-the director.”

“Syndra, Lizzie, may I have a word?”

Director’s office; ‘-why did he come out to see us?’ wondered the heated Syndra, ‘-he never leaves the damned office.’

“Ladies, please, have a seat,” he offered, “-about the absenteeism of Celina, her instructors are very worried. A missing person’s report will be filed later this afternoon. This is the reason why I came. Ladies, if you know anything about her whereabouts, do us a favor and bring her back. I’m under pressure from her guardian family,” he firmed on Lizzie, “-you know how protective the Haggard Dynasty can be.”

“We just have to find her?”

“Yes... if we hear from her later this afternoon, there won’t be a need to file a report. However, if I hear nothing, we’ll take the necessary actions to find one of our students. Is that acceptable?”

“Suppose it is.”

A key soon appeared from underneath his desk, “-here you are,” he dropped, “-we’ve already tried her room, no response. At the risk of invading privacy, I’d like for her friends.”

“...”

Practice finished earlier that day, “-here it is, Celina’s room,” commented Lizzie. Dormitories were a perfect mix between comfort and cheapness – the best compromise for needy students adapting to Rosepire’s rather high cost of living. A click and it opened, “-wait,” paused Syndra, “-what if we find something...”

“Find what, a dead body?” she smiled, “-don’t be absurd. Celina’s one of my closest friends, she’s an indirect member of the Haggard dynasty,” a flick of the switch showed a messy room. Musical sheets and empty noodle cups laid about. A cluster of dirty laundry rambled over her bed. There was barely enough space for the window to open.

“What about the indirect comment?”

“What about it...” Lizzie’s inside sank, “-she’s close to us... why is she living in such an ungodly apartment?”

“Unwashed dishes and trash. She hasn’t cleaned for quite a while. No never mind that, it barely looks like anyone’s visited this room in ages.”

“Not good,” quick to grab her phone, “-outgoing call; brother Igna.”

A disgruntled, “-what is it?” answered.

“Brother, it’s me, Lizzie.”

“Hey, Lizzie, something the matter?”

“I have to ask a favor...”

“Depends on what is needed.”

“It’s about Celina... she’s vanished.”

“Vanished?”

“Yeah, I’m in her room... there’s nothing around. I mean, nothing.”

“Probably out and about,” he sighed, “-if that’s all, I’m hanging up.”

Syndra snatched the phone and cried, “-stop wasting time. Celina could be dead or worse, kidnapped.”

“If it isn’t Syndra, what are you doing there?”

“I’m here to check on a friend, unlike someone I know.”

“Right, the passive-aggressive comments. Honestly, it doesn’t befit someone who’s run away her whole life, now does it? I’d rather heed the warning of a mime.”

“Stop it,” screamed Lizzie, “-brother, I don’t care how you do it. Find Celina!”

“My,” the voice deepened, “-seems Lizzie’s grown confident. By all means, go ahead and dump this pointless matter onto me, a king.”

“Don’t kid yourself, brother, a king by name is worthless, show me thy kingly stature in action. Don’t forget, she’s a member of the Haggard dynasty, or am I mistaken? Man who killed her family.”

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“Fine, you’ve made your point. I’ll see what I can do,” the call ended.

‘Celina’s missing... what if?’

Chapter 985: Formal Application

“What’s the matter?”

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Not really. Just tired, you know, how it always is after we finish,” flushed cheeks hid behind blankets, “-I know this must be hard, I mean...”

“Don’t justify it,” he sat on the precipice of the bed – the short distant downward seemed a cliff he ought to leap into. “-I’m not ashamed of it, I’ve been in the dumps. Everything’s slowly breaking around – without you,” he covered her warm hands, “-I don’t know what I’d have done.”

“You are the devil,” she smiled, “-I did what I must.”

"I am the devil," he rose, "-come what may, I'm ready." For the past few days after their return. Igna spent much of his time in the company of Syhton, the very short while spend talking and bonding: physically and mentally felt like eons. The dampened mood went between moments of utmost pleasure and vehement regrets. Katherine's alteration into Yumi Haggard was astounding. The casual trips from the bedroom to the kitchen. Retainers paid no heed to the king, choosing to allow time to pass. It was in said instances at which Igna had his head inside the refrigerator, that a shadow of his past – Katherine, would walk by the hallway. They'd exchange meaningful glances – she returned a cordial smile and he could but returned at the supply box. 'She's no longer the one I swore to protect,' he thought, '-her hair's turned from beautiful blond to a woeful deep blue.' Eventually, the time came for her enrollment. He watched as she began a new life as Yumi Haggard. Her temporary entourage consisted of guards from Phantom; lady Elvira's orders. Thus, on her leaving the palace grounds; he'd return to Syhton – a caring home he feared to disappear at any moment. After a while, the heart to heart settled, and the instability within found a haven, someone to rely on, someone who'd never leave, such as the ideal against the rational better judgment. '-I can dream, can't I?' he wondered as the nightshade toggled and Syhton's warm fingers ran along his back and tightened in front, "-come on," she'd whisper, "-let me help."

Lizzie's phone call, the moment all Syhton's fruit ripened, "-Igna," she held his arms and fixed onto the solemn look of confusion, "-you're the devil," she smiled, "-I did what I must," continued her sincere words. Igna quipped to a nonchalant Syhton, "-don't joke around," the blanket melted onto her lap, and she sat bare-chested with a purity unlike he'd ever seen, "-don't run away, don't fight, don't be ashamed. Don't have doubts about the relationship we share," she said adamantly, "-could mere words describe how thee feels? No. Could they dictate your actions? No, tis only a medium, and one that'll convey the deeper desire into comprehension. I did what I had because I wanted to. Don't misunderstand – us forming a pact isn't the reason why I gave myself to you," she held his chin, "-I'm here to stay. I'm here to fight."

.....

A single tear fell, "-what the hell," he sighed, shaking his head slowly, "-making a grown man cry. Guess I'm weak after all."

"No, you're not," she tenderly embraced the woeful figure. A man placed upon a pedestal of unsurmountable expectations. The conundrum of Osis, coined by the Hele during Iqavea Renaissance as an Empire, "-would a strong man stay strong if his entourage consisted of weaklings, or would a weak man be considered strong if his entourage consisted of strong?" answer to the lighthearted jest by a critical thinker was nay. For the answer in and of itself didn't exist. World leaders have long since added their opinion to Osis' thought experiment. Diversification of leadership styles begot strange questions – and ultimately, the question remained unanswered.

"Go, Igna, do what you must."

"Fine," he looked at the ground through blurry eyes, '-what is my answer to Osis. What's my answer...'

"Strength to kill whoever is in thy path," whispered a disembodied voice.

"Knowledge to ascertain the world's climate," whispered another.

“Adaptability,” said a strangely familiar voice, “-the strength to kill and the knowledge of foresight. Thinking is the best way forward, imagining thy own defeat – playing a scene where one’s family is killed... such is the way to move.”

A gentle push rocked the shoulder, “-Igna, wake up.”

“My bad,” he snapped into reality, “-sorry, what happened?”

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“Zoned out...”

“Ah, well,” he stood – uncertainties faded, “-enough of the tragic act,” he bellowed a heavy laugh, “-I feel refreshed. Good as new,” he spun and bowed, “-thank you for the help, Syhton, it truly means a lot.”

“Good,” she slipped out of the bed and leaped into his arms, “-better not forget who I am, yes?”

“I won’t,” he returned, diving deeper into her blue eyes, “-Daeirq Empress of Luna, Goddess of Stars, Syhton,” she leaned and bit, blood dripped from his neck, “-there,” she smeared her lips and cheeks in crimson, “-I’ve granted thee a gift,” her palms pressed against his chest, “-until the death element rejuvenates, my blood will act as a conduit between the Shadow Realm’s mana and your inability to generate said mana. We can’t afford a repeat of last time, can we?”

“Thank you,” the lips pressed and so, the clock read an early 10:45. Curtains drew, and the somber bedchambers carried the feeble outside hue.

“I ought to check on my estate,” said she dressed in a comfortable winter outfit, “-was part of our deal. Trust me,” she smirked, “-you’ll be on thy knees when I return.”

“I’ll be waiting,” he winked, the door shut behind as he watched through the balcony doors, ‘-a nice day,’ he breathed, ‘-Syhton’s help me in a time of need. She saw my ugly side, my weak side, and my ravenous side. With her blood, I can finally utilize the shadow realm’s mana without expanding my domain. Good to know,’ he threw on a suit jacket and exited the chambers. Strong footsteps echoed – a visible change greatedened the atmosphere. Dully cleaning maids inhale a mild fragrance of the oozing confidence, ‘-what the...’ the frowns turned upside down.

