

## Death Magic 511

### Chapter 511: Pressure

“Young man, do you think threats like that are going to suffice?” she broke free, “-listen to me,” hands-on his collar, “-you’re my damned prodigy. Do as I say, cook as I wish, and listen to my orders. Getting your panties twisted isn’t going to do anyone here any good.” Her short height seemed to increase, opposed to looking down, she stared on from up above.

“Don’t treat me as if I’m a dog,” he grabbed her hands, “-let me remind you,” brown eyes flashed red, “-I’ll do what is needed as long as it suits my purpose. Don’t get mixed up in how things appear.”

“IGNA!” \*slap,\* “-HOW DARE YOU TALK TO LADY YUKI THAT WAY,” screamed Igona, “-she’s your master, or should I remind what we did?” Pins went across, the heat burnt. No response came, he all but covered his cheeks. A violent side-glance at the door had Syndra shudder.

“Lady Yuki, Igna,” approached Leko, “-the kitchen isn’t a place to fight.”

“Not a place to fight?” smirked Igna, “-how presumptuous.”

“Don’t dare speak to Leko in that tone of voice,” fired Yuki.

The tension rose into violence, one wanted to do another harm. It all began friendly, Igna lost the matches and was somewhat content about it. Lady Yuki kept up her aggressive criticism, each dish got better – her blinded thirst of perfection nulled his efforts. All he could do was remain silent and do as was said. The chefs took turns battling; fatigue and stress whelmed many who cooked. Her mood lessened into borderline abuse. At one point, throwing dishes, cutlery and knives became the norm. Each time he got injured, the wounds would heal. That in of itself gave her the insurance to continue her immoral onslaught called training. Joe remained neutral through the ordeal. Igona stood strongly at her side and even partook in throwing dishes. Fast forwards to today, the miracle Kyle showed on stage – the way he moved, the way the presentation reached the eater, “-Yanni.” A deep-rooted fighting spirit rose, a battle of student versus student. Loron’s reputation laid on his back, the pressure of seeing him not improve, not give a damn, and being cocky rubbed them the wrong way. For argument’s sake, Igna didn’t slack one bit, his’s way of learning and working changed. None of them realized and began the witch hunt of physically drilling information into a poor boy’s body and mind.

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“éclair, I need to get away from here. These people are crazy,” the growing anger needed to be quelled. Blood rushed from the center out, the fingertips began to tingle, the body seemed lighter.

“It’s beside the point,” cried Yuki, “-Igna’s my student, I’ll do as I please. He’s not following instructions; the food being served is below standards. How is he going to compare against Yanni’s kid? I don’t want to lose face because of lack of practice, this isn’t the way I want to be disrespected.”

“Lady Yuki,” said Leko calmly, “-you’re treating him as if a machine. Have you taken a step back and looked at the injuries he sustained. Goes double for you, Chef Igona, don’t you see the heartlessness being played before thy very eyes.”

"I don't care," said he, "-if lady Yuki says he's underperforming, then it must be so. Our reputation is on that boy's shoulders, if he fails, what will the cooking world say about us?"

"Yeah," she broke free yet again, "-he dared to attack me," a metal rod swung for his head. \*smack,\* contact made, blood splatted across the floor and cooking station. Shook, the mind dazzled into him hitting the sharp corner.

"TOO FAR," exclaimed Leko squeezing her arms, "-HOW DARE YOU ASSAULT HIM!"

"MOTHER!" ran Syndra, "-HOW COULD YOU," she slid to hold his head, "-HITTING HIM WITH A METAL BAT FOR THE SAKE OF A FUCKING EVENT?"

\*Clap, clap, clap,\* heels echoed against the wooden floor. The open windows blew in to sway long lush white-hair. "Lady Yuki Lordon."

"Who are you?" turned Igona, "-what's your business here?"

"Silence," a side-glance had the man crumble onto his knees.

'C-c-can't b-b-breathe.'

"All this commotion for a mere cooking challenge," said the lady menacingly overlooking the mess.

"Move," she ordered.

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"Don't speak to my daughter that way!"

"Syndra," any attempts at raising her voice fell, "-The Medusa of cooking exists only when one is in the kitchen. In the real world," she knelt and dirtied her pants by blood, "-the ones at the top are people holding power and money. Have you forgotten the promise you made?" a deathly aura oozed. Despite now having no current, her hair levitated – black smoke blurred her outline, it emanated as if staring hot-roads during a sunny day.

"Promise?" she paused, "-I don't quite remember."

"How very intriguing," she patted the boy, "-wasn't it something along the lines of I apologize for mistreating Igna. Don't you forget, you've done this before. Playing the victim to only end up hurting my son. I should ruin you," her eyes spoke true, "-a single call," her phone dialed, "-Hello, Elvira," the onlookers watched afraid by what could happen.

"Hello lady Courtney, have you made it to Plaustan already?"

"Yes, I have."

"Why such a strange tone of voice," wondered she stopping her activities, "-something the matter?"

"Yes," she glanced about, "-éclair, send the data to Elvira." The feed showed the host's status. "The Medusa of Cooking saw it fit to abuse my son into getting better." Coming per her mouths, the implication of her actions soon dawned on everybody. "Words aren't going to suffice this time around," she locked onto Yuki, "-buy out the whole of Loron and their associated businesses. I want the Lordon family to be at our feet."

“What?”

“You can’t be serious,” exclaimed Leko, “-the Lordon’s are a rich family, how the hell do you expect?”

“Chef Leko,” she smiled, “-I appreciate you stepping in to try and convince this foolish viper. Suppose her venom runs deeper than we expected.”

“What a joke,” sighed Yuki, “-buying out our whole empire? How very much foolish.”

“Foolish?” she laughed, “-don’t ever underestimate the Haggard family name.” Meanwhile; the stock market fluctuated in the amount of money being invested. 25 Million exa bought out the whole of her family. Name, assets, land, businesses, anything related to her and her husband. What about the legal side of things? Nobles, especially Royalty, only have to smile and it’s fair game. Queen Gallienne’s promise of Staxius having unlimited access to anything in the continent played a part in their power. Also, having members working inside at the law-making level also helped. Put in perspective, 1 million exa assured a person the rank of Baron – a rich one at that. Who said money couldn’t buy nobility.

“Stop pulling our legs,” the silence of the kitchen daunted the soul. Igona had a meeting with death, the face and memories scarred for probably forever. Emma and Emmy were out during the whole ordeal. Joe remained neutral, the way he stared at Igna showed a man who cared. “There’s no way someone can buy out a family in an instant...”

“Dear oh dear,” laughed Courtney, “-my son is precious to me. I made the trip to watch him shine in Cle. I don’t care if he wins or loses. I can say for certain, even if the boy ever came to me and said he wished for the world’s destruction...” the tone darkened, “-I’d make sure it happens. La question se pose1, who are you, lady Lordon, to dare and hurt him.”

Then and there, phones vibrated without stop. “Hello,” the simultaneous calls had them shudder. The dirtied room, the fallen ingredients, blood-splattered about – things didn’t look good for those responsible. The Back, lawyers, and even a friend working at a state-level were baffled at what happened. Lordon’s property was bought and owned by Haggard’s. Ownership of Loron and the associated assets were transferred to Igna Haggard.

“Come on,” cursed she over the phone, “-how can we become homeless in seconds?”

“No idea, ma’am. I’m sorry, it’s all official. Whoever targeted this must have had money to spare. It happened so fast. They claimed all the company’s shares, then sent out a bankruptcy notice; putting Lordon in deep trouble, to only then be bought by yet another. I estimate around 50 million circulated about. The bank couldn’t let the deal pass, instead of seizing, they transferred ownership.

“You did buy us out...”

“Mother,” turned Syndra, “-what h-have y-you done?”

“It’s not my fault,” she stumbled to the wall with hands on her head, “-what are we if we’re poor. Not even poor, there’s nothing to our name... what the fuck!”

“Should teach you,” glared Courtney, “-Igna isn’t a mere worthless cook. He’s my son, a member of the Haggard family.”

'What's all this about,' consciousness regained, 'I got hit by Lady Yuki. Wait,' the warmth and firmness of muscles, 'I've been here before. Mother, it's her, she came for me. My anger is gone,' the eyes opened, '-why's lady Yuki so troubled? Everyone seems scared...'

"You're awake," smiled crimson-red lips, "-how are you feeling?"

"Good," she helped in having him sit upright.

"Don't worry about that," said she, "-no need to feel around, the injuries are healed."

"Mother," the comfort of her aura eased the troubled mind, "-what happened?"

"I taught a few people lessons they'll never forget."

A message flashed per éclair's courtesy, "-Igna Haggard's now the owner of Loron and their afflicted businesses. I'll manage the profits and income from today forth, there's no need to worry. Predicting what people want and except is secondary of my real capabilities."

"Loron? Show me the assets."

"Lordon's mansion, the restaurant, a few vehicles."

"What... how?"

"Your lady mother bought it to show Yuki her place. The result doesn't seem so inviting. She's losing it."

"Awfully quiet, aren't you," said she warmly.

"Sorry, mother. éclair was giving me a summary of what happened. Did you really buy out Lordon?"

"Yes," her hand laid atop his, "-don't worry about anything."

"Huh?" her hands moved for the phone.

"Hello, Elvira, transfer the mansion and a few million to the Lordon's family. A rich family has to keep up appearances, don't they?" The whole ordeal was a show of power. In the end, the Lordon's kept 5% of what they had. Houses, cars, and all those boring commodities were returned. The only exception was the medium through which the deal happened. Instead of the law, they went underground. Yuki spoke to Elvira on the phone, the latter didn't take lightly to what happened and was trashed into crying. Syndra remained shocked.

'This mess,' stared he blankly at the fallen apron, '-was my days working in her company nothing. Am I really that bad a chef?' night sprawled over the continent. Leko and his mother went into town to discuss the academy's future. Everyone else went their separate ways. Things got too awkward; Courtney's presence gave instated fear in their hearts. In face of true power, what illusioned they had was naught.

Time went at a snails-pace, Igna watched and thought. The dishes, the anger-fueled comments he received. Lady Yuki's personality and will. Many students told about the graduation exams. He soon learned about the divide between him and Kyle, a divide that would soon push him further than any other chef that came before.

Far, far, away from anyone's wanting eyes, Elvira talked with Lord Lordon.

"It's absolutely unacceptable for such an organization to lay siege on my property and funds."

"Lord Lordon, we did say that laying a hand on Igna would have severe consequences. Lady Yuki, mind you, I have the footage, has abused our beloved boy into cooking. What would you do if Syndra was in his place."

"You make a fair point," silence loomed, "-I yield. I accept my wife to be in the wrong. Still, I beg of you, let us have at least 25% of our belongings back."

"Check in with Igna, beg to him if needed, he owns most of what thee had at one point."

## Chapter 512: Family

\*Knock, knock,\* moved the door on the 1st of February. Cle stood in sight. The whole incident on the Lady abusing her prodigy died per those involved's silence. From the outside in, the Lordon's seemed to have expanded into the Phantom's dynasty. As for the inside, the family was more or less trapped, forced to serve the whims of Elvira. Her mind in trading and getting what she wanted had heightened the name more throughout the world.

The day rose on outside, a small bed barely large enough to hold two people shuffle per the sound of knocking. A small window allowed a sliver of light in the otherwise destitute room. A rotating fan moved in the corner to join hands with the cacophonous morning outside. The thin walls didn't give much in privacy. Parents shouting at kids, others forming newer generations, a typical atmosphere for a less than average inn. \*Knock, knock,\*

'Who is it at this hour?' yawned to a stand, he dived into a loose shirt, "-yes?" the door opened slightly.

"Igna, it's me," said a man in a suit.

"Lord Lordon," unimpressed, the door fully opened, "-close it when you come in," he faced away.

"Sure," he did as was ordered.

'What does he want now?' a chair screech to a pull, "-here, make yourself comfortable." Beside laid an old fridge which opened to clangs and faint amber-lights. "I've got milk and juice, want to have some?" offered he gently resting against the not-so sturdy handle.

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"Orange juice?" asked he sitting awkwardly.

"Sure," it slammed shut, "-here," two glasses and the drinks were served. "What brings you here this early morning, Lord Lordon."

"I came to apologize," said he facing Igna, "-I'm ashamed by my wife's behavior," he dropped to the floor and bowed, "-please, can you find it in your heart to forgive us?"

'Forgive?' the eyes narrowed, '-look at this pathetic a man. Begging to have his belongings back. I don't feel anything towards him. This emotion of utter disgust, I can only find myself wanting to crush his head under my sole. I supposed it's just my inner desire.'

