

Death Magic 501

Chapter 501: Bad Press

'Shut up,' hands moved to knock the annoying alarm. Eyes opened or closed didn't matter, the result was still darkness. '-Man,' thought Igna, '-it's been a week since we returned.' Slipped into slippers, he stepped out to the quiet corridor. There, turning towards the toilet, the morning routine of brushing teeth and getting ready began.

Boiling hot tea held in a custom-made cup, the window inside the living room opened to allow the breeze. The steam flowed and danced, the way the shutters shivered added to the overall lonesome atmosphere. It felt lacking, for months the morning routine was done in the company of Anna, the hero who saved her fellow comrades.

The academy didn't once acknowledge the trouble. Not until the somewhat safe-return of the fighters. Pegasus lost one of their adventuring squad. Beth and Misna took mild injuries, though, the mental scar of the darkness and quietude did their number. Everyone from the escapade was held in Rotherham. Phantom took the responsibility of treating them, a task Julius strongly voiced.

The day was as if yesterday, a birdcage of metal landed in the middle of multiple vehicles. Vans of white and red with a red cross on the sides. They moved left to right, paramedics, mages, and alchemists stood with potions in hand. Miya's mana dropped to a deadly level – she used all her power to save the leader and prevent Jen's injuries from worsening. Lady Elvira came to personally assist the return. She felt responsible as the duties of Guild Leader assigned to Julius was her doing. Flashing lights, the warmth of sitting shoulder to shoulder with his cousin, afterward, all became blurry.

Aided by the frosty outside, the cup dropped into a drinkable temperature. He'd stand and wait yearningly, the question of who he was didn't matter. What lain was the injustice of the academy. Even after voicing the opinions loudly to guild leader Haru, she could but turn a blind eye. The reasons had to be kept secret.

'The academy's reputation is primordial. Anyone who dares disrupt it shall be let-go,' said éclair summarizing the piles and piles of files.

'The aftermath is better than I could have hoped,' thought he sipping cautiously, '-Lady Beth and Misna have been discharged. Their mental states are affected to a certain extent. The doctors at Phantom did the god's work. Leonard, Lampard, and Frost were healed physically. Leonard's shock had him stay at Jen's side, the distress of seeing the one he loved in such a state did make the heart weak. Lampard awoke from his coma and is kept for further treatment. Rena's delirious state calmed to a snail's pace. Her sanity returned at the sight of her lover, kind of poetic in a way. She's at the hospital for safety, none knows the extent of how it affected the personality. Frost wasn't affected, the vitality of that boy is frightening. He recovered within a day to return and continue the classes. Jen had to have her arm amputated. By the last report, she's yet to wake up. The curse seems to have made way upwards to her brain. They say she won't be able to make it. Anna, my roommate, suffered the worse of it all. She didn't only hold the barrier but endure the vampire's advances; gave her body and soul, and is now paying the price. The doctors have given up, science can't save her, the only hope is Magiology. Ila came out with minor injuries. Cole's by Frost's side. Ko had his arms replaced, and the others sustained lesser harm. All

and all, no deaths.’ The door closed with a subtle snap of the lock, the darkened alley hosted youngsters sneakily having cigarettes.

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“Hey there Igna,” said the loud landlord, “-I’ve already prepared the ingredients for today. Go and have a break or something. I know all about the expedition, must have been hard.”

‘Obviously,’ he strolled past the kitchen to quietly glance at an old newspaper. *Heroes of the Adventuring Academy.* ‘-disgusting headline,’ the glance returned, ‘-publicizing the horror we had to endure into a stunt to attract more students. The heroism of our trained students has shown us that those who are in the academy can fight off a high-tier demon by force of ingenuity and strength. A blatant lie and over-exaggeration from the Director. It’s worked,’ the shopping street came in view, ‘-more people are signing to follow the academy.’ Even at this hour, students under the premise of jogging slowed at the eatery wanting to catch a glimpse of one of the survivors. They’d pause, see his face, pass some unruly comment and continue the exercise.

‘More of them today too?’ arms crossed; a long sigh brought memories. After Phantom took care of the survivors, the media approached many of them, especially Igna. Normally, as the prodigy of Medusa, she gave them the slip and save him from the unnecessary questions. Alas, stranded at Rotherham, the grueling journalist invaded his space, harassed until he agreed to an interview. By then, the true colors of the academy came to light, an amber flame of retribution lit.

“How do you feel returning from such a hard battle?”

“Returning, how presumptuous. We nearly died there, and if it wasn’t for a stroke of luck, I swear, everyone would have been slain by the demon.”

“Yes, the demon, how strong was it?”

“Strong isn’t enough to describe how powerful she was. The beast killed a nightwalker with a single snap.”

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“Nightwalkers, is Arda allied with the incident?”

“No, the latter was a rogue.”

“Did you assist the fight, how were you able to stay alive.”

“I-”

“You ran away, didn’t you?” the charming journalist wasn’t goodwill. The media company, Teran, wanted to paint a false narrative.

“Please, wasn’t it the responsibility from the Academy to send help. Why is a student of the trade’s guild there in the first place? I heard people from Military-arts were on said expedition too. Endangering the lives of students at such a young age, the guilds must do better, don’t you think?”

“Wrong,” he lashed out, “-what you say is far beyond the truth. I had-”

“Thank you for the interview,” it ended abruptly. The words from said interview plastered and used were out of context. Teran had one goal, to blame all the trouble onto the Guild as an openly anti-adventuring group. By open, the conclusion had to be drawn by the audience. As obvious as it was, many didn’t realize, and Teran grew their campaign. On the other side, the guilds were appalled by Igna’s comments. They too were blinded and wanted to remedy the bad-press. The director soon blamed it onto the Trader’s Guild – under Arda, for the irresponsible manner in which Igna intervened. The masses were angered, and even though he saved most of the people that day, was thrown into the deepest part of human mob-mentality. All and all, it led Haru to give part of her standing over to the other guilds. Her status dropped, and the others were more than happy.

‘I caused trouble,’ thought he ambling for the academy, ‘-people see me as a traitor and someone who should have stayed home. Most of the academy actively avoid my presence. Heck, I found a few trying to tamper with my bike a few days ago.’

Nothing was clear as it seemed, the troubles kept on piling. Hope wasn’t gone yet for a fire swayed in the distance. A man wearing glasses ordering deliverymen to take cargo into the gymnasium.

“Hello,” hailed Igna.

“Hello,” he returned the greeting, “-are you ready to depart?”

“Are we leaving right away?”

“Yes,” said he, “-I told you yesterday, didn’t I?” the pause grew into a frown.

“Sorry, I spaced out,” he coughed, “-we’re leaving for the Cooking Academy. I don’t see any transportation...”

“We’re taking the train,” said he moving towards the gymnasium, “-we’ll take the one at 08:00. Go meet with the Guild Leader, she came to visit a few minutes ago.” And so, confused by why she’d come, he made for the restaurant. There, kissed by the amber glow of a candle, she ate gracefully.

“Igna,” she hailed, “-over here,” her fork rested and she patted her mouth clean.

“Did you call for me?”

“Yes, it’s regarding Cle. You’re going with Leko to assist with the graduation exams and will head for the institute afterward. Hotshots of the cooking world will be in attending. I hope you realize the burden you’ll face.”

“I know.”

“Good, are you ready?”

“Yes, I’ve mastered an ingredient and dish. I’ll reveal it at the event.”

“Now then,” her fingers locked, “-about the interview. I know you didn’t mean what was said. Rest assured, I’ve heard of the harassment from éclair. Don’t worry, Arda’s taking the matter to heart. Phantom’s gotten involved too, I heard, your mother, lady Courtney paid a visit to the director of Teran. Go with a cleared mind, there’s nothing more hurtful to see someone fail.”

"I will," he stood, "-please excuse me, I have preparations to do."

Time continued on until the train arrived. They traveled to the capital where a five-hour flight waited. The plane made sure not to go anywhere near Totrya or the Azure-wall. Instead, the flight went about Kreston and soon into Plaustan. The more tourist-friendly part of the continent. Here, the terrain isn't rogue, most of the greener land towards the borders were farm-lands and idyllic farm villages. The real treasure was towards the coast, the plane landed. Naturally, the area around the Tower of Aria was restricted.

Touch down led into a steaming paradise of hot sun and sweaty air. Most were dressed in shorts and shirts. "Come on, don't be impressed," a car waited for Leko.

The province prided itself on being for the elite. Stars and important people were often spotted at the reserves side of the province. A district named Hephon was naturally barricaded by rivers and forests. The lower portion was for the normal as for Hephon higher placed than below, was for the rich. Many manors and hotels were there for the comfort of those who could afford it. Rumor had it a night at Msiza(a famed 5-star hotel) cost 500 Exa.

Stepping from the richest of the gifted, Leko's cooking academy stood near to the holiday town of Sunfall, a 40-minute walk, or a 10-minute drive. The town contained shopping malls, entertainment, and affordable motels for those wanting to relax. Albeit the emphasis on being for the chosen, Sunfall geared towards the normal folks, a place for the people. The drive after the airport lasted 3 hours along the highway. Going by how brightly the roads and foliage lit, the heat outside, and already sticky attire gave way to doubt. Adjusting to this weather might be more of an undertaking than he'd imagine.

During the drive, Leko spoke extensively to another lady dressed very professionally. They shared a close bond; she gave reports at times and he'd laugh and avoid the subject. Soon, the cooking academy, hidden behind countless trees and protected by a wall, came into view. Slowed to a walking pace, the car immediately turned right after the gates. It pulled onto a parking lot filled with expensive vehicles. The latter were around a tall building.

"We've arrived," said Leko.

"The academy?" gazing about briefly, he caught sight of taller buildings in the distance, what seemed to be a cafe, a yard, a tennis court, and a few more.

"Let's go," demanded he entering the tall blocky building.

"Ok..." following behind, the shadow cast gave a well-needed break from the sun's assault. Glass doors striped at the bottom in grey, gently pushed open. The cold fresh air of air-conditioning slapped across. The Chef entered confidently followed by the lady. The use of said area was unknown, éclair didn't take long to acquire a map of the premises. The working faces of highlighted names and occupations showed receptionists/attendants.

"We've been eagerly awaiting your return, director," spoke a crowd of well-mannered nameless figures.

"Good to be back," returned he sternly, "-has all been readied for the graduation?"

"Yes, director. Please, follow us to the grand-hall."

Chapter 502: Leko's Challenge

The great hall, as the name would suggest, would be a luxurious ball-styled room with marbles floors atop which an artist poured his soul in making lovely patterns in reference to flowers and gems. A curved roof off which hung a diamond stuttered chandelier worth more than a few hundred lives.

Reality stuck hard, leaving Igna speechless. The great hall was further from the truth. Before reaching there, they exited through the back entrance of the office building onto a lovely stone-path. To the left were fields where the students played football as well as run on the perimeter made to be a running track. On the right stood a swimming pool. The extravagance of the piles bordering the body of water sent shivers. As it so happened, the iron fencing separating the path from the various facilities didn't block much. A few students were spotted laying on beach-style chairs, taking the sun for a loveable tan. The amount of liberty given was frightening. Obligated to keep pace with Leko, they next came across a heated court for tennis. Balls smacked against the orangish color floor. Each time one would receive, the ball flew across with a less than amiable grunt. It felt uncomfortable as the seamlessly innocent sound could have fooled the wisest of minds. The size of the academy became apparent.

"Leko's Cooking Academy rivals most schools and highschool in Plaustan. The sheer size puts the Adventuring Academy to shame," said éclair. "The project was funded by the Trader's Guild, under the condition that Leko is a member and never leave unless permitted by Lady Haru. Part of the money comes from Phantom as well. The company in charge of construction is affiliated with Skokdrag's construction company. Considering the facts, Leko's Academy can be said to have been built using Ardanian craftsmanship."

"What about the students, what happens to them?"

"The nobles who graduate the academy are granted the honor to train at Leko's side for a month. There on, they are forwarded to the World Culinary Institute of Fine Dining where another test is conducted. Top restaurants around the world, regardless of the nation, come in flocks to fight for the elites. Cooking is a growing market; food will never go extinct – the skilled are in to make a fortune."

"Part of me doesn't think it's the only reason."

"Yes, that is true. They invested in such a show of a compound is to gather the truly prodigious to work for Arda. The province is now one of the richest around the world."

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"Yeah, I don't care about the politics. I want to know how they cash in favors..."

"Someone's gotten smarter," said éclair, "-it's pretty simple. The rich and famous come, they sign contracts with the Trader's Guild to become business partners. The chefs are often the heir to riches beyond a person's imagination. Add that to another reason why Arda's growing in strength day by day, another reason why the crown is in trouble."

