

Death Magic 1071

Chapter 1071: "Dear Boss" [14]

"Alchemic mister. What is the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," a frail old man bowed at a table filled with flasks, "-my attempts at restoration failed. Who was it?"

"Who was what, mister?"

"Ingrate," he flipped, "-I asked you a question, give me an answer," *cough, cough,* he gripped the table's ledge, lamenting the future. 'Who closed my portals... they destroyed the vase. I was this close to becoming a true god. I've used the extent of my mortal body, I need to reincarnate.'

"Engratse."

"Artanos..." a not-so-inviting tone returned, "-what brings you to my workshop?"

"I heard the latest update from the Alchemic Mister's workshop. You pathetically failed. So much for being a man of true intellect. I thought you'd be wiser."

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"Acting like you know everything," he shot his discontent. Artanos dipped under the feeling and fed the fracas, "-why are you here? Had to go and ruin my plans at taking Draebala."

"I'm here to ask a favor," he sat, "-and in exchange," a vase materialized, "-these are the remnants of Ayah's vase. I thought it wise to grab what remained before he destroyed it."

"You know who's responsible?"

"You bet I know," he grinned, "-I'm the one who knows much. Tell me, Engratse, what is your price?"

"My price is not for negotiation. I take what I want, such is what my father, Grostian taught us, siblings. Tell me who's responsible and where is he?"

"Thing is," he smiled, "-we're closer than you'd think," he walked to a small opening, threw curtains open, and saw the sea and a city perched atop a cliff, "-you went into hiding after the incident. You choose for your offspring to lead the city however they wanted. I mean, he did inherit that draconian style of leadership. The one responsible can be found in the city. You've harmed his precious little sister with a curse. The lass can't return despite his attempts. Orin's a good realm – it's perfect for what you have in mind, the reckoning of Estral. I would consider caution over recklessness. Take your time."

"I don't have time," he thundered, "-I need lives to feed my soul. I'm not god, I was a failed creation. My symbol of power weakens."

"Grostian died."

"WHAT?"

"The realm too."

"WHEN AND WHERE?"

"You should have heard it from your father. Your elder brother, the Cursed King Alfred. His reincarnation's here and well. He's inherited the true power of Grostian as well as the old man's domain. The death of another mighty god sends tremors around the dimensions. We have lost so many mighty gods. From the olden kings to nigh, Kronos, my mentor, and Grostian the VIth of Fall. He will be kindly remembered."

"My father's dead?"

"Are you angry?"

"No," he glared, "-I'm not angry, I'm disappointed. The old man was strong... he had so much on his plate, I- I guess I'm relieved."

Artanos leaned against the opening, the outside hue enveloped his outline, "-why the look of disdain?"

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"He gave Alfred the symbol. My older brother is bad. I ought to reincarnate. Facing him will demand a lot of strength."

"Don't," Artanos leaped, "-I have something even better," a portal to the infinite realm of Knowledge opened, "-join my faction, Engratse."

"What's in for me?"

"A true vessel. I have the perfect candidate for your reincarnation. A follower of your older brother's faction. A servant who served my mentor and my master, she'll remember when we pay a visit."

"Miira?"

"You got it," a sadistic grin echoed, "-she's helpless without Kronos, always living in his shadow. She's a shadow and depends on a great light, call her a pest. She's no Guardian, only a loyal dog. I'm sure she misses me," the portal widened, "-Orin's to be left alone. Such was the deal I made with him."

"You lost?"

"No, not lost. Leave Orin as it is. I know a place," glimpses of the Eipea Empire flashed, "-a realm which surpasses the threshold. Just so happens that Zeus and I have a meeting. I would like your company."

Golden and pure, jewels of power and of prestige, the three suns of Nortest and the Quadran of Elsia to the south. The guardian deity Monslav circles the realm, guiding the sun and the Quadran, elapsing night and day. Various floating isles scattered over a lower continent, the highest peak being a castle made with calcified godly mana. Angels flapped, and sparks of righteousness fluttered a deeply soothing aura. Old man Engratse inhaled into his stomach, *cough, cough, cough.*

"Don't overdo it," beamed Artanos, "-we've just started," he swiped, a golden bridge manifested towards the great hovering capital. They walked, and gods and mythical creatures flew past. Idyllic waterfalls rained gems, "-the abundance of mana."

"Such the Eipea nation," Artanos added, "-tell me, Engraste, care for a wager?"

"What wager?"

"Will Zeus accept my proposal or nigh?"

"If you make him accept, I'll join your cause no questions asked."

"That's what I like to hear." From pleasant outside to a ravishingly affluent inside. Tall intricately designed pillars carved from precious stones, marble, and elder wood held the domed interior on which, what could only be described as a masterpiece, was painted. The symbol of Athena gave credit to the artist. Artanos waited, as did the many servants(angels). A powerful presence echoed, and the doors opened with a gust of innate power. Zeus' boyish features transformed into a thick well-combed beard. His body grew muscular, he held a stronger, fiercer, and more mature look on his visage.

He dropped to the opposite seat and waved. The attendants left, and a simple click marked the beginning, "-Artanos."

"Supreme God."

"You and I are not friends," Zeus elaborated further, "-why have you come into enemy territory?"

"I seek an armistice."

"Is that so?" he watched cautiously, "-and who sits by your side?"

"Engratse."

"The Alchemist God," he nodded.

"Supreme God."

"Make your case, Artanos."

The room's aura dropped, "-Zeus, you're no longer in control of your surroundings. The Eipea Empire was on verge of a revolution. The one leading the assault is a little dame by the name of Miira. I heard about her recruitment efforts. She's taken the gods who were displeased by your leadership and is forming a formidable army. I know the location of her pocket dimension. There are little things in this world that I know. My title of God of Knowledge extends far and wide. Tell me, Zeus, what have you done in the time I've been away? Is your relationship with Lucifer going well or has the Fallen Angel decided to fly closer to the sun?"

"Artanos. You were part of the Heavenly faction; you were part of my faction before you decided to leave. Not obeying my orders is reason for execution. Why didn't you kill Eira when the opportunity presented itself? And Miira, she's returned and has gained popularity. I can't get rid of her... she's stronger. You abandoned us. Didn't you think I would know you're leading the Titan Army, God of Titan? Your assault on our territory in Draebala has caused my faction a lot of trouble. What will you do to attain for your sin, Artanos."

"Supreme God, I explicitly said I'm a neutral party before joining the Heavenly faction. I played my cards and came out on top. The Titan factions are on their way to crushing your armies."

"INSOLENCE!"

“Hold your tongue, Zeus. I’m not your enemy. Draebala’s not my target. The Aapith nation is,” he smiled, “-Lucifer’s outstayed his welcome. I think it best to take the realm of demons. They’re a nuisance.”

“Are you suggesting?”

“Yes, I am,” he smiled, “-in exchange for your help, I will grant you, my knowledge. Qhildir’s dead. You need an advisor, someone who can see what can’t be seen.”

“Qhildir’s death, you know something?”

“Yes. The Curse of Misfortune. It would seem the Curse’ out of control.”

“We could always ask Creation or Death about the matter.”

“The Neutral Faction best be left alone. Death and Creation have no say in our heavenly affairs. Zeus, will you join me in my quest of taking the Aapith Nation?”

“It sounds interesting,” he smiled, “-Lucifer and I have worked wonders together. We’ve killed and destroyed those who stood in our paths. Lucifer’s a strong man with a proven track record. How can you compare?”

“How can I compare?” he clapped, portals opened with demons of high-ranking power, “-these are a few of my Clockwork puppets. Dolls made from the Tower of Aria. An army with the ability to destroy and conquer realms. I dubbed them the Twelve Hour Mark, or The Twelve for short. ”

“Interesting,” Zeus clapped, the seats teleported into a coliseum. “Action speaks louder than words,” he clapped, and a four-armed behemoth roared into the arena, “-the champion Aras. He’s the strongest one of my many affairs. Tell me, do you have the strength to fight one of my sons?”

“First-hour mark,” Artanos clapped. A frail-looking skeleton stood opposite Aras, the latter dwarfed poor little skeleton.

“Insulting,” Zeus narrowed, “-you sure he can keep up with my son?”

A gong boomed. The fight instantly ended. Aras fell on his knees, a massive hole in his chest spewing blood, “-what did I say,” he clapped, and the skeleton disappeared, “-the strength of my army isn’t a linear increase, no my friend, it’s logarithmic. Hey, I doubt the supreme god cares for explanations. In summary, the XII is strong.”

“You’re telling me, they’re unbeatable?”

“Depends on the fighter... my goal is a small unit of elite fighters.”

“You killed Aras, he didn’t last a second. Artanos,” they teleported inside, “-tell me, why must we betray Lucifer and how do I know you haven’t approached him first?”

“The reason is simple. Eipea Empire was ruled by one monarch. The Aapith Nation’s ruled by a council of Demons. You see, the latter is a hassle. I rather not waste my energy butting them up. Instead, I came to you, Zeus. We’ve worked together and have a close connection to Kronos. We’re both students of his. I don’t care about what happened, the past is irrelevant. What remains is our deeper connection to a common man, a great man.”

"My father was great, I agree," he breathed a shallow sigh, "-he was a shining example of what it meant to be a ruler... he's paranoia fueled his downfall. I don't much care for the sentiment. Artanos, what will happen to the Demonic faction?"

"We will crush them. Their kind has long leeched mana off those who deserved the essence. Take them out of the picture and we can move to conquer Draebala without harming the realm. We should leave the domain heal... constant fighting hastened the clock of the end. I want to save Draebala. I have my own domain to think about, despite my strength, my personal realm isn't strong nor is it powerful. What I have is here, in this body, not locked or hidden. I am what you'll get, simple and easy. Zeus, you hate Lucifer too, don't you?"

"Lucifer?" he gulped; "-I don't hate him. He's a good companion and a good friend. We're the same if you think about it, he was unlucky, a failure unable to overthrow his father. I'm the exception, I defeated my father and stand here on his throne. Artanos, I've always wanted to rule over Time. Promise me the symbol of Kronos, promise me the symbol I failed to acquire, promise me."

"I don't make promises. Stick with me and ruling Time will seem like Childsplay. Zeus, by allying with us, you gain not only my council but also the Titan's might. I will cease my assault against your faction and channel their might towards the Aapith Nation. "

"What about Faction north?"

"Should be a simple process of taking the demons then walking to reclaim Zayan."

"To the start of a great partnership," Zeus extended his hand.

"To the beginning of the end," Artanos firmed the handshake, and thus, a new faction was born.

Chapter 1072: "Dear Boss" [15]

"Open, open, open!" no answer, only the mild reverberation of the metallic frame. More closed-fisted knocks echoed, yet, no answer returned. A small glimmer peaked from the top floor, through the hammered planks locking the broken windows. "Help me!" they turned upward desperately, "-help, I need help," they begged.

A nonchalant sigh glanced inward, "-someone's at the door," she said.

"I'm tired," Igna returned, "-throw a potion, I need rest."

Elize salivated at the thought, picked the potion, rushed into another room, threw open the only working window, and poured. Expensive elixir rained, and the imbued power lit their face as it landed, "-thank you," said the man, "-you've healed my son and me. I thank you, Doctor, I thank you." The man disappeared. Shadowy figures loomed around the alley, vague shapes hidden under shades of buildings and tall fences. The alleys seemed an ecosystem of their own where different rules applied. It didn't matter if the street were a stone's throw away, the truth was as so, '-step into the alley and brace thyself for the alley's thirst mustn't be quenched.'

Day rose on a particular day. Clock struck 05:40, the sun was out, and calendars flipped for the 1st of September. A new month, a new start. Such were hopeful thoughts. The gazette wasn't so kind to the populous. Igna exited the run-down hospital into the cold morning raise. From the alley to the side

streets, he made a straight line toward the docks. Workers puffed harshly, laborers were hard at work. Muck and filth were thrown into the Just canal. Factories and day-to-day excretions. Nods of recognition came his way, and he returned the compliments and ambled. Crashing winds and the beating of waves, the seas' saddened sea refreshed his nose from Just Canal's natural scent. He walked past the pier, bought the day's issue, folded the paper between his arms, and lit a cigarette. The weather changed early from well-lit to murky. A somber veiled clouded the horizon. Igna settled at a run-down park giving onto the broken pier. He crossed his legs and puffed. "Corruption?" read an ambiguous headline. '-not priming the reader to think a certain way, very brave of them,' he followed the lines, "-Istra's has changed within the past few months. Secrets are coming into the public lights, matters of which we believed on a base have been confirmed one way or the other. The Police-force's work in the DBK is astonishing. When asked of foreign agencies, they had this to say, '-there are several serial killers in the wild. We don't come across them, they're that smart and self-assured. The work Istra's police agency has done is phenomenal. With a lack of proper infrastructure, the detectives were able to keep the public's fear at bay. We must respect their efforts,' such was a comment from a chief investigator of the Emria province. Truth remains. The DBK has thrown salt into the wounds of the police agency. By shifting the investigation away from the public light, we have but assumption to base speculation. Will there come a day when the DBK is found? We don't know. It'll come to either the killer making a mistake or someone witnessing the assault directly. He has taken the lives of six people."