Cacophonous rants extended into the street. ‘Ministry of internal and external affair was a little crowded,’ followed a sarcastic observation. He vaulted over the barriers and into the back. Three steps led up inside. Argumentative businessmen and politicians were heard screaming.

“This is bad,” added troubled attendants, “-lady Katherine’s illness was leaked to the noble faction. They want payback and are threatening public condemnation.”

“What can we do anyway?” added another, “-we’re only temps.” A harsh figure passed the doorway – the cling of a spoon hiding a cup followed, “-did you see someone?”

“No, why?”

“I thought I sensed someone,” returned the other.

"The coffee," came a jestful comment, "-too much coffee I say."

\*Click,\* a turn-barged shattered the angry mob. Eira, Ela, Minerva, and éclair sat before a desk, unable to answer questions from a prominent low-ranking noble. Whispers muffled. The king ambled – striking murderous sneers at any who dared raise a malicious expression. He stopped and leaned onto the desk. A flick lit a cigarette. Few puffs exhaled onto the leader of the sudden revolt.

"King Igna," nodded the noble grudgingly, "-my name's Ester Corei, a noble hailing from the prosperous Plaustan."

"A baron," he observed, "-who's family has achieved quite a lot of influence. Tell me, are your family business tycoons or is there something greater at play?"

"My king, the continent knows of thy cynical nature. I shan't be confined to the Haggard way of negotiations. I will fight my case with or without threats. The sanctity of the Hidrosian royal line is at risk. We fear the possibility of annexation from the Empire. They've already taken the northern coast – with prime minister éclair's reported amorous engages with the Wracian Empress, I fear the unchecked leadership might trigger an international scandal."

"Royal line is at risk?"

"Yes, the noble faction swore fealty to duchess Katherine. A good source has reported her absence. We're justified to seek answers. Come what may we are entitled to a response. If deemed unworthy, the population has a right to voice their concerns."

"Good ol' civil unrest," he puffed, "-tell me, Baron Ester, have you ever taken a life before?"

"No? why should I sully my hands when a murderer is already at my disposal for the task?"

"Wrong," he puffed, "-the thrill of watching as life is slowly snuffed from the victim's body. The last breath they give, the moment where light leaves their faces. Tell me, have you ever experienced said joy?"

"My king, please do not brag about thy murderous past."

"Not bragging," he pressed cigarette and stared, "-Ester, what are your demands?"

"Demands?"

"Yeah," he said, "-regardless of who's at fault, I'm willing to overlook this blatant act of terrorism. A discourse ought to be played with words, not weapons," he rose his arms where a dark-metallic orb summoned, "-and thy entourage, I'm afraid, consists of cold hearted murderous," it brightened – pistols snapped as if metal to a magnet. A touch dropped the firearms, "-now, shall we have a nice discussion?" he flicked, and the door slammed shut.

"My king, a show of strength won't break my resolve. I will make sure this incident is told to the nation. The real truth of their leader, a cold-hearted murderer."

"My," he smiled, "-you'll find it amusing that," an interface toggled, "-everyone knows how deadly Hidros' culture of survival of the fittest is. We're a nation of adventurers, never underestimate our culture, you hear!" the room deadened, "-tell me, what are the demands?"

“Assurance of the noble faction’s position. Plaustan’s independence from the Hidrosian Crown. Dorchester’s been torn, we rather keep the peace of the province. Hidros’ are no longer united. I’m happy lady Gallienne’s not alive to see what a mess her lovely kingdom’s become.”

“Independence comes at a price. My lord Ester, if there’s something thee wish, then come take it. Plaustan ought to show their might in battle. I invite you and the appalling noble faction to a contest. To draw on the ancient tradition lain by the mages of old – I hereby challenge the province of Plaustan to a battle. Bring your army, bring mercenaries, I don’t care for I, Igna Haggard, shall face thee in battle alone.”

“ALONE!” the ministers shot upward, “-there’s no way we’re allowing this.”

“What will it be, Ester,” a hauntingly charming persona drew the baron’s focus.

“Perfect,” remarked the baron, “-let’s host the battle a week from now. It’ll be broadcasted to the world and hosted at Claireville Academy.”

“Claireville Academy?” he laughed, “-my, Ester, you’re a Claireville graduate. I sense a deeper grudge, tell me, why?”

“For the honor of our late director, Josiah.”

“Old man Josiah bit the dust?”

“Yes, he died of old age. We loved him, everyone loved how he’d recount the olden days. He’d go on about how he should have stopped a monster from ever enrolling at the academy. The defining moment at which Staxius Haggard became an apprentice mage. I guess it’s how the legend of the Haggard Dynasty began,” he sighed, “-honestly, I don’t stand a chance against you or anyone from the Haggard dynasty. I came here to see the king and voice my concerns. There’s no need for battle. Consider this my way of relaying our director’s death. As for the weapons and threats, they hail from the council of Plaustan. Independence is on the table as are their concerns.” The shouting stopped, “-until we meet again, my king. Until then, be careful of the noble faction – many schemes are on the way, and closest of allies may ruin the peace,” seats emptied, Igna waited patiently for the room’s silence.

“Brother?”

“My sincerest apologies, big sister. This man Ester, is a man of wisdom. The background told of miss play, however, upon revealing more information,” a message rang, “-I found him to have crawled from nothing and became something. It takes courage,” he smiled, “-this man, Ester, willingly acted as the opposition to draw my attention. éclair keeps a close eye on him – I’m sure today’s not the last day we hear of his accomplishment.”

The enigmatic man exited, ‘-until we meet again,’ he turned at the office building, ‘-consider that my formal application.’

Chapter 986: Unidentified Victim

“Addressing the elephant in the room. Igna, why is Katherine not present?”

“Yeah, I’d like to know more.”

“We deserve an answer.”

“Can’t run away forever. Here’s the full story,” the ministers listened with great interest. No stones left untouched, no details hidden, he spoke as it happened, “-she lost her memories. Artanos is one of the greatest foes I have ever faced. He’s thinking and the god of knowledge.”

“And?” narrowed Eira, “-we have Origin and Nexsolium.”

“Sister, we shan’t fail,” he said, “-long as the world isn’t shattered, we yet have a chance.”

A troubled call interrupted the meeting, “-I ought to take this,” said Minerva.

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“Meeting’s over, no need for such an expression,” narrowed Ela, “-I don’t get what’s with Plaustan all of the sudden. Feels like they were forced to act.”

“There are many kinds of people, some of the words, little of the action. One concrete rule combines the two; urgency.”

“They didn’t look hurried,” added an astute Eira, “-on the matter of the regency.”

“Yes, I know. I’ll take to my duties. Thank you for the help, sister.” One tête-à-tête displaced for another.

“Trouble,” added Minerva, “-crime’s risen in popularity. The coroner’s office called, and another body was found – this time, an unidentified female.”

“Perhaps I should give a helping hand,” said Igna, “-is there anything to do against the mounting trouble?”

“Noble faction?”

“Yes.”

“Could always kill them,” shrugged Ela, “-they already hate my guts since I forced many of their schemes to light. We’re a stronger nation without them,” she said an unspoken truth, “-what should we do, majesty?”

“Ignore them,” he added vehemently, “-focus our efforts on gathering allies. Easel Run Gard, Arda and Marinda. Let’s foster deeper relationships. Lady Eira, as the one responsible for such tasks; please see to it.”

“Understood,” she returned, “-good to finally return.”

“Us, my lord?”

“Civil war,” he added, “-there’s merit in the man’s word. Not necessarily on our land – any of the provinces may falter. Let’s stabilize the issue before it grows out of hand.”

Alas, where Igna walked – trouble followed. A loud crash signified a heavy entrance. éclair’s demeanor changed to terror. A lady of sharp and stern feathers entered. Her eye never once broke from the prime minister, not until Igna side-stepped onto the linear path.



“My lady Empress Lia.”

“Oh Igna,” she grabbed his hand, “-please, Igna, I do very much need help.”

“I’m here to listen,” he softly said, “-the meeting’s dismissed. Please, everyone, let’s make Hidros better than anything before.”

King and empress exited audible range, “-he seems changed?” added Eira with a hint of suspicion.

“I don’t think much has changed,” added Ela, “-when he spoke earlier – my memories of good ol’ Staxius returned. It was nostalgic and scary. I get shivers thinking about it.”

“Not that great a deal,” followed éclair, “-we should get back to work. The king’s back on duty,” they turned expecting Minerva’s response... “-where’s she?” nothing.

