

## Death Magic 1061

Chapter 1061: "Dear Boss" [4]

Midnight. Clouds hid the moon's reflected rays. A modest outline grew, Igna approached. The illuminated church's roof emerged. A greater presence shown in the distance; the other church, the main church as some might say. A rustic wind waved.

'He should be here,' Igna waited, the clock showed a few seconds before midnight. The second hand carried its partner, the minute hand onto the big '12'. Noises spawned out of the main church. A rhythmical tap pulsed, leaving the lows at Igna's ears.

"I would be worried if I were you."

"Mysterious Dealer," Igna paused.

"I doubt you'd come," the dealer emerged from the side-church, "-but I'm glad you did. I need your strength," he narrowed, "-King of Hidros."

"..."

"I will accept the silence as an admission. Bear in mind, my liege, I bear no ill-will towards you or your family. Rumors have told how his majesty treats adversaries, and I'm sure not a foe. I will cut my rambling short," he wrapped around and stood shoulder to shoulder, "-the main church's conducting a ritualistic sacrifice. Today's victim," he pulled a photo, "-is this lady."

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'Stephanie,' Igna watched, "-so?"

"My liege?" the dealer struck himself, "-my apologies, I thought his majesty would be more caring toward an ally?"

"Not really," he strained, "-does her life matter?" The taps turned howls; an aura blazed across under the many stars, "-to that matter, does yours matter?"

The king's pressure gathered, "-how are you?" he grabbed the dealer's jaw and pierced through the man's terrified gaze, "-who are you and who do you work for. You will tell me everything," fear glazed his eyes, the man fell on his knees.

"My name's Adam, my code name is Luso. I work for the Empire's Central Agency."

"What's your purpose?"

"I'm under orders to infiltrate the Frontline. The agency's objective is to uncover the truth about the new continent."

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"How did you know?"

"I was briefed by a member of the Hidrosian Intelligence unit."

‘Seriously?’ he exhaled, Adam fell sideways and curled, the cries were slow and silent. ‘The ritual sounds interesting,’ a snap, ‘-haven’t done that in a while,’ came a smirk, a concealment spell completely erased the presence. ‘Only a Watcher can see through my disguise,’ he scaled the main church and entered through the main tower. There, under a massive bell, vexingly narrow stairs gave in an equally narrow alley. Robed figures roamed the halls – many held candles and a few common religious items. ‘-The combination doesn’t reflect any deity I can remember?’ he followed the chatty-robed figures.

“Today’s a full moon.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s hard to see with the clouds. The head priest is out of town. She had errands to run.”

“Really? The archbishop’s not here?”

“No. I heard she left with a distressed look.”

“My, I wonder what could have gotten her worked up.”

“Okay, shut up,” the pace slowed just before growlingly loud hums, “-keep your eyes down and look through the peripherals. Don’t stare at anyone. It’s easier to look at the girl, especially since they’re naked.”

“You and your morbid fantasies. I so wish God has a cure for your kind.”

“No cure for this curse baby,” they entered a greater hall. It looked normal. Benches lined right and left, a carpet ran down the middle, and at the front stood godly symbols and an altar. The infrastructure was right in its design with one glaring discrepancy; ‘-it’s underground.’ The hooded figures joined the others. ‘-How could the noise travel so far out?’ and in said observation, Igna wandered his gaze for an answer, ‘-no physical means, I suppose it is magical?’ \*See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth.\* ‘Ancient runes,’ he widened. Strings of ancient writings joined a folly a ball; a rubber ball. ‘-The amount of power it holds is nothing,’ he gulped, ‘-what’s with the grandiose gathering circle? They have no sense in their action, there’s no purpose and no order. What in the world is happening?’

A deep-velvety blue hood walked from the crowd, “-gather my comrades,” it echoed, the voice cracked at ‘ga’. He cleared his throat, “-Today we pay our tribute to the god of death.” Igna comically took a seat in the audience and watched. “-From our offers of pig’s blood to the innards of chicken and pregnant cats; we have offered lives to the greater demon for his blessing. We want the destruction of the Church. I want vengeance against the people who led my father into his reclusive shelter. I will see to their destruction personally. Ishta is better without a god, tis better served with vices. Money, greed, lust – such are the worldly gain I possess; such is the way I wish to forge ahead. We will invoke a demon, we will contact the dead, and today,” he unwrapped a rectangular shaped red cloth, “-we shall do what no man has done,” he chanted, the book hovered by the aid of hidden strings.

‘Are they serious?’ the entourage counted elites from the rich circle. Few faces he recognized from the disastrous dinner. ‘SSY, Information Search.’

“Today we bring a sacrifice!” light deadened.

‘This guy,’ plenty of information arose on the man, ‘-Newhon Dextor. A wanted criminal charged with fraud and theft. He’s a scam artist, a great one at that.’ The story clicked, ‘-it ties together. The secret

the ECA is after is his location. He's scammed notable families including the Imperial court. I wouldn't like being in his shoes.'

A gagged lady was thrown onto the altar. Her flesh was visible to the masses. Few at the edge of the crowd motioned their companions, '-they've never seen a woman before?'

"Please settle down," he lunged forward, the book hovered at his side, "-As Magus of the Order of Fiend, my duty is to transmit my knowledge and wisdom to my students. Summoned entities are akin to genies. Once summoned, they're duty-bound to their masters. Some used for carnal pleasures, others for conquest; the possibilities are endless," he leaned over her illuminated body and grabbed a dagger, "-to complete the ritual, I shall sacrifice this virgin to the god of death!"

'Virgin?' Igna held his mouth, the dagger plunged, her movements dulled. Blood flowed, and the altar leaned forward, allowing the blood to follow a path into a bucket. The room's energy shifted suddenly. The overhanging lights toggled; darkness swallowed the area. 'To whom do I bear the pleasure of meeting?' a translucent figure materialized above her body, "-who summoned me?"

The disciples dropped to their knees. The Magus stepped forward and extended his right hand, "-Heather, my lord."

"What is it you wish, Heather?"

"I wish for wealth, my lord. I wish for knowledge, and lastly, I wish for immortality."

"The pillars of greed, the doctrine of the Order of Fiends. Very well," it clapped, reigning the room's amber lighting, "-I grant thy wish, o' knowledgeable one." The body disappeared, leaving the blood in the shape of a skull.

"Such is the power of this grimoire," he exhaled, "-I admit, my wishes were selfish," he touched his neck; "-I brandish the entity's symbol. Therefore, I know my wish will come true. My disciples, I wouldn't dare leave without passing down my knowledge. Thus, I offer this, my greatest treasure. The Velian Grimoire. Its teachings are complex and hard to decipher. The words it contains are of pure power. Tis hard to understand the vastness. Such is the way of the magus. By the Order of Fiend, you must understand the Velian Grimoire's teaching and preach the sacred words. Knowledge is power, this is why I will only accept inner disciples from tonight's circle. You ARE the chosen ones. You WILL become masters of your destiny," \*snap,\* a door lit, "-those willing, reach into that door and offer something of equal value to the means thee wish to obtain."

The mass hall emptied. Igna remained speechless, '-they didn't kill Stephanie. The crowd's collective worth ranged in the tens of million. What entity did he summon, an actor hung from the ceiling? The blood was fake, and the symbol was arranged. They're a band of rogues, serious scam artists. I heard their kind existed... why am I impressed? I should have known Istra would hide their kind as well.'

Disciples turned inner disciples. A sense of superiority instantly took their character – they changed. "-By yielding my materialistic gains, I was able to become a truth-seeker. I see the world's nothing more than an illusion. What I wish to attain can be reached with will and knowledge. Spreading our Magus's word is the only way," mumbled one. The curious Igna snuck into one of the meetings and saw the Magus sitting face to face against another. He held a pendulum, the latter swayed left and right – the moment the person focused, the pendulum flashed, showing deadened eyes briefly. '-A real artifact?'

"By yielding my materialistic gains, I became a truth-seeker. I see the world's nothing more than an illusion. What I wish to attain can be reached with will and knowledge. Spreading our Magus's word is the only way. Repeat my words," he ordered.

"By yielding my materialistic gains, I became a truth-seeker. I see the world's nothing more than an illusion. What I wish to attain can be reached with will and knowledge. Spreading our Magus's word is the only way," any sense of logic dived out of the room. They signed a contract and paid in the six figures. 'The artifact's wiping their personalities. A shell of a human...' he leaned closer, inches away from the sways, \*flash.\*

'Where am I?' a white plain stretched, 'seriously?' he facepalmed, 'I looked into the artifact. Guess I'm trapped in whatever spell it has,' he tapped his fingers, 'three, two, one,' he clapped, \*Break,\* the dimension shattered, 'much better,' not even a second passed. Another clueless shell exited. 'A pendulum made from the Eye of Ireliia, the wife of Dregna the Demon-King, the forgetful vixen. Her story goes like this; Demon King Dregna had a fetish for physical torture. Ireliia was said to scream the loudest when they slept. Her screams were music to his ears. After a few weeks, she got used to the pain and eventually stopped screaming. To rekindle his flame, Dregna ordered Ireliia to be cursed with a new spell, one of daily erasure. He specifically ordered her memories about their time shared in bed to be erased. Her screams returned and were said to shake the whole castle, just over the brooding laughter of Dregna. Her body was split into pieces after she died, the amount of curse Dregna injected into her mortal womb was dangerous enough for him to desecrate her body. Stricken by grief, the demon-lord fashioned jewelry, and there came the Pendulum of Ireliia, containing the power to erase particular memory,' the newfound knowledge came from a blue thread. 'To know the passing of time eternity,' he sighed, 'I baffle myself on how powerful I am. Far as it seems, the Pendulum's not being used to its greater capabilities. I wonder where he got his hands on a potentially Relic-tier artifact?'

"Three hours past midnight," said a voice down the corridor, "-Dextor, we've got 'em." He rose from his seat and stretched, "-another day, another scam. Tonight was hard, I feel like shit," he exited the room and headed towards the voice. There, a group of people gathered on modern couches and faced the fireplace, "-the Order of Fiend," added one sarcastically, "-to teach the rich how to live."

"Drop the act," he sighed and poured whiskey, "-the night was hard enough," he squared onto Stephanie, "-isn't that right, recruit?"

"Piss off," she waved her hand jokingly, "-I thought I was going to die back there."

"No, you're worth more alive. I mean, no one suspected we'd swap the bodies. To a scam well done," he rose his glass.

"To a scam well done," they cheered.

"As for the moment of truth," a smaller fellow stood before the fireplace, "-the total gain is... drumroll please..." they joined, "-5 million in assets and 1 million in cash!"

"HELL YEAH!"

Chapter 1062: "Dear Boss" [5]

“Been a month since I came to the new continent. Tell me why the emperor hasn’t picked a name for the place yet. I’ve slept on the same straw bed and can’t remember the pleasures of sleeping on a mattress. Does it matter, I couldn’t have cared any less. The cottage’s a warm place once you win over the owner and the cooking staff. They make good food for a low price... perhaps my standards have lowered, it’s a good thing. Eira, the hunt for Engratse’s come to a standstill. I don’t have information or leads to go on. Honestly, I was preoccupied with a band of scammers going by the moniker of Order of Fiends. They’ve scammed so many and the scammed return for more. They’ve lost a grip on reality, the scammed. It looks fun and perhaps I ought to join their ranks. Well, boredom has brought out another – I’m slower and take time for observation, more than ever before. It’s gratifying, cold-reading people and knowing their thoughts; the very idea’s preposterous when put into the context of a normal. Here’s a headline I’m so very proud of, ‘-The Dear Boss Killer: Infamously adored by Morbid fanatics,’ the world over knows my name. You should see how many sites and forums have sparked in trying to find my identity. No one’s close. I have the detective Count Stark at home being considered for a major position in the judicial system. He’s a man of real talent. Wasn’t two weeks that I got a call, “-my liege,” he said courteously. “-Greetings,” I replied.

“I heard of a serial killer prowling the streets of Istra. Do you interest in finding the killer?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I was right,” he chuckled, “-my liege, no offense, your lack of enthusiasm is proof on its own. My liege, you are the one responsible.”

“Pardon?”

“Please my liege, the channel’s exclusively ours. Elixia’s reassured its security.”

“She’s on the call?”

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“No, no. She’s outside playing with my daughter. I must say, the Plaustan weather is one akin to the heavens. I wake every day and look out at the sandy beaches, the crystal blue sea, I tell you, the place is moving.”

“How are things internally?”

“The ministry of Internal and External Affairs has taken a hit in productivity. Lady Eira’s absence has taken its toll. Prince Julius’s anger hasn’t subsided. The death of Lizzie affected him deeply.”

“I should have known. Leave him be, the man’s old enough to come to his conclusion. If he thinks I should have revived her, then, let it be,” the inner truth couldn’t be revealed. During the explosion that killed Ulgra and Lizzie, Igna forced a spell; one which affected his emotional state, one he cast under the radar and even under his. ‘Staxius’ distress at her death forced me to trap their soul in the Shadow Realm. Wasn’t able to refine the spell; I shattered their souls instead of rescuing their lives. It’ll take time before the fragments are one. I can’t tell them the truth. Staxius made his intent perfect – to save the ones closest to him, the sleeping monster, my past self, who will do what it takes to ensure their safety. Even if it means going against himself. I ought to hand it to him. Staxius, even if we’re one of the

same, isn't like me, nor am I like him. Lizzie should remain in the Shadow Realm. Her powers will grow and make sure the world isn't in immediate danger. After all, she's the only heir he left.'

