

## Death Magic 531

### Chapter 531: Pluton

Strategic meeting of the underworld. So secretive not even other members knew. The elites of Phantom stood as followed: Elvira and Lady Courtney. The latter handled most combat-related affairs. Her team, comprising of Yves, and Elliot, were revered by the whole of the organization. The moment she stepped onto the battlefield; a win was guaranteed. Other factions comprising of the alchemist sect and ex-Gate-six were also revered by those in the know. Rotherham, their private haven, the strongest armed city in the entirety of Hidros. Not even Rosespire could compare to them.

For more than a decade, the goal and quest of invading the territory of Snow, who is bound to Cimier, plagued Elvira's mind. The killers of Lizzie, those who abused and tortured for mere cheap-change hadn't been dealt with.

Now, the ones responsible for Staxius's disappearance – King Juvey's faction, the skirmishes between Elendor and Old Cray's kingdom, were also not to be found nor held accountable.

On a meeting hosted a few months ago, immediately after Courtney announced Igna to be her child, Elvira went and called those at the top. A dark-room containing only blue-dim displays had faceless grey icons. A word said and the icons would articulate accordingly.

"The meeting today's for a single purpose," said she strongly.

"Go on."

"Lady Courtney has a son who bears resemblance to Lord Staxius."

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"Are we speaking of an heir?"

Another interjected, "-we also have Prince Julius, the true son of our lord. He should be the rightful heir."

"The meeting isn't about deciding an heir," said she, "-Prince Julius is already at the highest degree in terms of ranking in the organization. The question lays on whether Igna should be allowed to join."

"There's nothing more to add."

"The decision lays in Shadow's hand. We are nothing but a servant to her will. I'm sure and believe those present agree that if the boy ever decides to enter Phantom, he'll start at the bottom. No nepotism, we're routed on merit alone."

"Well said," said she, "-the boy has shown disinterest in joining our ranks. Let it be known that if he ever does so, I'll be watching closely."

"Next topic of discussion," voiced another, "-there's been reported activity of Loron getting threatened. Cimier is growing bold, the conglomerates are getting stronger."

"I see," and this the meeting ends for hours.

Scenery flashed, a glance at the speedometer showed they'd gone beyond what was legal. "Igna," firm in voice and tight in grip around his waist, "éclair should have sent coordinates. Take us there."

"Alright," sharp press on the brakes lifted the backend, "-Aunt Elvira," said he, "-what are you going to do with the company?"

"We're headed there right now," said she. And as the map would have it, the mansion of the Go's.

12:00, prior smashed gates were fixed. No guards at the entrance. Construction on the broken wall was underway. Two black cars stood menacingly at the previous doorway.

"Come on," she leaped, "-we got no time to waste."

Through a corridor of hedges laid in a tidy garden of well-maintain flowers rose a small backdoor in a dark color. Elegant lampposts were about the yard, an imposing tree stood in the middle as the famed trophy.

"Lady Elvira," said Elliot, "-how was the journey?"

"Rough," she entered, "-and amusing." The face's paleness was closer to a corpse. Vibrant red-lipsticks and crimson pupils contrasted to birth an unusual charm. Igna followed behind, "-stop," said Elliot raising a hand, "-son or not, turn back. We can't have civilians in here," the polite tone and genuine smile lightened the room.

"Let him in," ordered Elvira, "-I'll go into more details later."

No others were present, the same faces who got out of the jet and Lady Go. A solemn face of distrust, nervous blinking, and sharp flickers. She seemed to be under the influence, the reddened eyes sure could have said otherwise.

"Alright," said Elvira taking a seat at the head of the table, "-let's start the meeting." They all sat except Igna who stood respectfully at Elvira's side. "I'd like to remind you that this meeting here isn't anything to do with our objective. The mansion here and the Unda gang is property of Mrs. Go."

No response gaze, she kept staring about and paid no heed.

"Let me fix her," glared Courtney, \*snap,\* the drowsiness crumbled into shards, the illusion in which she lived and smiled shattered. Reality settled; her eyes widened at Igna.

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"YOU!" gritting, "-how dare you come back. What the fuck is wrong with you? Killing my husband and having me be abused for god knows how many hours!"

"Would you like a taste?" interjected Igna softly, the table turned to watch what the two spoke about.

"Taste of what?" maniacal laughter ensued, "-I've suffered through your torture, there's nothing more than you can do!"

"Oh, is that so," \*snap\* "-the ghouls sure had fun," an evil smirk sent chills across the room. Heavy footsteps climbed the stairs, \*barge,\* a restless humanoid settled onto Mrs. Go.

\*Bang,\* “-What in the hell is that?”

“Elliot,” facepalmed Elvira, “-ask then shoot, not shoot first.”

“Oh...” he paused, “-I guess the splattered brains won’t help,” he turned to Igna with an awkward smile.

“No problem,” said he nodding to have the humanoid regenerate, “-ghouls are ghouls for a reason,” a glance landed onto the Mrs. Go. The attitude changed as the beast snatched her from the table and strangled her onto a couch at the back. It began to tear the clothes, she screamed and wept, “-stop, stop,” cried she, “-I give, I give.”

“Halt!” it stopped, “-go wait outside.” It limped to the stairway. “-I apologize for such an unbecoming display.”

“No worries,” said she.

“Igna,” said a sharp voice.

“Yes, mother?”

“Might I ask how this lady knows you?” her demeanor said to tread carefully, the motherly death-stare bloomed.

“Go on,” said Elvira, “-speak.”

“As you wish,” breathing deep, ‘-this is oddly terrifying.’

“Mr. Go and I had a little altercation during a photoshoot. The argument escalated from verbal to physical. He bragged about the wrongdoing of taking advantage of minors for sadistic pleasure. The thought sent me into an unending fury. One thing led to another and I landed at the Go mansion. I tortured him into signing over all the property to Mrs. Go, after which I killed him. Mrs. Go wasn’t all that innocent thus her current state of mind. Ghouls abused her daily, tis the punishment I thought be logical. I also took the liberty of conquering the gang as well. As far as is concerned, they were nothing more than local ruffians. Still, a gun in a psychopath’s hand can lead to a massacre.”

“That’s enough,” said Elvira, “-Igna conquered a local gang. It’s the break I’ve been waiting for. Good job.” He nodded and stepped back a little.

“Exterminating a gang on his lonesome,” thought Yves, “-very good, got potential.”

“Did you not see the ghoul,” said Elliot, “-he’s a nightwalker the same as Lady Elvira.”

“Igna,” echoed Courtney.

“Yes mother,” he shuddered.

“Come here.”

Each step weighed a ton, the fingers trembled at her aura. Slow and steady he arrived to bow.

“Look at me,” she stood, “-look me in the eye.”

“Lady Courtney,” interjected Elvira, “-I think that’s enough.”

“Don’t get involved,” her side-glance commanded the table.

“Look at me,” she lifted his chin, “-did you do all this?”

“Yes, mother.” The deep grey pupils seem hypnotic, her blinking slowed to a stare-off. Everyone clenched in wait, her response was the same as a decree. Gulps hung breath, the imposing air proved just how strong and respected the lady was.

“Good job,” the tension eased, “-why are you so stressed?” Fingers ran along with the medium-length hair, “-my confused little boy,” she smiled, “-I’m proud of what you’ve done. Take no pity on those who dare to fall prey to the arrogance of power.”

“Thank you, mother,” he dropped to one knee, “-I apologize for any trouble I might have caused.”

“Raise thine head.” The long white hair swayed mildly, “-congratulations and welcome to Phantom. Elvira, I think it’s obvious that my boy here has more in store than I can say.”

“Alright,” they all stood menacingly. The curtains dropped to have all stood in a single line. “Godfather Shadow,” said Elvira, “-may you please grant entry to Igna Haggard into the closed circle of the underworld.”

“Igna Haggard,” the room shook per each word, “-I, Godfather Shadow, presiding patriarch of the Dark-Guild in Hidros, deem thee worthy of joining the round-table as a temporary member. We shall see thy performance on the field as well as in discussion. Here’s a mask,” it hovered over to drop into his lap, “-from today forth, thou art known as Pluton.”

‘Did I get inducted into the higher-ranks of Phantom... I didn’t know mother was the Godfather.’

“Alright,” the aura released to allow the sun, “-back to your seats.” The chairs pulled, ‘-what’s happening?’

“Join us on the table,” said Courtney.

Glossing past what happened, the meeting continued, “-let’s decide what comes of Mrs. Go, any suggestion?”

“Take away the properties and kill her,” added Elliot without much thought.

“Might I interject?”

“Go on.”

“How about using her as a puppet ruler. Alpha is still too big to have Phantom’s name be linked to anyone.”

“Good eye,” said Elvira, “-the idea is somewhat flawed. If she’s to become the puppet ruler, questions will be raised on how she amassed power. I see one way, have her ally to Loron. It’ll give us time to prepare. More importantly, her estate in Odgawoan and all over Scaica and Subrea will come in handy.”

14:00 came with Courtney and her group leaving for Tash. Snacks and hot drinks were brought over by the guards. A nameless lady remained at her side. Brownish hair, a scar down her left cheek – oval face, and a gun at her waist.

“Alright, time for the other matter at hand.”

“Pardon me?”

“Igna,” sharp and direct, “-meet Tia. A personal guard to Prince Julius. He demanded us to bring her with.”

“Why?” wondered he.

“He wanted you to have protection.”

“I refuse,” said he, “-having her around will only hinder my movements. Aunt, please, let me be, for now, I don’t require protection.”

A faint breeze, ‘-fast,’ unable to react, the lady grabbed his hand and knocked him to the knees, ‘-not impressive,’ a tug, followed by a leap brought distance between the two.

“Stand-down,” said the lady.

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“Mana-cancelation,” he dashed to grab the nearest pistol.

Her eyes narrowed; ‘-my voice didn’t work on him.’ “Physical Enhancement,” white-hue amplified her aura, “-Acceleration,” she moved twice as fast.

‘She’s going to dodge it,’ they locked into close-hand combat. Countering and dodging increased in difficulty, her punches were strong, a direct hit, and the battle would be over. ‘Using Blood-Arts might kill her. Screw it,’ the thumb chipped, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* a cage of razer-sharp lines wrapped her fingers and arms.

“Impressive,” she backed off, “-I guess vampires can’t be killed using normal means.”

The fingers curled; her posture reminded of ancient arts – the movements were soft and imposing.

\*Slayer-Arts: Fire-Gate.\*

\*SMACK,\* a punch had Igna fly out the window, \*bang,\* the ground carved per the landing.

‘What the hell,’ barely conscious, the burning aura of the lady approached. ‘-My regeneration is slow.’ Beside the lady sat Elvira crossing her legs. ‘Are they serious...’ the breathing impaired, ‘-she’s honestly trying to kill me. The mark isn’t healing. Is she a vampire slayer, made a deal with the devil to fight off the nightwalker.’ A broken arm and shoulder healed at a slow pace. ‘-Why is she not continuing the attack?’

\*Slayer-Arts: Tetna Chains.\*

“GHOULS!” the resting beast ran up the stairs to spear her through the window. ‘-I’m not going to lose ever again,’ he dashed forth, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,\* the blood manifested in a hovering dagger, “-die,” an upward kick propelled the same as a bullet.

“Nice try,” she palmed the weapon as a rest to force her body onto Igna.

“Got you,” smirked he, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson-Threads,\* four spikes impaled her mercilessly.

## Chapter 532: How they grow

Blood flowed down the spikes sluggishly. The body rested in an arc, no movements, nothing. 'Is she dead?' wondered Igna staring up.

"Good job," whispered, \*Woosh,\* "-hold on there."

"How did you?" asked he with a blade inches from the lady's petite neck.

"Simple," she clapped, "-I substituted myself with a corpse."

Staring up once more, the body was none other than the ghoul. "You're strong," commented he.

"Same can be said about you," she dusted off the shoulder and cracked her neck. "Lady Elvira, I think the boy is qualified enough to be left alone."

"Was this a test?" the lady jumped to Elvira.

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"Good job on passing her test," said she, "-go on back. There's nothing more to do. I'll contact éclair about matters."

"Alright."

Turned to face the brighter inside, "-Tia, have her sign the papers."

"Are you sure?"

"Did I stutter?"

"Alright."

Elites of Phantom were now in Alpha. They'd soon leave after a few days. On that, Igna returned home, '-shut,' stopped midway, '-I forgot to ask Auntie about Celina.'

Konlda park, a place of nature and a host to the rejuvenating stream. Advertisement put it as follows, '-want to shave off two or three years off the wrinkling face, come on down to Konlda Park.' A hoax or perhaps the truth; pseudo-science or magic, who knew and who cared. The well-read and scientific of mind chose to ignore whilst those believing in superstitions, of which were mostly the elderly, came in masses.

The evening was upon the city. Youth ran about the nature trail. Nice place to enjoy what nature had to offer, a gateway into the past – the remainder of the forest of angels.

'Damn, really?' a message read; '-keep Celina safe until we leave for Hidros. Go on, show her a good time or something, be nice to the girl, she's gone through a lot.'

'Aunt's taken a liking to her without even seeing the face,' he breathed, the bellowing of cold breeze gave a glimpse into coming rainfall. The breeze, innocent at first, turned into full-blown gusts that took with leaves, umbrellas, and troubled those running.

"éclair, can I have a vague idea on the hierarchy used in Phantom?"

“Sure. It’s divided into four parts. Per Elvira’s orders, there’s no ranking opposed to other organizations. Everyone could interact with the Leader. General communication allowed for ease of transfer. This efficiently cleaned the chain-of-command and avoided sullyng of crucial information. Obviously, some supervisors control the lowest bunch. The hierarchy is loose since there’s no problem in discipline. All know their places and work to do what is needed.”

