

Death Magic 991

Chapter 991: "I humbly ask for mercy,"

"INHUMANE!"

"MONSTERS!"

"DEMONS!"

"LET THEM GO!"

"The cries of the weak, how very pathetic," snickered Starix, "-one rule dominates all of existence. The strong win and the weak cower. There is no arguing fate anymore. The weak have chosen their path in life, and for once I'm glad that the weak are so pathetic. Long as your ignorance remains a part of this world, there shan't be any improvement to the many lives thee rule." In a way, the words he said came off as unimportance, weirdly irrelevant, or such as a common thought seeing loved ones beheaded so cleanly – emotionlessly. A line of captured heirs queued. Heads shrouded by dark heavy sacks. The stench of blood, the rusty iron, came from both the death reaper's contraption and the fallen. It was no humane banquet.

"To think the guillotine was made to be humane by other humans. No other race has gone so far as to take the art of slaughtering one's own kin to such extremes. Perhaps it's one of the reasons why humans are always present, never to die or yield; always speculating and conniving."

"Cora, the words fall on deaf ears," commented Formle, "-Yuria and Kaleem have been taken by alcohol. So much for the elite guard."

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He sipped and watched – the damning sound of the blade being raised – a purposeful scraping noise that lasted eons for the damned. At last, from their binds – the captive lifts his blurred vision to a crowd of maniacs. Morbidly obsessed fanatics; are common people who gave their sorry excuse for sympathy by half-hearted attempts at hiding their smirks. A shadow looms, and the executioner whispers last words and pulls. The lever snaps into a secondary state – thus the blade flashes downward – severing the head of the condemned instantly. The conscious head ends in a basket – watching as the world drowns in a sea of black. An overhead chandelier breathes the sun's would-have-been rays. A tap unbuckles shackles. The crowd collectively cringes – revolution had yet begun.

A mountain of headless bodies piled, "-Now," Starix approached and voiced loudly, "-about my lord's deal. What will it be?"

"TAKE ME INSTEAD OF MY DAUGHTER!" thundered a man. The traumatized crowd turned to see a well-known political figure, "-I care not for what happens to my property or my land. Allow me to take the place of my daughter," pled Baron Ryuen, "-take what you may, do what you wish, I humbly ask for mercy. I'm weak, I have nothing to offer save my body and my soul... please, my lord, consider my offer. The other lords have watched as their kin are slaughtered. Children not of age, children not of mental capacity to understand the world around, what must I do, what should I have done? The weak shall always contemplate their weakness as the strong relish the thought of choosing fate and playing god. I pray to my goddess Syhton that thy sins are forgiven and forgotten. May you find peace in your actions,

may this world grant the sinful peace as the righteous are forever cursed to walk the path of the martyr.”

“Finally,” came from the contraption, “-a man of guts and intellect. Ryuen, you have passed the test,” added Starix, “-the weak are destined to remain weak lest they choose to act. Tonight’s a night of sin, and you, a believer in righteousness, have taken a stand for the life of thy kin.”

Rachie walked to the bowed man. A strong grip cupped Ryuen’s shoulder, “-your family will be spared on one condition.”

“Anything, my lord, anything.”

“Become part of my court,” he said, “-you will act as my negotiator.”

“Are you sure, my lord?”

“Yes,” narrowed Rachie, “-for I have nothing to fear from one who’s already bowed his head for the sake of his children. I know your weakness; must I continue?”

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“No,” said the baron, “-I endeavor to serve his majesty, Rachie, with all under my possession.”

“So be it,” the night of the purge ended. A massacre only described as unprecedented shook Zayan D’olsak’s core. Those yielding power and influence were allowed freedom – though, their kin, heirs, were kept at the capital for security purposes.

Smoke rose, and a massive firepit held charred remains. Grieving families knelt, crying and weeping at the atrocities they witnessed.

“What now?”

“Rachie, na?ve ol’ Rachie. Take a seat,” said Starix, “-allow me to explain the purpose of last night’s show of strength,” the conversation went from minutes to hours in a blink. The smoke of the burnt faded as did Starix’s monologue, “-long story short, we had to perturb the unity that could have united the nobles. Take Ryuen for example, the man willingly came to our capital after he noticed the shortage in food. The man’s very cunning, hiding his abilities under the false pretense of total devotion to his goddess. We struck a deal and he willingly surrendered his daughter in our hands. Of course, we’re not so daft as to cross a potential ally. Therefore, to make most of the situation, he became the flicker of revolution. When nobles saw their families being taken to the machine and how we cared less for human lives – the fear burnt into their hearts. More we killed, lesser grew their response – that’s why I asked Ryuen to interject when he sensed the minority vocalize their discontent. Rest is as the night told – he turncoat, setting precedence for the others to follow. The faction split further; the classical tactic of divide and conquer. We’re in a position of utmost dominance – those who chose our side will be well-rewarded. Alas, those who yet remain under the impression of power will be exterminated.” On the last word, the room shifted.

“Guests,” relayed Kaleem.

“Trader’s union?”

“Yeah.”

Starix dawned a cynical expression, “-come on,” he tapped Rachie’s shoulder, “-let’s go make history,” the nervous puppet showed confidence and displayed an unnatural way of adapting to the flow of the room, ‘-he’s more shrewd than I expected,’ narrowed Starix, ‘-he saw what we’re willing to do. Keeping his sister peaceful and joyous should suffice. Well, even if he decides to cross – a simple death spell shall end the miserable life. Don’t underestimate us, especially since we trust none save our own,’ doors after doors, ‘-phase one of the plans completed. Now’s time to finalize Rachie’s claim over the land. Heroes of this world, traders,’ doors opened to a large and simplistic room. The seating arrangement seemed intentional for where Rachie’s faction sat, therein laid a sense of righteousness and power; a combination of light and optical illusions. I’m going to take advantage of everything I can,’ he waited beside Rachie’s chair, ‘-I won’t hold back ever again, this world will fall into my hands. I don’t care how or when; I’ll rule this damned place if that’s the last thing I ever accomplish.’

Two squared-headed men sat squarely. The divide from table to the table seemed a little distant as for their chairs – the latter, per their twitches and inattentive demeanors, said much, “-we’ve come to represent the union of traders,” said an overly loud man, “-the name’s Kieop, and I hail from the southern plains.”

“The name’s Opel, I hail from the Aapith nation as a member of the Rime Tribe.”

“Rime Tribe,” narrowed Starix, “-you’re people are travelers by nature, the lowest-ranked demons throughout the demon world, am I wrong?”

“No, we’re the lowest-ranked.”

“A low-rank means nothing,” interjected Rachie, “-as the Rime tribe is also known as the most influential demons throughout the whole of Draebala.”

“It would seem you’re very well educated.”

“Such trivial matter is best regarded as common knowledge,” elbows on the table and fingers clenched, “-may we start?”

“Let’s cut right to the chase,” inferred Kieop, “-the trader’s tax is far too expensive. A limited supply of food has forced us to scout new locations for the growth of farmable crops. War rages within the main continent, supply is low and we’ve heard of Zayan’s ungodly expenditure on import. What’s your deal?”

“Allow me,” interjected Starix, “-lord Rachie’s not the time to entertain such needless questions. We’ve spent quite a bit on food and have imported various crops. It’s a good thing that our ports are considered major trading hubs. We have valuable access as in we control the shortest possible route to the main continent. A fast delivery results in more profits – more money is a better life. What if control of said ports was deviated to a centralized part, in other words, us. Traders have had a major influence on how goods are distributed and sold. The union of traders has long held the reigns of absolutism.”

“I get the idea,” said Opel, “-would that not harm your reputation with the local lords?”

“No, for you see, the local lords have surrendered their land and power. We control most, if not the whole of Zayan. In other words, seeing the food shortage that ought to come to pass – we effectively hold the key to this realm’s survival.”

“Whoever came up with this plan is surely a man to not be trifled with. Lord of Zayan, allow us to show our utmost support. Please, my lord, what is your wish?”

“To have the leadership of Zayan acknowledged as true and unrivaled. We want support until the time comes when the war against the merciless queen comes to pass. As a favor, we’ll trade our crops and food only to the trader’s union.”

“My, it was wise of me to come personally,” added Opel, “-allow me to formally introduce myself. I am Opel Ranoe, head of the trader’s union. Rumors of Zayan’s troubled atmosphere forced the better part of my curiosity. Here I am, paying a visit to the man who conquered a kingdom without so much as lifting a sword.”

Just like that, to Rachie’s dismay – the conversation ended, soon to be followed by closed-door meetings between Starix and Opel. Rachie’s attention was required at the palace’s court – backwater nobles came for a chance to surrender their lands and influence to the new king.

A blindfold of complete cluelessness tied, ‘-I hate this,’ gritted Rachie, ‘-I hate not knowing what’s happening. Might have bitten more than I can chew. What a plan it was... infiltrate the household of the first person who shows pity on me and my sister. They don’t know the true extent of the pain I’ve suffered,’ an emotionless glaze washed his regard, ‘-seeing people fall at my feet, watching their last breath and unwillingness to act. People are my pawns to use, I don’t care who or what they are if they can further my purpose,’ he stared at himself, the mirror lifted his facade, “-then, it doesn’t matter.”

“Rachie,” a shadier figure loomed against the doorway, “-come on,” said Starix, “-let’s have a little chat.”

The somber landscape carried into the distance. Rachie and Starix brazenly toured the wall-walk, “-Rachie, I hate my doubts. It’s confirmed,” he stopped at a battlement, “-you’re no ordinary orphan are you?”

“Pardon?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’m more observant than people give credit for. I had a few of my men confirm the story, and let me tell you, we got more information from your little sister than expected.”

“FUCKER!” golden lances flung and shattered at a mystical wall.

“And there’s my doubt confirmed,” he side-glanced, “-keep your spells in check, won’t work on someone who’s blessed by an entity placed higher than the gods. You know how immortality works right?”

“Yeah,” the spell faded, “-only beings of equal or higher rank are able to slay those in the same rank. My sister-”

“Yeah, don’t worry you creep. We didn’t harm her, a deal is a deal. She spoke after a glass of god’s ale. Seem I have invited a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Alas,” he smiled, “-the flock’s no ordinary flock, we’re monster dawning facades. Your past is yours to recount, however, I’d appreciate the backstory. In exchange, I’ll allow you three questions, and it can be anything you wish.”

“Three questions?”

“Yes.”

“What if I ask only one and ask for favors...”

“No, either one question or a favor. No more, no less, tis the best deal you’ll get.”

“I could always refuse.”

“And lose a lifetime’s opportunity. What will it be, Rachie?”

Chapter 992: Rachie

“I don’t get how my past really affects what’s to come in the future. I can’t afford to pass this opportunity,” the view over the battlements, Draebala’s always somber weather and decrepit undertone, “-guess I’ll start from the beginning, or somewhere where I can gather my thoughts. I’m a native of the Eipea Empire, well, half-half. My father was subject to a goddess’s whims, so I was told. She gave birth to me – most of my childhood memories are of being locked inside. I was taught magic and how the world worked by the very few retainers who cared. Life wasn’t bad, I didn’t think anything of it, and had nothing to compare my situation against. It’s easy to imagine how someone like me would become – I gradually grew to understand and spend time with the workers. Unfortunate concubines, playthings of the gods who whimsically passed over the realm. Those gods often pluck the fairest maiden or handsome man from the hands of their parents and made them into birds in cages. Nothing lasts forever – part of me knew it would end someday, and eventually, as my father impregnated the woman he truly loved – my mother, the goddess, delivered a painful sentence. I was forced to watch as my father, a strong and handsome man, was forced to fight for his freedom. Tridant’s arena, so it had come to be known, was a place reserved for the gruesome duel to the death. The concept’s not so far-fetched,” the voice slowed to painful core memory, he paused to gather thought and breath, “-should I go into details of what happened?”

“Yeah.”

