

## Death Magic 561

### Chapter 561: 'Peaceful Takeover'

Whimpers hindered by the sound of his own saliva, the more the helper, a man in his early twenties with black hair and dirty acne-filled face, squirmed, the more the dagger dug deep. No sense of tact nor care towards the watching crowd, the lonesome figure had his knee to the helper's neck. He pressed hard in sync with the blade.

"Someone..." cried the few managing to speak, "-stop him," said they in horror. The growing tension defused – the father and the husband stepped back.

"H-h-he's h-had e-enough," stuttered a frightened Jen who cowered behind Rena and Lampard. As for Leonard. He was nowhere to be found.

"You sure?" returned he unshaken by the cruelty, "-I could dig another if he'd like," leaned to whisper, "-give up yet?"

"Pl-please," coughed he, "-I d-don't want to d-die."

"Then behave," he stood without pulling the weapon, "-where's the doctor?" looking around showed a large table holding supplies, multiple tents in which the benches from the cafeteria were disguised as the beds held patients. Some went back and forth to the headquarters. The unlucky ones unable to get in the ambulances were kept away from the remainder; add to such, those afflicted by the curse were also held in the same tents. Nurses were scared to even venture anywhere close, healers sat huddled back-to-back besides crates of empty potions. None had the stamina to move, the last of the potions was up to debate, first-aiders had no say in the matter.

"He just left," said the nurse from before, "-he's going to get help from Meke."

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"Look at that," snarled the husband, "-the doctor ran away. Go on missy, why not join him. All they care about is helping the military officials, we count for fuck all, don't we."

"Shut up!" voiced the father, "-you have no right to question their priorities after the mutiny. Fuck you, every single one of you, rot in hell, I very well damn curse you, and if the devil was here, I'd make a contract without a second thought!"

"There's no need to call on the devil just yet," added Igna deeply, "-both of you, go one on one, fight for the potion, isn't that the way the world works, survival of the fittest?"

"W-well," gulped the husband, "-m-my w-wife needs immediate care," sweat filled the cheeks above the bushy beard.

"I'll do it," firmed the father, "-if I can't save my daughter, there's no need for me to stay here." The pain stung, each time he'd glance woefully at the girl, the feeling resounded.

"Backing out?" he glared and vanished, "-how about this?" dagger to the wife's neck, "-she's nearly dead. I'll kill in an act of mercy. The girl has a better chance. Besides, didn't the doctor say, potions heal

physical injuries, not the curse. The latter needs to be cleared by holy water or have an exorcist perform a cleansing ritual.”

“Igna?” paused Anna, “-w-what a-are you saying?” she limped over per Frost’s ever-caring squadmate.

“A triage,” said he making for the center, “-so, what will it be, a daughter or a wife? The ones who instigated a pointless mutiny or two bystanders.”

Murmurs swept the onlookers, “-what are you doing?” whispered Rena pulling onto Igna’s stained shirt, “-why are you trying to have them fight?”

“Let me go,” he pulled, “-I don’t know you.”

“Come on man,” said Lampard, “-there’s no need to treat her like that.”

“Lampard, I respect you as a person, don’t make this any worse. I honestly, don’t care.”

“Dude...” sighed Frost, “-how immature can you be, come on man, grow up.”

“Says the man who knows nothing about the reality of the situation. This petty squabble is nothing compared to the atrocities suffered by those who really need the potion. Have a look inside the tents, I can feel it from here, the taint of the monsters, it’s repulsive.” Each word shut their advances, it stung, yet, all was justified.

“Enough,” mumbled Jen, “-it’s not their fault,” said she shedding tears, “-I c-can’t a-accept t-this.”

“Pathetic,” he scowled as if staring pure human trash, “-you’re disgusting.”

Meanwhile, the father took a battle stance. Resolve was made in the stature. As for the husband, he knelt at his wife’s side to mumble a few prayers.

“Igna,” said Lingling and her companions struggling onto the yard, “-please, help them.”

“Why are you guys here?” he rushed to their side, “-got a death wish?”

“Come on,” said Lucia regretfully, “-I hate to ask this... d-do something about them, heal them as you healed us.”

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“On one condition,” he stood, “-take Ling back and rest.” The crowd’s silence broke; the daughter’s health deteriorated. The pulse slowed; the loss of blood grew harder to endure. The desperate nurse tried her hardest to stop the bleeding.

“Listen here,” cried the father, “I’m ready to fight to the death.”

“Don’t worry,” said Igna walking over, “-let him have the potion. Didn’t he do so for the sake of protecting the adventurers?”

“What are you saying?” exclaimed he reaching for the collar, “-I made up my mind to die for my girl, don’t tell me to back out,” the face pulled closer, “-I don’t want to lose her, not anymore, I can’t bear the pain of losing another loved one, I’LL KILL HIM, I SWEAR!”

"Please," sobbed the nurse, "-don't die on me."

Helplessness, desperation, the folly of losing someone close. He'd experienced it before, the pain of losing someone. Chef Leko rushed to mind; images of himself returned, how miserable it was, how the world crumbled, how the single amber light extinguished. Everyone here felt the same, regardless of the reason, they'd suffered.

"Don't worry," said he gently breaking the grip, "-I'll try my best." Quick to rush at the girl's side,"-nurse, do you have experience in surgery?"

"Y-yeah," said she a little flustered.

"Good, then we won't need you," pointing back, "-bring all those who were left to die. Everyone, have the survivors separate more thoroughly."

"W-who a-are you?"

"An Alchemist," he flashed the crest, "-understand now?"

She swapped to a stern expression, "-what are your orders?"

"Do as I said, have people who can be treated by potions at the entrance. We'll heal those mortally wounded right here, is that clear?"

"S-sure," and so, with the help of Jen and her party, another triage went underway. The little lady was taken inside the military quarters.

"Igna, I heard you were in a pinch," spoke the earring, "-better give thanks to Lady Viola later."

'That's Julius.' The cacophony of airplanes approached from the direction of Rotherham. The TU-05, the heir of the old TU-03, made a hasty descend bearing Phantom's crest. "Don't worry, we've brought supplies and plenty of medics," said he over the channel.

'Cousin, I knew I count on you,' stood inside with a dying child, '-I leave the rest to you and éclair.'

Landing at the Southern entrance (facing the Azure Wall) a well-organized team of healers, medics, and doctors rushed the battlefield. Some carried guns and other weapons. Julius stood at the summit of the ramp, '-Cousin, the amount of trouble caused... my head, it's about to explode. éclair threw a fit, Lady Viola is forcefully pulled from her station. Aunt Courtney starts to send death threats, I'm beat. Pulling supplies and medics this short a time is hell, never again, please no.'

Those left injured were taken care of immediately. The operation went fast as someone else had readied the fighters as if expecting the support.

"-A-are we safe?"

"Yes, we're here to help," reassured the medics.

"W-who are you p-people?" asked the nurse helping to move an unconscious man.

"Support division of Phantom's private army. Now, if you'd please?"

She moved out the way as others took over her duties.

"Is this any way for a prince to behave?" inquired a lady dressed in black.

"Lady Serene," sighed he, "-how's the situation?"

"Pretty hectic," said she scrolling through messages, "-the whole situation doesn't bode well. We're forcing our help onto a military establishment. Questions will be asked, trust me."

"I suppose Aunt Courtney and lady Elvira aren't getting involved?"

She shook her head with an 'uh-uh'. "-It's a mess the young master must take care of. Isn't that, right?" she winked.

"Lady Serene," said at the end of his rope, "-do you enjoy teasing other men?"

"What ever do you mean?" coyly avoiding the subject, "-Lieutenant Mello's in charge of this outpost. I heard from the guild he's on route." They passed the remains of a bloodbath.

"Young Master, please," said the leader of the advance squad, "-we've apprehended the officers."

"Come on," he facepalmed, "-this is supposed to be a good-faith operation, not a siege."

"There, there," grinned Serene, "-a job well done. Conversation will be easier."

'Apprehended the officers', face to what the leader meant, the sentence was a little off the mark. In no way was it apprehension, the squad stormed the building and held unsuspecting uniform-wearing men at gunpoint. Some were tied and pushed to the corner, others had collar bombs around their necks.

"Phantom never ceases to amaze," said the prince dusting off the issue, "-have the men released. And for god's sake, don't put collars around their necks."

"Understood," saluted he signaling for a more human take-over.

"Who are you people?" argued Sergeant Appy. The cozy office turned upside down. Table wedge between Corporal Tommy and Zoey. Appy knelt shackled by strong cuffs. Viola sat peacefully with tea in hand.

"Enough," said Serene, "-leave us be." Footsteps marched on outwards.

"My neck," complained Zoey, "-who the hell does this on an already injured woman."

"I'm afraid Phantom does," replied Viola.

"I do apologize for their rougher way of treatment," said Julius pulling a seat, "-shall we discuss business?"

"Phantom?" inquired Appy, "-why are you involved here?"

"Simple," said Serene allowing for Julius to have a break, "-we were called to help this sorry excuse for an outpost. The death toll, the number of injuries, is this supposed to be a joke. Do you know how much this is going to cost? Money aside, why are the defenses so lax. There's no way to protect against monsters if they climb over the wall, was that something you never thought about?"

"Our defenses are none of your concern," voiced Zoey, "-this can be seen as treason."

“Worry not my dear,” said Serene with the gentlest and most patriotic way imaginable, “-treason isn’t part of this discussion. Shall I bring up the incompetence of the military to care for their people? A look outside and I’m pretty sure the officers here could be court-martialed. There are even rumors floating around about soldiers opening fire on innocents?”

“It’s a lie!” cried Appy, “-they mutinied against us.”

“As a sergeant, you have authority over the corporal, meaning, the responsibility of keeping the peace is in your hands after the lieutenant left. Anyway, we’re not here to cause trouble. This can be overlooked.”

“I’d much appreciate the negotiations to happen without me on the floor,” exclaimed Appy.

“Fine, fine,” a flick of her finger and the cuff slit, “-shall we start?”

“Might I ask a question?” inquired Tommy.

“No,” said she, “-let me guess, you want to know why Phantom is here?”

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“Yes,” he gulped, her acuteness sent shivers.

“Easy, we came to help our young master.”

“Young master?”

“Yes, that is all you need to know. He asked to bring supplies and save the injured fighters. The takeover is a necessity, one must never be too cautious. The Guild must have enlisted countless ambulances to make the trip south. We’ll treat and heal as many as we can before leaving.”

“What are your conditions?”

“I’ve already forwarded the bill to the guild as well as the military.”

“But we never asked,” voiced Zoey.

“Either pay or the whole ordeal gets published as a scandal of the military,” facing Viola, “-I’m sure a Platinum Adventurer’s testimony counts more than an officer, considering the mutiny.”

“Alright, alright, we get it,” said Appy in a tone of defeat. Serene’s way of negotiation was the devil’s work – inherited from King Staxius.

## Chapter 562: Tainted ones

“Cheers to a great negotiation,” said she without an ounce of regret. The debate turned to a one-sided volley of demands and expectations. Her way of talking seemed like a fierce knight carving her way through an army. Low-ranking military officers had no other options. Either bow to her whim or suffer the consequences. Even if she hadn’t been part of Phantom, the talent in speechcraft would have given the same results.

Thus, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Appy and the two others sat idly. The few released were allowed to fetch refreshments.

"Truly a place needed for rebuilding, isn't that right?" asked she to Prince Julius.

"Yes, tis a mess."

"I wonder how much it might cost?" cup in hand, she sipped away gracefully. Corpses and dismembered limbs were carried inside wrapped dark-brown stained cloth. A disgusting sight of dragging entrails followed, she did naught but drink. No care for the massacre, no care for the lives lost or the bloodshed, a stern and melancholic visage watched. "Pretty good for a cheap brand," said she making for the couch, "-Sergeant Appy, have thee perhaps soiled thineself?" their eyes met.

"N-no, w-why w-would-"

"Then, don't look as so," said she dismissing his ramble.

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"Lady Serene, how long will you remain?" asked Zoey bandaging her wounds.

"As long as the young master says," firmed she. "Besides, the lieutenant is on his way, we'll continue the deliberations."

"As you wish," nodded Tommy. Complete control, a firm grasp on the people and their actions. Full-black, her melancholic style of clothing was more of a warning. Needless to what anyone said, behind her face and light-makeup, laid another beast.

"We shall leave for now," said Julius.

"Young Master," hailed the leader of the advance squad, "-we're treating them more humanely," said he strongly.

"Is that so?" glancing back, "-humanely huh...?" a forced hurdle of tied soldiers gagged by undergarments. "-What of the collars?"

"Disarmed them," said he.

"Good," smiled Serene smothering Julius in an affectionate embrace, "-cut them free, and keep an eye out. Report if anything goes amiss."

"Stop," coughed he, "-can't breathe."

"I'm terribly sorry, I thought you'd be a little stronger..."

"Shut up," breathing deep, "-you cautious about them?"

"Yeah," said she seriously, "-might go loud any minute. Well, their number is assurance. Viola, let's go for a walk."

"Alright," she joined and soon made trips about the yard. Checking on status, looking at those who died, helping in transport to the crematorium. None was afraid to get their hands dirty.

The feeling of relief shared by the warriors didn't reflect that inside. Outside was a place of healing and comfort, inside, a place of doubt and scheming.

"Can we trust them?" inquired Appy staring down the southern gate, '-how can she drink with such a sight? I feel nauseated.'

"Nothing we can do but trust them," added Tommy, "-don't forget, they came here with a whole Platoon. Our numbers left standing is 2 squad worth, then again, considering the few able to fight, we could scrape together a Squad of 10. Against their 50, we're 5 on 1."