'Seems to be written by another. The state's involvement with media governance. I see, corruption, the title's a hint and a blatant bait. Putting the truth out there makes the public less likely to question the matter. A problem's only a problem when people make a deal out of it. The ECA's influence,' a side-article caught his attention, "-the Slum's guardian deity," it read in bold letters. He flipped to the page, '-when did they?' a black and white portrait of Igna's side profile was placed beside the text, '-can't see my face... it's anonymized for better or worse. "Istra's lack of medical facilities and care has resulted in the deaths of many. From sailors to children, our society's culture of work has taken a deeper toll on the human aspect of things. Mankind's submission in the face of growing industries... in the face of coming poverty, famine, and all-encompassing despair, has proven a hard place to survive. Compared to other towns, Istra's growth against the income index has only grown worse. Appropriate comparison to Port Dawn shows a steady growth of the standard of living against the port's growth. Istra's an exception. The better it gets the worse becomes the city. Statistics performed by Professor Sine from the Financial Department have proved our assumptions. In stark contrast to the poor, crime-stricken background of Istra, a shining beacon of hope, Doctor Lyoko, or Doc for short, has taken to the alleys to help others. Many were healed. His hospice, a run-down apartment located a few steps from Hen's street into the dark corner of E Block, has delivered babies, healed the wounded, treated the plague, and even returned life to the dead. Medical aid is scarce, akin to a precious Maicite. Doc Lyoko's treatment differs from what we've come to know of physicians in the main city. He treats for an affordable price and has even been, and I quote, '-takes a simple meal in exchange for treatment.' He will trade and happily incur a loss to help another's life. Before you shrewd con artist get ideas, "-poor blokes tryin' to finesse the doc aren't unfamiliar with broken bones. I saw a fugger' get acid thrown in his face. The doc's a maniac. We call hi' guardian for reason. He's a certified badass," such were the words from the Malrish, from the Off guild. The doc' reputation is one to be respected. If you're wounded or ill, I'd have recommended a stay. The hospice was recently assaulted. One of the doc's nurses was shot in cold blood. Istra's vindictive kink's yet present."

He folded the paper and puffed, ‘-what an exaggerated article. They have nothing better to do, I swear,’ he snuffed the cigarette and looked at the gray sky. ‘-Someone running?’ he heard way beyond the hearing capacity of a normal being, ‘-the pace and the footstep,’ he focused, ‘-Tommy.’ Such was the truth, the little brother sprinted towards the pier. Igna lowered his gaze at the mist-covered area. He leaped into sight, and little Tommy locked and ran at him, “-hey doc,” he slid and gasped, “-help me, help me, help me!”

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“Calm it, Tommy. Steady, steady.”

“Doc, it’s big sis. She’s not waking up.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t know, she went out with bro last night... I went to check on her, her room’s closed. I asked them to open the door, they won’t listen.”

Wasn’t long before they arrived. Kepmt’s Cottage, placed at the opposite end of Block G, was home to the residential district and served as a gateway into the slums. Men in military outfits patrolled the entrance. “Follow me,” he went opposite the cottage into a tavern run by the same owners. It opened with unruly patrons passing insulting comments at the cottage. Igna found a seat at one of the windows and sat. A waitress came, her focus plastered against Kepmt’s cottage. “-may I take your order?” spewed a mix of tones uncaringly.

“Doc... what about sis?”

“Listen, Tommy,” he ordered, the waitress remained in her daze, “-there are things we must know before entering a battle. Come, eat something, you have work in about an hour. Leave her to me.”

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“Doctor, you sure bro is safe?”

“Why do you say that?”

“I saw them,” he swallowed, “-I saw them returning from the miner’s camp. Sister was crying and bro was silent. He looked angry, I don’t know doc, I’m scared. If sis is gone, I won’t have anyone else... she’s... she’s.”

“I know, I know,” warm food reached their table, “-you’re scared, I know the feeling all too well. Leave it to me.”

“Okay doc,” he ate. The whispers proved a great source of information.

“Who do they think they are?”

“Man, I was having such a nice dream.”

“Lack of sleep before work sucks.”

"Johnny's mad, looked at him," chuckles followed, "-he didn't get his twice-a-day session with the bartender."

"Oh man, you mean Barbara?"

"No, she's gone. I mean her replacement, Dalhi. She's got a great personality."

"Yeah, two of 'em."

He changed table, "-why do you think they got us out?"

"Couldn't tell you, they look like people working for the town hall."

"Man those corrupt bastards. They intruded on Kepmt's cottage, I doubt he'll take it lightly."

"Yeah, best not to get on Kepm's bad side. He's a crazy mothertrucker, I saw him hammer a guest's hand on the damned counter for failing to give his workers the required tip. He's not someone to mess with."

"Istra for you, we should have moved to Pawn. This place sucks... so much for the revolution, the rich get richer and the poor, well, look at the tavern, everyone was thrown out because of some rich kid's father, fuck the Duquant."

"Not so loud, they'll hear you."

An hour went by, Tommy left. 'I should make my move,' most of the patrons left for work. He crossed the street, "-slow down there buddy, no one's allowed in."

Igna fiercely stared at the guard, "-yes, well, no one doesn't concern me. I go wherever I want," he cocked Tharis and stared at the other guard, "-I have business inside. You should know my name by now," he took one step and whispered, "-Lyoko."

"The crazy-haired monster," they rose their rifles, "-we have orders to kill you, damned bastard!"

"Well then, it makes two of us. Step on in," he smirked, "-I rather not sully the street with your filth."

One turned and the other rose his rifle at Igna. He smiled and shot, the one guarding him fell, and the other, panicked and turned, *bang,* too late, the man's splattered blood against the door.

"Gunshots," echoed inside. The door creaked. Igna's dark outline entered – a mini-army stood with guns at the ready, "-STOP!" Svipe ran down the middle, "-Doc, why are you here?" he gasped, "-did you kill my men?" the red splatter against the door was proof, "-why..." he shook his head, "-Doc, please don't get involved. This matter doesn't concern you. I saw this for your and the lady's safety. We're on important business."

"Svipe, listen to me," he walked past, "-shoot me if you must. I have someone to care for," he climbed the stairs, and the army waited impatiently. Svipe held his tongue and ordered a stay. Many of the doors were kicked in, and slaps and cries came from down the hallway. Igna went and stopped at Nikki's door, '-they're not here for her,' he barged the door, stopped at the entrance, threw a glance at Svipe, "-I'm here for her, don't worry."

"Should we shoot?"

"Leave 'em be," he gasped, "-Lyoko's not here for us. He came for someone else. We continue the mission. Search the rooms, we need to find her. If she escapes, we're dead."

"Boss, what about the guards, they're dead?"

"Take them to the kitchen."

Another voice arrived, "-boss, we found Kepm."

"Good, step up the office for parole. I have a few screws I ought to unlock," he cracked his knuckles, '-better grit, Kepm, the dentist' here.'

Nikki slept. The curtains were drawn and the stench of the plague hit his nose. '-She's infected,' he approached and turned her face, '-good, it hasn't reached her brain. How many times am I going to treat this chick,' he snapped, a bubble expanded, '-she's more trouble than worth.' *Mana Control: Light Element Variant – Astro Krona.*

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, the taint crumbled, '-it's lifting.'

Cough, cough, cough, her head shot back and she manically clawed at her neck, "-what?" he fashioned a kite-shape, *I am he who slays without fear, I am he who shall be the last of what thee see. Heed mine call,thou whomst dared to fight the natural order, tis the day thou ought to be destroyed, Ancient Magic – Astral Binding.* '-a god-level curse?'

Chapter 1073: "Dear Boss" [16]

A sound like a shattered window. A warm green light encompassed the room. Nikki's wounds healed. Guards, astounded by the flash, held their breaths with tendency of 'trigger-finger'. Igna casually lit a cigarette. The smoke brought the lass into a few coughs. The latter scraped like a grate, a guttural cough. "Where am I?" she gasped, and the smoke fell heavily onto her pillow.

"Welcome," he said, stepping away from her face.

She wiped her eyes and looked about, "-where am I?" she asked.

"The cottage?" he replied with an inflection.

"The cottage?" she rose against bedrest, "-how long was I out?"

"Don't know and don't care," he puffed, muffled sound of distress and pain snuck. Akin to how the light of healing escaped into the corridor, remnants of painful screams came into theirs. "-Nikki, you have something to say?"

"Mirai," she gulped, "-he proposed."

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"Didn't I say he would?"

"I refused."

"And?"

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"He left."

"Just like that?"

"I guess?" she seemed confused, "-why the interest in our private affairs?"

Igna pressed the silence and blew smoke toward the bed. The question she asked hung like an ugly truth, "-I take it back," she backpedaled, "-thank you for healing me."

"You sound more confused than me. Nikki, can you remember what happened?"

"I can't," her eyes shut, the pupils moved, she reenacted the scene, or tried at least, "-nothing," it widened, "-nothing I can think of. I'm sorry, I don't remember how I got here. The last thing I know was leaving the jeep. Nothing comes to mind after."

He finished the last of the cigarette, and most of the smoke went upward. The ceiling thickened. The beating amplified, and questions turned insults. Table crashes or furniture, a vague auditory picture to paint the outside picture. Igna extended his fingers towards Nikki, "-you're worthless to me," the fingers sharpened, and he slit his thumb – the blood solidified, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* the aura of death reeked, she pulled back, the wall stopped the desperate attempt. With a glance at the door, Igna followed her intent, she swallowed, her heart dropped, and she pushed and threw off the covers, "-STAY AWAY!" Igna ambled. *To dwellers of the lower realm, inhabitants of the lower planes. Thy rank, thy status, thy prestige means naught. The powers of absolution run through my vein. Thy thoughts, thy will, thy fate; all rest nigh, all rest in the balance. Stare,* he narrowed, "-look deep, look hard, search, repent, and conclude," threads shot into her skull and paralyzed her body, *Blood-Arts: Revelation,* the crimson link whitened. Her memories flowed into his mind. Images flashed, and slideshows of the previous event were set in grayscale.

'What is this?' he watched, her memories played from her perception. The vision cleared, he watched through her eyes and took on her frame.

"...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," the voices slowly faded into the moment.

"STOP IT-" he grabbed her arms.

'Let me go,' crossed her mind, '-you're nothing like I thought. You're worthless.'

"-I didn't know... I didn't know," he elaborated.

'You don't have to say anything,' said her deepest thoughts. 'I'm far worse than you. I don't have the courage to admit my shortcomings. I'm worthless... projection of my faults. I know... I know, you're being genuine. You had nothing to do with my situation. Even still, you're trying hard to win my favor, you're trying to make things better. Why would you care for me, I'm not pretty, I'm not pure, I'm not smart. I'm worthless, my life is worth nothing, my body is worth not much more... why Mirai, why are you trying so hard.'

“-Nikki, I’m sorry... I interviewed you and based my decision on your qualification.”

‘I know, Mirai, don’t apologize. Stop looking at me with such pure eyes. You care, I know you care, I hate it, I can’t, I can’t stomach the thought of tainting you. I CAN’T DO IT!’

“-I never knew you endured such trauma; I never knew...”

“That’s it,” she fired, “-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,” she turned toward the forest. His voice came hastily, “-I know,” he firmed. “-I knew all along, Nikki, I knew they treated you badly. I know... my mother went through the same thing. So did my cousins. I saw them being abused, I saw my father, I saw him make his own siblings kiss his feet. I know my family is bad, we’re not pure. Mother’s royalty, even still, she can’t keep her face, she can’t keep her dignity. Father care only for money and power. Mother’s gotten ill from his abuse. I can’t live there. Father’s oppression, mother’s depression, the side family’s torment. I’ve seen it, I’ve seen them. I saw my cousin wrap a noose and kill himself. I couldn’t do anything, I was young. Didn’t know what to do. All he said was, “-take a deep breath and think for the future. Those fortunate to be graced by freedom are truly the chosen ones. It probably won’t make sense now,” he tussled my hair and pushed me out of the room. They found his body the next day. The wall had, ‘-I quit,’ painted in red. Nikki,” he walked, “-it’s selfish of me to expect understanding without listing the reasons. Please, hear me out one last time. If we have to end it, I want to do it properly. No regrets, please, let me be selfish this last time,” he stopped shy of her back.

‘You know pain too,’ she glanced over her shoulder and cracked, “-why are you crying?” her heart sank, “-Mirai?”

“Crying?” he wiped his tears and smiled, “-I’m not crying, I’m not.”