“Sorry, sorry. I mean the underworld, not Phantom.”

“Be more precise,” sighed he. “It’s different here, the Godfather stands at the top. Below there are the right-hand and left-hand, else known as the Don’s. Their job is to control the families in the familia. It’s confusing, don’t get me wrong. What’s there to know is the families, under which falls thugs and other hoodlums, report to a don than then reports to the Godfather. The power is handled by three at the top and the rest is decided by what faction/family one belongs to. In your case, the godfather gave the name Pluton – which excludes you from belonging to any other family. Basically, a lone-wolf. It’s a sought-after title since they are allowed to fight by the Godfather’s side. Elliot, Yves, Tia, Julius, and now you. Tis the information needed at the moment; time will teach of the other intricacies.”

“What about the Overlord.”

“He’s the ruler of the Dark-Guild, Godfather’s are his confidants.”

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“I see.” The mild shower had people running for cover, some under trees and others for the parking-lot.

‘Didn’t expect the organization to be so complicated. All I remember was going around and ordering people. I supposed Elvira took care of most of the grunt work. She’s really the best candidate to push Phantom into an unseen future. I’m satisfied by this,’ he straddled over the bike, ‘-being named Pluton means I don’t have to obey if I don’t want to. Knowing mother, she’ll never be defeated unless faced by a god. I wish I could sense her presence; the dormant death-element is a boon and curse. I can’t gauge people correctly. If I die, I return more or less the same, the regeneration is so slow. My arm still hurts from the fight against Tia, she’s strong, maybe stronger than me,’ the last moment replayed, ‘-she stopped my knife with a single finger. Never mind that, substituting for the ghoul and going for my blind spot. Not a matter of sense, she moved so fast I couldn’t even track. If she didn’t speak up, I’d have been defeated. My chest burns from the battle-wounds. I can’t sense but it’s obvious, these are the mark of a possessed individual. The ancient-art of binding a demon to a human in hopes of defeating vampires.’ Rain poured on relentlessly. The bodysuit soaked in seconds; each droplet felt heavy. ‘Vampire-Slayer, Mages, then Adventurers. That’s the evolution I’ve examined. What about her, she’s somehow different from vampire-slayers.’

“Let me answer that one,” said éclair. “Next step in evolution, the Alphan’s. Humans who don’t use mana for their special abilities. Alpha is first and foremost, a place of a relative unknown. Open your eyes and look around, the people aren’t normal. The very definition of normality is indescribable. Odgawoan isn’t subject to the truth of Alpha, the people here are very much humanoid. There’s even surgery performed to hide the evolution of the Alphan’s. They are the future. Tia’s born in Hidros with the blood of an Alphan and Vampire-slayer. Put in retrospect, her abilities would be Tier-2 Gold and Tier-4 Bronze in the Ardanian ranking. That’s only considering her innate ability. She can amplify her

powers without limit, the body's made to sustain the backlash. In a way, the demon reference made is her actual blood."

"Damn," he smiled, "-the people are getting stronger."

"They've been strong since the age of monsters. Nothing forces the anatomy to evolve than the fear of extinction."

"What about the monster infestation of Alphaia. I remember Whuotan being subject to their wilds."

"The quarantine district of the North is a battlefield. Heroes train day and night inside their borders. The reason why the Alphians are increasing their power."

"Scary," said he, "-if they decide to invade, there's no stopping them."

"Not really," argued éclair, "-in terms of firepower, we far-out rank them. Don't forget," a sly chuckle echoed, "-a single press of a button and the district could be wiped at any second. I mean, have you forgotten?" images flashed, "-the detonation of the Pabruska V1 in Legrury. The blast radius spans dozens of kilometers. Uninhabitable and as news reported, unknown. They blamed it on a factory explosion, but we both know the truth. We've gotten smarter too, the nuke is far stronger, I dare not comment on what damage it could bring about."

"I guess you're right," time showed 18:00, he'd been on the bike soaking as if a sponge.

"Message from Alicia, asks you to head to the hospital."

More than not, the time spanned had changed the world. The alteration wasn't noticeable, slight, and inconspicuous at the time. Forgetting Alphaia's AHA and the super-humans was a hard swallowed pill. On the ride back, the promise made by Emperor Sultria VI, to marry and bring Eira to the continent. 'What an unpleasant piece of information.'

Odgawoan City hospital climbed on high between the skyscrapers of downtown. Downpour cause multiple jams. Those in cars sunk into the inner-heat and pleasant smooth songs. Visibility dwindled; the visor didn't help in keeping the rain for it mostly impaired vision. Wind and rain, an awful combination, especially since the former blew grotesquely. Instead of water, it felt like needles.

The hue of headlights, the traffic-lights, the sound of the rainfall, and prominent lights of building in the distant soothed the heart. Mournful piano ambled onto the roads; a tenant of the affordable apartment held no trouble blasting the music.

'That's the Synyata C'oldo played by Syndra. The emotion of the composition is even sadder than before. She did look confused around the time of Cle. Whatever, the lady's making a life with that insufferable Kyle Darker.'

In before he realized it, the hospital stood mere footsteps away. The bodysuit dripped as a leaking pipe. Attendants frowned to exchange expressions with others. "Sorry about that," said he.

"No problem," frowned the cleaner with a twitch of the eye.

"Igna, over here," gestured Alicia at the waiting area.



“Hey,” they hugged as a greeting, “-why did you call me here?”

“It’s the representative of Alice,” to which she led the way to the lady in question’s room. Multiple soon-to-be artists and their managers hung in the corridor before the door. The glares were uninviting.

“I get why you didn’t stay around here long,” whispered Igna.

“Shut it,” returned a mumble.

“Please, the lady’s been waiting,” said a butler opening the door.

‘Butler?’ he gave a once-over and got pulled inside.

“The boy I wanted to see,” said the heavy lady moving her head, “-how have you been?”

“I’ve been well,” he approached, “-the injuries, are they bad?”

“No, no,” feeble as she spoke, the strong nature never left, “-I’d have died if not for the first-aid you provided.”

“I see,” he scratched his head and exhaled, “-there was another injured, how are they?”

“Died. Doctors were too late in saving him.”

‘Died, the story doesn’t match by what I predicted. What’s going on here, a cover-up?’ a discreet scan of the room using the interface revealed naught. ‘-maybe the walls?’ nothing.

“Hey,” said she, “-I know you tried saving us both. The other’s injury was a little too critical.”

‘Impossible, I’m sure I stopped the bleeding.’ Regret washed down the wet-face, “-I should have been better.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said she, “-did you look outside?”

“Yes, a lot of people,” returned he politely.

“They’re nothing more than hypocrites trying to get on my good side. They know Alice and Ikoen’s worth and want to be hired badly. I tell you; this industry doesn’t have a place for anyone kindhearted. Trust me, don’t believe in what anyone says, don’t believe in me either. However, I must repay the kindness shown. If not for you, as the doctor said, I’d have been dead. Thanks for saving my life, I appreciate it a lot.”

“Don’t mention it, ma’am. Wanting to save another is commonsense, is it not?”

“Common sense,” the head flipped to the rainy outside, “-it’s rarer than you’d think. The shooting showed the dark side of humanity. Everyone thought of saving themselves instead of another. You stay behind and fought, bought time for the escape.”

“You give me too much credit. Let the past be, I wish not to remember the traumatic experience.”

“éclair, what’s the difference between Ikoen and Alice.”

“Ikoen’s the music brand, Alice’s the modeling brand. They’re the same just different names.”

"Igna Haggard," she paused, "-I've thought long and hard. The decision is made, you'll be working for Ikoen. I need help from you as well," she stared coldly, "-Ikoen's not going to endorse you. The job would be a one-time thing. I want you to become a representative of the brand. If you can manage to garner the attention of musicians and built a reputation, I'll be able to pull-strings and provide an endorsement. What do you say, Alchemist of Cooking, up for the challenge?"

"You know," he smiled, "-what's the time-frame for the objective?"

"Indefinite, be sure to pull in attention, I'm sure the company will see the benefit of endorsing then."

"Then it's a deal, Ma'am."

"Call me Sally," said she, "-I'll be in touch with Alicia. Do be proud, both of you."

"Will do ma'am."

"Visiting hours are over," said a nurse struggling through the door, "-everyone out, the lady needs rest."

"You've done it," the noisy outside ambled into full view, "-God almighty, Igna, how did you?"

"Alicia," he held a high-five, "-don't underestimate our power."

"Hell yeah," she cheered and slapped, "-OUCH!"

"Too hard. Shall we head home?"

"In this rain?" she held her numb palm.

"Obviously, tis the best way to ride!"

"Crazy idiot," big inhale, "-let's do it. You and I are going to conquer Odgawoan."

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Chapter 533: Coming Cyclone

\*Achoo,\* "-I'm drenched."

"Tell me about it," added Igna joyfully. Time spent in each other's company, as little as it might have been, despite the hard-start, a mutual feeling of understanding and respect carved the way for a beautiful relation.

The door stumbled open to the nicely lit interior. The warmth of the inside sent chills. The television played in the distance, some cartoon or whatnot. Thus, the day came to an end. Pluton was inducted in Phantom's innermost circle. The responsibilities weren't known yet. A warm shower followed to a warm meal and lastly, the warm bed.

Meanwhile, far away from the city, the meeting of Phantom and Loron was underway. Elvira posed as the leader as opposed to Courtney who stayed as guards. The discussions went over nicely, a plan of action had yet to be drawn, though, they made some progress into the continent. Loron took Mrs. Go under their wing.

News of the takeover wouldn't reach the other factions for at least a few months. In the public's eye, as reported by the news; the massacre of the Go's turned to be a publicity stunt. A video of Mr. Go circulated around Lokka – it defused the growing fear of the underworld. Guards were dropped and life resumed its normality. Whispers of the inside were told as so, 'Mr. Go and Mrs. Go had a falling out. She learned of her husband's extramarital affairs and threatened to expose his libido to the world. Hence, in fear of being exposed, Mr. Go transferred most of the estate to the wife's name and left Alpha.' Adding to that was the video shot inside Hidros, Rosespire to be precise. éclair recreated the event, sent fake information, built a false narrative, and brought the scandalized headline to a halt.

The next day arrived at a full-on hurricane. News stations implored people to stay inside. Winds reached up to a hundred kilometers per hour. Granted, the eye of the cyclone laid around a few hundred kilometers off the shore – the predicted trajectory said the eye would pass over Odogwoan. A fear that had the public in a panic. Monsters, murders, or the mob weren't the only ones who could bring about pandemonium; natural disasters were in a whole other league.

Barely awake at the 06:00 alarm, \*-dring,\*

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"Hello?"

"Igna," came a rather inaudible voice through the deafening sound of a jet, "-it's me, Elvira, can you hear me?"

"Barely," said he sarcastically.

"Alright, I've got some bad news. The situation in Elendor is growing dire. Queen Gallienne's called a meeting for the potential of war. The Federation is attending, which includes us as well."

"What about Celina?"

"Take care of her." The clamor amplified, "-here, lady Courtney wants to have a word."

"Igna," her flirtatious speech left much to be desired.

"Hello, mother."

"Things are getting interesting. I'm hoping for the conflict to be resolved without bloodshed, if not," even through the phone, her blood-thirst could be sensed, "-I'm going head first."

"Ok," said he, "-take care as well. May the deliberation end peacefully."

"Sure."

'A war?' the phone dropped onto the shelf, '-what's the point of doing that now?'

"Igna," long gentle fingers back-handed his face, "-Alicia..." Realization hit, '-hold up,' the sleep broke, '-why is she in my bed.' The bedside carpet showed undies, clothes, '-oh god,' he chuckled.

"Sleep some more," her sleep broke, "-good morning."

"Alicia," he sighed, "-did we?"

"I guess," she wiped her eyes, "-I swear, a few too many drinks. I can vaguely remember... man, you've got experience."

"Are you serious," he laughed, '-why did I have to BLACKOUT.'

"Something the matter?" wondered she sitting upright.

"No, it's all good," the voice shook, "-it's not like I don't remember anything."

"Oh," she chuckled, "-so you don't remember," her visage fell into a coy expression, "-I could jog the memories," and so, the lady crawled over to bind him onto the bed. Her arms and legs straddled as if a cage, a very soft and inviting one. "Let me take you to heaven."

"Yeah no," he stopped her advances, "-don't get me wrong, you're very attractive. Still, it doesn't feel right. I understand the influence of alcohol might have brought about our flesh to bond, still, it doesn't justify us acting so savagely. I want to see you as the strong-mouthed lady who stops at nothing to get what she wants. Not a plaything for my desires."

"You say that," she stared at his waist, "-Igna Jr doesn't hold the same opinion."

"Ok enough," he jumped off the bed, "-Igna Jr has a mind of his own, none shall wield the sword of destruction without consent from gods themselves."

"Oh please," she laughed, "-Sword of destruction. Seriously," the laughter fell into hysteria, "-my stomach," buckled over, "-I can't."

"Anyway," semi-clothed, "-go take a shower."

"As you wish," she walked fully exposed to the bathroom, "-wielder of the sword of destruction."

"Stop it!" The door shut and the showers dribbled. '-Man,' he sat and exhaled, '-what's the matter with her.' Contact-lenses materialized, "-Good morning éclair."

"Good morning, Casanova."

"Oh please, you need not tease me about what happened."

"No need to tease?" the tone felt offended, "-my friend, my master, thou art mistaken. I'm certain the other residents have heard the lustful night thee shared."

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"Can we forget it?"

"Whatever, I'd be proud if I were you."