"I hear you," the door shut, "-I went out to check..." her face paled, emotions drained to her knees as if an unclosed faucet, "-the adventurers are on their side."

"The military's lost... let's wait for the Lieutenant."

Minutes turned to hours; the ambulance came in viewing distance over the horizon. The critically wounded were healed, high-tier potions did most of the work. Those beyond magic's reach were handled easily by the medics. Then again, nothing went as planned.

"Lady Serene," the drooping excuse for an entrance flung open, "-urgent news."

"What's the matter?" asked Viola gathered around a cozy-looking table.

"The monster's curse. We can't heal them. It's spreading; unless we cut off arms and legs, they have around a few hours till the transformation finishes."

"Is that so," said Julius calmly, "-how many are there?"

"Around ten, we've treated the rest."

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"How badly is the taint so far?"

"Pretty bad, we expect them to reach the spine in another few hours."

"They've been isolated?"

"Yes, young master," said he out of breath.

"Good, leave them be, draw a perimeter. We might have to cleanse them ourselves."

"Understood."

"Dismissed," interjected Serene. "-Cleanse them ourselves?" asked she tilting her head, "-the monster curse is the worst ailment since the yellow plague of the mage's war. Exorcisms have a twenty-percent success rate..."

"Right..." unable to act, the messenger carried orders till the isolation camp. Guard strongly secured the entrance; magically conjured barriers halted any unwanted advancement. The friends and close ones of the tainted sat with faces to the ground, praying and begging. It included the husband's wife, he who brought chaos in a time of crisis.

"What did they say?" asked he resting against the monolith of remembrance, "-are they safe?"

"No," said the messenger, "-depends on the development. The young master is deciding what to do next. They'll stay isolated for the time being."

"You can't," refuted he, "-she'll die if nothing is done!"

"Then so be it," said the father curled desperately, "-everyone's safe. I haven't heard from my daughter... waiting is what weaklings should do. Heed my words, I haven't forgiven the mess you and your party caused. Innocent lives were lost on a whim. It's fair if the wife dies, she led the revolt, did she not."

"Shut it," gritted he, "-don't talk about my wife!"

"Shut your mouth," a sword to his neck, "-mind your rank, Tier-8 Steel." A greenish tag shone.

"You're Tier-6 Emerald?" he gulped.

"Correct," from horizontal, it thrust down into the soil, "-now shut it."

Hidden and silent from view, aided by a few assistants; using Blood-Arts opposed to tools, the surgery went underway. Her condition, how to heal the injuries, and knowledge about the anatomy flowed to spiral in full. The hands worked almost subconsciously, no way to explain nor to teach, it happened without a word. Atop being shot, she'd lost blood and exposed to the curse. One by one, under the watchful eye of the nurse, he worked till exhaustion. 'Done, now the curse,' blank scrolls, courtesy of a local trader, spread about the room in a pentagram. "Stand back," voiced he loudly.

The room sunk in pressure; 'I'd usually use Astral-Binding to trap the curse. However,' the right eye glimmered, 'I can see the mana-lines. The threads binding the curse to her.' \*Mana Control: Wave Manipulation,\* similar to Crimson Threads, the darker lines were led to the five pentagrams. 'Done,' \*Snap,\* they hovered to spiral about her body till meeting at her center of gravity, 'got it.' \*Mana Control: Light Element Variant – Astro Krona.\* white features manifested to hover weightlessly, 'cleanse,' the quills shot to riddle the scrolls. A flash of light ended the ordeal.

"She's safe," he tumbled to catch the blunt edge of a shelf.

"Are you ok?" asked the nurse.

"Yeah," blood dripped, "I'm fine," panting on all fours, "-give me a moment to recover."

"Don't worry," said she courageously wrapping around his shoulders, "-let's get some fresh air," despite her size, she pushed and carried the startled alchemist outside.

"What you did there was amazing," said she falling back onto an opposing seat, "-hard to believe someone so young to be so knowledgeable."

"Well," he coughed, "-you impressed too. I barely spoke, yet you managed to help. Thanks for that."

"Are you ok though?"

"Yeah," said he, "-my injuries heal quickly," glancing up, "-see?" the cut faded.

Stamina, as well as mana potions soon brought the girl to her feet. She was healthy enough to walk but not overly strain. A trip to the hospital was in order.



A few minutes passed, "Sir, she's awake and wants to head outside," said an attendant.

"Huh?" cracking open a soft-drink can, "-she's awake already?"

"Yes," said the assistant.

"Bring her out then," he downed the drink.

"Hey," said the nurse ambling opposite the hall, "-my name's Mina."

"Introductions now?"

"Is it weird?" the dirtied outfit showed how much she had worked. The tan-skin complexion, brown hair, brown eyes, and a gently yet standoffish rounded nose. Rosy lips and very sharply shaped lashes. A small stature look-wise, many would say she's below average. Even so, the courage displayed and amount of work deserved credit.

"I'm Igna Haggard, nice to meet you, Mina. Frankly," he held another can, "-I respect you."

"W-what a-are you saying," the response returned a little more erratic.

"Giving credit where it's due," pressing the cold drink to her forehead, "-stop daydreaming."

A harsh gust blew, the weather grayed during the day. Many fighters were on their feet trying to help others. Rations were handed from the cafeteria. 'Looks like they've healed most of the injured.' A commotion rose at the northern entrance. Lieutenant Mello arrived with members from the central guild. The group advanced along the yard and cut straight for the military quarters.

"Igna, we better run."

"Why?" asked he staring at the strong individuals.

"They're from the guild, investigators who are merciless when safety is concerned. Mello's scared, look, it's bad."

"Don't worry," behind said supposed fearsome party, walked another, Julius, Viola, and Serene.

"Igna," a quick embrace, "-let's catch up after this."

"As you wish cousin," he nodded. Viola and Serene followed behind, the latter glanced up and down to then stop.

"Can I help you?"

"Emotionless, no care for the living," she leaned close, "-the stench of death, not to mention the rare aroma of the progenitor," a whisper turned hug, "-you're back, aren't you!"

"Shush, there's no need to make a scene out of it," cold and straightforward, the lady happily backed away with a bashful expression. "Can you do me a little favor, master?"

"Favor?"

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"Yes, sorry to spring this on you, the negotiations might get harder. Treat the tainted ones, pretty please."

"Sure," said he, "-good to see you've outgrown the seductress phase."

"Oh no," she gently caressed his lips, "-this leaves more room to the imagination."

"Go, go."

"Alright," she soon returned with Julius.

"Do you know them?" asked Mina.

"Yes, the princely charmed man is my cousin."

No time wasted, treatment for the tainted went underway. The real problem came in form of the two investigators from the guild. Table and seats were set, Mello remained at the head whilst Appy, Tommy, and Zoey stood in the background. Julius, Serene, and Viola sat menacingly; the pressure had the investigator's stern expression dissolve without effort.

"Shall we start?" inquired Serene, "-I presume details have been explained to the Lieutenant and the investigator?" the latter hung onto one another's visage, the silent treatment and expectations forced them to stare Mello.

"Yes," said he, "-I know the situation. Our esteemed guests from the guild aren't up to date with the information."

"In that case, let me summarize the state of things. New monsters sprawled into life beyond the walls. Reforge took enormous damage, lost more than 75% of their fighting force, and has been backed into a corner. The responsibility lies in the Guild's hand. Security of the wall, protection as well as maintenance fall in thy jurisdiction. As you see outside, the military has done their job in protecting the populous."

Meanwhile, inside the isolated camp, a strange piece of paper fell from the collar. '-What's this?'

"Interrogate the lady, she's responsible for the mutiny. I need her for the negotiations, the guild is about to pay big for hurting our young master."

'What's she thinking... well, if Serene's scheming, might as well join. Things are never boring when she takes the stage.' One by one, the tainted survivors had the curse lifted.

"Mina," approaching the last, "-can you get out and ask the guard to block off access. She's nearly dead. The curse is far more potent. I'll need time, alone."

"Alright," said she innocently.

'Well then,' \*Death Element: Magical Barrier.\*

"-w-who a-are you?" consciousness regained.

"No one special," said he destroying the curse, "-I've got a few questions."

"A-a-about what?"

"The mutiny," he smirked, "-we've captured the other members. Everyone else died without saying a word. Ladies go last," said he holding a knife, "-in torture that is."

#### Chapter 563: Intruders

"T-tor-t-ture?"

"Stuttering already?" paused he with a disappointed look, "-well, only if you resist. I don't mind going easy. Perhaps, maybe, telling me what I want before we begin. I must say, torturing another person is a very good bonding experience," he paced around her bed, "-we get to see what's inside of you. How much pain till you pass out, how much water to have the consciousness return. If this had been a day before... yeah, no, let's not think what I would have done."

"W-Who a-are you?"

"A traveling adventurer," said he taking a seat, "-also, I removed the curse."

"W-why would you s-save me?" she stopped, "-never mind," the face froze, "-I understand. My c-companions are dead?"

"Correct. Had to use their bodies and soul to save you. Don't you hear, the weeping souls of the dead?" just in there, he gently drew Orenmir – broke the mundane seal and allowed the howling faces to dash about the room.

Fidgeting about her bed did no good. The specters made for the head, hands, legs, taking a turn, scratching, biting, and freezing. Her composure cracked, seeing undead, her comrades, the featureless apparitions forced the mind to think outside the box. What was unreal took on a real form, the specters held her dead comrade's faces. Not like Igna knew, he plainly sat with one leg over the other, watching and waiting. Psychological torture and trauma brought greater results than staining one's clothes.

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"Stop moving so much," said he in discomfort, "-making me nauseous."

"W-what d-do you mean?" she tugged and pulled; "-don't you see these ghosts?"

"Ghosts?" leaning to her forehead, "-what ghosts?" At the same time, a horrifying apparition enlarged itself behind his nonchalant expression. "Where in the world are there specters?" looking to where her eyes rested, "-see, there's nothing." He reached out to no avail.

"S-stop l-lying to m-me," cried she.

"This fa?ade outlasted its welcome. Are you going to talk, or no?" Her hauntings intensified. The ghosts climbed onto the bed, laid on her chest, legs, and neck. Some whispered, others gave nightmares, and a few even going as far as to take blood.

"Not willing to talk, huh?" calmly staring at her terrified expression, "-how about this." The locks tightened; a small pot rested above her forehead – droplets of water fell at regular intervals. Her expression screamed of never-ending bravado. She kept her composure even after the ghost's assault. "I'll see you in a few days, goodbye." An imaginary door shut, \*Mana Control: Shadow Element Variant – Illusion,\* the barrier created a differing space. Time accelerated for the wife.

In the meantime, inside the office, the negotiations turned into full-blown heated arguments. The investigators named: Char and Harne were ostentatious in refuting her advances.

"The military failed to keep the peace," said Char, "-we have reports that a massacre occurred. The guild isn't so powerless," smirking at the fact, "-the army ordered machine-guns to be fired onto the fighters, that is unacceptable and a breach of their oath."

"Don't talk to me about the oath," cried Serene in a tone that'd make one feel idiotic, "-what of the fighters revolting for a worthless cause. Let's say, the culprits managed to bring a cursed body, one INFECTED, to the capital for a family to see. Yes, it will help the relatives have a semblance of peace. We know for a fact the taint can affect anyone who comes in contact. What would the guild do then, a family gets infected, spreads the taint over the continent, breaks the economy, ravages the land, and plunges us into a world of hate. Don't expect help from the Federation, they're already in trouble. Now, add the Wracia Empire's blatant attempts at invasion. What then, tell me, what then? Will the guild send out members to fight a war, no, tis the military, who showed a sliver of humanity, that is then forced to fight a pointless battle."

"Tis hypothetical," said Harne brushing off her well-constructed conclusion, "-we have the know-how to heal the curse. The body would be burnt right after. The fighters did nothing wrong, they were showing remorse. It wouldn't have happened if the wall wasn't breached," turning to the Lieutenant, "-isn't that right?"

"Yes," said he, "-I take responsibility for leading good men to die. The amount of death on my name is unsurmountable. To make amends, I'm willing to take any punishment the army decides."

"Wrong," said Serene with a less than amicable tone, "-Harne, Char, are you both cretins. Never mind, it's out of line, you are, fully bred idiots who cared only about the rules and not the miracle the military performed."

"Excuse you, what miracle?"

"I'll explain," said Viola flashing the Platinum tag, "-the newest monsters are strong, the same level as Boss-Class. Their abilities differed; I even saw one evolve well past Tier-2. I'm sure Sergeant Appy has something to add."

"Sergeant?" inquired Char, "-do you wish to interject?"

"Yes, it took us 4 parties of our best adventurers to take down one of the beasts. Then again, we didn't kill it, it was Kinless, a novice adventurer. He stormed the outpost, killed off the threat, made for the wall, cleared it, and then went on beyond the walls. I'm ashamed, as a silver adventurer, I should have laid on the battlefield to fight and hold back their advances. Sadly, orders are orders, my oath is to protect, and I did so."

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"I don't buy it," shrugged Harne parting his dirtied black hair, "-how do we explain 75% loss to the public, the guild, and the military. We have no proof..."

\*Knock, knock,\* the heated debate cooled. A single question went through their minds, '-who is it?'

\*Knock, knock,\* the wood buckled.

"Enter," said Mello feeling desperate. So far, the logical conclusion didn't matter. The investigators were possessed to make the military the ones responsible. The testimony didn't matter, and at said rate, Phantom would join as a suspect.

