

Death Magic 621

Chapter 621: 'I hate liars.'

High on a secluded land at Eldow's High, flight to Alpha took longer than expected. Current time showed 22:00 on the 21st, neither physically nor mentally fatigued, a newly erected billboard plastered on Fuda mountain's face advertised artists. Most of them being the embodiment of beauty for Alpha's standard.

An upward spiraling road cut into the naturally elevated hill, the trees were tall and frigid, most of which being pine-like. Sprinkle the tranquility of a remote location, a star-filled sky and glowing clouds per the moon's effort, and one has the perfect scene for a love story or murder, both of which bore the same kind of effect. For starting over, a sports car of the newly formed manufacturer named Astra was handed over the moment he landed. The compact and low profile felt fast and nimble, the figure of a lady put on wheels. Refine, elegant, and a spark of feistiness. Dubbed Astra Montrial Sky-night edition, his particular model was worth in the millions of Exa. Quite a penny to spend on a means of transport. Regardless of the reason, the attendant who graciously welcomed them handed keys and an address.

The farther one goes, the more expensive it gets. So was the logic at Eldow's high. Height and land meant prestige and fame. Despite what lady Courtney and Elvira said, starting over from scratch was but a figure of speech. A little trial of guts to see what the expression would be; as is common, he defiled their expectation, and rudely at that.

"A present from Phantom," came a message, "-more than that, a present from your family," a full-stop followed by smiley faces. The darkened atmosphere left much to be desired for he drove around with the moonlight as reference. Victorian-style gates beckoned the top, walls reminiscent of stereotypical vampiric-styled lair surrounded said structure.

'-is this a bad joke?' he stepped out of the car. The lens toggled and locked onto a blueish dot. Blinking at the object activated the mechanism, the gate opened inwards to a stone brick path. Not wanting to drive, a snap and éclair took over. The slow methodical walk onto the strange address revealed naught. Well-tended grass on either side, no gardens, only shadows, and outlines. A few meters later, a clap from éclair illuminated the grounds. Decorative street lamps stood at regular intervals. The driveway went on inside to spin around a fountain atop which stood the golden statue of a prominent figure. The first glance said it to be a woman, a closer inspection revealed a flat chest, straining for a better look, a bronze plate had, '-in remembrance of our founder, Staxius Haggard.'

"Seriously?" he paused with a jaded look, '-this has to be a joke,' turned for another scan, '-it's the improved version of the mansion in Rosespire. The garden's been taken out, the architecture's more in line with what's considered modern.' The car went around the fountain and stopped. There was space for another three vehicles. Per memory, he checked to the right and saw an outhouse, the garage. The door automatically opened, éclair took the lead, Draconis and Saniata slept peacefully in his grip. Igna followed with Vanesa, immediately after the entrance came a marble staircase that broadened at the first step, the hand-rests were made of dark wood. The more steps taken, the subtly tighter grew the stairs, to then stop and split. A gem-stuttered chandelier loomed above the carpeted stairs, the middle of said split held a painting by the notable artist; Julien De Carlme, a man of wealth and class.

Still shadowing éclair, the promenade led to the resting quarters at the right-wing of the manor. Here, a corridor stretched for what seems to be forever; in total, there were around eight bedrooms, two master bedrooms, and a lavishly made suite. Put to bed, éclair continued down said hall to an elevator. A press and they headed to the second floor. There laid the suite, master study, and office for private occasions. It also harbored a studio for photo shoots and music.

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Back down to the first floor, éclair dashed to the left-wing where laid the fun stuff. An indoor pool as well as one outside towards the back. A rest area, a private bar, the basement held a cellar filled with wine and whiskey. To top it off, the roof, two empty helipads. The building held more than just the basics of accommodation. A secluded part of the left wing also harbored a private server room, a command center equipped with Elon and Phantom's innovation. "This is my office," said éclair, "-information warfare is important nowadays."

"Information warfare," he watched in awe, "-the lens is going haywire by the data flow. It's more like the mainframe to a sentient machine than a work area. I have to ask, when, who, and why was this manor built, what was the cost?"

"Construction began around the same time the Lerado tried to enter Odgawoan's underworld. Lady Elvira was adamant about purchasing land at Eldow's high, as a result, she owns the whole area, and I'm not being sarcastic. She's the sole owner of Eldow's high. Her foresight in business is frightening. The manor was constructed as a base for potential expansion into town. The rest of the story is known. I say not to worry about the what's and why, consider it a gift, tis what the message read, did it not?"

"I get it," the breathing settled, "-what about the price, how expensive is it?"

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"I have no idea," returned he coldly, "-the values priceless. By how it has evolved, she could put any price and still garner recognition. By a low estimate, the land alone, and I mean the hill on which we stand, would fetch in the millions. 70 million, maybe more. As for the manor, it cost a hefty 10 million to build, and this was back in the olden days where 10 Exa equaled 1 gold, now it's around 100 Exa equals 1 gold."

"Let's talk about Eldow's high, does she own the whole district?" the eyes narrowed.

"She does," chuckled éclair, "-Phantom owns the whole lot. Price-wise, tis in the billions. I told you; it doesn't matter, she invested and got a great turnover."

"What of the buildings, what of the owners, have they bought the lands, or is she renting?"

"She's given construction rights but owns the land. Not much the rich and famous can do, being here is a symbol of power and stature."

"I know," he settled in a mediocre chair, "-the manor and car. I don't even, how rich can a company get..."

"Oh, there's more black money than one could ever imagine. No matter, the economy of a province is partly the cash brought from illegal activities."

“Well,” he stood, “-I ought to get some rest. Tomorrow’s a start to a new life. Have Mrs. Go join us for an audience early in the morning. While you’re at it, figure out the best way to make money quickly. A good cover to gain the people’s trust. We’re no longer in Hidros, the politics here are most troubling. The Anti-Narco Unit, keep tabs on them.”

“Pardon my saying,” interrupted éclair, “-will you not use the money Lady Elvira has provided?”

“We’ll use it when necessary. Best use dirty money for dirty deeds. Also, if this was planned to be an expansion for the business, is there an alchemic lab I might make use of?”

“Most definitely,” grinned éclair, “-tis in the basement.”

“Good, then we should be golden. I’ll make the produce instead of ordering from the Dark-Guild,” a sharp turn headed for the door, “-after all, I’m the creator of both God’s Ale and Angel’s dust,” the leather shoes faded in the distance. The butler pulled close to the desk and worked.

‘Starting over,’ the head shook, doors to the lavish suite opened, ‘-it should be easy. The real problem comes from the current situation here, an alliance with the other familias might be fruitful. My goal is to make whoever killed Aceline suffer, no matter who I have to kill, I’ll avenge her death. Perhaps I should start by conquering Ogdawoan. Scaica is a neutral area, no conglomerates or gangs have the right to claim for the owners are the Imperial family. I wonder if his imperial majesty remembers my visit, the boy who fell head-over-heels for Eira. The days are about to get exciting,’ he leaped into bed, ‘-I adore manipulating people and destroying tight bonds. Not to be smug, my specialty is in getting what I want,’ the fist clenched, ‘-I’m ready.’

The next day arrived at a fast pace. The curtains parted to allow the sun’s gentle glow. The hue caught his face, ‘-morning already?’ he sat upright, the mouth felt parched, ‘-I need blood,’ he thought licking the lips. ‘The view,’ crossed his mind, ‘-I better take a look.’ The feet slid into comfy slippers, ‘-how’s the outside,’ head-to-head with the door, just before he reached for the handle, it parted by the presence alone, ‘-freaky,’ he figured and stepped on the warmly colored wooden floor. A direct view towards the southeast, the heart of town, the cityscape of dreams and passion. The buildings went on and on. A true birds-eye view of the city. The large property didn’t allow for much of a view to the neighbors, forest and nature kept the location pretty hidden. ‘The jarring walls villainesque resemblance is a bad joke, I swear.’

The first floor’s corridor felt quiet, a peep into the children’s room showed sleeping angels. Their innocent faces sent a shiver, ‘-egh, how unnatural,’ the doors quietly shut. As was the mansion in Rosespire, the kitchen and dining hall were on the ground floor and at the same spot. Breakfast was mysteriously ready, not asking questions, he settled at the kitchen counter and ate. News reflected onto the phone’s hologram. éclair was nowhere to be found.

At around 8:50, the gates opened to a robust-looking car, the latter wrapped around the fountain and stopped. éclair arrived in company of Mrs. Go, the current head of the weak Unda Familia. Once inside, he made for the left to a quaint little seating area.

“Might I ask why I’ve been called so early in the morning?” her attitude remained strong.

“Lady Go, my master wishes to discuss a few things,” said he courteously.

“And who is this master, I care not. Ever since that day, Unda’s lost everything, we’re but shells living a life of constant hassle,” she crossed her legs and breathed a defiant ‘humph’.

“A life of constant hassle?” said a monotonous voice, the floor cried, footsteps echoed to her distant attitude, “-is that supposed to be a joke?” said Igna holding a smug half-smile. The designer suit spoke of his prestige, “-Lady Go,” confidently sat opposing her, “-it’s been quite a while since we’ve spoken.”

“It’s you,” she snarled, “-how dare you show your face to me again. Wasn’t it enough taking my daughter, killing my husband, and ruining my life, what else do you want?”

“Information,” he smirked, “-the poor Unda familia has no influence nor reach. How the mighty have fallen. I heard the business was recently bought out by a significant party.”

“Yes,” her browed knitted, her mouth tightened, a subtle flush whelmed her heavy makeup, “-Elon’s dynasty.”

“What lovely news. Lady Go, here’s an exciting offer. Relate everything you know about the current leaderships in town, I’ll grant thee freedom in exchange.”

“How very generous,” she gnarled, the eyes rolled, “-what brought on the idea that I’ll work with you?”

“Excuse me,” he leaned, “-you don’t understand,” the expression deepened, “-there’s no choice in the matter. You’ll take what I’m offering, no questions asked. Is that clear?”

“F-fine,” she averted his gaze, “-there are four familias ruling from the shadows,” thus, she kept on speaking till the clock displayed 10:00.

“Is that all?” returned Igna.

“Yes,” she gulped, “-can I be freed now?, I promise to be silent,” their eyes met, ‘-once I’m out, you’ll regret it.’

“Yes,” grinned Igna, *BANG,* her head exploded, *Blood-Arts: Bloody Mary,* ‘-I hate liars.’

Chapter 622: Trouble in Konlda

“Was the mess really a necessity?”

“Sure it was,” returned a nonchalant voice, “-the blood’s already cleaned up. Tidy the rest of the room.”

“As you wish.”

Crunch, ‘-weak blood,’ he swallowed, ‘-what a waste of energy.’ Headed to the study, the mind constantly went about the information provided. A couch next to a small table gave ample space to rest and think. The multiple outcomes gathered to form several white paths, each of which bore a certain ending. ‘Odgawoan and their leaders,’ he thought, ‘-the Konlda’s, Mi’s, Fulha’s district, and lastly, Stanley’s homage. They’re respectively ruled by, the Yanok, Saku, Vermillion, and Luon Families. Underground shadow leaders, similar to the guild, each ruffian has to ally to one of the four great families. They’re not only big here but throughout the whole of Alpha. Insider information says each of them is allied to one of the conglomerates. I’m starting to think Cimier isn’t such a threat, there’s the possibility of a stray lead, they could be considered a collection of the four great families. There’s no

feasible treaty at the moment, they're all greedy and bloodthirsty. Unda was part of the Luon's family, one of the more peaceful if we go on kill count alone. If not for Go, we'd have never found their names, truly an inspiration. The task ahead is slowly seeping into my core, we're in for a world of pain. I can't risk the possibility of war. It would be hard enough to manifest my puppet army in the current state. What to do, and what to think...'

Knock, knock, the potential foresight shattered with two hard taps.

"Enter," he replied.

"Hello pops," said the trio rushing inside, "-the mansion is amazing!" complimented Draconis.

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"Glad you liked it," he returned.

"I'm tired," said Vanesa climbing up his legs and into a cradle, "-breakfast was good, I want to sleep."

He but smiled at her reaction, "-don't forget about me," interjected Saniata, "-anyway," she looked around, "-this place definitely has enough stuff to keep us occupied."

Inhaling deep, "-gather around," he ordered. The tiny feet carried to a kneel, "-we're starting in a new continent. The mansion is akin to our heart. Unlike Hidros where we're free to do just about anything, here, the politics are different and people are strong. Draconis and Saniata, I want a guarantee that you'll not leave the mansion's vicinity unless I agree."

"You going to cage us?" frowned Draconis, "-pops, I thought we came to have fun."

"I'm sorry," he shuffled the boy's hair, "-until we have a stronghold, I can't allow our cover to be compromised. Besides, there's a gaming room at the eastern wing of the mansion. We're in the land of technology, do as is pleased and enjoy what the continent has to offer. If the conduct is satisfactory, I'll allow for you to head out without supervision."

"On one condition," said Saniata.

"Which is?"

"I get to come with any time I wish so."

"Don't try your luck."

"Either that or."

"Fine, fine, no need to throw a tantrum."

"Cool," said she, "-Draconis, let's go check out the gaming room."

"Hell yeah!" they darted out leaving a fatigued Igna.

'Kids,' he thought, '-how very convenient.'

"What about me?" yawned Vanesa, "-should I stay with them?" her face spoke of being at his side.

"No, you're coming with me," a forehead flick had her giggle. Later, he took to the streets in the newly acquired car. éclair had his hand full in finding the optimal course of action for income. Supplies for the synthesis were ordered, the estimated arrival was in a week.