"Once again," mumbled Igna, "-I don't care." And so, the path arrived at rectangular archways leading towards a massive grey-door. A slide of a card gave a faint beep.

'Great hall...' thought he after crossing the labyrinth of corridors, '-why does everything have to end up like this.' Once again, for god knows how much, rested a battle-style arena. The Hidronian culture was

one birthed off bloodshed and fight. Even now, in times of peace, even in a simple and peaceful activity such as cooking, was a place for battle. For an outsider, this belligerent behavior and will to sort out any misunderstanding on a battlefield, felt crude and barbaric. Yet, inside, for those born and raised, the survival instinct was primordial. Monsters, peoples, roads, even plants, anything could kill at any moment.

"This is where the graduation will happen," thundered Leko clapping down the stairs. The voice echoed in full around the empty seats. The closer the stage came, the bigger it was until, finally, he stood to face the audience. It'd take a few minutes to go from one end to the other. The screen behind, somber and unactive, toggled with the flare of a solar eruption. The disturbance fired across by jolts of electricity and crackling of white-noise. The screen froze, shifted between distorted images, and ultimately played a familiar video.

"LOUD!" cried he to Leko, who shrugged.

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"Igna, come here," he gestured.

"Yes, what's the matter, chef?" gently touching the earlobe, "-something amiss?"

"No," said he, *clap,* the stage rumbled, clogs and ticking permeated outwards the ground to the head. The assistants from before were nicely seated in the front row.

"What's going on?" the video behind showed, '-cook-off.'

"I wanted to do this from the day you returned," smirked Leko, "-partner, will you take part in a cooking battle?"

"Isn't it a bit too soon?" he wondered, "-don't you have to watch the students or something. As the director, won't doing this be disrespectful?"

"Shut up," he laughed, "-Igna, you worry too much."

"..." two cooking stations sprawled to face one another; a line crossed the middle.

"Igna, my partner," said Leko with pan in hand, "-Cle is coming soon. I want us to have this battle right now since graduation is upon us. The girls will serve as judges. Is that acceptable?"

"I don't mind it," said he, "-if you're sure about the contest, then I'm all for it."

"Attention to all students," intercoms blazed onto classrooms, the outside, and the changing rooms, "-Director Leko will have a cook-off against a young Chef. Anyone who wishes to assist, please make way to the great hall." Just like that, the empty arena shook by the multiples of steps.

'This feeling,' a glance showed the seats filling at a rapid pace, '-when did they get here?'

"Igna," said Leko, "-watch me, and not the audience. We're going to go head-to-head. Are you ready for the challenge?" he held a knife.

"Chef Leko," returned he, "-what are the conditions?"

“Free for all, make a single dish!”

Murmurs about why such an unprecedented event passed from ears to ears. The lecturers and instructors were baffled at the director’s actions. He, the great chef Leko, an example to any respectable young chef, was in a battle against an unknown. For him to acknowledge the opponent, he ought to be strong, was the conclusion many arrived to.

‘My arms and legs feel like mush.’ Cold knives stabbed his back, the look of dejection from the students wasn’t something to laugh at. The top student of the academy didn’t have the honor to challenge the director; the student council president, arguably the most talented youngster to touch a knife. He had been featured in many magazines, even Lady Lordon spoke about him on her various drunken escapades.

There, shy of the field of vision, the judgmental student council stared from their seats at the upper floor of the arena. Ingredients were brought to the center; assistants were at the ready to help in whatever way needed. Anything went as long as the rules were respected. The battle in question, free for all, meant, anything goes.

On one side, Chef Leko had picked and was readying the ingredient, on the other, Igna stood still facing the sink. ‘The pressure, the nervousness, I’ve never experienced this before,’ a feeling of nausea spurred from within, the vision narrowed, the hands trembled, and the mind blanked. The sudden change, the wanting glances of the audience were new to him. ‘-This is different from a combat trial. There, the attention is on staying alive, the body moves per instinct and the mind thinks of how to overcome trouble. Here, there’s no escape, the mind is free to wander and think of multiple possibilities. The fear of failing, the fear of underperforming. Is this the pressure lady Haru hinted at? Was I this much of a fool to think Cle would be easy? I’m failing here, what about the bigger stage, what about the expectation from Loron. They voiced to have me score a spot at the event – this is...’ *cling, cling, cling,* blade against blade, the slow tapping, the soothing sound of water boiling, the sharp smell of spice. ‘What was I thinking?’ facing him was Chef Leko moving graciously. The way the ingredients were prepared, *smack,* a piece of dirty-muddied meat flopped onto his chopping board.

‘Dungeon-Style cooking. Chef Leko is going all out, he’s not going to let me win that easy.’ Back to reality, although the nervousness and anxiety had their clutches around the limbs, Igna took the first step. Murmurs increased at every move he made.

“He’s completely out of it,” said a girl holding a teddy bear.

“Chef Leko gave him the honor of a cook-off, is that how he’s going to act?” rage-induced grits channeled into a clenched fist. “What’s so special about that good for nothing. Was I nothing more than failure in his eyes? I worked so hard, I beat every opponent, conquered the world of fine cuisines... all I wanted was to be acknowledged. I thought graduation would give me that chance, yet, he chose that, it pisses me off!”

“Come on, Chef Igna,” shouted second years, “-show us what you can do!”

‘The students from the apprenticeship.’

“Igna, it’s time to start cooking,” flashed éclair, “-the crowd is getting angrier by the second. Are you going to fail without a fight?”

“No.” Masking the nervousness with a smile, he made for the center and picked exotic ingredients. Things people would often cast aside. The choice sent the audience in a frenzy, questions about what the options and quality of the picks fired one after the other. The standard set wasn’t a thing to laugh at. Everyone in attendance was strong on their own merit. Aspiring chefs who would give anything to stand where he was. A position granted by merit and luck. ‘I’ve not attended cooking school. I’ve trained by the sides of legends and elites. That in itself is rewarding enough. I was given what most people dreamed about, I’m sure they’d kill to have the experience I’ve amassed. Getting started in a crowd isn’t worthy of my teacher’s effort. I need to be better. I’m the prodigy of Medusa and the assistant of Chef Leko. I worked at Loron, my understanding of the fundamentals is unbeatable. Chef Leko,’ digging around the pocket, he pulled the bandana. Tied at the back, the aura changed.

Similar to how Chef Leko pulled out a disgusting piece of meat. Igna pulled Kord from a tiny pouch, the reward offered by Kul. A gateway to the bottom-most layer of Coria. To his surprise, the lake also harbored Kord as well as another rare-type of a creature. Knife in hand, the prepping began. The ambidextrous boon worked wonders to ready the pans and stove. Bowl by bowl, ingredient by ingredient, the foul stench from Leko and Igna merged into a repulsive cacophony. The scent alone had many avert their eyes. Dungeon-Style Cooking, against Dungeon-Style Cooking.

Forty-five minutes later, the hypnotic and hard battle reached the end. Four plates on each side. Sweat dripped, anxiety from before vanished. Leko stared with a smile. Judges for the contest were moved to the stage. Three tasters waited impatiently, and so, the dishes were brought one after the other. Works of art rested on the counter; the audience was on the edge of their seats. The magnification of the seats all but swelled the appetite.

“That was a rough start for you, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said he to Leko, “-thank you for the experience. I don’t know what would have happened if I went to the event without preparation.”

“I just wanted to fight,” they stared one another with plates in hand, “-let’s see what the judges have to say.”

One bite each turned into silence, the elated faces spoke volume. The first dish was made by the director, most expected said reaction. Second, came the equally delicious looking dish.

“This is,” they crunched, “-amazing.” Rawness, fierceness, and the sense of danger from the dungeon, all transmigrated into their plates. Taste, flavor, spices, it all merged into a hardcore Xius song.

Chapter 503: Leko’s Gift

“I can’t decide,” said the first judge, “-I’m at a lost for words,” the crowd moved to silence. “The first dish has something special, honey as the base for the addition of multiple spices I’ve never seen nor heard of.” The other two nodded in acknowledgment. Leko’s face kept a mild attitude.

“Right,” said he, “-this dish is made specifically to show you,” pointing at Igna, “-the limits of Dungeon cooking. It’s a good concept, many chefs and I have tried to take it farther,” the hands clutched to crinkle his clothes, “-Goblin meat, the more disgusting out there, is also, the most delicious if well done. The spices are herbs we found on an expedition to various monster spawning areas. The limits are there

to see, masking the taste, embracing the taste, the meat restricts culinary capabilities, and I'm ashamed to admit, has left me baffled as to where to go from here."

The adorable sight of a mentor teaching his student played onstage. The students were amazed, the tough hardened, and heartless director they've grown to fear, was now, showing compassion, doubt, and love, to another. He showed his human side, not that he ever actively thought of becoming such a stone. The pressure of such a burden naturally took its course over his body.

"No," added the second judge, "-Director, there's something special within the boy's dish too. Just as you treated the meat like chicken, he treated his like fish, and the result is an explosion of the sea. I don't know-how, which leaves me baffled, my tongue has never failed to identify ingredients before. And so, in face of what this boy has shown, I tip my hat. Look at the way he's dressed it, look at the way it appeals to the heart. I'm sincere in saying this, Igna shall have my vote!" In a twist of fate, the boy's face glowed in ecstasy. Part of the crowd was so moved they jumped to stare blankly. Spotlights shrunk to add an air of tension, Igna and Leko's faces were contrary to one another. A smile here, a frown there, when one frowned, the other would smile.

"I beg to differ," voiced the third Judge, a teacher at the academy. Rose inlayed tucked up shirt above a pitch-black pair of pants running above her waist gave the illusion of a bigger chest. She'd try and not bring attention there as her face was twice as pretty. A beauty mark near her lower-lips and a famished look dowsed in seductive glances at the Director. Her hair, braided in a bun and let freed at the back, big bright golden-colored eyes held authority, "-the boy has talent, I won't argue, but lacks refinement. My pallet isn't accustomed to the sharp explosive taste of peasant food. What is this?" she wouldn't even take a bit, "-the smell alone has me physically moving back."

"Excuse you?" returned Leko, "-are you not going to taste his dish?"

"No, and that's my right," lifting her head to the audience, a black figure stood tall in blocking her vision, "-I don't care, lady Aiza Tiffens, refined or not, a dish is a dish. Are you that gutsy to question what I, Chef Leko, have deemed good?"

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"Chef Leko," interjected Igna, "-there's no need for conflict," said he rushing over. "If the lady doesn't want to partake, we needn't force her to do so. I only care about fulfilling the pallets of those who enjoy the rawness of my cuisine."

"Igna," he held his shoulder, "-you shouldn't be so cavalier, are you not hurt?"

"I'm hurt," said he, "-though, I've come to appreciate the experience. Lady Yuki has drilled the feeling of rejection into my soul, I can't help but smile."

"Young boy," she slammed to a stand leaving the cutlery to vibrate, "-who is this Lady Yuki you speak of?"

"Don't worry Igna," said Leko stepping in, "-he's referring to the Medusa of Cooking. Igna was once my student."

"Once?" inquired she.

"What are they saying?"

"Can't hear anything!" complained the crowd.

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"Yes, once," he smiled, "-the boy's not my student. He's my sous chef, the only one I deemed worthy. He's trained at Loron, under the supervision of super-stars of the cooking world, and most importantly, Lady Yuki. He's her prodigy, the reason why she returned to the kitchen. This contest was never important, I wanted him to experience the grandeur of the stage."

"Don't tell me," she sat with a solemn look, "-will he be participating at Cle?"

"Yes," he smiled.

"Are you serious?" her face flushed, "-is he the boy we've heard rumors about. The prodigy who had multiple Red-collared chefs vouch..."

"Damn right." All the while they spoke, Igna made for the first chef and shared the third dish. They graciously accepted to bring an end to the competition.

"A few things are lacking," commented the first, "-I'll give my vote to the Director.

"I enjoyed the rawness; it spoke to me. Good job, Igna," the second vote went to Igna.

"Whatever," the third vote went to the Director. Congratulations flashed with confetti and loud noises. Applause from the crowd left the 'great hall' shaking. Such a show of power and confidence, the look of complete control on Leko inspired most of the students. Well, until the time came for the winner's speech. Judges were off the stage, the cooking stations returned from whence they came, the energetic audience settled once more

"Greeting students," said he over the microphone, "-the graduation of the third years are fast approaching. The contest in which me and this boy," Igna followed his welcoming gesture, "-Igna, my friend, and sous chef, was nothing more than an exhibition. There are examples of truly talented people out there. By my side is one of them," he covered the mic, "-is it alright if I tell the story?"

"No harm is done."

