

Death Magic 1141

Chapter 1141 Hephaestus

Staxius return to a less than excitable Ragno. “-master, to the tower, we need to talk,” read his interface. ‘-Elixia needs me this badly?’ he lit a smoke and headed for the tower. There, upon arrival, the ground felt heavier than usual. Heaviness was usually accompanied by the whim of a greater being, someone or something of might. He took no time in climbing the stairs and was soon in the teleportation room, wherein, the device worked.

Elixia was beside the console with a tablet in hand, and Yui was on the other side, speaking to a few students.

“Over here,” Elixia hailed. He flicked the cigarette, took a pensive scan, and walked.

“The machine’s working?”

“Yeah, I had to call in a favor from the Heavenly realm.”

“Excuse me?” he coughed, ‘-how did she get to know the heavens?’

“I know what you’re thinking, master, it’s a simple thing. Heavens can be called forth to aid if we have allies. Evidently, by sheltering the gods from the oppression of Zeus and the newly formed heavenly convention, we’ve gained the support of many deities. Though they won’t reveal their allegiance just yet, we have earnt ourselves quite the following.

“This the reason you called?”

“Partly,” she swiped, “-I have urgent news regarding the situation in Draebala. I think it best we move now. There’s unrest amongst the troops – Draebala’s not a peaceful land, and from what I’ve learned scattered information, the blood moon is upon said dimension. It is said, when the moon shines red, the army of the fallen shall awaken and seek justice on those who did them harm.”

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“Convenient...”

“Also,” she turned, putting another outline into his field of view, “-I’d like to welcome our newest ally. Hephaestus.”

A tall fellow rose, the arms shone a darker tone and with impressive muscle carved finely by the motion of a hammer against an anvil. The face and skin battered by the heat of the forge, the hair perpetually tied behind a dirtied cloth, Hephaestus’s narrow stare paused on Staxius, like a master craftsman scanning his tools and materials, the goddess paused heavily on certain features of Staxius.

“I refuse,” Staxius returned, “-Hephaestus, you’re ranked as one of the greater gods, you don’t need protection. A goddess such as yourself should be stronger than any foe that comes your way. It is a simple matter of fact, I’ve learned from experience when someone of power comes, they always demand something greater. I appreciate you fixing the teleportation device, truly, I appreciate the help, however, I have a suspicion there’s more to your request than meets the eye.”

She pushed out her chest, revealing her well-defined waist and stomach, “-wise,” she answered, untying the cloth holding her hair, “-I’ll leave if I’m not needed.”

“Just like that?” he rolled his eyes, “-come on.”

“What?” she reached the door and only then, after a few seconds, seemed to receive the message, “-you want me to stay?”

“What is wrong with her?” he turned to Elixia.

“Hephaestus is an interesting character. You’ll like her I’m sure. We will need weapons to go against the combined army, don’t forget they’re of higher ranks, thus, normal weapons won’t be much lest the wielder of an equal or higher rank. And here I was thinking my master was far-sighted. You truly get worked up when the subject of the Olympian gods comes up don’t you?”

“I have to,” they observed the strange entity, “-Cruse warned me once. The Olympian gods are trouble. We can’t expect an ally of such great proportion to fall into our laps. It’s perhaps a ploy of some sort.”

“If you’re worried, I could always dig into the reasons,” said a beaming Yui, “-hello master, been a minute.”

“Yui, you sure are popular with the students.”

“Someone has to teach the class since their head teacher is on leave. It shouldn’t be an issue,” they made a trio and watched the less-than-present Hephaestus, “-what is she doing?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Elixia shrugged her shoulders, “-master, do what you must, you need to leave for Draebala as soon as possible. You wouldn’t want their bodies to stay exposed to the elements for too long, would you?”

‘Right...’ he exhaled, ‘-the battle and the death of my allies.’

“Hephaestus, will you join me for a chat?”

“Sure.”

The gloomy outside was soon casting a frigid breeze, which pierced skin and rang through one’s bones. They walked into town and settled at one of the cozy inns with seating arrangements outside over the beautifully polished stone-bricked walkways. Here, the streets were mostly used by the many restaurants and inns, and a small square made by the surrounding buildings felt like an escape from the outside world.

Neither too hot nor cold, neutral weather. Staxius ordered a few drinks whilst Hephaestus wasted her time browsing the menu, finally settling on today’s special.

“Goddess,” he narrowed, “-you must understand, I’ve fought against your brothers and sisters. The Olympian gods. Why would you ally yourself with me, why not stick with your own family, they are those who kept thee alive for all this time.”

She took her time, scanning the surrounding kiosks and smelling her drink, “-I don’t know,” she sipped, “-Igna, I heard many things about you from Zeus and the others,” she spoke slowly, “-and I think you’re

pretty entertaining. I've spent my life working the forge of Mount Olympus, I never had the time to adventure or go party. Look at me, I'm a lady but I have the sculpture and figure of a man, my skin's battered and my face is harsh. No man wishes to approach a lady who's stronger than them. I'm worshiped as a god, not a goddess, and no one cares about who I really am. They care about one thing, my weapons. It's a weapon this, a weapon that, all the goddamned time. I'm sick of it. The Heavenly convention came to me for a massive order of god-slaying weapons... I can only do so much; those things require the soul and life essence of gods. I brought it to Zeus, and he said, kill off the newborns, they may be small but the souls are mature..." she lowered her head and ungripped her cup, "-I wanted to escape. No one knew my plight, no one... no one until this girl with blond hair came to me in my dreams. She said to run and look for a man belonging to the Shadows. I looked around and found your name, rather, your title, The Adjudicator, the Master of Three in One. From there, I left and I found myself here, Elixia asked me if I could help you fix the teleportation device, it was a simple fix and I was glad to do it. Something, not a weapon, it got my blood pumping. Ragno is a good place, I watched the people, demons, and whatnot, we're different, and have been enemies. But when I look at them from here, they're the same, we're the same. The only difference is the appearance and ideals, aside from that, we live, eat, shit, and sleep."

"You don't care if I trust you or not, and the same goes for me, trust is a gamble. The landscape of intrigue has turned my mind more cynical than it should be. Even now, I can't bring myself to accept your place here. I heard your story and I don't have a reason to refuse. Therefore, instead of my acceptance, how about your visit to a friend of mine, she's the arbiter of all that is knotted."

"Sure, let's go now."

'Decisive,' he stood, '-I can't wait a week to give Tharis my decision. If I'm going against the heavens, I'll have to gain support from more than a few gods. At my current strength, taking on the whole of Draebala will be foolish. Our forces the disappearance of Kaleem, Cora, Yuria, Starix, and my children, Raphael, Saniata, and Draconis.'

Snap, instant teleportation to Tharis' realm, they arrived with their posture firm on the seats and snacks untouched on the table, "-would be rude to not finish the snacks before we leave, isn't that, right?"

"Fair," they ate underneath a soft willow tree surrounded by a pond. Royal guards made walked to and fro, they sat firmly inside the Capital's Castle, Tharis' home. A horde of advisors flocked to her side, she waved her arms like swords, deflecting their grievances and parried with her words, giving insight and resolution to their plight.

'Syhton gave her chastity and threw her chaste title away for my sake. She was there when I needed it most. Regardless of what she did with Romeo, I shouldn't be hard on her. She's still the one I vowed myself to... Tharis came in without warning and stole her spot. She's got plans for the future and I doubt the arbiter has any place left in her heart for affection. She's a rational entity, someone who will accept clear and concise arguments against her propositions. It might work, we need smokes and mirrors,' the downed the last sip, "-I'll be right back, have to rescue a dame." Staxius quickly went over an arched bridge and blocked the coming horde, Tharis rose her gaze over the crowd and widened her gaze, a sense of shock grabbed her expression.

"This is unacceptable, my lady, you will not be married to a nobody. Forget about the Adjudicator, his purpose is to bring ruin to the world, there's no point in siding with a man whose ideal is to destroy reality. Our survival is at stake... we need to call for Artanos, without your little brother's foresight, I think ruin will be upon us."

"My," Staxius interjected, "-Tharis, I need a word."

"Pardon?" the advisors made a shield in front of their goddess, "-a man of low standards has no purpose being inside the castle. Did you sneak in... leave before I call the guards."

She rose her arms and stepped out of the crowd, "-dismissed, we will take up the conversation later. I have to attend to a guest."

They grudgingly left, Tharis exhaled and relaxed her shoulders, "-why are you here, I thought you left?"

"I did, then I returned," he offered a cigarette, "-care for one?"

"Sure," she lit and puffed, "-did you come to a decision?"

"About the whole marriage thing, you must know about Syhton, yes?"

"She's your lover and yours her. She willingly gave her a chaste title for your comfort. She's truly a woman to be proud of. If I were a man, I'd have fallen for her the first time she smiled. She's an amazing woman, and there's the problem, she's too good for you, or us."

He puffed, "-care to elaborate?"

"I'm afraid she's confirmed my suspicion. I only had to put the thought of you in harm's way to sway her actions. She willingly accepted Romeo's advances in order to make you feel safe. I don't know what happened behind closed doors, but the problem lies there, she would do anything for you, and that mentality, is something we can't afford currently. Would you protect her or her lifestyle?"

'A deep question,' he unknowingly fell inside deeper thought, '-this is the mistake I've done over and over against. I selfishly took in people under the guise of protecting their lives for my peace of mind. Once time passed, I forgot and eventually ignored those I took in, they were like toys, I found interesting. Protecting her, who am I kidding, I've never been one to protect another's life, always fallen short. Her lifestyle is something I can protect... Tharis thought quite a bit on the matter, she played the villain to safeguard Syhton... she's without a doubt the strongest woman I've known. Tharis' understand what makes me tick and adjusted her plans, she's formidable. Her idea might have merit.'

"Another cigarette," she bumped his shoulder, "-and make it quick."

A genuine smile escaped, "-you, Tharis, are a piece of work."

"Look who's talking," they chuckled.

Chapter 1142 "-We don't need a hero..."

"By the way, I have a confession."

"What is it, Tharis?"

"The whole marriage thing, don't think of like a burden. It's smoke and mirrors – it's my way of making my allegiance known. Besides," she stepped forward and smiled, "-I'm not allowed to fall in love. Sounds childish, doesn't it?"

At that moment, a sinking sensation grabbed his stomach, '-the way her gaze lowered, there's regret in her word. The goddess of Judgement is a leader by example, she can't be shone to have biases else the whole foundation breaks. Calling me to be her husband will cause a few problems in the short run – I guess in the long run, with the military might she expects the Shadow Realm to bring, we might stand a chance.'

"Stop thinking of the possibilities," she added, casting a shaky gaze at the lass under the willow tree, "-you came with her, the lass sure is strong, I feel her power from here."

"Tharis, tell me, what's your goal?"

"To guarantee the survival of my people," she snapped, "-there's nothing more I'd want than to safeguard what is here. We're a haven for the rejected. The wrongdoers can find a new chance in life... unlike the Hall of Rebirth, where judgment is placed upon one's soul and karma is evaluated for the future, we provide a more, you know, slightly linear judgment. You saw it with the father and son, and I'm impressed, the proposition was spot on."

"To safeguard your people and realm," he snuffed the cigarette, "-and me, I have to do what I must. I can't say I have things to protect anymore, the smiles I longed to see have long faded into the back of my memories. The people I know and care about are gone, perhaps dead. Time passes and its hand never stops. I'm here to create a better place for the future to exist. I have shone the wrong in my ways, the childish ideals I harbored were, in the end, childish. If a better future can be made by destroying everything, such is what I shall do. I'll gladly become the one prophesied as the Bringer of Finality," he paused and looked, "-you know my purpose, I may very well decide to end your realm and countless others, with that possibility, will you still extend your hand?"

"To be married?" she tilted her head, "-I was wrong to put such pressure on you and Syhton, I don't mind if we don't get married. It will get in the way, but I'll make it work somehow..."

"No," he shook his head, "-feels like forever since someone spoke to me like this. Try as I may, I can't help but be touched by your words. It's truly something I cherish... I'm of the cynical kind... yet, with all the danger signs going off in my head, I can't help but accept your hand. You understood the core of what had me stray, to protect her lifestyle as opposed to her life. A very simple idea... I could have never thought of it. Tharis, you have yourself a somewhat young husband," he placed his head over his palm and winked.

"Don't," she muffled her chuckle, "-that pose isn't..."

"What, I thought I looked cute."

"HA-HA!"

And that came to be the day Tharis and Staxius became engaged. In retrospect, it could be viewed as the day everything changed for the two of them. Before too long, as the expansive fingers of Artanos and the Heavenly council sought to conquer reality and stop the Destroyer, Tharis, and Staxius found

something simpler, something childish and not worthy of the gods... they found friendship. Judgment's creed is based on realism, matters are viewed with logic and rational, such as Tharis' thought process. Sprinkle friendship atop... a very idealist concept children based their world around... she found herself in a new world. As for Staxius, a cynical man built from experience and past events, putting his trust blindly into someone he just met... they both experienced novelty. Was it a curse, or a blessing in disguise, only time could tell.