‘He’s quivering, he can barely speak, I know the feeling too,’ a lump locked her throat. He placed her hands into his, the jeep went northward to a retreat in the hills. They sat under the coming dusk, “-Nikki, you’re not the first one I’ve fallen in love with,” he toggled the engine, “-there was another girl like you. Someone who came from the slums, a hard worker, and a very charming assistant. She saw the world from a different view. I don’t know, I knew the day I saw her that she was special. She had an air of calm and confidence around her. Compared to the other women my father employed, she held her own and proved her worth with profits for the company. The perfect measure of talent and hard work. She was amazing. I was a trainee back then, learning the ropes of how father operates. Too big talent can be a double-edged sword. Her ambition grew, and she knew how to use her charms. I can only retell what I saw, I can’t say what went through her mind or if she even cared. Her promotion came shortly, father personally commended her effort. In ways the others didn’t see, she climbed the ranks using her womanly charm. Father assured me he hadn’t done so, there was no quip pro quo. He gave her merit and was rewarded with a hard worker. She was assigned as my supervisor, I was to learn from her. Her strong-headedness left an impression and a deeper feeling. I was in love. She looked like a queen, more so than my mother did. I looked at her files; her beginnings were humble, painfully humble. An orphan, with no family, only a little brother. Then it happened, she killed herself and left no notes, nothing. The company ruled it suicide as did the police. I knew she didn’t kill herself. Her face was battered, her legs and arms bruised. She was murdered, they murdered her. I rather not imagine how painful a death she experienced. Like her, there were others. No one came close to her talent. Why am I telling you this?

Well, you remind me of me. In a way, it's my selfishness. I hired you because I saw something of her inside you. Humble beginnings, a little brother, and a good resume. Your hire came with whispers. I then found out," he lowered his gaze, "-that one of the managers ordered a hit on her. They had her killed... jealousy, envy, greed. They wanted nothing more than to stay atop the world even if it meant standing on a pile of corpses to do so. You came along and were like me before I met her. I decided I wouldn't make the same mistakes. I only wanted the best. My actions said otherwise. Whispers began... rumors about your lustrous nature... the office talked. I checked if the rumors were true. I failed... you slept with one of the managers, rather, were forced into the agreement. I didn't have evidence, I had nothing too out the manager. I thought if you were to become associated with me, as in we were in a relationship, the rumors would quiet down, they'd leave you alone. I didn't plan on falling for you, my goal was to see you be left alone. Somewhere along the way-" he looked at her invitingly, "-well, I fell in love," he smiled, "-I really fell for you. Father heard. I should have been careful, I was a fool, I was naive. He asked me into his office and said to leave you at once. I fought back for the first time. He didn't say anything. He only looked with contempt. I left soon after. I made enemies of him and thus, incurred the wrath of his servants. Mother grew sick at that time..." he sighed, "-the rest is, well, not of importance. I've said what I needed. My actions culminated in the eventual attempted murder. I know they tried to kill you, I couldn't do anything, my hands are tied. I'm father's pawn," he looked at the stars, "-we're pawns one way or the other. A babe to her mother, a wife to her husband, a girlfriend to her boyfriend, and an artist to his art. Everything is linked, everyone is tied. We're pawns, we're pawns, we're goddamned pawns," the voice softened, "-Nikki," he took her hands into his, "-I'm sorry for everything. We have our demons. I got you in your position. I don't want you to fall anymore. Will you take my wings?"

"Your wings?"

"Yes," he smiled softly, "-the world... the world. It's hard. My cousins... Nikki."

"Look at me," he took his head and pulled, they kissed. The stars sparsely shone. They pulled away, "-I'm sorry too, Mirai. If my situation was better, I'd have hoped for us to be better. You're my one true love, Mirai. I say this from my heart. No matter our situation, I want the best for you. I'm tainted, I'm cursed. You're worth so much more... listen to your father," she smiled, tears flowed relentlessly, "-you and I want the same thing. I want your happiness."

"-I want for yours too," he smiled.

"Don't," she rose her hand, "-we can't make it work. It wouldn't work. It would be like swimming against a flooding river. I'm tied by my own demons."

"What do you mean?"

"Mirai, I can't say anymore," she stepped out of the jeep, "-this is goodbye," the wind brushed, the trees cried, and the wind wept. The night's coldness fell on their shoulders. The end was nigh. She lowered her gaze, Mirai started the engine and cruised away. He made passing glances at the rear view mirror. Regret whelmed, he grabbed his shirt and cried, "-WHYYYY!"

Nikki fell to her knees. Warm tears flowed against her frosty cheeks. She wailed and screamed, '-why me, why us,' she sniffled, '-why did it have to be us, why did it have to be us? I loved him, I fucking loved him... then why, THEN WHY, WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE US!' her roar intermixed with the forest's nightly howl, "-why...."

Chapter 1074: "Dear Boss" [17]

Rustling of the woods, a dart of light, 'I feel cold, my hands are warm. I'm hot, too hot, I need to take off my clothes,' her body went through the motion, there was no voice nor presence, the light simply did its course. Cloud shrouded the moon, Mirai's jeep disappeared. Nikki would be found the next morning covered in bright blistering rashes. He stopped the connection, the crimson threads shattered into tiny sparks. He longed at her courage, 'she betrayed me,' he narrowed, 'she had the bravado to go against my wishes. How fortunate for her,' he crossed his legs, lit another cigarette, and waited, 'she did so because of Mirai. If I were to take him out of the picture,' he puffed, 'doesn't matter, they love each other. I felt her emotion and how trapped she felt. It's great, honestly amazing. I could never feel so much in so little time. My heart, the element,' he placed a hand on his chest, 'I've never felt the love this great before. Memories of a person are precious. It's like walking into a library of countless books, the pages are their memories – to flip through is to simply raise my hand and recant the incantation.'

The cigarette snuffed. Night took her mighty place outside. Igna leaned over and pulled the window ajar. He stepped towards Nikki's bed, held his palm over her sweaty forehead, and gave a sympathetic grin.

'Self-reflection,' he exited, 'is something I do regularly. Evaluating who I am in all this confusion. My limitless life and powers have grown; I don't feel the urge towards anything. I know deeply if the world were to end, I'd have the Shadow Realm to return. This isn't the truth for them,' he stared at the many guards presiding the corridor. Muffled screams and lashes amplified. 'People of this world don't have my luxury. They're nothing but weak, alas, are brazen in their motion. Nikki's maladies were caused by God-level mana. The flash of light, tis from the conjuration of an entity beyond the realm's capacity. It ties into the current predicament. Will Orin be invaded or?' he pushed Kepm's door to a foul smell. Svipe took a pause, "Lyoko, should you be in here?" the latter simply leaned against the frame with another cigarette, "I'm here to watch," he closed the door, "wasn't Kepm supposed to be scary?" the battered man was all shades of bruised. Dark purple at spots; splatters of blood, he bled profusely, "fight tooth and nail," Svipe commented, "I take 'em literally."

"Svipe," he puffed, "you're a nasty little interviewer," Igna stepped towards the tied personage, grabbed the nearest bottle of alcohol, and poured, "AHHHHHHHHH!"

"So much for being innocent," Svipe chuckled, "rubbing salt?"

"If you hurt him too much," he lifted Kepm's cheeks and smiled, "he'll bleed or pass out. Can't let that happen. The best way of getting what one wishes," he scanned the room, "you, bring me these," he threw a card, "is to methodically advance on his fears and deeper despair," the black-eyed Kepm felt a shiver. He panted, Igna's sanguine stare, "GET ME OUT, GET ME OUT!" he stomped and resisted.

Svipe entered the frame, "tell me what I want and you'll be cool."

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"Fine, fine," he exhaled, "only if you promise him out of the room."

"I don't make promises," said Svipe.

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Igna took the cue and walked to the unmanned bar, "you there, fix me a drink," he ordered.

Svipe and Kepm's conversation flowed easier. "-Kepm, we didn't have to come to this. If only you'd spoken."

"And have my head skewered after I ratted?"

"No, maybe not skewered. We'd find more human means. Tell me, Kepm, where is she?"

"..."

"Don't make me regret this," Svipe leaned, "-I've called off the doc. He'll gladly finish the last rite as painfully as possible. You know," Kepm glanced, Igna threw a terrifying regard, "-I'll talk, I'll talk. No point dragging thi-" *cough, cough,* "-she's making her way to the port. We've arranged a boat. She'll leave at midnight. Thoas won't have her killed, I made that promise."

"So much a promise," said Svipe, "-why did you tell us?"

"He's lying," added Igna, "-the lass' not on a boat. She's right here, hiding."

"What do you mean?"

"Before I give the answer," he winked at Kepm, "-tell me, Svipe, who are you looking for?"

"Now this remains between us."

"Fair."

"We're looking for Thoas' illegitimate child. I don't know the exact way how she came into this world. All I heard and pieced together was this; my master is highly invested in the occult. Part of his great donation is handed to the church. Duquant wanted a prodigy, someone to carry his legacy. He had Mirai, a failure as he put it. Then, they had another. The high priestess had something to do with the matter. Lady Umi wasn't involved in the process. When he announced the news, we were ordered to remain silent. Only a few chosen ears were allowed the truth. He'd found what he wanted. A daughter not of this world, her abilities and intellect far outweighed what the common folk in Istra had to offer. She was schooled in Hidros until last year when she returned after suddenly dropping out of college. She's just hit eighteen. With what Mirai did, lord Duquant ordered her a stay at home. Things happened, and the ordeal intensified into what we have today," he looked at Igna gravely, "-do you understand?"

"A prodigious child returns home with a rebellious nature. The father's upset and this little guy here," he walked over, "-isn't as innocent as he looks. You know something more, don't you?" Igna peered into his soul, "-there's more to the story," he grabbed Kepm's hair, "-speak the truth," a wave of purple – the pupils altered briefly, Kepm could see the ultimate truth; nothing, deep inside Igna's bicolored eyes.

Shoulders dropped, "-Uri of the house Duquant works part-time in my human trafficking business. She coordinates much of the importation and exportation. I recruited her on the street when she led ladies of the night into riches. They found a leader, a teenager who crudely showed them the way both in practice and on the street. The profit spoke for itself."

The floorboard creaked, and a ball of condensed mana exploded. Sharp splinters spread akin to clusters in a grenade. Those unlucky to be hit in the neck fell to the ground and bled, Igna dodged, '-she's strong,' he side-stepped. Black hair flowed relentlessly, an oversized dress fluttered about her tiny frame – pale skin and darken eyes growled, '-a demon,' *To the union of mana and live-force, I call upon the

Control of the very essence of reality, change to my whims: Mana-Control: Purgatory Flame Variant -The Sword of Waithe,* it conjured and swung in the same motion as the demon went for his neck. ‘-this sensation,’ he made contact, she screeched, jumped onto the ceiling and pounced with a myriad of projectiles made of pure mana. ‘Damn,’ he stared at the attack, the spells went straight through; taking flesh and bones. She landed behind with a grin, “-no more hiding,” she stood and laughed, “-I’m powerful, too powerful for this place. I’m not going to hide anymore. Everyone can die,” a chilling presence gripped her shoulders. She gulped. Bones and charred skin made up the hand – she slowly turned towards the half-skeleton and half-human outline. “Not from this world,” he grinned, she clapped, a shockwave shredded the roof – demonic wings snapped off her back, and a terrified expression forced her out and into the damp night.

By the power bestowed by the Supreme god Kronos, I, Igna Haggard, inheritor of the sickle, order for the realm to go by mine pace: Time Control – Pause. a void-like bubble covered all of Istra, *Those below my station art be stopped, those unable to process must be mute. Forget the place, forget the time, and fall to the slumber of hate. Nothing lasts for the end is here: Erasure.* he sprouted his wings, the feathered wings of a dark angel, “-an entity of this caliber lives within Istra?” he flapped, “-someone must have taken advantage of my generosity. I wonder if she’s there, I suppose I must be angry.”

‘Did time stop?’ she darted her focus to no avail, ‘-I can’t feel my body, I can’t feel my wings. The world is at a stand-still, what’s happening... why did I run away from him, just who is he?’ a darker presence suddenly appeared, “-welcome,” he said, taking her head and plunging it into the cold-hard asphalt. The street fissured. Igna’s wound healed whilst she sustained little to no damage.

“Quite the strange being, aren’t you?” he turned her over and smiled, “-a teenager with the strength to refute an SSS-class attack. My sword should have burnt you; it should have taken your life without so much of a blink. Yet, here you are, standing... not exactly standing, laying is more appropriate. Who are you?” he stripped the skirmish dress, “-there it is, I knew you were blessed. Your crest is very interesting,” he narrowed onto her chest, “-the writings, ‘-to one blessed of the shadows,’ and the function, ‘-to be unharmed lest by the founder’ I know this feeling,” he gritted, anger fumed, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* a blade softly took her skin, blood flowed and a familiar aura, ‘-she’s a half-spawn of the Shadow Realm. Gophy...’ he stood over her naked body, “-we need to talk. However,” *Watchers, spectators, names ring high and low, us, unknown to the world’s reality, unknown to the world’s knowledge, have lived in utter solemnness for millennia to come and go. Watcher of the Shadow Realm, beckons my might to be fully materialized without prejudice, reality is but my playground, neither god nor demon shall overcome my authority, face me in stride, face me in fear, reality’s what I wish it to be for knowledge is the true strength: Realm Expansion, Shadow Realm Variant – Rantiam.* a cocoon enveloped her body, the fear chilled her mind into unconsciousness. *Mantia – Book of Adows: Yenha, first passage, chapter three, ‘-those burn under the star of Adamesia, the protector of the Skrekal, the guardian of Espei, must obey command from the ancient ones. For only the founder must found the foundation, and for the inheritor, the inheritance must be preserved for integrity. Evolution and change are tied. Protection offered by the realm can and will be revoked, for at the dawn when the sun rises, the moon fades, and in twilight – when the balance is struck, fate crumbles: Orieh.* her symbol split into pieces, the immunity to pain and damage disappeared, “-I must remove your powers.”