A bleak room made to serve lower guests soon held the fragrance of pastries and good drinks. Igna had himself seated comfortably opposite Lia, a lady who jumped at a mere tap. “-shall we begin?” he sipped, “-lady Lia, before anything is said, might I inquire to why thee haven’t asked for a return home?” he observed, ‘-her expression changed when I mentioned home,’ thus a picture began to grow.

“Home’s not home.”

“Well, who am I to judge,” said a comforting smile, “-forget I ever brought it up.”

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“O-okay, well, Igna, the thing is,” she shivered before even grabbing her cup, “-I don’t know how to say this... I think I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” he paused, ‘-oh don’t tell me,’ wheels and cogs churned, ‘-éclair...’

“I think I know who the father is,” she sniffled, “-my husband and I have tried to conceive for so long. Everyone said the problem lies with me, not the emperor. They said my soil wasn’t fertile, a barren woman stripped of her only duty. The pain and resentment I suffered as a result... why me, why me, I’m not barren, my womb isn’t worthless. I’m destined to be a mother,” and in those words, a comforting smile exuded, “-I feel at ease, I feel great. I wasn’t the problem; it was him, he deserves the blame, not I.”

“Hold on a moment.”

“Igna?”

“You’re keeping the baby?”

“Well,” she blinked, “-yes?” returned blankly as if an offense to her pride as a woman.

“In all good conscience, I’m afraid keeping the child isn’t a possibility. When the truth gets out, an international conflict may be brought to pass. If the child is born male, he’ll have a nice claim over the throne regardless of being a bastard or not.”

“I KNOW!”

“Then, you surely understand the secret might be life or death, yes?”

“Yeah,” she exhaled, “-I know what I did was stupid. Hidros’ been nothing but kind.”

“Well, if you’re determined to keep the baby, there’s a way.”

“And?”

“It involves a deception that’ll last a lifetime.”

“Pardon?”

“The baby isn’t éclairs’. Tis the emperor’s child. Long as he takes after you in look – we won’t have an issue. I’m sure his child will have features of a typically Iqavean baby.”

Amidst the discussion, a curious Minerva found herself at the coroner’s office. The guards saluted her entrance, immediately to guide inwards. “-as you see,” they reported, “-the victim count’s only increased. They’re all budding new starlets, or perhaps those of reported involvement in the musical academy. Either that or we have a serial killer who lusts after women. Can’t tell for now – the recognizing features were all destroyed in some way, leaving on the head. Even with that, there’s nothing to link...”

“Excuse me,” said two men dressed in patrol uniform, “-this young boy here has something to confirm.”

“Patrice...” the coroner rose his hands, “-I told you, the morgue is no place for a casual visit. Look, tis about time thee learns.”

“Not here on a social visit,” said the larger man, “-my boy here thinks he’s onto something.” With the lifeless body – the long-vested expression – Minerva found herself drawn to the victim as did the rookie.

“Never mind,” sighed the rookie, “-not her, I thought, well, it’s fine. I do beg your pardon for any affronts I might have caused.”

“You’re fine,” said the coroner – the metallic block closed, both figures passed a reinforced window and disappeared.

“Maybe!” fired the coroner hanging his phone, “-we have got a new missing person’s report. A lady by the name of Celina,” Minerva’s face dropped to pensive gaze, ‘-starlets, related to the musical academy, a serial murderer? No, it doesn’t add up,’ a noiseless shuffle had her peering onto the clean-shaven head, “-ITS HER!”

“Pardon?”

“IT’S HER!” she cried and ran out of the morgue. Wouldn’t be long until the room held Igna, Minerva, and Elvira, “-she’s dead,” he watched emptily, “-Celina’s dead. Where was she found?” the coroner did his due, “-what’s the cause of death?”

“Drug overdose and trauma to the head,” he added, “-besides from that, I found nothing to point at foul-play.”

“Right, I’ll handle the rest. Minerva,” ire-filled regard turned, “-have him on the case. I want the fucker apprehended and brought before my throne.”

The car door shut empty; rain dripped. ‘-If it’s not one thing...’ the palace rose in the way distance. Outside noise hailed silently.

The king’s office opened loudly, “-MAJESTY!” cried éclair, “-have you heard?”

“About Lia?”

“Yeah!”

“Correct, she’s expecting, and you’re not the father,” he added harshly.

“But she said...”

“-And I firm, you’re not the father. Tell me, éclair, what would possess thee to have intercourse with the empress. Okay, no, tis the wrong question. Intercourse is none of my business. Long as there’s no proof, none’s harmed. Could have at least used a condom, yeah?”

“Why the need for protection when she wanted me to melt...”

“No more,” he held his head, “-enough. There are more pressing matters at hand. éclair, consider yourself lucky,” he smiled, “-nothing’s worse than a secret as dastardly as knowing ones’ isn’t one’s own.”

“What about Lia,” the tranquility spawned doubt, “-what have thee done to her?”

“Don’t worry,” he said, “-the empress’s on her way home. She took my private jet and is on her way to Iqavea. To make certain her plan works – she’ll have to convince the empress that her babe is theirs. éclair,” he leaned into the desk, “-you’re very sly, aren’t you?”

“Figured my master would soon catch on,” he took a seat and breathed, “-I apologize for the outburst.”

“Playing the game to see if I took the hint. My trusted companion, I understood the moment whispers of the rendezvous took the castle. It was nice while it lasted, I do hope her companionship was adequate.”

“Well, if I were to voice my opinions – I’d compare her to a lifeless sack of ice.”

“Crude but accurate,” he sipped, “-the seed for the revolution’s been planted. éclair, thee seeks for a long game. One in which Hidros is to rise above the world and take Iqavea by force. The claim over one’s bloodline.”

“Most effective in a state where one’s belonging matters far more than one’s merit.”

“The complete opposite of Hidros. Tis settled – the Lia matter shan’t be spoken of.”

“I appreciate the help, majesty.”

“Anything for my companion,” the office door shut anew. Igna rose and lit a cigarette, ‘-the worse part is nigh,’ he puffed, threw on a coat, and left the premises. Passing traffic on a motorbike seemed easier as to take a car.

Gnah university, ‘-this brings back memories.’ Many cautious looks ended in his direction – a snap easily erased his presence – leaving the students in wonder, ‘-who was that?’ giggles and chatter displaced for music and silence. A disparity in outfits – quality, texture, and branding, ‘-smells of the rich,’ he stopped

and stared, ‘-music’s little more than the passing fancy of the nobles. A clear divide within the campus – why do they even bother,’ he passed two closely distant buildings – an alley stretched beyond the dark. “-why don’t you try this,” a group accosted a lonesome figure.

“What’s that?” they inquired brazenly.

“Something that’ll really make you fly,” added a charismatic response, “-why don’t you try it, princess. Allow me to take thee to Elysium.”

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“Please, I rather have my nails done,” she fired, “-get away from me.”

“No, doesn’t work that way,” the figures blocked off the exit, “-if you don’t buy, I’m afraid we ought to get rough.”

“Please,” her tone deadened, “-weaklings like you aren’t worth the trouble,” various hues flashed, “-scurry on home to daddy,” added the short but strong stature. Princess Lizzie exited with a shake of the head, “-bunch of idiots.”

‘Seems the supposed dealers were noble heirs. What even is this place?’ he unassumingly locked onto the princess, deactivating the erase presence. The ruthless pianist side-glared, “-what are you looking at?” she stormed, each footstep resounded – giving the impression of tremors, “-not from around here... creep.” Adjacent chatter commented unfavorably, “-between her beauty and her terror, those who stare are the brave...”

“Yeah, feel bad for the new guy.”

Igna could but watch, every word she said fell on muted ears, “-LIZZIE,” he rushed into an embrace followed by a twirl, “-you’re alive!”

“BROTHER!” she melted within his arms, “-you came, you actually came!”

“YEAH,” the twirl ended, alas, the world kept spinning – having the duo shortly fall upon the stone brick walkway. “-why are you here?” she asked.

“Can’t I pay a visit?”

“Never said that,” they stood, “-it’s rare for you to come out the palace nowadays.”

“Work’s pretty harsh,” he commented, “-what was that before?”

“You mean the ambush?”

“Yeah, a lot of young girls have been accosted by creeps posing as drug dealers. Don’t know what the deal is, thought I’d investigate.”

“And?”

“And what, I kicked ass,” she clenched her arms, “-I’m strong!”

“No doubt you are,” he returned, ‘-yeah, she’s truly Staxius’s child. Bearer of his blood – the power inside her body is unfathomable... I wonder if.’

“No,” she returned, “-I’ve rejected the boon of godhood. Goddess Syhton came to me long ago and wanted to bestow her symbol – I said no, wasn’t interested and she pursued no further.”