"Yeah, proud," he moved to part the curtains, "-what's the status of today?"

"A cyclone's making headway to the city. I expect it to be here in two days. Everyone's getting readied for the coming catastrophe."

"I see, I suppose we'll go shopping later."

"Igna, I took the liberty of purchasing another car. The trip yesterday showed the flaw of going around town on a bike, especially a night."

"Seriously, what model?"

"An expensive one..."

"HOW EXPENSIVE!"

"About 500,000 Exa."

"..."

"Don't get angry now," he laughed, "-didn't you once spend like 3 million on a car. There's no room for complaint."

"Really, 3 million – that's too much."

"What do you know," snickered éclair, "-Lord Staxius didn't respect money."

"Whatever, what car did you buy?"

"Oden R9 SST by Yokta."

"Huh?"

"It's a new brand, independent and local. They manufacture about three per month. Affordable looks incredible and sought-after."

"Affordable?" he laughed, "-500,000 isn't cheap."

"Says he who once overpaid for a piece of shit."

"Leave the past be."

"Ok, no more reference to the past. The car's already in the parking lot. Go have a look later."

"Purchases aside," whistling of the wind and mist over the streets felt straight out of a horror movie, "-what's the status of the conflict in Elendor?" headlights of cars and truck felt as if never-blinking eyes.

"Pretty stable I'd say. Haven't checked their servers yet. I'll do so later on today."

Showers behind stopped, "-Igna," the door slid open, "-get me a towel, I forgot to bring one."

"Seriously, are you a nudist?"

"No," she leaned against the frame, "-just someone who enjoys the fresh air once in a while."

"Fresh air," wrapped towels flew across the room.

"Awesome. Aren't you going to take a bath?"

"I will, just waiting for a certain lady to finish."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," she made for the door, "-see you in a bit." The innocent and gleeful expression gave a feeling of rest. Her methods were a little on the strange side.

The news played in the living room; the broadcast of the coming cyclone had Alicia worried.

"Hey, go wake up Celina."

"Okay," scurried she with the broom in hand.

'Cooking for people I care about feels therapeutic. The moment I think of selling this to a customer or have someone judge it... my arms drop to a numb.'

"Good morning, Igna," said Celina in Alicia's arms.

"Don't carry her," voiced he, "-she's not a kid, come on. Besides, aren't you tired from all the cleaning?"

"What," stared Alicia, "-am I not allowed to carry her. Celina, do you feel awkward?"

"No," she yawned, "-take me to the bathroom," said she monotonously.

"She's as light as a feather," chatter and good energy emanated from their exchange.

'Two victims of Go's psychotic pleasure. I guess she told Alicia about the past. They've got a link, better not get involved.'

Food readied onto the counter. The other two arrived in full to devour the meal. Reporters kept on voicing the coming hurricane as a world-ending catastrophe. An advertisement board broke and fell onto a bystander. The latter at the hospital and is critically injured.

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"Igna, any idea about Mr. Sally's quest?"

"Oh, becoming popular. I don't know, I need a guitar and amplifier first. Maybe some effect pedals too."

"You know about guitars?" her face lightened.

"Yeah..." (especially since éclair engraved all the knowledge about the instrument inside my brain).

"Don't zone-out on me," added she sternly.

"Sorry, sorry, just a few bad memories." (He's very sadistic. Drilling music theory and the different genres into my head. A knockoff of the Arcane Library).

"It looks bad," added Celina, "-the weather's going to get worse from here."

"Don't worry," said he, "-we're going shopping in a bit. Get ready; better be prepared in case of an outage."

"Seriously?" their visage flashed, "-not lying right?"

"Problem," interjected Celina, "-the bike holds only two people. I don't mind staying home," sadness filled the otherwise boring voice.

"Igna, let's go by bus," demanded she, "-that way we can bring her along!"

"Calm down," said he washing the dishes, "-I recently bought a car. It's in the garage. Go get ready, we'll leave at 10:30."

"Okay," the manager made for her changing room.

"Aren't you going to change?" wondered he.

"No clothes to change into," said she softly.

'Shit, I forgot.'

"It's fine," the face felt the same expression as before; one of guilt and self-pity.

"Not fine," ordered he, "-I brought you here on a selfish whim. Be more vocal about what's lacking."

"No, no," voiced she, "-I don't want to be more of a burden. Being freed from mother and having a place to stay is good enough."

"Disheartening," sat at her side, "-come on, the attitude isn't going to work. Listen to me, I don't plan on saying anything cheesy or dramatic. You're a member of this household, we're not related, I barely know Alicia, however, we stay as one. If you ever need something, come to me. I had thought of sending you to Hidros for studies – looks like it won't be possible for the coming months. I don't know what's going to happen going forth. Tell me, will you take the chance?"

"Chance?"

"Chance of staying with us."

"I don't mind," her face darted left and right, "-can't really go back, now, can I?"

"Yeah, you can't," he patted her head, "-let's get you clothes later, is that alright?"

"...s-sure."

"Don't worry," said he with a beautiful smile, "-money isn't an issue."

"Ok."

'Damn,' he moved to the living room, '-how didn't I realize this before. She's an example out of thousands who lost their family by my hands in the past. I never really thought of the consequences, what mattered was my survival, the survival of my comrades. I was so emotionless it's painful to think. There's no repentance. The least I can do is take responsibility for her.'

"Igna, I'm ready," said the manager in a puffed jacket and warm clothes.

"Alright," he stood in shabby clothes, "-when did you change, Celina?"

"She did it."

"Had a few clothes lying around. Anyway, let's go." The outfits matched, jacket and emphasis on being warm.

The underground lot had muddied ponds at random intervals. The ceiling leaked most of the water.

"Where's the car?" wondered Alicia.

“éclair,”

\*Beep,\* headlight flashed further inside. “Damn,” said she, “-Is that yours?”

“I guess,” he stood and watched. Large, robust and elegant, ‘-pretty nice for what éclair paid.’

“Look, there’s even an angel on the bonnet.”

“Where do you make so much money?” wondered Celina circling the vehicle.

“Rich parents,” said he shyly, “-my family is a bit on the eccentric side. Strong and honorable people. Enough about them, get in, we’re leaving.”

#### Chapter 534: Spree

The coming rainclouds of the menacing typhoon snuck their way inside the continent. The resulting downpour had a few alleys flooded; the otherwise empty neighborhood turned vacant. Not a soul around, the passing headlights of cars dwindled.

“A Class 1 Cyclone alert has been issued by the meteorological institute. Hourly reports will be given to further avoid issues. The public is advised to return home and not stay out for long.”

“Really getting heavy out there,” said Alicia wiping the foamed window.

“Class 1 isn’t to be worried about. They’ll put in class 2 tomorrow or so. Tis traveling at a low-speed after all.”

“If you say so.” She leaned on the comfortable seats. Celina sat in the back and stared about. The interior of the car had her in awe, the seats, the space, and the tidiness of it all.

“Where are we headed?”

“To the shopping center,” said he, “-we’ll check the hypermarket and browse the stores.”

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“Aren’t they going to close?” wondered Alicia.

“No, I don’t think so. Happens only after Class 3.” For once, the inner-roads of Odgawoan laid rather empty. Those cautious remained home, the adventurous roamed about. Regardless of what warning loomed, the fearless were out to discover the world. It took on about an hour and a half.

The main-road split onto a smaller one to lead down a boisterous tunnel. Following which an intersection led down multiple paths. “Parking,” read one pointing to the left.

“Beautiful,” said Alicia, “-it’s the first time coming here. Didn’t expect it to be so grandiose and lavish.”

“We’re at the heart of the city, it better be pleasant to the eye.” The conversation followed into what to do and buy. Alicia took charge and spoke loudly, Celina chimed in once or twice, voicing her opinion as Igna asked her to.”

Parked underground, stairs led up to a lift around which spiraled a gently colored staircase. “-Lift?” wondered Alicia.



“Stop being lazy,” grabbed by the arms, Igna led the two up the very tedious staircase.

“You’re inconsiderate,” said she panting at the summit.

“No, you’re just out of shape,” said he scanning the multiple shops. People were nicely dressed, most often than not with their families.

“Celina, are you ok?” asked he holding a hand.

“Yes, I’m fine,” said she accepting his gesture.

‘What should we do first?’

“Let’s go eat,” voiced Alicia, “-the food-court is right there.”

“Sure, fast-food?”

“Can you be any stingier?” her eyes narrowed.

“Listen,” with a casual smile, “-if you girls want to have something fancy, I don’t mind.”

“I want a burger,” voiced Celina nervously.

“The lady has spoken,” winked Igna, “-come on, are you not tired of fancy food,” they locked arms, “-fast-food for now.”

“Fine,” she gave, “-on one condition; you better cook us a lavish dinner later.”

“Consider it done.” Hand in hand with Celina and arms locked with Alicia, they seemed more of a young couple bearing a child than anything. Few gentlemen stopped and stared.

“See,” whispered she, “-I’m a knockout.”

“Don’t get a big head,” fired he.

Lunch ensued without much hassle. Fast-food glory, the gluttony shown by Alicia had him facepalm. She bought most on the menu and finished it all. The other two exchanged confused glances, after which, Celina broke into mild laughter. Seeing her smile all but reinforced the responsibility of her well-being.

‘She looks like Eira,’ thought he staring off in the distance, ‘-ok, not look, but feels like her. The nonchalant attitude and a peculiar hint of strength. Guess it’s why I felt compel to care.’

“Alright,” they returned from the washroom, “-shall we start?”

Shop after shop, as Igna said, “-don’t worry about the price-tag, buy what you want or need.” They did as so, Alicia’s taste was more refined than it appeared. Celina picked a few of which were the ‘popular’ clothes girls her age wore. Most were inspired by pop-idols. Laughter from before amplified as the lass smiled from the heart. The sight sufficed.

“That would be 200 Exa,” said the attendant.

‘200 Exa... that’s a whole-months pay for some people. We’re at the first shop.’

“Sir?”

"Sorry, here," the phone tapped against the card-reader.

"Thank you, have a good day," said she.

"You really kept the word," added Alicia.

"Don't worry about it," he smiled, "-get what you need." Thus, the trip continued, make-up, lingerie, clothes, shoes, accessories, Alicia didn't hold back. They spent an average of 250 Exa per shop. Seeing them have fun and chose what one wanted, '-money is meant to be spent,' added éclair sneakily.

It reached a point where a trolley had to be used to keep the number of bags. "Celina, make sure you have enough clothes."

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"I've gotten more than enough," said she, "-Alicia is picking for her and me too."

"Igna," she paused at a fancy shop for men, "-are you going to stay in those shabby clothes or?"

'Clothes,' the reflection cast onto a headless mannequin. 'Formal clothes, how long has it been since I've worn a suit?'

"Hey, are you ok?" wondered she.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Let's move on," they continued.

"Igna, are you sure?"

"I suppose. éclair, I'm confused, I feel weird, don't know who I am anymore. What's my name, Igna or Staxius... I feel like the former but act like the latter, it's... it's, I'm scared I might lose myself.'

"Listen to me," said he, "-there's nothing to lose. You are who you are. Staxius, Igna, who cares about names."

"I'm scared I might end up the same..."

"Stop right there," the tone lowered, "-you've already massacred a gang. There's no turning back. Embrace who you are. I think it's better this way. Look at their smiling faces, look at Celina. Here, ask her this."

"Celina," they paused, Alicia skipped on forward.

"Yes?" she stopped and stared.

"-do you regret me killing thy parents and taking you away from home?" heavy words dropped onto her skinny arms, her face showed no response.

"No," frown turned to a smile, "-I'm grateful. It's fun hanging out with Lady Alicia and you. I never really got to do this at home. Even if father was relatively wealthy, I was treated more or less the same as the maids. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," he backpedaled, "-want to come with?"

"Where are we going?"

"To buy me some clothes."

\*L'angine's couture.\*

"Good afternoon sire," said a well-dressed attendant, "-how might I be of service?"

"Good afternoon," returned he, "-how fast is it to have a custom piece made?"

"Depends on what you're seeking. Might I ask the occasion?"

"Everyday wear," said he.

"Then, follow me. I recommend what we've already made. Refitting should take more or fewer thirty-minutes."

"Grey," said he.

"Grey?" paused the attendant.

"Yes, grey."

A multitude of items was shown, all of which ranged from 300 Exa upwards.

"I like this one," he pointed to a piece resembling the one worn on the first day at Claireville Academy. The enrollment that snowballed into the present.

"Would you like cufflinks and other accessories?"

"Might as well," smiled he, "-I'd like other variants of the same model."

"As you wish. Please, head on to the changing room, we'll take measurements and fit it right away."

Forty minutes passed; Alicia went round the whole complex and figured they were lost at the last instant. Scanning shop after shop, L'angine's couture sprawled in the distance.

'Why's there a crowd of people gathered?' ambled closer, '-oh, tis because of their reputation. Most can't dream of affording their suits. The clientele is mostly nobles and rich businessmen. It sure looks classy and reputable.'

"What you think?" asked he nodding to Celina.

"Handsome," said she, "-you look like a prince."

"Oh please," he laughed, '-that title is for my cousin.'

"Sire, that would be 4000 Exa for five suits, shoes, and matching cufflinks."

"Very well," he paid without regrets.

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"Mind if I ask thy name?" wondered the attendant in a respectful voice.

"Igna Haggard," returned he.

“Are you perhaps of noble birth?”

“Does the answer really matter?” commanded he across the dark-brown pupils.

“Forgive my impertinence. Tis more for security reasons.”

“I see,” he handed over an identification card, “-all the information required is on here. Furthermore,” he handed over the signet ring, “-this should help as well.”