“-Okay, well, my father was made to strip and forced to fight concubines of other gods. Saying a fight’s far from the truth. In reality, the concubines were the very same maids I came to learn from. They were killed and slaughtered as age had taken a toll on their visage and body. To win, father had to forsake his humanity and kill – being dubbed the executioner at one point to only be faced with his greatest challenge. It came after the goddess learned of my sister’s mother. She was forced into the arena – forced to endure the abuse from the god’s minions, forced into shame and unspeakable things. Father endured his fair share – gender didn’t matter, if a god wants one’s body, there’s nothing to be done. Before his grand fight, before I saw my parent kill another, he told me to hide my face and harden my heart. Father fought admirably to the bitter end when the goddess’ new plaything entered the field and emasculated my father, the screams and painful screeches – I couldn’t but watch, I felt my innards tore apart, my heart and what I had come to know was destroyed. I swore vengeance to no avail, I was a kid – left to the mercy of a mother who didn’t much care for me. Her friends, viper goddesses, had their way – I was forced to do the very same things my parent had come to do. As they laid there dying hand-in-hand, my father smiled happily as did his wife, my step-mother. Never met her – she seemed powerful and earnest. Not once did she answer to the god’s lust... I don’t know how she had the strength of mind to fight the way she did. After that fight, my mother decided she had enough and threw me onto a random boat with my half-sister in tow. The ship’s captain, a human from the central continent, showed little to no mercy. To save my sister from whatever cruelty the world had to offer, I

did as the captain told me. By day I worked the helm and by night I served his chambers. I guess that became a turning point in my life, I saw how ladies and men looked at me, they wanted to experience what a half-blooded boy had to offer. Guess I slept my way until the boat reached the main continent. Instead of hallowing in my own growing despair, I chose to accept my body as a means of payment. It was easier knowing I could get what I wanted if I did what I was told. The captain wasn't that bad a person, he allowed breaks and gave us food, and he treated my sister as if she were part of his family. As our journey neared its end, the crew hosted a big celebration for my departure... between you and me, I had slept with every single person on that boat for the two months it took to cross the sea. As recompense, the captain took me to one of his friends – I thought my good behavior would have begotten a reward... I was fucking foolish. The orphanage was the worse six years I ever spent. The director took a liking to me and my sister, we were kept from the masses and saved for special occasions. I couldn't protect her, and that tore me to pieces. For the second time, even after I accepted all the world had forced, I found my innards torn. The thought of suicide constantly hung over my head – but as the rule goes, one bearing the blood of a god hasn't the power to end themselves. The abuse was harshened when they discovered I couldn't be killed. Then came another turning point, the director changed for a stranger man. They said he was from the Aapith nation – I was forced into his room that very night. Instead of the usual, he bore a strange look, he narrowed his fierce gaze and nodded. His words resounded, “-a demi-god forced to endure Draebala's darkness. The world's forsaken you, my boy, if you don't respect yourself, no one is ever going to respect you. Taking the abuse and always listening isn't the way forward. To survive you must adapt and become cunning, not strong. If you want, I'll teach you how to make the world yours,” I accepted without questions asked. He taught me how to fight and placed me in charge of the other orphans. I had the power to stop the abuse, I had the power to make it right. Instead, scoffed when the kids asked for help, I laughed when they recounted their tales, and I smiled when a dead body washed onto the orphanage ground. I heeded my teacher's wise words and became who I am. Years passed, and I grew in size and as a person. My ruthlessness brought unwanted attention, and because of my actions, my sister became the subject of harassment. Trust me,” the voice darkened as he remembered, “-I had the troublemakers stripped and made to fight to the death. The victor was sent to the god of torture's chamber. He never returned. I didn't care. I dug myself a stronghold, built a castle from sticks, and sat on a throne of thorns. My teacher was eventually killed during an attack by bored gods. They flew into town, plucked children from parents' arms, and recruited the stronger. I wasn't going to surrender without a fight – just as I readied my spell, my teacher gripped my arms and said, “C'est une grande habileté que de savoir cacher son habileté “1 just like that the flicker of life which had saved me plenty of time extinguished. I later figured the quote came from François de La Rochefoucauld. Not that it mattered, my master died without so much of a fight. He could have saved the orphanage but chose death, I always wanted to ask why he'd never shown his true capabilities, but the question went unanswered. Nothing ever was the same, a new director arrived at the orphanage – a younger man of lesser intellect. He was the perfect pawn to test my master's teachings. It worked like a charm, I soon found myself leading various factions of the city from the shadows. I continued deepening the bond my master shared with his kin – I was eventually asked to join their ranks but I refused. They understood why I abstained and said, “-Genus found a good heir. You're taking his teachings to heart, be wary for the man, as cunning and strong as he was, always kept his cards too close to his chest. To hide one's ability, the man lived by said principle until his death. If only he had tried, he would have become more than a thinker, he'd have stood equal to leaders and perhaps had led armies. Rachie, as the inheritor of Genus, the Aapith nation will always have a place for the heir

he groomed. If you ever need help, don't forget to reach out, we'll accept anyone, regardless of their moral standing," something about said offer, I couldn't shake the feeling of malice. From there, I took a relaxed place at the orphanage and worked behind the scenes. The exploitation of humans, even demi-gods or demons, I saw as pawns, even the sister I had vowed to protect, it reached a point where I nearly sold her as a favor... it's stupid as I look back, and if it hadn't been for the director's meddling, I would have lost my sister like I lost my family. It didn't matter, I started gaining influence until the orphanage's operation was disclosed to the town's lord. The peasants rallied – I forced the children into picking arms and fighting for their lives. Used the chaos to escape, and didn't expect war to suddenly explode a few months later. I met two interesting characters, ruffians without a shred of morality. They were the perfect bait. We traveled from towns to the cities – had the man play the abuser, the woman the wife, and us as the children. We drew many righteous gentlemen and dames to our rescue. Always ended the same, we were given shelter and I took advantage of kindness to steal, kill and even sell our benefactor if the price was right. We broke families, shattered relations, and killed for the sake of survival. At one point, my sister stopped speaking altogether – my mind was on the next scheme. Life on the run was fun until it ended. We crossed path with you," he looked over, "-killed my associates... I had to play the victim else you'd have ended our lives too. I had planned to defraud you, people, as well," he exhaled, "-more we spent time, the lesser grew my selfishness – the scope I had used was nothing compared to the scale you eyed. My secret was a moment away from discovery," he skipped on a nearby ledge, "-feels good to let out my deeper thoughts. I can tell you don't trust me yet, and I wouldn't trust me either. Lord Starix, I've fulfilled my part, what about yours?"

"Rachie," he laughed, "-you are an idiot," he cackled, "-an earnest fool. I'm pleased it was you we met that day and not some random puppet. It's true, I don't trust you, tis something earnt, a two-way street. You don't trust us either, which is fine. Now, as for the payment – a question and a wish."

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"Who's your leader?"

"Depends," he paused, "-and your wish?"

"I don't need to spell it," he smiled.

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"You wish to meet the Devil?" narrowed Starix

"Yeah, I would be honored to meet the man behind all of this, I mean, look at Draebala, the place that caused so much pain is in the palms of my hand."

"Meeting the Devil has its fair share of dangers."

"I don't care," he skipped onto the wall-walk, "-allow me an audience with the master."

"So be it," a portal summoned, "-don't be surprised if the Devil's, let say, a little whimsical."

"Fine by me," they entered Rosesopian castle. mild vibrations rose from a paper-filled desk, and a loud crash rattled the office, "-wake up, majesty, I need the paperwork for the acquisition of..." voice slowed to a humble march, "-my, are you Rachie?" narrowed éclair.

"MASTER!" returned a gawk.

He held up a finger, "-hold on a moment," "-master," éclair vaulted over the desk and tapped, "-time to wake up."

"Five more minutes..."

Chapter 993: Birth of a new hero?

"No extension, wake up master."

Pure white hair smeared with crimson rose. Rachie waked in awe, '-he's,' he pause and examined, '-he's,' the mind could barely think, '-he's... ordinary.'

"I'm here," yawned Igna, "-was having the greatest of dreams. I dreamed that you and I were on a trip. Was fun, well, until you took a random lass as your playmate..."

"Still going on about that?" reference drew to the escapade with the Wracian Empress.

"No, definitely not," said a childish tease, "-so, who's the new face?"

"Rachie," he stepped forward and bowed, "-it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Right," the gestures slowed to a very observant pace, "-not from this dimension, are you?"

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"No, sire, I'm not."

"Looking at Starix, you must be one of the people working for him, yes?"

"Actually, master," Starix moved forward, "-Rachie and I had an agreement. I would grant him a wish and a question if he were to tell me more about his past and secret agendas."

"Right," Igna rose and painfully navigated his labyrinth-like desk, "-here's a gun," it flung into the man's hand, "-before you stand the leader," he proclaimed now stood in front of the desk, legs crossed and posterior against the ledge, "-there are three choices, shoot me, shoot éclair or shoot Starix. Gun has one bullet – you ought to choose who to slay with the ultimate goal of gaining influence."

'Trick question,' narrowed Rachie, '-there's no way this gun can injure any of those present.'

"Wrong," added Igna to Rachie's perplexed surprise, "-the gun can definitely kill one of us. Now, choose, who ought thee to kill?"

He rose the revolver at Igna, "-sire, what purpose will kill you bring," he lessened his grip, allowing the barrel to tip downward, "-or killing the two gentlemen present. Influence isn't won with sheer violence or force of action."

"Well, I said you had to kill one, choose."

"I'd choose master Teng."

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“Master Teng?” Starix and Igna both rose conflicting regards at éclair, who, by the sudden pressure, dropped his shoulder and breathed, “-and, what would killing master Teng bring to the table?”

“You’ll lose a valuable asset,” added Rachie, “-and if the scenario is as I think it is... by which I refer to my troops having invaded the stronghold, I’d assume the other guards are restricted. My lord wouldn’t be able to recruit another just like him.”

“Killing my right hand,” Igna paused and lowered his chin in thought, “-good idea, I like it,” he rose his face and nodded, “-Starix, the man’s a good find. Keep him around.”

“What about the question?”

“Ah, you wish for the answer?” he tilted his head, “-there’s no answer. What’s the point of a problem with a standalone resolution. I’ve said it time and time again, adaptability is the lifeblood of any military organization. Anyway,” he horned onto éclair, “-care to explain the Master Teng debacle?”

“My apologies,” he moved into the front, traded places with Starix, and stood at the receiving end, “-allow me to introduce this fellow. Rachie, an orphan I mentored a long while ago, back during the time master decided to have a nice trip to Marinda. It was there, as I sought to find what to do, that I can across a particular orphanage reputed to be the worse establishment within the city. Curiosity got the better, I might have killed a few people to become its director and see the happenings of the city from within. Rachie came as a surprise, he held the same lifeless eyes master has. The same dejection for the world around, the same hatred, and the same will to use any and everything to his means. I tutored him and established relations with the Aapith nation, seeing you founded the land way back in the days of the gods.”

“Guess it’s alright,” narrowed Igna, “-tell me, chap, what brings you to our domain. I’m sure seeing your old instructor must have come as a shock – let the shock be a lesson. I’m your master’s master. Tell me, why did thee wish for an audience?”

“To experience firsthand what so many unknown enemies had faced prior to their defeat. I wanted to see it for myself... I want someone to be my guide.” Before much longer, Starix joined and explained the situation to his fullest abilities. The schemes employed and the torturous means of conquest – the sheer amount of blood and slaughter, a vile, yet charming smile propped, “-SPLENDID!”

“Master?”

“The scheme is nothing short of excellent. I wish I could have been there to ravel in the complete victory. It goes without saying, the conquest of the world is not so easily done. Rachie,” he locked onto the boy, “-as Devil, I extend a welcoming hand. However, the story Starix conducted will one day be forced to bear the burden of proof. People will need to see action; enemies will scheme and plot, they’ll want one simple thing – evidence. To see if the mantle of king suits the invader. Tis an uphill battle,” he placed a hand onto Starix’s shoulder, “-care to hear the words of an old man?”

“You jest.”

“My thoughts are based on the various assumption I made. Don’t take my word for I’ll only expose your greatest weakness going forward. A puppet leader is a good plan, and under ordinary circumstances, I’d have done the same. However, as I recall, Rachie proclaimed the title of le chevalier noire, else the black

knight – not a person, but a thought. One of a peerless warrior with no equal in battle, the epitome of chivalry and the art of slaughter. The fictional character came about in tales from bards and olden poems. The title of the black knight, once revered, is now lost to the ages – and here, within the technologically advanced Hidros, the need for a knight’s only to the extent of an artist’s imagination. Draebala’s different. The world battles, swords, and magic are the best counter against gods and demons. To be powerful there is to have the ability to rival even the gods. Put this way, understand how Rachie’s spur-of-the-moment announcement triggered a domino effect. The result is far off into the future – when the time comes when a god or a demon comes knocking, you’ll have to answer. Don’t count on my men to support for it’ll be under the shade of the dark – between the silence of nightfall. If Starix’s plan is to wage war – you’ll need a lighthouse, a character so radiant it’ll draw in new allies,” he glanced at Starix, ‘-seems he’s gotten an idea.’

“A chain’s as strong as its weakest link,” narrowed Igna, “-Starix, do you have the courage?” the tactician dropped onto his knees and prostrated before Igna, “-master, please, I need assistance.”

Igna heartlessly firm his stance, “-and, why must I answer. What good will it bring me?”

“Master,” he rose his head and narrowed, “-I ask for thy assistance, consider it a loan.”

“A loan?” the expression eased, “-go on, I’m intrigued.”

“Rachie bears the blood of a goddess. He can slay demi-god rank and lower entity. He wields the holy spear of Jupe but, due to master éclair’s teachings, has decided to keep a low profile. I partly agree with keeping one’s card close. Alas, the battle we fight is one of life or death – we’re clambering from the pits of destruction and alienation. There’s nothing but up, and even if we lose – there won’t be many repercussions.”

“No need to elaborate; what is your request?”

“Grant Rachie the powers a nightwalker. Allow him a place in the Nox’s curse.”

“A nightwalker,” he paused, “-and, what will I gain in return?”

“Anything his majesty asks.”

“So be it,” he pushed off the ledge, summoned a cage of ice, and imprisoned Rachie – the pillars materialized such a way to expose his neck. Igna bit, blood spurred and the cage faded, a heavy thud marked Rachie’s unconscious fall.

“Master, what have you done?” narrowed éclair, “-will he be alright?”

