

Death Magic 471

Chapter 471: Appearance

Strike after strike, punch after punch, kick after kick, a beatdown of the inhumane proportion followed to have the apprentice fall without a chance at retribution. The senseless brutality spawn couldn't be contained.

'Poor Igna,' thought she unbothered by the assault, '-you'll wake up soon, won't you?' annoyance from the look he gave had her wanting blood.

"Come on, continue the beatdown what's the hold-up?" approached Lord Lordon, "-my Yuki has yet to smile. Break the hands or something, make sure he doesn't cook."

"FATHER, MOTHER!" the door barged, "-WHAT'S THE MEANING OF THIS?" he curled with blood and broken teeth, the guards were merciless. "You're going to kill him at this rate?"

"So?" returned Yuki coldly, "-not my problem," she shrugged, "-he tried to assault me. The guards came to my rescue, is there something the matter?"

"It's as your mother says," said he holding her shoulders, "-merely self-defense."

'Self-defense,' the darkness flickered with talking orbs, '-I can hear them, did I pass out? Guess it's what I had to pay for trying to appeal. Why did it come to this, how, when, what, I'm confused. I only went to get an additional job and this is the way I'm treated...'

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"We arrived too late," said a group of three rushing into the room.

"Who are you, people?"

"Members of Phantom," said a lady with white hair, "-we've heard one of our ally's friend was in danger."

"Lady Courtney," said a man holding a large rifle, "-it's too late," the display of the glasses showed no life signs."

"Why's Phantom involved with that lowly commoner?" fired Yuki in disbelief.

"Don't you know?" the lady stared without care; "-this young man is an esteemed member of the Trader's Guild."

"Lady Courtney," voiced another holding the door, "-transport is here, what should we do?"

"I don't know," she glared Lord Lordon, "-if the boy is dead then our mission is failed. What a shame..."

"See," came a smug expression, "-Phantom can't help he who's been killed."

"Don't get conceited," returned the marksman, "-I have little to no interest in your survival," a pistol aim at her head.

"Don't get cocky," smiled Yuki, "-we have our guards too."

'Unfair,' the bloodlust of the outside whelmed the mind. The heart resumed, the wounds healed, a dark-triangle materialized on his right-palm. "Why am I the only one who got hurt?" he reawakened with the aura of Death filling the room, "-Daemonum Gladio, Yves and, Elliot," said the boy with a devilish smirk, "-it's good to see you're well."

"W-what's this?" exclaimed Courtney, "-brother, you're alive?" her face fell into an idyllic smile.

"No," he vanished to put Yuki in a headlock, "-my time has yet to come," said he, "-Staxius Haggard is not of this world. I'm naught but the fleeting conscience who suffered great damage, my purpose is to exact revenge upon those who dared to hurt me." *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* dagger-like weapons slit the guards' head. "Death can never die; the Death element will reawaken with my memory soon. Igna is the next Death Reaper, Courtney, speak to this with no one for the soul has transmigrated."

'I c-can't b-breathe,' the room felt submerged. Lungs stuck between breaths, the Lordon's watched as the definition of slaughter painted the entire room. *Thud,* upon killing the guards, Igna fell face-first. The pressure relaxed; the lingering symbol of power was erased without a trace.

"Lady Courtney," called Elliot.

"Yeah, no doubt about it," said she smiling, "-something great happened five-years ago. We thought he died but our master can't be defeated. I knew I sensed his presence."

"Does that mean he'll be back?" asked Yves.

"No," she shook her head, "-I'm afraid it's the last time we'll see of him. His mana reacted with mine, it's resonance."

"I don't understand," returned Yves cluelessly.

"Don't worry," her attention turned to the Lordon's, '-resonance between me and him. Master and the weapon. He's come to the mortal realm, rather, was forced into our world. The soul inside that boy is Staxius's. The face is similar to before the transformation into a vampire. I guess that's what lady Haru referred to before. Fate sure works in strange ways. Rest well, brother, everyone's waiting for your return.'

'My head?' pinching the forehead, '-it's so heavy,' the eyes opened to a blood sullied floor. Bodies were littered all-round, Yuki and her husband crouched arm in arm. "Who are you?"

"Oh, you've woken up," smiled the handsome lady with white hair, "-I'm Courtney Haggard, member of Phantom. We came on orders of Lady Haru."

"Thanks," he nervously smiled, "-did you kill them all?"

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"Yeah," said she brandishing a sword, "-they didn't give you much time to speak, did they?"

"It was pretty tough," scratching his head with innocence, "-I just wanted to know lady Yuki's intent."

"Don't worry about it, kid," came Elliot gently patting his head.

"Thank you too," he looked up and smiled adorably.

'Holy shit,' practically shaking, 'I patted the master's head as if a kid. What the fuck?' Yves and Courtney stared on the verge of laughter, "-don't get into more trouble, you hear?"

"Yes sir."

"Sir..." mumbled Yves, " -AH-HA-HA," the failing bridge cracked, they fell into a never-ending laughter session.

'How can they have fun amidst the bloodshed?' wondered Syndra with a throbbing heart. Igna joined their session as Yves's particular laugh made it funnier.

"My stomach hurts," said Elliot wiping the tears, "-jokes aside, Igna, if you ever get in trouble, call us."

"I will... but."

"But what?"

"Lady Courtney..." her resemblance to him birthed a trolley of questions, "-why do we look similar?"

"Oh," she paused, "-guess it's time to speak the truth," her voice turned serious, "-I'm your long-lost mother."

"You jest," he exclaimed, "-no way can someone so young be my mother.

"Yeah, I guess..." she thought hard, "-I'm not joking. I'm really your mother."

"Lady Courtney, this isn't a good idea," whispered Elliot, "-we'll get in trouble if he gets involved now."

"Don't, Lady Courtney," added Yves, "-it's a bad idea."

"Shut it you two. The master once said to guide the next into a better future. One where he wouldn't have to experience the hardship of bearing so heavy a burden. Lyoko Igna is a member of the Haggard family," her attitude changed to warmly kneel beside him, "-I'm not lying, Igna, I'm your mother."

"No, I don't believe it," the sincerity in her eyes, ' -it's a lie. We look similar but, but, that can't be it. My family...'

"You don't remember, do you?" she smiled, "-we had to abandon you long ago because of our secret ties. The story of our family is long and never-ending. I'll tell you more details if you want."

"Show me proof," said he.

"Here," she took off a locket that opened into a black-and-white photo, "-that's you."

"Y-yeah, it is me..."

'Except that's a picture of Staxius, I'm not technically lying.'

"Lady Courtney, you'll regret this," shaking his head, "-let's get out of here. I'll phone the clean-up crew."

"Come, Igna, let's go home."

'I can't argue, she looks like me and the phone is proof. Maybe I'm overthinking, the Haggard's... it does sound familiar. If she truly is my mother, I guess showing the vampiric nature won't bother.' To that, the trio stood with both men on their phones. One spoke to a 'cleaner' while the other referred to a 'sister'.

Syndra sat alone and scared, "-hey," he walked over to give a helping hand, "-thank you for calling lady Haru. I'm surprised you knew my intent. You saved my life, Syndra, I owe you everything."

"Don't thank me," she grabbed his hand, "-I guess you know why I ran away yesterday. My step-mother isn't someone that respectable. Father is to blame too, he's enchanted by her words, a lost cause."

"Still," he walked over to give a helping hand, "-Lady Yuki, Lord Lordon, I'm sad that I couldn't be the disciple thee sought for. I still don't understand why lady Yuki grew to hate all of a sudden-" the duo slowly looked to a boy holding only a look of concern, "-I don't hold any grudge. Instead, lady Yuki, would you reconsider me becoming Medusa's apprentice again."

"What's wrong with you?" her cheeks and mouth relaxed; "-how can you say all that after I treated you so badly?"

"Don't know," he gave a half-smile, "-starting a chain of hate seems too tedious. Lord Lordon, next time, please heed the voice of your daughter. She cares about you too."

"Leave me alone."

Courtney stood by the entrance with a pleasant face, '-you're Igna, not Staxius.'

"My lady, shall we leave, transport is waiting below."

"Sure, Igna, let's go."

"Ok," thus as an unexpected twist of fate, Courtney proclaimed to be his mother. The torrential rain outside intensified. A white van with the advertisement for cleaning stopped to carry multiple body bags up the café.

"Lady Courtney, am I really your son?" they stopped shy of the doorway.

"Yes," she pinched his nose, "-still don't believe me after that?"

"What if I'm a vampire?"

"Just means you've inherited the blood of my brother. The Blood-King of Arda," the downfall felt similar to waves crashing against the shore. The empty roads only held puddles; drains flooded to form streams along the pavement. The few passersby returned from impromptu trips in case of a power outage.

"Elliot, Yves, take the second car, I'll go along with Igna, is that fine?"

"Sure."

"Come on," a push and the gust nearly blew off the door, "-don't stop, run for the car." The headlights flashed with her key, "-get in," they jumped into the expensive vehicle.

"I'm sorry," drenched to the bones, "-the leather seats might get ruined because I'm wet."

“Don’t look so distraught,” she toggled the engine, “-you’ll understand soon enough.” Rain piled on atop the roof, the wipers moved to no avail. Courtney kept on sniffing due to the cold. A touch on the dashboard had a warm breeze heat the inside with the windows turning misty.

“Where are we going?”

“My apartment,” said she taking a turn and making for Juei. The empty streets made her speed without care for the lack of grip.

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‘Ok?’ unbothered by the speed, the car blazed down the capital.

“Incoming call from Lady Elvira.”

“Accept it.”

“Command acknowledged.”

“Hello, Lady Courtney, is everything ok?”

“Yes, Elvira, I’ve found my long-lost son.”

“Excuse me?” the dashboard soon projected a display, “-what do you mean?”

“Look,” she grabbed his head and pulled close, “-my son. Can’t you see the resemblance?”

“WAIT ISN’T THAT?”

“No,” she gritted, “-no other words need be said. This here is my son. We’re heading to my apartment. Come by if you like, there should be an express train for Rosespire in thirty-minutes?”

“I’m coming.”

“Call ended,” the display vanished.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” *cough.*

“Yeah,” replied he clueless about what happened.

The mist-filled road soon gave to Juei’s border. He fell asleep half-way along the journey. “Wake up,” said she gently tapping the freezing forehead.

“Sorry,” the eyes opened to mist, “-where are we?”

“Home,” the car leaned into the underground parking. The problem of water didn’t matter as the building had prepared measures in advance. “Come on.” The car rested in a closed section.

“Why are there so many cars here?”

“Oh, I bought them,” she laughed, “-see this yellow line?” it covered more than ten-spots, “-everything inside this border is mine. Let’s go take a shower first,” a lift came from the 70th floor, the climb went from underground to then the cloudy outside. The rain kept on assaulting the building. It took a few minutes to arrive.

“Welcome to my apartment,” the lift opened to the living-room, “-there’s a spare shower upstairs, go take a bath, I’ll be downstairs.”

‘This place is awesome,’ thought he climbing the spiral-stairs adorned with decorative lights, ‘-holy shit. She’s so rich, what the hell?’ the upstairs divided into two rooms with each having its own showers. ‘Guess I’ll take this one.’

Chapter 472: The Haggard’s

The uncomfortable dampness of the rainy weather soon came to a standstill. Heat warmed the inside; an hour had gone. Courtney brought over a fresh pair of change for her ‘son’.

“I’m going to order food,” came her echoey voice from below, “-anything you’d like?”

“No,” he returned, “-do you have ingredients?”

“Yeah,” she replied with footsteps heading for the stairs.

“I’m sorry, guess I caught you at a bad time,” she stood with only a bath towel wrapped around her body and hair.

“It’s fine,” said she unbothered by his presence, “-are you going to cook?”

“I’d love to.”

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“I’ll leave you to it then,” her pink fluffy slippers noiselessly made for the large rest area where multiple items were laid. A piano, a large television, a computer, a guitar, and a few more. It was neatly separated into differing hobbies. There even hosted a small library with a literal divine view as one would gaze onto the ground as if gods.

‘She’s got good ingredients. The kitchen seems nice and fast, won’t take long.’ As the clock struck 19:30, the fragrance of spices eluded the kitchen’s ventilation and sunk into the rest area.

‘Smell’s good,’ thought she putting down the glasses. The television played in the background as she continued work.

“What are you making?”

“Oh, sorry, did I disturb you?” asked he in full motion of readying the next batch.

“No, no, the spices riled the appetite,” her gentle hands slowly rested upon the stool to ease onto the tall counter. “Must feel weird.”

“Weird?”

“Yeah, me being your mother and all...”

“I’m still not convinced. Sorry, even if it’s true, I apologize.”

“Don’t worry about it,” an easeful grin settled his awkward expression.

“Thanks,” and so he continued until 20:00 where the receptionist called.

'Must be the lady she spoke to earlier,' thought he plating the meal. 'I'll have three readied just in case.'

"Lady Courtney," stood a drenched and shaking silhouette hidden by the dim corridor, "-I'm here," the paleness of her face and body was miserable. Droplets fell, her handbag and clothes were soaked through.

"Elvira, go take a shower," returned she courteously.

From kitchen to the dining area, "-should I set dinner?"

"Please," she smiled, "-I'll complete a few things and come back right away, sound good?"

"Sure." The crashing of the rain turned into a raging thunderstorm. Lightning flashed over the horizon; the thunder came after a delay with an even more fearsome roar. Steam rose from the plates, '-I wonder what's going to happen next?'

The ladies soon came one by one, Courtney arrived in her pajamas followed by Lady Elvira with matching attire. The two seemed close by their relaxed nature, '-must be nice,' thought he avoiding eye-contact. The news played on a small vintage radio beside the well-stocked bar.

"Delicious," complimented they with satisfied expressions.

