

Death Magic 411

Chapter 411: Elvira Stepania

The main-office stood with the two other – the sun over in Rotherham was more or less a rarity. It would most often be grey with the casual ‘hi’ of heat. Cake sat in the third building on the top floor; an office filled with screens, various machines, charts, and many more. In no way was it cumbersome, far from it, despite the number of items, it was barren.

“What do you mean?” asked she through the phone. ‘My wish has been granted?’

“Yes, it has,” returned a voice louder than the call.

“What wish may that be?” asked she with elbows on the table; “-I only voiced a possibility; immortality would be nice.”

“Well then,” said a deeper voice. A sudden realization had shivers down her spine, “-Boss?” her chair turned slowly – hesitation filled the motion.

“Hey,” without a warning, he crawled onto the large chair to angle his head at her neck.

“W-What a-are you d-doing?” her breathing increased, her face flushed, the heart raced; “-i-it’s n-not right,” her fist clenched.

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“I told you,” he licked his teeth, the sharp fangs were unseen by her for the eyes closed in embarrassment, “-thy wish has been granted,” a pleasant sensation of lips made her neck tingle, the hairs stood in response. It bit softly with the pain being but a fleeting sensation of bliss. ‘W-what’s this,’ her legs tightened for the impulses were too hard to bear, the body wanted to jump and tear off the clothes, but she knew better.

“Done,” he stepped back with blood running down the mouth, “-Cake, dear Cake,” a smile had her in shame. What she thought was far from reality, she thought of him trying to partake in her flesh – that single desire had her face utterly red to which she faced away.

“I have granted you the boon of immortality. Welcome to the family of Vampires, or nightwalkers. The blood of which I’ve given is royal, the purest out of the other factions. The awakening powers will be far stronger than any normal nightwalker. For once, the craving for blood will not be as harsh as it’s on others. The sun will not affect how thee live, and most of all, the night will serve as an amplifier for what thee inherited.”

“Wait?” her face rose from the depths of shame, “-am I immortal now?” her hands changed, more specifically, her nails, it sharpened – the same happened to the canines.

“Yes,” replied Staxius resting against her desk with arms and legs crossed, “-no one can kill you; maladies will be but a bite from a mosquito, inconsequential. Vampires are strong, very strong, and I’m the Blood-King, Ruler of the Nightwalkers. Come on, Cake, you must have known why I have such a title. I’ll go as far as say thee wanted to be one of us for long,” the arms relaxed from crossed to lay upon the desk.

"I won't add to that," preoccupied with the changes, the skin complexion lightened, "-is it weird that I feel light, there a few spells in my mind, I know how they work but not how it starts?"

"The activation for any vampiric spell is Blood. There are more hidden traits one acquires from being a vampire, there have been instances when a normal human turns into a genius or a complete psychopath. The world of vampires is complex and hard to get a grasp. Get accustomed to the powers first, we'll go to Arda soon enough; Noctis's Hallow, thee needs to meet the Clan leaders."

"W-why must I meet the leaders this early?" the question had him move to stand opposite her, she could but trace his movement with unnaturally sharpened sight.

"Thee was given the blood from me, a direct inheritor of the First Progenitor. I'll spare the lore – consider this, thou art now a pure-bred nightwalker. One with an undefiled legacy, so you see, if thee run rampant, we could see more damage. Cake, thou art now a member of the Blood-king faction, a family member since we share blood."

"T-thank you," said she wholeheartedly.

"No, far from it," he chuckled, "-bid goodbye to the peaceful nights of sleep, in no way will exhaustion stop thine strides. I've basically had you changed to always be by my side in managing Phantom, I honestly can't see anyone else replacing thee. Maybe I'm being sentimental or blowing it out of proportion, but I value thee, Cake, I value thee as a person who I can trust."

"Boss," a stabbing annoyance in her nose made her want to blow into a tissue. The throat tightened, "-I'm the grateful one. My ex-comrades will be proud of what we have accomplished."

"That they will," smiled he.

"Boss, please, I have a request."

"What is it?"

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"It's embarrassing, still, I want thee to give me a name, a proper one, one that will be known as my new identity," the brown hair decayed into being a few shades away from snow-white.

"A new name," the pressure was on to which he strolled back and forth the office. Hands-on chin, he thought, a multiple of names came to mind, 'Stephania Elvira Haggard.'

"Got it," the walk stopped, "-Elvira Stephania Haggard."

"Elvira," the expression showed satisfaction, "-is the family name not going to affect thy livelihood?"

"No, no, Haggard is both known in the underworld as well being the royal family. It's not uncommon for Royalty to bestow their name unto trusted allies – I doubt it will be an issue. I'm ordering so, you ought to be grateful for my first thought was Neigh, a translation of Snow. I considered it till a horse's muzzle crossed my mind; I digress."

"Elvira is good, I'll appreciate the name, Boss."

"Well then, Cake, please have a list ready of potential Agencies Phantom can acquire."

“Yes, boss, right away,” the door closed to them parting.

‘I wonder how Serene’s going to take the news.’

Date 27th March, the sky was cold and the outside freezing. Two days past since Cake turned into a vampire; her work grew faster and by her own words, ‘-I can calculate and predict what is going to happen in the stock market. My guesses have been accurate; I guess it’s the talent I inherited by the blood.’ The news came as an unusual surprise. Awake on the edge of the bed – faint shuffles came from behind. The broken balcony door brought smiles upon the face. The warm sleeping gown swayed as he stood; an open letter rested on the bedside table as he walked to the balcony. Addressed to the King of Arda; the sender, Viola Haggard.

“Dearest King of Arda, tis I thy humble...” the words were crossed, she didn’t make an effort to correct as the letter resumed immediately below, “-Dear brother, it’s me, Viola. I decided to send a letter since you always change location. It’s been five years since I’ve seen you, maybe longer, I don’t know. The Tower of Aris has been a good home – I was surprised to see Achilles returned to where she lost many things. We teamed up and are making way up the tower – profit is great and the people aren’t dying as much. Honestly speaking, life here on the mortal realm is pleasant. A lot of younger kids wander around in hopes of finding someone to tutor them – they feel like my own, thus, I’ve taken to teaching as well. At this point, you’re thinking (why does she not use telepathy?) the answer is simple, a letter makes it much more romantic, don’t you think?” the laughter could be heard even if it was a letter, “-anyway, I thought I’d give a status report. Life is good, and I love it; the pain of losing our comrade still linger, whatever. Don’t read the letter and leave me without reply; I’m expecting a letter.”

‘She seems in high-spirits,’ a weird letter with the author being weirder.

“You going somewhere?” asked a tired Xula.

“To Rosespire, there’s work to be done.”

“Is that so,” she rolled, taking the whole blanket, “good-bye. Check on Lizzie, she went to the toilet a while back.”

“Don’t worry,” *click,* “-I’ll check on the princess.”

“Majesty,” said maids waiting in line.

“Good morning, has anyone seen the Princess?”

“Her highness is with Rile,” replied another.

“Where may I find them?”

“Outside, majesty,” said yet another.

The walk was short; Rile sat in the company of Lizzie on the dewy ground.

“Anything the matter?”

“Majesty,” said Rile with a hint of nervousness, the ears and tail were suspicious.

‘Is he hiding something?’ thought Staxius.

“Highness wanted to have a breath of fresh air,” the explanation fell short, to which, the king raised an index finger – the retainer could but lower the head in shame and silence.

“Lizzie, is something the matter?” a worthless question for she held her stomach in pain.

“Y-yeah,” the petite figure tried hard to match his gaze, “-it hurts a lot more than before. I didn’t want to wake you and mother,” half-frown and half-smile, her eyelids were close to shutting completely.

“Why not,” he sat to rest her head on his lap, “-I’m thy father, tis my duty to attend to thy needs,” gently caressing her forehead, the motion said ‘-don’t worry, I’m here.’

“You looked tired; walking around usually made the pain go away, that’s why I asked to Rile to help.”

“I’m proud,” he smiled, “-compassionate at this age, I’m very proud.”

“R-really?”

“I’m proud you cared. Not about how thee hid the pain. I’m certain mother told you about the powers you have. Lizzie, you’re a fairy, the same as mother – the magical element is very powerful for a girl thy age,” holding an open palm to her heart, “-give me a moment.” The triangle lit faintly; her pain went away bit by bit.

“Done,” came an exclaim with which he pinched her cheeks.

“It’s gone,” she laughed, “-the pain is gone.”

“Next time it hurts, come to me, ok?”

“Yes, father.”

“No, I need you to promise.”

“I promise,” the relief in her speech was felt throughout his body.

“Rile, next time she’s in pain, contact me as fast as is possible. I glad thee listened to her will. She’s but a child, it’s not a bad thing, let us guide her till she can make decisions by herself.”

“Yes, majesty, I apologize for failing our princess.”

Changed into another formal suit, Staxius teleported to Rosespire. Cake arranged a meeting between him and the owner of Apexi; the agency was looking at a very low income. The revenue had forced them to cut away more employees – they were at a point where keeping a roof over the idols was hard. The post-war economy was still a mess.

The drive felt short as the media complex wasn’t far from the noble district. There were changes since the last time, the once empty field before the gates was cluttered with buildings from other agencies. Competition in Hidros was tough for such a small margin of profit.

“Sir, do you have an appointment?” asked the guard with control on the access inside.

“I have a meeting with the owner of Apexi – the details must have been forwarded?”

“Yes, please, it’s the second building at the front,” giving a vague direction, Void entered Memento. The place where he once gave an interview after rescuing the apostle from the clutches of Kreston. Relegated from the tall building to one short and less elaborate; Apexi showed their troubles with finance.

Opened to a brusque breeze, Staxius seemed unbothered whilst papers blew away from a clueless looking worker.

“Please, CATCH IT,” she screamed.

Death Element: Hand of God, it stopped from fluttering and falling as if leaves, “-here.”

“T-thank you?” said the lady who carefully picked the papers.

“Don’t mention it,” he strolled past what seemed to be a boyband. They returned him with confused looks; ‘-why would a man dressed so expensively be here?’

Chapter 412: Mr. Goodwill

The building, smaller than the others, was also the most populated. Each floor would be divided into different sections for other Agencies and organizations trying to break into the market. The atmosphere inside was exhausting, suffocating with a lingering odor of sweat. The receptionists wearing short clothes sat informally trying to lose the heat in their conversation. The shirts were unbuttoned to allow the sweat to dissipate. Whether it was intentional or not, that slight detail raised their sexual appeal. It didn’t help that the light would reflect against the skin as if a cleaned window.

“Excuse me,” said a large man peering over the dark-brown counter.

“Yes?” returned the leader of the gossip group, her body was on the chubby side and her clothes weren’t enticing – rather, it was covered from top to bottom.

“I have a meeting scheduled with Mr. Goodwill.” They recoiled upon hearing the name, slightly and not enough to make a scene.

“Mr. Goodwill,” repeated she giving a once over through her square glasses, “-let me check.” The tapping of keyboard cut amidst the noisy background, a pair of scissors rattling on and on until, “-take the elevator to the third floor; someone from Apexi will fetch you.”

“Thank you,” he nodded as a form of courtesy.

“Who was that?” inquired another group coming in from behind.

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“Don’t know,” was the last heard of the conversation for the elevator came in view. The hallways sure weren’t the best, the cleaners must have been slacking. One could see moist, green, and repugnant, growing far into the corners where wiring linked the many rooms.

‘Could have been cleaned,’ thought he facing a weird layout of buttons; the push to close function seemed to have been broken as it was the only one to not be lit. Thinking nothing of it, the fingers moved to select floor three.

“Hold the elevator,” waved a disorganized lady wearing uncomfortable heels. Her feet perpetually seemed to reject each step.

“Thank you,” panted she with unlevelled glasses, the short sprint had her body in ruin. The clothes were at a point one could refer to as bed-time ware. She entered first then came four ‘fashionably’ dressed boys.

“You’ve saved me again,” said she gathering her breath.

“It was my pleasure, my lady, what floor?”

“The third,” said one of the boys – darker clothes and a more reserved stance than his comrades.

“Very well,” the tight cell grew tighter and soon, the doors would open to a factory – a modern-day plant. The immediate exit was of a semi-transparent wall with posters of Aceline and other idols. Behind the blurred wall; one could see figures, numerous figures going back and forth working, handing paper works, and even shouting. Granted the voices never made it out to the relatively quiet corridor; the body language painted an ‘X’ in red.

“Can I ask a personal question?” inquired the troubled-lady alone and at a slower pace.

“Depends,” said he.

“Oh...” her fingers fidgeted as if it was important; the aura she gave was of a stray animal.

“I’ll try my best to answer,” added he with a sigh.

“Thanks,” her pitch shot up, “-I’ve never seen you here,” the tone lowered to a point between respectful and friendly.

“It’s my first visit,” he replied whilst giving his full attention, “-what about you?” her gaze would often wander everywhere but his face.

“I w-work here,” her speech slowed, “-enough about me, what about you? Did you come to audition as a potential idol?”

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“No, no,” he chuckled, “-far from it. I’m too old for such a line of work.”

“Do apologize for my informality, but thee look very young,” the slight smile of her eyes showed sincerity.

“I’m very much honored to be complimented by a diligent lady such as yourself.”

“What makes you say that?” she coyly asked.