“Please,” he dropped to give a hand, “-there’s no need to bow. I’ve already returned most of what my mother purchased. It shows about 40 million Exa. My lady mother isn’t the type of person to care about money or what she has to do. Her stature is far beyond what I can hope to have one day. I mean,” he moved to stare at the room, “-this here is enough for me. I don’t really care about getting famous or rich. Lady Haru’s coming to assist Cle, mother, and lady Elvira will be there as well. All I wanted was to make them proud, make them see my prowess. Still, Lady Yuki didn’t see what I was trying to accomplish. The dishes I made were bad on purpose. I used her god-tongue to taste-test most of the ingredients I’ll use tomorrow. I’ve gathered more information than anticipated. Loron, lady Yuki, the staff, it’s not going to be the same anymore. She’s disappointed and I’m nonchalant. Lord Lordon,” his face lit, “-it’s best we part ways. I heard about Syndra’s marriage to Kyle; they make a great couple. It’ll boost Loron’s reputation. From what I got told, the boy is amazing – saw a few magazines too, the gap is great, too great almost. Anyway, does that answer thy questions?”

“It does,” relief came in a likable face and relaxed posture, “-I’m grateful.”

“Don’t mention it,” he smiled, “-it’s honestly better if Loron and the other chefs remove their endorsement. I don’t want to tarnish the famed restaurant.”

“About that,” he nervously faced the door, “-there are more people outside.”

‘The whole crew is here,’ thought he opening the door once again, ‘I didn’t get time to put on the contact lenses. éclair’s going crazy in my ears... should have been more careful.’ Silent as a breeze, the room filled by a fatigued silhouette of Yuki’s team, even Syndra was present. Her bangs and feline gaze seemed to choke at what was said. A solemn expression marked the end of what could have been something great.

“Excuse me for the lack of chairs,” said he nervously smiling, “-drinks?” glasses were placed on the table without response, “-juice and milk, take your pick.”

“Iгна,” voiced Igona, “-cut the bullshit.”

“Cut the bullshit,” he side-glanced, “-yes, please do so. I’m tired of this apologetic self-pitying party. I personally don’t care about what happened. Guilty or not, who gives a fuck.”

“Calm down,” interjected Joe.

“...”

“Iгна, come on,” said Emmy in sympathy, “-you don’t have to be that way.”

“So, I’m the one in the wrong?” the juice flooded onto the table and floor, “-what is it you want, honestly, tell me right away.” The prior calmness dissolved into frustration. Not admitting and taking responsibility, the weakness being displayed, he hated all of it.

“Boy,” shouted Igona, “-hear us out for one god damned second.”

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“Fine!”

“Loron has decided,” they nodded to each other, “-we’ll be siding by Kyle Darker’s side for the upcoming Cle. Lady Yuki is bowing out the whole event.”

‘Look at that. I knew it would happen,’ paused to gather his breath, “-I don’t care really. Since my spot is confirmed by the organizers, endorsement or not, it doesn’t matter now. It’s been a good time. Ever since the first incident,” gazing Lord Lordon, “-it would have ended one day or the other. Lady Yuki tried her best to change. When a snake sheds its skin, tis never for the better. Chef Joe, Emma, Emmy, Igona, it was a pleasure.”

“Alright then,” said Lord Lordon, “-we’ll be off now. Thank you for everything, Igna. Lordon’s and Loron promise to never get in thy way again.” Although she was there, her eyes never once moved towards Igna. Only when the door opened did she woefully nod and leave.

Juice dripped to merge into a puddle of dust and concentrated goo. ‘Where’s my phone,’ he touched about, ‘-finally,’ a tap had the lenses materialized.

“Good morning Igna,” voiced éclair preparing the interface.

“Good morning, éclair. How’s today going?”

“Quite a party over the Arcanum. News about Lordon siding by Kyle nearly broke the culinary world. Multiple chefs are standing for you, they deem it cowardly to push a boy into an unclimbable wall and leave without a helping hand or rope. Well, the cooks and stars standing up are nothing but average trying to get by. Their following isn’t impressive. Kyle made a public comment-”

\*To those who think I forced Loron into changing sides is nothing but lies. I mean, I suppose I did attract their attention. Medusa’s prodigy was abandoned per his lack of hard work.\*

“-The attached picture of you getting shouted at by Yuki doesn’t bode well. Favor is changing, the few fans you attracted are jumping ship. The narrative changed to make you the antagonist – the talented smug kid who didn’t work to garner his mentor’s attention and praise.”

“I guess swaying the tides is a fruitless endeavor.”

“Igna,” voiced éclair strongly, “-don’t you go forgetting who I am. I’ve logged about the conversation, video footage, and the ability to make even more proof. I could ruin her life in a single instant, just say the word.”

“Don’t,” said he, “-there’s no need to fight fire with fire. Cle’s upon us, I have to gather ingredients for tomorrow. Question,” asked he, “-did everyone back out from supporting me?”

“No, Chef Leko is the only red-collared chef at thy side. He truly is like an older brother.”

“Yeah, I appreciate him a lot actually.”

\*Incoming call – Guild leader Haru\*

“Hello?”

“Helloooo Igna,” screamed a very energetic voice, “-it’s been a while. How’ve you been?”

“Could be better,” returned he, “-are you here for Cle?”

"Listen," said she, "-I'm in the company of Lady Elvira, Courtney, and a few surprise guests from Arda. Are you free perchance?"

"Not really," returned he sternly, "-I have to gather ingredients for tomorrow."

"Oh, about that," she laughed, "-send the order to the Trader's Guild, we'll take care of it."

"Are you sure, the ingredients are hard to gather..."

"Just do it, and get out, we're waiting in the sun."

'Waiting in the sun?' he dashed to the window, '-what's she thinking?' they noticed the blinders move and began waving.

'Oh god, I don't have clothes.'

"IGNA!" the door barged open, "-I knew you were hiding," smiled Haru.

"Lady Haru," straight-faced, "-welcome to my humble abode."

Leaned backward, "-come on in," gestured she at the others. "Such a cramped place, are you aroused by the modesty?"

"Not really, it's easier this way," he cleaned the stain off before.

Haru, Courtney, Elvira, Prince Julius, Princess Lizzie, and a few guards arrived. The latter stood on outside.

"Cousin Igna," smiled the handsome blonde man, "-it's a pleasure to see you again," he reached for a hug.

"Likewise, cousin," tapping his back twice, "-hello there, Lizzie."

"Ello brother Igna," she scurried to give a hi-five, "-you stay in a very dirty place."

"Yes, yes," his embarrassed laughter had Courtney hide her smile behind Elvira.

"Please, take a seat," offered he.

"No time," said Haru, "-we're going to the beach."

"But..."

"No arguments, are you going to allow tears of regret onto such an adorable girl's face?"

'There's no fighting them,' breathing a sigh, "-let's go."

"Good answer," the door opened by the guards. Three luxury cars waited in line followed by jeeps in where men in black waited. A single look showed their fierceness and power.

'Don't get startled,' wrote éclair, '-they're escorted from Phantom. There're helicopters on stand-by and jets readied to fly given the order. The leader of Phantom, Shadow, and royalty from Arda is here on a visit. It's expected.'

"The girls and I will take the front car," said Haru.



“Go spend time with your cousins,” smiled lady Courtney, “-Elvira and I have much to talk about.”

“Don’t forget about me,” grunted Haru. Over yonder, shirtless men stopped and stared. The three ladies were out of this world, beauties any man or woman would die for. The half-smiles, casual way of moving, and not to mention revealing attire; an elixir of love personified.

“I want to ride with you,” said Lizzie holding Courtney’s shirt, “-please!”

“Ok, ok,” she smiled.

“Cousin, come,” gestured Julius at the third car. \*Boup,\* doors shut, the hot-outside resolved into an air-conditioned interior. Scenery slide to go past the shopping mall, “-we’ll visit once we return,” came over the intercoms.

“Cousin Igna,” said Julius in a worried tone, “-I’ve heard about what happened from Leko. Are you ok, having Loron turn on you so suddenly, did they hurt you?”

“Not really. Thanks for the concern, the injuries just healed, to be honest. What’s the real purpose of coming here. I mean... the leader of Phantom, my lady mother, Haru, and royalty are here for a visit... it’s hard to imagine.”

“What if I said you’re the reason. Lady Courtney seems to be on edge, her stoic face is impregnable... but I know, there’s something wrong. She’s angry, I’ve not seen her in such a foul mood since forever. Anyone linked to us could have figured you and Loron to be at the center. It’s common sense, cousin Igna, are you fine?”

“Yes cousin,” he smiled, “-I’m fine. Just a little out of it.”

“Remember, you’re not alone. Even if the world turns against you, as a member of the Haggard family, as my cousin and son of my aunt, you have a special place in my heart. I swear to do anything I can to help; say the word and we’ll have it done.”

“I know,” the scenery changed to resemble the outskirts of the bridge, “-I’m only just realizing how much power our family actually has. I’m scared, what if it all crumbles down on us one day, what then?”

He chuckled and cut his breath, “-us, crumbling? How... from Phantom to Elon’s Dynasty, all the way to the Blood-King’s faction and all in-between, we’re invincible. Even if we lose it all,” he smirked, “-I’ll get it back for us.”

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## Chapter 513: Ingredients

‘Is this a warped reality, what’s going on, the scene around has changed so much, I’m lost, I’m confused, what is happening?’ As he described, the world felt different, lighter even. People smiled; the hot weather didn’t feel as uncomfortable as remembered. Passing over the bridge, Julius’s word of sheer confidence sprawled confidence in Igna’s distrusting heart.

‘People change, or so they say, people can get better, or so they say. I think, and I think it is true, change comes not from will but necessity. Unless a person needs to survive, he’ll change. If not, pretending to change to further his goal in life is perfectly normal. Not that I can do anything to criticize a person’s

fight. Judging is easy, understanding is hard. Morals, ideals and all in-between are put to the test, people are afraid of being labeled 'fake'. The sad reality is, Lady Yuki and Loron changed as it suited their need. I've no idea what I brought to the kitchen, maybe I was the pet whomst they felt sympathy for. In face of real hard-work and talent, in front of what is clearly better, they chose to part ways and leave me stranded on the precipice. Either fall or hold on a thin razor-like thread, in both cases, I'm the one getting hurt. Why,' he wondered, emotions sure were a thing of inconvenience, '-I get it. There's no need to reflect, I have people who care about me, I hope, at my side. My mother, my cousins, my guardians, they're all here for me this instant. I can't fail their expectation. I'll wield my knife for a single purpose, not to please people, not to be recognized, but to have the respect of myself and my prior self. Screw fame and money, if it means turning to someone like Kyle, I rather abandon it and live a mundane life.'

"Igna, all physical properties have been transferred over to Lord Lordon. The family is where they began, give a take a few million short. Phantom owns their business, therefore, the profit is controlled by us. Besides, we could have them be bankrupt at any time – tis up to lady Elvira."

'Good,' thought he, '-I rather not hold on their grudges. I've paid back my debt to lady Yuki thanks to mother.' Loron's apron, the bandana; ashes to ashes, dust to dust, memories were sent to oblivion. Here to where it began, the journey seemed to end in a blink. Consciousness reawakes to a familiar sight, the windows rolled to allow the draft of pleasant salty scent. 'The tides sure have changed,' thought he rubbing off drool.

"Cousin Igna, are you ready to take a bath?" asked the prince in beachwear. An open buttoned shirt, sunglasses, and light shorts paired with matching sandals.

'The way he rolls words off the tongue, the voice, and the accent hearing him are sometimes nice. I can't imagine him screaming loudly, or even if he did, the sheer power would draw cries for sure.'

"Was I sleeping for long?" asked he stepping onto a solid firm grass, '-no sand?'

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"Yes, I told the driver to let you nap a few minutes more. I mean, you seemed so relaxed it felt bad to break the slumber." He held out a hand, "-shall we go?"

"Thanks, cousin," grabbing the firm hands, '-nothing of what I imagined a prince's hand to be.' The sea and sand over the distance felt familiar. 'The sun isn't that annoying today,' then and there, a massive shadow covered where he stood. '-What the?' turning back, 'a villa?'

"Welcome to the Royal family's winter estate," said the Prince, "-we own most of the land around here," he ambled to the divide between sand and grass, "-over there," pointing to the right," - Msiza in her whole beauty."

"Wow," awestruck, "-how can something that big survive so far in the sea?"

"Quite simple to be honest, it's built on a private island off-shore of Plaustan. You can't see it very well unless crossing into the upper-district of Hephon."

"The mansion, how big is it?"

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"I don't know," they sat alongside the shade of a drafty tree-line, "-the place is massive, we need about 10 maids to keep it clean. Even then the number increases per our needs."

"Doesn't it get tiring?" wondered Igna rested against a rough wooden tree.

"You mean money wise?"

"Yeah," asked he unsure about what he wanted to hear.

"Not really," just then, as if he willed the wind, a gentle breeze moved to push aside his hair into comfort, "-tis a means to an end. Why are you so hesitant when speaking to me?" the brows raised, "-I've noticed it. You're not that open around me, are you cautious of something?"

"I'm sorry about that," he sighed, "-between what's happened, I can't really say anything. I know my forcing insecurities onto another is shameful, it's embarrassing, I rather not think about it."

