

Death Magic 521

Chapter 521: Odd

As surprising as Anna turned out to be Prophecy and Igna being the reincarnation of Staxius, their bonds remained as roommates. White-curtain of which lit in the amber lighting of the room brightened. Time showed 05:45 – from Cle to the unlikely event made time seem as if a sliver of what it was. The orangish glow eased the prior discussion.

‘Past is the past,’ thought Igna.

‘Present is what matters,’ thought Anna quietly holding her breath.

“About the monster curse,” voiced Igna.

“-oh,” she coughed, “-startled me.”

“Were you dreaming?”

“Yeah,” she grazed her nose, “-don’t know really, I feel empty but happy. Do you ever feel that way?”

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“Now’s not the time to discuss psychology. What explanation are we going to give about the sudden recovery?”

“The curse didn’t affect me, tis the mana depletion. Thanks to that demon,” she gulped, “-as threatening as she was, the cast spell is awesome. My flesh and body feel real, I can touch, feel, and sense the warm saliva down my throat.”

“To much detail,” he stood, “-I’m glad you’re safe, roommate.”

“Yeah,” she nodded to slip under the blanket, “-I’m going to sleep.”

“No worries,” said he moving to the door, “-I’ll have the doctors notified. We need to pay rent, Mr. Kord isn’t going to be happy.”

“Oh shit,” her closing eyes sprung, “-don’t tell me...”

“You argued about paying the rent so...” he held the ‘so’ part.

“Help me cover it,” her hands locked in prayer, “-I’ll pay you back later, I promise.”

“Fine,” he smiled, “-I’ll cover it this time. Girl,” he said coyly, “-you owe me.”

“Yeah, I got it,” fatigued materialized in a slow and loud yawn.

Three figures stood at the ready, each strained to speak, they eyed one another in attempts to read the room. A few hours had passed since Igna entered, nurses and doctors didn’t care much. Her recounting of the past took longer, contrary to what it seemed. And so, armed by a comforting grin, “-you guys waited long?”

“Igna,” approached Leonard, “-what did you do?”

"Calm down," a shift in the grin had the man stand down, "-there's no need to scream, tis a place of recovery." Effectively shutting out Leonard, he approached Rena and Lampard, "-come here," a gesture at Leonard returned by a sneer.

"Listen, everyone," a heavy sigh from Igna had them gulp. The tension grew, the feet froze, hands tingled, the heart sank, "-Anna's fine."

"What?" returned Rena blinking incessantly, "-she was on her death bed..."

"Are you a healer or mage?" wondered Leonard, "-I don't sense any mana from you..."

"I'm a chef," replied he, "-have you guys checked the Arcanum recently?" to which he held out his phone, "-here, read this article."

Weekly Digest posted, "-the controversial young rookie rejected and cut ties with Lady Yuki after stating her mistreatment. Cle sure has been eventful this year, we saw two highly sought-after ranks given to the youngsters who turned the Arcanum into a battlefield. Kyle Darker was given the Red-collar while Igna was granted the Black-collar from the esteemed Lord Amsey in what seemed to have been a declaration of war by Igna who saw fit to use the shamed Dungeon-Style cooking. By what could be described as a miracle, his dish, blatantly rejected by the judges, revitalized Mr. Amsey into the tycoon we only heard about in stories. The retired old man returned to a strapping young man of 20 years old. Scientists are left baffled, mages are left gawking, and he who made such a meal is left on a deserted island. Will he find fame or fall to ruin, only time will tell. I personally think Igna Haggard's going to be the most controversial star in the growing digital world." Written and edited by Lia.

"How though?" wondered Leonard, "-reversing time on a person's body isn't even plausible with magic. I supposed Magiology could probably spare a few years, not like that, the process is beyond our reality."

"I used the Elder Blood of a Dragon," said he, "-don't underestimate me, I might look weak, but I have my sources."

"Did you fight a dragon?" wondered Lampard, "-I dare you to prove it," he lifted the walking stick, "-prove it."

"No need," he smirked, "-I don't care about you lot," taking a few steps back, "-Rena, Leonard, Lampard, Jen, I say this here and now, I don't care about you. Being treated at this hospital is just a way to say thanks for the past, I want no part in the lives of people who'd be so willing to throw me away. I don't get where the grudge or hate originated, tis where I stay, we're all but mere acquaintances," turned to Leonard, "-you, young noble of the Goldberg's, you better take care of your friends."

Broad shoulders ambled strongly to the corner, "-Igna's changed," said Leonard.

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"I can sort of understand," said Lampard dropping onto the metal seat, "-we treated him like shit. Rena and Jen forced us to slowly hate him, and it worked. Part of me hates the guts and courage he has."

"You don't get it," added Rena, "-it's not a goodbye. We did push him away and he returned the feeling."

"Don't say you know shit now," fired Leonard, "-most of this began because of thy plots."

“No fighting,” cried Lampard, “-let’s just be grateful.”

The pace quicken towards Jen’s room, ‘-was it wise?’ wondered he, ‘-pushing them away. It feels right when considering all... part of me wants to support them best I can. Probably a lingering feeling of affection or something, I don’t know.’

‘Tis thy heart,’ commented éclair with a heart-sticker.

“Congratulation, you made me gag,” he chuckled arriving at her room. Plants laid about inside.

‘Jen,’ staring through the door, ‘-good to see...’

Her head gently faced him, “-don’t stand in the doorway, come in, Igna.”

“Impressive,” the door opened, “-how did you know?”

“Had a feeling,” she smiled and fixed onto a television showing the coverage of Cle, “-Anna’s situation grew dire, part of me thought you’d come as a prince in shining armor. You’re always one who cares despite being betrayed and shunned, are you perhaps a martyr?”

“Phrased that way,” he took a seat, “-makes it sound scandalous. Was the trip worth it?”

“To Coria, I don’t remember,” she stared into an empty spot, “-memories of the time are foreign to me. I do hear voices here and there – a side-effect I guess...”

“What now,” he asked, “-you’ve lost the right hand, what of the dream?”

“My dream’s long been broken,” said she solemnly, “-I wasn’t strong enough. Was wanting to join the wall-guardians that big a deal... I wanted to catch up to my big sister.”

“Stop it,” interjected he, “-you wanted to join the Wall-guardian?”

“Yes,” the would-be tears stopped in sudden confrontation, “-is my aspiration so lowly you use such a harsh tone?” her brows knitted as if a soldier lifting his shield.

“No,” the eyes crinkled, “-did so to stop you from crying. Don’t you know where we are?”

“Rotherham,” the response came blandly.

“Correct, a round of applause for you,” he clapped silently.

“Stop being sarcastic.”

“Stop being a pain.”

“What do you want...” the pitch rose, “-if it was about annoying me, then, Igna Haggard, the task’s successful.”

“Oh, thanks for the honor,” the smugness all but increased, “-jokes aside,” he released her pent-up frustration, “-I can arrange a new arm for you.”

“Stop lying,” she sighed, “-the technology’s not even possible yet.”

“Ha-ha,” pinching the forehead in grief, “-there’s a reason why Rotherham’s a secret to other nations. You’re standing on the ground where Magiology is of great importance, the scholars here are far smarter than anything you’d ever seen.”

“Seriously?” her voice warmed; “-can I have my arms back?”

‘If I had the Symbol of Kronos, turning back time on her injuries would be simple. Guess it’s time to call in favors.’

“Give me a moment.”

Out of the hospital and into a well-trimmed garden opposite the building, the sun rose over yonder, few people went to and fro, most were busy talking over the phone. By the vestment, they were scholars or people of intellect, not because most wore glasses, rather due to the white-overalls or special work outfits.

“éclair.”

“I got it,” said he, “-give me a moment.” Multiple people were contacted; using the Haggard name sufficed to gain entry at a normal level in the ever-stretching pool of projects Phantom commissioned. As a leader of the organization, Elvira had the privileged to access anything she wanted, and the hierarchy began from her to then diffuse into the lesser agents. éclair, a being who now maintained itself via self-operating mechanical arms, stood as an exception. He also had the privilege to do what he pleased at an even deeper level than Elvira.

“Hello, Clarise speaking,” the earpiece rumbled by a strong gust.

“Hello Clarise,” said éclair.

“Oh, the spirit, you reactivated from long years of being dormant. How can I help?”

“My master would like to speak with you.”

“Master?” background noise suggested she stumbled, “-is King Staxius back?”

“No,” interjected Igna, “-I’m afraid my uncle isn’t here. Good morning, Lady Clarise, I’m Igna Haggard, son of Courtney Haggard.”

“The young heir,” said she slowing her speech, “-if éclair deemed thee as master, I don’t doubt thy have great potential. So, what can I help with?”

“A simple favor really, one of my friend’s lost an arm. I’d like to-”

“I accept,” she voiced with no hesitation, “-you want her arm back. I expected an order along the lines of creating a world-ending explosive or something.”

“World-ending explosive?” he laughed, “-a good sense of humor.”

“No, I was serious...”

“Ok?” an awkward pause followed.

“I’m joking,” she broke the ice, “-when would you like the arm delivered, where’s the patient?”

“At the hospital, the name’s Jen.”

“Found her,” snapped she, “-I’ll have her fixed in two days.”

“Damn ok, I’ll leave you to it. How about the fee?”

“No need,” said she, “-I’ve been cooped up in the lab for an eternity. Getting out for some fresh air sounds good as payment.”

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“Thanks again.”

“No problem, call again if you ever need something built. ”

“Will do,” the call ended. ‘-What a weird conversation.’

Thus, ended the whole Cle event. The media did squeeze every single bit of information on the fellow chefs. Many went on to be in renowned restaurants as the trainee. The Red-collared Kyle went on to work at Loron. Lady Yuki and Yanni were on speaking terms. A fact that would be solidified per Yanni purchasing the building besides Loron in hopes of remodeling the two establishments into a big, fine-dining restaurant. Chef Leko returned to the Adventuring academy; the media sure was hungry for an interview. Kyle saw fit to hog the spotlight, he did interview after interview and even appeared into a famous late-night talk show called Hoggar. The popularity further boosted and engrave his name into the Arcanum.

Stepping from the world of cooking, Igna remained at Rotherham. Lady Elvira as well as Prince Julius showed and even took him to multiple deals with other interested parties. The way he walked, acted, and spoke, sometimes had the people around doubt the boy’s origin. He would often reflect Shadow’s personality so closely a few older guards were urged to salute in fear.

There and then, on a warm Wednesday evening, a certain memory came to mind. Most of the day was spent browsing the Arcanum, mostly, Lokka. He adventured down a massive rabbit where a particular name appeared. The Pride of Hidros and the story of her disappearance, the myth of an unfinished film of the presumed dead star’s return. ‘Aceline, what happened to the movie, I swear we bought a filmmaking company to shoot and show the story of Luna...’

“Hey, éclair, do you know anything about what happened to Aceline?”

“No, I do know the movie was finished in the allocated time. Well, that’s the last transmitted message from Aceline – after that, the filming crew, director, and all involved disappeared. We weren’t able to follow up as it’s in enemy territory.”

“You mean Alphaia,” he paused, “-Is there no way to track Aceline’s location?”

“No, I’m inclined to think she’s dead. Why bring her name up now?”

“I don’t know, I said I didn’t want to get involved but it’s beyond me now. I remember planning to make her the star of the watchmaking company... wait, what happened to that project?”

“The watch-makers are still making watches for military use. Meldorino was claimed and they sort of stole the watchmaking world. The brand is very sought after.”

“Man,” he facepalmed, “-I even went through the trouble of creating a fake hero and villain to promote the brand. I’m sure they’re glad I disappeared.”

“Yeah, you said it,” he laughed, “-they annual release a special edition for the celebration of Luna.”

“Damn it,” he facepalmed, “-shit, remembering isn’t doing so great for my mind.”

“Master Staxius did lay a lot of groundwork for possible expansion.”

“...”

Chapter 522: Lord Amsey

“No need to rub it in,” the evening grew darker and somber. About a few days ago, Jen had surgery under the watchful gaze of Clarise. Post-operation showed her body quickly adapted and accepted the less than the humane arm. They proclaimed with certainty that the lady would heal in the next few months. Lampard and the others were given the green-light to return to the academy. Leonard chose to remain at Rotherham and work until Jen was able to return in full health.

“Igna,” said a figure dressed in warm and comfortable clothes, “-are you going to sit mindlessly gazing at the rising stars, or are we moving out?” two brown medium-sized cases dropped to shake the bench.

“Anna,” said he staring her recovered face, she seemed to do better as proved the visible expressions and little gestures here and there, “-where did all this stuff come from?” the slouched posture straightened, “-being unconscious for so many months doesn’t magically bring about luggage...”

“Oh please,” she slapped his head, “-it’s gifts from visitors. They gave more than I’d like to accept,” a general tinge of crimson ambered her cheeks and easily be mistaken for make-up. Not here, not now, the redness came from the cold outside.

“The body is still trying to adjust to the norm?” wondered he sternly grabbing the cases.

“Yeah,” she motioned as if to hide under the puffy jacket, “-didn’t know Rotherham got so cold at night.”

“Rotherham’s on a higher plateau than the other places. Doesn’t jump to the eye since the slopes are gentle and unnoticed.”

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“Look at that,” she warmly patted his back, “-aren’t you the smart one.”

“Stop with the sarcasm,” they headed along the gravel path. A car hugged the curb and waited patiently. The clear night reflected off the black body.

“Igna,” said a voice on the other side of the vehicle, “-are you sure you don’t want a plane to take you home?” asked the Prince peeping over the roof.

"A lift to the train-station is enough," said he opening the booth, "-can't get too overly dependent on Phantom and mother's resources."

"Yeah sure," said he, "-see you soon, cousin."