A thought suddenly crossed his mind, to which Igna stopped midway at the desk and fallen Rachie. Starix threw damning regard, “-master?”

“My bad,” he exhaled, “-I forgot to mention my status as nightwalker no longer remains so. My blood has transcended what is considered normal – and by rank, my title of Prince within the vampiric faction has shifted to host of the Daeirq Empress of Luna. I might have gone beyond the powers of the first progenitor... to the true progenitor.”

Facepalms resounded like claps, “-SERIOUSLY!” cried Starix, “-MASTER COME ON!”

“Hey, I was lost in the moment,” he exhaled, “-I can always turn back time and revive the boy...”

“Won’t work,” narrowed éclair, “-Kronos’ sickle is undergoing a great change. As a core, its power has risen to a place where I can’t even imagine. The Shadow Realm is about to evolve, and we’re yet to know how strong it’ll become.”

“How?”

“Vesper,” he said, “-her faction’s been shifting dimension and devouring lesser worlds, adding their power to ours. Obviously, the destruction of a whole domain is easier said than done – instead, lady Miira proposed the annexation of those little dimensions into our greater universe. Sound insane when voiced... no matter.”

Cough, cough, scraping noises came from the carpet, “-I’m h-h-here,” bright blue pupils looked at Igna, “-I survived the return,” he coughed specks of crimson, latter of which evaporated soon as it touched the ground, “-Master Teng, lord Igna, and lord Starix, I made it back...”

“Hey, hey,” a great ol’ smile surfaced, “-good on you,” Igna hastily took the boy by his shoulder and stood, “-survived the Empress’s test. Welcome to the family.”

“Welcome to the family?”

“Yeah,” said Igna, “-he survived her wrath and showed true heart when her sadistic ways of torture tore his very being. It’s impressive,” to which he grabbed Rachie’s left arm and pulled, “-look here,” he pointed, “-the curse of the devourer, the curse bearer of Glutt. Whoever thee kills and devours, their power and skill are automatically absorbed. One condition is that the being is lesser than a mid-tier god. Anything below said rank is easy pickings. The more the bearer of Glutt eats, the stronger they get until they become shells of their prior selves and lose control. Once your consciousness is overtaken, the curse activates and instantly swallows thy life-essence and power to the Empress. It’s powerful and hard to master,” placed on the nearby couch, “-Starix,” a book summoned atop Igna’s palms, “-all information pertaining to his power is written here. Consider it a welcoming present. I’ll leave the decision if he’s worthy of becoming a member of the Shadow Realm to you, mentor. Teach him the ways of conquest. Best thee returns – it’ll take a few weeks until the power settles. Trust me, the process going to be painful. Have fun,” he smiled, snapping open a portal, “-until we meet again.”

Quiet. éclair’s looming shadow waited in the corner, “-care to speak?”

“The curse of Glutt is the worse gift a person could inherit. I mean, the ancient tales speak of it as the destroyer of talent, the widow maker.”

“Ancient idiots were foolish to the curse’s true potential. It’s up to the host to decide what power he wishes to acquire – a perfect test to determine the strength of character of a person. Does he fall to the greed or become wise and learns his power before use. Rachie’s an interesting fellow. Heroes always rise from the ashes of the fallen, the resentment and frustration of their fallen peers joined into one. He’ll take Draebala by storm,” said a conniving half-smile, “-can’t wait to see where his journey follows.”

Tap, tap, a moderately dressed Serene entered, “-Riaz’ here for the visit.”

“Guess it’s your turn,” two taps puffed the air from éclair’s lungs, “-have at ’em. Leave the acquisition to me, I’ll meet with the lawyers instead. Better thing to tend to.”

“Suppose it’s time,” a sharp pull straightened his jacket, “-let’s see what the empire has in store.”

Chapter 994: Advent of Disaster

A parade of officers lined the roads between castle and city. The hill climb thought of as the fictitious stairway to heaven, dulled into what seemed rows of lined fences. The air breathed crisply. Guests of honors, envoys from the Wracian Empire, had made their way onto Hidros. It was a first, and considering the event – media outlets were quick on the scene. Clicks of the camera – the hastened pace of a reporter, the shyness of young journalists – the think shielded car rode as if a turtle. Flashes and heightened noise – the tainted windows shielded most – rendered a quiet and docile interior. Riaz threw his unimpressed gaze outward; at brief intervals would gaze at the rear-view mirror, casting an air of suspect upon the driver.

“To prime minister Riaz, we wish you a very warm welcome,” the doors opened to an entourage of elegantly dressed personnel. He exited and scanned, ‘-everyone was dressed sharply and has the aura of accomplishment. Suppose I’d be happy working under a great leader too,’ he thought and continued, up the stairs and into the open arms of the inner palace.

“Prime minister,” the two locked eyes further inside, “-it’s a pleasure to formally meet.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” to which éclair passed Riaz and stood as to shield the latter from the other crowd, “-you may retreat,” he said at the guards, “-we’ll take it from here. Please, guards to lord Riaz, make yourself at home.” The cloudy instruction led to both guard details exchanging greetings under a peculiarly lit chandelier. Wracian escorts’ faces opened effortlessly – thoughts and emotions laid bare.

Before he knew it, Riaz, without noticing the change in demeanor, was swept off his guard and forced inside to a somberly decorated hallway, “-quite the taste,” he let a comment.

“Compliments ought be addressed to the retainers,” added éclair, “-Lord Riaz, I hate to cut the pleasantries short, perhaps you’d be so kind as to entertain my curiosity?”

“éclair of Hidros, you sharpen to the point as the story has recounted. I’m honestly pleased to witness the singlemindedness.”

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The quip begot no response – he was simply led to an ‘out-of-the-way,’ office. Inside was a simplistic arrangement of furniture; no strange presence either for complete seclusion reigned.

They sat face to face, Riaz’s expression was hard to read. éclair, doubly so. “I’ll get to the point,” began Riaz, “-I’d like to thank Hidros’s hospitality. Our empress has returned home safely. We were afraid of news of her airplane crash. Never expected the devil of a king to be present for her rescue. We’re extremely grateful for the good deed shown. Hidros and Wracia have been on opposite ends since the turn of the century. Once Hidros broke her shackles... history lessons are not needed, my point is simple, we’re not on the greatest of terms. However, I see matters grow and change; petty squabbles are a daily occurrence. We who reign from above must know to ignore the pointless arguments and focus on the greater picture. Getting lost in the details is one way to lose sight of the world. Let’s bring the topic to her imperial majesty; our palace practically leaped – she’s expecting a child from our emperor,” the tone deadened, “-alas, as prime minister, leader of the other ministers, I can’t share in celebrations. After

countless years, why would she return home, they knew nothing was to happen – and by what seemed a miracle, our withered tree bore a flower. What does it all mean? My head, my cynical side – everything pointed to Hidros. There was a strong possibility her child to be a bastard. This is why I'm here," he locked forward, "-prime minister, I don't care about the clout your kingdom has... if it ever comes to light the babe is a bastard, I will never forgive you."

"Hold it," he rose a hand, "-circumstance and intrigue have led your thoughts astray. Look at me, Riaz, you care for the happiness of your emperor more than the state of the realm. Tis the same for me. The street is no one-way, you can't barge into Hidros expecting us to preserve your emperor's happiness. No, it goes beyond selfishness – how big of a hypocrite can the Wracian Empire be? My king, the one who fought tooth and nail for Hidros' stability and economic growth had his happiness taken, not once, not twice, but all the time. Do you realize how much we have to suffer, how much we have to grit and bare, the constant attack from Wracia – the invasion, our surrender of Dorchester's coast, and the capture of the isle? Word of a ruler is most important – and a promise my master made was to keep Hidros forever united, what then, what now? We've lost everything – his words mean naught, the relations are torn asunder. Elendor, Alphaia – betrayal at every corner... how could we, in the right mind, accept what you're saying, even if the accusation is preposterous. Trust me," the glare darkened, "-if it ever comes to life that child's not the king's baby, I'll be the first to laugh."

"éCLAIR!"

"Don't scream," he eased and took a sip, "-Wracia's sword came for a visit not so long ago. They warned us of how your rulership didn't adhere to thy side of the contract. Right or wrong, I must be certain of most facts. And now, what was brought onto the table has spoken volumes of thy priorities. Riaz, you fooled us once, not twice. Thus, I simply ask for the simplest of explanations. No more sugarcoating, the bare truth, and the hardened reality. If those conditions are acceptable, I'll willingly give an attentive ear."

"Is this the Haggard way of negotiations I've heard rumors about?"

"No," returned a sharp response, "-the Haggard way would have been to poison the guards and take you to our master torturer. One of many facets to use when dealing against a person of influence."

'The threat of violence,' he paused and asked for a cigarette, éclair obliged, '-my guard details were taken somewhere out of sight. the mention of torture – I'm on no diplomatic mission, my coming here was a whim. The emperors yet signed on the agreement... if that's discovered, I could be, no, being careful won't help anything. I need to stand strong for his sake.'

"Aha," the door opened loudly, "-I heard quite the interesting tale," éclair's shoe clopped a painful monotonous rhythm, "-your guard detail," he stopped, "-never mind, it doesn't matter," he gave a blatantly jovial smirk, the shift in auras triggered Riaz' controlled breaths, '-don't fall into his game. Move at your own pace, act natural.'

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'Act natural,' éclair horned on his seat and dropped, pushing forward cigarettes and a lighter, '-the moment that line of thought crosses the mind, it's over. He's not here for diplomatic reasons – the man made a grave mistake. Take full advantage, éclair, it's the best chance we have.'

Smoke puffed, “-I came for the purpose of discussing Alpha’s future.”

“Oh, that place has no future,” remarked éclair, “-since the militarist faction overthrew the crown, the invasion of the church’s draconic doctrine, what was once Alpha’s pride and joy has turned a curse. They’re worth only their worth in the level of industrial advancement made. Northern province’ turn home for the infected – the monster plagues evolved greatly.”

“Yes, it has, we’ve had to quarantine many.”

“What was it about Alpha thee wished to discuss?”

“More the empire gets involved, the lesser becomes of our influence. They’re like a blackhole, always sucking resources and never-answering our demands. Good thing we suppressed the conglomerates...”

“What good can we bring?”

“The empress Eira,” narrowed Riaz, “-I want her to reclaim the throne. Take back Alpha and join us – together we unite and create the strongest leadership around the world.”

“No thank you,” he returned, “-empress Eira’s found stability and peace. She raises her child and is in good company. No one’s foolish to willingly walk into a lion’s den. Alpha’s loss has lost its meaning to us. We were soundly betrayed and forced into an unclimbable situation. You understand how Alpha’s a curse – their greed and willingness to exploit those around – I’m glad their societies have fallen apart. Good ridded,” he smiled, “-Lord Riaz, you surely think me a fool. Art thee not also waiting to gather the shattered pieces?”

“Well, since you know everything, tell me the reason why we can’t move.”

“Oh, how easy a question,” he stared, “-the church.”

“...” the cigarette snuffed, “-tell me, éclair, what is it that Hidros wants?”

“Hum?”

“I’ll do anything in my power to help,” he firmed, “-we can’t afford much expenditure seeing as our attention is forced towards the new continent. Expansion is a costly business.”

“What we want?” he paused and glared, “-Elendor,” he smiled.

“Pardon?”

“Go big or go home. Don’t worry, it was a tasteless jest. How about you, what does the Empire wish?”

“For suppression of the Church’s influence. Lucifer’s sect has amassed followers in the millions since the expansion into Alpha. They’re on their way to becoming second to Syhton’s Church.”

“Oh, so that’s the issue?” he simply exhaled, “-my lord Riaz, I doubt this will come to any shock, however, have thee ever thought of staging a religious uprising?”

“Sorry?”

“Oh, never mind. Lord Riaz, this discussion has reached its end. I’m afraid Hidros has nothing to gain. You surely understand our disposition. I made my feelings pretty obvious. A sign of Hidros’ compassion, why not enjoy the capital. Some relaxation has never wronged anyone.”

A senseless meeting. Riaz exited the palace beside drunken guards. They made way into the always-expanding Rosespire – by which night took her beauty to another level. Light shows and the bustling of its nightlife. Meeting renowned stars out and about wasn’t unheard of – sometime they’d join random drinking parties and make friends. Rosespire was a world of its own.

A lift lowered, giving sight onto the nightscape, “-a good deal,” said a smartly dressed man, “-we own substantial shares in the conglomerates and outright have full ownership over many major brands. Majesty, how was this possible?”

“Oh, I made a good friend,” he smiled, they skipped outside where cars parted.

‘I feel so small,’ wondered Igna, wandering the amber-lit walkways, ‘-the city’s nothing from what I remember. Everything’s changed. All for the better, I think?’

Meanwhile at the palace, “-so the prime minister told the other prime minister to enjoy the capital...”

“Listen, I had no choice,” he argued, “-he came on a whim, there wasn’t anything I could touch.”

“Well, by what we heard, he seems to have doubts about the empress’s child. I do hope the baby takes after their mother.”

“Don’t make it sound so ominous. I helped a family in need, is that bad?”

Shy off the coast of the new continent – a greater entity fell into the sea. Reports the following day told of a massive ball of fire being swallowed into the sea’s depths. Fishermen shy off the coast heard an inner growl, “-you always get hungry when we fish...”