“Tis was the first impression I got,” smooth and honest, “-you focus on others. I saw how thee acted upon the papers being fluttered by the wind – thee was the first to jump and fetch. Might I add, thy appearance, not that I mean it in bad-spirit, is lesser of importance; it showed the dedication to thy craft. I admire people who are that focused, it’s a very good trait, Miss?”

“Oh,” she stumbled trying to give a hand-shake, “-Miss Alexia.”

“Staxius Haggard, well met, my lady, well met,” following the greeting, he helped her to carry the unorganized paperwork.

“The walk felt so much longer,” commented she resting against a counter.

“It sure did,” he returned the files. “Can I trouble you to show where Mr. Goodwill’s office is?”

“Mr. Goodwill,” she pointed to the left, “-over there – should be easy to spot since the office is bigger than the rest.”

“Once again, tis was a pleasure,” he nodded to head deeper in. ‘Alexia, a manager of some sort. I’d figure she’s new and is in charge of the boyband. Maybe new talents affiliated to Apexi, who knows?’ Uninterested yet, Staxius walked in confidence across the workplace. A trip made by many guests and potential sponsors amidst a factory of mindless workers. Blue hue glowed from the computers, the mouse clicked away, while the keyboard typed away – some exhausted, some on the brink of death, and others flat-out sleeping; nothing about it struck as being in order.

“Mr. Goodwill.”

“Who are you?” returned a chubby man slightly annoyed.

“Excuse me,” muffled a petite figure who scurried out with arms covering her chests.

“Staxius Haggard,” returned he strongly.

“Majesty,” the palms rubbed disgustingly. Small eyes amplified by the strong glasses; a large nose and larger ears – one could have easily mistaken him for a savage beast if it were not for the suit and partly bald hair. “I had a call that you would be visiting.”

“I’m glad to see my assistants are doing their jobs; a thing not common around here.”

“There is no need for such animosity,” said the beast of a man proudly, “-they’re doing their jobs. Besides, I’m a man of open-mindedness.”

“A man of disrespectful manners I’d say,” voiced the king strongly.

“If the purpose of this visit is to throw insults, then I would most appreciate you leaving; with all respect, of course.” The last comment struck home.

“There’s no wrong in pointing out such an insolent lack of manners from one of the Federation’s citizens. Can you not muster the proper etiquette of standing, greeting the guest, and offer a seat?”

“...” the large nose sneered similar to a threatened prey.

“I suppose I would also be disrespectful if I thought with my libido instead of my head,” a reference to the Director.

“MAJESTY,” he screamed, “-kindly leave.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do so,” said the king taking a strong seat, “-Mr. Goodwill, how far from thy name have thee strayed. I came to negotiate the fate of Apexi, but I suppose, a company that is being liquidated

doesn't hold much value in the greater scheme. The market of idols is slim as is, the idols aren't getting paid, the workers all but sit and do nothing."

"On what basis are you saying this?" he snickered, "-majesty, I'm afraid the agency is still mine, and I'd rather die than liquidate the assets.

"éclair, shut the blinders and toggle the screen."

"Orders confirmed." Unknown to Mr. Goodwill, the room's automated curtains closed, the blinders shut, and a screen toggled.

"What is this sorcery?" asked the director afraid by what was to come, "-what have you done, majesty?"

"Nothing much than to ask my assistant to scour for some insider information. I have testimonies from the employees who were fired not so long ago. The receptionist downstairs and the girl who ran earlier confirmed my doubts – your libido can't be controlled. Promising the moon in exchange for their flesh, how low can a human fall?" accurate and to the point, the option of having a peaceful talk was never in the cards. Upon hearing the state of Apexi, the place where Aceline grew and where Emi Muko applied to join; éclair, tasked to monitor her activities, revealed that she was insulted in the company of Scott. Mr. Goodwill heavily scrutinized Scott for running away with Aceline. Apparently, the director never gave her permission to leave. It was through help from Prince Ernis and Queen Gallienne that she escaped. Once again it came to the single most prominent mean of exchange – 'pleasure' for a chance at changing one's life. Emi who had tried her best to forget her past sat there unable to move. She intended to agree to his demands. Scott replied with a harsh 'no'. Emi was reborn, she tried to remake herself and her manager knew.

"Should I continue to play the video?" asked Staxius.

"No, please, stop," he begged, "-if this gets leaked, I'll be ousted and killed. My family needs me, my wife, my children, they c-c-can't live without me."

"Mr. Goodwill," he laughed, "-how oblivious are you?" shaking the head, "-have you forgotten who I am? In no way will you live peacefully – thy family knows of the truth and soon will the continent. Good luck rotting in a demented world of hate, regret, and agony."

"Heh... heh... heh, I-I'm still the d-director of Apexi, I h-have p-power."

"Let me stop the misunderstanding," a piece of paper slammed across the desk, "-Apexi's shares have been bought by Phantom. Meaning, the Agency who thee revered, is rightfully mine. Enough of false games, the world doesn't need another Sten Parcyvell."

"M-majesty, t-thee a-are a fool. H-how a-are you going to run an agency w-without knowledge on the entertainment industry, the failing company will take you down with it. The millions of debts are still to be a pain, there's no way you're going to survive. I made sure if the company is ever sold, the new owners would go down with me."

"Do you mean the ten-million Exa of debt?"

"Yes," he smirked, "-in no way do you have that amount of money."

“Fool,” said the king pitying the clueless man, “-money is never a concern. As for the Agency, I have someone in mind who will perform better than anyone on the market. Mark my word, she’s the best companion one might have wished for, my moneymaker. As for you,” relaxed on the chair, “-out.”

“Y-you c-can’t d-do this!” rhythmic loud footstep stormed the office to give a salute.

“Guards, take this man away,” ordered the king.

“Yes, Boss.”

“I’ll make sure you never forget this day, MAJESTY!” shouted he being dragged away.

“Boss, what are your next orders?” asked a singular guard.

“Make sure he atones for the pain he’s caused. A little session of torture might beneficiate to enlighten him to his ways; have him sat on the Judas Chair.¹” On that, the guards left as soon as they came. The employees were baffled, the director was taken away and the King of Arda stood in their presence.

“My fellow companions,” a pin drop silence enveloped the room, “-Apexi is now a part of Phantom. I heard from the ex-employees that Mr. Goodwill had outstayed his welcome. A new director will be appointed as of tomorrow. Those who were fired will have their job returned. Apexi’s will start a new era. As the owner, I’ll do the same as I did to Meldorino. A one-week, all-paid vacation to a resort in Plaustan. Go and enjoy it. When thee returns, I want only the best.”

“A one-week all-paid vacation...” the thought of the sun, sand, and sea, had them in awe.

“Majesty,” spoke a well-dressed man, “-what are we supposed to do now?”

“Call it a day,” replied he.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, go,” he smiled, “-go relax and return as better individuals. I’m expecting great things,” the office emptied one by one.

‘There they go,’ thought he, ‘-I can’t believe that worked. Mr. Goodwill and his libido. If it hadn’t been for éclair acting on his own; I doubt we could have acquired the Agency so quickly.’

Chapter 413: Apexi’s rebirth

On the evening of 28th March; Phantom acquired Apexi. A massive achievement towards the desired outcome. Mr. Goodwill, as ordered by Staxius, was tortured. Giving time to heal and recover using magic, the suffering kept on pondering his psyche. The emphasis was put on breaking the mind instead of the body. Soon, the ex-director would be viewed as a fool. During said evening, over a warm-meal at the mansion in the company of Cake; Staxius declared that she would be in charge of Apexi. Up till today, her management in Phantom was perfect, she never made mistakes. Well, she did make a few but was so good as to hide said unwanted outcomes.

Elvira, as he called her by the newly given name – the vampiric talent bestowed upon her was of intelligence. She figured in haste of her abilities – the real talent of a born leader. Her show of predicting how the market would react with time was but a sliver of her potential. Staxius realized and so did she.

Adding Apexi onto her duties would further enable growth; besides, Phantom was allowed to make a few mistakes here and there. Meldorino being part of Phantom was led by its own director, Mr. Dorino. The man was capable in his own merit. A king was as strong as the person he surrounds himself with – his entourage. Word needn't be said of his entourage for many of the members would go on to become legends into the world's history. People who changed their destiny and to suit their needs.

Silently and gently, the warmth of the sun crept from its temporary sleep. Dawn broke the sleep of many, and amidst the many were those working for local newspapers. Journalists were excited about Rosepire's daily news.

Why? one might have asked, why was the reason for such a commotion? It was nothing short of a miracle – Apexi, a company adorned by the populous, and loved even more for their idols; would have ended in tragedy. Tis was then a knight swooped in to rescue the damsel in distress. A damsel who would have had her shares devoured by other agencies. Testimonies from ex-employees were already on the Arcanum. However, people chose to ignore it as pranksters would often flare up rumors in hopes of attention.

Went amiss for so long, the reality came to light. The same day upon which Mr. Goodwill was taken; stood a crowd of reporters. Cake had kindly tipped off the stations and did a crowd gather. A barrage of questions mixed with slurs and utter hate assaulted him verbally. Such a backlash would not have been permitted. Normally that is, the evidence éclair uploaded to the many databases showed with certainty the malicious acts. Needless to say, the news made it into the frontline of the 29th. It spawned various debates concerning and questioning the dignity of their loved Agencies. Many were forced to make statements in hopes of not being engulfed by the swarm of opportunistic and crusade-like mindset. One may fight off another on a one-on-one, however, when an army rushes thee, tis time to retreat or die trying.

Achieving what he had set out to do; the days went by one after the other. Cake took to her role strictly; ordered a restaffing and personally conducted interviews. Just like that, in a blink, a month went by.

Date 29th April, the whistling of wind against the massive offices in Memento felt fleeting. The shabby building in which Apexi once called home was moved to its neighbor, 'Gem'. A befitting name for the building's windows shone and reflected like gems. Phantom purchased an impressive two-floors left unoccupied by another company. The latter went bankrupt after a failed endeavor. A trade resulting in hundred-millions of debt. Phantom, or rather, Cake, was fast on purchasing the two floors. The cost ended at 25 Million Exa for both. A helipad was soon built for ease of transport. The trip from Rotherham and the Capital was cut to around thirty minutes to an hour. The focus was on rebranding the image, getting to know the competition, allowing the workers to settle.

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Only then, after a month of restarting, were the idols called in.

"Good afternoon, Elvira," said Staxius wearing another expensive suit. At this point, he changed them as if being socks.

"Good afternoon, Majesty," replied Cake joyfully; her appearance suited the job. The vampiric blood made her fiercer.

"I see you're drinking wine," commented he playing on the color 'red'.

"It's the closest I have to blood," laughed she having partaken in the pleasures of relishing a person's lifeforce.

One of the meeting rooms was arranged to suit the party. A celebration for the formal launch of Apexi. Once a place of discussion, the bland curtains swapped for one frilly and eye-catching. The lighting sure was brighter and people were walking from person to person introducing them in an impressionable fashion. The main guest of tonight was none other than the King himself. Eventually, the highest reaching individuals flocked to his side and spoke. Obligated to entertain them all, he spoke without end, reserved but continuous. Some asked questions on the potential market – the answers were educated and on point.

The clock struck 15:00, the formal party wrapped and many guests left.

"Are they here?" asked Cake over the phone.

"Boss," tapping lightly on he who slumped on a chair visibly drained, "-they're coming," said she eagerly.

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"I know, I know."

Click, complete darkness, the lonely footsteps echoed till the door.

"Hello?" it twisted, "-anyone here?" swung open, *bang,* "-welcome to Apexi," applause came from newer guests. Many o' figures stood in the entrance baffled. From elites to the employees, the real party began, the celebration of saving Apexi. They who had come were the idols and their managers.

S-Kiss, a band focused on a rougher style of music directed towards the heart of teenage boys. Three members with the youngest 20 and oldest 25. Their highest rank in sales was 44 out of 100.

H-Jewel, another band compromised of three boys and two girls. A mix of modern music with sprinkled of the olden era. Soft and melodic, they were the type of group majority heard over the speakers at malls in form of background music. The ranking, 60 out of 100.

First Romance, a duo of twin brothers who were as frail and delicate as flowers. Add on a wig and one might have thought of them as girls. One couldn't specifically group their style of music into a single genre. Their efforts in lyric writing were what had them shoot up the ranks, 25 out of 100. Those were the trio who had held Apexi from falling into the depths of ruin. Other idols left after the scandal of Mr. Goodwill, some left before the incident due to lack of funds. They were the ones who remained for the sake of friendship. It wasn't uncommon to see the three trade members among one another – one could say, the three were all but a part of a bigger group.

"Lady Elvira," said a man with dark-grey hair, dark black outfits with leather shoes, a beanie, and round sunglasses. "Thank you for having taken our company and given it a new life," the speech was strong but not rude. Heavily built arms pushed against a leather jacket on which had 'S-Kill,' written instead of 'S-Kiss.'

"Mr. Ghai, I did what I was ordered to do," said she formally.

“Still, I’m grateful and so are my boys. If the financial backing didn’t come, we would have left Apexi.”

“Don’t worry,” said she, “-the owner of Phantom is here to make sure that never happens, are you not, Majesty?”

“Mr. Ghai,” came an equally impressive man, “-it’s a pleasure to have thee here. May Apexi continue its journey to becoming a legend.”