Hephaestus held her cup to the sky, she chewed on sunflower seeds and passed less than stares around, '-boring,' she sipped, '-joining Igna might not be such a good idea. Why did I have to fight with them...'

Footsteps shook her line of thought, "-Hephaestus, I'd like you to meet Tharis."

The goddess of judgment, known for her long silver hair, big black eyes, and the symbol of judgment fashioned like tribal marks over her face took a first glance and paused her rosy-colored lips. They pressed in a perpetual frown, not knowing when to smile or otherwise, her softly shaped nose and angular visage were quite the heartthrob for the gutsy, "Hephaestus, I heard quite a bit about you," she joined the table, "-tell me, why are you here?"

"He brought me," she said.

"Goddess, please don't play games with me," Tharis showed a bit of animosity, "-I hear from my associates you and the Olympian gods have had a falling out. Perhaps that is the reason why you joined with Staxius, yes?"

"..."

"I'll take the silence as a yes. Staxius, Hephaestus had a falling out with her brothers and sisters. It would seem the battle between you and Hermes might have enraged them. Also, you taking in Athena might have hammered the last nail in the coffin. I advise caution..."

"Tharis," he slowed the table's energy, "-Hephaestus's family problem isn't of my concern, nor should it be yours. Who cares if she got in a fight with her family, she came to us and with us, I will find her abilities very much useful. Hephaestus, look at me," looked deeply into her soul, the firmness of his gaze, the confidence and conform found behind his bicolored pupils, she watched in awe, '-the charm of the devil,' Tharis gulped, '-he's taken her heart and misconceptions like that. I didn't expect him to use good cop bad cop here... and to think,' only a few minutes passed, the current plan was hatched on a shared cigarette, "-put doubt on her reason, I'll handle the rest," he spoke little but meant great.

"It's true," she lowered her gaze, "-I fledge from mount Olympus. I couldn't look at them anymore. It was painful, and even so, you know why I left. I didn't want to be part of another war, I don't care, I don't want to make weapons anymore. I'm done being the one responsible for taking the lives of others. Their memories, their past, the resentment, I feel it all, you know, each of those weapons is imbued with part of me. It's like I create extensions of my power for others to wield... it grants extraordinary powers but makes the wielder mad. Their targets become vindictive souls who haunt my dreams day in and day out," she exhaled, "-I had enough. This is why I don't pay attention to much around me, if I focus, I'm sure I'll see the souls of the dead, they writhe..."

Staxius held her hands and smiled, "-look around you, Hephaestus, this is the place where the demented are judged. And the one here is the Goddess of Judgment. It couldn't be a coincidence, could it?"

Tharis blinked at Staxius, '-of course, it's not a coincidence. Did he know about her plight, did he know she'd need to be saved before being useful? She has the curse of Attachment, those slain with her weapons are tied to her soul, they perpetually screech and attack the host... it's one of the worse curses a god, let alone a human, could endure. To think she might have lived thousands of years with such a burden... did the gods not see her woe?'

"They might have seen your troubles, even wanted to help, but in the end, chose not to. Such is the reality of the situation," he matched Tharis' gaze then turned to Hephaestus, "-you have so much to do and such great potential is frightening. I give you my promise, Hephaestus, long as you're under my people's care, whether it's me or my trusted assistants, you will never have to forge another weapon again. Instead, why not use your skills to assist Ragno, more specifically, Lucifer's academy? A good craftsman is always needed. We don't need god-slaying weapons," he opened his palms and displayed the symbol of Death, "-no need for such trivial toys when I have this," he closed his palms and stared straight, "-join us and I guarantee you'll have a place to sleep and rest for however long the peace lasts."

"I accept."

'Another one recruited. Hephaestus will come around. They'll make good use of her powers. Suppose it's time for me to leave, I've stalled long enough,' they returned to Ragno, where Staxius stood before the teleportation device with a weary Tharis and a half-asleep Hephaestus.

"You look troubled?"

"You think?" she panted, "-so many souls had to judge... there' yet to go. Every court was overwhelmed, just how many people were killed using her weapons?"

"I don't know," he shrugged, "-and I could care less."

"Dumping the hard work onto someone else again?" heels clopped, "-master,"

"If it's not my lovely secretary, Elixia."

She bowed, "-and presume you're headed to Draebala, at last?" her tone held his waste of time accountable.

"No need for fake smiles," he winked, "-I know you want me out already, I had to settle matters."

"Far warning," Yui followed behind Elixia's shadow, "-we don't know what the status of that realm is. Information's scarce, don't know if we'll be able to connect. I'll try my best on my end, you have to create a subspace for us to connect once you arrive, is that understood?"

"Yes, yes, this is like the first time my mother sent me to the merchants," he shook his head, "-take care of Fae and Makina in my absence, understood?"

"Yes, now, just go!"

'Honestly,' he shook his head and stepped into the portal, '-they could show a bit of compassion with me going away for god knows how long...'

"See you, master!" instead, everyone jovially gave their goodbyes.

A shot of intense energy blasted through his body. Reality faded for a minute. A chilling darkness wherein nothing mattered, no sense of touch, no sounds, no sight, just darkness without the simple chance of hope. "-Nothing is the end all be all," came said a whisper, the tranquility of the dark ocean cracked, ripples went around – the sound of water crashing, wind blowing – a deafening explosion, *bang,* he gasped and opened his eyes to a battlefield. Meteor crashed, trees and houses were on fire, and civilians ran. Dead bodies were thrown to the side, some crushed by buildings, others half-burn and some dismembered by vicious claws, the sight wasn't pleasant. Men in uniform held back the assault, the fire guns and cried out orders, "-DEFEND THE CIVILIANS!" they screamed, Staxius held behind a broken wall of the first floor of a shattered house, "-move along," they cried, guiding the few survivors, "-THEY'RE COMING," a giant ball of red descended from the heavens, '-oh god,' Staxius barely reacted, the echo went across the province, a massive flash of red, an orb swallowing organic materials, turning the corpses and living beings into ash, the deafening explosion snuffed with a high-pitched inhale, '-I barely survived,' he coughed, the protection spell barely activated, part of his right hand turned to ash, '-teleported me into a warzone. This place is worse than I thought,' he tapped his earrings, no response, '-the connection's lost. I'm here on my own and I can't expect backup. If the connection isn't going through, there's no way anything else could come.'

A scraping sound came from down below, he reached over and peeked through a missing brick in the wall, a man with one leg crawled his way through the carnage. Blood dripped, and he clawed on with staff, "-damned those gods," he clenched his fists, "-turning Draebala into a warzone again, how dare they," he fell, knocked over by the fragment of a frame. He turned and faced the bloodied sky, "-to the one able to stop this war, burn the whole fucking continent... leave no one of those Titans alive. We're living on the cusp of extinction... if nothing changes, we're doomed. We don't need a hero," he rose his hand, "-we need the Devil..."

Chapter 1143 Scavengers

Like so many others, the survivor breathed his last breath. Was it pain or was it the saddened truth of hopelessness? The gods abandoned Draebala and there was no going back. A deflowered lass, a broken heart, a shattered glass – they all have one thing in common, none can return to their prior dignity. Such was the case of this godforsaken land, a place dejected by the hell spawns. 'Another one bites the dust,' Staxius paused.

An ominous silence, followed by the muffled expansion, left this particular lot lifeless. 'Part of the landscape brings memories from my youth. The smells aren't the same, for once, the stench of unburied bodies isn't prominent. Battlefields have ways of combining the worse smells a person could ever imagine.' A piercing gale interrupted the settling waves of tranquility. Few robed figures approached from the west, they were tall and dark in their auras. Staxius watched nonchalantly.

'Found myself quite the good spot,' he casually took a cigarette, toggled a concealment spell, and observed. 'Judging by their appearance, they must be from... there's the problem, I don't know much about the land. Hard to see who's friend and who's foe,' he puffed, '-like it matters.'

"Any survivors?" one cried.

"Not that I see off," another answered, "-they used the gem."

"To think the Titan's answer to our insurgency would be so cruel."

“Don’t say that, it’s not like we gave them any chance.”

“I’ll be surprised if there are any bodies left,” said yet another from the back, “-we should split up and gather as many supplies as we can.”

“Are you robbing the dead?”

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“I get being new and all, signing to our purpose comes with more trouble. Recruit, don’t look so troubled, it will cast a shadow upon those who’ve opened their hearts to the safety of our world. The gods might have forsaken our cause, I will not, long as I breathe, I will carry the will of our order to the last limb I have.”

One of the trio held the newer man’s shoulder, “-I would watch and learn if I were you. Few can do our job and fewer have the ability to survive. Do what you need to, we’re scavengers.”

“Right people,” the leader of the robed band clapped, “-let’s get to work. Use the dimensional portals to store the items. If you sense danger, run, I will not accept death, bravado is for the foolish,” they split like a firework, exploding in many directions.

‘Scavengers. Must be the people from before, the ones who tried to save the people. I can’t afford to waste time learning about their purpose. What I need is directions,’ he finished the cigarette and flash-stepped to the leader, taping the man who cowered with a loud hiss, “-who stands there?” he whipped out daggers and growled.

“A survivor,” Staxius replied, dusting off his shoulder, “-I was wondering if you could help me find the town of Inux?”

“Inux?” the robed man slowly tightened and untightened his grip, casting much doubt over the sudden appearance, “-I can say we’re in Zayan D’olsak. Why Inux, the place’s the headquarters of the Titans. It’s manned by the God of Darkness, Lixbin. You better head south to the coast, there’s a little hamlet called Gesborrow.”

“Hamlet?”

“Yeah,” the man dropped his robe and inhaled, “-there used to be nothing there. I doubt it’s on any maps.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’m a spy?”

“Are you a spy?”

“No.”

“Then it’s settled, you’re not a spy,” he slumped his shoulder and scanned the ground, “-you feel strong, very strong. Maybe even stronger than those angels of war. I don’t know much... my father founded the Scavengers and we’ve lived like rodents. Feeding off the sacrifice of the resistance.”

“So the people earlier, those trying to evacuate, were they you?”

“No, not us. They’re the true faction trying to fight for the people’s safety. They were once stationed in Inux under the Shadow Realm’s banner. Formle, the god of war fell, and following his defeat, everything collapsed. The resistance’s momentum shot, and they scattered into the wild. Since then, every town and village of significance has been captured. They’re on the main continent headed to the Aapith Domain.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Well, I met someone like you before. A warrior of another world. He came with amazing strength and wielded power like nothing I’d ever seen.”

“Where is he now?”

“On a stake lining the entrance to Inux.”

“...”

The leader smirked, in two lines shattered any hopes a young hero might get, “-we don’t need heroes here.’

“-You need the devil,” Staxius answered.

“How did you-” the man dropped his jaw.

Staxius turned and faced a crumbling house, “-behind there, there was a man who said those words.”

“...” a gust of wind, the leader sprinted, ‘-he’s quite fast,’ Staxius observed and teleported to the man’s dying spot. The robed figures gathered one by one, the leader stood closest to the grim outline of what used to be human. Skin had burnt off the muscle, exposing the innards, and his guts spilled down one side, someone or something had dug its claws inside the man’s body and forcefully ripped out the intestines.

‘Living things are very ugly when they die,’ Staxius crossed his arms and watched.

“Uncle,” the leader dropped on one knee, “-such is the price when the laws aren’t followed. We’re scavengers, we don’t need strength to fight, we must learn to survive. This is what my father always said, and for so long, that idea has kept my team alive. Why would you forsake our ways... was it dishonorable...”

One of the scouts leaped across the rubbles, *-clang, clang,* he rang a cowbell and cried, “-soldiers from the extermination force are on patrol. They’re coming from the north. Evacuate.”

Whispers, none cared for the man’s moment of weakness, each took to their heels and scattered, “-don’t move,” another scout approached from the west, “-we’re being surrounded. They’ve got us cornered.”

“How did this happen?” cried one, panic bubbled below the pseudo surface of strength, ‘-are we getting ambushed...’ one answer, the leader threw a haunting glare at the recruit, “-you.”

The little fellow dropped his hood, “-too bad,” he yawned, “-seems like I’m figured out. You shouldn’t be so trusting of other people. This is the very reason why Inux fell, they allowed their pride and reckless

sympathy toward the weak to get in the way. I was honestly surprised when my cliché sob story worked. Guess many others have suffered the same fate. Don't get any weird ideas," he shot a glance at possible attacks, "-the army knows your location. And they know where you're stationed. Thank you for the information, I'll take my leave," wings sprouted, "-so long."

"It's done, they know where we are."

"How did this happen?"

"I said we shouldn't accept members, it's a gamble we can't afford to make."

"Leader said it'd be fine, and the master trusted his judgment."

