

Death Magic 541

Chapter 541: Vorn

“Prove a point?” complete silence befell the concert hall. The loudness reduced the single man sat at the piano. Judging eyes of the audience watched, the most critical, Cartney. The reason for the misunderstanding was one incomprehensible by the pianist. Why would a guitarist play the piano, it was as if asking a child to speak a foreign language. In any case, or so what thought Cartney, ‘- he said he’d prove a point. I don’t accept modern music; even if he’s played the piano before, there’s no way someone like him could please my trained ears. The world of classical music will not be shunned by worthless and shallow pop-idols.’

“éclair, is everything ready?”

“No need to worry. I’ve found all the information needed; you can play the instrument as well as the guitar. Good job on having a link with a demon.”

“Oh please,” he chuckled, “-you’re not a demon, thou art mine helper.”

“Supposed the old dialect is a force of habit?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged and pressed fingers together, “-it’s a battle between me and that snob.”

The first note played, “-so beautiful,” commented Sally.

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“Everyone can do that,” shrugged Cartney, ‘-the punk can play the piano.’ Jealousy and anger welled, the single note had him breathing deep and worried.

‘The only way to make him enjoy our music is,’ the single notes grew into complex chords, ‘-is the turn a pop-song into a classical piece.’ A loud pause had the audience on the edge, the anticipation of the next passage, the silent build-up, the tension, it all grew till the thread neared snapping. “Enjoy this,” fingers galloped along the keys, lower chords held strong, the stops sharpened to the point of punches, the culmination of the advanced techniques marred the hall, the performance was inches away from useless noise, a cacophonous masterpiece. It hurt to hear, the ears cried, the mind shook for silence, instead of the notes, they wanted to hear the pauses, the relaxation, the moment to breathe through heavy passages and heavier chords.

“Impressive,” Cartney’s jaw dropped. While the others listened with narrowed eyes, the pianist’s face eased to a gentle grin. The song played was an unheard arrangement from a renowned composer.

‘He thinks it’s a classical piece,’ side-glanced Igna, ‘-fool, I only drew thy attention for this.’ The intensity seamlessly transitioned into the woeful heart tearing cry of ‘Daylight Struggle’. A memorable melody, those beside the pianist listened and smiled. The soft notes tickled the inner-ear, a whisper from an angel.

“Daylight struggle,” said one of Vorn, “-it’s our song...” they paused in confusion.

“How is he playing it with such complexity and emotion?” wondered the pianist of the band.

"Igna is a genius," commented Alicia, "-he began the journey in the cooking world. Due to circumstances, came to Alpha in search of a new path. He was a rival to the renowned Kyle Darker. One of Alpha's elite up-and-coming chefs."

"I've heard of him," added the guitarist of Vorn, "-is that Kinless?"

"Yes," smiled Alicia, "-he's started posting guitar melodies over the Arcanum."

"Yeah, I remember now," smiled she, "-he's good. I follow him on a private account, the dude's amazing with that instrument in hand. I can't even replicate the techniques he uses."

"Ladies," voiced Cartney, "-could I have silence?"

"Sorry about that," nodded they.

The shy expression loomed about friendliness. Each note played had him in shock. There was no comparison, '-he's blessed by the god of music,' thought he in tears.

'Let's end the passage,' soft and melodic to fast and harsh, the note darted all over to end with a slam of the fist onto the lowest note.

Deep inhale, "-Cartney," he shouted, "-this is what I wanted to prove. Modern music and melodies are a thing to be respected and admired. Daylight Struggle might sound simple on the surface; it can be enhanced to sound as complex and evoking as a classical piece," vaulting down the stage, "-make sense now?"

"Igna," stood Cartney, "-let's play on stage!"

"Why?"

"You've shown me how pretty the new-age can sound. Now it's my turn to repay the favor. Come on, get on stage, I want to hear thy guitar in the company of my piano."

"As you wish," the duo made up the stairs once more.

'I still hate the new-age sound. However,' sat at the instrument, '-I can't ignore his ability. I suppose I ought to look at the best of both worlds. My heart belongs to the classics. My mind should be open to appreciate the few masterpieces made by the youth. I was a fool, being praised made me lose sight of the purpose of music,' glancing towards Igna, '-thanks for the reality check.'

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"Brother Cartney," shouted Sally.

"Yes, sister?"

"Do you mind if I record the performance?"

"No, not really," the voice felt less serious and more enjoying of life, "-what about you, Igna?"

"No, I don't mind. The opportunity to play with a renowned pianist is exciting."

"Cut the sarcasm," returned he, "-don't you hate me?"

“No, I do admire the composition and how your piano sounds.”

“Thank you.”

Meanwhile, the musicians fell into idle chatter, Sally focused on Thomas, clocked in black, mid-way between chubby and skinny. Few body features showed signs of having worked out before. The strong jarring forehead and sunken eyes watched ever so silently. Pierced ears, rounded glasses, and a sharp nose. Moustache and soul patch combination showed an interest in music.

“What?” returned he strongly.

“The camera,” smiled Sally, “-start recording.”

“Fine,” the already set camera recorded with a press.

“Alicia,” Vorn gathered about the singular lady, “-who’s Igna really?”

“Why are you girls so interested?” asked she.

“He’s handsome, talented, and stoic. Come on,” pleaded a pink-haired girl, “-there’s no need to be so coy about it.”

‘Nona Isabelle, the guitarist of Vorn. She’s talented and has a unique tone. I get why people see her as attractive. Her hair ends short of the collarbone; brightly colored blue eyes. Her explosive persona ignites the stage when they perform; her popularity goes a long way.’

‘Hinei Yuna, the singer. Tattoos down her arms and on the neck. Long hair with bands, half white and other black, her paleness resembles a ghost. Her outfits are very binary, dulled colors – the laid-back personality is something to contend with as well. Oval shape, a rounded nose, and fetching lashes.’

‘Morgaria D’hern, a bassist hailing from Iqavea. Blonde hair, green eyes, a rounded-shaped face, very curvy features. A model for Alice, she turned the stereotype of bassist being at the back of the show – taking center stage, breaking into solos, even singing at times. Out of the six, she’s got more followers.’

‘Enna Vornia, the leader and pianist. A background of playing classically until being scouted by Ansoft. A noble of the Dukedom of Vornia. Brown hair is always tied gracefully, her dresses and mannerism are very lady-like, tall, and ever-watching. Her presence alone can alter a room.’

‘Nerilina Gotla, the violinist and Enna’s best friend. Also, from a classical background. Opposed to Enna’s eye-catching presence, she’s more reserved. Grey-colored hair, grey-colored eyes, and simple clothes. Depending on the show, she’s either at the back or not present. Despite that, she’s got a quirkiness that makes her, her.’

‘Lastly, the drummer, Sheiwai Stan. A beast on her instrument, curly hair, tanned complexion, and deep brown eyes. Another model of Alice, her explosiveness pairs with Nona in a scary manner. When those two are left to rile up the audience – if left unchecked, they may cause riots. On top of being a very skilled drummer, she’s also the beauty standard many girls follow blindly. Uses her platform to educate younger ladies in becoming individuals with strong body and mind.’

“Come on,” voiced Nona, “-tell us who he is already.”

'They're interested in Igna. This could be good, Vorn's got a fair amount of popularity and are only starting to break into the international market.'

"There's no need to rush her, Nona, don't worry about it," said Enna calmly.

"Look at the front," smiled Morgaria, "-they're ready to start."

Minutes turned into hours, Cartney and Igna played over and over again. They went over multiple genres, the pianist broke out his shell as for Igna, he added and complemented Cartney without standing out. Thus, at noon, "-Igna," breathed he loudly, "-stop playing in the shadows. Stand out and show me what you can do," he began playing a repetitive progression, "-go on, show me the true abilities." Part of Vorn headed to the changing room and readied for photoshoots in 03. Guards allowed entry for anyone into the hall. Many dropped in and out, watching and listening. A private concert of two very talented musicians.

"Alright," said he, "-I'll take the lead." In the last two-minute, he swapped from acoustic to electric and so, they ended the jam session.

"Good job out there," smiled Alicia holding a towel and ice-cold water.

"What's there good about it," he wiped and smiled, "-We just played and got to know one another through music."

"I mean," she glanced to Cartney, "-I've never seen that man being so elated. Classical musicians feel like rocks, unsurmountable walls and a clear defining line between our worlds."

"I guess it's true. The same can be said for idols and normal folks, we all live in differing worlds," off the stage and leaned on her shoulders, "-I'm tired. Where's Lady Sally?"

"At her brother's side."

"Alicia, come over here."

"Coming," said she, "-go take a walk, I'll be back soon."

"Alright," he ambled out the hall, '-I feel dizzy.' Crossing into the outside, the hands braced for blinding sun rays, '-huh?' grey and calm, '-the weather's gloomy and better.' The turtle-neck stuck and felt very uncomfortable, the irritation of had the face twitching in annoyance. '-Fresh air, I need a breeze,' unknowing of the surrounding, the quest for freshness laid onto a cleared piece of land. A gentle slope led to a still under construction waiting area, a park per the first impression.

A singular bench covered by foliage from a tall tree stood lonesome, '-found my napping spot.'

"We're in luck," said éclair, "-Pluton may be meeting the agency sooner than predicted. They're headed to Odogwoan – shall I contact them?"

"Phone him up," said Igna.

Out in the silent streets of Melmark, a ring startled Odgar, '-unknown caller?' thought he directing Tensy in carrying supplies for the office. "Odgar Codd of the Codd Agency, how may I be of service?"

"Odgar Codd," a deep menacing voice echoed.

"Who is this?"

"Fret not, I mean no harm. Are you still a member of the Lerado Familia?"

"Yes, why?"

"I've heard the Codd agency's been lacking in funds lately. The Lerado haven't been able to grant any substance either."

"Who are you?" the voice grew suspicious.

"Pluton from the Dark-Guild."

"Which faction?"

"It doesn't matter. A supervisor hasn't the right to know my identity yet."

"I guess," he breathed nonchalantly, "-anything I can help with?"

"I'd like to hire your services, have the schedule open. I'll call once the agency is in Odgawoan."

"Hey boss," said Tensy, "-anything the matter?"

"No," returned he, "-continue loading the supplies," spun to face the road, '-Pluton of the Dark-guild. How did he know we'll be in Odgawoan... This could be a chance to avenge father's killer. Lerado hasn't done much in the search for the killer. I'll play along, Pluton, see you soon."

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"Was it necessary to be all secretive?" wondered éclair under the breezy shade.

"No, I don't know what faction I belong to," he facepalmed, "-mother never really told me."

"Should have asked," chuckled éclair, "-tis Godfather Shadow's faction."

"What about Godfather Renaud?"

"He's the right-hand man of the revived Overlord. It's safe to say Phantom's taken most of their activities. Renaud said it himself, he trusts our family more than he does his own. They're going through a dispute in regards to the next head of the family."

"Well, doesn't matter, does it," said he intrigued by a lonesome figure over to the left.

"Right, it doesn't."

Chapter 542: Ogdar Codd's arrival

A dispute, wailing of arms, another silhouette joins the lonesome figure. A fight from the gestures. Sun would have it another way, the cloud cleared to shine and shroud on those who chattered in a shadow. 'What's wrong with them?' wondered Igna sat silently after the phone call. The tender was the breeze and tenderer were the shade birthed off leaf roof.

"Seriously," they parted. One powered walked until the tree, "-can I have a seat?"

"Sure," he shrugged and slipped into a cheeky nap.

'So carefree,' thought she resting her head to stare at the scares spots of grey. Green seemed darker, the wind, fuller and more aggravated than those of memory.

"Nona Isabelle."

"Y-yes?" she startled to a stand.

"You look in a rather bad shape," a handkerchief laid an arm's length away, "-please, wipe the tears. Not my place to say so, yet, the mess brought by said culprits will surely mistake a photoshoot for a horror movie."

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"Thank you," she sniffled and blew fully into the white piece of cloth, "-a mild way to say I look horrible."

"Only said what was on my mind."

"Sorry for the trouble," she turned to give her fullest of attention, "-you're Igna Haggard, right?"

"Yes," said he nonchalantly.

"Can I ask a favor?"

"Sure?"

"Tell of this to no one?" her hands hid to show a great deal of distress.

"Whatever do you mean," returned he slightly baffled, "-the shade and breeze have me sleeping the devil's nap."

"Devil's nap?"

"Yes, afternoon naps are a thing to love and hate. They give a moment of rest in the early stages. Thing is, the moment one wakes from the day-dream, the body feels worse, the mind wants more, and the limbs refuse to move."

"Oh," she chuckled through the teary eyes, "-never heard anyone use the term before."

"Precisely," he stood, "-tis a matter of utmost concern!" and pointed to the sky with an imaginary sword.

"A hero," she laughed.

"Good," eased on overdramatic voice, "-a smile suits the face better than tears. Let's hang out another time," he bowed and held a hand, "-sweet lady guitarist of Vorn."

"Yes, at another time, hero." A fearful smile and marred cheeks had him a little annoyed.

"Excuse me," reached closer, "-the make-up is getting worse," wiping her face softly, as tedious a job it was, a loud exhale marked the end. "-there, presentable now."

"Igna!" wind carried the screams of an annoyed Alicia.

"I ought to go," he bowed once again, "-see you later, Nona."

Up the slope and at Alicia's side, the latter gave a stern talking while he tried imitating a turtle retreating its neck.

'He's right,' she breathed slowly, '-this place is nice and ripe for napping. The casting couch,' she stared the leaves, '-does it always end up the same place. Why can't people accept us for who we are, and not something to be played with. I've decided, not going to have it affect me anymore, damned them.' Her explosiveness seeped into her expression; '-I've cried too much. It's the first time someone's treated me like a lady and normal folk,' her phone showed Igna's contact information, '-maybe I'll take up on his advice and hangout.'