"Igna, my dear cousin," he smiled, "-I won't say I understand how you feel, but I can relate. It's going to get harder from here. Moving away from reality is cowardice. I say this as thy elder in age and experience, the hurdle before you are a crucial point in what's coming tomorrow. There's a promise you must have made on the way here, a purpose to work towards. This little outing is nothing more than an excuse to see you relax before the big day. The crowd's going to be massive, and from what news have reported – a false narrative has been painted. You're the antagonist in Kyle's story. People love a good story and adore jumping onto a bandwagon. Action means more than words," he paused, "-who am I kidding, I made those mistakes too in the past. Getting to where I am wasn't easy – having money doesn't matter, being famous or of repute can go out the front door. Guess what, murderers are also famous, child molesters, rapists, you name it and they're famous, even more so than actual idols. Heck, I know of a few big shots around the continent who love to indulge in disgusting behaviors when it comes to underage children. We've dabbled in it a little too as an organization. My point is, it's not what you have or what you can have, it's about what you can forge into, understand?"

"Basically, a sword can either be wielded to protect or to do harm."

"Exactly," a cheerful half-smile lifted to a grin, "-come join us when you feel like it," he stood and made for the beach where Lizzie and others played.

'Man,' leaned on the cold itchy grass, '-I'm glad they're here. Emotions, I feel weird, it's demotivating. Those few words he spoke cleared my doubts. How lucky am I to have them?'

The hour-hand moved as time passed. The Arcanum, to be specific, Thwan, went through a melt-down. Kyle kept on using his following to add to the narrative. The chefs who turned coats were viewed as heroes following the real chef. Igna became more and more of a face of hate. Weekly Digest had nothing to say despite the pressure. They remained neutral. Similar to pesky peddlers jumping onto a trend to make easy money, other social media figures jumped onto the 'Igna bad' movement. The issue went so far as for the organizers of the event, yes, the very well-respected World Culinary Institute of Fine Dining, personally intervened in a post.

\*Us, from the World Culinary Institute of Fine Dining, are very much disappointed with how the Arcanum has reacted to a mild change. It's wrong to point fingers and assume. Igna Haggard has earned

his spot in Cle and granted, most of the chef endorsing him changed side, the matter is unaffected. As an autonomous organization funded by our esteemed sponsors, we can't afford mob-mentality to ruin the anticipated event. In conclusion, all who will bear their fangs at an unjust cause will be reprimanded. The actions include chefs who are under our jurisdiction as well as staff or any personnel tied to our name.\*

The wrath of disappointment all but fueled a crazy witch-hunt. The strongly-worded statement didn't originate per a sense of justice of good-will. Instead, the silhouette of a handsome lady paced about a quaint little garden with a phone in hand. “-Yes, make sure we become the sole sponsor of the event. I don't care how much we pay, use any tactic necessary – I'll contact a few assistants. In case they speak up, feed them money or use force, I don't care, make sure it's done.”

“Elvira,” echoed from the first floor, “-are you coming?” wondered Haru perching over the balcony.

“I'll be there in an instant,” said she ending the call, ‘-Kyle Darker, don't dare think for a bit Phantom's going to sit ideally while you go on a crusade over the Arcanum. Being a part of Kuro's Trading makes it even more worth the extra effort.’

For the better part of three hours, Igna locked himself in the kitchen. A plethora of well-stocked ingredients scattered about. The stove kept on burning, ‘-was this seriously what Kyle made for the graduation exams?’

“Yes,” confirmed éclair, “-everything is identical down to the letter. No, not totally, it's far better quality than what I recorded during the exams.”

“This simple a dish?” head to the chopping board, ‘-I guess it's complicated to make, I can see how hard it's going to get... there's complexity but lack of feeling. Was this really what lady Yuki abused me for?’ A single bite and a glowing image of heaven roused the appetite, “-ok, this isn't any ordinary dish. It's recreated but feels lacking, Kyle must have added something different.’

“Wrong,” said éclair, “-the dish is correct to the last detail. My analysis is never wrong. You're giving Kyle too much credit.”

“No, I refuse to believe this is the dish I was abused for.” Splashes of cold water snapped out a state of daze.

“About the ingredients,” voiced éclair, “-are you going to give me a list or not, the event is approaching.”

“Yes, gather these,” most was common and readily available. No sign of main-ingredients nor a glimpse into what he had planned to make.

‘There's only one way I see myself showing the cooking I want to do,’ backpack around the shoulder, ‘-it's to find the more exquisite ingredients out there. I'm going to surpass the student council's poor performance; avant-garde cooking; tis nothing more than showing off. Complex techniques don't satisfy a pallet, tis the taste.’

He came to a standstill, the now clean kitchen watched as faint black smoke welled from the floor upwards.

\*Heed me, o' demon swore as mine vassal in trying time. I, Igna Haggard, humble inheritor of the Scifer's domain call on thee to manifest before me.\* Plates hit to a scream, the ground shook, the light flickered, the sunny outside gloomed into grey-thunder clouds.

"Lord Igna," four orbs of black stretched to form a portal, "-I heard thy call," Kul hovered with unprecedented strength, her horns grew into solid black atop which generated lightning, "-who is it you wish to kill," said she ready to strike.

"Thank you for answering," said he casually, "-please, conceal thy aura."

"Conceal?" she did so and dropped onto her bare feet, "-why did you call me?"

"To taste this," he shoved a full-spoon, "-you like it?"

\*Munch, munch, munch,\* the visage showed multiple expressions until, "-still prefer raw meat of a virgin boy. Did you honestly call me here to taste test some human food?"

"No," the voice deepened, "-I need to go to Totrya. There are a few things I need to discuss with Vesper."

"Sure, a teleport to Totrya it is," \*-snap,\* blue-skies turned purple, the very familiar room stood unchanged from prior.

"Lord Igna, I didn't expect a visit so early?" arrived Vesper with a coy-smile.

"I've come for ingredients, the rarest and strongest monster in the whole kingdom, take me to them," uttering those words had lightning flashing and thunder blasting the outside, "-it's time to kill."

#### Chapter 514: Institute

The World Culinary Institute of Fine Dining was perched atop a nice-hill side, further inside Plaustan. Roads aligned by meadows stretched along a gentle slope leading towards Oxshield. Off-by a few dozen kilometers from Swanview (the capital of Plaustan) in where the sun rose, where the ghastly shadows of the neighboring mountain ranges stayed, erected a quaint little town named Onjal. Recent years of tourism boosted the need for a new place of attraction. The sunny beach was fine, still, the more one had of a dessert, the quicker he grew bored of it. A step into exploring the wild garnered a market. The task sure was a hard one to pull, monster presence lurking in an unexplored area stood as a knife against the neck. In attempts of remedy, Onjal, surrounded by naturally rough terrain was born. It stood midway between the flat land and the Geno mountain range. Fences were placed to avoid thrill-seekers from venturing in where death waited. Adventurers were on stand-by, a branch of the guild established to provide more security. The more protection and care an item needed, the more expensive it got effectively clearing the potential list of clients. Prices were high and people paid without much hassle.

Onjal became more of a laid-back part of the area. Those wanting adventure headed to Geno's camp. Those who only took naps and admired the landscape could spend the night in town. Log-cabins were more popular in these higher places – putting a hotel would disrupt the balance and ruin the paysage. The town itself was built to completely surround the hill from top to bottom, no face was left untouched. The flatter parts were used for construction, mostly the foot, and the higher grounds fetch more price.

After riding through the tall farms of the vicinity, one arrived at the hill whereby the feeling altered. Peaceful, not much traffic, and no harsh sun to bother the walk. Figures strolled about in normal clothes, the town-folk, the heart of the community. It wasn't rare for a complete stranger to stare, wave, and start a conversation. Being friendly and accommodating played a major part in their growth. All were ready to help, the tourist gave a gateway into the outside world – many children here dreamt of going to the bigger city, to cross into Oxshield. The education here allowed them to get jobs at the cabins or becoming guides. Poverty isn't the word to describe them, it's more of a mid-way between middle and lower-class. Nonetheless, life was good, peaceful, and amusing.

Meeting the people, saying hi, and asking guides, most visitors would take the road around the hill. The prior settlement was the actual entrance to the town, opposed to being compact, the title of town was given for their sheer effort. It was more of a community. Politics aside, after going around the hill, which took around an hour give or take due to unsteady roads approached the 'touristic' part of Onjal. Here the roads were pretty and clean. The trees reached onto the skies and gave ample cover from the harmless sunlight. The carved hillside of grey and sharp feature had a net thrown atop to prevent rock-slides.

One couldn't reach the top from the front-side of the hill (where rested the first settlement) access was given to only the back-side (for tourists). After a sharp-turn, the roads circled towards the top all the while breaking into smaller paths on which rested the prior mentioned wooden-cabins and lodges. Multiple viewpoints were scattered at regular intervals.

At the summit, after a large and stunning viewpoint and few local restaurants, came a massive-metal gate on which laid the crest of the Institution. The building behind felt as if a vampiric castle, have the night be of a crimson glow and the moon glaring mercilessly and it'd be unmistakable. The World Culinary Institute of Fine Dining, main-branch in Hidros, boomed with activity. At the time of year, Onjal's sales increased because of Cle. Remote broadcasting trucks claimed the part of the large parking lot. Thrill-seekers often biked to the top all the while stopping at each viewpoint. Tis a local tradition for those in the know. Runners, walkers, you name it, the roads were big and beautiful. It allowed for hardcore training.

The day of the event was upon them. Before heading into the institution, a particular cabin was rented. The view left much to be desired.

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"Mother," came a whisper, almost a sob of a call.

"Syndra, I'm downstairs," said another lady cutting across chatter. Lord Lordon, his wife, his daughter, and the whole of Loron were sat facing the television around a large enough table. The coverage displayed participants and the well-spread drama between Igna and Kyle. Each time they covered the story; their stomach churned.

"It's honestly scary," said Igona, "-how can someone like him ever become a chef?"

"Come on," sighed Emmy, "-didn't we say not to go over what's happen?"

"You don't understand," voiced he loudly; the indifference of the others amplified his words, "-you weren't here, you don't know what happened. Ask Joe, ask Lady Yuki, heck, ask Chef Leko... what I saw and witness was utter chaos, I feared for my life."

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"Tell us what happened," added Emma, "-I rather know why we had to remove our endorsement."

"Fine," said Yuki, "-I'll recount what happened." She formed a narrative, carefully picked her words, omitted a few details, and portrayed Igna as the villain.

"Let me add," interjected Igona, "-Igna's mother, Courtney Haggard, is the devil in person. I've never seen someone so beautifully scary before. She bought out the whole of Loron and our lady's estate in mere seconds. Do you realize it, she snapped and spent millions for her child..."

"Is that true?" wondered Emmy, "-tis more on the side of fiction," glaring Joe, "-don't you have anything to say?"

"I'd personally not get involved," he simply left for the balcony.

"What's about him?"

"Don't know and don't care," voiced Lord Lordon, "-we were humiliated and thrown into despair. Loron is owned by Phantom, the profits are in their hands. For fear of our lives, we signed a contract that stated all the chefs are to remain employees of Loron willingly. The affair is shadier than I'd ever want to admit. Long story short, Igna showed his true colors and brought us to ruin."

"Could you stop with the lies," screamed Syndra holding a moist towel, "-I heard what you said, mother," her eyes flared, "-I heard you too, father," she gritted, "-Igna told me all about what deal you made on the visit earlier. You knew," she said with a gut-tearing tone, "-you knew he'd accept if you asked. Lady Courtney rightfully acted to set what was done to her son right. Didn't you promise to lady Elvira about not harming Igna, look what happened. Because of insecurities and the damned rivalry against Chef Yanni, you forced me into courting Kyle. You never considered my feelings, always wanting to expand the family's influence. I was honestly happy when everything was stripped from us, I hoped Igna kept it all, at least then, I'd have the will to continue pursuing my dreams and not become an ornament for a frolicker." In her mind, the words being said were what she thought. 'Father hates criticism, he always wants to pass the blame of his mistakes onto another. The ego and pride of being respectful have gone through his head. What Igna did was amazing, I can't unhear the words he spoke about me and Kyle. He's given up, and so have I... the blame lies on Kyle, if not for him, I could continue studying piano and Igna wouldn't have to suffer my step-mother's weakening ego.'

"Syndra!" the cabin echoed, "-that's no way to speak to me or your mother."

"Lord Lordon," refuted Emmy, "-tis no way to speak to a lady who's reached maturity. She's legal of age and can do what she wants."

"Are you going to oppose me?" he stood menacingly. A man his big size could easily beat the twins into a pulp.

“What if we did,” they matched his stance, “-don’t forget who we are,” violence oozed their face, “-we’re adventurers who were once part of Knig. Are you really such a fool to blatantly do injustice to thy own daughter in before our eyes?”

“Where do you get the confidence to stand up to a noble?” interjected Lady Yuki.

“It’s not about confidence,” yelled Joe, “-I stand firmly at the twin’s side. Tis about justice. The days of the nobility have long passed their welcome, people who are nobles are so in name, money, and status. Three things the Lordon lost upon mistreating a child of the Haggard family.” The room divided, Igona, Lord, and Lady Lordon against Igona, the twins, and Syndra. One fought for Syndra’s right as the other fought to not be a culprit of the whole mess.