'What is happening?' leader fell on himself, '-everyone's turning against one another, they've forgotten our purpose. A leader needs to set the pace in these types of situations... how can I bring them together, people are concerned with survival during times of crisis. Overwleeming charisma or strength... if only I had one-"

"Pathetic," Staxius emerged from the shadows and rose his hands at the hovering spy, "-though I appreciate a good plot twist. A big-mouthed spy like you getting away doesn't sound pleasant," he did a zigzagging gesture as if to cut the air, everyone's eyes glued to each move.

"-AHHH," the spy fell, the wings cleanly chopped at the root, "-WHO ARE YOU!" he yelled.

"Who am I?" Staxius casually entered the fray, everyone moved subconsciously, allowing him to be at the center of the crowd where the spy bled, "-oh, no one special. Just your friendly neighborhood devil," he placed one foot over the spy's face and lit a cigarette, he dropped the empty hand and stared the sky, "-listen here people, I need a ride to Inux. I'm not looking to spend weeks on foot if you people have a better way of travel-"

"-hmmhmmh,"

Staxius lifted his foot, "-what is it?"

"YOU WILL DIE BY THE SOLDIERS' HANDS, NO ONE ESCAPES OUR WRAT-"

"Right," Staxius dug his heels into the man's mouth, cracking sounds had some tremble, "-I've heard that cliché warning so many times it's not even funny. Leader of the Scavengers, time is running out. You have information and I have a few cards up my sleeve."

"..." nothing, the man was too deep in thought.

"Come on," they nudged, "-sorry?" he came too.

"Offer, will you help me?" said Staxius.

"What can you do for us?" he echoed.

"For someone who was inside his own mind contemplating the end, I won't hear a word of any favor I can do. I will act on what I think is best. You're scavengers, yes? why not hid in shadows like the rodents thee aspire to be and witness what this man here," he pointed at the dead uncle, "-meant with his last words," he casually dug in his foot, crashing the spy's head into bloodied morsels.

“How long until they arrived?”

“Thirty seconds,” said one scout.

“Better get to hiding,” he closed his eyes, ‘-open the gates of my past. I’ve hidden my talents for too long, it’s time to awaken the muscle memories developed through thousands of hours dealing with death. No more restraints, Draebala’s the perfect place to test my strength,’ an imposing pressure fell on the circle, and the scavengers ran into the ruins, many hid and some watched through fractures.

“Who is that?”

“I don’t know,” said the leader, “-I’ve only just met him.”

“Well, he’s in for a rude awakening. The extermination squad is filled with veterans who love hunting the weak. It’s a foul sport...”

“Who knows, we might see a miracle.”

Staxius leaped onto the tallest point, a tower shining over the broken remnants of a church dedicated to a forgotten deity.

Hear me, weapon forged in the death, relish the thought of slaughter, enjoy the thrill of sufferance, raise from thy slumber, Orenmir! the sword shook, the hilt nearly jumped out his hand, ‘-did you grow stronger on me?’ he waited, the clueless force advanced, ‘-since there’s no one strong to oppose their might. They’ve forsaken fear and don’t care about being ambushed. They know it’s hopeless for ill-equipped peasants to stand against a behemoth. Too bad,’ the white pupil flashed, *Fifth-layer Spell: Detection,* layers, a derivation from the class system, went like so in the realm beyond mortality; each layer is split into two, for example, layer one is split into rank I and II, which groups under the category of Singular Magic. Layer Two, would hold rank III and VI, which is known by Lower Tier magic. Like that, the layers go from one to five; Singular, Lower Tier, Mid-Tier, High Tier, and lastly, Celestial Magic. Celestial Magic, the fifth layer spell, would be considered a world-changing spell used by only the gods and entities of equal rank. In essence, the higher the number, the stronger the spell. And of course, there is a special category for spells beyond one’s imagination – domain-changing abilities, like the one cast by Scifer that sought the advent of monsters in Orin.

‘I see it,’ he watched, the figures moved in linear patterns, ‘-not even bothered to split their ranks. How foolish,’ he extended his left arm, *Spewed from Mothra’s granular mouth, bitten and seething from her perpetual hatred – lives and cries the begging of her child, thus rages the flame of Mother, one of many faces but one mouth, the whispers from her lips, the whispers of folly and misdirection, whispers of demise, Mana Control: Purgatory Flame Variant – Crando,* a ring of fire manifested, “-time to pay the entrance fee,” he dropped his hand, the flames erupted, instantly vaporizing the grouped forces.

Mana Control: Tempest Variant – Hastened, ‘-let the song of death play,’ he dove and midway into the fall, pushed off the tower like an arrow and shot into the incoming army, “-onward onto death!”

Chapter 1144 Gesborrow

‘What I saw, what my men witnessed, the images are forever burnt into my mind. I still feel my heart race from what I saw, the blood, the murderous rampage, the total destruction, and most of all, I saw the turning of a new age. We’re scavengers by heart, we’re rodents, we relish junk and thrive in others’

despair... it was awakening, and I remember my people being hunted and tortured. It was the worse feeling I could have ever felt – I never knew a world outside of mine, but, as time passed, through literature and recounts of the village elders, I discovered there were more outside our finite realm. A place where war didn't matter, a place where life was allowed to flourish, unlike Draebala. We're constantly at war, we've forsaken the thought of standing against the oppressors. The wise were quick to fall into the shadows, to live like rats, to survive like cockroaches. We grow fewer as the days elapse, it is a sorry sight... alas, there's nothing we can do...' a humble carriage rocked through an uneven pass. Tall impending trees forked over the narrow path, sometimes invisible to the untrained, as most landmarks were closed-guarded and hidden in plain sight. No intruder was allowed in these parts – the great forest of Gesborrow.

The leader, tired and wounded from the prior battle, threw passing glances at Staxius. The latter, sweaty but unbothered, casually puffed and looked over at the landscape, 'shielded by mountains and steep slopes,' he observed, '-a valley known to a few locals. I doubt anyone would brave the unknown path, especially since,' the foul stench of death whispered, he looked over at a decomposing body of a man impaled against a tree.

"Mark of the Spine Wolf," one of the scavengers added, "-guardians of the forest and apex predator."

The others threw suspicious gaze at the comment, Staxius felt it, '-there's more to him,' and so, without a moment wasted, he looked at the man and nodded, "-tell me more."

Meanwhile, the leader was trapped in his own fantasies. '-Their deathly screams, the howls, why do they make me happy, why am I pleased to have witnessed the fall...' in there was the truth; Revenge. The more he thought, the more Staxius' image was embedded with the idea of total power, and the more grew an infatuation with power, '-he has the authority to change the tide of war. I need him to join us,' alas for the Leader, another keen-eyed companion, a demi-human girl of bunny characteristic, threw a pensive gaze at him, her fluffy complexion ending at her neck, where more human-like trait followed, was like a tan for tourists. Instead of darker shade against lighter shade – it'd a separation between skin and hairs, "-don't get any ideas," she whispered, holding the carriage's reins.

"What now?" he coughed, "-you caught me offguard."

"You're interested in him, aren't you," they murmured, "-you're infatuated with how powerful he is."

"So what?"

"You can't risk the Scavengers on a pipe dream. I told you, you're not strong, nor are we. We don't have the manpower to survive, let alone fight. Will you repeat the mistakes of your uncle, will you jeopardize our fate on a single man?"

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"I know, you don't have to tell me twice," unpleasant memories trickled back in, '-we lost everything. My uncle and father were both confident leaders, competent in their own ways. Honestly, uncle was most popular with our people, they loved his charisma, and was the light of the show. Father was more of the intellectual type; he didn't really stand out and only offered his council when needed. One sought strength, the other, survivability. After the death of my grandfather, the village split, each choosing a leader to follow. Evidently, uncle's popularity saw him take ? of the villagers, and they traveled

northeast, towards Inux, to settle. Father kept us close to the sea, seeing we were dependent on the ocean. Later, we heard the news of the coming war – and from what reports were said, Uncle lost his family in the first attack. Armed by revenge, he rallied the men under a single banner and rode to meet the enemy, answering the call of a noble he befriended. Like many tragedies, this turned out to be a ploy. Father sent words of warning, alas, uncle didn't much care to listen to a coward's word.'

'The noble betrayed him, the villagers were abducted, the men slaughtered and the women sold. Just like that, ? of our village was gone. Those who remained behind, the elderly and the fearful, well, we survived and were mostly orphans. Father rallied us and began settling at a small abandoned village, there, we established ourselves as the guardians of Gesborrow, becoming one with the forest and learning how to use the monsters to our advantage Those who survived the ambush formed a resistance party and are now trying to face the opposition. We keep to the shadows while they fight for the continent's sake. I brought it up countless times with my father, but he never accepts my request nor does he care. Father's not a man – he doesn't have the fighting spirit passed from household to household, like my uncle put it, he's a coward. What would survive if the whole continent goes to ruin? Nothing, he never answers, instead, returned my regard with a long private frown.'

"Don't doze off," she tapped his elbow, "-we have quite the trip, carrying all this loot will greatly beneficiate our cause."

"Loot who we undeservingly took from the man who won the battle. By all mean this belongs to him, I don't know why he refuses to take the credit or the items."

"Great men have a way of their own. They live by their ideals, we can't interfere with a person's mind, even if it's in their best interest. They have to find the answer for themselves, is that not what the master taught us?"

"I don't know how you can stand up for a father like mine. The caution will certainly bring the downfall of the village one way or the other. Don't forget, we were nearly forced to yield information about our base. If Gesborrow is found, there will be no survival."

"Shut up, how dare you speak about him like that. We may be powerful, but we're no fools. He taught the importance of wit over childish displays of strength. How could you, I'm so disappointed."

Staxius' conversation a few feet away was also quite informative. Regardless of the crossed expression the man received, he was happy to give intel, "-tell me more about the Spine Wolves."

"Are you sure?"

"Go for it, and while at it, sprinkle things you might find interesting."

"To be clear, I find most of everything interesting. Spine wolves, for example, are an evolution brought by the crossing of animals and demons by the Harbinger of Anarchy. This particular Demi-God is feared the continent over, though the man's activity isn't known as of yet, I'm sure he's out there doing experiments on other living things. He brought chaos to the land. Like the Spine Wolf, many other creatures roam the forest. Some are doing, others vindictive. If you must know, there's a high probability of death during nightfall, the shadows are layered with taint. I'm not lying when I say, the shade kills. One of much Gesborrow strangeness." Like so, the conversations were filled with information. A few days later, a pillar of smoke rose in between the frosted tips of large pine trees. It felt

like a painting, a canvas drawn with blue and white. Snow led to a thicker greener outline of trees that continued to a frozen lake over which grew a massive collection of snowy peaks, the alps. The hamlet, Gesborrow lay near the frozen lake, the latter of which as one headed southeast, turned river and merged with the sea further down.

“Here we are,” said the leader.

“Right,” Staxius exited the carriage to be hit by a sudden pressure, “-we might have a problem,” he pointed at the smoke, “-the smell of death.”

Their heart collectively sank. Everyone sprinted into the forest, disappearing into the darkness of the foliage. Staxius calmly tended to his gear and only when a few minutes had passed, threw a knapsack over his shoulder and continued, ‘-they were attacked. I can feel it coming, the hamlet’s no more. Seeing the frozen lake, I don’t think they have the means for me to continue the trip on a boat. I didn’t want to waste energy flying days, it’s looking more and more like a necessity.’

Gesborrow, the scavengers’ headquarters lay in ruin. Nothing was left. Wood smothered, the log cabins, ones home to elders and children, were charred and in pieces. Effigies made of bones and wristed lined the snowy banks of the lake. No one remained, everyone had disappeared into the wrecked village. The demi-human girl waited at the lake, “-not joining them?”

“Don’t have anyone to cry over,” she threw pebbles at the solid surface, “-they must be devastated.”

“You knew this day would have come, didn’t you?”

She rose her ears, “-how?”

“Intuition,” he answered, “-pardon me for eavesdropping. You’re quite the manipulator, using that boy’s poor uncertainty against himself. What are you trying to do, kill the bravado?”

She shook her head and sighed, “-my job from the start was to protect him. I will do what’s needed, such as the responsibility given by my master.”

“Hold that thought for a bit,” he spun and faced the lake, ‘-I feel a heavy aura,’ he let go of the knapsack, “-take my stuff and go inside.”

“Why?”

“Just go,” he hovered over Orenmir, ‘-this presence isn’t normal. A titan?’

A slow rumble cracked the ice, he instantly clapped, *-I am he who slays without fear, I am he who shall be the last of what thy see. Heed mine call, thou whomst dared to fight the natural order, tis the day thou ought to be destroyed, Ancient Magic – Astral Binding.*

A giant arm pushed through the ice, shattering the lake’s surface and throwing ice into the skies, ‘-my spell, he shrugged it,’ he twirled his palms, *Pathway to the end, barrier to the truth, arise for thy master beckons thee. Disrupt the flow of reality, shatter the laws of causality, such is the way of the Anarchist, for where there is tension there is weakness, and where weakness resides, so grows the seed of fear, Death Element: Magical Barrier, Pentagram Variant, Hell’s Gate!* ice shattered at the translucent gate. A powerful force rose from the lake – water bubbled; steam rose.