Before exchanging goodbyes, "-Cousin," whispered Igna to the knowledge of none, "-about the thing we discussed, the Goldberg's, can you do something about it?"

"Yeah," he sorted the oiled blond-hair, "-I'll try talking to them. If not, we can arrange for the girl to suddenly find that a distant relative who left a big enough inheritance to arouse the nose of greedy bastards."

"I'd rather you stick to discussing. I know we don't really need to save and be mindful of money, still, feels weird to not have any respect for it."

"Please," the tone deepened, "-cousin, you must never respect money for tis the culprit that forces a person into slavery, tis it that forces a brother to kill another, a wife to cheat, a boyfriend to lie, a friend to betray, a child to work, and a man to ruin. There's no hope for those moving per the glitz and glamor of this accursed 'money'."

"Cousin," he broke into a tight embrace, "-I didn't mean to cause any harm."

"Don't worry about it," said he kissing Igna on the lips, "-you are my kin, and we are brothers. Take care on the way home, my fellow comrade, I shall see thee next we meet, till then, good luck."

"You too, cousin, you too," he slowly sunk into the car where a flushed Anna held her breath. "You didn't see anything."

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"I saw everything," she broke the seal, "-you kissed another!"

"What of it?" the face remained formal.

"Way to ruin the joke," her head moved to rest upon the cold window, "-it's cute how you guys kissed. Brotherly bonds are sure a thing to be amazed at."

"Kissing another man isn't wrong," said he, '-didn't feel weird or alarmed. Probably because of the involvement in the underworld, Julius hides it but I smell it, the stench of blood. The cold and resolute stare when someone he cares about is in danger.'

"I know," said she, "-was just trying to have fun. A long trip ahead of us, yeah?"

"Yeah, very long trip." Choosing to travel at night instead of the day came per the request of Anna. She wanted to return at the same time the sun rose. Luckily, the time-tables of departure aligned perfectly. They expected to reach the Academy in 14-15 hours.

Wednesday washed to Thursday. Guild Leader Haru and Chef Leko were in the company of very interesting guests. The restaurant above the gymnasium rested in a cold grave-like silence. Multiple figures were rounded on a table, a single light showed the faces – screams and shouts snuck in from the activities below.

“Explain why you’re here,” demanded Haru strongly.

“To check up on a future star,” said a lady bearing silvery grey hair tied in a neat bun. Glasses, eyelashes, and dark-colored lipstick accentuated her mature demeanor, otherwise, a description to nicely say she didn’t look old.

“What’s the Weekly Digest up to now,” interjected Leko, “-isn’t there perhaps better things to do than waste time here?”

“Oh no,” said she in a lowered tone, “-I’m not on business from the Weekly Digest, I’ve come here to recommend what step Igna should take. Opposed to him, Kyle and the others have strived to make and get their name out to the world of fame and stardom. I heard Kyle landed an advertisement job for a local company. It’s not much... tis but a babe learning to walk. I say this in full support of Igna, the moment Kyle starts to run, there will be no catching him and I’m serious. The market of Fine-dining and the shunned Dungeon-Style Cooking is too heavy a burden to break. Compare this to the discrimination of humans and demi-humans, despite the numerous laws and the current accord of the races, there are still pro-humans’ movements out there as is pro-demi-human,” a pause to breathe and show confidence exposed the opposite side’s expression. Leko stared into a wide-nothingness presumably thinking about the future. Haru’s face boiled to a tomato, her frustration loosened by her unbuttoning shirt a little. The cold-faced trader gave herself out as if an open-book.

‘Lady Haru is worried,’ figured Leko, ‘-she’d never go overboard for a simple chef. Igna means more to her than I’d imagine.’

“Back to what I was saying,” their attention returned, “-the people want to know what happened to him. The Arcanum is going wild, Weekly Digest’s social media pages have been bombarded by questions about Igna. They know we have ties to the elusive chef.”

“Haven’t heard anything about him too,” concluded a heavy patronizing voice. “For the boy who granted me the boon of youth, I’d wish he had more thought into the future and what is there to seek. What does he wish?” leaned Amsey dressed in light-clothes defining the stocky figure, “-any ideas?”

“No,” replied Haru, “-the boy’s been paying a visit to a few injured friends.”

“Injured friends?” pointed Lia, “-any more details?”

“It’s nothing of importance,” added Leko.

“Oh, I dare not say so,” uttered Lia dramatically, “-was the news of the Coria Dungeon incident a mere fantasy of the collective minds. I remember a mention of Group C and a few others, whom I dare say once again, is the same group Igna belonged to.”

“Cut the melodrama,” fired Haru, “-Igna’s responsible for taking matters into his own hands. He went out to save his friends and successfully did so.”

“Enough,” cried Amsey slamming the table, “-how dare you put him in danger?”

“Lord Amsey,” glared Haru, “-there’s no link between you and the boy. Lashing out here isn’t going to accomplish anything. Fondly enough, this decision means nothing without him.”

“Oh,” footsteps echoed to shatter the tense aura, “-quite a lot of famous people here,” said he with a bag over the shoulder, “-Lady Haru, Chef Leko, I’ve returned.”

“Welcome back.”

“Lord Amsey and the lady from the magazine. Why are you here?” he inquired rudely.

“Igna, please,” voiced Leko, “-tis no way to talk to guests.”

“Guests are deserving of the same type of treatment they bestow upon others. I only but did as they were. Isn’t the ‘lead by example,’ ideal not applicable here for I know Mr. Amsey loved to quote it specifically.”

“Sharp as a knife,” smiled the monstrous man, “-I’m quite fond of you.”

“Thou art also very much intriguing,” paused, ‘-I changed the dialect subconsciously.’

“A well-educated man from what I see,” added Lia.

“Being literate nowadays is a must to advance in life.” They didn’t catch the blunder, “-I do apologize for any misunderstood intentions.”

“Let’s skip the formalities,” suggested Haru, “-lady Lia, Lord Amsey, would you now get to the point of this visit?”

“Sure,” they nodded affirmingly, “-we’d like to have Igna as a model to Lord Amsey’s.”

“Let me introduce myself first,” the room drew to his aura, “-Lord Amsey D’Eona II, Director of Lumian O’dla, or Lum for short. One of the five conglomerates of Alphaia at thy service.”

‘Conglomerate,’ he winced, ‘-how dare he show here in Hidros as if nothing happened. Why Lady Haru so silent, doesn’t she know their history with Phantom?’

“Before popping a blood vessel, I’m not affiliated to the other four conglomerates. Lumian’s based off Iqavea originally, Alphaia’s like a secondary base. Don’t expect me to cower before the Gaso Group or any of their lackeys. We made fortune in fashion and jewelry. Lady Haru here’s our primary source of precious stones off the Ardianian mines. I say my credentials are pretty hefty.”

“Lower your guard,” voiced Haru, “-even in his olden age, even after becoming a chef, Amsey chose to take a different path. He’s the true personification of someone great. Not only did he bring a chance to the world of cooking but he did so in the world of fashion too.”

“Lord Amsey, I can’t certainly argue against what’s been said. Part of me wants to agree and do is wished,” reluctance came in forms of stutter, “-previous experience with Lady Yuki’s sort of made me disgust the prospect of being taught by anyone else. Chef Leko here is like an older brother; I’m content being in his shadow.”

“Listen,” said he, “-I’m not telling you to come to cook. I want you as a model, you’ve garnered the attention of the Arcanum, despite not posting anything or making yourself public, the people are curious and want to know more. This brings in more publicity than is imagined. As far as cooking is concerned, it’s up to you. I came here to offer a deal, an opportunity to grow into more than a cook.”

“More than a cook... heh.”

“What’s so funny?” wondered Lia.

“The amount of suffering I had to endure to take part in Cle, the relations that were lost to that damned event. I nearly lost my mind trying to conquer the hurdle before me. It’s not complaints, I’m not sad at all. Rather, feels more of a disappointment. I destroyed a bond for the sake of a Black-collar and a bit of recognition; what’s there more to say?”

“Igna,” before anyone could speak, Amsey grabbed the boy’s shoulder, “-listen to me. I’m saying this as someone interested in seeing where life takes you. I’m grateful for the second chance at life granted. Pulling off that feat is no mere task to smile at. They don’t realize how important that dish was. I know you’re a part of Phantom; one of the richest secretive companies around the world. I know, since we both fight on the same hardened battlefield. I probably don’t need to give the promise of being rich, that side of the story is claimed – what I offer is the ability to make you, Igna Haggard, someone of fame and repute. I want to pay homage to an idol/actress I admired and loved so many years ago.”

“Who was it?”

“Aceline.”

Chapter 523: Cooking?

‘It can’t be a coincidence,’ wondered Inga, ‘-Aceline came to mind a few days ago. I was curious about what happened, the past seems to intrigue me more, how are things since I arrived. Amsey’s indebted for sure, there’s no arguing it. How can I turn this into a playable card – going to Alpha might resolve a few things. I want to know what happened to that land of dreams, the land of cinema. Well, only way I see it happening.’

“How do I remind you of her?”

“I don’t know,” expressed he, “-her journey in Hidros is not that well documented. She was more of a recluse despite being the Pride of an entire continent. The work there before the trip abroad showed the telling of a girl who wanted to fight for justice, to fight the world using her music as the weapon. Glitz and glamor of the cinema-world took a toll on her life, the incidents of her death, disappearances, are so foreign I can’t imagine how or what was the reason. I suppose the way you go against the flow brings her spirit to shine.” Joy and admiration chocked the dim interior.

“Well,” turning to Leko and Haru, “-it’s only for a modeling job, right?” cautious gaze scanned about for a clearer picture.

“No, not just that – I’m planning to have advertisement and have you break into the Alphian market as a model.”

“Lady Haru, Chef Leko, what’s the verdict on Mr. Amsey’s proposition.”

“A trip abroad might be a chance a broadening the mind,” said Haru, “-if Igna agrees, I see no trouble.” The fact that Amsey and the guild were close made it easier to conclude.

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"I accept," said Leko, "-the restaurant's going to go through some changes. I doubt you'll have any work here."

"Then we've reached an agreement," said Lia, "-expect us here tomorrow at six." Handshakes and words of safe-travels closed the conversation. The visitors were pleased by the result and displayed it in laughter and light-hearted gestures. Haru's head hung in doubt for a while, Leko kept glaring at the room as if it were going to vanish. "Lady Haru, Chef Leko," voiced he, "-why so quiet?"

"Nothing much," stood Haru rather strenuously, "-I got things to attend to, later." A person out of the empty room felt eerie, Leko sat for a while and didn't respond. Igna gazed in a stupor wondering what went on in the chef's mind. The quietude grew to where the buzzing of the lights spoke louder than a breathing man.

"Igna," said he.

"Yes?"

"I-" he stood to a stop, "-ah, don't mind it," the gloom flushed to delight, "-there's more out there to discover. The world is too vast for words, descriptions, and books can only but give a trailer to what is to come. Go to Alphaia, make a name as a model or work as Chef, the path is open for decision. I'll be taking a break from cooking."

"A break?"

"Yes," he smiled, "-a good break to have the reality do what is due."

"Alright, see you tomorrow then," said Igna reaching for the door.

"Don't worry," said Leko, "-I'll close shop, head home, I'm sure they wait."

Enigmatic as the parting words were, Igna dashed down the stairs unknowing of what situation Haru and Leko faced. A conspiracy brewed behind the scenes, one implicating the leaders of the Academy and the investigation of Coria.

Muddy footprints ran onto the stone paths, heavy rain had soiled the surroundings for the worse. Cleaners and attendants expressed the dismay by the sudden outburst and scream at not-so-nice students. As expected, taking the path north to a graveyard of metal and components, the little room used by Gayae waited ever so patiently. The wooden-door had '-On duty, call me later dudes,' sketched in chalk.

Knock, knock,

"A moment," a loud thump followed by a feminine gasp, "-Oh shit, I'm sorry," came a mundane whisper.

"Don't worry about it," said the other, "-go check who's at the front... remember, we don't have room for more bikes!"

"Got it," the voice approached, "-sorry about that," oil on the face, grime, and grease on the fingers and hands, "-Igna?" said he in a loosely fitted mechanic's uniform.

"Am I interrupting?"

“No, no,” he moved to wrap the arms around Igna, “-let’s move somewhere else.”

Far away onto a plot of land on where labeled saplings laid in full, “-why did we have to go away?”

“Come on,” chuckled Gayae, “-girl trouble. My partner’s a bit of a psycho, she loves bikes more than her life and can get pretty scary at times.”

“I’m sure she’s a lovely woman,” said he diplomatically, “-I came by to say thanks for paying rent until now.”

“No problem, the phone call sure was abrupt. Anyway, old man Kord doesn’t seem mad, payments were on time and the rooms got cleaned once a week or so.”

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“Thanks a million.”

“No thanks needed,” said he, “-tis even. I’m so close to finishing my dream bike, only a few more parts.”

“Good luck then.” Over yonder came the wild gestures of a girl who’d captured the eyes of all around. Blonde hair held by a bandana and clean apparel.

“Damn, she’s pretty,” complimented Igna.

“I know right,” he winked, “-I’m handsome too,” and so he ran off as a babe seeing his mother. The frantic clanging and frequent explosions added to the compartment’s charm. Where most would abstain from engaging in conversation laid more interesting people. A hidden treasure of eccentric individuals accomplishing feats beyond imagination.

The scope through which he viewed the academy went from homely and curious to reminiscent. The prior discussion meant him leaving for an unknown amount of time. Despite not spending so much here, it was still a refuge for him. Especially the village whereupon he headed next.