"So, Igna," interjected Elvira, "-I'm guessing lady Courtney hasn't explained anything yet?"

"No..." the handkerchief slowly cleaned the lips as a glass of water concluded the meal. "Can I ask something?"

"Go ahead."

"What's my real name?"

"That..." she turned to Courtney; "-your mother will tell you."

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"It's Igna," said she, "-Igna Haggard, not Lyoko Igna. I heard from lady Haru that the name came all of a sudden?"

"It did."

"There you have it," she coyly winked at a flustered Elvira.

"Let me give you a summary of the name Haggard," voiced Elvira, "-our whole dynasty and legacy was spawned by the will of a single man, Blood-King Staxius Haggard of Arda. He was once the most powerful entity in the world with powerful in terms of money, fame, and military prowess. Things happened, between you and me, I suspect foul play, and he vanished without a thing said around five years ago. The Haggard's have always been involved in ruling the kingdom, from the shadows to the light, we spared no stone unturned. Lady Courtney here is the twin-sister of King Staxius, making him your uncle," paused she snickered, "-I see the perplexed expression, you're directly related to royalty. There's the Queen of Arda, Shanna Islegust – your aunt, the first princess, Eira Haggard, prince Julius Arnet Haggard, and the younger princess, Lizzie Haggard. They are your cousins. I'm told you're a nightwalker too?" she bared her fangs, "-it's proof of thy heritage. Not to go into details, as a member of

the Haggard dynasty, you've got the right to a lot more than money. We're leading in the world of military and magical research. Entire kingdoms fear our name, tis the truth. I'll recount more at a later date. Besides," her eyes met with the tag, "-you're an adventurer. If thee visit the Tower of Aris, platinum ranked adventurer Viola Haggard will sure come to aid. She's your aunt."

"It's all good an all," paused to think, "-I don't get it," he shrugged, "-just who is my uncle. The man sounds like a god... wait, if lady Viola is a platinum adventurer, does that mean she was part of the infamous Kniq?"

"You know of them," smiled Elvira with her sharpened fangs showing, "-Kniq, the adventuring guild symbolized by the wing-shaped crest, a group of people that terrorized and pioneered what it meant to be a warrior."

"I mean, I know," the index made small circles on the table, "-the whole academy speaks of it during lunch. Many want to become the next Kniq, some going as far as saying they'll be stronger than Xenos."

"Iгна," spoke Courtney, "-let's stop the chatting," she stood brusquely, "-come with me right now," her demeanor felt tense. Ignoring the dirtied dishes, she stomped into the rest-room.

"What are you up to?" wondered Elvira watching her movements closely.

"I'm frustrated," mumbled she reaching for a glass-cabinet, "-here."

"Excuse me?" a sword caught him by surprise.

"It's a wooden-sword," she got into a fighting stance.

"Wait, don't!"

"Shut up," no time wasted, the blades made contact. The sheer force of the impact sent numbing vibration at the hand and body, "-you're my son," said she continuing her onslaught, "-I've taught you swordsmanship at a young-age. Remember the muscle memory!" the resolved frown had him parrying each attack from reflex alone.

'She's strong,' desperately holding,'-how?' *boup,* a four-stroke combo had the boy on all fours. '-Fast...' she aimed for the neck, the heart, the lungs, and the stomach.

Cough, cough, '-I can't breathe.'

"Stop complaining and get up. You think being a Haggard is easy?"

'How did it come to this?' managing to stagger on his feet, the relentless assault resumed without warning. Her merciless aura had him fighting defensively. The body began to lighten; the sword felt familiar. '-I can read her moves now. The next combination is the heaven-and-earth strike,' the upward stroke narrowly missed his chin, *smack,* he blocked the downward stroke.

"Good, good," she smiled, "-you countered the heaven-and-earth strike. Are the names and memories coming to you?"

"Yes," he grinned, "-fighting with the sword is fun," the mouth said one thing and the body, another. A badly beaten face, bruised arms, and legs, one eye couldn't even stare properly.

'I guess channeling the mana of my death-element into him by force has worked. The swordsmanship is returning to how it was. Igna can't stay defenseless. He'll need to fight with only the body without enhancement. The soul is there – how cruel must you be, brother. You've returned as a new person devoid of hate and anger, most importantly, devoid of the curse of the Death Reaper. Was this planned? Did you get yourself killed by Lucifer and Zeus to cleanse the curse – if so, the gamble might pay off.'

"Lady Courtney," he panted, "-sorry..." taking a deep breath, "-mother, can we please continue the spar?"

'Mother,' her face flushed, '-it feels so warm,' she readied her posture, "-sure." The fight continued till midnight where they finally ended.

"I've reawakened the muscle memory of the sword fighting days," said she with his sword against her neck, "-remember, the style is offensive. Don't ever go on the defensive. It's a means for self-defense. It should help with adventuring."

"Thanks, lady mother," said he with her sword against his heart.

"On that," came Elvira with coffee, "-welcome back home, Igna."

"Thank you, lady Elvira."

"No, no," her head shook in dismissal, "-call me aunt Elvira."

"Are you sure, both of you look so young, it feels unnatural?"

"Oh, calling me aunt feels unnatural?" her warm hands pinched the earlobe tightly, "-you have no problem calling Lady Courtney 'mother'."

"Lady Mother," he added with her grip strengthening, "-sorry, I'm sorry, aunt Elvira, please, stop."

"Fine," she laughed.

"Lady Mother?"

"What is it?" asked she lounged on the couch.

"May I use the computer to call a few friends?"

"Sure, anything here is yours," the screen turned off, "-we're heading to bed. Leave the lights on amber setting when you're done, understood?"

"Yes," he nodded with the duo crossing into the next room.

'Fighting her feels like I've regained part of myself. Why am I so confused now?' without care, '-I'll call Jen.'

"Hello Jen?" the phone answered without reply. Only murmurs and moans came through, 'what's this?'

"Leonard, come on, don't be so rough," her melted voice came with the slow rocking of the bed.

"Shut up," came another, "-I love you so much, and don't worry, the others aren't coming back soon."

"S-stop, I-I c-can't hold it," her pitch rose, *beep.*

'What?' the mild showers burst onto the window at a more aggressive rate, '-were they having intercourse... Jen, Leonard, how did it come to this. Should have seen it coming. There's no way I had a chance; I wanted us to become closer. Whatever, I can't help but feel happy, it's almost relieving. Guess there's no need to worry about them.' The night continued with him feeling lost.

The next day came after an arduous night. "Good morning, lady mother, aunt Elvira."

"Good morning, Igna," said Courtney breathing a yawn, "-why up so early?"

"Figured I'd make breakfast and clean the apartment a little," said he proudly.

"What a responsible boy," added Elvira playfully rubbing his head, "-breakfast looks delicious, will you eat with us?"

"No, I had my meal earlier. Lady Mother, might I please ask where the dirtied clothes are?"

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"In the basket at my room, why?" her bed-hair didn't do any favors. Imagine tall grass being swept by a strong gust, instead of it returning to normal, the latter would be stuck at an angle. The wrinkled outfit all but enhanced the unseemly state. Compared to her, Elvira's tidy hair and attire were naught but spotless.

"I'll do the laundry and house-chores from now-on, don't worry about anything," he beamed with joy. Sun entered the curtains of the dining room. The radio played news paired with olden style music.

"Lady, are you sure about this?" wondered she biting into a crunchy crocket.

"Yeah, Igna's my son from today on. Is everything ready for later?"

"Yeah, I've created an account on his name, the bank's given their approval. Still, that much for a young adult, you sure?"

"Elvira," she facepalmed, "-that's the founder of Phantom, granted, maybe a little lost at the moment. Still, everything we have is due to him, a few million Exa is nothing compared to what we make bi-yearly."

"Well, I can't argue with that logic. He's very dependable," they watched as he went left and right with a broom. "Will he be involved with the underworld?"

"Not now, he's weak. The swordsmanship will take a few days to assimilate and reawaken. First things first, we formally add him to the family."

"The family crest, I totally forgot. Yves should be on the way with the item."

The day continued into the afternoon where Lady Courtney drove to Onela.

"Why are we at the bank?"

"To formally have you join the Haggard's," said climbing the elevator of the tallest building in the vicinity. The dress-code was obnoxiously formal, everyone spoke respectfully with fine accents.

“Lady Elvira, Lady Courtney, it’s a pleasure to see you here,” said a bald-man in his late-fifties. Chubby neck and chubbier body, the hands were same as surgical gloves being blown as if balloons.

“Silia,” added Elvira coldly, “-I’m afraid the feeling isn’t mutual.”

“Cold as always.”

“Silia, is everything ready?”

“Yes,” a leather briefcase slammed across the table, “-Igna Haggard’s ID, the family crest proving the heritage, birth-certificates, and the personal bank card account. We received the last smart-phone from Elon’s Research division earlier.”

“Good, good. Igna, come here.”

“Yes?”

“Here, all of these belong to you,” she reached for a warm embrace, “-I’m glad you’re back, son.”

“T-thank you, lady mother.”

Chapter 473: Forgiveness

Those present held wanting gazes, there laid a small excitement on their faces. Put it another way, when one gifts a present, they usually expect a good reaction to validate the effort. Part of him wanted to smile, another wanted to hide.

“Let’s head to the car,” said she holding the briefcase.

“Sorry about the urgency,” voiced the cool-faced Elvira, a call came prior concerning important matters.

“I’ll go on ahead,” said the leader of Phantom rushing to another parked car. The guards adjacent saluted the moment she came in sight. Big heavy wheels rolled upon the wet-tarmac flicking droplets about, the weather came to a balance between sunny and rainy. The moving grey-clouds were emotionless.

“Don’t you like the present?”

“No, that’s not it,” he paused outside reluctant to spoil the leathered interior.

“Get in already,” she reached to pull his arms, “-I told you, there’s no need to worry about dirtying the car.” The door shut peacefully with the wipers cleaning the windscreen. “Take a look for yourself,” said she pressing the ‘start’ button.

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‘The phone is amazing, my Id, papers and bank card. Everything’s interlocked with the phone. The bank account reads 10 million Exa with my name on top.’

“Impressive, isn’t it?” she smirked and sped for the apartment.

“Lady Mother,” gently shutting the case, “-I’m sorry, I can’t accept it. Having all that money is more of a pain than I thought. It doesn’t feel natural, I want to earn the right and not have it be given. I’m afraid I might go numb to the pleasures of working hard to attain a goal. Please, I c-can’t.”

“Look at you,” she gave a motherly smile, “-I’m glad you think that way, truly. Still, It’s my way of atonement for having abandoned my son so many years ago. Come on, let me spoil you,” the innocent lift of the lips and nose, even brows joined her bashful expression.

“On one condition,” said he, “-I want to work hard and earn on my own. Is that ok?”

“Do as you wish, the phone there is equipped with an AI named éclair. It’s unique and only listens to a certain person. It went offline with the sister-system running as a back-up. This is the final test. You’ll find contacts lenses and earrings below the dashboard. Wear them now.”

“I don’t have piercings.”

“No worries,” *snap,* two faint ambers burnt the center of the earlobe, “-there. Should fit easily now.”

‘Scary,’ the earrings were golden and held dark stones filled with minuscule white dots – a reflection of the star-stuttered night he admired so much. The contacts felt comfortable, almost inexistent.

“Don’t worry about changing the liquid,” said she, “-the contact works fine without the cleaning agent. Shower, extreme sports, do anything, it’s going nowhere.”

“I’ve got them on,” said he waiting for the response.

“Ok,” she glanced, “-there should be an interface,” the focus returned to the road.

“You mean the highlighted white boxes over yonder?”

“Yes, it’s a good sign already. Now, turn over the phone, remove the casing, there should be a needle. Let it prick your thumb.”

“Ok?” senselessly following instructions, ‘-it vibrated.’

Host recognized,

“What?” he jumped.

“You heard it?” asked she wanting to turn, the complex layout of vehicles made her weary, “-a voice.”

“Yes, it said, host recognized.”

“Good, it works,” she laughed, “-I knew it. Go on and turn over the phone, son, you’ve just inherited éclair. It will help you more than is imaginable.”

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“éclair, what does it do?”

“A spirit that roams the land beyond our world. He holds the key to many vestiges of the past, the future, the present, nothing escapes him. I won’t go into details, the thing’s just going to bore you.”

'This is amazing,' he stared the world with a new perspective. People's faces were highlighted, sometimes their name and occupation would come on, other times, their social media. Buildings, roads, traffic lights, stores, anything he watched had information come up. Things became apparent after passing a dark-alley, the boxes were color graded from white, green, yellow, red, and black. In that instant, the red box came with '-kidnapping in process.'

"Lady Mother," he shouted, "-please, stop the car."

She slammed the breaks, "-what happened?"

"Igna Haggard," spoke the same mysterious voice, "-what are your orders?"

"Help me stop the kidnapping," leaving no explanation, he bolted out of the car. Arrows showed the optimal route, smaller screens appeared with a feed from cameras, smart-phone, and even the recording of the assailant.

"Get her in the van already," said a man smoking a cigarette. The alley led into a hidden plot with rusted and broken shops. Gross black substances leaked out the many outside walls. The bins were littered with smelly bags.

"Please be on the lookout," said the voice, "-calling authorities. Estimated time of arrival, 05:00 minutes."

'Five minutes?' thought he leaned against a moisture brick wall. The unknown group fought to keep the girl silent. She'd kick, punch, and even go for the eyeballs. 'I can't help but be amazed. I can see their figures through the walls, these contacts are overpowered. One has a gun, the other two have daggers?'

"Culprit recognized as the Tunn's Gang. Their involvement in human trafficking has gone unnoticed. The leader is under investigation. What will you do?"

"I don't know," he stopped, "-I came here as a hero and don't have a plan. I don't even have a weapon."