"Good," returned to facing those seated, "-forgive me, I didn't mean talented. Talent itself is bountiful, though, similar to amber, if not provided with enough sustenance, the latter is bound to die. And here, the amber who limped his way to my kitchen is a raging inferno. Granted, he's not trained at an academy and only picked up the knife around a year ago – he clawed his way up to Cle, Medusa's prodigy. I know it's customary for me to grant my vote to the top graduating student for when the time comes. This year will be different. Igna Haggard will be judging the dishes by my side, and don't dare raise any question about his knowledge. He's being backed by multiple red-collared chefs and Lady Yuki. He's the same age if not a bit younger than most in attendance. Take him as an example and work hard." The lights died to leave the pin-drop stupor in the mouths of many. Footsteps echoed along the stage to then disappear. Murmurs spawned into chaos. More than inspired, they were offended. A nobody who took the knife for two years and trained under a legend is participating in Cle.

"I remember now," said the girl holding her teddy, "-it's the same boy we saw at the capital. The one who challenged the chef and made nuggets?"

"That plebian?" he scowled, "-how dare Chef Leko refuse to acknowledge me," the fingers laid between hair and scalp, visible irritation per the breathing, the anger boiling inside, and the disrespect felt, "-I'm going to destroy him!"

"Chill on the anger issues," laughed the girl, "-come on, let's go. We need to buy ingredients for the graduation."

"Yes," he stood to sort his tie, "-the student council has a few words to speak to administration. Come on," upfront, three others followed.

"Chef," ambling around the empty halls, "-was it wise to provoke them like that?"

"Provoke?" they stopped at a grey-colored intersection, "-I only said what is true. How is that provoking, I suppose, if they feel offended, one option remains, get better."

"You're cruder than usual," the walk resumed after a window giving to a lovely garden.

"Well," they stopped at the entrance, "-I have things to attend to. Igna, you a few days until Cle. Do whatever, sleeping arrangements have been made, or are you going to sleep somewhere else?"

"I get the feeling I'm not invited," the piercing gaze of the exiting students had him gulped, "-I'll probably head for Sunfall and look around. I'll be back by the 29th."

"Sure," he smiled, "-don't leave yet though. In an hour, some magazines are going to come for an interview about Cle. Better stick around since they're important in the world of fine-dining. The academy has a lot to do, just wander around. Better yet, head to the trial restaurant, you'll get to taste what the students are making."

"You even have live-practice, talk about being grand." The parts split towards the office and the other, unknown. Igna stayed a little to watch Leko disappear into the crowd, the faculty office felt so far away, almost out of reach.

'Can't believe the size of this place,' the path went right whereupon rested a massive olden style manor. The latter being the actual school area. The size was apparent only when having a top-down look or going around the perimeter. Aside from that, the beige color and pillars added a hint of homeliness. A feeling that soon flushed as the judging gazes of the students traveled from all around. 'éclair,' he headed for the building mentioned earlier, '-can you quickly check the student's name and affiliation?'

"Sure thing," a scan came in form of blue lines highlighting each face.

"Oh," opposed to names, the display changed to net worth and what company or family they were tied to. "-We got a lot of rich people here," said he looking about, "-most are north of five million Exa."

"Yes, reaching 500,000 Exa, by all means, is an impressive achievement. One enters the realm of richness. The 1 million exa you see are the people's whole net worth – including assets, houses, and other various connections." The amount fluctuated rapidly, those with one million or higher had a different air about them, an air of superiority. Those at the five-million were pompous and surrounded by others worth in the same range. Those below 1 million were ostracized into forming packs. The ladies

who held money were sought after and the men who were pretty enough were prey. The reality here wasn't far off how nobility and society worked. It became apparent that the majority were shy of 1 million, small businesses and smaller fortune.

'Is it worth speaking to them?' the walk carried until the hotel. Crossing the road into well-maintained grass, the training area was very much active. '-Why are they sitting outside?' thought he as the net worth showed below average.

"Don't go in there," hailed a student.

"Excuse me?" he stopped, "-is there something the matter?"

"No, no," said he apprehensive about speaking, "-the kitchen is being used by the student council. Going there now might bring about a problem."

"How so?" he shrugged; "-I fail to see how it may hurt." Ignoring the words of warning, Igna opened the tall heavy elder-wooden door. The immediate whiff of delicious food blasted the visage. Those outside cowered at the opening of said portal for they disappeared moments after. The particular situation had him weirdly intrigued, a hierarchy was about, one that was based on monetary and social status. Merit didn't help either, as good as a chef as they could have been, there was no denying the intangible upper hand the gifted had.

'What mystery does the trial-kitchen have.' Inside was a beautiful exhibition of fine arts. For an academy, it was a bit much. Still, not inclined on judging, Igna followed the sweet scent of cuisine.

"Excuse me," said a taller man, "-we've said the student council has taken the kitchen for the hour."

"I do apologize," he glanced inside, "-I'm new here. The Director said to come here if I wanted to taste good food."

"Who is it?" came from the kitchen.

"No one, sir."

"Kick him out then, what are you waiting for?"

"As you wish."

Chapter 504: Digest

"You heard the man."

"I guess," losing interest, "-there's nothing much here I suppose." The door locked to ease the atmosphere.

"Who was it?" approached a boy with white hair, "-did you kick him already?"

"Yes sir," said the guard, "-he left as soon as you ordered for him to be kicked."

"Any inclination on the uniform, what was he wearing?"

"Normal attire, he's the boy from earlier, the one who's going to judge the graduation exams."

“SHIT!” a chance to showcase the skill slipped from the oily fingers. Once more he had been humiliated, or so was the feeling brewing within. Igna’s walk went from top to bottom, examining the campus and wasting time. éclair played the previously known recording of Cle – walking was more of an excuse than anything. Looking at the chef’s checking their profiles, learning about the world of excellent cuisine. Culture and upbringing mattered a lot on the plate, the chef’s souls reflect on what he serves. A quote from one of the many magazines. As is the entertainment business, there are a few companies at the top who control how the populous view cooking. Like actors, artists, and entertainers, cooks are without escape. Popularity makes one’s business run, and the competitive restaurants need the advertisement to keep afloat.

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From what he gathered, there were three magazines hailed as the best. Monthly Digest, Weekly Digest, and FD-Magazine, short for Fine Dining. MD is the most sought after by those in want of publicity. The critics, gastronomes, and reviews are worshiped by a cult following of rich heirs. WD is more of the run of the mill news, being featured on there is a guarantee raising brows situation. FD-M is more on the common side of the spectrum, a bi-weekly publish with emphasis on anything and everything relating to food.

Going into details; what makes MD so wanting is the Chef feature. Those who can have their face printed on the front cover which is tantamount to drinking the ocean, are guaranteed an influx in sales and overall fame.

Digest, weekly and monthly, are owned by Sprint publishing. A renowned publisher with multiple famous authors under their grasp. Fine-dining’s ownership falls to Dodo’s Ink, a somewhat competent company who rose to fame per a single series of books. The history and rivalry between them two go up decades where letters were commonplace. Back then reading was the only way to get smart and entertaining.

As Cle knocks on the door, the various magazines rushed to the selected candidates for a shot at fame. Covering their background and maybe detailing the next remarkable chef is a plus.

The entrance inside the academy felt louder with each second. Sat under a tree from which dropped dead leaves, time passed until the journalists were here. Many rushed the premises, a mob of hungered packs of reporters. Even so, a group of select few stayed at the back inside black cars. A flash of grey hair strolled by half-way down the window. ‘Who are they?’ wondered Igna carefully examining the scene at hand. The seemingly famine crowd came to a sudden halt before a barricade. Orders were given to allow reporters... though it didn’t mean all of them. The calm and collected ridden on their metal steed stopped to hail the guardians. Those of big stature smiled to frown at the hungered masses. If one isn’t famous, if one isn’t credible, the world of journalism can end before it even starts. A taste of reality was served. In total, three were allowed in and the rest kicked out. Cried as they might, screamed as they would have, the danger of letting strangers in the campus overwrote any fleeting empathy. Inside was a treasure trove of rich heirs who, if by mischance, were to be kidnapped, would mostly bring a heavy ransom. The enticement, the dream of living a life of comfort, was too heavy a burden to bear. If a brother can commit fratricide for mere pennies or an argument, who can say what a stranger’s intentions are. People are scarier than any old monster or demon.

At their entrance into the library, the aura changed. Now that the crowd cleared, students could be spotted peeping from the main-building. Some even went as far as to casually stroll nearby and glimpse inside.

An assistant came running down the pathway, “-Igna, Igna,” screamed he, “-where are you?”

“Over here,” he hailed, “what’s the matter?”

“It’s the people from Digest. It’s the interview, you have to go.”

“Ok, ok, I’m coming,” and so they returned with the assistant giving few bits on the interviews. He explained as if it was something normal. The curious gazes of the students could have said otherwise.

A tidy office, two chairs sat before the dark-oak desk. Bookshelves as the backdrop and gentle sweet lights on the ceiling. The mood was set for one to recount a mystery novel. In said whelming atmosphere; the windows opened to allow the evening draft. Cameras, microphones, and photographers were seated behind the interviewer.

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‘The grey hair.’ Jumped immediately at his mind, ‘-why’s the tension so high?’ forced to tiptoe about in fear of disrupting the pressure, a lovely helper guided him to the seat. Where oppose the actor would have the upper hand on the discussion, this situation here felt reserved. Leko stood at the back with wanting eyes and crossed arms.

The lady cleared her throat and gave a handshake, “-good evening. I’m Lia from the Weekly Digest. I know what you might be thinking, the WD, what’s the point? Let me tell you something,” her face flushed with irritation, “-Monthly or Weekly, we get paid the same. Just because they have it easy and do it once a month while we have to do it 4 times.”

“Lady Lia,” whispered another.

“Sorry about that,” her face changed into a corporate smile, “-forget what I said.”

‘Bit on the unstable side,’ he kept quiet. “I’m sorry in advance, I’ve never done these kinds of things before.”

“You haven’t,” she leaned in intrigued, “-I suppose it’s like me taking your v-card in an interview,” nervous laughter followed.

“Lady Lia, it’s not appropriate to make such lewd comments,” whispered the same assistant.

“Not funny?” her shoulders dropped, “-whatever. Ok, Igna,” she smiled, “-don’t worry about anything. We’ll just talk, the cameras will record us and that’s about it. Take it as a normal conversation, does that sound alright?”

“Put it that way,” he eased into the seat.

“Well, hello,” she turned to the camera, “-for the guests at home, and live listeners; I’m Lia, from the Weekly Digest, interviewing our next issues. Once again, the company would like to thank you for the continued support in this avant-garde format.”

'What's this about live?'

"It's a live-stream," said éclair, "-here's the channel," he showed the page. "The video is deleted after the interview, it happens randomly; a sort of sneak-peak into the coming issue. You know, a way to build hype. Just deal with it for now."

Perplexed, to say the least, her ramble continued into an advert. "Excuse me, there was no talk about a live show," voiced Leko from the back.

"Chef Leko, please," said she softly, "-I'm handling the PR for this boy here. You personally contacted me," the intent went from childish to professional.

'Run me a background check on this Lia person.'

"Sure thing," the request went through and returned almost instantaneously, "-Lia Parnt, a former editor at the Monthly Digest. Her articles were always funny, well-paced, and filled with easy-to-read passages. The emphasis on such a simple style ultimately made her the best advertiser out there. She could be considered the incarnation of the snake-oil salesmen. She can change any narrative of any situation to fill her needs. A truly ruthless person who could bring even a politician to her knee. Many are glad she's not interested in politics, else, it would be carnage."

"Welcome back to the show," she turned to the interviewee, "-I'm here today in the company of Igna Haggard. The prodigy of the Medusa of Cooking, the boy who went viral a few months ago."

A pause and she followed, "Recent talks about the unprecedented recommendation from multiple red-collar chefs have many wanting answers. Could you give us a short story about the journey there?"

"Sure thing. I started off working for the Trader's Guild. There, I met Chef Leko, who introduced me to Lady Yuki. One thing led to another, and I found myself training as her prodigy. I am honestly honored to have been blessed with such brilliant chefs. They always inspire to get better; nothing can ever change that feeling." Though it fell short here, the actual story had more details of which the live-viewers swallowed without a word said.

"Must have been hard, training under such a star. The media attention should have had you in the spotlight months ago."

"Not really," said he nicely, "-I wasn't really one for the public eye. The peace and quiet are things very enjoyable. The ability to settle and think. Lady Yuki knew my intentions and helped in safeguarding the little-bubble I've made."

"Is it true you're also a fighter?"

"Not so much a fighter than a boy who can wield a sword. If things get rough, I can somewhat protect myself."