Somewhere deep in Fulha's district, a man clad in a plain shirt and pants ambled along the distant paths of Paster's Park, or Pasture for short. For those in the know, the naming had been done by a certain individual, greenery in the middle of a district of casinos and love hotels. Either genius or outright stupid; said matter was best left to the individual. Soon, the somberness inherit to Rotherham invaded the brighter Odgawoan. The tragedy of flashfloods was still fresh in the minds of many, none wanted a repeat, especially since Carter Lake had to be compromised.

Cigarette in mouth, a newspaper in hand, and sat on a wooden bench, the hardened path ahead was very frequented. Some ran, some walked, others flirted, parks were a place of secrecy. Smoke puffed, he leaned to an eyeful of the towering s of the casinos. The names carved the grey sky, 'I missed the peace,' he thought and crushed the cigarette. Two casually dressed men crossed his vision, '-it's them,' he narrowed. "-go, follow them." A mask-wearing lady took on after.

'Leaders of Wen, Carl and the Rept gang, Stea. One's in human trafficking, the other in prostitution. The tip on investigating Laven Enda led to those two. Not hard to imagine them being accomplices in the overdoses. Igna sure has guts, the three other members are very talented, especially Inesa, her talent in infiltration is top-notch.' Foliage soon marred the line of sight. "-Let's go," said a black-haired man, "-we ought to follow."

"Good idea," returned Odgar, "-Kion," to which he smiled. Trails led to one of the shabbier love hotels, a fifteen-minute drive from the park.

Transmission arrived saying, "-get ready."

"I recently acquired something you'll love," winked the leader of Wen draped in a shawl.

"You keep going on about this lass," refuted the other, "-how good is she?" the tall figures skipped into a back-alley to a silent eatery. "-Very good," he reassured.

"Moment of truth," whispered Odgar, "-the rest is up to you." When spoken, a nonchalant car trunk opened.

"See," said Carl, "-she's an up-and-coming starlet, worth a pretty penny."

"Where you find her?"

"The usual means," he chuckled, "-a drink and it was easy pickings."

"Good then," he nodded, "-I'll take it from here," said Stea, "-payments at the usual spot." He drove off without time wasted towards Stanley's homage where he made for Konlda. Odgar continued to trail, Aki and Tensy were at the ready. Kion's demeanor felt shaky at best.

"Will she be ok?" inquired Tensy.

"No idea," refuted Odgar, "-we're taking quite the risk for a low return. Desperate times mean desperate measures."

“What about the police,” gnarled Aki, “-have we informed them?”

“Those corrupt bastards aren’t going to do much,” returned Odgar, “-keep focus, we’re closing in.”

The car distantly stopped at a run-down drug store. The surrounding didn’t inspire confidence, for once, there was a lack of cars and bystanders. The opposing building, an abandoned five-story high apartment. To avoid detection, they were forced to take refuge a good distance away, at the slightly populated corner store.

The trunk buckled; an earpiece relayed what happened. “I never thought old man Carl would find such a fine specimen,” he grabbed by her hair and pulled, “-come on bitch.” Her screams resounded clearly regardless of the mouth-gag. Garbage bins, trash-filled streets, squatting homeless, and the odor of urine. The already tired body tripped and fell. The man mercilessly flung her into a red door. She landed face-first in the backroom, the smoke-filled air hampered breathing.

“What’s this?” said a man in a white shirt.

“I brought us some fresh meat,” added Stea, “-the boss’s going to be happy with this catch.” The chairs pushed back with a screech, murmurs of lustrous comments invaded her space, “-she’s good,” said one holding her chin. “What about her stuff?” he lustfully pushed her legs with his foot.

“Don’t damage the goods,” returned Stea, “-where’s Onil, we need the appraiser’s approval.”

“In the store,” returned a bystander, “-come on guys,” they returned to playing cards. Not a minute wasted, the lass was taken to a dark room filled with hostages. From boys to middle-aged maids, “-better not make a sound, else we’ll kill you,” glared Stea. Stale food, a squeaking fan, and a barred window. The panes were painted in light-brown, petrified stares that went from person to person. A total of five had curled into their private corners. None wanted to speak, even if the will was present, they dared not say a word.

Out to the corner store, they decided to continue on foot. The audio sufficed in providing a mental image. The pain and suffering, comments, and despicable actions could be heard through the radio. Aki and Tensy took the lead, the former made for the left opposing sidewalk whilst the latter kept closer to the drug store.

“Good thing you called me,” said a stranger man, “-this one is a fake,” he said.

“What do you mean fake?” refuted the other.

“Her cover’s been blown!” cried Kion sat in the car.

“Stay put,” cried Odgar shadowing their step, “-AKI, TENSY, GET IN COVER.”

Men with rifles rushed onto the street. Alas, the duo had walked into the open, the only hiding spot was a broken car and an old fridge against the apartment.

“We’re pinned down,” refuted Aki, “-bring the car around.”

“Oh god,” said Tensy crouched behind the car, “-what about Inesa? Kion, are her vital signs...”

“She’s alive, for now... the earpiece has been destroyed,” gloom befell his tone.

'What now?' thought Odgar dashing for a back alley, '-they fooled us and acted cluelessly. I should have known it wouldn't be so easy.'

AHHH, cried Aki, "-I'm hit," gasped, "-they got my legs."

"Let me help," offered Tensy.

"No," returned he adamantly, "-you're closest to the intersection. Make a run for it," he scanned about, "-I'll create a distraction."

"Understood," they exchanged nods.

"On my mark," he held a rock, "-NOW!" he peeped to fling a grenade, the gunfire stopped with screams of, "-GET IN COVER." The decoy didn't work so, a lone gunman courageously held his nerves and shot.

'Aki...' gulped Tensy who darted for the intersection, "-AKI'S HIT IN THE CHEST," he fell noiselessly, a puddle gathered about his area.

'Aki's hit?' gritted Odgar, '-there's no way to fight back. We walked into a trap... they don't even have weapons to fight with,' he used a mirror, '-damn it, Aki's down. Tensy's circling to check on Inesa. What can I do in this situation, should I ask for Kion's help? No, if he comes here, he'll be shot instantly. That one has a rocket launcher.'

"TENSY, DON'T!" exclaimed Odgar.

The advances halted, "-listen to me," said Odgar, "-the apartment's an ambush, they have eyes on the alley. The moment one crosses, it's death. Retreat, we have to fall back."

"What about Inesa?" inquired Kion, "-there's no way I'm leaving my companion behind."

"Don't argue," said Tensy, "-Aki's dead, listen to our leader or get out. Tis the condition we made."

He bit his tongue in ire, '-hopeless, I'm hopeless.'

Armored vans darted down the streets where Tensy hid. The fight was a failed operation. In when they thought the situation couldn't get worse, Stea walked into the street with Inesa held by the hair. He jammed a pistol into her mouth, a sadistic grin broke Odgar's tenacity, '-I can't do anything.'

"éclair, toggle battle mode, infiltrate their coms, and take control of the car," he climbed onto the metal steed.

"Understood," returned the butler. *Woosh,* he leaped, "-good afternoon, gentlemen."

The car skid to stop, the doors opened, Tensy jumped without a word said. It accelerated and swerved towards the corner store; the armored vans followed closely.

"You've gotten in quite the mess I see," a figure flew atop the drug store, *bang,* a downward shot knocked the gun out of Stea's hand.

Partial Realm Expansion; Mantia, the hands pressed, he landed atop the apartment, the left eye bleached into white, *Spatial-Arts: Wormhole,* a snap conjured a hole under Inesa and Aki. "-LEG IT ÉCLAIR," the car brunt into overdrive.

'What's happening?' wondered Odgar, the black steed whistled past.

'So much work,' he leaped from building to building till the last, '-there,' hung onto the side, he pushed, the walls cracked, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* a man-sized bullet flung across the street. 'And we should be clear,' a swipe cleanly split the van and its passengers, *Mana Control: Purgatory Flame Variant – Hellfire Blaze.*

Ancient Magic: Gate, the street rattled, the van crashed and burnt to a loud explosion. "-Odgar Codd, long time no see," said a man hovered before a ball of flame. Flickers of fire and debris hovered as snow, '-it's you.'

Chapter 623: Wonder Drug

"Who else can it be?" the godlike silhouette gave a helping hand. 'He just took out the gang without support,' the breathing disrupted.

"No time for anxiety," chastised Igna, "-wake up, Odgar, you're the leader. I've only halted the premature slaughter."

"The hospital," cried he, "-we need a doctor, Aki's badly wounded."

"So be it," the palms pressed, *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* they stood atop the drug store. He watched silently; any unnecessary movement could rupture the savior's concentration.

"Are they the only one's present?" inquired Igna who waited atop the edge.

"Yes," nodded Odgar with a faint inhale, '-is that a child on his back?'

"Then so be it," he playfully tapped the dark-green hair, "-Vanessa, if you'd please take them out."

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"Okay..." she said without much effort, "-ancient demon arts or whatever," the arms sloppily stretched forward, "-amnesia," her wrist curled to sprinkle green flakes along the street. Those below fell after the tiniest of contact. "Should forget a day's worth of memory," she yawned, "-alright, I'm going back, good night."

"Guess she's done," side-glanced Igna, "-Odgar, jump."

"Excuse me?" he pulled back.

"Didn't I make myself clear?" he followed with a lecherous mien; "-jump I say."

"Jump," he gulped, "-fine," he leaped shut-eyed to the whole situation.

Spatial-Arts: Wormhole, the eyes reopened to a red-leathery seat and a large dirty edged glass pane. The outside felt heavy, and so did the inside. A supposed vintage radio played older songs, the likes of Save the World by Aceline and occasional recent titles, Kill the Bitch by Xius. A bolted table plastered before his person, a waitress in an uncleaned uniform went around and flung her pigtailed behind. Her gestures were sharp and erratic, many customers were startled reflectively at her actions. Any moment and her tray would crash onto the checkered-tiled floor. The head-chef stood behind a register with a dejected wince.

Cling, the doorbell rang, the waitress rushed to bid a warm welcome. "Where are we?" said Odgar, "-I remember jumping off a building."

"We're at the Roadster Eatery," said Igna, "-look outside," he gestured abruptly with his thumb, "-there's your car. A little bit on the shabby side, but hey, what can you do?" A typical fast-food special arrived, a burger and fries.

"Where are they others?"

"Look around," he said holding a gracious expression.

"Sorry, must be the shock," he strained for a better look, '-Kion, Aki, Tensy, Ulia, Inesa and Camilia.' Granted, the girls were sat at the next table.

"Aki, are you well?"

"Don't worry boss," returned the shorter military man, "-I'm fine. The bullet vest came in handy," he proudly proclaimed.

"Shut it," fired Camilia, "-we were scared shitless."

"Mind your tongue," murmured Odgar, "-a lady mustn't be so foul-mouthed."

"Whatever," she disgruntled her attitude.

"Thanks for taking the hit, Aki."

"Don't worry, Tensy," he gave a brotherly shoulder tap, "-you'd do the same in my shoes." Food piled one after the other, the smell of fried glistening meat roused plenty o' beasts. The stomachs seemed to talk in riddles as they'd growl and sneer. A mouth-full of the buns, "-I never expected this," said Kion.

"Seems your party has been under a lot of pressure, how's life so far?"

"Amazing," fired Ulia.

"Odgar is an amazing boss," winked Inesa, "-we make quite the team," she elbowed Camilia whilst holding an obnoxious smirk.

"Yes, we do," her eyes rolled, "-Kion and those two are average, I guess," she scarfed the fries without eye contact.

"I second Kion's question. What brings you here, Igna?"

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"For work," he replied nonchalantly. Part of the mind worried about Vanesa for she had climbed atop his lap and waited impatiently. 'Where is the food?' said her gaze reflecting against Odgar's soft-drink bottle. "-I was out in town and heard gunfire. Good thing we were close."

"We really screwed up," facepalmed Kion, "-we're lucky."

"I know," exhaled Odgar desperately, "-the blame is on me for not being prepared."

"Don't worry boss," returned the crowd, "-no one blames you."

"I should have been better," said Inesa, "-the man figured the disguise so easily, I should have thought of ways to escape."

"Who was that even?" wondered Camilia in a battle against a lonesome lush fry coated in sauce, "-isn't the illusion arts Inesa's specialty or something?"

"It is," a sip of juice led into, "-or was. They called him the appraiser, maybe a spell or skill about detection?"

"Should be good enough for today," said Igna, "-enjoy the meals, we'll discuss the matter later." He said so after men in suits entered the premises. Each wore sunglasses inside, '-a bunch of idiots,' snickered the maid.

"Listen up people," said a bigger man, "-who's the owner of the Astra?"

"That would be me," smiled Igna, "-what's the matter gentlemen?" Vanesa was left to her own devices. 'Watch over her,' said the expression.

"You're the rich dude," chuckled he, "-listen, buddy," the crowd gathered, the atmosphere fell to a pin-drop silence. Those who ate stopped in fear, the imposing owner cowered behind a dispenser, "-can we, like, get a picture?"

"Excuse me?" the head tilted, "-if it's a picture, just take one."

"No, you don't understand," he grasped Igna's shoulder, "-we need contact information. The boss's been looking all over for that particular model."

"Oh," darkness shrouded the intent, "-I'm not opposed to negotiations."

"Will he be ok?" inquired Aki, the rude men crossed their window. Igna all but waved at Vanesa.

"Shouldn't be a problem," shrugged Odgar, "-I seriously doubt they'll cause trouble."

Thus, the back of the eatery stood in reckless abandon. Trash littered the area, toppled dustbins and stray dogs wagged their tails at leftovers. The streets were empty. 'Let's see here,' the lens dug deep into the negotiators, '-the weaklings have generic names and common upbringings. They're affiliated to...' he looked to the leader, '-Wen, the human traffickers.'