“Destroy,” echoed a deep cry, “-Destroy,” a monster rose and growled – shaking the snow from nearby trees.

“Guardian of the Lake,” gasped the man from earlier, “-it’s the protector of the forest. Please don’t kill it, look at its eyes, the guardians under a curse. It never attacks humans, it never does,” and just before he finished – an instant cry, fire spewed and lit the man ablaze.

‘And he’s dead,’ Staxius hovered above the attack, ‘-a long tentacle that’s able to shape mana into various body parts. If I’m looking at this correctly, someone’s trying to evaluate my power. And for that, I need to search the area to find the culprit...’ orbs flung and exploded, ‘-this beast’ formidable,’ without hesitation, ‘-one simple solution,’ he extended his arms, “-come forth, Vengeance.”

“Orders, master?”

“Finish off that big ugly thing,” Vengeance shot forward, ‘-and if I’m correct, the attacker’s probably hiding in between the planes. Otherwise, there’s no way getting close to such a monster.’ *Shatter the norms of reality, bring forth the wave of tempest, blow as the wind of turbulence erodes one’s fragile stability, Ancient Magic, Spatial-Arts: Disruption,* ‘-there,’ he sensed the mana for a split-second, not even a blink sufficed to measure the speed, Orenmir was through an unknowing viewer’s stomach.

“Too bad, seeing Watchers be slain. You overstepped your boundaries, fellow comrade, and thus, thou must die.”

Chapter 1145 Elion

“Hypocrite.”

“Excuse me?” he held off the execution.

“You heard me right, Watcher of the Shadow Realm. The promise thee made was to safeguard thy realm, not invade another. I came to confirm the suspicion, and it seems, as a Watcher, I’m not one who overstepped my boundaries, it was you. It’s always you, and there in lays the fact – the Watchers can’t be stopped from picking a side. We’ve held our truths for long enough, thus, I call upon my powers, as the Watcher of Estonia, I pull from the void fragments of my heart and split open reality, for nothing has meaning,” the layer covering his chest carved inward, a swift breeze and the Watcher imploded, seemingly swallowed in on himself.

Yonder, a sprinkle of cold water rained. Vengeance sat upon a throne made of dead bodies, one hand held a sword, the other the head of the monster. Condensation brought a fog, and those who witnessed the battle rose from their hiding spots. Staxius advanced, or what remained of it – a single pathway of ice cut the lake.

“Master, I have slain the beasts.”

“How strong was it?”

“Not worth mentioning,” he dropped his head, “-please call on me when there are more battles. I can’t shake this feeling of wanting to hunt, I must acquire blood, I must gain the ability to slaughter. Master, we’re walking down a path of no return, as your weapon and companion, I must warn thee of the

coming dangers. Please let go of the notion of having fun in battle – we’re strong and must utilize the strength. No more holding back, even against smaller opponents.”

“I understand,” they exchanged a high-five. The fog settled; the lake’s level diminished. Staxius ventured into the village. His prominent shadow, seeing as the fog lingered, many held their breaths.

“Where are you going?”

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Sharp hands held his elbow, “-where are you going?”

“Demi-human girl, where is your leader?”

“He’s over there,” she confidently pointed over a dissonate view, nothing could be plucked, though, in her mind, the area was as clear as day, “-follow me,” she said.

A campfire lit outside the hamlet, inside a cave used for food storage. The fire danced, casting shadows of hunched figures. “-Last report,” said an uncertain voice, “-most of the villagers have died. Others crushed. Gesborrow is no more I’m afraid. I found this,” he inched forward a red band, “-the mark of the leader,” said the scout, “-Elion, you should take it.”

Elion slowly held the fabric, ‘-father’s dead...’

‘There’s nothing to gain from these people...’ Staxius stepped out of the cave and lit a cigarette, the white landscape with dark trees and tall peaks was one to behold. Monsters prowled the vicinity, ‘-peculiar’, he puffed.

The demi-human girl followed, “-where are you going?”

“Third time,” he answered and went around the entrance, to some nice flatland echoing into the valley, “-third time you asked where I’m headed.”

“What are you?” she narrowed a skeptical gaze.

“Someone who’s on a journey to unite this land,” he puffed, “-Draebala’s in war, and their enemy is me. The Shadow Realm is ruled by my people,” he side-glanced, “-I’m here to conquer the land belonging to the Aapith Nation.”

“Don’t lie to me,” she crossed her arms, “-no one can bring such a thing to Draebala. The gods have their own plaything, a lady coming from Kronos’ sect. She apparently changed sides and is leaking information about her previous team, I don’t know what they’re up to.”

“How would you know that?”

“We Scavengers have our ways. Between you and me, Elion’s a child. He can’t lead our people, not yet. I’m here to aid his journey,” she opened her palms, a symbol of power hovered, “-I got by the name of Hesta, I’m a guardian spirit who transcendence into divinity. I was once hailed as the goddess of Harvest by the people. Alas, when the time changes, so does their beliefs. I diminished in power and was left with only my life and symbol intact. I don’t possess any powers, only my wisdom which I granted to

Elion, the small boy who took pity on a stray and invited her home. I owe a great deal to the scavengers," she stepped closer, "-and I know you're not any simple man. You're a god, like me."

"Correction," he snuffed the cigarette, "-I'm no god. Hesta, you shouldn't get involved if you want to protect Elion. A great war comes, and I planned said war to be the last."

"What do you mean?"

A glacial wind blew, "-you know shortcuts to Inux?"

"Are you stupid?" she threw her hands up, "-are you insane, Inux is under their control. We can't approach a stronghold..."

"You can't, but I can," he smirked, "-I need to deliver a message."

"I can take you there," said a distant voice, "-I overheard the conversation," Elion shuffled, "-my apologies," he bowed, "-Hesta, I'm sorry," he bowed again in her direction and dropped to Staxius' feet, "-please, help me get revenge. They ruined our home, they took away our peace, the people of Draebala deserve more... I wish someone could understand the fear of battle, and what it means to live on a perpetual battlefield. I wish they'd understand our struggles and how afflicted our lives have become... there's no hope for survival, my father's efforts when down the drain... I can't help it anymore-"

"I do understand," he made no motion of helping the leader, "-I was brought up in a place called Dorchester, a land where war was waged constantly. I saw people killed, younglings abused, and mothers selling their bodies for a morsel of food. The stench of death, the rot of corpse... it's all too common, Elion. I'm afraid I can't help you," he echoed.

"..."

"I won't lead you or your people. That is something you should do. I will, however, think about it after I've reclaimed Inux. Guide me there in less than three days and I promise you'll get a safe place for the Scavengers to regroup."

"The confidence to give such a promise," Hesta's cynical gaze saw straight through Staxius, "-what if the promise fails, we'll be bait. I'm sorry, Inux made the promise of protection, look where it landed them, dead and desolate."

He remained silent, focusing his gaze on Elion, '-he's seen my strength and knows what I can do. I extended a bait, and he asked to help, controlling his action from here on should be simple. Hesta's wiser than she appears, she saw through my ploy and played the voice of reason. Too bad – it's human nature to flock to light in the darkness. Even if the darkness screams worth of wisdom, the light, fake as it please, will always gain their attention.'

"No matter," he dusted off his shoulder, "-the trip shouldn't be hard."

"-Wait!"

"..."

"I'll take you there," he nodded, "-Hesta, I'm sorry, I have to trust in him. Even if it's the greatest mistake I ever make, I have to trust him now, and leave the future for the weaver of destiny to decide," he

turned to Staxius, “-I will make my promise. In exchange, I only ask for you to give us a place to convene... Gesborrow’s done.”

“Deal.”

The preparation lasted a day – sunrise came the next morning. The dual orbs of sunlight rose over the mountains – casting gem-like shards of light upon the lake’s glittering surface. Where a boat kindly waited, the vessel was massive and decorated with ancient artifacts.

“The Scavengers’ praised possession,” Elion explained, “-we rescued it from a shore, it belonged to a warrior of the sea. A tribe whose name and influence once held terror over Draebala. It’s a fast vessel,” they hopped on board, “-sea travel’s easier, no monsters to worry about,” behind, at the mouth of the hamlet’ many graves lined the street. ‘-This is goodbye,’ Elion paid respect and climbed aboard. Everyone manned the deck, they went through the motions, pulling the anchor and calculating the wind, Elion stood at the helm confidently. Staxius and Hesta were opposite the stern, the bow.

“Just so you know, I don’t trust you” the ship moved and slowly advanced toward the river.

“Neither do I,” he returned, “-how good is Elion?”

“When it comes to handling a ship, I think that’s where he excels the most. The boy’s always been a favorite of the ocean. Tell me, Staxius, if your no god, how is it you think you can defeat Inux?”

“I couldn’t say what I am,” he puffed, “-did you think heroes and even demons for that man, of the olden days, knew what they were up to? The term was coined only after their stories were retold. It’s a simple affair, you don’t need to think about any of it. Of course, Draebala’s story won’t be known to anyone... the place’s forsaken.”

Thus, with their course set to Inux, a few days elapsed – the voyage turned long due to the instability of the seas near the shores. Elion masterfully plotted a course around and was scheduled to land at the farthest point.

“I contest your plan, captain. If we’re sailing at night, especially in traitorous waters known to be the death of sailors north of the lighthouse, this whole trip will be rendered useless,” arguments plagued the capital’s cabin hours before arrival.

“I appreciate the concern,” said Elion, “-if we approach them during the day, we’ll be shot out the sea. The best option is to arrive at night, there’s no full moon, and it will take a lot of concentration and luck to navigate through those seas.”

“INSANITY!”

“You don’t need to do anything,” said Hesta, “-we will handle it from here.”

And so, pitch darkness covered the seas. There was nothing to guide nor to lead. Elion casually stepped to the bow and snapped; “-my gift is to see in darkness. I can easily make the landing. What about you, Staxius, will be able to take the town in a single night?”

“Easily.”

Below deck, “-Elion’s gone insane. He wishes for us to die.”

“Calm down.”

“No, I will not, Hesta. He’s getting influenced by that man. He’d have never acted so rashly before. I hate this, we’re at the mercy of someone else...”

“Such is the price to pay,” said Hesta, “-we should put our trust in them. And if something goes wrong, you’ll be in the right to voice your concern. I will not entertain the thought of mutiny, not at this hour.”

“Fine,” they grudgingly waited.

Elion carefully followed the current into the lagoon – a feat that none saw or expected to be so smooth. It happened so quickly and easily they were shocked that they’d even arrive. ‘-There may be a lot of dangers with obstacles. If one knows the seas, he also knows that she has a plan for everything, I had to get the timing correct, just when the tide changes, and there, ride it.’ he looked at Staxius, “-this is far enough,”

“Right, I’ll be back in the morning,” wings sprouted, he darted into the night and came at the Castletown, ‘-the defenses haven’t been repaired. Just like I predicted, they don’t see the need for fortification. Who’s there to contest them anyway. And, as I thought, the battle brought a lot of damage to the remaining defenses,’ *Fifth-layer Spell: Detection,* ‘-that’s quite a lot,’ he sensed numbers in the thousands, ‘-are they all fighters?’ he hovered, ‘-a single entrance to the west, facing the pathway into the forest,’ he landed somewhere west, in the forest. Torches lit the castle battlements. Soldiers patrolled. ‘-Seems like I’m fortunate. I didn’t detect anyone of higher rank. Regardless, I have to show them the strength of the shadows, *Souls of the dead, thee who’ve sworn to serve me in life and death, arise from thy slumber for the time of the reckoning has come. Awaken from the eternal slumber and rise, come to my side. Blood-Arts: Ghouls Requiem.*

Chapter 1146 Lixbin’s Requiem

“Lixbin, the god of fraud,” painful memories stung, forcing the god to awake from a restless slumber, ‘-the nightmare doesn’t stop. I find myself looking back at my actions. Nothing changes. I thought I was siding with the better side. They seemed like they were on the right course. However, to my surprise, it figures they didn’t care. I was stupid to think otherwise. The Heavenly Convention used my name, they used it to blame the following incident of them losing angels, to justify the full-scale invasion of the Aapith Region,’ he strolled side to side, changing views from mountains to the partial sea over darkened trees resembling dagger-tips. ‘-why did I ever believe in Artanos? Why did I shake my loyalty so easily,’ he eventually stepped out and glanced sideways past the courtyard and into the arch headed into the dungeons, ‘-their screams haven’t stopped. Igna Haggard’s children are yet prisoners. I guess my attempts at getting them to respace ended in my alienation. They saw it as an act of treason and sought my replacement. I was made the guardian of Inux and forcibly tied to the vicinity. I’m their protector... what a stale existence,’ a pressure drop suddenly perked his lips. ‘-This presence,’ he waited atop one of the watch towers. The familiar sound of running snuck into his direction, “-UNDEAD” a soldier barged into his room, “-lord Lixbin, we’re under attack from the undead,” he gasped, a muffled crack, the man’s head exploded into the room. ‘-Gunfire?’ he cowered under the desk, ‘-we don’t have guns in this world.’ The sound of carnage and destruction seeped. ‘-It’s him, Igna’s come to reclaim this territory. Well, I better give him a good fight, otherwise, he won’t be able to face the coming tide,’ with a resolute exhale, Lixbin rose and beckoned the soldiers left standing, “-call the army, ready their weapons and

activate the boon. We will face the undead horde with a force of equal measure. Inux must not be allowed to fall.”