‘Let me see,’ browsing the computer, “-Igna Haggard of the Haggard dynasty. I apologize,” the information had him breathing heavy, ‘-a nephew of King Staxius. Related to the Ardanian royal family.’

“Are we done here?”

“Young master, if there is anything our shop might do, please let us know.”

“Garments for ladies,” he glanced at Celina.

“Yes – though it’s not that elaborate of dresses. Our sister shop focuses more on a hybrid of traditional and modern. Would thee like an escort?”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Very well,” said the attendant taking to the entrance. “-If you would, please follow me.”

“Where are we going?” wondered Celina.

“Getting you some clothes,” said he.

“I don’t need any.”

“Oh please,” he patted her head, “-let’s see what they have first.”

“Ok.”

An elegant figure accompanied by a young lady left the shop. ‘Must be nobles,’ thought she staring their back, ‘-where are those two at?’ the man turned to smile at the young lady, ‘-wait,’ she caught the profile, ‘-that’s Igna.’

“Igna, wait up!”

“Alicia, where have you been?” they joined to follow the attendant.

“I’ve been looking for you,” the eyes kept on gawking up and down.

“Something the matter?” wondered he.

“No, it’s just... the suit feels at home. I’ve seen people wear formal attire before, not like this, there’s another feeling, can’t get my hand on it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said he, “-I bought a few for the fun of it.” The time came for him to fill the wardrobe. The sister shop displayed pretty dresses and expensive outfits. They fell in love almost instantly. And so, the shopping spree continued till 14:00. In the end, they filled up the trunk and part of the back-seat.

"Come on," voiced he resting the suit-jacket, "-we need to shop for groceries."

"Alright."

A music-shop caught their attention before the hypermarket. "Celina," said he, "-let's stop here for a bit."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" wondered Alicia.

"Sally's quest..."

"Yeah."

Small on the outside, the inside could have been farther from appearance. Guitars laid in full display on stands and hung on the ceiling. Piano, drum-sets, more emphasis was placed on the guitars. The sound of the instrument being tuned drew them in further. Celina's eyes drew to bass, as for Alicia, she kept admiring effect pedals not knowing what they did.

"Hey there," said a cheerful assistant, "-how can I help you?"

"Hello," returned he, "-just browsing at the moment."

"Take your time, sir," he returned to a group of loud guitarists.

'I've never owned an instrument before,' he walked about, '-oh, I like that one,' he ended beside the young musician.

"It's a good guitar," said he to Igna.

"Good you say?" paused to stare, "-Hey, are there any more models available?"

"Yes, but they're way more expensive than the ones we have here. I'd recommend starting with a cheap one."

"I see, still, I'd like to see more."

"As you wish," nodding to the supervisor, "-this way."

"Come on guys," said the young musician, "-he's opening the vault."

The excitement in the boy's eyes showed in full, the door unlocked to a dark room. The bulb flickered to show multiple instruments kept safely from out of reach. The price-tags were also things to consider.

'No brand on this one,' he stopped at the centerpiece, '-a pentagram and that's it?'

"You've taken a liking to the cursed T-style," said he.

"Cursed?"

"Not actually. Since it has no brand name nor maker, we nicknamed it the cursed T-style."

"Can I try it?"

"Sure, just a warning, it's sort of hard to play."

Flamed top, part of the lower-body had scratches and loss of paint. The pickup showed signs of rusting. Strings were changed for once. 'What do you sound like?'

Chapter 535: House of Haggard

Plucking the highest string at around the twelve frets gave a chilling and crisp tone. For the way it looked and aged, the pick-ups were unnaturally nice, the front gave a warm tone melting into the ears whilst the back pick-up gave a rough crispy tone.

"He only picked one string and the room's drawn," voiced the younger musician, "-how's he done that?"

"Lacks in sustain," said Igna, "-however, makes up in this unique tone. I'm buying it," said he.

"Mister, Mister," voiced the younger folk, "-please, play us something."

"Sure," barred chords embellished by little maneuvers only a master or a hard-trained rookie could perform. Switching from chords to then solo over said chords, all in one flexible and smooth motion had the room in awe. Reaching for the last fret, the note bent out of tune almost screeching in pain.

"Satisfied?" wondered he resting the guitar.

"Holy shit," exclaimed the attendant, "-I don't believe it," quick to pull a video, "-can you try and replay this?"

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"Why?" asked he noticing the manager enter.

"A test of some sort," said the well-built man, "-that song there is Viper's lair, one of the hardest songs composed by Xius. Sugar's hailed as one of the best guitarists. How do you compare to him?"

'Considering I might have influenced his growth,' a silent pat on the back followed to, "-how about a deal?"

"What deal?"

"I assume everyone who purchases a guitar has to attempt the hardest song, isn't that right?" an educated guess from the way the boys giddied in excitement.

"How do you figure," they stood an arm's length away. Celina and Alicia waited in the main area to the point of boredom.

"Let's go in the hypermarket."

"But..." her eyes hung on a particular bass-guitar.

"Come on, let's go," ordered she, "-I'm hungry. How about I get you snacks?"

"O-ok," her confidence broke, not before Igna catch a glimpse.

The tension grew, "-what deal?" wondered the manager.

"How many people have actually recreated the song until now?"

“The lucky can barely play the opening riff, the solo at the end is where most of the people falter. It’s a test of endurance and skill, keeping up the tempo and going faster at the end. I nearly killed my fingers.”

“Forgot to warm-up,” added the attendant.

“Whatever,” turning to Igna, “-what deal?”

“If I manage to play the song, what’s in it for me?”

“A discount of 25% on everything you purchase.”

“25%?”

“Manager!” exclaimed the attendant.

The face all but read, ‘-don’t worry, it’s impossible,’ a half-smile escaped.

“Ok, do you sell cameras and other components?”

“At the sister shop next,” he threw a thumb to the left, “-my twin brothers in charge of there. I’m sure I can make some arrangement.”

“Then it’s on,” said he, “-bring the dirtiest sounding amp and effect pedals.”

The shop shifted from selling to providing for a challenge. The way they moved and hastily gathered the necessary gear proved he wasn’t the first to accept the challenge. In the greater scheme of things, tis nothing more than bragging rights.

“Bring a camera as well,” said Igna, “-we’ll live stream it. If I fail, it’ll stay on the Arcanum forever.”

“Why that?” wondered the manager.

“A challenge is meant for both parties to put something of value on the line.”

“I respect a man with conviction,” stomping to the doorway, “-I’ll get the necessary items. Warm-up.”

“Igna, what are you planning?” interjected éclair.

“Starting a career in music,” said he, “-I’ve decided to get into the high ranks to understand what happened to Aceline. We’ve dug all around the place to no avail. Besides, I was once part of the shadows. I want to experience the light for once.”

“What about cooking?”

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“Who said one can’t multitask?”

“Honestly,” an audible facepalm echoed out the earrings, “-how eccentric can you be?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Meanwhile, a live performance of the song in question played at twice the speed. The notes were obvious and so were the chord’s shapes. The challenge came to tapping, Sugar did so at a tempo of 170.

“Can you update my Hwan profile? Remove the full-name and use Kinless instead.”

“Alright,” the follower count read 10,400.

Then and there, the excitement of altering and messing with gear had the whole shop bustling in activity. The younger musicians went as far as to run down to bring in their parents. The commotion brought attention; customers entered to be stunned at the beauty of the small set. The camera behind which stood twins. A well-dressed noble in a suit sat with legs cross. The guitar buzzed a little, effect pedals lined to give the proper tone of the song.

‘A crowd?’ staring up gave images of Cle.

“Alright,” said the manager, “-start playing a few songs; we’ll get the backing track readied.”

“Ok,” a thumbs-up launched into a slow and nice progression.

‘I’ve memorized the song by heart. It’s happening; I’ll launch myself into the world of music. The end goal is finding information about Aceline; I suspect Cimier’s involved. Let’s see the intricacies of this city, Ogdawoan, here I come.’

The video went live, light dimed. Murmurs dropped to silence. The well-known tune played through the backing-track. The guitar came in after the intro. The live stream garnered a few hundred viewers.

“Igna’s playing guitar?”

“Isn’t he a chef, what’s this about?”

“Don’t know, just watch.”

Comments built-in momentum, the small yet prominent fanbase shared it about to the point of tagging the members of Xius. The title read, ‘-Kinless covers Viper’s Lair.’

“Here we go,” right on the beat, the guitar, old as it might have looked, screamed into tune. Power chords interlocked in the run of notes.

‘He’s doing it,’ thought the manager.

“How the hell?” wondered the younger musician, “-it’s a hard song, the start took me a few months to learn, what the fuck. He makes it look so easy. Look at his hands, there’s no shred of doubt – such confidence.”

‘Don’t get it wrong,’ thought Igna, ‘-it’s damned hard. If not for the vampiric blood and natural body enhancement, there’s no way I’d be able to play it.’

One minute, two minutes, three, four, six, seven, the end shone over yonder, ‘-alright,’ breathing deep, the backing track halted in prelude of what was to come. Moment of truth, breaths choked in anticipation, the momentum built, the volume increased, “NOW!” slamming the pedal, fingers darted up the fretboard to rattle the amps. Sweat ran and fell down the forehead, the untidy hair stuck to the cheeks, notes after note, he reached the last note, an upward bend which broke the strings in time as the drums closed the song.

Thunder and lightning shattered the mystified listeners.

“He’s done it,” applause filled the room.



'Tired,' big inhaled left the fingers and arms shaking, '-it hurts!'

"I don't believe it," said the manager, "-you covered the song and went faster than what Sugar ever did."

"Did I?"

"Yes, look," flipping the laptop, "-see?"

"Oh," he gulped, "-I got lost in the song, didn't realize I went too fast."

"No, it matches the track perfectly," they agreed, "-from A4's Music, I'd like you to have a 50% discount."

"Why, aren't you going to suffer a loss then?"

"No," he signaled to the front, "-the customers are filling the stores as we speak. Yohan, take care of the lord, I'll tend to the others."

"Congratulations," said Yohan, "-I'm impressed, didn't think anyone could recreate it to such precision."

"Neither did I," mumbled he.

"What?"

"Nothing. Can you ready the payment?"

"Sure, you'll be taking that guitar I suppose?"

"Yes. Bring me the warmest sounding amp, and those pedals as well as that bass-guitar over there."

"Alright," one after the other, the items were laid at the counter. Two guitars in hard-cases, a vintage amp kept inside a metal case. "Total's 3500 Exa."

"Done."

'Too much stuff to carry,' scanning the crowd, "-Celina, over here!"

"Hello, what's happened here?" she ambled inside, leaving Alicia out.

"Where did you leave too?"

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"Went grocery shopping with Alicia."

"No matter, hold on to this for me."

"Two guitars?" wondered she.

"Yeah, I got the bass you wanted," he patted her head, "-let's go home now."

More and more people approached the music shop.

"Igna," a baffled exhale brought a frown, "-you played so loudly I heard it all the way inside the market."

“My bad,” he shrugged, “-They did the set-up, not me.”

“How was it?”

“Fun,” said he, “-they streamed it all. Anyway, shall we head home?”

“Fine by me.”

The weather worsened in the afternoon. They left as soon as a Class 2 warning was issued. The streets deadened and the mist fogged to a meager few meters of sight. The ride back happened in complete silence. Celina sat on the edge as the backseats were full of items.

A few days passed, the charming prince of Arda arrived at Rosespire. Prominent figures of the Federation stood about the throne-room. Queen Gallienne had yet to make an appearance. ‘What’s going on here?’

“Hello Prince Julius,” said a lady dressed lavishly bearing down the long green-hair with arms locked to another dazzling figure of a man. Tall and handsome, the exuded charm rivaled his, Princess Eira as well as Lizzie stood at their side. The latter chose to escape her mother’s presence and hide at the prince’s legs.

“Good afternoon, lady mother. I hope the travel wasn’t troubling. Considering the...” he locked onto her full belly.

“Oh please,” said she bearing red-lipstick, “-please come around to the palace. I miss you tremendously.”

“I rather not,” said he with a fake smile, “-I’ve vowed to stay and keep watch over the heritage left by my father.”

“Good ambition,” said the charming man, “-I admire that about you.”

“The feeling is not likewise, I do apologize.”

“Julius,” voiced Eira, “-tis no way to speak to mother’s fiancé.”

“I speak how I wish, sister. Hidros is a free country, unlike the recent developments in Arda.”

“Julius,” a presence escaped detection to give a warm peck, “-how’s it been, nephew?”

“Aunt Courtney,” he returned with a peck of his own, “-it’s been very good. Now that you’re here, I feel much better. How’s cousin Igna doing?”

“The boy’s gotten stronger,” said she, “-he’s making progress in Alphaia.”

“Sister Courtney,” said Queen Shanna.

“Hello,” she nodded, “-didn’t notice you, I apologize. How’s the coming engagement? I hope Arda’s ready for their new king,” an underlying tone of discontent had the queen shudder.

“It’s coming along very nicely,” said the charming man, “-I hope to see the Haggard family at the feast.”

“Oh yes,” said she, “-as the head of the Haggard family,” the eyes laid on Eira and Lizzie, “-after the marriage is set and done, Lizzie and Julius will remain in the Haggard Dynasty. Princess Eira’s chosen her alliance to stay with the royal family.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it,” cried Shanna, “-son, daughter, are you leaving?”

“Yes mother,” they nodded, “-we’ll abdicate claims to the throne. May you and the Lord be happy ever and after.”

“But-”

“-But of course, the house of Haggard might lose ties to nobility, though I think it’s best for the sake of the future. Long are the days where my brother’s dream of peace breathed. Discord is bound to sprawl, thus, as the head of the Haggard’s, I shall be taking the heirs to his heritage.”