"My liege, perhaps this news hasn't reached – Ester's asking for a transfer into the Minister of Foreign affairs. He's taken the permission of lady Synthia, you must make the decision."

"My dear Count, the decision resides with the ministers. Take it to the new head of state. He must decide on his own. I have built the foundation, now tis time for them to carve the future."

"My liege, I apologize for the conversation being led astray. I'm sure you knew already."

"No, you would be surprised," he chuckled, "-I've asked Elixia and éclair to keep the matter of state hidden. I don't much care for politics. I will perform my duty as king when needed. Preferably, not soon Alta keeps my ear ringing, her vigor in leading Glenda is refreshing."

"Majesty, back to the matter at hand. You're the DBK killer, yes?"

"And if I were, tell me about the thought process."

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"The killings began when you left. Of course, the information wouldn't be known since it was under wraps. Next were the reported victims – I saw Kyle flash on a particular article, he gave an interview about the explosion and recounted his experience. A terrorist attack – my guess is the church or some other organization which his majesty must have angered. Obviously, lady Syhton and Vanesa conveniently returned to the castle a few days later. They chose against telling the truth. The pieces gather one by one. A truth one would know if they were introduced to the Hidrosian monarchy, the latter being confined to a few dozen subjects. The killings began shortly after the explosion. Police reports came out contradicting the time and cause of death. I read conflicting eyewitness accounts, hard to say what is true and what is not. Corruption's high and the police department have much on their plates. Poor sods."

"I see," he exhaled, "-way to piece the chaos into a single line of thought. Impressive, there's no question your title as best Detective mind of civilization has grown so much. Will you be writing a short story on the case, I mean, the Case Files are one of the best-selling books published to date."

"If his majesty says no, then I won't."

"Tis conflicting," the publishing house is owned by him. A respected maison for literature and great works of art. The latter came as a prize from Syhton upon them sealing their relationship, "-why not," he exhaled, "-on the condition, it's published a few years from the current events. Don't want people digging around."

"As you wish, majesty, as you wish," the phone call ended as did the memory of said call. Ink ran low, and dusk was shown through tiny holes in the ceiling. "Count Stark is a man to be feared," the ink refined by a flick of the wrist, "-looking at current events, I might have to involve him in the godly affairs. He has the potential of seeking Engratse. I guess I'll follow the wind as usual. Hate to say it, but despite the enormous power I have, brute forcing Eira from her curse won't amend the real problem; my siblings."

Pebbles hit the wooden window, a wave turned his journal into nothing. The symbol of Grotian ambered. "Aye, little Tommy," he spoke over the window, "-what brings you here this early, boy?"

"Lyoko, I need help man," the youngin of a nine, marred with coal and oil, drenched in sweat and wounds, helplessly gasped. The brown complexion shone in the morning ray, the face bordered full-on cries, "-it's my sister. She fell down the mineshaft."

"Mineshaft?" he tilted his head, "-how?"

"I don't know. Lyoko, help me!"

"Fine," he dawned a cardigan bought at a local shop and vaulted, "-lead the way, Tommy." The boy was fast on his feet and pulled a sharp right, east, towards one of the industrial districts. Heavy pillars of smoke puffed from massive factories. The sky turned a damn gray, and the smell of muck and filth pulsed. 'Underage workers,' he scanned and ran, '-cheap labor I suppose,' they cut through fields and ran up makeshift paths over a hill. Tommy swayed and nearly fell, Igna took his arm and threw the boy on his back. They reached the peak, and the landscape changed. Drillings circled massive holes, workers dug – race ranged from demi-human to pale-skinned, and children were put to work transporting coal from one place to another. 'They don't care,' he slid down the trail, "-Tommy, where's the mineshaft?"

"Over there," he pointed over the main hole, to which Igna leaped and hovered a full kilometer before landing at the secondary dig site. A crowd gathered. Machines halted and desperate workers threw ropes and screamed, "-you down there?" they yelled to no avail.

"Tommy!" cried one of the boys, "-your sister, she's not responding."

"We should get back to work," shuddered another, "-the boss will come and we'll be punished."

"Don't worry kids," said an assistant supervisor, "-I'll save her, I make damn sure I'll save her," the man wore good clothes with dirt marks and signs of work. 'Compared to the others,' he observed the other assistants, '-he's hands-on and shares the burden. Either he's a good leader or a fool,' attention eventually landed on Igna.

"Tommy, who is that?"

"Bro, this is Lyoko. He's helped me out a few times when my injuries."

"Yeah," narrowed the other kids, "-that's doc."

The man nicknamed bro threw a side glance and returned to his helpless rescue attempts, "-Nikki, can you hear me?"

'I see,' Igna horned onto two man-perched a few hundred kilometers north, "-an unfortunate accident. Let's hope the young master sees reason and stops looking for attention from the lower class."

"Let's hope the master is happy," they left.

'Lipreading is a good skill,' Igna approached the hole and held bro's shoulder, "-screaming won't do anything. How long has she been in there?"

"Thirty minutes."

“And why are the other assistants not helping out?”

“...”

“I see,” Igna came to a quick conclusion. Bro’s aversion was very telling, “-falling down a mineshaft’s a deadly ordeal. The only way to see if she’s alive is to go in there. Looking at the equipment, we don’t have the means to organize a rescue party. Istra’s ruled by one all-encompassing law, time is money.”

“Doc, can you save her?”

“I don’t know,” he faced the workers, “-she’s dead.”

Bro rose with malicious intent, a simple regard dissuaded the pent-up frustration, “-Tommy, it’s the hard truth. She could be alive but the chance of it happening is, well, improbable.”

“NO, I REFUSE TO ADMIT DEFEAT!” bro echoed down the chamber, “-NIKKI!”

A fatigued voice echoed back, “-MIRAI!” Joy whelmed their faces, she responded, they turned at Igna to see the doc sprinting at the tunnel, “-leave it to me,” he leaped and landed a few seconds later. The opening was but a tiny light in the heavy black ceiling.

“You look like shit.”

“Doc?”

“You’ve broken your legs and ribs, maybe have a punctured lung and even internal bleeding. How the hell were you able to survive for thirty minutes?”

“This,” she held a flask, “-I sipped the potion you gave Tommy. He gave it to me and said I needed it more. I feel pathetic... Doc, tell me, am I going to die?”

“Die?” he laughed, “-on my watch?” he leaned, the piercing bicolor pupils ambered, “-Nikki, Death has its master, and your fortunate to look upon one who once held the title of God of Death.”

“Stop joking,” she laughed and coughed, “-you’re as eccentric as they say.”

“Sleep,” he held her forehead, her mind drifted, \*Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, Sixteenth passage, for the wounded’s assured restoration, the hardships ought be cleansed. Such flowed the whisper of the healer: Imenia,\* her life-threatening wounds healed, ‘-can’t get her up without injuries. I’ll save her from imminent danger. Risking my cover for her isn’t worth the trouble. She’ll live,” he summoned and administered a few potions, after which scaled the walls with her on his back. The light at the end brightened, “-DOC!” came astounded cheers. Tommy rushed to their aid, pulling the duo out of the tunnel.

“Where’s Mirai?”

“He went to get a jeep,” speaking of him, the man darted down the side, “-I’m here,” he gasped, “-where’s she?”

“Here,” Igna waved, “-let’s get her to a hospital.”



Alas, a menacing personage manifested from the skies. Helicopters halted production, everyone dropped to their knees, “-Mirai, leave the girl.” He rose defiantly, and lasers instantly lined the workers, including Igna and the wounded girl, “-choose, you or your workers.”

Chapter 1063: “Dear Boss” [6]

‘One life or the lives of many,’ Mirai was lost in his gesture. He sought, Igna motioned but he didn’t notice. The workers dropped their foreheads to the rocky soil. One man glared defiantly. He walked, the lasers focused on his chest, “-choose,” Igna thundered, “-your son or their safety,” he unholstered Tharis, “-what will it be?”

“You dare oppose me?”

“I dare do much more,” he returned, “-for example,” without so much a warning, Igna’s pistol locked and fired. A body fell from the helicopter. The barrel returned on Mirai, “-the man yet lives,” he said, “-my next shot won’t miss.” The message was clear. Intercoms from the helicopter spewed white noise. The squadron did a 180 into distant dots. The petrified expression many held remained. One monster is replaced by another. The crowd viewed with much distress. Shaky hands, avoided eye-contact, slow movements; ‘-they’re frightened,’ Igna walked to Mirai, “-you’re pathetic.”

“Why would you say that, Doc?”

“Tommy, my boy, there are things in this world that are best left unknown. Don’t interfere,” the signals were clear. Mirai bowed his gratitude, “-there will not be the next time. Get her in the jeep.”

Meanwhile, “-who was that man?”

“We don’t know, sir. He’s an unknown in our database. I will ask for further intel.”

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“Try and get him on our side. He might prove useful,” a suited businessman hung the call and turned towards a grand view, ‘-whoever you are, I will get my revenge. No one messes with our family,’ a strange light glowed from the wrist, “-have the wounded taken to the crematorium. Burn him if he lives. I don’t need additional cost weighting my progress.”

Time jumped for the late evening. The orangish glow turned dark outlines. The streets coughed what little light they held – like an old man gathering his strength to walk. Sewer puddles overflowed and caught the reflection of passersby and meandering vehicles.

Rat squealed. The foul stench of rotten food and decomposing flesh layered the alleys. A man in warm clothes walked. He breathed puffs. Whispers of society’s rats lingered. He paid no heed to danger, the rotten thugs watched and waited. A person’s caliber sufficed for disinterest. Said particular alley led from the harbor to a neighborhood-owned medical center. Wounded from all ages waited on benches, latter thrown onto the very alleys ruled by filth. Open wounds left to fester. Flies pranced, fumes wandered and the injured pained. Nurses bore unwanted attention – thick white stockings and white dresses prevented advances from lingerers. The outfits weren’t glamorous nor did they pay attention to their appearance. Some of the women smelt worse than the street itself.

"Next one," said an attendant with wrinkled skin showing bone. A young boy stood. He had neither parents nor guardians, only a white now brown cloth tying his wound; an amputated arm. And so, the darkness of night encompassed the outside seats. Rain dribbled. The sick coughed blood and others hit their heads against the bricked walls. Wasn't uncommon to see stain marks of previous head-butts.

The warmly dressed man skipped past the train of wounds, "-who are you?" lashed a stern nurse with hands inside a middle-aged man's pants. She had bloated cheeks, red lipstick, and a mark on her chin. Her diamond-shaped glasses rested uncomfortably on her pimpled nose, "-answer my question."

"Mirai," answered the good-looking fellow, "-I'm here to see my fellow."

"Mirai, huh?" she took a full-body scan and pointed back, "-down there, past the main entrance, take a right at the first corner."

"Thank you," he nodded nervously and obeyed the direction. Moans and grim a display flashed; one of the younger nurses was thrown over a closed garbage can and was being groped by a gang. He hung back and gasped. Her cries whimpered, and passersby from the opposite alley threw a look at the nurse and then at Mirai, "-wrong side, buddy," one commented, "-if you want to visit, I suggest you head for the main street and circle around. The back-alleys isn't for use for your kind," the man took one step and breathed into Mirai's face, "-won't be lucky the next time." He gulped, the tattooed man shuffled away with baggy clothes, and his entourage took turns eying Mirai.

"Ay, how's she fair?"

"No idea," returned malicious cackles, "-she looks good from this angle. Look at the shape of that ass, oh my god, the exotic kind indeed hit the best."

"No, no, I want to know how she screams," they pulled her hair, and she cried, Mirai's heart dropped, '-what is this place?' he covered his mouth and ran for the main street.

\*Bump,\* he hit someone, "-I'm SO SORRY!" fired instantly.

"Watch where you're going."

'Keep your head down,' he gulped, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to cause trouble," darker thoughts crossed, '-is he going to kill me, what have I done, should I give him my money, what should I do?'

"Mirai, is that you?" a familiar voice froze the frantic thoughts.

"..." He looked up from the apologetic demeanor, "-Doc?"

"What's got you flustered?"

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"Doc, it's you," he breathed a sigh of relief, "-I'm scared."

"About what?" there was no need for an explanation. The distant cries were enough. Igna took Mirai's arms, "-came to check on Nikki?"

"Yes. Tommy told me you took her here."

"That's about right," he continued walking, "-thing about the slums is, you don't get better treatment from anywhere else. The real hospitals in the city. We both know commoners aren't allowed there. This is what the slums make do with," they arrived onto the same alley with patients lain on rows. The wounded looked at Doc as if he were a god. The grumpy nurse turned, "-Doc, we've been waiting," her hands were still inside the man's pants.

"What's this about?"

"Someone stabbed and dropped him there. The bleeding's stopped, couldn't do much but hold the artery."

"Right," he clapped. An army of medics dressed in white overalls and dark masks turned the corner and attended the patients, "-we'll do a triage and start administering potions. Chop, chop people," multiple nurses ran out of the building, "-where's the new kid?" he narrowed.

"She's out back."

"Harassed?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I specifically told them not to dress up," he looked in front, "-stay here," and confidently vanished around the corner.