Chapter 987: “what will a little kingdom like ours accomplish?”

Strained expressions, misguided looks, and troubled air. The rehearsal hall felt nothing as imagined. Expectations of a jovial atmosphere, a place where music lovers alike gathered; Igna soon realized how futile the display was. Fake smiles and brave faces; even during recitals where multiple guests came to watch – Syndra’s orchestra’s cheery side, well, was nothing but an illusion. A cleanly constructed facade hiding misery. And thus, as he entered said area – the air brushed them past. Lizzie held a common look as if saying, ‘-here we go again.’

“And, what about the symbol?”

“I refused her offer,” she said, they ambled backstage, “-wasn’t worth the trouble. Our family name is prestigious – a great burden come upon those inheriting our humble name. We must strive to be leaders or be the best at what we do. I’m lucky to have been granted my abilities and boon,” her words trailed towards a surprising direction, “-compared to me, Celina, a bearer of the Haggard name, is rather poor. Don’t get me wrong, she’s worked hard to become the first violinist, Syndra’s hierarchy is the epitome of meritocracy.”

“Yeah, quite the meritocracy,” he added sarcastically, “-all I see is noble faces dawning instruments,” his piercing words led to a duo messing about with a trumpet. Those around felt no need to humble their distraction. Imagine a light amidst complete darkness; they projected a villainous flair of uncaringness.

“Don’t mind them,” she said, climbing stairs to the stage, “-those noble kids are around just to watch and learn. Can’t fault anyone if they wish to learn – no matter the excuse. Syndra’s Orchestra has her fair share of troubles. Hats off to the conductor, she’s amazing and has kept us as a whole consistent. Regardless of her standalone strength, I hardly see us advancing further this year. Ticket sales have stagnated. Casuals have an abundance of choices. Who’s interested in classical music?”

“Snobs?”

“Correct,” she smiled, “-fits, does it not?”

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“Yeah, I guess,” the tone remained more or less flat, “-what was it about Celina?”

“My bad,” she tapped her head and refocused by a shake, “-between her playing violin and bass – the girl hardly has time for herself. We went to check on her room earlier, that’s why I called. Was nowhere to be found. I called brother Julius. Turns out her agency declared bankruptcy not long ago. By what I managed to gather, she was making money on the side selling narcotics...”

“Is that confirmed?”

“Yeah,” she hushed, “-I mean... she is part of our family. Procuring the goods was as simple as giving lady Elvira’s secretary a call.”

“And?”

“She worked as a dealer – giving commission to the boss and taking a fair share for herself. Seems her ways went around the campus,” they slowed at the sight of a backroom, “-did brother Igna find her?”

“Yes,” he stopped, her relieved demeanor halted. Passing chatter faded, leaving them alone behind a costume rack.

Her pensive frown rose, “-And?”

“I’m afraid she’s dead.”

“...” her lashes crashed in slow-motion, “-just like that?” she stumbled onto a nearby chair, “-just like that?”

“Yeah, he answered monotonously, “-they found her decomposing body yesterday or so...”

“Of course she’s dead,” her head crawled under her thighs, “-of course she’s dead. Everyone’s dying...”

“Everyone?”

“...”

“Lizzie, are you there?”

“Syndra.”

“Igna,” she stopped, “-why’s Lizzie crying?”

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“Celina’s dead.”

“Pardon?”

“You didn’t mishear,” he firmed, “-she’s dead, truly dead.”

“BROTHER,” a pinch tugged the trousers, “-where is she now?”

“The morgue,” he added blankly, “-an autopsy.”

Silence. Lizzie gathered her strength and stood, passed Igna, and grabbed Syndra. The conductor said naught, for most was said in the exchange. The muted clops faded.

“Practice is adjourned,” floated through the vacant corridors. Reality sunk at slow intervals. ‘Haggard name’s a curse on its own,’ he walked at a slowed pace. Lizzie dashed into the distance, her sports car growled at the dismay of revising students.

“-Here we are,” Igna stood face to face against a door, ‘-an apartment complex turned dormitory. Old wall paint, the smell of oil, uncleaned walkways, and rusted railings. For a university, the place sure is rundown.’ Igna veered upon the sound of soles against metallic stairs. A familiar silhouette broadened, “-Count Stark.”

“Majesty,” he bowed, throwing his bleak regard upon the door, “-I see we had the same idea.”

“Looking at the outfit, you’re working for Minerva?”

“Something like that,” he said, “-I’m an advisor who reports directly to the crown.”

“And am I to presume it’s éclair?”

“Yes,” they shared shadows lain upon the dirtied frame,”-shall we?”

“Please,” a tap, and the lock clicked. Heavy stench of stale food – an untidiness unfit for a lady. Clothes bundled as if mines – the slow drops by the kitchen sink, “-this place is lovely,” added Stark, “-majesty, before we continue, I’d like to know thy intent. Will you get involved in the investigation or will thee stand?”

“No need to mince words,” he turned, “-I’ll wait outside. Take your time, advisor.”

“I meant no offense,” he elaborated.

“I understand,” returned Igna, “-long as the culprit is found, I’m content.” With a mild thud, the door shut. Hands moved subconsciously for his pocket, ‘-a cigarette,’ he lit and puffed over the railing, ‘-how deep does her death go?’

Stark exited the room at a quarter of the cigarette, “-done already?”

“No,” he returned, “-the room was tempered with. There’s nothing to be gained here. The staleness of the food and the way the clothes have been scattered feels deliberate. Feels like someone or something wishes for us to think lady Celina was a disorderly person.”

“Just how would that be of consequence?”

“Points to premeditation. I know for certain the room’s a lie. How, then, are there no infraction marks or evidence of another’s presence. I mean, it looks too good to be the truth. There’s no way to physically leave the crime scene without evidence. Forget the scene, what about the pathway, where is the security footage? It seems too good to be true.”

“One explanation,” he snuffed the last of the cigarette, “-whoever’s responsible is not of this world,” all pointed to one astute personage, ‘-Artanos,’ he crushed the bud.

“Majesty?”

“Forget the room,” he said, “-determine her cause of death. Look at it from what they wish us to follow. How does one measure the invisible?”

“Study its effect.”

“Correct,” they hurried down the stairs, “-this case is more than intrigue, count. Report to me directly when thee reached any breakthrough. A simple message or call is sufficient.”

Story about the dead body lost semblance of interest – a scandal between a major movie star and a noble hit the news by storm. Public attention flooded to the next, and so, as the weeks passed – Hidros forgot what had happened. Reports upon reports laid over the king’s desk. The appointment of two new ministers – health and education, lessened much of the other offices’ workload.

Just like so, from August to October – the world moved at its own pace until a faithful call resounded through the Rosesian Castle. \*SMACK,\* the king’s office barged open – the monarch rose his head from a pile of papers and yawned, “-what’s got you panting?”

“BIG NEWS!” said a representative from Eira’s office, “-Riaz, Prime minister of the Wracian Empire, has asked if it is possible for the prime ministers to meet.”

“Have it organized,” he said, “-refusing the invitation would not become our image of inclusiveness.”

“As is wished.”

‘Riaz’s coming to Hidros. éclair,’ he breathed, ‘-if we’re able to smooth the parle – the first step in establishing friendly relation with the Wracian Empire’s not out of the picture. Else,’ the cynical side speculated, ‘-what if the empress’s worked against us. What if the democratic meeting is but a one-way assault on Hidros’ reputation.’

Another tap, “-my lord, you’re requested at the throne room.”

“Medusa,” he stood, “-what’s with you running around?”

“Since my master decided for me to stay under my lady Athena, I can’t say I have many choices in the matter.”

“Look at you blush,” he stepped into the hallway, “-don’t say the newfound bond isn’t satisfying.”

“Oh, it is very satisfying,” she smiled halfway, “-my lord, please be ready.”

And thus, Igna entered the throne hall to an audience of unfamiliar faces. His ministers were gathered beside the throne, “-serious?”

“Very,” added Eira, “-brother, be careful.”

He took a seat on the throne and narrowed. The strange entourage knelt respectfully, “-raise thy heads,” thundered Igna.

“To the just king of Hidros, I, Qua Srin, vassal of his majesty, King Ezel of Greenhoot first warrior of the Sadian people, humbly ask for a moment of thy time,” a member of the warrior-kingdom of Sadia; the sheer weight and muscle on the trained bodies – the confident air hidden in how he spoke, “-proceed,” returned Igna.