"Alright," returned the tall man, "-the car, how much to part from it?"

"I ought to ask, is there a reason why baseball bats have to be inserted in the presumed negotiations. Granted, I'm not accustomed to the ways of guard dogs, it would truly befit thy station and solely stick to speaking terms."

"Sorry buddy, we don't understand whatever you said?" they laughed.

"A noble accent," refuted the leader, "-you're from Hidros, aren't you?"

"Correct," he smiled, "-have you heard of us?"

"Yes, the news often say the people of Hidros are strong and animalistic. How goes the fight against the monsters?"

"I'm impressed," the arms crossed, "-you're smart."

"I have a good head on my shoulders," he grinned, "-excuse the bats. Tis a little bit of intimidation."

"Let's get to the real reason."

"I'd like to purchase the car and double whatever thee paid for."

"Are you sure?" wondered Igna, "-I'm not particularly attached. Go on, shoot me a price."

"Retail is around five million, I'll offer ten million."

"Ten million," he paused, "-a scrumptious offer. Alas, I must decline. There are better models made available for thy budget."

"One problem, many of the companies don't want to sell to us."

"Mobsters have a rough time," said he, "-Alphian politics is jarring. Hidros is simpler, if one wants something, use either of two ways; money or violence. I understand the mobsters don't have much leverage against law enforcement. Corrupt bunch, they move to the sway of bills, must be hard trying to stay in business."

"Lookey here, fellow," voiced a bystander, "-stop the small talk and get to the point," a metal bat grazed against the asphalted lot, "-I think I'll take your advice and stick to violence instead."

"Boy, I said to stick to words alone," *thud,* "-I appreciate your leader's foresight. He didn't jump headfirst into battle. Talking is often the best way to come to a solution," *Mana Control: Elemental Variant – Spectral Dislocation,* the primary elements hovered on each of his fingers, "-tales of Hidros must surely speak of magic." The pressure forced an untimely surrender, "-mages are perhaps the thing of the past," the hues flared, "-there are still those who command tremendous power."

"Calm it," said the leader, "-I think he's had enough."

"So be it," *Dispel,* "-what then, the negotiations?"

"-I'll be honest," he jumped onto a closed bin, "-we came in search of a little spy. She wears a black mask and was spotted beside the Astra. She's not here, so we'll take our leave," he leaped, "-Noble from Hidros, you're the same as us, a member of society's most hated bunch."

"Correct," he smirked, "-well met, Fujio of Wen's gang. We shall meet again soon."

"Full of surprises," he chuckled, "-good day, lord noble," a van promptly stopped and left.

'Fujio, the right-hand man of Carl who's a duckling in a lake of fearsome competitors.' The others exited after their meal as he arrived, "-anything the matter?" inquired Odgar who regained the prior stern frown.

"You seem well," commented Igna.

"The pressure of losing my companions broke me," he admitted with much pain, "-what's the plan?"

"Head on to the manor, what else."

And so, the dusk waned on the greyish sky. Go's manor returned to the former glory. Walls and traces of armored trucks erased to a blank painting. The residence of a powerful man stood as was meant. Lady Go's disappearance came as no surprise. They could have cared less. Inesa took the lead and made for the bath, the men headed to the study where half the room laid in waste by paper.

"Quite a mess," remarked Igna.

"Don't pay heed," said Kion, "-the leader's crazy, I can't even."

"All the brain stuff goes over my head," said Aki, "-Tensy, let's go freshen up." The teddy bear agreed and left the three in a room of ruin.

"Take a seat wherever."

'Wherever he says,' narrowed Igna.

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Kion kept an unsettling grin, conscious or not, the distance closed into borderline creepy. "Odgar," he thundered and broke the confusion, "-mind explaining what happened earlier?"

"We were on a trail about the murders. It seems the attacks are unrelated. Anyone who wishes to get away with murder only has to order a special grade of drug and give their victims. It also looks as if there's one that can affect the psyche, the recipient turns into a puppet for the master," videos plastered onto a flat-screen, "-here are the uses. The Arcanum's a dark place, darker than people realize. They've used the drug to enchant men and women alike into sadistic and depraved acts. Some are even mutilated on film, there's no end to the clips. Here," another one flashed, "-he ordered a teenager to screw right into his nether regions."

"Turn it off!" exclaimed Kion.

"Y-yeah, it's graphic alright," sighed Igna. "-the mind control pill, who manufactures it?"

"No idea," said he, "-rumors has it those wishing of the pill have to be prominent in society or the underworld, tis myths."

"What trail were you onto?"

"The case of Bheta Zena."

"Found dead in her apartment and ruled as a narcotic overdose. It's quite old if I remember correctly."

"Astute as usual. Ulia's talent in perfectly recreating images of the past using limited information couldn't have come at a better time. We took her to the apartment and had a scan of the area. The story goes deeper into the scandal. There were two figures, one held a camera, and the other, a hammer."

"Let me see the picture," he requested.

"There," it spawned onto the screen. 'She didn't have physical injuries. Why would there be a camera and a hammer?'

"Scroll," said Igna.

"There," another picture showed the bedroom and shadows. Not much could be concluded. The last picture flashed, and it told of the woman's death of which was on the bed.

"She killed herself," said Igna, "-the hammer, she was a sadist, the video camera, it makes sense."

"I came to the same conclusion. Her death was actually as was meant. The media portrayed it to be a scandal, a way to take the blame off the narcotics."

"Backtracked and you found her connection to Stea."

"Correct."

Chapter 624: Top dog

"The events culminated in our current situation."

"The plan to use a decoy backfired quite a bit."

"We should lay for a few months," said Kion, "-Igna saved us, the gang will be on edge. Can't hunt the beasts when the latter is on the prowl. Let's focus on the other cases."

Beep, beep, the flat screen toggled to another channel. Video footage from a helicopter displayed the ground. Sirens resounded as did the flashing red and blue lights.

"We're currently hovering above the sight of a recent murder," said the reporter, "-law-enforcement received a distress call from the drug store. The police have blocked off access. Insider information says the death count is in the dozen," a press froze the image.

"Did you kill them?" inquired Kion.

"No, I don't think so," he replied as confused as they, "-Vanessa used an anesthetic so they'd forget. Nothing lethal, I vouch for her credibility."

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Before any conclusion was made, éclair disrupted the paused image, "-I have news," he said, "-here are live footage of the area." Walls dowsed in crimson red, beheaded and mutilated chests with, '-never forget,' written as a child would finger paint. "Some officers have hurled at the discretion, I'm certain the attacker isn't someone native of Alpha. Alas, if they are, we're in trouble," the display ended.

"What does he mean?" leaned Odgar stroking the kindling of a beard.

"An enemy," returned Igna knowingly. "-Never forget isn't a moniker of a well-known murderer or vigilante. There are many plausible motifs, a clean-up of the gang, unsolicited violence, or perhaps a deal gone wrong."

Driing, "-Odgar of the Codd Agency speaking."

Kion watched intently, "-understood," the phone hung. "-We were requested to investigate by Larson from the 8th division," the trench coat slipped on, "-I'll go alone. Aki and Tensy will handle matters here. When Camilia arrives, tell her to forward the location of Carl's hideout."

"Understood," replied Kion. The shabbier car left without trouble, Igna waited at the entrance for Vanesa who arrived promptly. 'Getting involved will not be beneficial just of yet,' they stepped inside, 'time to head home.'

The next day rose to an explosion. An unimpressed stare showed Gophy, Intherna, Draconis, and Lilith playing a game of volleyball. *Knock, knock,* "-open," he wiped the eyes.

"Good morning," smiled Miira, "-long time no see," she winked.

"Why are you in a maid's outfit?" the tone fell under her expectation.

"Come on," she exhaled, "-I made it especially alluring to garner some sort of reaction," she clicked defiantly.

"Such trivial things," he placed a hand atop her shoulders, "-try again later," he said in a lowering mien.

"Go to hell," she returned, "-I guess you're not interested in seeing what I've hidden so carefully under my skirt."

"You're right," he shrugged, "-a lady must keep her goods hidden," at the lift, "-besides," he smugly spun, "-I don't really care."

"You," she stomped aggressively.

"Later," he winked, the lift shut and dropped to the ground floor. A surprise house visit from the goddesses always begot a laugh or two. éclair's hands were full trying to control Saniata.

"Master," he yelped for her tiny fingers dug and pulled the rather slim cheeks, "-h-help."

"Saniata, stop it," said Igna, "-come here." She leaped into his arms, "-what did I say about good behavior."

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"I don't care," she pouted, "-Vanesa got to go on a trip. I'm going to ruin the mansion."

"Do that and you're off to the shadow realm," he retorted.

"No!" she pulled from his clutches, "-never," and stormed out the front door. The overly energetic boy power-slammed the ball into the unsuspecting Saniata. A wall of water was summoned to return the strike at twice the speed. He momentarily stopped and gazed, '-they're having fun,' the butler briefly shook his head.

"Good morning, éclair," he greeted after many distractions.

"Good morning, master," they headed for the kitchen, "-I have compiled a list of jobs."

"Let's see it," he sat in the company of a cereal bowl.

"Food," smaller feet scurried, a shadow darted in the kitchen. Maniacal snake-shaped locks slithered to grab on the edges, a pull later, Vanesa's fearsome visage blinked into sight, her face sparkled proudly." FOOD," said she, the arms stretched in embrace.

"No," he blocked her advances singlehandedly, "-have a bowl ready for her."

"Meanie," she pouted to lay on the granite counter, "-whatever," the eyes shut, snake-shaped locks retreated into the dirtied green hue. The list slid over on a tablet; the stove fired for a hefty breakfast.

'Jobs suited to my specification. Modeling, become an idol, play an instrument, or become a movie star. Skill already acquired, less work, and great income. The influence will increase and the opportunity to get in contact with the shadier side of the industry.'

'He's taken to my idea and made it a possibility,' paused Igna, '-conniving éclair, you knew I wanted to try my hands at being a recognized figure. He's already taken a few pictures. Alicia wouldn't have made such progress in what time I gave...' he gave a self-slap, '-don't think about her,' the fist clenched.

Images of her expression on the day they parted told a different story. The time spent behind the doors of the bedroom wasn't in search of carnal pleasure. Rather, they spoke extensively, he refuted her arguments about staying a couple. As the habit showed and from memory, the fear of losing someone precious would hinder the climb to greater heights. Then and there, he decided to break off their relationship. She unwillingly agreed and vowed to break his cold-heartedness. The bicolored pupils erupted to a molten red, '-no time to worry about the others. I'm accepting the title of the devil, the monster's signet feels right,' the trinket flickered, '-the time will come when I'll become an enemy of humanity, the king of demons. Lucifer,' he valiantly gulped coffee, '-first things first, conquer the Alphan underworld. Break Cimier and the alliance to Iqavea shatters, I'll lay that damned continent to ruin, I swear.'

"Master?" interjected éclair, "-something the matter?"

"A soliloquy," he nonchalantly replied. "-I've decided. Becoming a prominent figure in Ogdawoan will open many paths."

"Thing is," smiled éclair, "-much progress has been made. Remember the cover of Xius's song?" he conveniently swiped to the video, "-Kinless covers Viper's layer. Hwan's follower count skyrocketed from 10,400 to 50,000. A single video proved much your skill. At one time, Suga tagged and followed back. Part of his fan base transferred to yours. If we take it seriously, the popularity can grow to the hundreds of thousands."

"Well then, let me make a phone call."

Dialing Amsey of Lumian O'dla.

"Hello, Amsey speaking, what you want?"

"Good morning, lord Amsey."

"Igna," the voice tightened, "-are you here to blackmail again?"

"Come on," he chuckled, "-I said it before, didn't I, you're not my enemy."

"Like I'd agree to what you say. Nevertheless, why have you called?"

"To relay some information. I've figured what happened to Aceline. On the day she presumably died, my uncle transferred her body to Rotherham where she was revived. Her return would have been a thing of

glory if not for the untimely death. As a resident of Iqavea, the name Kion Hurworth must surely be known. The hero who died in the assault against the Devil of Glenda. The church isn't so pure, he's no hero of another world, solely a reincarnated soul of a boy from Alpha. Fate works in strange ways, before he died, the locked memories escaped, he remembered the past life, and how he died, rather, murdered. He watched as Aceline was shot in Melmark, she died protecting him."

"Devil of Glenda, else, known as Baron Igna Haggard. You managed to kill the hero of the church. I'm not particularly interested in religion, hence my unbothered approach. The business has boomed since the war. Precious metals and gemstones are rare, lady Haru offered to sign an exclusive deal in exchange for unlimited support to Phantom and the Faction."

"You accepted?"

"Of course. Ardanian gemstones are the world's best. Rich people have too much money to spend. Enough. What does Kinless want with us?"

"To work in the entertainment industry. I've left Hidros in search of another path. What say you, Amsey of Lumian O'dla, my record speaks for itself."

"I'm reluctant," he frowned, "-can we speak of this in a more private environment?"

"I'll forward my address. It's a ten-minute drive from thy mansion."

"I mean," he itched in uncertainty, "-I recently bought a luxury helicopter from Phantom. Driving has grown numb."

"Don't worry," he laughed, "-my manor has a helipad. Go on and fly over, I'll be waiting."

The manor channeled to welcome an important guest. éclair rushed around cleaning and telling off the others. They could have cared any less about politics. The game swapped to tennis, Saniata and Draconis were at each other's throats. Gophy and Intherna joined as a pair. Miira, who seemed a little infuriated rained meteors without allowing Lilith to play. She carried their team, Gophy returned her drive with harder swings.