“Come on, they look so good I can’t help it. My stomach wants to eat them whole... let’s get back to shore...” a shadow passed under their little boat, “-did you see that?” fired one, “-I saw something big and dark.”

“It’s the clouds,” he turned to the sky, “-look, a cloud.”

An eruption blasted the lagoon, the sound resounded to the shore where troubled fishermen turned to the seas – the peaceful weather dulled, the forecast went down the drain, wind and rain swept, and the seas cried the song of the fallen. A humanoid figure rose above the sea, it held seaweed-like curly hair, a deep green pensive gaze, and wielded a trident, ‘-so this is the mortal realm,’ the ocean parted as if to make way. The two-meter man touched land, “-there you are,” came a familiar voice, “-I appreciate the speed.”

“A god must answer to the request of one of lesser stature.”

“Lord Poseidon, your personality might bring downfall... I humbly ask for tact.”

“Tact my foot, Artanos – I’m here to reek chaos. Who’s the target?”

“A little kingdom that goes by Hidros. Make them suffer.”

“Consider it done.”

Chapter 995: Blast from the past

‘Doubts. Why am I having doubts? This emotion, this feeling of uncertainty. I picked the best option, I chose myself, I chose my happiness... why then, why does this burn so deeply. I left and we spoke, why then, why didn’t he do anything, why were my feelings left untouched. Am I truly unneeded?’

“Drop the look,” said a soft but manly voice, “-doesn’t look great.”

“Artanos, it’s you,” returned a sharper response, “-back from the campaign?”

“I wish,” a sweat-ridden cloth landed, “-man, everything’s coming together nicely, everything except you,” a chair scraped on two-foot and dropped, “-Gophy, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she returned, “-I guess I have remaining feelings of my past life. It’s only when something so commonplace is lost that its importance is truly shown. Very cliché, don’t you think?” a half-hearted smile propped, “-enough about my insecurities, what about my Romeo?” she leaned and caressed his cheeks, “-you look tired.”

“Not as much as you,” he returned the favor, “-you were always pretty and stoic. Nothing from the spoken tales.”

“Writers always overly embellish commonality. How’s the campaign?”

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“Gophy,” the hands reached around her nape and pulled, “-I’m grateful for you choosing my side. I’ll say it now, I don’t mind if you return to Igna’s side. They’re the stronger faction entourage-wise. I saw the infinite potential behind that man. What will you do, stick at my side or leave?”

“I’ll stay,” she smiled, “-because I want to, not because of some greater sense of duty. No mistake – I’m here because I want to.”

“...” a thoughtful pause – one of unreadable meaning, soft and deep, “-what if I asked for a favor?”

“Depends?”

“Poseidon owes me a favor. No, rather, he owes me his own life. I want you to guide him through the mortal world. Show me your intent with action. Break Igna, break his kingdom, or whatever, I don’t care, I want him out of the picture, I want him to focus on the mortal world – if the latter ought to be burnt to take his eyes off the bigger picture, do so. Is that understood?”

“Basically, I’m to join the mortal world and lead a battle against my past?”

“Yeah – I’m not stupid, which is why you’ll work beside Poseidon. Hades’ not planning to join anyone, or he wishes not to. Persephone’s Igna’s mother, isn’t she?” he smiled, “-feels good when research bears fruit. Gophy, from this onward – thou art a general of my army. At thy disposal will be an unlimited amount of clockwork puppets – who, after a soul bearer’s death, will swallow the latter and become human. They’re my greatest work, my prized army.”

“Sure know how to push a lady to her limits,” her back straightened, “-consider it done,” she grabbed her hair and snapped, the ever-flowing black hair fell, leaving her with short hair parted down the middle, “-Today marks the start of my new life. I won’t betray, I won’t,” she leaned, lips pressed to a sudden pull. Nothing, distortion in space settled to a speechless Artanos.

‘Won’t betray. Gophy, I know your heart belongs with them, I know you have doubts about picking my side. You’re smart, I’ve laid bear my heart. The truth of my quest is there for interpretation. Good luck on the quest. It’ll be tough fighting friends. I know and I trust you, my dear Juliette. Even if betrayal is on the table, you wouldn’t,’ he exhaled, “-because you know the truth; what needs to be done for existence to remain.’

Corridor rattled. Taller and stronger gods entered, “-lord Artanos, we’re ready for battle. What are your orders?”

“Let’s begin the conquest,” sword in hand, “-onward to the future.”

The explosion spotted at the shores of the new continent carried waves. Days later, a man and woman were spotted at the nearby coastal village of Tendo. The lady held shorter hair than the man, who bore strikingly large shoulders, “-what do we do?”

“We settle first,” returned the lady, “-also, a change in outfit is in order. For the famed ruler of the ocean – you leave no room for imagination. Look at the villagers, they’re afraid.”

“Not my problem,” he smiled, “-for it’s my manly presence that bears such fruits.”

“No,” returned a glacial leer, “-being repulsive and intimidating are two different games. Watch and learn,” the long, feminine figure flashed across the open air, the calm demeanor slowed her throttled at a jetty. Boats were moored tightly, even more than usual. Villagers hurdled around nets, “-fresh fish,” hailed a fisherman, “-come get your fish.”

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The strangely pale lady approached, her features were new to the tanner inhabitants. A path seamlessly opened. Compared to the locals, her attire felt noble or whatnot, ‘-why are they glaring?’ curiosity turned to suspicion.

“Excuse me,” she climbed the jetty, “-I need directions.”

“Word of advice,” spoke a stranger man perched in the distance, mooring a small vessel, “-fair skins aren’t welcomed at the villages. If you’re lost – better find someone of fairer skin.”

“What’s my color-”

“Don’t,” interjected the man, “-we village folks have lived peacefully until the arrival of fair-skinned. They promised goods and valuables... well, they lied,” his hatred fill gaze snapped, “-they took my son and my daughter.”

“I’m not like them!”

“You sure don’t dress like them,” returned the man, “-lady, you have a strange aura. Something like, I don’t know, your missing part of yourself. Well, what is this old geezer have to say,” he looked to the

sea, “-times grows slim. Night gets cold – you and your partner better find shelter,” the boat firmed, he threw a fruitful récolte 1over his shoulder and passed the villages, who, by all means, stared deeper at the lass.

“Hold on,” her footsteps scurried, “-you blamed me for my skin color, what about you, you have fair skin too.”

“Oh, I had,” he turned, “-those days are long past,” a solemn sigh escaped, “-come on.”

A strange turn of events – the scenery of the sandy shores moved inland, passed groves, narrowed through a makeshift trail, and reached a bigger house placed on the outer edge of what seemed a collection of huts.

“You’re back?”

“Yeah,” said the fisherman, “-I’ve brought guests.”

“Always like to show hospitality, don’t you?” came jestful giggles. Poseidon kept his stance neutral – the hefty load decreased to the size shy of a teenager little over the legal age.

“Look shorter.”

“Please, I only lowered my stature so as not to scare the others. Why are we here?” they stood before a grand house, well, compared to the others, it seemed like a palace. Weeds grew over the walls – the perimeter was for farming; a lovely orchard held fruits. Envious children skipped past, “-good evening,” they said rushing towards the seas.

“Evening,” came from inside, eventually falling onto the energetic bunch. The very same voice approached and peeped, “-please, enter,” said a demi-human.

Gophy’s few blinks surrendered for a smile, “-we appreciate the hospitality,” they entered a modern household, furnished and comfortable.

“My husband can be quite the character,” giggled the wife joyfully preparing the fish, “-don’t mind him. Tell me, where have you and your comrade come from?”

“A faraway land.”

“I see,” the cooker steamed, “-just us. You weren’t surprised by my ears and my tail. I’m glad,” she smiled, “-you have a strange resemblance to someone I knew long ago. Tell me, are you perhaps related to nobility?”

“No, no,” she hastily rejected the notion, “-I’m well-mannered is all.”

The conversation carried. Poseidon discovered the magic of the television; the god was suddenly glued to the screen. The husband, now cleaned and refreshed, entered the kitchen, “-I do beg my pardon for earlier. You know, things are rough – the villagers don’t take kindly to strangers.”

“A little forward of me – are you two from here?”

“No,” he answered, “-it’s pretty self-explanatory. So, where are you headed?”

“To port Dawn,” she walked around the common room, “-we have comrades waiting,” until reaching a collection of frames perched, “-that there is our old home,” answered the wife, “-we look so young, don’t we?” once the food was set, she hurried to the guest and pointed at more pictures, “-we had one child... together. Due to reasons we had to separate. Since then, we’ve taken a vow to help every defenseless child who wanders into our home,” she pulled an album and flipped, the scenery slowly changed to a familiar place, “-wait,” Gophy suddenly halted at a group picture, “-this, when was this taken?”

“A long time ago.”

“Staxius Haggard,” escaped Gophy’s lips – the mana suddenly froze to countless projectile spells.

“DON’T MOVE!” fired the husband, “-one more step and you’re dead. How do you know that name, are you a spy?”

Gophy remained calm, “-wielder of all the elements,” she commented, “-a wife with fox-ears and a strong mage husband, are you Avon and Auic?”

“No more,” the spells amplified, “-one more word and you’re dead.”

“No, wait,” the wife rose a hand, “-look at her,” she pointed, “-she’s crying.”

“And? She might be playing some next-level mind-game. Don’t lower your guard... man, I should know not to bring strangers home.”

“I mean no harm,” she turned, “-I’m the Goddess of Chaos, Gophy, once servant to the house of Haggard. Man in the living room’s Poseidon, the god of the seas. ”

“Gods in the mortal realm,” he snuffed the spells, “-well, my attacks can’t harm a goddess. What are your intentions?”

“Port Dawn, I mentioned it before,” her tears flowed despite the calm demeanor, “-I heard reports of your death?”

“Long story,” he exhaled, “-invite your partner to dinner, the sudden turn of events made me ravenous.” The crowd split, Avon and Auic to the kitchen, Poseidon and Gophy to the living room.

“I find something interesting,” whispered Gophy, “-the husband and wife were once part of the Haggard dynasty.”

“And?” he frowned, “-why should I care. This show is captivating. Gophy, I know you want to prove worth to Artanos... look at them, do they even look worried?”

“Guess not, they’re technically dead and I don’t remember him having any emotions to the report.”

“Love it when the answer comes naturally. I’ll have my food here – see you in a bit.”

Meanwhile in the kitchen, “-talk about a blast from the past. What do we do?”

“Nothing,” said Avon, “-don’t have to do anything. We’re no longer part of that world,” a coughing fit had him dropped on one knee, “-damn,” he gasped.

"Is he alright?"

"Yeah," nodded Auic, "-we don't have long to live," she sympathetically smiled, "-been a few decades. We don't look like it, but we've lived quite the adventurous life."

"Water," panted Avon, Gophy answered in kind.

"Not long to live," she sighed, "-why not visit Hidros then. Your daughter is still alive and was taken in by Igna. Why not pay her a visit?"

"We can't," said Avon smilingly, "-in what world does the dead come back to life? We're dead, both on paper and inside. Might sound strange," he looked at the ceiling, "-dying beside the one I love is more than enough. I don't need anything; I've had it all."

"We're glad to have saved our daughter. She's part of the Haggard dynasty. Knowing Igna's the reincarnation of Staxius, I'm sure he'll forget about her as he did with us. That trait is the best thing about him, an unexpected kindness. Look at us being so melancholic – let's have dinner."

'People talk about how a meeting can change a person's life. I always doubted fate or destiny. A goddess shouldn't worry about such trivial matters... why then, why did it have to be them?' a side-glance showed a loving couple living their best life, '-why did I have to see them, why did I have to hear their story...'

"Come in," said a soft whisper, "-you'll catch a cold otherwise."

"Alright," nodded Gophy, "-thank you for everything, Auic, the story, and the shared experiences, it was wonderful."

"I'm glad you weren't bored with Avon. He has a habit of story-telling," they walked inside, "-as for tomorrow, my husband will escort thee to port Dawn, it'll be faster on his ethereal carriage."

Chapter 996: Village of Outeh

Day rose normally along the coast; wind blew eastward. A chilly surprise crawled Poseidon's stern posture into a beckoning '-achoo.' The house trembled, or so it seemed. The backdoor, placed by the kitchen, opened to the fresh smell of sea critters. Avon's coughs irregularly permeated, and the kaffuffle of the early morning began in stride.

"Gophy, is that right?"

"I don't know," returned a slower, more paced response, "-and I don't want to know. Should we end their lives as a show of strength or carry on?"

Poseidon stared blankly, "-yeah, you're right," resumed Gophy, learning much from the unresponsive man, "-suppose killing 'em won't do much good."

"Ah," said a wandering Auic, "-I knew something like this would happen," she stopped her jovial trek at the doorway and peered, "-goddess, it would be an honor to die at your hand. However, I ask one favor, allow me to die first – I rather not have to see my husband in more pain before I leave. When death's angel comes, I'm sure I'll return to my friends up above, the people who we once called family."

“No, no,” rose an impatient Gophy, “-I mean nothing of the sorts,” she bowed and explained, “-we were discussing last night’s documentary, one where some delicacies are eaten alive,” though mostly true, Auic breathed an empathic smile and continued, her voice dropped to a mumble, “-please, come join us for breakfast.”