"Sorry to intrude," two figures entered, "-I've uncovered something of interest," he kicked the lady onto her knees. "Meet Enia Koskov. A rather strange individual hailing from the Empire," he met Serene's thankful gaze, "-Investigators, Reforge has outlasted your welcome. I've contacted the guild in good faith. The issue is far beyond the jurisdiction of pawns, tis a matter of national security. Hence, it falls into the military's hand."

"Military's hand?" fired Char slamming his table, "-what in the fuc-" he stared anxiously.

"Mind thy tongue," scowled Igna, "-there are people of fame and stature in attendance. Disrespecting them equals death."

"And who the hell are you?" inquired Harne pushing up his glasses in dismissal.

"Kinless," replied he nonchalantly, "-the son of Duchess Haggard of Rotherham. Shall I say more?"

"Nobility..."

"Worry not," said he, "-Harne, Char. Might I ask a few questions?"

"What is a silver-spoon fed brat wish with us, hard-working peasants?"

"Information," tightly grabbing Enia's cheeks, "-come on dear," spoken in an unnaturally soft voice, "-what are Harne and Char's true identity?"

"S-sp,"

\*Clang,\* three daggers echoed onto the floor, "-you've been outplayed," said Igna dispelling the magical barrier. "-Enia's confession has been sent to the guild as well as the military. Harnold Kosnia and Charmin Vosk," the grip over her mouth lessened. Cover blown, they stared at one another resolutely. The thumb slit, \*Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads.\*

"Traitors," said Serene telepathically pushing the two against the wall.

"How pleasant," said Viola, "-poison pills. Interesting."

"Restrain them," ordered Julius, "-be mindful, they're spies from the Empire."

Tied, the advance squad handled the extraction. "-take her too," said Igna, "-she'll speak whenever. Maybe drug her as well, there's no saying when she might recover.

The room emptied, Mello and his team watched, everything happened in haste, none knew what really occurred. From an outside perspective, a boy said spies, and the others restrained the investigators.

"Perplexed?" inquired Julius proudly.

"Yeah," said Zoey with an open mouth, "-what happened?"

"Let me explain," and so, he went into a detailed summary.

'Serene had her doubts about the whole turn of events. Why would adventurers start a fight without a cause? For the sake of a tainted body, who in the right mind would do so. Then again, it doesn't matter. Her suspicion came true when the investigator stood adamantly on forcing the blame onto the military. The note was insurance, a gamble on a gut feeling. After spending time and breaking her mind, Enia gave crucial information. This was nothing more than a planned attack to break the public's trust in the government. Hidros is walking on thin-ice as is, they saw the weakness and saw fit to act on it, very shrewd and commendable.' Potential cause and effect riddled the mind, he watched as Julius reached his conclusion.

"What about contacting the guild?" inquired Tommy.

"A lie," said Igna, "-lying often brings more results than speaking the truth. I could tell what lady Serene thought, only had to edge them over. Nobility, assumed of treason, and lastly, Enia's confession, well-fabricated lies."

"It worked," said Viola, "-they tried to kill themselves."

"Fast thinking from my cousin," said Julius reaching for a playful handshake, "-good to see the good spirit."

"Yeah, it's nice to be here."

"What's going to happen now?" wondered Appy at the window, the spies hurled out the southern gates.

"We take it to the top," said Julius, "-as Guild Leader of Xenon, there isn't much I can do at the moment. The rest is in the higher-ups' hand. One thing is sure, neither the adventurers nor military are to blame."

"Won't this mean war?"

"Don't think so," added Serene, "-we have an edge on the Empire. A turn-coat spy is worth more than a weapon. Leave it to us," said she in a seductive manner. On that, the chaotic scene at Reforge ended. Ambulances arrived to carry the many wounded to Meke. Support from Ground-Zero and Stonegrove would cover for Reforge until new orders. Phantom's forces returned; makeshift tents were dismantled.

'I guess it's over,' thought Igna at the vending machine, '-some ice-tea might do good.' Three light taps, "-Igna,"

"Mina, something the matter?"

"Not really," said she fidgeting, "-I h-h-heard from the others. You're strong, very strong," her cheeks flushed.

"Not strong, just lucky," turned with two soda cans, "-what, do you have a crush on me?" rather than being monotonous, Origin jumped in with a joyful expression.

"N-no," she skipped to hide behind her palms, "-i-I'm j-just impressed."

"Mina, Mina, o' dearest Mina," knelt as if to propose, "-would you make me the happiest man on earth."

"W-what is this?" jumped to hit the back of her head.

"Are you ok?" quick to grab her wrist, "-does it hurt?"

"N-no," her cheeks boiled.

"Here," she yelped, cold against hot didn't bode well, "-sorry if I took the teasing a bit far."

"It's fine. Are you going back?"

"I suppose so." They sat with back against the window, "-I came for my graduation. Don't have a clue what's next. Life moves on, not much to it."

"Will I ever see you again?" sincere and a hint of coyness, "-will I?" asking so took courage, blatantly displayed on the embarrassed posture and expression.

"Don't know," replied he calmly, "-Mina," taking a sip, "-let me say one thing. I don't think I'll ever get involved in a romantic relation. I had a girl, she betrayed and left me for another. The fault is mine since I always ran off to do quests and get strong. I'm selfish, so, it's not a good idea. Behind a pretty face lies the worst person ever known to man."

"I don't care," said she sharply, "-I'm not interested in pretty boys. You worked hard, sweated, and bled to save the girl; I don't even know you. Even if it's a crush or whatever, I want to know more ... I guess my visage and small stature isn't much to please another."

"Don't play the victim," said he sharply, "-have more self-respect. No one cares for someone who takes pity on herself. You worked hard to take care of the patients, look at you, dirtied, the hair is a mess, the face is sweaty, you smell like ass. Still," he took her hand, "-what you did to save others is worth more than one would ever think."

"So, can we meet again?"

"Sure, I won't make any promises."

"Good enough for me," she smiled, "-let's start as friends."

"As you wish," he gave into her friendliness, she exuded a familiar charm. "-To a newly formed friendship."

"A new friendship," said she warmly.

Chapter 564: Rotherham

"Quite a catch," said Serene.

"Shut it," refuted Igna. Time was nigh, it was back to Rotherham. The interior, robust, simple, and efficient. The advance squad sat in order, some moved about, and others discussed missions or debriefed to the leader's command. A little out of place, he made till the upper area and sat where Julius told to. To and fro made the simple take-off feel heavy and charged.

'And my time here is done,' thought he, the plane lifted. 'A single day and all of this occurred. Feels like another world. Suppose merging with Origin made it worthwhile. I can use magic once again, the mana manipulation arts is limitless. Things are looking up, well, I'd like to think so.' Notification blasted into his face, calls from Lady Courtney, Julius, and Alicia, most of all, éclair. Once putting the lenses, "-ABOUT TIME!"

"Chill," voiced he.

"No, I've been in the dark for two days. What happened, where have you been?"

"Look through my memories, the answer should be there."

"Fine, no need to be standoffish."

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Halfway into the flight, a figure slipped onto the next seat, black hair and fierce eyes. "Shall we catch up?" asked she leaned to envelop his seat.

"Do you mind?" returned he unimpressed, "-still got the habit of exposing cleavage."

"And that's why I love you," she settled pretty easily, "-where were you for 6 years?"

"I was killed by Lucifer and Eira. Happened in Iqavea. Remember the mission to help border control, apparently, it was a trap. No idea what happened after that. I found myself watching me, as Igna. The barrier broke, and we merged. Mind and soul, I'm Staxius. Name and body, Igna. It doesn't matter. The fresh start gives perspective. What about you, how's handling Arda been?"

"A mess," she half-heartedly sighed, "-glad we got out of there."

"Are things that bad in Arda?"

"Terrible. The Blood-King's faction is doing fine. Lady Elvira and I made sure to round the clan leaders. We're a neutral party, similar to the Haggard's departure from the Federation. Tension is high, Elendor's keeping us together at the moment, no idea when it might break."

"Sorry about that," said he a little concerned for abandoning such a task on her.

"No worry," said she, "-I quite enjoyed playing politics."

"Enjoyed playing politics. It truly was just a game."

"Don't get me wrong," her posture straightened, "-tis a game of cat and mouse. On another note, what's the deal with you, what now?"

"Trying to make a career in Alpha. There are a few things amiss. Remember Aceline?"

"The pride of Hidros, of course, I know. She was murdered, right?"

"Wrong, we actually revived her, quite a tedious story for another time," the gaze escaped to the passing clouds.

"Don't want to talk about it. No problem," she stood, "-let's go over the details behind a nice dinner later, my treat."

"Sure," he nodded. 'éclair, can I have an update on what Serene's doing here?"

"The lady is shadowing Prince Julius, learning about the intricacies of Xenon and the underworld. She's secretary to the current head of the family, your lady mother. Results so far are worthwhile, Arda doesn't dare make a move on the alliance because of her."



'I get it, the closest confidant turned coat to a neutral party. Prince Julius and princess Lizzie are other issues entirely.'

Blond locks snuck to glance over the next seat. Blue eyes sparkled in the well-lit interior. The blueness outside befitted her visage, "-Lady Viola," said he matching her gaze, "-stop being a cat, join me already."

"Sorry about that," she cleared her throat and sat, "-it's been quite a while."

"No joke," he gave a once-over. "-Undrar, you've grown into a very beautiful lady."

"Ha-ha," the face remained dull, "-I've got more than a few complaints. Need I remind, you pulled me from the hall of rebirth onto the mortal plane to then disappear. We did a few quests then you up and left with responsibilities on my shoulder."

"I know, I know. I dumped most of my work onto others. Call it outsourcing..."

"Shut up," she slammed the seat, "-no way, I'm pissed," the mild expression before was naught but a trap. A sweet innocent bunny holding a knife and murderous intent.

"Ok, ok. Let me explain." Thus, for the next fifteen minutes – he spared no details and told everything. "To conclude, I've inherited Scifer's will as well as the duty of becoming king of the monsters."

"Seriously," her head hang low, "-so much happened. You died for god's sake."

"Well," pointing to Knig's emblem, "-memories of old is what kept me so long. What's happened to attaining divinity. Demi-Goddess, shouldn't you be a goddess by now?"

"Jokes on you," said she leering at his neck, "-I ascended into a higher-being a few years ago. Undrar, the bringer of death, separated from me, Viola, to perform her godly duties. I wield the power of an angel still."

"Why separate?"

"Really?" shadows covered her empty gaze, "-I stayed because of you, idiot. I enjoy the mortal plain, grown fond of it. The heir of Lord Death died; the element didn't change host. Left quite a mess. To fill the empty spot, Undrar took on the mantle of the current god of death besides Lord Death. "

"Why speak in the third person?"

"Because Undrar is another being," said she, "-we share most things. Consciousness isn't one of them."

"..."

"Speechless?" she remarked in jest.

"Yeah, very much so. Can't believe how most things have altered. What about the personal life; made a family yet?"

"Yes," said she proudly, "-matter of fact, I'm a mother."

“Mother?” a brow rose, “-stop lying.”

“It’s true.”

“Stop right there,” palm to her face, “-the wind of lies, I sense it.”

“Just a passing gust,” returned she sternly. “Jokes aside, I watch over an Orphanage back in Aria. Adventurers, no, climbers, die almost daily. Some leave behind massive families, up to us to take care of them. Phantom has helped a lot, Lady Elvira in particular, she sends funds, provides food and weapons,” her reminiscing followed into, “-the students often become Climbers. At the age of 16, they can either go out into the world, stay until 18, or venture up the tower. I’ve trained so many young recruits who’ve gone on and became Silver-tier adventurers.”

Igna sat and watched, a slight grin showed fulfillment. “Sorry, did I ramble?”

“Not really,” said he, “-I’m glad for the children. Being trained by an angel isn’t something to be laughed at.”

“Shut it. Anyway, what now, what about you?”

“Nothing at the moment. Viola, tis a good time to say, I won’t be calling on thy help. The kids have a home and a charming instructor.”

“I know,” she held his hands, “-already made my peace with it. I’m not strong, my power dwindles every year. I’ll die the same as a human and fully merge with Undrar. Good things don’t last.”

“I’m sorry,” the gaze lowered in shame.

“Don’t misunderstand-” she pinched.

“My cheeks,” he squirmed.

“-This isn’t goodbye. I’ll be in touch. We’re family. The time spent apart made me realize, you’re the only one I can truly feel at ease with. Even now, the long reunion feels second to none, it feels right.”

“I agree, being able to say things otherwise kept secret. I won’t apologize, instead, let me thank you for everything, Viola,” he bowed, “-I appreciate all the support and patience, I’m grateful.”

“Shut up,” she pulled his head on her lap, “-I accept the sentiment,” her fingers went through the hair, “-I’ll always help. We started, walked, and parted ways. I was immature and you were a kid, time made us wiser. I’m happy, happier than fighting for the sake of fighting. The difficulty will only increase from here on. Remember,” she gave a soft peck, “-I’ll always be on thy side.”

The plane landed at 17:32. Prince Julius took command and directed the troops onto their next duties. Healers and medics headed for the hospital. Smiles and overall bliss carried on in conversations. They’d saved an outpost; the gratification, a sense of achievement, and fulfillment.

‘I’m 2 days into the trip and already this much has happened.’ Transport for the hotel waited. Serene and Viola made for the skyscraper, Julius took a car for the train station.