“Please,” added a lady unrivaled in beauty and strength, “-is it wise to have such a discussion now?”

“Serene,” exclaimed Courtney, “-it’s been a while,” they exchanged kisses.

“Yes, my lady, longer than I’d hoped.”

“Why are you here?” frowned the charming man, “-what of the duties as the secretary of her majesty?”

“What duties,” she snickered, “-I’m fulfilling the command given by my old master. To protect and serve the Haggards. As I see it now, Lady Courtney is the head of the family.”

“Is this a coup?” glared Eira.

“Keep thy aura in check,” said Courtney, “Mana-cancelation,” \*Snap,\* “-Librarian of Nexsolium.”

“Her Majesty Queen Gallienne is in attendance.” The scattered guests grouped at the feet of the throne.

‘Tis time.’

#### Chapter 536: Head of Family

“On the behalf of the Kingdom and the Federation, I’d like to start by thanking everyone in attendance for making the trip on such short notice. Without wasting time for those who are related to the Federation, please make your way to the council room. Everyone else, enjoy the banquet organized by our talented staff.” She left twice as fast as she came. The urgency brought about needless worries. Those in the company of esteemed guests made for the large tables.

“Lady Courtney, Lady Elvira, Prince Julius, her majesty requests a private audience before the start of the discussion,” said a neatly dressed attendant.

“Very well,” said Courtney nodding to Queen Shanna.

“Might I also accompany?” interjected Serene.

“If the house of Haggard sees no qualms, then who am I to interject,” calm and composed, the maid locked her fingers onto her belly. Such a sign, as is by the customs, meant no ill-will. A premonition, language via gestures in the trying times of olden war.

The lowered head-count of guests meant no much to those at the banquet. They were quicker to have morsels in their mouth than thought in their mind.

“Mother,” said Eira, “-the Haggard’s are getting more audacious.”

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“I agree with her,” said the charming man, “-please, there must be a way to ensnare them for the disrespectful attitude.”

“I’m afraid not,” said she, “-Serene is the secretary who’s also closely tied to the Blood-King’s faction. The people view the nightwalkers as saviors to our nation. There’s no undermining the influence they hold.”

“How did they acquire such power for mere bloodsuckers?”

“The Blood-King,” said she, “-my late husband who abandoned us for the sake of war. I’ll never forgive.”

Perched atop a refurbished tower, the council room scanned the surrounding kingdom using the circular windows. Well-lit and comforting for matters of utmost importance. Walls often had ears, thus, the Queen’s decision to have the meeting a place from whence one could only enter using the stairs. The vexing climb towards the gateway to heaven. In a twisted manner, the rumbustious title fitted the tower since the populous’ fate depended on the exchanged words.

“Greetings Queen Gallienne,” said Courtney in respect of her majesty.

“Please drop the formalities,” said she with a toddler in hand, “-take a seat, there’s no need to be on edge.”

“I see the young prince’s grown into a handsome little boy,” complimented Elvira caressing the boy’s cheeks.

“Yes, he does cause me quite a lot of trouble.” \*Clap,\*

“You called?” inquired a strong presence.

“Yes, could you take the prince to his chambers?”

“As you wish,” a snap and he vanished.

“Was that Theodore?” wondered Courtney.

“No, he’s Theodore’s pupil. A very strong and capable young man that one.”

“I can tell,” commented Elvira, “-there’s an air of mystery and confidence about.”

“Shall we start?” the room tightened.

“Why did you call on us?” wondered Courtney.

“It’s about the Federation. Forget the war, for now, we have more urgent matters. The Argashield’s losing power as we speak. We can’t afford to hide the truth anymore, King Staxius is gone. Silence isn’t sufficient. We have a duty to the people.”

"It has been a long time coming," said the prince, "-I do apologize for speaking out of line."

"Go ahead," said Gallienne.

"Thank you, majesty. We've fought for half a decade to keep my father's disappearance a secret. The Federation is strong in terms of raw power, what we lack in cohesion we made in military might. That being said, Oxshield and Arda were the two spears rivaling the Wracia Empire. Arda's dulled, and Oxshield's disposition is more towards peace than warfare. The root of the problem is that man, the one calling himself Lucifer."

"Shanna's fiancé, why, don't you like him?" asked Gallienne.

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"Not a matter of liking, he's dangerous. Lizzie and I, and I'm sure Lady Serene too has felt the undermining aura."

"I see..." deep thoughts clashed for a plausible solution, "-it seems as if," the demeanor fell to a distressed sneer, "-destiny is against us."

"I don't think so," added Elvira, "-Arda and Oxshield were bound to clash at one point. The reason for the discord at the moment is a power-struggle. The Federation's leader is gone. However hard we might try, there's no way to gather Elendor, Easel Run Gard, and Arda under the same banner. The common ground between the nations is lost, there's nothing to ally under."

"Naught is lost," voiced Courtney, "-we have a common enemy."

"Elendor?"

"Yes. It's only possible Arda and Oxshield return as one."

"At this stage, I don't think we can do so," said Julius in doubt.

"On the contrary, dearest nephew, we can have them be one."

"How so?" wondered Queen Gallienne.

"It's going to take away significant power – the lessened load should be easier to manage," astute and concise, the words spoke as if the prophecy of a seer.

"How?" wondered Elvira as well, '-wait,' her mind clicked, the resulting gesture at Courtney resolved by her blinking slowly. '-Lady Courtney, hats off.'

"The House of Haggard break ties to Arda."

"What?" the table slammed, "-you can't be serious," argued Gallienne, "-come on, it's not real..."

"Aunt Courtney is right," said Julius, "-Lizzie and I have already voiced our determination to abdicate from the royal family. Taking us out of the picture will give more space for each party to move and bond."

"What about thy mother?"

“Saddens me to say; I do love her, don’t get me wrong, mother’s not the same any longer. She’s not the caring lady I remember; not the lady who once had father as the happiest man on the planet. She’s chosen to move and have a relationship without consent from me or Lizzie. Tis selfish of me, I care not, my allegiance shall always lie in where my father walked.”

“I see,” the exhale felt like the last breath of a man, “-the house of Haggard’s turning to a neutral party?”

“Yes, and so is Phantom, both I and Elvira agree on that aspect.”

“What about the fight against the conglomerate?” inquired the very observant Gallienne.

“It’ll have to wait. Besides, we don’t really care about Arda all that much, isn’t that right, nephew?”

“Rotherham’s a kingdom of its own, there’s no hassle of leading a whole nation then,” said he proudly.

“About that,” her eyes narrowed, “-I remember permitting the hero-king to do as he pleased... though, I don’t remember agreeing to...”

“The Hero King bears the name Haggard, and so, the right is bestowed upon the next head of the family, which is me, his twin sister, don’t you remember?” then and there, she moved to stand behind the queen, “-don’t worry, I’m not leaving you just yet.”

“How so?” the inaudible whispers left the room confused.

“We’re friends, and friends must help each other out. Phantom has forces stationed in Elendor. Elvira will buy as much time as you need. Discuss what needs to happen going forth with the Federation.”

“I suppose the discussion is over,” said Serene yawning over to the landscape, “-damn, you can see Dorchester from here.”

“Normal person can’t,” said her majesty, “-vampires do have very sharp eyes.”

“Queen Gallienne, be safe in trying times. Don’t be afraid to reach out.”

“As aunt said,” added Julius, “-I wish you the best of luck.”

Opening and shutting of the gates left a sour taste. ‘Just like that,’ thought the queen, ‘-three prominent figures in the entirety of Hidros left in the most polite way possible. They excluded details about Shanna’s seemingly good faith. Arda appears as the same idyllic paradise for demi-human created for the safety of their people. Sadly, rumors from a few contacts say otherwise. The country’s endured a massive loss from the failed relations with Alpha. Negotiations are still underway. If not for the Guild’s support I suspect Arda to have fallen in a week or so. So hard to see the thing a friend work for getting turned to dust. Is this what you dreamed about?’ clouds passed at a running pace, “-Staxius, what are you up to in heaven. Knowing that personality, surely driving them crazy and entering one versus one.”

“Bring in the other representatives, we have matters to attend to.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The announcement of the Haggard Dynasty spread from the meeting outwards. Most laughed and ravished the thought of such a prominent figure ousted out the picture. Ambition could be enacted, and those wanting power had empty seats to fill at her majesty's side.

"I bid thee farewell, for now, mother," said Julius as the couple ambled flirtatiously.

"See you soon, son," once more, her face and smile had him gag.

"Brother, why did you stop?"

"Nothing, let's continue."

"Okay," the puffed cheeks rendered the pain bearable.

Down the noble district, at the precipice of the sloped hill laid the Haggard mansion. The interior and exterior were kept the same as so many years before, the yard was immaculate, the roads clean, and the mansion as resplendent as before. Looking at it from new sights, the place was of antique than new.

Retainers stood in a row at the doorway. "-Welcome back, Princess Lizzie," said Rile standing first in line.

"Hello," she waved, "-I've missed you."

"We've missed you too, young lady." The four assigned to guard Lizzie did so for the past few years. The head-maid, sworn to the house by the king, remains so as a mother figure. The vacant time allowed her to return home and visit her children even if a maid was bound to never leave and rest. The mentality of having servants treated the same as family members never once faltered.

"Laura, could you please ready snacks for the guests?"

"As you wish, Master Courtney."

"What now?" asked she at the dining table.

"We move on I guess," said Elvira, "-what's there more to discuss."

"Haggard Dynasty's not going to be at lost, are we?"

"No, and I'm sure you've figured so. Leaving the nobility is actually better, breaking ties with a crumbling nation will serve in the longer run."

"We're no longer nobles," added Julius firming the resolve.

"Nephew," smiled she softly, "-we'll reacquire our title of nobility soon. Your father once held the title of Baron before abdication and becoming King. We could pull strings and get back said title, though, being a lord and caring for one's province is harder than imagined."

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"No, we'll be granted a title of nobility," said Serene, "-Rotherham is thriving city. Since we broke from Arda, Queen Gallienne's going to declare Rotherham a County or perhaps a Dukedom to allow for our ease of movement. Without us, the military might is naught."

"What about the Blood-King Faction," inquired Seiran bringing in the snacks.

“Seiran, good to see you well,” said Serene.

“Likewise, lady Serene.”

“She rose a good point,” firmed Elvira.

“We ought to check the Nox’s clan. I’m sure they’ll agree to follow us wherever.”

The vacancy left by the House of Haggard had an impact on Arda as opposed to Oxshield. The chevalier attitude from the head of the family fooled everyone. The plan was to have Arda take the hit and be made a potential target by the Wracia Empire. She and Julius sensed it, the malice of Shanna’s lover.

Friday the 19th of February. A Class-3 warning was upon the city. Most businesses were shut. People stayed on in the comforts of their homes. Day or evening didn’t matter, the blemished greyscale landscape and hard winds rattled the windows.

‘Again,’ sleep broke to legs laying atop his stomach, ‘-she’s been sleeping here too often.’ Aside from the first encounter, them sharing a bed was fully plutonic. ‘Better not wake her,’ out her feeble prison and on the cold floor, ‘-what’s wrong with me?’ a reflection showed a brighter version of himself. The guitar cover slowly built momentum mostly to the efforts of devote fans.

“Good morning, Igna,” yawned Celina running for the television.

“Good morning. Did you brush your teeth?”

“Yes,” the words flew over her shoulders, “-please make something sweet for breakfast.”

‘Alright,’ a softened smirk led to the bathroom.

Chapter 537: Lost of a friend

“NOOOO!”

“What happened?” cried he over the counter.

“They’ve stopped the cartoons for some breaking news,” sniffled the warmly dressed Celina.

“Must be important, go have a shower. You can always rewatch it later.”

“Fine,” a long thoughtful stare stamped onto his face.

‘Must have been really into the show. éclair, what’s the issue?’

“Murders,” said he, “-a body has been found at Carter Lake; south-east of the city.”

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“What’s so breaking news about it?”

“It’s the body of a young starlet. The cause of death has yet been to be determined. The detectives aren’t willing to divulge information on the issue.”

“Oh, a star died,” said he presumptuously, “-big deal. Tis a city of stars, I bet she overdosed.”



"Thing is," paused the spirit, "-stars and starlets go missing suddenly after gaining a good reputation. Those who fight the casting couch are often the prey to said cruelty. I forgot to mention, the lady who died, was also the one being pestered at the photoshoot."

"The one involving that director?"

"Yes," said he, "-the city is livening on the verge of a Class-4 warning."

\*Barge\*, "-Igna," said a palpitating Alicia, "-I need a lift to Eldow's High."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Didn't you hear, the starlet who died was a friend of mine. Please, don't ask questions, and let's go."

"Steady now," said he calmly, "-rushing isn't the wisest choice. Her body is under autopsy. If the cause of death is ruled as a homicide; then she might be in the morgue for a few days, even weeks at worse."

"No, no," refuted she, "-I got word from her parents. The body's already on way to her home."

"And the cause of death?"

"Suicide."

"Is that so," wiping the hand clean, "-go get dressed properly first. I surely don't mind you not having any leg-wear, yet, the family of the deceased might not agree."

"Sorry, sorry," her emotion calmed a little, "-Class 3 warning and her death to boot, I overreacted, sorry again."

"Don't worry; go freshen up. I'll set the table."

"Are we going somewhere?" wondered Celina scurrying to the table.

"Did you have a shower?" wondered he sternly.

"Yes, I didn't wash my hair," familiarity grew per the days spent together. A trio of strangers grew to be a very tightly knitted group of friends.

"Please, have breakfast without me," said she grieving at the memories. Her warm feet crossed the cold-floor with a sticking-like sound.