“Welcome to the other side, escapee of the Shadows,” he slammed on her arm and cracked bone, “-AHHHHHHHHH!”

“Pain feels good, doesn’t it?” *Realm Retraction,* the eminence of the Shadows lowered; the air lightened. *Present and never changing, present and never yielding. All who wait break and all made are subjected to thine will. I, the humble inheritor of thy power; call upon thee to have mine will answered: Time Control – Reversal.* the broken apartment restored, the clock turned back to the moment before the surprise attack.

*Continuation, Recantation; Those below my station art be stopped, those unable to process must be mute. Forget the place, forget the time, and fall to the slumber of hate. Nothing lasts for the end is here: Erasure.*he clapped, ‘-their memories will be wiped, they won’t remember what happened. This is for the best. Everyone except her,’ he looked at the floorboard being fixed and how she returned to her hiding position. ‘-Let it resume,’ *snap,* a brighter expansion released the area’s stoppage of time. Everything fell into pieces – nothing seemed amiss.

Kepm reached the end of his sentence; “-The profit spoke for itself.” A creek, Igna instantly pulled Tharis and shot twice into the floor. “-WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT!” Kepm screamed. Confused stares and worried guards hung on the trigger.

“I found the rat,” Igna winked, “-open the board, she’s alive.”

‘How did he?’ she whimpered, ‘-my vision, it was no premonition... my crest, my crest,’ she looked, ‘-it’s gone...’

Chapter 1075: “Dear Boss” [18]

“The young lady.”

“Indeed,” said Igna.

“How did you know?”

“I had a hunch,” he explained.

“You never fail to impress, doc.”

“And you never fail to deliver,” he returned, “-do take her from this humble establishment. I’ll see to Kepm’s treatment. Vacate the premises, the guests have suffered enough, wouldn’t you agree?”

“You’re right,” he ordered his men, “-thank you for the help, doc. Let’s keep our arrangement cordial, yes?”

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“Until she decides to act,” Igna hinted at Umi, “-who knows the extent of how the pieces will move. No matter, I will see to it everything here is cleaned. Worry not, yes?”

“Thank you.”

Swipe and his men left. Guests breathed sighs of relief and entered their rooms. Staff returned to their duties. A badly wounded Kepm faced a crisis of his own. The wounds were terrible. Left to nature, infection leading to death might have plagued the poor sod. Sworn by the current character of being a medic, Igna tended to the man’s wounds. Corridors carried quite the sound. Igna kicked his feet over a

window and gazed upon the cityscape. He saw the big cliff yonder, its lights, and ever-condescending hubris. 'Gophy's involved. The crest I destroyed belongs to the shadows. I guess she has a connection in the realm which allows her access. I did say she was free to return. Gophy's not the same. I need to rectify the issue,' a portal split reality.

"My king, have you called?" Vesper slithered into the room.

"Yes," he answered, "-do you know anything of Gophy's recent activities? I had the pleasant experience of fighting one of the Shadows. I doubt the child knew much of her past. It would seem a babe was taken from her home, perhaps even a mother helped conceived the child."

"Majesty?"

"Vesper. I want a detailed report on who's allowed to leave the Shadows. If one escaped, there may be others. If such is the case, have Formle look into the issue. You're free to take any action thee wish."

"Majesty, if the problem turns out to be Gophy, what will you do?"

"What else?" he emotionlessly blinked, "-we'll eradicate her and her associates. On matters of trouble, has the Tower of Aria regained its monster population?"

"Yes, our army restarted their training. Newer, more powerful bosses rank at the top, many of whom have their place in the puppet army. We shouldn't worry about potential turncoats – they're bound by law to the tower and obey only commands issued by me or you, majesty."

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"Excellent. If matters grow odd, let me know right away."

"Majesty, will you look into the disappearance of the Guardians?"

"No," he returned, "-I must focus on Eira's situation."

She lowered her gaze, her posture said, '-disappointing'.

"Excuse you?"

"Pardon?" she inquired.

"I thought you had something to say. Please, speak your mind."

Deep breath in, "-majesty, we're in serious difficulties. By cultivating such a power domain – we may be on the advent of self-destruction. The core built on Kronos' power has evolved. Everyone is changing, everyone."

"Good, right?"

"No, not exactly. If everyone changes – what will happen to the founder? They know about their guardians, the four generals, and the one who rules over said generals; you. The Shadow Realm is liberal, we go into detail about how we're free and speak of matters beyond this world's limits. We're home to gods. They're right to ask questions and demand answers. Alas, without a strong enough pillar

to support their mental capacity, I'm afraid they won't know how to act or what to do. They need reassurance."

"And? What I am supposed to do? I'm a believer in the hands-off approach. They can reach their judgment on their own. If their belief sadly grows against my wishes and the potential for revolt is struck, then, Vesper, we won't have any choice but to exterminate our own. My domain, my way, my whims, my say. If anyone dares a revolt, I will simply exterminate the pest. A simple flick of the wrist," he smiled, "-and they'll be wiped from existence. It won't come to such barbaric means."

"But majesty, if you don't intervene, who else will?"

"My purpose is to create lasting foundations. Consider Orin for example. There's no clear leader to which the people bow. It will be the same for the Shadows. Let the people be diverse, let them do as they please. It is their world, and they are their own masters. We're observers, not mediators. Like ants, we must only watch from afar and not perturb the evolution. I fall into said category. Innately, I'm not from the Shadows, I'm from Orin, my views aren't synced to the Shadows, and I rather it not. My distance is precaution, get too attached and one won't be able to make the justification from logical and sentimental. Vesper, the monster folks, how are they mentally?"

"We live in peace on a separate continent. Trade routes and much of the exchanges similar to this world are mirrored. Consider us the nations of Monsters – you were right in saying the Shadows evolved. Forgive my asking, I was only worried about the future."

"Embrace the difference and learn from diversification. It won't affect much of the flow."

"Understood, my liege. What of the alienated gods, must we recruit them?"

"Yes, have them be treated hospitably. I believe the castle is sufficiently big?"

"Yes, it is. We have quite a diverse group of strange deities. They've pledged themselves and surrendered their powers for a chance at a new life. I say my liege's contact works wonders."

"Good, long as they don't interfere; they're free to live. Vesper, I do expect results. Have the report delivered as soon as the investigation is over. Bring the traitor's head into Orin when found, I will take pleasure in culling the sacrilegious." The split, in reality, is stitched into form. 'Gophy, Intherna, Miira, and Lilith. There is much to do. Vesper didn't say it aloud, she knows I'm wasting time and she's right. I'm stalling. Coming to Istra in search of Engratse is a fa?ade. I ran from my duties as King in Hidros, I ran from my responsibility as Founder of the Shadows. I ran from my children, they're big and strong. I'm no hero, I'm not a genius, I'm a procrastinator, a time-waster. Excuses, I don't want to fight, I don't care for mind games, I've grown tired, I'm jaded. My end will come, I know how it unfolds – the mere thought makes this unnecessary. The curse of freedom.'

Kepm's sheets rustled, "-where am I?" he sat upright and wandered his attention. A figure waited precariously at the window, feet kicked onto the ledge and puffs of cigarette smoke. "Who's there?"

"Calm down. It's me, Doc. Bring round a bottle, let's have a little chat?"

'A little chat?' he glanced at a mirror, '-my wounds are completely healed. What the hell is this about?' he brought a small table, set a chair, and poured drinks for the both, "-what did you want to talk about?"

"Tell me Kepm, what's your story, who are you supposed to be and how does the Duquant fit in your little business?"

"To tell you the truth, Doc, I'm the gang leader of Allio. We're a small band of traffickers who rules this part of the slums. We take in orphans and fellows who ain't got a home. Our name's not well-regarded. We're not popular like the other gangs. Tell you, even the slum people hate us. We take from them, their children, their women, we take and we sell. Such is our business. I don't really care about how it affects us. Long as those under my wing have a house over their heads and food in their mouths, I'm happy to screw over anyone. That bastard Svipec is a pain. You shouldn't hang around him, Doc. He'll backstab you the moment he gets what he wants."

"Go on."

"Take today. Allio's pretty cool with the officials. I mean, we're on good terms with Duquant. Why would I willingly take the mayor's daughter as a worker if he didn't give his approval? I don't know what happened but things are not the same. I hid her because she's one of us. As for why they choose to attack, well, better ask him. What can you do in my shoe, I bit and endured. You're crazy, Doc, far crazier than I thought. Beyond recklessness, Doc. You belong in Istra... somehow, I feel like you're made for this type of atmosphere, with all due respect," they drank. The more drink Kepm had, the greater he delved into his private life, "-I'm an orphan, I think most of the people here are orphans. They have parents but not the ones who made 'em. Istra's a piece of shit of a town. I hated every moment of it growing up. Not a good place to find your morals, I tell you. Man, I remember holding a gun when I was five, and I remember killing an old man with that very same gun when I was seven. My teacher, may the devil torment his soul, was what you'd say, evil incarnate. He had owned a house far into the woods northeast. He took pride in killing people, I grew up with the geezer, he had no care for human life. He'd kill, slaughter, bury and pray to the Aedric lords. I think his prayers were answered, I don't know. He groomed me... never found pleasure in killing another, it's boring. You get used to it and sooner or later, you're there taking the life of a kid without so much taking a moment to think. The moment I pulled that trigger, something deep inside awoke, and I cried. It was the first time I showed fear and regret. I killed a kid man, he was innocent, he robbed one of my stores to feed his kid sister... I shot him as if he was a fucking animal. It really screws with your head... I had, I had to change. I met her around that time. Uri Duquant is a rebel from the illustrious Duquant family. She showed me the meaning of family. I changed for the better I think, I understood the importance of caring for those who look up to you. I became a better man for them and my enemy's worse nightmare. It's a soothing change, I invite it," he sipped, "-sorry doc, I have a habit of rambling when I talk."

"Don't mention it," added Igna, "-you're fine."

"What will happen to me now?"

"Nothing."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm guessing the Duquant will throw a tantrum, I guess the mayor might be mad and send a few of his men. Doubt you're in trouble since I shot two of his men earlier."

The flushed man's face gleamed, "-it dawned on me... are you the Doctor from the newspaper?"

“Yeah, that will be me.”

“THANK YOU,” he dropped on his knees, “-thank you so much for opening that hospice. You don’t know how many people of mine you have saved. It’s hard for men and women to work the night without the fear of the plague. Your hospice has saved them countless of times... thank you so much Doctor, thank you so very much!”

“Don’t mention it,” he smiled and stood, “-you’re fine. Take care of your followers as you have.”

And so, Igna exited the room with a newfound admiration for Kepm, ‘-he’s like me,’ he thought and headed into Nikki’s room, ‘-he started killing and realized the importance of family. Why do I get a funny feeling whenever I say, the importance of family? It sounds cheeky and I don’t know why,’ the lock clicked, and he entered a dull room. The bed was messy, the sheets half-hung on the floor, the windows were wide open and footprints marred a desk placed at the window. He walked to the wildly flapping curtains and inhaled, “-she escaped.”

“Master,” a purred summoned in corner of the room, “-I smell them. The clockwork soldiers. It’s not just them,” another presence materialized, “-not just them, Elize, I sense the presence of Godly mana.”

“So, they’ve made their move?” he grabbed the window’s ledge, “-I’m getting dragged into yet another conflict,” Elize and Cruse stood at his side, “-what are my chances?”

“At the current strength?” Cruse paused; “-I’d say 50-50. I don’t know for sure.”

“Using the Shadow Realm, an easy victory,” she meowed.

“I rather not make my target bigger.”

Chapter 1076: “Dear Boss” [19]

“Cruse, Elize. The coming conflict might very well result in quite a lot of mess. Cruse, have Vengeance handle the Dear Boss Killer affair. Get in contact with the appropriate entities. It’s come to this, I swear, nothing’s ever linear. Spur of the moment actions, nothing’s ever predictable. Elize, you stay – I’ll need a partner,” her form switched into a gray cat with white stripes, greenish pupils, and pink-colored paws. She climbed onto his shoulder, and he looked at Cruse, “-Father,” he added, “-no matter what happens, fight. If it comes to defeat, leave it to us,” he gave a sinister grin, “-you have allies in powerful places.”

“I know, and they’re too powerful for my taste,” he chuckled.

“Says you,” he joined in the laughter. Vengeance came from the ground, “-orders, master?”