"Son," approached Lady Courtney with high-heels, "-there are things you need to tell me before rushing off," her white-hair flowed to vanish into the empty plot. Not even a second past, she apprehended the kidnapers and let the girl free.

"Amazing..." thought he admiring her strong figure.

"Stop gawking," a chop to the head later, "-you know how hard it is to find parking?"

'She's mad about the parking and not me running off? I'm lost for words.' He followed silently and the trip resumed.

"Don't just run out without a plan," said she.

"Mother, these contacts would be more useful on your hands..."

"Don't look at me as if a stray," she poked his cheeks, "-it's related to éclair, and only the spirit has the right to see a fitting host. He'll take good care of you in my absence. I won't force the duties of a noble-birthed boy on you, go out and explore, live the world for yourself. You imposed your condition, and it's now my turn. Never take off the contacts or earrings. There's a special slot on the phone that manages

the contacts. Put them when you sleep or don't need them. The phone needs, and I repeat, MUST be on you at all times, is that clear?"

"Yes lady mother, I appreciate it."

"Good, then feel free to mess around with the AI. After all, it's a creation of Phantom, a gift from my brother. You're back to our family, don't cause too much trouble. Else lady Haru is going to be angry."

"By lady Haru," a frightful possibility flashed, "-did you speak to her?"

"Obviously," she laughed at his timid face, "-she knew it all along. Now, what will you do?"

"Don't know," he shrugged, "-I guess I'll head to the Trader's Guild and start working. I did promise lady Haru to do my best... I mean, I did sort of get kicked out of the lady Yuki's favors."

"I won't be so sure," without realizing as he kept on scouring the phone for more features, she sneakily brought the car to the town square. Twilight laid out the window, the stone-road ambered with street-lamps until a nicely lit, 'Loron's Restaurant'.

"Lady Mother, are you sure?" asked he bewildered at her decisive stare.

"Yeah, I heard from Lord Lordon earlier. It's part of the reason why Elvira return. The Lordon's were very apologetic, mostly Yuki, she grieved the most at her attitude. Here," the speakers came to life. "-Lady Elvira, I beg of thee, I never knew my actions would end in such a scandal. I'm saying this not as the owner-chef of Loron, but as the lady who endeavored to teach a young boy. I know my personality is very toxic at times, I've acknowledged it for years... habits are hard to change. I pledge from this moment forth to care for Igna with all my might. I thought he would have come for revenge. Those sympathetic eyes that turned to comfort and love, I want them back, they are the reason I stepped in the kitchen. I want the best for him, please, give me a chance."

"I don't have a say in the matter," said she strictly, "-the decision is master Igna's alone. Lady Courtney shall bring him to the restaurant later. Don't get me wrong, I haven't forgotten the way you treated a potential heir to the Haggard's. If word of this got out, the Lordon's might be vanquished and squandered like the feasting ants you are. That goes double for you, Lord Lordon. My sources say you've engaged in rendezvous with the Five conglomerates of Alpha, must I remind thee of thy stature? Thou art part of the nobility of Hidros, scandals can break a nation's peace. Let this be a warning, any more of those secretive meetings and I swear," a heavy object dropped onto the table, "-the DG might get involved."

"I apologize, lady Elvira, I was naught but an exchange of food talk with another gourmet. I meant no harm."

"What is done is done, don't stand out too much," the recording ended. The pause of silence amplified the terrifying nature of the cheerful Elvira.

"She's a totally different person," he stepped out.

"That's the leader of Phantom for you," winked Courtney, "-go on and decide. Tis thy future. there's a gift waiting inside. Don't take long," the windows rolled.

'Off she goes,' back against the speeding car, he walked slowly towards the opened restaurant. Many o' couples went to and fro. The night-life had begun, the atmosphere had a sophisticated air to it. No longer were teenagers and mothers gossiping, it replaced for one quiet and peaceful.

"What did she mean by surprise?"

"Lady Courtney sent a bike, a gift for quicker movement. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"I was wondering, are you éclair?"

"Yes, I'm your assistant from today onwards. There's no particular thing to be worried about. Make sure the phone is charged, that's about it."

"Are you sentient?"

"Yes, I'm a living being in all the sense of the word except in physical form. Remember, if you need anything, just speak, I shall come to thy aid without delay. The interface before is my view on the world. In other words, we've merged for you see what I see, and I see what you see. The danger levels are self-explanatory, you can configure the settings later," it zoomed onto a strange figure hidden behind a curtain.

"That's lady Yuki, isn't it?"

"Yes," the visual changed to the inner-camera, "-lady Yuki."

"You can access anything?" asked he with a cheeky expression.

"Affirmative, I can even get into an actress's bedchambers and leak a few explicit videos and photos, granted there's digital gadgets present."

"A nice invitation," he laughed, "-éclair, thank you for the help."

"No worries. I'll configure the current settings for cooking. Lady Elvira uploaded a summary of preferences and such."

"I don't have any idea of what you speak, but thank you." The voice turned mute with small pop-ups in the corner, he took to speaking in word.

'This is awkward,' he stood at the door, "-excuse me, may I come in?"

"Igna?"

"Manager Jola," he entered the emptied restaurant, "-where's lady Yuki?"

"In the kitchen," she stopped mid of cleaning the tables as he walked by, "-psst."

"Yeah?"

"Come here," she gestured, "-do you know anything about the lady's strange behavior?"

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“No, maybe it’s the weather.” Not only was Jola cleaning the room, but the other chefs were also spotted here and there replacing glasses and plates. They nodded as hello and resumed. ‘Interrupting them is not that good an idea,’ he figured and pushed the wide-double doors of the kitchen.

“Lady Yuki,” she stood strongly with a wandering gaze.

“Igna,” her half-smile felt confusing and on edge, Joe paused to lean into the would-be exchange. Emma and Emmy were cat-like in their espionage to crouch blatantly behind flour. Something was wrong, they felt it first-hand. “You’ve come?”

“Yeah?” he shrugged, “-about the restaurant.”

“It’s fine,” she interrupted, “-I won’t be sad if you leave us now. I mean, it’s partly my fault. I mean, you’re from a noble family, I can’t expect to have you cutting vegetables for a living,” the words sped, “-so, so, I’m...”

“Lady Yuki,” he chuckled, “-I came to work. My lady mother sort of dropped me here and left.”

“You’re not leaving?” the tense cheeks eased into her resting face, “-I’m glad. We don’t have time to speak, go get dressed, service starts in half an hour.”

Chapter 474: Winter Festival

Loron came to life, Igna worked as Yuki taught. The duo was harmonious, her resolve to train was ironclad. Igna on the other hand was quick to assimilate the information. No stone left unturned, the assistance from éclair became necessary. Ingredients highlighted with taste, what went well, and how to optimally prepare for the pre-decided recipe. The inexperience of not knowing much was effectively reduced to a bad-memory.

Thus, the life of Igna stabilized for the next coming months. He’d wake early and train at the multiple restaurants the other staff worked. They took turns teaching and finally at night when the group rejoined at Loron, Lady Yuki took over.

Days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months, the happenings at the Academy were more visible. Jen and Leonard were known as love-birds, their relationship spread outwards of the class.

“Good morning guys,” said Rena waking from a drooling stupor.

“Good morning, Rena,” yawned Leonard with his arms tightly wrapped around Jen, “-it’s been two weeks, where’s Lampard?”

“He should be coming back today,” said she with a wrapped towel around her waist, “-the train should be here at 10:00.”

“I suppose I should get ready,” he quietly made for the baths.

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As the days went past, the training at the academy turns strenuous. The joint exercises in the battle-arena turned to the far reaches of the Azure Wall. Differing classes working as trainee adventurers on the field. News of Lampard’s prowess gave him the title of the third strongest up-and-coming fighter.

The second was Frost of Blade's End and the first, Anna Igusta, the prodigious battle-mage. Her fighting style was archaic, using magic to enchant her body and weapons, the limitation on her abilities was yet to be found. Tales of the front-line said she once melted the flesh off a hobgoblin.

'I feel fresh,' the steaming hot showers shut tight, echoes or what appeared so came from other cabinets. Murmurs from the guest of Block D.

"Good morning there," said a young adult with facial hair, "-how's Jen doing?"

"She's fine. If you're here, does that mean year 3 of Military-Arts returned?"

"Yeah, we went to the castle. A shame we didn't get to see the queen."

"I doubt she'd come for trivial matters. So long," the little exchange stopped without much thought.

'Rena, Jen, me and Lampard, we've become so close,' thought he entering the chatter filled room.

"Good morning, Leonard," said a warm voice hid by the cloudy-designed blanket.

"Good morning," without much time wasted, he reached to hold her in a princess-carry, "-don't sleep in so late."

"Stop treating me like a kid," words meant one thing – the tone meant another, she wanted more time and affection.

"You two again," sighed Rena with a nervous chuckle, "-how can you be so in love? I don't get it," dressed in casual wear, "-come on, let's go greet Lampard."

Outside came the sunny-blue sky. Multiple students returned from the somber train-station. The trio cut across the park to stand at the foot of the staircase. Instructors led the way followed by fatigued remnants of students. With the lifeless color of the now pale skin and the ire of having to climb such a hurdle, the ungodly silence was justified. Out the group further at the back, a trio of loudmouths arrived with the silent Anna batting her long lashes at Jen and Rena. Frost all but shrugged in dismissal at Lampard who turned his face away. "I was the one who killed the One-eyed Wolf, not you, Anna, and not you Lampard."

"Hey guys," he vaulted over the railing.

"DON'T YOU DARE IGNORE ME!" screamed Frost holding the railing tight, "-this argument isn't over," the voice muddled by the raging stomps of upper-classmen.

"Will he be ok?" wondered Rena jokingly.

"Yeah, he'll be fine." The softness of the grass illuminated the hardship he had gone through. The spear was chipped and scratched; the chest-plate had a chunk missing with bite marks.

"Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," he reached for a hug.

"Hold up," Leonard caught Lampard, "-you're not ok," said he with a smile, "-come on. Let's get you treated." The infirmary laid with plenty o' students.

“How hard was the training camp?”

“Very tough,” smiled he barely standing.

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“Let me patch you up,” said Rena – her face flushed at the mere thought.

And so, the relationship of Group C solidified into one that transcended being friends. They were each best friends, Jen and Rena in particular. The two were so close it made Leonard uncomfortable at the time. Leonard and Lampard were nothing short of brothers, they’d often sneak out and wander the lonesome night. The couple was happy but not always on agreeing terms, fights and arguments were plenty. The more they loved one another, the more passionate became their disagreements. Per their perspective, the fight wasn’t about who’s right or wrong, but about what would be better for the other.

Thus, time passed and December returned. The cold winter settled, the roads were foggy, the whistling of wind against the buildings. Rosepire’s Town Square was nothing short of a masterpiece. Artists from all over the continent were called. Sadly, when Lady Yuki and Igna worked, the Summer Festival was organized at Lai. Work overloaded per increase of customers and they missed it. This time around, the Winter Festival would be hosted at the Town-Square.

Stalls, merchants, a stage, camps with games – name it and it was there. Opportune businessmen flocked to the event to promote their wares. Loron and the neighboring restaurants didn’t give either, preparations were near complete.

“The warm smell of paint and glue,” said Emma holding multiple bags.

“The frosty air,” added Emmy, “-gosh, I love winter.”

“First time you’re experiencing the Winter Festival, right?” asked Joe at the front of the group.

“Yes, Chef,” he peered to the right where multiple people dashed holding wood and other items. The redundant hammering of nails and drilling, a cacophony of construction.

“I told you,” he gave a half-smile, “-don’t call me Chef out in the public. I’m a friend, get it through that thick skull of yours.”

“Sorry, chef.”

“He never-changes,” laughed the twin-sisters.

‘The winter festival,’ multiple icons of people, items, and such popped onto the interface, ‘-it’s going to be a battle. The 24th till New Year’s, seven days of celebrations. Local bands, shows, and more by performers. I can’t wait for it to start.’

Open and large to cells of narrow paths. Stalls didn’t hold back on advertisement. Massive cutouts of whatever they sold. Some held action-heroes, others noodle bowls – the list carried on. Around said time of year, the Adventuring Academy went on holiday. Students went home, some stayed, many made plans as a group to stay at the capital for the festivities.

“Alright everyone,” the colder outside swapped for a fiery inside. Lady Yuki stood with arms crossed and a bandana. The white cloth had ‘-Loron’s’ painted in black. “Tonight’s the last night of preparations!” said she unusually hyped. Jola and Chef Igona presided over her shoulders, they added the extra ‘oomph,’ to her words. “We might be a fine-dining establishment, NEVERTHELESS,” a pause followed with Jola tapping the table as if a drumroll, “-WE’LL SERVE CUSTOMERS. Street-food is a staple of festivals, Loron will participate. Winter is upon us.”

“Don’t worry about her,” whispered Emma, “-the chef gets a little excited when it comes to holidays. Still, get ready, our reputation garners more customers every year.”

“She loves her festivals,” winked Emmy, “-I guess it’s the final event for you.”

“Yeah.”

“Outfits are on the table,” she pointed, “-take an early night, we start early tomorrow. Rotations will be as follows, we have three cooking stalls. Igona, Emma, and Emmy will take the 10:00 to 16:00. Igna, Joe and, I will take over 16:00 to 22:00.”

“Yes chef,” her contagious energy grew the anticipation of the event.

‘A shirt with a wave, quite bold for a fine-dining establishment.’

“Igna,” approached Yuki amidst the chatter of the others, “-I’m glad I met you,” she gave a soft pat, “-I’m surprised you learned everything we taught. Cooking only begins from here, I taught thee all I know. You truly are a Prodigy – go and finish Adventuring Academy. We’ll always be here waiting. Loron will be home if you ever need one.” The warmth in her smile could but bring a tear. The others held the same feeling, Igna became part of their working force. Trial or not, he fit their rhythm so perfectly that few cooking magazines began following his exploits. The already heavenly rated quality increased even more so by the addition.