And so, the day went on without much happening. The photoshoot ended with Lady Sally being more pleased about the performance between Cartney and Igna. All of Vorn partook in the same shoot. Ikoen asked to have them showcase and pose for better reception. Vorn's fanbase was 'unnatural' to put it mildly.

17:00, a very exhausted Alicia sat face down to her knees, "-good job today," clapped Sally.

"Good job to you as well," said Igna, "-my Manager's feeling a bit under the weather."

"Hey there, Igna," waved Thomas leading forth Vorn.

"Great job out there," returned he courteously.

"You too, young guitarist. I'm sure Alicia's grateful to have such a talented boy at her side."

"Oh please," her head rose, "-he's lucky to have me."

"There, there," patting her head as if a child, "-there's no need to fight."

A painted bus arrived, a day of hard work for those in the entertainment industry. The glitz and glamor were second to the effort those at the top put in. Rumor had it, many overcome by the pressure resorted to narcotics, and some ended dead as a result. 'A very convenient excuse,' thought he with her resting against the thighs.

'Wait,' after Vorn, over yonder, hidden in-between stone-pillars, '-isn't that the same guy from earlier?' It showed as Nona's pink hair hung solemnly.

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"éclair!"

"Too late," said the spirit, "-he's gone."

"A slimy one," sighed he, "-Mrs. Sally, I think we ought to leave now."

"Wait a moment," smiled she, "-Cartney wants to have a few words."

"I'm here," said a glimmering forehead.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" inquired she in a motherly manner.

"I feared missing Igna. Let's exchange contact information contact," he smiled, "-we might have had a bad start and our values aren't the same. I think there's a chance we can become great friends, speaking as a musician to another musician."

"Sure," a handshake firmed the newly made friendship.

"Igna..." groaned Alicia, "-home, I want home."

"I do apologize for this," said he, "-she's gotten sicker. Suppose today's the first and last day of the shoot. Was a pleasure, Mrs. Sally."

Arms over the shoulder, "-you're such a mess," commented he towards the car.

"Leave me alone," she walked fatigued by all of today. No questions asked the door opened, "-sleep in the back for a while." The metal steed darted off towards the car and overtook the Vorn's transport. A visit to the medical cabinet was in order. She ultimately came down with a cold.

Melmark's mysteries halted, Cobb's agency went on for a few days without any job requests. The lady of the dune asked for a time to enjoy the city and cleanse her mind from the troubling past. Naturally, leaving her alone would be a mistake – thus, the whole of the Agency trailed and stayed in the shadows as bodyguards. Odgar often made trips to the red-light district in hopes of finding answers to the abduction of young women.

'There,' stood on a four-story apartment configured to suit the desires of the district, '-the nonchalant meat delivering truck.' He'd been tailing a lead for quite a while now. During a rather bloody questioning session, a hoodlum accidentally hinted at a particular butchery who'd supply for one of the familia. When pressed further, the man revealed said company's involvement in human trafficking.

'There they are,' content to observe, the truck parked at the back into the darker alleys. Over the edge and all was shown. The meat was unloaded and nothing else. The latter was normal considering the rumor. Still, the way they moved and acted, the whispers, and careful study of their surroundings cause reason for concern.

"Bring 'er here," said a fedora-wearing man.

"You sure?" came a quieter voice.

"Yee, are you scared about the cops?" he coughed, "-ain't no way they care about this place. Bring 'er already."

"Alright," a cleaner dragged a lady by the legs. Her clothes were not to be seen, bruise and unhealed cuts on her stomach and neck.

"God almighty," cried the man, "-did you have to do such a messy job?" her head slowly scrapped the dirtied alley – a bullet wound in the middle of the eyebrows. "This is why I tell the boss to not hire you, lceht."

"Come on old man," clopped another smartly dressed personage, "-not every day I get tasked to slaughter a prostitute. What's the reason now?"

“She got a little too comfortable with the boss,” explained the old man, “-you know how he is, always paranoid about leaking information.”

“Whatever,” he holstered his pistol, “-tell him to wire the cash. Got another job; see you later, old man.”

“Fuck you.”

The truck went on its way seamlessly. Leftover blood cleaned using some foaming agent.

‘Iceht the hitman. The company is involved, the question remains about which family. Iceht’s a freelancer – doubt he knows anything.’ Next thing, they were on a plane heading to Ogdawoan.

The day; Saturday 27th of February. It had taken longer than anticipated for the agency to make its move. Nevertheless, hours before they landed, “-they’re inbound for the city.”

“Good, contact him right away.”

“As you wish.”

Caller Unknown, ‘-who’s it at this hour?’ mid-way into the flight, cries from a babe push multiple on the edge of insanity.

“Hello-”

“Hello Odgar Codd,” spoke the same deep voice, “-I hope the flight is well and good.”

“Pluton,” he smirked, “-I was waiting.”

“I’ll wait at the airport personally, have you arranged for transport?”

“No,” said he, “-was thinking of a taxi or bus.”

“It shan’t do. Worry not, I’ll have cars readied. You should leave the safety of the girl to the others, we need to speak.”

“Alright, I’ll be waiting.”

Cars were called from Unda’s Inc. In about an hour, three cars laid in wait for the agency. ‘Alright,’ parked, ‘-let’s go meet this Odgar.’ Three suited men, the drivers, and members of Phantom stood in line and waited.

‘This is a nice view,’ thought he peering over to the coming crowd of passengers.

“I see,” scanned, “-that’s Odgar.”

“Boss, are you sure about this?” interjected Camilia slightly on edge.

“Is this Pluton a trustworthy person?” squinted Aki reaching for an imaginary pistol, ‘-shit...’

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“Don’t worry,” returned he coldly, “-everything happens for a reason.”

The suited men stood strongly. A pin on the showed their allegiance, “-Hello, I’m Odgar from the Codd’s Agency.”

They exchanged glances and nodded, “-this way,” said they heading for a spiral staircase.

“These guys feel strong,” gulped Tensy, “-the auras are murderous.”

“I know,” firmed Aki, “-they must be don’s or something.”

“What’s their leader like?” wondered Camilia.

Passengers moved about the food court. Prices were beyond the average. Most opted for the cheaper options, considering it cost a few Exa’s less.

Panthea’s café, a relatively posh establishment. A restaurant host to heart-warming food and an amazing view of the airport. Inside or out, the place sure was mighty and subject to dreams of the common.

“Ok, this is weird. Why are we here now?” inquired Aki, “-is it a ruse or something?”

“Shut up,” mumbled Camilia.

“Greetings,” smiled a lavishly dressed man, “-take a seat.” The striking appearance cut the breaths.

“Greetings,” they accepted, “-might I ask who are you?”

“Odgar Codd,” sipping coffee, “-don’t you remember,” he smiled, “-tis Pluton.”

“I mean no disrespect, didn’t expect a gentleman like yourself to be Pluton.”

“Oh, it’s no matter,” he smiled, “-there’s no need for concern. Might I presume she’s the unfortunate lady?”

“Yes,” replied Aki, “-Dian Paroth.”

“Does she have no tongue,” fired he coldly?

“Dian Paroth, sir,” said she startled by the display.

“Good. You there,” pointing to Aki, “-mind taking a trip to the brewery downstairs?”

“Excuse me?”

“Alas, do you not have ears as well as common sense?”

“Forgive him,” interjected Odgar, “-tis the first time they’re meeting a noble.”

“I’ll forget this once,” laying the cup softly, “-lady Paroth, I’m sure your family waits impatiently for the return.”

“Aki, Tensy, Camilia, have her escorted to her mansion.”

“But boss, we can’t leave you here,” argued Camilia.

“Whatever is the quandary in said prospect?” tilting the head slightly, “-do you not trust me?”

“N-no,” her heart boomed, “-it’s n-not that.”

“Then, the matter is final. You have my word,” a calling gesture to the guards, “-drive them safely.”

“As you wish,” they nodded. The table cleared to have only Pluton and Odgar. The tense atmosphere had the latter confused about what to do.

“They’ll be fine,” said Pluton breaking the ice, “-shall we discuss business?”

“Please, I’m curious about what services a small agency like us can accomplish.”

“Simple really. I need information and eyes around the continent. Have you ever heard of Aceline, the Pride of Hidros?”

“Yes, who hasn’t.”

“Good, then, do you remember how she died?”

“By a gunshot in the nature park, right?”

“No, wrong,” he laughed, “-she survived the incident. The whole ordeal was played in such a way to bring out the culprits in the open. Regardless, it’s been half a decade since then – there was a plan to have her relaunched in a movie and exposed the untimely death.”

‘Interesting.’

Chapter 543: Codd’s Agency

“How were you able to procure said information. It wouldn’t have been possible unless directly involved. Tell me, who are you really?”

“I don’t trust you,” said he gently, “-my sources are very much factual and concrete. Let’s talk about you and the involvement in Lerado, care to fill the details?”

“Trust,” going over the frankness, ‘-this man,’ thought Odgar, ‘-there’s no fighting him verbally.’

“Cat got your tongue?” remarked Igna slyly.

“Fine, fine,” he gave, “-the hierarchy of the DG must be upheld. My journey into meeting the Lerado spawned from a desire for revenge. My father, who I presume you’ve heard about, was killed, yes, killed, not a suicide, but murdered, had gotten a massive lead on the inside working of this continent. The ties linked way into the forest of the unknown, the people involved were of power. Even the investigation-unit, for whomst he’d ignore our family to work, turned heads from a singular phone call. The case of Nesse Williams forced him into becoming a private investigator. There, without the pressure of the brass, the investigation continued. I’d often drop by the office and read the case files. As a kid, I thought it’d be a funny joke. God was I wrong, the morbid description of the death and how bodies were found. Still got the vivid memory.” Speech slowed, memories whelmed to flutter into mind, the café grew blurry.

“Are you alright?” inquired Igna in oblige.

“Yes, I’m fine. Sorry about that,” a cup of tea arrived in a silvery tray. Gulping the drink, the tensed throat relaxed. “Back to the story. Her case fascinated me more than it did father. For him, at the time, was a pain, massive pain, and pressure – all his reputation laid in uncovering the cause of her death.

Didn't realize it later on in life, that time in life was the worst for father, and he'd soon succumb to the backlash. Suddenly, on a cheerful matin, a tip came as an anonymous call. One hinting to Eclipses. The actual investigation is missing from the journal, what I managed to gather was a single name, Gyo Tune, some secretive mob-boss. The report stops here as father was next found dead at his office, presumably from a drug overdose. Pretty common for that time – they ruled it a suicide. From there on; the moment the coroner and investigators entered where he died, I saw it, their nonchalant attitude. All bore grey-faces and stares of indifference. An ex-colleague died; they ought to have cared a little. The investigation following that was a farce, a month in and the court ruled an accident. No, follow up, nothing – the bruises pointed to a fight and shot-fired. Even so, they remained adamant on silence. Then and there, I decided to become an investigator. Forget joining with the police, I hate," catching his word, "-no, rather, I abhor the judicial system. The sentiment's touching and all, I haven't made any progress. The way the logs and entries were written blemish any potential lead. Gyo Tune and Eclipses, suspect or witnesses, I'll never understand. And so, I found myself linking to the underworld; the surface of it anyway. I joined the Lerado, gathered evidence against frauds and possible traitors, and made my way to a stable position. Soon realized their reach wasn't as big as people had rumored so. An incident between them and other factions rattled the order. Can't use them for information and can't leave even if I wanted. I'm in limbo, all point to a certain end."

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"Quite the story," smiled Igna, "-Odgar Codd," holding a handshake, "-I understand the circumstances. There are few secrets I wish to uncover as well. Why not join the Dark-Guild, most precisely, Godfather Shadow's faction."

"Really?" the eyes lit, "-the inclusive faction only the upper echelon knows of."

"You'll be under my command. Here are the terms – allying to me will forge an unbreakable bond to the Dark-Guild. You have a team to take care of, no family. Take time and think about the Agency's future."

"Will we be forced to kill?" nervousness brought the cold visage to an ample of emotions.

"Perhaps, it depends. The jobs might stay the same – I've yet to consult a certain individual. I can promise one thing, money, and my backing."

"Considering my team and I," he nodded, "-alright, Pluton, give me a few days to decide."

"Alright," they firmed the handshake. "-Odgar Codd, a car's waiting below. I've made arrangements for the stay. It's a meager mansion. Stay and take in the life of Odgawoan. Balls in thy court."

A strenuous conversation ended in good faith. Both parted ways – Igna headed to his apartment whilst Odgar made for the mansion.

Lonesome roads of the night led to an echoey tunnel. Light flickered periodically until sleep laid claws onto the thinking Odgar. For the first time in forever, he wasn't able to read the opposing party – who was he, what was he, what did he want, what's the true intent, naught but questions.

"Sir, wake up," the door unlocked, "-we're at the mansion." A big blocky vessel of countless windows. '-Meagre mansion?' facepalmed, two other cars parked at the front. The well-lit interior cause concern. '-someone's watching,' glancing the roof, a shadow returned the favor, '-must be the security.'

A reception room held cozy couches, maids stood near walls, and his colleagues.

“Welcome back,” waved Camilia.

“Thanks, how was the delivery?”

“They welcomed her with open arms,” smiled Tensy, “-the girl’s got a loving family.”

“More importantly,” taking off her mask, “-what happened to that pretty boy?”

“Do be more respectful of him,” fired Aki.

“Why do you always oppose me?” she reached for his collar.

“Why do you always get in the way?” returned he.

“Now, now,” said Codd taking a seat, “-tis no time to fight.”