‘A long walk seems fair,’ thought he stood at the first bus stop. Behind, after empty roads, stone walls, buildings, and the dome-shaped roof of the university of Magiology. He took a detour for the town-

square, a relatively empty lot separating the university and the hospital. Further along the square came the mall. Mostly self-sufficient, the shops were of brands associated with Elon's Empire and Phantom's many ventures. This year alone, Elvira bought out countless companies, some thriving, some cutting losses. Her talent in business made the thriving into colossal and the poor into resilient businesses. Unlike other times, Rotherham opened its gate to visitors. Access to the military and research area was tightly guarded, to which they expanded more to the south. The ease of travel by train made it somewhat popular. Clearer, technologically more advanced, and efficient, the feel differed tremendously from the capital.

The town itself, where the hoodlums and local gangs resided was the same. Illegal activities ran rampant; the Dark-Guild controlled the whole vicinity, thus limiting the damage. It actually made it visitable. Godfather Renaud had a mansion towards the outer edge of town, a massive area supervised by his elite guards. Such pressure alone didn't require law enforcement for the familia made their own. Officially a Dukedom, Duchess Haggard's word was the law.

A mall next to a university and hospital; good or not, the opinions differed. The clean streets and artistic design felt like a dream. 'First time visiting the mall,' off the popular couple's destination and onto the concrete stairs, neon lights, cleanly displayed, and refined advertisement. Looks alone screamed wealthy. Once inside, people were up and about. Security stood strong, couples, families, students. A private high school opened three years ago, emphasis was on student autonomy. The University gradually allowed for more subjects without dropping its prestige.

'Classy restaurants overlooking the yard. When was this even built?'

"Six years is a long time. Construction completed in around three years. Lady Elvira's objective was always to make Phantom flourish. Her foresight led to Rotherham being a worthy town."

"No more trivia," voiced he, "-I'm hungry. Let's pick it up at a later date?"

"Fine, the bike is on its way. Enjoy the finer details of what the town has to offer."

'He's right,'

Elvira's office burnt, reports of the spies had her in shock. "-The empire's invaded the country."

"We're lucky," said Serene, "-if not for Igna, the situation would have never been brought to light."

"What about Aria?"

"Still the same," said Viola, "-Julius did a good job leading the troops. Didn't expect to meet Igna so soon. My job's done here. Report if things get rough."

"Viola," called Elvira, "-I appreciate the help."

"Don't mention it," she winked and left.

"Serene, are they being interrogated?"

"Yeah. One of them is already talking. We should have more information during the week. Uncovering the spy ring is a must."

"I know," sat strongly behind the desk, "-call in the nightwalkers. They're best for these assignments. I'll handle the guild and her majesty."

The evening turned to dusk, the skyscrapers gleamed in a blueish hue. The night was another scene. People flocked to the mall, high-schoolers weren't as common as university students. Cheap alcohol in hand; others with books and laptops, the price of living wasn't much. Looks were deceiving.

'No luck in Leko's investigation. What are they doing, the cause of death is still suicide.' Dinner arrived swiftly, '-why did he die, who killed him?' the chosen place to eat was a bar. Counters had people chatting and drinking. He sat facing the yard, the cold nightly breeze enhanced the meal's appearance. 'Food...' taking a bite, '-wait, I'm looking at this the wrong way. Tis not how he died, but who would benefit from the death. Don't tell me,' a suspect came to mind, '-the wife...'

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#### Chapter 565: Celina's Future

'Leko's wife is the killer, that's the potential motive. Inheriting a fortune, and the academy, being the admin might not be worth the trouble. Questions and no leads, in that mindset, what if someone inside the adventuring academy wanted him out. More spies, what's the reason for killing a chef, nothing jumps out. How he died in of itself, a mere hanging, drugs. The body was burnt; a suspicious fact but not damning. I need more information.' Between thinking and eating, the latter finished hastily. The mall's splendor shone in positive expressions. A tip to the waiter and off it was to the hotel. Streets were loud, many returned from working the offices around the three great towers. The town-square, also a park, brittle and robust in construction, contrasted the soft and tending aura of the trees and gardens. A perfect blend of technology and nature's beauty. Insects made trips about the amber gleaming street lamps. Some burnt, others hung on the protruding curvy metalwork. Not noticeable, pretty things attracted attention, and sometimes, the prettiest of things was the deadliest. For a town of research and military prowess, attention to detail was second to none. Buildings placed strategically, out of sight for those unnecessary, and immediate for those of importance.

Stepped onto the pavement, an unmanned bike glided to a stop. Effortlessly, straddling the powerful steed, he went forth to the hotel and ended the strenuous trip.

'I'm tired,' passing the lobby till the elevator, two figures jumped in ambush.

"Alicia," said he without much care, "-Celina, you girls seemed to be fine."

"Hey," said the little lady. Her body and face drew to the vague direction of the restaurant.

"Anything the matter?" asked he, she began to fidget.

"I-" catching Alicia's expression, "-nothing."

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'What's the matter with her?' over in said direction, '-oh, a special menu for sugar enthusiast.'

"Come on then," he took her hand, "-let's try some desserts."

"Really?" the expression melted.

“Obviously.”

A round table, tall heavy red curtains frilled in waves, “-Igna, the restaurant is expensive, like a lot.”

“Chill,” said he, “-if the lady wants sweets, who am I to complain.”

The sight of cheeks being stuffed, Alicia’s regular interjection to clean the morsels off her lips, the two grew to like one another. Never mind her age, when food was on the table, Celina never cared to proper ethics, her mannerism swayed between barbaric and normal, a fresh outlook or so he thought.

“Alicia,” said he insinuating a matter of secrecy, “-how was the talk with Cousin Julius,” the fingers interlocked in subjection.

“Don’t make it scandalous,” she coughed, “-it was a good talk. He gave us a tour of the town, went to the mall and found things to do. He offered to care for Celina after you returned. Something to do with joining Apexi.”

“Celina, what did cousin Julius say?”

“The prince asked me about my dreams, so I said I wanted to be an idol. Told him about how you trained me to be a musician, the conversation went along those lines,” she cleaned her mouth, “-he offered me to join the agency right away on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“I discuss it with you,” she smiled, “-I’m glad the opportunity to grow is here, I want to do my best, but I don’t know anymore. The pressure, I’m scared to mess up.”

“Listen,” a strong and direct posture trampled the babble, “-the opportunity is there for grasp. Your parents are gone, making you an orphan. It’s hard to swallow, and I won’t mince words, there’s no one to rely on. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again, you have to become independent. To that end, if the opportunity is too great a task, why not enroll at a university. There’s one for music at Rosespire. They have dorms; enrolling and tuition will cost a fair bit. Don’t worry on that front,” stopped to check the reaction, “-interested or should I stop?”

“A musical University, more details please.”

“Ok. You’ll learn music from a strong background, and don’t worry about being a novice. They accept anyone and everyone; it’s a pretty lax environment. Consider it a trial before setting out in the real world. Work part-time, join the agency, and study. Nothing more, nothing less, rinse and repeat until graduation. Four years is enough to make it in the industry, under the correct supervision. Besides, if things don’t go the way we planned, I’ll be here to help. You’re my responsibility.”

“Igna,” voiced Alicia, “-isn’t she a little too young for such a task?”

“No,” refuted he, “-age mustn’t be a barrier. She has time to grow. Experiencing a new world, meeting new people, working towards a goal, towards her dream, sounds awesome to me.”

“Deal,” said she sternly, “-I want to do as you say.”

"I see," he smiled, "-Then, we'll head to Rosespire tomorrow. They're taking applications for the next semester this week."

"Thank you."

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"No need for gratifications," said he strongly, "-keep it for when you graduate."

"Ok," the melancholic expression crumbled into cute smiles.

Decision made, Alicia pulled him close, "-you planned this, didn't you?"

"Obviously," said he breaking the grip, "-nothing is done without a purpose. She's my responsibility, I might not be her father or guardian, I'll still care for her no mistake about it."

"You've changed," her head lowered, "-are you ok?"

"I'm fine," returned he coldly, "-what about you, find anything interesting?"

"No, I'm just bored."

"Good," he smiled, "-Cousin Julius headed for Rosespire, he'll be at the Agency. Why not check them out for a while."

"Why?"

"Experience. I bet things are different here. Why not watch them for personal growth. A trip is supposed to broaden one's mind, not the contrary."

"Someone's certainly gotten wiser."

"After what happened, I ought to have grown a little," he stood, "-let's call it a night."

Plans for the next day were settled in a sitting. éclair worked to be granted a spot for Celina, the university had a lot of applicants, ease of payment contributed to said fact. Glitz and glamor of the world of entertainment opened a ray of hope for those unable to do battle. Anyone could become a star, poor to rich, status and background held no value. In a way, it was true. Besides, noble ladies and gentlemen were busy trying to get engaged to other families for political gain. Becoming scholars seemed nobler than sweating to achieve greatness.

Leko's murder, graduation from the academy, and now, Celina's future. The trip to Hidros had more in store. The murder reached a standstill, nothing could be done. Asking questions over and over again would only bring stress. Knowledge from Origin did give a few subtle clues, as time progressed, many timelines were established to justify the killing. One thing remained, Leko died by hanging, no information prior, and none after.

Tuesday the 9th of March rose by the sound of éclair's alarm. The spirit's grudge lingered. Instead of the normal bells, the sound swapped for a screaming banshee. At 06:00, the room blasted to have him jump onto the cold floor. "Shut up," sat on his knees, "-damn it, éclair!"

"You're not scared?" asked he over the phone.

"No. Didn't you read my memories. I merged without another being, I paid the price with my emotions."

"You still feel emotions," said he, "-I can sense it."

"Yeah, that's the second persona." A tough day was ahead. Paying no heed to the joke, the morning ritual happened subconsciously. Forty-five minutes later, he sat in the lobby in wait for Alicia and Celina.

"Ready," said they waving across the hall. Celina wore a very fitting outfit. Blue blazer, white shirt tucked inside black pants accompanied by a single heart-shaped pendant. Brown boots finished off her look. Alicia wore a black formal dress that very much so exposed her legs. Neatly tied hair, the duo was ready for whatever laid ahead.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Igna."

"Sleep well?" asked he moving to the entrance.

"Yeah, like a baby," said Celina, "-these clothes sure make me look grown-up."

"Yeah, they do," he nodded.

"Shouldn't you compliment us?" asked Alicia coyly.

"No," returned he, "-I'll do so when the time is right."

"Gosh, whatever," the cold treatment made her chat to Alicia frequently.

"A-are we taking t-the train?" gulped she stood out in the misty morning.

"I planned on doing so... well, looking at how nicely you ladies dressed. We better take another means of transport."

Skipping the details, a private jet departed for the capital city. The sheer scale of Phantom's reach and power had Alicia in awe. 'A private jet on-demand,' thought she enjoying wine, '-they have so much and are making even more. How rich is Phantom, how powerful is Igna. He's the son of a duchess, lady Courtney Haggard who owns Phantom, ran by Elvira Stepania Haggard. The ex-head of the family was Staxius Haggard, the king of Arda, founder of the Federation, and overseer to many companies. Some say he built the dynasty from nothing and brought it to be a phenom. Hidros's history is very captivating. There's missing information; the culture of differing races is unlike Alphaia. They ousted Kreston to unify the continent. The only information available on the Haggard's Dynasty is what's allowed to the public's eye. Talk about scary.'

They soon landed at the same private airfield. 'Back to Rosespire,' thought he on hard-ground, '-last time was lady Yuki. I should perhaps visit them.'

"Hey, where are we headed next?" inquired Celina forcefully.

"You're excited?"

"Yes, traveling with you is always fun."

"I see," he paused and spun, "-unlike a certain lady I know," said louder, she glared.

"I can hear you, stupid rich kid. Can't help if my stuff got stuck."

"Alicia Raze, the harbinger of trouble, and a loner at heart," proclaimed he.

"Shut up," she fired back, "-this isn't funny!"

"Whatever," a gesture followed by robust luxurious car, "-finished?"

"Yeah, the pilots helped me get my bag unstuck," flushed, "-unlike some gentleman I know."

"Please," fired he, "-how could you get stuck, baffles me more and more."

"No comments," the door opened.

"Cousin Igna."

"Cousin Julius, you came?"

"Obviously," said he, "-I had to."

"P-p-prince J-Julius."

"Lady Alicia, please, there's no need to be flustered. Cousin Igna has explained everything. You'll be spending a day with me at the agency. Xius's back from their world tour."

"I see, they're the reason you left so quickly." Once settled, the driver made for Lai. Apexi recently moved to another media complex. The growing popularity forced the transfer.

"Cousin Igna, is it fine if we head to the agency first. The enrollment starts at 09:00. It's still 07:43."

"I don't mind," said he, "-Celina's fallen asleep, doesn't matter either way."

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"Awesome," to which he engaged Alicia in conversation. Her awe couldn't fight the will to learn.

Apexi's new media complex stood at the northernmost edge of Lai. A clear view of the neighboring forests. Igna decided for Julius to carry on without him. It would be more troublesome than good, besides, tis Celina's time to shine. The prince understood and agreed. She happily walked with Julius. From there, a straight road to the castle walls and inside the capital city. Gnah's University stood in the education district where Lizzie once studied.

"Could you take us to the noble district, I'd like to stop at the mansion."

"Sure," said the driver effortlessly. More mansion sprawled over the years, the noble district felt cleaner and more reserved. The castle remained strong. In there somewhere sat Queen Gallienne. 'Royal family,' thinking back, '-an enemy to close allies. I took her eye and she took my life. The days of fights; the days where my companions were still around. She cursed me to not experience Eira's upbringing.'