‘She’s right, my training here is over.’ The slick and powerful sport’s bike burnt the streets towards the apartment. ‘Can’t believe Lady Yuki and I was at odds end. The few months have been so hectic – it feels like years. Magazines always want to have interviews and photoshoots; Lady Yuki wants me to do them but...’

“Igna, an incoming call from Jen,” said éclair.

“Put it through.”

“Hello?” answered he through the flares of the well-lit buildings against the black visor.

“Hello, is that you Igna?” came a manlier voice.

“Yeah, who’s this?” the traffic light turned green.

“It’s me, Leonard.”

“Long time no see, how’ve you been?”

“Don’t play dumb,” said he sharply, “-anyway, the rest and I are coming to Rosespire for the Winter Festival,” the playful murmurs of Jen and Rena littered the background. One could hear Lampard

demand silence through the deep heavy voice. "I was wondering if you'd like to meet up... what are you doing?"

"Hey, hey," by the sound of things, "-it's me, Jen," she forcefully snatched the phone. "I'm angry you know..."

"Why so?" wondered he speeding down towards the main road.

"You disappeared off the planet. A call to say hello would have been appreciated. Idiot."

'Don't make it my fault. Group C doesn't need a third wheel.'

"Are you there?" her perky tone grew annoying.

"I'm here, alright. So, you guys coming to the festival?"

"Yeah, about that, where are you staying?"

"A relative's place."

"WAIT WHAT? Did you get your memories back?"

"No, still clueless. Whatever, where are you guys staying... LEONARD, GIVE ME THE PHONE." She screamed.

"Sorry about that," said he apologetically, "-we'll be staying at Juei, my family owns a mansion. Thought I'd give you a call, want to join us for the week to catch up and stuff?"

"Whereabouts in Juei, wait, are you here already?"

"Yeah, yeah," said he, "-we arrived like an hour ago. I'll send you the address."

"Cool, I'll be there in an hour or so."

"Awesome, we'll wait," the call ended.

'They are idiots,' he smiled, '-but I love 'em. Who cares about third wheels, Group C are the first friends I made,' the exhaust roared, the bike shot like a bullet.

"What did he say?" wondered Rena.

"He's coming in an hour."

"How?" inquired Lampard, "-didn't you say Juei was reserved for the rich or something like that. I got the impression there's no transport here."

"You right," paused, "-he might own a scooter or something. Who cares, Igna's finally going to show up. We've so much to speak about."

"Yeah, like A LOT." Beige ceiling, warm tiled floor, exquisite couches, and a massive television on the wall, the mansion was reserved for Juei's standards. Emphasis was placed on the moderately sized garden in which ran the main path inside.

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"I'm starving," cried Lampard.

"Want to order?" wondered Leonard to his right, the large six-seat couch held plenty of space.

"Won't it take too long?" the television played a scary movie under the dim-lighting setting.

"We're approaching the location," said éclair, "-don't lose the lenses. I've informed Lady Yuki of the plans. She has yet to respond."

"Mother's hard at work," the road trembled as the bike closed.

"You heard that?" asked Jen cuddling Rena.

"Y-yeah, a roar..."

Dring, "WHAT WAS THAT!"

"-Leonard, it's me – open the gates," came through the intercoms.

"Chill out you two," laughed he, "-It's just Igna." The light soon toggled, the front-yard illuminated, and the gates opened.

"Igna..." soon exiting in hopes of welcoming their friend, their breath cut short. He drove in with a flashy vehicle.

"Hey guys," the helmet lifted with the medium-length hair dropping onto the shoulders, "-long time no see."

Chapter 475: Distance

'I knew it the moment I stepped in,' images of his friends flashed, '-things were not the same anymore. Time did what was due, it changed the people I first met at the Academy. Leonard and Jen were not the same any longer. He looks better and more mature in a way, the responsibility of having to care for another person must have spurred the mind to grow. No longer did he keep quiet or act smug, a truly good change. Jen,' as he thought her name; the glance nonchalantly turned to the living room. There, through the door left ajar, her sharp profile paused for a few seconds then returned. 'A lady in love is more beautiful, I heard that from Joe. I guess it's true. She's attractive, well, I have to distance my thoughts from her. The bigger the gap, the better it will be. I came here to meet friends – didn't expect this. Rena has feelings for Lampard, her flushed face is always hidden behind makeup. She desperately tries to convey her feelings, the attempt is both admirable and depressive. Love, why did it have to sprout, why did the bud have to spawn such a common desire, why did it have to fill the air. The room feels tight, my throat wants to close on itself, so tiresome.' A whiff of sparkling invisible goodness eluded the mild protection of the ajar door. The sense went full speed around the couch to twirl in the middle. A sniff had the stomach's growling, Rena's habit of drooling showed a most embarrassing scene. Lampard had cupped her mouth with tissues, '-stop it,' said he strongly.

"Leave me alone," pushed away, the ears warmed to a boil, "-thanks for the tissues," her head kindly lowered.

"Jen," voiced Leonard, "-is that really the Igna we remember?" wondered he wanting to open the kitchen doors.

"I don't know," said she frightful of what laid beyond. The 'super-bike' outside raised multiple questions. His coming felt uncomfortable, the moment the helmet lifted, the protruding half-smile gave a sense of uneasiness. The scene played on repeat;

"Hey guys, long time no see," said he as the breeze carried his hair.

"Long time no see," added a shocked Lampard, the group stepped onto the cold-moist grass.

"Nice ride," smiled Leonard, "-quite a rare model," said he quick to examine the body and engine.

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"Thanks," returned he without much care, "-it's good to see you again."

"Good to see you," they hugged one-another tightly.

"You've changed," added Lampard, "-I don't feel nervousness or fear of the unknown."

"I suppose so," he shrugged and waved at the girls.

Thud, the way the wave and eyes made contact sent flutters down the body, '-impossible,' thought Rena glaring through the stretched eyes, '-why do I think he's handsome? Why the fuck do I find him kind of attractive, he's gone and changed so much. Why is he leaning on the bike as if an actor, what's the deal with him?' her fist clenched, '-and why is it Lampard and Leonard feel so hopeless by him?'

"Rena..." added Jen softly, "-why does he seem so charming?"

"I don't know. How did he become so gallant?"

"It's not me then," she breathed to tightly hold Rena's hand, "-I'm scared. He looks charming and the way he speaks and laughs are alluring – still, I-I can't but be scared. Leonard lost his confidence, Lampard's just asking questions, the two are clearly overwhelmed."

"I KNOW," she turned to hide behind the curtain, "-I can't anymore!"

"Rena, you're so red," a chuckle broke the uncertainty, "-how is that humanly possible?"

"Shut up," she fired back, "-your ears are just as hot as my cheeks."

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"Shut up," the lips froze, footsteps approached.

"Nice mansion," said he taking off the shoes, "-don't mind the intrusion," the untied hair all but elevated the sharpness of his oval face. Brown eyes, tanned skin, and black hair with a tint of grey, "-have you guys eaten?"

"No."

"Got ingredients?" he paused at the partition separating the living room and hall.

"Yeah, we should be stocked, the kitchen's over there."

“Awesome,” with a casual grin, “-I’ll take care of the cooking. Set the table, I’ll be done in thirty minutes or so,” and so was his arrival. The uneasiness didn’t once fade, it all but increased. Jen and Rena were scared to greet, Leonard and Lampard sat with face to the ceiling.

“Igna’s not weak anymore,” voiced one of the boys.

“He’s a man, the maturity in how he spoke, laughed, and acted. It doesn’t come across as smug in the least, rather, it’s gentlemanly.”

“How do you suppose he got so?”

“Go ask him, Rena,” laughed Leonard, “-I see his charm has worked on you girls too.”

“What do you mean?” they turned with a closed fist and tense arms.

“He’s awesome,” added Lampard, “-I know what Leo means. Boys are stupid; we always idolize someone superior and want to help especially when it’s a friend. A certain part of me wants to show-off and take the attention...”

“I get what you mean,” added Leonard, “-I feel like he’s a leader.”

‘Those idiots,’ calmly stirring fried vegetables, ‘-don’t they realize I can hear what they say?’ Keeping a nonchalant expression, food was readied.

“Leonard, Lampard,” the slightly monotonous voice escaped the same ajar door, “-the food’s ready.” So, with plates in hand, he exited the kitchen to head for the dining area beside the living room. Here, a bar stood on one end and an old jukebox on the other, the table laid in the middle with hanging lights. Steam filled perfume of the fried rice had them limbo between mouthwatering and stomach growl.

“Sorry it’s not elaborate,” added he, “-since its night and all, figured a lighter meal might ease the hunger and not disrupt sleep.”

“T-thanks,” nodded Rena avoiding his sight.

“It’s good,” added Jen with a more disingenuous tone.

‘I’ll head home after this,’ thought he focusing on the meal, ‘-we can’t return to normal. Eight months is too long to keep any semblance of hope. They say one thing and mean another, Leonard was courteous in keeping the atmosphere friendly, Lampard tried hard to not let the girls speak, what a shame.’ Mild chatter went around the table from Leonard to Lampard, from Rena to Leonard, from Jen to Lampard. They ignored or rather, felt uncomfortable speaking. ‘Group C is better off without me,’ the chair pushed back sharply. “-Thanks for the invitation,” he smiled, “-I’ll head home now. Have fun during the Winter Festival. See you at the academy or something.”

“You’re leaving already?” wondered Lampard. Throwing a side-eye at the table, Rena felt relief and Jen had tightly locked herself to Leonard, “-stay awhile, come on.”

“I’m fine,” he stared the front, “-what’s the point of staying a place where I’m not clearly invited. Thanks for the polite reception, Leonard. I think we ought to carry on our own paths from today forth. May group C achieve greater things in the future,” the footsteps felt heavy and lonesome, the front door opened.

"Let's see him off," voiced Leonard trying to stand, "-let me go!"

"No," she shook her head, "-I can't..."

"You too Lampard, don't see him off, it's for the better," added Rena.

"Shut up," they pulled to dash down the hall, "-you girls are nothing but idiots!" screamed Lampard. The front-door barged open, "-Igna," said they panting, "-thanks for coming man, I'm sorry you felt left out."

"Leonard, Lampard," the helmet rested in his lap, "-don't worry about it. I'm glad to see you in good spirits. Jen's ease when speaking to you is a pleasure for my eyes. Congratulations on being a couple. Lampard, you're strong my friend, very strong. It takes a lot to try and be ignorant about a girl who deeply loves you. Don't get too tired. Anyway, drop by the town square, I'll be working the afternoon at Loron."

"Man, Igna, I'm sorry for all this, I never meant for it to get this uncomfortable."

"Stop," he wrapped an arm around Leonard and the other around Lampard, "-we'll always be friends. If anything ever comes up, give me a call, I'll come to help," the brotherly touch felt peaceful. Dark-massive gates opened to allow passage.

"What a guy," said Lampard sitting cross-legged, "-I'm happy you called him here."

"I know what you mean," said Leonard laying on his back, "-the sincerity is still there. Remember how you used to hate him for being weak?"

"Yeah," a chuckled broke the windy murmurs, "-I hated him, but now, it's the opposite. The hour we spend together feels like years."

"He feels like a big brother," on that sentiment, the front door opened.

"Leonard, Lampard, come in else you'll catch a cold."

"Jen," came a disappointed voice, "-why did you girls do that?" the warm inside gave comfort.

"Do what?" pleaded Rena, "-what are you insinuating?"

"Please, don't be so obnoxious," added Lampard, "-this isn't an argument, we want to know the truth. Why reject Igna? Jen, you were more excited out of anyone to see him. Why such a change of mind, are you serious?"

"I second Lampard, why treat him as if an outsider!"

"This is why," added a somber Rena, "-Group C doesn't need Igna."

"He doesn't belong in our friend group," added Jen, "-I thought of him as a good friend until he arrived. I can't, something inside me says to run away. I refuse to let him in between us. Can't you see?" her soft pupils reflected the amber lights, "-I didn't want to lose you, Leonard."

"Lose me?" the truth in her voice reduce the seed of doubt, "-why?"

"Cause, I love you. Igna's an intruder, Group C will always be us four."

“We’re group C,” added Rena, “-without Igna.” They sowed another seed, one of mistrust. The would-be bond crumbled. They conspired to exclude he who had made them so uncomfortable prior. Blind in love, Leonard’s mind thoughtlessly agreed with the false narrative of, ‘Igna’s trying to break us apart.” Lampard kept his head and watched, he agreed to see the clearer intent. Put into words, it didn’t sound so bad until one realized the mind of two girls was involved – the never-ending labyrinth of confusion and mixed feelings.

‘What a shame...’ thought he faced with a direct feed of the mansion. éclair took the liberty of sneaking into their security system and redirected the unfolding scene. Words behind walls were naught but mindless effort. ‘I knew something was wrong the moment I walked in. Jen and Rena aren’t the same, they feel more scheming. Leonard and Lampard are tied to their whims... or so that’s what I’d like to believe. Truth is, they’re being protective of ‘home’. I’m an intruder now, they don’t want to allow anyone to break the well-formed circle. I can’t fault them for thinking so, I’d fight to protect my circle given the same position. Suppose I’ll have to continue as before, no regrets nor bad-feelings. Good-bye Group C.’