"éclair, when was the body found?"

"Two days ago. The information was kept until today, thus the announcement."

"Have they made any official statement?"

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"Yes, says the cause of death is suicide by overdosing on narcotics."

"Those reports, can you acquire them?"

"All of it?"

“Yes.”

“As you wish,” and so, he went to work infiltrating the servers for information. Security stood on as a menacing castle of which éclair laid siege. There and then, many reports from two differing investigating units at the first stages of the case were shown. Disparities ranged from the cause of death to the actual whereabouts of the body. The stench of foul-play cut his appetite. Reading more into the paragraphs, the officer pointing to a homicide was ousted for one who didn’t seem credible. What the latter wrote was of the victim being a player in her own death. Even the coroner changed the cause of death from drowning due to unknown factors to drowning under the influence of narcotics. Security was strongest around the rejected report, the photos were locked behind biometric-type security. Alas for the public safety office, the security they used was programmed and built by Elon’s Dynasty. The one at the forefront of said security; éclair – else dubbed the Phantasmic Programmer.

“Got it,” commented he in an excited voice.

“Good job.”

“Date 18th February. An anonymous call into the station claimed to have found a dead body. Upon reaching the location, the skin was pale and dirty blue. The lady, who we later find is Melle Nao, was recovered on the shore of Carter Lake. The surroundings showed no evidence of a fight nor struggle. A scan of the immediate area pointed to a possible suicide,” tis the summary of the first investigator’s findings. Now for the second investigator, “slight bruises around her chest and nether regions point to foul-play. The victim could have been drugged and assaulted as is most cases nowadays. A possible overdose on the strong narcotics might have been a miscalculation on the assailant’s side. The case has similarities to the one of Bheta Zena; who’s death came as an anonymous call.”

“Interesting,” thought he sipping tea, “-can you bring up the case of Bheta?”

“Found dead on the 12th of January in her apartment. Cause of death, an overdose of narcotics. Her body was found two days after her death. Possible links are the refusal to lay atop the casting couch for a chance at stardom.”

‘We’ve got two killed for refusing the casting couch. Things might get difficult from here.’

“I’m back,” said Alicia dressed in a coat and warmth-clothes, “-will Celina accompany us?”

“Yes,” said Igna, “-have breakfast now, I’ll go get ready.”

The mysterious deaths weren’t so mysterious. Those wanting a conspiracy scrutinized the officers for their lack of evidence. Such bold claims were refuted instantly by the higher-up saying, ‘-the fantasy of crazed individuals shan’t trouble our highly capable investigators.’

White-shirt, a black overcoat and black-tie. The hair was neatly parted down the middle to hang just above the brows. ‘This isn’t going to be pleasant to attend. éclair, have the lenses set to reconnaissance.’

“As you wish.”

From plain and normal, the interface changed to display various information of items the host focused on. Outlines were seen through walls, the dimmed conversation between Celina and Alicia was audible.

In this mode, the user could control éclair's power over technology with the movement of the eyes. Then again, the connection was mostly telepathic. Tightening the tie, the two silhouettes headed to Celina's room. The Oxford leather shoes' heels were very loud against the cold-floor. Each step made the same as heels.

'The weather is only worsening.' Hard winds had already toppled a few advertising boards.

"Igna," said Celina in a black dress, "-Is this necessary?"

"Oh yes, it is," said he taking her hand, "-you've never attended a funeral before?"

"No, father had me stay home for those occasions."

"Well, it's not fun, that's for sure," the eyes met Alicia who opted for a plain black dress, leggings, and heels. A black coat hid most of her features. Black gloves and handbags, her hair neatened with a white ribbon.

"Good to see you've changed into a more formal outfit," said he.

"Yeah, well, I was lost as to what to wear."

The journey north took more or less twenty-minutes. 'We're here,' said she signaling Igna, "-there, you see those butlers?" retainers were lined outside to act as guides for the coming guests. Many walked to the location; the Nao family's a prominent trading company allied to the Kura's Trading corporation.

"Please, this way," said they at the car. Drive on inside, the architecture reminisced of the olden-era of being big, blocky, and full of windows, similar to ones in Hidros. Many vehicles were rounded at a parking lot nearest to a fountain.

"We're here," said he, "-Celina, could you grab the umbrella?"

"Sure," she reached for the back, "-rains stopped."

"We won't need it," said Alicia in a subdued voice; sadness whelmed her throat and heart.

Arms locked with Alicia and holding Celina's hand, they walked at a reserved pace. éclair immediately went to work digging information on the people in attendance. Most were affluent and prominent figures. A given since a lady of the house of Nao died.

"Alicia, I'm glad you made it," said the short grieving mother. Her husband was a few inches taller.

"Lady Nao, I'm sorry for thy lost," they embraced to tightened the pain.

"Mr. Nao," voiced Igna, "-my dearest sympathies."

"Thank you, young man," said he slowly, "-please, our daughter is on her way to heaven as we speak. Do pay her a visit."

'A very nice man,' thought he.

Like many who came before, the body was laid in a casket at a makeshift altar. It would be taken to the church after all the guests gave their condolences and spoke with for the last time. Coming to the room

felt heart-breaking. Many mourned her death, close family, close friends, they all hurdled. Women on one side and men on another, the room split per tradition.

Lowered heads, hands held onto another, a few prayers exchanged in silence. Celina mirrored Igna for the most part. Alicia wept her tears. “-I’ll help lady Nao.”

“As you wish,” said he.

‘Isn’t that the leaders of Kura’s Corporation?’ éclair confirmed their identities, ‘-I guess the five-conglomerates will be in attendance.’ He stood at a more reserved spot, watching as the guests filled the room one by one. At one point, Alicia joined with other ladies who began to gossip.

“What’s going on there?” wondered Celina spotting chaos at the entry.

“No idea,” returned he, “-I’d guess someone important has arrived.”

Mr. Dorino, lady Shino Pierre Gaso accompanied by lord Guiz Patek and their son, Ziu Patek. Dorino grew older, Lady Gaso seemed the same as memory, the Patek’s were a new sight.

‘It’s time,’ he gritted, ‘-this could be the perfect opportunity to put an end to the five conglomerates,’ rage ended in a tighter grip of Celina’s hands.

“Are you ok?” asked she pinching his hands.

“Yes, sorry,” shaking off the embarrassing display of emotions – the four prosperous names paid their respect and split to merge into the hall.

Ziu Patek’s demeanor befell onto a grieving Alicia. The well-built heir stood at her side as if an acquaintance. The ladies around were mostly scared to make eye contact.

“éclair, enhance the audio.”

“Hello there, Alicia, how have you been. Looks like the hot-headed Melle had an unfortunate accident,” he took her arms, “-why do you always refuse my advances. Come on, be at my side and I’ll make of you the most powerful lady in the continent. Staying single for that amount of time is only going to put thy beauty to shame.”

“Please, I don’t want to hear of thy lust at the moment. It’s a place of mourning, can’t you keep quiet for once?”

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“Alicia,” he caressed her cheeks, “-don’t be so harsh for I’m only a man in love.”

“That’s enough,” voiced Igna holding Ziu’s arms.

“Who the hell are you?” side-glanced he, “-how dare you hold my arm?”

“I’m Alicia’s lover. Is there perhaps something you want to discuss?”

“Her lover?” he chuckled, “-impossible... looking at you now, I guess you are a handsome man, not better than me though. Are you going to let go?”

“Sure,” the grip lessened, “-try and not make a fool out of thineself, heir to the Patek’s.”

“Very well,” he inhaled, “-I’ll take the words to mind. See you around,” he stomped over to Lord Patek who glared mercilessly at Igna.

“Why did you do that?” wondered she, “-the conglomerates are angry, look.”

“I don’t care about them,” said he giving a smile, “-we’ve come here to pay respect to thy friend. Not put up to some pompous bastard,” he spun as the situation sorted itself.

“Wait-” she grabbed his hand, “-about what you said...”

“Don’t worry about it,” knelt to wipe her tears, “-I did what needed to be done. Take care, I’ll go check on Celina.”

“What a gentleman,” whispered those around, “-he gallantly stood up for his lover, how very romantic.”

“It’s not like that,” said she.

“Oh, I think there’s more than meets the surface.”

Meanwhile, at the more ‘reserved entourage,’ “-what happened over there?”

“Nothing much, father. I found someone interesting. Tis the first time anyone’s dare lay a hand on me,” they all glared in a threatening manner.

‘Trying to intimidate?’ he glared right back with a darker sense of violence, ‘-let’s see how mighty the leaders are in the country.’

Chapter 538: Ziu Patek

“Igna, why are you glaring at those men so intently?”

“To mark my territory,” said he half-in-jest, “-Let’s sit, Mr. and Mrs. Nao are coming.”

Most of the guests were present. A priest of the Syhton Church arrived with a lamp and a book in hand. Multiple followers walked shy of his back; the scattered groups gathered to fill the hall. The parents stood at the front; the father’s emotion remained stoic; the mother had to be comforted multiple times by family members.

‘The reality of killing someone,’ thought he, ‘-is that the departed always leaves things unfinished. I kill without mercy, only after that, the guilt grips my heart, then again, an unknown sense of calm sweeps the pain away.’

Patek’s entourage sat directly behind. Ziu pressed no issue in breathing down Igna’s neck. The intimidation went on even as the priest prayed for the lost soul.

“Can’t believe the lady died so early,” said one of the countless faces in Patek’s entourage.

“The young master sure was a little rough in the negotiations.”

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“Whatever, even if the death is ruled as murder, there’s doubt the corrupt department’s going to do anything.”

“Don’t speak to freely,” cautioned another member.

Prayers exchanged; the parents stood at the casket’s side. Last glances and exchange led into a speech. Gusts reaching 150 km/h rattled the windows violently. Mother nature and death weren’t a good match. Thunder and lightning made smaller trips. At one point during the prayer, the lights cut to a subdued reflection of the grey clouds. For the most part, the funeral ended here for many people. Those willing to accompany the lady to her final resting place were free to do so. Many others who came on good-will alone returned after the prayer. The high-profile individuals left alongside the first batch, all except for Ziu Patek who’s gaze thirsted over the melancholic Alicia.

“Igna, you can leave if you want,” said Alicia as the prayers concluded. The mass of people bottlenecked at the entrance of the hall. Politeness of the men to allow the ladies to go first halted the line further.

“No,” returned he, “-are they going to cremate her?”

“Yes, it’s a tradition for the Syhton sect. And about leaving,” she pulled closer to his chest, “-are you sure?”

“Yes,” he patted her back, “-we’re leaving together.”

“Alicia, would you like a ride to the crematorium in my car?” ambled Ziu gallantly, “-I’ll spare the insult of riding in the bus at his company,” the difference in body-size and the title of heir placed him above others, or so thought the young heir. In his mind, Igna was naught but a weak-pretty boy, plenty of which he had dealt with long ago.

“I’ve said it before,” he stood in to hide her from the overly rude heir, “-she’s my partner. You need not embarrass yourself. Yearning for her will result in nothing more than regret.”

“Don’t give me that,” refuted Ziu, “-I don’t know anyone who’d dare refuse my advances. I’ve got money, power, and beauty. What do you have – I’m the complete package, girls drool to have a chance to play in my chambers. I’ve slept with so many starlets and idols it’s funny thinking about how easy it was. The lower-class men who only thirst and dream of the stars in the spotlight can never experience what I have. If I fancy someone, I’ll have her without question. Do you hear me?” he pointed strongly at Igna’s chest.

“The higher one is, the harder is the fall. I’m not going to bow,” the cold stare sent shivers, “-so, Ziu, what will it be? Embarrassment or humiliation.”

“How dare you speak to me in such a tone?” arms crossed, “-boy, I’m stronger than you’d ever imagine. Patek isn’t the only thing going for me,” muscles began to bulge through the suit, “-I’ve never lost a fight either.”

“Not planning to fight either,” said he, “-the doorway’s free for us to head out. Come on, there’s no merit in wasting here debating.”

“You running away?” chuckled Ziu.

“Think what you wish,” returned he holding Alicia by the waist, “-I’ve won as far as is concerned.” Rain crashed against the side of the mansion.

“éclair, bring the car.”

“What’s your name?” wondered Ziu stood at Igna’s side.

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“Igna, why does it matter?”

“You’re the first man who’s dared defy me in such a way. Not that I feel anything remotely close to friendship, the prospect of fighting someone weak has me pitying your existence. We’re worlds apart, you might hold her for today – still, like the one who’s going to be cremated, partner or not, I’ll have what I desire, and Alicia, I’ll savor each of us in bed. The day will come where you’ll beg me to sleep with; trust my word,” another car pulled up, “-because, a whore can never be mended into a thing of praise, similar to broken glass.” Red, low to the ground and fast looking, “-where’s your ride?”

“Over there,” he pointed, “-shall we go?”

“Look at you,” said Ziu, “-the exclusive model, what a surprise. I guess we’re similar.”

“I doubt it,” the doors shut.

‘Race me to the crematorium,’ signaled the gutsy Ziu.

“Don’t,” said Alicia, “-he’s toying with you.”

“Oh don’t worry,” focused on the road,” -a single mistake and it’s death. Therefore,” catching Celina’s gaze, “-wear the seatbelt, this ride is going to get rough.”

“Are you planning to get us killed?” complained Alicia.

“Trust me for once.”

A countdown, 3, 2, 1, and the cars roared to skid and accelerate. The local crematorium stood around a thirty-minute drive from the mansion. The roads were narrow and tight; the weather also didn’t favor Igna’s ride. Ziu’s model, old as it seemed, was perfect for racing.

“Igna,” materialized éclair, “-follow my lead, I’ll take over if the car seems to get out of control.”