The message was quickly relayed. And in those few seconds, a report came from the town square, “- they have breached the town. We must close the gates to the castle, the invaders are cutting out forces. We can’t hold.”

A feminine outline phased into reality, “-allow me,” she said, “-allow me,” Cleopatra bowed.

“Then, go for it,” he clapped, releasing the hold upon her powers, “-take your soldiers,” a portal opened, “-and go wage war. You’re free to act however you wish, Cleopatra. I will impose this, you must return, for I know no one else like you, my dear.”

“Don’t grow soft on me, Lixbin,” she winked, “-I haven’t forgotten our promise. You saved me from my world and my death, we’re comrades, don’t ever forget that,” she slipped out the door like a feather to the wind. ‘-I know she’s gone,’ he fell into his chair, ‘-I knew the moment she left my care, she wouldn’t return. And it turns out, I was right,’ he stared at the ceiling, the cacophony of a growing battle stung, and the ground shook and pulsed. Buildings crashed, the sound of destruction and defeat. ‘-Like me,’ he sank into his thoughts, Cleopatra gathered her forces in front of the main-castle gates, ‘-I was from among the first generations of humans. I transcended my mortal limits and became a human god. The title didn’t pose much at first, was a way to show off. Even then, with the heaviness which came with the title, I absentmindedly followed instructions and was led into the path I locked myself into. I was to represent Darkness and cater to the deepest, most degenerate thoughts the human or godly psychic could ever dream. In those dark hours, a god came to me, Lord Death. I remember his words, even now, as the current inheritor burns the town into ash, “-why have you lowered your head?”

“Have you come for a favor?” a slim, tired-looking version of Lixbin gasped from over a bloodied altar. The cave cast a simple glow over the god and his ritual, “-a proper offering must be made.”

The elegant figure of Death ambled, “-I haven’t come to make demands,” he suavely smiled, “-you can call me Death.”

A shaken smile surfaced, “-my salvation, at last,” he trembled, “-please, end my suffering!”

“A proper sacrifice must be made,” Death returned, “-no, Lixbin, I have come to make a deal. I consulted with a friend and have seen what the future could hold. It’s very hazy but I sensed your mana guiding the one who will lead Reality into a new age. The story of our reality is complex, and us gods weren’t so popular wherein all began.”

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“Why does it concern me... I was chosen from among the slaves. An orphan forced to bear the weight of darkness. I blinded trusted and landed here, in the pits of the abyss. I’m no chosen one.”

“Don’t worry,” he approached and kindly caressed the broken boy’s head, “-it is what it is, my friend, you will not suffer the cruel fate of darkness. I will bestow on thee the gift of Necromancy and the gift of Twilight Displacement. Do with it as you wish – the power will grow and evolve per your needs. Becoming a high-ranking god shouldn’t be hard. Take heed and become strong. In exchange, I will ask this.”

Having received overwhelming power, Lixbin perked his ears in gratitude, “-one day, after I have created a realm residing from the reality – and I hope it comes soon, a man will emerge from the shadows. A cynical man, my heir, the true incarnation. He will hold the powers of the Three in One, and for him to awaken those powers, I will need someone to guide his every step. A clever man will easily disguise his intention and lead my heir’s action. You will have to become a villain... do that for me, and I promise, I will make the darkness that plagues thy mind disappear.”

“Parting from darkness?” he stood, “-I won’t. I’ll keep the darkness close to my heart. I will accept your request, Death. When the time comes for the heir to grow, I will light the path,” and so came to pass, a secondary title known only to him and Death, the Guide.

‘From that day, I waited until tales of a man were whispered across the capital. A man known as Staxius Haggard, a student of Clareville Academy would force Undrar, the Bringer of Death, into action. I knew instantly it was him. And there, set on to manipulate the people around him – I didn’t invade too much, I only added a touch of darkness where the path strayed. Cleopatra joined me in my quest and we agreed to be the villains for Staxius’ sake. Lucifer did his own thing, playing the villain, as did I. It’s underhanded and I fear there is no salvation from my actions. I can take solace in the result,’ he waited outside on a terrace, watching the closed gate shake, “-we’ve done our job. The rest is in his hand.”

“FOLLOW ME!” Cleopatra cried, her clothes torn to shred – no weapon or magic pieced her skin, she led the march, fighting to save whoever was caught in the crossfire.

Stab, she fell, blood flowed down her waist, “-Cleopatra, you’ve caused me so much harm, and there you are, still breathing. How goes it, little wench!”

“Staxius,” she coughed and defiantly rose her hands, “-you won’t get the best of me that easily,” and clenched. A painful expression flashed across the collective faces, “-you might have won the battle,” she smiled, “-you haven’t won the war!” her chest glowed, ‘-this energy,’ Staxius subconsciously thrust his hands forward, and ripped out the glow, “-the symbol of self-sacrifice,” he blew, turning the symbol into ash, “-don’t go out in a blaze of glory yet. I need to see my kids first,” he grabbed her by the neck, the soldiers ran forward to surround the invader, “-ready your weapons.”

Staxius took notice of their will and simply signaled, “-may your deaths not be in vain,” muffled shots eradicated whoever stood in his way. They were at the main gate, where Staxius nonchalantly kicked it open, “-Lixbin,” he threw Cleopatra on the ground, “-there’s no chance of victory. I have surrounded Inux and taken control of the guard towers. Your forces are being wiped as we speak. I’ve come to seek out a discussion.”

“You’ve come to speak?” he leaped from the balcony, wing-shaped shadow slowing the fall, “-what of Cleopatra, is she alive?”

“Barely,” he rubbed his hands, “-you took off her oath. She came at me ready to sacrifice her existence for a chance at victory. Why go so far, why yearn for such destruction, I don’t get it.”

“Because,” he summoned swords, “-such is the purpose of A GUIDE!” and lunged forward. Staxius barely summoned Orenmir to parry the first strike. He dipped under Lixbin’s second sword and gained some distance. They exchanged glances and ran at one another – the vivid unpredictability of Lixbin didn’t break through Staxius’s calm demeanor. The latter’s version of the fight was slowed, Lixbin’s every move

was read before it even happened, “-the gift of foresight,” he ducked and threw his sword at Staxius’s left side, and the weapon drew blood. “Enough play around,” he dropped the short swords, an aurora-like hue gathered at Lixbin’s hand, *I call upon the power long granted to me by Death. Rise from the slumber and one with my oath, Twilight-light summoning: Imperstra, the Sword of Gest,* a great sword summoned, it constantly spewed aurora, each hue of color represented a part of Lixbin. He walked and absorbed his energy.

Sparks flew from both sides, “-one swing to end it all,” crossed their minds. Staxius lowered his stance, and a sheath manifested. Lixbin held his sword above his shoulder – a lightning crackle, they disappeared – and in an instant blink, Staxius stood on the opposing side with a chip on his face. Lixbin fell to the ground with a strike to his neck. Blood poured purposefully, ‘-a god-slaying weapon,’ he trembled, ‘-Staxius’ grown into a strong person. He’ll easily cut down what comes in the future.’ Cleopatra’s pale visage lay at his side, he reached for her hands, ‘-if I die, I want to die with you by my side, Cleopatra.’ Her losing conscience understood his intent, they exchanged a last glance. Rain fell, “-you two are idiots,” Staxius stood over them, “-you thought I was going to eat your lies again? Lixbin, stop with the guide act. I know what happened, Lord Death told me much of what he did for me to reach my position. Cleopatra, and you too Lixbin, you’ve been cast aside from the Heavenly Convention. Forced to stand in Inux as bait for when I do come to Draebala. This works out perfectly,” *Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes perspective, watcher watches, the creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht.*

“I’m healed?”

“Me too?” Cleopatra blinked, “-why?”

“No one needs to know what happened here today,” he smiled, “-Lixbin, I’m willing to cast aside what happened in the past. Let’s start over. Goes the same for you, Cleopatra, you are a pain and the bane of my troubles, however, with you two out of the way, I can breathe easy. I hate to admit it – having you on my side will be a great asset. Won’t have to look over my shoulder as often.”

“Just like that?” Lixbin exhaled, “-willing to forgive and forget?”

“Sure.”

“Finally,” Cleopatra stretched her arms and shouted, “-no more games,” she stood on her feet, her breast prominently glistened under the rain, “-no more games,” she smiled, “-no more games!”

“What’s she on about?” narrowed Staxius.

“Cleopatra is eccentric, she hates lying more than anything. Her act in deceiving you were forced onto her by me, don’t blame her...”

“I see,” he clapped, the rain vanished, “-getting soaked isn’t a great start. I have to check on my kids, let’s meet in the dining hall later.”

Chapter 1147 Goddess of the Celesital Seas

Silent and heart-wrenching. Despite the rather casual outlook on how the battle ended, there yet remained a bit of sensation within Staxius’s chest. The closer he walked, the bigger grew the archway,

and there, underneath the clouded sky, a simple ray of light guided his motion toward the dungeon. Two seats were left empty; the guards died. A torch on its way out and the other, empty. He reached for the rusty handle; the door beckoned a mighty creek. A cry enough to call upon surveying guards, ‘-the rust becomes a formidable alarm,’ he ducked under the low ceiling and adventured deeper. A certain smell made its presence known. For those unlucky to smell, let alone see a body’s decomposing state, they understand the pungent smell it echoes. Those of humans, encompassing demi-humans and humanoid wearing limbed races poured what could only be described as a toxic ooze. The foul smell punched with such force to make one’s head spin.

Staxius raised his hand and snapped into life a white flame. The gentle glow cast a deep shadow; it enlightened the coming cells. The array was complex, ‘-a crypt turned dungeon,’ he explored further, ‘-or rather, a dungeon turned crypt.’ Skulls of various kinds were lain and stacked, a wall of bones, a wall of skulls – if not the smell, it’d have been a very pleasant sight.

The deeper he walked, the better grew the cells, and by cells, it referred to the inmates. Those closer to the entrance were dead, left to be eaten by the dungeon’s natural cleaners. Further, he walked, bones held morsels of flesh, and the more he advanced, the more the bones gained their prior status. Eventually, ‘-there’s the first cadaver,’ unmaimed though deliberately left in how they died. Arms tired to the iron cage, bloodied footprints, and torn clothes. ‘-Dungeons,’ he shook his head and continued, ‘-was abused to death. Good to see,’ he paused, ‘-not good to see?’ he lit a cigarette and reached the end. The darkness there was encompassing, he rose his palms to hung corpses, placed as if it were a slaughterhouse. Some skinned, others, gutted, the floor reeked, ‘-the smell comes from here,’ he breathed through his nose, ‘-better get used to the smell,’ and continued into the swinging display of races. The flame eventually cast great darkness in one of the corners, ‘-the hidden room,’ he skipped over a puddle of muck, ‘-iron gates,’ he casually undid the lock and entered.

Torches lined on pillars, each lit automatically. The cells were empty, he continued, ‘-how far did they keep them?’ a muffled cough and pained yelps emerged. He clapped, and the torches spewed flames twice their size.

“No more,” came a disgruntled voice, “-Saniata’s had enough, she needs a break. I can’t keep healing her...”

“Shit happened, brother,” came another despaired sigh, “-if not Saniata, who’s going to treat those bastards. They’ve already cut her tongue and thrown acid on her face... she’s blind... I doubt she even feels pain now...”

“DRACONIS, WHY?”

“RAPHAEL, STOP IT, WE CAN’T HELP. WE’RE DOOMED.”

“In the end, I guess we were abandoned.”

.....

He crossed into an open space; three cells were in a triangle shape. A chandelier of body parts marked the center, under which resided an altar. “-Who said anything about getting abandoned.”

“...”

“Am dreaming?”

Staxius cast light onto the cells, “-you look like hell.”

A muffled plea, a cry for help whispered from the northern cell, “-Draconis?” Staxius stared at him and Raphael, the duo could but keep their gaze lowered. ‘They’ve shrunk. Their powers were restricted by Artanos... must have been during the war.’ He followed the muffles and sniffled, “-ayeh,” said unintelligible words, “-athyer.”

Dark mana flowed, ‘-for the third time,’ he grabbed the iron cage, a murderous ire filled his gaze, ‘-they’ve taken one of my children and abused them,’ he effortlessly split the cage, “-Saniata,” he dropped to his knees and held her blindfolded face. Her skinny, battered, and bruised body was apparent through the rags. She no longer held the dignified aura he once admired. Without a moment’s notice, she forced herself onto her knees and tapped her way around Staxius’ chest – her small hands trembled, she reached for his waist, “-STOP,” he grabbed her hands, “-what are you doing?”