At that moment, the hard wind against the body felt close to a hug, the pressure soothed the mind. A bullet across the streets of Juei. Tough as he might have acted, the woe in losing comrades stung. They lived for months until the departure for Rosespire. Who could he blame, time, the human heart, or, those trying to make him better? No matter the inner-emotions, the debt incurred from so many people’s help gave a bigger goal than petty disagreements. Ignorance of the unknown came as a heavy mist, a lonesome road appeared holding no landscape. The perpetual struggle of knowing oneself, a tinkling orb spawned in form of a quote, “-people lose friends when one gets serious about a goal. Those baseless relations are best forgotten, face the front, and don’t stop. In the end, the one who stands at the top has seen what happens to those at the bottom. Only they are allowed to rest, for the never-ending struggle will follow till the grave.” Foggy and muddy to clear, the happening of earlier secluded to the far reaches of the abyss, ‘Move on.’

Chapter 476: 24th December

‘I’m home,’ the climb up the elevator over the many times became a mundane task. Same as brushing one’s teeth, taking a bath, or walking – there remained no space for excitement. When building the elevator shaft, architects must have thought the clearness of the exterior would make the ride pleasant. It did do justice, for the first few times. Afterward, the view became naught but mundane. Same to an awesome music track, after a few repeats, it turned to naught.

‘The apartment feels lonesome,’ once dim, a step inside and the lights toggled by éclair. Windows opened, the door shut, everything automated. ‘Mother hasn’t been home for two months,’ thought he laying the helmet on an adjacent coat-hanger. ‘I wonder what she’s up to?’ a shower, browsing the Arcanum over a warm cup of coffee before the giant television screen, news broadcasted the Winter Festival. Advertisements littered the channel.

“We’ve got a special interview with Emi Muko of Xius,” the camera panned to a lovely lady wearing a short skirt and revealing top. The outfit reminisced those of cheerleaders – a branding had ‘-Lona,’ sowed on the sleeves.

'Xius?' putting the phone face-down, the lady's face seemed familiar. Her group consisted of another lady and a man. The latter didn't seem bothered by the interview. A mustache and goatee, tattoos over the arms and neck – he screamed of being a badass guitarist. The former, a shy version of the man with plain attire. 'I've heard of them before.'

"Lady Muko, we're all proud to host you here on our modest channel."

"It's no problem," said she beaming with a contagious smile, her body movement as well as the expression was refined and cute at the same time. She'd chuckle like a kid then reply like a diplomat.

"Are the rumors about you performing the last day of the Festival true?"

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"Yes."

"Will it not be a small stage for the world-renowned Xius?"

'What's wrong with that reporter?' thought Igna, '-this feels like an interrogation as opposed to an interview. Got to hand it to the idol, she's handling the passive-aggressiveness perfectly.'

"No stage is big nor small. Sugar here agrees," she turned to the handsome man.

"It's true," he nodded, "-as long as there's a guitar, a microphone, a bass, and drums, we'll jam till we can't speak anymore," exclaimed he.

"O-oh, ok," the reporter quickly shuffled through her papers.

'Getting flustered?' grinned Igna.

"Back to you, lady Muko – we've heard rumors about you dating a noble, is that true?"

"Johana," smiled the idol, "-Xius came here for an interview on the coming Winter Festival, right?" the prior smile suddenly changed to one murderous and vindictive, "-personal life doesn't matter."

"I apologize," the words choked by the darkened expression, '-cut to commercial,' her wandering gaze floated off the camera and to the back. The channel soon flashed with prior performances of Xius.

'Awesome. If they're performing the last day, it might be worthwhile.' *vrr, vrr,* '-huh?' he turned over the phone, '-notifications from Jen and Leonard.' A press had their social media come onto the feed, they posted a typical couple's picture. 'Look at them,' he shook his head with a slight grin, '-first time seeing them post a picture like this.' The lights soon turned off and the night continued the rule over the landscape.

Meanwhile, at the Goldberg's mansion, Leonard stood holding a look of dejection. Footsteps approached, "-you ok?" asked Lampard.

"No..." he clutched his hair in dismissal, "-it can't be possible," a cracked phone laid on the floor, the revealing picture of him and Jen kissing flickered on and off.

"Dude, pull yourself together," said Lampard shaking his shoulder, "-come on, wake the hell up!"

“YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND,” the voice echoed down the hall until a closed-door with escaping feeble lights. Whimpers could be heard faintly, though, the shouting muted the cries of woe. “I TOLD HER TO NOT POST ON MY ACCOUNT, SHE’S DAMNED STUPID,” a slam on the decorative cupboard wiggled the glass-cups into falling.

“Why is it so important?” the cups crashed onto the floor.

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“Lampard, sorry, I can’t,” he twirled aimlessly, “-I can’t, my mind doesn’t think anymore,” the arms exploded with ups and downs.

“DUDE, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?”

“LAMPARD, SHUT THE FUCK UP!” the echoed dulled the hallway.

“Fine,” he turned, “-suit yourself,” *SLAM*

“Lampard?” said Rena cuddling Jen who cried onto her lap, “-why is he getting so angry about that photo?”

“I can’t believe the nerve on that guy,” he bolted for the window, “-I’m trying to help and he just pushes me away. What the hell? Like, COME ON.”

“I don’t get it either,” whimpered Jen, “-after we’ve done everything together,” she sniffled, “-a measly picture had him nearly slapping me... I don’t get it.”

“Jen, did he hurt you?” asked Rena strongly, “-if so...”

“Don’t.”

“Lampard, let go of my shoulders.”

“Leonard might come across smug sometimes,” shadows hid his gaze, “-he’ll never hit a woman. That bastard is a respectable man, the picture must have more riding than we expect. If only we knew what it was...” he wandered again to the window. ‘Isn’t that?’

“Something the matter?” breathed Rena deeply.

“Come over here, he’s on the phone,” to which she jumped to eavesdrop below, the voice was faint but audible.

“Hello,” he paced about with frustration.

“Hello, Leonard, are you well?”

“Yes, mother, it’s been a long time since we’ve spoken.”

“Son, can you explain the picture of you kissing another girl?” her pitch came like sharpened daggers, “-Is this something I or your father agreed upon? The Adventuring Academy was supposed to make you strong, not weak by the fake promise of love. Do you know what’s best if this relation continues? As part of the main-family branch, you must marry into prestige and wealth. Son, I’m willing to look away if the

relationship is broken, sullyng our family name is a burden one mustn't bear, else the whole nobility stands to be badmouthed."

"Mother, please," he pleaded, "-I was going to tell you, time was an issue. Please, listen to me, I do really love her!" the call ended without another word said. Upright to slumped on all fours, Leonard's composure broke with tears rolling onto the stone-path.

"Did you hear?" said Rena, "-things mustn't be good. I hope he can resolve this soon."

The next day came, the entire sound system blasted tunes from the morning radio. éclair had the habit of waking the whole house instead of a single person. Rubbing the eyes listlessly, the curtains parted automatically. A view onto the mansion filled suburb covered by walls of greenery. Over yonder after Juei, the sun sneakily rose from the gentle-hills of Coria. A well-known monster-slaying spots ranging from Tier-10 to Tier-7. A chasm at the summit hidden by dense forest led into an underground dungeon. None knows how or when it appeared, what was known is monsters there were weak – that is, until floor 5. After that, any deeper and the difficulty increased shockingly with semi-boss class monsters acting as guardians. 'The leveling ground of novices,' thought he turning away, '-why am I remembering it all of a sudden?'

Down the stairs towards the rest area holding a yawn, a silhouette of a lady passed out on the couch, "-lady mother," he rushed to see her peaceful sleep. Bloodstains were few and many, the heels were separated, one on the table, the other on the television. 'I better not wake her.'

'There,' covered by a blanket, she wrapped herself into a more comfortable posture. 'Better make breakfast, I'll get lunch ready while I'm at it.' The door closed for the sake of her sleep.

"Don't forget to wear the lenses."

"I haven't forgotten," sighed he, "-give me a break," the phone brought the contacts from seemingly out of nowhere. "Done," the room rescanned to highlight multiple items. Recipe for the lunch listed in bullet-points. 'The Winter Festival is upon us,' thought he as news played over the earring. éclair made it certain to never skip out on the happenings of the world. He'd condense and regurgitate the information. Out of playfulness, he'd read the headlines and updates as if a real morning talk-show. The obnoxious laughing track after an unfunny joke made it unbearable. 'Another person murdered by a monster,' thought he on the way to work, '-the death count's increased. That's why Coria remain stuck to my mind earlier, éclair's been throwing the same thing on repeat every day. The cases keep on increasing, they say the guild's going to do something... there's yet to be a response.'

During the holiday's the Adventuring Academy had few tales of instructors giving special tasks to students for extra credits and money. The experience garnered would better help in future rank promotions. On the 24th of December, a message went round to the year one students.

"Attention, students of the Adventuring Academy – the director has assigned an optional task of aiding the expedition into Coria's Dungeon. Students who show up and participate will be eligible for an early rank-promotion. You have three days until the teams have been chosen. Those who make it early will go with the advance squads. On that, good luck – the task has been given to other fields, meaning, anyone can participate."

'They spring this on us now?' wondered Igna arriving at the town-square, '-who will be dumb enough to take the invitation. An early rank-promotion, what a joke.'

"Hey, Igna, ready for the festival?" hailed the same guard of a few months ago.

"Hey, officer," he nodded, "-security sure is tight this time of year."

"Yeah," he gave a long gasp, "-heard you'll be working the whole of the event. Must be hard."

"Not really," he scratched his head, "-you have it way worse than me."

"I guess," they laughed, "-I'll drop by when my shift is over, take care."

"You too, officer." Time showed 09:00, preparations were still underway, the stage in particular, drums played, musicians tested the equipment and technical staff worked tirelessly to have it perfected. Around the square to avoid the reading stalls, "-hey, Igna, good morning," waved Emma dressed in her cooks' outfit with stripes of blue.

"Chef Emma," he nodded, "-it all starts in one-hour."

"Yeah," whispered Emmy over his shoulder, "-aren't you excited?"

"Chef EMMY!" nearly dropping the bike, "-please, I've asked of you to not scare me like that."

"You three going to keep messing around or?" came the harsher Chef Igona, "-Igna, put the bike away and start chopping. I don't care if you got the afternoon shift, we need to prep the ingredients!"

"Yes, Chef."

The morning couldn't be said to do Leonard favors. The phone call of last night paired with the message of the morning had him in limbo. Jen tried her hardest to have an answer. He'd but avoid her under the pretense of work. Lampard and Rena stood idly for they had snuck a listen of last night's conversation.

"This goes beyond what I'd imagine," sighed Rena sprawled over the grassy yard.

"I know, being a noble is hard. Shouldn't we tell Jen?"

"No. It's something he has to do, alone. By the way, what do you make of this message?"

SLAM "LEONARD, I'VE HAD ENOUGH," screamed Jen barging into the bath.

"Take it easy," said he under the shower.

"What did I do wrong?"

"What did you do wrong?" he walked out the showers, "-DO YOU HAVE THE NERVE TO ASK ME THAT?" the door slammed shut.

"YES, I can't deal with it, tell me right now."

"Fine. My parents found out we were dating because of the picture you uploaded. There's a reason I told you to keep it private, but you never listen, do you..."

"Is this my fault now, why should I keep my relation private, don't I have the right to do anything?"

“There you go again,” he kicked the door menacingly, “-your relation, not ours, not us, you make it about you, and YOU alone. Frankly, I’ve had enough. Even if I tell you what happened, there’s no way you’ll understand.”

“OH, I’M THE ONE WHO’S AT FAULT? What of you, why do you keep it secret, why can’t I be open about who I loved. I’m done with your insecurities, goodbye,” she darted down the hallway.

“IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT!” screamed he.

‘All my fault, screw you,’ the front-gates opened without a sound.

Chapter 477: Jen’s trouble

‘How is uploading a picture so detrimental. Why did it turn out this way, all I wanted was to be like a normal couple. Coming to the capital for the celebration was a mistake. What a joke.’ The sun made his round to be perched at noon, the unbearable heat made sight blurry. Without knowing, Jen walked from Juei towards the tram-stop and headed for the town square.

There, she browsed the multiple stalls with purpose, the body knew where it was headed, as for the mind, nothing. The festive mood sure was contagious, people handed out flyers – crowds from all over came to partake. A local band performed tranquil music to set the mood, the guitar-focused olden-style altered the whole setting. The antique architecture couldn’t have been more perfect. And so, amidst the countless queues – she headed north, past the stage in the middle to a clearer opening. There, stalls and people were few, the path curved around Loron’s place outwards to the other adjacent buildings. ‘Here of all places?’ she joined one of the queues. One would have the impression there weren’t many customers – however, the queue, the curved peculiarity gave said illusion. In fact, there were more than thrice the people here compared to the other cooking stalls. The cooks worked tirelessly, ingredients constantly supplied and the queue advanced without stop nor delay. The pace sufficed to prevent any crowd gathering.

“Good morning, might I take your order?” asked a stern lady overlooking the queue.

“I’d like today’s special,” said she woefully, the tell-tell signs of extensive crying showed on the swollen face.

“That would be 15 Exa,” said she.

‘Expensive...’ reluctantly foraging the wallet, “-here.”

“Thanks,” nothing need be said or done, she turned to the cooks and gave a detailed order.

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“It will be done in two minutes,” said she pointing to a larger area, “-wait over there.”

‘This is where Igna’s been working for the past months,’ she gawked the expensive-looking arrangement. The line didn’t exclude white-collar workers, there were even a few men in well-tailored suits. ‘They must be a great deal,’ thought she leaned on the simple railing, ‘-why am I here... are they not going to search for me?’

Meanwhile at the kitchen, delivery for meat came steadfast. "Can you take care of it?" asked Joe holding the back-lines.

"Sure," dropping the hat, he dashed into the alley where men in blue-attire waited.

"We've got the delivery for Loron," said he gazing at the backdoor, "-might I see the manager?"

"Lady Jola is preoccupied," said he rubbed his fingers on the apron, "-payment has been readied, yes?"

"Yes..." paused the deliveryman tapping the metal-truck twice, "-please, check on the quality."