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“You look amused,” breathed Camilia, “-what happened?”

“I have something important to say.” The atmosphere changed – an uneasiness shattered per the door opening.

“Greetings, dearest guests,” said a very well-dressed lady.

“Greetings,” said Odgar standing to kiss her palm, “-might you be the lady of the house?”

“Yes,” she held a courteous smile, “-I’m Elian Go, a pleasure to make thy acquaintance. Please, make yourself at home. If there’s anything the matter, please see to the maids or the guards. We’re all members of the familia.”

“Will do so,” said he, ‘-she’s vengeful,’ thought he as the door closed, ‘-that lady is trouble. She’s angry towards the one in charge.’

“Can we have the room to ourselves?”

“As you wish,” said the maid heading for the door, “-please, call for me if anything is amiss.”

“What did you mean earlier?”

“Take a seat,” said he, “-I’ve an important announcement.”

“Okay,” focused on their leader.

“Pluton’s offered for us to join the Dark-Guild. I know that we all met through the underworld – we’re bound to Lerado. However, this is a chance to break free, the familia is getting weak, we need to ally to a more powerful family – Godfather Shadow’s faction.”

“Hey, hey,” interjected Aki, “-hold on a minute, did you accept?”

“No,” the head shook, “-Pluton said to discuss it thoroughly. I’ve already made up my mind – I’m joining him without argument.”

“Not much a discussion is it,” shrugged Camilia, “-a talk should include the whole agency, not just you boss. We all joined the agency for secretive reasons I don’t know the rest, but for me, I couldn’t care less who we’re allied to. As long as money is on the table, I’ll follow to hell if needed.”

“Same here,” said Aki, “-we’re already knees deep in the underbelly of society. Ain’t no way to back out now.”

“I agree,” smiled Tensy, “-the decision is final, we’re sticking with Codd’s Agency.”

“Certain about this? I don’t know what will happen, can’t promise a happy ending either.”

“Don’t worry about it,” reassured they, “-we’re a team, are we not?”

“Thank you, everyone, I appreciate it.”

Thus, Codd’s agency became part of Pluton’s responsibility. A call to Elvira showed no mistrust nor anger. She seemed more pleased with the gathering of allies.

Monday 1st of March, “-alright, I’m off,” said Igna straddling the bike, “-don’t forget to wake up Celina for her music classes.”

“Yes, yes,” waved Alicia.

A thirty-minute drive led to a small café in the vicinity of the town square. Smaller in stature than those around; plant-pots at the windows, a warmer exterior, and simplistic flower drawing on the windows gave a homely feeling. Brown round tables and wooden floors, a very rustic feel considering the clean and sharp popular architecture.

“Good morning, Pluton,” said Codd.

“Good morning,” pulling a seat, “-a pleasure to see you again.”

“Good morning,” nodded the others.

“I see the Agency’s here. Shall we get to business?” sternness and straight-forward approach had the table anxious.

“Yes.”

“Tis very fortunate you accepted to follow Mr. Codd,” a daring glance slice the tension, “-I had readied three graves in case of refusal.” The threat rocked their very core. Pluton’s appealing appearance added to the growing fear. A palpable intimidating aura surrounded him who spoke gracefully. “We agree the agency is joining the DG?”

“Yes,” nodded Codd.

“Any conditions?”

“Money,” fired Camilia.

“Stability,” added Aki.

“Support against other gangs,” voiced Tensy.

“Good. If they accepted without demands, I’d have refused the alliance straight-up. Money, how about 5,000 Exa per person for joining. Pay will be merit-based. Stability, in case the agency can’t support itself, I’ll personally make sure minimum pay is allocated. Support against other gangs; as long as you don’t stick your nose into other’s business, there’s no fear of a conflict. In case the situation grows violent, the Godfather’s faction will help, are those acceptable?”

“Yes,” the conditions couldn’t be any more favorable.

“As for the agency,” a briefcase laid onto the table, “-here are the papers for ownership of the Rivena.”

“Excuse me?” exclaimed Codd.

“What’s the matter?” stared he coldly.

“H-how did you g-get ownership of such building?” gulped Tensy.

“I bought it,” he facepalmed, “-tis an investment. It belongs to the DG. Odgar, shall we discuss the price for the ownership of the Agency?”

“I don’t understand?” he frowned.

“I’m purchasing the agency, is that hard to understand?”

“Can I refuse?” he inquired.

“Sure you can,” returned he, “-I figured since the business is going under, getting rid of it might be less of a stress on you.”

“No, I’ll kindly refuse. It’s a precious heritage left by my father.”

“As you wish,” smiled Igna, “-starting from today, the Agency has a single purpose; to uncover Alpha’s secret. I need information on both the stars and the underworld. Tis a big responsibility.”

“Understood. Where do we start?”

“The deaths of multiple starlets,” smiled he, “-Odgawoan is the center of the underworld at the moment. Those of influence have moved from Melmark to here.”

“I get it,” said Odgar, “-we’ll be stationed here until further notice?”

“Yes. The mansion should be a good place for rest and work. I’ll leave the trivial matter in thy hands.”
The meeting ended – Igna and Codd headed on a casual promenade around town.

“Are the terms satisfactory?”

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“Better than that,” said he, “-the burdens lifted. I can finally think about the cases.”

“About that, I’ve come across a few files that may be of interest. Tis forwarded to the phone. It’s about the death of Engn Codd and Nesse Williams. I’ve included two more, Bheta Zena and Melle Nao. They’re all linked by the casting couch. Nao was adamant about fighting against the flow, she paid with her life.

Try looking into Laven Enda. I'm sure it's clicked by now," to which Odgar halted, "-it's Eclipses," said Igna stopping a bit further.

"Where did you find all this information?"

"I'm interested in the deaths. Consider it a hobby of mine. Keep the information flowing. On that, welcome back to the city of dreams."

"I'd lie if I said I missed this place. I'll have someone look into Laven. Let's part here, there are a few things to set-up before diving into the incidents."

"Good luck," said Igna, "-I'll be waiting for the exploits. Remember, even if the law can't bring justice, we'll deal with them personally."

Chapter 544: Carter Lake

Carter lake, a place most common for those in love. Family, couples, siblings, friends – all tied and shared by love. The place's been a staple and go-to area for rest and fishing. The surrounding forest is neither too thick nor too empty, a perfect balance for those in want of escaping the booming city.

Sadly, time had not done it justice. A very strong cyclone, who, hidden under the fog and pressure of those wanting life to return to the norm, had left a few homeless and unable to work. The minority were 'scum' by all means, and those in charge couldn't have agreed anymore. A morose way of thinking. Then again, the lake had its fair share of secrets.

On a cold windy morning, a few days after the cyclone passed – a young couple; waiters at the same restaurant, send out on a quest to stay fit. What better way than to run along the forest trail. And so, the duo entered a very glum-looking area. Long was the cheerful forest gone, a veil of threat loomed courtesy of the ever-so cloudy sky. Cries of birds, brislings of the bushes, signs pointing to not enter. Gulping at the entrance, the man took his lover by the hands and waltz inside. The heart boomed, a low casting dimness and a timid frosty mist. Boots against the semi-gravel path, they jogged, and jogged, and jogged, until arriving at the Carter Lake.

Here, the roads were pretty, dark from being used. Forest on one side, a road, and then a very steep slope leading up to the enormous body of water. Granted the name couldn't have done justice – the lake was a reservoir for the city-folk. One hundred and fifty steps until the top, the trial of the slothful. Locals had it those of lesser stature couldn't make the climb twice in a row.

Up top, the rising sun though hidden, lightened the stagnant body. Ripples carried to and fro, the fresh wind, fresher than the city, was worth the trip. A square concrete barrier prevented any unfortunate accidents.

Running along felt nice, and so smiled the couple. Sweating and feeling pain as one, a true test of their relation. Alas, nothing was as pretty as described. The lake had once been such a place of beauty, the overflow dirtied the streets, the stairs, and the soft place of respace. None had been here since forever. Regret and disgust filled the air; the couple ran across the muddied roads until two figures sneaked in sight.

"Wait," said the lady, "-that's..." A pungent smacked before they were any closer.

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"Don't tell me," said the man quickening his pace, "-is that?" skin sunk into the skull, dirt, and debris stuck onto the decaying body.

"What is this?" she stopped to glance over the barrier. The body's hands were tied, the feet missing and the face unrecognizable. The two figures were in a similar state, what frightened the most was the visible skull.

"Call the police," shouted the man not wanting to step any further. The news came as a big surprise to the police, who soon arrived on the scene.

A melodic guitar ruffled across the vintage amp; a bend ended the passage of notes. '-that's training for today,' breathed Igna glancing at the computer screen. 'What's this about?' an obnoxious notification riddled the screen via multiple windows.

"éclair," said he, "-what's this?"

"Quit it with the angry voice. Check the notifications already."

"Fine," reclined onto the office-chair, "-Breaking News, two bodies found at Carter Lake." Reading further into the article, "-a young couple came across the unrecognizable body of two women left hanging on the lake's barrier. By what police said on the matter, the heavy weather must have caused the lake to bring up things not meant for the public. For now, they've shown adamancy in staying secretive until further information comes to light."

"Did you hear the news?" wondered Alicia dropping to check, "-they found two bodies."

"Yeah," said he leaned on the chair, "-what about you, isn't it time to pick up Celina?"

"OH YEAH," she shook, "-what should I do," staring about.

"Here," he threw the car-keys, "-make sure not to crash the vehicle."

"Be a little more careful," she barely caught it, "-are you sure?"

"Go on, manager, there's no need to be tactful now. Are we not a close group of friends?"

"Well yeah..."

"Then the matter is settled. Go and maybe drop by the mall. Celina's feeling a little under the weather lately, see to her."

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"What do you think I am?" her posture tightened as did the lips.

"A trusted friend," a big thumbs up resulted in a roll of the eye.

"Whatever," the door shut with attitude.

"Back to this," fingers to the keyboard, "-I guess Odgar's on the case."

The agency broke into two teams. Aki and Tensy returned to Melmark to handle the few job requests by frequent clients. Camilia and Odgar remained in Odgawoan. The mansion proved very much comfortable; the study changed into a place of investigation. File cabinets carried the multiple written reports by Engn Codd. The contents were unknown to even the son. There were so many it'd take a few months to read.

Over the course of a week, the bodies of Carter lake stayed with no face nor name. The coroner was at a loss, the cause of death – drowning. Multiple conclusions were drawn. With no tips nor leads, the case soon went cold. The media was advised to stay off the investigation. Just like that, the populous, indifferent unless affected personally, went on without caring for the deaths.

Wednesday the 3rd of March; Igna's modeling photo went live on the issue of Nexe Magazine. The focus was on the instruments as opposed to the models. The few avid fans quickly linked his videos to the publication. Then and there, those wanting to know what happened to the Alchemist were shocked to see the branch off into music. Sally connivingly had Ikoen release the duet of Mr. Cartney and Kinless. Classical meets new-age, a combination that oddly fits. The first job gave a little boost in popularity. In the grandeur of the world, the few who read said magazine were interested in the product, not the model.

Days flew by till Friday. An urgent call resounded through the bedside table. 'What's the problem?' caller showed Nona of Vorn, '-it's 02:00 in the morning.' Pitch darkness merged into a slightly reddish vision, "-hello?"

"HELLO!" came a fatigued tone, "-I NEED HELP, PLEASE!"

"Take it easy, tell me what happened?"

"They're going to kill me, I know it. I-IGNA HELP ME!" the call ended abruptly.

"Oh shit," wide awake, "-éclair, track the location," he burst out the apartment.

"Carter lake," said he.

Footsteps crinkled sticks and leaves. The forest loomed ever-so fearsomely. '-W-why me,' biting her tongue inside a bush, '-why did it have to be me?' blood rolled down the forehead. '-I only wanted to retain my chastity, why a-are they a-after me?'

"Hey, did you find her?" echoed about.

"No, how the fuck you did let her escape?"

"Come on, don't blame this on me. I only wanted to piss a little."

"Well, the boss is going to piss on our corpse if we don't do something."

"Fuck sake, we've botched this job. The forest's too big," the voice grew closer, "-we've been at it for more than an hour now."

"You think she escaped?"

"No, we've got guards at the entrance. She's in the forest, I can promise that much."

“Coming from the mouth who let her escape, doesn’t seem so viable now, does it?”

Staying quiet grew harder. The more time passed, the closer the attackers moved until “-I’ve got an idea.”

DRING, DRING, the phone resonated mere steps away.

“Here you are,” said the walking murderously.

“Wait...” turning the corner showed the phone and nothing else.

‘Don’t underestimate a girl,’ to which she snuck her way into the forest, ‘-wait,’ *thud,* ‘-why’s my heart...’ dropped to the knees, ‘-what’s this?’ memories of a drink and a gentleman jumped to mind. ‘-Have I been drugged?’ the world spun and soon she fell.

Tied by rope, the vision returned into more of a drunken stupor, the voices were long and echoey. “She caused quite a ruckus,” said one of the men carry her to the lake.

“Very lively one, unlike the others we had to chase.”

“Good, excellent,” another stronger figure walked into her elated state, “-you ran farther than I’d imagine. The thrill of the chase, if only the drug didn’t kick, you might have escaped. God forbid,” palm to the forehead, “-I wish not to deprive the world of another beautiful lady like you,” moved close to lick her cheeks, “-alas, tis as the law of survival dictates. The strong life and the weak dies.” A chain tied around her feet; “-they’ve found the prey of our prior hunts. Still, the lake is the rightful heir of those who dared oppose our master.” A signal had them throw her into the lake. “-Good-bye,” waved the man.