“Pops, she can’t hear you,” came a woeful Draconis, “-Saniata gave her body and soul to save us. She willingly pledges herself to the foul beasts for us to be free. Our torture was to watch as the ritual lasted each night from midnight to three. Demon beasts would raise from the altar and invade her cell, they’d do unspeakable things, and she’d get beaten and thrown across the room.”

“I used my magic to heal her,” said Raphael, “-after a while, the poison of their taint made her immune to my magic. Her pain, I don’t dare imagine it.”

They collectively exchanged glances and stared at Staxius, “-Father, you were too late to save her...”

“It’s never too late,” a bright red flame burst out of Orenmir, “-I heard everything,” gasped a familiar face. Scars filled her arms and legs, “-I’ve done it,” she gulped, “-father, I survived Orenmir’s trial, I’ve returned,” many swords hovered around her back, “-I’ll take care of Draconis and Raphael, you focus on Saniata.” She tapped his back and nodded.

‘Guess Sathanas’ returned stronger than before.’

‘Saniata, my foolish daughter,’ he caressed her head, and her trembling stopped, “-can you hear me?”

“Pops?”

“The telepathy works. Saniata, it’s me.”

“You’ve come to save us?”

“A little too late for that. What happened to you?”

“Look at my body, it should be enough explanation. Come on now, restore it so I can wear cute clothes again.”

“...”

“Are you surprised?” she chuckled, “-pops, I knew you would come. I needed to buy time, the only way to appease those sadists is to give them what they wanted. I had to take the fall for the team, otherwise, Draconis and Raphael would have fought and died needlessly. We can’t lose any more people. They

killed Formle and the apprentices – if I were to die, it wouldn't take from your firepower. Draconis needs to live as does Raphael, I'm not that special, I can be cast aside."

"You know well-

"-that you hate self-sacrificing bs. I know, I hate it too. It's just, it was the best option available at the time. My teacher did say to cut your losses and retreat if the battle is unwinnable."

"Quoting me now of all the times," he sighed, "-at least the ritual didn't break your soul. You have good resistance."

"Yeah, I acted hurt but was alright in comparison. Sure took a beating physically... nothing a few spells can't heal. I'm so happy you're back, pops, I waited for so long... you've returned, thank you."

Bright lit beamed from her cell, "-I should be the one thanking you." They are mentally transported into a realm of white and purity. Saniata walked about, white and distant grey giving features to blocks and squares, there were no details, and the ground she stood upon was a darker shade of white with lines of black stripped as if to make many smaller squares.

"Confused?" said a prominent voice.

"Who's there?"

"Me," Staxius materialized, "-Saniata, it's good to see you."

"Where are we?" she turned and turned, looking at the infinite white space.

"This, my daughter, is the Realm of Naught, the place of nothingness, the place where all comes into creation. It is an unknown Realm, those who step into this place are blessed and cursed at the same time. I've never revealed this card to anyone, it is one I keep hidden and never wish to use. For tis a realm not for battle, but for creation and alteration of Reality itself," he swiped, strands of various hues manifested as if holograms, "-each one of those lines is a different dimension with its many timelines. The center," he opened his palm, "-is my symbol, the three in one. This is the true power of the Adjudicator. I can change reality with a single word, it is as simple as saying yes," he clapped, the strands turned image-boxes, "-those are memories and glimpses of the future. I was never really one to glance at the future."

"Why are you showing this to me?"

"You said you were useless, willingly sacrificed yourself for your siblings. You did what I should have done. I'm the parent in name, not in action, I should have been there sooner, or so I'd have said," he paused and sunk his dense piercing gaze into her soul, "-such be the ideals Igna spouts. I'm not Igna, not anymore. Consider him gone. You stand before Staxius Haggard," he grinned, "-Saniata, you're here for one reason."

"..."

"To become an almighty god," he clapped, her body in Draebala faded into ash, and it reappeared in the Realm of Naught, "-there's the mortal vessel. We're going to transfer your soul into a body that is far better suited for battle. This is the one and only time I'm going to create an entity with enough power to rival even the supreme god."

“Why?”

“For my satisfaction,” he smiled, “-there’s no nothing sweeter than revenge served on a cold plate. Don’t you want retribution?”

A similar sinister smile rose upon her face, “-how did you know?”

“We’re related after all,” they smiled. *Book of Rue, on the first day of the devil’s awakening – the ancient art of creation falls, for the conjurer is a priest sworn to the gods but led astray by evil. The anti-god, the devourer of angels, the embodiment of evil, cursed King Alfred, reaches the heavens and swallows Creation’s heir, gaining the powers of Creation. Fashion into life a perfect replica, grant the symbol of Creation; Yeve,*

An empty shell built from the feet up, “-you want it exact or want some changes done to it?”

“Give me long blue hair, a good female physique, and blue eyes, and keep my tanned complexion. I want to be a little taller if possible.”

“Yeah, character creation,” he shook his head and sighed, “-that better?”

“Yes, perfect!”

He rose from his stead, *-Words hidden from the world, symbol kept underneath Reality’s many fa?ades, heed the call of thy creator, heeds the voice of thy master. I beckon the power of the one and truth, I call upon my name as the one who rules and guides all; Reality Bend – Art of Creation: Power Symbol Genesis!* the realm of naught shrunk onto Staxius, “-with this, I create the legend of the Goddess of Celestial Seas, the guardian of the passage between the mortal and the divine, the protector of the Celestial Space – Saniata the Celeste,” the threads of reality twanged,”-for the ritual to complete, you will have to die,” he casually lifted his finger, her head rolled off her shoulders, *Order of the Adjudicator – symbol of the Celestial Seas, Saniata’s Daggers, from genesis to its host, under my contract, I seal the pact and grant Saniata – the position of Guardian of the Shadow Realm and instate her as a Candidate for Supreme God,*

A blinding glow flashed, Saniata opened her eyes to a peaceful beach overlooking an idyllic ocean, “-like it?”

“Pops, where are we?”

“That is the Celestial Sea,” he clapped, the sky vanished for a starry night, “-the place you whole dominion over. I created your legend and bestowed a powerful body as well as a symbol of power. You’re without a doubt, on par with the Guardians now.”

“Do I have responsibilities like, do I have to protect the Celestial Seas or whatever?”

“Not really, it’s your background story. The Celestial Seas didn’t exist, but now it does. It’s the realm separating the Shadow Realm from the other dimension. Long story short, you’re strong and don’t have to do much. Same life, just stronger.”

“What about you?” she turned, the realm shattered for reality, “-pops?” she blinked. Staxius dropped.

“What happened?”

“He coughed blood then fell, I don’t know.”

Chapter 1148 ‘-they’re still there, smiling.’

“Saniata?”

“Saniata, is that really you?” Draconis and Raphael broke their shackles. An unconscious Staxius lay beside his daughter. Her wavy long hair fell over her shoulders. She held his head and smiled, ‘-I feel powerful, I have memories I never had before. I know things I didn’t know. My title of Celestial Guardian, the guardian of the separating plains holds a lot of weight. As it stands, I’m rival to even the guardian of Time, the one who keeps travelers from messing with the past,’ and there, as she held his head on her lap, a flicker of a mild flame flashed on Staxius’ stomach. ‘What was that?’

“What happened to you, sister?” Draconis and Raphael ran to her side.

“I changed,” she smiled, “-and I was saved. We should be happy,” she motioned a helping hand, “-we need to get pops into a bed.” The interval between day and night, the space where the air felt moist, the air crispy, and the sound chilly – the trio walked with their father toe towards the barracks. It felt like a dream, especially Saniata, ‘-I walk with a sense of knowledge. My steps reflect, and I see things I couldn’t before. Sparks of energy, higher lifeforms, spirits – I willingly convey my thoughts to the elements. Is this what becoming a god feels like?’ she looked around, ‘-I can see glimmers of their destiny, their fate written in gold or rust. The shiner, the better, and here, everyone looks dull.’

“What happened?” a curious Lixbin echoed from one of the stairs headed onto the walls.

“Why are you alive?” fired Draconis, “-did pops spare your life?”

“Yeah,” Lixbin shrugged, “-he said to meet in the dining hall. Looking at him now, don’t think he’ll make it.”

The outside noise faded; a deepening silence overwhelmed from within. Like claws stretching outward to grab one’s soul – Staxius found himself at an unknown place. ‘This is my payment?’

“Not your payment,” echoed numerous voices, “-we owe you our lives,” many ghastr-like forms fluttered to and fro – visibility bloomed, and he stood inside a cave, in the middle of an elevation, a half-pyramid, on which lay slabs of metal covered in ancient writings.

.....

“Where am I?” he studied the slabs, but nothing came to.

“Your core,” said a familiar voice, “-we’re inside your head. A reflection of what you feel and act upon. It is cold as ice, hard as a rock, and desolate like the open seas. The ancient writings are the boons offered to you by the ages. Conditions and powers laid in bold, such is the power of the three in one, to modify their ability as they wish. This part was never meant to be revealed, for with the ability to modify, comes the tumultuous act of self-preservation and harmony. Cast your gaze below,” he obliged – a sinking feeling pulls his heart, ‘-so many shattered slabs. Are those?’

“Previously failed combinations. You stand upon a pile of your failures. The four plates placed upon the pyramid are as follows, Alfred, Staxius, Igna, and lastly, the one who encompasses all, the Adjudicator. They contain their powers, their spells, and what they’ve learned. Previously the spells came from

muscle memory and awakened randomly. Not anymore, you have the knowledge and there, within the words carved by your predecessors, now can pick and choose between which host to embody. Of course, you can always create a new persona – a combination of the four, alas, as the pile show, it will take an enormous effort.”

“Why am I here, I didn’t ask for power?”

“Of you did. By creating a new candidate for the position of Supreme God, you unlocked the last barrier holding the overwhelming power.”

“It comes with a big price,” he crossed his feet and sat, “-the curse of the three in one. Overwhelming power that eats one from the inside out. The more I use my powers, the shorter grows my lifespan. I’m immortal to the extent of how I choose to use what lifespan is allowed.”

“Such is the curse of being the Three in one. You, alas, bound by your tremendous strength.”

“The only way to win is to allocate my powers to other hosts. Creation, Death, and Time.”

“Correct.”

“I can’t do that, not yet,” He lay on the ground and gazed into the light cast by crystals, ‘-I knew something like this would eventually happen. I understand why I had the urge to create a foundation from which others could spring. It was a fear embedded in the beginning. I remember parts of the other reality – it was a crude but happy place. If not for his coming to life, we would have lived.’

“What will it be, time grows nigh for daybreak.”

“I will return when the time comes,” he stood in front of an empty slate, ‘-a balancing act, huh,’ he stared at the words; Immortal, God-slayer, All-knowing, Death. ‘-Well,’ he waved his hands, some of the writings changed, ‘-won’t affect much since I can wield the three without a problem.’ An unseen force pulled his soul into the crystals and shot him out, passing countless frames of history, ‘-is this-’

Thus, the legend of the Celestial Goddess was born, ‘-clad by her wavy blue hair, the guardian of the Celestial seas appears and graces the listless lives of troubled sailors. Her call is akin to one of a mermaid, beautiful and melodic. She rules the ocean to the dismay of the God, Poseidon, whose authority waned over time. She appeared suddenly, answering the plight of a lost hero seeking revenge. And thus, with a wave of her hands, she conjured a magical weapon from the very sea that had taken his friends’ lives. An ocean of idyllic gold – the sea of eternity. Alas, the goddess’ power was too great, for when the god Poseidon knew of her hubris, he took to his brothers and invaded her kingdom, set to be the mighty Atlantis. They attacked with valkyries and undead demi-gods – wailing and slaughtering her people. She rose to arms, fighting equally against Poseidon and his brothers. Her battle was cut short – her closest aid, Ralph, turned his sword against his mistress. The island fell, and she was bound to the tallest tower, forced to watch as tsunamic waves crashed and plunged her domain into the seas. There was nothing left- the ocean regained its might and Poseidon reconquered his realm. The Celestial Goddess, fates unknown but revered to this day as a powerful goddess, was without people’s knowledge, granted a far greater responsibility and station. She became the Guardian of the Celestial Seas.’

“The legend of Saniata,” he pulled into reality, “-so that’s what happened.”

Comforting lights and good smells, ‘-what is this?’ he woke to a distressing sight, ‘-Lixbin, Cleopatra, and my children are sharing a drink and a warm meal. This smell is reminiscing, what happened?’

“Pops,” said a slightly tipsy Saniata, “-good morning,” her greetings got the attention of the others, “-He’s awake!” Lixbin proclaimed.

“Don’t worry about how this happened,” narrowed Raphael, “-let me explain,” he went into a short summary, “-in the end, we found that we were all forced under Artanos’ thumb. We’re all responsible for each other’s plight. As you accepted Lixbin and forgave, I think, Cleopatra, we thought we should respect our father’s decision.”