"Sure," he climbed inside, the lenses examined the quality with approval, "-good," said he, "-the last crate isn't fresh. I do hope it wasn't meant for us..." dropped onto firm ground, the somber threat brought a gulp.

"Yes, it's actually meant for the animal shop, we must have gotten confused."

"Do refund the amount due, no questions will be asked then," he made for the kitchen.

"Alright everyone, get down here," the scrambling of workers went to and fro. The walk-in fridge to the side breathed open the same coldness of the alps. The foam of coldness, the tingling scent of raw meat. Inside was cleaner than the outside, Chef Igona made it his duty to always watch over the ingredients.

"Chef Joe," the chopping board riddled by the sound of the knife, "-I've checked on the meat. Anything else?"

"No," he wiped his forehead, "-we've prepped for the next two hours or so. Go take a break, it's complete," the knife rested vertically beside the board. "-have a stroll around the festival, I'll take a nap."

"As you wish, Chef," folding the apron, the white-collar chef's outfit had Loron embroidered near the chest. 'A few months ago, I came to work with nothing more than a plain-shirt. Look at me now,' the outfit made him proud, '-I belong here. The disagreement between us and the Lordon all but reinforced my bond. Chef Leko, the experience has truly been eye-opening.' Through the back-alley and into the town-square, Emma, Emmy and Igona worked through sweat and smile.

"Going to take a break?" shouted Emma stir-frying vegetables.

"Yeah, we've readied the ingredients for the next two-hours."

"Good job there, boy," said the always grumpy tone of Chef Igona.

"Don't worry about him," laughed Emmy, "-he's telling you to go enjoy."

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"I will, thank you, everyone," a gentle nod and he escaped onto the fuller queue. 'Now then,' the contacts scanned the vicinity for inconsistencies. éclair viewed in more detail the external cameras dotted around. Said amount of people would surely bring chaos and trouble.

'Isn't that?' through the scan, '-Jen?' she sat lonesome with a plate in hand and food in mouth. The way she ate felt painful. 'Something happened?'

"Igna, would you like to know a secret?" voiced éclair.

"Sure?" he paused with arms crossed, "-impress me, dear friend." Details of the argument, the call itself, the opinions, and different sides of the story were made obvious. He assimilated the issue with a grain of salt, '-should I even get involved?' their refusal prior made it awkward to try and get involved. 'She's on the verge of crying,' giving into the fading sense of friendship, "-Jen."

'That voice,' she turned, "-Leonard!" the eyes met, relief turned to disappointment, "-Igna, it's you," she sniffled trying to hide the want of crying.

"Very enthusiastic," said he leaning against the railing, "-the others aren't here?"

"No," the focus turned to the food.

'This is awkward,' thought he at her visible discomfort, "-I'll leave you to it then."

"Stop," voiced she loudly.

"-huh?" paused in the motion of walking away, "-something you got to say?"

"Yeah," the empty plate dropped into a nearby bin, "-you've changed a lot."

"I know," he smiled, "-so have you," said he reminiscent of the old-time, "-getting in relation with Leonard, a noble no less. It goes without saying, I've grown more perceptive. I knew the first moment I entered the mansion that my presence was no longer welcomed. You and Rena feel threatened, tis what I felt. Anyway," he patted her shoulders, "-are you going to keep moping or will you join me for a stroll around the festival?"

"What do you mean?" a raise of the brows masked the woeful slumped lashes, "-I'm not moping around..."

"Please," he chuckled, "-you've been crying, it's plain to see. I won't pry," he faced the ungodly sized crowd over yonder, "-failing to enjoy the moment might be worse."

"But..."

"Shut up," he grabbed her arms and pulled, "-we're friends, aren't we?" they made for the inside where snacks, food, games, and various other actives waited. Her reserved smile slowly turned the frown upside down. Each passing moment in his company gave a sense of freedom. 'Igna's changed,' thought she running with him at the front, '-he's moving forward with or without us. We pushed him away and didn't try to understand what he's been through... makes me, envious,' an hour flashed in a blink and only a fifth of the festival was explored.

"That was fun," said he panting over a wooden bench near the guard station.

"How?" asked she sipping water, "-how can you move forward?"

"A matter of mindset," he smiled, "-there's only the future for me. I don't have a past, no memories... still, someone is waiting at home."

"Someone waiting at home?" she frowned, "-are you dating someone?"

"Heavens forbid," a nervous chuckle escaped, "-I'm not cut out for that sort of thing."

"Igna," she gripped his arms, "-I'm sorry for the way we acted yesterday."

"Don't worry about it," he gave a comforting pat, "-we're all dealing with our own demons. It's a battle that has no end, either you give or you fight, the result will vary. Some find happiness, others fall short. Look at me talking philosophically."

'He's more mature,' she kept on gawking, '-why does he feel like a big brother. I guess I never knew him. Leonard, Lampard, Rena, I'm starting to realize how lucky we are to have one another. He's been alone for so many months, no one to rely on, no family. Compared to him, my troubles and hardship seem naught but Childsplay. I was selfish, the smug expression is his way of showing kindness. All be it weird, the grin needs work.'

"Why are you grinning, are you mocking me?" he frowned in jest.

"NO, NO." *Dring,* "Incoming call, Rena."

"Pick it up," said he nicely.

"Ok."

'She smiled for the first time, I guess her mind is cleared for now. Leonard is being pressured by his family to break the relation. From what éclair showed, he hasn't broken the news yet. I wonder what he's thinking. He's stronger than any of us, the resolve might be troublesome. Either he follows the family or chooses love, either way, someone is going to get hurt. I better not get more involved,' he stood while she faced the other side.

"Igna!"

'Who is it now?' new visitors came for the afternoon concert.

"It's you!" a pair of delicate arms wrapped around his torso; "-I've missed you. Why have you not been to the mansion lately?"

"Lady Syndra. Please, it's unbecoming for a noble lady to be so open in public. Is your lady mother here too?"

"Yeah," the lady emerged out of the crowd with arms locked to her husband.

"Igna," said Lord Lordon through narrowed eyes, "-what was that?"

"Lord Lordon, it was beyond my control, lady Syndra latched onto me, please, I apologize for the disrespect."

"How scandalous," chuckled Lady Yuki, "-my daughter has fallen for my apprentice. O' the tragedy, am I to side with my angel's chastity or the firm libido of my prodigy."

"Lady Yuki, please," he bowed, "-tis nothing of the sorts."

"Stop bowing," a slap to the back of the head forced him upright.

"My lord?" what returned was a pure smile.

“We’re merely teasing. I know you and Syndra are close, it’s all good.”

“See,” said she rubbing shoulders, “-my parents have no qualms, why should you?” she winked. Her usual twin-tail hair was tied in a classy simple bun. She wore a lovely light-blue dress reminiscing of the sky paired with lighter-blue heels. Fair in complexion, her rosy lips, and curvier figure caught the eyes of many wandering guests.

“Igna, Rena said they’re coming to join us,” Jen’s pace soon halted in face of the Medusa of Cooking and her husband, the feared food critic.

“Who’s that?” said Syndra tilting her head, “-don’t tell me you have another girlfriend,” she cupped her mouth to hide behind Yuki.

“Did I come at a bad time?”

“No,” he laughed, “-Lord Lordon, Lady Yuki, here’s one of my roommates from the Academy, Jen.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Igna, I expect you at the kitchen later,” voiced she strongly, “-Syndra, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll have Igna show me around the Festival,” she snapped his arm, “-Father, mother, please don’t worry.”

Sat on the lonesome bench, Syndra spoke extensively to Igna. He could but answer to her whims – more often than not, she’d get closer as if they were in relation. Jen watched from the sideline reservedly. A strenuous situation to handle.

Dring, “Incoming call from éclair.”

‘éclair, you’re amazing,’ seeing a chance to flee,”-I’ll be right back,” he faded into the crowd. Before Syndra’s charm, Jen sat waiting for her friends.

“What’s your relation with Igna?”

“Friends, I suppose,” returned Jen, “-things haven’t been that simple between us.”

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“Friends, I hope it remains so. I’ve set my eyes on Igna, none shall take him from me,” the beautiful pupils sprawled as if the wings of a phoenix.

“Do as you wish,” said she, “-I’m in a relationship. That aside, I’ve seen you before. Are you Syndra Lordon, the pianist?”

“Look at that, you know who I am?” a pleasant chuckle eased the prior misunderstanding

Chapter 478: Bonds

“Obviously,” the gaze met with want and admiration, “-Syndra Lordon, la virtuose de Hidros, else known as the girl with the Frozen touch. I can’t get enough of the Synyata C’oldo – the arrangement is a masterpiece. Music critics have praised it highly to the point where Princess Lizzie, the prodigious Pianist of Arda, played it live.”

“Synyata,” said she peering towards a couple browsing a nearby shop, “-the composition came to me on one night,” her lips reminisced, “-all because of a boy I met so many months ago. A certain man who had no shame in troubling my life. We went through a lot; he nearly died at the hand of those I hold dear. Man,” she shook her head, “-I apologize for the prior animosity. I merely wanted to mark my territory.”

“I understand,” said Jen aching for the face of he whom she holds dear, “-the right person can change one’s life for the better.”

“I don’t understand,” she slid over to cup the unsuspecting Jen’s palms, “-why do you look so distraught. Did you and your boyfriend have a fallout?”

“Am I that easy to read?” the cupped palms grew heavy, “-I did something stupid and so did he. Things never went so bad before... I’m lost, I’m confused. Thanks to Igna, I was able to laugh a little and take a step back, I’m starting to realize the trouble I caused. Still, I don’t want to apologize,” her pride made it so, “-if he loves me, he’ll come, I know it.”

“Wishful thinking,” said Syndra, “-but I like it. Don’t falter and make him yearn for you, make him suffer.”

“Make who suffer?”

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“IGNA!” they jumped, “-don’t scare us like that.”

“What,” he mumbled, “-here,” with cream on the cheeks, he handed over crepes atop which laid flakes of strawberry and other goodness. “Rather eat and keep the mouth occupied than to cry or speak nonsense of another.”

“You’re right,” the girls glanced one another – the way the lashes fluttered, smiles turn to smirks, slight raise of the nose and brows, they were speaking telepathically, or so it seemed.

“By the way,” minutes turned into hours, “-isn’t Leonard and the others coming?” inquired Igna stood before a tent. Countless teddy-bears were arranged on moving platforms, the aim of the game was simple, knock one and the prize is yours. The concept might seem easy; however, the application was another story. Inside the tent, away from the eyes of the players, the stands were unequal, moving at differing speed, the vision was tempered by mirrors at the back and sides. Other distractions such as a jack-o’-lantern would often jump out to throw off the balance.

“Here’s three balls, good luck,” said the young attendant holding a forced grin.

“I don’t know,” answered Jen who scanned the tent.

“Give them a call or something,” added Syndra, “-by the way, I want the panda.”

“Easier said than done,” sweat glimmering off the forehead, ‘-here we go.’ *smack, smack,* they missed by a large margin.

“Give that here,” she snatched the ball and threw without taking a break. It landed squarely on the panda.

“We have a winner,” said the attendant grudgingly.

"Here, lady Syndra, tis a gift to commemorate our meeting," she snickered at the sulking Igna.

"It's unfair," returned he, "-a marksman can't participate!"

"Stop being such a sore loser," laughed Syndra, "-thank you for helping the incompetent Igna, Jen," none knew when but they locked hands and walked alongside the many other games.

'Look at them,' thought Igna, '-they seem as if long lost friend. Guess running away earlier did help somewhat,' the portrait when one would turn to say one thing and the other would return with a chuckle felt blissful. 'What will happen when Leonard arrives. Will she fall back into regret or overcome the arduous path before.'

"Igna," spoke éclair.

"Yes, éclair," he paused as the duo continued further inside the jungle of men.

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"Lady Yuki has asked you to bring Syndra to the restaurant. Lampard and the others are there as well."

"Why are they there?" he wondered as footage of Loron's security displayed the trio aimlessly looking for Jen. "Never mind stupid question. I did say I was working there."

A sudden splash of a large fish caught their attention. "Watch here very closely," said a man in a top-hat and a wand, "-the fish will traverse space and time," two bowls laid on opposite ends of a simple table. *Ting, ting,* two taps, he waved his hand carefully before the fish to then *poof,* a spark had the latter end in the other bowl. Small and young to old and rigid, the fish aged in matters of seconds.

"Amazing," said a young boy cheerfully placing money into a '-donation box'.

"Amusing, don't you say, Jen?" said Syndra in her classy accent.

"Yes," returned she holding an accent though not as refine and well-spoken as the lady, "-how did he do that?"

"Simple," came a group of young boys in uniforms, "-there's a mirror with a contraption below the table, a hinge that retracts the thin mirror. The spark is misdirection, the bowls were never empty."

"Is that so," turned Jen stood firmly, "-thanks for ruining the illusion?"

"My lady, please," said presumed leader of the group, "-we hail from St. Orena's research Academy, tis part of our duty to enlighten the masses," arrogant laughter followed. "Charlie, that's no way to speak to a lady," said another at the back, "-the common folks don't have what we do in our pinky. Let us leave and not watch breaths."

"Elion, please, my friend," said he softly, "-we must be respectful to every living being, goes for sewer rats and them alike." Blatant was more than perfect to describe the taunts.

"Lady Syndra, Jen," voiced Igna swimming across the waves of people, "-why do you have to walk so fast," the pace slowed to a halt, '-why are they so focused?'

"Charlie, look," laughed Elion smugly parting his hair, "-the ladies have a dog as their guards."

“Please, Elion,” he chuckled, “-what did I say about respecting the commoners?”

“My lord, you’re too much,” laughed the group loudly. It garnered the crowd’s attention, even the performer stopped to shake his head.