‘I c-can’t breathe,’ the starry night blurred under the water surface, ‘-am I going to die?’ bubbles of water escaped, ‘-save me, somebody, save me...’ Suffocation, water filled the lungs, ‘-I wanted to live.’ Her long hair swayed, the pulling force of the metal chain bound her to the bottom. Breathing stopped, the airway shut, unconsciousness set in, the darkness grew darker.

“Not on my watch,” a figure dove without concern, ‘-where’s she,’ looking about, ‘-I don’t have my lenses. Damn it, I can’t see her in this darkness.’ *thud,* ‘-I can sense her,’ a fading thread rose beyond the surface, ‘-it’s her,’ he dove further inside, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads.*

“wake up... wake up... WAKE UP!” consciousness returned to a drenched Igna giving mouth to mouth under the moon-lit sky. “Don’t be an idiot, you were there for less than two minutes.”

Cough, cough, her face flickered into life.

“Good,” exhaling deeply, “-let’s hope this works.” *Blood-Arts: Enlian,* canines sharpened, the hair whitened, the eyes bright red and the wings of an angel sprouting out the back, “-let’s get you to a hospital.”

Emergency hastily took her for further treatment.

‘I can’t,’ back on the roof, ‘-using my vampiric form was a bad idea,’ crumbled onto his feet, ‘-no way my body can handle the backlash,’ blood spewed out the nose and mouth. Nausea and a throbbing pain

forced him onto the barricade. ‘-I’m weak,’ the pain intensified so much so the heart raced. ‘-Am I going to die?’ hands clutching the chest, ‘-I feel it... d-death.’ The pupils dilated on the last breath.

‘Where am I?’ the spirit floated across Hidros, ‘-am I at the motherland?’ the weather and scenery didn’t match reality. The streets were lesser populated and the multiple villages were absent. It wandered until Rosepire where the few people residing did so in bliss. Kronos’s sickle shone vaguely through the ground, ‘-I can see the heart of the world. T-this is the realm of Shadows.’

“Wake up,” a calm voiced pull the consciousness into reality, “-dude, are you ok?”

“Who are you?”

“A nurse. The girl’s awake, are you not going to see her?”

“Nona,” he stood, “-is she ok?”

“Don’t worry,” said the nurse, “-she’s fine. Quite lucky you brought her here so fast.”

“Thank god,” the body relaxed, ‘-my body feels lighter.’ The nurse kept on staring.

“Is something the matter?” frowned Igna.

“Did you always have white and black hair or is it a dye job?”

“What do you mean?” checking the reflection, “-wait,” silvery-white accompanied by meshes of black. The skin grew paler, the left eye remained crimson. ‘My transformation’s incomplete... WAIT,” looking back, ‘-ok, the wings are gone.’

“Sir, are you alright?”

“Sorry about that. A little dazed from what happened. And yes, it’s a dye job. I couldn’t decide between black and white, figured why not go for both.

“To each, their own I suppose,” the silhouette disappeared into the distance.

‘I saw the realm of Shadow. Intherna, Gophy, are you guys still alive?’ stopped before a reflective surface, ‘-my transformation’s stuck between human and vampire. I can’t use Enlian; it’s not responding. I’m such an idiot – breaking the seal before preparation.’

Chapter 545: The Realm

‘Why are they running about, I’m fine. Everything’s so blurry, I feel like I woke up from a long nap. Wait... the lake, they threw me inside the lake. Those bastards, how did I survive... my limbs are still here, what a relief. I feel better, time to wake up.’ In a minimalistic white room, mild shouts echoed down the hall, patients rolled from one place to another. Time showed 05:00, the cold fearsome outside muddled with the rising sun.

“Are you ok?” inquired a soothing voice.

“Igna?” the head shuffled about the pillow, “-is that you?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” said he sat on a stool, “-you were submerged for less than three minutes.”

"Give me a break."

"No, you give me a break," visibly agitated, "-what happened?"

"Question," her lashes paused, "-why's the hair black and white, I don't get the crimson pupil either..."

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"There's no room for you to speak," refuted he, "-care to explain?"

"Fine," gathering her strength to sit upright, "-it happened last night. I was invited to a party by some workers from Eclipses. I mean, I saw a lot of important people on said list. Figured, if I wanted to get to places, I had to make contacts. The party was normal for the most part. Many were indulging in alcohol and some in more nefarious activities in private-rooms. Didn't matter to me since I was engaged with an employer of the film studio. The talk went over nice until the drinks came along. I can handle my liquor, proven time and time again... however, this time, something else was mixed in the drinks. Next thing, I blacked out and woke inside the forest with men chasing me. A guy said to run away, we're playing tag... I feared for my life since bodies were also found in the lake. I thought about contacting the police... well, they wouldn't help, I knew it. All my contacts were either girls or good-for-nothing assistants. You popped into mind for some reason, that's why I called."

"Look at that," he held her hands, "-aren't you energetic now."

"You son of a b--"

"There, there, a lady shouldn't go use such vulgar language," he came across as defiant and mocking.

"What about a gentleman?"

"Fuck you," giving the middle finger, "-doctors said you can leave. There's no risk of pneumonia and any other complications. I'll have the papers readied, take a nap or something," he parted the thin curtains.

"Ighna!" the damp pink hair usually kept parted down the middle awry into an adorable mess.

"What?" he turned also damped by the rescue.

"Thanks for saving me."

"No thanks," refuted he, "-I demand a date as compensation."

"A date?"

"Yes, a date," he laughed, "-might not look it, but a handsome boy such as myself is still single," a heavy dramatic tone nulled any seriousness.

"Shut up," she chuckled, "-there's nothing handsome about you, wet dog."

"Wow, wet dog," the brows raised, "-what does that make you?"

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"An angel," she smiled in a conceited manner, jerking her chin up and to the left.

"Too bad angels can't swim," the door shut on the last laugh.

“éclair, you’ve got the location of the nightclub?”

“Yes, made a few conclusions from what she said.”

“The culprits should still be near the lake or on the way back. Do your thing.”

“Orders confirmed, also, PUT ON THE DAMNED LENSES!”

“No need to shout.”

Far from the hospital, as the sun rose on outside, so did the guests at the mansion. The case of the two bodies found added another layer of mystery to the already complex turn of events. Odgar sat at the desk going over and worrying about what to do next. ‘-There must be a way to sneak inside the company. The coroner didn’t give an exact cause of death. Were drugs used or not, is it the same company or another killer. Hold on,’ accessing missing person’s report, ‘-two starlets were filed as lost after four months of disappearance. The information didn’t get any media attention. I can hardly find any mention on the Arcanum. Good thing Igna gave me access to the police’s servers. The ones who filed were, let’s see, Robert Dania. A director working for Bright Barnacle Film Company. He was found dead to natural causes a week after the police report, hmm, maybe, just maybe,’ stood to grab the overcoat.

“You going somewhere?” inquired Camilia rhythmically typing.

“Yes, some old school information gathering.”

“Sure it wise?”

“Definitely,” said he, “-if there’s a person who knows what happens here, then it’s him.”

At the driver’s seat, he rode off towards Fulha’s district. A more moderately priced area for those in search of a budget vacation. As the largest district, locals divided the latter into three parts. North also referred to as Mi’s district, Center, and South, which held no connection to the cardinal points, just a convenient naming scheme. North, a place of gambling and host to the local red-light district. Center, a place for many media companies and idol agencies. There were mostly subsidiaries of the bigger brands, a proving ground for up-and-coming stars. And then, South, the residential area, similar to Eldow’s high but at a way, way, lower price. Destination, the center of Fulha – to a certain low-key publication company, host to the controversial Rave’s paper. They took pride in writing just about anything, from scandals to well, scandals. The only reason for the popularity was the baiting titles and secret investigation on certain powerful individuals.

At the center, a journalist and writer, by the pen name, Nav. The articles written by him were worthy of praise. The words reached the point of having the star in question mail death threats. A mistake he’d never be able to live down. The shrewd play of the card of justice and being rightful, forcing both the police and the star into granting immunity. If ever found dead, the blame laid on the death threats, and if the investigation grew cold per any reason, they were corrupt. That day forth, Nav painted a bullseye on his back.

Out in the reaches of Hidros, after the council ended. Reception of the Haggard’s leaving the Federation rattled both parties. Arda’s leadership slowly secluded themselves with Lucifer at the center.

The Queen of Elendor expressed her dismay in full, blaming the Ardanian for such a cause of trouble. Even the young couple of Easel Run Gard saw fit to take the Haggard's side. The two went as far as to propose forming an alliance and extraditing Arda and their troubles. Borders were shut, and the bridge linking Dorchester and Arda closed for an undisclosed amount. Tourists were sent on their way; the decision was made during a round-table discussion. The Blood-King's faction refused to the point of drawing weapons. The representatives turned face and allied with Lucifer. Thus, power shifted – and the aged vampiric clans were shunned, almost referred to as traitors. The guild remained neutral as profit and safety of the populous was primary.

Noctis's Hallow, the surrounding forest evolved into a death-trap for the uninvited. The last discussion had brought multiple to host a meeting of their own. Dark in color scheme, lavish wooden chairs, and ancient oak tables brimmed and basked in the tension. Lord Alaric Eoin, Lord Balthazar, Lady Aurora, Lady Julia Fawn, Lady Gabrielle Izora, Lady Elvira, and lastly, Lady Serene. An old portal linking Hidros and Noctis's Hallow, remained inside the attic.

"Hello everyone," said Aurora, "-I do apologize for the lack of decorum. There's a pressing issue at hand. Lucifer and the round-table of Arda."

"What do you mean?" inquired Alaric.

"Let me explain," said Balthazar clearing the throat, the choice of attire sure was heavy and fully in-line with the Victorian flavor, "-the Blood-King's faction was dishonored by Lord Lucifer. He's going to marry her majesty the queen in the coming months. She's granted him the honor of ruling the realm in her stead. Our allies have swapped sides, we only have 2 votes at the council. The guilds remain silent in fear of being shunned – they're following the order of keeping the peace."

"Reason for said disagreement?" wondered Alaric with an erupting displeased expression.

"Arda's trying to shut off borders as the Haggard's left the Federation."

"Is that true?" inquired Lady Julia to Serene.

"It's true," said she, "-I've left the royal family's care to stand at my master's side, the head of the Haggard family."

"What about the descendants of our master?" voiced Gabrielle who knew of the disaccord and not the reason.

"Prince Julius and Princess Lizzie have abdicated claims to the throne and moved to stay with Lady Courtney inside Rotherham," explained Lord Balthazar calmly.

"Good gracious," smiled Julia, "-as long as the blood survives, we need not worry."

"Hence the discussion today," added Aurora, "-we need to decide what the Blood-King's faction ought to do."

"Thanks to the cure King Staxius bestowed upon the vampires, even low-born have the power of a hundred men, far superior to the army or the adventuring guild."

“There’s no need to worry about the adventurers,” said Elvira, “-if they move against us, we can always call onto the guild of Hidros. Besides, the current guild master of Arda is Lady Haru, who’s a member of the family. The adventurers know who saved them and who didn’t, they won’t fight, not now.”

“I second Lady Elvira,” said Serene, “-we have a lot of cards to play.”

“The question remains, what of the faction?”

“We should prioritize the safety of our kin,” said Balthazar.

“Yes,” added Elvira with Serene nodding.

“Arda isn’t of our concern,” voiced Alaric, “-as far as the realm sees us, we’re an independent faction. This is oddly similar to the war we fought so many years ago. The memories are still fresh. Our allies, the Winged-Wolves, are loyal and won’t forget our King saving them. If push comes to shove, we could call onto the spirits of the forest.”

“How could we forget,” reminisced Balthazar, “-we’ve got allies all over the kingdom. Did he foresee such a possibility?”

“Knowing him,” said Elvira, “-he must have.”

“Is the table in agreement about leaving Arda as is and focus on our kin instead?”

“Yes,” they firmed the decision.

And so, the Blood-King faction remained in the council of Arda but independent. Turned to neutrality and joining the Guild for the sake of the populous. Another war would only hurt the people and not gain anything of importance. In the end, the borders of Arda and Hidros were shut due to internal conflicts.

Queen Gallienne had her sights on the possible fight against Iqavea. ‘Arda can’t do much without our help. Shanna’s a lost cause, a friend gone so quickly. Lucifer’s the real problem. I’m sure he’ll try to make an alliance with Alphaia under the excuse of the Federation. If Alphaia joins them, we’re doomed – getting cornered on two sides. Elendor won’t be of much help since Old Cray’s tenacity has the realm in fear. Easel Run Gard can’t afford to fight, they’re weak and pacifist. The tension’s risen, leaving the Federation was a great move. We can now see who’s friend and who’s foe. Lady Courtney is as shrewd as him. Well, before war can start,” her eyes grew merciless,”-I might have to dispose of my daughter...”

“Hello majesty, how might I be of help?” the phone rang.

“Lady Courtney,” said she, “-I apologize for the informal tone. I’ve decided to have Rotherham be granted the title of Dukedom.”

“I see, are you perhaps wanting for a favor?”

“I know it’s hard to say this, but in the interest of the kingdom. I need Princess Eira taken out of the picture for a while.”

“An assassination?” her tone froze out the phone.

“There isn’t a need to take her life. We only need her out the picture.”

"You do know," she sighed, "-my niece is a demi-goddess, the Librarian of Nexsolium is a strong opponent."

"What about you?"

"No," said she, "-a weapon is only as strong as its wielder. I can't fight, not anytime soon. I doubt there's anyone strong enough to do said job."

"If she marries the Emperor of Alpha, we're in trouble, Hidros might come to an end. For his sake, I don't wish for the motherland to end, especially when the provinces are allied under a single name."