“Can we win?”

“Should have thought of it before accepting the challenge. Still, there’s a chance – the weather’s our greatest ally.”

Down Eldow’s high and its winding road, both went head-to-head. Ziu smiled childishly to pull ahead on the straights. Acceleration-wise, he had Igna beat by a conquerable margin. Despite the heavy rain, Igna kept up the pace. The only chance at victory was the hardest curve leading into downtown. There, the roads would be smaller and easier to avoid being overtaken.

“Igna, there’s a massive turn ahead. If you don’t break, we’ll go straight off the cliff. ”

"I know," said he slamming the pedal to tailgate Ziu.

'What's he thinking?' the heart shot in anxiety, '-there's a dangerous curve ahead. Why is he so close, is he trying to kill me?' the pressure forced him to break into the inner-lane, '-not going to happen, idiot.' Smirking the passengers, '-why is he accelerating?' the eyes widened, '-it's too late to break...'

"NOW!" screamed éclair. The car slid into the turn millimeters away from the curb, the slippery road made it both easy and hard, easy to start and hard to control. Taking the turn at such a speed had Ziu scared for their deaths. No sound, nor major tremor, he turned the corner to see skid marks and Igna pelting down the straight.

'How fast did he take that corner?' accelerating now didn't matter since Igna won.

"We're here," the crematorium beside which laid a graveyard stood against the clouds in a relatively empty lot.

"ARE YOU FUCKING INSANE?" screamed Alicia beating him out the car, "-YOU FUCKING FANATIC!"

"Hey chill," escaping to the outside, "-we made it here safe and sound, didn't we?"

"THE FUCK YOU MEAN SAFE, LOOK AT CELINA." She held an empty stare, "-YOU TRAUMATIZED HER!"

"Oh, come on," he sighed, the rain came as little freckles, '-good job éclair.'

"Teamwork," said the spirit joyously. The other guests arrived a few minutes later, including Ziu who pulled behind Igna's car.

"You're a scumbag," said he slamming the door, "-do you have no perception of fear?" he reached to almost grab the collar.

"Take one more step," glared Igna, "-I took the risk since I had a high percentage of success. The road surface was perfect for a heavy machine as mine."

"Are you dumb?" voiced he, "-imagine if the roads weren't optimal, the speed would have sent you flying."

"Comes down to skill, doesn't it."

"Alicia," said he moving to the window side, "-are you going to stay with him?" the tone changed, "-come back with me, come on."

"No," voiced she, "-going on dates doesn't mean we're a couple. Forget me already, I don't like you!"

"Pest," he slammed the roof and left.

"You two have a history?"

"Yeah," she exhaled, "-sorry I didn't tell you."

"I don't care really. My words about us being a thing were nothing more than a convenient lie to scare him away."

"I know. Shall we?"



The mystery of the death and the comments by the Patek's added a new layer to the overall story. A layer of involvement, the way Ziu spoke was of pride, he wanted to share information that would have otherwise been unavailable to the public, he's done things that could make many revere him as a god. And so, as the body burnt; the parents cried at the all-engulfing flames. 'He's responsible for killing Asuna Muld. Aceline was readied to confront them using the movie to showcase her death and those responsible. Much time has passed; the information relevant years ago won't be of much help here. Need to find a trustworthy investigator first; someone who hates the police and has a strong resolve to carry out justice without care of repercussion.' The motions of paying respect and heading home were carried automatically. Celina and Alicia slept on the way back. The subconscious returned them to the comfort of the apartment. Once inside, the duo ran into bed and slept. Whimpers and moans escaped the ajar door of Alicia's bedroom.

'The death must have affected her more than she's letting onto,' thought he walking to the previously unused study. The room was changed into a recording studio, the guitars rested on the walls, a camera shot onto a stool and plain-beige backdrop. When sat, only the upper-half could be seen. A computer laid behind the camera, the work-station during the cyclonic weather.

Multiple casefiles laid on the desktop. Nesse Williams' case oddly matched that of Mello Nao. 'There must be something I'm overlooking. The cause of death is suicide... wait, if there was a cover-up, surely the real report would have been burnt. XX96, corruption then is as bad as is today. The one who made the link to the mobsters...Engn Codd, the detective found dead after uncovering a hidden plot... I'm such an idiot,' facepalming, "éclair, is Odgar Codd still a member of the Lerado's family?"

"Yes, he's climbed the ranks and is very respected in the inner-circles of the family."

"Any chance I'll be able to meet him?"

"Sure, if it's orders from Pluton, then I'm sure he'll accept."

"Not orders, where is he right now?"

"Working on a case in Melmark. A double-murder involving a minister."

"Is he related to the police?"

"No, he's a private investigator. The information given to the police often leads to the conviction of the culprits."

"I see," he paused, "-how big is the agency?"

"It's around 4 members big. They're running out of money from the last report to Lerado. He asked for a loan to no avail, the family is in big trouble since Cimier's gotten more active lately."

'Could it not have come at the worst time... guess I'll have to meet him someday. éclair, write him a message anonymously using the God-Father's channel. Tell him someone's willing to grant a loan for the survival of the investigation agency.'

"Very sly, anonymous hailing from the God-father, there's no way he'll be able to refuse the offer then."

"Yes," smiled he, "-anyway, let's record some clips – I ought to get popular."

“Camera’s on, have fun.”

“Thank you.”

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## Chapter 539: Agency

Dim cigarette smoke escapes into the dark moist alley. Water drops of exposed leaks flowed on slowly against the dirtied brick walls. Dressed in a coat and smart attire, the pungent smell of rotten rats permeated the darkened space. Over yonder laid civilization, the bustling streets of Melmark. Flashing lights of differing hues from the advertisements echoed onto the relatively silent alley. Few gusty enough threw reserved side-glances. Though it wasn’t illegal to watch, passing the multiple alleys of the deeper part of Melmark, else referred to as the red-light district, did feel morally bad. On one side the normality of a capital-city and boundless movement, while the other side, as if marching down the portal to hell itself, one came onto said Red-light district. Buildings, often apartment up top and bars on the bottom; held gambling den at irregular intervals. Those roaming the streets were criminals, hoodlums, and even murderers who’d escape the law.

‘This city never changed,’ thought a man in a deep and seeking voice, ‘-the police can’t do anything on their own. Public safety is left in the hands of the Hero’s union. The fall of the AHA didn’t bring any good for the public. The lives of heroes sure became easier; the focus was on saving the people... or so what some people thought would happen. The invasion of monsters changed priorities, the new heroes vowed to become strong and fight the invaders. Villains were able to merge into normal society without the watchful eyes of our protectors.’

“Sir, we’ve found him,” said a softer voice of which was definitely of a man.

“Good job,” said he flicking the cigarette bud, “-we’ve got him.”

‘Another worthless hitman,’ a well-protected door clicked to an unlock courtesy of the smaller man.

“Who are you?” asked a broad figure playing cards.

“Your nightmare,” said the little man vanishing into the room.

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‘He’s too antsy.’ Guns were pulled onto the taller man, “-deal with them already,” ordered he.

“SHOOT!”

\*Knock,\* five guards fell headfirst onto the table.

“Sorry about that,” apologized he wiping his hands, “-they’ve got strong necks.”

“Killing them isn’t going to do much,” brown-stained stairs led upstairs to hall splitting three rooms on each side. ‘The smell,’ thought he, ‘-never gets any better.’ A dying plant laid in the corner; light came from a buzzing light-bulb. Stains on the ‘would have been white walls’ deterred to brownish red. Bullet holes, knife marks, the ax-head of a broken tool, ‘-assault’s more common around these parts.’

“PLEASE,” escaped a deathly scream, “-I CAN’T.”

"Is that them?" wondered the tall man.

"No, he's in the last room," they continued down the hall. Moans and groans, sometimes the loud echo of a slap and even breaking glass.

'Alcohol,' exhaled he, '-father, what is right and what is wrong?'

The smaller man leaned with ears on the filthy door, the expression showed attentiveness. '-Yes, it's them,' mumbled he.

'Double homicide,' the door barged open.

"DON'T MOVE," screamed the smaller man.

"What's this about?" returned a man dress in a suit and tie.

'A new face around town?' figured the taller man onto a lady hiding behind stained blankets. The carpeted floor absorbed the numerous time people puked, threw alcohol, and even urinated. 'Wait,' the mind churned and showed multiple possibilities, '-that's the missing lady of the Dune, a girl born of a wealthy family.'

"Are you going to answer?" voiced the suited man, "-the time is valuable. If you want a piece of her, it'll have to wait since I've got first dibs. Not every day you find a virgin. I paid good money for this piece."

"Sir, what are your orders?"

"Break in," said he through an earpiece. The smaller man nodded at expression. \*Clash,\* two figures dressed in black suits erupted inside the room. First, one bearing medium hair and in a white surgical mask grabbed the lady as the other restrained the broad man.

"What's this?" fired he in ire.

"It's our assignment," said the taller man lighting another cigarette, "-hitman of the Jonia Familia. The double-murder of minister Kurt and the secretary Nia is a little much for a low-ranking mob group, don't you think?"

"Who the fuck are you?" he fought to try and escape.

"Pipe down," said another broad man, "-squirm more and I might not be able to hold back."

"How much money do you want?" voiced he.

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"We already got paid," said the small man, "-don't even dare tempt us."

"Who hired you?" screamed he.

"The Jonia Familia," sighed the tall man, '-this city is corrupt, everyone wants to kill another.'

"How?" cried he, "-I need answers, I WANT PROOF!"

"Shut up," catching the jaw, "-don't speak anymore," he extinguished the cigarette on the man's tongue, "-you're all scum."

"What do we do, sir?"

"Bag him up, the quest was to bring him either alive or dead. I don't want to stain my hands."

Almost telepathically, a dark-colored van pulled in onto the alley. "Transport is here," said the one in a surgical mask, "-what do we do about her?"

"She's got a bounty on her head," said the taller man, "-take her with, should bring a good paycheck." The three led the walk to the vehicle.

'Melmark,' paused at the mouth of the stairs, '-what beast have you become. What monsters are you hiding, the damned city who stole my only family. Father, was it worth it? Finding the truth, was it worth your life?'

"Sir, we're ready to go."

"Coming," gently and elegant, '-if justice couldn't bring father's killers to court, I'll have to take it in my hands. Alpha is controlled by the mob, the five conglomerates are in cahoots with Cimier or some other organization. Emperor Sultria VI isn't going to do much.'

Cigar smoke filled a mildly lit mundane bar. Two rough guards sat surrounded by fairly mundane-looking ladies. The bar-woman kept cool and wiped whiskey glasses.

"Are you saying that you didn't find him?" the scenery changed from alley to bar

"We found him," said the taller man with legs crossed, "-still, the price is too little for our service. Paying with drugs doesn't mean anything. The one thing we agreed on was cold-hard, cash, not this piece of shit."

"You forget where you are," said the lady signaling for hoodlums to point their guns, "-take the drug or get out."

'Pieces of shit,' gritted he, "-fine. How about half cash and half drugs?"

"Now we talking," she smiled and gestured at a guard who leaned into her face, "-do understand," said she kissing said guard who left with a flushed face, "-money is a bit tight nowadays. The main-supplier is in trouble from the other familia. The drug routes are falling behind. Anyway," a case came with Exa bills, "-here's 25,000 Exa. I like how you look," she leaned onto the table to boast her cleavage, "-how about we have a private discussion?"

"Once the money is exchanged, the deal ends," exhaled he, "-bring in the man." The broader assistant entered holding a bean-bagged figure. "There's the hitman," he stood, "-our connection ends here. See you, lady Jonia."

"No problem," said she a little disappointed, "-good job on bringing him here."

"Come on," said he to the broad man, "-let's leave." Crossing the doorway into the full-street, gunfire rattled the surrounding.

"Shall I head to the office, master?"

"Yeah."

Stood on the Usu's boulevard, at a more reserved and quiet part of Melmark rested a tall-building in the shape of a right angle. One of the offices was rented by a particular investigation agency. The warm surrounding of not having digital advertisement enchanted the building named Rivena. Up a worn lift to the third floor, '-we're back,' thought he opening the door.

Five tables, one overlooking the other four. Plant-pots, bookshelves, an always active fan. The base of operation for Codd's Agency as shown on the brown-metal tag.

"Feels good to be back," stretched the one in a surgical mask, "-how much did we get for that job?" asked she removing the cover. It exposed burnt cheeks from an acid attack. If not for said scar, she'd have been a beautiful lady in every sense of the word. The medium blond hair paired against the bright-blue eyes and oval face did give an air of belonging to Iqavea. Her name, Camilia Hartford

"Keep the greed in check," said the shorter man, a man in his early twenties. Dirty-brown hair, a sharp-jawline, pierced ears, brown eyes, pointy nose, and an accent of which reminisced nobility. The stealth expert of the group due to his lack of presence, Aki Hando, an ex-military officer.

"Oh, shut it," fired she sitting at her table.

"I'm going to make coffee, anyone interested?" said Tensy Brown, a well-build man host to an innocent rounded face. The eyes were always in a squint from the overbearing cheeks. A shiny-bald head on which had the tattoos of a dragon, an ex-member of a hidden organization.

"I'll have some," said the taller man.

"Alright sir," said he rushing for a small counter.

Lastly came the leader of the group, Odgar Codd, a clean-shaven well-spoken gentleman. He always wore a suit or formal attire, the professionalism never deterred. Out of the group, he held the most crucial ability of all, Flawless Deduction. A talent passed down from the late Engn Codd. Dichromatic eyes of green and blue, gelled back hair, and a cigarette at an arm's length away.

"Why do you always pester the boss about money?" argued Aki.