"That brings us to the Dungeon," her legs crossed, "-Lady Yuki, Chef Leko, and a few others began a project many years ago, a new style of cooking. One involving monsters as means to satisfy the pallet. It's still shunned by the community, what are your thoughts on that?"

"My thoughts?" a few seconds passed, he shifted from left to right, looking for the perfect posture, "-I suppose my intentions will be clear at Cle."

"I see," she smiled, "-keeping the suspense, I like it. On Cle, did you know someone from the Academy was also recommended to partake in the event?"

"Right now?" the eyes narrowed, "-here?"

"Yes, I'm surprised you didn't know."

"I'm afraid not," the lips dropped to a standstill.

"Give me a moment," her long arms pillage and robbed her bags, "-found, here."

"An issue of the Monthly Digest," flipping the pages, *The Future of Leko's Academy, a virtuoso of ingredients.* "The student council president!"

"Correct," she nodded, "-he's the one many elites have admired and respect. The innovations in his dishes go beyond what we think. The hard work he pours into each dish is something to behold. The nickname of Virtuoso comes from how he moves. Calm and flowing, a serenade of violins and piano."

"You speak highly of him. I'm afraid I was too busy having my head dug into a frying pan. The world of fine-dining isn't that familiar to me."

"It's fine. Setting cooking aside, what is the thing you hold most important in life?"

"Relations with those I care about. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for people. I'm grateful for Hidros, it's a good place to be. There're squabbles here and there, the continent isn't perfect, but I like it. It has its charm; people are motivated to do what they want. The drive to become better, I've seen it multiple times. The academies, in particular, the rawness of their passion, a very good place to be. What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

"Lastly, Mr. Haggard, I like to ask a personal question."

"Depends on how personal it is."

"The Haggard name, are you part of the Dynasty, and by that, I mean, Phantom and the Royal family."

éclair remained silent; the heritage would have caught up regardless of the time he kept quiet. "Tell them," said the spirit, "-people will know sooner or later."

"Yes. I'm part of the Dynasty. It's not that big of a deal. I don't have any claim to the royal throne. I'm a Haggard in name alone, that's about it."

"Still," said she, "-the Haggard name is very respected around the continent."

"I know," said he, "-my uncle is the example of what a leader should endeavor to be."

Chapter 505: Sunfall

The interview ended in due time. A small crowd of curious adventurous students etched ever so close to the faculty office. The reporters stood to stride out the office. Lia paused to gesture at Chef Leko. A gentle push had him follow behind. The empty seat was soon filled by photographers moving close. Flashes blinded the eyes, they gave subtle instructions on how to smile, how to act, and how to pause. A

subtle photoshoot to promote the next issue. The live-stream ended with many viewers peaking at 5,043 reaching the end.

Snippets of the interview soon traveled around social media. Many, prominently 'girls' were quoting, sharing, and reposting said clips. A certain one where he'd casually lift the long hair eventually garnered 'trending' status. Most of the traffic occurred on Thwan where users often quote other users. One thing led to the other, a certain profile on Hwan (used to post and share pictures) linked to Igna's personal account. A profile relatively quiet holding about a few dozen followers and two pictures. One of Azure's pass, and the other of another landscape. More than he'd enjoy, the pictures were liked by hundreds of people to rest at around seven-hundred.

"Igna," tinkled éclair, "-looks like you're back in the spotlight." By that, he meant the cult-like following. There came in to play the video of him cooking with Lady Yuki. By all accounts, Igna, not to exaggerate, is handsome, very much so. A man who'd many ladies wouldn't disagree to speak and engage in conversation. Not to discriminate, boys playing for the other team might have been interested as well. As means to tease, live-footage of what circulated the Arcanum scrolled along with the display.

"Medusa's prodigy is so cute," said one linking to the interview.

"The way he speaks, I love his voice," said another using a heart-eyes sticker.

"I can't believe he's been cooking for so short a time."

"Look at this guy," said another in caps, "-thinks he's great and all, what's to see about him. All there I see is some guy doing an interview, what's this platform coming up too." Said quote was requoted by another user saying, "-what do you see, all I see is you overusing see. Obviously below average dudes will feel uneasy at that man's persona." Thus, a war flamed in the comment section of the pinned quote, an argument of young boys and girls spread onto multiple paragraphs.

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"Igna Haggard," quoted another, "-we finally have a name to pin with the face."

"I've found the Hwan account," said they sharing his username. Cunningness over the Arcanum wasn't really a thing to consider until now, the phone vibrated constantly per follower.

"Using Kinless as the username and Igna Haggard is sort of dumb on your part," mocked éclair. "-Not to mention you're being followed by Prince Julius Arnet Haggard who boasts over 3.2 million followers on Hwan and 7 million on Thwan."

"The follower count is impressive. I did feel a little honored to have such a person follow me back."

"Well, well," said éclair, "-you might be Arcanum famous soon." The bootleg shoot ended. Lighting and cameras were loaded into black-bags.

Giggling at the sudden experience, "-excuse me," called a man dressed smartly. The face was generic as far as one could describe, the general smile of an office-worker. Short hair and a clean-shaven jaw.

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"Can I help you?" returned Igna smiling.

"Yes, yes," said he, "-My name's Yone, I'm part of the team that manages Weekly Digest's social media. Could you please sign this form and input your social media information, we'll need it for promotion."

"Alright," he stared at the page blankly.

"Nothing out of place," said éclair, "-the paper is clean. Go sign and let's go." Leaned over the table, few assistants briefly stared at the rather inviting posture. A clear of the throat by one of the supervisors resumed the flow of work. Items were taken out and soon the office returned to normal. No sign of any interview was there. A fake fireplace video played over in the corner. Thing was, the television was nailed onto the wall, so it served no purpose than to only give a non-realistic ambiance. 'Chalk it up to the Chef's whims,' thought Igna. The date showed the 27th of January, night came upon the privilege academy.

'What's my bike doing here?'

"Like it?" inquired éclair, "-I had it brought over from the Academy. Figured you'd enjoy the road-trip."

"Like it?" skipping a few stairs and nearly kissing the tarmac, the interviewer left as they came, silent and uninteresting. Leko stood onto the walkway by his secretary. "Igna," he voiced without looking.

"Yes chef," clutching the helmet between the torso and arms, "-did I miss something?"

"Are you going somewhere?" evening dawned in rosy-purple. The clouds were scattered upon the casted backdrop of the setting sun. Patches of white close and far, the distance daunted one's perception. The more he'd stare up, the more apparent the curvature of the planet seemed. Images of a snow globe, a trapped cage for the pleasures of someone's desk. Beyond it lays the presence of a higher being. He who controls the fate of the 'reality' many knew and loved. A moment of reflection, a moment of psychology, time seemed to skip, Leko walked blurrily. The figure transposed onto the road, splashes of white, splashes of dark, distorted colors, at the center came to a twirl, *thud.* 'Not now,' sharp canines pushed against the inner-cheeks. 'I need to go, like now,' the more he waited, the heavier became the breathing, a pinching headache, and parched lips.

"Igna, are you ok?" inquired Leko holding the shoulder.

"Yes, I'm fine," putting the helmet, '-can't let him see me like this.' The visor dropped brusquely.

"Are you sure, Igna?"

"Yes, I'm sure," a turn of the key, the engine roared followed by the wheels spinning until it faced the exit. The aggression created ruckus and left tire-tracks on asphalt. 'What's wrong with him?' thought Leko.

"Director, please, come this way," said the assistant.

Plain to the sight, Igna rode farther and faster. Each beat had vision impaired, the thirst forced bestial instincts. "éclair, help me."

"Don't worry," said he, "-turn right at the next junction. Darkness soon shrouded the land; the roads were scenic at day but haunting at night. A local map showed a singular caravan parked deep in a trailer park. Spots of forests were dotted about despite the sunnier climate. What followed next came straight from a horror movie. Igna dropped onto the couple in the middle of their loving bond. The craving for

blood and the groans couldn't but enhance the appetite. The smell of humans, their sweat, their feelings, the tiny tinges of blood from the passionate lovemaking. Rather than the front door, he dropped from the top; breaking into the sleeping area. Not a second went to waste, *Blood-Arts: Extra,* the ability to control any living being's blood at a subjected distance. He reversed their blood-flow at such speeds their heart exploded. A painless death, the liquid levitated to form orbs. *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,* the bodies crushed and turned into dark-shiny apples. Although the powers of the Death-Reaper were dormant – even as the Death Element slept, being a nightwalker and paired to the memories unlocked strength acquired in the past life. By the end, like a child wiping the ketchup filled mouth against sleeves, Igna did the same.

"Two lives sacrificed for my hunger," sat on the bed, "-how different am I from the vampire Kul killed. He had to make means-ends, can't really blame him, I've done the same thing. Not the first time either. The more I eat, the more I drink, the stronger I feel the blood coursing within. Waking the Death Element at this stage isn't important. I don't have to walk the bloodied path I've trodden. Politics, ruling a country, making a name for myself, I've done it all. If push comes to shove, I can defend myself. What a bad joke, I still carry a sword in this day and age."

"You going to reminisce all night, or are we making a move?" interrupted éclair.

"You right," he dusted the clothes, "-who cares anyway. I feel guilty for killing, but not that much. This feeling is completely new, I can't help but shake," exiting down the front door, the bike turned to automatically return at his side. "What about the evidence?"

"Not to worry," he accelerated, "-I have a backup plan." The blinking map showed a fast-approaching projectile. *BOOOM,* a flash accompanied by a shockwave, the suddenness nearly had him fall. The fiery explosion reflected off the visor. The immediate forest suffered no damage, what remained of the truck flamed vividly. Keeping still, the image felt pretty, as vile as it sounded, the beauty of burning trash soothed the prior shaking.

Date: Thursday 28th of January, the town of Sunfall rose prematurely. A single room in an inn on the outskirts of town. Looking from above, the layout of the town was a jagged half-moon facing the sea. Most of it came because of the slopes leading into a bridge that crossed into the 'beachier' side of Plaustan. By no means was Sunfall close to the sea. Maybe a three-hour drive using the roads or 2 hours per tram. A quick cold-shower had the mind refreshed.

"Thank you for your stay," said the lady at the counter.

"Thank you for my nightly request."

"Don't worry, sir, we have many more situations like these."

"Glad to hear it," a cheap room gave into dried-uncleaned dirt paths. One thing was certain, the vibrance of colors here was much more than the pupils were accustomed to. Coming to town was all but an escape. Deep down, even after slaying, the couple beat a nervousness of expectation. The interview dropped to overflow the cup. Putting the helmet, modest families walk to and fro in shorts and slippers. The flowery-style open buttoned shirt seemed to be a favorite. Time showed 09:30. 'A lonesome guy on a trip to god knows where. My bank account should have taken a hit by hiring Xenon. It still displays 10 million Exa.'

"The allowance is monthly. Lady Courtney is adamant about having your account stuck at ten-million. Clawing away at that fortune isn't going to do much for the ever-growing Phantom. We own about 4 Billion in assets, which are known to the public. Underneath the amount goes into double digits."

"I said I didn't want to take part in the politics," voiced he toggling the bike.

"Surely," laughed éclair, "-it's not hard to see the interest. Master Staxius, you may fool the world – but you don't fool me. I've known it for the longest time, else, why would I, a spirit ordered by the God of Death, to serve a mere child."

"Fine," taking a right, they drove into town. The buildings were pretty standard; clean and out of budget for some but most common and affordable. The clothes were simple, not that good o' quality. A massive shopping complex arrived in stride. The name, Consu, was written onto a roundabout. Either one turns towards the complex or away and towards the bridge. Igna took the latter, why go into the complex, why, without none to bring gifts for, it would be pointless and borderline sad. Blocks of buildings emptied to a slope over which sprawled a vast land of green merging into the blue. The bridge came after multiple curves.

"On the topic of Phantom," voiced éclair, "-Lady Elvira sure made good on her promise. She's enjoying the conform of being a noble-nightwalker. Serene came to welcome her into the Blood-kings faction a few years ago. Since then, business only grew profitable. We supply weapons, direct wars to favor our trade – smuggle drugs into other continents. Alpha hosts more of our customers."

"There's no way to have you shut up, is there?" said he distantly.

"No, even if it doesn't directly affect you, it affects the world around. Might I add," the tone felt inviting, "-I have updates on the whole Cimier business, the unfinished task of Shadow."

Chapter 506: The Sea

'He's not going to shut up, is he?' the bike sped along the dangerous roads. The refusal to have anything be linked to the past had death come pretty close. If not for the last second where a truck's horns felt like tremors, he'd have ended on the side of the hill. The driver behind noticed the biker's fleeting attention. Out of respect, Igna gave a thumbs-up.