"What do we have here?" the nurse's dress was torn by this point, her tears melted into her makeup, her leggings were used as gags as for her undergarment, they took a turn wearing it as if a crown, "-poor little lambs stumbling into my trap," he smirked. The gag melted, the nurse's features changed, her legs grew, her color swapped for black, wings sprouted and horns curled, her expression licked viciously, "-have your fun," \*snap,\* the naked demon flipped her body and cleanly sliced her aggressor's member. She sat seductively on the garbage can, her tail pulsed as did her inviting visage. They couldn't breathe, much less take account of what happened. Her nails sharpened and with the flexibility of a hunter, pounced. Heads, legs, feet – nothing was spared.

"Down girl," the demoness clawed on all fours and waited at Igna's feet. Her mannerisms were the same as one of a cat, though, the visage and part of her body were obviously female, "-did you enjoy your meal?"

"Yes master," she purred.

"Good," \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* it gathered in a yarn, "-here you go," it laughed and vanished, leaving her innocent laugh in the air.

"Poor sod," Igna leaned in and strangled the man, "-you who were so confident, how does it feel, tell me, how does it feel to see your life flash before your eyes," his own blood tore from his body in a macabre display. The flesh dried, his chest was open, and had his innards poured over the waist, "-Signed, DBK," he etched the writings and teleported the victim on a boat left hanging on the river.

"Doc?" Mirai leaned around, "-is everything okay?"

"Someone's confident."

"No, I was worried something might have happened."

"Don't worry," he walked past, "-nothing's the matter. They were being a nuisance."

"What about the girl?"

"Such is the sorry truth of the slums," he pressed Mirai's shoulder, "-you rather not get involved with the politics."

"Where are the patients?" the bench was empty, "-where did they all go?"

"Healed," Igna entered the medical center, "-running a medical center in the slums isn't profitable. We use barter instead," they walked past a suspiciously cold and dark room, "-those who can't pay, well," Igna turned towards Mirai, "-have to give something greater," the ajar door closed slowly by a strange entity.

"Here we are," \*Room 13,\* was written on white doors.

"Doc, and bro!" said from down the hallway.

"Hey Tommy, how are you?"

"Good," the little fellow walked towards Igna, "-Doc, how's my sis doing?"

"She's more or less healed," they entered the room, "-give me a moment first." Awkward eye exchange, "-hot day, isn't it?"

"Bro, you suck at small talk," the conversation faded. Igna's footstep moved towards closed curtains, "-Nikki," he pulled, "-how's my patient doing?"

She sat upright and watched the closed window, "-aside from the dull view, I guess I'm fine?"

"Now Nikki," he stood at the foot of the bed, "-I've treated most of your wounds. You can go back to work. I recommend rest."

"Why the grave tone, doc?"

"I'm afraid you have an incurable disease. By working the nights and looking after your little bro, I'm afraid you've contracted the Night's Plague. I'm guessing one of your customers. Nothing more we can do here. If you want treatment, I suggest the main hospital. They have better facilities."

"The night's plague?" she covered her face, "-how long do I have left?"

"I can't say," he walked to the window, "-you suspected much, didn't you?"

"Yeah," her voice softened, "-I guess I did. I knew something was wrong, my body doesn't feel like it use to. Doc, isn't there anything you can do?" she looked at him with widened eyes, "-is there nothing you can do?"

"If you were to choose between family or love, what would it be?"

"Family."

"And between money or integrity?"

“Money,” her expression fastened, “-Doc, we’re from the slums. Why do you think I’d get involved in this business if not for the money? I will do what I must to protect my family.”

“Good, very good. Nikki,” he grabbed her shoulder and gazed into her soul, “-I know a way you can be saved. Matter of fact, if you accept, I will make certain one of your wishes comes true. Dit moi, tu desies quoi1?”

“Freedom.”

“Good,” he held her hands, “-starting today, you will work for me. You will obey my every command; you will do as I say.”

“Anything you want. Long as I’m safe and can live to see my brother get married.”

“You will.”

The door opened. Mirai entered whilst Igna exited. Nikki’s expression remained in shock. ‘I have a new pawn,’ he headed for the outside. Her head rang with his clamorous words, “-make Mirai yours. Make me worship you, use your body, use your charm, use whatever means you need to make him yours. Have him depend on you, become the victim, do that and get in his favor, build rapport until I make my move,” a letter was burnt onto her palm, “-if you speak about this to anyone, you’ll die, as well as your little brother. I’ll have your family become pawns to the leeches on the street.”

“Nikki, Nikki,” Mirai’s warm hands touched her cheeks, “-hey, wake up. Are you okay?”

“Mirai,” she gripped his hand, “-I’m sorry,” and pulled back, “-I can’t.”

“Why, Nikki, why?”

“It’s your father. I’m going to die if we stay together. You promised me I wouldn’t have to work the streets anymore; you promised me you would look after me and my family. What did I get in return, for all the intimate times I shared... I was pushed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sis, that’s enough. Bro, you should leave. Sister needs rest.”

“But...” \*slam,\* the lock clicked.

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Chapter 1064: “Dear Boss” [7]

“The Dear Boss Killer strikes again,” word spread. The article detailed, “-on the early morning of May 25th, a body was found decomposed on lake Shaw, struck in the middle of Pestia Forest. The finder, a miner working the industrial district, was said to have been struck in place for half an hour. We were alerted to the news by one of our trusted sources. The newly appointed Chief investigator had this to say, “-it seems the Dear Boss Killer’s action has spread across Istra. A couple was found shot and killed on the sunset strip – as usual, tells of it being the DBK killer was present. However, it points to another possibility. There is one DBK killer, so we assume. There are more out there, the killer can’t possibly exist in one place and then teleport to another. I fear more killers are on the loose. The police force is

working day and night to piece up the mystery. Sadly, the couple was residents of the city. And so, the city guard has been called to duty. If the DBK strikes, we will be here to catch him, such is certain." The disparity between services is clear. How will the detectives answer now that members of the city were targeted? Is the mayor to blame or must the leadership change? One thing remains constant – the populous isn't happy."

"Absolutely depressing," said one.

"It's terrifying, my wife and I are afraid to leave at night for dinner."

"A dark cloud loom over Istra. No one knows when the DB killer will strike, no one knows. What person could do such a thing? I only wish my family to live and see another day."

"I'm sorry for the victims. Their families must be grievous. We share our sympathy."

Those were a few words from residents of Istra. Next, workers, "-man, who cares about the killer. I have to put money on the table."

"Cilentelle's lowered since he showed up. One thing's for sure, the killer made an impression."

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"Who is the DB Killer?"

"Go bother someone else, I'm working."

People of Istra, we leave you with this from our private investigator, "-anyone has the potential to become a killer. The fact there's only one monster out there is rewarding. We know about DB, he's theatrics and loves putting on a show. The killings, gruesome as it appears, are for a purpose. He strikes me as someone of intellect, perhaps a noble. Someone in the know about medical facts, in the gore and blood, hides a clinical precision."

The Xth issue of Istra's gazette sold out at Coft's shop. "-Old man, did the paper run out?"

"If it's not Doc," came an ardent man behind iron gates, "-what brings you here?"

"Meds for your wife," he slid a white container through the gates, "-how's she doing?"

"Doc, I tell you, the wife's crazier since she started working at yours. I can't tell you how much the port is grateful you came around," he muddled behind jars of pickled something, animals or fruits, no clear indication. "I'll send my kid to the hospice later, is it okay?"

"Well, in exchange for today's paper, some smokes and drinks."

"You're worst than them sailors," he breathed a guttural laugh and slid back the items "-don't get killed out there," he hailed, "-heard the Extermina gang's active." Igna exited the shop that gave onto the sea, for it was built at the start of a run-down pier. Rusty logs rose from the sea floor. The wood creaked and the wind crashed. Planks were missed at a few intervals. He stopped at the marked-off area and lit a smoke, \*-puff,\* the wind carried the white cloud. '-What's the news got to say.' The cigarette finished, he folded the paper in between his arms and turned, '-why did they have to use the word clinical? I was blatant, not that blatant. Haven't been killed since the last guy, the poor fellow was bait for the

investigators. Seems the police force's corruption knows no bounds. I don't remember killing a couple. He heavily emphasized DB being more than one. The chief is cunning. He wants to create a narrative to make his incompetency logical and viable. Too bad, I'm not going to let you have that much fun,' an old beggar had his head against a rock. The poorly dressed demi-human coughed blood and trembled.

"Spare a coin?"

Igna lowered his gaze, "-beggar, you're sick. Devil's Seed has corrupted your mind. Do us a favor," the eyes shimmered a purple hue, "-die." He looked away. The beggar rose in the backdrop, workers on break returned from Coft's shop, and some waved in recognition of Igna, who returned the greeting. A loud splash had the men sprint past, '-works fast.' A seductively dressed lady manifested from one of the containers, "-master."

"Elize," he stopped, "-how many times must I repeat myself? Please wear clothes when approaching the street. What happened to the nurse's outfit I provided?"

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"Master," she crouched and licked her palms, "-can I hunt?" He shook his head and snapped – another nurse' outfit wrapped her exposed flesh. Her eyebrows flashed, "-master!"

"Mind your tone," he tapped her head, she rose on her feet and skipped ahead. Igna watched silently, '-and she's supposed to be an elite fighter graduating from the Shadow Realm's Combat unit. Vesper vouched for her skill. She's a demoness of Feline origin. A native of the Shadows, one of the best. Her abilities are off-the-chart. Can't say that about her personality. She's vindictive, in heat, and lusts for death. How I wish I could have Fenrir by my side.'

"Master, trouble," they arrived at a well-frequented part of the port. The exchange depot, where deadly negotiations and heated debates were as common as salt in the ocean. A crowd perpetually hung as trading ships entered the Trader's cub, a cave turned storage for trading vessels. Large narrow stairs fixed down a slope leading into Cub's channel. Ships awaited patiently the change to unload cargo. The channel was divided into two parts, the left side was for the commoners, and for the right, the citizens. The difference in ship size and beauty was also another tell. The actual port broke at this point, separating into a hill carved with the infrastructure of period buildings and a fort perched atop. The citizens sure loved their segregation.

"Go to the hospice, don't make trouble, I won't come to help like last time."

"Do I have permission to kill then?" her big-feline eyes invitingly winked.

"No," he added sternly, "-no killing, lest it's necessary. There's plenty of food in the morgue, no more dead bodies, understood?"

"Yes, yes," she faded into the crowd. Handymen hauled cargo up the many stairs, "-come get your slaves," screamed some, "-come get your spices," added others.

'Trouble indeed,' he noticed a familiar face and continued scanning the wares. A foul-smelling tent pushed clients. A vacant blob screamed space amidst the crowded merchant street. "-Anista's magical stuff," read a badly painted sign. The stench took a purplish hue. He entered the blob and lunged, tapping the board twice with, "-you there?"

"That voice," a cloaked figure rose from a nicely painted pillow, "-is that you?"

"Honestly," he narrowed, "-this the best disguise they could afford?"

"Pops, come on. I worked hard on the sign." The writing and nonchalant attitude were refreshing, '-Vanesa's infiltration mission,' he closed his eyes, '-what is Syhton thinking? I asked her to leave Istra, not come back as a member of Hidros' spies. I can picture Minerva laughing... damn her.'

"Pardon me," another came, "-I hope my little sister didn't cause trouble. Tell me, mister, what can I serve you?"

"Jenah, you have the supplies?"

"Yes," she smiled, "-it will be 60 Exa," Igna's eyes widened.

"Honestly," he sighed, "-that much?" he received the items and glanced at Vanesa, "-Jenah, I sure hope your sister doesn't cause trouble."

"No, no. She'll head home soon – a few uncertain matters intruded. Thank you for worrying," awkward smiles were exchanged.

"Doc!" hailed the familiar voice, Igna quit the crowd of merchants and headed vaguely towards the hospice, "-Doc!" it hurried, the noisy streets were a hassle, "-doc," came heavy pants and slouched demeanor, "-wait for me," he gasped.

"Luso."

"Can we talk," he scanned, "-over there," he pointed at Shaker's cottage.

"Sure, about that?"

"Yeah."

A separate table was dressed outback. Heavy cigarette smoke and alcohol prowled the halls. Cabinesque rooms held a table and two benches. Space was tight and privacy was somewhat assured.

"Again, Luso, you sure?"

"Yes," he firmed, "-they're not here. Besides, it'll make a more compelling argument."

"Your funeral," he shrugged, "-get on with it, I have a hospice to run."

"I know you met him," he narrowed, "-I know you know where he's at. I have reports of Stephanie joining their ranks. They've been calling themselves the Order of Fiends. For the greater good of the empire, please, I need their information."

"What do I get?" he leaned, "-are you sure you have the necessary means to afford a favor from the likes of me?" he grinned, "-Adam, don't misunderstand thy predicament. I allowed for thy life, disrespect is paid in blood where I hail, do you understand?" the tone lowered. Adam's shoulders dropped, the space closed and his mind lowered.

'Pathetic,' Igna slid out of the bench.



"Wait," Luso rebutted, "-the death of Amelia Rose and Oerl Dionne."

"What about it?"

"The police's looking for a tip. We know the DB. Killers are all over the news. A simple call from my agency and the police force will be forced to act on my intel. An innocent can be made the subject of the doubt when placed before the court of public opinion. How did you find the article, my liege, the clinical precision; it does imply the hospice heavily. I'm quite proud of said feat."