Early morning of students wanting lunch occurred as a film. The busy metropolis displayed on the Arcanum, snippets he glossed over whilst scrolling about. Many conveniently forgot the Coria incident. Those involved didn’t take long to return to how things were.

Two hoodie-wearing figures fought for a boxed lunch at Kord’s eatery. The old-man tried hard to control the rowdy crowd. Orders and flailing hands cried for their meal. He certainly handled it calmly, though the figures didn’t hold much of a fight.

“Rena, Lampard.”

“Igna?”

“Yeah, come here,” he gestured.

“This better be for a good reason,” said Lampard, “-lost my chance at the famed lunch.”

Rena stared emptily; her intentions were more on letting Lampard do the talking.

“How about I cook you guys something.”

“Now?”

“Obviously.” Along the back alley where the scent of garbage rose, Kord’s back door conveniently opened to a simple push. The chaos of the front seemed naught at the back.

“Old man Kord,” cried Igna, “-I’ll use the kitchen for a while, is that cool?”

“Yeah, sure,” preoccupied with the increasing horde, “-welcome back by the way. Guests are visiting the young lass upstairs. Take the ingredients and head on to her side.”

“Sure.”

Cole, Ila, and Frost spoke and laughed; the door opened to silence the apartment. Rena and Lampard soon headed on to meet the others in the living room, Igna contented to falling back inside the kitchen. The familiarity of the utensils gave a touch of comfort before going on a spontaneous trip.

“Hello people,” said Lampard confidently.

“Hey there,” returned the others, “-how’s it been?” wondered Frost reaching for a hug.

“Pretty good,” said Rena, “-how are you feeling, Anna?”

“Good,” smiled she resting onto a comfortable couch, “-you didn’t have to wake up so early to greet us.”

“What do you mean us?” wondered Ila, “-didn’t you come alone?”

“No,” she refused, “-Igna’s here too. He dropped me off and left for the academy.”

Sizzling brought on a mix of spices, “-he’s here,” said Cole. The five exchanged pleasantries and tried not to touch on what happened. Frost and Ila had a lot to say, they recounted funny tales about stories others missed. A catch-up of the soap opera hosted by the Academy’s romantic life.

Skipping to when he finished the dishes, everyone gathered around the modest counter and ate.

“Thanks for coming by,” said Igna at Frost and the rest. They did do a lot when he was absent. If not for them, the hospital might not have tried so hard at treatment.

“Don’t mention it,” said Frost nicely, “-you’ve gone and become a celebrity.”

“Oh yeah,” wondered Ila, “-how’s the life of stardom?”

“What stardom?” he frowned, “-I only did Cle and headed for Rotherham.”

“Seriously?” facepalmed Anna, “-check your social media.”

“Why there’s nothing,” showing the phone, “-see?”

“Why are you logged out?” inquired Rena through judging eyes.

“Oh,” the mouth made an embarrassed oval shape, “-my bad.” éclair inputted the login details and bam, an onslaught of notification deafened the room. Likes follows, the Hwan accounted – linked and quoted by the Weekly Digest, had pictures from the interview breaking the 20 thousand likes. As for him, the follower count read 10 thousand.

“See?” smiled Anna, “-you’re popular.”

“Not really...” fingers hastened to a certain profile, “-look,” he showed Jen and Rena’s account, “-they both have 20 thousand followers.”

“Oh,” stared Rena, “-social media’s less of my worry.”

“See, it doesn’t mean much,” concluded Igna.

“Dumbass,” cried Lampard, “-the show’s been broadcasted all over the world. High-profiled people know who you are. Kyle Darker’s getting bigger and his rival, Igna Haggard’s nowhere to be found, interest is only growing.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I like to stalk people online,” smiled he proudly.

“Look at that,” exclaimed Frost, “-we ought to go. Thanks for breakfast, Igna.”

“Here’s boxed lunch for later,” he made enough.

Back to the living room, silence loomed as the television played. Neither wanted to speak and preferred the quietness. They sat there and waited for a few minutes till a sudden phone call.

“Who was it?” wondered Anna.

“Lady Haru,” returned Igna, “-can I ask something?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the plan now?” wondered he.

“I’ll get back to adventuring as soon as possible. Imagine conquering the tower of monsters.”

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“Nice,” said he, “-Frost and the others are friendly, you’ll be fine.”

“Why the tone of dejected, are you not going to stay?”

“No,” said he frankly, “-I’m leaving for Alpha tomorrow morning. Was offered a good opportunity to grow. Honestly speaking, after the whole incident with Cle and Lordon’s, I’m starting to question if I really enjoy cooking that much. Who the hell knows – being compared to Kyle is definitely a pain.”

“Answer me this,” the visage froze.

He gulped, “-what are the things you like?”

“Don’t know...”

“Forget the now and present, think deep, what is it you regret?”

‘Regrets...’

“Dying early,” said he, “-I had so much planned and it ended so quickly.”

“Are you sure?” her brows lifted in suggestion, “-what’s thy name?”

“Igna Haggard?”

“Haggard... linked to the royal family. Unofficial rulers of Phantom, a monstrous powerhouse under whom controls armies and weapons. Don’t you think,” she smirked, “-getting back what you lose would be simple?”

“I see,” he nodded, “-I get it now.”

“Good.”

‘Origin, the quest bestowed by Scifer. My life as Staxius ended; not the aspirations and dreams. Where once I was a mage and alchemist – the role’s been changed to being a chef. Whatever the title does not matter. The side-quest of looking for a purpose has outstayed its welcome. I can’t fight it now, my memories and personality from long ago are stronger than those I made now. Familiar faces, familiar names, the links all but strengthen. Time to face the truth Igna, I was running away from my responsibilities. I understand what to do now – this rebirth is a clean slate. Those who did me wrong in the past will suffer. Being lost and without a goal, trying to be a chef, and challenging the Lordon wasn’t thought out or anything. What I feel is anger, rage... forgetting was a mistake.’

Chapter 524: Land o’ Dream

Friday the 12th – the day began per the downpour of rain. A disturbance in the weather was reported late at night. The extent of the rainfall eluded even the weather reporter’s mind.

Whatever happened didn’t matter, suitcase in hand, backpack on the shoulder, and weapons on the table. An unbranded cap kept the hair from moving; a cheaply made long-sleeved dark-brown shirt, skinny jeans, and less than presentable shoes. For someone owning a lot of cash, caring about materialistic things could have been less of a worry.

“Igna?” the door stumbled with minor yelps.

“Anna!” opening the door, “-why are you moving about?” she fell into his arms.

“Don’t,” said she trying to stand, “-I felt normal a few minutes ago. Got dizzy, that’s all.”

The explanation went in one ear and out the other, “-congratulations.”

“For what... oh, wait,” for a brief second, her hands braced for an eventual fall, “-huh?”

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“Stop moving around so much,” said Igna holding the young lady, “-heavier than you appear.”

“Ha-ha,” the sarcastic remark followed a pleasant smile, not overbearing or under shadowed; a perfect balance. “No commotions outside,” said she.

“The rain,” he pulled the curtains, “-pouring cats and dogs.”

The television toggled to show the early morning news. Igna headed on to pack his bags, though, he did so before the day. Cross-checking was but a diversion. A less than gratifying sleepless night of utter insult and self-degradation left him exhausted mentally. The eyelids waned per each blink, the eyeballs itself burnt, uncontrollable yawns and achy joints, ‘-not the best start for today.’

Knock, knock, slammed the door.

“Coming,” replied he.

Knock, knock, slammed the door yet again.

“Said I’m coming,” a brute pull had the visitor stumble inside on her knees. “Damn it,” cried Igna, “-you’ve soiled the entryway.”

“Shut the hell up,” glared Ila quickly sorting her revealing outfit into more of a respectable one.

“She’s back for more,” cried the local hoodlums, “-Ay, Igna,” waved a certain familiar face.

“What’s up,” returned he.

“The girl’s got stripes pink and white panties man,” they laughed obnoxiously, “-don’t get too close, else you’ll end up in jail like Papa John.”

“Got it, thanks for the advice,” returned he courteously. Before closing, the door halted with an escaping wink and thumbs up.

“Was that necessary?” returned she with a listless visage.

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“Not my fault you decided to wear skimpy outfits on a rainy day,” he held her bags, “-thanks for moving in. Anna’s going to need the help of someone trustworthy,” he guided till his room, “-you’ll stay here, I’ve cleaned up the place.”

“Awesome,” she entered, “-I’ll take a shower, see you in a bit.”

“Alright,” he moved to the kitchen and readied a simple dish as well as lunch before leaving. Meanwhile, a documentary on the glamour of the Alphan’s entertainment lifestyle had Anna clutching her pillow. Multiple famous figures gave snippets and interviews for the world to know. It looked like a fantasy, hanging out at the side of popular people, gaining their trust, learning about the secrets hidden deep within.

“Excited for the journey?” wondered Anna half-an-hour later.

“Referring to the documentary?” asked he doing the dishes.

“Obviously, a friend of mine is going to the place of dreams. Can’t help being hyped.”

“Quiet down,” said he pulling a bowl, “-have some soup. My rides on the way.”

At 09:30, éclair received the call for departure. “I’ll be off then,” he stared into the hallway leading to the living room. Green-hair stood leaning over the tall-shoulders of Ila, the duo was pleased. ‘Time to head out then.’

“Take care on the travels,” said Anna.

“Break a leg,” added Ila a bit too literally.

Off the metal stairs and inside the restaurant, “-Mr. Kord, I’ll be leaving.”

“No worries kid,” said he reading the special dishes, “-go there and conquer the world. The Academy is too small for someone who has so much potential. Don’t forget, cooking doesn’t have to bind you, do what the mind feels like doing – you’ll eventually come across what was meant for you.”

“Thanks for the advice.” And so, a little sprint across the road led into a big-black car. Anna stared from on above, she waved and so did he. Rain slammed harder on the metal body, “-hello Igna,” said Lia sat with legs crossed.

“Good morning.”

“Let’s go, driver,” ordered Mr. Amsey. The Adventuring grew distant on the rear-view mirror. Heavy clouds atop felt more of a curse. How would he have known that the day he left; things wouldn’t be the same ever again. The tension of those in the shadows had Leko and Haru bound to no ends. Lady Elvira’s help was requested.

“Where are we headed?”

“To Odgawoan, the land of cinema and entertainment empire of Scaica.”

“Wasn’t Melmark the center of attention?” wondered he.

“No, at one point yes... tis not that clean-cut. The growing market of entertainment needed a town of their own. Thus, rich businessmen laid claim to a small village a few decades ago and build tall buildings. More and more production companies, idol agencies, you name it, and most moved to Odgawoan. Tis mostly because of the independent rule – the town is its own state. Money talks, and here, it ordered.”

“Alright,” seeking no further information, éclair took matters into his hands and researched the particular town. It went as far as to dig up a shady past;

“Odgawoan, nestled near the Fuda Mountains, was previously thriving mining village that suddenly stopped about thirty years ago. The reserves were exhausted as stated by officials. The village remained dormant for the bitter part of two years until clever businessmen adventured deep into the Fuda Mountains. Many came and went; most were interested in easy money and bidden adventuring farewell. Not until estate agents wanting to reclaim the ghost village wandered about, traversing the forest and arriving at a valley. A gentle slope cut itself up the mountain, a pathway into a land of unknown. Stood at the peak, what they saw couldn’t be described nor showed. A land of utter beauty, the trees were unlike anything they’d seen – some village’s folk referred to it as the land of fairies. Then and there, the land was claimed and built to be a private refuge for the wealthy. So on and so forth, things led to another and Odgawoan became a place of pleasure and gamble. The elusive Cimier ruled the town for a decade until the rise of the entertainment market. Musicians, actors, directors, moviemakers, all needed a place to call home – Melmark did but few things, and thus, the gambling den evolved into the town of dreams. Active Raven Pictures, Golden Media Films, and Eclipses were a few of the major names who did the first move.

The cruise from the Adventuring Academy passed through the Azure-pass and northward. The more ground gained, the farther seemed the cloudy weather, and after a while, the weather came to a steady grey hue. The closest airport was one at Rosespire, a drive that would take more than 12 hours. Instead, the car pulled into a curving road off the highway. Here, the roads were narrow filled with overhanging trees. The latter was so overly present the road seemed as if a triangular tunnel. Long story short, a

detour led to a small village where waited a helicopter. The journey took shy of one and a half hours. A private jet bearing Phantom's crest waited on a vacant airstrip. Numerous passenger planes were about, some landed and some taking off.

"Here we are," said Amsey taking off headphones, "-the journey back to Alpha's going be in style."

"Phantom's sponsoring the trip?" wondered Igna.

"Obviously," he laughed, "-as the sponsor of Cle, they tended to our needs. I must say," he smiled, "-the arm's company is friendly and accommodating," a red-carpet stretched to the jet.

"Anything to comment?" wondered Igna to Lia.

"Yes," she snapped out the dream-like gaze, "-I've called someone to be the liaison in Alpha. Since Lord Asmey's decided to have you become a model, you'll need assistants to help score jobs and stuff. Going on interviews per thy behalf, someone capable."

"I see," he smiled.

They were off the grounds in mere minutes, the long trip to Alpha began. Igna decided to sit farther back to enjoy private time. The duo up front didn't ask why or how, the boy being there sufficed.

'Let's get to work,' thought he pulling out a laptop, '-thanks a bunch Anna for letting me borrow this.' The keyboard had heart-stickers and bunnies scattered around.

"Good," commented éclair, "-I'm connected to the laptop. What's the order."

"I'd like to know more about Ogdawoan, the idyllic land of dream comments isn't doing it for me. I smell a dark underlying truth."