"Cimier," began éclair's tale, "-have been on the prowl for more than a few years. Ever since they acquired Meldorino and conquered the Eastern side of Iqeavea as well as Alpha, the business between our two groups grew into war. Just like we're allied to the Federation on a secretive level, they've allied with the Emperor. The value in technology and advancement outweighed the always war mindset attitude. The five-conglomerate only grew to become pillars, a full-fledged mountain in our path. They hold the key to where we want to step into, the place from where came Snow. Things aren't that difficult. The Larson Family managed to etch a strong base and control over a small village in Skouso. We deal with them and they deliver to other gangs throughout said continent. Phantom allied with Elon's Dynasty is just about strong to go face-to-face against the five-conglomerates and their bountiful continent. Illegal as it may be, we're still smuggling drugs into their turf. The more the risk, the higher the pay. Our produce all but grew better, Lady Courtney came to invent another simulant named Dragon's Breath. Seemingly innocent tablets at first glance. Once inside a person's mouth, the eruption

has them always opening wide and blowing over the heat. We've no idea about the composition – the formula keeps on changing. The success of the novel drug is very much appreciated."

"Many battles and turf wars have been fought in the underground. The Dark-Guild is holding head against Cimier, for the most part. Elon's Dynasty and the Overlord went under much change three years ago. Lord Elon, our benefactor, went into cardiac arrest at his residence. Lucky for us, lady Elvira was on a visit – she quickly managed to turn the man into a nightwalker. The decision was of her own volition, losing someone of such power would turn the tides onto us. The advantage of immortality can't be refuted. Thus, opposed to the old man dying, he rejuvenated into the young-man who clawed into hell. The succession, as to not arise suspiciously, was handled privately. Those in the front know him as Elon II, the bastard son of Elon, who is in fact, himself. Quite a confusing affair though it doesn't matter. Thanks to that, we've managed to secure part of Hidros; mostly, Queen Elendor's land. Airbases, army, tanks, weapons, name it, and they have it. Phantom saw fit to bring about fear into the heart of the Emperor. And so, the animosity of the East and West began. Hidros stands in the middle of the conflict as originators of the revolt against Cimier."

"Tis a battle you began six years ago, a battle to fight against Snow. Fate had another decision in-store, and the revenge was brought to an untimely defeat per the god's themselves."

"Are you done?" an hour and a half passed. The roads gentled into flatlands of agriculture, cattle, farm-villages, and overall pleasant countryside. The balance between modern and tourist-friendly was counteracted by hard work and effort. Bluer skies had the eyes narrowed, 'the beach, we're half-way there.'

Rotherham, the day began normally for those working for Phantom. A special clinic dedicated to those deemed worthy by the organization awoke to the gentle pulling of a cranky tray. The building might seem new and comfortable, and in the most example, was more of a hotel than a treatment area, the rusted squealing of a particular tray always waned the empty halls of dawn.

"Hey, are you guys ok?" walked heavy footsteps.

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"Leonard," glanced piercing blue-eyes.

"Frost," they stopped to give firm handshakes, "-didn't think I'd see you here so early."

"Yeah, me neither," he shuffled towards a window, "-dreams have been more of a hassle."

"I get what you mean," added Leonard peering over the shoulder, "-it's hard. That day can't be erased from my heart, I can't."

"You've certainly gotten more dependent," said he half-seriously, "-it's not easy to stand up and walk with all that's happened."

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"Well," breathing a sigh, "-I can't afford to be left in despair. I want to be a better person for when Jen wakes up."

"About that," he pushed away to head for the waiting area down the hall, "-she's undergoing special treatment, is she not?"

"I guess," the couches gave to their weight. The white floor, white ceiling, and a single line running horizontally across the walls. Nurses in white, doctors in white, assistants in white, here white there white everywhere white, there laid a good reason for the 'white'. One he didn't know. "She's been receiving treatments from multiple scholars. I don't really know myself."

A tall figure ambled into the waiting area, "-Hey guys."

"Lampard," stood Leonard for a hug, "-you seem well."

"I guess," he sat with slight twitches of the eyes and head, "-what brings you here today? I heard the school sent another expedition into Coria."

"You heard right," exclaimed Frost, "-they ignore us and now this. I'm honestly ashamed to call that institution a place for growth."

"Calm it," said Leonard, "-you're disturbing them," the looks on the worker's faces greatly worried him. The lower the pitch went, the sooner they returned to work.

"I see," sighed Lampard, "-man, a lot has happened. I just wish the other students do suffer what we went through." An unexplainable bond formed between them, the strongest of those who joined at the same time Igna arrived. Mild differences of the past were changed to compassion, empathy, trust, and love. On one where society and the student-body rejected their fight and dismayed to ignore their presence, the comfort given by those who shared the same experience brought closure. A single hug, words of comfort or even a lie would have done. The craving, the want for acknowledgment ultimately became their regret. Licking their wounds, stitching each other's hearts; the broken mended the broken into a complex maze of emotions.

"Lampard, Lampard," skips and hums dissolved in where they sat. All came to a stop as she jumped and landed with hands in the air. Her eyes narrowed to glare at the faces with pouted lips. Locked onto Leonard, the frown brightened into a smile. "Found you," she sprinted to tag him.

"Rena," said Lampard patting her head, "-Come, sit."

"Ok," she gayly skipped to sit and bob her head.

"What about her?" wondered Frost.

"Doctors say the scars will go away in due time. Her delirious state is because of the medicines she's using. I've seen the results first hand; she's slowly coming back."

"Question is," mumbled Frost, "-what's going to happen to Anna and Jen. They're still in bad shape."

"Anna's body has healed. The psychological trauma she suffered; the strain the body had to endure whilst putting up that barrier for our safety."

"That's not it. Lampard, that's not the whole story," said Frost with frustration, "-she took on a vampire to buy us time. Gave into his crazy sadistic libido for us. She deserves more than I can ever repay."

"I know," said Leonard staring the floor, "-the girls were more powerful than us. We were worthless when it mattered. How useless can a boyfriend be!"

"Stop it," fired Rena, "-you guys did your best. We did our best too. What we knew in that moment was to save the other. It's all that matters," stern to childish, the hands returned to playing with the teddy. The conversations were always in this manner. None of them ever realized. Anna and Jen were the links gluing the newly formed group together. Ila and Cole weren't much of help. The duo spent their days at the academy, focusing on studying.

'Hot,' the bike came upon a gentle hill overlooking Ami's bay. Waves crashed into white fuzz over yonder. The aroma of salt and heat, to the right, crashed bigger waves. Visitors ran about in swimwear. Children made sandcastles; food stands were gathered to the left. 'I've made it.' Blue, greenish-blue, the discoloration of the lagoon added vibrance. Climbing down the stairs, the sheer size of the place came into perspective. 'So many people have come to enjoy the sun, sand, and sea.' The sand made it hard to walk, most of which entered the sneakers. The discomfort didn't matter. The water glistened invitingly. Who'd refuse such an invitation; the unpleasant heat gave rise to sweat, and sweat led to sticky clothes.

"There's a locker for hire," commented éclair, "-over there." Freed from the things in the pocket and all now safely kept inside the locker; the time came. Walking into the lagoon, the water moving against the legs, he pushed across the current and jumped. The instinct to dive and just swim. Contact lenses and earpieces were kept in his bag. A moment's peace without displays of people's names and information. He resurfaced to laid afloat drifting by the whims of the sea. It sure was tightly packed. A school had come for an outing, the screaming and shouting of the innocent children put a smile.

'The sea is nice, too nice. One wrong move and the ocean can steal a life as easily as she gives sustenance for the people. What was the point of coming to this beach? I've acted upon my whim. The peace is but fleeting. I'll have to aid Chef Leko for the graduation in 2 days. After that comes Cle, what dish am I going to make. Dungeon-Styled cooking. Experimenting with that new fish sure opened a lot of options when it comes to taste. Using wine to enhance the flavor seems too mundane. God's ale could work... well, I doubt the chefs will be pleased by me using narcotics. Sure fire way to get expelled from the cooking world.' There and then, a foolish idea dawned on him. The mention of Hephon and the five-star hotel named Msiza. It was bound to have great food, learning all about fine-dining could help for the contest.

'No, I can't,' water splashed onto his face forcing him to stand, '-it's going to go against the idea of cooking for normal people. Cle, I can't afford to shame those who've trusted me. Letting go of this pointless ideal is rudimentary. If I make a simple dish using simple ingredients and average cooking style, it'll look bad.'

An open shower close to the lock rinsed the salt, '-there's no question about it. I have to show the greatest aptitude of them all. No need to hold back.' Changed into lighter clothes, '-I'm going to use everything I have. Ignoring the fortune isn't worth the hardship.' An on-going struggle of whether he deserved what he had resolved in the most anti-climatic way. Part of his forgotten past showed how much he had to work for the gains. Using all of it now felt normal.

"éclair," shutting the metal-door, "-I need to make a reservation."

"About what?" he asked.

"What's the best place with the best food around these parts?"

"Hephon, in a four-star hotel named Balna. The owner went bankrupt a few years ago, service dropped considerably until an unknown owner took over the business. Their motto, affordable rooms and expensive food made for anyone's wallet and taste."

"How far is it?"

"Four-hour drive along the coast. The scenic road should more than makeup for it."

"It's decided then," helmet on, "-we're going to Balna."

'How hard must it be to run a business between those sharks. Balna's policy goes against what I've heard about Hephon. The competitors must hate them, bring down the value, and allowing for the norm. Not hard to imagine the comments, '-a stain on our exclusive area.' What pompousness."

Chapter 507: Special guests

A four-drive prolonged into five hours. Along the coast admiring the blueness yonder, he missed a junction and followed the wrong road. It didn't take long to get back on track, though it came at the price of time. Approaching the 'elite' area, the change began with a slow and gentle ascension. The road narrowed into a single lane, the forestry about grew thick and overwhelming. At times the signs would simply not give instruction, the more one continued, the more decrepit and deserted it felt. Normal judgment would kick and say return home. Not here, not in this case, éclair showed exactly where to head. The fear of the unknown turned to mere words.

Blue sky stuttered by floss-like clouds loomed beyond the tree-line. The road resumed, long and slow, peaceful or cautious, none knew. Flowing of water sang, a wooden bridge spawned as the portal to another dimension. The heavy blockage of the trees from the prior climb all but disappeared. Made by triangle supports, the pathway gave a clear view of the sea far down. At the mouth of the river, a delta formed upon which farmers grew plants. The brownness didn't extend far up the shore, few barricades stopped the dirt from escaping deeper into the lagoon.

'We're here,' he crossed into Hephon. Cleanliness and solitude were immediate. The road grew large. Numerous beautiful buildings were about, the lovely hedge-style barricades around various mansions accompanied by avant-garde architecture. Not stopping to admire, he sped along farther inside until a private road protected by brick-walls. 'Balna,' stood in a sign.

"Hello, how may I help you?" gestured a guard.

"I have a reservation," said Igna taking off the helmet.

"Yes, please," the actions felt unwilling, "-can I see your luggage and check for verifications?"

"Sure."

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A fresh breeze of relief dowsed the visage, the tight and uncomfortable relaxed per laid back shoulders.

"Might I ask why security is so?" wondered Igna noticing few people and more guards about.

"Balna," said he cross-checking with the receptionists inside, "-isn't that well seen per the inhabitants here. We're against sharks of the resort business. I don't know how long we'll last. Considering every customer that comes here is either a spy or plans some sort of sabotage, we have to be careful."

"What about the policy?" he wondered in pure curiosity.

"Shames me to say," exhaled the guard, "-the staff tries hard to keep true to the owner's wishes. Our food is amazing, and the service is affordable. I'd gladly take my family here if I could. Thing is," the check paused, "-we had a particular incident last week. Business's been low, and the scheme was successful," he handed over Igna's card, "-please enjoy the stay." Gates opened per a push, and the bike went on its way. No red-carpet was deployed, the building inside wasn't that impressive. For a four-star beast, the very compartmental design left much to be desired. Despite the 'boring' outside, a step in and the perspective change. A grand lobby with few customers roaming about. The workers held smiles and white-gloves. A pillar englobed by various slideshows went up to the ceiling. At its feet was a quaint little fountain sprouting water at a normal pace.

"Greetings sir," said the lovely receptionist.

"Hello, I have a booking under the name Igna," replied he.

"A moment please," she fiddled around the keyboard to breathe in awe.

"Something the matter?" he asked with a tilt.

"No, no," her hands hid nervously under the counter, "-you've booked the master-suite," the other hand reached for a card, "-this will get you access to the room. Please have a good stay."

"Thank you," he faced away, '-why did she seem so distraught?'

"You've booked the master-suite," commented éclair, "-the most expensive room in the entire hotel for two days and one night. It's bound to turn eyes."