Chapter 546: Fleeting moment

"Even so, majesty, there's no one strong enough to take her on at the moment. Most of our men are in Elendor trying to stop a war."

"No, there is one person."

"..."

"And?"

"..."

"..." a treacherous long-winded silence, a prophet of a coming disaster.

"There's only one person," her mouth articulated each syllable with prestige, "-Julius or thy son, Igna Haggard."

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"Why my son?" the tide changed, "-how dare you suggest such a thing?"

"Don't get so worked up, this is for the future of the kingdom. Get it done, lady Courtney, I'm still thy queen!"

"Fine," audible discontent came in a tsk, "-I'll figure something out on my end. The Dukedom of Rotherham needs to be equal to the effort we're to put in."

"Don't worry," said she, "-if the task is successful, I'll have most of the land over there transferred to Duke Haggard, no worries," a lighter almost childish stress on the 'ies' brought Courtney to a sulk.

"Gallienne, I swear," said she, "-I can't believe the audacity."

"Oh, get off it," refuted the queen, "-we're best friends, are we not?"

"I suppose. Alright, I'll have it done. Make sure the realm doesn't fall to pride or ignorance."

"Will do."

Inside the comfort of the apartment, guitar in hand, the phone rang loudly. *Caller: Lady Mother.*

"Good evening?"

"Hello Igna," the youthful voice never parted, "I have urgent news. Sorry about this; you'll need to return to Hidros for a week. Its matters of the Academy, and a few other private issues."

"Alright, when should I make the trip?"

"Later tonight, I've already sent a plane."

"Sure... WAIT!"

"No need to shout," said she physically distancing the phone, "-speak calmly."

"Mother, can I bring over my companions?"

"Do as you wish, son. You're old and responsible. I'll see you in Hidros."

The happenings of the realms and world were naught but passing thoughts to him. He knew not of the abdication and the strained relations. One thing did bother, the academy – he hadn't returned for a few months. Off to Alpha he went, messages from Lady Haru stopped half-way into the trip, it felt weird to worry about someone busy.

At around 14:45, the doors opened to show Alicia and a tired Celina.

'What's wrong with him?' wondered Alicia narrowing her gaze at the stern Igna. He sat with legs crossed and elbows on the counter veering towards the silent outside.

"Are you ok?"

"Yes," turned he yawning in full, "-welcome back."

"Igna," she paused, "-your hair and eye, what happened?"

"Nothing much," said he avoided the subject, "-there are more pressing matters," dashed to Celina's side, "-Hey, I have good news!"

"What news?" asked she nonchalantly.

"Does this involve me?" inquired the manager.

"Depends on you," said he, "-I'm heading to Hidros for a week. Celina, you're coming with me. It was the plan from the start."

"What about me?" asked she stomping to stare head-to-head, "-how... wait, WHY?"

"Calm it," said he, "-Alicia, something important came up. I'll be back in a week; besides, we can go together."

"No, no," she held his shoulder, "-that's not the matter here," her cheeks flushed, "-why didn't you talk to me about this?"

"Why didn't I talk?" the head tilted in confusion, "-aren't you dating someone from Red-Loft. There's no reason to speak on the matter. I said you can come, what's the big idea here?"

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“Do you not get it,” her fist tightened, “-whatever,” silently ambling to her room, “-I’ll pack my stuff.”

“Alright,” returned to Celina, “-this is important. I’m sure you figured that I won’t be able to stay forever. My wish is for you to become independent. It was selfish of me to take you with, and kill your father, still, seeing your face and that environment... sort of made me want to help, you understand?”

“Yes,” she tiptoed to pat the shoulders, “-don’t worry. I want to become an idol. I’ll work hard and become famous so you don’t have to worry. I’m not a child anymore, I realized it on the day everything changed.”

“Hey, hey,” pinching her cheeks, “-it’s not like I’m abandoning you. You’ll study and work at the same time. What do you say?”

“Alright,” she smiled, “-if my dreams are fulfilled, I’ll go anywhere.”

“Thanks for that, now, go pack.”

They arrived on Saturday the 6th at around 16:00. The plane landed with a screech. A scan around showed a rather empty airfield. Not many guards were about, empty-hangars and such. Suspicion rose upon standing on the warm asphalt.

“It’s good to be back home,” breathed Igna, “-there’s a difference between Alpha and Hidros.”

“Wait for us,” called Alicia pulling a heavy bag.

“I told you,” said he smugly, “-we’re here for a week. Why pack so much?”

“A lady needs clothes for multiple occasions,” she pouted while he facepalmed. Celina watched in a confused manner, ‘-why are you facepalming?’ voiced across the dulled expression.

“Sorry about that,” he took her hands, “-don’t worry.”

“Ok,” she shrugged.

A large luxury car drove onto the airfield, “-the ride’s here,” said he to Alicia.

“Where even are we?” wondered she, “-I’ve been to Oxshield, this is different. Feels more like a military establishment...”

“We’re in a military town,” said he, “-welcome to Rotherham.” The door to the metallic beast opened automatically. Luggage in the trunk, they headed for the skyscrapers.

“It’s pretty,” said Celina hung onto the tidy scenery.

“The town’s even prettier,” said Igna.

“Wait, we’re not in town?”

“No.” No elaboration, nothing, he left her to her own demise. She thought until napping against the window.

‘What could be so urgent mother called me. It’s weird, the academy isn’t so important for such actions. There’s something else behind the scene. What have you gotten into, mother?’

"Wait, Igna," said Alicia awoke, "-why is Rotherham not marked on the map?"

"No idea," said he, "-go back to sleep."

"Whatever," she did so.

Pulled before the behemoth of a building, a retainer came to open the door.

"Welcome back, young master," said the valet.

"Thank you, are lady Elvira and Courtney present?"

"Yes," returned the valet fearful of matching Igna's gaze, "-they wait in the office. Please head on inside."

"As you wish," returned he to a stop a few steps up the stairs, "-Alicia, Celina, will you stop gawking and come along?"

Gulp, "-yes, yes," they followed. Ambling at his side felt awkward. The working personnel nodded in respect at Igna.

"Who are you, really?" wondered Alicia.

"Told you already, a son of a rich family," said he calling the elevator.

"Rich alone can't achieve such a prosperous facility, there's more to it."

"Digging too deeply might end in death, are you so pressing to see the scythe?"

"No, never mind, forget I said anything."

Ding, a whiff of misfortune slowed the walk, '-something's amiss. I can feel sadness and regret. What's happened here?' down the corridor felt as if diving further into the depths of an ever-tranquil lake. '-This is serious,' he stopped shy of the door, "-could you girls please wait over there?" he pointed at a glass door leading into a study of some kind, "-mind taking care of them?" asked he to guard.

Click, '-wait?' the bright interior took adjusting, '-Cousin Julius, Aunt Elvira, Mother, and lady Haru...'

"Ahh, you're finally back," said lady Courtney, "-come, come, sit by my side."

"With pleasure," to which he made his way across the heavily charged atmosphere.

"Igna," said Julius tapping the shoulder, "-be strong."

'What's happening here?' checking lady Haru showed a distant expression. Turning to Courtney showed naught but the shake of dismissal.

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"Igna," called Elvira, "-I'm sorry for the urgency,"

"No, let me," interjected Haru. "-Igna, listen,"

"..."

“-Chef Leko’s dead.”

“Dead?” it took a few moments to sink, “-DEAD?”

“Yes,” said Haru.

“When, what, how?”

“A student found him hanging inside the restaurant two days ago.”

Words kept on filling the room, they explained, tried to go into details about the cause of death to no avail. He sat there with an empty expression, the death of someone who was practically family. The pain, the regret, the memories, ‘-how can they be calm...’ more than pain, something flipped. The aura of the room toppled.

“Igna?” the lips moved but no sound reached his ears. “-Igna, Igna?” said they trying to get his attention. ‘How can he be dead?’ a burst of dark-mana flooded the room, ‘-impossible,’ the hair levitated, ‘-There’s no way Chef Leko hung himself!’

“Keep it together,” *Mana-Cancellation,* a flick on the forehead, “-don’t fall prey to despair,” said Courtney pulling him into a tight embrace. “-Listen to me, don’t fall prey to any of it, you hear?”

‘Mother’s beating heart,’ *thud, thud, thud,* ‘-she’s right, there’s no need to worry.’

‘How can I just say that?’

‘Don’t worry.’

‘I should worry, a close friend of mine’s dead.’

‘What about the lives you have taken, were they not also precious to another. Stop being selfish, one who kills must be readied to be killed or have those close die.’

‘No, tis not what I mean...’

‘I know what you mean, Igna, there’s no need to worry. Trust in me, trust in yourself. Remember who you are. Emotions are a pain, don’t worry, trust me, don’t worry.’

‘Trust in me, yes, trust in myself. Who cares if someone’s dead, they’ll all reach the afterlife someday. I’m a fool, snap out of it.’

“igna...Igna...IGNA!”

“Yes, sorry,” sat upright in the chair, “-the shock came so suddenly. Thank you, mother,” turned to Haru and Elvira, “-how did he die?”

“We’re suspecting a murder,” said Elvira, “-Leko would never kill himself. No idea on the motive so far. The academy’s dodged the issues entirely.”

“I’ll take it from here,” interjected Courtney, “-let me explain what’s happened over the past few months.” All and all, it took more than two hours, the guests were carried to a nearby hotel.

'How did he die?' a pitch-dark room swayed by the draft of the night-wind. Glimmers of the setting sun onto the rising night, moon in the company of the stars, a lonesome combination of astral-bodies from which many drew fortune and what to expect. The answer sought in the astral plane sure were convoluted and vague. Hanging onto the stool of the double-hung window, 'the stars sure are lonely. Weirdly feel appeased by them. Leko's dead, the realm is in chaos and I'm here trying to become a star. It doesn't feel right anymore. I worked hard to be a chef, and now, the reason why I cooked is gone. What's the point of anything, its so fleeting. Here I thought life was going great, what a big pile of goo that was. Arda's in trouble again; the place I swore to protect and nurture's fallen into the hands of Lucifer. How many times are you going to pain me, damned god of Kreston? Can't you leave me alone – took my life, stole my powers, and still not enough. Eira's not any better either, she chose him as opposed to making amends. Tharis, Orenmir... screw it.'

"éclair, call Cousin Julius right away."

"Sure."

"Hello?"

"Hello, cousin Julius," rage bellowed, "-I need a favor."

"What is it?" returned he cautiously.

"Can we head to Arda as soon as possible?"

"Yes, why?" the voice grew even more suspicious.

"I need to meet with my aunt. There's something important I ought to say. Goes double for princess Eira as well."

"You do know the state of affairs there," the way he asked so casually turned caution into annoyance.

"I know and I don't care. She'll be pleased to have a surprise visit from her son."

"Mind I ask the reason?" the temper bordered a thin-line.

"I want to reclaim Orenmir and Tharis."

"Are you serious?" he coughed, "-the cursed weapons?" pent-up ire vanished.

"Yes, the cursed weapons, will you help or no?"

"Are you so willing to die?" argued he.

"Cousin Julius, please, grant me this singular wish."

"Put that way," he gave, "-I suppose I can do something."

Chapter 547: Cursed Items

No real arguments were made on the decision. Julius stood there, quietly, letting the draft sway the hair. In a bizarre twist, or so what Elvira had planned for them to believe, the Haggard siblings were residing at the same hotel as did Igna. This would only come to pass on the next morning where a very commanding text forced the prince out of bed. Breakfast resulted in an unexpected meeting.

“Cousin,” said Igna rushing downstairs.

“Cousin,” returned Julius already at the table, “-I didn’t realize you were here.”

“I suppose mother must have planned it so,” returned he softly, “-about yesterday,” pulling the chair, “-I’m sorry about the rude tone. I didn’t mean anything malicious by it, I’m very sorry, Cousin.”

“Don’t worry,” he nodded, “-I don’t hold any grudge. The news and all,” hesitant on the issue, “-about heading to Arda, are you sure?”

“Yes,” returned he strongly, “-I need my items back.”

“My items?”

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“No, sorry, I meant my uncle’s item, weapons included. I realize it’s a tall order, however, I do have a right to said belongings.”

“It’s no skin off my back,” he stopped and stared, the charismatic-hypnotic aura faltered, “-I can’t say much for mother,” a sneer showed the mistrust. Her actions trampled over his feelings. Selfish or not, right or wrong, who cares; she was probably right or was he right, the answer faded so very far away.

“I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“Oh, stop it,” the normal expression of joy and fulfillment returned, “-it’s no matter. I’ve already spoken to mother; she says it’s fine to come around.”

No time wasted and without informing his companions, both cousins headed to Arda. The flight lasted little more than a few hours. Flying over felt nostalgic and scary, the brimming forest after the desolate war-torn Dorchester remained strong.

‘The sheer scale of this province,’ thought he staring towards Noctis’s Hallow, ‘-always very impressive to see.’

“Igna,” jumped éclair, “-I’ve set the lenses to combat/infiltration mode. Arda’s a place of unknown, I can’t do much here. Please be careful.”

“I got it, thanks for the advice.”

‘This piece of shit country,’ he scoffed to a stop, ‘-why am I so angry?’

Between yesterday and today, something was off. The mind thought of multiple scenarios without even remotely controlling the process. More information added and the clearer the mental map of the world became. Opposing parties, people of interest, potential threats – they were all there waiting to be touched on and examined. Arda definitely held a high level of trouble. Even the fingers trembled in reaction after crossing the border. The way nature should have spoken felt more like a cry for help.

“Must be the first time here, huh?” said Julius leaping off the plane.

“Why are you in such a h-h-hurry?” stuttered Igna in the heat of the moment.

“I’ll be honest, cousin, I do not wish to spend any more time than necessary.”