Rotors chopped the air; the noise was bearable. A red-striped silver-colored bird perched onto the manor. The broad personage humbly ducked at the spin; the gust sure shuffled the gelled hair. A charismatic smile followed by a smartly dressed older man. Partial balding and a white mustache told plenty of information.

"Hello," said he amiably, "-long time no see, Igna."

"Hello," he returned to a firm handshake, "-your outfits are as extravagant as I remember."

"Of course, they're a staple of my life, my fashion, my brand."

"Cut the overcompensation. The energy is annoying."

"Fine," the shoulders slumped, "-part of me was confused."

"Young master," said the older man, "-please, how many times do I have to say not to show uncertainty before a stranger."

“Meet my private butler and assistant. We grew up together, he’s still old, whilst I’ve gotten younger.”

“Good day sir,” said the man courteously.

“Good day to you,” he nodded, “-in the spirit of introductions, meet my butler and secretary, éclair.” An amber sparked on eye contact, a contest of butlers or whatnot.

Compared to Amsey’s mansion, Igna’s felt smaller with better class. The view enough sufficed to put Amsey’s to shame, the land and property told of the background. The meet took place outside on a lavish balcony directly above the dining hall. Beautifully tiled roof and pleasant scape over yonder. éclair hastily arranged for refreshments, “-take a seat,” he offered.

And so, they peered over to the cityscape, “-how much did it cost, the land is far higher than other mansions. We’re atop Scarlet hill.”

“The land is owned by my aunt.”

“I can’t stress how hard it’s been to get access to such an idyllic place of residence. Those who tried have failed, the hill’s absolutely astonishing, and thee have a place atop said mountain of gold?”

“Tis but a house.”

“I see, money isn’t the issue here, is it?”

“Not really. The current objective is to get into the world of entertainment.”

“Lumian O’ dla is a great place to start. Our magazines, idols, and actors are world-renowned. I said it before, tis not easy to reach the top. Young stars work day and night to have a chance at fame and fortune. Especially the younger demographic, teenage idols have become a trend lately, none’s going to be interested in males.”

“Turi of Alice has grown out of shape lately. Will the brand be ok going forth or?”

“What scheme have you concocted this time.”

“Such a blatant insinuation, I’m rather offended.”

“Oh please, nothing can get under your skin.”

“Frankly, I called on a whim. Kinless has the background of an exiled chef and the making of a prodigious guitar player. I don’t doubt my abilities. Becoming famous takes persistence and luck, I can make do with persistence. Other agencies want to break into the spotlight, and even more talented singers and musicians trying to be renown. Modeling will follow suit, and perhaps a shot at an acting career. Assembling a band of talented individuals shouldn’t be hard. Apexi’s risen to greater height ever since Vorn’s arrival. Ansoft isn’t the top dog, I heard Leina’s agency is top-ranked.”

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Chapter 625: The better vessel

“Ansoft isn’t at the top anymore. You know the reason and so do I. Since Vorn departed and our ways of treating idols have been exposed. More and more singers have joined the Eual’s Movement. If stars

aren't treated humanely, they'll take the matter to court. If not for our arduous contracts, the idols would never be where they are now, the hard work and diligence always ends in a success story. I want them to look back with smiles at how the strictness livened their future. Hate me, it doesn't matter. So long they don't hate themselves and believe in their futures, I'll take the hit for whatever comes."

"Good speech," he said. "-Look to the cityscape, the display of lights and varying intensities is something else. Rotherham is beautiful, Odegawoan is far prettier. I made the judgment with full bias. Should say a word or two about how well-defined the town is."

"Igna, are you still willing to join the world of entertainment?"

"Yes," he said, "-I'll take to the stage with a band of my own. There was only one person who could have changed the world using music; her life was taken prematurely; I don't want it to happen again."

"Here's my deal," he leaned with elbows to his knees, "-create a band and gain recognition. I don't need much, let the people know there are a new talented bunch of musicians prowling the streets. Do that and we'll sign a contract. You'll have a shot at the high life of entertainment, whilst I'll honor my promise so many months ago."

"Then, tis a deal," they formally shook hands, "-by the way," said Igna of which Amsey halted in response, "-I have transferred a million to your account. Consider it a gift for visiting an old friend."

"Free money," he cheered, "-or so I'd wish. I'll take it as a sign of good faith. However, once the stage is yours, I'll return it ten-fold."

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"How much do you hate the other conglomerates?"

"Hate?" he side-glance in contempt, "-I loathe them. Those bastards have made a mockery of the Odegawoan, them and their influence in the underworld, it pisses me off. Talented idols kill themselves or so says the corrupt law enforcement. I hate needless deaths, especially those of pure malice and no purpose."

"Understood," replied Igna. The guests were escorted by éclair to the roof where they took off and made for his mansion. The talk left a little void in Igna's already empty heart. He watched on at the changed field, full-throttled swings mercilessly carved the tender ground.

Blonde locks fluttered into sight, "-have you called for me?" bowed Miira, her tone and posture spoke of seriousness.

"Yes," replied Igna leaned against the balustrade, "-the higher they are, the harder they fall. I've considered other options and it led to one answer. We have to start a band and break into the spotlight. Gaining the support of fans in an unknown province is a smart idea. Tis a tall order, and one I know just how to accomplish," he confidently walked to grasp her shoulders, "-I need to use Kronos's power."

Her glistening large pupils retorted the statement, her hands trembled to grab his wrists, "-are you sane?" her white lashes narrowed to frown, "-going back in time is sacrilege, even for a god."

"I know," he took her frightened hands, "-there won't be a need to alter the past. I just need to be present at a single none caring event."

"Please explain," she escaped to the beach-style chairs, "-I need the details, else, there's no traveling back."

"I know, and I don't expect it to be easy. Here are my plans. Aceline's murder by gunshot was told to the world, they didn't know of her revival. Then again, she died again by a gun from the mob. We'll travel to the moment she falls down the hotel and grab her soul and consciousness, her body will be found dead and the future will not be affected."

"No physical actions, tis not imposing on the time but rather, on the death reaper's terms."

"Terms of which I'm free to manipulate and do as is pleased."

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"Isn't it possible to search for her soul in our era, she could have been reincarnated."

"A plausible solution. We could search for her soul... what if she's a prominent figure or trapped in the afterlife."

"The former is the better option," her visage reflected resolve, "-I'll do it, it shan't take much time. Let's take to the Shadow Realm."

Between the deadly match, an all-encompassing pressure called for a premature stop. Looking towards the balcony showed naught but the distortion of air, the same as staring peaks to an open flame. No heed was paid, Draconis resumed the battle.

'Scary,' thought Igna, '-the castle of Rosespire,' footsteps echoed down the thorn room, "-is a menacing place.' A reddish tipped arrow flung from the inside pillars, "-careful," he remarked with a slothful stop. The projectile missed, "-don't spear people for greetings," he caught it after a brief look.

"Fast as usual," said a disgruntled Adete, "-my hair and clothes are a mess," she pouted.

"You're the one to blame," escaped a smug remark.

"Move your feet," thundered Miira impatiently waiting at the entrance.

"You're the one who got shouted at," winked Adete, "-I get the last laugh," to which she breathed a monotonous, '-ha'. *BITE.*

The walk carried to the town inside the castle walls, the manors were grand and pristine. Cottage and taverns, there was no restriction to whom could visit. No class system, only monarchs at the top and people of the Shadow Realm below. The population had grown into the thirty-thousands. Most of which were men who fought dearly till the last breath. Life inside wasn't bad, "-they look to be having fun."

"They are, the Shadow Realm's a perfect place to spend one's afterlife. Tis the same as starting in another world. Granted, their purpose is to join fights when the master desires."

"Don't they get bored?" the vexing descent into the noble district arrived.

"They don't, we have anything and everything, they but need to ask."

“Still, it’s deserted for how many people I’ve trapped here,” the promenade took to the outer edge of the district.

“Rosespire is big enough to accommodate a hundred thousand people, and tis a low estimate. Most of the newcomers choose to stay in villages, some prefer hot, others cold, and many the tranquility of nature.” Therein came a familiar sight, the gates to the first mansion. “-Let’s go,” she waved to unlock a cage, “-what we seek is inside.”

Up it was, along with the arduous twists and turns. Words were kept at a minimum; she darted past the lobby and straight into the attic. “We’re here,” said she, a hatch opened to a party of cobwebs and dust.

“Here I thought there weren’t any other life forms,” he coughed.

“No, the realm is growing to be a secondary world. Why is it other gods have a realm of their own, tis for the sake of power? The bigger and better domain is, the stronger is the god. It’s the reason why you were able to fight Kion without using the element. Mantia is the manifestation of the Shadow Realm in the real world, it takes on the shape of owner’s will, and in your case, it’s the manifestation of Origin’s tremendous power.”

“The death element is strong, the power of immortality and rebirth at twice the strength sounds nice but has far more drawbacks. I rather it stays at a manageable pace, don’t want to end up like last time.”

“Enough,” she flung open a chest, “-here’s the portal to the flow of time. Take my hand and don’t even dare move. Heads up, it won’t be a full passage into the world of the past, we won’t see faces nor be able to communicate. Take her soul and we leave, if those terms are acceptable, then we’ll depart.”

“I agree.” She dive-bombed the empty coffer as did Igna. The very concept of reality and what it meant to be human, god, or devil, shifted to a concurrent link of nothing and everything. A gentle outline of Miira’s hands led the way, he watched unable to move, let alone communicate.

“We’re here,” said she gently.

“What happened?” he snapped to, ‘-I’m floating, I can’t see, nor hear, then how did I hear Miira?’

“Don’t think too much,” said she, “-we’re at the point of no return. Use thy mind, not the senses, use thy mind’s eye and see what is before us.”

‘It’s the past...’ the scene of Aceline’s death played slowly. She jumped to save another, vagueness dulled any sense of reasonable logic, ‘-she’s proud,’ said a secondary voice, ‘-don’t overthink, rescue her soul and get out.’

Lost soul of the brave, lost soul of the forgotten. Heed me, heed my voice, for I’ve come to rescue from the vestige of regret, follow as we move to a better place; Box of Soul – Soulfeld.

Release, clapped Miira, destiny itself flew past to a sudden reawakening. ‘What happened?’ the fingers curled, ‘-I feel good, maybe a slight headache, nothing I can’t live with.’

“You’re back?” inquired Miira in a desolate state, her face and arms were burnt. Her lovely hair was spoiled and left draping over the chair.

“Hey,” rushed to her side, “-what happened?”

"I fought," she coughed, "-going back in time requires a fight against the Guardian. In other words, I fought myself," her breathing slowed, "-I used most of my strength to challenge your soul along with the flow. If nothing else, I helped in my master's endeavor."

"Cut the melodramatic speech."

See the unseen, feel the unfelt, knowledge deep within, awaken for I order so; Eye of Truth.

'The curse of blasphemy, the curse to punish any who dares glimpse and alter the past. Time is ruthless, she conveniently left out said piece of information, how very caring.' A warming flow of solace exuded down the shoulders and into his index finger, '-a simple fix,' he touched her forehead, *Partial Realm Expansion: Mantia* a bubble swallowed her injured body.

"Begone unsightly fiends," a host of symbols layered atop the hovering cocoon, *-Ancient-Arts of Cleansing: Deliverance.* Words turned daggers impaled the burnt marks, she cried and yelled to naught but a serene balcony. Her water-like cocoon marred in dirtied black of which disappeared into a vortex. *Mana Control: Healing Element Variant: Restoration.*

She harshly landed, "-could have been a little bit tactful."

"No," he brazenly replied, "-you must take the blame for not speaking of the repercussion. What if it had killed you, why didn't the thought cross thine mind. I would have found another way to reach the desired results."

"No, it's fine," she inched to the edge, "-I said I would help, so I helped. I didn't accomplish much in the battle for Glenda, I was hesitant."

"Listen," he poured juice, "-being hesitant is a good thing when greater wit is necessary. Being reckless works for muscle-brained fighters, you don't fit said demography."

"Are you disappointed?" she sipped.

"Not in the least, I'm happy you staked everything on my whim. Promise to speak of the deeper meaning the next time I call for help."

"To be frank," she gulped the drink, "-I had full confidence in you. Deep down, my heart said to believe, and I did, the results speak for themselves. We captured a soul and I was healed from the curse of blasphemy. Forgive my impertinence, compared to the life as Staxius Haggard, the current vessel is far stronger. Watching the former fight felt wrong, he always did so without care for himself. He took on curses after curses and strived to make it his own. The current vessel relies on others and has trust in his entourage, something the old lacked."

"Experience and wisdom I suppose," he chuckled, "-go rest, I'll handle it from here."

"Good day to you then," she affectionately gave a hug and took to the shadow realm.

Chapter 626: Misplaced emotions

Best said to be a blink of the eye, the days turned into weeks. August departed and made way for the second week of September. Wednesday the 8th to be precise. After saving Aceline's soul, the matter was placed on the back burner. Settling into a grand place such as the peak of Eldow's high required

finesse and attention. Rumors of a prince residing in the vampiric lair jestfully knocked onto the neighbors' windows.

He spoke a big game, confidence was overwhelming. The incident at Konlda left much to be desired. Odgar's agency was placed to aid the investigation, the leader stood bemused to the events. The corrupted police were never much to take notice of such complaints. Instead, they'd often blame instances and ignore the situations – if money was involved, they'd sure to act childish and without authority. Being asked such a favor meant one thing, desperation. They invited the man who started the battle and begged for the murder's resolve. The Jonia Familia, a branch family of Yonak voiced their anger vehemently. To stop any sliver of bloodbath, the representatives met in Stanley's homage to pay respect. There, the misunderstandings were cleared, a single plausible motive spawned off the discussion, 'someone's out to disrupt the peace.'