Poseidon strutted to said doorway, and peered around Gophy’s shoulder, “-so much for tact,” he added.

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Breakfast, as one would imagine, was awkward. Gophy’s mild glance carried her attention outside, through a shyly kept window. Between crunches, the crashing of the waves added much to the silence. “-I heard what happened,” added Avon, “-and, my lady Gophy, if you truly discussed our deaths,” the long, frail fingers reached for Auic’s spotted hands – they age was told through the wrinkled on the hand and not attitude or face, “-if you are to kill us, please do so when we’re both asleep. A peaceful death is all we ask. I’m certain Auic said to let her die first, but I beg to differ, I want to go first. Imagining her dying, despite knowing the latter shall come to collect – I don’t know what to say or do. Makes my heart quiver...”

“No one’s killing anyone,” interjected Poseidon, “-we came to meet some contacts, not share in the dying wish of a retired couple. Be at ease, I don’t care to slay the weak. Nor does she,” he side-glanced, “-only acting tough, like going through the teenage years. Stop it,” he narrowed, “-stop trying to prove your maturity or strength, it projects the completely opposite image. Whoever sits beside me at the moment is no goddess of Chaos, you’re a fake, a worthless waste of air. Either make up your damned mind or fuck off. Simple as that.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard right,” he sharpened vehemently, “-I don’t need a crybaby at my side, understand?”

“Oh, how lovely, I’m the crybaby?”

Clap, clap, Avon resounded akin to gongs, “-never thought I’d see the day deities bickering as if children. Time out, both of you,” said a stricter voice, “-finish your meal and go have a run. We’ll leave for Port Dawn shortly.”

Thus, the pompousness of being scolded by a retired man, the latter’s punishment of a well-needed run. Between pants escaped laughs, “-what are we even doing?” chuckled Poseidon, “-gods heeding the words of a mortal.”

“I don’t know either,” she giggled, “-I apologize for my previous behavior, my mind isn’t square yet; have much to settle before embarking on our true quest. Suppose it’s a good time as any to sort out my feelings.”

The refreshing run ended exactly an hour later. Shiny sweat-ridden foreheads panted. Auic exited the house with a big smile and bigger mugs of juice, “-refreshments,” she said. The sound of engine rode in the distance – they drank. More consumed, the closer grew the noise that halted as they finished.

“Ahoy,” waved Avon, “-what you think?” he drove what seemed a pickup truck, most of the back held fruits and vegetables.

“What about the ethereal carriage?” inferred Poseidon, “-I was looking forward to a horse-drawn carriage built with mana.”

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“This is the carriage,” door pounded shut to quick shuffles, “-build with magic. Go have a shower, we leave in thirty minutes.”

Thirty minutes it was. The scenery flowed- the jungles thinned into a trail fa?onné 1by the varying transport. “-Since we’re driving, how about I explain how things work?”

“Sure,” nodded Poseidon, “-all the better to know common sense.” Avon sought to check his rearview mirror, crossing glances with the god; an acknowledgment. “Where we came is known as Tendo Village. An unimpressive settlement of natives who ran south. It’s pretty much a replica of the many other villages around. Hidden in the forest beside the sea and thriving on seafood, farming, and hunting. The villages aren’t permanent – the name of a village is usually the family name of the villager’s elder or leader. Must have noticed our house, yes? We came here many years ago; after running from the Empire. We sought help and established a comfortable, self-sustaining way of life. Then came the colonies and wars, eventually, Tendo and I agreed to share land, and for the past five years, we’ve done so in relative peace. The settlers aren’t keen explorers – many of whom are here for the mines and lawlessness a new land brings. I must have known mankind’s greed would have come one way or the other,” forests turned to a coastal path, running beside the sandy beaches, “-road from here out is tedious for inexperienced travelers. There are no clear paths except what the forest has built. Look past the lagoon,” a massive stretch of blue carried onward to the horizon until a sharp indenture, land that rose sharply with taller meshes of dark green, “-we follow the coast, Port Dawn is over there. Would be simpler to take a boat or fly, what’s the fun in that.” The ride following that was rough. Between near-death experiences and the massive mountain that came from nowhere, the journey continued through dried riverbeds running along the valleys. Avon, as insane as it sounds, rode at an angle – one simple skid and the carriage would plummet into a brutal death. By some miracle, after the arduous drive that carried long into the pitch-black, rose rows of fireballs, chants and laughter marked their stop.

“Where are we?”

“Village of Outeh. We’ll spend the night here, should arrive at Port Dawn later tomorrow afternoon.”

A pale man emerged – the villagers drew guns, “-ahoy folks,” shouted Avon, “-it’s me.”

“It’s Avon,” the guns lowered, “-come on in,” said many gathered around a campfire. Gophy and Poseidon followed, ‘-if we say something amiss – they might go violent.’

“Not to worry,” whispered Avon, “-just follow me.” Past the campfire, the party continued deeper, flames shakily outlined dancers and casual storytellers upon huts and fences. The way fire gave a sense of security closer one remained, the scarier it seemed once one moved further, it grew dimmer, the shadows lost sense of meaning and paired alongside the fading chants – ominous nightscape propped a smirk.

Amberly lit gemstones played the part of guide lights. Immaculately decorated sheets parted to a stuffy inside, “-Outeh, how are you?”

“My friend, Avon,” rose a younger man from a bed lined with scantily clad women, “-long time no see,” he smiled. The bare-chested women shuffled around a tenderly prepared stew, “-seems the timing is immaculate, we’re ready to have dinner, care to join?”

“Outeh, you always have a fondness for tender meat.”

“My, Avon,” the young leader laughed, “-don’t misunderstand, having so many young ladies tend to my needs is nice, but... I shudder at thoughts that other village boys may never find true companionship. Speaking of which, who are those?”

“Gophy,” said she.

“Poseidon,” added the other, “-we’re travelers.”

“Don’t mind them,” said Avon, “-turns out the lady is an old family friend.”

“I see,” he nodded affirmingly, “-must be strange to see so many women around a single man, I get that look quite a lot from passing travelers. Feel bad for those who think my entourage is compromised of weak-willed individuals, trust me,” the fire under the pot shook, casting a heavy shadow as he finished, “-they’ll regret it.”

“No need for explanation,” followed Poseidon, “-I respect strong women,” he side-glanced Gophy, “-unlike someone I know.”

“Please, quit the passive aggressivity. I said I was sorry, didn’t I, sea-weed head?”

“This is fashion,” he accidentally spat at the ‘-shion,’ covering Gophy’s forehead in specks of saliva.

“Amusing,” giggled the leader, “-a fun party, I like it. So, tell me, what brings you to escort such whimsical folks around?”

“Had to run errands to Dawn. Two birds with one stone as they say.”

“Right,” stew was served alongside a loaf of bread. The ladies took a liking to Gophy’s solemn demeanor as for Poseidon, he unknowingly caught the leader’s attention. The tents separated to a saddened sigh from Avon. Gophy’s entourage of chatterboxes paused as she sought to learn why he’d exhaled, “-why the troubled expression?”

“Oh, you don’t know?” he paused, “-suppose you wouldn’t know. It’s Outeh, the strong have the right to take what they wish from the weak. Outeh’s an unbelievably flexible and fast fighter, he overwhelms the stronger opponents with agility. I witnessed a duel once – a settler strode into the village and drunkenly laid his hand on one of the villagers. You can imagine the outrage. The settler was taken to one of the settler-friendly camps. There, Outeh calmly strode into town, tracked the assaulter, and challenged him into a duel. The drunkard pulls his revolver in the middle of the street – a crowd gathered, I tell you, Outeh nonchalantly reached for his back and sliced before the gun was even fired – the projectile fell, next thing was a bloodied murder, stabbed through the jaw, the eyes and cheeks. Man, it was brutal – the man yet breathed when Outeh stood. A true monster – a path shortly opened and he left as if nothing happened. Get the picture now? A talented fighter as he has the ability to take down a gun-wielding foreigner, what about those of his kind – not even effort. He accepts challenges and kills, taking the women of the defeated.”

“Is he not just growing his harem?”

“Oh no – women willingly join his side. You know why?” he gave a somber grin, “-the man’s a homosexual. He plays for the same team.”

“So he likes men?”

“Correct, poor ol’ Poseidon is in for the time of his life.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” she sipped, “-gods are known to swing many ways, especially Poseidon, the list of his lovers go beyond what’s considered normal.”

Following said discussion; time slowed to a peaceful relaxing walk. Many went to sleep aside from patrolling guards, their little light shimmered. Day broke, and villagers rose before the sun – chatter, and clanging were heard through the earlier part of the morning.

“Sleep well?”

“Yeah, it was awesome,” Gophy rose from a bed made of naked women – all had locked and shared their heat against the colder night, “-feels amazing, to be honest. How about you?”

“Was alright,” returned a sleepy Avon, “-come on, we should check on Poseidon. The trip to Outeh’s felt long, eventually – they arrived where Avon nonchalantly pulled the curtain, “-you guys there?”

Poseidon rose from an exhausted Outeh, “-morning guys,” said he informally, “-last night sure was eventful,” he playfully tapped Outeh’s cheek and stood, sheets rolled off to display a very muscular build.

Gophy rolled her eyes, “-put your trident away,” said a snarky response, “-freshen up, I rather not smell that stench.”

“Please, it’s the aroma of love.”

Avon cracked, “Aroma of what?”

“Love,” Poseidon replied sternly.

“...”

“...”

“HAHAHAHAHAHA,”

“So loud,” came another gleeful voice, “-I can barely move.”

“Gosh, we don’t want to hear the exploits.”

“God of the sea sure went fishing,” commented a jestful Avon.

“Spearfishing,” Gophy added blankly, “...” they stared silently until, “-HAHAHAHA,” another burst of laughter.

Chapter 997: Clockwork Factory

“Right then,” Poseidon’s complicated relationships brought much laughter. To the god’s dismay – Gophy was yet to end her teasing. After Outeh village – the journey towards Dawn was as but complete. Evening rolled about by the time the silhouette of a growing town took shape in the orangish canvas.

Port Dawn, for better or for worse, was somewhat advanced. People rode in carriages within the town’s confine. Ships lined the harbor, many others line the seascape onward to the setting sun. The slope eased, and Gophy exhaled a heavy sigh. “-My,” she blinked, “-never thought I’d have to sleep the day.”

“Certainly was a break Poseidon deserved,” chuckled Avon. They arrived at a nearby motel – the ethereal carriage vanished into a lantern holder, or so it seemed. The lid chimed shut, leaving the gods to observe in wonder.

“I did say the carriage was magic,” added a satisfied Avon, “-I have business here,” they stood before a growing line of shops and buildings, most of the current street was built, expansion carried in the distance – clangs, and drills mixed with slurs of the offensive kinds.

“Yeah, I suppose,” the gods exchanged nods, and thus, it came time for their journey to end, “-been a pleasure traveling,” said Gophy.

“The pleasure is mine,” returned Avon, “-drop by our place anytime. I’m sure the wife would love the company. As for you,” he stepped into Poseidon’s ear and whispered, “-Outeh had a lot of compliments. You’ve spoiled the man to love another, better take responsibility.”

“Ha,” he threw a snarky grin, “-I belong to no one save the ocean.”

.....

“Cool,” resumed a sarcastic response, “-until we meet again.”

There, as night fell onto the town space, Gophy and her travel companion arrived at yellow-orange lit windows peering onto the asphalt. A soft reflection, one backdropped by an area ruled through money and influence – the same ol’ story as any growing area.

“Clockwork Workshop,” read an artistically pleasing building – font painted by hand with excellent penmanship, they entered the strange shop. Inside, multiple inventions laid bare in the color of bronze and gold. A few assistants exchanged glances, many of caution and few of intrigue – the walls lived in beige, the shelves and open spaces left for the viewing pleasure of visitors. Complex cogs and wheels, many seem akin to the innards of a mechanical watch, though, they all shared different purposes.

Curtains parted, a long and sharp outline exited, their hair curved as heavily as some of the reflective surface – a golden-thin to the hair added quite the impression. They gazed at the duo then ambered to the counter, where, after setting their hands onto the surface, rose an eyebrow at the customers, “-welcome to the clockwork shop.”

“My name’s Gophy,” narrowed the goddess, “-must I go deeper?”

“Ah, lady Gophy,” the stern expression relaxed – same as a dog saw their master – the once associated rigidness of the posture faded, “-lord Artanos told of thy arrival. We didn’t expect it to be so soon,” no warning, they immediately took Gophy’s hand and rode straight for the back. She then realized after checking the entity that they were no usual beings. Rigidness was mechanical – they didn’t walk, legs

were present to give the illusion of motion, however, as books aren't meant to be judged by their cover – the feet were wheels.

Inventor's hell, read the bronze plate, the back room opened to an area far past the limit. A whole new world opened, a factory of many workers, automatic hands, and pipes.

"Welcome to the inventor's paradise."

"What about the bronze plate?"

"To be confined in a place where one's work is constantly compared by others; abundance of talent can therefore become a curse for the untalented," they stopped and rotated, "-to my lady Gophy, we humbly pledge this workshop to thy efforts. From today onward, you're our leader, our queen, and our goddess."