“Exactly,” laughed the manager, “-heroes die but legends live on forever, I like the drive, it screams of power and ‘-Forus!1’ Thus ended the first exchange, Mr. Ghai was soon to leap across the floor towards the alcohol. The members of S-Kiss were dark, the tattooed arms, necks, and ominous facial drawings were truly amazing in their own way.

“Do apologize Mr. Ghai’s behavior,” said a lady with an upper-class type of accent. The way she articulated her words said more than enough.

“Lady Haworth, it’s a pleasure.”

“Dearest King of Arda,” she curtsied the same as a noblewoman.

“Lady Olnia; I’m stunned, to say the least. I suppose nobles are humans after all, how is your mother, Duchess Alice doing?”

“Mother is doing just fine,” said she with a sense of familiarity, “-I’m the one who must speak of the perplexing encounter. I do suppose our monarch has a very eccentric way of leading a continent.”

“I’ll take it as a compliment. Lady Olnia, may I have thy thoughts on Apexi?”

“Improved for the better,” her eyes soon wandered around, “-we’re doing far better than under that damned Mr. Goodwill’s filthy hands,” exclaimed she.

“That will be enough,” interjected Cake.

“I suppose we shall also get going,” she led the way following Ghai.

“Lady Elvira,” came a slender figure of a handsome woman, “-good to see you,” she reached in for an exchange of kisses.

“Good to see you made it, Lady Kofa.”

“Don’t,” she blushed, “-there’s no need for such formality, you know it makes me a little on edge. Short hair, almond-shaped eyes, a nose which seemed to graciously accompany her scarlet lips, “-it’s a pleasure to meet you, majesty.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” returned he cautious of her. The mannerisms were too provocative and easy to slide into people’s safe space. He naturally cast a subconscious barrier to have her stop.

“I’ll get going.”

“Quite an array of eccentric personalities,” commented Staxius seeing the managers in action.

“Tell me about it,” she sighed, “-I had to deal with them instead of the idols. I wish I had time to speak to the actual performers.” The managers weren’t only servants, they were guard-dogs, waiting to pounce and bite at any who dared to harm their master.

“Don’t you have guests coming?” asked Cake.

“Obviously,” he took a sip, the door opened with six people. Scott, Emi, Julius, Sugar, Dei, and Aceline.

“HOW DID YOU?” her drink nearly toppled.

“I present you,” he walked to where they stood, “-companions who are to join Apexi from today forth,” smirking at the managers, “-I’m sure there isn’t a need for introduction, however, I shall do so. First, we have Scott, arguably a master-mind of a manager. Emi Muko, his new partner, a will-be-star who the world has yet to see. Julius Haggard, my son, and assistant to Scott. Sugar, idol and once the man who stole the hearts of many, his fiancée, Dei, an amazing bassist, then lastly, Aceline, the pride of Hidros, a lady who many thought died. Mr. Ghai, Lady Elvira, Lady Kofa, Lady Olnia, and lastly, the diligent staff who work day and night, may I have a round of applause for my friends.” It was the first they heard of the news and so was it for the entire of Apexi.

King Staxius brought elemental figures in the entertainment industry to the Agency. The bleakness of their future faded to concrete confidence.

The silence, almost torturous, broke by the loud applause of Mr. Ghai. S-Kiss, who was supposed to be darkness incarnate could but shed tears. Scott and Aceline debuted at the same time as the bands; they shared a bond close to family. She went on to become famous while they stood happily in the shadows.

“Majesty, what’s the meaning of this?” asked an irritated Scott.

“A reunion,” he turned, “-Aceline.”

“I-I’m sorry, Scott,” her head lowered with a bow, “-I was led astray by fame and fortune. I mistreated a friend and for that, I’m deeply sorry. There’s no way my words can excuse my actions, which is why I’ve decided to start again with his Majesty.”

“W-what’s t-t-the m-m-meaning of t-this?” stuttered Scott.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he laughed, “-Aceline’s alive and well, she’s going to work for Meldorino.”

“N-no...” the body shook, “-t-t-that not it,” without a shred of restraint, “-I THOUGHT YOU DIED!” they hugged.

Chapter 414: Eclipses

Clear and crisp, the morning fresh air at dawn, the airfield came to life with a jet waiting. The party the night prior ended with Apexi being more confident in the new owner. For once, the old team including Scott and the other colleague returned to how it was.

The man did have a lot to say about the king getting involved. It didn’t take long to persuade him else wise – to which he grudgingly accepted. He had remained in Hidros for two months; there were things still needed to be done in Alpha. Tasked to become better, Dei, Sugar, and Emi formed a band named Retribution, or, RTB, for short. Their journey had just begun.

The walk up the stairs to the jet felt strange; a memory of the unorganized lady came to mind. He hadn't seen her after the encounter in the hallway; the boyband too – no traces of being present.

"Aceline," spoke he inside the moving plane.

"How can I help?" returned she fastening the seat belt.

"I know not if my memory is failing me. Was there ever another group with a young, disorganized, manager at the center?"

"No, Apexi only removed members, not hire, that goes double for the idols."

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"What of her then?" trying hard to remember, the elbow came to rest on the seat's arm as he held his chin.

"Maybe..." interjected Aceline, the plane soon had liftoff.

"Maybe?" asked he a few minutes later.

"Do you remember her name?"

"Miss Alexia, I think, memory concerning her presence is curious."

"Is that it..." her face sulked into a gloomy stare, "-Are you sure it's Alexia?"

"Yes, why is that?" returned he intrigued by her reaction.

"It's a myth; Alexia, and she was with a boyband, right?"

"Correct," he raised a brow, "-how did you know?"

"Damn it," her face felt into one far beyond worried, "-Alexia isn't a real person. She's a myth or dead person, information on her is entirely a mystery. I heard long ago that a disorganized manager got together a group of friends into a band. Their unmotivated way of working had them hit the top 20. She knew their potential but they were unwilling to work. She kept on working, days, weeks, months, years until the band was motivated by single news – she was diagnosed with a terminal disease. After said news, the band gave it they're all to have their big first concert to the world and realize her dreams. On the day of the performance, well after the event, news arrived that she died in her hospital bed. The news had the boys spiral into depression, some took to substance abuse while others fell into more convoluted traps. It's said that to this day; her soul wanders around the halls trying to latch onto a potential target. Those who have said they saw the figure met with an uncertain death or bad-fortune," the idealness of the plane made it ever so eerie.

"Suppose a person had a full-on conversation?"

"I've no idea," her tensed expression relaxed into a smile, "-a myth is a myth. I don't think this Alexia person exists. Probably some fantasy made by a drunkard."

'Was it a premonition, did it foretell the possible future?' wondered he along the journey. 'Wrong, far from it.' The plane didn't only have him and Aceline, no, there was another entity, one unseen to the human eye; Miss Alexia.

"See," thought Staxius, "-the stories about you are related to death. You have the aura of an Angel of Death."

"No, no," returned she telepathically, "-I refuse to say a word on the matter. I'm not an Angel of Death; I'm Alexia, a manager."

"Don't get it twisted. Tis blatant to see how thee doesn't belong on this realm. There's but one thing to do, go back, else misfortune might befall another."

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"LEAVE ME ALONE," cried she. Following a gesture, a portal opened to suck Alexia into the Hall of Rebirth.

'How did an angel manage to escape. Those things fly over the world to distribute the news of death and the misfortune carried with it. I know for certain there's no way for them to become sentient and have their thoughts. The angels are made for one purpose, to help souls to the afterlife or kill those misfortunated enough to witness the presence. Consciousness and a story, a potential recipe for disaster. Glad it's taken care of,' the body relaxed to peer outside. The clouds over yonder came in various shapes and sizes, and soon, the mind had a fun activity of discerning shapes.

The trip to Alphaia didn't happen on a whim. He had made plans to remain in Hidros for another month to study how Apexi evolves. Duty had called, Godfather Renaud to be precise. There had been another incident – one costing the Lerado's half of their fighting force. The details were as followed; Lerado was ready to exchange money for narcotics close to their base. A normal and easy transaction, however, this time, Public Safety got involved. Two detectives managed to track down the deal and report to the Anti-Narco unit. The latter were ruthless and soon, without the worry of repercussion, a shoot-out between the unit and the underworld factions started. Nothing more could be found on the matter. It made no show in the news, the Anti-Narco Unit was just as bad as the underworld members. If nothing was done, Lerado would be wiped and the Jefferson's would become the sole representative in Alphaia – thus profits would be handed to Godfather Stanley.

Seven long hours later; Marrowy came to sight. The landing, hard as it was, seemed easy in the talented pilots' hand. Giving a salute without need for refueling, the plane turned to return from whence they came. Cake had more work for the pilots as the monarch of Easel Run Gard was due to meet with Queen Gallienne.

Clang, opened the closed hangar. Behind, the jet turned to nothing more than an outline in the sky.

"Where are we?" asked she looking all over.

"Marrowy," said he pushed against the massive sliding doors, "-the airfield to be more precise."

"It's barren and alone, there's not even a control tower. Why not use the one other planes uses?" she referred to public airports.

“No can do,” the hangar stood opened with dust levitating, “-its easier to use this place. No waiting line and people will not dare to use it; have thee seen the run-way and scenery?”

“Yeah,” she entered tactfully, it was as if a cat trying to touch water, “-are we allowed here?” her voice echoed.

“No,” the outline of a car came from the back, “-it would have been trespassing a few months ago. The airfield is owned by Phantom,” he pulled onto a dark-sheet revealing the less than pretty EDO-4. “She’s gotten dirty,” the headlight toggled with a silent groan. “Wait outside,” he drove, got off, shut the hangar, got in, had Aceline seated, then accelerated down the valley on route to Melmark.

“I was wondering, what am I going to do from now on?”

“Ansoft, the ex-agency has no business with a dead idol. Apexi is all the way in Hidros. I did say I would have you be in the spotlight – there are legions of young idols who support thee out there. Don’t worry about the ‘hows’, trust me. I made sure the thing about thy death be nothing but a rumor.”

“The smirk makes me wonder – what sort of deal have thee struck?” asked she rather sharply.

“I pulled some strings and became the sponsor for an upcoming film. I’ll give you the script later. Just know, the agency we’re working with is Eclipses.”

“Shut up,” her head turned in shock, “-the Eclipses?”

“Yes, the third most popular filmmaking studio in the world, I know.”

“HOW DID YOU?”

“Do you think I rested on my laurels for those two months?”

“Where have we headed now?” her voice spiked with excitement and energy.

“To Melmark, the business district – there’s an audition.”

Eclipses, an agency worth in the billions. They were close and very picky about the actors and actresses. Said pickiness was what had them skyrocket into the world of film-making. Emphasis is placed on quality as opposed to quantity and the iron-will to not fall prey to what is popular. Negotiations took days of back and forth -éclair did most of the talking as an assistant to Staxius. In the end, he was welcomed to financially help in the coming movie. A murder-mystery from the glimpses given over the phone. The pulling factor was the dead Aceline. Her accident would be taken as a publicity stunt for the movie – her re-appearance would bring so much attention. The people from marketing couldn’t ignore her influence. The director was swayed by money and a priceless talent.

The capital city came over the horizon, a multiple of high reaching buildings. They had no idea what was going to be dropped on them. Going round the outer capital road, he continued to the East. A place farther from the Business district, a closed compound with Eclipses Studios written in bold.

Stopped short of the entrance, a guard asked for their purpose. The casual exchange occurred and soon, access was granted into the world of cinema. Her eyes had the glimmer of a child brought to the park. Many buildings serving a vast amount of purpose had people in costumes walking.

Set 05, went by on a sign. A dark-black building with 05 written, stood menacingly. The car parked, he stepped out to escort Aceline inside. There, a lady was kind enough to guide them to the auditioning room.

"How does it feel?"

"I'm beyond words," her hands trembled, "-this feeling, I haven't been excited in a while." Soon to arrive, a queue of actresses of renown sat with their managers. The latter held formal conversations on the phone while the former practiced their lines.

Another assistant came to hand a copy of the script, *The Casefiles of Blair Riley.*

None cared any less about who was there or not. "My lady, do you work here?" asked Staxius politely.

"Y-yes, I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do to advance the queue. Please, wait with the others," she repeated an answer of which had been said so many times before.

"No, no," he shook his head, "-I'm Mr. Haggard, could I see the Director?"

"I-I'm sorry b-but m-managers aren't allowed to meet the Director unless called for." The simple request he made had the other managers turned with malicious glares.

"It's fine," he smiled to defuse the situation. The assistant went away.

"éclair, get a hold of the Producer, tell him we've come."

"Orders confirmed, any particulars might I add?"

"Do it in the most threatening way possible."

"Understood."

"Why do you want to meet the director so badly?" asked Aceline who went over her lines.

"Focus, we need thee in top-shape." The two-double doors inside which conducted the auditions barged open. A multiple of staff came in haste with the Director and the Producers."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Haggard," said the Director tipping his beret.

"Good afternoon, Director."

"It's true," voiced the producer, "-Lady Aceline is alive and well."

"Let's not waste time," said Staxius.

"Y-yes," gulped the Producer, "-Director, let's have her audition."

"Sure," he cast a reluctant gaze.

"Let's go," they followed to empty the once crowded space.