"Adam," Igna sat back down, "-you've earned my focus."

"All I need," he exhaled, "-my liege, I have a deal. Give me information on the Order of Fiends and I'll provide intel on Istra leadership. Trouble will befall paradise."

"How good are the connections amidst the church?"

"Pretty good."

"I suggest you look closer for your answer."

"What does that mean?"

"I gave you your answer. Adam, I don't need anything from you," he stood, "-you've impressed me. Consider this acknowledgment from the King of Hidros. Don't disappoint me, Adam, for if I find your actions to be inadequate, the death reaper might not be patient," the King's massive presence disappeared. Adam slumped over the table, the energy and strength drained, the will to continue barely ambered. The fire of motivation lit his grin, '-the king acknowledged me,' he smiled, '-he has high expectations. I best get to work.'

"Can I get you a drink?"

"No sorry darling," he exited the cabin, "-I will be back tonight," he slid a playing card into her bra, "-call me." The hostess side-glanced invitingly, "-later," she replied.

The hospice's waiting line seemed unmoving. A crowd gathered, blocking his view.

"Get out of the way," youngin was thrown to the street. Men dressed in camo uniforms held guns and stormed the buildings. Medical equipment was thrown from the first floor, patients were kicked onto the street. Medics and nurses were handcuffed. He met Elize's eyes, the lass was tied to the bench. Resistance was met with grave retorts. Brass knuckles split heads – an unfortunate young fellow caught the brunt force of a metal bat to the head, and his body dropped. Looks of horror grasped the entourage, common guests were outcasts – the hospice's destruction looked undeniable. Footsteps clopped, a white trail of cigarette smoke slithered through the crowd, \*puff,\* "-that desk costs my nurse a night with a drunkard masochist," he approached the leader and exhaled into his face. "-Tell your man to back off."

"The doctor," the leader smirked, "-I have a message from my boss. He says it's the welcome party to Istra," the mini-army laughed, "-don't fuck with us again."

Igna pierced the leader's gaze, "-don't fuck with us?" he grabbed the leader's throat and raised him off the ground, "-tell your boss to not fuck with me," the strangled man tapped, the army surrounded Igna with rifles, "-let him go or we shoot."

Chapter 1065: "Dear Boss" [8]

"Don't shoot. I'll come, please don't shoot," a feeble man crossed the brutal exchange, "-I won't come here again. Please don't harm them, they don't deserve any of this. It's my selfishness."

The buff uniform fighter crossed his arms, the shirt nearly ripped by its size, "-young master. I said it before," he looked at his underlings with a telling smile, "-orders from the boss are decrees. You must see the result of your actions." Once more, the sinister grin. Igna kept his calm for the guns remained at him. The crowd fell in fear of harm.

"Bring her out," he ordered. Another window crashed – the sound turned heads to the second floor, "-is this the girl?" inquired two violently dressed men. Nikki's frail body was pulled by the hair and forced outside the window – she nicked her arms and cheeks. Blood dropped to the amusement of the others, "-the young master's whore?"

"She's the one," the leader took one step and got so close Igna could smell the man's nasty breath, "-one more word and I'll have her killed in front of your hospice. These people don't deserve treatment. Your skills are better served towards the city. Doc, here's my offer. The boss wants to see what you're made of. He wishes to have a sword that'll clash and cut down people for his rise. Call me on this number," he slid a card down Igna's pocket, "-the sooner, the better," he pulled back and clapped. The small army gathered, "-in the name of the boss, we have performed our duty. Hear us," he addressed the crowd, "-may this reach every corner and diseases-ridden alley the slums bear; when the time's right, your kind will be purged. As for you," he turned at the nurse, rose his pistol, and fired, \*BANG,\* brain matter splattered against the hospice wall, "-Doc, we return favors in kind. Don't get in our way, again." Military vehicles rumbled to a stop. The mini-army took their soldiers, including the young master, and left. A cloud of uneasiness fell over the hospice. The few who stood up to the attackers laid either in blood or were cast aside for they were dead.

"HENNY!" a weeping mother ran to her son, "-HENNY!" she cried, her emotions pierced the very fibers of whoever listened. Her son's split skull rested on her lap. The tears flowed endlessly. 'Elize,' he stood over her corpse, '-what an idiot,' he shook his head and crossed his hand, '-don't go wasting my time,' he leaned and took her into his arms, "-everyone," he stood at the doorway, "-I'm afraid I have to close the hospice for a few days. Such comes with the territory. Until my place is up and running; I'll offer my services at Enno's inn. Come to me only if you're deadly ill. If I see someone with a cold asking for meds, I swear," he flashed the crowd, "-I will kill you myself," the doc's distant outline climbed into the destroyed workplace. He closed what little curtain remained for what little privacy it offered. Shattered windows and the unforgiving wind – privacy was one hard-fought battle. Moans and cries snuck in. He laid her body and went back. Time froze, so it seemed. '-Shock and despair,' he exited onto the bloodied alley, '-they're frightened. Brutality is a weapon when used correctly. The power of fear is ultimate since life is destined to fight for survival. The apex predator decides his environment and how the lower class obey his whims. This is fun,' he walked slowly towards the grieving mother, '-the world from the slums is something I miss. Being a king a reigning as monarch of one of the more powerful nations was one thing, I can't express, the fear, the lawlessness, the amount of violence, and how death is around each corner.

I'm having fun. I can play any part I want; I can manipulate people to my whims – I can do whatever without affection for the greater state of things. Envy for power, the lust for dominance – my world, I feel like I'm home,' he grabbed the mother's shoulder and lifted her pose, "-stand up, you have a visitor."

"Excuse me?"

Igna turned at the edge of the crowd, towards another side alley, "-your employer. I'll take care of him. Don't worry about funeral expenses – life must go on, you should leave," a purple hue glowed from the piercing gaze, she stood silently and walked into the arms of a brothel owner. "-Right people," medics under his employment, now freed, spread across and healed whoever needed attention. The deceased was carried inside the hospice, thirty minutes later, the doors were shut and the broken furniture was put in a pile and lit ablaze. News reached high and low. The attack on Doc's hospice went as far as newly boarding ships and over the canals. The crowd eventually vanished, well, anyone would disappear on hearing distant gunshots.

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The sea breeze moved curtains. Igna sat with feet kicked onto an upside-down wooden box. A cigarette puffed. A mediocre ceiling fan turned or screeched – made more sound than air. Three bodies laid head-to-toe against one another. Nikki's grievous wounds were bandaged and healed using potions from a prior purchase.

"What now?"

"Nikki?" he puffed and looked over, "-you're still able to speak?" he narrowed her closed posture, "-sitting on the floor will increase the likelihood of infection you know?"

"Don't change the subject. You lost."

"Lost?"

"Yes, you lost. Against Mirai and his family, you lost, Lyoko. It's a matter of time before they come again. I've seen it before. Businesses who go against his father will be harassed out of town and maybe even disappear."

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"Right."

"Doc, you don't understand!" she clawed over and grabbed his foot, "-they're demons. THEY KILLED MY FATHER!"

"Killing someone makes another a demon?" he uncrossed his legs and sat with his focus on Nikki, "-good thing I'm not a human."

"Please, doc, move to another town. I don't think I can do this..."

"Okay," he snuffed the cigarette and exhaled the smoke in her face, "-I move then what? What will you do, go back to the street?"

“Yeah...”

“Even the shit plaguing the street has standards. You won’t last a week without meds, much less on their drugs. Let me say this, I care about you because we struck an agreement. What was it you agreed?”

“To obey your orders.”

“Good,” he grabbed her chin and leaned so close she could smell his breath on her cold lips, “-you will listen, understand?” a purple amber pulsed, recognition in her eyes blanked. ‘-What is this?’ he leaned back and narrowed, “-slap yourself,” she hit her right cheeks. “-Pick your nose,” the lass went full-force into her nostrils. “Sing the symphony of Mester,” her crackling voice fought for signs of musical talent, “-stop,” her banshee-esque pitch tore, “-go to sleep,” she lowered her head and fell asleep. ‘How could I forget about the Dark-arts,’ he facepalmed, ‘-acquiring Grostian symbol’s unlocked the deeper part of my inner abilities. I influence people without so much activating mana or thoughts. I should have realized it when I asked the beggar to die. It felt weird he’d simply walk over and jump off the pier. How does it work?’ the mind drifted into the library of Mantia, countless pages passed, the strings of information waved like weeds on the sea floor. The depths, the sea of knowledge. ‘-The answer, for when the one bestowed by the powers of Nothings for action, the universe must heed his orders and obey his whims. For nothing’s embodiment of everything expands across infinity. He shall feel the ability activate, for when the god conjures their domains to extradite their influence – such is the same motion reserved to further his whims,’ Igna returned to the same broken office, ‘-I understand. To break my hold,’ he looked at Nikki then snapped, “-I can choose between temporary or permanent afflictions. My,” he looked at the bodies, “-I wonder if my words could,” and focused on Elize, “-become whole.” Nothing, no glow nor actions, ‘-good, it works on the living. The thought of influencing the inanimate makes me queasy. Accidentally ordering the universe to vanish from existence would be a bad thing. A very bad thing.’

“Elize, stop sleeping,” her mortal wound rejuvenated.

“Young master?”

“Good job holding back. Here’s your threat.”

Her nails sharpened, “-two bodies just for me?”

“Yes. Once you’re done, return to the Shadows.”

“Understood, master.”

The evening was upon the city. He grabbed hold of the nearest parchment and pen, “-Dear Boss, the time has passed us. I miss going the street, I miss hunting for the fateless. You say I’m a doctor, ha-ha, you say I’m one of great clinical knowledge, ha-ha. Great line, the chief was very descriptive in how I was to be captured. Dear boss, I’m not so easily found, for I’m one person, and only one. The one who killed the unfortunate couple, I bring him as the present. Do take attention when unraveling the box – the head is yet wet. The next victim will be someone important – don’t mock my actions and don’t draw baseless assumptions. I will strike again, yours truly, the DB. Killer,” Igna folded the letter into his breast pocket and shot a glance at the night sky. The ground shook, and a shadowy entity materialized, “-Vengeance, what did you find?”

"The hitman was employed by the Extermina gang. He hangs out in the main city in a gang-owned tavern on the edge of the hill. Here's a detailed report of his movements."

"Good," he smiled, "-go to this address and scout the area. Secrecy is of the utmost importance," he handed the card given earlier.

"Understood," the shadow puffed. Nikki awoke from her slumber to nightfall.

"Where am I?"

"The hospice," he returned, "-feel cold?"

"What happened to my wounds?"

"I healed them fully. Head home. Mirai's going to contact you sometime this week. He'll propose and ask you to elope. Accept his offer but stall," he threw a phone, "-report to me where you're going and when it happens."

"What about Tommy, I can't leave?"

"Don't worry about him. Don't forget."

"I get it," she sighed, "-I will do as you say."

They parted ways. Igna dawned a somewhat good-looking two-piece suit and exited the run-down hospice. The streets glowed with the light of modest households. The average working men returned and the nightlife started. Women lined the street, some dressed in peculiar outfits, others fully dressed. Brothels and all-night orgies were subject to a simple fee. A culture of drug and death.

Igna took the long way and headed Cub's channel. Men in baggy outfits ran after a poor bloke. They leaped and caught his heel before he reached the bridge. A cloth was tied to his mouth and a handcuff with boulders was attached to his foot. \*Bang,\* then a splash. He stared the men directly.

"Good night, ain't it, doc?"

"Yeah, lovely night," he answered, "-Cub's farewell ay?"

"Got to love the Cub's sendoff," they laughed and headed into town, "-Doc, I wouldn't cross the bridge. Place reeks. Better off using the side roads."

"Who cares," he winked.

"Crazy bastard," they laughed.

Igna came to the railing and leaned, '-they kill a man and throw him off the bridge into the channel. The value of human life's worth nothing to them,' he shrugged and continued, '-becoming a doc was the best choice. I'm essential for some gangs, they need my treatment. No real doctor's foolish enough to get involved with the commoners. Was the best possible choice I made.' Vengeance's report detailed the hitman's walking pattern, '-he goes to the tavern, drinks for a few hours, discuss business with the higher-ups, and returns to the slum through Cub's bridge. He'll pass here every night at eleven with armed guards. Guess I should stay,' he lit a cigarette and waited for time to flow. 'The strange invitation earlier was suspicious. A trap, or is it an invitation? If they want me to work for them, would I accept?'

Chapter 1066: "Dear Boss" [9]

"Boy."

"Who, me?"

"Yes you, one in the brown shirt, come here."

"Why should I?"

"I have a job."

"Okay," he perked up on hearing money.

"Take this and give it to the guy right there," Igna pointed at a gentlemanly dressed journalist.

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"Okay?" the boy furrowed, "-how much you paying, old man."

"10 Exa."

"Holy shit!" the boy caught his mouth, '-money for a whole week,' he gulped and hastily took the money and parcel. "-Thank yo," the old man vanished, only the empty street headed to the harbor remained.

The apprehensive journalist took his focus off his camera and looked at the boy, "-what?"

"I have a letter," the boy extended his hands.

"What letter?" the moon's ray just lit the sender's name, "DB.Killer," he jumped and snatched the item, '-another letter from the killer,' he gulped, "-kid, did you see the man?"

"No," the boy tilted his head, "-the man was old I guess?"