“You three, don’t bother with them,” said he checking the ‘box’, “-those boys come here all the time to ruin the illusion. Thanks to them I’ve not pulled in much crowd than before, it’s a pain but what can you do when nobility decides to intervene?”

“You insinuating these rejects are nobles?” voiced Syndra loudly, “-please, they aren’t worth the excrement of a dog let alone be associated with the upper-class.”

“Syndra,” whispered Jen, “-don’t get provoked by them.”

“Else what?” she shrugged to stomp and gawk at Charlie, “-I won’t budge until they’ve apologized to Sir Illusionist here.” A circle slowly opened to have them at the epicenter.

“My lady,” the so-called magnanimous voice lowered to a standstill, “-would you kindly step-away. Having you so close is an honor, yet, I must decline the advances of such a repulsive individual.”

“Shorty,” interjected Igna, “-better take that back,” he came to stand in-between them.

“Don’t get involved,” mumbled Jen sensing the powerful magical energy from the students.

‘Don’t,’ gestured Syndra, “-watch,” said she over the shoulder.

“Who are you to give me orders?” he raised his head, “-do you pissant really want to get involved with St. Orena’s Academy?”

“Pissant?” he looked down holding the worst expression imaginable, “-quite amusing that thee chose to use an insult with ‘ant’ in it, considering thee have to stand on thy toe to stare and still fall short. Pardon me, did I say short, I didn’t mean it so, my vocabulary is quite dwarven. Wouldn’t it be easier to get a stool?”

‘Listen here,’ he gritted, “-I’m not in the mood to play thy games.”

“Why not?” he laughed, “-I thought kids loved to partake in games. I suppose there must be a height limit for shooting teddies. Not to worry, I can put in a good word to lower the targets.”

“Listen here!” he grabbed Igna’s collar, “-I’m not playing around. Don’t mess with us else.”

“Sorry,” he latched onto Charlie’s arms, “-the height difference made it difficult to hear.”

“I’VE HAD IT – FUCK HIM UP!” mid-level projectile spells conjured, Ice-Barrage, Tempest-Wind, and Fire-Arrow made for him.

‘This trick is going to come in handy.’ The contacts detected the danger from long-ago, attacking first would be unwise as it would paint him as the villain. Now, the matter changed, it came to self-defense. Using magic in public gathering was a serious offense. ‘-Mana Cancellation,’ thought he as the interface displayed many o’ possibilities. ‘Lady Mother made it clear to not fight using magic. I’d be at a disadvantage when faced against mages – unless I close the distance, there’s no chance. The torturous training will pay-off.’ A side-stepped easily evaded the projectiles followed by wave-like movements to

touch and dispel the invocations. 'I'm not as fast as mother,' he closed the distance, '-and not as powerful either,' he dodged another spell by ducking. A backhand touch turned it to naught followed by three punches, '-but I can very much protect myself and my friends.'

"What's happening here?" came a squad of police officers, the curled-up students made them side-eye the spectators.

"Self-defense," added Syndra, "-these students provoked and disrespected a noble. Not to mention used magic in public. If not for my friend here, bystanders could have been injured and even killed."

"Lady Lordon," nodded the older man, "-thanks for the help, and you too, sir. They're from the St. Orena's Academy. They've been like this since the start of the Festival. Youth, I tell you," gasping at the coming paperwork, "-please, return to the celebrations. We'll handle it from here."

"Thank you, officer," the crowd dispersed.

"My lady, words can't express how much I'm grateful," said the Illusionist, "-I can get to performing without hassle."

"Not to worry," said Syndra, "-tis the duty of a respectful citizen."

"Let's go!" added Igna, "-your lady mother is looking for us."

"OK, ok," smiled she holding Jen's arm, "-don't dilly-dally." They crossed the sea of sweat and heat, the sea of claustrophobia, the sea of harassment. In name and description, Festivals were moments of utter joy. Nonetheless, they were also despised by many, predators would roam and attack through the anonymous freedom bestowed by the countless faces. Getting touched or felt while shopping, eating, playing – the list carried on and on. Despite how many guards were put on patrol, the issue could but be limited, not exterminated.

"Igna, say, how did you get strong?" wondered Jen coming to the lighter part of town.

"Training from my mother," said he panting, "-forget it, Lampard's waiting for us at the restaurant."

"What do you mean, mother?" they arrived. Lampard noticed to suddenly burst in shouts and waves.

"Over here, over here," cried he unbothered by the gossiping glares.

"Leonard, Lampard, Rena," said Igna, "-please, do keep an eye on Jen in the future."

"You've been with Igna, Jen?" asked Rena, "-what about..."

"Listen, Rena," courage didn't suffice to speak face-to-face, "-we were wrong about him. Igna's still the same boy we've known from the academy."

"Igna," added Leonard who quickly leaped into a tight-embrace, "-thanks for keeping watch over Jen. I mean it, truly, I was worried to death especially when that message came."

"Don't worry, man," he patted his back in turn.

"Jen, I'm sorry about keeping this a secret," he took her hardened fingertips, "-being a noble is more trouble than due. My family gave an ultimatum of us breaking our relation. That's why I didn't want to post any pictures, I wanted it to be a secret so I could work my way into my mother's cold heart."

"I'm sorry too," the words of not apologizing felt short, "-I didn't try to see it from your perspective," they hugged, "-I love you, Leonard."

"Me too, Jen, I love you too."

"I'm glad," smiled Syndra, "-Leonard of the Dukedom of Goldberg. I understand why thy hands are tied; lady Goldberg is very much strong-willed."

"Lady Syndra, might I ask why a lady of thy stature is here on the Festival?"

"You jest, surely," she pointed at the restaurant, "-Loron's belongs to my lady Mother."

"Speaking of mother," inquired Jen, "-Igna, what did you say earlier?"

The roar of a sport's bike flickered to cut their breaths. Silvery-white hair flowed as a seducing silhouette approached, "-Igna."

Chapter 479: For love

"Lady mother, what a pleasant surprise?"

"Igna," her melancholic posture rose above his shoulder, her heels made her taller than normal, the hair flowed ever-so-gently. No tie, nothing, she left it to the wild, "-thank you for lunch."

"I'm grateful you came," replied he solemnly embarrassed, such a refined lady had no right to be associated to the likes of him. A day didn't escape when he thought of if he was a burden to the lady. She'd return the same phrase, '-you're my son, there's no doubting it.'

A whiff of perplexion blew on their face, each gazed for answers to no avail. Lady Courtney's arrival brought the friendly atmosphere to a stand. She watched through her grey pupils yearningly.

"Lady Courtney," came a familiar voice, "-please, over this way."

"Alright, Igna, I'll see you in a moment. Enjoy the day with your friends," she grinned to casually engage Lady Yuki and her gloomy husband. The prior incident had yet to be forgotten. Being reprimanded so thoroughly and witnessing such heavy bloodshed, left not much to be desired.

Click, opened the back-door, Lady Syndra took the lead and greeted the still resting Joe. They made their way to the main hall where a single table held multiple plates of the food being served outside.

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"Lady Yuki wanted us to have meals readied for the guests."

"Madia," cried he in surprise, "-didn't think I'd see you again."

"I'm sorry," she bowed, "-I heard all about the-"

"-Shh," whispered to stop, "-water under the bridge," thus, Group C sat in the company of Syndra. The singular lighting of the chandelier overhead came across as eerie, the same feeling associated with an interrogation room. Save it didn't hail from the actual décor or the layout – the strenuous silence of wanting to speak. Words laid at tongue's end; no noise spawned apart from the mundane semi-mute chewing paired against the ringing of cutlery against plates.

"This is hard," exclaimed Rena, "-please, Igna, I need answers," she gestured towards Leonard and Jen, "-rather, we need answers."

"Yeah, you haven't replied to my question on the 'lady mother' mentioning earlier," gawked Jen.

"Fine," he sighed to use a handkerchief, "-the lady with wife's hair is my mother. I found out per a certain dangerous situation," Syndra gasped, "-I didn't know at first. Honestly, I figured I'd come here to help and make some additional money. There's not much use for it now. It was pretty weird; the queerness of speech and mannerism threw me at odd's end. We met, rather suddenly, and was rendered stunned at her proclamation. Imagine being called '-son,' when you have no memories nor anything linking to her past. She showed me a photo and further proof. What I hold dear is mine, and what she holds dear is hers, that's the way I see it," dried from speaking, a sip of water and the tale resumed. "Allbeit I was cautious at first... it only lasted a few hours. I was happy to know I had a family, I found my mother, and she gave sufficient reassurance. Lady Courtney Haggard, my very young-looking mother, she's older than she looks and is more refined as far as I can tell."

"You speaking of me?" approached a redundant clapping, "-Igna, what's wrong with you?" she cheerfully held his shoulder, "-I'm thy mother, not a lady, please, bear it in mind," turned to Leonard, "-you the son of lady Goldberg?"

"Yes," he gulped, "-Leonard Goldberg."

"Drop the formalities," she laughed, "-I sense you have understood the standing my son has now, do you not?"

"Yes," he nodded slowly, "-the Haggard's are one of the more, if not, the most prominent family in the entirety of Hidros. They own Phantom, which in itself has defused into other business ventures and even joined with the ever-fortunate Elon Empire."

"Hold on," interjected Lampard, "-are you referring to the royal family of Arda, the founder of the Federation... those Haggard?"

"Yes," they all but turned face, "-my lady, please, what's Igna's standing?"

"Fret not," a laugh escaped, "-Igna isn't that special. He bears the Haggard name, that's about it. I'm afraid he's cousins don't even know of him existing. After all, this boy here was the product of my many romantic ventures. He came to the world when I was confused, I regret my actions and the family was rather intent on being pure. Thus, we had to separate. He was entrusted to a now-destroyed monastery not far off the Azure Walls. I found no records of him growing, and after many years, we meet per fate's providence. My long-lost son."

"What about you, my lady," voiced Jen, "-who are you?"

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"Courtney Haggard, the older sister of the Blood-King of Arda, Staxius Haggard."

"So close," glared Leonard, "-this means he has a direct blood connection to the Hero-King."

"Please," added Igna, "-my family line doesn't matter. Mother said I won't be involved in politics and for that, I couldn't be more grateful. I've decided to forge my path as Lyoko Igna, though my given name is Igna Haggard."

"The Kinless adventuring name..."

"A part of me, Kinless will always be my nickname." On that, the long conversation continued further with Syndra and Rena adding their thoughts. Lady Courtney left midway after an important phone call. They laughed until Chef Joe stomped into the room.

"Igna, it's time to get ready," said he tying his apron.

"Yes, Chef."

"You going already?" asked Jen holding Leonard's hand.

"Yes, it's time for my shift to begin. Everyone, thank you for visiting. I'll return to the academy after the Winter Festival. On another note, what of the message, the Dungeon. Anyone going?"

"No, I don't think so," added Rena ignorant of the other's feeling, "-go to work already, we'll leave." Thus, they parted ways, Igona, Emma, and Emmy returned holding a full-filled expression. The stations changed to Lady Yuki, Igna, and Chef Joe. The flame blazed and the food readied, the crowd increased and the music played.

"Look at him," whispered Leonard, "-Igna's awesome, don't you think?"

"In what way?" added Rena not impressed.

"He was abandoned as a child to then find the original parents. I'd be fuming and ready to curse out her actions. Not him, he's calm and collected, accepting the fate and moving forward. We ought to take an example."

"I guess," mumbled a reluctant Lampard. One person noticed his demeanor, he'd been going through a tough time ever-since coming here. Doubt, stress, none knew. Rena contented on watching from a distance, the sullen expression of he who she cherished was painful.

The sunset ambered into the idyllic expression of the guests. Sweat and tears flowed off the singers on stage, the merchants were hard at trading. Group C headed to the mansion, the heavy load of the affairs of the heart took its toll. Meanwhile, as lights flickered to aid in sparkling the night; Loron graciously added lanterns to the décor, the overall esthetic was pleasant and comfortable. A step back from the noisy center of town. Orders came without rest, Jola swapped for Igona.

"You fancied the Jen girl, didn't you?" mumbled Joe dicing onions.

"Whatever do you mean?" he coughed.

"Shut it," he laughed, "-I can smell love just as clearly as the fragrance of spices. You had and still have a lingering sense of affection for her. A crush, how very youthful."

"No, that's not it," the mouth meant one, and the action said another. Syndra overheard the conversation to fall into a somber state of mind.

'That pest,' gritted she, '-how dare she!'

"You're wrong," voiced he, "-I did have some affection for her, not the romantic type, rather, it's more of a sisterly feeling. She's the first friend I made at the Academy and was by my side through the thick of it. Can't help do anything about it? Anyway, let's get to work."

16:00 to 22:00, the crowd all but increased. They didn't lie about the night shift being the more tiresome. People kept on coming from work, school, tuition. Orders stacked faster than they could prepare, the flowing line halted.

"Igna," voiced Lady Yuki, "-do it."

"As you wish," a fourth stove was brought, the single-handed method broke into the staple ambidextrous show of skill. Joe didn't falter either, he kept the pace without much trouble. Lady Yuki was amazed the most, she truly took a nobody and turned him into a diamond.

"Young man," spoke a deep voice, "-we've been expecting you," the gate opened to a hardened solitary figure.

"What are you doing here?" fired Leonard covering Jen, "-I thought I said the mansion be left at my disposal."

"No, young master," said the butler stepping into moon-light, "-as long as the relationship is maintained, you'll have no right to the Goldberg's or their estate. It's the condition thy lady Mother has added."

"I'm sorry for this," whispered Jen, "-Leonard, losing your title as noble isn't worth it. Please, let's just part. I'm at fault for the picture, it's a given I ought to take responsibility."

"Are you dumb?" he yelled; "-I resolved to stay at your side even if I lost my title of nobility. I said to Lampard long ago that I'd let go of everything to be at the side of she who truly loves me, and not my name or influence."