“Alright, I understand. As soon as we get the items, we leave, is that fair?”

“Yes, definitely,” a brotherly hug soon turned to a scan of the area. An airfield located in cleared out part of the forest. In bearing to the capital, well, not even Julius knew for it was an empty plot of land. éclair managed to bring a map of the area; placing them about North-West of the mines.

“... Cousin.”

“I know, I know,” exhaled Julius, “-just a moment.” Stood close to a modest hangar on which grew grapevines, “-this place is an abandoned project by my mother. She wanted to make another public airport and ended saying it be a waste of time. Henceforth,” the fingers drew runes in an intangible white glow, “-I built a portal linking here to the castle yard.”

“Really?”

No answered need be said, a doorway opened to a darkened mass. “-Follow me,” said the prince leading the charge.

“As you wish,” returned he close behind. Weightlessness for a mere second to the pulling force of gravity, “-nauseating...”

“We’re here.”

Indeed, they were. The garden had bloomed into a fuller more vivid display. The stone-paths were redecorated and remade to have multiple crests. Statues were dotted about, and the castle door; big and heavy after which rested guards in adamantite armor. Glancing over the shoulder showed a crowded street of demi-humans. The uninhabited town of the castle-level expanded into another district for commerce and business. The noise made was very lively.

“Igna,” said Julius, “-I have something to say before we go on.”

“What?”

“Thy appearance,” he paused, “-the grey suit, the hair color, the heterochromia eyes; are you alright?”

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“It’s a bit embarrassing. My vampiric transformation didn’t go as planned, thus the result.”

“Oh,” he chuckled, “-well, I guess it’s time then.”

The first step met with judging eyes. The prince wasn’t royalty any longer. The guards watched in pain and anger. He had abandoned them, or so they thought.

‘Portraits,’ thought Igna, one thing became very clear. The less than invited reception, the change in décor, the statues and such, all pointed to a certain source.

“Lord Julius,” hailed a servant, “-her majesty would like a few words.”

He cared not for a response and thus made for the throne room. ‘Pillars, the red-carpet down the middle. The platform for the overlooking nobles. The banner and the artistic backdrop, it hasn’t changed much.’

“Lord Julius, what a pleasure to see you again,” said a very charismatic man standing at the Queen’s side.

“Lord Lucifer,” they bowed and knelt “-what a pleasure to see you,” an obvious lie.

“Might I ask who this personage is?”

“My cousin,” said he, “-Igna Haggard, son of Lady Courtney.”

“What brings you to the capital this fine morning-”

The queen rose her hand, “-I’ll take it from here, my lord.”

“As you wish,” he bowed with hands across the chest.

“You there, boy,” looking down her nose, “-raise thine head.”

He did so in complete confidence.

‘Impossible,’ her bravado shook, ‘-he can’t be...’

“Majesty,” voiced Julius, “-we’ve come here in urgent business.”

“Silence Julius, I’ll hear none of you today,” she stood with hands on the heavy gemstone stuttered attire, “-are you truly the son of Courtney?” her heads reached to touch his cheeks.

“Majesty,” pushing aside her hands, “-I’m not very keen on having strangers touch my person.”

“INSOLENCE!” cried Lucifer emerging out the shadows.

“Stand-down,” fired she, “-my dear, please, don’t, tis an urgent matter. After all, tis what he said, is it not?” glaring him, “-so, tell me, nephew, what’s the reason for the visit.”

“I’ve come to reclaim my uncle’s items,” said he, “-I was sent a will dictating all he lost would be handed to me.”

“Whatever do you mean?” her posture faltered, “-what will, I’ve not heard of anything of sorts.”

“Majesty, have you known of my presence until now?”

“I suppose not...”

“Then it goes double for the will,” reaching inside the suit-jacket, “-here are the papers, only a copy of course.”

“I see,” glossing over the paper, “-it does say the weapons and a few particular items.”

“Orenmir, Tharis, the badge of Alchemist, the noble crest, a glove, and a signet ring.”

“Brother,” the tranquil atmosphere broke, “-how dare you show thine face around here after the betrayal?”

“Sister Eira,” said Julius, “-good to see you in good health.”

“Cut the crap,” said she loudly, “-what are you doing here?”

“Hold it,” said the queen lifting a finger, “-Igna was it, are you sure about wanting these items?”

“Yes,” he smirked, “-I’d like nothing more than to inherit what is lawfully mine.”

“Mother, this can’t be,” cried Eira, “-father would have never allowed for anyone to touch his weapons.”

“I suppose the one responsible for his death would know now, wouldn’t she,” remarked Igna.

“You,” she walked to dig her knee into the side of his head, “-don’t get cocky, we’re in Arda, and here, the royal family holds power, not you, understand?”

“Sister,” glared Julius, “-that will be enough out of you.”

“It goes the same for you, dearest younger brother.”

“Rumors were true. The melancholic beauty of Arda is bound to remain single till death comes. Doesn’t surprise me since you’re not even of the same blood as the previous king, damn kingslayer.”

“IGNA!”

“Enough!” yelled Shanna, “-Bring over the briefcase.”

“As you wish,” returned Lucifer making for the treasury.

The tension died a little after the queen regained her seat. Eira kept to the pillar and gawked. Igna and Julius stood and stared. The guards showed no hostility and neither did the queen. The provoking didn’t do much except provide entertainment for Julius. It had been a long time coming.

“There you are,” said the charming man laying the items onto a portable table, “-be careful, they’re very much cursed. This the reason why we have them sealed in this box here.”

“I see,” said Igna admiring the stained scabbard of Orenmir.

“Young nephew, can I ask a question?” she leaned onto the arm-rest.

“As you wish, majesty,” returned he nonchalantly.

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“What are you planning to do with these cursed items?”

“Nothing much,” he opened the case where rested the glove, the same one used to propose to Xula. The one the king kept as remembrance and proof of his love. “Just plan on making them my own,” turning to Julius, “-can you create fire?”

“Yes, why?”

“Create one right away.”

Snap, a hovering ball of flame levitated next to Igna, “-Queen Shanna, might I ask a question now?”

“Go on ahead,” returned she a little concerned.

“I’ve always wondered what happened to my uncle. The body was never found – there could have been a possibility of survival. I suppose, the charming man at thy side is proof enough of the documented love

of the Ardanian Royal family," he pinched the gloves over the flames, "-the past is best forgotten, and I wish not to remember someone who didn't care for her children," the grip lessened and it burnt to ashes.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!" cried the Queen.

"Majesty," he stared blankly, "-why are you so distraught. Isn't Lord Lucifer thy fiancé. Tis better to forget," to which he smiled at the charming man. A simple sentence brought the entourage to a standstill.

"The dragon crest, the mark of Undrar, the badge of an alchemist, and the signet ring of the Ardanian royal family," placing the latter onto the table, "-I will not be needing this one. Lord Lucifer, I think it best you have it."

"I appreciate the gesture," the head shook, "-I'll kindly decline the offer."

"What about you then, cousin?"

"Sure," with a half-smile, "-I'll make it my own," he carved a cross onto the crest, "-this should be better." A blatant act of refusal, the cousins stood strongly in hostile territory and did things that'd often end in jail and even death.

"Igna," cautioned the charming man, "-do not open these last two boxes for our sakes. They can't be wielded by anyone other than the king."

"Au contraire," he broke the magical seal, "-these weapons belong to me."

'How did he...' wondered Shanna widening her focus, "-Igna, don't you go do something stupid."

"Queen Shanna," he reached for the blade, "-there's nothing more shameful than to have a weapon not be used."

"Don't draw it!" cried Eira, "-you'll curse the throne room."

"GUARDS!" yelled Shanna seeing him reached for the grip, "-RESTRAIN HIM!"

"Back off," the blade slid out its cage, "-don't get anywhere close to me," the tip laid at the neck of one of the guards. "Orenmir, the Blood-Blade of the Queen. Is this the cursed sword I wonder," slightly tilting the blade brought on specters and an unnatural indoor typhoon, "-yes, I suppose it is," back into its scabbard, "-Tharis's a very sexy pistol." Holstered inside the suit-jacket, "-thank you, majesty, for the warm reception. I've taken what was bestowed, time to bid adieu."

"Wait for a second," said she sharply, "-do you think you can leave just like that?"

"Excuse me, majesty," he smiled, "-there's no need to think when tis already set-in-stones. Why should I be worried when the queen of Arda's lost her true self. Prophecy is dead, is she not?"

"NEPHEW," she rose strongly, "-how do you know of that?"

"Should have been obvious from the beginning," he spun away, "-Xula."

Chapter 548: He's gone.

'Xula...' the word stuck. A portal conjured immediately after Igna nodded. The queen stretched her arms in vain, wanting to have a thing she'd given up hope. Besides Staxius, no one had called her by the real name; even the fiancé failed in the end. A young boy, bearing the blood of her husband, and who also bore a striking resemblance – used the cursed weapons and knew stuff not even the closest confidants knew.

"The little pest," gritted Eira, "-mother, please allow me to hunt them down!"

"No," interjected Lord Lucifer, "-the lady queen needs a few to recuperate. You have another matter to attend to, isn't that right?"

"Yes," the jumpy attitude silenced into obedience, "-I'll make the necessary preparations."

A few hours later, at around 13:00, the cousins were inside Rotherham holding conniving smirks. All who walk past questioned the expression for it bared resemblance to those young boys would have after having completed a mischievous deed.

"Cousin," said Julius holding his laughter, "-we really did it."

"Yeah," returned he emptily, "-I can't believe it." Realization hit after setting foot onto safe grounds, guards were lowered and emotions ran wild.

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"Two coffee please," they dropped by into a neatly little café tucked between the growing town-square.

"Cousin, you're crazy," breathed Julius, "-standing up to them without care for thy life."

"They couldn't have hurt me even if they wanted," remarked he, "-attacking is a declaration of war against Phantom. Arda can't fight us despite their armies."

"You're right," said he, "-we've only gotten stronger."

Bells twinkled, two figures wearing puffed jackets entered, "-so cold," said the little one.

"Celina, Alicia," waved Igna, "-are you headed somewhere?"

"What do you mean," she rushed over to grab his coat, "-where were you since yesterday!" as each table had been woodenly partitioned, she didn't notice the blonde-haired man.

"Not very ladylike," said he nonchalantly, "-look, look," he signaled by raising the brows.

"What do you even mean?" she turned to cough, "-oh shit... hello, I'm sorry, my name's Alicia, n-nice to meet y-you."

"Good afternoon," said the handsome Julius, "-are you a friend of my cousin?"

"Forget about him," she forced her way into his seat, "-I'd never expect to meet the Julius here of all places."

"Please, you give me far too much credit," said he humbly, "-I'm honored to meet a fan, thank you for the support." The manager took to express her love in a very loud way. Julius handled the situation and signaled, 'take it easy, Igna.'

"Igna!" said Celina monotonously, "-hello, how are you?"

"Hello, how are you?" smiled he, "-did you sleep well yesterday?"

"Yes, and stop treating me like a child," her gaze sneaked glances towards Julius.

"Look at you," teased Igna, "-blushing at cousin Julius." For a small little café, there were a lot of people. The dark-wooden floor and fresh-shiny furniture screamed novel and good-quality.

"Good job on fighting alone," commented éclair.

"Yeah, whatever," Celina and Alicia took to the prince immensely. He spoke and handled the situation nicely. Igna had his drink then left, leaving the two girls in Julius's care.

'I guess it's time,' outside on the cold-streets, '-time to pay Chef Leko a visit.' He hailed a taxi and made for the hospital. 'I came here to see my friends last time, now, it's to see a dead body, what shame.' Throughout the trip, the heart raced. The newfound courage faded with each step, the pain increased till the white-stairs leading inside.

"Hello, son," said Lady Courtney, "-are you alright?"

"Could be better," returned he, "-why are you here, mother?"

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"The autopsy concluded. Everyone's here to pay their respects." Down the hall towards the morgue, the ins and outs of the nurses and patients lessened. The corridors seemed to stretch into forever; at one point, without realizing it, Igna halted at a doorway to stare at the floor. He hyperventilated. 'Calm down,' the hands cupped, '-slower, breathe slowly.'

Every noise, everything seemed distorted and echoey. The morgue laid a few steps forward, in addition to Lady Elvira and the others, an unfamiliar lady and two children stood idly.

"Come on," whispered lady Courtney, "-man up, son, this isn't the time to break down."

Her words oddly gave confidence, '-who's she?' they approached.

"Igna," said Lady Haru teary from the sight.

"Go on," said Elvira, "-go talk to him for the last time," she pushed and shut the door.

Cold, decrepit, and silent, one step forth reverberated loudly in the ears. There, on the metal mortuary table, covered by a single white cloth, laid Leko. Pulling the cloth showed the lifeless pale visage, '-it is him,' the heart sank, '-chef Leko...' No words exchanged, he stood there and watched – standing respectfully at his side. 'There was so much more I could have learned. Why didn't you make Dungeon-Style cooking a real thing; there was so much to do.' Inhaling deep, '-well,' he forced a grin, '-there's no use crying over your death, big brother. May you live in peace in the afterlife. Damn it, if only I could have used magic.... If only I had an ancient scroll, if only my powers of the death reaper were still here, I could have... I could have revived you and taken revenge. Even as a vampire, I can't grant eternal life... you'd hate me if I did so. Exchanging your humanity for a never-ending life; so selfish.' He covered the face, "-éclair, did you scan his body?"

“Yes, I’ve mapped it.”

“Thank you for everything,” he bowed, “-chef Leko, I’ll forever cherish our memories and lesson. You were and will remain a great man. I promise to find whoever did this,” reaching for the doorknob, “-I swear, they’ll repay it tenfold.”