“We heard of lord Riaz’s planned visit to Hidros. By all means, majesty, the man’s a cunning devil. He promised king Juvey’s land to us for mere participation in the Wracian campaign of conquest of the new continent. As direct vassal and Count in King Ezel’s court, I’m here to humbly request for thy disapproval of any scheme Riaz might offer.”

“And?” a pin drop silence echoed, “-what of it, what if he wishes to scheme his way into our good graces. Empress Lia was gallant and charming in how she conducted herself around the castle. I confess I was bemused by how her whims took her around our capital,” he loaded his words, preparing the field for the unexpected, “-get on with it,” the pulse suddenly struck, “-Count Qua, I hardly find it amusing to have an entourage of highly influential people gathered at my palace for a mere warning. The slander



must be reinforced with evidence, for as thee said, Hidros is run on fact and logic, not the hivemind of those forever stuck in their holy text.”

“Leave it to his majesty,” smiled the count, “-I don’t have proof. What I have is the support of the free lords sharing borders between the capital province and Elendor. Small as they are – they hold major spots in strategic warfare. Elendor’s null from the world map,” to which he knowingly glanced at Ela, “-the kingdom’s fallen, nothing but a shell of its previous glory. Prime minister Riaz’s as shady as they come, he wishes to gather power and influence until he’s able to topple the empire.”

“I don’t understand,” he crossed his legs, “-Hidros has no play in the world’s super empire. Alpha and Iqavea are one of the same – what will a little kingdom like ours accomplish?”

“Haggard Dynasty,” he said, “-the hero king of Hidros and now, the second coming of the dynasty, Devil of Glenda, Igna Haggard. During both reigns, the Haggards were able to establish an alliance with one of the three major superpowers. It’s impressive enough that Hidros has so much weight in how war is fought. As a warring faction, the fear of a Gatesix made weapon and possibly Phantom’s mercenaries are enough to chill a man to his bones. My duty today was to relay a warning – I’ve done so. Sadian people have the utmost support of the independent factions. We shall stand against the empire’s greed and forceful capture.”

“Count Qua, would it be alright if I hear what Riaz has to say?”

“I have no place to intrude, majesty.”

“If there’s nothing else, the audience’s hereby over. Retainers, please show our guests the Hidrosian courtesy.” Heavy men rose to the distant doorway – the maids looked akin to ants compared to those warriors.

“He knows,” said Ela, “-he knows who I am.”

“And, does it matter?”

“It does,” she hushed harshly, “-and if this information climbs to the emperor. What if Juvey figures the destruction of the kingdom was-”

“Enough,” interjected éclair, “-we have two sides to contend with. Hidros has no reason to partake in picking sides. I should agree on one part, why take this to us and not Alpha?”

“Does it matter?” sighed Igna, “-éclair, the rest is thine to handle. I’m needed somewhere else.”

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Chapter 988: What truly happened?

“Someplace else he says.”

“Her place?”

“Most likely.”

“Should we intervene?”

“No, long as the king performs his kingly duties, we have nothing to worry about.”

A sprawling new apartment complex – fitted by the best of the best, a combination of three tall buildings build as if a peeled orange rose over the extended skyline. At the middle laid a circular mass – a mall of some kind, inspiration taken from the greatest architectural marvel of the century fixed upon Rotherham.

A relaxed pace guided Igna through the new roads and pathways. Guard details were tight as was the security. He continued, hand in his pocket, and scaled its slope. ‘-Rosespire’s growing at an astounding pace,’ he observed and reached the mall’s yard. Traditional food stalls were a common sight. Ordinary folks laughed and walked. Regardless of the massive buildings – the ground below served as a resting space for the rest. ‘-Hidros’ social differences aren’t pronounced as I remember. Nobles and commoners interact without the heaviness of prestige breathing down their necks. Seems a good time as any,’ he passed the center display of bronze structures. Arts and craft students were hard at work, painting or sculpting still lives. Pass the relaxed atmosphere – he headed towards one of the three buildings dubbed, ‘Apartment A.’

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‘A bit on the nose,’ a tap of the phone begot a beep. He entered a clean and stylish reception. Workers handled their duties with the most respect. ‘-residents,’ he spotted and made for the lift, ‘-stars if I remember correctly,’ indeed it was so, a couple – a beautiful actress known for her comedy and an actor known for his agility. ‘Top floor,’ he pressed silently – the lift rose.

“I’m here,” he entered a grand foyer, “-wait a moment,” said a distant troubled voice, “-in a bit of a bind.”

“Right,” he entered, changing shoes for warm slipper, “-of course, tis a bind,” he had visited the apartment so many times at night it felt wrong to stand there in daylight. White overalls caught his eye, and afterward came the steaming pile of vegetable goodness, “-morning, Syhton.”

“Morning my foot,” she giggled, “-it’s nearly afternoon.”

“Had trouble on the way here. You know, castle life. Anyway, how have you been?”

“Good,” she answered, “-very good.” A hearty meal graced the table – lunchtime, they ate. Casual talk led to teasing and flirtatious comments. For a virtuous goddess, actually, for one who was a virtuous goddess, her mind was as dirty as the slums.

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When it mattered, the conversation deepened into solemn tranquility. Igna took up a seat at the lounge. Television played at a whisper’s volume. Syhton returned in a more presentable outfit, placing a thick-black briefcase onto the table, “-there,” she smiled, “-as the richest person on this planet, I hereby share all my wealth and associated businesses with my lover, the devil.”

“Your lover?” he narrowed.

“Pardon me, I got a bit ahead of myself.”

“Don’t be,” he held her hands, “-we’ve spent so much time together – I don’t mind us being called lovers. Clandestine meetings are exciting and invigorating; there’s so much I can barely contain myself. It’s honestly helpful. Thank you, Syhton.”

“Look at us now,” she dropped at his side and threw her feet over his, “-who would have guessed a goddess would fall head-over-heels for a devil.”

“Who would have guessed I’d take your baits so easily. No matter, the past is the past – let’s take some time to ourselves.

“No,” she rose her finger, “-if we start you won’t go back to the castle. Work comes first,” she smiled, “-I have much to attend to as the owner of so many companies. Hard to keep a low profile when income is twice if not thrice that of kingdoms.”

“Yeah, I never expected thy net worth to decimate ours, that’s saying something.”

“Told you,” she gave a quick peck, “-religion is a profitable business, more so than any around.”

The apartment later grew a stroke of color in the background, ‘-my personal wealth skyrocketed. I have so much money now, that I can even buy out one of the great fours and still have plenty left over. Forget the money – Syhton influences the world. Chosen few of the Church of the Stars share information with the church of Lucifer. History’s lost this bitter part of the olden days – the two churches used to be one. Where there was money to be made, the factions split and deviated. Explains the deep-hearted hatred, not just the empty threats of a collection of ideals.’

Rosespian Castle rose as any other day, “-éclair,” he entered the prime minister’s office and dropped the payload, “-take a look,” he smiled.

“Majesty,” a tired expression rose, “-barging into someone’s office is crude, don’t you think?”

“Get used to it.”

“And?” he pulled the case and dawned reading glasses, “-what is this?”

“A surprise.”

“Springing Riaz’s request on me surprised enough. I don’t think there much you ca- holy mother,” he rose, “-WHAT IS ALL THIS?”

“Contracts of partial and full ownership of many of the top businesses in the world. We speculated about a shadow leader ruling the world’s economy, the shrewdest tycoon to ever walk the earth. Turns out, the person was a lass, no ordinary lady either, a goddess. Her area of expertise; religion. Take it all in, such is the fruit of our labor. Have them incorporated within Raven.”

“Not Phantom?”

“No. Raven it is,” he said, “-oppose to two conglomerates fighting the four of Alpha, let’s make another. Three on four seems fair, and in fairness, the third has the power to decimate anyone with sheer financial prowess.”

“Papers don’t lie.”

“Nor do people,” quipped Igna, “-only if one is blessed to catch lies as they form. Nothing a little bit of practice can’t help.”

\*Incoming call, Count Stark,\* read the interface, “-have the implementation a top priority. Riaz’s arrival is scheduled a week from now, plenty of time to plan,” the room shut to an instant, “-hello?”

“Majesty, it’s me, Count Stark. I was wondering if we could meet in private?”

“Where are you currently?”

“At his majesty’s office.”

“Wait no further,” a nonchalant snap, “-here I am,” the call hung, Igna strolled – leaving fragments of the teleportation spell to flicker. “-why the sudden audience?”

“On the matter of Celina’s death,” he took a seat, “-I pieced together what happened.”

“You have my fullest of attention.”