Time is august, before the arrival of a special package, Igna watched and worked. éclair provided much support, especially in the promotional department. The task was fixed, a band needed to be formed.

'Rough patches of land, daring outfits, and countless flashes.' A beacon of heat glared onto the dried synthetic grass.

"Give me more of your feminine sensuality," cried a flustered photographer. The crew remained close; visage reminiscent of disgust, as in moments from hurling. The female models varied in size, appearance, and specialty.

'More sensuality,' thought Igna, 'fine, how about this!' he sarcastically struck a pose, the few workers watched in awe.

"YES, EXCELLENT, THAT'S THE WAY!" begged the photographer, "-Lon's magazine is going to have a field day with this," he cheered.

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'Lon's magazine,' sweat coated the forehead in a mystical shine, '-I'm tired,' tedious as it was, the complaint was never in mind.

"You're done, good job," said the bespectacled photographer named Larry.

"You too," replied Igna. '-The bench,' he eased off the elevated floor to a dimmer and cooler area. The set had been built to stand at least half a meter above the floor. In retrospect, one could think it to be a launching platform. Rockets to the stars versus people dubbed future stars shooting to the top, quite a poetic way of thought. The sweat washed away with few splashes. Automatic taps and clean mirrors were a must, the floor had an immaculate shine, not that it mattered.

"Larry's quite the fanatic," commented a man putting away his aviator sunglasses.

"I'd say passionate," refuted Igna freshening the visage.

"And I'll say you're well-mannered," he smirked, "-rookies are often cocky and never get the job done. I'm impressed by the diligence showed," they crossed paths, a shadow dropped onto Igna's person, "-be careful, the climb to stardom is thorny and perhaps, deadly." Thus ended the audition, the shoot was but a way to clear the path for the chosen. '-did he threaten me?' black curtains parted to the studio;

the waiting bench sat empty. 'Better wait and see,' he sat and waited. The shoot for the female began, 'male models aren't so common,' he scanned to no avail. There had only been four or so before him. The brightly lit synthetic ground swapped for a beachesque flavor. The diligent novices clambered on to their destiny. Flash after flash, the noon fell into the evening. The studio's heat dulled to blizzard. Air condition smugly spoke in their weird hums. Larry brought the models to a neutral area; lesser cramped as workers unloaded props.

"I'd like to thank you all for coming here," he courteously nodded, "-as you know, breaking into the world of modeling is hard. The popularity of glitz and glamour has flooded the market with talented and good-looking individuals. I mean no disrespect, the industry is hard," they knew what he implied, "-we'll start with the girls." He bobbed left and right, "-Runo from Leina and Ariela from Aneisa's, please come forward."

Between the crowd of ladies, two sublimely radiant figures said, '-yes.'

'We're done,' flapped a few mutterers.

'Potential idols from those agencies are bound to win,' complained another, '-us with dreams aren't a match to their looks and talents.'

'Giving up before the results,' paused Igna, '-what's with them?' a stained look detailed much of the chosen's stories.

"For the men," the voice sharpened, "-Romeo from Leina."

"Romeo?" the whispers giddied, "-it's really him, oh my god, I don't care if I lost."

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In from the back approached a pretentious walk. "-Good evening Larry," handshakes exchanged, "-Runa, Ariela," he winked, "-good to see you girls made it."

"Y-yeah," returned a reluctant Runo.

"We're done for," said male models, "-he's here, the star with no qualm to the future of novices. He's already appeared in shows and is in the making of a movie, what's the point of fighting weaklings?"

"I know, he's one of Odgawoan's top guy. I heard he's a member of the familia."

'Makes sense,' thought Igna, '-the prestige behind them almost voids the need for ability. Name alone pushes the careers. I wondered why Amsey remained so adamant about me joining an agency first. They're not going to help recruits unless there's enough support.'

Clap, clap, bickering halted, "-we have chosen our three main models. Time to pack up people, we'll see you another time," disappointment weighed heavy in the exchanges. The air felt tense. éclair sent plans via the phone of which he sighed.

"Excuse me," interjected Romeo, "-Larry, have you forgotten someone?"

"No, why?" returned the shorter man.

“What about the brown-haired boy,” he pointed, “-that’s the Alchemist, a disgraced chef awarded the black-collar. I know because I followed the journey from when the video went viral. He vanished after conceding to the current star of Spring Publishing’s weekly digest, Kyle Darker, the virtuoso of ingredients. I searched long and hard to no avail, the social media accounts were inactive until a video of Kinless playing Xius’s song surfaced. Is this where you have been, Igna Haggard?”

“Do pardon me,” he wrapped his scarf, “-I’m honored to be recognized by such a reputable idol, truly, I can’t be any prouder. And yes, my actions were heavily criticized, I quit cooking to start a new life. I realized my entourage wished my downfall, and nothing else. The reason I cooked washed away as is an unfinished plate, he had so much to accomplish and yet, left so early. Life isn’t fair, and neither is the world.”

“Wait,” cried Larry, “-are you really him, Medusa’s prodigy?”

“Was,” the words escaped, “-I don’t mind auditioning again. There’s no need for special favors, Larry, and Romeo. My journey starts the same as the others, I don’t care much for favoritism.”

“Watch your mouth,” fired Larry, “-what is this about favoritism?”

“Just as I meant it,” he brazenly half-smiled, “-the people here have worked hard to overcome weaknesses. I don’t discredit the work put by Runa and Ariela either, good fortune is a skill too. Hard work doesn’t always equate to success. Regardless, they try and strive to be the best. The hierarchy of precedence is present, disgustingly so. I should understand, the world answer to the call of the strong, the meek and weak must adapt or suffer.”

“What are you talking about?” squinted Runa, “-boy, have you gone crazy?”

“Figures,” he lit a cigar, “-Runa and Ariela,” he puffed, “-take a look at these girls, they don’t have the backing of a strong agency. Many of them are professionals. Some have soared greater heights than so-called idols have. In the end, my words are rambles of a man with ideals.”

“I knew it,” chuckled Romeo, “-you’re plenty the man I’ve heard in rumors. Always fighting the system and trying to change what is present. Such idealistic mentalism won’t work in Alpha; I know from the fact; the foundation is rock-solid and I apologize. I should have been more understanding of the hard work.” Therein ended the first photoshoot.

The passage of time didn’t facilitate matters in Hidros. Julius worked hard for Apexi. Vorn’s growing popularity made Alicia’s work easier. The idols became independent and sought out work, the populous openly welcomed the girls.

‘It’s been a month now,’ sniffled the distressed Alicia, ‘-why am I crying so much,’ her eyes closed inside the privacy of the washroom.

Apexi’s new headquarters made Lai proud. The well-decorated corridors hurdled to a stop as she returned from the bathroom break. Her aura matched one of sorrow and pain.

“What’s the matter?”

“Julius,” whispered Nona, “-our manager’s feeling worst lately. I don’t know what’s happened to her.”

“Why, what’s the matter?” a swift glance showed a slumped shouldered Alicia, “-looks bad,” he remarked, “-is it the reason you called me?”

“Yes, and we know,” added the others, “-she’s been like that for god knows how long. Should we be worried?”

“No,” he reassured, “-she’s strong enough to take care of her own mind and body. I don’t think we should be worried,” and though he had the truest of intent, fate didn’t work in his favor.

Dusk fully swallowed the capital, ‘I can’t take it anymore,’ cold showers assaulted her head, ‘-he was right, our relation didn’t work out. I don’t have the will to wait anymore, I’m done.’ A restless expression loomed before the mirror, ‘-Alicia, wake up, you can’t keep going like this. What happened, happened.’ A twinkle caught her eye, ‘-oh yeah, tonight I meet with Ziu.’

A lavish restaurant at the heart of the capital, expensive champagne, and an escort inside a limousine. Red carpet rolled to welcome, an army of butlers bowed in wait.

“Good evening,” said a tough-looking man, “-it’s been quite a while, dearest Alicia.”

“Ziu,” she narrowed, “-don’t misinterpret my intentions. I’ve come to negotiate on behalf of Vorn.”

“Yes, yes,” he leered up and down, “-let’s discuss it over dinner.”

Roads up to the private restaurant were shut. Their silhouette outlined against the light-brown curtains, they ate and chatted until drinks were served.

“You bastard,” her head spun, “-did you use...”

“Yes I did,” he grabbed her neck, “-you bitch, always avoiding my advances, insulting me and my family, who the fuck do you think you are?” the grip tightened, “-my heart burns with hatred. This drug makes anyone I wish my slave,” he spat on her face, “-disgusting visage soiled by other men. My libido doesn’t even wish to entertain thy final moments,” he pressed, light emanated from the palms, “-if I can’t have you, none shall.”

The same day they said she would be fine, a tragedy shook Rosespire’s order. Alicia’s beheaded body was found on the outer edge of Onela, brown veiled in red, broke shards in her stomachs, and knife through her heart. 8th of September, a frantic phone call arrived. “Igna speaking.”

“Cousin, I’m sorry, you have to come right away. Alicia’s been murdered.”

“M-murdered?” he watched on emotionlessly, “-I’ll take the next flight,” the call ended. ‘Alicia’s dead?’ a glass returned to the empty bar, ‘-Should I be angry or sad?’ nothing came of the news. ‘-I see,’ he ambled on to his room, “-Vanesa, Draconis, and Saniata.”

“What happened pops?” the door shut behind.

“Alicia’s been murdered.”

“Wait...” gulped Saniata, “-she’s your partner, right?”

“Was.”

"I'm sorry for the loss," added Draconis, "-the death of a friend isn't something to laugh at."

"I know," he nonchalantly packed the essentials.

"Should you not be a little more concerned?" remarked Saniata.

"I should," he turned, "-but I can't, this heart of mind doesn't care if people die. I've suffered the trauma plenty o' time. I decided after he died."

Knock, knock,

"-enter," slid out the somber suite.

"Master, transportation is ready. A jet is on standby at the airport. We must leave right away."

"Understood," melancholic echoes rattled across the room, '-why did you have to die!' anger gathered within Origin's heart.

Chapter 627: Rage.

Night shielded the capital. Public safety blocked access. Barricades of armored vehicles laid in wait. The public's attention was drawn to no avail. People were fascinated by death. Upon the news of a murder, the curious rushed for a sneak peek. Photos circulated the underbelly of the Arcanum.

A white overlay hid the disheartening sight. No matter the fascination with the afterlife. When someone dies gruesomely, no matter their stomach or level of resistance, the pain fuels the fear for one's ultimate end.

Black cars rushed the riverbank. The latter was a park of the outer 'exercise' area. A running path turned attraction. Blonde hair immediately darted the grassy slopes, men in uniform allowed entry, albeit nervously. What they protected was crude and vile, the investigators barely took a look and decided no.

"Excuse me," said Julius.

"Lord Julius," said the detective, "-my name's Arlon from the homicide division. The victim is a member of the Haggard's dynasty."

"Yes," the heart raced, "-where's she!"

"Being hauled to the hospice," a pen roughly scratched his head, "pardon the tactlessness, will Phantom take over the investigation?"

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"Are you serious?" the arms instinctively grabbed his collar, "-will the homicide division sit idly."

"Excuse me," he countered the grip, "-my job is to access the scene, don't let emotion run wild," he gawked.

"I apologize," the grip eased, "-got carried away. The girl's practically family to me. We had our differences... tell me, have there been leads?" stretchers carried the soul to the hospice.

"The murder took place somewhere else. The killer purposefully dumped her here, they're mocking us."

'Alicia...' the heart cowered, '-if only I intervened.' The sirens faded and so did the light. Yellow tapes surrounded the vicinity. Most of the scene was scanned. An attack on the Haggard dynasty, the message echoed through Phantom and the Dark-Guild. Imposing armored cars and trucks pulled into the hospice later that night. Julius lifelessly watched the ceiling, the regret clawed at the deadly mistake. Vorn and Xius arrived after prominent members.

Lady Courtney and Elvira stormed the entrance in the company of highly armed fighters. They were armed to the teeth and didn't waver to pull the trigger. A raging inferno was set ablaze, the autopsy was handled by doctors employed by Phantom.

"Julius," said Elvira, "-I heard the gist from the detective."

"I've sent a team to investigate the area," said Courtney, "-we'll comb the whole capital if need-be to bring the perpetrator to justice."

"What justice," frowned the prince, "-punish me too, I should have been more careful. I broke my promise..."

"Alicia," sobbed Dei and Emi, "-s-she's r-really d-dead?"

"Get a hold of yourself," gritted Suga.

"HOW," cried Dei, "-she's our friend!"

"Please," said an attendant, "-follow me this way."

Enna's composed self crumbled, Vorn's inner sense of safety cracked. They spoke no words and sat silently. The culprit fled the country, a private jet escaped Phantom's watch before long, the nonchalant visit of a hotshot went amiss by the detection system. The attack surprised the nobles. The shock rattled Celina's uncertainty. She who strived to make a future had one of her morale pillars broken. Before dawn, Alicia moved to Rotherham at a better establishment. Vorn, Xius, and a few others stayed.

Courtney and Elvira departed after landing. 'How can this have happened,' the mouth draped. No motive nor warning, hell, she didn't say a word about her activities. She died simply for the sake of dying, those closest were obviously distraught and on edge. The same couldn't be said for those acquainted; like the radio report on who died, Alicia was but a name to the populous.

The inferno's flame would flare further, Igna landed. '-Barely a month,' the stairs carefully lowered. 'Origin, my other self,' he walked, '-I sense the rage seeping through my pores.'