“Follow Cruse and tie up loose ends,” he hung on Vengeance’s shoulders, pulled him aside, and whispered, “-how was Umi?”

Vengeance sparked a satisfied grin, “-she’s adequate in bed.”

“Good,” a warm slap on the back, “-I’ll catch you tomorrow.” A gale gathered – thunderous clouds moved. Flashes followed by roars; the weather worsened. A hurricane was born to the northeast, it moved quickly southwest – its eye lined parallel to the continent, the trajectory was an omen. Curtains flapped. Bottles and spoons fell, and the roof whimpered with creaks and fatigued cracks. A fierce aura gathered at his feet. The nails and ears sharpened. The crimson-tipped silver hair levitated, he removed

the glasses and firmed with the sharpened canines. A demonic tail elongated; the visage sharpened its contours despite the natural resting curves being sharp. The outline of a halo materialized. The pressure at his feet – black smoke; a sort of muck, touched a well-ordained flower – it withered immediately. Elize held on comfortably. He took one step up, the wings stretched, ‘-this is what I call fun,’ a slightly sadistic grin took over the resting face. Sparks of purple went up and down his person.

Cruse and Vengeance held their chest, a flap, and the hefty presence disappeared. The snap-like change made Cruse lose balance, “-honestly,” he caught himself by holding Vengeance, “-my father is rather crude.”

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“He’s weird,” said Vengeance in a dysmorphic tone; it sounded like multiple people speaking at once, a bizarre discordant harmonization, “-who would accept the pain of an entire population just to create a halfling?”

“I mean, you are father’s weapon of choice.”

“No, I’m more of a protector. You see, Cruse, I act like the shield to his offensive prowess. Judging now,” the tone woefully lowered, “-master’s not going to win.”

“The fight,” they walked to the window, “-it’s against Gophy, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I don’t think master could try and harm one of his own. I mean, you heard of how the previous incarnation died, he bit the bullet to save his family. I wonder now, what will happen?”

“Doesn’t affect our duties,” Cruse surmised, “-let’s tie up the loose ends.” It would be a long night, both for them and him, a reckless man of much potential heading into battle without preparation.

Vengeance stood under a run-down apartment building a few blocks from the harbor; compared to the slums, this was a five-star hotel. Shattered windows, cracked by bullets, iron gates, and an old, smelly owner, sat at his desk with a buzzing bulb. “-Cruse,” the voice firmed into one, “-sure you are the man for this?”

“Yeah,” he side-stepped from Vengeance’s shadow, straightening his tie and running fingers through the well-combed hair, “-leave it to me,” he stopped at Vengeance’s sudden stoppage, “-what are you staring at?”

“A drawn cursed blade won’t do damage lest the intent is to kill. Tis akin to slashing at an opponent with a dulled sword. To fuel the strength of the man hailed as the Devil, one must actively fan its flame, for when a strong enough wind blows, the amber will be snuffed.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing, my bad,” he cleared his throat and entered the apartment’s yard. Yard, for it, was but a run-down lot where weed and garbage settled. The owner, the smelly old man, threw his heavy regard out of the painfully yellow room side-room. He lowered his head and narrowed, the prominently crooked nose landed upon the duo, “-come in,” he smiled and revealed quite the lack of teeth.

Vengeance faded into a mist, Cruse’s walked to the window and tapped, “-how much?”

"Excuse me?"

"How much old man," he flashed a bundle of notes.

"Depends," the old man gestured a washing motion and inched forward with a humped back, "-what are you after, sir?"

"I need to meet someone. Goes by the name of Odgar. Does the man live here?"

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"Yes, he does."

"Give me his room number."

"Are you sure?"

He threw a few hundred exa notes and walked towards the door. The owner rushed out of his office and opened the main door, Cruse scanned the geezer and entered. The gluttonous weight of a man stomped outside; he groveled in the dirt for notes Cruse purposefully let fall. The stairs weren't even straight, the smell of rot and pestilence; brown stains, perhaps blood, broken doors – break-ins, and a carpet sullied with vomit and piss. A lady sat in said puddle, her dirty red dress strap hung off her shoulder and revealed her breasts. She shivered. Her hair seemed to fester an ecosystem of bugs of her own. Listless, vacant hallows rose to the strange man, she foamed at the mouth and hissed. The ajar door beside which she sat harbored muffled screams and the sound of lashes. 'The commonness of humanity's filth,' he shrugged and climbed further. The more the levels increased, the better the corridors looked. Third-floor, final stop. The corridor was devoid of carpets or light. A small opening at opposite ends gave light from the outside. He walked – each step resounded like a bell. *Knock, knock,*

"Who's there?"

"A Haggard."

Sudden movements, stumbling and crashing were heard, "-a Haggard," a middle-aged man opened the door with a gasp, "-did I hear correctly?"

"Yeah, I'm a Haggard," Cruse brandished the family's signet ring.

"My apologies," he widened the door, "-please hurry inside." Odgar hung at the door with a studious look, "-no one," he locked and toggled the lights.

"Hurricane Toria's will pass by Istra early morning tomorrow. It is advised for the population not to leave until the storm has passed. For those unable to find refuge, shelters will be opened at the following locations," said the television flashing onto piles of newspaper, reports, and scribbled notes scattered about the room.

"Excuse the mess," he lowered the volume, "-the DBK case is interesting."

"I've come to speak on the matter."

"Pardon?"

"I must ask that you leave the case unsolved."

"How?"

"I understand the ECA has taken a personal interest in the case. Without a proper conclusion, I doubt the people will feel satisfied. Allow me to close the loose ends. It will be my pleasure to handle the political conflict."

"Do you know the killer?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a simple conclusion if one knows where to look. Odgar Codd, I ask for your agency to not waste time on a one-and-done case."

"..."

"You're a logical man, thus, there is no need for threats. Allow me an introduction," he courteously bowed as would nobility in court, "I am, Cruse Haggard, son of Igna Haggard, the King of Hidros, else known as the Devil of Glenda. Seeing as my age, I haven't made my entrance into the world of nobility. We rather keep our family affairs confined, yes, now that the Prime Minister's in charge."

"I don't mind dropping the case," he sat, "as an investigator, my curiosity must be satisfied, otherwise, I won't have the heart to leave this place. You say you're the son of the Devil. I see you bear similar traits – you also bear a strong presence. Not biased to throwing your weight and money around. Tell me, Cruse, why should I stop my research?"

"Simple," he smiled, "it's best not for you to have a stain on your immaculate career. The DBK affair is cursed as it is tainted. Whoever gets involved will eventually find themselves at the mercy of the Reaper's scythe."

"Curses, I need more tangible-"

"If I say the case is cursed, it will be cursed. Odgar, the identity of the killer is here," he held a small drive, "the mystery of the DB. Tell me, would you like to continue the charade?"

"Wait, wait, wait," the events clicked, "is the killing related to y-"

"A Wiseman knows to shut his mouth. We have two options," Cruse sat opposite Odgar, "either we stand in, stop the affair, and air out dirty laundry or we take a page out of Istra's custom of corruption. Give the people a story they crave. A final hooray from the DBK."

"What exactly do you have in mind?"

Far in the distance, past Cub's bridge and into the Duquant -owned apartment, a lady dressed in lingerie had her passion satisfied by a strong-headed man, "amazing," she melted, barely able to use her limbs much less stare into the eyes of her tormentor, "y-y-y-y..."

"Another round," she closed the showers, "you won't say no, will you?"

"Umi," Vengeance sat on the balcony, "that was the last time we bonded."

"What?"

"I'm only a distraction. You won't companionship within the heart of someone as tainted as me. I'm no one special, I hail from the slums and I wouldn't want-"

"What are you saying," her pitch dropped, her hands reached for the nearest knife slowly, "-are you going to abandon me?" the blade pressed against his neck.

"Umi, who do you think you are?" the void flame engulfed the weapon, "-HOT!" she dropped it and fell on her bottom, "-you're worthless," glared, "-a pathetic queen whose appetite for sex is unmatched. Remember, I saved you. You're nothing without me, you would have died if not for me. Tell me, Umi, what do you want, yeah, what do YOU want?"

"Don't act high and mighty," she snarled, "-you're a pitiful existence without a place to call home. I gave you comfort and pleasures no other women can. So, why are you leaving?"

He got on one knee and rose her chin, the angry expression was quite daunting, "-because my time has ended. I don't have much time left. Umi, before I disappear, I want to give you a gift, not temporary, not the nights we shared, no, I want to give you something concrete, something lasting. You've fallen from the throne, no longer a queen, only a servant of someone unworthy of thy attention."

Her lashes fluttered, "-this is why I like you," she wrapped her arms around his back, "-you know my deepest desires. I'm filthy," she pulled him onto her, "-I'm yours, do with me as you want, I'm a filthy little whor-"

The doors barged, "-my lady, I bring Uri-"

Vengeance looked up and laughed, "-Svipe, how is it?"

"My god," he gulped, "-do you two ever take breaks?"

"Mothers?"

"I'll be done in a minute," she mumbled with her mouth full.

"Rude to talk with your mouth full," another shower and they sat at the balcony, Uri's fear was palpable. '-Master did a number on her,' Vengeance examined, "-Svipe, wasn't she supposed to be wanted by him?"

"Oh, the master had a business trip."

"Off to see his mistresses," added Umi with a platter of drinks, "-have yourselves drinks."

"You sure?" they looked at the thunderous clouds, "-the weather's only going to get worse."

"A little wind never bothered anyone," she winked, "-Uri, I'm glad you're here."

"Feelings not the same," she cringed, "-mother, you're filthy."

"Don't kink shame lest thee've tried," added a playful Svipe, "-we need a serious talk about Istra future."

"The DBK killer," Vengeance inferred, "-Umi, don't you think it's the perfect excuse to have Thoas executed?"

Uri and Svipe's mouths dropped, "-a conspiracy?"

Cruse and Vengeance's thoughts aligned telepathically, 'a conspiracy to out the Duquant and take control of Istra,' one that seemed to originate here, but no, tis a task pledged by éclair and Essin, one signed behind closed doors, one by which the players never knew who played and for what purpose, 'take control of Istra and we'll have ease of access into the new continent's lawlessness. My apologies, master,' they smirked, 'to make honest use of our master's abilities, tis sometimes best to lead our leader into the proper direction, such is the purpose of his entourage.'

Chapter 1077: "Dear Boss" [20]

"Let me explain." Vengeance took a seat near the duo. Hurricane winds amplified. Cracking sounds were all the more fearsome. 'They're not sold on the prospect, not yet. Umi's more or less on board. We share an intimate bond. Svipe's an unknown. I can't get a read on him, he is using us for his own advancement, or are there more at play than I expected? No matter, it's something I'll have to figure out while I speak. Don't count me short of master,' emotive confidence grasped his space, eyes are naturally drawn; strong and open gestures, no tell of malice or hatred, a simple but effective way of relaying trust, 'I know plenty myself.' He paused at the trio, and Uri found herself further from the group. Umi's lustful gaze made short passes. She'd grab Vengeance's legs, 'she's thirsty,' he reached for a glass of cold water. The pace fell into his hands, the room's control looked to be his. "Thoas Duquant, from what I've heard, is a man of money and power. He will stop at nothing to get what he wants. I'm sure you can ascertain such on your own. The Duquant are influential. Taking life to further one's agenda is something you have to live with. Duquant sealed his fate when he dared hurt one of my nurses. Medics on the battlefield are considered allies for both parties. We share the same love for saving another life. Thoas shot and killed one of my nurses. She was a recruit with great potential. I found her whilst browsing the street – Istra's not so forsaken. The slums and the city have their place, just like how you, Umi, Svipe, and even Uri, have your place in this city. I hail from Hidros, Istra's a good city."

"Doctor," Umi closed the distance, "what about my husband, what are you suggesting?"

"The Dear Boss Killer said he would target someone important. Despite the investigation being locked, no bodies have turned."

"How would you know?" inquired Svipe.

"With connections, my friend," he rose his glass, "being a doctor is a selfless job."

"The ECA's on the case," Svipe narrowed, "how will you take the mayor's life if they're involved?"

"Leave the logistics to me," he leaned and sipped, "what we say remains here, understand?" a merciless stare paused at each of their individual faces. The awkward pause and unblinking sternness, 'he's speaking the truth.'

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"Will it not be suspicious?" Uri added remotely.

"What will?"

"My father's death," she walked over, "won't people talk about the suspicious way he died?"

"No, it won't be. Who would blame a faceless killer?"

“They might suspect a copycat.”

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“And who will give them the tip? It’s only real if we make it real. Decide here and now,” he looked at Svipe, “-Svipe?”

‘Killing my master,’ the man fell in thought, ‘-I was treated well. Who must I protect, who do I owe my service to?’ Vengeance sneakily tapped Umi’s shoulder, she shot a glance over her shoulder, and he motioned Svipe with a discreet tilt. Warm hands took Svipe’s hardened hands, “-don’t trouble yourself,” she smiled with a reassuring touch, “-your hands have been stained with blood already. My husband’s not a good person. He mistreats his family and abuses his power as a leader. The town folk, albeit our relatively prosperous nature, live in abject poverty. I’m guilty too,” her gaze lowered, “-I’m guilty of looking out for my people.”