‘This worked out for the best,’ an orangish glow poured from the outside by the slated windows, “-I have a place to be. Lixbin, Cleopatra, meet me to the north after the forest,” he clapped, *Portal to the Ragno widened!*

“About time,” Elixia and Yui stepped through, “-about time, master.”

“My bad,” he clapped and cast a huge barrier around the town, *Once living now dead. O’ thee who’ve lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival* those lost in the fight was pulled into the abyss, *Souls of the dead, thee who’ve sworn to serve me in life and death, come to my side. Blood-Arts: Ghouls Requiem.* and rose in the courtyard, “-I’ve revived those whose souls were untarnished. This should give some manpower to rebuild,” he looked at Elixia, “-you know the drill. If we need more manpower, free to call upon the Shadows.”

He stepped out, the dining hall blossomed with life. Not long ago, the place was dead without a single shred of hope or energy. None cared about tomorrow, there was nothing save the cold harshness of Inux’s location. The gloomy skies always dampened the mood, and more often than not, the courtyard would be muddy and desolate. Heavy rains are good for some but lacking in vigor.

‘I didn’t come from the main gates,’ he slowly walked, a gentle shower cut across the land, ‘-I feared to see what was there,’ he summoned a cigarette and puffed. The barred gates held blood, the walls drenched in bloodstained hands, wasn’t hard to imagine the sight, ‘-people clawing to get out, soldiering crying to get in. A complete waste of life – total annihilation,’ the memories of wars. He reached into one of the pillars, flicked the cog, and opened the gates. A sharp gust slapped. Lines of stakes lined the path, bodies hung off trees and off battlements. In the crowd of decomposing bodies, ‘-there,’ he came across a familiar face, ‘-Cora, Kaleem, Yuria, and Starix,’ he shook his head in disdain, ‘-you were killed brutally. Fighting to defend the land I asked thee to keep. I failed as a leader – taking territory without being present is akin to a death sentence. I should have been here and expanded the Shadow Realm’s influence. In a way,’ he rubbed his hands at the cold air, ‘-this is perfect. Artanos fought and knows the power of the Shadow, he knows they’re weak. He’ll underestimate us if ever we’re in a battle. The deaths were not in vain,” he conjured the Hands of Lamentation and plucked them off the spikes, laying their bodies to rest just under the archway, ‘-the souls have been tainted. Can’t revive or save them. They died believing in a cause. I could try to bring them back, but it’ll mean reversing time... might not be beneficial. Knowing Artanos, he’s keeping track. Besides, your masters, the Guardians of the Shadow Realm, have taken their own path. Only Intherna remains... it’s not worth the effort. The best I can do is cleanse your soul,’ *Souls who’ve been lost and are bound to this world for perpetual suffering, heed my

call. I, Staxius Haggard, grant thee salvation. Follow mine voice, tis the place where the dead are reborn, tis the place where wrongdoers are to be purged – in my name, those who are to be judged, will be judged, and those who are to be saved, will be saved.* fragmented parts rose, ‘-I can see them,’ he smiled, ‘-they’re still there, smiling. They never gave up, even when we conquered their world, they never-’ he exhaled, ‘-this is the only thing I can do to save them,’ *Living or dead, I invite all to the realm of absurdity, serve me and my companions, be one of a greater family. Forgo the past and look towards the future, one in which thou art be immortal and without regret. Box of Soul: Shadow Realm Transmigration.*

“-you’ll be weak, but have your memories. It will be a chance to start. Go forth and live a peaceful life. be at ease,” their half-material bodies shuffled towards a white portal, they stopped, mumbled a few words, and bowed, and the portal vanished, ‘-thank you,’ he shook his head and sighed, ‘-they never change.’

“Elion, we can’t do this anymore!” tention below deck spilled into his quarters, “-we have to get back to our families. We lost enough time here. It’s apparent the man didn’t win. We need to go save our families!”

“I will hear none of it!” he echoed.

“I dare you,” came a visceral screech, “-take one step against Elion, and I will have your heads,” Hesta growled, her kukris shimmered with the rising sun.

Chapter 1149 The Demon within

“Lady Hesta,” the crew surrounded the area just outside the captain’s cabin, “-please step away,” they said, slowly brandishing their brooms and buckets. Some shook at the sight of others holding cutlery; rusty knives, and forks. The half-covered sun advanced, and dawn was upon the landscape.

“You should step away,” she hissed, her ears sharpened as did her stance, “-don’t move or I will kill you.” Tensions grew, and the aura intensified. Any false move could initiate a mutiny.

“Just leave, captain, we don’t want to hurt you, or Lady Hesta. We want to return home, we want to see our families.”

“Yonder!” the crows’ nest echoed, “-Ahoy,” he cried, “-the signal from shore!”

Elion ran through the crowd, casting their weapons or hardened stance aside, “-it’s the signal,” he took out the telescope and narrowed, “-it’s him,” a sense of relief washed over him, “-it’s him, it’s the signal!”

Hesta lowered her weapons. A collective sigh of breath washed the ship, “-come on, we’re headed to shore,” he ordered. The crew instinctively headed forth, and so, a few moments later, the ship led into a port owned by Inux.

‘Firm ground,’ Elion exited his ship.

“You made it,” said Hesta.

“Obviously,” Staxius returned, “-we’re not out of trouble yet. There’s much to do, and for now, I want to reinforce Inux as much as we can. There will be an expedition to the west in a week. I won’t be here to personally observe the rebuilding process. It comes to the people to fulfill said role. We have the

manpower and enough strength to protect from assaults. This Hesta and Elion is the start of the Shadow's conquest of Zayan D'olsak. Scavengers," he crossed his arms, "-as the one who captured Inux, I have authority on who and what comes and leaves."

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"Are you rejecting our stay?" echoed Hesta.

"Everything comes with a price," Elion followed, "-you captured the town and never agreed to give us shelter. You might have suggested but never confirmed it."

"Correct, the Scavengers are scattered all over the continent. Do as you would with your people. My people will guarantee the safety of Inux, not the safety of the population. Draebala is played with different rules. Lives are expendable,' he glanced at Hesta, "-such the hard truth of your situation."

"Survival of the fittest," she lowered her head, "-will you give us shelter?"

"Obviously," he nodded, "-don't expect anything else. I heard what happened, a difference of opinion and a potential mutiny. My informants already located the instigator's location."

Elion, confused by the information, switched his gaze from Staxius to Hesta, and vice-versa, '-what are they talking about?'

"Leader," came a distant voice, "-we need help carrying supplies into town."

"I'll be there," he raised his hand, turned to Staxius, bowed, "-I will take my leave. Thank you for granting us safe refuge. I will handle the people and any new refugees who may want to take shelter at Inux. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, go with my blessing," he nodded and slowly landed on Hesta, "-tell me," he stepped forward, threw his arms around her shoulders, and pulled, "-how about we have a little tête-à-tête?"

She puckered her lips and dropped her shoulders, "-lead the way."

Elion caught a glimpse of Staxius and Hesta, '-where are they going?' he paused whilst holding a box, "-leader, supplies," a sudden shout brought him to his sense. The duo walked up a slope and disappeared behind trees and boulders, as for him, the ship's shadow fell on the stone-brick port. Carriages came and went – the sailors gratefully shared a few celebratory gifts. With that, the capture of Inux was confirmed, though, news of the accomplishment wouldn't leave the camp until a month later.

A harsh cliff stood in the way of them and the rough seas crashed with big howls. The wind blew hard and cold, enough to push back the common man, "-why are we here?" she inched forward for a better view, and the waves exploded in white smoke, "-don't you know?" he ominously replied, lighting a cigarette, "-traitors to a newly formed resistance is bad. Scavengers are like rats. We need to establish contact with the resistance," he puffed. Her fox ears gently shook, '-what's this deep anguish I feel?' she gulped.

"The mutiny," he casually sat on a rock and crossed his legs, "-wasn't done by the crew. You led the assault. You whispered sweet nothings into their ears. Goddess of Harvest, you weren't completely honest with me."

'He figured it out,' she threw open her palms, and symbols of magic materialized, "-not on my watch," he stomped, the ground rumbled and chains of blood burst through, *Blood-Arts: Chains of Subjugation,* it impaled her palms and legs, raising her above the ground and solidifying with her pose in a cross-shape, "-AHHHHHHH" she screamed, "-MY POWER," she cringed, the brownish red chains pulsed from her to an orb in Staxius' palm, "-here lies the power I'm siphoning away. There are many ways to get answers – alas, for a waning goddess with a lack of followers, you're stuck between a rock and a hard place. I would say I feel for you... I would have if you'd chosen the path of honesty. We might have stood on the same page," he gradually pulled, each drop she lost sent mind-numbing pain across her body, "-so, ready to talk?"

Huff, puff, '-my powers,' she trembled and further widened her wounds, "-what d-do y-y-you want to k-k-k-know?"

"Mutiny, tell me why?"

"Stop," she begged, "-please let me live, I'll tell you everything."

"Do you think me a fool?" he pressed on the suction, she writhed in pain, "-STOP!"

"Do you think this is fun for me?" he flicked his cigarette at her face, the lit part burnt her lower lips, "-huh, do you think this is fun for me?" he phased and reappeared behind, "-do you think I like to torture people?" the chains lowered, allowing her to kneel with her arms still spread apart, "-do you think I enjoy this?" he grabbed and pulled her hair.

"AHHH!" tears flowed.

"Lovely ears," the nails sharpened, he effortlessly sliced half of her ear off, and the beauty in her feature faded, like the blood flowing from her wounds. He forced her on her back, the chains pulled on her four limbs and slowly stretched, she cried, "-MERCY," she wept, suffocating under her tears, "-AHHHHHH!"

"This kind of pain is nothing," he casually knelt, lighting another cigarette over her face.

"STOP IT!" came a distant cry. A shaken Elion trembled, "-HESTA?" he ran at Staxius, "-LEAVE HER ALONE," Staxius smirked and stepped away at the last moment, knocking his foot, sending the poor man over the edge, "-SAVE HIM!" he went off the cliff, swallowed by the crashing white flames of the sea.

'Elion...' a deep sense of ire pulsed, "-WHY DIDN'T YOU SAVE HIM!" she broke the chains of subjugation, forcing her to stand with what little power remained, "-I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!" two kukris summoned at her hand, "-YOU FUCKING DEMON!" she dashed.

'This is what I wanted to see,' he side-stepped and dodged her attacks effortlessly, '-there's a fine limit that holds a goddess' power. I wondered why gods needed the influence to grow... the power of belief? No, it was nothing that grand. The influence was used to soften the burden of a god's overwhelming strength. Depending on their rank and status, they have self-destructing abilities. Hesta was the perfect candidate to test my theory. With the amount of damage I forced on her limiter paired with the false image of Elion dying, she snapped. The power she exudes is mighty.'

"-DIE!" she leaped, forcing all her strength behind a final attack – the mana waves rippled, and her force tore through reality, exposing the realm of naught, *Hear me, weapon forged in the death, relish the thought of slaughter, enjoy the thrill of sufferance, raise from thy slumber, Orenmir!*

“-FOR YOU!” her blades neared Staxius’s head.

“There’s no one stronger than me,” Orenmir summoned as he swung his hand forward and upward to meet her strike, “-it goes double for the worthless goddess,” the motion followed effortlessly, they touched, and he shattered her weapons and sliced cleanly across her neck, she dropped with considerable force – the sound of bone cracking muffled on impact.

Cough, she desperately held her neck, ‘-I’m bleeding out,’ she gasped, ‘-I can’t feel my body, did I lose?’ *cough,* more blood spewed, “-I f-f-f-fail.” Cold footsteps approached. Her consciousness faded, and colors turned dull hues of gray, ‘-I should have said the truth.’

“Never too late,” Staxius stood over her dying corpse, ‘-I did it again,’ he stared at his bloodied hands, ‘-the thrill of torture... I slipped,’ he smiled and lifted his head at the open sky, ‘-demon... she was correct.’

An hour passed. *Gasp,* Hesta shot forward, “-NO!”

“Calm the hell down,” echoed Staxius, “-you’re in the infirmary. Other people need rest.”

“Why are you here?”

“Don’t you remember?” he casually threw an apple in her lap, “-we need to talk after,” footsteps ran through the door, “-HESTA” Elion cried, “-I WAS WORRIED ABOUT YOU!” he ran and embraced her tightly, “-I’m so sorry, I should have been there, I’m sorry Hesta.”

“What happened?”

“You fell down the cliff,” he said, she could but watched as Staxius slowly left the room.

“You’re safe now,” Elion pulled her cheeks, “-I’m so grateful to him... he saved you.”

The view from atop the castle gates spread across the outer town, wherein the surrounding walls were smaller compared to the castle walls located atop a gentle slope. People moved in, refugees from nearby villagers – escapees from the Heavenly army’s assault.

“Staxius.”

“Lixbin.”

“I have a hint on where Gluttony might be hiding. Got a report of a beast swallowing a whole regiment from the Resistance whole a few weeks ago on the main continent. Looks like he’s in the army, working for the Heavenly convention.”