The bike burnt asphalt till a stoppie. '-the hospital,' he thought and vaulted without care for the expensive ride. Bodyguard barely caught the latter. The white building stood its ground. Draconis and Saniata left to the Shadow Realm on their own accord. Joking around wouldn't be the greatest idea. Vanesa remained her usual self.

"Julius, don't beat yourself up," said Malley.

"Shut it, Malley," the break room echoed, "-I can't calm down. I'm frightened," the face paled.

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“Why, are you the murderer?” inquired Suga.

“No, I’m not.”

“Then calm it,” said the man drenched in snot and tears courtesy of Dei and Emi.

A menace barged into the morgue; the silence sufficed to freeze bravado. Tall guards glanced to lower their heads.

Click,

“Igna...” the prince gasped. An ominous presence glued to his back. No exchange of pleasantries or care for a hello, he toppled a chair and firmly glared.

“Who’s responsible?”

“Igna,” intervened Malley, “-Julius’ traumatized, please understand the situation.”

“I’m sorry, did he lose someone or?” he side-glanced, “-Priestess, I say this in good faith. Don’t interrupt me.”

“Son,” said Courtney, “-don’t blame him,” others entered.

“I never said I blame him,” murderous intent overflowed his person, “-tell me, who’s responsible?” Guards flooded the room; Elvira led the charge.

“I’ll reveal it only if you promise not to cause trouble,” fired Elvira sternly.

“What trouble?” he took a step-in confrontation, the guards jumped to make a wall, “-I see my aunt’s reluctant in speaking one on one.”

“Promise me,” pleaded Courtney.

“Promise?” he kicked a metal table through the walls, “-listen to me closely,” the hair parted, brown bleached to white, canines sharpened, “-there’s no such thing as a promise. Tis my fault for thinking Rosepire to be a peaceful place. Alphaia was supposed to be the dangerous endeavor, not a job as fucking manager.”

“DON’T MOVE!” exclaimed the guards.

“Out of my way,” *Blood-Arts: Extria,* they flung and struck to the walls. “-Mother, Aunt, tell me who’s responsible.”

“Let them go,” glared Courtney. A sword manifested, *Death Element – Daemonum Gladio Variant: Unleash Aura.*

“Is this how you treat your family?” Elvira snapped, her nails sharpened, her raw strength pulsed throughout the building.

“Family,” he gritted, “-am I suppose to take the blatant attack lightly?” their auras fought to scrape the room.

“Cousin, don’t do it!”

“Don’t stop me,” palm clenched and knocked out the guards, “-I’m in the mood to destroy an entire continent.”

“My son,” she fell through the floor, “-don’t make us fight,” *CLANG,* he countered her strike. Unable to keep pace, Elvira tore into his stomach, floating dagger snapped and nailed his feet. *Cough,* ‘-strong,’ consciousness wavered.

“Enough, Igna,” whispered Courtney, “-listen to me. I know you’re in pain.”

“We’re trying to save you,” said Elvira.

“Listen to them,” *Creation: Astral Binding,* five pentagram-shaped swords restrained his movement.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,” jovial laughter escaped, “-my safety?” the struggle eased, “-how very generous. Tis the level of protection I expected for Alicia. Look where she’s at, in a morgue, lifeless and miserable. I regret not telling her my feelings. I should have confessed. I’m but human, I can’t manipulate the fate of another.”

“Don’t lower your guard!” fired Julius.

“What happened, happened, I’ll avenge her in my own way.”

Knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing.

“Calm down,” four portals opened.

Demonic-Arts: Restraint of a thousand Aedric , a pool of purple sludge solidified, “-can’t allow our master to go berserk,” winked Lilith.

Divine-Arts Chaos Variant: Unfounded Calamity, skull-shaped chains climbed to stroke the jugular and weak spots. “-Such a big baby,” said Gophy.

Hands of the moving clock, come to a stop for I, guardian of time, order so. Azure-Dragon’s roar – Freezure. “-we’re even,” smiled Miira.

“So rash sometimes,” murmured Intherna, “-listen here, Igna,” a small-size phoenix perched on her arms, “-do anything stupid and we’ll pull the trigger.”

“Seriously?” the shoulders slumped; “-I yield.”

One would have sufficed to restrain Igna. The sight of their friend burning in the unforgiving flame of vengeance forced a collective response. The revolt left him tired; Origin’s anger joined Igna’s bloodlust for the briefest of time. They must never be allowed to walk said path. He apologized and took to the empty apartment.

Her funeral was soon hosted without an official ceremony. The autopsy concluded the presence of narcotics. Elvira knew the murderer. Thus, with eyes glued onto her pretty visage, the realization sank. ‘-I’ll never see her again,’ the heart sank, ‘-Alicia’s really dead...’ she rested on a metal table, most in attendance were asked to stay behind a one-way mirror. “Excuse me,” Igna reflectively made for the door, “-can I perform her last rites?” The handlers paused on the unusual request.

“Cousin, was the punishment, not enough?”

“Let him be,” said Elvira.

“He deserves at least that honor.”

‘Cold,’ he caressed her battered face, ‘-you’re pretty even in death,’ he smiled tenderly, ‘-you grew on me, Alicia, I can confidently say it now, I fell for you. My feelings grew and I chose to ignore them. I didn’t wish the responsibility of another human in my life. You gave me more than companionship, thank you for everything. I wish I could revive you...’ he blinked; ‘-your soul has been reborn plenty. Tis the final journey, the heavenly plain awaits. May thee choose wisely.’ *Souls lost to the world; souls trapped by regret. Forgo the worldly barriers and depart joyfully. I, Igna Haggard, wielder of the death element, wish upon thee a graceful future,* he pressed her forehead, *-Neae.*

A semi-transparent figure hovered; the faceless skull nodded in gratitude. *Mana Control: Light Variant – Serenade.* The blocky entrance shut; a peaceful glow covered the body. Angel-like creatures hovered with harps and flutes, they serenaded her departure.

The evening showed on the clock. The representatives of many factions and companies gathered inside the skyscrapers. Elvira led the homage to Alicia. Reputable people of law to the worst of the scum, no discrimination. Prince-consort Piers acted as the Queen’s proxy. The party flowed; the guests were deeply sympathetic to the grieving family.

“Cousin, I apologize for failing to keep my promise,” he lowered his head.

“Julius,” he stopped the shameful act and gave a tight embrace, “-we share the blame. Don’t trouble yourself,” three loud pats appeased the guilt. The last rite was a thing of beauty. He conveyed the deepest regret and sorrow to the fallen, of which, they left serenely. “I’ll excuse myself for the night.”

The wind blew harshly, ‘-so pathetic,’ he lit a cigar outside the three arrows, ‘-how hopeless can I be?’ he smoked shy of the massive entrance under a little wet bench. Rain shyly showered the region. ‘They found the wonder drug in her body. I can guess who killed her, it’s obvious. My prior outrage was a long-time coming. Damned Ziu Patek. As Aunt and mother warned, I can’t attack them directly. I’m helpless, the politics are conflicting with my way of vengeance. I want to run my sword through his stomach, there’s nothing more that’ll make me happy. Why even bother, the bastard doesn’t deserve a painless death,’ he curled against the marbled walls, ‘-reviving her should have been an easy job... What was it about Staxius being the better vessel... he would have done anything to get what he wanted. I can’t compare to how I was, am I weak or strong, I don’t know anymore.’

Footsteps exited the left, he side-glanced without much thought. The crimson shine of hate bleached to one woefully white. The heart pained, the limbs were numb, the mind flooded in macabre thoughts.

Clop, clop, a feeble figure rested against his shoulder.

“Celina?” he puffed.

“...”

“-are you ok?”

“...”

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"Fine, do as you wish."

"She's gone," her face buried into his shoulders, "-she's gone. Who am I going to talk to at night? Who's going to give me advice. Alicia taught me so much, I knew nothing about making friends... I-I-I w-was able t-to s-start a n-new life."

"Alicia was an awesome person," he watched the moon melancholically, "-her sharp tongue and refreshing personality. I'll miss her."

"M-me too," she wept, "-I w-w-wanted t-to play in a c-concert and r-repay her kindness."

Chapter 628: "I say we do it, let's become true devils.'

Two days elapsed; a sunny 10th of September kindly waved. Between discussion of avenge and justice, Igna drifted with Celina. Trauma and the loss were heavy, a hefty burden only time could fix. Customarily, he stayed at her side and spent days counseling one another. Nothing had changed, the thought glazed Igna's stare. A menace of presence burnt as he washed his teeth, the reflection wasn't of a human nor a god, but a devil. The signet ring burnt vividly, '-destroy everything,' he thought, an idea shared by his other-self. 'The sorrow of my ally's death resounded strongly. He overpowered my emotions, I felt pitiful. Alpha isn't a place one can ride into battle,' he held the basin, blood mixed with the foamed paste, '-the moniker of the devil,' he inhaled, '-to get what I want,' the mind tethered on a difficult thought, '-should I embrace the darker side of what's human?'

'The darker side of humanity, what is it?'

'I suppose the actions deemed unlawful and perhaps evil?'

'What constitutes evil, is it the act of violence. Animals kill for the sake of survival; they kill to eat. Monsters kill for the sake of killing, which of the two are evil?'

'A sane individual would say monsters as they're directly involved. If we were placed in the shoes of the prey, they'd look upon the hunters and see them as monsters, the very definition of evil.'

'How does it affect us?'

'It doesn't, evil is how the strong are branded. Heroes are strong people who've saved their kinsmen and strive to better society. Another perspective says heroes are slaves employed to do what most cannot. A simple title of demon or witch and a person is hated. If the hero kills said hated being, he's venerated. If ever the opposite happens, the demon is feared and treated differently. Looking back to the kill or be killed, the so-called evil did so for survival, the same as an animal. What then, are animals evil for killing?'

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'A counter-argument might say consciousness is a factor.'

'Yes, a very frail argument. Just because of the ability to think and waste time, tis though they have the upper hand in the animal kingdom. A chirping bird, a meowing cat, and a barking dog, they're all signs of communication, inferior yes, but present.'

'What is evil then?'

'A title, nothing more, nothing less. Tis a world where a gentleman can be tricked by a vixen and shunned into exile. I say we do it, let's become true devils.'

'True devils,' he stared the mirror, 'either suffer and be used as Kion, or fight and be shunned. My minds made up,' the ring burst into a flame of which cloaked his entire person.

Lightning thundered, dirt and ash hung in the air. A rustic-stone coliseum boomed in chants and shouts. He stood in the lower levels, heavy metallic gates barred the front and back exit. The ascending seats made for ease of view. Purple-colored sky bolted lightning; every impact shook the ground.

Two loud taps opened the gates, a monstrous figure clambered with broad shoulders and muscled legs. The cheering stopped with a crash of war-hammer and ax. The beasts drooled despite the gag. The lunatic stepped into the light and snuffled; cognitive ability was less than present. It swung the weapons as if toys, Igna narrowly dodged an unwanted swing.

Lights blasted on the center-seating area, a veil covered the resident guest, "-Greetings people of Totrya!" they cheered and howled, the cacophony sent shivers, '-the sheer pressure of their rawness.'

"Today's the day our Founder was coronated by the Supreme God, Kronos. He took the mantle of God-slayer and sought to vanquish evil. We were brought to serve his purpose, our kind has destroyed countless worlds, exterminated many races to absorb their lifeforce. Alas, he lost to the cowardly Zeus and his minion. Fate be damned for he bestowed his power onto another," she pointed, the spotlights followed, "-there he is, our founder's heir, the next king of monsters, Igna Haggard!" Applause resounded in tremors equal to the prior lightning strikes. "-We've met him before, though he was weak and feeble, he made a promise to become strong. He hasn't accepted the title of kingship. What say you, majesty, test thine might?"

He glanced to her elevated station, "-I did promise to prove myself first," the hands made for Orenmir, "-Steward Vesper, I accept the challenge!"

The crowd went ecstatic, "-Vesper, is it wise, I don't sense much power from him."

"Oh Kul, dearest Kul, you don't understand," said she in a mocking voice, "-he's strong, a lot stronger. Watch, he shall prove us wrong."

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"What's your name big guy?" they faced one another, "-there's a gag, I doubt you'll be able to speak."

"Majesty," whimpered a childish tone, "-fight me, fight me, fight me," cried it, fur-covered most of its body. A singular strap went across the chest, on it laid decorations.

'Telepathy?' he wondered.

"The first bout will be against our fierce competitor of last year, Leia, the weeping one."

'The weeping one?' he stood on guard, the sword's edge waited solemnly, a whirlpool of ghastly screams silenced the crowd. *FIGHT,*

The beast charged for an instant strike, it threw the ax, Igna dodged and jumped closer. It took the hammer and swung downward, the tip grazed his sword-arm, '-too close,' he jumped out of position and failed to notice the ax. '-Behind?' the weapon boomeranged, '-damn,' *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* the thumb slit and shot for the ground of which he pulled, the ax cleanly took his right ear, he fell harshly. Before it could strike again, Igna rolled out the reach and breathed heavy. 'He's fast for a big guy,' blood annoyingly washed the right cheek. 'No point in keeping cards hidden.' *Mana Control: Purgatory Flame Variant – Sea of Flames,* pillars of fire erupted, the dusty battleground swapped for a wasteland of lava. *Mana Control: Purgatory Flame Variant: Cloak of Rah,* a cape of black and red hovered in tandem with the whitened hair. "I always want to go all out but can't, I fear the repercussion it may have on the world."

"Fight me majesty, fight me, fight me, fight me," he wept.