“Peculiarities of this case are rather strange. It seems the scheme was planted not long ago – around the time her agency, Doel, filed bankruptcy. Apparently, they were contracted under a greater business – one by the name of Zei. I searched deeper on the latter and found nothing. More, if not, all of the fired employees were absorbed into the greater Zei, all with exception of ‘-talents’ so we call idols. Even here, as I continued my search, I arrived at a particular discrepancy. Celina’s musical abilities and degree carefully read her profile as one of a great and skilled musician. Her various trips overseas, playing alongside the greatest in the classical world – the list continues. Then, it came to me, as I found another less interesting profile. This time, one belonging to an untalented idol known for only her looks and brazen attitude. Nothing compared to what her colleague had accomplished. There comes the question, why did the latter get hired, and not the former. Was it looks? Certainly not, Celina’s well-defined and foreign features were a success on social media. Her follower count is a thing to behold. Then, there’s her musical skill – it all leads to this; every major agency shut its doors to her. If good looks, hard work, and talent weren’t able to make her stand out, I wondered what would... my search continued for days until I found the lead I needed. Her counterpart, an idol by the moniker of Pixie, was spotted applying for another agency. It pays to have contacts. Intervention from the ministry of justice procured most of her information. Her banking activity was highly strange, the balance would grow suddenly even when she remained unemployed. I took it upon myself to scout a newer hotel booking she made – what I discovered slowly made sense. What I came upon were men readying a filming set – the actor was a well-renowned performer. The idol known as Pixie turned her attention to the adult industry – a subject still taboo per pressure from the many religious factions. We spoke a while, she told everything when I mentioned a greater involvement from the crown, here I quote her response.”

“I love Celina to death. We’re friends or were until the agency began acting weird. Money became an issue. I constantly doubted myself for not performing my hardest during our live shows. Our band consists of nameless good looking teenagers and young adults. We knew deep down hard work was one constant – Celina brought most of our shortcomings. Her energetic persona on stage even allowed her to perform alongside Vorn. We hailed her as the savior of our low-ended agency. After they declared bankruptcy, many of us retired and I was left in an unknown city fighting for my survival. We surely thought her talents would have carried into a greater agency... nothing ever came from it. We were left

helpless and wondering what we would be if she wasn't hired. To our complete surprise, many of the agencies decided to hire most who choose to remain, all except Celina. I tried my best and failed – my manager eventually said my body and persona would be great for the weirdos on the Arcanum. It began innocently, I guess, taking lewd pictures and whatnot. Didn't take long for it to escalate and I was scouted to become a star in the adult production. Saw it as an opportunity for it was either that or prostitution. Celina and I lost touch; what I heard from friends is that she turned a new leaf. Taking on a business instead of pursuing a life of creativity."

"I initially expected the girl to be antagonistic – her words were sincere, had no reason to doubt. The sudden hires came because of a favor Celina asked of her guardian. She turned down Julius' offer for employment and asked for her comrades to be granted a chance. Everything spirals down from here – loss of job meant loss of money. Her many astute investments broke one after the other – the other agencies rejected her offer as they heard what she had done. Lies and infectious rumors spread – Pixie and Celina's close friendship became a curse for many who suspected Celina to be in the adult industry. Who would care for a sullied reputation? I dug some more and found the last ditch effort was to gather enough money to purchase Deol and lead her own agency. A short-lived dream for when her account had reached a sufficient amount – all the money was withdrawn and she was nowhere to be found. My conjecture is so; Celina worked hard to accumulate the money – she went to purchase the business, however, was subject to a deal gone wrong. Her head was shaven as a claim to fame and the money stolen. Deol truly was on sale – though, one discrepancy bothered me, no singular entity could own the rights – only a business or a proxy of a business could have the leverage for purchase. Such is how she died, and how it was meant to be backtracked. The legend of a hardworking lady brought down by corruption and greed; is the dirty truth of any stable society. Being just is sometimes not enough. All my sources and references are in this letter, you may check for yourself."

"What about the true scheme, what's the thought without proof?"

"Someone carefully orchestrated the fall of Deol. It moves linearly, how the agencies became rogue, how the idols were made to do unspeakable things, how money was short, and how the greater company decided to pull the plug. Makes one wonder, what truly happen," he exhaled, "-on the matter of Celina's death, against my better judgment, I ought to say, it will remain unsolved."

Chapter 989: Zya

"Befits us if her death remains a mystery. Don't look at me, I know what that looks like, honestly, there's so much I can afford to push my anger towards. In the greater scheme of things – her death truly means nothing."

"If his majesty thinks her death is nothing to be worried about, who am I to judge. As for the Doel, most of their contacts are on said list. My duties are over," he bowed, "-my liege, I'd like to take my leave."

"You're excused," he said toggling an interface of many faces, "-SSY, connection to l'ombre."

"Connection granted," a secure channel wrote upon the display, "-I hereby decree these men wanted criminals. Their judgment ought to be swift and merciless," from the confine of his office – a target wrote upon a few dozens of high-ranking personas. Leaders and managers – contractors and the like, those having dared to step into Igna's way would perish one day or the other.

Cigarette lit. Puffed smoke climbed towards the ceiling, “-Celina’s death is no mystery,’ he surmised, “-the count did an amazing job finding the truth. Everything lines up, there’s no one who could have orchestrated such a scheme – no one under heaven. How long’s Artanos been involved in worldly matters. I do wonder,” he gave a slight smirk, “-how long can the god of knowledge afford to give his attention to the mortal realm?”

Universes exchanged in an aftermath of a tumultuous battle. The air held the heaviness of death under a faint cloud of moisture. Demon insects – mosquitos of twice their normal size blew like thick black. It swarmed the piles of lifeless fighters. Weapons and remnants of high-level magic carved the landscape. If one were to venture southwest from Inux, following the main route marked by brave merchants; the capital of Zayan D’olsak would shine amidst a desert landscape. Sand for miles – the change felt so sudden it leveled on the edge of improbability. The divide between sand and forest was so sharp, so prominent – it seemed to the lesser judgment of the commonfolk that a greater force had mistaken their land with another – a matching but differing puzzle piece. Sandstorms blew the dunes waves along a never-ending display of beige.

Zya, as the capital was to be named – thrived on a massive river that ran from a faraway mountain range. Rain and somberness were commonplace – the region didn’t quite fit the criteria of dessert or scorching hell – it meandered between commonality and uncertainty. Said river, having passed Zya’s inner city, would carry on its merry way to the northern seas. Uncommon greenery brought by the flowing water signaled clear directions. A bellowing storm swept the city, the demonic insect retreated – tsunamic-like waves of sand crashed. Those left undigested were buried to never be seen. Once again, the whimsical nature of Zayan D’olsak epitomized the very essence of what Draebala had come to be known.

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“We’ve won the first battle,” said a rider thrust upon a tamed lizard-beast, else known as a dragonol, “-how’re our forces holding?”

“They look about the same,” commented Yuria, “-Starix, aren’t Cora and Kaleem taking a bit too long, let me go check.”

“Don’t you dare,” he thundered, riding at a snail’s pace, “-we forbid thee from taking part in any battle,” the heaviness of the storm lowered visibility to a few meters. Sword-driven corpses laid half-buried – the sandstorm breathed heavy, “-good thing you have a master mage by your side,” she winked, “-protective barriers and all.”

“Don’t cause any more trouble,” he narrowed, “-we should be at the capital soon.”

“I sense them,” they reached atop one of many nameless dunes, “-they’re close,” said Yuria with whitened gaze, “-seems Cora’s having too much fun.”

“How can you tell?”

“Well, he’s jumping around like a kid on a pogo stick.”

“And here I thought we sent ’em to play a fundamental part in our campaign.” A tempestuous flap broke what little layer of the storm had settled, “-Penoix, the legendary bird of fire – lady Intherna’s familiar.”

"That's her alright," narrowed Starix – above them flew a gigantic outline of pure flames. It flapped and carried plenty smaller of its kin, "-best we hold on," they locked eyes. PenoiX smirked, or what Starix perceived to be one; dangerously rough winds darted, "-easy," he tugged onto the dragonol's harness, "-don't know why they hate me..."

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"It's the face," returned Yuria, "-it's uneasy, you know, not knowing what you are – male, female, it's strange but weirdly exciting."

"No more," he rose his hand, "-I rather not get involved in thy fantasies." Thus the duo's humble journey continued. Closer came the capital – clearer grew what occurred. The makeshift peasant army recruited by Plu Oden, mayor of Inux, laid in a grave of their own choosing. Despite Starix's countless warnings, "-mayor, tis insanity, no, never mind insanity, its buffoonery to think such meek framed fighters ought to help our cause. As my lady firmed – we represent the Devil, we need not men of weak stature to fight the battle," memories flooded.