Aceline was taken to a separate room leaving Staxius and Mr. Drowney, the executive producer, alone.

"About the budget," said he in a lowered voice.

"I said it beforehand; money is not an issue. I have a team working to evaluate the approximate cost of the movie – if the margin goes beyond 10 percent, consider the deal voided."

"Yes sir, we would never think of stealing."

"About the other condition."

"Depends on the director's choice, there's nothing much I can do."

"Mr. Drowney, in no way do I intend to compromise thy situation. Aceline would not enjoy the prospect of having bought her way into the movie. Just make sure the Director doesn't use his prejudice – the strong-headed man might be renowned in the world of cinema, but..."

"I understand, Sir, I'll do what is in my power." Soon, an assistant came to fetch, the sense of relief was palpable.

Chapter 415: 'Five for the Price of One

The audition proceeded, Aceline stood in a lonesome room with a camera directed at her face. Obnoxious lighting made opening one's eye hard, similar to a cloudless summer day. *The Casefiles of Blair Riley,* a mystery detective type movie. The story was based around the detective Blair Riley. Since the heroine would play the detective, the whole film depended on the actress's ability. It would either make or break it. Heart and soul into the script; Aceline impersonated, channeled the character, and gave an applause-worthy performance.

Formerly a crime-novel, the writer sat in the company of the director. The way she spoke, moved and acted had him in shock. Aceline became the personification of Blair. Glimmers of sweat had her forehead light with the same vigor of an athlete.

"Director," said the writer, "-Lady Aceline is the perfect choice for Blair. I will not allow any other to have the role," the firmness showed the resolve. Unsureness changed to certainty upon those words, the reluctant director's way of perception evolved. Her ten minutes felt as if an hour – those behind the cameras were speechless. Normally, the would-be cast members performed – each video would be judged and scrutinized for every little detail until someone fit the role. Today was the exception, she made good on her word.

"How did it go?" asked Staxius waiting in the lounge close to the entrance.

"I was chosen," said she with a smile – a legion of footsteps approached. Their gazes in the long corridor were reminiscent of a wolf pack; red and filled with the will to devour. The managers were the ones most angered, as for the idols, neither could have cared less. Some were quick to jump on their phones, and one by one, soon, transport would come.

"Mr. Haggard," came the producer.

"What's the matter?" inquired he.

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"It's a matter of schedule."

“Lady Aceline is going to stay at Lekdo. There’s not much the lady has to do these days. Do phone her beforehand; just to make sure, I’ll have three guards be at her side, is that acceptable?”

“Yes, Sir,” nodded he still afraid.

“Come on, Aceline, let’s head back.”

“Sure,” cup in hand, she gulped the drink and headed outside. The duo left without wasting time. Three members of Phantom would come to act as her bodyguards. The extra security was in preparation for any would-be problem. The issues of the underworld remained, the Lerado.

“I can’t believe it,” said she shaking from the knees.

“Why not?” Lekdo came in sight.

“Getting chosen as the main-actress, the main-character for a Detective story with a similar case to my murder must be fate.”

“Sure, it is,” he smiled, “-fate is a lady none of us dares to defy.”

Inside, the room previously occupied by Emi would be taken by Aceline. The guards would arrive in a day or so, tis was what éclair predicted.

‘Aceline’s returned. Doesn’t matter if people know she’s alive or not. The movie is going to be out in a year or so since it’s short. Fate said she, my scheming is being handed to fate. She doesn’t realize that the writer was forced into selling his script to Eclipses per my orders. From director to producer, everyone has been handpicked and they don’t even know it. She should be fine working at the broken relationship. If whoever tried to kill her comes in sight, Phantom will make sure they die,’ a warm-cup of coffee cooled whilst basking in the landscape of Melmark. The penthouse was worth the money.

“Time to head out,” shut tight, cup on the counter, suit jacket on, keys in hand, and lights off; time had come to meet the Lerado.

Four hours on the road led to a quaint little village named Tash. Farther away from the capital and closer to the port – the flat-landed meadows came upon a gentle hill on which raised the village. Small with few buildings amidst which a prominent slated-roof building stood true. A church to Goddess Syhton. The roads leading up were curved beside which ran a stream of pure dazzling water. Climbed to the top, he faced an entire change of scenery; the sea and port came in view though, far, far away. One could even see the enormous mountains, called guardians, of Marrowy; yet, in this case, the guardians were farther away than the port.

“éclair, call Mallie Lerado,” ordered he parked outside the church. Purposefully built the highest out of the rest; it was common belief that higher one was, closer they would be to the goddess.

‘It’s fascinating,’ each step echoed around the prior building – a statue stood with her face, or rather, eyes blindfolded. The weapon of choice was a staff on which held a star surrounded by a ring. The robe spiraled around to cover the chest, legs, and thighs, to keep her dignity. The sculptor must have been very talented since the robe itself was in a way, magically hovering.

“Good afternoon, good sir,” hailed a nun.

“Good afternoon,” replied he, “-how long has the church been active?”

“Why do you ask?” hands pressed, her way of hunching over to hear his words felt closer to a bow.

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“Curious, I didn’t know Goddess Syhton being worshipped in Alpha. Do pardon my rudeness, it’s just that I’ve only seen her being worshipped back home, in Hidros.”

“Seeking for knowledge isn’t a sin,” she smiled, “-the church was built per our apostle’s wishes. She said, ‘people of Hidros will one day go abroad to find their calling and purpose. Tis our duty to give them a home in case of hardship, Goddess Syhton’s children must never be allowed to suffer,’ those were her words.”

“Her journey to spreading the words of the Goddess holds true,” giving a nod to the statue, “-I must get going. May the goddess always shine her light upon thee.”

“May she enlighten thy path, majesty.

‘She knows,’ he turned with a grin. ‘Goddess Syhton is Hidros’s primary goddess. People can pray to other deities but tis her who most pray for we have an apostle.’

“Mr. Haggard.”

“Yes?” glanced to the left, a lady stood with a parasol and a bloodstain jacket.

“Why did you come to Tash all of a sudden?” from resting against the walls, she pushed to stand with a frown.

“I’ve come to do my duty,” said he strongly.

“What duty?” her eyes rolled, “-what duty might that possibly be?” now facing a flower-bed, “-look at them,” she pointed, “-so pretty, yet, if I were to take a step inside, they’d die without a second thought.”

“Die, yet, another will take its place,” he refuted, “-nature isn’t as weak as to be stopped by a single action of a man. Remember, if it wasn’t for her, we’d be dead, that goes double for you. A dulled, weaken analogy is nothing but words of complaint from a powerless leader.”

“HOW DARE YOU,”

“Don’t,” he held her arms, “-don’t you dare raise thine hand,” he slowly added pressure, “-if thee wants to direct the anger, choose thy own weakness, not I. The means to succeed were handed on a silver platter. The Jefferson’s were alienated from the drug cartel, how can you stand there playing the victim whilst others are out there trying to survive. The Lerado mustn’t fall!”

“Let me go,” she pulled, “-I’ve had enough. The words of encouragement were nothing but thee trying to control me,” she eyed the floor.

“What then?” hands on her shoulders, “-what then, are you going to give up? What if I told you, you were a pawn, what then, lay down and thy husband and child’s death be in vain?”

“DON’T BRING MY FAMILY INTO THE CONVERSATION!”

SMACK, “-then stop being a bitch and take responsibility. Mallie Lerado, I’m sorry to say this, thou art nothing but a worthless pawn. A PAWN I’D RATHER GET RID THAN TO LEAD AROUND.” Fair to crimson, her cheeks outlined where Staxius had just slapped.

“Is that it...” asked she holding onto the stinging face.

“Yes, that is it, and I care not. Choose, Lady Lerado – choose carefully and think about who was there. Who was it that helped you, who was it that gave a new purpose, who was it who made enemies of others, who was it, tell me, WHO WAS IT?”

“Y-you,”

“LOUDER.”

“YOU, SHADOW, IT WAS YOU, OK.”

“Good,” he smiled, “-stop blaming yourself. The underworld isn’t a place for the faint of hearts. Make the decision, will thee back out and choose a life of repentance?” he faced the church, “-or will you come with me to have revenge.”

“The choice is obvious,” *clop, clop, clop.*

“Good decision; if not, you would have been killed.”

From the church, they headed below where the village rested. There, after passing a few buildings and fewer people – came a secluded area with an alley. EDO-4 managed to squeeze inside. There, the place was as if a castle, enclosed by the houses around. The place was once where the village leader and his family lived. Now, it was headquarters to Lerado – a new group needed a new location. Pulled to the right; the enclosed space was used as parking. Many o’ cars and vans rested patiently.

“Welcome to Lerado,” said she energized, “-this place would have been filled with members transporting merchandise.”

“Did the incident halt the operations?” asked he following her footstep.

“More or less,” they climbed a short set-of-stairs to a house, “-we’re on the brink of being wiped,” moans escaped the door. The roughness of gun-powder, explosives, metal, and blood.

“Few of our injured members are staying in the upstairs – sorry for the noise,” quick to head into a more or less secluded room, “-I presume Godfather Renaud sent you?”

“Yeah,” he sat, ‘-her attitude took a turn for the better. I guess she needed a waking call.’

‘Ahhhhh.....my leg,’ the agony of which the men endured crept into their haven.

“I’m sorry about the noise,” she pinched her forehead, “-I tried to get a doctor...”

“Being so far from the capital must be hard, and I’m certain the village doctor wants no business with your faction.”

“Pretty much,” she confirmed.

“I can’t speak with all this noise. How many are there?”

“Seven, never mind, six, one died yesterday.”

“Fine...” he stood, “-give me a moment.”

“WAIT,” her pitched raised, “-please don’t tell me you’re going to kill them.”

“What do you take me for, a murderer?”

“N-no...”

“Just stand still, I’ll be right back.”

‘Their screams are pathetic. People who are injured must be killed or die trying to kill another. They need to be strong, not complain.’

Boup, the first door barged open.

“W-who a-are you...”

“Shut up,” *Box of Alche,* with no tact to restrain, he summoned healing potions a shoved it deep in their mouth. The liquid escaped from the nose for the man coughed in desperation. The same treatment went around the other room.

‘The last one,’ thought he kicking down another door. ‘-A child?’ petite, frail, and tired, the chest showed signs of a gunshot. ‘How the hell is he alive?’

“W-who a-are you?”

“No one,” he replied coldly, “-tell me, boy, can you breathe or feel any pain?”

“I only feel pain,” slow and tedious, “-w-what d-does it m-matter...”

“I see,” a pistol rested on his counter, “-tell me, boy, what do you want?”

“F-for the pain t-to s-stop.”

“Consider the wish granted,” loaded with the safety off, “-may thy soul find salvation.” *BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG.* ‘The box of Alche ran out of uses. It’s a shame the last one had to be a kid.’

“W-WHAT DID YOU DO?” screamed Mallie who ran inside the room, “-DON’T YOU HAVE A HEART?”

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“No,” returned he coldly, “-why was a kid allowed on the battlefield in the first place? This is on your shoulder – I will not take the blame for giving the kid salvation.”

“Y-you c-could h-have t-tried...”

“Five for the price of one.”

Chapter 416: Anti-Narco Unit

“Is that it?” the lonesome figure of Mallie Lerado kned to lean over the dead child. Her eyes watered, her hands bloodied, and her face filled with grief. “Tis my fault he died?” said she to herself. Footsteps

came from the corridor behind, the five who were saved cramped into the doorway to watch their leader in tears. The one responsible for such a heartless act stood without a shred of remorse.

“Mallie Lerado,” said he strongly, “-get away from the body.”

“WHY?”

“Do as I say!” the authority couldn’t be argued with. The men behind saw how cruel he was yet, how easily he healed their injuries. To them, they owed more than their saved lives to this daunting figure.

Slowly, without the will to stand, she crawled all the while fixating on the body.

“Those departed from the mortal realm shall live anew in the afterlife. Choose, child, for thee haven’t sin; paradise or rebirth, choose, my child, choose, for death came to greet thee. For now, rest,” fist to his chest, Staxius spoke a few words for the departed; *Death Element: Void Flame.*

“STOP!” cried she, “-DON’T BURN HIM!”

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“It’s for the better,” *Death Element: Magical Barrier,* quick to force her into idleness – the body of the child burnt. Slowly, softly, and with dignity. There was no feeling of ill-will, the boy was sent to the afterlife.

“Let’s go,” he stepped out, “-gather the ashes in remembrance or let it flow to the wind. The dead continue to live in memory. Crying over lost ones is normal, and I understand the feeling; however, the pain mustn’t become a burden,” alone in the corridor, the members stood inside beside their leader. “Heed me,” said he to them, “-heed my words – there’s nothing more disrespectful than to stop living for the sake of one who has lost his life. Live for him; I say this as a friend of the Lerado’s, there will be more to come. Consider this a test, those who wish to leave, you included, Mallie, must do so this instant. I have been ordered to have revenge on those who decided to go against Godfather Renaud.” No doubt nor fear, what needed to be said was said.

“éclair, I need information on what happened on the day of the deal. I suspect the Public service to be involved. This is but guess; have a log of what Larson of Unit 8 inputted.”

“Orders confirmed.”