"How much did it cost?"

"About 350 Exa per night."

"Isn't it supposed to be like, cheap?"

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"Obviously. Still, tis a hotel we're talking about. The prices range from 20 till 500."

"You saying there's another more expensive room?"

"Yeah, the presidential suite. I'll get into details later, head up the elevator – there's something you need to know."

Clean marble floors changed to the carpet. The suite was on the fifth-floor at the eastern wing. Here, the few guests about turned to a ghastly town. Ambling down the red-brown carpeted corridor felt eerie. The more steps taken, the longer it felt. *Master Suite,* no room name assigned. A tap of the card and

voila, an expensive room at a hotel. What could be said of the décor, not much? It sure was pretty and minimalistic. The few things about were expensive. A sunny-balcony gave onto the idyllic beach. In the end, the money was worth the view. *Slrr,* it slid to a warmer outside.

"What is it?" he laid upon a beach-style chair.

"Balna's gone through a few conspiracies as of late."

"Really?" he looked about curiously.

"Isn't it weird that the Presidential Suite isn't up for booking?"

"Now that you say that..."

"Let me speak."

"Fine."

"It goes without saying, what I have here has been dug up from the hotel's and local law enforcement's servers. Don't underestimate my power. It all starts about two months ago. The guests staying at the presidential suite were spooked by weird knocking at night. They reported it almost immediately. The footage was scanned and nothing was found. The guards were on alert but none pay much attention. Most draw it to the rambling of a drunkard man. The very next day, same reports and these are witness reports I'm quoting. He returned to the lobby and cried about seeing a shadow. Once again, they checked the footage and found nothing. At parts of it, the clip blurred and grew distorted."

"Hold on," interjected Igna, "-are you sure this is what happened? Getting the feeling of having heard this story somewhere."

"Shut up!"

"Sorry, sorry."

"Where was I?... ah, ok, found it. After three days, the guest left and another one came to stay. Bear in mind, the people who booked such a room were very often traveling merchants or businessmen. People of real stature choose the better alternative. Budget luxury, that's straying off the facts. Here's where it gets weird. The numerous guests reported the same shadow and knocks. A lady went as far as to record herself sleeping. To which," a video played, "-we see a figure looming around her bed. It makes no sound. The lady doesn't even seem to sense the presence. Fast-forward two weeks ago, and the incident turns tragic. A guest has a fatal accident. Footage shows the same figure, albeit unlikely, guiding the sleeping man off the bed. He moves, trance-like, to open the balcony and jump. The body is found and taken to the hospital within thirty minutes. Autopsy says he died on impact. Since then, the hotel's made it inaccessible for other people. An investigation is underway. I mean, you could have an innocent peep."

"Are you really suggesting this is the job of a supernatural being? Let me remind you, the world's normality includes the dead coming to life. And no, I'm not interested."

"I know," said the spirit, "-a bit of mystery is fun here and there."

"Out with it already, what's happening here?" fired Igna.

“Don’t you want to take a guess?” wondered he impatiently.

“An inside job, something to tarnish the reputation. Aiming for the weak-spot – a good strategy considering. What happened to the dead person, what about the family?”

“He was a nobody, no record on his whereabouts. I’m suspicious the death came earlier than the drop.”

“Shut up,” the situation brought bad memories, “-controlling a dead body. If Lucifer’s church is involved – I guess the new owner of Balna is someone from the DG or the Federation. Has there not been any news reports?”

“No, the incident was settled privately. Large amounts of money were moved from the hotel’s account.”

“It doesn’t bode well,” said Igna, “-fighting the drop is fruitless. The owner realizes it now. Pulling out the market is the only option. He’s going to sell it for cheap and save-face.”

“For someone who doesn’t want to get involved...”

“Shut it,” fired Igna, “-you did this on purpose, didn’t you?”

“No, I did nothing.”

“Whatever, I came here for food, and that’s what I’ll get.” Stood sharply, the main-restaurant came as a surprise. A supposed unsolved murder case didn’t stop the tables to be filled. The food was to die for. As the guest holding the master-suite, a table peering over a nice pond was always opened. The menu, the aroma, the deliciousness in the air watered the pallet.

The suicide case, whatever one wanted to call it, was nothing more than some good information on what happened. Balna’s policy would eventually crumble under the pressure of the other hotels. It showed in the worker’s hesitance. Still, upon that sunny evening, each bite warmed the soul. The texture, the difference in temperature, flavor, and aroma, the way the chef expertly played about with the ingredient, good didn’t suffice. He devoured plate after plate and learn of a different type of cooking. Guests and waiters became enthralled by the starved boy. Rumors went from the restaurant to the kitchen.

“There’s a young man on the master-suite table devouring everything we throw at him. He’s ordering even more. Chef, I think you have a fan.”

“Is that so,” returned a monotone voice, “-I’m glad,” heavy dark-circles and slumped posture all but reflected what was on the plate. Experiencing such a roller-coaster of a ride slapped a smile across the face.

“éclair, I need a favor.”

“What is it?”

“Have it so I can use the kitchen later. I want to experiment. The food here is so good I’m forced to hold a knife.”

Days went on till the 29th. Nothing major occurred, Igna spent the days and nights cooking, exploring, and experimenting. Hephon’s multitude of restaurants sure made it worthwhile. None was the wiser, as

long as one had money, there was access to almost anything. Dressed in warm clothes, the bike readied for the trip home. The cooking staff waved good-byes for he had worked into their circle. The always fatigued head-chef was pleased to give tips and tricks on how to improve. Learning never ended – an idea for a dish came to mind. It'd take a few days to perfect. Along the coast he went, smiling at the energetic kids running. Sunfall came after a nine-hour drive. Leaving early in the morning allowed for just about time to return soundly. The back did pain per the exhausting posture of riding a sports-bike.

Dring,

"Hello?" answered Igna able to stretch the limbs.

"Where have you been?" came through loudly, "-I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Why, what's the matter?" he casually opened the door, "-I said I'll be back by the 29th."

"Where are you now?"

"Sunfall."

"Head to the academy. I don't care how long it takes."

'What's wrong with him?' the room locked without fully stepping inside. A sense of impatience oozed out the call, something major must have happened. éclair couldn't help either, the call ended too early to provide any insight. Dusk shrouded the lonesome roads.

"Chef Leko," said a sharp voice, "-where is Igna?"

"My lady, I've called him, he should be back soon."

"Good, we want to taste the improvement of my wife's prodigy. Rumors about the battle made waves around the noble houses."

"He's very much grown," nodded Leko. The Lordon's flew over for Cle. Just as it so happens, Leko offered Lady Yuki to partake in the graduation evaluation. She'd step in as a special guest. Her praise would surely give confidence to the younger cooks. Despite the offer, she declined. Instead, Syndra would judge the food.

"I'm here," time showed 17:00, the faculty officed worked deep into the night.

"Welcome back, Igna," said Leko, "-I'm busy at the moment. Head to the restaurant, I'll be there shortly."

"Sure."

Chapter 508: Divine Tongue

From once being rejected; the restaurant sparkled to welcome Igna. Waiters were at the ready to serve, the doorway led into a mournful ball of music. A dancing hall had been cleared for those who wished to partake in dancing. The orchestra to the director's credit was very much talented. They played through thick and thin. The groups formed per vestment and status. 'This sight sure brings back memories,' he entered. Few recognizable faces were here and there, students wore their uniforms.

"Look," voiced a girl holding a teddy, "-he's back."

"The boy who fought the director," snarled the white-haired boy, "-I can't stand him." The entourage of the student council couldn't be laughed at either. Where one side hosted the rich and famous, his group hosted heirs of prominent families. A smile and gentle pleasantries exchanged.

"President," said a rather reserved girl, "-why do you hate that boy so much?"

"Patricia," he turned obtusely, "-I want to speak none about him," the glance clawed at another special group, one within which stood red-collared chefs. The aura of prominence and confidence dominated the cold floor.

'All these people,' thought Igna scanning across the faces, '-the different cliques. Why's there an event like this in the first place. Should it not be hosted after the exams?' The formal attire many wore, upon which he stared what he had, felt inadequate. They were well-dressed and mannered. The posh accent of needlessly pronouncing words with an added touch of 'pizzazz' grew tiring. Waking turned to tip-toeing, '-I don't want to stand out.' He snuck in behind the buffet. From one end to the other rose the aroma of utter pleasure.

Before he knew, the hands reached for a plate, forks and knives were out of the questions. Dish after dish, he took, gathered, examined, and walked away.

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"Nice choice," said a very short boy, "-the spices use in that curry is divine."

"What do you mean?" paused Igna.

"I mean," he walked up front, "-out of all the curries here, that one is the better. I know it by smell," to which he pointed at the face. "Do you have a good sense of smell like me?"

"No," he shrugged, "-I had a feeling it would be good."

"A feeling," the brows rose, "-are you joking with me?" it dropped to a frown.

"I'm serious. Besides," he took a bite, "-food is food. Now if you'd excuse me, I have to conquer a realm of civilized people."

'What a strange person...'

He stood close to the shadow of a large pillar. The breeze of the outside didn't intrude much for it only grazed the ankle. The warmth of the dishes was enjoyed in large bites.

"Juo, where have you been?" inquired the student council president.

"Browsing the buffet, president. What about you?" he tiptoed over the shoulder, "-are the ladies' company keeping you fine?"

"Shut it," cheeks reddened.

"Look at you," teased the girl caressing her teddy, "-blushing at the mere sight of thy crush. How very cute."

"Please," said he under his breath, "-Tristin, you can't do this to me."

"How the great virtuoso of ingredient, Kyle Darker, has fallen to the clutches of love and romance," jested Juo.

"Whatever," the shoulders straightened, '-damn,' the eyes locked to a very handsome lady, '-I can barely stare her in the face.' Amorous wants fit like a glove in the academy filled by the youth. Under the premise of learning, ulterior motives in forming relations to other prominent families loomed about. Many younger couples were formed by force. What could they expect, tis how the world worked, or so was the thought implanted.

The doors opened briefly into silence; Chef Leko arrived in new attire. Many ladies of age glanced to exchange comments about the look. He took note and nodded. Kyle tried to approach, "-Director."

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"Kyle, I have things to attend to, please see me after the ball." The exchange came cold as ice. He who only wanted to be acknowledge felt anger burn within. The face tightened into an unmistakable fury. "Tristin, I'm going."

"Wait for me," replied she. The council left in due time. None took notice of the strange exchange, most assumed tis a visit to the washroom. Cutting the middle of the hall for the group of red-collared chefs, "-Hello again," said he courteously.

"Greetings," said Lady Lordon. The circle around her opened, "-it's the second time we meet this evening."

"Yes," he smiled, "-I hope the event isn't much trouble."

"That you needn't worry," added a slightly tipsy Lord Lordon, "-we're used to these formal activities. So, tell me, where is he?" All eyes were on them. Comments went about, students cut short their banter. Rumors had it Chef Leko and Lady Yuki weren't on good terms. A baseless tension rose at the back. Here laid an example of how the media affected people's minds.

"I understand," he nodded, "-where's Igna at, I'm sure I sent him to the ballroom?"

"Where Syndra," wondered Yuki, "-she disappeared too."

Sat atop a curb under a lamp, mosquitoes made rounds. Eating grew hard, the jarring little creatures would swoop in to suck the blood out the exposed hands. "Little pest," he shook them off, "-can't I eat in peace?" The last bite left the stomach famine for a little more. 'All that and I still want food,' head tucked between the knees, '-why did I run away from the hall... I regret it. Man, I want to get something else to eat but...'

"This is where you were," her warm hands covered his eyes as soon as he looked up.

'So gentle and soft. This perfume, I've smelled this before.'

"Guess who it is?"

"I don't know really," he touched the hand for more proof, "-Lady Syndra."

“Correct,” she leaped in front, “-how are you doing?” she knelt.

“I’m good. Why are you kneeling, the dress’s going to get dirtied.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she laughed, “-it’s been a long time, hasn’t it.”

“Yeah,” they held one another up, “-you were featured in the Monthly Digest two months ago. Your palette has become something of priceless value. Lady Yuki must be so proud of you.”

“Well,” she sighed, “-tasting food has never been that fun to me. I must have acquired my aptitude for taste from my mother. It doesn’t really matter; the article was just something to boost mother’s restaurant a little. Anyway, why are you outside?”

“Came to get some fresh air.”

“I saw you,” she smiled, “-you’re uncomfortable, isn’t that right. The clothes aren’t suited for such a grand soirée. I’d honestly enjoy wearing some joggers and a hoodie. The whole formal dress thing doesn’t really fancy me.”

“You’re a pianist,” said he, “-I’ve seen photos of you looking splendid on stage. Seeing La virtuose de Hidros in a formal dress up so close is very flattering.”