‘My lady is talking opening,’ he widened, ‘-my lady has changed. There’s purpose in her vision, she knew what she did, and did so anyway. I must honor her bravery; I must honor her vision...’

“-Justification for the segregation is to retain what little money can be generated from the wealthy. Without their help, without their lavish spending, I doubt money would ever trickle to the lower classes. The shops, the craftsmanship, the sponsored events; I host them for a single purpose – to bring a little relief to the townsfolk. I haven’t told this to anyone,” her persona changed, “-I’m not so dumb that I don’t know what’s happening. I’m self-aware, I have raised a princess of a duke. I know my way around the court and I know my way around schemes. The future my husband sees for Istra is a dystopia. Svipe, I know I ask much of you, even now, I’m asking for a betrayal. I understand if you say no... you always were and will be my friend, Svipe. I trust your judgment,” a kind smile and a sincere tone.

‘She’s a force of nature, this Umi. I guess she’s not daft after all. I wonder, did she know about this? No, it doesn’t look like she’s playing a game. Her words were genuine, and if it was a lie... she’s a threat, a potential ally.’

Svipe gathered his breath and exhaled, “-for the greater good of Istra, I swear myself to secrecy.” An agreement was reached. ‘Manipulation,’ the balcony door closed. Svipe excused himself for the study, where the rapid pace could be heard below, ‘-the mother of persuasion. He was faced by kindness and sincerity... what about her?’ he looked at the kitchen, Umi preoccupied herself with melodic whistles and the casual chops of food being prepared.

Similarly, over Cub’s bridge towards the slums; Odgar’s tiny apartment flickered. The wind blew harshly, rain crashed against the walls. The owner shut his office. A deep silence hung over Odgar and Cruse.

“What are you saying?”

“The investigation is cursed; I’ve said so earlier. Listen Odgar, attaching your name to his case will come back sooner or later.”

“How is it cursed? Cruse, as a Haggard or not, I will need a concrete explanation.”

“Odgar Codd, before I speak, tell me, what have you been up to, tell me, how did you make it here on a case the ECA overlooks?”

"I made a name as a reliable investigator. The agency does very well nowadays. We mostly investigate cases pertaining to the rich. Scandals and so on. You know, adultery and the bunch. My team's spread into two main branches; Alpha and Iqavea. Our name's not commonly taken by the mouth of the common folk. Tis a reputation that permeates high society. Tis a paradox, if I'm honest. We're well-known and anonymous simultaneously. Yes, I know it doesn't make sense. We have to be secretive so that our investigation isn't perturbed by outside interference. You asked how I got the position? My father helped cover an imperial scandal a few decades ago. Adding to that, I take part-time contracts from intelligence agencies around the globe. The business of information exchange is lucrative. I'm sure a Haggard shouldn't be told such common sense. I source materials for my clients and they give me money or compensation of the equal value. The DBK struck me as fun. Who doesn't like a good mystery?"

"I see you're a man of bluntness. Well, Odgar, my purpose for coming today is to wipe clean any dirt which may arise from the investigation. I will reveal the identity of the killer, the report was curated by Count Stark, I'm sure his findings will prove adequate?"

"Count Stark solved the mystery without coming here?"

"Yes, and he did so using his gift of deduction."

A laptop opened the files, "-to Odgar Codd," read the title, "-I'm sure Cruse must have come to this to convince you. I mean, you are a hard shell to crack. He should have used Count Stark's name to get you to open this letter. Weird isn't it, it's weird how I can read your thoughts accurately without even being there. I tell you, the world is a playground everyone must enjoy. I'm having the time of my life. The answer to your question is I, my dear Odgar. I am the killer; I am the man who kills. You know who I am and I need not say anymore. I've attached a report compiled by Stark whereby most of the killings have been explained. Leaking this document will trigger my safeguard's activation. Don't bother outing my secret, I know everything there needs to know. As for Cruse, I'm sure the scheme he's concocted is based on reality. Don't tell me you're reading this letter either – long as he knows, I've surmised the murders. This is a conversation between us. The mystery of the DB killer needs to end in grace. I'm confident they can't retrace my steps. The killings were neither random nor strange. There's a greater scheme at play, a scheme in which they think I'm the pawn. Alas, forcing my hand is something you shouldn't do. Don't worry, I'm not talking about you. They'll feel my wrath sooner or later. Odgar, you're no longer needed in resolving the DBK murder. I will ask the appropriate channels to have your name stricken from the records. In exchange for wiping your character clean, I will need a favor. Take this pen drive and upload it to the police station's computer. Anything will work. Leave the rest to the handy work of my ally over the Arcanum. Odgar, you know what to do. Do not disappoint me, understand?"

A curious Cruse made longing stares at Odgar, the latter dropped his head against the sofa and laughed. 'The killer is Igna, he was responsible all along. I get it, the scheme they're playing at is a revolution. Someone's trying to tilt the power in Istra, they realize it's a joker. The best solution for lawlessness isn't sternness or punishment, it's guidance.'

"Are you going to help, or not?"

"I will," he closed the laptop, "-let's get the little scheme of yours going. What do you need of me?"

"I want evidence linking to the DB killer to be erased from the databases and physical records. Can you handle that?"

"No, I can't and I will not. I will, however, upload a present in the police's main network."

"Did it come from the top?"

"No, it came from hell."

The night moved by one hour. Both sides reached their first goal. Over the bridge and into Umi's apartment; Vengeance and Svipe held a private chat in the study. A one-on-one. 'He asked me here,' narrowed Vengeance, 'I wonder what Svipe has to say?'

"Finally free from them," the door locked, "-Vengeance, I asked you to guard Umi, not become a sword. Do you know the trouble I'm facing?" he sat with a hallowed expression, "-you've ruined my plan... I was going to use Uri and his son... Thoas needs to go. Why did you get involved?" darker circle murderously rose at Vengeance, "-what's your angle?"

"The mask is off?" he crossed his legs and laughed; "-you play the role of a well-caring friend well. Tell me, how deep does your facade go? You've already hit rock bottom. I mean, here you are, revealing the long-awaited secret to me, a doctor?"

"Don't piss me off," he flung his arms, "-you, Lyoko, are a pain," he exhaled and breathed, "-doesn't mean we can't work together."

"No, we can't," he leaned into the conversation, "-Svipe, you're not loyal to either Umi or Thoas. You work for another agency altogether, you're a remnant of Aisik. A sub-family of Cimier. You really thought I wouldn't notice?"

"How did you?"

"The personality changes. It's not normal... tis an illness local to a tiny country set in the northern part of the Empire. I know of it from a record passed to be long ago during my personal investigation. Doesn't matter, your tribe's no longer a part of Cimier. You were cast aside in the war, forced to infiltrate the opposition to no avail. You drew the lucky stick and were sent here, to the new continent. Too bad, I say, too bad. You don't have a master nor a home to return to."

"So, what if my tribe is gone? I'm here to carry their name, I'm here to continue the legacy they've granted through blood. Doctor, what will it be, are we friends, or are we foes?"

"Such is the question."

Chapter 1078: "Dear Boss" [Finale] [1]

'Master was suspicious of Svipe. He found him weird. Look at him, the way he walks and talks. You know something is off, but can't seem to place your hand on it. I wonder if master knew who he was all along. I don't doubt he did... maybe I'm giving too much credit.' A notification, '-note from éclair,' it read, '-no, wait, not éclair,' the id wasn't changed, '-it's SSY,' he focused on the text, '-the last command reads, '-SSY, Information on Svipe and entourage.' She went and dug so deep, the command ran for so long, and the entire history of Aisik people was pasted. 'Cimier's sword, the Aisik Tribe,' it read, '-found in the alps of the Northern ranges, fixed atop the tallest mountain known to humanity, lives a tribe of Alpine men.

The physical capabilities stretched to those beyond normal means. Key component of their evolution; is a change in their psychology. Most Aisik tribesmen, akin to the berserkers of Sadia, possess a similar attribute. Mental Dismorphism, coined by an Iqavian Researcher. He cites, 'the Aisik people's way of dealing with trauma has gone beyond normal expectations. Contrary to how we of the human race handle trauma, which gives rise to mental disorders, they've followed a similar path and have accepted their flaws. Turning said disability into an ability. To willingly change their personality at will. With that comes a sudden burst of strength, intellect, or else a change in their personality or nature. The initiation of a young boy into adulthood begins with trauma. The boy is required to scale the mountain without food, cloth, or shelter. He is equipped with only a spear, and some magical abilities, and is forbidden from returning home lest he brings the egg of Anne, laid by the mountain dweller, a sub-species of griffin, the Grindors. They're monsters in nature – non-aggressive towards land not of their territory, and highly aggressive and protective when their land is threatened. The Grindors can be recognized by large white feathers, a sleek body, and a resemblance to an eagle. Fascinatingly, the name, 'Egg of Anne,' comes from a not-so-fascinating tale whereupon a young girl by the same name was viciously mauled and killed by said monsters. Back to the journey. The trail is rife with dangers and threats – the only way of survival is developing the Dismorphic trait. Many never return, and those who do, are labeled heroes and sent to the mainland. It goes without saying, the practice of survival of the fittest has taken the Aisik tribe into a realm of their own. They can't be considered part of humankind, they're farther from what we can expect from our own evolution,' the study went on into more detail. 'The Aisik people's downfall,' read a secondary issue by the same researcher, 'I have spent more of my life in the Aisik people's care. I was initiated as an honorary tribesman and made to walk the stairway of Edura. Aisik's contact with the outside world came from Cimier. I was employed by them to report and study the Aisik people's way of life. The world's sudden change complied by the ruthless survival of the fittest law drove the Aisik people into potential extinction. Women aren't respected. Parents often kill their daughters in favor of their sons. And even when sons are born, they sometimes never meet the expectation of Anne's egg. It is without a doubt, a sorry process. The alps, as I found by digging around, have traces of other tribes. The place was once populated; therefore, a great genetic pool. Limited people, many being closely related. In-breeding of necessity. We know from the past, the Habsburg dynasty, were firm believers in keeping the bloodline pure. A sorry way of thinking led to their eventual fall, following which came the war of succession of Konak, by that time in history occupied most of the northern and eastern lands. Conclusion? The Aisik people forced in-breeding and xenophobia brought by their ancient customs and teaching paved the way for the coming end. To date, there are no remarkable in-breeding 'disabilities,' to be found in their physical abilities. In fact, they seem stronger and faster. I suspect their genetic differences have allowed leeway in how nature ends the weak. If the world had remained so, I think they would have survived in some way or the other. Perhaps immigrate further down the mountain or mingle with foreign powers. Their first contact was us, adventurers and researchers from Konak and Estral. Thus, Cimier's involvement. Aisik people found a way to relieve their sufferance; money, trade, weaponry, and the salivating prospect of growth and expansion. Cimier needed strong fighters to bolster their ranks; they proved a suitable fit. The tribe turned sell-sword would have done fine... however, foreign power needed spies. The sacred power of splitting their personalities came into the limelight. They saw an opportunity – they trained and soon became the unofficial spies of the Alpha Kingdom. The Wracian Empire waning influence eventually set off events for world war. Millions of deaths, as I close the chapter on a race that may never find their calling. Thousands of them – Aisik spies. Cimier's true color showed when the tribe couldn't provide fresh

blood. In a way, they could but not on the level of their prior renown. The tribes were eventually forced to give up their land for a military base. The women were sold as slaves and the few remaining men were thrown into the jaws of death. The Aisik line will continue, though I doubt their abilities will be of much use in a world where a single tap can end one's life. Thus, comes an end to their life, the existence of a not-so-well-known tribe, the Aisik people,' curated by Zenda Arlo, Jemn Ento, and Carl Jasen. More details were published in subsequent books, of which only a few survived the great fire of Kon. Rumor has it, when defeat came, they threw their most damning secret into a bonfire. '-Zenda Arlo, Jemn Ento, and Carl Jasen were executed in public on June 6th X127. The works were safeguarded by a member of the Order of the Nightwalker. The archive was uploaded into Raven's database where many of Konak and the fallen alliance's manuscripts and books are currently kept for historical references,' wrote Elixia in a comment.

Vengeance looked at Svipe, and a few seconds passed. Their story engraved in his thoughts.

"Doctor..."

"Svipe," the tone changed, "-tell me, boy, what's your greatest wish?"

"My wish?" he tilted his head, "-are you serious? Doctor, we don't have time. Tell me, are we friends or are we foes? We're running out of time."

Vengeance snapped at the television, the latter toggled loudly and played the news. "Hurricane Toria has intensified in the last few hours. The sea's temperament has altered significantly. Gusts in exceedance of 280 km/h have been reported. It is advised to stay off the roads."

A cold stare landed on an ecstatic Svipe, "-no way your master leaves in this weather."

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"How can you be so sure?"

"I have you," he smiled, "-are you not the head of security?"

"..."

"Tell me, Svipe, what is your purpose?"