Far, far away from Onjal, inside a different dimension came whimpers off a rather large creature. ‘I didn’t expect it to be this easy,’ thought he grinning at the unlikely sight. A few hours ago upon arrival, the statement about killing was quickly dismissed by Vesper’s wheeze. “Lord Igna, there’s no need to kill. The creatures here are at thy service. Let me guess, you need ingredients from monsters for cooking?”

“Yes, actually,” he frowned, “-how did you know?”

“Kul told me about tasting human food. Please, follow me,” the mysterious door opened to a clean empty corridor. They walked for a few minutes and by the descending stairs, went to a dungeon, or so he thought. Instead, they came to a massive hall with a large table put in a U-shape where the closed-end gave onto a ‘throne’ guarded by skeletons. Multiple monsters laughed and sang; a chandelier burnt on above. To the side, a bear clawed at a lute, or so it seemed. The surrealness took time to adjust. A large black bear with red eyes playing the lute melodically. Beside it stood a bird of some kind singing at a high-pitch. That much he could accept for birds did chirp melodically; the lute-playing bear would come to haunt him – he accepted it so.

“Don’t be alarmed,” said Vesper slithering across with frequent hiss.

“Hey there Vesper,” screamed a semi-transparent figure, “-a good day for a stroll is it not?”

“Who’s that?” wondered he.

“A ghost,” she shrugged, “-don’t ask me, he’s neither monster nor spirit, have no idea where he came from,” she turned, “-yes, a good day for a stroll.” And there the strange individual rose his cup and downed the drink, all of which fell onto the floor.

“Don’t mind them,” said she quickening her pace. Across multiple maze-like corridors, the shouts of the main-hall murmured as a figment of the past, “-here we are,” no door, a simple plain cloth lifted to show a primitive kitchen.

“Hello there Vesper,” said rough crackling of a humanoid figure bearing the stature of a minotaur.

“Hello there, Piglet,” said she in jest.

“Don’t call me Piglet,” he threatened using a spoon, “-it’s my private name,” the cheeks blushed, or so what appeared to be.



“This here is Lord Igna, the founder’s chosen heir. I won’t go into details; all you need to know is that he needs the finest ingredients to cook. Blood of a black-dragon to the shit of a goblin, I don’t care, find and get what he needs. Assist him.”

“Excuse me, Vesper, you guys eat one another?”

“Obviously,” she shrugged, “-I’ve said it before, the monster kingdom isn’t the same as what you know of reality. We kill and cook, those who die are reborn – it’s how the evolved keep sane and healthy.” And here ended the flashback, ‘-how is this even true?’ standing before him was an elder-dragon as beautiful and fierce as recounted in the age-old tales. Due to the size, the beast stood outside on the red-colored grass.

“Please be gentle,” said it using telepathy.

“Come on grandma,” laughed the chef named Piglet, “-we just need some of thy blood. I’ll be careful to not touch thine arsehole.”

“You better,” her disapproval came in head aching messages, “-last time you did this I had a bleeding arse for a whole week, we don’t heal fast, you know that!”

‘What am I hearing...’ wondered a baffled Igna, ‘-are these the creatures who have our world in fear of destruction?’

#### Chapter 515: Start of Cle

‘The realm on monsters, Totrya. I still can’t get my mind around it. This place is far, far out there. I don’t think people have the imagination to even comprehend the way these beings live. They eat one another and return as if nothing happened. Their bodies, strength, anything in-between, those here is smart, and those in our world are training to get strong. This is the army he built, an army that I feel could bring more than chaos. Setting that aside, I’ve been in this kitchen for more than a few days now. Time in here is faster than the world I know. I mean, there are even separate rooms in even darker realms where the time goes even faster. Tis conveniently dubbed, training-room. I suppose Scifer was also from another world, someone who got pulled into our mess. Mere guesses at this point, one thing is for sure. The dish I ought to present for Cle didn’t compare to what Kyle made at the graduation exams. I know what I want, and here, in this unusual peaceful land, is avidly available. The image of that bear playing the lute, the dragon getting pricked for the sake of some blood...’ the knife rattled away against the chopping board. Kul had her arms sprawled over a tinier table.

‘I want to go,’ was what came from her listless expression. It didn’t matter for he used her as a tasting partner. Then and there, pulling at all the knowledge amassed and not to forget, Piglet, the minotaur chef, a dish worthy for royalty was concocted. At one point, the one behind the boiling pot seemed as if a witch making her love potions.

Another day flew out the door, ‘-I’m ready,’ time constraint by the outside world did factor in his departure.

Four black orbs formed a rectangular doorway, “-have a safe trip back. Do call on me whenever things get difficult,” said she waving as if a child. Vesper pressed her hands and bowed; no other word need be

said. Brighter hue clawed at the corner of the room, paying no heed to the rising star, he stepped through accompanied by a lot of items.

2nd of February arrived at last. It was only yesterday where the parking lot in front of the institute felt empty, today, the whole area was booked. One could bet the cars weren't cheap either, most wore a suit and very expensive attire. The huge metallic door opened as if heaven's gate.

The vampiric castle slowly unveiled a hidden construction, an observation center to the far right. The tall and huge trees were stagnant around the premises. A nicely decorated path, made for cars too, led into the compound. The size, compared to a rather tall guard standing watch, blew those in the unknown's mind away. People of repute and power promenaded along the black silhouettes of nature. If Cle wasn't the occasion, one would almost confuse this path to be a very-well acquainted '-lover's walk'. Needless to say, the media tightly had their hands wrapped around the whole event. Red-collar chefs were already in the amphitheater. Highly critical gastronomes, accomplished chefs, owners of businesses, and a few chosen – the top of the world of cooking, sat on an elevated platform tucked away in the shadows of the theater. Cameras were placed here and there to broadcast the event. Ten cooking stations, not identical mind you, were allocated the same amount of space.

Guests arrived one by one, the seats filled in due pace.

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"Yuki, Yanni, I'm glad to see my students getting along for once," said a man in his late fifties parting the red-curtains.

"Mentor," said the two ladies, "-it's a pleasure to see you," the voice might have been courteous, the gaze was but sharp daggers against the other.

"Lord Amsey, please," said a man with a red-collar, "-there's no need to strain thine self. Please, take a seat, the event is to start soon."

"Good to see you too," said Yuki, "-Chef Agneo."

"Yes, the feeling's mutual," returned he coldly.

"Your husband sure hasn't changed, Yanni. He's still the cold stoic chef I remember."

"Oh please, cut it with the reminiscing," sighed she, "-in other news, why did you back out the competition. Was it because my prodigy is better than yours?" she leaned onto her knees in provocation, "-come on, tell me, how was it... the air of defeat at his prowess. Trust me," she laughed coyly, "-Kyle isn't just my prodigy, he was trained by Lord Amsey and my husband too."

"Damn you..." the words went unnoticed as an army of red-collared chefs entered the room.

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"Do forgive our lateness," said they bearing the crest of the institute. A group of elite cooks around the world was bound as one. Their job, test and evaluate the meals being cooked. Those sitting at the top of the institute were people holding power and fame, mostly talent for the art of cooking. However, when the time came to judge, only the best of the best, and not a few, but many, were allowed to do so. This efficiently reduced preferential treatment and gave an overwhelming range in taste and significance."

"We're here live from Cle," spoke a pretty lady holding a mic, "-the event will be broadcasted over the air once it begins," she snuck her way across security and into the castle, "-the top-novices around the world have been gathered here today to showcase their skills. There are no winners and no losers, all are guaranteed a spot in the cooking world. Even if it's rare, tis serves as a recruitment process for big restaurants." Key-players moved to and fro, "-wait," she ran without warning, "-excuse me, are you prince Julius?"

"How did you sneak through security?" said he amused at the prospect, "-yes, I'm indeed the prince. Is there something the matter?"

"Please, can we have a few words before the event starts?"

"Sure, why not, just give me a moment," the shining aura disappeared behind the corner, "-I do apologize for the wait," Princess Lizzie stood at his side, "-so, how can I be of assistance?"

"I-I," nervousness got her tongue.

"Please, don't be alarmed or in a rush."

"Thank you," gathering her breath, multiple figures walked past and headed for the theater. "This is the first time we've seen the royal family of Arda get involved in Cle, is there perhaps someone thee wishes to recruit?"

"No," said he softly, "-I came to cheer someone very dear to us both," he held Lizzie's hands.

"Yes, we're going to support big-brother," she cheered, her rosy cheeks and green hair glistened at the pan of the camera, '-adorable,' thought the cameraman.

"Is the special someone a person of interest, someone we know perhaps?"

"It's pretty obvious," he shrugged, "-the name's already on display. It doesn't take much to figure that out."

"One last question."

"Go on?"

"Who do you think is going to win?" the quiet corridor echoed by footsteps and chatter. Flashes of light and the cacophony of inquisitive tone approached. The reporter's face turned to the coming crowd, the ten cooks taking part in Cle hassled by other reporters. Kyle led the pack, one thing stood out about the others... the sternness of their expression, the way the hair and face were styled.

Out in where the event readied to begin, lights shut to pitch-darkness. The murmurs and frivolous chatter cut short. Spotlights flashed onto the stage, "-hello everyone," said a lady with grace, "-I'm Emi Muko, the host of today's event." Her long dress laced at the back brought the best of her figure, her visage exuded the aura of being refined – a far-stretch from what many knew her as. "Long has it been since the culinary world grew into what it is today. If not for pioneers such as Lord Amsey, Lady Yuki, Lady Yanni, and many others," lights flashed onto their platform, "-we can bet it wouldn't have been as popular as it is today. Not to forget the very talented group of judges who will evaluate the stars of the future. All red-collared chefs had to go through this process here. Getting invited to Cle is the staple of becoming someone great in this industry. From the bottom of my heart, I wish these talented cooks to

take the stage," the screen displayed a live-feed of the approaching participants. Applause riled the arena.

Kyle headed the line with a smile. Many others contended being at the back and preparing mentally. Showing-off wasn't always the greatest idea.

"Welcome," said she pointing the mic at Kyle, "-anything you'd like to add before we start?" the others were at his side staring at the crowd, anxiety had the hands tremble, so much pressure on their shoulders... time had come. The host went one by one, introducing and having them give a little sentence.

Things didn't look great backstage; a participant was missing. "Anyone know where Igna is?" rushed the assistants screaming through their earpieces.

"No idea," it went to the point where Chef Leko and Lady Haru were called by the supervisor.

"Chef Leko, we apologize for bringing you here," a single curtain separated them from the changing room, "-Igna is missing. We haven't seen him enter the premises nor speak to the locals, where is he?"

"We don't know," said Lady Haru, "-he disappeared yesterday. I thought he'd have gotten here by now. You know anything, Leko?"

"No, the cellphone is offline. He did order ingredients from the trader's guild, right?"

"Yeah, he did," sighed she, "-he's on his way, don't worry about it."

"Something the matter," heels clapped against the wooden floor.

"Lady Elvira, Lady Courtney," bowed the assistant, "-it's just that Igna's missing. The event is already underway."

"Don't worry about it," smiled the seductive Elvira, "-he'll be back soon."

"Even if he doesn't show up," added Courtney, "-it doesn't matter. My son is free to do what he wants."

"Come on," urged Haru, "-you're spoiling him too much!" the banter faded into the commotion of the background noises.

"Just who is Igna Haggard," facepalmed the supervisor, "-I've never been so scared in my life. They're pleasing to look but hard to argue against."

"Don't worry," said Leko slapping the man's back, "-the sponsors don't see anything wrong about the ordeal. Why are you getting so flustered, I personally hate Cle." The introductions reached the 8th participant named Hanlo, endorsed by 3 green and 1 red collared chef.

"I'm honored to be participating in the well-received Cle. Just glad to be able to showcase my skills," the distant words barely made it to Leko's seat.

'What a joke, to organize such an event for the sole purpose of ranking the best. It should be done by trial and error, the testing here might appear just and right, there's more going in the background than I'd like to admit. Cle, what an overrated piece of shit. Being angry doesn't hide it's a sure-fire way to get to the top. Igna's nowhere to be found, maybe he figured out the truth, he's a smart kid. I mean,'

scrolling down the phone, ‘-the Arcanum isn’t going easy on him. They have no tact, bashing an innocent boy to smithereens per the actions of disrespectful chefs.’

“Oh,” exclaimed Emi, “-it would appear one has gone missing. I’ve never seen this happen.”

“Maybe he gave up,” commented Kyle loudly sending the audience in a burst of laughter. Weirdly enough, the tension felt lifted, having him around didn’t please many. Rumors and all, Emi stood ideally waiting for the organizers to issue the next plan of action.

“Don’t get so worked up,” said a figure moving across the arena, “-in no way am I going to give up to the likes of you,” half a smirk on the face, a steel briefcase rested over his shoulder, “-did you miss me?” said he rudely at Kyle.

“I’m Igna Haggard,” he snatched Emi’s microphone, “-Chef Leko’s sous chef. This is a challenge at you,” he pointed at Yuki, “-Medusa of Cooking, my teacher who fell under the pressure of fighting an old-rival. I make this vow here and now, I’ll never return to Loron or associate myself with you or your family,” he threw a burnt apron on the floor, “-I’m not thy prodigy, remember that.”