The afternoon changed to dusk. The air felt cool – the streets of Tash were even more silent than at day. Rather, the night made it sinister, the perfect setting for a story of murder. Since Lerado came in town, the settling of the story became real – bodies would often be found in back alleys and taken to the infirmary or the church. Both were trained to heal the injured but not revive the fallen.

The clock struck eight; the once moan heavy building calmed to a library. The crackling of firewood giving heat came from the bricked fireplace. Amber and somber; the building seemed to speak with the gusts.

Knock, knock,

“Enter,* creaked to a stop, a lady stood awkwardly in the doorway. Her hair long and messy, the color now of a bleach-blond – she wore red lipsticks, and the eyes were bright blue.

“Mallie Lerado,” said Staxius holding a notebook, “-have thee decided?”

“Yes.”

“I see you’ve changed thy appearance once again; must be thy DNA?”

“Yes.”

“So, have you come to terms with the death of the boy?”

“Yes.”

“Glad to hear it, shall we begin?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to repeat yes until I bash thy head in?”

“Yes... wait no.”

“Fret not, take a seat, the warmth from the fireplace is soothing.” Soon, she pulled a couch from another table and sat covered by a blanket. Brown or red, the color was changing depending on the fire – inlaid with flowery design, a very feminine blanket complimenting her appearance.

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“Where are the other members?” asked he taking a sip of whiskey.

“They headed off to our old base. The other members are trying to bait whoever attacked us into showing their faces. I’ll say this is war,” said she sternly. The voice changed to match her face – a bittersweet tone that didn’t fluctuate as much as before.

“I see,” he paused to light a cigar, “-give me the full story of what happened.”

“As you wish,” gathering her thoughts, “-it happened a few days ago. We were scheduled to exchange merchandise with a party not that far from our base. The usual trade – hidden by night and done secretly. It had been a smooth sail until that moment. Just as money was going to change hands, we were attacked by Kevlar wearing officers. The Anti-Narco unit, it was them, the bane of the narcotics trade. I don’t know how or what tipped them off, but with them as our enemy – there was nothing to do than fight. The Anti-Narco unit is a part of the military that is ordered to kill on sight. They don’t ask questions nor care for answers, anyone related to the trade is killed. I doubt their credibility since they only show up for trades that don’t include Cimier. The whole thing smells of scheming – tis the gut feeling also. That night, we lost half of our forces, the money, and the supplies we had for the month. Running the faction alone is hard, and without money, we might just be kids roaming the playgrounds calling themselves heroes or villains.”

“How does the boy fit into the story?”

“I don’t know,” she shook her head, “-we found him a while ago. Since he reminded us of what we were as children, we gave him a home, shelter, and food.”

Two sharp flashes perturbed the talk.

“What was that?” asked she familiar with the shade of light.

“Mallie Lerado,” he stood, “-let me tell you, the boy was a mole. The reason they were tipped off was because of him and the intervention of other individuals. You made a good choice by having the five go away – the house is about to be raided.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?” her face sunk into despair.

“The Anti-Narco Unit is here to destroy the remainder of Lerado.”

“éclair,” quick to contact the butler, “-have the car moved to the edge of Tash.”

“Orders confirmed.”

Her face said one thing, ‘what is happening?’

“Listen, Mallie, you’ve changed appearance and I doubt they know who the leader is. Which is why I want you to go away.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll clean the trash.”

“o-ok...” *Ancient Magic: Teleportation.*

“Lady Mallie Lerado, welcome inside the EDO-4,” driverless, the car dashed over the hill and towards the capital.

‘The Anti-Narco unit was tipped off by the boy who was a spy for Larson. A good but unthought idea. You never thought someone had the powers to track you back, did you? éclair has infiltrated thy computer, phone, and anything linked to it. Unless it’s on paper, there’s nowhere to hide from my trusted butler. Larson, Chad, this is war – Phantom is joining the fray.’

Click, the main door opened.

“PUT YOUR HANDS UP,” screamed a well-built man holding a hammer. They were shocked to see someone walk one without concern – the ambush they planned was foiled.

“DON’T YOU DARE MOVE,” screamed another hidden behind a car – their guns poised on the roofs and hood.

“What might be the matter?” asked Staxius.

“REMOVE YOUR MASK!”

“Gentlemen, there isn’t a need to be so heartless.”

“STOP MOVING OR WE’LL SHOOT.”

‘They’re not going to talk, well, whatever, guess this is going to serve as a warning to those who decide to come after us.’

“May death find thee well,” *slash,* the ones closest were beheaded in an instant – blood spewed like a broken hose. “FIRE!”

Blood Arts: Bloody Mary, channeled, the crystal formed a hovering shield. Bullets did not harm and fell as if rubber bands. *Clap, clap, clap,* down the stairs, their final moments were those footsteps.
Death Element: Shadow-Step. The bodies fell one after the other.

"I should get some gloves," said he taking a breath, "-It's been a while since I've killed using my hands – such a barbaric way of fighting. Long are the days when I would once jump into a fight with my sword – I fear the day I have to arm with Tharis and Orenmir."

"STOP RIGHT THERE," cried the fallen squad. They rose one by one with glowing veins. The eye socket was burnt and carved; flames spewed as if an uncovered flame. The unit revived.

"Oh, a chance to redo the fight?" he wondered.

"Did you really think it was that easy to take down the Anti-Narco Unit?" came a loud voice up the roof.
BAM, whoever it was, landed.

"You who so cruelly killed my companion will suffer their same fate," said he smugly.

"Captain Flare?" asked Staxius.

"HOW DID YOU KNOW?" he laughed; "-I suppose my reputation precedes me."

"No, far from it," said the masked man, "-the badge makes it awfully obvious. I make it a creed to not remember the weak. Now, Flare; are you going to be my next toy?"

"No, I shall be thy DEATH, Attack my minions, ATTACK!"

"So pathetic," *Death Element: Magical Barrier.*

"Are you going to hide away behind a wall, are thee that cowardly?"

"Watch and learn, amateur," *Death Element: Magical Barrier – Spikes.* The mindless wave skewered on the spot, one by one, they came without care. *Blood Arts: Crimson Thread,* the blood from before became gems which soon embedded into the zombies' forehead.

Blood Arts: Ghoul Revival. The pointless march halted, the barrier vanished, the puppets turned with crimson-colored glares.

"A puppet master should always remain behind the scene, there isn't a need to come in the open. Flare, you were foolish and over-confident, now die by the hands of those thee created." *Snap,* the mindless horde who were but weak evolved into the servants of a vampire. The pace increased, they jumped farther than the common man and had strength well over the normal limit.

"LET ME GO," one by one, they bit, tore off skin, muscle, limbs, and devoured. "OUR GOD WILL BE BACK, HE WILL LAY DESTRUCTION TO THIS WORTHLESS PLANE, OH GOD OF KRESTON, HERE I COME TO BE IN THY GRACEEE." A nauseating crack had him fall silent, one of the ghouls tore out his throat.

'God of Kreston,' thought he, '-here's something I thought I dealt with. It does explain why he managed to revive the bodies. It's lesser powerful with more potential than what the pope did. That conniving old man, he must have had acolytes all over the world. When will that damned fool leave this realm?'

Those who fought soon came to kneel before Staxius. "Ghouls," spoke he, "-what does thee wish, death and reincarnation or to serve my will."

"S-serve t-thy w-will," said them in tandem.

"Come to my shadow," a gesture opened a dark-crimson vortex. The total was thirty, thirty ghouls to join the puppet army.

"Master, I've confirmed that Larson was involved again in tipping the Anti-Narco Unit."

"How many of their forces did they dispatch on this mission?"

"Not much, sire, I think they underestimated our forces."

"No, this is bad," a realization had him worried, "-it could be a diversion. The real attack is at the old base, we need to go now!" Sprouting wings, he flew towards the hideout.

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"I've confirmed the worry. The real Anti-Narco unit is headed to the hideout. Should I call for help?"

"I doubt Phantom to make it here in such a short time. We'll have to fight on our own, éclair, get ready, it's going to be a tiresome fight."

"Sir Larson," far away, "-do you think it was a good idea to have the Anti-Narco Unit split?"

"Chad, dear Chad," replied he in a jingle, "-it was a distraction. Lerado is still a family tied with the underground – we can't underestimate them. The mole sadly died, which means they know. Nothing more than to start a war now," came a nonchalant shrug.

"Sir is resorting to violence..."

"Don't preach to me of justice, they who could kill an innocent child are heartless murderers." Surrounded by screens and people speaking through microphones, the mobile command unit closed into the Lerado's hideout.

Chapter 417: War [Underworld]

Time was 21:00, the secluded town of Tole rested gently under the peak of the highest mountain of Dostein. Atlon, the mountain, stood lonesome upon the otherwise flatlands. An irregularity which many saw as beautiful. During the day, one could see the snowy peak surrounded by clouds. A very steep climb waited for those who wished to thread upon its face.

Tole was to the Northwest of Atlon. A quaint little town with access being twice a day train schedule or the long road wrapping around the mountain. As far as the entirety of Alphaia was concerned, Tole was but an ant. The title of the town was given only because the population was in the four thousand. Fondly enough, the town was a hotbed of underworld related activities. The lack of law-enforcement here made dumping bodies into the nearby forest easier. A spot of clearance amidst the endless woodlands. The rain was the most prominent factor – during heavier rain, landslides could happen at any moment. The people weren't safe, not until a few years ago when a mage came to build a natural barrier against the mud.

Similar to other small gangs – Tole hosted the Lerado’s hideout. One kept secret and usually out of people’s mouths.

At 21:30 – the sound of helicopters had the town anxiously awake. People who roamed to the local pub were baffled as the flickering lights in the sky were menacing. Intel was leaked, those with ties to the Anti-Narco Unit knew of the impromptu visit. Thus, the filled streets cleared to a desert. The red-light district close to Tole’s downtown was dead silent. Prostitution was rampant, motels made a fortune giving rooms to those partaking in the flesh. The ringleader – a man from Cimier; many knew not to speak his name.

The hideout was to the other end of town, a place with a direct path into the forest.

“They are here,” said a man dressed smartly – the tables laid with guns and ammo.

“Yeah, I know,” replied another with a bigger gun. “Half of our brothers were killed, it’s time for payback.”

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“Hell yeah,” puffed another, “-lady Lerado’s safe.”

“Who told ya?” asked yet another.

“Dunno man,” inhaling the last smoke, he crushed the cigarette. “Ay, Chicken-Head, how’s the missy doing?”

“She’s fine,” replied a man with an eyepatch, “-how’s the whore you’ve been screwing, huh, Dingle-Bell?”

“Dead,” replied he with a scarred face, “-I heard a drunken fool stabbed her instead of paying.”

“Damn,” sighed the one dressed smartly, “-any news on the fool then?”

“No, Mart, last I know the owner had him fed to the dogs.”

“This town is as shitty as always,” said a new character opening the door.

“Look who it is, Mr. Bigeyes.”

“Shove it, Dingle,” brushing off the comment, “-aye, Mart, is everyone ready?” asked he with a beanie and long hair.

“Ask ‘em yourself,” replied he staring out the window.

“Ain’t no need to repeat the question,” added Chicken-Head confidently, “-we’ve been ready.”

“Then, let’s go boys.” A war brewed, the Anti-Narco Unit versus the remainder of the Lerado. The choppers landed; the mobile unit stood close to the mountain; time had come – the assault against the Lerado began.

“There’s trouble, master, the Lerado are under attack,” voiced éclair, “-I’ve confirmed the location of the AN-U at Tole.”

'Damn it,' the flaps grew faster, and soon after a 'boom,' Staxius shot as if a bullet.

Bang, bang, bang, the sound of gunshots echoed around town. Blinders and windows were shut, the mansion in which the members hid was breached. Build in a C-shape; hard as they might have tried; the barrage on the courtyard did naught but slow the slaughter. The AN-U was overwhelmingly strong. It took two to kill one.

'Chicken-Head, Dingle-Bell, Sparkles, Twin-Dog, Twilight,' time slowed, a platoon of soldiers surrounded the remaining member, Mart. 'I'm sorry.' The shuffles of the heavily armed forces pierced the bloodied hallway. 'Lerado is finished,' no ammo, he stood with an empty gun.

"That's the last one, what are your orders, sir?"

"Kill him," came a merciless demand.

"Mr. Tello, isn't saving the last and asking for the location of their leader the best option?" interjected Larson.

"This is my operation, we were ordered to wipe-out Lerado, and that is what we'll do. Leader or not, who cares, the preceding event lead to this. Why did you think we allowed Jefferson's to run wild?"

"S-sure," he sat with a shrug.

"Sir, what did he mean by run-wild?" whispered Chad.

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"Ah, you don't know do you. There was a massacre not long ago – the leaders of Lerado were wiped. The Jefferson's were in on the plan; let's say it was a trade. They want a monopoly on the drug trade, and we want to have a share of the profit. Come on now, dear Chad, a country isn't run on white-money; more often than not, it's black, dirty money. Bet they didn't teach that at the Academy?"

"What're the numbers," asked Staxius.

"I'd estimate around two-hundred."

"Quite a lot. éclair, start trying to find a justifiable way of resolving this issue. Pull as much string as is needed, I want their commander knelt on my doorstep in the next week."

"Yes, master, I shall contact Lady Elvira."