"Good, good," he rushed towards his car, "-good job there sonny. Come with me," he pulled the backdoor open, "-we need to get a portrait of the man. You'll make me money, you'll make us wealth," the reflection of currency muddled the man's eye for justice, or what he thought was justice. A selfish agenda for haunting others' secretive past; such was journalism.

One hour short of midnight. '-The cool and refreshing silence,' Igna sat atop a viewing station fixed at the edge of the port. Direction, southeast, where the city's cliff rested its massive foundation. Lookouts were made for hunting stations, the latter of which was built in kilometer's difference – giving reference and landmark for hunters calling the unbridled wild.

He sat with legs crossed and puffed, "-the police will have a handy surprise tomorrow morning. For the meeting," Vengeance and him swapped places. A frequented well-lit street carried into a shopping district. The distant outer walls and better buildings spoke high-class in comparison. He scanned and shuffled to a sidewalk. Horse carriages clopped. Men and women were dressed in old Victorian-styled clothes. Women wore long dresses, the focus placed on their busts and bottoms. Veiled hats and expensive jewelry salivated the mouths of budding pickpockets. The gentlemen wore black suits, often of three pieces with top hats, rounded glasses, and bejeweled canes. The illustrious of the gentlemen had mustaches, often curled, without beards. The accent was distinguishable from Iqavea's upper

echelon. 'First time I entered the city,' he walked to a tailor's shop and caught his reflection, 'I don't look good,' from clothes the hairstyle, 'it reeks of laziness and tactlessness. Living in the slums has made me a lesser man,' he took a harsh look at himself then smiled, 'a chameleon,' he chuckled and entered the establishment. Formally dressed attendants bowed their heads with courteous, "welcome, sire." The nicely dressed tailor turned his well-groomed head at Igna with a scowl, "pardon me," he approached Igna, "are you perhaps from the slums?"

"Why does it matter?" Igna reached into his breast pocket, pulled out his wallet, and threw it on the nearest display table, "my suit has seen better days," he pulled off the jacket, "does your shop serve quality attire?" he pointed at the embroidered maker on the inside, the tailor's demeanor changed, "yes my lord, you need not worry. The weather gets rough during the night."

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"Glad we've reached an understanding," he walked deeper inside, "I will need this," and thus presented a well-detailed list. The tailor could but drool, 'a man in the know about suits,' he swooned, albeit inappropriate, "a custom made, my lord?"

"Yes, and I will need one for tonight. Ready-made is fine."

"Understood, we'll refit one of our best sellers."

"No," he scanned, "best-sellers are for the ones wanting to blend. I want something that reflects me," he locked onto a particularly gloomy-looking suit, "this one," the latter was black and grey, including gloves, a heavy trench coat, and a checkered scarf, "this will do." The man took his measurements in the inner rooms. Getting half-nude before another man wasn't that big of a deal – not to him. The same thing could be argued outside, "holy mother of all gods," the attendants snuck peaks, "he's so hot," they blushed. Igna even winked at one of them, 'been a while,' he untied his hair, "your fitting room, where is it?"

"Inside, my lord," the tailor rushed to his station and began fitting the pre-made suit. A bubble of water swallowed him into an oval cage, the pressure twirled and drained for a blast of cold air. 'Clean,' he stared at the mirror, 'magic, an unpopular art known to Hidros and not the other states. It's convenient,' he exited with a freshness that enamored the shop. Even the tailor couldn't get his eye off the idyllic specimen.

An hour passed, and Igna dawned the new outfit and looked rather suave. "Excellent job," he took the tailor's hand, "you, my dear sir, are a genius," the warm smile paired with a charismatic compliment, "thank you very much."

"I will come for my custom order sometime during the week. Please have it ready."

"Will do, my lord, will do. Please come again," the shop's door closed. The staff stood in line with a warm goodbye. He stepped into the street and caught the attention of many ladies. They threw an inviting gaze, to which, he simply returned a friendly smile and walked towards a more exclusive district, the town square. Richer couples walked here and there. Highly established restaurants, shops, and hotels lined the square. Asphalted streets led into stone-brick sidewalks and walkways. Such was the first he'd noticed since the arrival to Istra. 'Takes me back home,' he sat on a bench facing a street headed south. Guards patrolled, they threw suspicious glares. Some locked onto Igna and even walked

toward him; his aura dissuaded their concerns. 'Vengeance scanned the area and says the man's located somewhere around here. I should call him,' he toggled the phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Good evening."

"This voice, do I know you?"

"For a man who cruelly trashed my hospice and killed one of my nurses, I'd expect some level of recognition."

"Oh, the doc," the tone rose, "-why have you called?"

"The sooner the better?"

"I forgot," he paused, Igna lit a cigarette and waited, '-the tough leader's mellowed. Guess God's Ale has the effect of a downer.'

"Sorry for the wait, doc. Where are you?"

"Town-square," he returned, "-the city's very pretty compared to the harbor."

"Town-square you say... fair enough. Give me a moment, I will be there soon."

He puffed. Just as the cigarette neared its end, a man came from the southern street.

"Doc," he rose his hands. Igna nodded.

An exhausted sigh saw him slide onto the bench, "-sure gets tiring. Good choice of outfit, doc. A part of me knew you were noble, are you a noble?"

"Who can say? Istra's a place where people hide their deepest desires. The past means nothing, only the present weighs the future. Shall we get to the matter at hand?"

"Allow me a monologue."

"Go ahead."

"Thoas Duquant, the mayor of Istra. Mirai's his one and only son. I was there when you shot and killed one of my men. Master Duquant's severity has driven him to be an absolute figure in Istra. The Duquant family comes from a lineage of prestige and nobility. They can be traced to the founding of the empire; a family that came and went. They kept their assets closed and were subject to scorn by the other families, especially during wartime. My knowledge of the past stops here. I'm head of security for the mayor and also the leader of the city guards. No official title or anything glamorous, they know me as Svipe."

"Thoas Duquant wants my employment?"

"No, on the contrary," he crossed his fingers, "-doctor, you're a smart man, tell me, why would I ask for your help?"



He paused, ‘-he’s testing me. Severity – absolute figure, the sentence, the details. Mirai’s his one and only son. Nobles make a point to procreate... wouldn’t be possible if the wife didn’t agree. The wife, a family traced back to the empire – marriage in high society. I get it,’ he rose an understanding smile, “-Duquant’s aren’t on good terms. There’s a fight in the family on the inside, keeping up appearances on the outside. I’d guess there are two major factions within the family, and perhaps even a third for whatever branch family it can be. Svipe, tell me, who do you serve, the master or the mistress?”

“...” dumbfounded, ‘-how did he? Who is this doctor...’

“Confused? The silence is telling. Svipe, stop holding back; if I wish to know the truth, I’ll find the answer. Confess, it’s the only way.”

“I yield,” he held up his hand, “-my gut’s telling me to stop. Doctor, the persona about you isn’t inviting. The moment crucial information is given... your brain, it’ll conclude, and most often is the truth. You’re a formidable fighter and a greater intellectual. Pair those attributes with your mannerisms displayed here, you’re someone from a prominent family. Someone whose lineage far surpasses the Duquant, perhaps even a ruling monarch. You hold the same level of power... I’ve met many influential people before, nobles from other countries, you know, the same caliber of people ruling nations. Vous dégagez le même sens d’autorité.”<sup>1</sup>

“And?”

“I rather not give you the full rundown.”

“Svipe, you’re a cautious man. Alas, what is caution without gamble? What is life without death? What is white without black? One cannot exist without the other. If one always chooses the straight and narrow – one’s life ought be a simple, unimportant existence. Gamble, on the other hand, makes life interesting. In good measure, the synergistic effect propels one to greater heights or a nose-dive to failure. Such the nature of life, Svipe. What will you choose?”

He thought hard. Crinkles expression, a furrowed brow, and a small tint of flushness in his cheeks. ‘Svipe’s drank God’s ale before coming. He made a big mistake. When the elixir climbs to one’s head, tis akin to a truth serum. You can’t resist the hold, it’s not worth the trouble. You want to speak the truth,’ he smiled, the man cracked.

“Gamble!” he slammed the table. “-The family’s broken into three factions. The master, the mistress, and the branch family. They each rule a portion here in Istra. The town is overseen by the mistress, and the industrial area as well as the port is ruled by the master, as the branch family, they leech off the main family. You know, bastard of the master’s adventures into the slums. The title of mayor doesn’t hold much meaning. The master hates dealing with the town’s trouble, it is a waste of time as he says. The mistress loves the city, she loves tending to the upper echelon. Her lineage is one of royalty from an independent nation fixed in the Yian-Dho. I work for the master, and I serve him loyally. Before my position, I was a slum dweller. It was the mistress who found and fed me, she made me into the person I am before I was snatched by the master. I owe her a great level of gratitude.”

“Why look for me?”

“Her attendants came to me with troubling news. The mistress fell gravely ill. Rumors speak of poisoning... it’s under wraps. When I heard about you, I thought you’d be able to help the mistress. It’s

not her, many another affluent fall ill. Despite their wealth, health care in Istra's inexistent. Physicians are below-standard – most fly to Hidros for treatment... alas, since the war, there's been a restriction on travel. Only the vetted fly, not to mention Hidros' policy. Tis hard to get acceptance, even for a noble. The best way for flight is endorsement... a subject of much deliberation," he exhaled, "-I want to repay my debt. Lyoko, would you help the mistress?"

'A power struggle. This is perfect.'

"Lyoko?"

"I'll do it. One expectation, I won't give up my hospice in the slums. They need healthcare, otherwise, the working class will suffer at the hands of Thoas' tyranny."

"I don't guarantee safety but I give my word."

Chapter 1067: "Dear Boss" [10]

Svipe disappeared into the growing night. Tomorrow was soon upon Istra. With much despair, the daily news opened with headlines that spoke, "-The DB. Killer's taunt."

Police tape lined the outside of the station. The Chief Investigator arrived on the scene. Arrived but it was little more than a two-minute walk from the station. A headless body was crucified against a concrete wall.

"Did no one see him?"

"I don't know," police officers were on edge. The body was fixed a few walls from the station, in an alley separating occupied eateries. Investigators prowled the street for witnesses or otherwise, proof.

Jack removed his hat and entered the scene, "-report."

"Body was found at 05:45 this morning."

"What about last night?"

.....

The officer moved one step and turned towards a man. The chief walked, and the officers cleared, leaving a somewhat private tête-à-tête. "You are?"

"Name's Arnold. I found the body."

"What about last night?" he took out a notepad, "-where there any strangeness?"

"No, not that I remember," he looked over his shoulder and pointed upward, "-I live there, above the eatery. I have a good view of the alley. My windows give straight here. I didn't notice it last night, a blinding shadow hid the alley. It's hard to see on a full moon, let alone yesterday."

The street's mild dampness and fresh metallic-earthly scent, "-I suppose it did rain a bit."

"Was it the DB. Killer?" narrowed the weirdly excited observer, "-I saw the Liar on his chest. It was the DBK wasn't it?"

Jake moved aside and threw a strange look at Arnold, “-a man lost his life. Don’t be so excited. He had a family or even children.”

“Enough,” Tile arrived and pealed the duo aside, “-we will handle the investigation. Thank you for alerting the officers, good day.” Arnold remained in the open, shy of the yellow and black tape.

“Can you believe him?” Jack whispered.

“Don’t,” Tile held his breath, “-calm down, you don’t have to get riled up.”

“My bad,” they stood before the victim, “-victim number eight?”

“Victim number eight...” Tile sighed and vaulted over photographers. Jake shadowed.

“The paleness, the body’s been drained of blood. I can’t say the cause of death without an autopsy. Liar’s branded across his chest, I guess the DBK strikes.”

Jack carefully watched. The body was removed and placed on a stretcher, “-wait a moment,” he ordered the assistants, ‘-I remember this tattoo,’ he caught a glimpse of the arm, a pair of cards, an ace of spade and ace of diamond, both inked in their respective black and red color.

“Chief?”

“Nothing, nothing,” he zoned out.

“Take him to my office,” said Tile, “-I’ll start on the autopsy right away,” Jack pulled him aside and scanned, “-we have to talk.”

“Let’s talk here.”

“No, in private,” he whispered. Distant officers and attendants cleared the area, a clean-up crew was called to finish the final touches. 07:45, the morgue held various deceased patrons. ‘Jack’s acting weird,’ they entered Tile’s office, “-can we talk here?” Jack gasped.

“Yes, we should be the only ones. Why, what is the matter?”

“Tile, the man who came in earlier. He’s not a victim,” he swallowed hard, “-he’s the hitman we employed to kill the couple.”

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“What?” they grabbed each other, “-the hitman?”

“Yeah...”

“What then?”

“I don’t know. If DB was able to find him... wait, where’s his head?”

“What do you mean head?”

Forceful footsteps echoed, “-Chief, chief!” a young officer stormed into the room, “-you need to see this,” he sweated and gasped.

"What now?" they threw on their coats and ran to the front desk. A dashing young man stood before an empty reception. "-I come to deliver this," he softly laid a carton box and glanced at the chief with a content grin. Attention around the mystery parcel held the breaths of passing attendants.

"I know you," Tile side-stepped into frame, "-you're that reporter."

"Correct," the dashing man pushed back and bowed, "-the name's Namra. An independent journalist working for the greater good of justice." The department visibly pushed back, "-why are you here?" Tile narrowed.