All stood a few meters from the morgue after paying respects. “Igna,” called lady Haru, “-this is Chef Leko’s wife and daughters.”

“Good to meet you,” said he politely.

“Igna,” she jumped for a tight embrace, “-thank you for everything. Leko was very happy after he met you, he always spoke fondly about this little brother.”

“Please,” said he holding back tears, “-don’t, I can’t.”

“I’m grateful, thank you.”

Nothing brought people together as the passing of a loved one. More celebrated the end of life instead of the birth of one. The whole logic should have been inverted. Supposed the morbid nature added to why so many were fascinated.

“When will the funeral be held?” wondered Igna away from the grieving family.

“He’s going to be cremated here and now,” said Haru, “-it’s his will and wish. ‘I don’t want people to mourn my death, please cremate me and send my ashes to my wife and children, tell them father is deeply sorry.’ He was a caring individual until the end.” Per his wish, a white-van came as transit to the crematorium. Graves to the left and a garden to the right, final prayers exchanged and so, the renowned chef burnt peacefully. The wife and daughters stood hand in hand and watched, the children were sad but didn’t cry, the mother grieved but stayed strong.

“Igna,” said lady Leko, “-can I have a moment?” her cheeks and nose reddened in woe.

“Ok,” they moved outside to a quieter area, “-listen, I killed him.”

“What?” he halted under the tall foliage of trees.

“I killed him,” said she crying, “-I killed my husband. I wasn’t able to look after him, I wasn’t here to take care of him, and I wasn’t there to help. I killed him for being incompetent.”

“Please,” said he, “-the circumstances of his death are...”

“I know,” she sniffled, “-my husband worked hard to get where he was. He endorsed thee at Cle and left his legacy in thy hands.”

“I’m sorry,” back against a tree, “-I can’t carry on cooking anymore. He was the reason I cooked... I’m grateful for what he did, and I want to return, but I can’t. The kitchen makes me sad, the scar left behind by the Lordon, and now the passing of my teacher, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to hold a knife like a chef. I lost the right to do so, my selfishness and cowardice drove me out of Hidros, I set out searching for another path and left Chef Leko alone. I should have been the one at his side, if only I was here, I

could have done something to help. Don't you understand, lady Leko, I'm the one at fault," he sunk to a crouch, "-I've lost the right to cook, I can't... it's gone."

"Don't say that," she joined and crouched.

"I'm sorry, I should be the one consoling you..."

"Hey, it's fine," she patted his shoulder, "-I can't afford to be sad. He left me with two bundles of joy, I can't afford to give in to sorrow."

"Can I ask a question?" the voice lingered between timidity and despair.

"Go on."

"What's your name?"

"Linda Leko-Goodwin."

"A compound name?"

"Yes," said she softly.

"What's going to happen to the academy?"

"I'll take over as director. I might not look it, I'm a red-collared chef too. The burden left is heavy, a good thing my shoulders are strong. Igna, the reason I called you out here was to ask for help in readying the academy for a future without my husband. Sadly, by what you said, I can't do that anymore. I won't force anything. I'll try my hardest to make it work. Sorry for the trouble."

"Lady Linda," said he as she stood, "-I'm sorry for being useless."

"Don't worry," she smiled, "-I'll carry on with my husband's legacy. Tis the duty of the wife," a forced smile ended in a solemn expression whilst facing away. "See you around," she scurried out of the garden.

'I'm such an idiot. She wanted a shoulder to lean on, she wanted for me to take over what he left, but I can't. It's beyond me, I'm sorry Chef Leko, your disciple is nothing but a weakling. I can't, I'm done, it's too painful.'

Ashes in an urn; the Leko family returned to Plaustan the same night. She couldn't care to stand still else grief would catch up. Instead, she ran far and focused on work and caring for the daughters.

Later that night, Igna took to staying alone in a pitch-black room. Weirds shapes formed out the darkness, an after-effect from drawing Orenmir was the partial capture of the restless souls.

Knock, knock, "-I'm coming in," heels walked to a stop, *flick,* "-Igna," said Courtney with crossed arms, "-still grieving over the death?"

"No, not really," he pulled to sit upright, "-was just thinking about stuff. Can I help you, mother?"

"Yes, matter of fact," the door shut, "-I have something important to ask."

"Which is?"

"It's concerning the realm," she moved to stand at the window. The wind blew her hair out the visage, "- I need you to capture someone. Alive or dead, doesn't matter."

"An assassination, is this an order from the Godfather?"

"No, it's a request from your mother," she turned to grab his palm, "-it's a tall order. I don't want to impose this burden... I'm afraid it's more of a suicide job than anything."

"Is the target strong?"

"Yes, a demi-goddess."

"Who is it?"

"Your cousin, Eira."

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"Why?" the seriousness didn't leave space for expressions.

"She can potentially influence the Alphan leadership. Marrying the emperor would grant so much power to Arda. They could break the alliance and join with the Wracia Empire and lay catastrophe on Hidros. I'm sure Lucifer's thinking of such a possibility. There's much to do, staying out of politics isn't an option anymore."

"Ok... how?"

"I don't know," said she, "-this responsibility is too heavy to shoulder alone."

"Let me guess, it's Queen Gallienne's idea?"

She nodded, "-up to the task or shall I find another?"

"Is there a time limit?"

"Not really, as long as the alliance isn't formed."

"Then it should be simple," said he, "-why go after Eira when we can go after the Alphan leadership."

"The matter is in thy hands, dearest son. Also, lady Haru's leaving for the adventuring academy. Go with, you're still a student last I checked."

"Yes, mother."

Chapter 549: Haru's demeanor

'You must be kidding me with this. She stepped out of the room so casually after asking a hit on royalty. The Librarian of Nexsolium no less. Let me think on this, how can I apprehend her without killing, or if she ends up dead, how will that affect me. Lucifer wants to ally with Alpha based on what the Queen of Hidros wants. There's no way they're pushing to ally with the Wracia Empire. Some demi-humans are slaves and pro-human activities are supreme, there's no way to do so. Alpha's different in its own way, I don't think they'll risk allying with the Wracia Empire. Not on the surface; as for Cimier and the

underworld, they might pull something. Hidros's in a bad spot because of internal conflicts. News must have leaked by now...'

"éclair is it possible to monitor the ins and out of Arda. Who's traveling and who's not?"

"Without problem," said he proudly, "-the last visit gave ample time to sneak a few minions. I have control over the whole network. Shouldn't be a problem. What about you, Lady Courtney asked for the death of Eira, did she not?"

"You know full well I'll die if I fight her. The only reason I took on Orenmir and Tharis was in case of a potential war. I'll need to defend myself if that happens."

Knock, knock,

"Who is it?"

"Sir, it's Lady Haru, she asks for you."

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'Returning to the academy...'

It had been a few months, returning felt wrong. The journey there happened in silence. Just the thought had the mind uneasy, After all, Leko was murdered and the whole student body ignored it, said it was nothing more than an accident. A massive cover-up; aside from the working staff, no one really cared about the Trader's Guild and their members. Reason more for pleading ignorance. What could Haru have done, the whole incident regarding Arda, and now this, nothing made sense?

Deep down, after casually watching her sleep, he knew, he knew she was in a bad place. The adorable and harsh, heart stealer, Haru, was in pain. Weighted down by responsibility and the loss of a friend. Her lips tightened, the brows knitted, the breaths prolonged as her body reacted to regain composure. Worry about her couldn't accomplish anything in the greater picture. Hence, slowly tilting against the glass-window, the duo sat until the train station.

There, a transit from Rotherham till Rosespire from where they'd go down to Meke and another to the Adventuring Academy. All and all, it 10-hour journey. The capital came in the early hours of dawn. The sun rose shyly as to not cover the continent. The air was icy-cold, Haru's ears reacted in a way to brace from the breeze.

"Let's grab something to eat," suggested he stepping off the train.

"Something to eat?" she thought, "-warm milk. Yes, warm milk and a cookie."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't make that face," she pouted, "-why are you looking at me as if a child. Humph."

"I apologize for my behavior," he bowed in jest, "-shall we get something to eat now?"

"Fine," lifting her chin, "-I suppose this little date is on thy tab?"

‘-Stingy,’ he scoffed, “-m-my pleasure.” Nothing more came of the little conversations. They ate, took the train to Meke, the longest ride yet, and slept. The quiet lounge didn’t give much in ways of speaking. Everyone held a dead-eyed expression. Either gobbling a book or perusing the Arcanum. At some point, Haru fell over to Igna’s lap and slept. She curled as if a little cat, her expression relaxed. ‘So innocent and exposed,’ he patted her head instinctively, ‘-well, guess she really is a feline deep down.’

Beep... BEEP, BEEP, BEEP

“Oh shit,” quick to silence the phone, “-must have dozed off. Still half-way until Meke. She’s still asleep.” Notification showed ‘Alicia the annoying manager.’

“Where are you.”

“Where did you go?”

“Are you still alive?”

“Hey, hey, Igna, did you abandon us?”

“Dude, reply to my messages already.”

“Annoying!” a return to her spams.

“Finally, where are you?”

“On a train, why, what’s the matter?”

“Are you dumb, why did you leave us alone?”

“Julius’s there, don’t worry about it. I’ve asked him to take care of you both. Have some urgent business to attend to, see you later.”

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“Wait, WAIT!”

“éclair, mute her until further notice.”

“Understood.”

‘Obviously,’ he exhaled, ‘-the urgent business is, a big ol’ nap.’

Skipping the arrival at Meke, a town still brimming with adventures and injured folks returning from the Azure Walls, they made for the Academy. ‘Here we are,’ the train slowly pulled into the vicinity. The station held a few students headed to the Azure Wall as part of training. Most were ignorant of who came and who left.

‘Wait,’ onto the platform facing the dormitory, ‘-they’ve made the short-cut an actual path.’ Before long, the popularity of crossing the park’s darker reaches became the norm. The amount of time-saving it did, went beyond a little dirt on one’s boot. The administration couldn’t ignore and so, after a petition by the students, a small stone-path erected as a short-cut.

“I need to check with the office admins,” said Haru, “-you’re ready to graduate. I’ll do what is right.”

“Ready to graduate?”

“Yes, can’t be tied down by the academy now, can you?” her figure joyfully hopped along the stairs.

‘Stop lying. Putting on a front, I know that smile is fake, the whole persona is fake. You’re fake, lady Haru, fake. Why don’t you accept someone’s help, why not reach out to anyone, look for a partner and support. Leko’s gone, she’ll be left alone. With my going away too, she’ll move to Arda and never see the light of day again. There’s no reason to tie her here. What a pain...’

Time showed 15:00 – it took longer than expected. Students scurried to the dorms. ‘I don’t want to go there,’ stuck on the third step, ‘-I don’t want to return to Leko’s resting place. How weak can I be...’ Despite that, he clambered on forward until the summit. A torrent of excited students made for the stairs. Narrowly dodging their march, the backdrop of the academy stood as a sad colorless picture. After the statues, he subconsciously headed for the gymnasium.

“I like you, please go out with me!”

“Not a chance, get a higher tier then we can talk.”

A young lady in uniform escaped out the back of the building. Her face and attitude showed confidence and pride. Her eyes locked onto him for a brief second then left with a tsk. Whimpering also second her walk. ‘Rejection,’ he cut the corner, “-pick yourself up, it’s not the end yet.”

“Oh,” nervously hiding tears, “-I didn’t get rejected. I just have to get stronger!”

“I never asked that,” he paused at the metal staircase, “-give it your all.”

“Thanks for that, stranger,” after which, the boy bolted opposite the path she took.

Long fingers wrapped around the doorknob, ‘-should I or not?’

“Come in,” said another opening the door, “-are you a recruit?” wondered a man dressed in a chef’s attire.

“No,” the expression eased, “-just a returning student of Chef Leko.”

“I see,” the cheerful greeting swapped for tact, “-you know of the news?”

“Yeah,” taking a step in, “-can you tell me where?”

“Over there,” he pointed to the dish-washing station, “-they found him there. I don’t know what business you have but still, pay respects and leave. I can’t afford to waste time and effort.”

“I appreciate it.” He moved over, “-say, how did he die?”

“By accident. They say he slipped and fell onto a knife.”

“Does the student body know?”

“Not really,” said the man preparing ingredients, “-a few instructors know of the truth. To be frank, no one cares what happened. Besides,” glaring back, “-are you done?”

“Just a little moment,” facing the station, “-éclair, scan the room.”

“On it.”

Bit by bit, he combed the whole kitchen to no avail. Not a lead nor a piece of evidence. The chef grew annoyed. “Thanks for the visit,” the door slammed.

‘Did I just get kicked out?’ turning back with a confused look, ‘-can’t help it,’ wind against the face, upon cutting the corner, *bam,* “OUCH!” yelled a lady who felt square on her bottom.

“I’m so sorry,” holding a hand, “-I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Damn it,” she gritted, “-can’t you see where you’re going?” The eyes met a long crimson hair, an expression of utmost disgust.

“-Ila?”

“Ilna?” taking his hand, “-is that you?”

“Yes, you don’t look so pleased.”

“Obviously not,” she frowned, “-what brings you to the academy?”

“I’m a student here.”

“I forgot,” she let out an exasperated sigh, “-how very gentlemanly of you.”

“Cut the crap,” cried he, “-see you later.”

“Hey, wait!”

“What now?”

“Stop,” she held his hands, “-I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care,” shaking her grip, “-whatever is done, is done,” the distance increased.

“Go meet Anna, she’s at the battle-arena!” shouted she before vanishing into the crowd.