“Stop being so sarcastic,” she reached for a hug, “-I’ve sure missed you, Igna.”

“Me too.”

Hidden at the corner, white hair rested against the stone-bricked restaurant. ‘What are they doing together... this can’t be right. My fiancé can’t be having an affair without my knowledge now, can she?’ he turned the corner once more, ‘-even if I can’t stare at her pretty face, my body can hardly control it. I want to have her for myself. Plating a dish is one thing, treating ingredients another... Syndra Lordon is of the rarest breed. I swear,’ he faced away, ‘-if she’s cheating on me... I’ll make it damn obvious who I am.’

The embrace cut short, “-let’s go over there,” offered Igna.

“N-no,” a slight discrepancy, “-why don’t you show me around. Don’t you know the academy?”

“No, I don’t,” the lips closed, “-whatever,” it sprung to a smile, “-let’s get lost together.”

‘éclair, search whoever was spying on us. I have a feeling something else I going on behind the scene. Syndra’s acting weird.’

‘On it.’

A phone call ended the unplanned tour of the grounds. Leko gave a stern talking, to the point of demanding for Igna to show up. Thus, the duo walked sloppily, on one side stood the lady in dirtied clothes and Igna in equally as bad attire. Luckily, the director cunningly called them to a private room on the first floor.

“Igna,” said lady Yuki, “-where have you been?” she went in for a hug.

“Lady Yuki,” he accepted the show of affection, “-you’ve come for the graduation exams?”

"No," she smiled, "-I've come to test you."

"Test me?" he gulped.

"Hello Igna," a secondary flung by the energetic Joe.

"Hey there," waved Emma, "-long time no see," added Emmy."

"I'm glad to see you're doing well," added the formal Manager Beatrice.

"Good, you haven't died," fired Chef Igona. The entirety of Loron made the long trip.

Taken aback, "-Is this really ok?" normally, leaving a restaurant unattended would hurt their reputation. The faction said side into the matter, Igna worried for them.

"Trust me," approached lady Yuki, "-we came here to fight you," the implications slowly settled in. "Cle will be hard. Everyone here has vouched for thy competence. Chef Leko relayed that you weren't doing so good lately. It's bad form, we're worried, not about reputation, but about you. Igna," she paused at Leko who then nodded., "-you'll always be a member of Loron. This is why," they all dawned the white apron bearing Loron's prestigious . Starting now until the competition, you'll take time to battle each one of us. I don't care about the cost, time, or effort. We, red-collared chefs, will show the divide between us. Dread if you haven't improved."

"Lady Yuki speaks true," added Igona, "-the basics can only take you so far. Show us what it means to cook like Igna, show us what you've learned on thy own."

"What about the graduation exams?" wondered he to Leko.

"Don't mention it," he scowled, "-the entirety of the first floor will be reserved for Loron. Go and lose, Igna, make mistakes, try, experiment, do whatever. The chefs from Loron will prove how much someone as talented as you has to aim for." Forget words of encouragement. This felt more of a mugging than anything else. The piercing pressure of the cooks altered his mindset. Long was the friendly attitude of the mentors gone.

'This is what it feels like to be somewhat competent at something.' The gang before him stood stronger than an army. 'I feel their drive, the passion. It's similar to what I've experienced before. War is underway,' the bandana slowly made for the forehead, '-I'll prove I haven't been slacking for the past few months. Come on then,' tied firmly, "-who's first?"

"The damned grin," laughed Joe, "-don't get cocky kid, this is the beginning of hell."

"Bring it on, chef." The scene was set, the ambidextrousness of moving about seemed to have imported. Yuki watched through a very critical lens.

"Movement wise," added Emmy, "-he seems to have gotten faster."

"Sharper too," interjected Emma, "-just what has he been doing these past few months.

"Sister," voiced Emmy, "-do you feel that aura?"

"Yes," she gulped, "-it's there, dark and wanting to strike."

‘Emma and Emmy Lymsey. The girls who were children when Kniq was about. Man, how time has passed. They are the same girl who cried per the death of their family. I don’t quite remember much. My last memory is of them coming by the mansion in Rosespire. They went down the culinary path.’

The first dish arrived in 30 minutes. Joe followed suit at 35 minutes. The tasting began, “-lacks consistency,” voiced Yuki, “-the seasoning is a little off. The plating is off-putting, try again. This is a poor display. Joe’s the clear winner here. Try again!” the more dishes were cooked, the harsher grew the feedback. An unclimbable wall built itself before him. The masons were Loron, the mentors.

‘The dishes are good, worthy of fine-dining establishment,’ thought Beatrice, ‘-I do have to agree with Lady Yuki. Something feels off, the taste is there but the emotion isn’t. She’s judging him with her god-tongue, there’s no way he’ll be able to please her in that state.’

Chapter 509: Kyle Darker

30th of January. Graduation was at the doorstep. Students being judged couldn’t bear the thought of tomorrow. Night of the 29th was a hard-fought battle to sleep. Nervousness, anxiety, excess energy worked to efficiently crush the will to sleep.

Article from multiple lesser-known magazines referenced said graduating year counted amongst the most talented the Academy had ever seen. Most of it was caused by Kyle and Tristin. It was sure to bring pride to the establishment, or so what perceived the outside world.

Inside, known to only a few people, Kyle hated the Director. The one who refused his talents from whence he arrived as a fresh year. The Virtuoso of Ingredients didn’t get his name until the second year. Darker, a noble family holding the title of Count from the ‘mainland, were involved deeply in agriculture. From wholesaling to retailing – high-quality ingredients could be obtained per a singular phone call. The growing Culinary scene boosted Darker’s profits. They went from medium company to international within years. Kopi, (the company name) expanded to work for Kuro’s Trading corporation. Setting that aside, the second-in-line to be the head of the family had to work twice as hard to compare against a very talented older brother. The only domain where his brother hadn’t claimed was Cooking. Thus, wanting to gain the praise of his parents, Kyle learned cooking. He learned, adopted, and hired cooks all over the continent to reach where he was. Shadow and underestimated to be known and respected gave an addicting taste of what it meant to be at the top. Thus, the boy worked to get into Leko’s Academy. A short following grew to increase confidence... he thought he was the best until the entrance exams.

On a rainy day, the crashing of droplets on metal sheets outside chilled the spine. Most students failed the exams. The time came for the Director to taste his dish. A shadowy tall figure moved to grab the spoon.

“Average, you pass the test,” not another word said, he went along. Before then, comments were always, “-wow, that’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted. You’re amazing.” Face to face against reality, the ego took a tiny blow. The feeling didn’t affect much. Tristin also passed the test. In fact, they were the only two who made it in that particular exam. On said day, Kyle swore to make Leko smile at his dish. Average, he couldn’t bear the thought of returning into the shadow. The hellscape upon which bred depression, annoyance, rejection, and pity. ‘I’ve clawed my way to the top,’ glaring the counter, ‘-no one is going to surpass me, I’ll become the best chef this academy has ever seen.’ As presumptuous as a

comment seemed, he stayed true to his words and became the best chef the academy had seen. Leko refused to acknowledge him, the director held an unknown grudge. Combined, the pressure from being a noble, the pressure of staying at the top, and the added pressure of marriage – led to what Kyle became.

The battle arena emptied for the occasion. Multiple cooking stations – ten in total, were laid to allow ease of access. The test went as so, the Director would prepare a dish and they were asked to recreate the meal without a recipe. Second, they'd have to prepare a dessert and a main-dish using whatever means necessary; free-styled and conventional.

"These are the students?" wondered Igona carefully watching.

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"Yeah," nodded Joe, "-that boy over there, white-haired one. He's an upcoming star, isn't he?"

"I can see why," jested Emma.

"He's good looking," added Emmy, "-pretty boys cooking food is always a highlight. They are a different breed from pop-idols."

"I'm worried about Igna," mumbled Joe, "-he's alone with Lady Yuki. Things are going to get worse from there on."

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"I mean," said Igona holding his chin, "-he's improved very much. The taste has changed, there's more refinement, but it lacks punch. I get it."

"Must be hard though," said Emmy, "-getting beaten for more than 50 times. We've battled nonstop, he's barely gotten any sleep and is still cooking. She's going to kill him at this rate."

"He'll be fine," said Joe, "-Igna isn't normal per say."

The stage sets ablaze. Loron sat in the stands judging and waiting. Director Leko and Syndra kept close to the stairs. Three hours were allocated, the first taste would be of the conventional dish.

"It's ready," steam rose off the plate, dressing was identical to what the director made. Looks to the aroma, it mirrored. Five layers of vegetables and sprinkles of meats here and there. Each layer was a complex taste that had to match and compliment the other layers. One was hard enough, five to content with gave birth to fear and doubt. Seasoned veterans were barely able to pull off this complex harmony of texture and taste – a signature dish from the controversial Leko. Putting into perspective, seasoned Jazz musicians know not to play the right notes. They make mistakes to grab listeners' attention. Here, the cacophony gave rise to a new experience. The first bite and the off-putting taste flinches the mouth to suddenly grow into a smooth melody. The difficulty of this dish was in making mistakes, on paper, it's the worst thing imaginable, but in presentation, it works. Most often, even while people make mistakes, they make the wrong mistakes.

The director knew to not expect much, no other has ever replicated the meal to perfection. Not until now – the moment Kyle lifted the lid, the scent slapped. 'This can't be possible,' he went to and fro

between dish and chef, 'the student council president,' staring behind, 'he's talented and hard-working. My cold treatment had a good impact.'

"Kyle," he smiled, "you've gotten better," a slice followed one by another. Bite after bite, relish shone on the face, "the recipe, it's been replicated and made better."

"Director," hands slammed across the counter, "why did you ignore me for so many years. Am I not worthy of you?"

"Listen," said he calmly, "my cold treatment was to make you work harder. Don't you hate me now, how's the heart, didn't it force you to go beyond the boundaries, didn't it make you stronger. Think about it, back to the graduation. What would have happened if I said the dish was good. You'd have grown an ego and think less of the academy. Look at the result, the ends justify the means. You pass the Conventional test. Go get ready for the free-style – show me what you can do."

"..." no words, he merely glanced Syndra knowingly and fell back to the station. 'What's he on about? Treating me so badly to make me better. Don't tell me,' watching him was the face of a good-natured man, 'my ego is sometime overwhelming. People avoid me because of it, director, I've respected you for so long, I'm glad,' a tear fell, 'I'm glad I can let go of this baseless anger. He finally acknowledged my cooking, the burden off my shoulders, I can cook freely.'

"Any comments on thy fiancé's cooking?"

"Please Chef Leko, don't joke about that. It's good... can't argue much," her fingers shuffled about, "I can't..."

"I suppose the affairs of a young lady is her own. Honestly, a pretty boy like him who can cook is a catch. Not to mention the career ahead of him."

"Director, it's rather weird for you to speak of him so casually. If he's so good, why not make him thy assistant?"

"No, impossible," the expression gloom as a grey cloud, "he and I will never get along. Kyle is a chef who's focused on the ingredient and how to get the most out of it. His line of thinking will always be geared towards what has been tried and tested."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No, not in the least. Didn't you see how he replicated my dish? Unless one knows the fundamental of how ingredients interact with another, there's no way to make it. I have trouble remaking it too. Tis something I made with my mentor, the lasting memory I have of him. We made it together. Anyway, I'm may seem strict and glued to fundamentals... yet, what I make is purely from the gut. I don't think, I feel. Igna's the same and so is Lady Yuki, our kind of cooking has and always will be up for debate. It's partly the reason why I never acknowledged Kyle – working with him would have been worse. Self-growth and self-improvement, I knew he'd make it, and that's the result."

"Basically, you assumed he'd work it out and ran away," her tone grazed the line of disrespect.

“Think what thee wishes.” More dishes made the others arrived. 8 of them scored below expectation. Tristin added her own flair and scored above average. The stage was set for the final test, the free-style examination.

“The girl has skills,” commented Joe.

“Never seen her before.”

“She hasn’t stood out much,” voiced an instructor, “-Tristan always stays in Kyle’s shadow. It’s a weird relationship, I mean, more power to them. I do feel bad for her, she could be so much better if only she’d try a bit harder.”

Conversations revolved around the two student council members. Loron sure was impressed at their level. Aside from the Graduation, another event occurred more alongside the market and Arcanum. Saturday – the weekly publishing of the anticipated magazine.

Ever since the interview, the social accounts of Weekly Digest posted photos of Igna hinting at the coming issue. The hype grew, the photo circulating about were given more definition. The personal account on Hwan was linked to the post. From there, snippets of the video interview carried about. The rise in popularity didn’t mean much for Igna as most of it went unnoticed. Lady Yuki explicitly ordered to NOT have the phone during the battles.