Jack held his chest and shook his head behind the crowd. 'The box's damp. We found the body near the station. A reporter came with a smile. My gut's telling me the DB killer has us on the ropes.'

"Chief Investigator," Namra voiced, "-could I have a moment?"

He approached the box and looked at Namra, "-what is this?"

"I saw the body being hauled into the coroner's office. My god, the timing couldn't have been better," he opened the box, Jack lost balance, "-careful," Tile caught his colleague and glanced over his shoulder. "-My god," he echoed. Silence brought the attention of bystanders. They each tiptoed for a better look – when satisfied, the expression dropped. "-So gruesome," they echoed, an avalanche of fear and disgust gushed onto unsuspecting observers. In a way, becoming a sort of victim by association. Jack hastily closed the box and motioned to lift, "-not so fast," Namra interjected, "-Jack, if I may be so bold," he slid a note that read, "-Dear Boss, the time has passed us. I miss going the street, I miss hunting for the fateless. You say I'm a doctor, ha-ha, you say I'm one of great clinical knowledge, ha-ha. Great line, the chief was very descriptive in how I was to be captured. Dear boss, I'm not so easily found, for I'm one person, and only one. The one who killed the unfortunate couple, I bring him as a present. Do take attention when unraveling the box – the head is yet wet. The next victim will be someone important – don't mock my actions and don't draw baseless assumptions. I will strike again, yours truly, the DB. Killer," a pale-faced Jack glanced, "-no way this is happening."

"Unfortunately, I've sent the letter to various news outlets. It should be out any minute."

"Where did you find the box?"

"I saw it on my way to work. Let me be frank. Someone gave me this letter last night. I was on the lookout for anything really."

"Who's that someone?" Tile's ear perked, "-we might get a sketch."

"Already did," he smiled, "-It's going to be published with the letter. I suggest you watch your back. The media won't let this slide. Consider this my way of saying thank you for the profit."

"Damned letch."

The morgue's cold temperament countered Jack's flushed expression. The time read 09:00, and last night's event was published. Istra's gazette sold out their copies. A sketch of the DB. Killer was printed next to the crucified body as well as a close-up of the head. Suit-wearing officials entered and barged, "-Chief Jack, where is he?"

"Here," he narrowed, "-and who might you be?"

"We're from the Empire's Central Agency, my name's Luso. Starting now, we're taking over the investigation on the DB.Killer."

"The ECA doesn't have authority in town affairs," narrowed Jack, "-Istra's a free ran the state. Policies within our town are decided by vote of the populous. We're independent of the Empire."

"A pseudo-democracy," Luso narrowed, "-I'm accustomed to Istra's way of life. I know very well how things work. Nevertheless, I won't be the one supervising the investigation," the group split, "-meet Odgar Codd of the Codd's agency of investigation."

"ECA's outsourcing our investigation to some random name?"

"I've worked for many state-sponsored organizations," Codd narrowed, "-you best comply. Orders come directly from the emperor."

"Serious?" Tile coughed; "-is this not overkill?"

"No, it is not."

10:00, the hot-day sun flashed through the frameless window. 'Another nightmare,' he sat upright and stared at the floor, "-last night was a lot of work," an issue of the day's paper waited under the door, half-pushed and half-crinkled. 'So much for a subscription,' he went over to the door, picked up the news and began the daily routine. Breakfast was served, last night's takeaway of fried rice cooked in goblin flesh. "-They found the head. Poor chief, he's under fire," the article went deeper and quoted, "-one of our sources say other investigations were called from overseas. Join us for the live coverage of the chief's press conference."

'Looks to be about time,' time showed 10:15, the starting time was set at 10:30.

"Looks like you slept well," hailed an old lady behind a counter.

"Like a baby," he returned smilingly, "-any idea where I can catch the news?"

"You mean the conference," she shot a feeble gaze outside, "-go there, they're hosting the news and serving food."

"Alright," he crossed the street and entered a somewhat crowded tavern. The table hosted few choice items, mostly the cheapest menu offered. A small television spoke loudly. He took a seat at the bar counter, ordered a beer, and stared at the screen like many. Anticipation, envy, and a thirst for answers. The camera switched, "-Good morning Istra. Today, our channel will host the live conference and go into detail about the DB. Killer." Small talk was exchanged between the commentators, on the clock striking 10:29, the view changed to a full conference room. Chief Investigator Jack was accompanied by Tile, a representative of the police department and a familiar face fixed in the entourage.

'Odgar?' he stopped sipping.

"We will hold a question-and-answer session after the Chief investigator has spoken. Please," he tapped the mic and scanned the crowd, "-the Dear Boss Killer is a menace to our lives in Istra. We of the investigative unit have pledged our lives to resolve crime and bring criminals to justice. Today is no different. Much speculation is out there, some say a killer is an old man, others a lady, and the conspiracies are fanned by the mind of an inexperienced sleuth. The Arcanum's powerful tool, alas, tis a

double-edged sword that has sullied the current investigation. We reassure the population that security has been fortified..." the chief went into details about what they knew and what the media had gotten wrong. The show came to the question-and-answer segment.

"What do you say about today's murder?"

"It is unfortunate the body was found in such a gruesome state."

"Is it true the body was found only a few meters walk from the police compound?"

"Yes."

"How then can we trust the police force to protect us if they can't catch a killer even when he crucified a body to a neighborhood wall?"

"..."

"What about the reports of the last victim being the actual killer who shot the couple?"

"..."

"Did someone scheme and take advantage of the serial killer?"

"..."

"What do you make of this letter?"

"..."

"What do you have to say about the police force corruption?"

"..." chaos ensued. Jack waited and listened, he made no effort in answering their questions. Time limit grew, "-I'll say this," he grabbed the mic, "-whoever the killer is, I will make sure I find him and lock him away. Such monsters aren't born in this world, he's a demon. The investigating unit, starting today, will classify the investigation. Anyone found to be using said documents will be persecuted under Imperial Law. This is all," he rose, "-thank you."

Igna didn't once veer from the screen, "-are you a lawyer?"

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"Why?" he turned at the young bartender, a lady in her mid-twenties with brown hair tied in a ponytail, "-do I look so corrupt?"

"No, no," she chuckled, "-you watched so attentively. I thought you must be from the law."

"No," he took her compliment, "-I'm nothing of the sort. Just a humble doctor working the days and sleeping the nights," he leaned, "-although, I shouldn't be drinking this early."

"A lawless doctor," she smiled invitingly, "-what's your name?"

"Lyoko," he whispered, "-and you are, let me guess," he closed his eyes, "-Barbara."

"HOW DID YOU?"

"Your nametag," they laughed, "-I forgot," her nose flushed.

Barbara, it a pleasure," he finished his drink, "-a drink served by the hands of such a lovely lady is most delicious."

"Thank you," she smiled and fluttered her eyelashes, "-Lyoko," she bit her lips, her want to speak caught his attention, "-where or when can I see you again?"

"Ah, hopefully soon," he leaned, "-I hear the cold season upon us," she cracked, and they laughed.

Chapter 1068: "Dear Boss" [11]

Barbara, the wonderful bartender, a lovely specimen with a good personality and attractive features. Describing her as if she was an object seemed right. Igna's nonchalant gaze landed upon a macabre scene. Night was upon the town; pressure from inner and outer forces had the investigating unit rattled. The humble hospice, remnants of what it used to be, no glory to be found in its prior architecture or paint job, remained so, a crumbling manmade structure, one of many scattered around Istra. Wooden planks barricaded windows. "Elize, don't play with your food," he watched from a lonesome bench set at lines of metallic beds."

"But master," she licked her fingers turned paws, "-I want to play."

Barbara, the saddened thing, threw fatigued glances at Igna. Her face spoke yet of attraction. The experience was wonderful, or so she thought. A dream perhaps, one of pleasure and satisfaction, reality being a nightmare. Her arms were finely sliced. Her toes were replaced by bite marks. Her chest tore open, and her organs and entrail spewed. Imagine a toddler before a present tearing the box in search of greater things. The wrapping, her skin, ribbon, her entrails, and the present, her heart.

"Master, she's resilient."

"Yes, I know. I made sure she doesn't die too quickly."

"Master," Elize purred. Her demonic features manifested. Her casted shadow of a feeble lady transformed into a monster, "-thank you for the feast."

"Fine," he toggled his phone and peered through the planks, '-he's here.'

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"Master?"

"I have to go," he stood, "-clean up the place when you're done, understand?"

"As ordered," a sinister gaze locked onto Barbara. He shut the door right at the moment when Elize dove. 'She gets competitive when food is in question.' With a briefcase at his side and a cigarette in his mouth, Igna left the hospice in a well-made suit. A shadowy figure loomed under a broken lamp. He walked. The military outfit came to light, "-how goes it, doc?"

"Svipe," he puffed.

"I trust you're up-to-date with the current situation?"

“What’s my name?” they hopped into a jeep and drove into town. The longer the drive, the deeper they went into the heart of Istra’s nobility. Past the town square, which, until today, Igna thought to be a highly affluent portion, turned out to be nothing more than a hangout. Real wealth was fixed at the edge of town, a continuous drive south, facing the sea. The influential took residence there. If one were to look up from the port, one’d see high walls fixed onto the massive cliff. They were there, on the extremity of the cliff. No homes, only manors built a few meters across. The ingenious arrangement kept the balance between space and estate. One of the greater manors stood quietly behind barricades. Security at the gate was intimidating. Svipe pulled beside the gates, “-here’s the doc,” he said to one of the guards, “-treat him with the same respect you treat a noble.”

Igna side-glanced Svipe.

“I’m not coming,” Svipe answered, “-matters have grown complicated. You know, the DB. Killer?”

“Ah yes,” he shut the door, “-keep your wits about you. I rather not see your face plastered on tomorrow’s newspaper.”

“I appreciate the concern, my lord. Please do what you must. I leave the mistress’ fate in your hands, dear doctor,” the jeep drove away, and the metallic gates opened and closed. A single road went forward and turned at a fountain-made roundabout. The land on each side was grass, perplexing considering the cliff’s rocky nature. A beautifully lit starry night rose in the distance. The view cast by the manor was majestic. Lighting was reserved – metallic lanterns lined the road. A few figures moved across the windows. Eyes were on the strange man. He took a deep breath and walked. A beautifully treated wooden double door stood on marble stairs. It opened, “-greetings, doctor.”

“Lovely evening,” he said, the butler invited Igna inside, “-if I say so myself. The breeze is very refreshing.”

“It’s the valleys, doctor,” said the butler, “-they give us much in terms of fresh air,” Igna removed his coat and stood before a grand hall. The walls were adorned with swords, shields, paintings, and portraits. Very much a familiar sight. “Doctor,” the butler stopped at an open terrace giving on the right side of the estate, “-may we have a word in private?”

“Please,” the butler nodded graciously at Igna’s acceptance. They soon stood under the beautiful night. “-Might I ask why you were called?”

“I see you’re suspicious.”

“It is part of my job to ascertain my lady’s safety.”

“And part of my job is to heal the sick,” he answered coldly, “-the manor is a very strange place. I’ve noticed outlines running from side to side. The disparity tells a different story. Now, my job is to heal and help the ill. I don’t much care about reason or morals. The oath of physicians states to treat all equally. My adherence to said rule is paramount. Istra’s a lovely place for those in the gain. The layout and architecture are pleasing to the eye. Alas, the lack of medical knowledge and availability of physicians is, you understand, perplexing?”

“Forget I brought up the subject.”

“I answered your questions. Care if I ask a few of my own?”



"Please."

"Who's mainly in contact with the mistress?"

"Pardon?"

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"Contamination," he explained, "-if she's ill, attendants might catch her illness. I must know for precaution."

"I'm the mistress' private aid. I help with her daily activities. As you see, I'm perfectly healthy."

"Nothing to complain," he paused, "-might I meet the mistress?"

"Right now?"

"Yes."

"The mistress is sleeping."

"It shouldn't be a problem."

"The previous doctor advocated rest for her health. Waking the mistress, wouldn't you say, counteractive?"

"Counteractive?" he exhaled, "-listen, I'm a busy man."

"I know about you," the butler narrowed, "-a slum dweller. You killed the master's servant. I damn you!"

"Right," he leaned on the balustrade, "-getting frustrated at the master's desire instead of the mistress. Who do you work for?"

"The mistress," he swallowed and fidgeted, "-I'm angry on good reason. Slum dwellers are not invited to the city. Such is the decree my lady imposed. You're not worthy."

"My god," he lit a cigarette and shook his head, "-will this do?" footsteps approached from behind. Svipe's crinkled brow took the butler by surprise, "-w-w-w-w-"

"Hold your tongue, damned traitor," he grabbed the butler's shirt and spoke through gritted teeth, "-how dare you, how dare you mistrust the mistress' faith."

"Get off me," he shrugged, "-your kind will never understand."

"Understand what?"

"The master is right," he glared, "-the mistress' best left to her own fate. No one can treat her; she's infected by the plague GOD DAMN IT!" he breathed, "-I can't bear to see her suffer. She's a shell of her former self. I had to obey the master, otherwise, he'd make her life miserable. What would you know, Svipe," the butler fell onto one knee, "-I did my best and it didn't matter. I was a fool, I thought I could have saved her, I thought I was doing the right thing. She... she... she knew... she knew..."