Big and majestic, the mansion's splendor soon interrupted the memories. Gates opened without identification. éclair informed about the arrival. Up the same hill and stopped at the same porch. Apart from the helipads on the yard, things were the same.

"Good morning, young master," said the head-maid.



"Rosetta," gulped he.

"Excuse me?"

"No, no, I apologize. I heard good things from Prince Julius."

"I see," she smiled with her round-glasses. "-Princess Lizzie is inside."

#### Chapter 566: Forgotten Memories

'I turned ten, well, I'd like to think so. My body, my memories, they're all jumbled up. I remember dying, being assaulted, then transported inside a tube, and then reawaken. People say I'm a princess, they act like I'm a princess, and in all sense of the word, I'm a princess. My face isn't the same, I remember being part of an adventuring party. Enrolled at a school, I met many people and did many things. Was I reincarnated or saved; I don't know. Father Staxius, lady Auic, and Avon took care of me. It's been a few years since then, my memories are slowly returning. Servants take care of me, I've grown fond of my retainers, handsome folks. I still don't believe I'm a princess, I've lived my whole life as one, it's second nature. For a thirteen-year-old... not bad, I think. This new life is a blessing; I'm going to cherish it the best I can.'

The day always began with Seiran parting the curtains. Life now, after abdicating claims to the throne, was very much lavish. Per the good faith of her aunt, Lizzie returned to her 'home' a castle given by her late father. A memorial grave with Lizzie amidst the garden. '-I knew it,' thought she on the days running about the property. Time was mostly spent playing the piano. Memories from the previous life slowly added over time until fully grasping the mind.

The troubling flashes and dreams would soon conclude on a particular day. All went on as usual, Seiran came to wake the princess. Breakfast was served by Rosetta, Rile and Laurance were out in town. Laura jumped about to clean the furniture from the never-ending fall of dust.

Food laid on the large table, eating alone didn't bother much. A vintage radio always had music adding to the atmosphere. Training one's ear was best done early, said one of her many tutors.

Gates to the mansion opened, Seiran and Rosetta hastily made for the porch. '-a visitor?' she ate without indifferent to the ordeal. She had been very melancholic during the past few days. Laura concluded it is puberty whilst Seiran argue it was pressure from leaving her lady mother. None consulted her during said time, Rile and Laurance gladly spoke and kept company. Word of warning from the ladies had them tread lightly.

'My friends,' thought she, '-they're always trying to keep me happy. Protecting me and my future. They're my family. Lady Mother never truly enjoyed my company, her eyes, always fixed on the path ahead. Father Staxius died, or so what big sister Eira and Lord Lucifer said. Brother Julius argued a lot to mother – fighting and crying, I don't understand it or didn't want to understand. My plate is full as is, memories of a past life, and complication from mother. I don't resent anyone, I'm grateful for this life of comfort. Who would have known, a gutter rat suddenly became a princess. His blood flows through my veins, I can take comfort in that.'

A car noisily halted at the porch. Murmurs exchanged into steps leading towards the dining hall. 'Who's the new guest?' she glanced over, '-I don't.'

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"Good morning Princess," gestured Igna, "-I came to pay a visit."

"F-father?"

"My lady," interjected Rosetta, "-please, keep your wits about you."

"Don't worry," said he to the head-maid, "-it's quite alright. Might I take the princess on a little promenade?"

"Sure," she smiled. Seiran crawled about the shadows, her piercing stare spoke volumes. Laura waited at the other end of the corridor murderously.

"Let's go then," said Lizzie hastily taking his arms.

"If it's not much trouble," stopped at the entrance, "-could you take care of my companion here."

"You're leaving me alone?" she exclaimed.

"Not alone," a playful tap on the head, "-the maids here are graceful and considerate. A nightwalker, a demi-human, and an arachnid."

\*Cough,\* "-p-please, we'll do as is needed."

The situation wasn't much to speak of. Laura took to Celina, Seiran and Rosetta stood in the kitchen.

"Are you sure we shouldn't guard the princess?" asked Seiran rather crudely.

"No, leave them be," said she operating the station, "-Igna Haggard's family." The tone implicated another matter, '-how does he know so much. Our race, the way he threatened without an expression. The air emanating feels so much like him. I wonder, is our master back, or is he just a copy?'

"Whatever you say," said Seiran, "-the resemblance to King Staxius is uncanny."

"Not just the resemblance," said she under her breath.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing much," she pointed to spices, "-was asking for pepper."

"Alright."

Flowers, butterflies flapping from one to another. With a hint of fragrance, the garden stood bigger than memory served. More plants were displayed, all carefully labeled and cared for by Laura. The memorial serenely rested at the center. The treelined walls spread upwards to shield the inside. The expansive plot of land and higher stature built the facade of being alone and tranquil. The well-built noble district blushed inactivity, parties, and functions organized by bored nobles.

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Soon seated, "might I ask a question?" inquired Lizzie swaying her feet upon a raindrop-shaped swing.

"Go on," returned he observing the premises.

"Not a question, more of a story," her fingers twirled, the swing swayed.

"I'm all ears."

"There was once a girl, left alone in a world in arms. People fought and did battle many times. She did battle too, fighting against the world to stay alive. Then, one day, a certain man entered her life, he leaped from a window to break apart a fight. Not for the sake of justice... instead, it was to argue about losing sleep. The girl wanted death, she gave up until the man took her in. There on, she grew accustomed to the ways of the party and was happy. Regret brought her savior back, he vowed to make her his daughter. The duo led a pretty nice life, things were looking up until the day the girl was kidnapped."

"The girl died," interjected Igna, "-The worthless savior did naught. The girl died with the hope of being rescued. Then and there, the trauma broke what little semblance of humanity remained. However, as fate would have it, another opportunity presented itself. To have the girl be saved and return as his daughter, as a princess, and as someone he cared about."

"So..." soft fingers interlocked with his, "-you knew, didn't you," looking up, "-Staxius, it's you."

"Yes," he knelt, "-the memories are slowly returning?" he wiped her watery cheeks.

"No," her head shook, "-they've fully returned," no warning, she jumped into a tight embrace. Off-balance, he tipped backward and landed onto the dirtied stone path.

"Careful," remarked he whilst patting her back.

"Yeah, yeah," she breathed softly, "-I don't get it." Settled on her knees, "-what happened next?"

"I don't know," shrugged he, "-Lizzie, to be fair, I don't remember much. I know I died and got reincarnated as Igna Haggard, the nephew of Staxius Haggard. I know right, confusing."

"Your uncle is yourself?" the puffed cheeks crinkled at her nose, "-yes?"

"Stop that," he poked her forehead to which her face relaxed, "-things are changed, it's a new world, a new life, and a fresh start. A family is waiting inside, Rile, Laurance, Rosetta, Seiran, and Laura, they all care. Besides, the brilliant pianist of Arda made her name in the world of classical music. I'm proud, truly."

"Well, it's not like I did it for you," she pouted.

"Good, you're not related to me anymore. Be what you wish to be, I'll do my best to ensure the future ahead."

"What do you mean?" she pinched his cheeks.

"What I said, I'll do my best," coldly watching her curious expression, "-are you done playing?"

"Sorry. So slumped and emotionless, I thought it was a mask."

"Not a mask," he stood, "-time's running late."

"Hey," she tugged, "-what about us, what are we now?"

"Cousins?" he shrugged; "-I don't know. You're Lizzie, I'm Igna, nothing more, nothing less. Works with you?"

"Fine."

"By the way, do try to be the gentle thirteen-year-old princess."

"Whatever," she refuted the jestful comment.

The past coincided with a present to affect the future. Many people of interest, those who once shared a deep bond with Staxius, knew it in their hearts, Igna was the king. The awakening of the Death element made it so. Even if the truth got out, there was no way to prove it.

"Princess Lizzie," called Rile, "-we're back."

"Rile, Laurance, welcome back."

"Highness," said Rile, "-we've brought the records." Suspicion rose at the guest.

"Highness," said Laurance effortlessly stood to shield, "-go to your room."

"Oh please," said she running back to Igna, "-Brother Igna is a good person." The ruckus felt more of an argument through the walls. Seiran spared no time in making for the front door. Rosetta followed closely behind.

"Gracious me," said he, "-do try and hide the belligerent aura. Rile and Laurance, jealousy is a good trait in mild increments. There are many who'd think to take offense," the tone deepened, "-be mindful. Princess Lizzie's reputation and safety are on thy shoulders."

Celina's smaller stature swam across the maids, "-Igna, let's go!"

"Rosetta, is Void still around?"

"Void?" she squinted.

"Yes, the black car."

"Ohh," back to her senses, "-yes, it's in the garage alongside Red-Fury."

"Good," he nodded, "-I'll be taking Void."

"You can't," interjected Laurance.

"Why not," he displayed the noble-crest, "-I'm Igna Haggard, son of the head of the family. What is here is my property as well."

"But-"

"-Laurance," voiced Lizzie, "-that will be enough. Brother Igna, do as pleased."

Laura reluctantly showed him to the car. Celina watched with a rather ignorant look. A press of a button had the gates lift.

"Young master, mind I speak a few words of caution?"

“Go ahead,” said he in anticipation.

“Void is a car usable by a certain man. He’s long gone, the car won’t react to anyone else. The same goes for Red-Fury, ever since Princess Eira moved to Arda, they’ve remained dormant.”

“Laura, there’s no cause for concern.” The garage fully opened; the two majestic beauties stood side by side. No matter the vehicle, Void held a special place.

‘Since joining with Origin, I feel more and more like myself. Ignia’s personality doesn’t seem to cloud my judgment. The complexities, such a troublesome existence. Wait, is it maybe that his persona was also taken after the link. Regardless, I like who I am now, a better version of myself.’ From the hood to the back, the body’s unique shape reminded of a sharpened blade.

“Here are the keys,” said Seiran.

“Right,” the beast toggled by a flash. The leathery interior and complex-looking driver’s seat stood strong over the years. The maids cleaned it regularly, that much was apparent. Seat belt locked, hands on the steering wheel, ‘-alright then,’ he smiled, ‘-take my mana.’

“AFR connected,” said éclair, “-Void is the perfect host for a spirit. Tis scary how smoothly the connection went.”

“It was host to a spirit named Avon,” the reserves filled. ‘-My mana capacity isn’t much to speak of.’  
\*Mana Control: Regeneration,\* ‘-I’ll just take the mana outside.’

Thus, without another word said, Celina jumped into the passenger seat, and off they were. The black car soon returned to Lai where Julius worked.

Part of him forced the reunion. Void’s handling and speed felt right. Anything owned prior couldn’t compare to said beast. The streets trembled by the roar. Time showed 08:45, the destination – Gnah’s University.

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“Bad news,” reported éclair, “-Princess Eira is on the move. Lord Lucifer’s holding a conference later today. From what I gathered, the airport is getting ready for the departure of a noble. Law enforcement in Alpha is ready to welcome someone of high birth.”

“I see,” paused at the intersection, ‘-we can’t allow Arda to form an alliance with Alpha. Things are bound to get hard. What to do, what to do. The assignment is to take control of Eira. Maybe it’s better to let her fly for Alpha, if push comes to shove, we can always shoot her out of the sky. éclair’s jet is ready to fight.’

## Chapter 567: Arts and Culture

Between the drive and stopping to sightsee, they arrived at around 10:45. Most students had already finalized the paperwork in the prior months. Today was more of an orientation. Young folks filled with dreams of entering the industry sat about the yard. A massive tree, landmark for the expansive grounds, often held gathering by clubs, announcements from the faculty, and more. The lax way came from it being private as said the very expensive entry fee.

Stood at the westernmost area of the academic district – underground stations linked each district. Ease of movement was a must for the busy Capital City. Thus, after turning about many intersections, the university stood on in the distance, away from the ruffle of the hectic goings.

“We’re here,” said he pulling to the gate, “-excuse me,” the windows rolled.

“How might I help,” returned the guard kindly.

“The admission,” he pointed to a notice board, “-are open?”

“Yes,” said he, “-please go down the path and park to the right.”

“Alright, have a good day,” the window rolled back up.

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“Igna, I’m getting nervous.”

“Yeah, I can see,” returned he, “-sure look pale. Don’t worry,” stopped, “-have a little faith. Tis a start at a new life.”

“I guess,” the doors opened to a very natural-looking layout. Space gave room to breathe, the warm colors gave a sense of relief. Students and visitors walked about; many buildings laid separated for their proposed task. Makeshift signs led to the central building kept in the middle of other smaller buildings.

“This looks fun,” said he trying to settle her nerves. Lashes blinked far too many times. Her posture slumped mid-way across. ‘I’ve been here so many times before, the scenario. Eira, Lizzie, and now Celina. Why do I always take care of them? Is it guilt or what, I don’t even...’

“Hey, Igna,” her steps slowed, “-thanks for this. I’m grateful for the opportunity.”

“Why are you anxious then?” they stopped underneath the massive tree.

“I’m scared I’ll make things harder on you.”

“What are you even on about?” the head shook, “-I might look like a young adult, not a very responsible one. Yet, tis my responsibility to care for you. Don’t forget, I did sort of kidnap you from Alpha, I’m not afraid to admit my fault. So, does that suffice?”

Her anxious expression froze in disdain, “-seriously.”

“What’s the look for?”

“Motivating people isn’t really your forte, now is it, Igna?” said she in contempt.

“Quite the attitude for the lady who neared falling into tears a few seconds ago.”

“Go to hell,” she gave light playful punches, “-thanks for that.”

“Excuse me,” approached a younger-looking man, “-can I help?”

“Yes,” stern and focused, “-I’ve come for the admission.” éclair went over her registration during the drive.