"I know," narrowed the mayor, "-these men are nothing but weak and useless. Lord Starix, remember the discussion we held pertaining to what a lord might sacrifice when faced with bankruptcy and famine?"

"No..."

"Yes," mumbled the mayor, "-it pains me greatly... the number of refugees flooding our city after news of our victory's grown out of hand. We barely have rations to keep the locals fed, now these people from richer backgrounds have stormed the city. What am I to do in this position. The richer men have their way by flaunting wealth; I'm under strain from his majesty the king – nobles and traders art be hailed as gods, and indeed they ought to be hailed so."

"We cut the crowd under the pretense of war?"

"..."

Reality wrote upon the one-sided battle. Orders of a full-on assault headed by the heroes reached the peasant army's ears. "No other way," he mumbled, "-such is the way of war," decapitated bodies of the elderly laid in ruin. The sickly were thrown as bait, with no remorse for the very essence of life.

"I feel bad for them," said Yuria, "-might I give them a prayer?"

"Go for it," the Dragonol halted, she slipped down onto the uneven ground and knelt.

PenoiX' cries beckoned in the faraway distance. Rains of fire, instant vaporization of any entity without the blessing of immortality. Zyu's massive gates came into view – the weather changed. The ever-encompassing sandstorm eased, "-here we are," Yuria clasped her hand, "-dispel."

Smoke rose from inside the massive capital. Gates were thrust open, escaping cries ran outward, "-die," flashed a disturbingly hallowed expression, "-the last of them," it rose an emotionless gaze at the clean skyline, "-peace at last," followed quietly.

"Vengeance," Starix unsaddled the lizard-steed and pulled closer, "-taking out a titan singlehandedly is an amazing feat."

“Ah,” sight of familiar faces snapped the ever potent regard, “-lord Starix and lady Yuria, I do apologize for the unsightly display,” he smiled warmly – nothing like the killer from a few seconds ago, “-once Penoix joined our the siege, there was no escape. The capital of Zya’s now under our control.”

Defeated silhouettes, undead as they appeared, came from the outside battlefield. A familiar face led the battered soldiers, “-guys,” hailed the boy, “-I made it back,” grinned Esh, “-found a few comrades along the way.”

“Survivors,” whispered Starix under his breath, “-good job,” he smiled, “-who knew the lady of luck would smile so openly on the vacant expressions,” a snap and Vengeance vanished to only return with severed heads. The survivors laid headless on their knees. No blood flowed, “-clockwork spies,” added Starix, “-Esh, I can understand being empathetic. However, this now goes beyond recklessness.”

“I KNOW THEY WERE THE ENEMY!” he cried, “-Thought we could make friends...”

Without another word said, Starix side-stepped, allowing a better look inside, “-you think they’ll want to make friends after we did this?” blood, destruction, and carnage. Penoix perched its majestic frame upon a clocktower. There, as the sun seemed to merge with its outline – fire breathed mercilessly onto the town. Innocent and guilty slain, “-don’t act coy with us,” side-glanced Starix, “-I know you’re a demigod, Esh. A member of the werewolf clan. I don’t need details, I already know our guardian deities were behind the little intrusion. Doesn’t matter – look at what’s here.”

“Guess the innocent act lasted so long,” he sighed and chose a sterner voice, “-what now, why the change of heart.”

“To be honest,” Cora landed, “-it doesn’t feel right to slaughter so many people.”

“I don’t care personally,” added a gloomier Kaleem.

“Yuria’s near-death experience and how they were taught the truth of battle,” approached a scarier presence, “-is enough to make a man cower. Here’s the truth of Draebala, kill or be killed,” firmed Formle, “-follow me,” he waved, “-let us take the capital.”

And so, news of Zya’s ultimate fall under Inux’s mighty military spread across the continent. The invaders, the titans – regardless of what news or information obtained prior, turned to naught.

“Liars,” said Starix stood upon the city walls, “-everyone’s a liar. Zya was supposed to be an easy target, if not for Penoix’ involvement, who knows how long our forces would have lasted a siege. One thing’s for certain, the Shadow Realm’s army won’t be defeated ever again. I’m tired of being the good guy, I’m tired of listening those around me before making my decision. It’s time I strive to achieve my goals and be of use to my master.”

“Starix, you’ve changed,” added a slower Yuria, “-what’s happened?”

“The mortal realm,” he said, throwing his head to the clouds, “-it’s nothing like here. I prefer the sheer grit and strength of might. The moral realm’s a headache-inducing playing field. No one reveals their ace, no one, even if one’s about to lose, they’d never show their hand. I mean, what’s the point of having a massive army or world-destroying weapons if one isn’t going to use them? I don’t get it. sometimes, I get the feeling that our master, Igna, isn’t the mastermind we think he is, I truly think the man’s an insane character. He’s no thinker,” he paused, “-he’s a gambler.”



“Then again,” footsteps followed, “-who are we to judge.”

“Portal’s been created,” said Yuria, “-look, lord Formle’s made the circle to Inux.”

“Let’s pay Plu Oden a visit.”

The mayor, out on a relaxing stroll around the not-so-relaxing cityscape, arrived at a destitute alley. He exhaled a cloud of breath. Destitute lines of uncared shops, broken down windows replaced by wooden planks, “-a truly appalling sight,” he followed, lowering his head as to not draw attention. Little of the populous left to wander the street cowered in side alleys, hidden behind garbage bins.

“Fuck you looking at?” fired another rougher sounding man, “-outta here,” a crash of a bottle led into whimpers of a lady in a dirtied green dress, “-fuck this town,” he tore into the lady, “-keep it quiet, whore!” the garbage can swayed heavily.

“Disgusting,” Plu averted his gaze to a bunch of cowering children – the lady in the green dress held a timid smile, almost as if to reassure the kids.

“Scum,” a glimpse, nothing. Blood and morsels of innards splattered onto the opposite wall, “-no matter how rough it gets, Inux won’t become a den for the filthy,” narrowed Formle, “-as for you, lady,” he grabbed her by the throat and pressed, “-no one’s going to fall for the innocent act.”

“That’s her,” firmed Cora, “-the fraudsters.”

“Goodbye,” he pressed, her body imploded, “-no mess this time,” he clapped his hand clean, “-what about the kids?”

“What’s the mayor thinking?”

‘The Devil’s minion,’ he gulped, ‘-no matter how I try to figure out their objectives, nothing comes to mind. I wonder if they’re truly what they say they are.’

“Have news sent to the Eipea Empire,” narrowed Starix who leaned against a wall pensively, “-Zya’s free for the taking.”

Chapter 990: Great Purge

“Excuse you?”

“Drop the act,” he pushed off the wall, passed the array of innards, “-we’ve captured Zya for the empire. Now, will the gods occupy the capital city or must we act at our own discretion?”

“I doubt the Eipea empire will take part in any schemes. Besides, our part of the continent is little more than slums compared to the central land. Zya’s been captured, good news for all I think.”

“I highly doubt the people ought to accept such a lackluster story. We’ve got those of other affiliations who yet remain within the captured Capital city,” the flare of intrigue washed his visage. The astute Starix horned upon an orphan, “-you there,” he knelt and pointed, “-what’s your name and place of birth.”

“Rachie. I was born I don’t know. I guess I’m one of the people,” he watched through dirtied lids – brows and hair tied by mud, body, and clothes stained in filth.

“Why are you here?”

“I heard rumors of Inux town accepting refugees. Thought I could get my little brother admitted to the Childeo guild. I’m far too old.”

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“You’d planned on giving thy little brother to the guild and scurry to the dangerous world of adventuring?”

“Isn’t that the best course of action?”

“Depends,” rose a cynical crowd, “-how about you work for us,” offered Starix, “-you’re going to become the new head of the newfound family.”

“...”

“Trust me,” he said connivingly, “-all shall be well. Allow us,” the devil’s army surrounded the alley in shadows and murderous intent, “-we’ll take care of any obstruction.”

“What must I do?”

“Follow my orders,” narrowed Starix, “-I promise a relatively peaceful life. Is that sufficient?”

“I guess,” he accepted, “-my brother?”

“I’ll take him to the guild,” smiled a sincere Esh, “-he’ll be in the right hands with us. Don’t worry.”

“Okay...” he blinked. News would soon cross the seas and borders – reaching the many faction’s strongholds like bolts of lightning. Months in the making and minutes in writing – the announcement was ready.