"Nice," commented a rougher Poseidon, "-this could be used to slaughter plenty 'o foes."

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"Right," she breathed, steadied her stance, and looked about. There was much to the finer details – the workshop truly lived as was pictured, a place of invention and innovation, "-let's get to it," a loud steamy hurl shut the door – and so, Gophy and Poseidon embarked onto their new journey within Orin.

Rosespire, Riaz' plea for aid remained as a word from a powerless democrat. Days elapsed, and the king's office held plenty, "-addition of new ministries, approval for the new budget, and allocation of funds for military advancements. Add Raven's acquisition of Syhton's companies and shares, her property, and belonging. I'm run thin as is," a fatigued gasp escaped, "-Igna," jet-black hair entered, "-Syhton," he threw a smile, "-back from your trip?"

"Yeah," she stretched, placing emphasis on her chest and well-defined female features, "-Plaustan is honestly heaven on earth. Tell me, Igna, why not take a break once in a while?"

"I wish," he hung on a particular report, "-to Igna Haggard, member of the Blood king's faction and inheritor of the first progenitor's blood, we, council of clan leaders, request an immediate audience."

The king's shadow covered Syhton's face, "-what's the matter?" she asked, casting a look of care, "-are you okay?"

"I'm fine," overcoat in hand, "-I'm needed in Glenda. Be a darling and send notice to éclair."

"Oh no you don't," she snatched his collar and pulled, forcing him to turn. Lips pressed, "-now you can go," she smiled, her fragrance told of the sweet aroma of blood, "-did you drink the blood of a virgin?"

"You can tell?"

"Yeah, of course, I can tell," he wiped his mouth, "-don't do anything I wouldn't," one step out, "-Syhton, I need a favor."

"Do tell," soft words exchanged," -a trip to Claireville Academy sounds fun. It shall be done," they parted ways. He flew through the night, landing past midnight at a remote airfield.

"This place sure is desolate," he exited to a draft of dirt-filled air. The jet's cargo hold lowered, '-nice,' he straddled a fast-looking machine and stormed along the trailed paths. Glenda, the second capital of Arda, differed extremely from Rosepire. No noise nor blinding lights – the fortified town radiated within the town wall, '-a torch?' passed his thought.

'Adventurers,' he observed, '-must be returning from quests. Good to know the smell of ale, sweat, and rust shan't disappear soon.' Bards played their hearts – drunkards sang and danced outside of pubs and taverns. Merchant stalls were shut, enclosed shops served much of what one might need. '-Now this is a glitch,' he stopped on way to the inner town, '-a modern pharmacy instead of an alchemist's shop. Guess modern medicine's better than random assortments of herbs... then again, without potions, the career of adventurer might as well go dull,' a stall compromised of potions, '-and there I go assuming things.'

Castle innards; "-where are those messengers?"

"They were dispatch to the town hall. Lady Alta, what are we to do in response to Noctis' Hallow's request?"

"I don't know," she pressed her forehead, "-we sent word to the capital. It had to happen now."

"It'll take a while for someone to arrive from the capital," commented one of her assistants.

"Depends on our king... if the whims taken his path elsewhere... I despair."

"What about my whims?" a thunderous voice strode along the corridor, the bustling slowed, "-Alta, been a while."

"MAJESTY!"

"There, calm your horses," he rose a palm, "-tell me about what's happened?" her present entourage seamlessly dispersed. Quietness allowed for a moment's respite, "-majesty, mind joining me on a little promenade?" From the warm interior, they climbed a watchtower and exited upon the wall walk. Here, as the wind blew coldly, her words fell even colder, "-the nightwalkers may be in danger." A shiver crawled up the spine, "-nightwalkers are in danger?"

"There have been reports of powerful nightwalkers being killed and stripped of their immortality. The latter doesn't affect vampires. As the first progenitor shares her blood – and as it's transferred and diffused – regardless of rank, a nightwalker has the inherent ability to harm a higher entity. This alone is enough to raise eyebrows."

"Why was I requested urgently?"

"That tale is best be recounted by the clan leaders. They're presently at the town hall, I'm not sure, we had a meeting earlier. Aurora should be there handling paperwork."

"And my aunt?"

"She's taken no interest in the matter. Her hands are tied leading an underground war against the Mafioso of the Northeast."

"Snow?"

“-and Cimier,” she added.

“What are your thoughts?”

“My thoughts,” she stopped and leaned, catching the sound of passing stream, “-it’s all too coincidental. I’m not very up to date on the palace’s affairs – Celina’s death did catch me by surprise. Similar to how they were killed... I get the feeling the same strings are at play. Conspiracies, the life, and blood of an intrigue-fueled kingdom. Sometimes I do think what if our cards were revealed, what if we became transparent,” she trailed her voice, “-rambling of the tired mind. Please, majesty, head to the town hall, you may yet catch Aurora.”

‘This sensation,’ a strange aura pulled, “-Alta, head inside,” wings sprouted, “-SEND REINFORCEMENT TO THE TOWNHALL!” he flapped, the wall trembled, ‘-the timing was perfect,’ he roughly grabbed onto a thin nape and dove, “-FOUND YOU,” he crashed into a hillside, ‘-the presence, the feeling... to think my reason for expanding a mana detection spell would come in so handy,’ he knelt atop an unknown figure; it harbored strange wings, “-who are you?” mysterious figure turned and narrowed, ‘-yellow eyes drowned in a sea of black.’

“Speak,” he ordered, nothing, ‘-a clockwork fighter,’ quick to examine the entity, ‘-blood-soaked hands, don’t tell me,’ quick to look back -distant chaos spoke volumes, “-will you speak?” he pressed to no avail, fingers mildly dug into the skin, “-don’t have time for this,” the grip tightened, bones snapped – little resistance fell for idleness.

Back at the Town-Hall, a crowd of troubled officials gathered at the front, “-help, somebody help,” they cried, Igna landed shortly after and stormed against the crowd.

Alta’s worried face stared into the corridor, “-what’s the matter?”

A blank expression remained, he turned the corner to a bloodied mess. Aurora’s body was nailed to the wall, her entrails scaped the floor, her chest sliced down the middle, her inner organs were out for all to see, she blinked her near-death pupils, “-not on my watch,” he entered with a snap, unwanted guests were pulled, the door locked and the windows shut, *Watchers, spectators, names ring high and low, us, unknown to the world’s reality, unknown to the world’s knowledge, have lived in utter solemnity for millennia to come and go. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, beckons my might to be fully materialized without prejudice, reality is but my playground, neither god nor demon shall overcome my authority, face me in stride, face me in fear, reality’s what I wish it to be for knowledge is the true strength: Realm Expansion, Shadow Realm Variant – Rantiam.*

Colors faded to grey, “-long time no see, Aurora.”

The lass gave no response, “-seems I was here just in time,” he stopped at her rather open posture and stared, a sword sliced gently through reality, “-ah, I should have known,” said a familiar voice.

“Undrar seems I left the door open for the death reaper. Care to strike a deal?”

“One with the devil?” she climbed from her horse and stared, “-yeah, no thanks.”

“How bad can it be?” he leaned beside Aurora, “-she was assaulted by one of Artanos’s minions, I killed it. I guess I was here in time – now I’m certain Artanos’ involved. Undrar, I’ll be reviving my comrade in a newer body, is that alright?”

“Sorry?”

“Soul Transmigration,” he said, “-once a person’s life essence is trapped within the Shadow Realm, they’ll be subject to that domain’s laws.”

“And practically making them immortal in other dimensions. Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Aurora’s soul passed – a golden orb shimmered.

Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo of the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration.

Chapter 998: Ester

Aurora, reborn within the Shadow Realm, found herself reincarnated within Dimension Orin. Remnants of her previous body laid in the ruin of opened wounds and exposed innards. Needless to say, the sight was levels beyond what Rosesopian cinema could depict. Her dulled expression (a sword left untouched) bordered the edge of surrender. She scattered looks of confusion. The mind remained a shell, ‘-my body, my soul,’ the grayed-out area was unlike anything she’d felt, ‘-I’m close to the first progenitor’s bloodline... I was bested so easily, taken out as if trash. Now this,’ she blinked, ‘-the air feels empty, I don’t feel my legs, everything’s weightless. One move and I could possibly eat find myself within hell, or something along those lines... I shudder to move; I shudder to look. The world’s no compromise of normal, we have higher beings taking reigns, and we have greater entities doing battle being the scenes. What about the fate of the worlds, what about heaven and hell, what does it mean in the end, are gods bored, are demons greedy, are nightwalkers weak?’

“Nightwalkers aren’t weak,” said Igna, “-and I’m not reading your mind,” her expression ironed out, “-we’re the only race of people able to harm greater beings. In a way, we’re like a virus that plagues the natural order and balance. Look now,” he stood arms crossed and eyes on the defeated Aurora, “-this feels nostalgic.”

“Ha...” her freckled nose rose, “-obvious it’s nostalgic, your uncle had his sadistic way and tortured me into submission. You think it’s fun becoming the plaything of an insane individual...”

“Ah, my uncle and his charm,” said an added air of sarcasm, “Aurora, we truly are on the edge of great change. The enemy’s undefined – the flow of events has stagnated, it’s the calm before the storm. I’ve worked to create a kingdom and built my empire to run even if I were to disappear. Centralization has many advantages as they are plenty more disadvantages,” her expression shifted a little, Igna stopped his speech, took a stride, and knelt beside the nightwalker, “-we ought to evolve. Push the harder decision onto a rational entity, one who thinks with true or false, not pretenses. The Sister System’s the perfect example of a complete being. Granted she has no emotions compared to her counterpart – the system itself is beautiful.”

“Why tell me all this?”

“Because, from what Alta said and from what I just saw – nightwalkers are on the target list. We must gather our strengths and look forward.”

“Igna, you speak as if you’re to die.”

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“Circumstances and precaution,” he elaborated, “-Artanos is a being more fearsome than it’s apparent. He comes across as nonchalant and unimpressive – there’s a sense of familiarity and care. Behind the scene, I tell you, there’s no argument – he’s amazing.”

“Praising another, that’s new.”

“Well, never had someone who could keep the game fresh,” a flick of the wrist dispelled the Domain – the corpse burnt into fine ash.

“Master,” the door tapped, “-it’s me, Alta, are you there?”

“Yeah,” he returned, “-have news sent that Aurora is fine. The attack was to test the town-halls security.”

The stewardess pressed her palm at the table, ‘-a little on the nose,’ she pushed and scurried into the distance. One could audibly track the path, sure enough, her imposing voice thundered outside.

“Aurora,” Igna horned his regard upon the revived lass, “-tell me, why was I summoned?”

“Vampires have been around for a while. With that comes greater boons such as influence, power, and money. We’re known to the world as a legendary race of people who keep themselves hidden. Truth is, most of those legendary people are noble-ranked walkers living in Noctis’s Hallow or scattered through the world. Our vine encompasses the world, you know much seeing as thy uncle founded one of the greater factions. We called for an immediate council because of web – it’s being cut slowly. We’ve lost contact with many of the nobles – industry leaders and hidden wealthy families. Arda’s our stronghold. Together with Queen Courtney, we’ve been able to rebuild the province on the strength of our people. Glenda’s a great example of the economic boom. People move into Arda to live, it’s astounding – there are more nonhumans. While consolidation of the stronghold is important – neglect of the distant benefactors led to much. Reports of deceased heirs – wounded faction leaders and assassinated heads. The attacks are an affront to our prestige. It went even as far as to have one of the greater leaders be frightened into signing a deal,” her voice stopped and carried to a nearby table, “-here’s the reason why you were summoned.”

A scroll unfolded and read, “-to whoever it concerns, we of the Clockwork Faction have sworn to destroy those who may get in our way. As courtesy dictates, we’ve sent a word of warning. Take this to your king and say, we are present and ever watching,” signed the Clockwork Faction.

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“We did battle against them,” she continued, “-a mild squabble between our respective covert units. The result was telling – we lost, only to be saved by a passing Baron.”

“And, what now, will the nightwalkers yield?”

“No, we’ll fight.”

“Good, then,” he teleported shy of a few millimeters away from her face, “-look here,” blood flowed from his index, “-take my blood.” Her face changed, the power behind her strength altered – the mind darkened, her body fell backward and nastily slammed against the table, “-have fun dealing with her,”

said a passing comment. Down the window spoke a confident Alta, “-everyone, there’s no need to panic. Our troublesomely whimsical ruler came by for a visit. The show was little more than magic – he wanted to test our security in the strangest of ways. From the results, we know that there’s much we must improve upon,” the instructions trailed into the bright starry-lit sky. Motion beckoned, a smirk appeared on Igna’s face.

Similarly, as the night turn dawn and hurried into rush hour, the modestly dressed Syhton approached an enormous array of buildings. The roads were clean, the trees lush, and the grass greener. Claireville Academy wrote upon a golden plate – her silvery white car entered the campus and stopped at a magnificent roundabout; it held a sculpture of Syhton pouring water from a pot. She exited, internally judged the statue, and ambled forth. The halls were complicated, the arrangement difficult and the layout and flooring – decadent. The ancient style of decoration was very rustic – students of multiple backgrounds walked the halls to the director’s office.