"Well-spotted," countless files and reports flashed onto the screen – all of which were deleted after Igna finished reading. Copies were stored on the phone instead. 'Murders, mysterious killings, a lack of integrity by the officers and unheard witness testimonies. The case file of Blair Riley, isn't that the movie Aceline was supposed to do?' further digging showed up a few interesting details, '-the production company went broke at 90% completion. Eclipses decided to oust the directors and producers on drug-abuse charges half-way across. Not many people knew of the project. The last message ever sent by the director was, '-we've done it, it's a wrap. I'm coming home to celebrate, dearest baby Bella', kind of a weird thing to say.'

"Any more reports I can examine?"

"No," said éclair, "-I've dug deep into the police report, nothing came up. Not even a missing person's case. I did find a thing," a new article from a lesser-known publication stated, '-The Case file of Blair Riley, myth or truth?' The subheading read, '-is the world of the dream as innocent as it seems?'

"éclair, how's the underworld faction of the town?"

"Cimier ruled from the shadows for a decade, they could well still be controlling the town. Police officers are corrupt."

"I see," he paused, "-who's in charge of drug distribution in Alpha?"

“Lerado; they’re only importers.”

“I see,” more he thought, the cloudier grew the picture. ‘What could have happened to the filming crew. I remember the script went into details about Luna and the crimes done by the Patek’s I think. People seem to think Aceline was murdered. I know she’s alive, or was alive since we revived her... maybe leaving her alone here was a mistake. Six years is a long time, gathering information’s going to be hard.’

“I found a hidden report,” voiced éclair, “-it’s not related to Aceline.”

“Go on,” said he.

“It reads that on May 7th XX96, the body of a starlet Nesse Williams was found dead in her apartment on Huston Boulevard. The cause of death was ruled as natural. What’s interesting is the investigation led by a private investigator named Engn Codd. He soon found the cause of death wasn’t natural, instead, drugs were found in her body. The coroner, closely tied to the police and the underworld, most likely kept quiet. At some point, after following a very damning lead, brought Eclipses under scrutiny. The evidence went on to show the leaders were in cahoots with Gyo Tune, a notorious mob-boss who’s still prowling the streets. The investigation ended shortly as Engn Codd would die the same death as did the starlet. The case is closed, nothing more can be done, officially. Codd had a son, Odgar Codd, who’s also a private investigator working in Melmark.”

“Where did you get this information?”

“Odgar Codd was a member of Lerado’s family. He’d hope to go against Gyo Tune using force as he believed they killed his father.”

“Did he say that?”

“Yes, he bluntly stated why he wanted to join and was welcomed by the family. The mystery of Odgawoan is thicker than you might accept.”

“Lord Amsey, where are we landing?” he asked thinking it’d be Melmark.

“Odgawoan.”

Chapter 525: Manager

A looming mystery brought itself onto a young chef’s platter. Questions about what he pursued created doubt. The culmination of mishaps changed an otherwise happy and elated profession into hell. Talent compared to hard work and in the end having hard work best talent. Short-run, those with talent can outshine just about anyone, however, when it comes to the mid and late stages, hard work always wins.

Sat peering through the infinite blueness of the sky; Igna wondered. ‘Is this really ok?’ It had always been the same, once reaching what appeared to be the top, an incident would always ruin the carefully built road. A castle made of cards blown by a gentle breeze. Then and there, it dawned on him, ‘-why did I let myself get killed?’ the hidden agenda, ‘-to go underground, to hide from the world and allow the name Staxius to be a fond memory. Too many eyes followed my movement, I needed to getaway. The curse of death reaper – I gambled... and it paid off. The death-element sleeps and my body feels weak but better. If things come to worse, I have the blood of the first progenitor in my veins.’

The jet pierced the white-cloud to show the immense continent of Alpha resting in her lonesome beauty. Not actually visible, there was change; it felt different. "Two hours until we land," said the pilot. Laidback to stare the fuselage, 'a nap seems nice.'

Screech, a rocky landing jolted him awake, 'time flew by fast,' thought he. Amsey and Lia stood impervious from the journey, they exchanged pleasantries as if forgetting Igna's presence.

"We're in Alpha," came Amsey after whispering to the attentive lady.

"I can see that," sighed he to a stand, "-what now?"

"It's a night out. My mansions in the Eldow's High, want to join me?"

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"No," refused Igna, "-I'll feel like a burden. How about I stay at a cheap inn somewhere."

"A cheap inn," he faced Lia who held an expression of 'don't look at me, I don't know.'

"Listen," giving up on her, "-Odgawoan isn't such a good place to be," he spoke per experience. "There's a lot of mob-influence. Being so far from actual civilization makes it more the reason to be on edge. The town is massive, don't get me wrong."

"Are the surrounding woods that scary?" asked he half-in-jest.

"Yeah, you bet they are," the hands tightly gripped the leather seats, "-it's common for runaway people to find bodies in the forest South-West. They've conveniently dubbed it, the Weeping Forest."

"A good name for a scary movie," added Igna, "-I'm not changing my mind about choosing a cheap inn."

"Listen," added Lia, "-don't worry about what Mr. Amsey says."

Ding, "-I've sent a detailed map of the area," said she, "-we'll drive into town first."

"Alright," said he casually walking off the jet. 'Not what I expected,' the airport stood at an hour drive from town. The divide between them both was of the forest, an apparent feature of this supposed land 'o dreams.

The car arrived and it began. Igna spent more time studying the map. Odgawoan was divided into four major parts. First came Eldow's High on the northern-most area of town. It rested near and close to the foot of the Fuda Mountains. Second, came Konlda, the downtown followed by Mi's and Fulha's district. Stanley's homage was erected in the middle of the three district borders. The center of town, an extension of the downtown.

"Where are we headed?" wondered Igna after entering the town. The well-lit buildings, flashing advertisements, and never-ending nightlife is shown a new view of life. People were very well-dressed. Ladies were classy and very sexy at times, the men wore suits, some chose more fashionable attire. One thing never changed – the well-decorated streets and constructions. Custom lamps provided light for drivers; traffic was more of a hassle, the city bustled with activity.

"We're heading downtown, there's a lovely restaurant I'd like for us to visit," said Lia coyly. "The tab is on Mr. Amsey, no need to be shy about the prices," she winked.

"I'm paying?" he frowned, "-I didn't agree..."

"Stop being stingy," sighed she, "-a millionaire doesn't have that right."

"Shut up," he soon moved to admire the outside. Stopped at a busy intersection, they headed west, to the outskirts of town that laid on elevated grounds. From the bustling and obviously lit to somber and appeasing to the eyes, the car moved without stop for the lack of traffic. Said part had few buildings being renovated, and the road winded up to warmly light white and black buildings.

L's restaurant, "-what a pleasant surprise," said Amsey realizing the destination, "-I don't mind paying now." It took another hour to arrive due to the traffic. A quiet establishment perched onto the sloped hill they recently climbed. A private parking-lot showed a moderate number of cars, most of which screamed rich.

"Lady Lia," said Igna, "-this establishment seems expensive."

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"Cost is no issue," added Amsey, "-good food must be paid handsomely." Past an arch made of plants and flowers came a tiled walkway of marble beside which rested statues and fountains. What intrigued most was the view, the tall-buildings of Odgawoan were at full display. Expansive and the glamor alone showed how thriving the city was.

"Come on," whispered Lia, "-let's go."

'Oh boy,' a deep inhale led them to the best seating. Upstairs overlooking the landscape of the city. Waiters came in full to greet Lord Amsey, even the manager bowed his head and flowered him with compliments.

"Quite popular," commented Lia.

"Don't act as if you don't know," orders were placed.

"Well, it's to be expected," said she scanning the area, "-where is she?"

"She?" wondered Igna.

"Pardon me," she cleared her throat, "-nothing, don't worry."

'Suspicious.'

Starters arrived in silver-platter fifteen minutes later, Lia seemed preoccupied and kept glancing the glass stairs. Another ten-minutes past and the mains arrived. No words exchanged for the deliciousness of the plate had hypnotized the mouth.

On the last bite, heels echoed against the fragile-looking stairs. A lady in her early twenties dawned a beige-colored dress atop which she had worn a white scarf and jacket. The dark-brown hair ran down her back till shy off her waist while the front rested just shy of the chest. Hazel eyes fluttered per long lashes; the gentle touch of eyeliner gave a hint of sternness. She stared about with a nonchalant expression until locking onto Lia, who waved. The heels approached strongly; the purse showed the brand of Meldorino.

"I apologize for coming late," said she in a chilled lower tone, "-Lady Lia, Lord Amsey, a pleasure to see you again."

"Oh, so there she is," said he stood for an embrace, "-take a seat."

"Thank you," she gracefully lowered to be seated. The profiled look showed her curt, rounded nose and sharp-edged ears. 'Half-elf?' or so was the impression. 'I better not stare too much,' he faced the scenery.

"I didn't know you were in town," said Amsey, "-what's become of the idol group?"

"They had a falling out," said she, "-the fame and stardom brought delusions of being gods. You know," she softly tied the hair loosely exposing more of her sharp-jaw and prestige cheeks, "-drugs, alcohol, one led to another and bam, they killed themselves."

"Not literally?" inquired Lia.

"Yeah," laughed Amsey, "-don't take her words too seriously."

"Quite rude to say so," she glanced Igna and returned to the prior conversation.

'Why do I feel inferior?' the eyes narrowed, '-what a pain.' Not knowing how to feel, the gaze met the falling stars over yonder.

"Igna...Igna...Igna."

"Oh," startled, "-sorry," he answered, "-must have zoned-out."

"Zoned out?" laughed the lady, "-for 15 minutes," her smile was even prettier than before.

"Where's Lord Amsey and Lia?"

"Downstairs. Forget that, my name's Alicia Raze."

"Nice to meet you, Miss Raze, I'm Igna Haggard."

"I noticed," her head rested on one arm, "-the Medusa's prodigy."

"Not anymore," said he strongly, "-who are you, Miss Raze?"

"I suppose lady Lia didn't tell you?" the posture straightened. "Starting tonight, I'm your manager."

"Manager?" he voiced with a hint of doubt, "-why would I require one?"

"Because," spoke another, "-you're going to be a star," said Lord Amsey.

"Star?"

"Yes," he smiled and sat, "-the world of Ogdawoan waits. Don't you want to experience what others dream of?"

"Why should I live the dreams of others?"

"I see there are doubt and uncertainty," voiced Raze, "-I thought you'd be a little more enthusiastic."

“Oh, that’s not the issue. My tone gradually gets mundane, please pay it no mind. I don’t have doubts, just questions.”

“The same thing,” said she, “-in any case, you’re not fit to become a public figure.”

“Is that the evaluation?” approached Lia.

“Yeah,” she explained, “-there’s no energy, no charisma, and no charm. A dull individual bearing only a pretty face. The market is full of even more handsome boys. Lord Amsey, are you sure this guy fits the criteria, making him an ambassador of thy brand will surely bring loss.”

‘Seriously?’ the face dropped to a standstill, ‘-who’s this brat mouthing off about me not being good enough. Amsey and Lia don’t seem impressed, what’s this wrong situation about?’

“Don’t care,” said he, “-I want him as a model for one of my brands. Do what you have to, build him from the ground up.”

“No, it’s impossible,” said she, “-natural born stars exude a presence unlike any other. Without it, people can’t bond, they can’t relate and can’t admire. There are a lot of handsome boys bearing better personalities than Igna here,” her hands and expression were sharp and direct. No mincing words, she said what she thought, a brutal honesty.

‘No charm, no charisma,’ the evaluation fit like a puzzle, ‘-she’s right.’

“Igna, do you have anything else to add?”

“Add?” the aura changed, “-no, not really. I care not for people who judge per their subjection. Charm, charisma, are you perhaps referring to the art of lying?” a handsome smirk and energetic movements baffled her mind, “-the idiocy of it all makes me want to puke. Lord Amsey, Lady Lia, was this lady the best manager you’ve found?”

Before they could answer, “-I care not. She’s the own definition of what she described of me. A pretty face who harshly speaks the truth. A minority might accept brutal honesty, not the majority. Placed in a popularity contest excluding thine face, I’m sure you’d be ranked second to last counting a dead body.” Sharp, enigmatic, and the overbearing presence of nobility, Igna gave way to the vampiric allure and mannerism of old.

“Excuse you?” she took offense, “-by what grounds do you say I’m not one fit for thee?”

“éclair.”

“Understood,” the lens displayed information of her past, present what any scandals she might have been involved in.

“What,” he smiled handsomely, “-don’t dare say thee can’t take criticism. Quite hypocritical for someone who prides herself in speaking her mind.”

“Why you- who the hell are you?”

“Please, there’s no need to get angry,” soft and sharp, “-Miss Alicia Raze, the whore of the idol scene. Tis what I quote from a news article. The most group managed by you always ends up breaking apart. The

given cause is romantic interests, a lily blooming on a pond of poison. Here are my thoughts about you; Miss I can't take criticism, judge thyself before laying claim to another's personality. My dullness comes from choice – anyone can act, calm waters are often the deeper ones," the appealing charm swapped for utter hatred and fear, "-mind thine tongue for there are those who'd not blink an eye in face of an obstacle," the knife flashed to gently lay on her neck, "-words can only take you so far, actions is what matters, and I know people who'd not care to defile and kill you in an instant."

"Igna!" pleaded Lia, "-please, calm down."

"Enough," said Amsey, "-too far."

"Sure," the utensil dropped into a fist, "-dull."

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Chapter 526: Alicia Raze

How dare he,' startled to the point of tears, words paused on her tongue. Voicing the fury aloud felt impossible, a knife got drawn to her neck in an instant. She blinked and there it was, the cold tip pressed onto her fair skin. An experience that would most definitely invite official actions was left untouched. 'The personality swapped frighteningly quick, how in the world did he manage that?'