The hidden genius; Medusa’s prodigy, read the title.

“Just a few days ago, we had the chance to interview one of the best-kept secrets of the cooking world. Not to make it sound scandalous, the phrasing is only to grab thy attention. Igna Haggard, a boy who’s trained under Lady Yuki, the Medusa of Cooking, worked at Loron and trained under her renowned staff, is going to participate in this year’s Cle. The contest is going to be hard disputed; cooks of prestige will be presenting their dish for the elites to taste. We’ve also confirmed him to be endorsed by red-collar chefs: Lady Yuki, Chef Igona, Chef Joe, Chef Emmy Lymsey, Chef Emma Lymsey, and Chef Leko. The line-up is putting the esteemed Loron restaurant on the line. How will the culinary world react to such an unprecedented event? Going against Igna is Kyle Darker being endorsed by Chef Yanni Heola – a long-time rival. Most of you are familiar with the cook-off of Sun versus Moon. The final episode of Yuki going against Yanni has and will always be forever remembered by the cooking world. Student versus student, who will come out at the top. Lady Yuki’s sudden retirement declared Lady Yanni as the automatic victor. The cooking world changed then – until now. The arc is film-worthy. We from Digest cannot wait for said day. More information available on the magazine,” read the description.

The trailer to a godlike battle had the scene mauling over clips and statements of other chefs. Key-players gave their opinion on the matter.

The moment the magazine was released, it sold out within the next hour – physical copies were unavailable. Many had to turn to the online version.

“This is the first time we’ve managed to out-sell the Monthly Digest’s sales figures,” smiled Lia, “-looks like putting Igna on the front-page did the job,” the photo laid on her table. He sat firmly and held his chin. The half-smile and long hair against the classy background shouted upper-class. ‘The interview’s painted him as someone who refused to be known for the sake of working hard. People will eat it like candy, he’s the perfect image to monetize and model. Modeling companies and brands will surely seek

him out. Leko needs to hire a manager, the boy's career is going to explode after Cle. Impress everyone, boy, you have the potential to become a star, don't disappoint now."

Chapter 510: Standards

Dessert and main-dish, the delicacy of the exotic ingredients being used. Tristin, else known as the 'eccentric cook' always had a way of dealing with rare and difficult items. Dungeon-Style cooking could also be in her arsenal if she so chooses. Opposed to earlier, she brought her meal to the judge's panel quickly. The Director nodded, sniffed, gave an exalted sigh, then dug into the heart. The wild, the forest, hunting instinct, the law of survival – all these emotions and feelings laid on the pallet by a single scoop. Impressed to the point of having another bite, "–Congratulations, Tristin Algeria, you've passed the exams with flying colors."

Her accomplishment sent the other students in a blazing fury. "I've done it," her pink teddy held out in front, "–thank you, director," following a nod, the teddy squeezed to suffocation.

"Go on," he gestured to the other instructors, "–they wait..."

Second came a lesser-known student. The meal was very much beyond what other institutions were capable of teaching. "Bland, not much inspiration," criticized he, "–you failed. Try again in a month."

"Yes, Chef," no choking up, no tension, no pressure, "–I will do my best." He left as respectfully as he came. Setting the rumored dictatorial-style of teaching aside, Leko's Academy offered great effort to those who willed to be better. The student that failed, even though it was deemed bland, the effort was in his sweat, face, and shaking hands. Hard work isn't a guarantee of success, neither is talent. A stroke of luck is required as well. Emphasis wasn't always on producing the best, no far from it. If everyone stands in the light, who'll manage the shadows, who'll take the hit for the stars, who are going to assist the suns... A prime example left shortly after. Average, nothing more, nothing less. He did as was told, worked hard, and expected to live a normal life. Granted noble blood runs in his vein, tis beside the point. He'll become an assistant, one with the qualities of a top-class chef. Teamwork, sacrifice, they knew it all too well.

Here so arrived the others in a train-like manner. The dishes were aromatic, delicious, and appetizing. Syndra had her face stuffed after the third tasting.

"Very good," said he gently lowering the knife, "–all of you have improved massively. Honestly, this standard is better than last-year. Nonetheless, I have to compare these dishes to one Tristin made earlier," the looks of achievement dulled to a frown, dark-clouds went about their heads. "I'm afraid you have to retake the graduation exams in one month. Thank you for the dishes, we'll see you very soon."

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"Yes Chef," echoed the stage. Arms wrapped around shoulders, they walked amicably, joking to appease the pain of failure. Hiding emotions behind a stoic face – hiding the gut turning agony... reality at its finest. A drunkard may live in the world of pleasure for hours on end, yet, once the fantasy disrobes into reality; the body ails, the mind crumbles, and the stomach turns.

"How sad," whispered Emmy not wanting on drawing attention.

“There’s nothing to be sad about,” returned Igona, “-failing in something means one dared to try something new. Failing is the staple of growing, if you don’t make mistakes, it’s not worth the journey. They understand and have accepted the level-of difference in-between.”

Tlss, stoves chugged, ingredients flipped, and the scent dissolved. The personification of the gap, white-hair wiping sweat with a piece of cloth. A semi-smirk, no wasted movements; he readied his dishes.

Clop, clop, clop, dessert in one hand, main-dish in another, they came to rest on the table. The flavor underneath a lid wanted to break free; the tightness of anticipation, Syndra’s mouth watered before the item was presented.

The final piece unveiled, at last, needly arranged portions of ingredients were about in almost a painting manner. Seconds elapsed before another word said, silence in the stage described the level of culinary-arts before them. Loron’s chefs moved onto the stage.

“Please, dig in,” said he smugly.

Morning turned afternoon, the sun-lit outside grew hotter and brighter. Graduation exams ended about four hours ago. The director sat in a stupor in the shade of a very-filled tree on the lawn after the parking lot. Said area wasn’t made to rest and sit for it suited decorative purposes more. Nonetheless, the quietude gave time to reflect. ‘Kyle Darker,’ back against the tree, ‘-a phenom. I had no idea he grew into such a beast. What he made is red-collar level, I’m not even kidding. How can a mere graduating student do so much? The skill-gap can’t be crossed, he’s moved into his own style of cooking. It reflected Lady Yanni’s elegance and refinement. An artwork on a plate. Cle is in for a treat.’ Then and there, doubt shot into thoughts. ‘-Will Igna be ok? All of his dishes haven’t glazed past Blue-collar. At this rate, he’s going to fail. Maybe...’ the eyes shut, ‘-maybe it’s too early for him to take part in Cle. We forced him into it without considering other chefs out there. Compared to Tristin and Kyle, he’s lacking. What accomplishment does he have, working at Loron and training under Lady Yuki? Kyle’s done the same and even then, exceeded expectations. He’s trained since middle-school at Yanni’s style. There’s no edge to him, oh god, we might have ended a promising career without it starting. I should have known how hard it is.’

The event drew in more viewers each year. Publicity from Kyle and others from the world around have garnered the attention of nobility and royalty. One staple of Cle is the fame of the participating chefs. To be precise, the version Igna’s attending is for apprentice and graduating youths. There’s another event, for already seasoned chefs who have their colored collars assigned. Tis the last hurdle for those who want to become the next masters of the kitchen.

In it, graduated students have to showcase their best dish, cooking abilities, and other skills, to the cameras, live audience, and very judging chefs. Lady Yanni, Leko, and a few more have attended the occasion each year. Onlookers are baffled, popularity rises,

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and the world is taken by storm. Similar to how a worker has to craft a resume and ‘sell’ his abilities to the employee, Cle, is the same. Though, the prestigious medium guarantees some sort of support as opposed to rejection.

"I can't believe the director had so much praise for the dish," murmurs rose beyond the slightly sloped hill, "-President, you've done the academy a great favor. Winning Cle is the next goal, isn't it?" chatters of infatuated younger lass tinged the tongue.

'I need to know,' he rose to step out the shade, "-Kyle."

"Director, what a pleasant surprise," said he courteously smiling.

"Can we have a word in private," the girls around moved to stand behind the boy.

"Girl, please," he nodded and they vanished.

"Quite popular, aren't you," voiced Leko in a deep tone.

"Not as popular as thee imagines," he sighed, "-those girls are conniving and want to get on my good side. You know, kissing up to people so that one can move to higher places in life. It disgusts me."

"Quite honest for thy age, the sense of justice sure is beyond what I've come to expect from you," they moved into the hidden shades.

"Director," resting against the tree, "-I get the feeling you hate me or something."

"Didn't we move past that relation earlier?"

"Yes, the explaining of us not working out as a team. I know the world knows, our cooking style is too different. I was fueled by anger; I want and will become the best chef. Lady Yanni took me in, and here I am, sitting at your side, sir," intonations in the voice showed a calmer demeanor.

"The dish you made earlier," voiced Leko, "-that's not your best, is it?"

"Right," he beamed with a crinkled eye, "-I can't play all my cards here," the smile grew obnoxious, "-Cle is the real goal. I've worked a whole year to come up and perfect the dish."

"Expected as much."

"I better leave," he dusted off the pants, "-see you later, director. Do make sure that boy is readied for the event. It's a war between me and him. If he fails to live up to the expectation; the repercussion is going to last until death. Trust me," the mood turned sour, "-for someone who laid his hands on my precious fiancé, I'll spare no pity and drive him to the ground." Winds shook the leaves, Kyle's figure vanished over the slope. Words of warning or threats, take it how it appeared, one thing was sure – he hated Igna.

"Syndra, were you eavesdropping?"

"Director," she jumped, "-n-no. Ok, fine, yes, I was."

"Then you heard about the warning," he ambled out the shade, "-why are you here?"

"To show this," she gave a magazine, "-Igna's on the front page. The Arcanum is going wild about the coming event. Even people who don't cook as much are sharing the battle. I've never seen anything like this before."

"Was that it?" he paused.

"No, mother said to come and fetch you."

"Sure, lead the way." A quick browse on social media displayed the hype. 'People are going crazy. The argument is on who's cuter?' the eyes narrowed, "-am I reading this correctly?"

"You saw it, huh?" she chuckled, "-they're fighting over who's prettier. I can't take these comments," her fingers moved to, "-here," showed a particular argument.

"Kyle is overrated, a pretty boy with white hair. Who cares, I've only seen him around other girls, it breaks my heart. Igna's more refined, the dark-hair and toned skin complexion rubs me a particular way."

"Shut up, you freak. Kyle beats him in the looks department. Who in their damned mind is going to refuse those grey eyes, firm body, and sharp jaws."

"Igna's prettier."

"No, Kyle is!"

"There," a photo comparison burst forth, "-I've heightened their main attributes." It detailed in red the definition of their features, mannerism, and interviews.

"I can't," he stopped, "-this is too much," he burst into laughter, "-are you serious, they're worried about looks more than cooking. People are crazy."

Going over the comments gave topics to converse until the restaurant rose in over yonder. The empty yard and benches brought suspicion. The smell of burning cringed the nose, "-what's happened here?"

"I don't know," they entered, "-mother called and asked to bring you." The deeper they walked, the thicker grew the smoke – stepping onto the stairs made the lungs cry.

"We should evacuate if there's a fire," said Leko.

"No, we would have felt the flames by now," she leaped till the summit, "-it's the kitchen."

"IS THIS SHIT WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO SERVE?" screamed Lady Yuki, "-DO YOU KNOW HOW FAR BACK YOU ARE? I'VE JUST SEEN KYLE'S DISH. IGNA!" the muffled scream soon amplified by a single push against the door.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS!" Igona and Joe grabbed her hands, "-I'M GOING TO KILL YOU," the fallen knife gave a faint opening into what transpired. The stove flamed, broth shot across the walls, vegetables murdered, and meat in bins.

Igna 0, Loron 324. Burnt marks ran across his face, knife wounds on the neck and hands. The gifted apron was held by a single string; the bandana laid in a puddle of goo.

'I'm done,' Igna's fatigued stance crumbled onto the floor, '-this is too much. I can't do it anymore. My hand hurts, my face's on fire. The abuse from Yuki's getting on my nerves. How pathetic can I be, losing so many times in a row? We've stood here since forever and I've yet to win a single time. Red-collared chefs are another breed.'

"Are you going to sit there and cry?" yelled Yuki, "-YANNI'S STUDENT IS SO MUCH BETTER THAN YOU. Man, I regret ever teaching!" she snarled, the words cut and it came out truer than ever.

"Regret teaching me," he clambered to a stand, "-my lady," the face gritted, "-I've had just about enough," *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* the knife flew into his hands, "-say that shit one more time, and I swear," *snap,* it graze her cheeks and impaled the walls behind, "-I'll use thee as my next ingredient."