“Quite the predicament,” he breathed, “-thank you for the report, Lixbin. You do as you see fit. I will continue my hunt.”

“Understood, Staxius.

‘Gluttony is the last piece. I could fight a war on my own... taking Inux was a game of chance. It exhausted my mind... I barely made it that time. I can’t afford to call on the princes, Makina, or Fae for battle... There’s someone, yeah, there is someone who I haven’t asked for help in a while,’ *Portal to the Shadow Realm, widen and hear my call, old friend, I, Staxius Haggard, called upon thy strength, old

friend,* a howl shook the entire fortress, light blue hair, lovely wolverine ears, and a puffy tail walked through the portal, fierce light blue eyes commanded the area, *-howl!*

“Fenrir.”

“Looks like you finally called,” she stretched, “-calling on me is rather brave. Especially since you abandoned me after saying all that shit about peace in the Shadow Realm.”

“Was it not peaceful?”

“It was,” she narrowed, “-besides the point.”

“Fenrir,” he smiled, “-I’m glad you answered my call.”

“Well, I’m here to help,” she walked past and winked, “-nothing to get this ol’ wolf excited.”

“If you’re old, then what am I?” they chuckled.

Next stop, Staxius’ makeshift office. They entered with two guests already sitting with books in hand, “-Sathanas and Saniata,” he closed the door, Fenrir stuck to his side with a prominently strong aura, “-didn’t I ask you to rest?”

“Thing is, I can’t rest,” said Sathanas, “-I’m on edge. I don’t know what’s happened to me.”

“You’ve awakened as a new person,” he said, “-by completing Orenmir’s challenges.”

“Yeah,” she rose, “-Orenmir’s challenge, did you know your sword is sentient?”

“Of course I know,” he smiled, a translucent shadow pulsed, and the room sank with a feeling of nausea, “-Orenmir’s my trusted partner after all. Sathanas, go with Draconis, Raphael, and Saniata to Ragno. Lend them your strength.”

“No...”

“This is for the best,” he narrowed, “-Asmodeus and the others are there. Sathanas, join them, and so will my children. I won’t entertain refusal or did you forget what happened?”

“Where are Draconis and Raphael?”

“Gone,” Saniata answered, “-to Ragno. The war in Draebala, we need to get ready.”

“Then it’s settled.”

Sathanas crudely obeyed his word, and after all, she’d done, felt a little disappointed. The door closed, leaving Saniata to stare coldly into Staxius’ face, “-what about me?”

He shook his head, “-do what you want.”

Chapter 1150 Dionysus

Like that, a week passed. Inux’s local populous grew to accommodate locals. News about the reconquered fortress made the rounds. Internally, the place was run by the Shadow Realm, or the Shadows as it came to be known. The Scavengers were charged with maintaining supplies for the coming refugees. With a third of Zayan D’olsak in enemy control, the lack of provision waned on the

refugees. Elion was dubbed the right-hand man of the mysterious leader, a man whose only name was known, Staxius.

“We need supplies,” came a fatigued Fenrir, “-no more game to be had in the forest. Even monsters have stopped spawning. They’re being pulled to the southwest, I suspect there’s more development happening beyond our knowledge.”

“This is disconcerting,” he stared out one of the incognito buildings set in the middle of the town, outside of the castle. The locals ran.

“We don’t have food,” complained one of the refugees.

“The merchants are charging an arm and a leg. We can’t afford anything much less those ingredients. There’s no work, we should have remained in the forest, at least we could have foraged for food.”

“Any luck fishing?” they asked a passing fisherman.

“No, the sea is rough. The fishes seem to have disappeared. I don’t know how or why, it’s strange.”

“What should we do?”

“Wait for the higher-ups,” they sighed, “-don’t think we’ll last another week. Might be time to pack up our bags and leave.”

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“You have a newborn to care for, don’t make rash decisions.”

“He died a few nights ago,” he said with a soft and lowered gaze, “-I thought we’d be safe. Inux is a haven, I know shelter is difficult to find... still, without provision, we’ll all die.”

“Come on man,” came a group of hunters, “-don’t despair. We’re going further out today... join us.”

Staxius turned from the ajar window, “-the situation is worsening,” he shrugged, “-I did say we couldn’t handle so many refugees. There needs to be a triage... you know what I mean.”

“A genocide?” she placed her tail on her lap and rose an eyebrow, “-will that not go against the principle of the Scavengers?”

“Principles and morale are the last things in a person’s mind when survival is a matter of life and death.”

knock, knock, the shoddy door rattled, “-come in.”

Hesta entered slowly, behind her were men dressed in civilian clothing. Commoner’s outfit – a little on the thin side and bad for the weather and cold of Inux. She shuffled to Fenrir’s side, “-Staxius, please meet Enji, a representative from the Resistance.” A short but broad man cut across the crowd of five. He tipped his head with an affirming gaze, pushing his aura onto Fenrir, Staxius, and Hesta; his hands and movements commanded the pace around him. “-You must be Staxius?” said a gravelly voice – scraped and torn from years of screaming, such was the impression given by the sharply squared forehead and weathered face.

“Enji,” Staxius nonchalantly returned, “-can’t say I’ve heard much of you or your faction. I did see them in action – though, they died in the end. Tell me, is Hesta your spy?”

“Hesta isn’t our spy,” he paused, “-she’s one of us. We asked her to keep an eye on the Scavenger. People often mistake our factions. Unlike the rats, we fight for what we believe in. Our members have diminished but we are very much strong.”

“What was Hesta’s purpose?”

“...” Enji knitted his brow and checked side to side. No one responded to his nonverbal cues, of which, he simply crossed his arms and stared through Staxius, “-that I cannot say.”

“Of course, you can.”

“...”

“Tell you what. I will give you a piece of information in exchange for the answers I seek.”

“There’s nothing much I want to know,” he casually shrugged.

“Not even how Inux was taken in a single night, by a single man.”

Enji blinked, “-a single night?”

“Correct,” he lit a cigarette, “-sadly, I’ve lost interest. This meeting is pointless. You came to have a look at the stage of Inux. Are you, perhaps, planning an attack?” he smirked and looked at the northeast, “-the plan changed, didn’t it. You were going to take over the Scavenger’s supplies and base of operation. Gesborrow was there when you arrived, it was already destroyed. Keeping an army on your side is difficult, especially when the land has been exhausted from its resources. Either the Scavengers or the Resistance.”

“...”

“Enji, I would appreciate it if you’d ask your spies, yes, I know they’re waiting at the Little Maiden’s tavern, to gather their information from a credible source. You had a good enough look at our defenses. I see the Resistance planning to attack tomorrow night. I welcome the battle,” he puffed, “-selling out to the enemy... how predictable.”

“KILL HIM!” Enji cried. Fenrir made a clawing motion with her right hand – a bodyless apparition of a divine wolf materialized and chomped the attackers into halves. The torso-less bodies fell with blood spilling on the wooden floor.

“So predictable,” he snuffed the cigarette and flick it onto Enji’s head, “-leave before I change my mind.” A darker sense of control held the room’s tension. Enji eventually shrugged off the traumatic display of strength and left.

A full day passed. Fireflies fluttered over a stream passing by Inux. “-are you sure they’re going to attack tonight?”

“Yeah, I have it on good authority,” he tapped his earring, “-isn’t that right, Yui?”

“Oh please, give me a break,” she echoed, “-my schedule is full as is. Not easy to run two regions at once. Where’s Elixia, tell her to return to Ragno. We’re in the crucial process of choosing the next student council.”

“Right,” the interface lit with many dots, “-my apologies Yui. Tonight’s the last night, you’re free to leave after we’ve crushed the resistance.” He casually turned and faced an empty street. The houses were mute, with no signs of life. Most were evacuated into the castle, leaving the town itself barren and prime for setting traps.

“You sure we’re enough to handle them?”

“Yes, we are,” he smiled, “-Fenrir.”

“Well, long as there are things to kill, I’m not complaining.”

Facing them was the resistance’s army, a bulk of their force reaching in the four hundred. Many were volunteers and used rudimentary gear. Some had little to no training, though, as one born of Draebala, each possessed tremendous physical strength.

“Listen, men, we’re faced with a problem. The Scavengers have allied with a demon. They’ve betrayed the trust of the people. They’ve called upon a curse to cure their plight. We must do the same, and thus, we have asked our new allies – the Exions, to grant us a weapon. They have graciously brought forth an incarnation of the elder demons – a royal from the demonic realm. Hear me, man, tonight is the night we take back Inux, we will win the fight, we will win a place for our families to belong. Once we have Inux, I promise you, as one of the commanders, I promise good ale and good times. The resistance exists for the peace of the people, and for that reason, we will cross any line to make said reality possible. Draebala has abandoned us, and so have the gods we prayed to. What we’re left with is a faint sense of self-preservation. Muster whatever strength you possess, whatever you have, it will be great. For even climbing the tallest mountain, one’s journey starts with a single step.”

A cold wind tussled Staxius’s hair, “-the moon shines brightly tonight,” he looked right, Fenrir had one leg on one of the arrow slits, “-I sense someone strong.”

“You want to take him?”

“Sure,” she excitedly wiped her mouth, “-four hundred strong, sure you can handle them?”

“Piece of cake.”

A somber cloud passed over the moon. The surrounding visibility diminished, “-CHARGE!”

Pillars of fiery red shot into the sky like fireworks, ‘-mortar fire?’ he blinked, ‘-since when do they use modern weaponry,’ it arched and dove straight for town, ‘-this might be a problem.’ Fenrir leaped right in, her long bright hair floating as she met the coming attackers, “-AHH,” heads torn, limbs ripped – a gore full sight kindly censored by the low visibility. The death gasps were a symphony to his ears, *Barrier of the underworld, separation between life and death. Gate of Retribution, the land of judgment, rises from the abyssal flame, burn the opposition to ash, and grind their souls to smithereens, for there is one separation, and one separation halts all; Death Element, Deific Barrier, Abyssal Variant: Quretech,* a hand-like outline made of flames rose over the town in a cupping motion – the mortar fire exploded. The resultant shockwaves disrupted unsuspecting clouds.

'She's torn through them,' *Once living now dead. O' thee who've lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival,* those slain by Fenrir's might were swallowed by a purple stain, *Souls of the dead, thee who've sworn to serve me in life and death, come to my side. Blood-Arts: Ghouls Requiem.* and then spat out into different entities. Identical puppets were born for the simple purpose of killing. A muffled snap echoed in the distance, '-puppets soldiers born to kill, the battle's already over.'

There was no need for tactical assistance. Staxius simply sat over the battlements and watched as those who died returned as ghouls under his control. *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* those lucky enough to slip past Fenrir and the soldiers were met with a swift death. 'No more fireworks?' he squinted; '-guess they made short work of them. Going better than I expected,' like clockwork – Fenrir's blue hair shot past, *Mana Control: Tempest Variant – Feather wall,* "-you good?" he caught her fall.

"No," she shook her head and dropped from Staxius' spell, "-fighting a prince of Hell without using demon slaying weapons is not that smart. The ghouls you summoned have been swallowed. He blocked my attack and sent me here," she casually cracked her knuckles and shook her hands, "-I'm going in for a second round. Don't feed him. Also, I'd check the flak just in case. They don't seem troubled by our show of force."

'Off she goes,' her dash left cracks in the wall, '-maybe I'm underestimating them,' he closed his eyes, the bicolored pupils changed to one white shrouding in flakes of purples and red, "-show me the way," he widened his gaze, reality faded in and out, "-she was right. A floating fortress," he looked up, "-a celestial ship. I wouldn't have noticed it using my normal sight. It transcends expectations," the giant airship lowered – the presence it spewed forced even the strongest on their head, '-so strong,' he rose his arms over his head and watched, '-who's vessel is that?'

"M-m-m-master?" Yui's voice barely connected, "-c-c-c-can y-you hear m-me?"

"Yeah, what's the matter?"

"B-bec-c-careful. A C-c-celestial-" it ended.

"A Celestial?" he conjured his wings and leaped.

An eyepatch-wearing met his gaze from the deck, "-Staxius Haggard," he proclaimed, "-join me on my ship."

To which, Staxius obliged and landed, "-who are you?"

"The youngest of the Olympian Gods, son of Zeus and Semele, Dionysus at your service," he bowed, "-I'm also known as the God of Wine, Fertility, Festivity, Ecstasy, Madness and Resurrection, all and all, I'm a swell guy to be around with."

"Dionysus," Staxius took a few steps forward, "-why are you here?"

"To come to see another eccentric god," he crossed his fingers, "-I've searched long and hard, I followed your trail and the adventures in your realm. The Chronicles were a great way to learn about you and your exploits. Of course, it did help when Miira was asked to retell the stories."

"One question, Friend or foe."

“Friend.”

“Cool. Follow me then,” he jumped, Dionysus waved his hands, and the airship vanished – both landed on a watchtower and stared in the distance, “-you believe me?”

“Why not?”