"I see," he nodded, "-please, follow me to the main building."

Celina kept tight on his arms. Bystanders gave obvious looks of envy. Look-wise, Igna was dressed in a formal designer suit. An impactful impression seized the natural dominance. Celina's outfit wasn't poor either, they carved strong imprints. One thing stood out; the students were casually dressed to suit what was trendy. Long hair and a rough look for the male and oversized hoodies for the female.

"First time at the university?" asked the young man.

"Yes. Might I know a little more of the establishment?"

"Sure," a smile flew over the shoulder, "-campus is mainly a place for arts and culture. Some study foreign ethos whilst many paint, learn music, dance, and anything in-between. It's a good place to grow into the entertainment industry. To be fair, the influence of the pop idols of Alpha has very much enchanted Hidros. Cinema has also gotten very much attention. This culture of glitz and glamor has only just entered the norm. The youth are very much pleased by it. Old folks are stuck wishing for kids to be strong and fight. Look at that," they arrived into a marble-floor lobby, "-I'll inform the lecturers. Have a seat in the meantime."

'Arts and Culture,' elaborate paintings displayed on the very encumbered lobby. Many went back and forth, some were doused in paint, others chatting about music. The distant sound of piano gave a vague sense of what's in store.

"Excuse me," another man approached with gray hair and glasses, "-are you perhaps?"

"I don't believe it," said Igna, "-the discolored hair. Mr. Rocher Cartney, what a pleasure."

"I apologize," taking a step back, "-are we perhaps acquainted?"

"Acquainted, please, do you not remember me," he smiled, "-how bad is your memory?"

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"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Please," the head shook, "-does Alpha bring memories, our performance, the challenge?"

"Igna Haggard?" he squinted, "-it is you," the face lightened, "-leave us be," said he to the assistant. Quite a few threw confused glances, mainly the receptionists. "I apologize, my glasses have gotten a little worse."

"No, that would be your eyes," returned he. "-I'm surprised to see the renowned snob-pianist out here of all places."

"Please," moved closer, "-don't call me snobbish, it's embarrassing."

"Alright," the teasing stopped, "-I presume you work here?"

"Yes, I teach classical music for those who wish to pursue the path of music, true music."

"Good to hear the strong personality stands true." For a moment, the pianist stood in silence baffled by a passing landscape painting.

"Cartney, is anything the matter?" he glanced at the canvas.

"Sorry, sorry," quick to his wits, "-the application, follow me to the auditorium. To enter the music class, one must pick an instrument and play. Tis for the instructors to gauge their level."

"What about beginners?" asked he.

"Same thing, except the playing part. I didn't expect you to enroll here."

"Not me actually. This young lady here wishes to learn music. It's her dream to be a musician."

"I see," he gave a once over, "-the admission is rather expensive."

"Cartney," he smirked, "-things are different in Hidros."

\*Interview,\* a small line waited before a double door. Students and their mentors, "-care to explain?"

"Sure," said Cartney, "-many who enroll here are nobles. They pursue the study of arts and culture to broaden their minds. Tis a place for people to become independent and grow, a good atmosphere. To be surrounded by talented people working towards a singular objective."

"Not that good if you ask me," remarked Igna, "-the pressure can just as easily break someone's confidence."

"As you did during our playing session," said he straight-faced. Many looked upon the pianist in envy, the reputation, and skill behind was a thing of praise. Similar to a knight renowned around the kingdom, Cartney was one in his own rights.

"What exactly does the renowned pianist do here?" asked Igna with a very obnoxious tone.

"Come on," returned he softly, "-still holding a grudge?"

"Not really. Watching you get flustered is very entertaining."

"Well, I don't enjoy it in the least," the flow of words was tantamount to mothers meeting their friends, the talk continued as the kid watched in utter boredom. Celina took the role of the kid; she watched and didn't understand a thing they said.

"First time here?" inquired the girl next in line.

"Yeah," she replied.

"Same here, do you have any musical experience?"

"I know the basics I guess."

"I see," she smiled, "-I got interested in the violin, so I asked my father to enroll me here. By the way, what family do you belong to? I'm from the Hart lineage, the name's Jonia Hart, daughter of Marquess Hanet Hart."

"Good to make your acquaintance, lady Hart."

"Please," returned she with an air of superiority, "-call me Hart. What about you?"



“...” turned to Igna, “-I’m C-Celina.”

“Family name?” asked she forcefully.

“Haggard,” interjected Igna, “-her name’s Celina Haggard.”

“Haggard?” she paused to open her eyes, “-that Haggard?”

“Yes, the one and only,” said he, “-please get along with my little sister. She’s a bit awkward.”

“And who might you be?” inquired a well-built man standing beside the young lady.

“Is it not polite to give one’s name first?” refuted Igna.

“My apologies. My name’s Nicola Vonhen Hart, the eldest son, and heir to the Hart family.”

‘Boastful and smug,’ thought he, ‘-nobles of Hidros are one and the same.’

“Igna,” whispered Celina, ‘-what’s that about?’ wrote across her face.

“Pleasure is mine. I’m Igna Haggard, son of the Duchess of Rotherham. Nice to make your acquaintance.”

“Duchess of Rotherham,” he gulped, “-I see. The pleasure is likewise.”

Currently under the royal family were, Goldberg, Haworth, and Riviera, ranked from strongest to weakest were the three major dukedoms of Oxshield. The Hart family served under Haworth. Marquess was always titles bestowed to the assistants of the dukes. Likely candidates to succeed the title of duke if the prior patriarch fails. So was the balance for decades. The Haggard’s dynasty – once royalty of the Ardanian crown climbed the ranks in arms, money, and influence during Argashield Federation’s reign. Things didn’t look very hopeful, the Haggard left the federation as a neutral party and chancellor to a life of peace. The influence remained tangible. Add the title of Duchess and recognizing Rotherham as its own dukedom toppled the balance. Prosperity was on par if not greater than the royal capital – thus, the Haggards stood at the top. Goldberg’s and their puppet ruler were only there to keep ambition in check. None knew where they came from, nor how they fight up the ladder, reality was, the Haggard had favors from the people and the royal family. Most of it came from lady Elvira and Courtney’s unsurmountable talent in politics. That being said, none of it would have been possible without groundworks laid by an orphan.

“Lord Haggard, might I ask the reason of such a visit?” the eldest son Hart sang a different tune.

“My little sister wanted to learn music, who am I to refuse her whims?”

“I see,” he held the bogus smile.

“Lady Hart, if you don’t mind,” she curtsied, “-I’d like to become your friend.”

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“The pleasure is all mine,” said she returning the courtesy.

“Goodness,” exhaled Igna, “-I’ll leave the young ladies to chat.”

"As you wish," said Nicola a little stumped by the exchange.

"Lady Haggard,"

"-No, call me Celina, it's less formal."

"Then, call me Jonia," the subject changed, "-are you related to Prince Julius?"

"I suppose," said she.

"Oh my," her face melted, "-he's so handsome. Do you think I can get his autograph?"

"Maybe, I don't know. Ask my brother."

"No, I can't," said she, "-if I ask your brother, then I'll be putting my love to Prince Julius in jeopardy. Don't get me wrong, your brother is very handsome too. Too many hot guys, I can't take it," she stumbled.

"Forgive my sister," said Nicola, "-she's a little crazed about the idols."

The conversation returned to Igna and Cartney. "-I didn't expect you to be a noble of such high status," remarked the latter.

"Tis nothing more than bragging rights. Cartney, could I ask a favor?"

"Sure."

"I want you to teach Celina, teach her the ways of classical music. I know she wants to be an idol. Regardless, classical music is a very strong foundation. Idols are often one-shot wonders, in said aspect, classical musicians are grounded and knowledgeable."

"Finally accepted it?" asked he in wait to celebrate the victory.

"I never said I was against classical music," returned he monotonously.

"Fine then, give me a moment." The interviews stopped to which Cartney returned ten minutes later. Many bystanders watched in contempt.

"Igna," said he sternly, "-I'll accept to teach Lady Celina in the ways of classical music on one condition." Murmurs dashed about as he rarely ever took on apprentices. Either one was a genius at the piano or an excellent violinist. Neither money nor fame interested him, tours around the globe made his teaching the more special and sought-after.

"Whatever you need," said he carelessly.

"Play in my ensemble as the primary guitarist whenever the time calls for."

"Excuse me?" time stopped, expression froze, breaths held, the condition shocked most who stood.

Chapter 568: Whims

"As in being part of an orchestra?"

"Yes, we've recently added a new violinist, some of our performances need the warm and brisk tone of an acoustic. What say you?"

"As if I have a choice," staring Celina shadowed by her dream, "-fine. I don't mind. I'm quite busy, I'll probably not practice as much in the orchestra. If my terms are accepted, then I don't see a reason to refuse."

"Great." Random and out of character, an offer to play music at the side of renowned musicians waltz into his lap. There were some causes for concern, practice time, when and where the performances would happen, who were the members. Trifling matters need be put in the back, though he resolute to aid Celina's new start. A visit to the lobby finalized her enrollment. Bypassing the interview and tedious exams, the girl found herself in a strict and sought-after Pianist's hands.

"You're Celina, sorry I didn't present myself earlier," stood outside the lobby, "-my name's Rocher Cartney, pianist, and your private instructor."

'They didn't lie about it being expensive,' stepping onto the marble floor sent shivers, '-why are people staring?' news went around the campus. '-What In the world is wrong with them?'

"Igna, Igna," hailed Celina more or less confused, "-what did you do?"

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"Rocher Cartney, a very popular pianist will be the foundation of your musical knowledge. Trust in him," said he softly, "-he's a bit of a music snob, but the talent and skill is there, hard-working as well. Learn classical music, learn from the greats of old, and then slowly add touches of your own. Sorry if this isn't the whole pop-idol career you wanted."

"No, it's not like that," she nervously stared at the floor, "-I'm a complete novice, won't he get angry?"

"Don't worry," exclaimed Rocher, "-tis better to teach from the ground up than a shaky foundation."

"Final then," up straight, "-you'll be taking care of her."

"You have my word," said he strongly, "-for my condition," turned westward, "-follow me."

"Are we headed to the dorms?"

"No," refuted he, "-we're headed to the practice hall." Throw a few more curved paths and brownish hue, passing a running track, came a slightly large building. A massive entrance on which had advertisement glued onto the glass.

"-Cartney, I demand to know where we are headed?"

"To my orchestra," said he loudly, "-I handpicked the musicians, the conductor is a friend of mine, hails from Iqavea, an exiled noble of a count's branch family." Many o' ajar doors allowed a glimpse into practice room; instruments, singing, a notice-board read, \*-club rooms.\*

"Watch very closely," said he to Celina, "-today will be the first lesson, to hear beautiful music, to be moved, and to see how individuals come together as one," mildly thicker doors opened to a larger room. A few seats led to a stage onto which stood multiple people unpacking instruments. Some hurdled to

speak about the composition, others tuned said instruments. The conductor, a long-packed man bearing a ridged forehead, long and sharp nose, parched lips, greyish eyes, and the darkened tone of dark circles. Hair was of a dirtied blond as for the resting expression – a nightmare. Strong and unmoving leaped into thought.

“Good morning,” said he noticing Cartney.

“Maestro Nelvah, welcome back to Alpha.”

“The same to you,” they exchanged greetings, “-the world tour finished in success. The magazines sure are singing high praises.”

“High praises...” paused to pounder.

“Who might they be?”

“Igna Haggard.”

“Celina Haggard,” short and direct, attention pulled to the musicians on stage. “Cartney, if you would, please get on piano. The arrangement is a mournful piece, Daylight Struggle.”

‘He turned it into an orchestra piece?’ The duo merged as one on said stage. Minutes turned to hours, Celina watched and listened, her heart moved per the sound, from the get-go, the piano pulled her interest. The complex nature Igna criticized elevated beyond so, the tension eased and the melody allowed for a clearer picture. A satisfying sound and pleasant afternoon. A chair remained open opposite the piano, many wondered for whom it was reserved.

“Wrong,” tsked the maestro, “-the sound is muddled at this part. Cartney, something is lacking,” to which he hummed the melody, “-it needs to be sweeter, tis the point of bliss,” the stiff expression closed to one of utmost pleasure.

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“There we go again,” mumbled they, “-Nelvah’s back to his former self. The eccentric conductor...”

“Let’s take a break.”

Harmony dismissed into cacophony. The conductor sure made his opinions heard loud, the subtle alterations and mistakes fired incessantly. “Quite the commotion,” remarked Igna.

“Please,” said Cartney limped over the chair, “-he’s too strict for his own good. I remember why I hated doing ensembles.”

“Suppose it our time to leave then?”

“CARTNEY!” he came as if a storm, “-why hasn’t the guitar player shown up yet?”

“He’s here,” he sloppily pointed, “-I wanted him to watch how the performance played out.” So much for the all-encompassing Cartney. The man felt as if a saint next to Nelvah – in retrospect, the nick-name of Musical Snob looked like a blessing against the maestro’s hardened remarks

"Don't force this on me," said he softly, "-hey, Cartney, if you hate ensembles so much, let me out of it already."

"No," strong and shiny, "-if I'm to look after Celina, you'd better suffer with me."

"Don't tell me," they moved to a corner, "-the reason I'm here is to suffer the dictator's assault to cover for thine arse?"

"Yes," he smirked.

"I'm going to strangle you," the grip tightened.

"Let go, I'm dying," arms around the pianist's indifferent shoulder turned into a lock, "-I-Igna... just play the music, s-stop."