"Don't tell me," Svipe's expression dropped, "-is the mistress?"

"No," the butler gasped, "-she's alive but we don't know for how long," he horned onto Igna, "-the people you saw are entertainers. I called them to play and dance for the mistress. Keeping herself shut will aggravate the situation. I planned on hosting a party to cheer her mood... you had to go and ruin it with this."

"Nigel, don't."

"Was this your idea of salvation? A damned slum dweller. We have money, we can afford doctors. What's with him, a lower-class imbecile? I won't allo-" Igna suddenly grabbed the butler's mouth and glared, "-stop talking, ingrate," he snuffed the cigarette on Nigel's forehead. "AHHHHH," muffled screams escaped. "Here's the thing. I came in good fate. You arrogant bastard went and ruined my night. Insulting the slums is the last mistake you'll ever make," he took out Tharis and pressed the barrel against the man's forehead, "-slums or the city, death comes for everyone."

Svipe pleaded, "-let him go, doctor, please."

The grip eased. Nigel made a fist and leaped. Igna sidestepped instantly and countered with a left hook. A crack and the butler landed a few meters away. Blood gushed, "-Doctor, did you kill him?"

"No," he knelt, "-I held back. I'd have aimed for the throat if I wanted to kill," Igna administered a health potion. The man was soon healed and on his feet. Precious seconds of memories vanished.

"What happened?"

"The doctor knocked you out," Svipe chuckled, "-bad move attacking a physician."

"He hits like a truck," he sat in a common room, "-Svipe, I mean what I said. I don't want him around the mistress, I'm against it. I said yes because I thought you'd bring someone competent..."

"You still doubt his abilities?" he gave a mirror, "-look at your forehead."

"The burn mark?"

"Yeah, no scar, he healed you using magic."

"Magic?"

"Yes, the forgotten art used in Hidros. He's a noble."

"He was wearing nice clothes... why would he want to stay in the slums?"

"To treat people."

"To treat people?"

"Yes, the doctor's a strange character alright. He is not motivated by money or fame. We crashed his hospice and even shot one of his nurses..."

"YOU DID WHAT?"

"Forget about it."

"Where is he now?"

"With the mistress."

Nigel jumped on his feet, "-no," Svipe took the butler's hand and pulled, "-not today, you won't interfere."

The door closed quietly. A large window overlooked the inner city. Fresh air flooded the room. Large bed and expensive beddings, blackout curtains, '-she's crazy rich,' a warmly colored carpet and a wallpaper of intricate design, "-you're here?" said a frail voice, "-tell me, has death come?" Igna walked to the bed, "-my, the reaper of souls is very handsome."

"Death hasn't come," he smiled, "-I'm here to treat your illness."

"Treat my illness?"

"Yes."

"Where's Nigel, is he coming?"

"No, the butler's entertaining a few guests. Tell me," he examined her hands and face, giving a checkup, '-dark pupils, wrinkled skin, and purple. She's a victim of the monster plague. How could there be a monster-related illness here, in a relatively neutral continent?"

"Who are you?"

"Don't waste your breath," he opened his briefcase, "-close your eyes and rest." \*Mana Control: Light Element Variant – Astro Krona.\* cleanse the taint and \*Mantia – Book of Restoration, Honzela, fifth passage, broken art be fixed, fixed art be broken, eternal cycle; creation and destruction, the levy for reality changes perspective, watcher watches, creator creates, destroyer destroys, and restorer restores, Hicht.\* '-completely heal her body.' her breathing slowed, '-lack of mana and stamina,' two potion flask sufficed.

\*BARGE,\* "-GET OUT OF THE ROOM!"

'Nigel?'

.....

"GET OUT!" the butler gritted, "-Svipe killed your nurse. You're here to get revenge, GET OUT RIGHT THIS INSTANT."

"Nigel," Igna dropped the flasks, "-I warned you," he stepped and teleported across the room, "-don't you disrespect me again," he locked the butler's arm behind his shoulder, "-I've killed people for less," a simple push shattered the elbow. Igna rose his feet and stomped sideways on the butler's knee, bending the leg in a painful contortion. "-AHHH," a blood-curling scream resounded across the manor. Igna casually rose his gun and fired, \*Bang, bang, bang,\* two shots in the leg and one in the shoulder, "-AHHHH!" he got down on Nigel's level, winked at the grown man in tears, stood and kicked. Teeth flew across the room. Igna wasn't done, he titled Nigel's head and kicked again, taking both rights and left.

Svipe arrived too late. Igna poured salt water onto open wounds, "-too bad. You should have kept him on a leech."

A dominant presence rose from the bed, “-how dare you...”

‘She’s awake?’

“HOW DARE YOU!” she ran past Igna and blasted Nigel with a kick of her own, “-AH!” she cringed, “-it hurts,” she fell on her bottom and hissed.

“Why did you kick him?”

“Svipe, is that you?”

“Mistress, tell me, why did you kick him?”

“The bastard’s a traitor...”

Chapter 1069: “Dear Boss” [12]

“I misunderstand.”

“Svipe, you’re a good kid. Don’t let anyone else tell you otherwise. I respect your work and how you’ve fought to get to your position. Must have been hard. You took a risk. I’m glad you did. I can breathe freely,” she eyed Igna.

“Late introductions,” said Svipe, “-Doctor Lyoko, meet lady Umi Naht.”

They locked eyes. Umi Nath was of small and slender frame. Her medium-length hair swayed. She looked to be in her late thirties. “-I feel rejuvenated,” she commented, her black pupils scanning top to bottom.

“Umi Nath.”

“You’re a man of little words?”

“Depends on the person,” he took a step back, “-lady Umi, I must ask, are you the one in charge of the town?”

.....

“Yes, why?”

“The segregation?”

“Ah, the separation between rich and poor?”

“I suppose.”

“A necessity, otherwise the town sponsors will-” the ground rumbled. A sinister aura crept outside. ‘Someone entered Orin,’ he horned onto the pin-point location, ‘-angelic... who is it?’

“Doctor?”

“Svipe, lady Umi, I should leave.”

The scenery changed for the expansive wilderness set west, past the mountainous regions, and through steep valleys. Lack of town or settlement; the unpopulated, unventured landscape of the novel

continent. He flapped and shot across the skies. ‘-There,’ he stopped. Two entities fought. Fissures and burnt marks marred the jungle. Trees toppled, and birds flew swiftly – the pace was so it looked like two lights, one golden and the other dark green, flung at one another.

‘It’s a battle of the gods,’ he hovered. The eyes transformed, and the eye of truth revealed their potential and powers. Mana sense grabbed information infinitely. A stray ball of energy flung past. A distant boom followed. He turned and saw a hill half-destroyed. ‘-No holding back,’ he narrowed, ‘-who are they, and why are they fighting?’ the portal from whence they came yet remained. He soon hovered over and examined, ‘-ancient markings read the dialect of Esteh, the alchemic God. It’s not correctly formulated. At this rate,’ greenery around the portal withered. ‘-It’s sucking the live energy and mana from the atmosphere. What in the world is this?’ he moved closer, “-STOP!” Cruze suddenly manifested.

“Were you not in Hidros?”

“I sensed trouble,” he hovered shyly off the dark ground, “-I feel more and more portals opening. Igna,” Cruze gulped, “-the portals link to Draebala.”

“How do you know?”

“I remember the symbols,” he pointed, “-this one defines a location. Someone’s trying to leech off Orin. Draebala is in a state of upheaval,” another growl saw Igna side-step abruptly.

A voice lunged from another portal, “DIE!” a volley of weapons summoned, “-TO HELL YOU GO!” and rained onto the gold and green light. A slight shake of the head mumbled, “-always trying something. I swear,” he and Igna locked gaze. The man dropped his jaw, “-master?”

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“Formle?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I should be asking the questions.”

They focused on the dying personages, “-don’t mind me,” the god of war calmly skipped toward the destructive sight. Half-burnt trees, charred ground, fissures, and distress, “-this here a demon, the other, angel.”

“Why were they fighting?”

“Draebala’s under stress. Master, you should listen to what I have to say.”

“I’ll do it on one condition,” Cruze manifested fully, “-tell me, are the portals similar?”

Cruze took a minute, Formle’s brows knitted, “-portals?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the serpent.

“Well,” Igna opened his palm and closed his eyes, ‘-to see through reality, I need the full capability of my vision.’ \*See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth.\* the outside world glowed in vague dim outline.’ \*Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing,\* he sunk deep in the ocean.

Multiple possibilities are presented. The nature of the portal was such that none were linked. ‘To put an end to the portals, I need to reach the source. I see the mana waves, it’s a vague direction. I see the strings,’ a blank scroll manifested, ‘I understand,’ knowledge of the expansive Origin horned, ‘I see them,’ the vision contoured reality and followed across dimensions to an ancient Vase. ‘A bathhouse of marble. Steam rises. It’s around here,’ his projection passed through walls, ‘where is it,’ he focused deeper, veins on his forehead bulged. A golden hue began to flow. Igna’s body radiated godly mana. Nike’s symbol sprawled. The outline of a diadem embodied the goddess’ symbol, the latter of which was often spotted on Igna’s forehead. The change from physical to ethereal was one of growth.

“Nike’s crown,” Cruze commented, “-her artifact lives?”

“Why, did something happen?”

“Yes, I heard it was lost, destroyed at the spear of the devourer. She lost her life in said fight. I’m surprised about her symbol’s potency. Formle, God of war, what is going on, really?” conversation grew.

\*O’ goddess forgotten by the ages, o’ goddess who spread victory and peace over the souls of true warriors. I, humble vessel for thy Symbol, plea to have a sliver of thy strength,\*

“As you wish,” the goddess’ transient apparition was spotted hovering above Igna. Her arms cuddled Igna’s head, like a mother soothing her child’s cries.

“Nike’s not dead, not that I remember.”

“You know something?”

“Partly,” Formle shrugged, “I remember the guardians talking about how Athena and Nike came to the Realm for a visit. So far gone, does it really matter?”

“I guess not,” they lit cigarettes each, walked over to the angel and demon then puffed, “-poor bastards,” Formle exhaled, “-they chose the wrong side to go after.”

Meanwhile, the air and energy around Igna changed. It felt heavy and suffocating. ‘Look for it,’ the projection’s vision cleared. ‘Deep underground,’ he looked around, ‘-hidden in a forgotten tomb. The remnant of an artifact was reawakened by curious bystanders. I can’t see who’s responsible. I feel their power, it’s big, very big. I’d say on par with the Guardians. Entities of such caliber are hard to come by. It’s feeding off Orin. Draebala’s mana capacity isn’t enough. It easily summoned portals across dimensions... who in the world is this, someone with knowledge of the ancient arts? Artanos... no, it’s not him. He’s shrewder,’ he focused, ‘-the source is the cremated remains of Ayah, a personage from old tales. God or demon, I can’t say. He’s human I think,’ the fingers moved. Igna’s projection established a bond with the vase, ‘-good, a stable link. Now onto the difficult part,’ he moved, blood gushed from his corporal body, the strain amplified. \*Powers to bring down my enemies, powers to bring down my foe, from the abyssal depths of hell to the highest peak in the heavens, shudder, cower, and fear, my anger is not to be triggered, my rage is not to be quelled and my lust is not to be quenched. Bow before the power feared by even Creation himself, Hand of the Lamented,\* bodiless palms sprang into a pointing gesture. From Ayah’s vase to the open portals, the Hand of the Lamented made contact, ‘-it’s not just Orin, the portals were thrown in other realms,’ he clenched his fist, ‘-Nike’s power isn’t enough,’ but was unable to seal the routes. ‘It goes beyond what my body can do,’ he pressed his palms and breathed, ‘-one solution,’ \*Thud,\* a dark sensation came from within.

\*Deep slumber, deep rest, awaken for the chance at retribution. Gate of which stands before mine way, open for thy master has come: Nevermore – Hell’s Gate,\* Lightning cackled. Rain clouds formed. Igna’s body transformed. The vampiric features grew apparent, and a dark cloud containing Death’s symbol emanated. ‘Still not enough.’

\*Span across the ages, fear is what held peace, fear is what caused War, fear is the root of evil. I, the harbinger of the ultimate fear, have come to spread and reclaim what is mine of right: Nevermore – Terror Gate.\* A heavy feeling brought him to his knees, ‘-the strain,’ blood ran down his chin, ‘-a little bit more,’ a hard-swallow, \*Unbound by the laws of Heaven and Hell; unshackle my power: Nevermore – Annihilation Gate.\* ‘-still nothing?’ the heart sank, a heavy pressure dropped him on one knee, ‘-two more gates, will this body last?’ destruction by the immense power far surpassed the regeneration rate of both Vampiric and the dormant Death Element. \*Gateway to the afterlife, gateway to life, gateway of those who live, open, for I order so: Nevermore – Eleo Gate,\* ‘-YES!’ the hand of lamented touched the portal, he clenched and sealed the links, “-now the finale,” he opened his eyes to a sea of red, he cried tears of blood, \*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, from when you were born and till you die, I, Devil, hold in my hands the strings which binds you to this world, by my authority, I order thy chains to be severed, spell, Tactus Interitus.\* The portal decayed and puffed. Igna fell and his head, with little strength, flipped and stared at the stars. Cruze’ soft footstep ambled, and the serpent looked down, to which Igna ignored the stare for the starry night. “Master, you do know using the Shadow Realm’s power would have been easy?”