"I said it before, I want to return my tribe to what it used to be. I will carry my people's blood further."

"I doubt you will," he narrowed, "-Svipe, let me ask you this, have you ever impregnated someone before?"

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"..." a sharp pain dug through his heart. The words flew like darts. The pause and gradual intensity of Vengeance's demeanor, "-why would you say that?" he said with a hint of timidity.

"I've read the papers about your people. It's an interesting read. I can't say so without further testing, but I can definitely say, the toll of your people's lack of genetic pool has taken a tremendous effort on your reproductive system. Nature is all about balance, and to make one stronger and faster, the repercussion wasn't the split personality, no, it wrapped her wrinkled hands around your balls."

"Excuse me?" he cringed; "-the image's bad enough. Why would you?"

"To give the crude taste of reality. Svipe, things aren't looking good."

"So, what about me?"

"Who knows?" he shrugged, "-can't say so without the appropriate test. The Aisik people will live on. The women," he sighed, "-the women your people so carelessly discarded will carry on the bloodline. It will be filtered... more people will have access to said genetic pool... tis the end of the Aisik people's physical strength. Such is evolution, you were simply dealt a bad hand."

"What about you, are you not human?"

"No, I'm certainly not. I'm, what you call, a vampire. Must have heard our name be whispered, the Order of the Nightwalkers. One of my brothers saved records related to your people's existence. The people you swore loyalty to, yes, Cimier and Alpha, they sold your women and burnt the records. You're mission here was a simple case of luck, they forced you into an impossible situation and when the war was over, you were stricken from the records. If it was Hidros who'd lost the war, you can be certain an order to eliminate our spies and terminate their operations would be issued."

"..."

"..."

A poignant silence settled. Both men did their calculation, rather, it was Svipe. He went through scenario after scenario, '-the doctor's a weird guy. He sees through my facade and knows about my past. What should I do, what can I do?' flash images of Umi flooded his mind, '-the lady's kind smile. She believes in me... she rescued me even if my mission was to infiltrate Istra. I'm where I am because of her. Thoas abused and ignored her, she reminds me of my mother... how my father would ignore her, how she would always prepare a warm meal for when I returned home from the mountains. They'd share her around, they'd share women... why did I remember,' he shoveled his face into his hands, '-I'm so stupid.'

'Drawing onto his deepest fear, tugging at his heart and showing what he wants to hear and see. You shouldn't force someone into your line of thinking, instead, you should make them see that what you want is in their favor. Mental sleight of hand. To think master has mastery over the very art itself. I'm already shoulders deep into my own thoughts, how can you breathe when you are being dragged by multiple possibilities, a wrong move, one wrong word choice, and the fragile hold snaps.'

"Doctor," Svipe rose a fearsome gaze, "-my question, are we friends or are we foe?"

"What would you say we are?"

"I don't know?"

"I'd reply with a partner," he reached for a drink, "-we're not friends, we're not foe. We're partners. It goes beyond that," he sipped, "-for partners work as one bound by a shared goal."

"I like that," he also reached for a drink, "-you've convinced me, Doctor. I have another question."

"Go ahead."

"What's your end goal here?"

"End goal?"

"Yes, what will become of Istra?"

"Istra will remain the same," he sipped, "-I'd never be so conceited to think I could change an entire town," he exhaled, '-I'm not the one you should be asking that question to. There's someone who's conceited enough he thinks the world is his playground,' a weirdly comical grin broadened.

"What's with the expression?"

"Remembered something funny. As for the question, it will fall into her hands. I think putting Umi on the task will increase her confidence. Besides, we don't want some other Thoas to take over the city."

"Time to make our move," he rose, "-Thoas Duquant's staying in the city, at the Esma Hotel. He should have moved to the harbor and boarded his private yacht. The seas' rough so I think he'll spend the night in Esma."

"Because the mistress' arrived?"

"You know?"

"No, I guessed," he gulped, "-as for the assassination, leave the matter to me."

The door opened, and Svipe exited first, "-should doctor really be killing people?"

Vengeance looked him up and down, "-haven't I already killed your men?"

"Ah," Svipe slowed his step, "-I guess it was a stupid question."

"Not stupid," he paused, "-just dumb," they cackled.

Chapter 1079: "Dear Boss" [Finale] [2]

"We have good news, Odgar."

"What's good about this?" a shrieking howl, almost like the skin of a person being ripped, rushed into the apartment, "-the whole town's getting destroyed," he carefully slipped a curious look outside, "-the slums," the jaws dropped, "-it's being torn," he turned at Cruse then back outside, "-DEBRIS!" *CRASH,* a wooden post slammed right into the room, Odgar barely ducked. Gust howled, rain thrashed – twigs and leaves pinged off the buildings.

"A pinball machine," added a carefree Cruse, "-don't bother with the window," *snap,* a barrier summoned, "-I have news, my dear Odgar."

"Don't call me my dear," he rolled his eyes, "-doesn't sound good coming from your mouth. Makes me feel dirty."

"Why not?" he posed seductively, "-do you not like the flesh of young ma-"

"Enough," Odgar pulled the reigns, "-we need not useless jokes, son of Igna."

"Don't get so formal," Cruse stretched his arms and stared outside.

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"What's the good news?"

"Tonight's the night of change," he smiled, "-my associate's delivered Thoas' location. You know what follows, don't you?"

Odgar studied the wet floor grimly. The shattered windows partially reflected his face, '-it comes to this.' Cruse entered the kitchen, "-you got a knife?"

"Pardon?"

"I need a knife," he glared back, "-how else am I going to kill Thoas."

"Wait, you're just a kid..."

"There's no age in killing a person," he grabbed the nearest blade and stepped into the living room, "-Odgar, focus on your task. It'll be more difficult than mine. Taking a life," he pressed the blade's top, "-is relatively simple. Good luck, Odgar. Let's end the Dear Boss Killer affair," the relative corridor howled. The gust took up speed. '-to properly end the affair; multiple cogs must properly sync,' a strange rubbing against his breast pocket, '-what's this?' he reached in, '-a letter?' the label marked the Dear Boss Killer's insignia, "-Dear boss, time comes for us to part. Thoas Duquant is the humble soul chosen for my sacrifice. Thou must understand, dear boss, I'm not one of this world. I represent the hatred and sufferance of the lower-class. Bother not scouring the street nor the high and mighty, for my existence thrives in thy nightmares. I'm omnipresent, I know and I see. Employing the ECA, hiring Odgar Codd, I know much of thine tales, dear boss. To the sorry chief of investigation, Jack, and the poor coroner, Tile, I bid my heartfelt thanks. Justice never thrives, it never does and only acts upon the fate of the chosen few. Thoas Duquant is one remarkable chosen one, he has power, money, and influence. Alas, he has no wit nor courage to endure my treatment. Such will be my last act – I proclaim killers who impersonate my action will be paid in kind, like the marksmen thee hired, isn't it true, dear Jack? Coroner Tile, I dedicate this victim to thee, for I know the Mayor's crude action have prevented thy dream as a family man. Awaken, Istra, for thy reputation as the land of lawlessness must be upheld. Justice shackles a man, for when man steps into the battlefield, humanity, and empathy are but restrains. No holding back in the war, dear boss, no holding back,' signed the Dear Boss Killer. Cruse threw a confused and amused smile, '-so father knows?' he lowered his shoulder and breathed, '-he knows they used him as a pawn, he played the part despite being used. How fearsome can you possibly be, dear father? With this, I will end the tale of the DBK, no one needs to know the truth,' he reached the staircase, '-after all, the world is a Haggard's playground. We are with all the meaning of the word; invincible.' Cruse set off into the pits of despair – hurricane Toria. A translucent barrier kept wind, rain, and debris away from the lavish suit.

Odgar watched from the broken window, '-the Haggard's...' he exhaled, '-just how powerful have they grown?' he equipped waterproof boots, baggy trousers, and warm pullovers and closed the uniform with a jacket. A poncho and a courage umbrella opened into the cyclonic descent. The engine of a cheap motorcycle squealed, '-to the police station,' fog and rain lowered visibility. '-The rain's making the ride worse,' he cringed from inside the helmet. Cars drove at a moderate pace – standing out only with the headlights. Corners shop remained open – business was through ajar doors and windows.

'Doesn't work,' the bike gasped to no avail, '-the street's too slippy, she can't continue...' he ditched the bike, a simple bicycle with an engine strapped to its already rusty frame. It was no motoring masterpiece – for it is the masterpiece of not a master mechanic, but a humble fisherman. Rain trashed like bullets; each drop pelted with subsequent force. Rogue gales threw people off their feet, literally shoving some against barriers or walls.

"WATCH OUT!" cried a side alley. A man dropped. Odgar glanced, bystanders, rushed to the man's side, "-he's bleeding out," they sought cover, "-he got stabbed by a metallic sheet."

'Is that a gun?' Odgar noticed the outline from the men's damp shirt. They held some kind of weapons, the terror faced by mother nature's wrath, "-man, let's get out of here," another explosion of sound, scraping of sheets against the rough asphalt, "-I'm not looking to get killed without a fight," brought the fear from these ruthless killers.

Odgar threw open his flip phone and dialed, "-Luso?"

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"Speaking, what's up, Odgar?"

"Are you working on the case?"

"Not the DB case, why, any leads?"

"I might have one. I'll need to access the database. Can't do so without appropriate clearance."

"Yeah sure," he dismissed the request, "-the weather's pretty bad out there. Where are you, I hear a lot of noise?"

"I'm headed to the police station."

"Oh, the compound, yeah sure. Come along if you can. Should I send an escort?"

"No, no, I'll be fine. I'm a few minutes away."

"Man, I'm sorry, but I have something on my plate. I got a fancy lead on this case I've been working on. We might have able to reel in that damned scammer," the voice faded, "-and don't worry about clearance, I'll have them grant you special access. Ask for Jack or Tile when you are here, cool?"

"Yeah, thanks, man. Good luck on the crackdown."

"Yeah, thanks, you too man. Good luck traveling the street. It's a shitstorm out there, literally. I hear drained were uprooted – I tell you; the walls were covered with shit and piss. Slums man, I tell you, they're not worth the city's attention. Anyway, I'll catch you later, good night." He closed the phone and waited, '-Luso agreed so easily. My gut's saying no... should I ignore my feelings? I don't know, well, a deal is a deal, better act on it.'

Contrast Odgar to Cruse, the latter walked as if out in the park. The canals flooded, and people ran up and down the street. He made his way around Cub's bridge, under the apartment where Vengeance hid with Svipe and Umi, and continued up the hill. The residential soon shifted into stronger, more beautiful manors. A bridge, known as Lion's bridge, built further up the canals, facilitated access from the hill to

the city. Once more, reserved only for the citizens. Trees draped the railings; the river crashed like a waterfall and joined the harbor. Night watch patrolled the area with lamps, “-ahoy, mister,” hailed one, “-the street’s not safe to be taking a casual walk,” two more joined the ranks.

“Evening, gentleman,” rain and window bounced off the lavishly dressed man, “-the weather is absolutely ravishing.”

“Mister, you be a weird one,” he commented, “-do you have your pass?”

“Pass?” Cruse furrowed his brow, “-how very insulting.”

One of the others tapped the night-watches shoulder and whispered, “-look at this outfit man, he’s clearly affluent. The jewelry and the magic, he’s a noble. Let him.”

“My apologies, mister,” jet-black ornate outlines; the gates, crashed against the amber reflection of lamps against the damp stone-brick street, opening to a sensation of deep melancholy and tranquility. The troubled guards said gates.

“Who stands there?” they cried once more, this time, Cruse watched from the other side. A man, a woman, and a babe wrapped in a blanket ran to the guards, “-please, mister, let us in. We need to see a doctor. Our child, our child, she’s gotten ill. We’ll pay whatever we have, I’ll do anything, just let us in,” begged the man.

A guard inside the city looked at Cruse and then the couple, “-don’t trouble yourself, my lord. These things occur regularly. You might want to cover your ears.”

He crinkled at the remark, *bang, bang, bang,* they dropped, “-bring the body bags.”

“Toss ’em off the bridge,” he cried.

“You stupid, we’ll get in trouble like last time. Get the bags already,” the guard looked at Cruse with a shake, “-told you, my lord, tis a regular occurrence” he ran into a well-lit guard post. Cruse carried on the trip, ‘-they’re ruthless,’ he came to the town square, and the affluent dined in complete comfort and regale. Sooth music, warm drinks, and the not-so-important hurricane.

“Good evening,” greeted a few wandering couples.

“The night sure is present,” Cruse added with a hint of sarcasm, the couple giggled.

“It sure is, sir, it sure is,” and hastily hurried into one of the many restaurants. Hotel Esma,’ a quick scan, ‘-there, I see it,’ he moved northwest. Including the ground floor, the hotel carried at least five floors and was built remotely. The large yard, large street, and thick walls around its perimeter set the tone for its prestige. Each room seemed to have a balcony. The hotel staff worked proficiently. Night had begun for the residents.

“Excuse me,” the guard hailed from inside the gates, “-do you have an appointment?”