From the three, Eipea, Aapith, and the Freedom League of Eron – the saint of Tharis, Queen of Eron, Paige the Merciless, had upon her desk a letter sealed in crimson wax. The somberly humid weather harshened on the letter. An oil lamp ambered, “-to the leaders across Draebala, my name’s Rachie of the Northeast. I hail from the town of Inux – one of few who survived the abhorrent assault by the Titan’s faction. Per the ancient tradition of ‘to the victor goes the spoil’ I hereby decree myself the lord of Zya and monarch of the whole northern region. We will be campaigning to vanquish any foreign elements. I hereby extend warm hands for parole. To the leaders and lords, I, Rachie, backed by the town of Inux, humbly offer a hand to those who wish to ally. Freedom League of Eron, I address this letter personally to thee, majesty. We’re tired of living under the feeble shadow of the royal family. Your rule was fair and just – however, the restrictions imposed went against thy very faction’s name. We wish nothing more than a stable environment for the people of Zayan D’olsak. Those wishing to impair my agenda will have to answer personally to my army.” Signed, his royal majesty of Zya, Rachie.

“INSOLENCE,” the table echoed, “-tell me, who is this new character and where does he fit?”

“My liege, we have little to no information about the northern region. After the titan’s invasion, you ordered our troops to scatter and retreat home. We’re currently stationed at the northwestern isle of Zome.”

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"I know that, tell me about the new king..."

"We know they fought back the titan invasion from Inux, driving the enemy forces Zya wherein a hasty siege rose the flag of victory."

\*Tap, tap,\* dust settled, "-report my liege."

"Speak," she horned onto a slab of meat, her sharp gnashes tore through flesh and swallowed.

"Rachie's faction has captured all major cities across Zya, including trade ports. They're also in the process of adding a border fee to traders and travelers."

"How did they capture the cities?"

"The lords willingly pledged their allegiance."

"Cool," paused the queen, "-best we leave 'em to their affair. Zayan D'olsak's finally off my hands. We don't have to care for that worthless domain. Have a messenger sent to the Eipea Empire and Aapith Nation – time for us to formally announce an alliance against the Titan uprising."

The retainer cordially bowed and exited her majesty's office, "-why the pale impression," inferred the prior messenger, "-you're ill?"

"No," returned the retainer, "-I'm very worried about how we'll face the coming trials. I have a bad feeling about the Zayan D'olsak and the new lord of Zya, who's now at a possibility of becoming king."

"So, he'll probably die by the harsh weather or something. That place is one bolstering a very low survival rate. I'm sure the battle was won on weather conditions and not to forget those damned demon beasts."

"Hey, hush it," gritted the servant, "-calling them by that moniker is taboo. Lest thee wish to be under the cross of the Demonlord, we best not anger them farther."

"My bad, it slipped out. By the way, what is it about them that makes it so uneasy?"

"The way the lords yielded. It doesn't fit. Well, best not think too much else I would fail as a servant to my queen. Catch you later, fair maiden of the south, may the wind carry your step."

"You too, the ever-cautious butler, you too."

Step back a few weeks ago, at a time of turmoil and scarceness of essential needs – Starix ordered the occupation of major trading routes and complete seizure of the ports. Inux and Zya were stocked on major products, an investment the tactician made uncaring to how it'd reflect on their reputation. Didn't take long for riots and uprisings to force city residents into pressuring their lords.

"Done," came a report, "-we've instigated riots at the major cities. What now?" observed the curious Rachie.

"We wait and watch," Starix grinned, "-have the supplies stored. As for the Jeungo Seeds, are they ready?"

“Yes, we have stationed guards across many plantations. We’ve also instructed them not to arrest or use brutal force when villages try to steal.”

“Let them work for the food,” he said, “-a masterful scheme from the mind of Frederick the Great, the potato king.”

“I don’t get it?”

“A problem’s only a problem when people bring attention to it. The reverse can be said for valuables, people rank their views based on others – regardless if there are outliers, a majority will always confine themselves and become part of the crowd. Therefore, if I were to take a rock and say it’s a fragment from the gods – no one would believe me, no one. However, if I were to, let’s say, place the very same rock into a saint’s hand and have them say it came from the higher beings, the story would go down a completely different path. To control the masses one must understand needs and wants. One of the worse dictatorships from where I hail has controlled their population using hunger. Who in the right mind would think of escape when attention is on where they’ll obtain their next meal. In a way, I’ve essentially made us bait, not for the villagers, but the noble lord.”

“I see, why would they take the bait?”

“Lords are easy to manipulate, money or family, either one should suffice.”

Starix’s ingenious ways of thought turned Draebala into a massive chessboard. No matter the prestige associated with names and titles – the level of intrigue faced home made the game as if a toddler fighting a grandmaster. Tis then, an unsavory thought crossed his mind, ‘-king Igna knows how badly this land’s protection is against schemes and intrigue. People are focused on survival and don’t care about the other’s intentions. A culture of fear has turned wit and cunning into cowardice. He placed me into so many headache-inducing situations that I feel at ease playing the vile role of shadow leader. Honestly, master, you truly are the worse of the worst.’

Riots saw cities in ruin – just at the doors to lavish homes were to be broken – portals conjured for the safety of Inux.

Plu Oden opened the courtyard, “-welcome to Inux,” he said without drawing attention to the level of security. Soldiers of the Shadow Realm’s faction laid upon the castle walls, some walked in civilian clothes, and others brazenly held the fort – shooting at any incoming monster invasions. A warm banquet alleviated the noble of birth – famous lords and infamous tyrants shared a common hall.

“Starix, it’s done,” added Formle, “-most of the lords have been transported to the castle.”

“Good, let them have a moment of respite. Tonight’s the night where their worse nightmares come to truth.”

Cora and Yuria clambered out of a dingy and smelly dungeon, “-honestly,” he wiped his brow and yawned, “-so much work to capture children.”

“Starix’s lost it,” added Yuria, “-not that it matters. This is how a nobody becomes a king without the need for a war or legitimate claim. Soiree ought to be entertaining.”

The lovely hall brought soothing melodies, last the calming effect held no patience against the fouled mouth backwater nobles, “-the food’s awful!”

“We demand an audience with the leader of this banquet.”

Wiser men hurdled far from the centerstage; content on pouring standalone drinks. “-What do you think, Baron Ryuen – these men saved us from the jaws of death.”

“Right they did, or so they wish us to believe. Food and drinks so readily available, a strained atmosphere, and the look of despair on the retainers. This place reeks of malice. May my goddess guide me through this darkness,” he clenched his palms, “-and wash my soul from the taint of sin.”

“Baron Ryuen, you always were the religious one.”

“My goddess Syhton’s light I’ve followed since the little age of a troublemaker.”

An ominous clap brought the tapage to un ciel serene<sup>1</sup>. Three calm observers sipped drinks at a privately hosted bar, “-and here’s the entrance,” added Cora, “-come on, let’s have some drinks,” the party cheered silently. Rachie, dressed in a dark-blue military outfit inlaid with gold threads boldly made his entrance. He stood over the dancehall, at a place where one would raise a throne. The dyed golden locks, fake crystal clean gray pupils, and godly charm washed the room in a daze. Yuria naturally tapped her wand and smiled, “-have at it,” she sipped, “-let them have it.”

A complete opposite presence followed and overtook the unknown man, “-on behalf of lord Rachie, I welcome you nobles to a night of celebrations. As you see,” he snapped, the retainers swapped into military outfits, drawing weapons at the crowd, “-you’re now in a situation where any wrong move ought to begot death.”

“LIES!” fired an unfamiliar voice, \*BANG!\* instant death.

“There it is,” said Cora, “-the signal.”

“He’s very shrewd,” added Yuria, “-killing a puppet for sowing the seed of fear. What a scary idea.”

“Hate to be in their shoes,” added a slumped Kaleem, “-I’m done,” he laid head-down upon the counter, “-my stomach says no more.”

“Now that I have your undivided attention, please, my lord – speak a few words to the crowd.”

He stepped forward and glared, “-to the nobles of Zayan D’olsak, tonight’s the great purge. Many of you will die, many of you will be tortured, and lastly, some of you, and I give no assurance, might live – or be fed to the demon beasts. Allow me to introduce myself, I’m Rachie Eldrictch, else known as le Chevalier Noire. I fought back the titan invasion and dove headfirst into the siege of Zya – killing titans as they came. Enough about my exploits, let’s talk about yours,” he coldly narrowed, “-if you don’t want to be killed or tortured, there but one option. Join my faction,” he lifted his arms, “-else,” Starix snapped and a guillotine summoned, “-as this young boy will shortly learn.”

“MY SON!” screamed from the back, “-LET HIM GO!”

“To the head of the Rontline family – here’s to justice,” the string snapped to an innocent head landing into a basket, “-cheers to revolution,” he cackled.