#### Chapter 516: Against the Flow

Brusque and insolent as the introduction came to be, the visible reaction didn’t show ill-will. Instead, having had such thoughts about an innocent boy who all but wanted to cook, shook their very cores. As the seconds felt like hours, allowing silence, allowing the cameras to fix on his face, and allowing for Emi’s startled mind to reestablish, felt satisfying. Leaving people speechless, turning the opinions onto its head, Kyle watched silently. The other participants gazed coyly with lessened nerves. A blatant entrance dazzled their minds into focus.

“Well then,” said she gathering her thoughts, “-welcome to Cle, Igna Haggard. You sure are confident in saying what you said. Without wasting time, let the competition begin.” The ten split into groups of five and dispersed across the stations. Kyle and Igna were closest to the audience – the broadcasters cherished the thought of promotion.

‘Entering the arena as the villain...’ thought Lia sharing the second row of seats with people of repute. Mainly, Suga and Dei from Xius, a few movie stars hailing from Alpha, and single artists from Hidros. The line-up wasn’t as star-studded as one would have come to expect... still, the presence couldn’t be laughed at either. Two gems shone brightly to catch the mouth and ears of wives, “-Prince Julius and Princess Lizzie are here.” Sat high on above in a remote-viewing booth, the young princess dangled her feet innocently, the Prince viewed with a critical eye. Numerous guards were about; looking back for a cheeky peak ensured the wrath of their glares. Lady Haru, Lady Courtney, and Lady Elvira were also present.

Below, the competitors brought ingredients of the highest quality. Some went as far as to have the meat brought in alive until an hour before the contest. The difference in cooking stations showed the cook’s finances. Some held silver knives and forks, others were rustically decorated as shown by the 8th participant Hanlo and his wooden style design.

Kyle brought venison allied with countless vegetables and rare spices. A four-doored fridge remained at his side as well as numerous appliances for ease of movement. The way he went from one place to

another showed the skill it took to be the best. Soon after, the flavor and scent of the meals enshrouded the theater.

"Yuki," said a voice beaten by old age and senseless screaming, "-might I ask why that boy spoke and challenged you in such a tone?"

"Yes," interjected Yanni, "-he came up front and rejected thy name. The image of him stepping over the prestigious Loron's apron does raise questions. Did that old habit of yours get in the way, were you perhaps a little sadistic in training?"

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"Shut up," the voice glazed the aura, "-I don't want to talk about it."

"As you wish," said Mr. Amsey locking onto the participants.

Emi gave insightful commentary on what procedures and methods of preparation, all were hard at work, except for one, Igna. "So, Kyle, what are you making?" thirty-minutes had passed.

"A staple of fine-dining," said he cleaning his hands, "-a dish I very much enjoyed when I was little. Of course," he moved to another spot, "-it's going to be more exquisite than I remember, nonetheless, the dish will speak for itself."

"On another note," she closed it coyly, "-any thoughts on Igna's cooking, he hasn't moved since speaking those ambitious words."

"I rather not get involved to the likes of him, damned bastard," the last part went unnoticed. And so, in the same manner, she went about the stage chatting and gave ample entertainment in the otherwise boring display.

No time-limit was imposed on the cooks. However, it was common sense to have the meals readied in less than five hours. The judges were now surrounding the stage as if soldiers planning an ambush, they hid in the shadows and took note of the various techniques. Remember, it wasn't all about the taste, often, most came down to the personal touch of the person.

"Igna Haggard," said she approaching his table, "-you haven't begun thy dish, is something the matter?" The boy stood silently with arms crossed.

"Hello, are you nervous?" she intruded into his personal space.

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"Emi Muko, please," said he coldly, "-you don't have to pry so much," at least, he moved to the plain-cooking station. Nothing stood out, no personalization, nor effort, tis the blandest contraption one could have seen.

"It's my job," said she following his steps, "-the other contestants are already a third way done, their masterpieces reflect how much effort they've put in... standing here and doing nothing is disrespectful to those working hard," her thoughts amplified her tone into one of a lecture.

"Shut it," he glared, "-I'll cook however I want, now, please get away from here, it's going to get scary."

“Scary...?” it hung on their minds, how could cooking be anymore frightful than chopping vegetables. The crowd moved to the edge of their seats. ‘Why are they so interested?’ snickered Kyle, ‘-he hasn’t cooked anything and the crowd are so zoned in on him after a single movement,’ he took an unfinished dish out the oven, ‘-why aren’t the cameras looking at me?’ the massive screen displayed Igna.

“Miss Muko,” he whispered.

“Yes?” she turned, “-something the matter?”

“No, not really,” the hands moved under the cover of the cutlery, “-I have a question.”

“Yes, what might that be, if it’s about time-limit, there’s none,” the rhetoric garnered a few chuckles out the audience.

“Wrong,” said he holding half a smirk, “-everyone here is using a style of cooking born from the same principle of making food. At the end of the day, one comes in one end, gets out the other. Either way, it doesn’t matter. Some people eat people and animals eat other animals. The former may be shunned in our day and age... still, the stained past can’t be forgotten.”

“We’re in Cle, not some channel about history. Are you done?”

“Ah yes,” he sighed deeply, “-the world never accepts what doesn’t conform to reality. You’re a perfect example, a lady who hails from Arda, your past...” he stopped, “-never mind, what is done is done,” the movements grew sharper, “-and today, I’ll show you my way of cooking. \*SNAP,\* the atmosphere froze, the fear of death loomed instantly across the hearts of many – guards pointed guns on stage, “-Dungeon-styled Cooking.” Live monsters were pulled out of portals from left and right, the hands killed, drained, skinned, and prepared the meat without wasted motions. In no way was it dirty or disgusting, the inherent feeling of nausea couldn’t be sensed.

‘This is the best dish I can make at the moment. Piglet showed me how to blend monster-meat and use the tinge of their odor to my advantage.’

“Igna?” approached Emi, “-what are you preparing?”

“Haven’t given it a name yet,” \*slash,\* the torso of a chimera sliced into tiny slices before hitting the floor. Two scabbards and one blade. The muscle memory from the years of fighting reawakened. He’d swap one end to the other, single strokes that prepared what he needed.

“The monsters,” said she, “-are they alive?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “-I was waiting for a portal to be built.”

“What do you mean?” she prodded further.

“It doesn’t matter to you,” he laughed, “-go annoy someone else.”

Dungeon-Style cooking was brought into the sanctuary of Cle. Multiple judges were held in chokeholds for wanting to jump on stage and stop Igna. The critics and chefs bared frown sharp as fangs. Almost everyone had the same reaction, ‘-the shunned style of cooking, what is he thinking?’

The audience's curiosity shifted to annoyance. They felt betrayed, waiting for so long to pull up such a prank, it didn't bode well. Especially since the silence lit a spark of chit-chat.

"How amusing," said Kyle, "-you've dug yourself a grave. How pathetic, I thought it would be a battle I'd remember. I mean, who cares, I'm going to make Loron proud for endorsing me instead of you, damned pest. I'll show you the talent and hard work needed to succeed in this industry."

"Oh, shut it," said he talking down to Kyle, "-what industry, a place of gluttony and unnecessary babble about prestige and pedigree. No one wants to experiment, I don't see innovation... Forgive me, I mean to say, those who innovate are shunned, I know many cooks who haven't followed any cooking lessons and still have more character than the ones cooking here. Tasteless, all of you." Anger boiled from emotion to physical, the only outlet was the station.

What he said sent waves across the Arcanum, those following online were impressed at how he didn't conform to what was there. The rules didn't matter to him, a true rebel in the flesh. Normally, such statements would have had him thrown out of the castle, however, Phantom's primary sponsorship gave immunity.

Across the distasteful comments and mumbled insults of those in the know, a certain someone watched with a grin.

"Mentor," cried Yanni, "-why are you grinning?"

"Huh?" turned Yuki, "-master is laughing, I haven't seen it since..."

"That boy is amazing," said he softly, "-Oh Yuki, you spotted a diamond in the rough but couldn't see his real worth. All you did was dust off the gem, not polish it. The only one fit to train him is Chef Leko, I'm sure he realizes it by now. Cle isn't important to Igna, just look at those eyes, he's doing this to be acknowledged by a single person, and I'm sure he's smiling with tears. Go on, look at the crowd, a single person is standing up."

It was true enough, Chef Leko stood proudly and wept silently. Dungeon-Style Cooking, one he wanted to bring to the main-stream, one he wanted to discover the potential alongside other capable people. 'Igna, you're amazing,' thought he, '-for someone who doesn't remember anything about his past – I'm proud. I'm glad Guild Leader Haru brought him to my doorstep.'

Minutes turned to hours; the discontent spread without stop. Meals were readied, some tasted, and some were told to sit and wait. One by one, the stage emptied leaving Kyle and Igna as the last two. They finished at the same time as fate would have it, the final moments of Cle came suddenly, chatter turned to silence. Crest on the chest and red-collars around their neck, the judges approached at last. Most didn't even look at Igna, the disrespect the boy displayed and using a rejected style garnered prejudice before evaluation. Kyle sensed the discord, he all but smiled, the dish he gave for examination received praises of the highest-degree. In the end, none even dared touch Igna's plate.

"Looks like you've lost without even fighting," winked Kyle. Still, he didn't move nor flinch.

'Chef Leko, did I do you proud,' thought he, '-was it worth it?'



“Who would have thought,” said Emi over the microphone, “-this is the first time the judges have refused to taste a dish. I suppose it means one thing,” the crowd couldn’t contain the joy of defeating a villain, “-he’s failed the-”

“Hold on a moment,” said a dusty voice clambering up the stairs, “-it’s not fair.”

“Lord Amsey and Chef Agneo, what brings you here?” returned the startled Emi.

“I want to taste both their dishes.” Not that it was strange for a leader of the association to personally assess the participants, it sure was rare. The last memorable time he intervened was during Chef Leko’s trial.

Lord Amsey, the dictator of the institute, was feared by many in the culinary world. In his prime, the man was fiercer than Yuki and Yanni, none can dare argue the heritage under his belt. \*Munch,\* first was Kyle, the reaction remained more or less the same.

“Good,” said Agneo following behind, “-impressive for your age. There are more things you can improve upon; hard work is present. A virtuoso of ingredients, the name suits you very well.”

Then came Igna, “-tell me, boy,” wondered the old man, “-the wine you used, it’s not normal, is it?”

“Yes,” returned he with a smile, “-it’s the Blood of an Elder Dragon.”

Chapter 517: Black

“They’re mythical creatures, how could you have procured such an item?”

“It was no trouble,” he smiled, “-the methodology I used is simple, I rather not get into details since what I pursue is deemed unworthy and heresy.” A bite at those who viewed from their comfortable heavenly seats, looking down onto those who made mistakes while trying things of new.

“Before I taste,” the pace slowed to have a gentle glimmer in the otherwise blank stare, “-if this is truly the blood of an elder dragon, then my boy, I’ll have no option than to bypass the whole judgment process. I will not shudder in using my wildcard to have you become a respected chef, trust me on that.”

“Wildcard?” the inquiry of Emi and the crowd turned towards Chef Agneo.

Left-right, he watched, paused, breathed, then, “-fine,” the stance relaxed.

“Could you please tell us a bit more?” wondered she, and once again, Kyle, who had put his heart and soul in the dish was ignored for the unusualness of Igna. Frustration couldn’t be put in actions let alone words. Heavy sighs permeated as a result... the judges took to the stage and waited behind the Virtuoso of ingredients. ‘Again,’ he scanned the audience, ‘-he stole the spotlight again... my dish is the best this competition has ever seen. The judges were left on their knees, how is he able to garner such promotion without effort. Where’s Syndra, surely my fiancé is watching me instead of him...’

“The wildcard is as the name describes. In the unfortunate moment where someone has been misjudged – Lord Amsey has the power to grant any candidate the desired collar of which he deems fit for the participant.”

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"I understand," and so did the audience.

"Igna sure knows how to make a scene," said Julius in jest.

"I don't know," shrugged lady Haru, "-he's just the same old boy I found lost so many months ago."

"Don't reminisce," fired Courtney, "-tis my son thou art speaking for. He's not dead."

"Excuse me," said a shaken tone.

"Elvira?" wondered Haru as the lady dashed out per a phone call.

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Lights, audience, and critic, they glued onto a single spoon moving towards an old man's mouth. Shut in the same manner as a gate, he stared at the ceiling in awe, the spoon returned softly at the table. A white glow outlined the wrinkles on his face, "-the blood of an elder dragon grants the user youth and reverts the clock by 40 years," the grey hair amassed color to turn dark-red mixed with black, "-or so said the rumors," he smiled through pearly white teeth. The cheeks and body went from limp to straight and confident, "-Igna," grey pupils adorned by white flakes reverted to black and deep, "-you're a monster."

"Why?" he smirked.

"Don't you dare say this wasn't planned," he approached holding an aura of prestige and fame, "-I can see it in thine eyes, this was the moment you waited for."