“Pardon?”

“I do apologize for asking, my lord, the hotel’s hosting a rather exclusive soiree. ”

"I see," he looked inside, "-you must think I'm not one of the elites. Suppose not having a car and walking to the hotel is a bit out of character," he laughed, "-my dear, it will be foolish to refuse my patronage. See," he displayed a very elaborate crest, "-I'm of foreign nobility."

"My apologies," he opened the gates, "-I meant no disrespect, my dear sir. Ever since the DBK's announcement of killing someone of high standing, the owner and the guests have tightened security."

"About the soiree, is it a charade?"

"No, no. It's being hosted and is yet exclusive. Please, hurry inside, you must not catch a cold because of me."

"Don't worry, my dear," he flipped through exa bills and handed a hefty tip, "-for a job well done. And please do not worry," he opened his palm, "-as you see, the rain barely touches me. Good work, my dear, good work," such, the handsome young noble entered Esna hotel. Arriving on foot made quite the impression, especially from the hotel staff.

"Pardon my asking," a suited staff member stopped Cruse at the entrance, "-we're out of rooms tonight. I will kindly ask-

"The hospitality sure is apauling," he added loudly, "-my dear, do you know who I am?"

"My dear sir, please, you're being a nuisance to the customers," narrowed the man, with emphasis on two young damsels in the waiting area.

"To whom?" Cruse glanced over his shoulder and winked at the ladies, they both blushed and giggled, "-I don't suppose a laugh counts as disturbance, does it?"

An older gentleman hurried to the front and touched the younger attendant, "-would you excuse us?"

"Fair," Cruse nodded respectfully, "-might I take a seat or would that be considered an upfront to this less than mediocre establishment?"

"No sir, please make yourself at home," the older gentleman accepted grudgingly and hurried into a corner.

"What's the matter, why would you cause a scene?"

"My, it's not me," he threw his arms, "-I was only upholding the standard you set, manager."

"Well, that man is clearly not someone of the ordinary."

"He came on foot," he whispered, "-is that not a sign of-

"A sign of what?" the older gentleman seethed, "-you and your crooked ways. Look," they looked at Cruse, "-his outfit is completely dry, his clothes and accessories are worth more than my annual wage. Besides, Marvin granted access, you know as well as I do, Marvin doesn't open the gate for anyone."

Chapter 1080: "Dear Boss"[Finale] [3]

"Manager, I understand what you're saying. However, was it not you who said not to accept people with too much pizzazz?"

"Always hanging onto discardable advice. Tis the reason why you never move up the ranks. You're excused, I'll handle the man myself."

Cruse had his arms firmly around the two ladies. Both giggled, enchanted by the gallant man, "-my, you sure are princely, aren't you?" one of the lasses covered her lips playfully.

"To be called a prince by ladies of equal beauty, my, I sure feel like a prince," he laughed and gave both equal attention.

"Where do you come from?" asked the other.

"Somewhere far away," he looked at the first, "-from Count Donte's fairy tale."

"OH MY GOD!" she pressed his legs and dropped her jaw, "-are you familiar with Count Donte's work?"

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"I might not look it," he nodded at her collarbone, "-but I have quite a wide field of vision. My lady, I'm guilty of being entrapped by your charms. I perhaps, with the purest of intentions, have seen your tattoo."

She pressed her hand against her chest, her expression meant more than casual banter, "-perhaps you'd like to see the full extent of my canvas?"

"Not fair, sister," the other pressed against his arms, "-you always bait them with your cleavage. Let me have my fun too," she adorably pouted.

"Dania," added the other, "-do not speak so of your older sister," they laughed heartily.

"Ahem," the manager waited before the trio awkwardly. Cruse ignored his advance for a few seconds, instead focusing on the ladies who gave their utmost attention, "-Pardon me, sir."

"You're nothing short of your friend," he winked.

"How did you know?" they leaned into him in awe, "-I'm certain we look like sisters."

"Yes, you look like sisters," he slowed his cadence, "-to the general public. You see," he grabbed their hands, "-I'm not part of the general public. I see more than people like to share," a cheeky bit of the lips had them intrigued with a hint of harmless danger.

"Sir?"

Cruse eventually broke the conversation and watched the manager, "-have I done something to offend?"

"No, no," the manager locked his hands below the waist, the shoulder mildly slumped forward, the regard, despite looking down at Cruse, didn't seem to bother the latter. He firmed his grip and eased, "-excuse me, ladies," he stood, "-I must get going."

"Wait!" they pulled his jacket, "-may we see you again?"

He returned their invite with a ravenous stare himself, "-if the manager allows me a room. One preferably large for the accommodation of you lovely ladies," he turned at the fellow.

'Strong-minded and confident,' the manager exhaled, '-he's a tough customer. The disrespect is warranted. Do I apologize or wait out the anger?'

"Timothe."

"Excuse me?" the manager flashed; "-do you know my name?"

"It's written over there," he pointed, "-an employee of the month. Quite the amazing feat. I do say, the picture doesn't make your charm justice. Water under the bridge, Manager. Shall we start anew and bury the past?"

"I'm confused, are you not going to reprimand us for our conduct?"

"No, no," he extended his hands at the ladies, "-who in their right mind can stay angry when surrounded by beautiful flowers? I must say, the hotel has amazing guests."

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'He's not angry?' the strained expression eased, "-let us find you a room, my dear sir."

"Please lead the way."

Room 100, located on the highest floor and counted as one of the more expensive lodgments. The ease with which he paid garnered the lass' attention. Manager Timothe's impression of Cruse improved considerably. And so, he entered the massive room – the tall ceiling split into halves; a room within a room. It looked more like an apartment than a typical hotel room. A bar, lounge, relaxing station, and a king-size bed in one of the formidable rooms.

"I'm here," he dropped onto the couch and toggled the television over the fireplace, a holographic display that added charm and mild heat. He played with the DB letter, '-how do I kill Thaos. They've talked about a special ceremony... I'm sure it's a banquet in his honor. Men like him love their orgies... the ladies were dressed lavishly but don't have the level of arrogance I've come to know from noble ladies. They're easier, friendlier, and hands-on. In fairness, I know plenty of people who are touchy... they don't match even if they're trying to blend. Are they workers of the night?' he glanced at his watch, '-three, two, one,' *DING, DING,* '-right on cue,' he took off the suit jacket, unbuttoned his shirt halfway, and headed for the bar. There, he poured some wine and sipped. *Ding, ding,* the bell rang hastily. He ambled forward, the lock clicked two the ladies of before, "-lovely surprise," he leaned off the door frame and smiled, "-you ladies sure are ready," he turned his shoulder, they glanced at each other and entered with a sense of victory. He peaked, saw none, then locked the doors.

"Ladies, the night is on me. Order what thee wish from room service," the rain-swept winds crashed, any harder and the windows ought to shatter. They watched in awe as they entered. High heels clopped. The expensive dresses and accessories added to their overall beauty. One bore a short but present red dress with emphasis on her bust. Her hair parted and curled; purple-colored locks contoured her face. A deeper colored purple jewel lined her neck. Her skin, smooth and pretty, '-I might be wrong,' he sipped from over the bar counter, '-maybe they're girls of the nobility. Observations can be strange." The other wore a longer, curvier dress of white and blue. Her tanned complexion added finely to the outfit's color balance. Her eyes were almond-shaped, the same as the other, thus the sister-like resemblance. Hers were green, a beautiful green of the likes of gems, or a vibrant field. Her slender frame pushed emphasis

on her long legs as opposed to her friend. She flapped her eyelashes and radiated charm. As a pair, they were knockouts. 'They must be models,' he casually leaned over the counter and sipped.

"The presidential suite," said the one in the red dress.

"My, I thought it was reserved for only the rich and famous?"

"You got the latter part correct," said Cruse, "-it is reserved for the rich and famous. I'm far from rich thought," he said jestfully, "-daddy's money as my friends like to tease."

The girls lowered their bags and came to the counter, "-mind fixing us a drink?"

"A drink?" he glanced, '-never made cocktails before,' a double tap summoned an interface over his vision, '-SSY, full mastery over the bartending profession,' the pool of information downloaded.

"Make us anything."

"You girls testing me?" he rolled his sleeves, "-get ready to be amazed," he worked the counter as if a man who'd been there for decades. Drinks came one after the other – the showmanship stunned them into submission. Six drinks suddenly lined the tables, "-I made a selection," he winked, "-choose which ones you'd like."

Confused laughter, "-I thought you were just a rich kid. You have some skills there, man."

"Hey, my family's rich, I work for my money."

"Are you a bartender?" inquired the one in blue.

"Have the drinks, please," he pushed the glasses, "-my name's Cruse by the way. We forgot introductions."

"Dania Elmster," said the one in red.

"Sunta Haol," added the other in blue.

"I'm honored," he fixed himself a drink.

"About what?" they sipped, the taste instantly pulled them from their seats, and their face widened, an explosion of deliciousness – the alcohol came as a soft tasteless aftertaste, more of a sensation, "-this is very good," they agreed, "-and sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off, Cruse."

"No harm done, Dania."

"What were you saying?"

"Nothing much."

"Don't tease us like that," Sunta bit her lips.

"I said I was honored."

"Why?"

"To be drinking with models," he sipped.

"Models?" she paused, he broke the awkward silence, "-yeah, you girls model for the gym, right?"

"Gyms?" they laughed, "-no, of course, we're not models," the laughter ensued. Conversation went from seconds to minutes, and eventually, an hour passed. The delicious cocktails waved on them 40 minutes ago, he kept on serving until they had no secret to share.

"Dania, why are you here exactly?"

"For the mayor's celebrations," her speech slowed, "-he's the one who asked for us to come."

"Tell me more."

"Dania and I are noble girls from impoverished families. My father and his father are close friends, we fell into financial debt when the global market crashed. We kept up the facade from our mother's wealthy families, they eventually stopped and we found ourselves working to feed our own mouths."

"We had two choices," Dania voiced, "-either get married or work. We choose work," they smiled, "-and were sent here by our parents to make connections. We look like models because we are, objects for the world's viewing pleasure. "

"How old are you two?"

"Rude to ask a lady's age," they chuckled, "-we're both eighteen. Don't ask me how Dania got such a figure... men die to talk with her, it's infuriating but fun. The drama is interesting."

"Oh, shut it," Dania wrapped her arms around Sunta, "-talking like people don't find you attractive. They shy away since you're so pretty, Sunta. I envy your charm," she pressed her chin, "-we're best friends, no one can break our bonds," and noticed the time, "-oh my god," *hic,* "-WE'RE GOING TO BE LATE!"

"Late for what?"

"The soiree?"

"When does it start?"

"21:00"

"It's 20:00," Cruse narrowed.

"We're supposed to meet with our benefactors... Cruse, it's been nice chatting," her hurried state landed on Sunta, the lass was out. Cheeks on the counter and consciousness in a constant twist. "-Shit..."

"God, why do you girls drink so much," he went around the counter, "-don't worry, I got it," two potion flashes popped, "-drink this," they gulped, the sluggish movements and speech straightened. Sunta sat upright. Dania looked perplexed. Cruse held their hands, "-thank you for the time, ladies."

"Wait, what happened?"

"You girls got drunk," he smiled, "-look at the counter," their gluttony was laid for their guilty viewing, "-did we do anything?" Dania wondered with a hint of salaciousness. Sunta added her ear, they both were in their own way, yearning.

"I have a policy not to take advantage of inebriated people."

"Oh..." they added with mild disappointment.

"By the way how you speak, tell me, are you both experienced?"

Warm cheeks and blushing stares, "-y-y-y-yes... we a-a-are," Dania gulped.

"The riskier one is often the more sensitive. Poor Dania," he laughed, "-you get embarrassed quickly, don't you. Look, you're blushing so hard right now. I make a point of not taking advantage," he leaned and whispered, "-however, when it's consensual, who knows, I might just take you to another world," he casually walked around the counter, "-the world out there is rough. You will be taken advantage of; the freedom of consent is given to only the rich and powerful. You start tonight as debutants. Like many others, you're being sold to a rich person for their pleasures. Take my words with a grain of salt, I'm only a stranger after all. Throw what they want before they steal it," he paused, the words slowly infiltrating their complex wave of emotions, "-I appreciate both of you, Dania and Sunta, you're the first people I made drinks for from a place of affection. It's a good feeling. The stories were amusing, and honestly, the sad parts were awful. It's hard, you know," he watched them sincerely, "-to be someone in this day and age," he glanced at the watch, "-ten-minutes past."

Dania stood; "-do you have a shower?"

"Yeah, it's on the upper floor."

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"I'm still a little tipsy, can you help?"

'Little tipsy?' he internally laughed, '-the portion treats everything, my dear Dania.'

"Oh my god, you have a grand piano..."

"Please, be my guest," he helped Dania onto the upper floor, a distant melody played.

"What you said," she stopped well away from Sunta's attention, "-it makes sense, she turned with a definite look. Before he replied, she'd leaped into his arms and pressed her lips, "-show me the other world," she moaned.