"Why not, I need food to survive, come on, Aki," voiced Camilia.

"Both of you," echoed Odgar, "-mind your manners, we have a guest, or have you forgotten?"

"Sorry about that boss," they returned in fear.

"S-sorry for the intrusion," said the lady whom they rescued in the previous job.

"Why is she here anyway?" wondered Camilia dropping onto her office chair.

"Don't bother with that," said Tensy resting a mug with, '-I heart you,' painted in full-pink.

"Thanks for the coffee," her attention swapped to the computer screen.

"Here you go boss," another mug went to the leader's table.

"Thank you," the curtains parted, "-young lady mind exchanging a few words?"

"O-ok," she ambled past the menacing eccentric members.

“Do forgive my associates, they’re a rowdy bunch,” just as he said so, Camilia and Aki got into another argument.

“I-I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“Let’s get straight to business,” he puffed, “-are you Dian Paroth?”

“How did you know?” her eyes widened.

“Came across a missing person’s report a few weeks ago.”

“Oh my god,” she exhaled, relief had her shoulders slumped, “-I’m so happy.”

“Don’t be so carefree,” cautioned he, “-can you tell me what happened?”

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“I was kidnapped,” said she. “All I remember was going for an audition, next I was in a van being carried to Melmark. I spend most of the time inside a barrel. Thought I’d have been killed a long time ago. I’m surprised they didn’t ask for ransom...”

“Don’t worry about that,” said he, “-the ones who kidnapped you were probably good for nothing thugs. They steal girls all around the continent and bring them here for business. Well, what’s done is done. What next?”

“Might I ask a question first?”

“Go ahead.

“Who are you guys?”

“We’re primarily a private investigation agency. Though, it’s been rough to get any decent jobs. Could say we do odd-jobs here and there to make ends meet.”

“Then I’d like to hire your services.”

“Good,” smiled he, “-I presume we ought to send you to Odgawoan?”

“Yes, yes.”

“We’ll take a fee after the job is complete. Camilia, have her cleaned up and taken care of.”

“On it, boss,” she stood and led the lady out the room.

“Are we still on the clock?” inquired Aki.

“No, take a break. It’s enough for today,” to which the duo left without complaints. ‘-25,000 Exa and drugs, should last us a few months, I hope. Running a private agency is hard. A class-3 cyclone warning doesn’t even deter the folks into staying home,’ droplet-filled gust slammed against the windows, ‘-I want to sleep.’

Chapter 540: Rocher Cartney

Wednesday 26th of February, the cyclonic weather cleared to the light-grey hanging clouds. Carter Lake overflowed into the neighboring park. At one time, the latter reached the streets leading towards the city. The close and condensed streets of the metropolis had the black and white roads turned brown and flawed with dirt. Firefighters worked relentlessly for the duration of the beast's visit. House flooding, falling billboards gravely injuring bystanders – more information laid in full on the numerous news sites.

Scary as it had been, the electricity held nicely. Though, people were advised to boil water before drinking. Leaks could be present without anyone's knowledge; caution over sickness.

Normality returned to the office workers and scouts. Delayed work laid on the tables of those in smart-clothes. "Igna," the day rose at the apartment, "-are you ready to go?" asked a muffled voice.

"Yes," a turtle neck atop which laid a sport's jacket and light-colored pants. Most of the days were spent playing the guitar, recording, teaching Celina how to handle the bass, and scouring the police reports. Learning of Aceline's disappearance had another meaning, another of which he couldn't ignore. To find who was pulling the strings, the true masterminds. Research led to the vile and disappointing truth of the hopeless Emperor.

"Do I really have to go?" argued Celina pulling away from Alicia.

"Come on, wear the jacket already," said she running after the girl.

'What the?' stood at the doorway.

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"IGNA, HELP," she ran to leap into his arms.

"Calm down," caught without effort, "-why all the ruckus?"

"I told her she ought to come..." explained a flustered Alicia.

"It's fine," he patted her head, "-Leave her be, she'll get bored."

"You spoil her too much," pouted Alicia into a displeased, '-whatever,' expression.

"What are you?"

"What you mean?" she gave herself a once-over, "-smart clothing, what's the problem?"

"The tag," brows raised to point her neck, "-supposed to be a fashion statement or?"

"Oh," embarrassed, "-let's leave already," her heels thudded to the door.

"Thanks for the save."

"Don't cause trouble," holding a high-five, "-we'll be back soon."

"Ok," she smiled.

Lady Sally contacted them for the coming photoshoot late afternoon. The suddenness had the manager frown in suspicion. Not worrying about the state of things, Igna thought it best to go with the flow.

Area 04, the industrial-looking compound turned into a horror movie. The rain left marks of struggles onto the 'clean' metal roof. Caretakers strolled about holding cleaning supplies. A raise of the hand, a sweep of the mop, and wiping off the forehead ended in a fatigued sigh. Unda's Inc owned the rented warehouses. Came as a shock when Phantom decided to leave it as is. No involvement, lady Elvira must have had a better idea in mind. Or so the expected line of thought, her way in seeing profit and ability to make money couldn't be rivaled.

"We're back," said he pulling to Warehouse 03.

"Igna," bumped Alicia, "-look at the black-bus over there."

"What about it?" a close look showed decals and the name, 'Rocher Cartney.'

"Don't you know him?" her eyes widened, "-Cartney, the Pianist, doesn't it ring any bells?"

"No."

"You uncultured dumbass," she facepalmed, "-he's a world-renowned classical musician."

"Uncultured dumbass," the lips tightened, "-seriously?"

"There, there," she condescendingly patted his shoulder.

"Go to hell."

Opened to the solemnly mournful scape, '-why's the renowned pianist here?'

"éclair, search for that pianist," frowned Igna.

"Aw, did she hurt your feelings?" commented the spirit slyly.

'Last I heard of him was the concert given in Iqavea. No one can compare to the dexterity and technique, why's someone so legendary in a place like this. Pop music doesn't really mix with classical.'

"Here's a few pieces," said éclair.

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"Let's go," ordered Alicia taking charge.

'That's him?' paused he nodding at the skillful display, '-I see. The man's more of a virtuoso than I'd imagine. I'm actually stupid,' breathing a laugh, '-I've heard the music, not the man. Being referred to as uncultured hurt a little.'

A blast of warm air slapped the duo. Inside felt more of a furnace than a photo studio. Lady Sally's stood in conversation with Mr. Cartney. The latter held black-hair turning grey. A big forehead, rimless glasses, bone-structure resembling the noble of birth from Iqavea. Gloomy pupils scanned about as he gave a fragile smile during the conversation. The lady's overbearing personality stole control of the parley. Bandages and cast kept her injuries recovering at their pace.

"Over here," she waved, almost hitting Mr. Cartney.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sally," said Alicia courteously.



“Good morning,” said the pianist as well.

“Mr. Cartney,” said she with a resolved tone, “-this is the boy I was talking about.

“Greetings,” said Igna puzzled at the awkward combination.

“Are you Igna?” he moved to give a trembling handshake.

“Yes sir,” gripping tight, “-a pleasure to make thy acquaintance, Mr. Cartney.”

“Alright,” nodding to Sally, “-we’ll go talk for a bit.”

“Ok,” she snorted a laugh. Alicia kept an awkward smile at the disturbing laughter.

Black-curtain gave a sliver of privacy, the pianist’s demeanor changed into a more pleasant expression.

“Might I ask the relation you share with Mrs. Sally?”

“Oh,” sweating profusely, “-she’s my sister-in-law. Brother had to go ahead and fall for a boisterous lady. I get it, she’s got a good reputation and hails from a wealthy family, still, her personality lays more on the animal side than human. Just so you know, I have no interest in you whatsoever.”

“I see,” he nodded, “-why are you here?”

“Sally asked me to come by. She goes on and on about thy guitar playing. I honestly prefer a soulful melodic violin or piano to the hardness of a guitar. The instrument deserves praise, it can be warm in the right hands... I’ve yet to see anyone skillful enough to produce the sound I wish to hear. The best guitarist only screams and has the instrument cry in pain, I hate it.”

“Basically, you hate what the world has changed into.”

“Pop-music is awfully simple, the lyrics either talk about love or heartbreak, there’s no emotion behind the singing. Four simple chords pertaining the same feeling throughout.” A one-sided rant on how the man hated the evolution of sound. Bored in the middle of the talk, he took a stool and sat. Cartney played melodically on the piano. Face-to-face, a polar opposite of what was shown to the world. A snob for music; or so what thought Igna, a befitting title from the thirty-minute babble.

“So,” he stopped, “-you’re a guitarist too, is that correct?”

“Yes,” the expression changed.

“Pitiful. Have you ever tried changing instruments?”

“No,” he shrugged, “-the piano is a good instrument, I get it. I know a few good pianists myself, sadly, the association of the upper-class to the music makes it less available to the average ear. What you say is full of emotion and heart-moving is nothing more than noise in the common-sense of the words. Discord-making harmony, the concept is nice, and the composers of the olden era are to be revered – that I don’t argue against. Still, the pop music of which thee spoke so hatefully is more inclined to the new era. Classical music is classical, old, and meant for the museum. What we have now is experimental, people learning new instruments, developing new sounds, and moving towards a unified path of music.”

“Prove it,” said he, “-I doubt the modern way of playing can move the hearts of another. It’s dull, complexity is what brings flavor and passion!”

“This is a chicken-egg argument.”

“No,” he strongly gripped Igna’s shoulder, “-I dare you to play the piano.”

“Are you sure about that?” he stood, “-even though I’m a guitarist?”

“Yes,” he glared.

Back to the assistants moving to and fro, “-that sure took long,” commented Alicia.

“Yes, or so a waste of time,” refuted Igna.

“What’s this about?” turned Sally.

“Mr. Cartney thinks what idols aspire to be in wanting to move the hearts of many is a fa?ade. The quicker they learn that modern music can’t move hearts, the better they’ll fall back onto the greats of classical.”

“Brother, is that true?” her persona changed to a bear, “-why did you say all that to him?”

“No, sister, you misunderstand,” a lion turned sheep at her presence, “-I didn’t mean that,” the innocent expression couldn’t hide the hate welling in deep.

“Mrs. Sally. I respect Mr. Cartney’s opinion. Everyone’s free to think and form a judgment, tis the way we advance as a society. There’s a simple way to resolve the argument, music.”

“You’re in luck, we’ve brought over guitars for the photo-shoot, want to use them?”

“No,” the head shook slowly, “-a piano. Is there a piano?”

“Not here no,” she paused to think, “-I think warehouse 06 has one. They record music for coming bands and idols, they must have one.”

“Good, let’s head over then.”

Opposite 03 rested 06. The redundant exteriors didn’t spawn excitement for what the interior would be. Expectations were low, and on the opening of the inside, a gentle breeze of air-conditioned greatness. Clean, carefully planned, and separated. Renowned pop-idol groups practiced in differing recording booths. ‘A pleasant surprise.’

“Excuse me,” voiced a guard, “-the recording studio is restricted at the moment. Can you come at a later date?”

“No,” said Sally, “-we require a piano at the moment.”

“I’m sorry,” apologized the guard, “-lady Sally, the concert hall is being used for practice.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she shoved him aside, “-what group is performing?”

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"Vorn."

"Oh, I know them," she smiled, "-we'll be fine."

'She does get around.' The long walk had the pianist breathing heavy. Each time they passed a recording booth, he'd avert the gaze in fear of being tainted. Musical snobs, as politely referred to by Igna, were very common in the classical world. Instead of being a thing to admire and praise, the snobs cruelly disrespected those who of low skill and common-birth.

Through the metallic door, speakers played the live-performance of a six-member girl band. A singer, guitarist, bassist, pianist, violinist, and drummer.

"Didn't I asked the guards to," spotting the reflection of the door, "-who are you?" stomped the manager.

"Hey there Thomas," smiled Sally.

"Sally, what are you doing here?" the guard dropped.

"I'm here for a challenge," said she, "-my brother-in-law wants to prove something to young Igna."

"It's actually the other way around," said he.

"Could you wait a few minutes, watch the show."

"Sure," sat in the front row, the six on stage sang, played, and danced to the melody. The last song performed was, 'Daylight struggle'.

"See," said Igna, "-this is the music you refused to acknowledge."

"No, I refuse," ego forced a disagreement, '-pretty, but I can't say yes to him now.'

Sweat dripped, spotlight glistened the pearly forehead, "-the singer is great," complimented Alicia.

"Yeah, she's awesome," said Thomas.

They ended practically drenched in sweat. Fighting to be at the top was a hard battle. "I'm tired," complained the lead-singer.

"Tell me about it," laughed the guitarist.

"Good job everyone," said the pianist, also the captain, "-we need to keep this energy for the coming festival."

"Understood," the empty hall gave a moment of respace. Then and there, footsteps clopped onto the stage, a gust of wind flowed against their face. A handsome man walked towards the piano with a stoic expression. The strange allure captured their attention, "-excuse me, may I please use the piano for a bit?"

"..." the girl kept on staring without blinking.

"Excuse me," he waved, "-are you there?"

"Oh yes," her face flushed, "-I'm sorry. The keys are a bit wet from the hours of playing."

"It's no issue," smiled he, "-I just need it for a few minutes."

Questions riddled the collective minds of Vorn.

'Who's he?'

'Where did he come from?'

'What is he?'

"Manager," voiced the violinist, "-who's that young man there?"

"Igna Haggard," replied Alicia, "-a newbie in the entertainment world."

"Is he a pianist?" wondered she who spaced out after seeing him.

"No, a guitarist," said Sally.

"Why is he using a piano then?" wondered they.

"To prove a point," said Cartney.