"Master Leonard, I'd refrain from going against the Goldberg's. The lady did foresee such a situation," a sword unsheathed, "-she also said to kill those who may want to take away the young lord. I see no reason to disobey," he glared at Jen.

"This is bad," added Lampard, "-we don't have our weapons. Fighting him here is a death sentence. Leonard, Jen, there's only one way out."

"Please, Lampard, don't tell me you're going to tell them to part... it's too cruel!"

"I think Lampard is right," added Jen, "-even if I'm to die for the sake of love, it better be me alone, and not my friends. Leonard, this is the only choice we have. Love can be rekindled anew..."

"Oh, shut up," exclaimed Lampard, "-I didn't mean anything like that," he pulled away the coat exposing few metallic items, "-run, we RUN," smoke grenades paired with flashes aided their escape. The trio barged out the front door and headed up-hill.

"What do we do?"

“Go after them, kill everyone except the young master. Nobility mustn’t be sullied, especially not by the hands of weak commoners.”

“Understood,” countless shapeless figures melted into the night.

‘Young master, why run, it’s a pointless effort.’

“We’re being followed,” panted Lampard. The tranquillity of Juei turned out to be a nightmare. No public safety officers, none to reach for help, they went aimlessly up towards the capital walls.

“We can’t escape,” said Leonard, “-my damned mother sent her assassins after us. We’ve got around an hour at best before they catch up.”

“You should have STAYED WITH THEM.”

“Jen!” screamed Rena, “-do you want to be separated from him so badly. Earth to idiot, we’re doing this because of your love for one another. Death, nobility, and stature be damned, we’ll get you to safety if that’s the last thing we do.”

“We can’t run till Juei,” added Leonard, “-if only we had weapons,” they came upon a steep slope – stamina dropped to a laughable attempt at climbing.

“We’ll need to take a stand here,” said Rena.

“Impossible,” voiced Leonard, “-the assassins are not that easy to beat. There’s a reason why mother keeps them around, the kill off any stragglers or opposition. They have no human emotions and can kill a Tier-4 Bronze Ranked adventurer without trouble. Former Silver ranks. We’re dead if we stop.”

“So what, do we give up?”

“No, far from it,” added Jen, “-what time is it?”

“Why?” asked Rena checking her phone, “-22:45, I don’t know how it’s relevant.”

“Means that Igna is coming home from the Festival,” they hid behind a building atop the hill, “-he’ll help, I’m sure of it.”

“And get killed in the process,” mumbled Lampard, “-are you dumb?”

“It might be the only choice,” added Rena, “-if we use him as bait...”

“No. We can’t get him involved,” voiced Leonard, “-he’s just and found his family. We can’t.” The steps closed on both sides, “-we’re surrounded,” said Jen jumping into Leonard’s arms, “-I’m sorry our love turned to this.”

Chapter 480: Kindness

‘I received a signal of distress from éclair 30 minutes ago. The last images of the Goldberg mansion and their butler are clear to me, the lady has made her move. They want to exterminate those closest to Leonard. Talk about a bad turn of events.’

“éclair, how far are we from them?”

“At the current speed, we should be there in another thirty minutes or so. I highly doubt them to be alive at this point.”

“The killers, have you discovered their identities?”

“Yes, partly, I’m speculating their ranks to be Silver. You have no chance of winning against them – maybe one on one, that’s still a far-stretch. You’ve trained but are weak to the wall of experience. I’d refrain from fighting.”

“Thanks for the head’s up, I’ll see what I can do,” switching gears to the last, the rebound nearly threw him off-balance. Over yonder as time passed, Juei’s situation became nothing but void. éclair tried hard to locate to no avail. The last ‘ping’ of Leonard’s phone was half-way across the district.

The suburban border of Juei held many scattered ‘under-construction’ buildings. The ruin-like appearance felt creepy to the sight, cloud hid and covered the moon-lit sky. The Pitch-darkness of the unlit area made it perfect for hiding.

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“Are you guys ok?” whispered Lampard laid atop the open roof of a two-story house.

“Yeah,” coughed Rena, “-the dust from the concrete is asphyxiating.”

“Bear with it for now,” mumbled Leonard peering down the staircase. He conjured a few detection barriers around the perimeter. ‘I can’t believe we’ve escaped them for more than two hours,’ thought he with mana exhaustion. The earlier escape happened by pure luck, a heavy truck carrying rock-sand drove past. Earth Magic was used to conjure Earth-darts that flung and struck the assailants. The impact paralyzed the body momentarily giving time to escape. Time at the Magical Academy proved useful.

“This a good idea?” wondered Rena clinging to a scared Jen.

“Who can say,” sighed Lampard, “-we’re on the run. I doubt they’ll find us here – let’s rest, Leonard, you deserve the respace after such a battle. I just wish we had our weapons.”

“I appreciate it,” he laid atop the rough roof – the unpleasant stinging felt nothing more than bug bites. Such trivialities were blocked by the mind, the body screamed for comfort yet the mind remained steadfast on resting. Around the hideout sprawled a block of unfinished buildings. The streets were also not ready, all and all, this part of town was blacked out from the rest. A black dot onto the “-picture-perfect holiday spot” a quote from one of the local newspapers. Shuffling of rocks below gave rise to caution. It made it unable to rest, Lampard constantly lifted himself strenuously to check the oddity. Say it so happened one was forced to stare death in the face, you know turning the corner, and it’s guaranteed death. The pressure alone would have much faltered, the few who peeked the corner can never do so again – tis the situation Lampard experienced. The assassins might have guns, peering over would end his life. Constantly gathering courage, the visible worn expression came as the price for the other’s safety. More often than not, the noises were rats darting from cats.

“Lampard,” whispered Rena, “-are you ok?”

“Why are you here?” returned he frowning, “-aren’t you with Jen?”

“No,” with a stomach to the floor, she rolled her arms and pointed, “-she’s sleeping beside Leonard.”

"I guess that's fine," he followed her arms, "-what about you?"

"I-I'm fine," their eyes met, "-just tired from running. You think we'll make it?"

"I don't know," he rolled over, "-Rena, I'm sorry you had to go through all of this. It's hard to deal with someone as indecisive as me."

"What do you mean?" her ears flamed.

"I know you've been in love," said he patting her head, "-I know it, I've known it for a long time now. I just can't see you be tormented anymore, Rena, I've always looked at you like family."

"And you've always ignored me," she turned her head, "-Lampard," a parting of the clouds had the darkened face illuminated, "-can't you see I've grown into a woman. I'm not the little tom-boy as I was before..." tears glistened over her eyes and made no effort in falling. Just then, reality hit. Her matured body, the long lashes, the thick and well-maintained brows.

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'Rena's a lady. I've seen her as the child as she was back then. How could I have been so stupid.'

"You've never even tried to look at me."

"Slow," he patted her head, "-Rena, I figured I'd face the truth. I've never had any feelings even if you're much prettier than before. I honestly want to become strong; I can't forget our past, there are things we need to do, and that, Rena, I'm afraid can't be changed," another passing cloud covered the moon once more. 'Why did I do that... I'm so stupid, why did I have to bring up the subject at this hour. I want to crawl and hide. Rena's tears, how long has it been?'

"Even so," said she, "-even if you don't look at me, I'll still try. Lampard, it's as you said, I've liked you for so long..." the words came at irregular intervals, "-I know you don't," she couldn't think, the mind spaced out to the point of forgetting one's vocabulary, "-I'll try. I don't care, I swore to be by your side."

"I'm thankful," said he, "-I won't promise anything."

"Didn't expect you to," a little laugh lowered the tension. Time went from 23:00 to 02:00, they hid, Leonard and Jen took as overwatch.

'Where are they, I've been looking around without a purpose. How long has it been,' the lenses displayed everything save the information to their location. "éclair, any leads?"

"Currently scanning the private cameras, give me a moment." The bike moved at a snail's pace, going on foot wasn't such a great idea. The assassins could strike, especially if nobility was involved, he was part of their group as far as concerned.

BANG, BANG, two vaguely quiet shots came from behind, "-Is that them?"

"MOVE IT, IGNA, THAT'S THEM!" screamed éclair, the interface showed masked men running after students.

'SHIT!' the tires skid to a 180 and bolted forth, the acceleration forced a wheelie. 'Hold on guys, I'm coming,' the heart raced.

“Run, run,” screamed Leonard, “-I’ll conjure barriers. Go on,” the bullets fired to end into the feeble looking barriers.

“What about you?” halted Jen.

“They can’t kill me, remember, GO, LAMPARD, TAKE ‘EM.” To which he reached to grab their waist and run, the barrier broke from the bottom, Jen’s face froze – a bullet hit his legs.

“LEONARD,” she squirmed, “LET ME GO!”

“No chance in hell,” said he tightening his grip, “-we’re leaving if that’s the last thing I do.”

“WE CAN’T KEEP THIS UP,” panted Rena, “-LAMPARD, GO SAVE LEONARD, I don’t think those are the assassins.”

“What do you mean?” the terror was bordering the realm of nightmares. The mask figures had kicked Leonard to the ground and aimed a gun at his head.

“GO,” screamed he, “-GO AND DON’T LOOK BACK!”

“FUCKING DAMN IT!” as much as the gut said to help, as much as he gritted, as much as the fist clenched, a sacrifice had to be honored, and so, with tears of ire blurring the somber streets, Lampard ran. Jen didn’t take it well, her nails dug into Lampard’s arm and left blood. Rena followed with utter shame, so much for being fighters, so much for training so long. In the end, without weapons, they could but run away.

‘Please make it in time,’ the roaring of the bike came so fast that all they saw was a blink and two of the four ended onto the building across, an explosion rattled the street. The remainder ate the pavement with cracked skulls and a dagger in another’s throat. He jumped at full speed and use the men as a cushion. A deadly gamble that paid off, ‘-fuck sakes, I’ve broken my arms and a few ribs, it shows a hemorrhage, my lung’s punctured. I can’t breathe...’

“Igna, is that you?” Leonard’s expression said it all, “-why are you here?” the boy rested between two bloodied corpses.

“You sure you can talk with that broken mouth?” he laughed unable to move, the internal bleeding intensified.

“Are you crazy?” he crawled over; “-I didn’t see what happen...”

“Have you heard of bowling?” asked he out of the blue.

“Yeah?”

“It’s like that but with living humans,” the face turned pale, “-Leonard, I’m sorry I arrived late,” the crunchy sound of shoes against the gravel path amplified.

“Leonard, are you ok?” cried Jen.

“Leonard, what happened?” said Rena tending to his wounds.

“Guys,” added Lampard, “-that’s Igna, right?”

“He saved me,” added Leonard wallowing in pain, “-he died.”

“Fuck off,” said Lampard checking for a pulse, “-you can’t be serious...” the heat vanished, the body grew heavy and the pupils lost their vigor.

“We need to move, now,” argued Jen, “-sorry Igna, we must run, the assassins should be after us,” her mind didn’t care for him, she wanted to protect Leonard. The selfishness, the greed of humankind, no amount of kindness could overturn the latent desire to have what one wanted. Rena collected the stray weapons. Leonard was holstered on Lampard’s back and ran off into the distance without care. The explosion birthed a raging inferno, the crackling of wood soon spread to the neighboring houses.

“Igna’s been killed,” displayed the lenses, “-estimated revival time: 60:00 minutes. Toggling Operation Swan.” Somewhere in Hidros, a missile silo deployed automatically. A projectile shot for the sky’s giving the impression of a meteor. “éclair’s duty is automated and separate, the task given is to ensure the safety of Phantom and the owner, Igna Haggard.” A few minutes later, a capsule landed a millimeter from the lifeless body. Articulated arms controlled by the spirit injected blood, potions, mana, as well as drop a strongbox. “Estimated Revival Time – 02:00 minutes.”

Over yonder ran the Group, “-I would have been the sacrifice a few minutes earlier. Why didn’t we take his body, why, Lampard, WHY MAN.”

“SHUT UP LEONARD. I’m tired of having to run away while my friends die. Igna rescued you without a care for his life, I’m not going to let another sacrifice themselves anymore. It’s done.”

“I understand, but why,” he turned to Jen, “-why didn’t we take him with us...”

“It’s our fault he got into this mess; I don’t want to think about it anymore. What is done is done, he sacrificed himself to save us, I’m grateful, tis about it.”

“How cold can you get,” wondered Rena, “-I admit I’m not that good a person. What you did there was beyond shameful. You stole money from him and disrespected his body, how can you do that to a friend?”

“Shut up,” bloodshot eyes glared, “-I don’t want to hear about it.”

“Is this really how humane we are? cried Leonard, “-it’s the second time we treated him like shit. I can’t... I’m done, I wish I had died there.”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP,” *smack,* “-Don’t be selfish,” cried Jen, “-this is our fault. Move forward, I don’t care, hate me, I’m going to save us. No way am I going to stay here and let you die for my sake, you HEAR?”

“Revival complete,” *cough,* ‘-my head,’ the scorching heat felt pleasant. ‘-Where am I?’ memories of the crash returned.

“éclair, I’m alive, right?”

“Welcome back,” said he, “-I’m ashamed to say the noble sacrifice amounted to nothing. The companions stole your money, luckily, the smart-phone is untouched. What is the plan now?” images of them scuffling across the empty roads came in waves.

“Going to help them of course. I’d have done the same, and have done so previously. I thought my regeneration took longer than an hour, it’s been 10 minutes.”

“Don’t worry about the details. The strongbox contains a sword and a gun. Please take them for self-defense. As for the bike, there’s another on the way. I’d guess in 20 minutes or so.”

“Mother’s going to be mad.”

“That she is,” affirmed éclair, “-the bike you broke cost around 50,000 Exa.”

“EXPENSIVE!”