"I won't deny it," he smiled, "-I knew the audience would be taken aback by dungeon-style cooking, still, I had to make sure they hated me so that no one else tasted the meal before you. I did do my research, I found out the reason why Chef Leko is so alienated from the culinary world, tis the same reason why you personally came on stage. This here is a gift from me to you, Lord Amsey, a thank you for allowing unconventional cooks to shine dimly but fully."

"No, no," he glanced at the crowd then returned, "-I know my history with monsters. Dragons are rare and majestic, the boon of reverting one's age doesn't come with simply drinking the blood, it's prepared using an ancient ritual none knows about."

"Cooking," said Igna, "-before potions people used to mix magic into pills, sweets, or meals. The only way to extract mana in that era was through cooking and adding the touch personally. Tis taken for granted now, using potions when things get through is almost second nature. I tell you, if not for a certain alchemist and founder of a certain field of research, we would have not seen this change."

"How were you able to do so?"

"A recipe is a chef's hidden weapon. I hope you understand. The boon of youth came at a price that I already paid for. Don't worry, Lord Amsey, the effects were meant for thine pallet only."

"You saying anyone who tastes the dish now is?"

"Is only going to experience the taste, not the effect."

A man turned back time onto his own body per a single bite of food. The whole amphitheater rattled at such an ungodly prospect. Potions, magic, who cares, the world of adventuring was always fascinating. They viewed it as a privilege to be able to fight against the monsters – now, facing them was a new breed of unknown. An insolent young cook acquired an ingredient many, many people sought after for years and even decades. The only sighting of dragons was a decade ago per a certain guild listing.

“Effect aside, I’ll taste the dish itself.” Old age had dulled the senses, he missed enjoying the taste of good food which resulted in the distant and listless expression. Returned to his prime, the scent, taste, and every single detail didn’t escape, the voice had the power and vigor returned as well.

‘Look at them gawk,’ thought Igna, ‘-scheming my way to this point was tough. I don’t want to do that again... the blood of a Dragon, they think I’ve killed one just to obtain such a worthless commodity. Piglet went and stuck a syringe inside the elder dragon’s bottom, the image is burnt into my mind, I can’t forget... it’s hilarious,’ he sneered, ‘-the onslaught of the insult he got, as a result, was even funnier. Totrya is a cheerful place.’

“Amazing,” said Amsey, “-it doesn’t compare to what the others have made here today. By my goddess Syhton, the way the tinges of the monster flesh working in harmony quenches the palette by warm pats down my neck. Igna Haggard, you’ve gained my respect and admiration. For one so young and for one who fought through so much absurdity to produce this work of art, I’m honored.”

“Lord Amsey, please, there’s no need for such things.”

“You bet it’s necessary,” he spun to the judges, “-you, you, and you,” cold and straight-faced, “-go and taste his dish. Yuki, Yanni,” side-glancing the platform, “-come here this instant.”

One by one, a single spoon had the taster fall onto their knees. The explosion of fierceness and power shook their very cores. Igna made it to a point where ranking didn’t matter. “Members of the esteemed audience,” said Amsey taking the microphone, “-heed me well. What I’ve witnessed today is a thing of divinity, granting an old man the gift of youth once again – tis the ultimate show of what Dungeon-Styled Cooking is capable of. Chef Leko, a man I dubbed Carnage, has found the perfect sous-chef for their adventures into such dangerous lands. Kyle Darker isn’t to be trifled with either, he has the potential to outclass even Chef Yanni, and I believe it wholeheartedly. Tis a shame I wasn’t able to taste the other participant’s dishes. Nonetheless, I see that the culinary world is only going to get bigger and better,” he moved to stand at Igna’s side, “-Igna Haggard,” a butler came with a silver-lid plate, “-I chose thee to bear the nickname of Alchemist,” the lid lifted to reveal a black-color collar, “-this here is a special color since it doesn’t define thy abilities. Tis the color of the unknown and the unjudged. Aside from you, Chef Yuki also bears the same color, well, tis a fitting end for you’ve vowed to never stand at her side.”

“Yes.” Amsey personally wrapped it around Igna’s neck, “-I suppose the battle between you and Yuki has come to an end?” the duo stood face to face.

“Medusa of Cooking,” said Igna, “-I’m here not because of what you taught me, take that to heart. I won’t ever forgive the torture I was put through during the supposed training. I won’t forgive you turning thy back on me after hearing comments about Kyle’s dish,” the center of the stage lit to showcase the two, prodigy and master. Those around contented in stepping into the shadows.

“This is far from what Chef Leko did for Kyle, he at least knew how to provoke the boy into becoming better. All you wanted was to have someone who’d cook boringly,” to which he turned and took out another dish, “-here’s the dish Kyle made for graduation, I recreated it with ease. Go on, have a taste.”

She grudgingly accepted, “-amazing,” the spoon returned to the plate. A look of woe flashed her face, the hands and feet moved nervously.

“You never really believed in me, the seven months at Loron was because lady Elvira forced you to do so. Anyway, what is done is done, I hereby break all my ties with you, your family, and anything to do with Loron. Good-bye,” he faced away, “-one more thing,” he dug his pockets, “-the bandana you gave me was nice while it lasted,” it flung to rest at her feet.

In the distance, “-Lord Amsey, everything is over, right?”

“Yes,” he nodded.

“Then I’ll take my leave,” heavy clops echoed, a single spotlight followed him heading for the backstage area through the audience. All stood on their feet and watched in silence. The blow to her ego and pride shifted their attention, Yanni approached to give a hug, “-there, there,” said she as if a big sister, “-it had to happen.”

The ceremony continued, the participants were given their colored collars and congratulated by their mentors. Those in support of Kyle stood at his side; a lid revealed the sought-after collar, “-per the institute, we deem you, Kyle Darker, befitting the highest grade. This is but a stepping stone into the real world, there are more awards out in the wild to be gathered. You’ve taken the first step into a thunderstorm, destiny is in thy hands, walk, crumble, or persevere, you decide.”

“Thank you, everyone, for making the trip to Cle,” said Emi taking the stage, the lights turned off, “-we have special guests here this evening to put an end to the eventful ceremony.” The cooking stations gave way to a magnificent piano at the center, “-Prince Julius Haggard and Princess Lizzie Haggard have requested to perform a little piece for the entertainment of all.” Music enthusiasts rushed onto their seats, hearing the princess perform live was a once-in-a-lifetime event, none could dare to leave after her entrance. She and her brother gracefully walked onto the stage, she wore a lovely white dress paired with light green as her brother wore a fitting tuxedo. He took the microphone and she seated near the instrument. A push and the piano hummed melodically, it started slow and painful, Julius waited for a certain note. A high-pitched resolve had him start at a low tone, she went from high to low, while he went from low to high, two masters performed.

Out in the corridor leading outside, “-Elvira, is something the matter?” approached Lady Haru. The outside was mellow and orange, dusk wandered without their knowledge. The event took more time than anticipated.

“Yeah,” she returned checking for prying eyes, “-we’re in trouble. The Empire is starting to move, I don’t know when or why, but they appear to be getting ready for a war.”

“A war?” said Courtney, “-impossible, the Federation has more firepower.”

“That’s the thing, they’re moving to wage war, not on Hidros, but reclaiming the land of Elendor and Dreqai.”

“Old Cray is up to no good again,” sighed Haru as it was usual for the war-hungry king to move his forces where he pleased.

“No,” said Elvira with a shaken smile, “-the orders came from the Emperor.”

Chapter 518: End of Cle

Who would have thought the impromptu concert would go over so nicely. The media attention surpassed even the squabble of Kyle and Igna. Broadcasted live, it felt hypnotic, the way the melody spoke to the soul, the way the mind buckled under the slow and heavy pressure – none could have wanted anything more.

And so, curtains were pulled onto Cle. The amphitheater cleared into a desolate land of seats. The lifeless faces of those who sat before, a grave of some kind, or so thought the people who had to clean after the giant event.

What kind of Fine-Dining institute would it be if not for a place to enjoy food. Lord Amsey, Chef Yuki, Chef Yanni, and their respective cooking staff took the ginormous kitchen. Half of the guests left as soon as the event ended, those remaining were of the upper-class demographic.

‘It’s over,’ thought Igna wandering along the lonesome ever-going corridors, ‘-what’s the point of such large windows?’ he wondered to a stop. Gazing out showed an instant drop, said part of the building was built over a cliff or some kind. The view onto the mountain-range gave a sense of comfort.

“Hey cousin.”

“Cousin Julius. The performance was very touching,” he turned to Lizzie, “-you too, the piano was amazingly good, I felt my heart beating in my palms.”

“Big brother, you liked it?” she hid her hands in embarrassment.

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“I loved it,” he replied to a squat, “-was that an original piece?”

“No, no,” she shook her head, “-it’s a composition from Syndra Lordon.”

“Syndra?” he turned to Julius who nodded in agreement.

“She released it as a music sheet a few days ago, I don’t know why but the piece is unusually sad. I can’t help but think something’s wrong with her.”

“Do you know her personally?” he stood.

“No, I’ve only seen her in pictures. The daughter of the Medusa of Cooking, right?” he gestured to walk.

“Yeah,” Igna followed, Lizzie held both their hands and hopped.

“Cousin,” the tone sunk into seriousness, “-I know you said you didn’t want to get involved in politics...”

“I rather not,” the demeanor after remembering changed the perception a little. The thirst to know what was happening dried the tongue even more, “-still, as a Haggard, I guess I must know?”

“Good response,” smiled Julius, “-thing is, the conflict between the Federation and the Empire hasn’t gotten any better. I’m suspecting the first world war in the coming years. We’re trying hard to alleviate the situation on democracy alone. Alphaia and Marinda are neutral as far as I know. The problem lays in the Empire itself; their neutral provinces are moving in such a way to support Old Cray.”

“I see,” they stopped at a better view of the mountains, a small draft entered few steps away, “-Cousin, if I may be so bold, what’s Arda and Oxshield thinking?”

“Arda’s more or less neutral, lady mother hasn’t said anything. Her companion sure is ready to wage war, the Blood-King faction’s holding him in a strangle. He’s dangerous, I feel it, but mother and big sister Eira don’t want to admit it.”

“What about Hidros?”

“Queen Gallienne is more preoccupied with her child. The continent is being run by a roundtable of representatives of the various allies of the Federation. Arda, Oxshield, Easel Run Gard, and Elendor have to move as one, else, it’s chaos. I tell you, the ambitious nobles are annoying as hell, I so wish father was here to take firm hold of the falling alliance.”

“The Federation is falling apart?”

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“No, not falling apart... I’d say we’re growing distant. The common pillar we had hasn’t made an appearance for six years.”

“Come on,” he sighed heavily, “-Cousin, are you not the son of King Staxius, take the reins and do something. I’m sure you can take his mantle. Queen Gallienne and Queen Shanna are best-friends, Queen Ela is another good person... the siblings ruling Easel Run Gard aren’t that hard to convince. Honestly speaking,” a tinge of intellect flashed across Igna’s face, “-this coming war might be a boon. Remember, there are only two things that ally people strongly – love and war. They’ll see the strength in wanting to help. I’m sure, King Staxius prepared the Federation in such a way that even when he died, those allied were obligated to help one another.”

“Cousin,” paused Julius holding a look of disdain, “-how do you know so much... are you hiding something from me?”

“No, no,” he shook the head, “-it’s what I came to after reading multiple articles on the subject. The Arcanum is a place of vast knowledge. Set that aside, what’s Phantom going to do?”

“Up to Lady Elvira and aunt Courtney.”

“Either way,” smiled Igna, “-I can’t do anything even if I wanted. There are more things to discover out there, I don’t want to be bound by a single nation anymore. I might depart on a voyage after graduating from the Academy in a year.”

“How so?”

“You said it earlier,” laughed Igna, “-Marinda, the land of lost treasure, the land built on witchcraft and arcane knowledge of the wild and earth. There are rumors of floating islands and mythical animals. Arda’s, no,” he paused, “-the world’s magic revolves around one’s magical element, not in Marinda,

their knowledge runs deeper than we know. Since we're more technologically focused now, even that piece of knowledge is lost."

"A quest for treasure?" wondered Julius bemused by the prospect.

"No, more of an adventure into the second tower of gods."

"Tower of gods?"

"Tis what the indigenous people refer to the Tower of Aris as."

"Oh boy," smiled Julius, "-cousin, do ease on the pace a little." The conversation broke shortly when Lizzie threw a tantrum about being hungry. "Excuse me, cousin," said he nodding, "-we'll part here, see you soon."

"Likewise, cousin," the wave stopped as the prince turned the corner.

"Thanks for the save."

"No worries," replied éclair, "-you successfully changed the subject to Marinda instead of the information about the kingdoms. Must be annoying how they're acting in such trying times."

"Not really," shrugged he continuing the walk, "-I'm not a king nor a noble anymore. Just a cook who happened to wake up a few years ago. Anyway, what's the plan now?"

"No idea," sighed éclair, "-Cle's over, the quest's been completed. I do have to ask where you went yesterday."

"Totrya," replied he, "-the land of monsters. Had to gather supplies for the event."