"Igna," said Lia in a dossal mood, "-the prank's gone too far."

"Oh please," returned he strongly, "-do I look like the type of person to care about people who don't take time to evaluate another?"

"Did we touch on thy nerve?" added Amsey.

"No," he refused per a sigh, "-I just wanted her to have a taste of what could happen."

"What do you mean?" inquired Lia for he knew the boy to not do things haphazardly.

"An honest personality can only take one so far. Words can sometimes hurt more than actions, and in said case, the opposing party could take her anger out in form of rage and violence."

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"I see," her mind calmed, "-I don't like you one bit," voiced she.

"Same here," added he, "-as for a manager," he turned to the stars, "-I think I can manage on my own."

"No," firmed she, "-going solo and without contacts here is a big mistake."

"She's right," added Amsey followed by the obligatory nod of Lia.

"So," turned to the still blushed lady, "-you agree to be my manager?"

"Obviously," said she holding a handshake, "-I'll make sure to get you to unprecedented heights."

"Fine," he accepted, "-Miss Alicia."

"Mr. Haggard."

"Igna is fine."

"Alright, Alicia is fine too."

"Look at that," chimed Lia, "-two not so popular wonderchildren joining as one."

"Very cute," said Amsey. "From here on, I'll contact you, Alicia, for jobs pertaining to Igna being a model."

"Understood," she nodded.

"I'll write an article on the matter soon," said Lia. Thus, someone rather curious entered the circle. One could say a new partner of sorts. One thing remained true, the adventure in the famed city only begun. Dinner ended on dessert assorted by the cold-breeze moving through the skies onto the restaurant's balcony.

"Igna," said Alicia, "-just a reminder. I'm not that well respected in the entertainment industry. Said it yourself, most know me as a whore, someone who'd suck another for a chance at success."

"Oh please," said he taking a scoop of ice-cream, "-coming from your mouth it tears my guts into pieces. Don't degrade yourself, it's unbecoming. Yes, I know, I said those things earlier – didn't mean it."

"I get it," said she, "-I only hope it gets better from here." Her long and soft fingers went on the rest against the balustrade, the cityscape had her lost in thoughts. There was a very pleasant feeling of elation when turning to the lively flickering of lights. A calling of some sort.

"Hey, Alicia," a gentle bump against her shoulder.

"Sorry, what?"

"Don't worry about making me a star," said he, "-doesn't matter. I came here to find an answer."

"Answer to what question?"

"That's the problem," setting aside the emptied plate, "-I don't even know the question. Maybe it's something about me finding myself?"

"Oh," she warmly gazed in acceptance, "-I see."

"Anyway," changing the topic, "-any recommendation on places to stay?"

"Forgot about that." And soon, the duo of Lia and Amsey arrived with second servings.

"Why look so glum?" inquired Amsey.

"Thing is," she approached, "-my apartment was seized after the last incident. I'm homeless at the moment, savings are nearly low from jumping hotel to hotel."

"Oh," he paused, "-don't look at me. Thy employer is Igna."

"Igna?" she turned; "-can you even afford a place to live?"

'Why did he have to pin this on me,' he glared Amsey who chuckled and ate ice-cream, '-that grimly old fool.' Lia conveniently made herself distant.

"I guess," he shook the head, "-how much were you paid in the last job?"

"Around 70 Exa per week."

"70 Exa per week?" he coughed, "-seriously?"

"What," her brows knitted, "-it's the common-rate. I know managers who are getting 100 Exa per week. Most of us have to take part-time jobs to make ends meet."

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"Igna," commented éclair, "-life in Ogdawoan is cheap compared to Plaustan. Depends on the area. Normal office workers make around 250 exa per month."

'Put into perspective... ok, let's not think about it.'

"How about 50 Exa per week for the first month. I'll decide whether to increase the rate per performance?"

"Going by merit?" said she, "-deal. Don't be alarmed when I start racking in the big work."

"And about the apartment," he stared, "-was it yours or given by the agency?"

"Mine, the debt sort of went overboard, and then..." she gulped, "-here I am?" a confused shrug had Lia laugh under her breath.

"Can you reclaim it?" wondered he.

"Yeah, only if I pay around 3000 Exa. I can't spare that even if I sell my organs."

"3000 Exa. And if you pay that, does it become yours?"

"No, it's just the cost to unseize it. Around 50,000 Exa to buy the whole property. I've already chipped away at 25,000 from the initial; 75,000."

"I suppose," he took a deep breath, "-a new city means new items, and new items require money."

"I'm not lending you cash," said he seeing Igna approach.

"No, I just need a ride."

"Sure," said he, "-ask the driver; I've got few friends coming later tonight."

"Are you going already?" added Lia, "-stay for the party?"

"No," he turned to the city, "-I have the feeling I'm not going to leave anytime soon."

"Let me say this," glared Amsey coldly, "-I was selfish in bringing you here. That much I agree. Don't expect me to babysit or pay you unless work is done."

"Yeah," he held a handshake, "-don't fret, Lord Amsey, it's a new start for me. I better adjust for the future's sake."

"Good sentiment," smiled he, "-I knew I could count on you."

“Alright, I’ll be off then.”

“Are you sure about this?” inquired Lia watching the duo’s amble out of view.

“The boy is strong. The city is dangerous – I want to see what he can do.”

“Are you going to hire him for the modeling job?”

“No, not now. He realizes what I meant. Climbing the ranks on his own is the test to see whether he’s worthy. The young lass did voice some important points earlier, there isn’t a lack of people wanting fame and fortune. We’ll see.”

“Yeah,” added Lia, “-we’ll see.”

Although the profession didn’t change; the mindset sure had taken a different turn. Cooking seemed a burden lately, the change of pace and scenery would settle the mind, or so he’d hoped. A new land, a new city, and a new start. Underlying the presented narrative, another agenda of digging for information kept éclair occupied.

“Where are we headed?” asked the driver.

“The nearest dealership for bikes.”

“Which brand?”

“Denly,” said he, ‘-I ought to pay respect to mother.’

“Denly?” repeated she in dismissal, “-the prices far exceed my apartment.”

“Whatever,” he laughed, “-the apartment has parking?”

“I suppose. It is in the upper-district.”

“Don’t lie to me, it’s in the modest upper district.”

“Whatever,” she lowered her window to let the wind caress her hair. Albeit the personality was a little weird, her beauty was concrete. Tis was further acknowledged by men and women locking onto her visage. Cut across the middle, turning here and there, they arrived at Stanley’s Homage stapled in the middle. The roads were large, the pavement less busy and the buildings classier. It had taken around 2 hours due to traffic on an otherwise 1-hour drive. Time showed 22:00, shops were still opened.

The driver turned onto Shinder Street – dealerships from cars, to bikes, and even private-jets were laid one after the other. Sharp, pretty, and expensive. Costly cars were often sighted parked adjacent to the shops.

“We’re here,” said the driver.

“Awesome, thanks for the lift.”

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“Pleasure was all mine,” said he speeding off into the distance.

“What are we doing here,” complained she.

“Getting settled in the town.” The cheap outfit and overly obnoxious bags didn’t add to their repute. Whilst Alicia barely fit the requirement of ‘good garment’ Igna fell short. The rare visitors side-glanced in sympathy for it was an area frequented by the rich.

“Igna, let’s just get a taxi to an inn nearby,” the glances against her back made way for discomfort.

“No wait,” they strolled about until ‘Denly Motor’ came in sight. Glass-panned windows gave onto the prestige sharp-colored interior. ‘This feels awkwardly familiar,’ thought he.

“Look,” signaled a salesman on the inside, “-we got another window shopper.”

“Don’t mind him,” said she, “-let them dream.”

“Dream?” the speech halted. Automatic doors parted as Igna walked in.

‘Another dreamer,’ sighed she, “-hello, how can I help you today?”

“Hello,” replied he courteously.

‘The torn outfit, where did he come from, the zoo? The ripped backpack, dirtied shoes, damn, does he have no shame?’

“-do you perhaps have the Spuntna X8?”

‘Asking for the brand’s best model from the start?’ her eyes rolled, “-yes, please, over here.”

A rotating platform displayed the beast in all her beauty. Buffed and streamlined for speed, ‘-might as well show the special model too.’

“Here we have the Spuntna X8V2 SST.”

“Sports standard tuning,” he paused. Alicia chose to remain outside in embarrassment.

“How much for the normal version?” wondered he.

“250,000 Exa.”

“And the SST?”

“350,000 Exa. It’s a rare model, we’ve got the only one in the whole of Alpha. It just came in today as luck would have it.”

“Red and black,” thought he, “-it’s awesome.”

“Yes,” said she, “-though, please don’t touch it.”

“It’s very rude,” said he, “-judging people on appearance. Nevertheless, I’ll buy it.”

“Excuse me?” she coughed, “-sir, the price is 350,000 Exa, the same as a mansion...”

“Did I stutter?” he facepalmed.

“Alright,” she moved to the counter, the other salesmen were baffled.

“Could I have your name?” asked she.

Ding, all the information filled and signed.

“The payment has been approved...”

“Alright,” he turned.

“Will you be taking it out now?”

“Yes, and please hand over the bodysuit. I’d like another helmet for my friend outside.”

“As you pleased,” the atmosphere changed the moment payment was confirmed. Money talks, the saying was concrete and truthful.

“Hey, Alicia.”

“What is it now?” she turned preoccupied with what to say to the salesperson.

“What do you think?” he stood with a very expensive looking body-suit bearing the brand and of the Spuntna X8V2.

“How?” she stomped up the stairs, “-Spuntnas are expensive; some go the same as a fucking mansion!”

“Yeah,” he patted her head, “-don’t judge people so much,” the bike was brought by a handyman, “-come on, let’s head out.”

“Here’s a helmet for the young lady,” said the attendant.

“Thanks.”

“Connection made to the bike,” commented éclair, “-I’m sorry about asking to buy this expensive a vehicle.”

“It’s fine, as long as you can use it too, I don’t mind. Besides,” he laughed; “-this is nothing compared to what Phantom makes in a week.”

“True.”

The manager reluctantly approached, the vehicle screamed of prestige and power. She feared putting a dent or scratching the paint. “Sit already,” exclaimed he, “-where’s the apartment?”

“On the outskirts of Eldow’s high.”

“Got it,” by that, he meant éclair found it. It didn’t take much to repurchase the lot and transferring the ownership to Alicia.

The engine bared down hell on the streets. Traffic didn’t matter, and thus, in less than 45 minutes, in which he drove like a mad-man, they arrived at the sloped hill. The apartment stood at an intersection next to which rested a shopping complex.

“Why are we here?” they stopped.

“Because I bought the apartment,” commented he, “-I’ll be staying with since I paid most of it.”

Chapter 527: Shady Manager

“Staying?”

“Don’t look surprised,” said he taking off the helmet, “-I paid, and I need a place to stay. The apartment is big enough for four people.” He ambled towards the lift, each word spoken echoed about the dusty and stagnant underground parking, “-besides,” with a smirk, “-it’s not like you have a partner or anything.”

“Why you little,” she hopped onto where he waited, “-how dare you!”

“Mindful,” said he, “-won’t take much to transfer the apartment onto my name.”

“Whatever,” her embarrassment released physical strains; clenching the fist, gritting, and obnoxious loud breaths.

Inside came to be a quaint environment; a small balcony used for plants instead of humans. The interior merged the kitchen and living room into one giant cluster. Rooms were labeled, “-take the room over there,” commented she hiding her smile.

“Alright.”

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Click, locked, she eased onto the couch, ‘-I’ve missed you so much,’ said she hugging a pillow. ‘Jumping places to places didn’t feel right, my banks nearly exhausted. Those damned brats had to go and destroy themselves. How could they?’ drool escaped the otherwise tight-lipped mouth, ‘-I didn’t even do anything this time. Bunch of idiots.’ Low muffled music exited Igna’s room, ‘-I’m employed by Igna Haggard. Didn’t think he was rich but was I wrong. Spending so much on a bike and reclaiming my apartment. We don’t get along that much but there’s a mutual understanding. I like it, a good relation. I’ll show him my real talent. Enough wasting time on worthless idols and pretty faces; I like him. There’s the power to the words, and I like a man with conviction. Igna Haggard, congratulations, you’ve won me to your side. The first impression wasn’t of weakness, rather, it came to be of a lie, someone who hid their truest desire.’

The days would continue – Alicia gave tours of the city of which he could have cared less. They spent more time with one another than searching for jobs. A heavy cloud of unknown hung atop their heads. A lack of jobs on Alicia’s part and the nonchalant, ‘-I’m bored,’ look on Igna’s face.

Monday the 15th of February; a few days passed. Igna woke up to prepare breakfast. Alicia arrived ten-minutes later in a very childish-looking pajama. “Morning.”

“Morning,” returned he.

“Wait,” locked onto Igna, “-I’ve found us a job,” said she.

“What kind of job?”

“A photoshoot,” she came to lean against the granite counter, “-I’ve already sent the resume and a few photos.”

“Oh, for what?”

“Man,” she smiled, “-the first job is actually a massive one. Tis a music company, they’ve decided to bring multiple idols and stars for the shooting.”

“I’m relatively unknown, how did you?”

“Don’t worry about that,” she left with a coy wink towards the bathroom, ‘-can’t tell him I had to call in favors from a few friends. Lustful bastards,’ staring at her reflection, ‘-I’m a mess of a woman.’

A prominent figure and one-shot wonder artist named Turi suffered a bad accident. The Arcanum, mostly the man’s fanbase, went haywire looking for an answer. It happened a few days ago – the photoshoot organized by Alice had initially picked him. Now that the star was out of the picture, they needed new faces to showcase the new guitar. Few forums complied theory of what happened but none took any attention as most were busy sending love messages for a good recovery.