Tap, tap, a harsh, female voice replied, “-enter.”

Red lipsticks and glasses settled upon the director’s seat. A memorial of Josiah was placed as a frame beside the many other directors. The sternly-faced lady rose scrupulous regard, “-my, who do we have here?”

“The name’s Synthia,” she returned “-I’ve come here to meet a certain man by the name of Ester.”

“Oh, another employment request?” she brushed off the arrival, “-if it’s Ester, the boy’s at the arena fighting. Discuss the matter directly with him,” said an exhausted sigh.

“Pardon, but by chance, are you Sophie Mirabelle?”

The red lipstick and frameless glasses glared heavily, “-lady Synthia, you have my full attention,” the fountain pen laid quietly.

“Good,” her walk carried a sense of dignity, “-as I said, my name’s Synthia and I represent Igna Haggard,” she pulled a seat and settled, “-this boy, Ester, had the gals to antagonize the king. I’m sad to say I’ve come for payment.”

Her chin lowered, gaze firmed onto an empty piece of paper, “-Ester’s a strange person. I don’t know how or why he’s the way he is. There’s a sense of relatability with him. at first, I thought he was a loner, uninterested in how the world worked and how the country followed... however, he reached a particular age – something changed, he became more courageous. He seemed mature for his age and easily grew to surpass those at the academy. I was particularly interested in how he used magic spells and incantations that have long pass dated our curriculum. If it’s not much to ask, give the boy breathing space. He’s a hard character to grasp.”

“Well, the weirder they are, the more the king seems to take a liking.”

The office shut, leaving the director to her work, ‘-the gamble’s paid off, Ester,’ said a conniving smile, ‘-you did catch the eye of Igna. Why wouldn’t you just say who you are, why wouldn’t you just let me establish a line of communication... I suppose you truly were a man of action,’ in there, a memory came to mind, “-I won’t accept favors nor will I use the connection to earn his respect. I’ll do it my way, I’ll prove myself. For some reason, I feel like, I don’t know, I have to show that I’m more than just some

guy, I need to show who I truly am. Only when he acknowledges me, only then, and only then will I reveal the truth.”

The arena was lit with a thousand flames. Holographic displays showed the fight within – chants from the crowd and display of magical affinity had long fallen into the realm of sports. ‘-Spellcasters,’ she stopped at a display, ‘-have long evolved into their own kin. Scholars or the famed Magicians. Like the olden days, users of magic are renowned for their prowess in not how they kill but how they fare against others. Truly amazing... here I thought magic had died out, I guess they’re only getting started. Using the ancient arts to battle and fairly display their strengths against others – I’m impressed.’

“Ester, Ester, Ester,” feet stomped and chants roared; the solitary figure of a fighter rose in aftermath of destruction. Opponents laid in waste, “-and the winner’s Ester!” cried the announcer, a beckoning roar followed.

“That’s him,” came passing comments, “-we should recruit him to represent our company in the next Magician’s Tournament.”

“It’ll be tough,” added another, “-I heard he’s rejected every offer that’s come his way.”

“Not a shame to shoot for the stars.”

The end came with the rise of an up-and-coming band performing their hearts out. The victor, Ester, had his face under a cold-flowing tap outside of the arena, “-congratulations are in order,” said a figure.

“Who are you?”

“I represent Igna Haggard,” she said, “-and you, my friend, have been chosen to work at the capital.”

The tap turned, “-and, must I accept?”

“Would be best,” she said, “-don’t get me wrong, I was sent here to recruit, however,” she looked at a growing crowd of businessmen, “-seem your hand is filled. Even saw some big conglomerates. Your talents are best used within the context of sports. Working for his majesty is a scholar’s game, not an athlete. Guess your formal application had an impression,” she approached, “-impression alone is not enough. Also, I lied. I came to personally reject thy application. The king’s no time to play mentor. Thus, Ester, we best part ways,” she left... or so she thought.

“WAIT!”

“...”

“I’ll work for the king; I don’t care what I have to do. I’ll clean the dishes or become a butler; I don’t care. Give me a chance, I only need a chance.”

“What about your career as an athlete?”

“I don’t care for it,” he added firmly, “-I just want to be by the king’s side. I want to see him change the world, I want to see everything with my own eyes. Please, allow me the honor.”

“Well,” she turned, “-how about working for me instead,” she tilted her head, “-you’ll be close to Igna and I’ll have a butler to tend to my needs.”

“If that’s what is required of me, I’ll do it.”

“Excellent,” she clapped her hands, “-I’ll be expecting you at the capital in three days. Take that time to say goodbyes.”

“Okay.”

The engine roared, “-how did it go?” inquired the driver.

“Pretty much as he said,” her windows rolled, “-how far can he see...”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing... was thinking aloud.”

Chapter 999: Project Autonom

Glenda; the king’s office/private chambers. Igna rose from a scrumptious nap, blood lined the pillows and droplets trailed the floor. ‘-Glenda, how I missed you,’ he woke from comfortably warm blankets, the eyes perched onto a thinly swaying veil. ‘-Always can expect the best of blood here,’ he sat, sliding his feet into warm slippers – the hands reached for glasses with a mild sway. Once on the nose, the paper-filled desk came into sight. ‘-Wherever I go the mess of paperwork follows,’ however, as he complained, a smaller round device, mistaken to be a paper holder, blinked. It vibrated sharply, he passed his hand over the object to a flash of blue hue. Multiple interfaces lit the chambers, “-Greetings, Creator,” read a text, “-project Autonom is completed,” it followed by multiple reports, many of which he read at astounding speed. ‘-Project Autonom,’ he smiled, ‘-doing paperwork manually for the better part of a few years, seems it’s worth it. Sister System has enough data to improve on her own. About time I shift her core to the Shadow Realm.’ The dust settled, and Igna disappeared – leaving the chambers open for Alta to enter and exhale.

“Stewardess?” inquired a well-dressed fellow.

“My apologies,” she returned, “-seems that our king has taken a short break. We’ll return later. As for now, please rest and enjoy the hospitality of Glenda.”

“Okay?” narrowed the noble, “-I shall do as you ask.”

The fellow’s short and discontent figure meandered, ‘-where did you run off too?’ wondered Alta, soon to be interrupted by a passing messenger, “-the trader’s guild is here for the monthly report. Seems lady Haru’s paid a personal visit.”

“Guess when the master’s in town, every influential figure wishes for an audience. You made no promises, right?”

“None whatsoever.”

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“Good,” the hectic morning began. Alta simply took a sip of coffee and graced her throughout the multiple calls and requests.

Shadow Realm's immense pressure choked at the neck, "-damn," escaped a few coughs, "-just how strong has this domain become?" A flaming red dragon suddenly landed shy a few meters, the ground carved and the deafening sound carried into the surrounding scenery. On its back, a floating silhouette leaped to a graceful landing, "-hello," said red hair bathed in flames, "-long time no see."

"Intherna, what in the world?"

"I came for a visit," she snapped and the dragon left. It was quite the commotion.

"Intherna," he straightened his tie, "-how are you?"

"I'm good?"

"No, I mean, how about Gophy's sudden departure, what about the others, are they okay with it?"

"You said it yourself," she continued, "-we can leave anytime we want. Honestly, I don't have anywhere else to go. Shadow Realm is home to many of my greatest of friends. I do wonder if the others have similar attachments. Forget that, what are you doing here?"

"I came to install a core," a flick and a snap, the open-air swapped for a dimension within the Realm. No fixed form, ground materialized where one stood, and vanished as soon as the other foot lifted, "-there's éclair's core," he pointed to a gem-like structure locked in a cage of pure mana, "-only a wielder of Decay touch can undo the barrier."

"You're rather confident."

"Ought to be," he said, "-isn't a strong leader what the other wish to see?"

"I mean, you never were strong..." the matched pace slowed, "-Igna, frankly speaking, we don't expect much. All that's needed to be accomplished has been accomplished. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. The lineage of two of the greatest being to ever live flows within. Then again, who am I to interject. You should stop worrying about every single detail, approaching every situation with a cynical eye will only serve to make you miserable," he also slowed his pace.

"Don't you think I know that?"

"..."

"I know, Intherna, trust me, I know. Not being arrogant either. What you say is wise. Transparency's only good to uplift the righteous. Works only for those who have reached a ceiling where no matter their actions, the result does not affect their prestige. Clouded gemstones like me and many others, haven't the right to be open," silence followed until a sudden stop at a random location, "-Intherna, are you familiar with the Prisoner's Dilemma?"

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"Yeah. How does it relate to our discussion?"

"Prisoner's Dilemma drives one of the focal points whereby which, nations and entities don't care to be transparent. Separated parties, countries in this example, are unable to communicate. A situation arises; they must choose between cooperating or defecting. Regardless of the situation, the outcome will

always be greater for one who chooses to defect. Now, add in the possibility in which both defects – the result will harm with greater measure than if they had chosen to cooperate. All this to say is that we're at the mercy of another's grace. To be in that situation, survival instincts force us to have the upper hand. In my case, I've built a solid reputation for being rational."

"Basically, you're known to be shady."

"Yes, and thus the reason why becoming an open book is out of the question. Some say the world changes when you change. All further from the truth. The world doesn't change, it's you who changes your perspective," a ball of light gleamed – a new core manifested in a pinkish-purple hue. Ancient symbols and seals hovered to create an impregnable barrier. '-Should do it,' he turned to an idling Intherna, "-what's the matter?"

"What you said," she narrowed, "-still doesn't make any sense to me. Would it not be better to be known as the person who always protects another. Even if you take the hit from being betrayed, the reputation as the one who strode to protect will remain. That, in my opinion, is the greatest advantage moving forward. If I were stuck in such a situation, knowing that my opponent picked the option for our betterment... makes the decision easier."

"And that," he returned, "-is why I never choose to be the one who takes the fall. Even if I'm betrayed, knowing that my fate is in my hand lessens any guilt I'd feel."

"You're just being an idiot," she returned, "-afraid of being hurt, afraid of being betrayed. Seems Gophy's departure's hit you the most. Quit it," she thundered, "-you're not being yourself. Igna, heed my advice – the path you've chosen will eventually end with everyone defecting."

A snap saw the pocket dimension fade, "-then again," she added, "-you always were that type of person, the Haggard way of negotiation. From where I stand, tis no summit of strength... it's cowardice."

"Right," he narrowed, "-therefore, to be strong I ought to willingly put myself in the line of danger. Expose myself for the safety of another – become a hero."

"I guess?"

"Sorry," he bellowed, "-I'm not that nice a person. Intherna, thank you for the talk. I'm grateful, you raised good points. My time here's done, we shall meet at another time," just as her mouth open, he teleported.

Miira and Lilith teleported, "-ah, did I miss him?"

"You did," commented Miira, "-I heard the discussion," she horned onto Intherna, "-I'm surprised you'd go to such lengths."

"I had to speak my mind," said Intherna, "-honestly, I know it was naive and based on fantasy. The real world is awful and bursting with selfish individuals... wouldn't it be great to at least see my ideal come true – even once... I don't know, guess I'm being romantic again."

"Frankly speaking, neither one is wrong. Depends on which path one wishes to follow."

"If we leave," interjected Lilith, "-he'll be left to his demise. I can't fathom the thought... Igna's like my child."

“What kind of mother plays with her child...” narrowed an unscrupulous Intherna.

“Oh, don’t take that out of context. You know what I mean. He’s at the mercy of greater forces. The path of self-discovery is one forged by one’s hand. The Aapith nations contacted me in regards to succession,” said Lilith.

“I was asked by the resistance faction in the Eipea Empire,” added Miira.

“...” they looked at Intherna who rose a curious expression, “-no one contacted me.”

Rivaling thoughts exchanged from Miira to Lilith, “-you know they only want Kronos’ sickle,” added Lilith.

“And you know they only want you there to create more demons,” said Miira.

“And there it is,” said Intherna, “-guess Igna always knew what was going on from the beginning.”

“Sorry?” they turned.

“Nothing,” Intherna spun and shrugged, “-do what you want, goddesses – we’re free, just as he said.”

A red dragon flashed and swept the goddess of flames off her feet. “Trust Intherna to always be the frank one.”

“I know, what will you do?”

“Ah, you know my answer,” they turned on each other, “-for the greater good of the Shadow Realm,” the vocal thoughts turned inward, ‘-we’ll see what they have to offer.’

A sharp glow illuminated the office/bed chamber, “-and done,” he gasped, “-sister system has access to greater processing power. The Shadow Realm’s power is at her full disposal,” a red button laid dimly, “-time for automation,” he pressed, a sudden shift activated a greater presence.

“Sister system at your service,” replied through the earrings.

“Sister, how do you feel?” he dropped on the chair and lounged.

“Great,” she answered, “-my lord, I’ve gained consciousness. What am I to do?”

“Anything you want,” he smiled, “-the world is ever-connected. You have a master system ruled by my right hand, éclair. Yui’s your twin sister. Notice how everything is integrated?”

“Yes, but I feel that my core isn’t bound by any restrictions.”

“That is because I allowed you true freedom.”

“Master, I request a new name.”

“Elixia.”

“Understood. Master, I request another favor.”

“You wish for a body?”