Chants and mild bantering snuck from a light in the distance. The otherwise dark corridor lit per each step. éclair's map showed the ball-room/reception area. Few suit-wearing figures stood along the paths with alcohol in hand. They cheered and laughed, the atmosphere felt light and peaceful. The same couldn't be said upon gazing to the main-castle gate. Reporters were fighting to get a look at the new chefs, the Arcanum erupted into an untamed beast.

'Wow,' he turned the corner inside, mechanical and bronze. The design wasn't gold and overly obnoxious. Rather, the décor matched the cogs and wheels of a watch. It fondly suited the overall esthetic of the institute. 'Look at the participants,' thought he at the hurdled nobles flattering the chosen nine. Present or past, one thing never changed, people would lick another's boot just to advance in life. Naturally, the hurdle's size depended on who they sought after, and so, Kyle's army-like audience won.

"éclair," he paused at the entrance, "-do I really have to come here, let's just leave."

"Seriously?" wondered the spirit, "-no victory lap, nothing?"

"Not really," he stepped out almost instantly, "-have the bike be readied, we're going home."

"You're lucky," said éclair, "I had the bike drive for day and night. Wait another hour or so, it's on the way."

“Fine.” Reluctance to indulged the self-satisfying guests inside had him sat in a corner covered by rain.

Rotherham boomed in activity, the potential calls to arms of war had multiple aircraft readied to takeoff. Cargo planes holding elite troupes were sent to Elendor as a way to scare any surprise attack. The last resort Pabruska V5, a potential province-ending nuke stayed at the ready. Tales and dates about its destruction were displayed in full during the annual convention of arms. Tis partly the reason why the Empire remained silent for so long. The Cobalt unit grew weak and without funds to run their research. Phantom sneakily stiffen away their stocks, profits, and customers. The Empire couldn't afford to entertain King Juvey's battle. A masterplan to take over the world of science. Scientists wanting to prove their theories were brought to Rotherham and contracted to the company. The living conditions were allowed inside the borders of the town, going beyond equated to betrayal which resulted in death.

Amidst the chaos of a potential fight, the hospital in where rested Jen and the others shook. Anna's situation for having fought for so long grew dire. Jen's treatment and operations ended successfully. She opened her eyes on the 1st of February. Leonard who stayed in Rotherham and worked part-time jobs to make ends meet felt a sense of relief wash over. The same white décor felt livelier, he ran and ran until her new room. A quaint little rest area peering towards the skyscrapers.

“Jen,” stumbled he onto the door, “-is that you?”

“Leonard,” smiled the doctor, “-she's fine now. We'll leave you, lovers, to it.” On the way out, “-don't get too excited, she's just woken up.”

“Leonard,” her fatigued and shrunken face eyed him with much effort, “-what happened?” she listlessly stared her amputated arm, “-last I know we were stuck in the dungeon.”

“Don't worry about that,” he rushed to melt into her arms, “-I'm so happy you're alive!”

“Come on,” she coughed, “-don't get so rough,” he stepped away and sat at her side. The visage showed discoloration, her right cheeks were paler than the overall complexion, the earlobe grew dark-blue which would light up periodically. “It's been I don't know, I forgot to keep track of time. What's important is you've woken up, the doctors had given up on healing you.”

“Where are we though?” she stared about, “-it's a fancy hospital. That landscape is new and beautiful, are we still in Hidros?”

“We're in Rotherham,” said he.

“How?” she coughed, “-Rotherham is supposed to be private to the public eye.”

“No, not really,” said he, “-as long as you have someone's permission, you can enter. We're here thanks to Igna, or I should say, Igna Haggard, he's a member of the Haggard Dynasty. Phantom falls into their heritage as well.”

“I see,” she tried to reach out, “-oh, my right arm isn't here.” The left one moved sloppily to caress his cheeks, “-I'm sorry for the trouble I caused, forgive me.”

“Stop it,” he melted in her arms again, “-you're here, it's all that matters.”

“What about the others,” she asked hesitantly, “-are they safe?”



"Everyone's alive," he returned, "-except for Anna, her condition is degrading by the day. The doctors decided to save you instead of her. They don't know how long she's going to last."

"I see," unable to get angry or sad, "-are the others coming back?"

"I'll call them in a bit. The hospital has already informed the Academy and those close to Anna."

"Call Igna," said she taking a deep breath, "-he needs to know."

"No, we can't," he turned on the television, "-he's participating in Cle. Our boy is making waves across the media and Arcanum, just look at that coverage."

"I see," she smiled, '-you've gone and became a better person. I'm sorry for the things I've thought and spoke about. Igna, you sure are a true friend.'

Over to the Institute, éclair relayed the news of Anna's condition. "She's getting worse?" stood brusquely, "-let me guess, the product of the monster curse?"

"Yes, by what the report says."

"I need to return as fast as possible," demanded he, "-I know a way to contain the curse."

"Impossible," said éclair, "-you can't use magic anymore."

"Doesn't matter," returned he confidently, "-I'll use a catalyst," he frowned, "-I know the perfect candidate."

#### Chapter 519: Taint

None noticed on the way out, or should reality be told, none cared. Igna walked out the front door into the grisly forest-pass. The battle of wanting to score a major interview screeched at what appeared to be in that instant, heaven's gate.

"Where's the bike," voiced Igna loudly.

"Look behind you," a maned sport's mobile arrived in style, the hologram of a rider dazzled into white-noise. A helmet hung off the handle as the riding suit remained in the backpack now over his shoulder. Utensils used for the event were expensive in the sense they were forged by a 'mothman' in Totrya. The crimson stare against the hot furnace chiming away at boiling piece of molten ore couldn't be mistaken as one. Leaped to a sit, the exhaust rattled at the human touch, "-have a plane be ready at the airport."

"Already on it," said éclair, "-the closest airfield is in Swanview. Head north-west. Thus, the return home came at startling news. Losing a friend here wasn't an option. The mind and body flamed in wanting to help. If it was Rena or Jen, he'd not have reacted so strongly. Anna, the roommate, shared a close bond with him, nothing beyond what best-friends would share. She was a part of the day-to-day life at the academy.

"Open the gates," said he at the guards.

"We can't," returned a shaken man, "-if we do, the masses are going to rush in."

“What’s wrong in that, they’ve come to have a peek at those chosen. Don’t worry about it,” no words need be said, a distant pinch had the lock slice in half, “-sorry for the trouble,” he dashed through the small opening in the disoriented crowd. Cars here and there, the streets were jammed. ‘Well then,’ slid to the middle, he pressed on like a madman and blasted down the torturous curvy roads. Knowledge of this idyllic area was foreign, either focus on the road or admire the landscape. ‘Hold on, Anna, I’m coming.’

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The sun headed to sleep in the distance, Rotherham’s noisy shuffle escalated into utter cacophony. éclair’s order arrived at the command tower like a king’s edict.

“What now?” turned he who controlled intel.

“I don’t know,” screamed another frantically guiding the planes off the ground.

“Leave it to me,” said a younger man, “-I’ll have a plane readied for éclair’s order.”

“Which one?” turned the whole room.

“The untested jet,” said he smirking.

“Get this guy out of here,” voiced the first, “-supervisor, can we plea to Lady Elvira and have this dimwit thrown into the gutters?”

“The boy has a point,” said a lady sat onto an elevated platform, “-we’ll send over the unnamed craft. I’m sure éclair will handle it from there on.”

“Supervisor, we cannot spare any more pilots.”

“No need to worry.” Hence, a closed hangar opened on a deserted abandoned airstrip not far from the other cleaner hangars. “Uncle,” waved a little girl in a boyish outfit, “-the tower is ordering for us to take out the plane.”

“Huh?” underneath the said bird, “-a test-flight already?” he slid backward to a stand, “-let me see.” The greenish glow from the screen ached the sight a little, “-I see.”

“Comes from éclair,” said she, “-your baby is ready to go, come on.”

“I guess,” \*snap,\* the hangar lit to showcase a menacing jet with jaws of death painted on its nose. AFR wrote underneath the cockpit. “-She’s ready to fly, have éclair be notified.”

“No need for such actions,” rumbled the speakers, “-good job on finishing the experimental craft. I’ve gone over the sheets and specifications; it will do nicely. The first unmanned aircraft per my design.”

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“A pretty easy job if you ask me,” complained the man, “-any modification will be handled by the main-branch of Midas. I appreciate you choosing me for the project.”

“Oh, don’t say it so unjustly, makes it seem as if thou art being rejected. A special someone will arrive in thy craft, I’m sure he’ll recognize your work.”

“Whatever you say,” he held a cigarette, “-I’ll be sure to meet this special someone when the plane lands.” A warm glow heated the inside of the metal hangar, the polished floor scorched in black-fumes, the unusually-shaped plane taxied onto the dirt land strip.

“There she goes,” said the girl fondly, “-the inverted wings are sure strange to the eyes.”

“I know,” he puffed, “-no idea why he wanted it that way,” the engine howled murderously into the cold-night. Red lights from the capital were spotted as faint stars in the distance. Only when the city went under a crisis of having planes take off and land simultaneously, and especially at night, did the starry night glow unhinged by manmade lights. Various parties moved in tandem across the world, change was upon the era. One of the unprecedented outcomes, few individuals of not too stable nature gave talks over television and described a time where the balance of power would shift into a concrete position. A nation would increment themselves as the feared and the others will follow as the pack. Many suspected Alpha to take said mantle – the Empire held the opportune spot until last decade. A new foe entered the field of battle, the Federation.

Wars until now were in small scale, squabbles if they’d so pleased to say. Then again, only the war of the Mages in Dorchester could be classed as a terrifying event in Hidronian history. There was never any battle waged against other continents. Not till they had their independence. Invasion of Kreston and the Holy Crusade of Duke Percyvell’s era could mildly compare to the dangers faced today. Phantom, without the orders of the Federation, moved its forces to remote bases across Elendor. The presence of the arm’s company alone sufficed. Those at the top held the keys to whatever future the world waited for.

Ignna’s mind didn’t once turn to politics. He rid across the night on the warm asphalt to Swanview. Night made distinguishing the landscape beyond a little hard. Cars were few and whistled past.

‘A dormant magical element,’ thought he closing onto the marked location. ‘-I can’t do magic. To take away Anna’s curse I’ll need to treat her the same as I did that noble-girl. What’s the name,’ scouring the memories, “-yes, the Remington’s. Astral Binding,” shaking in disagreement, “-as if I can use ancient magic. Can’t even conjure a simple spell, how am I suppose to accomplish that feat. Far as I know, I’ll need an SSS-ranked mage, I doubt they even exist nowadays. Perhaps a demon will do?” a single barn stood as a silhouette on a corn-field. “Is this it?” he took off the helmet to wander on a landing strip, “-I guess it’s here,” glancing left-right, “-fields of corns onto miles. Swanview’s so far away.”

“Heads-up,” said éclair, “-plane inbound,” a flash followed by delayed roars.

“Did you have to take so long?” wondered he resting the bike inside the barn.

“I went on ahead and checked a few things, don’t worry about it. I’d close the eyes if I were you.”

‘What does he mean?’ almost planned, it landed to rock the very ground sending dirt, leaves, and rocks across. A pebble ended inside the mouth in the dazed state. \*Cough.\*

“Don’t look so annoyed,” it circled,”-get in, we have to make it quick.” The unusual shape and built had nervousness escape, “-who’s piloting?”

“Me,” claimed it in pride, “-not much of an unmanned aircraft if not for that crucial feature.”

“What about me?”

“There’s a place for a pilot, and as so it happens, is the passenger seat too. Get in, this baby is faster than anything Midas’s made before. We’re bordering on the edge of Magiology’s limit.”

“Yes, yes, I don’t care,” he clambered onboard, “-don’t I need a suit to resist the gravity?”

“Who are you kidding,” the tone crackled into robotic laughter, “-a vampire’s body is more resilient than people give credit for. Come on, you knew about this already,” the hatch closed without a moment of rest. \*Click,\* he flinched, “-there’s a joystick.”

“Fine,” sighed the spirit in annoyance, “-the plane can be used by a living person too. However, it’s harder than most aircraft. Tis why it’s made for my personal use.”

“I got it, no need to be so harsh. When are we taking off?”

“Right now,” the blast had him glued onto the seat.

‘He’s doing this out of spite, I swear.’ The gap between ground and plane increased. Roads bearing lamppost stretched on as if the veins of a living organism. The settlements, small houses, and villages built at differing intervals did come as a pleasant surprise.

“When are we reaching Rotherham?”

“Two hours,” said it.

“Alright,” they climbed on till the star glowed as clear as a clean window. Their presence, the peace, and quiet setting aside the engine were nice. A small dot showed the progress.