The grip eased, '-what's wrong with this guy. The story and the way he acted in Alpha are different from how he is now. What's his problem... he feels more like a child, someone who enjoys playing the piano more than anything. Is the passion really so much that he'd... I've agreed to play. Therefore, it should be fine. As long as she's getting tutored, I don't mind. Cooking is out of the picture. The magazines that covered my journey slowly forgot, the name Igna fades from the culinary scene. I wasted two years, suppose meeting other people was worthwhile. Kyle's exploits have already out-shone me. No way Dungeon Style cooking could rival that man's prowess. Regardless, changing the path seems better in the bigger picture. Orchestras are very expensive to put and kept as one, they're usually called for grand occasions. Should be a worthwhile distraction.'

\*Thud,\* "-Mr. Nelvah, I'm here," said a lady stumbling through the door, "-sorry for the tardiness." Shorter black hair, nicely shaped eyes, pointy small nose rounded at the base, pink lipstick, and the attitude of a child. To Igna's dismay, the lady was none other than Syndra Lordon. Her chubby side shrunk to slender, there was a different air about her, the childish side felt more of a playful jest than character.

"Good, my prodigy is here," firm to elated, the two made for the stage where formal introductions were exchanged.

"Why's she here?"

"You know her, Igna?"

"We're acquainted."

"She's the maestro's newfound prodigy, a very gifted composer and talented conductor from what I've heard. A diamond in the rough, her pieces have captivated many before."

Practice resumed, the empty seat remained unfilled, a guitar soon carried onto the stage by a student. Syndra sat close to Nelvah, pen, music sheet, and firm stare onto the musicians.

'éclair, do a check on her past activities.'

"Already done so," said he smugly, "-Syndra Lordon, now engaged to Kyle Darker, came to pursue her career in music. Kopi's influence over international trades is formidable. They monopolize the agricultural sales in Alpha, Kuro's Trading Corporation made them in charge of said field. Kyle has very

close ties with the Patek's especially the heir. Some say they're best friends. I've gotten this much from the Arcanum, here's something of interest, Kyle uses his fame to boost the business. The dishes he makes only uses ingredients available in Alpha, thus, working in Hidros, people are more taken to their culture."

'He's affiliated with the conglomerates. I knew that already. At least she's back to making music.'

'A maniac,' thought she, '-Kyle is a deviant, I can't stay by his side. He charged into the restaurant and took over mother's heart. The added bonus of business influx to father's profit has tied a chain around my neck. My only escape is making a name for myself; I need to become someone independent and respectable. We're engaged, he loves me, but I don't. I want to write music, I want to see the world, not be tied by a contract. The only way to do so is music.'

"Cartney, where's the guitarist?"

"Over here," said Igna, "-is a man not allowed to visit the latrine?"

"My apologies," returned Nelvah, "-if you wish to visit the latrine next time, please do so during the break, not after."

"I'm sorry," refuted he taking a stand, "-the sound of gentle water flowing into the gutter is more pleasant than what I've heard so far."

"Igna!" voiced Cartney, "-cut it with the provocations."

"Regardless," he ignored the comments, "-if your mouth is so putrid, I shudder to think of the guitar." Laughter escaped from the musicians, comparing their sound to pissing garnered unwanted attention.

'Damn it,' he sighed, '-why didn't he kick me out. My way of escape...'

Thus, the practice resumed. The guitar parts were subtle, warm touches to the piece, or so what Nelvah envisioned.

'There's no need to stand out,' thought he, '-in an orchestra, everyone plays to better the other. I'll just follow Cartney since he's the lead.'

"Good," they stopped, "-here's the part where you come in," glanced at Igna, "-let's hear your play."

"Fine," indifferent to the aura, "-how about this."

Practice ended at 13:00, it was more of an audition. Maestro Nelvah, Syndra, Celina, Cartney, and Igna stood under the same tree, "-that was a good performance," said Nelvah.

"Cartney, Nelvah," voiced Igna, "-it was fun, sadly, I'm afraid I cannot play in the orchestra anymore. I have duties of way greater proportion. The condition was to play, and I played, it never said to stay. Cartney, I'm sorry. I can't see myself performing."

"Why not?" argued Syndra, "-you played it perfectly."

"Not the issue here," returned he, "-as a member of the Haggard Dynasty, the responsibilities don't allow me so. The practice required to play as a unit is time I don't have. Do understand where I'm coming from, said spot should be to deserving one."

“Fine,” returned Cartney, “-my condition’s been fulfilled. I get it, tis different from whence we played. The thrill I felt will never be topped. My apologies for selfishly wanting to feel the same sensation. I fooled myself into thinking the emotion could return.”

“Tis where we part ways,” said he in arms with Celina.

“If I were you, book an apartment instead of the dorms,” said Cartney, “-we’ll start tomorrow, make sure to be on time, young Celina.”

“Alright instructor.”

A whim turned mistake; the realization hit. The bigger picture was the mysterious deaths and fate of kingdoms, not the passing pleasure of playing music. The whole guitarist objective was to score repute in Alpha – to enter close circles of underhanded activities. Hence, a scan showed multiple apartments, Celina settled on one closer to the commercial district. A twenty-minute ride via the bus. The place came fully furnished. The view gave onto a concrete jungle, an above-average abode.

“This place is awesome,” she skipped inside.

“Yeah,” returned he, “-a good place to live. Celina, the new life starts now. Rosespire is a good place to grow, take full advantage of this opportunity. Four years, live, fall in love, do as you like, each action will be thy responsibility, is that understood?”

“Yes,” said she knelt onto the wooden floor.

“Next up, pocket money. I’ll send 500 Exa weekly.”

“That much?” her mouth dropped.

“Too little?”

“No, too much,” said she adamantly.

“Cost of living here is expensive, thus, 500 Exa period. Work part-time, and don’t worry about rent, I’ll handle it.”

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“What about being independent?”

“Surely,” he laughed, “-it’s a head start. I’ll cut the funding in one year, save up, find a part-time job, do whatever is necessary to get settled.”

Relief filled her step.

‘Now then, the real problem; how did the council end?’

Chapter 569: Xius’s Arrival

A whole afternoon caring for Celina, her demeanor remained grateful. The opportunity to get stronger, and be a person should she could be proud of. The muddled past of her involvement with her father and the mob. Who could say how many girls like her have, had, or will, experience the same events, the

same scenarios without no one to help. No savior, no hero in shining armor, nothing, only fate, and the cruel plans written by the culprits.

Regardless, in the greater picture, how many are even worried about those in the slums. Who goes out of their way to help if not for attention or being praised. Rich do charity to increase popularity, there's no such thing as unconditional kindness. The lesson fits into head pretty much instantly. Said reason was the same for Igna, he had helped, Eira, Lizzie, and many others in the past, unconditionally for a chance at cashing in the favors. In Eira's case, the lass loved him so much as a father that her will to become strong override what little semblance of reality she had. The Librarian of Nexsolum stood as her new identity, not the babe left adrift by Gallienne and Piers.

"Alright," said Celina lost in a deluge of carton boxes, "-this is enough for today." Sweat darted down her temples onto the reflective wooden floor.

"Are you sure?" inquired Igna with phone in hand. For welcome gifts, the number of items was a little excessive. Clothes, household appliances, a full fridge, name it and it was here.

"This is more than enough," the words muffled through her tight lips; in comparison, felt close to an awakening behemoth, a low growl capable of shaking the earth's very core.

"Bad habit," remarked he, "-anyway, good luck on the new life." Void posed on the very expose side-alley. Many were rather infatuated by the rare and exquisite car.

"Thanks," said she. They walked to the entrance, "-hey, Igna," before he left, "-will you be back?"

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"Depends," said he, "-I turned down the invitation because of the dangers ahead. We might be facing more than a few demons in the future. Don't worry, I can vouch for one thing, once the mastery of an instrument is complete, vocal, string, wind, anything, I don't care. Send a message, I'll gladly come."

"Awesome." A troubled expression, nervousness from the unknown. Words alone hadn't the ability to ease such troubles – experience did a better job.

"Don't worry too much," he reached for the handle, "-the life ahead is worth more than the past. Try not to overwork, and if ever trouble strikes, go to the mansion. I'm sure princess Lizzie will help."

"Makes me feel a little better." Thus, like a shadow against the setting sky of orange and red, Void sped off out of town. Her door locked, and thus, a new adventure began for Celina.

'The detours before her settling onto her dreams was worth it. A gentle smile, very satisfying. Origin's meddling often brings out spurs of emotions. I wish I knew him better.'

The radio flicked on, "-ahem, is this working?"

"éclair," returned he without care, "-how was the council?"

"Good news, Princess Eira isn't the one heading for Alpha, tis an ambassador. The identity is still a mystery at the moment, I've strong doubts tis Lucifer himself. In another news, the princess is headed to the capital. There are a few things she needs to handle. What are your orders?"



"Relay the information to Elvira, she'll decide what's the come of the ambassador. Also, about your jet, is it fully upgraded?"

"The beast slumbers till the chance at lift-off. The uncle and niece have made it to outperform just about anything in the skies."

"Put a spirit as the pilot and things are almost too easy."

"Interruption, a call from Serene."

"Put it through," he moved along rush-hour at a snail's pace.

"Hello, Igna, are you there?" whimpers escaped to join her very seductive accent.

"I wish I were not. Let me guess, you're eating a few virgins?"

"No, I'd never do that," she laughed just as obnoxiously, "-no, the whimpers are from the spies we captured. Their so delicious the blood, the torture; makes a lady weak on her knees."

"Good to know, any information?"

"Quite a lot actually," said she, "-they were very talkative. Especially the girl, a few of our rumbustious guards might have taken to her, physically, if you get my intent."

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"Any reason why?" traffic moved once more.

"They did so for the sake of research... the lady had a lot of things to share, a single command and she obeyed. The husband was quite a nut to crack, and don't worry, by physical, we didn't mean they assaulted her, no, that would be cruel. Instead, we hired other folks to do the dirty work."

"Out-sourcing torture?" he facepalmed, "-what of the supposed workers, I'm sure you took care of them?"

"Yeah, was just burning the last of them. So, about the dinner, wasn't there a promise to..."

"Celina's enrollment was important. Say, where are you at the moment?"

"Rotherham, soaked in the blood of comrades, why?"

"Go have a shower, I'll be there in three hours."

"See you soon," the call ended.

"Lady Serene surely knows no bound," returned éclair.

"All is fair in love and war; I personally don't care what happens. Failed spies must be killed and alienated. More information, the better. In that respect, I have a few of my own, just remembered the envoys I sent. 02 and Michelle, they should have infiltrated Cimier by now. Contact now might be a little hard. They might know something about the killings."

He blazed past the capital and into Lai, where, a lonesome figure stood emptily at a bus stop. Forced to stop, '-isn't that?' the window rolled, "-Alicia, what's the matter with you?"

"Igna?" tears stopped by sniffles, "-is that you?" she rushed, out of concern, the windows rolled to pin her fingers, "-WHY ARE YOU SO MEAN?" she cried idiotically.

"What do you mean, I'm being careful. Nothing more annoying than a balling mess of a woman. The makeup is like railways down your cheeks. The lipstick is nonexistent, the clothes are ripped and you reek of alcohol."

"Let me in," she wept, people threw strange glances, "-don't abandon me, I don't have anywhere else to goooo," a guttural scream led to, \*smack,\* a face-full of Void's door. He stood straight-faced with the door held open, she fell bottoms first on the pavement. "-Care to explain the deal?" asked he strongly.

"D-don't look at m-me I-like that," she balled, many bystanders reached for their phones.

'éclair shut down communication,' a whiff later, many devices fried in the owners' hands.

"Meanie," she wept, "-why are you always so distant with me," a quick motion and she hung to his legs, "-please, don't leave, I have your kid inside me."

"Goodness gracious," cried the crowd, "-how despicable."

"Shut up," returned he, "-you've mistaken me for another guy. Come on, rabbit," holding her collar, "-take the bus to the station and then return to Rotherham, there's no way I'm dealing with you."

"Dear God," cried the onlookers, "-he's abandoning the maiden."

'This looks so bad, she's a drunken mess. I should have never gotten out the car.'

Headlights moved to park behind Void, four flushed figures walked to crash onto the same station.

"Alicia," said the first, "-baby, why did you leave?"

"Emi," they embraced, "-I didn't leave," light pecks on the cheeks led to full-on passionate kisses, "-I'm a manager, Igna will get angry if I don't return home."

"Aren't they so passionate," said a half-naked man giving a half-naked lady a piggy-back ride.

'Suga, Dei, Emi, and Alicia, explains why she's drunk. Xius has a reputation of partying too wildly.' The crowd soon disappeared, Emi and Alicia got passionate real quick.

"Julius," now on the phone.

"Sorry cousin. Alicia ran away from us. Xius's disappeared too," said he in desperation.

"I know, cousin, they're here, making out. Oh, never mind, Alicia just hurled her dinner onto Emi's chest. Dei faceplanted into Suga who crashed against a trashcan."

"Oh shit," cried he, "-keep an eye on them. I'm coming," the call ended.

'Drinking till they blacked out,' breathing an exasperated sigh, "-éclair, take Void and move it to that hotel over there. Also, book a room and order some clothes in their sizes."

"Alright," said he.

"Hey man," coughed Suga, "-I'm sorry about this," sat against the cold bus stop, "-partying got a little out of hand."

"Don't worry," returned Igna, "-can you walk?"

"I think so," forehead crinkled in pain, "-I'll take care of Dei."