The cloud hiding the full moon swayed. A dark figure landed atop the roof of the mansion. Down in the yard, men in uniform dragged bodies onto a pile. Others were busy salvaging the weapons as well as narcotics. There was also money; Exa notes escaping to the wind.

"Adete, wake up."

"What now?" a dark-crimson portal opened; "-did you call on me?"

"Yes, I did, First progenitor," with a murderous smirk, "-look at the prey below. The full-moon feels nice, it's warm and gentle."

"A fight?" her sleep broke, "-is it time to eat?"

“Can thee not see the abundance of livestock?”

“I’m salivating, go, go, Blood-King, go, go, I want to eat.”

“Let’s enjoy,” smirked he. The conflict that began so long ago would enter the last stages.

BAM, the transportation of merchandise stopped after a crack. A man had his skull crushed onto the floor. Brain matter splattered along the stone path. “My shoes are dirtied.”

“What are you doing here?” approached one of the fighters, “-this place is currently under the AN-C’s command.”

Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary, Adete stood on his head and conducted the blood into power.

“I’d beg to differ,” said he, “-this place belongs to Lerado.”

“Hey, look at this dumbass,” laughed another, “-the Lerado, I guess we missed one.”

Blood-Arts: Crimson Thread, a turn of the finger had four beheaded in an instant.

“Who’s laughing now?” walked the man.

“KILL HIM!”

“Bullets are nothing but toys,” gesturing with only the index, people fell left, right, and center.”

“03, do you hear me, this is command, RESPOND DAMN IT!”

“03 is dead,” said Staxius, “-Commander of the AN-U, retreat this instant. I will allow thee to beg for mercy.”

“Who are you?” the atmosphere of the command unit dropped. The conversation was broadcasted over the speakers.

“Shadow.”

“Shadow who?” asked the commander.

“...” the transmission ended.

“More, kill more,” said Adete in hysteria.

“Alright,” the suppressed killing intent came to light. The anger to kill and the slaughter was held back for so long. The raw adrenaline of slaying another foe, the decimation of what stood in his path.

Time 22:00; a once green lawn was covered in blood. Bodies became more common than the ever-abundant trees.

“Status report,” urged the commander.

You’ve been compromised, flashed across their screens. The data of the operation and the people involved were transferred before their eyes. The screen didn’t only show what happened but also a smugly animated teddy bear.

“We’ve pissed off the wrong people,” laughed Larson.

“WHAT IS SO DAMN FUNNY?” frowned the commander.

“I had a feeling tonight would be amusing, and oh boy did it deliver.”

“IF YOU DON’T SHUT THE FUCK,” *SPLAT*

“AHHHHHHHHHH,” panic had the crew reaching for the door. A spear-like rod pierced the van and into the commander. One could see the starry night from the hole left.

“The stench of blood,” sighed Larson, “-come on Chad,” he took to the front door.

“B-but,”

“Do you think the enemy is going to allow the rest to live? Whoever it is has wiped out 200 men in less than thirty-minute. We’re nothing but detectives, we hunt for clues, not kill people. Come on, follow me,” out the van and into the forest. Larson knew what would happen next.

BAM, an explosion rattled the sleeping forest.

“I told you,” said he, “-they were wiped.”

“Larson and Chad of Unit 08,” came a mysterious voice from an unknown location. “We know of thy involvement.”

“What then, are you going to kill us?”

“No, far from it. Larson and Chad, consider this a warning. Do not get involve. A war has begun; the AN-U will pay for their discrimination and fake justice.”

“What if we get involved?”

“Then we shall take what is most valued to thee. Chad, you have a family living peacefully in Dostein, a sister who’s getting ready to be wedded soon. I heard the groom is very much handsome and a part of the upper echelon of society. Larson, you have a sick wife nearing her death at St. Anea’s Hospital. Thy children seem to be growing up in nice spirit, the boy is fond of detective movies and the girl is very much infatuated with the idols.”

“ENOUGH, DON’T SPEAK OF MY WIFE” yelled at the dense forestry, Larson lost composure for the first time. “I swear, if you touch one hair, I’ll hunt you to the ends of the earth.”

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“We won’t touch a hair, no, the girl has the potential to be a very good asset, and the boy can be brainwashed into becoming a hitman. Any threats thee makes will end in naught. Larson, you are a man of intellect, realize the Underground isn’t a place for he who wishes to save his wife.” A scroll dropped into his hand. “If the time ever gets desperate that her life is far-gone; go to said address, we promise she’ll be saved in exchange of thy soul,” cawing of crows dispersed into silence.

“It’s a trap, sir, don’t believe a word.”

“I know Chad. I guess we bit more than we can chew.”

On said night, declaration of war went around the continent. Addressed to the chief-commander of the AN-U and head of the Jefferson's; under Godfather Renaud's name, Shadow launched a war. The slaughter of Lerado would be paid twice as much.

Soon, dawn broke the eternal night. News of what had happened reached the capital via an anonymous tip. The heading, "-a 200-man slaughter; war is upon us."

"On the 30th of April, the Anti-Narco Unit scheduled to track down an organization at Tole were met with an unfortunate end. They were wiped by an uncertain team. The officials are baffled as casualties included Sergeant Commander Major Tello. Will the AN-U continue to act or does this call for a higher authority to take command? Time will tell."

"Yesterday was fun," came a sleepy mumble to the left. 'I'm home,' waked Staxius – the bedsheets were clean. The same couldn't be said about the clothes for they laid on the floor.

"Master," spoke a holographic display of éclair, "-Lady Elvira is sending over the special forces of Phantom. The base of operation will be at Tole. ETA, 15:00."

"What about the response of the families?" semi-nude, he signaled for the television to play the news.

"The Jefferson's have been preparing for the eventuality."

"What about Cimier, did the spies relay anything?"

"No, not at the moment."

"I suppose they don't want to get involved in our dispute. What of the evidence, did you find any relating to the Jefferson's?"

"No, I've fabricated an incriminating conversation between Yuri and Tello."

"A dead man can't testify against a lie. Good job, éclair, I'd pat thee if only thou were in flesh."

"The feeling is recompense enough, master."

Chapter 418: Phantom's Armed Forces

Thuds came from the door. The day hadn't fully settled. Still nude and barely awake, with a sudden push, Staxius headed for the door. Each step and the thudding grew faster to impatience.

"What do you need?" it clicked.

"You finally answered," said Aceline holding her breath, "-I was being followed."

"By what?" he turned the corner to see naught.

"Mosquitoes..." her face gave into a smirk, one's kids often did after pranking a friend.

"Congratulation, at least there something who wants to suck your blood," the motion of closing the door began.

"STOP," she jammed her foot before it shut, "-I'm sorry, I have something to discuss."

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“Be my guest,” the grip lessened and soon, the door opened into an amazingly sharp penthouse. “I’m about to call room service, need anything?” asked he over the phone.

“No, I had breakfast a while back.”

“And who is it that’s going to pay?” covering the microphone of said phone, he frowned.

“You, isn’t that courtesy?” as familiar and as audacious as a cat, she lounged onto the warm cozy couch to watch the news.

“Courtesy also says to not abuse of a person’s good nature.”

“Whatever,” she gestured for him to shush, “-take responsibility, I’m Aceline, the pride of Hidros, after all.”

“Honestly...” unwilling to start a cat and mouse chase; the order for a light breakfast was given.

“What’s the topic of discussion?” sat on an opposite couch, they both stared at the screen.

“I heard from a helper that you came back pretty injured yesterday, what’s the deal with that?”

“Injured? Whoever it was must have been dreaming. Besides,” the tone froze, “-there’s no need for thee to know my whereabouts.”

“Fine, fine,” she ignored the threat, “-there’s nothing that can kill you.”

“I suppose you’re right,” *thud, thud.*

“Room service sure is quick,” commented Aceline.

“A bit too quick.” It hadn’t been five minutes. Doubt and suspicion filled the walk – no peephole meant opening the door was the only way of finding who stood on the other side.

“Mr. Haggard,” said a lady panting with no sleep on her face.

“Lady Mallie, what brings you here?” asked he confused.

The awkward exchange changed into silence, “-Master, I’m sorry, Lady Mallie wanted to meet thy on the topic of what to come of the Lerado,” said éclair.

‘This had to happen now?’ rolling his eyes, “-come on, get in.”

“Are you sure?” asked she visibly dirty.

“Yeah, come on, I’ve another pig laying on the couch.”

“I’M NOT FAT,” screamed across the corridor.

“Quite a lively penthouse, Mr. Haggard,” grinned she at the outburst.

“Sure...” the trio soon sat watching the same news. Both ladies had questions and he didn’t want to speak nor pay attention. The mind’s focus was on the coming war – what would happen to the underworld.

“Staxius, want to explain what’s happening?” asked the idol strongly.

“Why is the Pride of Hidros in thy apartment – is the king exchanging pleasure for fame?”

“Shut up, both of you,” *thud, thud,* the door knocked.

“Room service is here,” commented Aceline.

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“I think thee should go answer the door,” said Mallie, their sights matched one another in a fight.

Thud, thud, the door knocked faster, ‘-why’s room service so impatient?’

Click, immediate and without rest, a figure jumped to push him on the floor. “-FATHER,” said it tightly embracing him.

“Julius,” dazzled by the fall, Scott and Emi were seen standing in the doorway with healthy smiles. ‘So adorable,’ was what came across.

“FATHER, I’m back,” said he laughing.

“Prince Julius,” stood without the trouble of the prince’s weight, “-it’s quite unsavory for royalty to meet in such a manner.”

“Father, you may be king, but we are father and son first,” he winked.

“I suppose you’re right. Still, do be careful next time,” quick to pat his head, “-welcome back to Alpha, Scott, Emi.”

“Thanks, can we come in, there’s something we need to discuss,” asked the manager.

“Sure, come on in.” For some ungodly reason – many essential figures made themselves known.

“Father, if mother hears of you being alone with two women, then I’m sure she’d bring about another Xenosious.”

“Fret not,” said he, “-one is a pig and the other a doormat – you needn’t worry.”

“Excuse me?” exclaimed the ladies. The spacious couches grew tight. Julius and Emi chose to stare out the balcony.

“Scott, Aceline, meet Lady Mallie Lerado. She’s a close contact in Alpha.”

“Well met,” went across the table.

“Lady Mallie, meet Scott, a very good friend, Aceline, the pride of Hidros. The two outside are Emi Muko and Julius Haggard. One an up and coming idol and the other, my son.”

“I know of them,” said Mallie, “-I remember Emi from the Feline Force. A heroine who but only showed her face on the many advertisements from the AHA. There’s also that incident...”

“That’s her alright,” interjected Scott.

“Mallie, I’d like us to have a tête-à-tête later.”

“Understood, I’ll be back in a few minutes, Mr. Haggard,” her silhouette soon vanished with a click.

“Aceline, Scott, care to explain why thee are here?”

“It’s Lady Elvira,” spoke Scott, “-she asked us to come to Alpha for a photoshoot. I heard Meldorino was going to model new products.”

“éclair,” hands-on the earring, “-care to explain?”

“Meldorino is ready to model the first line of watches named Frontier. Lady Aceline, Emi Muko, and prince Julius Haggard will be at the forefront of the publicity. Good exposure since the three are on the path to stardom. Of course, Lady Aceline will be an ambassador for the brand.”

“Frontier,” said he, “-when’s the photoshoot?”

“Later this afternoon.”

“Location?”

“Active Raven Pictures Film Studio.”

“That’s close to here. I see, there’s no need to go into details of the visit.”

‘Meldorino and Apexi are collaborating to boost one another up. Cake’s seeing into the future. Old man Dorino must have had a shock to get a phone call from Elvira. She’s very strong-minded when it comes to business. Guess that leaves me to handle the strenuous situation of the Lerado’s.’

“I think it’s time we get going,” added Scott.

“This early?” asked he.

“Majesty, I’m sure there’s another matter that takes precedence. We bid thee goodbye.” One by one, the penthouse emptied. “Have a good day, father,” smiled Julius.

“You too, have a great day,” the door shut in silence.

‘A very eventful morning,’ thought he sat on the kitchen counter. *Thud, thud.*

“Room service,” cried he finally able to have some food.

Time showed 08:30. Mallie returned from her long walk.

“Mr. Haggard,” the television froze on a particular frame, ‘200 men slaughtered.’

“The forces who came to attack Lerado last night, why, is something bothering you?”

“What of my men?” asked she, “-what happened to them?”

“I gave them a proper send-off via cremation.” The memory was of a pile of corpses burning into the full-moon night. The AN-U forces were all turned into ghouls. Authorities reported their death, and no corpse was returned to the family.

Till now, the ability to turn dead into ghouls was there but never used. Only after being granted the powers of Time did the ability fully manifest. From a few souls to now soulless fighters with strength rivaling Tier 6 Emerald Adventurers – the climb to being the strongest leaped.

“What next?”

“Simple,” smiled he, “-the Lerado will be under Haggard’s control. Of course, we’ll fight under the Godfather’s name. That way, we can minimize any potential backlash and keep the involvement hidden. The goal has always been to have a strong foot in Alpha. This might be the chance.”

“Do you mean that thee wants to join in the drugs trade?”

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“No, no, far from that. I wish to join as Phantom, the arm’s dealer – not as an underworld organization. Lerado will fulfill that part of the coin for us; do you understand?”

“The Lerado will become the hidden puppets of Phantom?”