The details felt a little suspicious, reading the few posts had Igna thinking. “éclair, can you?”

“Yeah, already on it,” said he, “-I’ve infiltrated her phone and kept an eye out. She did visit a few people, especially those holding places of power. I count, Turi from Alice, the modeling company. A subsidiary of Ansoft.”

“I presume he’s a singer or some kind of musician?”

“Yeah, a star who met an unfortunate accident. The reports are incoherent, some say he fell, others say was pushed, the result is he’s at the hospital.”

“Let me guess, my Manager’s involved?”

“Does fit the details of what happened. She went for a visit and the man is reported injured a few hours later.”

“If so,” grinned Igna, ‘she might be more useful than I think. People on the Arcanum are smart. Most ruled it as an accident while few thought it is foul-play.’ Dark-brown hair swept before him, “-Igna, get ready, we’re leaving in an hour or so. Make sure to have some nice clothes on you.”

“Got it,” returned he, ‘-innocent or not, I can’t tell.’

“Guilty,” said éclair, “-I’ve traced and found a damning piece of evidence linking her to the incident.”

“Which is?”

“A recording,” of which played. He held his breath, stopped whatever he was doing, and listened, the murmurs, the uncleared chatter. “-Let me fix it,” said éclair. The track replayed in clarity and the conversation was heard in full.

‘He’s drunk. The way he speaks, he wanted to get some – Alicia’s sober. Guiding him to the bed. Got a vague representation of what happened, she drugged him into falling off the balcony.’

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“éclair,” said he, “-video, there’s video evidence against her right?”

“Yeah, the police’s gathered the recordings.”

“Wipe it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Obviously,” the face straightened, “-let her do as she wishes. Wipe all the evidence, disprove the witnesses, feed them cash – if things get rough... we ought to have hitmen wanting for some easy money.”

“Igna,” said éclair, “-you’ve certainly gotten scary over the past few days.”

“Well, I figured it’s better this way. I won’t lie, I sort of enjoy the prospect of killing. There’s a strange pleasure within.”

“No murder,” voiced the spirit.

“I know, I’m not a monster.”

Readied in smart clothes and a short-black skirt Alicia wound up at a counter and ate breakfast. The innocence on her face, no remorse, no guilt, nothing, it was as if nothing ever happened. Igna watched, both impressed and frightened. Someone like her was a double-edged sword. The evidence left behind would one day or the other bring the police to their door.

‘As long as éclair keeps an eye on her, we’ll be fine.’

The place of the audition was a media complex in Konlda, close to the center. The drive felt more or less relaxing until Igna began to speed along the main-roads neatly linking each district.

“What’s the interview going to be like?” wondered he.

“Oh, nothing much. Just a group of select people. The evaluation comes down to the company itself. I honestly doubt they’ll hire anyone. Ansoft being part of the five-conglomerate as well as the top production company in Alphaia currently. Alice’s just as scary.”

“Way to score such an opportunity Say, was there anything shady involved?”

“Perhaps. No matter, why worry about it now?”

“I ought to warn you,” the bike slowed shy of the location, “-leaving condemning evidence behind...”

“How did you know?” she tightened her grip around his stomach.

“Lady Manager,” coughed he, “-I have more reach than you’d ever imagine. I might not be able to cover the next time – do be vigilant.”

“Are you going to fire me?”

“No, hell no,” he laughed, “-a manager who isn’t afraid of getting dirty is the best thing I could have asked for. I won’t interfere, make sure you don’t leave proof behind next time.”

“Understood,” for a second, her heart jumped out the chest, anxiousness of getting fired worried more than a potential police case.

Dubbed Area 04, most of the buildings were warehouses held inside a compound. A single guard at the front lazily allowed entry. The massive buildings had numbers painted on their sides. Grey, dusty, and industrial, a far cry from what many painted the Odgawoan life to be.

"Warehouse 03."

"Got it," they passed a lovely mural of prior deceased super-stars.

'More people than I'd imagined,' the bike drove at a walking pace. Pretty faces went to and fro, some had guards' others had managers, and some even reporters. Side-casts in costumes crossed the street separating the various warehouses.

"There's another movie being shot," explained Alicia, "-doesn't matter to us, just head on forward."

Big and bland, they got off to catch the eye of a hurdled group of well-dressed figures.

"Look," hailed one, "-it's Alicia," voiced they.

She nervously smiled, "-go on then," she stumbled per a bump, '-Igna!'

"Don't worry," said he, "-let's score this job."

"Fine," rolling her eyes, once out of his line of sight, she grinned.

A sign displayed, 'auditions,' to which he followed. A small door opened to the dim and fresh inside. Voices echoed, photos clicked, a line of chairs had the names of various written on paper. 'There's mine,' he sat. The others weren't present yet.

"Hello."

"Hello?"

"You're Igna I presume?" spoke a little man aged in his early thirties, "-head down the hall."

"Okay..." he walked, '-strange.'

The heat stabbed her fragile shoulders, "-Alicia, I didn't expect you to be hired so quickly," said a man in glasses blatantly drooling over her body.

"Don't say that," interjected another lady dress moderately, "-she might be young but has spunk."

"Or so what the men she's slept with say," interjected another lady in her late forties.

"Glad to see you're as insufferable as ever," fired she, "-so, what's the purpose of coming here?"

"I don't know," said the man, "-Ikoen sent us messages of wanting to recruit new blood for their upcoming product launch."

"I see," said she, "-what's the interview like?"

"A mess," said the older lady, "-my girls left without even participating. How dare they..."

"What about the others?" wondered she.

"We all pulled out the interviews. Far too shady, the supervisor doesn't speak nor give hints. In any case, we're going to hit the pub, want to join?"

"Thanks for the invitation, I'll have to refuse."

"Suit yourself," said the man, "-good luck!"

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A bittersweet relation between managers. Rivals on the field and perhaps friends off the scene? Who would have guessed. Their harassment was always geared towards Alicia. Part of her knew the reason, and part of her refused to admit it. By the standards laid per the media, she was pretty in every single way, a perfect fit to become an actress or idol. Still, she never wanted the attention always saying, 'I rather help others than help myself.' The disrespect left a bad taste. 'Way to ruin my day.'

"Are you the only one here?" said a man flamboyantly dressed.

"Yes?" he rose an eyebrow, "-might I ask what's this about?"

"Don't worry," said he moving in a feminine manner, "-a representative of Ikoen will be here shortly," he dove to rest a hand onto Igna's knee, "-don't move or do anything bad," the whisper sent shivers, "-else I'll have to redo the makeup."

"Rose, GET BACK HERE!"

"Be right back, hottie," he galloped out the confined space.

Clap, clap, clap, two sets of footsteps halted at the same time, "-Igna Haggard," stood a heavy woman bearing red-colored hair and heavy make-up, "-I'm a representative of Ikoen. We're currently looking for people to endorse the brand. Sadly," she held a piece of paper, "-the resume doesn't match what we're looking for. As a music brand, we need musicians, not chefs."

"Excuse me," interjected he, "-I can play the guitar..."

"Can you now," she frowned, "-Park, bring the guitar here."

"Okay."

The manager crossed her arms and watched; '-can he even play the instrument?'

'This is perfect,' thought he, '-haven't touched this in a while,' the fingers ran up and down the fretboard. "-Do you have a pick?" wondered he.

"Oh, sorry," she gave one without much enthusiasm.

'Who's the best guitarist currently?' a search by éclair had one name, Sugar.

'Alright, no problem,' with a grin, '-don't underestimate me.'

"Are you going to play?" asked she.

"Give me a moment," the hands formed multiple chord-shapes and galloped up and down, "-alright, it's done." He strummed a melodically pleasing chord; the sound had the stern lady smile. '-Time to show

off,' the pace increased, the notes rang melodically and the room soon fell silent, workers from other stations stopped to watch.

"Enough," said she, "-I'm reluctant to say this, but you're better than Turi." The heavy stature went on to speak with Alicia.

'How you like 'em apples.'

Chapter 528: Stained hands

"I've heard skilled guitarist before. This one here is different," she paused.

"Yes," smiled she, "-he has a lot of hidden skills. Can I assume we have the job?"

"Consider yourself lucky," said she, "-being endorsed by a music company is a dream for many musicians. The boy there has a chance at doing just that. I won't promise much. The modeling contract is yours."

"Thank you for the opportunity."

"Yes, yes," she brutally leaped over the tiles, "-follow me," each stride was long and full of effort. Her forehead glistened from sweat – the light caught and hung onto the rectangular temple.

'Nearly mistook her for a man,' sighed he, '-won't hurt if I play a little more.' Strumming, embellishing a few chords here and there. In a way, grabbing the instrument felt right. Compared to the time where he had to guard Aceline, there, playing the instrument felt more of a curse.

"Igna Haggard."

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"Yes," the strings muted, "-something the matter?"

"Please follow me," said the same short man of before. Handing over the stringed ax, they strolled down a corridor partitioned by heavy-black clothes. Eavesdropping onto the 'attempted wall,' revealed a dirtied truth.

"Are you refusing?" mumbled a commanding tone.

"Yes, if it means my dignity remains in place, I'll refuse more than once!"

"Fine," halted the man, "-I'll see to it the dream of becoming a starlet ends here. Climbing to the top is hard, and even harder for beautiful ladies."

'Sexist bastard,' thought Igna, "-éclair, I want an image and details on who that man is."

"On it."

A sour taste forced him into increasing the pace.

"Casting couch," said éclair, "-there are multiple reported cases of director sleeping with starlets for a chance at fame. Most of them grudgingly accept. Police here aren't reliable; most are corrupt and affiliated to the mob."

“Well, it’s a trying city for sure. What of the man?”

“Laven Enda. A respected director specializing in romantic flicks.”

“I’ll remember the name.” Crossed onto the upper half, three figures stood before a white room covered by the same black partitions. ‘Studio,’ wrote on a sloppily attached sign.

“Stay here,” and so the short man walked towards a group of well-dressed men.

“Igna,” whispered Alicia, “-you’ve done it.”

“Done what?”

“Don’t you realize the opportunity given? This could boost you to the top instantly. I can’t believe our luck.”

“I’m not surprised,” he smiled and patted her shoulder, “-you foresaw the future.”

“No need to bring it here,” she shrugged off the hand, “-there’s a decision to make here. Chef or Musician. The ball is in your court.”

‘Chef or musician,’ he wondered as the group separated, ‘-I don’t care about money. Anywhere I go there will be judgment, people will compare me to the best. What do I want?’ the eyes shut, ‘-cooking?’ the mere thought shook the heart, ‘-I feel nauseated. I can’t do it,’ he breathed. “-A new life it is,” said he.

“Hey,” smiled she, “-don’t get so worked up. Who said you can’t do both. Lord Amsey is a chef and director of a conglomerate, should be easy to manage as long as you don’t care about making money.”

“Ha-ha,” he frowned.

“Lady Alicia.” A chubby man approached with sweat down the forehead and neck, “-it’s good to see you’ve gotten employed, considering the last incident.”

“Mr. Go,” said she, “-didn’t expect the head of Unda’s Inc to be here.”

“Oh come on,” said he, “-why take such an angry tone.”

“...” the fierceness froze as if bound by a secret.

“Well,” he glossed over the silence, “-I feel Turi’s disappearance is all too sudden. The police ruled it an accident. I wonder if there’s perhaps more to the story.”

“Excuse me,” interjected Igna, “-Is there perhaps something you need?”

“No, not really,” he smirked, “-I’ll be off. See you later, little whor-”

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“Don’t you dare,” side-glanced Igna.

“Huh?” he stopped, “-what was that?”

“Igna, don’t,” gritted Alicia.

"I said, don't you dare," said he with chest, "-one who doesn't have the reason to respect another human doesn't have the right to be respected."

"Oh, my boy," the tone came across as patronizing, "-being new and full of justice in this city is a mistake," the voice altered to baby talk at one point. "Alicia," he pushed the boy aside, "-where did you pick up this fool?" he leaned to sniff her neck, "-should I remind you of our time together?"

"I told you to stop," glared Igna grasping Go's meaty shoulder, "-get off her," an effortless pull had the man shot back a few meters.

"Boy," dusting off the suit, "-are you sure you want to start a fight?" A crowd gathered to watch the argument, Alicia's silence damned her, the guilt of her past forced her to stand down.

"Not really," said he, "-if words don't work, then I don't mind exchanging blows."

"Igna," she forced a cry, "-for my sake, don't. They'll kill you."

"Oooh, it's too late to backpedal," he laughed, "-don't forget, little Alicia, I own you. I will take what is mine, and your part of the deal. Sadly," *clap,* five heavily built men emerged out the shadows, "-I'll take this boy's life as compensation for the disrespect."

"Don't," she broke free and ran, "-I beg, don't kil-,"

"Stop right there," he grabbed her arms, "-what's my name?"

"Igna, stop," she stared with teary eyes, "-Mr. Go is part of the familia, he's a mobster!"

"I ask this one more time, what's my name?"

"Igna, let me GO!"

"Alicia, answer me, what's my name?"

"Igna Haggard," sniffles marred her words.

"Good," a tug pulled her close, "-remember it."

"BOYS, FIRE!"

"Calculating bullet trajectory. Igna, time to fight, they've initiated the first contact, I have sufficient proof to have the case ruled as self-defense."

"Alright," he dove towards a cabinet. Screams and cries permeated the warehouse, the gunfire brought panic. The guards kept on firing, Alicia's face froze, the bystanders made for the doors.

"Why would you do that..."

"Oh shut up," said he, "-this isn't the time," a bullet grazed his shoulder to have blood splatter onto her face.