The hospital’s activities went on as calmly as normal. A few patients were brought in per work-related injuries, things first aids and healing potions could fix. The special ward where more troublesome cases like Rena, Anna, and Jen, underwent a current emergency. An old-man next to Anna’s room went into cardiac arrest. He suffered from the same curse she fought against, the taint of the inhumane. Where medicine failed, magic took precedence. Mages were employed to a sad reality of lacking power. Their mana didn’t allow for more than a few treatments each day. It frustrated them since management had to decide what patients were priority. For the last two months, Rena, Anna, and Jen were priority to the point where a Bronze-ranked adventurer was hired to be their personal healer. A man arrived in mortal conditions a few hours ago, the only mage on call used her remainder on saving his life. The result, not that people could blame the hospice, a deathly ridden man. After trying to resuscitate the man, the doctors established a pulse – the curse had reached the arteries near the heart. Death had its scythe around the neck, a single pull and over, a life was gone. Families were called and they arrived at a trying sight. The son broke into tears as did the wife. The children were more preoccupied in the playroom down the corridor.

“Sad,” said Rena holding Lampard’s hand.

“I know,” he watched distantly, “-he’s suffering the same as Anna is.”

“Rena, Leonard.”

“Jen?”

“When did you wake up,” turned Leonard, “-Lampard, why did you hide it from us?”

“A little surprise,” said he moving from the wheelchair, “-I didn’t want to break the news so quickly. Doctors said Anna’s situation is degrading, felt disrespectful.”

“Don’t get mad at him,” said Jen, “-I told him to do so,” the left-arm shook to hold Rena’s hand, “-a bit hard to use my nondominant arm.”

“Keep it down,” mumbled Leonard, “-the family over there is possibly witnessing their loved one’s last moment.”

“Why aren’t they at his side?” wondered Jen.

“Monster curses are a tough battle to fight against. Doctors and mages alike don’t know how to handle it. It seems to have differing properties. Some are easy to exterminate whilst others are tougher.”

“Did you call upon the blessing of a god?” wondered she.

“We tried Holy water; the curse rejected it completely and caused more harm than good.”

“Igna, we’re here,” they approached and flew over Rotherham.

‘Beautiful,’ thought he, ‘-it’s become so big and modern. Elvira outdid herself.’ The landing came rough onto the unfinished landing-strip.

“Firm ground,” he leaped.

“Good evening,” approached two figures backed by the metal hangar.

“Good evening,” said he dusting off the pants, “-Igna Haggard, nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” said he, “-here’s the keys to a bike, I presume your friend waits at the hospital?”

“Thanks for that,” he snatched it, “-I’ll pay a visit once I’ve seen her. Thanks for waiting so long in the night, I appreciate it.”

“A very well-mannered young man,” commented the man gazing at the boy’s back.

“Yes, he’s nice,” said the girl.

A gust followed by a chilling jitter , ‘-I’m coming.’

## Chapter 520: Prophecy

Grievance and the fear of losing someone precious. With or without the knowledge of having to face the disappearance of a loved one or close ally. What’s a person going to do, reverting to the past isn’t a possibility nor is it viable to wish for an uncertain future. Hospitals were alike in said way, they were hope and despair joined as one.

A side of the heart wanted to jump and scream. Another wanted to breakdown and cry, life’s cruelty knew no bounds. Jen’s recovery came as a mere token of luck, Anna’s deadly degrading of her health spun more into the minds. When against joy or despair, the deciding faction of which will win the battle is based and results from prior experiences. Pessimism ran cold in the blood – and so, opposed to wishing a friend good recovery, they resorted to questioning how or what to feel.

"I'll take Jen to her room," said Leonard. The empty corridor trembled at the sound of medical staff. Another mortally wounded patient was brought as the operation room laid in around the vicinity.

"Alright," returned Rena emptily, "-we'll see you later," the fatigued waves and sinking glances told more than words ever could. Lampard and Rena were getting readied for the worst. A nurse arrived moments ago, shook her heads at a visiting doctor, then left. The new case took precedence over hers.

"What should we do?" asked Lampard dropping onto a curved metal chair riddled by tiny holes.

"We should really call everyone," said she focusing on slightly tinted glass.

"Call everyone..." the hands crossed in prayer; "-I don't want to bear such a burden. She's still alive, god shuns us for thinking otherwise."

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"I didn't mean it that way," she moved closer, "-I just wanted to let everyone know and prepare," they turned to the grieving family, the old man passed away. Attempts at reviving ended in naught, the lady broke onto her husband's knees. He bent to comfort her with few warm pats down the back.

"Sad," voiced Rena with a drop slipping past her eyelashes, "-will Anna?" she sought answers.

"Don't," the head moved in refusal, "-don't look at me like that," he moved back, her pupils felt deeper, the nose chimed into slightly more reddish color, the earlobes matched as well.

'Don't die on me,' thought he speeding along the large and empty roads of Rotherham, the noise echoed as the howl of a famine beast. The crescent moon followed to be the backdrop of the tall officers. "éclair, who's on staff and who's not?" he dove to a stumble, "-give me a list of the available doctors on call."

"I can't do that," said he, "-don't interfere with the hospital. Tis a sacred place, I don't want to put anyone else in potential harm's way."

"Don't worry," said he moving towards Anna's room, "-I don't plan on impeding onto anyone else's territory. Have you forgotten what my name is?"

"-Hey, hey," hailed a guard, "-where are you running off too?"

"To save a friend," returned he, "-my name's Igna Haggard," flashing the signet ring, "-do call onto Lady Elvira for more details, hell, reach out to my lady mother. I'll be with you shortly," dusting the man aside, 'no time to waste on you people,' the sleeves rolled hastily. 'The curse of monsters,' the closer he got, the faster the heart raced, 'never felt this nervous when treating people before.'

"Igna," flashed éclair, "-here's a list of available information on the monster curse as well as traditional ways to treat ailments. I doubt you had the time to revise what a trained doctor had over the years of hibernation."

"No need to tease about it."

Two figures buried their heads before the daunting sight of woeness, no medical staff were around the room labeled 043. 'Rena, Lampard?'

“Hey, are you guys alright?” inquired Igna tapping their shoulders.

“Could be better,” said Lampard raising his head, “-no way...”

“No way?” he frowned, “-Rena, good to see you’re doing well after the incident.”

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“Why are you here,” pressed Lampard, “-I thought you were in Plaustan?”

“Dude,” said he in a relaxed tone, “-I heard Anna’s in trouble, there’s no chance she’ll survive.”

“We know that,” said Rena softly, “-there’s no need to rub it in.”

“Whatever,” he spun, “-Anna here is my roommate. I won’t let anything happen to her,” he made for the handle.

“Stop,” interjected Leonard, “-don’t go in there, it’s contagious,” said he holding Igna’s arms.

“Don’t care,” he glared back, “-I’ll handle it from here on.”

“Wait!” voiced Rena, “-what can you do?”

“More than normal doctors can,” he stepped and locked the door, the windows went from tainted to fully black.

“I’ve notified the hospital about the arrival; they think it’s a private visit. The cameras are of no concern,” said éclair emphasizing on the, ‘-you owe me for this,’ undertone.

‘Green hair, the face is similar to Xula,’ thought he, ‘-not similar, there are a few things that don’t match her originally. My memory of Anna isn’t very clear, what’s going on here?’ moving in for a closer look, the lower half of the body turned transparent, ‘-a spirit?’

“Hello,” said she.

“Hello,” returned Igna, “-I rushed as fast as I could, are you doing better?”

“No,” she replied, “-I’m not. Come on,” the face warmed to a familiar expression, “-stop hiding it now, I know you’re Staxius Haggard.”

“People do say I bear resemblance to my uncle,” returned he, “-what’s up with you?”

“Stop changing the subject,” she sat upright, “-it’s me, Prophecy, not Queen Shanna.”

“I do know of a man named Staxius Haggard, he’s dead from what I know. Don’t worry, I can take a message to him if you’d like.”

“I knew it,” said she, “-you’ve reincarnated. I’ll skip the greetings. I knew I sensed it, your mana, it’s almost nonexistent but present. The stench of death in that aura can’t be mistaken. Don’t worry about me,” said she, “-I’m living on borrowed time. This vessel is going to expire. Did me well while it lasted.”

“Why go through all that trouble?”

“It’s a long story...”

“Try me,” said he taking a seat, “-you’re on borrowed time?”

“Preoccupied with that are we now?” she pained into a half-smile.

“Hold on a moment-”

\*Heed me, o’ demon swore as mine vassal in trying time. I, Igna Haggard, humble inheritor of the Scifer’s domain call on thee to manifest before me.\*

“-there we go!” the lights twinkled into a small portal.

“You asked for me?” hovered a tiny entity, “-sure been fast.”

“Need a favor,” said he, “-can you bestow her with mana?”

“How much?” she stood onto Anna’s legs.

“Fill the tank?” shrugged he.

“Your wish is my command,” five hovering orbs conjured various symbols above the patient’s head.

“Done,” she pressed her arms against Anna’s flesh – a molten-like stream went up to her body towards the forehead. There, as if a magnet, the symbols plastered to almost engrave themselves. “-Not full tank,” said Kul stretching her arms, “-I gave the boon of mana regeneration, she’ll be fine as long as the mana doesn’t go below a certain amount.”

“Thanks for the help,” he held out a high-five.

“No problem,” the clap didn’t make much sound.

The flickering stopped, “-now you,” said he narrowing the eyes, “-let me guess,” he laughed, “-was this supposed to be the last goodbye before ending into the abyss?”

“Yeah,” she looked on in embarrassment, “-how?”

“I can’t use magic anymore,” he shrugged, “-in case that you were human, I’d have used Kul as the catalyst for the exorcism. Imagine taking away evil by evil, what a world. Now then, take time and recount everything, bear in mind, I don’t promise to help or intervene.”

“Should have expected this from you, going against the flow as usual,” a pause set the mood, her body solidified, the mana lost recuperated. “I’m not a member of the Queen’s inner circle anymore. I’m both Prophecy and not, she ousted me after I tried to speak on the matter of your disappearance. Princess Eira is directly involved, I gathered much from the spreading rumors. Well, a year after you went missing, a certain man came into the Royal capital demanding an audience with Princess Eira. The Queen didn’t allow so and sought fit to speak to him first. The meeting itself is foreign to me even though I remember being there. He’s beyond the beauty of anyone I’ve seen, there’s an angelic side to him, the way he spoke felt like singing. I had flashbacks of the time you came into the capital for the first time accompanied by the vampire. Nevertheless, the meeting ended, I saw Arda, and the highly uninviting people open up to him like nothing before. From a mere visitor, he climbed the ranks to the point of being her right-hand man. I dare say, and forgive me when I say so, he helped her in the moment of utter grieve. The queen needed someone to rely on; times were rough on her, having to take most of the activities of Arda. Power-hungry nobles and all, some even saw fit to try and force Princess



Eira onto the throne as a puppet ruler. Affairs with Alphaia as the Federation was like walking on eggshells. We couldn't risk a war or any conflict," she exhaled and closed her eyes, "-I'm sorry I have to say this... their relation went beyond advisor and monarch. The charm exuded naturally led to amorous ventures in the sleeping chambers. Yes, it's not a joke this time. And so, for the coming time I saw and watched as she changed to depend on him more and more. Luckily, power was given to the council of representatives, without majority votes, no harmful policies or actions could be voiced. The Blood-King factions and Guilds take up more than 70%, we're in the clear. Princess Eira and the Queen are infatuated with this new man, I don't like him, and when I rose my voice – I was ousted as her guardian spirit. Serene and Lady Haru helped me escape into an ethereal being. Part of me knew king Staxius would come soon, and I was right."

"Really?" he paused; "-queen Shanna found another partner?"

"Yes, are you shaken by it?"

"No... not really," the visible disagreement said otherwise.

"I forgot to mention, the man goes by the name Lucifer."

"Lucifer?" then and there, a string broke, '-he's the one allied with Zeus and that other son of a bitch. They guided my daughter into killing me, and now he's infiltrated Arda as the next savior...'

"Calm down," said she, "-it's disheartening to hear, the queen should have been more careful..."

"No," the spur of ire calmed by a pair of hands holding his tightly, '-this touch...' no one was around but Anna who hid under the blanket, '-something or someone I've known for a long time... sets me at ease, what?'

"Remember," whispered a chilling gust.

"Are you ok?" wondered Anna.

"Yes, I'm fine," he smiled, "-I'm Igna Haggard, not Staxius. What happens in Arda, Hidros, or the world isn't related to me, I'm a cook. That life of striving to make the strongest province has long been fulfilled. It's not a province, but a dynasty. I sought out to make Dorchester great, then came Arda, then Hidros, until the present was taken. My heritage is ever-growing and ever-expanding, the empire I built per the sacrifice and deals with the devil have done me proud. Phantom is a culmination of the old King's life. You're Anna Igusta, the best student in the adventuring academy as well as my roommate. I say we bury the past, no one needs to know what happened. If I can accept being betrayed and shoved to the side by my family, surely you can accept starting again?"

"The last two to three years in exile did prove one thing, I have emotions and am more or less human."

"The spell Kul placed on you will carry on as long as you never go beyond the limit. Even if it so happens, I'm sure a high-level demon can figure out how to bind a legendary weapon."

"Igna Haggard," she smiled, "-my roommate, could you please cook me a succulent dish as soon as we return?"

"With pleasure," they smiled and hugged.