“No puppets, but allies. Similar to other companies having ties with Cimier; I’ll have my company tied with Lerado.”

“I understood that part,” said she taking a breather, “-what I don’t get is where does the Haggard fall into the equation?”

“Simple, the Haggard name, not to confuse with royalty of Hidros, is and always be close allies to Godfather Renaud. As allies, we’ll jump into the fight.”

“I see, using Godfather Renaud’s name as a reason to fight those who might get in thy way.”

“You catch on quick,” grinned he, “-Lady Mallie; I promise to have revenge for the fallen. What I want in return is thy pledge to my name, pledge to Phantom, pledge to the Haggard’s.”

“Please destroy them,” knelt she, “-I’ll do what you want for a chance at retribution.”

“Henceforth, Lady Mallie, welcome to the family.”

On that, the coming of war stood ever so close. Minutes turned to hours – Staxius took to the skies whilst Mallie waited for the train. The destination was Tole – the mountain sure was tall. Curious to the actual height, Staxius flapped until the snowy peak – the air was barely breathable as for below, naught but dots.

16:00 came in haste. Multiple bystanders wandered about the mansion. Some in hooded cloaks, others in suits, and some in sport’s wear. The curiosity of what happened last night had risen many brows. The mansion would have been seized if not for a phone call to some high placed officers. Thus, the incident was brushed under the rug.

It was hard to see at night, but the yard was very expansive. The Lerado were also rich once upon a time and it showed.

‘It’s almost as if nothing happened,’ thought he stood on the roof. Over yonder, an outline of a plane approached. The TU-03, Phantom was here. Switched to vertical, the plane landed to only take half of the yard. Soon, another similar outline approached. The TU-03 Cargo Variant. Deafening and fear-inducing – those roaming around could but run away.

“Greetings Boss,” saluted a man in jet-black uniform.

“Greetings Thempa. I guess the Black Unit came to aid in the war?”

“No sir, we’re here with the Subjugation Platoon 05.”

“Where’s the leader of the SBGA-05?”

“Platoon leader Kendy is on board leading his troupes in transporting supplies.”

“Good, how many members do we have at the moment?”

“Black Unit has 10 members I included. SBGA-05 has 50 members. It’s only the initial numbers sir, we have more coming later tomorrow.”

“What about air-support?”

“Only after the airfield 025 is secured.”

“What Squadron will she be sending?”

“The VT10-BSQD, Sir.”

“Good, coordinate with SBGA-05 and have the insides turned into a base of operation. I estimate a week before Jefferson’s make a move.”

Supplies, guns, ammo, provision, people dressed in uniform were quick to secure the mansion. The gates were immediately barricaded off. A temporary patrol began to walk as to send a threatening message. Phantom’s private military was called on duty.

‘She’s sending over the VT10-BSQD. I suppose we must take the war seriously. Sending them means utter destruction. The unfamed squadron of elite pilots of Sotepios. Their specialty, air-strikes, and undercover operations. Let’s see how the underworld reacts.’

Emperor Sultria knew of the plans mildly, else, having so many troupes and weapons moved into Alpha be a declaration of war. The response to it was, ‘-Father-in-law, I know not of thy involvement with the Underworld. Since I, myself have ties to some unruly factions, I have no right to pass judgment. Cimier might not take lightly to the act of aggression. Please, I have but a humble request to make. If war is to happen, then take it to the South. I wish not for innocent people to be hurt.’

Amidst the people who surveyed the mansion, few spies lurked about. They were tied to factions allied to the Jefferson’s and ultimately, Cimier. An uninvited entity made a move onto the Alphian soil. Those who controlled the town weren’t happy and it showed.

20:00; countless vehicles pulled to the entrance. Their leader, a broad man in a white suit wanted to speak to the Shadow. Cigar in mouth and accompanied by armed guards; it began.

Chapter 419: Thempa and Kendy

“Ay, open the damn gate,” *clang,* the sound of metal being kicked had the guards frown.

“Who are you?” asked one of the people from Phantom.

“None ya business,” said the man in white-suit, “-I wanna speak to the leader of your little group.”

“No can do,” sighed the guard to face away.

“DON’T IGNORE US,” screamed a typhoon of henchmen dressed similarly with only the colors varying. The weapons; sub-machine guns with silencers. Each one of them looked menacing. The definition of what one could expect roaming in back-alleys, killing, stealing, and other more. The noise kept on growing, “-qui fait tout ce bruit?” 1

“What’s the matter, Kendy?” asked Thempa as the duo stood on the opened roof.

“Look down over there,” replied he in a foreign language, “-they’re making trouble,” pointed he. The squared face, bushy brows, big ears, a dark skin complexion, and the body of a well-trained soldier, tis was Kendy – the leader of the SBGA-05. Acronym for the Subjugation Platoon – they were tantamount to Special forces of another country’s army. In Phantom’s case, the soldiers were recruited from the multiple training facilities around Hidros. Some with the potential to be recruited into Phantom were hand-picked. As a whole, Phantom was an arm’s trading company that had more than a few fights with the Underworld. Them being a part of it never made it to the public. Secrets were worth more than lives. The few unfortunate enough to have any condemning information were assassinated. The SBGA-05 was only implemented after the war. Trained and battle-hardened, each member of the Platoon was sent to Iqavea to help in the constant in-fighting. A test or initiation to enter the program. Those weak, killed, and the strong, given a life of well-compensated hard work. The curious knew to stay quiet and the wise never asked question.

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“Should we intervene?” asked Thempa knelt with a rifle lying beside him. The leader of the Black Unit. No good militia would be worth its money without a hidden unit. The BU was mostly tasked with under-cover jobs, hidden, and well-informed. The majority of the fighters came from the Dark-Guild; exiled from the organization due to the culling of traitors. Similar to the Subjugation Platoon, despite the low numbers, the Black Unit was one to be feared. The worth and talent were tried and tested – the most notable achievement being the elimination of a lonesome outpost on borders nearing Elendor. The mission lasted three days; with almost no supplies and no back-up, Thempa made sure he and his men returned victoriously.

“Sir Thempa, Sir Kendy,” saluted a soldier, “-the Boss has requested your presence.”

“Let’s go,” said Thempa grabbing the gun.

“Allons-y,”¹ added Kendy.

Down the stairs and to the farthest corner of the mansion – Staxius sat in a primitive base of operation. The room was filled with carton boxes filled with logistical appliances. The engineer, a member of GateSix, would come on the second trip. Only a table and three chairs were in place. The hallway leading to the room crawled with fighters carrying the many boxes.

“You called for us, boss?” asked Thempa sharply.

“Yes,” turned he after unrolling a map over the table, “-quite archaic to be using this,” a comment to self.

“Monsieur?”¹ voiced he seeing the less than attentive boss.

“Thempa, Kendy, glad to see thee are here. I’m sure the noise outside is getting a little out of hand,”
click, just as those words were spoken, Thempa loaded the rifle.

“Bring the leader of that group to me,” ordered Staxius.

“What of the others?” asked Kendy in his foreign tongue.

“Open fire if need be, I’ll trust thy judgment.”

“Oui, monsieur.”¹

“If you don’t let us in, I think I’m gonna order my boys to start shooting,” smirked the white-suit man.

“Tell ‘em boss, ain’t nobody gonna lay their hands on our soil.”

Irritated by the pointless teasing, the guards were a hair away from pulling the trigger. Before the last straw was drawn; two imposing figures emerged from the mansion. Rifle in hand wearing a bullet-proof vest; those around stopped to salute.

“Are you the leader of the group?” asked Thempa deeply.

“Who asks?” smirked the recipient.

“Our Leader,” interjected Kendy, “-Dogs barking is far tamer than you animals screaming.”

“We have no business talking to someone who comes from Easel Run Guard. You and your dumbass pronunciations, go back to that piss poor country.”

“Crétin!”¹

“Chill,” gestured Thempa, “-getting provoked isn’t going to change anything.”

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“What happen?” laughed the henchmen, “-does the dog only bark, not bite?”

BANG, immediate and without time to react; “-don’t test my patience,” gritted Thempa. Outside the gate, they who laughed came to a stop – one of their members was shot in cold-blood.

“RASCALS, HOW DARE YOU,” yelled the leader, “-GET ‘EM BOYS.”

The cacophony of guns being fired cut across the tranquil night. The smell of the powder of death. Screams of those in agony – windows breaking, metal being pierced.

“What happened to being calm?” asked Kendy mockingly.

“Shut up...” The visitors were annihilated, bodies laid over the cars. Some tried to escape to only end up in a ditch not so far away.

Tik, tok, tik, tok, tik, tok, silence prevailed. Only the clock counted away the passing seconds. Staxius sat with elbows on the table. Thempa and Kendy brought over the leader who was allowed to live. No questions were asked, not a word spoken, the ones inside kept quiet. ‘Who are these people?’ thought he anxiously tied to a chair. ‘Bullets did not affect them, my men were killed without a shred of remorse. The boss is going to be angry.’

“Care to speak of the reason of thy visit?” the silence broke.

“...”

“Parle!,” 1 heavy boot stomped onto the man’s leg, “-AHHH.”

“Kendy...”

“Sorry Boss,” the head lowered to catch a glimpse of the captured.

“Speak, else my comrades may get a little excited,” said Staxius smugly. Reference was made to Thempa who stood in the corner. He cracked his knuckles slowly and painfully.

Cold sweat flashed across the captured’s face – the heartlessness had shivers down the back. The aura around the room changed the moment the leader spoke. Dauntingly cold for the night, “-I came per orders from my boss.”

“Interesting,” said Staxius with his fingers touching one another, “-what else can you tell me about said boss?”

“We’re a small faction in Tale allied to some people I cannot reveal the name of. After the AN-U’s intervention, we thought we could occupy the house and kill any remainders. It backfired since new occupants came.”

“Why did you shoot then?” asked Staxius.

“We had too,” he slowly glanced over to Thempa, “-you were the ones who opened fire first.”

“Is that true?” he glanced seeking answers.

“Yes, boss.”

“I did give the order to shoot if necessary. So, Mr?”

“Winey, Winey ‘Lock’ Gafro.”

“Mr. Lock,” stood Staxius, “-I do apologize for the less than inviting welcome. Blood was shed needlessly. I wish to only be amiable; return to thy leader, tell them Phantom has occupied the mansion. Tis but a warning, for tonight forth, the area around this mansion will be kill-on-sight. Relay it to the people of the town; if anyone dares to cross into our property, then, a bullet is what they shall see last.”

“Y-yes.”

“Let him go.” The once-spotless white suit had splatters of blood turned into a reddish-brown color.

Click, the door shut, “-Thempa,” called the Boss.

“Y-yes?”

“Good job,” smiled he walking to the window, “-a very good impression.” Lights from Winey’s car dashed to the center of town. “They know we’re not going to sit and follow their lead.”

“What are your orders, sir?”

“Kendy, I want you to take command of the other soldiers who are to come tomorrow. Coordinate them to have a safe perimeter, I want the buildings closest to us cleared. Be peaceful – if resistance is met, kill them.”

“Yes, sir,” saluted he.

“Thempa, I want the Black Unit to infiltrate the common folks. We need intel, do what thee know best. Contact headquarters for any requests for supply, weapons, or manpower.”

“Yes, sir.”

‘Winey...’ laid fully onto the chair, the two broad figures disappeared into the long hallway. ‘He was nothing more than bait. The factions are suspicious. The gunfight earlier should have them think twice before starting anything. We need more information on the town and the allied factions. Someone is pulling the strings and I need to know who.’

“Master.”

“éclair?”

“It’s concerning the AN-U. The group isn’t being disbanded. The fake-evidence was thrown aside.”

“What of the media?”

“They rejected the scoop; said they didn’t want to get involved into matters not concerning them.”

“What of operation Malk?”

“News of Hero Luna and the Jester are the most searched terms for the past few months.”

“Status on the AHA, did you find any links yet?”

“No, still searching sir. The data is locked behind tight encryption. Either I get physical access to the servers or we have to wait a while longer.”

“Physical access,” he paused, “-care to elaborate?”

“The servers at the AHA headquarters. Any means inside their network will suffice. I’m sure I can break into their darkest secret that way.”

Upon those words, a memory came, an interview with a representative of the AHA which happened a few weeks after Jester’s second appearance. Many questions were asked. One sentence, in particular, stood out, ‘-the AHA will do anything to have Hero Luna. We’re willing to work our hardest to meet her needs. The veil of her identity has us on edge just as much as the populous. Her arrival was a godsend, we truly thank her for the voluntary service. A true hero who helps without care for his own. She only needs to visit the headquarters. Hero Luna, if you’re watching this, the AHA will be grateful to have someone of your caliber to combat crime. Public safety agrees so.’ The representative later went on to elaborate on how being in touch will help to save countless other innocent lives.

‘That’s it,’ *Ancient Magic: Teleportation.*

“Intherna, Gophy, heed my voice for I call on thee.”

"It's about time," said a lady materializing with a burst of flame.

"I shudder to think of why thee have called," said another followed by dark mist.

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"Hero Luna and Jester," smiled he, "-you've done well."

"Well," *Snap,* the outfits changed to match those on newspapers and television, "-we have a job to do," said Gophy, "-why though?"