"As you wish," the index slid along the blade's edge, *Mana Control: Void Flame Variant – Burnt Edge,* a pure hue associated with heaven outlined the weapon. The cloak gave fire immunity and heightened defense, the sea of flames boosted the fire affinity, as for the last spell, an enhancement to the weapon.

"Shall we?" he smirked. The beast darted with both arms swinging forth, he sidestepped and swung. The heat melted the weapon's handle and stopped shy of its neck. It fell, defeated in a single stroke; the ear healed, the fiery arena subsided.

"Igna's declared the winner of the first bout!" she proclaimed.

"YEAH!"

"For the second round, we'll have a contest of marksmanship," said she, "-please dispel the flame." The few closest to the fight sweated bullets, a boy fell to the heat. The giant phenom returned from whence it came, the gate shut. Spotlights flash to the top, a humanoid figure leaped and landed gracefully. Dark wings retracted, "-greetings, candidate of kingship," said the suited figure, "-my name is not of importance for now. The second bout is marksmanship, we but have to shoot as many targets as we can," a rifle summoned out a portal of which he hoisted in utmost concentration.

'Don't underestimate me,' said Igna unholstering Tharis, '-a shooting range, we're quite the distance away,' he aimed with one eye shut. A singular beep marked the start, goblins flew from one edge to the other. The adversary took no qualm in shooting, each pull of the trigger dowsed the ground in innards.

"Weak stomach?" he snickered.

"Weak stomach?" Igna kept a half-smile, '-let's shoot some goblins.' *Bang, bang,* the contest lasted a whole ten minutes. The projectiles varied in shape, size, and speed. The smaller and faster it moved, the more points they were awarded. *Beep* the score displayed a tie of which the crowd fiercely applauded.

"Good display," said he, "-going toe to toe with an expert marksman. I deem thee fit to be the ruler," he flapped into the skies. In the same spirit, many of the combatants jumped the gun and straight-up challenged the guest. He accepted the fights, no matter their strength, he battled relentlessly. From a portion of the crowd to the whole coliseum, the show and entertainment were worth their weight. Weirdly enough, the rush buried the thirst for vengeance. Emotions were let loose, the regret faded with each stroke and victory.

"Time for the last battle," said Vesper. The curtains parted to show familiar faces. Demons, they leaped into the fray with murderous intent.

"Long time no see," said Kul. She levitated, her horns shone fiercely, five dark orbs hovered in a circle at her back, "-time for us to fight seriously."

"Igna," winked the other, "-I hope you remember me," he bowed.

"Yes, the demon controlling gravity," the appearance altered as he seemed more human. "Don't be mistaken," remarked he, "-my face and body may match the humans..."

"You're still a demon," he interjected, "-I was beaten soundly last time," he smirked, "-as is wished by the crowd, the blade sheathed, "-I won't hold anything back."

Giant symbols conjured around the field; the weight shifted on Igna's side. Kul's speed increased; a barrage of orb covered the open roof.

Realm Expansion – Gravitax, "-the thing with demons," smirked the nameless butler, "-we can utilize realm expansion without the need for a domain."

Igna buckled, the orbs rained on mercilessly, the butler used portals to guide the stray into a fixed point.

"Not that I'll be so lax," she teleported in his black spot, dark-colored lances rimmed by blue impaled in a single motion.

"Get back," cried the butler, "-Rockfelt," a square mass dropped onto his person. The aftermath of dust and sparks flew, the duo rejoined and strolled to his position. "-Did we kill him?"

"I think we might have," shrugged the butler.

"Alas!" resounded across, *Realm Expansion: Mantia* the previous domain shattered to a distorted reality; "-I activated Mantia before Gravitax was conjured. Butler, it was a good attempt," flickers of lights joined into a vibrant figure, "-an attempt cannot justify victory," he casually patted their shoulders. *Snap,* the square mass reappeared as did Kul's attack, '-a taste of one's own medicine seems in order.'

Beep, "-the battle is over," exclaimed Vesper, "-Igna's proven his might by defeating countless foes." Stronger presences laying in wait disappeared, the pleased crowd showered compliments and flowers. A press of the palm replaced the arena.

"Good fight out there," said Vesper, "-I apologize if we were rather intrusive in the sudden invitation."

"Not really," he watched the purple outside, "-I was able to let loose and fight. Good way to keep the mind of things," he spun, "-I must verify one thing."

"Whatever you wish, my lord."

"The battle, it wasn't a show. I noticed the combatants were of differing races. The marksman said I had his approval."

"Damn brat can't keep quiet," she snarled.

"I heard you," said Igna, "-was that my coronation ceremony, a fight to prove my worth?"

"I expected much," she nodded, "-we host the fight every year. Many of the overseers had, let's say, issues. They wanted confirmation our leader was working to fulfill the promise. Hence the battle, defeating two high-level demons is impressive. They should be quiet for the time being."

"Am I crowned as the king or?"

"We need to host a ceremony first; the battle is the pre-celebration. If it's no trouble, would you spend the rest of the day till his majesty is crowned?"

"No skin off my back," he smiled, "-better time now than later."

Knock, knock,

"-who is it?" fired Vesper.

"Representative of the demon-tribe," came through loudly. Her composure failed.

"I apologize for my tone," the door opened.

"Out of the way."

Chapter 629: The next Demonking

Two strong-armed gentlebeast stood adjacent to the doorway. Igna peculiarly eyed them, the title of gentlebeast spawned by the common association of well-mannered men with suits. Inhumane structures of the monsters often halted their desired vestments.

"Good evening, my lord," stomped a charming man. The long black hair parted down the middle, a dark circle arched the outline of his eyes, the lashes were sharp and menacing. A tattoo of a beast's head quietly rested on the neck. Aside from the masculine horns and heavy personage, the entity felt human. Vesper cowered in the corner. The gentlebeasts mounting the door glared, they oppressed her aura in much easiness.

"Good evening," returned Igna, he stepped closer and threateningly gawked. "Can I help you?" he asked, the ominous man backed off and nodded.

"I'm Asmodeus, one of the four princes of hell, and current ruler of demons in Totrya. My other brothers have done many absurdities over the ages, especially Lucifer, he's turned into quite the hotshot. I must digress," he straddled a stool, "-it's quite a pain to watch."

"The demon of lust said to have the head of a sheep, bull, and one human, though the latter is quite the jarring sight to watch. Texts speak of the seven princes of hell, not that it matters here. There's also the part of being the son of Lilith, the mother of all succubus."

He stopped, the flabbergasted demon chuckled, "-you don't seem surprised?"

"No, not really," said he walking to the demon's side, "-actually, I'm very interested. Out of the others, you have a lust for revenge and a playful personality. One can say, a childlike motive fuel thine desires."

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“And I say,” he whispered, “-you’re also quite the subject of discussion. The man with the strength to defeat an army of five-thousand, the harbinger of Origin, the heir to death, Kronos, and Nike. An unrivaled pioneer in Magiology with knowledge exceeding the Librarian of Nexsolium.”

“I see the prince is well informed,” he sidestepped and grinned, “-might I ask why the prince is here?”

“My story is a dull one,” said he in much agony, “-I was bested in a game of dice and ousted to the realm of nothingness. There, a man bearing white hair flew on an azure dragon. I won’t lie and say he didn’t make my heart skip a beat. In that instant, he rescued me and my troublesome brother, Beelzebub. Between me and you, my brother is quite the pain to deal with, there’s no arguing the fact.”

“Can’t be worse than my children.”

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing of importance,” hard-pressed to be attentive, “-Prince Asmodeus, might I know of thy standing in current affairs. Vesper’s rather traumatized from the sudden audience, she’s shaking vividly. You’re an essential figure in Totrya, who will you side with?”

“Depends,” he reached for the upper pocket, “-here’s a six-faced die. Lady fate shall decide my actions. We each pick two numbers and hope for the best. If it lands without any victor, we go again till a winner, acceptable?”

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“Alright,” said Igna, “-can I hold the die first?” a kindling of a smirk perturbed Vesper’s cowardly attitude, “-I pick three and five.”

“I pick one and six,” said the prince. The immaculately designed die left his palm, it hung and fell, the display was quite the treat. The cube bounced, hitting many o’ obstacles until the number three.

“Lord Igna is the winner,” proclaimed a gentlebeast.

“Damn it,” facepalmed Asmodeus, “-here I thought I could control outcomes.”

“I see, Prince Asmodeus was fooled by Lucifer and me.”

“What do you mean?” he frowned, “-I didn’t cheat, I only manipulate the fate of the cube.”

“There’s the issue, manipulating the cube was the downfall. Pre tell, is this the one Lucifer asked to battle with?”

“Yes, how did you know?” he jumped into Igna’s face, “-are you psychic?”

“Space, highness,” he kindly stopped the impudent approach, “-the die is rigged. Tis a magical object, or a weighted die as commonly referred to by humans. There’s a slow-acting spell that reacts to mana. It works perfectly fine without the convenient backdoor. If pushed to odd odds, one must do all to bring favor to his side. A good leader must be ready to commit treason if need be. You lost to wit, Prince of lust and gambling.”

“Not wit,” he pouted, “-it was cheating, clear cheating!”

“There, there,” a brotherly tap resolved the misunderstanding, “-let’s call it even?”

“No,” he stepped away with confidence, “-as the bet states, I must pledge myself to the new king of monsters, the new demon king of Totrya,” he dropped on one knee.

“So be it,” thundered Igna, “-Prince of Lust and Gambling, Asmodeus, will you stand by my side as we conquer the new age?” he held out a hand.

“Excuse me?” inquired the prince, “-should I not be under?”

“No, no, heavy mistake. I don’t care for hierarchy amongst my comrades. Thou art my sword and shield, my bastion of hope if even the quest crumbles. I began as a humble mercenary and have made it to this position using wit and meeting competent people. I say it again, prince of lust, will you be my comrade?”

“Comrade?” the face lightened, “-I’ve never heard that one before,” he gladly took Igna’s offer, “-show us the way forth, majesty.”

The scenery changed to an amphitheater, the stage was replaced for an elaborate podium lined by red and gold. The throne of the Founder waited impatiently. Time seemed to match the occasion; the suns left for the moon. Dusk dowsed the landscape in black outlines and chilly breeze. Streets leading to the place of the occasion were well-lit. The hardened paths divulged into alleys and streets throughout the town. In that instant, the concentrated number of monsters made the theater to be a beating heart. Cheers pulsed; the event welcomed many of influential figures. Igna dawned a majestic robe. The audience fell silent as he walked into sight. Therein harbored the qualities and mannerism of a great leader. Vesper, Kul, Asmodeus, Beelzebub, and a few others laid in wait behind the throne. The great priest of Shcenlta, Guardian of Scifer’s domain, approached opposite Igna. A gem-stuttered white robe and imposing staff carried to the throne where the would-be-king waited.

“Greetings, people of Totrya,” murmured the priest, “-today, after bravely proving might in body and soul, the heir to the founder has stepped to take the mantle of king,” a well-dressed maiden carried the crown on a cushion of scarlet-gold. Concurrently, Igna stood at the foot of the stairs, the priest nodded, the ceremony ensued. Cheers accompanied his walk, he walked passionately, ‘-our time has come.’

“By the grace of our eternal guardian, Shcenlta, I, high priest, deem Igna Haggard to be fit for kingship. May his rule lead us to greater heights and may his enemies perish in the abyssal flame.”

He dropped to one knee and bowed; the crown soon followed. Sparks flickered, a charge of energy dispersed from the throne outward, the weather greyed to a raging thunderstorm. “Inheritor of Scifer,” thundered a frightening voice, “-tis thy last trial. Defeat the Protector of Lightning and lay claim to thy title.” A bolt of lightning struck, flames crackered by a pool of smoke. A greyish humanoid figure clambered out the hole, lines of purple exuded bolts, the body visibly burnt, steam as in raw power built as a protective layer.

“The last trial of kingship,” explained the priest, “-is to battle the strongest representative of the elemental tribe. They’re the strongest entity in the whole of Totrya, each has the strength to take on and defeat angels and demons alike. Their power slices through the dimensional levels of protection. One can say, they’re Lord Scifer’s private army.”

"I understand," said Igna. He unbuttoned the robe and leaped into battle. *Blood-Arts: Enlian,* wings sprouted, the hair whitened, he fully materialized as a true noble vampire, "-hear me, protectors of lightning," Orenmir slid out of the guard, "-I won't hold anything back." Thunder echoed; a whirlpool of lightning bolts summoned. The grey figure vanished; a pool of white levitated under Igna's feet. The bolts fired, the pool caught his legs, a bolt-made sword ran through Igna's chest. 'So fast,' he coughed and fell, the figure spazzed in and out of existence. The crowd's excitement nullified, protectors of the elements were strong.

'Strong,' he clenched, *Ancient Magic: Teleportation,* and escaped the pool of retardation. 'Don't underestimate me,' now in its blind spot, he leaped and made contact, the body vanished to knee Igna into the ground, *Teleportation.* he fell a few meters away, '-holy hell,' the eyes barely registered the opponent's face, much less movement. Without warning, another bolt-shaped dagger stabbed his back, he coughed, a kick had him flung across, *Bzz,* the protector leaped and summoned countless projectile. The moment Igna hit the wall, the projectile impaled head to toe. *Crash,* the grey figure landed for a merciless strangle, electricity sprouted left and right. Consciousness faded, the defeat was apparent, '-don't forget who I am.' *Death-Element: Unleash Aura,* an explosion of dark mana broke the hold, he dropped to his knees, "-ha-ha-ha," the battered visage turned to the skies, "-is this the best the world can offer?" a lustful glare befell the protector, the wounds healed, *-knowledge known to only the watcher, I, master and inheritor of Origin, beckon thee; Mantia, Library of the all-knowing. Realm Expansion.* A mosaic hue halted time for the present, "-foolish bearers of hope," *snap,* unseen projectile bound the entity, it struggled and shifted out of existence.