"Chill," said he, "-just stand on your feet and follow me." Alicia soon slumped over his back, one arm carried Dei and the other Emi. They soon made for the four-star hotel where many cast suspicious looks. Up the elevator to the tenth floor, éclair booked the most expensive and spacious suite. After the door, Suga stumbled and crashed onto the carpeted floor.

"I'm going to vomit," said Alicia.

"Me too," interjected Emi.

"Me three," added Dei.

"Not on my watch," he darted for the bathroom where the tree lady had their heads on the bath's ledge. One vomited after the other, water ran to carry the stink. 'What am I doing?' facepalmed he sat on the toilet.

'-I better call Serene.' The dinner postponed; her reaction wasn't much to be scared about. Rather, she said it be perfect, the information given by éclair made for an impromptu meeting. Queen Gallienne was to join.

"Better," said Emi, "-I feel better," words meant one thing, her eyes rolled back and she passed out on the clean floor. 'Why is Dei naked, seriously...' The door rang, the ordered clothes came hastily. 'Baby-sitting drunks. There goes my plan for a nice dinner.' No sooner, the bath filled, the four drunks sat in line outside, each slumped onto the other's shoulder. One by one, he forced them under the cold shower. 'Let's use magic to clean them easily.' Water to rinse, wind, and fire to heat and dry, clothes on, he kicked them into the bedroom. This repeated till all the drunks laid horizontally onto the bed.

The warm hue of the opposite building shone as pleasantly as moonlight falling onto a tranquil lake. Large windows left ajar; the nightly breeze invited itself in to caress the fallen.

'What am I, a maid?' the puke-stained clothes were soon thrown into a basket. Time showed 22:00, Julius showed no signs of coming. The jeep in which Xius arrived later was kept in the hotel's lot. If not for place of residence, the night-out could have ended worse.

'Might as well watch some television,' kick back onto a lovely sofa, ice-filled jar, aged whiskey, some cigars, and a dim room. '-Habits are hard to shake.' Julius arrived at a slightly flushed Igna around midnight.

"I can't believe it," said he casting a glimpse, "-they're dressed and clean, did you do all this?"

"Come on cousin, join me for a drink."

"Alright," the blond hair swayed, the suit unbuttoned and another cup joined the party. "-You like whiskey?"

"Love it," returned Igna, "-how was the day?"

"Speaks for itself," he sipped, "-Emi took to Alicia right away. Since the world tour ended in success, we hosted a little party. Knowing Suga and Dei, they went overboard and brought God's ale. I was away at the time, before I knew it, the reception turned into a wrestling match. Attendants were naked, apparently, Dei has an obsession with strip rock-paper-scissors."

"Sounds fun," returned he.

"What about Celina, is she ok?" asked Julius in concern.

"Cousin, I'm sorry to bring this up. Tis about Celina. If ever things are hard, please give her a hand. I sort of proclaimed she's a Haggard and my little sister."

"Oh," cutting the cigar, "-no worries, she's a Haggard, no question about it. That aside, you've merged with Origin, the death-element seems strong, have you awakened yet?"

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"Sharp eye, heir to creation."

"Please," he chuckled, "-from father and son to cousins, quite a development."

"I know, the world is full of surprises," they joyfully smiled.

#### Chapter 570: Drunks

'My head,' day rose over the horizon, the gentle nightly breeze chilled to a freeze. Igna and Julius were left to slumber over the sofa. One after the other, the drinks accumulated till both passed into the world of temporal happiness.

"Emi," sleep broke to a famed singer cocooned onto her arm. No tact to speak of, the sleeping gowns barely held her breasts of which spilled to the pleasure of any stalker. 'My head hurts like hell,' bits and pieces of yesterday regained, a painful feeling of nausea snuck up the stomach. '-Mild snoring?' turning over, Dei and Suga were in a rather awkward posture, erotic or plain uncomfortable, no clue to which she fell onto her pillow. Attempts to struggle were foiled, just as she did, Dei turned over to sprawl her arms. As if planned, Emi joined to make a prison. The throbbing headache stole energy and will to wake. '-Back to sleep,' and so, regardless of the freezing outside, she slept.

"Igna," yawned the prince, "-I'm done taking a shower, head on in, I'll order room service."

"Alright," said he a little shaken, '-not as resistant to alcohol as I remember.'

Forgotten memories, the vestige of a well-spent night scattered in the hangover.

The hot stream ran down the hair and face, the mirror foamed and so did the windows. 'Last night's talk sure went on for ages. I recounted my death, Julius seemed to know a little and not the whole story. It should clear up any doubts, I framed it to incriminate Lucifer and the other gods, he should conclude soon. Nonetheless, Creation's heir is more of a gentleman now, a prince through and through. He loves the life here and never wants to leave. I respect the sentiment. Quite awkward that he dozed off after ten shots. Drunk Julius is even more of a worrywart. Crying to say that he loves me and everyone he's

met, crying to say he'll do anything to help me and the quest ahead. The divine realm is the ultimate destination. I'll take what was stolen from me, the politics of the gods, what a joke. My goals are clear, there are a few things I need to follow up on, the primary objective is getting strong. Need to gather the symbols of power and make way for Drejai, recruit gods and demons for the Shadow Realm, and then set out to the ancient continent. Research from éclair said any plane or boat that approaches is either stuck by storm or falls to the giant waves. Access is granted only a few times a year. Things are getting started, I don't have time to worry about myself and who I am. All is clear. Now then, to find out who's responsible for killing Leko. The Agency should be on top of the investigations.' A push and the man-made rainfall halted. A red bathrobe hoisted over the shoulder then led into the cacophonous bedroom.

"Last night was a blast," said Emi onto her feet, "-you know how to party, don't you, girl."

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"What was the drink anyway?" asked Alicia gazing outside, "-why are we in a hotel. I remember stumbling to catch the last bus."

"I remember," said Suga, "-you wanted to get back home before someone got angry, something like that."

"Why are we here anyway?" asked Dei.

"I know right," said Suga a little baffled, "-we're clean, there's no vomit, the hotel is nice, were we kidnapped?"

"A failed kidnapping," the handle dropped, "-good morning, drunkards." Wet black hair tied to the back, tattoos about the arms and chest, a face fit for a star, "-you people sure are a crazy bunch to handle."

"Excuse me?" refuted Emi, "-do I know you?"

"Harsh," said he sipping coffee, "-here's what happened." Ten minutes passed, the four sat on the bed as if students being reprimanded. Julius arrived on time as the lecture ended.

"How's everyone doing?" a silent smile portrayed hell, "-I hope the fun was worth the trouble."

"Sorry," said they in shame.

"Medusa's prodigy, right?" inquired Emi, "-for Cle, you were there?"

"Yes," said he, "-we got into a little argument too, remember?" a condescending smirk sent shivers of disgust, the whole ordeal had her wanting to forget. "Water under the bridge as they say," holding a hand, "-I'm Igna Haggard. Alicia here is my manager."

"And he's my cousin," interjected Julius, "-the one I talk about a lot."

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"Oh, the pretty boy," added Suga who played with a growing stubble, "-I remember now, didn't you cover one of our songs?"

"Correct," said he, "-enough about that, let's get to the discussion at hand. Alicia, care to explain why I had to babysit?"

"I'm sorry, ok?" she knelt, "-my memory's sort of coming back. I'm ashamed, causing a scene in public, I proclaimed you had planted a seed in me."

"Yeah, a seed," arms crossed, "-let's talk about it later."

"Come on man," voiced Emi, "-it's not her-"

"Not so fast," added Julius replicating Igna's posture, "-the party last night caused quite a lot of problem. The reception hall is ruined, many of our staff were found naked and on the street. Honestly, tis lucky the complex was closed off, the guards made sure to give them a nice place to stay, by nice, I mean two chairs pulled together."

"It's how Xius do things," whispered Dei, "-come on, can't fault us for that."

"Shut it," said he, "-Igna, why not tell them the bigger story."

The reply came in a reluctant, "-really?"

"Go on then," edged the prince. The anticipation had them buckle, what happened, what would be the punishment, questions, and no answers.

"The influence of alcohol is something none can predict. Still, Emi and Alicia, you two were especially idiotic. We had to deal with complaints from bystanders; two ladies making passionate love on the bench of a bus stop, seriously?" the two watched not knowing how to react, the events told were bad, seriously bad. "Dei and Suga were somewhat normal, considering. Walking around half-naked, leaving lady parts to hang."

"I'm angrier about the drinking and driving," said Julius.

"Whatever," breathed Igna, "-Julius's dealt with most of the complaints. Go freshen up, breakfast is in the dining room."

"Yes sir," said they. The cousins left on towards the lobby.

"Gone," whispered Dei, "-holy shit," she turned to Suga, "-we had too much fun."

"Half-naked in public," a facepalm led into laughter, "-sounds like a great night."

"I know," added Emi a little coy towards Alicia. Her lashes flickered invitingly.

"No way," returned Alicia, "-go have a shower and cool the lustful gaze."

"Hell no. I'm not letting a beauty such as you off the hook," a lick of the lips confirmed the intention. The manager was grounded in the middle of pleasure and responsibility, her actions last night were shameful and the things said out loud, the misinformation could bring the fall of her client. The failure to care sluggishly sank in her very core.

"Stop teasing her," added Dei stopping beside Alicia. -She's weird like that, don't worry. To be honest, the lecture is the whole point of why we do the things we do. Not long ago, without help, we'd have been lost to the slums of society. It's nice to know someone cares about us, very childish, I know. The attention is why we're Xius, to prove we were rescued for a purpose."

“Sorry about the mess,” said Emi, “-we clicked, I don’t know how or why; it just felt right.”

“I know,” smiled Alicia, “-felt like we were meant to know one another. Go on, the shower awaits.” Thus, the room emptied with a lonesome Suga and melancholic manager.

“Come on,” in the dining room, “-have something to eat.”

“I’m good,” her forehead slumped onto the table, “-the hangover is bad.”

“Some food will get the body to speed,” said he devouring the succulent light meal. “About Igna,” he scarfed down fruits, “-he’s a good man.”

“What?” her zombie-like expression rose, “-what do you mean?” she squinted painfully at the glutton.

“You look like shit,” remarked he. “-I was sort of sober last night, I remember everything from when you left till the hotel. He carried us here. You disgustingly hurled onto Emi’s chest, man, that must have been a pain. I respect the willingness to help – though a little rough. He showered everyone in ice-cold water and brought clothes. I can say one thing, yesterday was the first time someone cared so much for idiots. We usually wake in cars, side of the street or the toilet. To be cared for made me happy.”

‘Y-yeah, good person...’ \*thud,\* ‘-why is he coming to mind now?’ the head slammed once more, “-gosh, I don’t want to think about it anymore.” Hair awry onto the table and shoulder, the smell of alcohol and sweat rose, ‘-do I smell?’ A timid glance at Suga showed naught but a glutton. ‘-why do I feel so uneasy?’

Everyone soon had dinner, more clothes were delivered. Julius and Igna soon arrived with medicines in form of water. 10:30, a jeep and Void stood ready to leave. “Cousin,” inquired Julius, “-what’s the plan now?”

“Depends on what mother decides. I’m headed to Rotherham, there are things to discuss with Serene.”

“Lady Serene, yeah, I forgot. I’ll be back in a day or so,” pointing behind, “-you’ve seen it firsthand. There’s no way I can leave them alone.” The troublemakers spoke loudly and laughed; Alicia fit right in.

“What about Manager Scott?”

“He’s in Iqavea, spending time with the family,” a nod ended the conversation. An unlikely encounter resolved by the jeep turned for Apexi’s office. Void stood solemnly, as did Igna leaned with a cigar in mouth. The manager shyly kept her distance, the distraught expression and hair didn’t assure much.

“You ready to leave, or no?”

“Y-y-yes.”

On the road once again, a silent journey. Ill or another reason, she couldn’t keep her composure. The awkward tranquility added to the tension, maybe guilt, regret perhaps, quietly resting against the leather seat, the drive continued.

“Good news,” exclaimed éclair, “-they’ve solved Leko’s death. Researchers found traces of a new synthetic drug closely resembling a certain project by the Cobalt-Unit’s offshore research center. They were looking into the possibility of bio-weapons; spreading illness as opposed to destruction. Killing the

people for easy conquest. The drug and the submitted papers have more than a few things in common. Clarise is currently reverse working the hints for a clearer picture.”

‘A lead at last,’ thought he inducting more mana, ‘I need to get to the lab. Can’t forget someone else might have used the papers in attempts to frame the Cobalt Unit. What better way to offset a link. Fitting reality to a hypothesis, and not a hypothesis to reality. A play on the human nature of not wanting to be wrong. Might just be paranoia.’

“In other news,” added éclair once more, “-I’ve looked into Linda Leko-Goodwin. The new director has been very active in reclaiming shares and spreading the influence. For once, the relations between student family and school body are stronger than ever. The families have taken to restore her name. The relations spread randomly to cover track, all and all, a good try to smother the possibility of being held accountable.”

‘She’s cunning. I was led to believe her narrative.’

“It’s not over yet,” interjected éclair, “-I made the connection. There’s a private family-run restaurant in Plaustan. For the seamless lack of clientele, the profits speak for themselves.”

‘How do they relate?’

“I traced the money instead of the people. Before entering her account, the latter spread, similar to how the lady operates. It’s almost impossible to trace unless I’m involved. It hails from Alpha, tis the extent of the track.”

‘Linda Leko-Goodwin, since you were my mentor’s wife, I didn’t like the idea. Then again, why would he die so stupidly? I’m doubtful of the Adventuring Academy, things do not add up.’ The death heightened the depths of the case, nothing was as it seemed.