"Operation Malk was set in place to skyrocket Meldorino's fame. To have the infamous Hero Luna unconsciously endorse our brand. It worked but not as much. My butler stayed over the Arcanum and filled forums with conspiracy theories. The only link to Luna's identity was our brand. People love a good mystery, and we gave them one. That purpose has been served. Color me impressed, Intherna, you did amazingly well to sell the Jester. The bombs, New Year Wrecker – a villain who has a good ideology. You went after the AHA, the fake heroes – people who the populous are starting to question. A charismatic crazed man. You even have a Fanclub, imagine, someone who's killed to be taken seriously."

"Operation Malk was fun," said Intherna leaned over the kitchen counter.

"Yeah," replied Gophy pouring whiskey for three. "Why did you call on us?"

"Time has come to put an end to the Jester and Luna," smiled he.

"Already?" said Gophy slightly disappointed, "-wasn't the point of Luna to take down the AHA and those within?"

"That she will," he laughed, "-the last act will be at Arkta, a final send-off."

"Is this in preparations for the coming underworld conflict?"

"Yes," said he adding ice, "-Cleopatra's mission is nearly completed."

"Oh her..." Gophy's eyes rolled.

"Yeah, her." Following cheers; the duo began to brainstorm the last act.

'Time to end the many schemes around Alpha. There's too much on the plate. Luna and Jester served their purpose. I need to know if the Patek's are involved with Cimier – the only link is the AHA. Worry not, Son-in-law, I'll make sure this idyllic continent remains so.'

Chapter 420: The Jester's Final Act

Tale stood loud and proud amidst the coldness of the mountain. A few days had passed; the date was the 5th of May. The bristling of trees was replaced by the sound of engines, guns being fired, and soldiers marching. The buildings immediate to the Mansion, now called HQ, were captured with force. As a reaction, the other factions created alliances to fight in possible conflicts going forth.

Weak alliances from what the Black Unit reported. All information was submitted through the Arcanum to a server private to Phantom. Their links were simple to break, a single touch would engage a large domino effect.

The streets and alleys further into town roamed with drunkards. People overdosed on God's Ale and Angel's Dust. The two most prominent narcotics in the world. From plants to adding physical mana transmuted from the air itself, the state of well-being one had from a single dose was worth the money. Other gangs, alchemists, and scholars desperate enough for money tried their hands at new experimental substances. Some went as far as collecting blood from a monster or the wings of an insect. Backed by the confidence that the narcotic, harmful as they were, would not kill one if he was responsible – brought more clients.

The Dark-Guild only grew richer – mainly, Godfather Renaud's faction. The assassin sect was lesser feared as a strong enough 'special' dose could kill or force a person into submission. In Alpha's case, murders happened but at high costs. The hitmen were hunted and captured by the investigation Unit. Once caught, Dark-guild or not, those who killed weren't allowed to live.

Going farther into the underworld – concerning the faction dealing with prostitution and human trafficking. Tis was what Cimier's specialized in, or so what the rumors said. Rumored that was confirmed upon a visit to the Red-light District by Thempa. Amidst the mess of pointless dribble; an interesting piece of information came to fruition. Someone had managed to tinker with God's Ale and converted it into a pill. One named, Ropth. No color, no smell, and quickly acting – they were given to the ladies working the nights. Often, the 'products' as referred to by the 'owners' would run away with customers bringing another level of drama. To minimize the loss, everyone was fed Ropth. It brought addiction, a sense of worthlessness to which they became numb to physical and mental aches. To put it simply, the ladies, and men included, became mindless dolls. Maladies, rashes, overdoses, and abortion – taboo subjects in the Alphan society escalated in frequency. Raising awareness would but shame those fallen into its trap. Prejudice, and ill-treatment; they were viewed as the scums of the world, rejected and without a place to live nor one to love them.

It was hard to not feel for those who lived in such conditions. On a mission to infiltrate the red-light district, one of the BU members came across a young girl aged 16, who had her front teeth removed. The face scarred and surrounded by men twice if not thrice her age. It did not stop there, no, far, far from it. She worked at a place named Neo, a motel known for its 'primed' products. The list wasn't of girls, no, but boys far younger than she. Battle-hardened as they might have been; this was a mere fraction of the reality of the Underworld, their hearts could but shed. In there, amidst that sorrow and carnage, was where Staxius made his home.

Three matters were brought to the Boss' table. Ropth, the underworld child-prostitution ring, and slavery. 'Cimier,' thought he reading the reports, '-they are vile and dishonest. The Dark-guild can't be excused either since we deal in human trafficking. Tis Godfather Sable's department.'

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Breaking away from what awaited – the 8th of April marked the day on which Hero's were celebrated for their hard work. 'The date is coming close,' thought the leader traveling back to Melmark. Courtney was called into standby at Tale. Her duty, protection of Lady Lerado.

'And we're on schedule,' thought he going over the news. Orangish glares came from the rising sun. The 6th of April came as the helicopter flew.

Breaking News: Hero Luna agrees to join the AHA.

After months of convincing she who has saved us more than a few times. Lady Luna, whose identity is yet to be found, has contacted the AHA. The information comes from a reliable source. She will be implemented as a true-hero and instated into the Association by the vice-director. Great country of Alpha, we finally have a good event to wait for.

Thus, free publicity of her being present at Arkta made waves. Fans were more than excited; the festival hosted at said City would be grandiose. Apparently, many idols were called to perform on said day. Priority was given to local agencies. Apexi's attempt at securing a spot ended in naught.

7th of April, the eve of the celebrations – the city across the bridge lit with multiple lights shooting to the stars. A dark conference room lit with multiple screens. The latter represented the people, and the people were hidden behind a voice filter. Ruled by companies and multiple owners – he who held the rein was to the middle, a golden-colored screen. No face, no voice, nothing.

“Esteemed owners of AHA, welcome,” said a man dressed sharply. Square glasses, a blue-suit, neatly combed and cut hair. The same couldn't be said about his nose hairs as they seemed to want to crawl out the nostrils. Tiny spider legs unseen from a far distance. “The day we've been waiting for has come,” said he toggling a screen behind, “-Hero Luna has agreed to join our association.”

“Mr. Vice Director,” spoke out one of the screens, “-isn't Asuna Muld dead?”

“Mr. Four, I do understand the cause for caution. Lady Muld was indeed slain. I personally attended the gruesome event and have evidence to back up the claim. What is showed on the screen,” another toggle displayed her picture next to the original. “There are many irregularities in her body size. The black-hair and vague facial resemblance did bring around very much needed attention. In no doubt is she a fake.”

“Do we not risk being uncovered by the public?” asked a female voice.

“Lady Six, that is the precise reason we've desperately tried to get a hold of the fake-Luna. She needs to be silenced; and I'm sure Mr. Zero, will be glad to help in said endeavor.”

“Yes,” said the Golden screen, “-the matter of pills will be handled.”

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“An interrogation?” interjected another.

“Correct. Mr. Five, there's no need to fret. I have personally taken it onto my shoulders. We will turn her into profit, the Feline-Force have served their purpose.”

“What about Director Leo, he's gotten a little too confident,” snarled Lady Six.

“I shall make sure he knows his place, ma'am.”

“That sex-crazed fool will have us in trouble. Make sure he gets disposed of, Vice-Director, we trust thee.”

“As thee wishes,” the darkened room lit in a flash. The multiple screens vanished. He who stood in the middle breathed heavily. The pressure from those who owned the company was tremendous. He shuddered to think what it would have been if the people were present.

The day of the festival arrived. The main-event, Lady Luna's acceptance into the AHA. Thousands of fans came to catch a glimpse of she who had had the Arcanum drool in mystery. Arkta's commercial district boomed with activity. Being so close to Whuotan, the fear of monsters made people anxious. Many chose to not stay. The event brought well-earned money. The investment in being 'grandiose' paid off. The mayor of the city, in collaboration with the AHA, ensured money wasn't a problem. The celebration took place to the East of the central City at the main park. There, a stage, many stalls, vendors, and many other activities were built for entertainment. Protection was provided by Heroes.

The three-top hero: Starlight, The Time-Teller, and Scorpion, were present. Ever since Luna's arrival, their fight to remain relevant grew tough. She would often run in to save the people with almost no effort.

At Noon, the ever-growing crowd gathered to the stage. People in uniforms, as well as suits, stood coldly peering at the guests.

"Hello everyone," said a lady across the arena. "Today we're celebrating the Hero's day. A day on which we thank the heroes for being ever so present in saving our lives. The past few years have been rough. I don't need to go into more details," she moved about whilst speaking. "Nevertheless, similar to fire-fighters, police officers, doctors, and many more, heroes are part of our society, they are there to help us in need. Please, let's have a round of applause." Broadcasted over Arcanum as well as television, many joined into watching the event.

"It happened a few months ago, an unknown Hero jumped into action to save many lives. Her story is known by everyone at this point, Hero, LUNA!" energetic music blasted across without tact. The crowd went wild but she was nowhere to be found. Not until an observant spectator pointed to the sky, '-look it's her.'

She hovered and landed. The crowd all but doubled in excitement. *Clap, clap, clap.* The skin-tight suit was worth the trip. Her walk, refined and dignified, approached the announcer.

"Thank you," said she speaking openly.

"I can't believe it," said the announcer stupefied, "-you were so elusive. I mean, no one knew where, who, and what you were. How was the experience?"

"It's been a learning experience that's for sure."

"Let's not waste any time," facing the Vice-director, "-if you would."

"Thank you, Asn," nodded he. "Once again, on behalf of the AHA, thank you and welcome to the Association, hero Luna."

"I can't believe you," came a familiar voice across the speakers, "-what are you, what is this, who are you... I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm disappointed, HERO LUNA!" The hefty words of he who had caused so much harm had the crowd in disarray. "Selling off to the corrupt AHA, what a shame, what a joke, what a failure..."

BANG! "die... hehe, DIE!"

"Jester..." said Luna.

“Better not move,” he laughed stood behind the vice-director, “-ELSE I’LL KILL THIS MAN,” leaned closer, “-Vice-director... Vice-corrupt director, what will you do... call for help? No, Call for backup? No, pray to god? No... CALL THE PUPPET MASTERS” *BANG.*

“MY LEG!” screamed the hostage, “-WHY DID YOU SHOOT ME?” holding tight, the pain intensified, blood dripped, he laid on the ground.

“Why... why... why?” turned the jester shrugged to the crowd, “-I wonder?”

“HEROES, PLEASE HELP ME.”

“On it sir,” the three most powerful heroes arrived. The Time-teller, dressed in clock-work styled clothes. A man who moved faster than sound, the nickname came after the obsession with being punctual. No time was wasted; the hostages were taken to safety.

“Give it up, Jester,” said Scorpion holding a chain, “-make a move and we’ll kill you.” The outfit was reminiscent of the harshness of machinery, spikes, and rough edges.

“Fear not, for I’ve come,” smiled Starlight. “Hero Luna, would you let us do the honors?”

“THREE VERSUS... one? Impossible, impossible, IMPOSSIBLE,” he pulled his hair, “-I’M GOING TO KILL?” paused, “-am I going to kill?” staring at the awestruck crowd, “-yes, maybe I am.” *SNAP,* “-HAVE FUN DEALING WITH THAT,” a warhead materialized over the crowd. “I have them all hostage, what will you do? What will you do... do something, I’m bored,” the face changed to nonchalant. Making a move would cause a slaughter, there was nothing to be done. The heroes froze, those in charge stood petrified by the turn of events.

“SHOOT HIM FOR FUCK SAKES!” yelled across the injured Vice-Director.

“DON’T!” voiced Luna, “-if the Jester dies, the people will go with him.”

“DING DONG, that is correct, AHAHAHA.”

“What do you suppose we do?” asked Starlight.

“Time-Teller,” whispered she, “-can you distract him for two seconds?”

“Only two seconds?”

“Yeah, it’s all I need.”

“Then yes.” *Whoosh,* instead of distraction, the hero dashed straight to spear the Jester.

“Alright,” *CRACK,* with a leap she jumped to physically push the warhead upwards.

“NO, YOU DON’T,” screamed the Jester dashing after.

“I’M GOING TO KILL YOU!” came across the speakers, *BANGGG.* The mid-day clear sky turned to a somber dust-filled hell. The explosion caused massive panic. Debris flew to land one by one across the arena.

Crash, two meteors broke the stage. Disfigured, burnt, and mortally injured, Luna and Jester stood with the hero holding onto the villain’s throat.

"I yield, Hero Luna, I've done my purpose. We'll both die and leave this cruel world."

"Why did you try to cause so much chaos?" burnt clothes, unrefined, and crude, her injuries were stomach-turning.

"For revenge," smiled he grabbing his necklace, "-THOSE WHO RAPED AND KILLED MY SISTER WILL PAY. ASUNA MULD WAS THE BEST DAMNED HERO THIS CONTINENT HAD EVER SEEN, AND NOW, THERE'S NOTHING TO PROVE HER INNOCENCE. WHAT'S THE POINT OF SUCH A JUSTICE, A JUSTICE WHERE THOSE WHO HAVE MONEY CAN DO ANYTHING THEY WANT. THE AHA WILL PAY," *beep.*

"WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"Justice..." smiled the Jester.

"NO YOU DON'T," she leaped into his arm, *BANG...* Smoke and dust, rubble and nothingness, they returned to whence they came; heaven and hell.