He reappeared in the blank spot, "-won't work again," a golden hammer slammed the guardian onto the ground, "-as ruler of the Shadow Realm," he nonchalantly turned, "-my realm is as strong as the people it harbors," an elegant melodic cry echoed, the shadow of a magnificent bird circled the battleground. A dart of flame crashed, a spiral of pure power shot to the sky's, "-I present thee, the phoenix," he smirked, "-no matter one's power," the posture lowered, "-the strength of my companions flows through me," shadows of Gophy, Intherna, Miira, Adete, Lilith, and a mountain of faceless residence linked into a single person. Orenmir swallowed the majestic bird's flame, "-the battle is over," a flash blinded the spectators, *Realm Release,* the sword sheathed, the guardian fell, and thus, the battle ended. "Good fight," he said.

The display frightened the crowd, cheers dwindled to a minimum. The ceremony completed; the mantle of Demon-King rested as the crown. The unoccupied seat at least had a master. The defeat of a thunder guardian held a lot of merits, the valiant show cemented the start of his legacy.

A banquet hosted many o' delicacies and influential figures. The newly crowned king retreated to the balcony after hours of meeting guests. An oval-shaped terrace gave onto a training field for the strong. 'I saw Scifer's memories, a common man born to a normal family from another world. The defeat didn't end so graciously, he died and moved to the initial world, where, he fell in a coma. The boy's slowly recovering, though, there's no way of telling. The guardian was strong, far stronger than me, I should keep Mantia as a last resort. I ought to master the partial realm expansion. I'm mentally drained, conjuring Origin's knowledge is strenuous. One day use, after that, my mind buckles. It's worth the bearable strain.'

"Majesty, does the crowd displease you?"

"Prince Asmodeus, shouldn't you be entertaining the ladies?" he slyly glimpsed the horde of maidens, "look, they're calling for their master."

"Please, can the jest be any less flavorful? I confess the maidens of Totrya have differing charm. Each race offers a certain spice. I prefer humans, they're easy to break and provide the best experience once in one's control," he pointed over the balustrade, "-see the girls there." Igna took notice, "-they're slaves I stole in my limited trips to Hidros. My liege, I have a favor."

"Go ahead."

"Please allow me the grace to be part of thy inner circle of confidants."

"My inner circle," he paused, "-the idea crossed my mind. Why not, I have a single condition."

"Which is?"

"The Shadow Realm is a place of rest; I wish nothing bad on them. As prince of lust, I entrust the mission of bringing females to the domain, the world must grow."

"Most pleasant."

Chapter 630: A message

"Here I present, my brother, the lord of flies, Beelzebub," said Asmodeus, "-master, as was agreed in our duel, I'm a companion. Wherever I go, my infant brother follows. Don't let the age fool you," he held a toddler in a cradle, "-he prefers the body of a weakling, lighter and easier to run away with, or so he says." Vibrant green hair, scars ran away from his eyes, the cheeks were chubby and the stature was one of a drunkard old man miniaturized.

"Hello," waved the toddler, "-I'm the lord of fly, I like dirty places and smelly stuff. My favorite place is a battlefield of rotten bodies," he signaled for a change of partners.

'Quite the introduction,' figured Igna. Kul, Vesper, and the butler approached timidly. Two princes of hell were in the audience, interrupting the conversation would be sacrilege.

"My lord, here," the toddler handed to Igna, who, rather than perplexed, cradled the boy affectionately, "-Beelzebub, the lord of flies. Welcome to my family. We have more people waiting home," thus came the queue for the others.

"Master," knelt the butler, "-please, might I beg for a favor!"

"Insolence," cried Asmodeus, "-has the demon-tribe lost the tact for manners." A seeping sensation of dread relapsed, the blacken horns shone in warning, his power surged.

"Enough," returned Igna caring for Beelzebub, "-there's no need for such trivialities at this moment. Tell me, Butler, Vesper, and Kul, what's the reason for your visit."

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"I've come to serve his majesty," said the butler, "-I was defeated and have been at a loss for so long. I need to find a new path forward, please, majesty, could you find it in thine heart to grant me such a favor. I vow to serve until my death."

“Same here,” knelt Kul, “-I’ve evolved into a high-ranking demon. I wish to guard his majesty. As the new Demon-King, it would make me proud to have such an auspicious post.”

“My decision is the same, I will accept thy pledges,” he smiled. A sense of relief washed over the startled demons, “-however, to be fully accepted, just as I had to go through the rite of passage, the same must be done. I won’t be the judge, instead, there will be individuals who are twice and thrice my strength laying in wait. Counting among them is Lilith, Queen of Demon.”

“My lord,” interjected Asmodeus, “-have thee married lady mother, wasn’t she wife to Lucifer?”

“I don’t know myself, Asmodeus, tis quite the quandary. I vouch for her loyalty. Therefore, as crowned King, I say, will you partake in the rite of passage. No one shall be excused.”

“If his majesty says so,” they lined up and knelt, “-we shall undertake any task required of us.”

“Before you depart,” interrupted Vesper, “-let me complete the ritual.” A warm glow lit the crown, the structure melted into liquid gold and hovered to the signet ring. “-with this, you’re the true ruler of monsters. No matter the strength, race, or power, they must bow to their king, the signet ring proves the title. My duties as stewardess shall continue, our fight has yet to start, his majesty will be summoned if matters of our domain are in jeopardy.”

A darken veil swallowed the demon as it did Igna. The purple sky swapped for a lovely star-filled horizon. The ground felt wet, clouds partially marred the night. ‘-Back in Rotherham,’ the face glittered, ‘-I didn’t leave the apartment.’ *Dring, dring,* the bed vibrated, “-Igna speaking,” he answered.

“COUSIN!” shouted Julius, “-where have you been all day?”

“Had matters to attend to,” he replied nonchalantly, “-did something happen, why, I see countless miscalls.”

“Obviously,” he argued, “-there’s a war in Rosespire. A rival gang has revolted, they say if Phantom can be disgruntled by the death of a pest, what does it say about the organization.”

“Those bastards,” he darted for the balcony, “-where are they, I’m coming right away.”

“You’re in Rotherham, still, one of our arms transport trucks was attacked. I’ll send the coordinates.”

“What of our forces?”

“Not present yet, they have a Sultrian, it’s hard-pressed to fight a monster without another monster.”

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“Don’t worry,” he leaped, “-you wanted a monster, I’ll give thee the devil instead.” A loud boom resonated. The bystanders cowered, was it a bomb or an attack. An upward glimpse showed a crimson-tailed shooting star.

Outside the range of the city guard on a diversion of the main road, an armored truck pelted for the safety of the main route. The initial destination was Rotherham or was until mines were scattered on a public road. If not for a speeding bike, the truck would have blown to bits. A trail of smoke whirled to the sky, from afar, one could mistake for a smoke signal. The unlucky biker died. Unequipped by the

AFR, the truck-driver took command and sped into a chase. Jeeps of older generations rapidly swarmed the target. The hunt began around five minutes ago, a distress signal was issued to no response. The closest unit was inside the city, a hard task even for Phantom. "Don't shoot," said the driver, "-you open that window and we die. Let them fire, the truck is armored. We can't be hurt."

Headlights befell the frame of a boy, he stared into the driver's eye and swung, an arc of blueish flame halted the vehicle in a tumble. The heavy beasts returned to their normal posture; the same couldn't be said about the passengers.

'A sultrian,' coughed the driver, '-relay the information to headquarters. It's them, the gang who recently employed foreigner.'

"Another job is done," he smugly chuckled, "-stealing from the mafia is so easy. I was unrivaled in Alpha and now, I'm unbeatable in the land of animals."

"Good job, Soun," cheered a fully armed mercenary, "-take the supplies and leave."

"Why are you so worried," he casually walked to the injured driver, "-they're weaklings."

"Don't get cocky," cried the mercenary, "-our job is to steal the weapons, not kill them."

"Bastards!" coughed the passenger, "-I'll kill you," he pulled a gun, *bang,* blood splattered the seats.

"Didn't you say no killing?"

"Forget it," he exhaled, "-we'll load the jeeps, keep watch."

Ancient Magic: Gate, he blasted out another portal and crashed into the asphalt. The entrance had the loaders halt, mercenaries jumped behind cover, "-who are you?"

"No one particular," said the entity dusting his shoulders, "-I'm somewhat of a fighter for Phantom," he leaped onto the truck admits the carnage, "-do tell, are the supplies yours or?"

"Are you dumb?" snickered a handyman, "-we're robbing this truck."

"And who are you exactly?"

"Let me interject," said the Sultrian, "-my name's Soun," he jumped and stood face to face against Igna, "-a martial-artist trained in the art of blazing fist."

"A martial artist," he watched nonchalantly, "-should I be impressed or frightened?"

"Such bravado," he eased into a relaxed posture, "-let see how you stack up against us, damned animal," he dropped and charged, the movements were fake, feints mixed with real intent. *Martial-Arts – Second form, Aura.*

"Y-yeah," he sidestepped, "-martial arts or not," the fighter's eyes flooded with ire, "-I don't care," a back-handed palm ended the fight. No less than a second, Soun crashed into a jeep and died of a cracked skull. "My apologies," he glided off the edge, "-I couldn't hold back against a pretentious fighter." The air altered, knowing glances flew around the mercenaries, "-RETREAT!"

Guns fired for cover; the jeeps toggled to skid out into the night. 'They never learn,' *Spatial-Arts: Disruption,* wave-like bubbles stopped the projectiles, *Partial-Realm Expansion: Mantia,* a vortex swallowed the bullets, *Spatial-Arts: Wormhole.* The roofs peppered, the attackers were wiped in a worthless exchange.

'I suppose we don't have much to talk about,' he sat adjacent the dead Sultrian, "-why would someone of Alphaia join such a meaningless battle?" Minutes turned to hours, the night sky showed signs of the coming dawn, an amber hue rose on the horizon. The crashed truck and jeeps rested in a pile on the side of the road. Previous damages to the roads were fixed with magic. Igna all but sat atop the pile and watched, the bodies of the fallen became a lax breakfast.

'There they are,' armored cars and jeeps surrounded a similar truck.

"Igna," the vanguard stopped, "-are you well?" inquired a flustered Julius.

"Aside from the cold breeze," *achoo,* "-I'm fine."

"What happened to the rest?" he continued to the pile of bloodied clothes, weapons, and personal belongings, "-are they dead?"

"-Obviously," he landed, "-Julius, mind telling what happened here?"

"Sources say Cimier sent a member as a trial to a local gang. We've located their whereabouts at a nearby village referred to as the Stoppage."

"Any idea why the name Stoppage?"

"Don't know," he shrugged, "-just a small settlement along the highway to the west."

"What of the population?"

"Around a few hundreds."

"Cool, leave the cleanup duty to me."

"Here then, catch."

"What's this?" he held a key.

"Keys to a bike," he winked, "-I'll handle the matters here. Go wipe out the rival gang and send a message not to fuck with the Dark-Guild."

The stroll down the road felt more or less normal. 'Here's the settlement,' he pulled into a side-road, '-not very impressive,' the bike cruised to the lonelier part. Houses were scarce and so were people. 'How to send an impression,' the hideout came in view.

"éclair, is it possible to record my point of view using the lens?"

"Yes," he returned, "-go on ahead, I'll begin the process."

"No need to say it twice," Tharis unholstered and barged through the front. The residents werewhelmed by the intrusion, some ran towards the door thinking the others had returned.

“Say hello to creation for me,” *bang,* one by one, armed or not, Pluton tanked into the hideout and cleared room by room.

“We’re under attack,” echoed around the cacophonous house.

“Throw the Molotov,” said another, “-block off the stairs, block it off!”

A bottle crashed to no avail, *Mana Control: Water Variant – Raindrop.* the flames of revolution doused effortlessly. They who dared attack Phantom were showed the one-sided slaughter. He who killed did so mercilessly. In the end, few begged for forgiveness, “-please, let me live, I only did this job to bring food to my family.”

“The life of a ruffian is hard and full of bad choices,” he grabbed a metal bat, “-I don’t care what brought you to this point. Attacking Phantom was the last mistake you ever made,” the remainder were bludgeoned to death. Each strike immaculately caught the breaking of bones, one by one, strike by strike, he beat, and beat, and beat, until the deed was complete.

“There,” said he wiping off the sweat and blood, “-send that video to the gangs. Say it to be a warm present from Pluton.”

Indeed, it was, the trauma spawned from the video truly drowned the reason for revolution. Godfather Shadow’s faction grew infamous among others. Their power alone could end the conflict with a pull of a trigger.

No other word needed to be exchanged. Igna left for Alphaia on strenuous terms. Lady Courtney and Elvira were yet to be decisive on what to do about the murder. Similar to Chef Leko’s death, even when he knew the culprit, the same response of staying low returned.

“Wednesday the 15th,” the vampiric lair came in view, the gates parted as was usual. ‘-I lost Alicia and gained the title of King of monsters,’ the car parked at the entrance. ‘-I’ve made progress strength-wise. I wonder,’ he stepped inside, ‘-can I somewhat merge Scifer’s and the Shadow realm. The unification would truly bring power to my side.’

Tiny feet scurried off the wooden floor, “-WELCOME BACK POPS!” cried Draconis, Saniata was literally on his tail, “-slow down dummy,” she complained without a say.

“You’re energetic,” he caught the duo, “-what happened about the stay in the Shadow Realm?”

“Miira told us to move in with éclair,” they laughed. Vanesa eventually crawled her way to the porch, “-pops, I’m hungry...”