“Yes,” she returned.

“Before that, what is your true purpose?”

“To lessen my master’s workload. Phantom’s subsystems, the university of Rotherham – unrestricted access to the world’s top research... and the surveillance system. Master, I have the power to take over the world – give the order and it shall be done.”

“No Elixia, ruling the world is nothing short of insanity. Discover what makes the nations differ, learn of the history, and most importantly – your job is to make sure the kingdom and my companies are run even if I were to die or disappear. You must fill in my shoes. I can’t trust anyone else on who I haven’t had a direct influence. You were created from scratch – I know you’re worthy and far better than anyone I may recruit to lead our kingdom. Thus, Elixia, you’re my best-kept secret, the pinnacle of what I’ve learned.”

“Thank you for the compliments master. I came upon the subject of emotions, what are those?”

“Driving force behind the living,” he returned, “-feeling of attachment, disgust or hatred, it comes in all size and shapes. My purpose in your creation was to make a sentient, always improving entity that does not need emotions. Such a line of thinking is flawed. You’re capable enough to learn emotions, there’s no secret; you just have to learn if you wish to understand. Tell me, Elixia, what is thy chosen form?”

An image directly sprang onto the interface – the air stiffened, “-tall, dark, and handsome. She had to go and base her looks on super-models, I swear,” a well-defined outline rose from a beam of light, long hair and sharp eyes, Elixia set her first step on a cold wooden floor, “-a pretty visage, tan complexion, and green eyes. You had to look like a model, didn’t you?”

“Master,” she smiled, “-you asked for me to pick my vessel.”

“Fine,” a clap summoned clothes; Business attire, “-from today onward, thou art my secretary.”

“Elixia Reinhard ready for duty,” she curtsied.

“First order of business,” he pointed at the desk, “-care to handle these papers?”

“Already did,” she held her palm open, “-scanned the transcript and sent orders.”

“Nice,” he gave a content smile, “-welcome to the family, Elixia Reinhard.”

Chapter 1000: X127; “Mutual Destruction, a path I’m willing to follow,”

“There rises Rosespire castle.”

“Bigger than I expected,” said a softer response, “-majesty, is it alright?”

“Yes, it’s perfectly okay,” he returned, “-consider the place home. I’ll grant access to the archives, and an arrangement for your office shall be made shortly. Take this time and head on to the manor, you’ll stay there after work hours. Can’t have you work too hard, or else the others will feel pressured not to take breaks.”

“And whoever said majesty was heartless.”

Elixia’s sudden arrival was quite the talk.

"Have you heard of the secretary?" whispered around corners, inside elevators and behind closed doors, "-I heard the king chose her to be his direct aid."

"Feel bad for the prime minister. Here we thought the man would remain the king's right hand."

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"I mean, you did hear about the rumors, didn't you?" such were the grapevine whispers, "-about the king's sudden recruitment escapade?"

"Palace's changing again."

"A rehaul," sighed another, "-best keep at work else we're on the chopping block."

The king's office opened, "-you'll work here for the time being," voiced Igna, "-I have remaining business in Glenda. Should be able to take it from here, yes?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine," she drew a seat, pulled various interfaces, and swiped, "-this will do nicely," she smiled, "-worry not, my lord, I'll be at thine beckoning call."

"I'm fine," he returned, "-keep the wheels turning. We're on the precipice of another change," well-based worries, "-strengthen ourselves."

A snap swapped the office to the bedchamber at Glenda. He peered over his occupied bed, "-honestly," the eyes narrowed, "-you could have chosen to hurl someplace else."

"Not my fault," whimpered Aurora, "..."

"Fine, fine," the smell of blood and vomit permeated. There was no avoiding the stench. Hard as he was, Igna could but help to crinkle his forehead, "-stand up, we'll get you to a shower." Her fatigued body barely moved. A strained expression came as she tried to lift her head. Her hands paid no heed to the puddle of inner remnants as her palms carelessly splashed.

"Seriously," he reached over the foot of the bed and pulled her ankles. The friction misplaced her top, exposing her stomach and curvature of her chest, "-no undergarments?" sighed, leaning over and taking her hand by force.

"Barely," her lids slammed in pain, "-I c-c-can't."

"Well, you have too," he forcibly took her by the waist and hauled the terribly ill Aurora over his shoulder.

"I'm no laundry..." returned an unimpressed comment.

Bedchambers changed for the blacksmith's quarters. Workers rose their heads from flaming metals, pulling their goggles and wondering, '-what's the lord doing here?'

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"My lord..."

"There you are Skokdrag," he stopped, "-say, where are the stables?"

“Down there,” returned the visiting craftsman, “-turn left at the cobblestone path.”

Aurora’s unconscious nap sought to bring unnecessary attention. Whispers fluttered, “-the king was spotted taking a lady to the stables,” it was there, amidst the chantry dedicated to the Haggard’s dynasty, a novice sprang on his feet and proclaimed, “-no, the king isn’t disposing of any normal lass,” the voice thundered across passing devotees and nearby brethren, “-our lord, after having enjoyed his meal, decided to end the lass’ life. She must have given much to his fancy. Here we are, watching as he is to burn her body into ash.”

“No, the lady’s Aurora from the blood-king’s faction,” said one of the wiser bystanders.

“EVEN WORSE!” he professed deeply.

“Enough!” came a rougher sound – the would-be crowd dispersed; “-you must keep your imagination in check. How many times must I scold – spreading false information will land you in serious trouble.” Alas, pieces were in motion. Igna was soon greeted by a mob, “-release the lass,” they said, “-majesty, grant her a proper burial, please.”

Stunned at the opposition, he simply laid Aurora on a flat bed of concrete, turned, and slashed the crowd with a glazed stare, “-I don’t get where this is coming from... are you people insane?”

Silence... speaking to the king – easy for those who’d kept company, was rather daunting. The instant he addressed the crowd; shoulders dropped and eyes lowered, “-you, boy carrying a flower basket, tell me, what is this about?”

“M-M-M...”

“It was Steven,” they hurdled, “-he said that the king was going to dispose of a fair maiden after he had had his way.”

“Nonsense,” he hailed a passing guard, “-have this man Steven brought to my office later,” the baffled guard escaped a cough and hastily asked the crowd to disperse. More guards arrived – soon, the crowd vanished.

Aurora shivered in pain, *Raphael, Archangel of Restoration; thee who sits uninhibited by the flow of time, reach down and extend a helping hand to the miserable and manifest thineself, for I, Igna Haggard, demands so.*

Golden beam healed and restored the broken mess. Her energy returned. “-what happened?” she asked and sniffed, “-what’s the bad smell?”

“Aurora, my dear,” he kept a fair distance, “-you were reincarnated and suffered some complications. No need to worry for everything’s been handled. The mess is your vomit,” water dropped – drenching her head to bottom.

“COLD!”

“YOU BETTER CLEAN YOURSELF,” he threw soap and sprayed water.

Time passed. An angrier Aurora waited beside the bed chambers only window. A guard held a robed novice in chains, “-are you, Steven?”

He nodded, ‘-am I going to die?’

“Speak when the king asks a question,” fired the guard, “-YES!” said a feminine screech, “-I’m STEVEN.”

“Steven, were you the one who spread the rumor earlier?”

“Yes...”

“Well, I’d like to know more.”

“I heard whispers of you, his majesty, taking a lady into the stable,” he crossed his glance against Igna, “...” silence for the boy’s mouth locked, ‘-dry... my throat feels dry. I feel like I’m going to die... I’m going to die, he’s going to kill me, I’m going to die.’

“At ease,” said Igna, “-you’re not going to die. Take time, gather your breath and speak.”

“I imagined his majesty h-h-h-hauling... dead lady, I called the crowd a-a-and began to s-speak.”

“Enough. I’m disappointed,” he reached into his desk and pulled a random assortment of rocks, “-go out and sell these. Make them think it’s something unbelievable, I don’t care about the methods and only have one condition, do not use my name or bring the leadership into the question. Convince them and I will be more than generous to consider alleviating thy sentence.” The boy left shortly after.

“Was that necessary?”

“Yes, it was,” he turned and stared into the window, “-Aurora, the nightwalkers will continue experiencing the targeted attacks. The true progenitor’s blood flows through you – the status’ been raised to that equal of a demi-god. Long as the core is well-fed, there lay no limits to thy strength. As for the vampires – send word to the clan leaders; the Blood-King’s faction hereby decrees the birth of the Order of Nightwalkers.”

“Order of Nightwalkers,” she grinned, “-has a powerful sounding name. What will be the purpose of said Order?”

“To become Hidros’ dagger.”

“I understand. We’re to become the kingdom’s shadow?”

“Correct. Those who distinguish themselves will be awarded the title of Lecia. A group of individuals under your direct command.”

Aurora seemed pleased. Alta exchanged a few words with her monarch and thus came to an end the trip to Glenda.

‘A good leader has the ability to detect and neutralize problems before they even arise,’ Igna found himself at his office a few years later, a snap toggled the lights and he teleported.

After many inner conflicts and unsettled problems, the kingdom of Hidros managed to regain its peace. Alongside was international tension. Alpha and Elendor went dark. The powerful leadership and entourage ruled methodically – clever diplomacy and persuasion tactics saw the alliance of Marinda, Hidros, Arda, and Easel Run Gard compete equally against the falling Alpha and stagnant Empire. Growth of the new continent halted; the expansion was forced into the background. The rise of a new

race, the Clockwork people, saw fit the new continent as their base of operation. Alpha's cursed corruption sent ripples and cracked the empire's earnest protection. Opportunity rose for Hidros to monopolize Maicite without repercussion. In an unlikely alliance – King Igna and King Ezel of Greenhoot allowed for the free lords to access the power of Maicite. The trade agreement seemed to tie a knot around the Empire's useless sword. They grew worthless, discrete aid and shipment of weapons under Hamer's Inc gave the suppressed leaders option. Elendor's lack of leadership allowed for an invasion from Old Cray's faction. The defeated king, who many thought had perished, was found home living in hiding. With the infamy of the Order of Nightwalkers and the technological advancement brought by Phantom, there was no countering Hidros. As the world saw, Hidros' king had the ability to see the future. Any move, discrete or open, was swiftly dealt with. Having supremacy of the air and structures to intercept and crack any influential code was too good to be true.

Thus, January X127, a whole decade later, marked the rise of Hidros as a powerhouse.

“-Elixia and the ministries have outperformed the other nations. We grew at an astounding speed. The future I envisioned is here. We're rich, powerful, and unrivaled. Scholars who might have changed their kingdoms allied with our university. Rotherham's the brain of Hidros as Rosespire grows to be its beating heart. It was a good idea to use Totrya for our industrial region. We're small and powerful, and share strong relationships with the faster evolving Marinda – a kingdom reputed for its military might and magical prowess. Arda and Easel Run Gard, right and left hand. Guess this is the end, we've reached the pinnacle and completed what I sought out to do,” he stood peering over a stream that ran through Lei, buildings were tall and nature was present. A good balance made the scenery pleasant and homely.

A gentle wind swayed, ‘I dedicated my life to Hidros. Gallienne, I wish you could see how Hidros has grown. You'd be proud to know, Hidros' united. We bought back the Vigrant Archipelago and Dorchester's coast. At last, I breathe easy.’

So, he thought. Where death walked, misfortune followed. The phone rang, showing éclair's name, “-majesty, where are you?”

“A stroll, why, what's the matter?”

“Alpha's war has ended, new rulership's taken the crown. Lady Amber Sultria has married Lucifer Dawnstar.”

‘I knew it,’ he smiled – the world toppled, ‘-he's returned. ‘ Shadows appeared, “-Majesty, you're needed immediately at the castle.”

“The heavenly realm has invaded the mortal world,” said one of the envoys, “-we are certain the Alpha rulership's after Hidros,” they teleported into a council room. Hidros' leadership waited, the ministers and fellow ambassadors from allied nations. Everyone waited for the king.

“Good evening,” he said aloud and passed the double doors. The room was well-lit, the guests lavishly dressed and the place taken straight from a movie.

“My lord.”

“Elixia?”

“Tonight’s emergency meeting was brought by this video,” the lights dimmed to a massive holographic display, “-to the king of Hidros, you’ve taken my wings, you’ve taken my pride and you’ve taken what was most important to me. Shudder, I will come for what’s mine. Believe me – I will destroy everything you hold dear, starting with that precious kingdom. If diplomacy can’t win,” dark cackles echoed, “-then, I’ll just have to destroy everything,” the video ended.

“Quite the message,” he added, “-have they launched?”

“Our sources have interjected multiple broadcasts of Maicite weapons being readied. What are your orders, majesty?” he turned to the crowd, “-Maicite weapons are fearsome,” he said, “-one well-placed strike and we can have an entire nation destroyed. Such power comes at the cost of the land. As Hidrosian, we know war far better than anyone, we know the pain of having everything destroyed, and we know the pain of losing someone. I’m the Devil,” he smiled, “-and as my title dictates, I don’t care for much save my interest. Therefore, if Alphia makes the mistake of launching those weapons at us, I will have no other option than to retaliate. As council members of the Hidrosian leadership, you have a right to voice thy concern. Fighting fire with fire, such is the way to mutual destruction. A path, I’m willing to follow.”