'Warm,' she touched to see red. The hands trembled, "-Igna... a-a-are you ok?" wide-eyed at the scene before her contoured the face in a mix of fear and sorrow.

"I'm fine," then and there, the small man cut across from the exit and slid to their side. "-Are you guys ok?" asked he in a familiar accent. "-You'll be fine," said he, "-some of my buddies are coming to handle that idiot."

"Are you friends with the Unda Familia?"

"Oh hell no. Just a pig-faced bastard with guns for fire. The underworld hates his ass."

"Alright, listen. Take my manager to somewhere safe. I have a few things to discuss with Mr. Go."

"You're a kid, chill and leave this to the professionals."

"Mister," the aura changed, "-I'm no kid," a malignant aura rose out from the depths of the abyss, "-she's unconscious, take her to safety."

"Alright," despite the size, he carried her outside without much trouble, '-don't die on me kid.'

"Two injured behind five more hiding upstairs. Five guards in total and Mr. Go."

"éclair, change the interface for battle."

"Alright," the calm hue morphed into a slightly red-color. The surrounding grew a bit slow.

"Stop hiding."

"I'm here already," said he standing amidst the five-guards. Took them a few seconds to realize, the first who aimed the weapon had it broken with a single tap. Three others charged for close-combat. A duck and a spin knocked them off their feet, he dashed on behind the remainder and snapped their heads, "-so," a blink later, "-what were you saying earlier?" a hard and cold revolver pressed against the back of his head, "-anything to add now?"

"Kid, do you know who I am?" the attitude remained calm and in control.

"Over here boys," waved the short man. Men dressed in white shirts and black pants sprinted, "-I haven't heard anything in a while." They ran inside to examine.

"Where's Igna?" the heated pricks of the sun brought the mind to consciousness, "-where's Igna?" she mumbled surrounded by scared models and attendants.

"Don't know," said a boy around her age, "-I don't know... he-he's not come out and neither has the representative from Alice..."

Dimness of the interior, broken glasses, bullet holes, and yelping victims bleeding to their demise over yonder. Footsteps ran in to see the guard's unconscious, "-boy, do you know who I am?" repeated he, "-I swear, once this is over, I'll take Alicia back and defile her as I did when she was young. Someone like her doesn't have the right to become an actress, she's the scum of the planet, a stain on the world, a waste of breath!

"Defiled her huh?" *BANG, BANG,* two shots in each thigh brought him to the floor. "éclair, bring a car. I don't care where you get it from, bring one right now!"

"Got it."

“Hey, hey,” said the short man, “-did you do all this?”

.....

“Mister,” he paused, “-I need a favor.”

“What is it?”

“Where’s the Unda Familia held up?” he smiled.

“Why?”

“I’m going to wipe them out.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” he gritted, “-this is enough for today.”

“Don’t misunderstand me,” he walked whilst spinning the gun around the index, “-I’m doing this for myself,” one of the guards moved, *BANG!* no hesitation, “-will you get in my way too?”

“Ay, Jim,” said one of the backups, “-let the boy live a little.”

“Fine, go die, the address is Bento street five blocks from here.”

“Got it.”

A car screeched to a stop outside, “-boy, what’s your name.”

“Igna Haggard,” said he, “-remember it.” Go’s groaning body dragged across by the collar leaving a large bloodstain. “Call an ambulance, I’ve already stopped the bleeding for the representative.”

“Jim,” said one of the men, “-what do we do about this mess?”

“Clean it up,” replied he, “-I have a feeling we’ll see something truly horrifying later in the week.”

A heavy jeep smashed into a private property hidden in the midst of town square. Silence and lack of people showed prestige. *Bang, bang,* two guards were shot before making a move. “Have the whole area blacked out,” ordered he.

“Igna,” said éclair, “-isn’t this going a bit too far?”

“No,” he laughed and ripped across the well-lawned grass to break into the front door. The mansion rattled. Servants rushed to the noise. A kick sent the windshield crashing against the grand marble staircase, “-who are you?” asked a frightened servant.

“Special delivery,” said he throwing Mr. Go across, “-bring me the lady and daughter of the house. I have a few things to discuss.”

“...” three of them remained silent and unmoving.

“Did you not hear me?” glared Igna. The pristine white and golden tiled dirtied by blood and dust.

“No-”

Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads, a faint line drew across the servant's head. Worried glances stared to only be sent into fight or flight. He who refused had the head cleanly cut, *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,* the blood hovered over to form a crystal halo. "Should I repeat myself now?"

Lady and daughter were brought to the hall, "-FATHER!" cried she to his side.

"What do you want?" screamed the mother.

"Your lives," he gently dropped off the jeep, "-you see," he smiled, "-Mr. Go is nothing but a menace."

"What gives you the right to say so!" she refuted.

"I've got the evidence against Mr. Go," a heartbreaking video of him abusing and torturing girls of all ages played to the family. They watched with sunken faces, he who laid in his blood had everything crumble around.

"How old are you, girl," voiced Igna.

"15," she fired back in fear and shame.

"What would you do if someone else did that do you? Would you want revenge, would you want to die or want to return the favor."

"Please," begged the mother who held his feet, "-don't show this to the world. I don't care what happens to me, take out the revenge on me, leave my daughter and husband alone."

"Take out the revenge on you?" he grabbed her neck and lifted without a second's thought, "-what if I did that to you?" he ripped the clothes and send her knocking against the wall. "What would you do if I defiled that girl here in front of you?" he marched to pinch her chin, "-Mr. Go, Mrs. Go," a freezing aura suffocated the room, "-give me an answer."

Chapter 529: Go's

"An answer?" laid exposed at her husband's side, the wife could but see cruelty. The girl squirmed per the strong fingers wrapped around her chin. He'd gaze maliciously at the ladies. A part of Mr. Go sought to run and hide. Another part wanted to cry and wail although, none could help.

"So," he moved to squat before the wife's face, "-might I have an answer?"

"..." Complete silence, the servants stood in utmost horror.

"Don't move," a line drew, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* two more left for death, the blood all but amplified the crystal halo. "Crying for help isn't going to matter," a deathly half-smirk had the family hurdle in protection, "-so, might I have an answer?"

"O-ok," strangling the fear of death, "-I'll g-give you a-an answer," staggered to a stand, the blood flowed profusely. "-my actions in the past don't deserve forgiveness, neither does it need to be exposed to the world. Listen here, boy," he glared, "-words won't matter, tell me your condition and I'll do as you say."

"Sell me your wife and daughter."

“What?” the heart sank.

.....

“You heard me,” he smiled, “-I’ll enjoy defiling both the ladies of the Unda family. What,” paused to glance over the shoulder, “-does it burn you inside?”

“...”

“Ohh, you choose silence now?” he laughed mockingly, the hall echoed, the tranquility felt unbearable. “-How unfortunate, I have a libido that can only be quelled per the death of my lover,” dashed to Lady Go’s side, “-she’ll hold up strong after a few lashes. Some boiling hot water may help in her recovery,” sat on the staircase with legs crossed, “-now then, Mr. Go, would you like another chance at bargain?”

“How cruel can a person be,” said the lady, “-do you have no shame looking at me through such a perverse gaze.”

“Shut your mouth. This is getting old.”

Once living now dead. O’ thee who’ve lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghoul Revival. a simple gesture of ascension rumbled the tiled floor. The dead servants rose to a pale state. Eyes held no emotion, the face hung in-between life and death.

“You, go fetch me a video camera.” The maid in question soiled herself after being pointed at, “-Quickly,” he commanded.

All the while a makeshift filming set was made, Mr. Go’s knees gave to him lying in a pool of his urine. The walking ghoul’s presence stole speech from everyone present’s mouth. “Doesn’t this bring back memories,” added Igna.

Go rose his head in confusion, the expression flashed to terror, “-d-don’t.”

“Oh, what now,” a hard slap had his face bang against the cold floor, “-doesn’t it bring back sweet memories?”

“W-what a-are you...”

“Shut up,” a kick knocked a tooth, “-watch and admire, this is the price I’ve decided you’ll pay.”

The slow-walking of the ghouls paused. Mrs. Go watched as the reality sunk in, “-no,” she begged.

“Ghouls,” commanded Igna, “-defile her and have no mercy.” The three ex-butlers galloped to tear at her remaining clothes. She cried, begged, try to escape to no avail, the ghouls soon had her on all-fours.

“I GIVE UP, PLEASE, STOP THIS!”

“Halt!” moment before the ghouls devoured, they paused mere inches away.

“What is this now?” he smiled; “-you give up?”

“Y-yes,” he breathed, “-I c-can’t. Take what you want, I’ll do what you want, just don’t hurt my family.”

“Give me the address to the hideout. Transfer everything over to Mrs. Go’s name. She’ll be the new head of the family.”

“Ok, bring me the contract, I’ll sign it.” Just as it so happened, éclair had it all readied beforehand. ‘Unda Inc owns multiple warehouses used for photoshoots. They mainly make money from real-estate. Alright, this should do.’

“Please,” he begged with sweat pouring down the forehead, “-let my wife and child go.”

“Huh,” he stopped, “-I never promised I’d let her go.” Despair settled, he did as was told to no avail, not a shred of regret nor humanity shone in the boy’s eyes. “Guess what,” he turned to the ghouls, “-RESUME!” the event broadcasted over the dark-side of the Arcanum, a lady being abused and tortured. She cried, screamed, begged. The man’s heart sank, the girl’s laid her head onto the cold floor and watched, tragedy and pain traumatized the psyche.

“YOU LIED!”

“How very observant,” *Blood-Arts: Extria* a snap and blood exploded all over the hall. Mrs. Go rested head first onto the staircase, her body rocked, the pain in her eyes, it couldn’t have been any more tragic.

“Alright, that’s enough,” *snap,* they dissolved.

“How was it,” asked he holding a nonchalant smile.

“You demon,” said she.

“Mind thy tongue,” the commanding tone had her in tears, “-remember my face and name well. You’re under my command, you’ll do as I say,” he stared at the girl. “Ever try double-crossing me,” he grabbed her collar, “-and I’ll make sure this little princess suffers far more than you have endured here.”

“Never, I’m not going to bow-down and give up.”

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“You’ve already swooped to kiss the floor. Shall I bring in more ghouls to ravish what little dignity you have?”

“I dare you,” she glared, adrenaline had her standing head-to-head against him.

“As you wish,” *Smack,* she went flying across, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* the remainder of the retainers died.

Once living now dead. O’ thee who’ve lost thine life to mine blade, thee who held regrets in the mortal world, I grant thee a chance at life. Be one with those who are to serve me, Blood-Arts: Ghouls Revival.

“Hear me, undead,” voiced he, “-enjoy partaking in the carnal desires.”

“IGNA!” her bravado soon sunk into terror.

“I’ll be taking this girl here as a hostage,” held by the neck, “-see you in a few days.”

“Was all that necessary?” wondered éclair.

“Do you feel bad for them?” the jeep drove away.

“Not really, the cruelty is a little too much.”

“Is that so,” he chuckled, “-believe it or not, I had darker plans in mind.”

The girl sat quietly in the passenger seat. Destination, Unda’s hideout. The latter stood on the border between Konlda and Fulha towards the south. A two-hour drive considering traffic. “éclair,’ halfway into the drive, “-how’s the local news here, are they corrupt?”

“Yeah, everything is corrupt, as long as you have money, anything goes.”

“Alright. Have the footage be transferred to multiple papers. Heading should be, ‘-Karma.’ Include the damning evidence against Mr. Go, show the tortured girls.”

“Why, didn’t you do this to acquire Unda Inc?”

“Not now,” said he, “-if I make the transfer there’ll be suspicion even if there’s corruption. It’s an open threat to those who might be responsible for Aceline’s disappearance.”

“Shooting in the dark?”

“Obviously.”

The girl kept the same expression, “-hey,” spoke he.

“...”

“Girl, tell me your name.”

“...”

“Want to end up like mother?”

“...” she turned to hold teary eyes, “-too late...”

“What do you mean?”

“Mother and Father have already sold me to other people before.”

“Oh, I see,” patting her head, “-did you enjoy the sight of them being treated the same as you?”

“Yes...”

“Then, no problem,” facing the road, ‘-tis a problem. If the parent chose to sell her, she has no merit as a hostage. Suppose I’ll have to subdue Mrs. Go.’ The hideout came in viewing distance, a small building hidden between taller apartments. “Stay here,” ordered he. The door locked; the lone-figure merged into the supposed washing company’s inside.

‘All of you, die.’

Outside, “-Girl,” said the jeep, “-are you going to stay here or run away?”

“I’ll stay,” said she.

“Why?”

“Because I feel at ease,” the voice held a hint of guilt.

“Tell me your story.”

“Well, father abused me when I was around nine. Mother kept watch and snickered. I tried to run but he refused. He’d often bring other men his age and even older to do the same thing as before. I don’t hate father, nor I hate mother, they always said I was a good girl after I did what the strangers asked. I know it was wrong... well, it’s fine. Father said the only way to become a starlet was to go on the casting couch, he said it was training for the future.”

“Phew,” the door opened, “-sure was a mess,” said Igna soaked in blood. “-What’s your name?”

“Lilian Go.”

“Alright Lily, I heard what you said to éclair. Honestly speaking,” he stared coldly, “-you have no merit as a hostage. I’m content to abandon you here.”

“Ok,” she sunk her head and opened the door, “-sorry for being a bother.”

“Don’t be so hasty,” the door shut, “-what have you dreamt of becoming?”

“I want to sing and be an idol. I want to become like Aceline, the Pride of Hidros. Her songs always made me happy during those traumatic experiences.”

“Ahh,” he smiled, “-how about you die.”

“Die?”

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“Yes,” a knife rested atop the dashboard, “-take the knife and slit thy throat.”