A lot of things have changed ever since the departure. Mostly the ex-group of friends. Leonard’s family accepted him and his decision. The choice of picking love as opposed to family touched their hearts, or so said Lady Goldberg. Jen’s bionic hand was as good as new. Rena and Lampard officially entered a relation. Frost and Anna were rumored to be dating since they spent more time with one another.

Not being able to carry a sword in public meant having Orenmir hidden inside a bag. Thanks to éclair, they were able to give a pouch of some sort, a bag perfectly fit to carry a weapon around one’s back.

Inhale, stood at the entrance, “-the smell of dust and metal.”

A practice bout divided the arena in two. On one side stood Frost, Anna, and Leonard. The other held, Rena, Lampard, and Jen.

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“Don’t get cocky,” an explosion levied Anna’s side of the arena. “Frost, focus on countering Lampard, I’ll take care of defense. Leonard, draw Jen’s attention. She’s a monster with that bow now.”

“Roger.” For the most part, each team was on equal standing, the mages were great addition against close-quarter fighters. She slyly kept Rena and Lampard from teaming up.

Even so, Lampard didn’t yield for he stormed Frost, created an opening that Jen used to launch another attack, *BANG.*

“Look at them,” said lady Haru, “-so strong in their youth. Want to join them?”

“I don’t know,” he stood, hands in pockets and an overall none caring stance.

“Join them,” said she, “-it’s a practice bout. None’s going to say anything if a certain someone joins. That is to say, only if that someone manages to win.”

A few people dotted around the arena, team practices like these were very common. “Let’s say,” he smirked, “-a demon lord’s joined the fight.” *Woosh,* a giant leap had him smiling, ‘-this is going to be fun.’

“WATCH OUT FOR HER ARROW!” screamed Leonard, “-if not, FROST’S GOING TO DIE!” The scene moved in slow motion, inches away from Frost’s blue eyes, a mysterious figure landed with a force to crack the very ground. Hands still in the pocket, the dust settled – giving time for both teams to gather.

“Who’s there?” voiced Anna, “-it’s a joint practice, we have the arena booked.”

“Joint practice?” the dust cleared. White hair mixed with black, a stoic expression, and a very nice tailored suit, “-sounds like fun.”

“Igna?” remarked Leonard, “-is that you?”

“Yes, the one and only,” he smirked, “-don’t lower thy guards just yet,” a sprint had him behind Lampard, “-I’ve come as an enemy, show me what you can do.” A kick sent him flying across.

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU?” screamed Rena.

“Don’t you get it?” he glared, “-consider me an enemy, I’ve come as a Demonlord.”

“Demonlord?” she broke into laughter, “-stop joking around.”

“I’m not joking,” two steps and he stood with a gun to her head, “-go on people. Tis an open challenge, show me thy strength.”

“We accept,” screamed Lampard crawling to a stand, “-Demonlord.”

Chapter 550: “Lover of tea and cute things”

‘Little do they know,’ light caught the signet ring granted by those of the monster realm, ‘-there’s a chance of me becoming just that.’

Granted, the entrance was a little confusing, and the fighters watched one another more than the opponent. An exchange between Frost and Leonard resumed the fight.

“Don’t get too cocky,” said Frost summoning two-swords, “-Rena, Lampard, let’s go,” said he mid-sprint.

'Fast,' thought Igna leaning on the first swing. No time to recover, another went for the bowel, a jump had Frost smiling. 'I've fallen in a trap.' Two shadows loomed behind with weapons in hand, '-good try,' a spin narrowly dodged both attacks of which the forces lashed at the empty ground. Three steps back, "-strong, is this teamwork?" a faint dot blinked into sight, Jen stood at the opposite side with a broken bow. '-Must be her best attack, I'll play along.' *Woosh,* he caught the projectile, '-what's happened to me since the transformation. I feel so much stronger now. Wait, she's grinning,' scanning the arena.

"Above," cried éclair, "-they've conjured two high-tier spells."

"Spells?" checking upwards, '-Glacier and Rathome; first is a spell that freezes the area and slows the enemy. It also gives the caster power to strike at any time using said frozen ground. Rathome is a dark-element spell, one focused on immobilization. A favorite of combat-mages, the target feels nauseated and prone to surrender.'

"Behind," said éclair, "-Rena, Lampard, Frost, and Jen are closing in for the last attack."

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'I'm surrounded, Leonard enhanced the team's base abilities thrice their normal limit.' Lids shut; the sense of impending doom had the heart racing.

"THIS IS THE END,"

"SURRENDER NOW OR DIE!"

'I'm not going to use Blood-Arts.' *Bzzt,* a jolt ran along the body, Rathome hit, followed by Glacier, of which, ice-spears dug mercilessly into the sole. Jen's arrowed hit its mark, the head. Frost's sword ran through the body, Leonard's spear pierced the heart and Rena took off the throat. A complete and total defeat, Leonard's delay attack hit into an explosion of ice and blood.

"Hey guys..." voiced Anna, "-we killed him..."

"Shit," cried Frost, "-it's just... you felt it, didn't you?" he yearned for an answer.

"He f-felt like a monster," said Rena, "-the body reacted with intent to kill."

"I know," gulped Leonard, "-we lost the ability to think for a second."

"No...no...no, I don't accept it," exclaimed Jen, "-WHY DID WE FIGHT SO HARD? It was six versus one, and come on, our opponent was Igna." The frosty mist settled, they gritted in anticipation of a dead-body.

"No chill," battered and bruised, "-high-tier spells, I'm impressed. Well, considering they were mostly for support; only attack variants shine when using the title of high-tier."

"How are you alive?" cried Rena, "-I swear I took your head."

"Think again," he smirked, "-enough playing around, shall we end this little battle?"

More than anything, the discouragement carried with ire, one of unknown heights. He survived one of their tried and tested stratagems.

'Thank you, father. If not for mana-cancellation, I'd have been a dead man. The gamble paid off, my regeneration is faster, and so is my body. The incomplete transformation wasn't a mistake, the curse of the blood grew too pure to be contained. I'm an idiot for thinking the power grew weak. It's damned obvious, I carry the purest blood of the vampire clan, tis a given. How is Mrs. the First Progenitor, Adete, where are you, what you up to?' The physical pain inflicted remained after the wounds healed. Guards rose once more, the spilled blood gathered around the right hand, twirling about the wrist. 'Let's get serious then.'

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Lampard jumped first into the fray, spear in hand, blood on the face, and murder in the eyes. "Fight me like a real man, IGNA!" he charged like a bull.

"Alright," the bag dropped, the scabbarded join with his belt. 'I haven't neglected my sword training. Practicing every day, even during those hours where I had to cater to others, I've never stopped swinging. A man's heart is reflected in his blade, wise words from father. Guess after all this time, it never left me.'

"Stop looking dazed!" screamed he readying the spear to impale.

'No special techniques, no names, only muscle memory, and battle-experience.' Deep breath in, the body lowered closer to the ground, hands on the grip, a perimeter materialized around the floor, a zone in which he could hit his target. First came the spear riding towards his neck, the weapon would reach him before the spear's wielder. Narrowly escaping the spear, Lampard stepped into the zone. A dark-aura filled his vision, *crack,* Igna's presence and figure flickered to suddenly stand behind.

"You missed," said Lampard, "-what was that?"

"Are you sure?" the blade returned to its home. The spear shattered into pieces, blood flowed from numerous spots.

"I see," crumbled to the knees, "-I died the moment I stepped into the sword's reach. You're quite the fierce swordsman."

"No, don't say that," facing the others, "-you're fearsome too. Your body reacted albeit a little slow, but faster than your mind; most people are usually dead without moving." Rena and Frost charged into battle; "-besides, I have more experience fighting than you. Spent my childhood, teenage years, and adulthood in battle."

"What are you even talking about?" breathing a sigh, "-go and fight, friend."

"No need to say it twice."

"HOW DARE YOU!" came the screaming ire of Rena, seeing her lover defeated so easily clouded the rational way of thought.

Earth-Barrier, said Frost conjuring a wall to impair vision.

'Casting magic without incantation, adventurers sure are strong.'

"This is the end," said Frost leaping.

“Our ultimate attack,” said Rena proudly, “-ain’t no way!” two users of the double-sword style, two tornadoes of death and fierce resolve.

“Get ‘em!” said Leonard conjuring earth-magic, a spell to dull movement and make the ground unsteady.

“Nice try,” *Mana-cancellation,* merely making contact failed the spell. *Clang, clang,* parring both attackers, they dodged nimbly and repositioned into a better striking posture.

“Leonard, are you ok?” inquired Jen.

“No, I’m not,” on a single knee and hand to the ground, “-my spell nullified without even reaching the target.”

“Don’t even bother,” said Anna sat with legs crossed, “-it’s a lost battle now.”

“Are you giving up?” voiced Jen loudly.

“Didn’t you see?” catching your best attack, nullifying the spell, and now facing two of our best fighters using that sword.

“It’s cursed,” said Jen, “-I feel the damnation of the many souls slain at its core.”

“Cursed?” gulped Leonard, “-but, how is that possible. The way the aura shifted when he drew the sword, there’s more to it, Anna, do you know anything?”

“Yeah,” said she, “-a lot actually. Listen, the sword there isn’t anything normal. It was used to massacre hundreds, if not thousands of fighters during battle and war. A relic of the past, or should I say, a relic made by the strongest person to ever walk this planet. The Blood Blade of the Queen, Orenmir, a weapon usable only by a chosen individual.”

“Well, what if the sword is cursed, we can conjure a high-tier spell and break him, can’t we?”

“No,” her head shook, “-sorry to say, but, Igna there isn’t the same as before. He remembers the past, his past, and the past of a world unknown to us. Forget it, one thing remains true till today, if we were still in the era of mages; he would have slain us all.”

“I don’t get it,” cried Jen, “-how do you know so much?”

“My mother and his father were related; I know more than you could ever imagine. Trust me, we’ve lost our only chance. Look at him,” and as she said, the pace of the fight grew, “-the muscle memory is awakening.”

“Even so,” fired she, “-I’m not backing down.” The aura lifted, “-if he says he a Demonlord, then I’ll be a hero!” the appearance swapped for one angelic and pure. A white ethereal bow materialized,

Blessed bow of my god. Carry with the sufferance of my comrades. Bring forth an arrow capable of solving our query, I, humble servant, implore of thee to grant mine wish, a wish to end life as is, to bring upon the salvation of the tormented soul, grant the power to undo harm.

The strings pulled; gust welled from the ground up. “RENA, FROST, GET BACK!” cried Leonard.

“Oh shit, we ought to run, NOW!”

‘What’s this, I was having fun,’ the duo dashed to hide behind a barrier of bricks courtesy of Leonard. ‘-It can’t be,’ he locked onto Jen, ‘-she’s a saint?’

Blessed goes the arrow, SQUANDER ALL EVIL!

Thud, “my heart,” *thud,* “-not now.” A cacophony of lost souls shrieked so much so he buckled, ‘-what is it now?’

“Dearest heir,”

Thud, the face paled, ‘-is that?’

“-Tis I, thy one and only master, Lord Death. Time is short and waits for no one, not even a god. Zeus has made a mockery of the godly realm, all is in chaos, balance will tip in his favor before long. He searches for the Symbol of Kronos as does Lucifer for the Symbol of Death. Worry not, I’ll handle the situation alongside Creation. Thy body is ready to reawaken the Death-Element. Yes, my son, you were truly the one best fit for the title of Death Reaper. The risk paid off, you shook off the curse of misfortune and have cleansed the element. Congratulations, my heir, a job well done. There are more things to come, the future looks bleak, Miira and the others wait. The day might come where you are called to fight the realm of the gods, all of us, on thy lonesome. I leave with this, you’re my pride and joy, Staxius, Igna, no matter what age, what name, or what body, I’ll always watch over for I’m lord Death, lover of tea and cute things.” A burst of black ran along with the hands towards the chest; the sleeping element awoke with a cough of blood. ‘It’s back,’ he winched, ‘-the element, I feel it.’ *BANG* Jen’s arrow made contact.

A burnt white-shirt and dirtied pants remained; the arrow pierced the then disappear. For a brief moment, he laid face-down lifelessly. Jen panted to draw another arrow.

“That’s enough,” said Anna.

“No, I missed,” said she, “-I missed my last shot.” Pulling back twice as hard, the bow buckled but stood stronger. “-I’m a saint, there’s no way my god’s going to accept defeat!”

‘I died,’ the eyes reopened, ‘-it’s been a long time,’ he smirked, ‘-I’m back, finally back. The element is strong, too strong – this body’s great. I lost the title of god. The three boons of divinity are gone. Well, no matter,’ push to a stand, ‘-I can use magic.’ Over yonder grew another powerful attack. “-Why is Jen so persistent, “-hands-on the grip, *Lightning Strike: Death Element Variant,* “-an homage to you, dearest friend, Adelana.” Mana sucked out the arena and gathered around, the expression showed relief as well as pain.

“CLEANSE EVIL!” cried Jen. A trail of destruction followed in its wake, she’d used all her mana and power. The strongest arrow fired to date, “-I’m tired,” she fell, “-give me strength, my god.”

“There goes nothing,” color turned black and white, the outline of objects highlighted into a white movable mist, while those of the living harbored a colorless burning flame. ‘-this is,’ he thought, ‘-the power I used when fighting the unseen. It’s all coming back to me.’ A step forth, the blade carried the full brunt of the newly awoken element – the arrow split upon contact to fire into the distance and explode. Cuts formed along the left cheeks, ‘-she’s strong.’

“Good fight,” said he falling to his knees, “-good to see you guys again.”

“IGNA,” cried Anna jumping into his arms, “-I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you too,” he coughed, “-Jen, you’ve grown stronger than I imagined.”

“Says the one who’s grown so much,” a pout turned grin, “-good to see you again.”

‘Feels good to be back.’