“Yeah, but there’s too much risk. My domain will remain a secret as long as it permits me. Besides,’ the body regenerated, ‘-I had to test the limit of this body. It’s bad,’ he laughed, ‘-I can barely make it to the four-level of the Nevermore seal. The Death element’s in order at least.”

“If you say so.”

Formle approached from the other side, “-mind listening to my side?”

“Sure,” he sat upright, the scene before wasn’t too much. Destruction and the smell of fresh blood, what could be better?

“Draebala’s not the same. We conquered Zayan D’olsak. We forged connections with both the Aapith Nation and the Eipea Empire. The fight against the Titan’s underway. You can imagine the strain it puts on the domain. God-level entities firing spells without concern. It takes a toll and the damage was felt in the main continent. There were reports of the ground literally disappearing before people. It simply vanished from existence. A grayscale orb replaced the thing, I can’t describe it. We call it World’ End. To supply mana, the domain’s eating itself. The very frame of Draebala’s reality is in danger. I’ve granted our force authority to recall home. No one knows what’ll happen. If the Titans continue at their pace, there won’t be anything left. The line of communication between Aapith and Eipea will be lost.”

“Wouldn’t be a bad thing,” Cruze added.

“It will be, trust me. The demon and angel over there fought over nothing. They flew into our land and began tearing the place apart. It makes no sense, no sense I say.”

“Are they dead?”

“Yeah,” he exhaled.

The phone rang, “-caller Svipe.”

“I’m going back.”

“Me too.”

“Master, I implore you, to look into the disappearance of the Guardians. We know their location, just not their intent. I fear we might lose more than we have if you stand here and do nothing. We need Lilith. Please master, I beg thee.”

“I will,” he stood, “-once I’ve healed Eira, I’ll begin the search for Lilith. She’s in the Aapith Nation, yes?”

“I don’t know, maybe? She ought to be there.”

‘My aids,’ the duo vanished, ‘The princes of Hell, Asmodeus and the rest. They’ll be fine, I trust in their skill. Kul did say something about a change. Well, I’m in no hurry. The end will come, I know it will. Preparations... the Nevermore gate is working. I’m one step closer. Come what may, a great deed will be done for salvation. I hate martyrs.’

“Hello?”

“About time!”

“What is it?”

“The lady wants to meet you.”

“Didn’t we meet already? I fail to see why it’ll benefit-”

“Stop talking and meet me by the Cub’s bridge,” the phone hung abruptly.

‘Blood, death, a battle,’ he pinched his forehead, ‘-pain,’ and dropped on one knee, ‘-I can’t stop the eye, reality’s fading, I need,’ he gasped, ‘-I need.’

A cold sensation took his nose, ‘-glasses?’

“Master,” Elize purred, “-I knew you’d need this.”

“Thank you,” he smiled, “-can you help? My body’s not at one hundred percent.”

Chapter 1070: “Dear Boss” [13]

“You look different.”

“Does it matter?”

“Not really,” Svipe bowed over the bridge, “-you made a good impression.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah,” he smiled, “-the lady is on her way.”

Headlights beamed from the bridge’s other side, under the scale of buildings populating the ‘-citizen’s region’. Svipe’s pleased expression. The unnaturally silent port at two in the morning, ‘-what are they up do?’



Breaks strained a high-pitch squeal. Doors shut, a lady dropped from the driver's side, walked to the bridge, turned at Igna, and rose her cap, "-you," she pointed dressed in a trucker's outfit, "-I choose you."

.....

"Pardon?"

She moved into his face and said, "-I choose you."

Igna calmly watched through the frameless glasses, "-really," he grabbed her shoulders, "-you think you can tame me?"

"I don't think, I will tame you," she shrugged and hopped back, "-Doctor Lyoko," her arms opened towards the port, "-Istra is a beautiful city, from the filth to the clean, everyone is deserving of a place. I want the city to be a place where the law isn't a hassle, but rules that may be bent to suit one's power or agenda. After all, I love when strong foes face off. The battle and drama are treats for poor little ol' me."

"I see," he narrowed, "-so you're something of a rebel."

"You could say that," she sighed and stared, "-I'm more than just a rebel, I'm the one who rules these plains. I love everything about this city. I love my life, I couldn't be more grateful for the second chance," she skipped to his side and took his hand, "-please, Doctor, will you become one with me?"

"..."

"I need you," she leaned, "-I need you for my quest. I need you to help me, I want just one thing."

"..."

"Immortality."

"Immortality?" Igna returned with a somewhat pleased expression, "-such things are fantasy."

"No, no there is. I believe they go by The Order of Nightwalkers. Hidros' secret, an organization feared the world over. Their members are Nightwalkers, vampires as referred to in ancient texts."

"And?"

"I want it, immortality."

"What are you willing to pay?"

"Everything."

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"Not enough."

"..."

"Enough," Svipe interjected, "-no more. My lady, you're here for another reason."

"My apologies," she swallowed hard and looked away, "-I'm here for this," the truck's cargo fell at Igna's feet, "-here's my butler," she narrowed, "-do with him as you'd please. I don't much care for traitors."

"Is he alive?" he tapped Nigel's face with his foot, '-unconscious,' a gun flew in the peripheral, "-what is this?"

"A gun," added Svipe, "-best finish the job you started."

"Right," he scanned, "-I rendered him unable to work. Too bad," he crouched and tapped the man's pale cheeks, "-wake up," he whispered, the pupils focused and shrieked, "-HMM, HMMMM!" he jolted, the restraints were much for a broken man.

"There, that's the spirit," he stood and lowered the gun, "-face your death with dignity, foul ingrate. Don't ever disrespect me again," \*BANG,\* the skull cracked, \*BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG,\* he emptied the clip. A puddle veered off into the drains, and droplets of red fell from the bridge.

"Send him off," Svipe ordered. Attendants emerged from the truck's shadows and threw him off the side. The lady held a sadistic and inviting look. Her cheeks reddened and her fingers made small gestures, '-this one,' he side-glanced, '-this one will be easy to control. She's a fiend of her own desires.'

"My job's done," Svipe affirmed, "-lady Umi, I trust you're pleased?"

"Yeah, I got what I need," she gleamed, "-Lyoko, starting today, you're my personal attendant. Please don't say no until you hear my terms. Will you join me in my office?"

"Lead the way," the door shut, and the truck reversed into the citizen's district.

Sun threw a glimpse into a manor fixed upon the port's highest point. The view below was grand, the slums were shy of the harbor. The sea, the ships, and the movements of carriages and cars in and out of the city. Igna threw the curtain wide open and stepped into the light. A warm teacup at his side and the distant figure of Umi's expose body kept under blankets. 'She's a masochist,' he sipped, '-the perfect punching bag for nights when I feel frustrated. Too bad I'm pleasing myself with only one partner,' he smiled, '-long as she enjoys the torture,' he sipped, a vague outline walked to his side, "-is it all, my liege?"

"Good job satisfying her lust, Emerald. You may return to the Shadows."

"As you wish, my liege," emerald-colored eyes stared Umi up and down with a cheeky lick of the lips.

Warm hands wormed their way around his chest and crotch, "-you were splendid," lips pressed his back and shoulders, "-you're hired." He slapped her hand and kicked her to the ground, "-don't you dare," he thundered. She spread her legs and cowered, "-please don't hurt me." He took one step and poured hot tea onto her stomach, she screamed in joy, "-I own you," he grabbed her jaw, "-remember that."

"Yes, I'm sorry. Please punish me," the curtains shut and two hours passed. The view moved from the bedroom to an office. Umi held her pose straight and had a sense of authority by her side. The office, not to be confused by those in Hidros, associated with high-rises and skyscrapers, was nothing much but a study in the main manor.

"Doctor, what we do in private is ours alone. You understand, yes?"

“You’re one freaky human being.”

“Thank you, I appreciate the compliment. In no will is my subduedness a sign for you to take command. You don’t want to become like Nigel?”

He laughed at the threat, “-listen,” he leaned forward, “-I do what I want and screw who I please. You’re the odd nail on my list. I tell you, you’re nothing more than an entitled leader who came to power from a piss-poor marriage. Your influence is nothing, Yian-Dho means nothing... take away your husband, what is left save the hole in-between your legs?”

“DON’T DISRESPEC-”

He slammed the table, “-respect is earned. Not bought. The night we shared doesn’t mean anything. You’re needy, you must have someone tell you how to live, you need guidance, and you crave the feeling of worthlessness. I can give you what you need,” he smiled; “-however, it will be my call to make, understand?”

“Where do you get off-”

“The strong have authority,” he brandished Tharis, “-and I’m not opposed making Istra cower. DBK’s already got the people in anguish, imagine one for the faction’s downfall. You need me and I don’t need you. Your flesh isn’t worthy – the wrinkled skin of a forgotten princess is akin to an artifact. There but locked, present but impractical.”

She held her temples, “-you’re the devil.”

“Indeed I am.”

“You’ll regret not accepting my terms. You could have become a citizen, someone influential in the city, we could have taken my husband’s fortune, we could have ruled as one.”

He paused, “-there’s only one ruler of my heart, and she’s the best thing to ever happen to me. I cherish her always. Your materialist gains don’t satisfy my whims,” he stood, “-I say the meeting is over.”

“WAIT!”

He grabbed the handle, “-WAIT, DOCTOR, PLEASE... I’LL DO WHAT YOU WANT, TELL ME YOUR TERMS!”

“Good,” he released the knob and leaned against the door, “-my terms are simple. You do as you want and I do as I please. I’ll work as your physician and exterminate any threats imposed on your life. In exchange, I want my service as a healer to be kept a secret. I will heal the rich as I will the poor.”

“Money, fame, you want nothing?”

“What will I do with things that I’ve already had,” he laughed, “-here’s my cell number. I will be staying at the hill-side manor,” he went around her desk and tied a necklace around her neck, “-keep this one at all times. Consider it a protection against evil. I assure your safety is my priority. Scheme and think about your next move, I’ll be there waiting, lady Umi.”

She looked up with a confused expression, “-you called me lady?”

"Yes. Though there's far much to do before gaining my respect. Consider this my way of saying I'm willing."

"Thank you," she shot up and held Igna, "-I needed this, thank you, Lyoko."

He later returned to the slums, '-she'll want to have more intercourse,' he sat on the straw bed and stared out the window, '-good thing I have him. Do your worse, Vengeance, take the lady on the best-elated dream she's ever had. Make her yours and let me,' he covered his eyes, '-let me sleep.' The battle wounds caught up. Fatigue and pain shot; the body's remaining energy is drained. It would be a week before Igna came too.

During said week, Nikki found herself in quite a predicament. 'I work the brothel; my usual customers don't come anymore. No one wants to pay. What's happening?' evening dawned upon the city, '-I guess I'll visit the miners.' She walked kilometers to the miner's camp, a small area surrounded by trees fixed a few minutes walk from the mines. "-Nikki, how goes it?" waved another lady of the night, "-haven't seen you here," the lass' face was wounded, beaten. Her short dress revealed much of her injuries, "-keep by the brothel, you won't last a moment."

"I will," she stepped into the compound, '-their gaze,' she swallowed hard, -they pierce me. Rough men starved for affection...'

"Trust me, Nikki, the pay isn't worth the hurt."

"What about you?"

"I've lived here my whole life. My parents abandoned me to them... I lost my virginity when I was eight. This way of life is the only thing I know," she coughed and sprinkled blood, "-I'm going to die anyway. Leave, Nikki, you don't have to. I'll keep them entertained, no one should go through what I have, no one. Do you hear me?"

"NIKKI!" firm hands grabbed and pulled, "-LOOK AT ME!"

"Mirai?"

"Come with me, come!"

They left the compound in Mirai's jeep. An awkward silence fell. He reached for her hand at the exit, "-Nikki."

"Would you stop," she pulled, "-Mirai, I don't want anything to do with you. I'm a lady of the night. I'll give my body to anyone for money. Why do you want to save me, why, do you want to feel like a hero so badly? Go find another helpless bitch. I don't care for sympathy!"

"NIKKI STOP!" he slammed the brakes, "-I LOVE YOU, DON'T YOU GET THAT?"

"WHY?"

"BECAUSE I DO!"

She slammed the door, "-I don't believe you. Selfish asshole. Where was the bravado when I was forced into the mines by your workers? Where were you when they made me swallow lead and their filth?"

Where were you when they forced rocks and physically abused me, huh, where were you? I was raised by a loving mother. I was happy living the life of a normal girl in a city of filth. She worked the nights and I understood what awaited me. I accepted said fate but my mother said no, she gave me a proper education, and I was set to work for your father's company. It's because of you, Mirai, it's because I met you that I became who I am today, a worthless slave used for the pleasure of your father's corporate hotshots. Even when you say you love me, even if I return the feelings, I can't become your lover. We're not the same, we won't ever be the same. You're innocent... I couldn't stomach faking my innocence too. I'm a lady of the Night, Mirai, I was made so by your father and your family. I don't think we could work out."

"STOP IT," he jumped and held her in his arms, "-I didn't know... I didn't know. Nikki, I'm sorry... I interviewed you and based my decision on your qualification. I never knew you endured such trauma; I never knew..."

"That's it," she pushed back, "-you never knew because you never cared. A lady in this misogynistic city won't ever get far without sleeping around. I don't know anymore. Come find me when you dare face the truth. Until then, don't see me again."