“Is this an order?” wondered she coldly.

“Yes.”

Gulp, blade in hand, ‘-goodbye,’ eyes shut, she motioned to slit in a single stroke.

“Good,” the blade stopped shy of her neck, “-you’re dead.”

“I don’t understand...” her lashes flickered in confusion.

“You killed yourself,” he smiled, “-what’s there to not understand. From today forth, you’re reborn. Don’t worry about the past. Swear right now that you’ll always obey my every word.”

“I swear,” she bowed.

“Then, lil lady, think of a name.”

“Celina,” said she.

“Celina it is.” The jeep went forth towards the apartment. Left in his wake, the ash of Unda’s underground ‘gang’. Images and evidence of their movement arrived at the news stations. The blood-

soaked clothes soon cleared using Bloody-Mary. The hovering halo gathered into an apple. *Crunch,* “-want to stop by and eat something?” she nodded. Crowley’s Eatery, a big sign of a burger holding a presumptuous smile. The yellow jeep parked in a beaten state, breaking through a mansion and driving for so long deserved praise.

“Come on,” they held hands, “-what would you like to eat?”

“The big one if it’s no trouble.”

“Alright,” thus, they sat and had lunch. The frightened girl’s expression lightened at the sight of chips and soft drinks.

‘Why did I have to fall prey to her sad past,’ the prospect brought a sneaky grin, ‘-I’ve killed so many people today. Ordered a lady to be defiled, and had a husband suffer through the worst time of his life. Come to think of it, all this began because of a single comment of my manager being referred to as a play-thing. Should really set my priorities straight.’ The window gave onto the broken jeep, ‘-if only I had magic, I could destroy the jeep without effort. Intherna would do just about fine.’ *Thud,* a sharp pain had him headfirst onto the table, ‘-what’s this...’

“Thy wish is my command,” whispered a gentle voice. *BANG* the jeep burst into flames. People struggled to call the firefighters.

‘This pain,’ he buckled, ‘-I can’t...’

“Grow stronger,” said the whisper.

“Are you ok?” inquired Celina calmly staring at the ball of fire.

“Yeah,” the pain eased, ‘-weird.’

“éclair, get me a hold of Lady Elvira.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Dring, “-Hello?”

“Lady Elvira, sorry, it’s me, Igna.”

“How are you doing,” said she ruffling about.

“I’m fine, thank you for asking. I need a favor.”

“Favor at this young an age?” she teased, “-so, what’s the matter.”

“éclair will send a few files. I’ve sort of exterminated a gang and captured the leader. Is it possible to have a few members look over the mansion?”

“Igna,” her tone sunk, “-are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “-thought long and hard. I’d like to get involved in Phantom after all. There’s something I need to find, and I can’t do so without your help.”

“Glad to hear it,” said she, “-I’ll notify lady Courtney. Welcome to the family. I’ll relay orders to éclair. Good job,” said she browsing the report, “-Unda’s Inc, good choice.”

“About that,” the voice felt hesitant, “-I might have taken pity.”

“The little girl,” voiced she, “-I know, éclair’s sent the information. Let’s discuss it in greater details later in the week.”

“Alright, see you soon, auntie.”

“Later, nephew.”

Chapter 530: Phantom’s elite

A little noise grew to a burning carnage brazen onto the eatery walls. Celina watched pinching her fries, the large cup of soda emptied on a single breath. “Yummy,” an exalted sigh escaped to a slouch. A bit further and one would mistake her posture as the table swallowing her feet.

“Celina.”

“Yes?” the posture straightened.

“Anything else you want to do or have?”

“A good night’s sleep,” said she prisoned by a tormenting past.

“Good night sleep,” he stood, “-then let’s go,” holding a hand, “-I’ll help in the dream of becoming the next Aceline. Though, currently, tis Emi Muko who stands at the top.”

“I don’t like her,” said she, “-she starts off melodic and then becomes a madwoman screaming and banging her head. Everyone loves it but I don’t, too violent for me.”

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“I see.”

Time displayed 17:45. Halls of screams churned on against the ear. A room held multiple beds on each having differing guests. Some groaned in pain, others had nurses paying attention and one on the verge of surrender. To and fro never stopped nor did the distant screams. It felt more of a fantasy mental asylum than a hospital. Not injured herself, Alicia waited in the corridor before the rooms. Wounds of prior were scraps and a few bruises.

“Where’s Igna?” thought she replaying the events. Ambulances arrived in full force. Few volunteers went on inside to bring the injured. Dead-bodies were also carried off, the exposed flesh; gun-wounds and one holding a contoured face. Law-enforcement tagged along with the ambulances. The first reaction, talk to a shorter man over yonder. No case for concern towards the injured, first-aid medics did their due and returned. Those with minor injuries were placed in buses and sent on their way.

“Could you tell us what happened?” asked an officer dressed in casual clothes.

“Don’t know really,” said the dazed man, “-I heard gunshots and then panic ensued.”

“What about you, ma’am,” they moved to another.

"It was Mr. Go," said she violently, "-that bastard called his guards to intimidate a boy. The latter refused to give. Go got mad and ordered for them to fire. Next of what I know; representative of Alice and a friend of mine was hurt."

"Thank you for the information," he moved to Alicia.

"Ma'am, can I ask if you remember anything about what happened?"

"Sure," she said in an uninterested voice, "-they fired at my client and nearly killed me in the process. I still haven't found him. I hope one of those body bags isn't his."

"Ay, come over here," hailed the short man, "-let me give you a detail of the incident." To which the officer accepted.

"Know anything?"

"Listen," he motioned for the officer to sit, "-Odgawoan ain't the place to be doing justice," the whisper felt eerie onto the neck.

"Ok?" he accepted and sat; "-can you elaborate?"

"You a recruit, right?"

"Yes, why ask?"

"Because I haven't seen yer face before. Listen, don't get involved. This case is what you'd call, egh, out of the reach. Be a good recruit and obey the higher-ups," a business card handed over, "-the name's Anse Ota, people call me Jimmy. Pay us a visit if you ever feel broke or without a purpose."

"Thanks, sir."

Thus, the investigation on what happened ended there and then. Alicia side-glanced and eavesdropped, '-the police are hopeless. The Unda familia is involved, he had to go pick a fight with them. The short man carried me outside,' head against the trembling window, '-where the hell are you, Igna?' And so, between having herself treated and asked questions by other officers, the day when on into the afternoon. No phone calls nor messages arrived. Worried about the boy, she took the bus home.

Stopped shy of the intersection, the silent and empty cold-streets were awful. Cold breeze pierced the skin on till the bones, cupping her hand before the mouth, '-hough, hough, so cold.' Crystals and pearls of light glittered at the coming dawn. An inky-black shadow obscured the land to only enhance the cityscape. Casual cars drove past accompanied by the normal honks and gawks. So many years of being called pretty and showered in compliments had rendered any show of affection meaningless. Jumping relations to relations didn't help the mental-state either.

'Home,' the apartment building rose on high, '-the park sure is noisy today,' thought she shuffling to catch a glimpse. 'Isn't that?' her eyes narrowed to a black and red bike. Quickening the pace to set the bushes aside, '-that's Igna,' her eyes widened.

From pavement to then the gravel-pathway, a lonesome figure sat with heads turn to the sky. A girl over yonder played with a stray-dog.

'Hold on,' she moved closer to see the blood-stained shoes and pants. It was more of a reddish-brown.

"Igna, are you ok?"

"Huh?" the nap broke, "-oh, it's you. How's it going?" he yawned, "-must have dozed off."

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"Where have you been?" the pitch rose, "-I was worried. Could have called or at least messaged me!"

"I mean," he shrugged, "-doesn't matter really," he stood and scanned the vicinity, "-HEY, CELINA, OVER HERE!"

"MY EARS," she gritted.

"Sorry not sorry," the little girl scurried over.

"The clothes are dirtied," voiced he, "-plenty o' paw stains."

"Can't help it," she smiled, "-the dog was too energetic."

"What dog?"

"Over there," pointed over, there none to be found which left her a little baffled. The fountain-like structure in the middle held naught but the breezy whisper. 'I'm sure I...'

"Igna..."

"Let's go inside," said he, "-I'll recount what happened."

19:00 dinged on the pendulum, the distant noise of showers gave an unusual air of nervousness. "-What happened?"

"I got in a fight," said he moving about the kitchen. "-Remember the Unda familia?"

"Yes, Mr. Go..."

"They're dead," said he.

"HOW?" she slammed the counter.

"Don't break it."

"Not to issue here," opposed to relieved her face flushed to then redden.

"Are you serious?" paused to look over the chopping board, "-why the anger?"

"Go's dead, which means the Unda familia are going to attack whoever is responsible."

"Shut up," he motioned for éclair to send video, "-there, you see. They're all dead. Also," the Livestream of the lady played, "-Mrs. Go sure is skilled."

"Skilled?" she stared away, "-no way, no possible, who in the right mind would take a local gang?"

"Me," smiled he, "-not obvious now is it?" the damning files deleted. "The girl there is the lady of the house Go. Her past is similar to yours. Figured I'd kill her... then, it dawned on me, she could make a great distraction."

"Igna... who the hell are you, really?"

"At the moment," he waited beside the oven, "-a cook trying to reach the stars in the land o' dreams."

"I'll have a shower now, set the table."

"Ok," mumbled she. *slam*

'Igna's a murderer. He killed around 30 people and doesn't look phased. The coldness as he watched Mrs. Go, who the fuck is my employer,' stuck between whether it's right or wrong, '-why did he do this, was it for me?' the question loomed, though, it couldn't be asked outright. 'Something must have happened between him and Mr. Go, the damned pedophile. What's done is done, better set the table. Alice might just employ us after all.'

A little girl joined the otherwise emptied apartment. Wednesday 17th arrived with breaking news. From newspapers to television, everyone had one word in their mouth, 'Karma'. Shinon's daily broke the news about a massacre in Odogwoan.

"Yesterday, to the shock of the publication unit, a strange blood-letter arrived prior to a mail. The latter, which held damning evidence was referred over to the police. They did naught but dismiss the situation. If not for the letter, we'd have kept silent. Mr. Go hid behind the fa?ade of the successful real estate agent. The men committed crimes of sexual assaults on minors. The blood-stain letter contained links to illicit pictures and evidence of a massacre. One thing can be said for certain, good riddance."

The television also had the news on loop, "-today's news, the mysterious murder of Mr. Go. So far, police have managed to locate the Odogwoan hidden office. Liza's on the scene," to which it changed to the office. Yellow tapes barred the entrance, crowds gathered about as police officers stood guard. "It's been four hours. There has been no sign of bodies contrary to what the picture indicated."

"They sure are getting overly active," said Alicia setting the table for breakfast.

"I suppose," added Igna.

"Aren't you scared?" asked she.

"No," he laughed, "-there's no way they'll make the connection to me. Besides, even if they find a clue; who knows, there might be other incidents. I know one thing for sure, they'll close the case and cover the incident."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Odogwoan is part of the underworld. Probing too much might bring about other organizations, and trust me, they wouldn't like the publicity."

"Alright, I'm off for today," said he jumping into the bodysuit.

"Wait, what about the photoshoot?"

"It's not confirmed. Go visit the representative and make sure to drive the narrative that we saved her life. Should be easy to accomplish."

"What about Celina?"

"She's a grown girl. I've left a note on the fridge, anyway, see you."

The door shut followed by the bike roaring down the street.

'Members of Phantom are coming to town. I wonder if aunt Elvira will be here too?'

Pristine white and blue; an angel, a spotless reference to the clouds and sky – Phantom's jet approached the runway strongly. The wheels screeched into smoke. Multiple cars were at the ready – said part of the airport was reserved for the rich. Commercial planes stood far, far away. Only drivers and no guards.

'Here they come,' thought he leaning against the bike, '-the members of Phantom.' It taxied over to face the cars, the hatch opened slow and meticulously. The passengers took their time in getting ready before setting out. By the figures inside, '-there's a few.' First came four men in suits, then, Lady Elvira, Elliot, Courtney, Yves, and another lady.

'Why are the elites of Phantom here?'

"Igna," said Lady Courtney.

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"Lady mother," they embraced tightly, "-good to see you in good health."

"Yes, it's good to see you too, my son," the face held genuine pleasure and relief.

"Aunt Elvira, good to see you here in good spirit."

"Hey," she shuffled his hair, "-where's my hug?"

"Here," another tight embrace.

"I see that our lady's son sure does resemble him," added Elliot who gave a firm handshake.

"Thank you for rescuing me," said Igna, "-if not for the help, I'd have surely died that day."

"Don't fret it," winked Yves turning to Elvira, "-We'll be off."

"I'm coming with," said Courtney, "-sorry, Igna," leaned to give a peck on the cheek, "-there are more important matters."

"Alright, take care mother."

Left alone, the hidden sun sneakily threw a few rays onto the cold ground.

"Aunt, might I ask why you came?"

"Do you have a helmet?" wondered she.

"Yeah."

“Right, get on the bike, I’ll be riding with you.”

“As you wish.”

“You, get in the car and follow behind,” ordered she to the driver. The words landed the same as a punch.

On the road to seemingly no destination, “-Igna, are you sure about joining Phantom?”

“Yes,” said he, “-I don’t mind starting at the lowest of the low.”

“What about becoming a chef?” wondered she.

“I can’t do it,” said he, “-the thought of cooking professionally makes me sick. I’ve grown to disgust the thought, makes me want to puke.”

“Interesting. Alright, Igna,” voiced she, “-Lady Courtney said it’s fine, and Lady Haru’s accepted too. It has been a long time coming, we might be going to war in the next few years. Today’s the first strategic meeting. We’ll be selecting members to oversee the covert invasion of Alpha.”